

Juliana Engberg

my week

SATURDAY: A creature of habit, I shop at the Vic market every Saturday morning when I'm in Melbourne. People seem happy at the market. I love the potato guys, bread people, butter girls and the crayfish ladies. It's a good day if I get there before 8am. After that it's too late and you have to rush.

Putting the first Melbourne International Biennial together over the past 12 months has taken me out of Melbourne for the greater part of last year. As I trudged from airport to airport with one week blurring into the next I longed for my routine. It hasn't been fully restored yet. Like the rest of my staff, this is my 25th week without a weekend, and the Biennial, which began in May, still has a week to run. But I'm squeezing the market in nevertheless.

SUNDAY: I give a floor talk on Sundays at the Biennial. It's something I enjoy. My work as a curator is about communicating the ideas of art to people who are not necessarily specialists. Biennials — or *Biennales* if you want the continental pronunciation — are generally pitched at the art cognoscenti, but I've tried hard to create a show that can have meaning for a much broader audience.

Most of all, I wanted to propose that art is still vital and can make us consider new ways of seeing things which we take for granted. And I wanted to make a show which unabashedly proposed a kind of link between art and humanity. Despite my gruff exterior, I'm a closet humanist. One commentator suggested I was quasi-religious, but of course humanism is a secular movement. It's about people taking responsibility for the life on earth they share with others. That's one of reasons I called the Biennial "Signs of Life".

MONDAY: I'm probably the only artistic director in the history of Biennials who works her own till. I like it. I get to speak to the visitors and receive real feedback. Another reward is seeing how many kids have come to the exhibition. Some of them have been with school groups and now they are bringing their parents. I like to send them towards certain works. The Robert Gligorov, for instance — a video piece showing the artist nesting birds in his mouth. The fabulous moving models of Ricky Swallow that show future and past worlds in miniature. And of course the Robert Gober suitcase which

beneath its bottom. Kids love the show. They think it's "kewl".

TUESDAY: All things going well I walk the dog at 5.30am each morning, but it's raining so walking Baguette will have to wait. Gertrude Stein once said "I know I am me because my little dog knows me". Last year I was in jeopardy of not knowing who or where I was a lot of the time. Baguette barked at me like a stranger when I got back from being away.

Selecting for a Biennial is strenuous business. Last year I met more than 1500 artists from countries around the world. In Belfast on one day alone I saw 56 artists. In Vilnius, Lithuania, I started at 7am and worked through till 1am for four days in a row in order to see all the artists who wanted to meet with a curator from elsewhere. The Minister for Culture said "Thank you for coming to Vilnius". It was a pleasure. It was sub-zero temperatures and the mother of one of the artists lent me a coat because the museum cafe wasn't well heated.

The poor people of Vilnius. In order to participate in the stock exchange their government has decided to coincide time with Berlin and so they are plummeted into darkness at 2pm instead of 5pm. The suicide rate is very high. It's the first thing anyone tells you. One of the reasons I went there was to meet an artist named Diemantas Narkevicius. His work so powerfully evoked a people emerging out of communism into the great unknown of the free market that I felt compelled to invite him into the Biennial and to see if there were other Lithuanian artists making work of such quality.

People always ask me: "How can you make a selection of 56 projects after seeing over 1500 artists". The answer is the project should make you to feel something and ask something. The best question to ask about art is: Why? For instance, why would you float a miniature forest in a tank? The answers are numerous. You might, for instance, think of female sexuality as described in Grimm's fairy tales, where the wood is a dramatic character.

WEDNESDAY: My 7am meeting runs over time which makes me late for my 8am meeting. My collection of parking fines for this month is now up to 25. The Premier visits the Biennial — a quiet, private visit which he seems to enjoy.



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THURSDAY: Trouble in paradise. Our colony of snails has been stolen again! Well meaning snail liberationists have been heisting our families of snails which perform a meandering map in the work of Portuguese artist Francisco Tropa. Tropa's work is about the transient workers who travel the rural areas of Portugal and set up their temporary homes. For them, like the snail, the horizon continues to fall away as they slowly move around their working districts. I feel sorry about the snails being stolen. They seem to flourish in our care and there has been much new birth.

FRIDAY: 5.30am. Pick up a colleague at the airport. Many overseas curators are arriving from the UK and the US to see the Biennial. People like to compare them. Melbourne has entered the Biennial world with an immediate reputation for quality and curatorial spirit. Alongside its most senior benchmark, the glamorous and ancient Venice Biennale, the international art press has been full of praise.

On the home front, the washing machine has packed it in, the taps have all fallen off, and the compost in the fridge could do with some attention. At the least the dog has started to recognise me again.

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