The Melbourne International Biennial

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Interviewed by Robyn McKenzie 29 September 1998

Robyn McKenzie: When, firstly, is the Biennial scheduled for?

Bala Starr: May – June 1999

Juliana Engberg: We launch the whole Biennial on the 11th of May, a Tuesday; that's the official launch for the media etc. The Collaborating Country Projects commence then too. On the nights of the 11th, 12th and 13th there will be opening celebrations involving the participating galleries in each area. The galleries in Flinders Lane will open one night, the Fitzroy based galleries, another evening. The major exhibition, *Signs of Life*, opens its doors to the public on Friday the 14th. We're not going to have an opening as such, with the idea of people coming to look at works. The exhibition opens its doors on the 14th, and its business as usual. We'll have a party to celebrate, separately. And we'll kick off at the weekend with some talks.

RM: And how long does it run for?

JE: About eight weeks overall. Because we don't have to work in with other people's programming for the major exhibition we are fortunate to be able to run it for quite a length of time. People will have an opportunity to go back and see it a number of times, which is good. With about 60 artists it is going to be quite a big show, and a lot of the works will take some time to see; a number will be video or film-based. There will be at least 18 hours of 'viewing' in it.

RM: You are going to be using a new site in the CBD for the main exhibition. Can you confirm what or where that is?

JE: No, not yet.

RM: Can you give out any information about participating artists as yet?

JE: We want to release that information in a co-ordinated way a bit further down the track.

RM: Could you talk a bit about the Pavilions, to clarify what the idea is there?

BS: Through the Collaborating Country Projects we are investigating different ways in which national representation can occur within the Biennial format. We're working very closely with what we see as the strength of Melbourne's contemporary art scene: capitalising on the existing infrastructure and importantly, the staff who drive it. We've invited 9 of the highest profile galleries in the city, both public and private, to participate as host venues. On the other side of things we're approaching international governments and funding agencies, looking at ways to develop curated artist's projects. They will be modestly scaled, quite intimate, involving one or two artists. The Biennial is providing the encircling infra-structure, setting things in train. But then we in effect stand back, and allow the projects to develop along a natural course from the inter-action between the staff of the Melbourne galleries and the international participants. This type of thing occurs all the time in Melbourne anyway, as we know. What we're doing is bringing it to the fore and celebrating it.

JE: We go into this fully aware that a lot of countries are questioning the whole issue of national representation at this level. We hope that by providing a situation where the pavilion itself is ready-made – so no infrastructural commitment is required – and there is a strong curatorial element to the provision of the space through it's staff, we can start to rethink what that model might be. Some countries may select a curator from elsewhere, for example. None of these things are solid or fixed. We want to make it a strongly practitioner based collaboration rather than a diplomatic exercise.

RM: Back in the mid-1980s Peter Fuller coined the acronym BICCA, standing for Biennale International Club Class Art. His complaint was that the same artists and the same type of art, was shown at all the shows on the 'international circuit', wherever and whenever they were. 'International' used to be thought of as like the cream on the top of the national bottle – 'International art' was what rose to the top and was then skimmed off into this kind of superstrata of existence. But now it seems that has changed, 'international exchange' is going on at a number of different levels, involving all strata of the art world. In this context, what does the 'big international show' offer? Where does it sit within this new globalism.

JE: There are a huge number of international events all around the world on the art calendar. Rather than focus on what that is about, its better to focus on what we do best, which is create opportunities for an energised emerging

practice. What we hope to do is bring into our local mix an international event that corresponds with that emphasis. So, instead of art stars, on the contrary, our Biennial will have more than 75% of artists who very few people will have heard of before, unless they've had opportunities to travel extensively. They will be working at a similar level to many of the people here – struggling in similar ways in their own countries to create the next emphasis. So there will be an easy recognition and a happy conversation to be drawn out from that.
To answer your question then, it's not BICCA. It's about creating an international event which corresponds to some of the desires and aspirations that we already have here. Melbourne is an exciting city for contemporary art, but I think like every city, it needs to bring other things in, otherwise it can stagnate; it can begin to believe that its own art environment is the be all and end all. I think we need to bring into Melbourne, something that is at the next level of engagement, at the next point of discussion. If we don't do that soon, while there can be a satisfaction that we have quite a nice environment that we've created here for ourselves, it won't have extension.

RM: So, you're not so concerned about differentiating the Melbourne Biennial on the international calendar as much as creating something, an international exhibition, for Melbourne.

JE: I think it works both ways. Because I'm responding to the environment of Melbourne, I think the Biennial will *ipso facto* be different from many of the things I've seen as I've gone around, and I think it should be. What I'm not concerned about in selecting the works is that perhaps I'm showing something that has already been seen, say in *Manifesta*. If it's an excellent work by someone who I think is at an interesting stage of development, I think it's far more important to bring that artist here, than to worry if 15 well-placed colleagues in Europe have seen that work. It's the context of here that I've drawn from. I'm making something for here. This has got to be the primary site of engagement.

RM: Some people from overseas that I've had conversations with ask why Australia needs two Biennials, and they cite the fact that the Sydney Biennale has been established now for 25 years, and that people have a commitment there. Is there going to be a problem, both with regard to perceptions, but also practically, in attracting participation from overseas government agencies and the like.

JE: People do ask that question. They often start off that conversation being concerned from a money point of view. We do understand that. There is only a limited amount of money that people can spend on international participation. Our answer is that we will be endeavouring to develop a different type of event from Sydney or Queensland. And we see ourselves very much value-adding back in to what they've already started. Hopefully, as the calendar starts to work itself out, and if we can be co-operative with each other we will go year about, as it were. And that means that we start to build up a strong international presence in Australia at all times. Instead of thinking of ourselves as being competitors, we think of ourselves as natural collaborators, hopefully, each with a distinctive event. Our event will be distinctive from Sydney's because as well as the exhibitions it will give tremendous weight to its ancilliary programs: the open studio program, the curator discussion programs, the artist discussion programs. We're not thinking so much about the standard forum event with formal presentations, but a more active, practical set of discussions – workshop like.
I must say, that by the end of the discussions we have been having it turns around. Our international colleagues are very interested in what we might do here, and keen to participate and to think about the model. We're very much about shifting our model all the time. What will happen in 1999 won't happen in 2001. In 99 we should be trying to deliver a Biennial that indicates its interest to look at the model and change it somewhat, but still works satisfactorily within the paradigm that is established by Biennials. In 2001 it will be a very different kind of event again, which I think will be steered to a certain degree by the conversation that takes place in 99.

RM: What do you mean by 'the model'?

JE: A biggish exhibition, a single curatorial vision. In 2001 it is our intention to change that quite significantly. And by then we can, because we have established a certain level of interest, credibility, and collaborative partners.

RM: To press the point the MIB is entering the scene when the genre of 'the big international' show has expanded and arguably reached a crisis point of definition and purpose.

JE: I think that's true.

RM: So, how do you see the Biennial interacting with that situation. How are you going to differentiate it?

JE: I'm not trying to differentiate is so much in the first instance, because I think for it to be successful from the point of view of local expectation more than international expectation – and that's got to be its major purpose – it has to represent an example of something people have hoped for. And I think people have hoped for an event of scale, that introduces them to interesting international work, that they feel they have some connection with. But I do myself – and I think you'd have to be stupid not to, given the array of them – think one has to start questioning what these things will be and how they will continue to be relevant. If ours is successful in the first instance then the need that we have to address is already changed; already there is a much stronger international context. Then you need to think what will make this different from an open slather international. I think 2001 should be more practitioner directed. What I mean by that is artist and curator directed, not so much the work of an over-arching Artistic Director. In this instance it is terribly important that there is some one person who can be an advocate, a statesperson if you like, an explaining person, for what we've put in place. We need to get over the first hurdle, which is how do we draw an

audience to this event. We can't do that if we fracture it too much. It needs a certain density and a certain critical mass, to be visible. The importance of the Collaborating Country Projects is that it represents in a way a kernal for the next model, a slightly more dispersed one.

RM: Your 'Factsheet' talks about the Biennial being interested in nurturing professional development opportunities for artists and curators. Could you outline in that context some of these ancillary programs; such as the open studio program, and the visiting critics program.

JE: We will be allocating funds for the participation of select curators, critics, writers. If we are paying for them to come we can then ask them to work. So they're not just coming to visit and have a good time, they're coming here to do some practical work, and that work should benefit artists and the people who work here, that's the whole point of it. Curating the *Signs of Life* exhibition, has meant that I've had a reason to think about the way an international curator might best connect with artists in another country. One of the things I've enjoyed most is the opportunity to sit down with artists and find about their work. I want to provide some structure for that inside the Biennial program through organised studio visits, and presentations.

Part of the commitment the people we bring out will make, will be to participate in the studio program and see the work of as many artists here as possible, to participate in the discussions and workshops which will go to deliver the next model, and give a public presentation of some sort. We estimate that through various programs of assistance we can bring into the city at least 12 very significant people. The Biennial should act as a focus, creating the opportunity for colleagues from around the world to work with Australian artists, and for Australian curators to work with artists from elsewhere. In 2001 I want to see some of the benefits from this process.

RM: Can I ask a more basic question. How much it is going to cost?

JE: *The Age* reported 1.4 million.

RM: And is that $700,000 put up by the City of Melbourne and Arts Victoria and $700,000 to be raised?

Deirdre O'Callaghan: There is about $620,000 for us to raise which is actually not so difficult, when you take into account that a lot of it is in-kind. You have an airline sponsor, a hotel sponsor, a technology sponsor. All of those asks are quite big, their value is quite considerable, but they're not cash. We are seeking cash sponsorship though of course. And we've got a great package. Because it's a CBD event, and it's so focussed the Biennial offers sponsors high level brand recognition.

JE: And I think that one of the things that appears to be working for us is that we're new. Sponsors like the idea of something that's new, that's innovative. Deirdre, and the rest of the team, have been spending quite a bit of time working up our sponsorship model. There's a thing called the marketing fit.

RM: What sort of things do you say to sponsors? What are your selling points?

DO: One of the first things I say is we're interested in innovators and creators, first up. We're not really interested in people who are not going to come along on our journey, which is something which is very innovative and creative for the city, and which will feed back into a very vibrant artistic community in Melbourne.

RM: Have you got estimates for the size of the audience you're hoping to attract?

DO: Our marketing people have been working on this. They've been doing a benchmarking exercise. But there is nothing directly comparable that we can draw on. Around 160,000 went to Van Gogh. Compared to that, I think that about 80,000 people paid to see something at the Festival last year. We can talk about demographics and psychographics until the cows come home, but we really have no figures on this. We'd be happy if we reached between 30,000 and 40,000.

RM: And who are your audience?

DO: Just to give you a very brief overview. One of our niche audiences is described in the Roy Morgan segmentations as 'Young Optimists'. 'Young Optimists' are young professionals, usually urban dwellers, living near the city. Time is really valuable for them. This is an event that is packed up, it's in the one venue. The other thing they'll be attracted to, is this is a non-mainstream venue – it's not the typical going down to the gallery. And also a lot of the art works deal with high technology components. This particular group's arts consumption is directly related to their interest in technology. So, we have an enormous potential for getting that group in. As well as the 'Socially Aware'.

JE: I think the theme of the exhibition will hold a lot of interest. The theme is not a flippant one. It questions things about existence and about humanity.

RM: *Signs of Life*, seems a quite enigmatic title.

JE: I think there is a real danger with a title that is so fixed in people's minds already, they have a sense of what it is, and they say 'Well, that's a mismatch between its title and its content'. To that extent *Signs of Life* is deliberately enigmatic. But it allows us to excursion through a number of issues. Quite specifically I've said that I'm interested in where humanity is up to now, and how we will take ourselves into the next century. I believe that a lot of the artists I'm looking at hold these kinds of questions very dear.

There's a strong element of communication in the show, that is personal communication between people, and communication between ourselves and those things that culturally inscribe us: including nature and the environment. These seem to be the most cogent things I'm seeing when I go around. There's a tremendous amount of storytelling – for want of a better description – in a lot of the works. People want to tell stories again, recapture some sense of their past, their history, through a retelling of things.

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JE: A lot of artists I am looking at from areas emerging out of Communism for example have many stories to tell. They're stories that have not been allowed to be told for some time. It's really very moving to encounter people struggling to come to grips with a life that is changing so dramatically, from a state of quite massive restriction, to a state of tentative freedom. And they're coming to find out about atrocities that occurred in their country that they never even knew about before because of the propaganda and restrictions on information. I make no apology, right from the offset, that the Biennial will, I think, be very moving. I don't intend for it to be a flippant fun day out. I think it should be something people come and spend time with, and think about, and leave somewhat altered I would hope.

RM: A lot of people have been critical of contemporary art at the end of the twentieth century, charging it with being in a state of terminal decline. The title *Signs of Life* suggests, it still has a pulse. In a recent interview Peter Costello claimed 'people expect too much from politics'. You've talked about this exhibition being about the big questions. Do people – do you – expect too much from art?

JE: No, I think people expect too little from art, mostly. I think that art is still one of the most potent conveyors of meaning. I think its more interesting than many things, more interesting than television for example, as a conveyor of meaning. Because it doesn't lay it out for you straight, it doesn't lay it down for you in a pre-determined pattern. It often takes you to this next level of apprehension where you have to worry about what you're looking at, or engaging with. And really only art can do this significantly well, in my view – bring an audience into a realm of uncertainty once more. We live in a world of known factors, it's the uncertain things which will jolt us. Not to be banal, but the whole gas crisis is really very interesting. I think people will start to be very inventive, creative about what they cook, what they wear . . . how they get themselves together. Yes it's inconvenient, but at the same time its a challenge. Most of the art in my show will be both challenging, and rewarding if that challenge is met, because there will be something there to be conveyed.

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