Look!

# *Children of the Revolutions*

## Juliana Engberg on the Sixteenth Biennale of Sydney

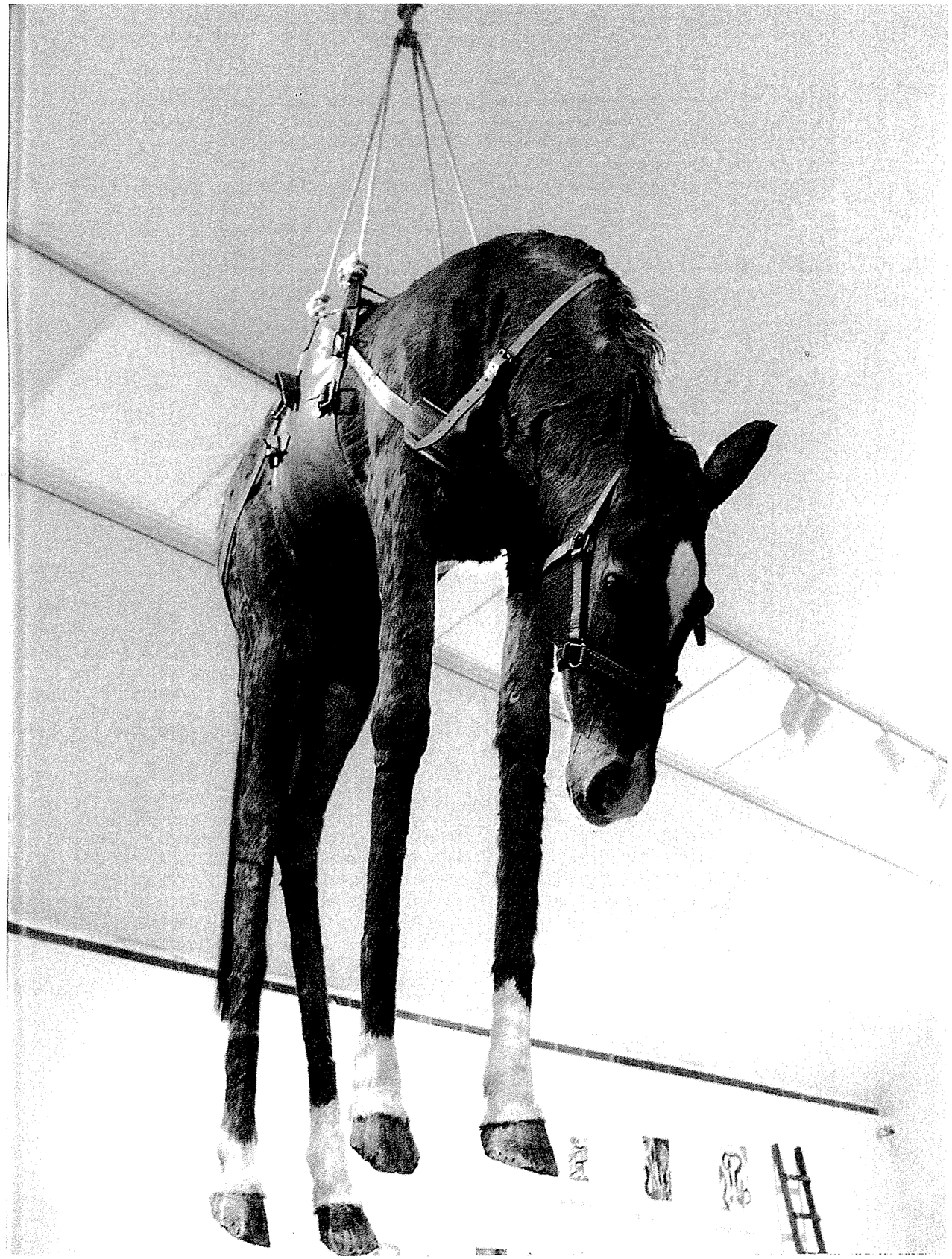
As Wordsworth once wrote: "There's something in a flying horse / There's something in a huge balloon." And while there's no record of WW himself having flown among the clouds, he had a penchant for lofty things that hovered and gave new perspectives on life below the heavens. Art has had a habit of looking up. As early as the Italian trecento paintings, artists recorded cosmic flashes in the sky: cataclysmic phenomena that ruptured the faith of agrarian villagers' hearts, as the sky was slashed by what we later came to call Halley's comet. Without the knowledge of Galileo to hand, it seemed as if the sky was falling down. Was God hurling things at our unworthy earthly place?

The unsettling often descends upon us. Airships and planes, bombs and rockets, space junk and meteors fling themselves into our history. These things that fly and catapult are the stuff of revolution; they change geography and philosophy, faith and disbelief. It is thrilling, then, that one of the Biennale of Sydney's best rooms includes the contemporary Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's suspended stuffed horse, *Novecento*, the Russian constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko's radically cosmic *Spatial Constructions*, and Canadian Rodney Graham's ladder to … well, nowhere but up. In this room at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the biennale's theme, *Revolutions: Forms that Turn*, is neatly encapsulated. At the beginning of the twentieth century, represented by Rodchenko, art is launching into space, daring us to embrace the dawn of speed and velocity. By the end of the century, represented by Cattelan's forlorn hoisted horse, all the puff has gone out of the revolutionary enterprise. The vehicle of the revolution, once an amiable four-legged creature, is now a spinning, freewheeling thing that comes hurtling through the air to slam into tall buildings and finish the New World Order. The revolution of the twenty-first century, represented by Rodney Graham's ladder, is without destination, seemingly confused and directionless, but hoping to find an exit strategy.

As an antidote to this somewhat nihilistic turn of events, another magnificent room at the MCA contains Alexander Calder's scintillating night-and-day, black-and-white mobiles, *Hanging Spider* and *Roxbury Flurry*; Olafur Eliasson's kinetic event of wind and moonshine, *Light Ventilator Mobile*; and Man Ray's experiment in positive–negative photography, *(No Title) Woman with Closed Eyes*. These works that deliver movement, and gesture to nature and alchemical activity, assert a symbolic natural flow of things. "To everything, turn, turn, turn," as The Byrds once sung. *Revolutions: Forms that Turn* refers to the way in which, phenomenologically and philosophically, things go round and come round. Humanity, like the elements, is in a revolutionary continuum rondo.

Rodchenko seems most representative of this cycle. As a member of the Russian avant-garde, he sought to revolutionise art by liberating it from gravity and mundane outlooks, breaking away from the beaux-art traditions of idealised representations in order to pursue experimentation in all aspects of visual art and design. He languished for a period, banished from the Union of Soviet Artists, charged with being a formalist in a time when image-making reverted to the propaganda of heroic realism. Now, after glasnost, Rodchenko is a hero once again: an example of Russia's early experimental flourishing. Today, his art looks great, sprightly and utopian, but not as dangerous as he thought when he first made, then destroyed, his spatial experiments, concerned that they were too extreme for an audience. *Spatial Constructions* has been tamed by a century of design, architecture and wood-crafted mind puzzles. But in a way, this is what Rodchenko was striving for.

Much of the Sydney Biennale pivots around important historical works, resuscitated and reinforced by the curatorial strategy of artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Her modus operandi is to show the generations of artistic revolution intertwined with the political and social movements of the twentieth century. In the Art Gallery of New South Wales a selection of individual works exemplifies the force and derangement of modernity. The machine contraptions of Jean Tinguely, optical and kinetic works of Len Lye, holes and ruptures punched by Saburo Murakami, and savage slicing by Rebecca Horn, all serve to remind us of a century full of clangour, explosions and manual or mechanised activity. By comparison, the twenty-first century is made of quiet software and surreptitious labour, and art is recording this in sly and engaging ways. Nedko Solakov enlists house painters to paint and then paint over in black and white the foyer of the AGNSW: a reference to the negative and positive zero points of modernism, but also an allusion to the futility of labour.



*Novecento*, by Maurizio Cattelan, 1997. Taxidermy horse, metal frame, leather, slings, rope. Photo © Ben Symons.

Everywhere in this biennale there is roundness, a shape both resilient and mobile. At the MCA there is Michelangelo Pistolleto's work of 1967–68, *Mappamondo*, and the film of this papier-mâché globe, made from newspaper, being rolled and lifted through Italian streets and arcades by a small band of artists. Such interventions into the everyday world were inspired by a Situationist desire to wrest the art object from the bourgeois cycle of commodification, and to exemplify unique experience. Pistoletto's gesture, though, rescued as charismatic black-and-white footage on a video monitor, and the *Mappamondo* itself, encaged in a skeletal metal orb, have become artefacts of revolution. Now collected, archived and revered as an iconic action and item, they have succumbed to the force of history and our human desire to catalogue events, even when those events strove for an ephemeral life.

Several actions hope to break through the niceties of museum culture, to kick out the jams and resuscitate the rebellious gesture. The Australian artist Tony Schwensen (aided by his mother, brother and the artist Justine Williams), inspired by the laments of the curator that there was insufficient money for the biennale, established that quintessential Australian solution to a lack of funds, a sausage sizzle, to collect dollars outside the MCA. Stuart Ringholt, meanwhile, conducts *Anger Workshops* in a little room inside the AGNSW. Viewed and heard from outside, the minimal box seems inhabited by all the angst of the age. Inside, the participants scream, hug and cry in a sequence of self-awareness and restoration. Positioned near Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* and Murakami's *Six Holes*, Ringholt's screaming mouths introduce another kind of rupture.

Not all interventions are as upfront. The Swiss artist Christoph Büchel's much-anticipated *No Future*, with octogenarians belting out the Sex Pistols' anthem to anarchy, was strangely exiled to the end of the MCA, with a funereal curtain drawn across the rehearsal room, which on several visits was ominously absent of players. Well, they are 80-plus, after all, so perhaps they were resting. Or perhaps this was an anti-spectacle, in deference to Christov-Bakargiev's determination to work against the overproduction which beleaguers biennales that feel compelled to entertain. Tony Schwensen's motto, "while entertaining, art is not entertainment," seen on invites and paraphernalia ad infinitum, seemed to make the point, and was a good companion piece to the Büchel.

The inclusion of Cockatoo Island and Pier 2/3 as biennale venues, meanwhile, permits a grander gesture than some of the smaller areas at the AGNSW and the MCA. On Cockatoo, there is also the readymade environment of industrial ruins, still and silent cranes and disused shipbuilding yards, adding a patina to the event. Perhaps the most haunting and beautiful use of space is Susan Philipsz' single voice singing 'The Internationale' in the vast abandonment of the Turbine Hall: an anthem to labour now lost, to a revolution now spent.

William Kentridge's newest suite of videos, projected onto the rough surface of a shed, is a wonderful whirligig of revolutionary momentums. Loosely referencing Gogol's short story 'The Nose', Kentridge parades the commissary in a circus of paper puppets and shadow plays. His conversation with the constructivist designs of Rodchenko is deliberate, as is the use of Shostakovich's music blended with the sounds of Eritrea and Ethiopia. The years of "endless enthusiasm" for radical change that his films nostalgically recall are inflected with the irony and raggedy humour of a Russian clown troupe.

The brutality of history is investigated in the successive performances and actions of the Australian artist Mike Parr. Parr has made a relic of his own body as a site for memory and memorial. In a devastating suite of films on Cockatoo Island, we revisit Parr's psycho-dramatic investigations – the famous arm-chopping, the massacre of chickens, the sewing of his face – that move through catharsis and catastrophe. Parr uses himself as a scapegoat – a *pharmakos*, in ancient Greece – to purge and exorcise the horrors of the past. Linking to the symbolic ruptures on display in the AGNSW, Parr's works have a stronger impact than any other included by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

Sound and music is the unannounced sub-theme of the biennale. In the huge space of Pier 2/3, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's 98-speaker-and-chair installation, *The Murder of Crows*, is an imagistic world of noises colliding. Cardiff and Miller have a talent for producing emotionally charged environments, and at times this piece is overwhelmingly moving. Piano sonatas, the lone lieder voice, crashing waves, and the rumbling march of the Soviet army clashing with Nepalese singers come at you from every angle and are all-encompassing. The interspersed cries of crows, which travel miles to mourn in groups, announce the funereal gathering for a passing century of hope and turmoil. Cardiff's narrated dreams, issuing from a lonely old speaker, add a twist to this emotional upheaval. Her references are artistic as well as cinematic. Glimpses of other artworks – Graham's ladder, Robert Gober's legs – churn around footage from horrific newsreels. The lullaby at the end of the piece is a welcome relaxation after so much tumultuousness.

This biennale, which runs until September, is rich in ideas, strong on art and history, both nostalgic and critical about the past. And it ultimately asserts the power of the unique artwork, while demonstrating with considerable intellectual and aesthetic force the energy of the collective enterprise. M