

# LIVING THE PAST WITHIN THE PRESENT: AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS AT PERFORMA 15

VARIOUS LOCATIONS ACROSS NEW YORK CITY  
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Three years ago, the long-standing New York performance festival Performa established its *Pavilion Without Walls*. This program piggybacks the concept of the pavilion at the Venice Biennale, but dispenses with the permanent architectural infrastructure, allowing a variety of exhibitions, performances and public programs from a single country to spill into venues across the city.

The inaugural *Pavilion Without Walls* featured work from Norway and Poland. Focusing on Australia, Performa commissioned new works in cooperation with Australian institutions, such as Artspace and Performance Space; the artists included Agatha Gothe-Snape, Brian Fuata, Richard Bell (with Emory Douglas), Vernon Ah Kee, Stuart Ringholt, duo Zheng Mahler, Justene Williams, WrongSolo (Gothe-Snape, Fuata and Shane Haseman), with archival works by Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy, John Hughes, Andrew Scollo and Bonita Ely.

What are the implications of this model? Taken at face value, it means that Performa can more comprehensively represent a geographical region than the United Nations-cum-Olympic Games model favoured in Venice.<sup>1</sup> Biennales, from Performa to Venice, inevitably make generalisations based on geography and can give the impression that the curators have ‘discovered’ the artists inhabiting the far-flung regions of the world, then validating them by presenting them in a world centre like New York. But selecting just one country as the focus generates an additional anxiety, namely that this opportunity will not arise again, and one must therefore strive to represent the region. The pavilion structure therefore requires the represented country to ‘perform’ a version of itself to an international audience.

While Performa’s focus is on commissioning and thus emphasising new, previously unseen works, many of the works in the Australian Pavilion had some kind of historical resonance. The inclusion of a series of films of performance pieces suggested a desire for us to assert our history. It was appropriate then that expatriate theorist Terry Smith, who penned the essay *The Provincialism Problem*<sup>2</sup> over 40 years ago, officiated over the film series. *From the Archive: 1970’s Australian Performance Videos* featured Peter Kennedy, Mike Parr, Bonita Ely, John Hughes and Andrew Scollo, as a pointed reminder that Australia has had a rich history of performance

movements. Indeed Terry Smith was in the audience for many of the selected performances.<sup>3</sup>

This sequence of historical pieces and the accompanying discussion placed the live performance pieces at Performa in an historical context, specific to Australia. As a curatorial manoeuvre, it sought to identify a lineage, prove a history, and thus show the breadth of Australian practice.

Of course the history of Australian art is well documented. But like the art of most other nationalities, it remains somewhat invisible within the global cultural aggregator that is New York. Thus in the context of Performa, it seemed, it needed to be restated. It is natural for curators and art historians to delve into and reanimate the archive – to recover histories of which most of New York remains unaware. But many of the Australian artists in Performa themselves delved into the archives in one way or another.

Brian Fuata’s *A preparatory/predictive performance for a circuit of email and the living* related to the context of Performa and New York, through its resonance with American artist Ray Johnson’s mail art archive. Fuata’s performances, whether in the flesh or in the form of emails, are idiosyncratic, casual and strangely poetic. For the New York performances, Fuata taped out a large square on the ground, designating that site a stage, just as he turns the screen of your computer and email inbox into a theatre.

While Fuata’s work for Performa was linked to Ray Johnson’s archive, his work typically defies conventional, institutional archiving processes. There is no clear, conventional way to store and exhibit the email performances. Would it be OK, for example, to print out each email and keep it as hardcopy in a curator’s file? Or can they only be properly experienced scattered among the barrage of constant business, social and advertising emails, which fill our inboxes every day?

Fuata also participated in Agatha Gothe-Snape’s newly-commissioned *Rhetorical Chorus*, as a kind of master of ceremonies. This elaborate performance addressed the question of the archive, inasmuch as it was based on archival footage of the conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner. Gothe-Snape encountered Weiner by chance at Los Angeles International airport some

years ago. At the time she was making work based on Weiner's hand gestures and for this commission she returned to that research, schematising his gestures and, with composer Megan Clunes, developing a code by which they were interpreted chorally. Given conceptual art's typical negation of the 'hand of the artist', this focus on his body language can be seen as both inversion and historical reimagining.<sup>4</sup>

Another group of artists in the Pavilion Without Walls asserted Australian history with an explicitly political purpose. Richard Bell's *Aboriginal Tent Embassy*, soon to feature in the Biennale of Sydney, transposed a physical structure, which has occupied the lawn of Old Parliament House in Australia, and which various authorities have tried to erase since 1972.

Bell's work of reconstructing and transposing could be read as a form of archival practice that fits within the broader turn towards re-enactment in contemporary art.<sup>5</sup> The space was host to talks and workshops, but most of all asserted the ongoing presence of those precarious structures. On the outside of his tent was a sign reading, 'White invaders you are living on stolen land'. Even though the physical structure has been demolished or moved on again and again, this fact remains the same.

Bell's semi-permanent fixture became the site of a series of public programs and performances, including a screening of Vernon Ah Kee's powerful video work *Tall Man* (2010). The piece is edited together from many hours of archival footage documenting the riot and subsequent burning down of a police station on Queensland's Palm Island, following the death in custody of Cameron Doomadgee (tribal name: *Mulrunji*). This story, and Ah Kee's video representation of it, is one of Australia's most important cultural productions. In a poetic accident, red and blue police lights flashed against the walls throughout the screening of this work and the subsequent discussion, which repeatedly returned to the police brutality directed at both African Americans and Aboriginal Australians.

Following the screening, a conversation between Ah Kee, Bell and Emory Douglas (formerly Minister for Culture for the Black Panther Party) with curator Maura Reilly centred on questions of solidarity. Amongst other things, the conversation addressed the historical links between the American-founded Black Panthers and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. In 1971, Dennis Walker (son of prominent Aboriginal activist Kath Walker) formed the Black Panther Party of Australia and this little-known history speaks to the relationship between the organisation of African American and Australian Aboriginal identities.<sup>6</sup> It was interesting, however, that throughout this discussion indigenous American cultures remained unexplored.

Following this discussion, Stuart Ringholt hosted one of his Anger Workshops, an evolving series of participatory performances in the form of a group therapy session, in which people experience anger followed by love. The staging of this piece on the night of Ah Kee's screening was pertinent; what did it mean to hold such a therapeutic exercise inside Bell's tent? The juxtaposition foregrounded the way in which anger functions in

our society; is it something that needs to be 'managed', indeed repressed, or might anger be productive, even as it is uncomfortable and accusatory?

Performance art was originally a means of dissolving the art object, yet has increasingly become an archived, and archivable, practice. Further, the archival aspect subtending the Australian pavilion was an understandable response to a once-in-a-generation opportunity demanding that we prove ourselves, show our best and brightest, and lay claim to our territory and history. This could be seen in the breadth of practices on display. Gothe-Snape and Fuata acted to complicate the archive through their esoteric strategies, whilst Ringholt looked to a more social/relational perspective. Justene Williams' and Zheng Mahler's pieces combined installation strategies with performance, bringing in autobiography, narrative and the carnivalesque. Bell and Ah Kee's work made the most political claim, and by suggesting continuity with the land and their ancestry, asserted, as with all Aboriginal art, that Australia 'always was, always will be Aboriginal land'.

It might be obvious, yet it remains important to note that by establishing a history, one can claim the right to a future. Historical continuity is crucial to the present moment; cultures across the world reference their traditions and historical rootedness in order to assert their continuing presence. The presentation of Australian art on an international stage – namely New York's Performa – returns us to Terry Smith's provincialism problem, leaving us to wonder how we are to relate to this metropolitan centre of the arts, whether it still feeds upon artists from all over the world, who cannot be recognised in their own countries, until they have passed through this rhetorical centre? As Smith himself wrote about the New York art world, 'It casts most of us all the time, and a few of us some of the time, into the provincialist bind, whether we live in New York or outside. The further away we live, the less we can rationalize our entrapment.'<sup>7</sup>

Performa nonetheless shares some of the problems of biennales in general which have been widely discussed following the recent announcement of Australia's selection of Tracey Moffatt for Venice 2017.

## ENDNOTES

1. Terry Smith, 'The provincialism problem', in *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 1, September 1974: 54-59.
2. Correspondence with Amelia Wallin, 31-01-16.
3. Amelia Wallin, 'Behind the scenes: Agatha Gothe-Snape', in *Performa Magazine* published online: <http://performa-arts.org/magazine/entry/behind-the-scenes-agatha-gothe-snape>, accessed on 25-01-16.
4. See Rebecca Schneider, *Performing remains: art and war in times of theatrical reenactment*, New York: Routledge, 2011.
5. For further information see Kathy Lothian, *Moving Blackwards: Black Power and the Aboriginal Embassy*, accessed from [http://press.anu.edu.au/aborig\\_history/transgressions/mobile\\_devices/ch02.html](http://press.anu.edu.au/aborig_history/transgressions/mobile_devices/ch02.html), accessed on 13-01-16.
6. Smith, op cit: 58.