

Global Ti(ra)des

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There was a time – not too long ago, either – when Australia decided that representation of its artists at the Venice Biennale in a dedicated pavilion might be well worth all the meters of red tape, negotiation and heartache.

Prior to that time we'd staked sites on the edges of the main event at the Giardini, in spaces and places that changed every two years. The decision to pitch camp in the main arena not only entailed long negotiations with the Biennale of Venice, it also entailed long and contentious wranglings about what kind of building best reflected the country. And to a large extent, the jury is still out on the merits and demerits of the decisions that were made at the time about the site and the architecture. But there are few, if any similar discussions about the extent to which that particular biennale is the best context to back – questions about what we might get out of national representation in that particular framework. At the time Venice was the mother of all international biennales, the place where artists are assembled on the basis of national representation, an event the structure of which acknowledged the fact that cultural identity as defined by nationalism persists in a post-colonial, post-modern era.

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The costly decision to be part of that framework was underwritten by a belief that it would represent a marker of our emergent international status, a kind of coming of age that reflected our sophistication in a globalised world. It's a decision that has continued to be an expensive one, and more so when we consider that it's one of the ONLY biennales where we back our representation with so much support (money, resources). Even though since that time biennales have mushroomed all across the globe, we have not thrown ourselves with as much zeal into any of those that have emerged in regions closer to home.

And yet it's probably fair to say that it's in the regions closer to home within which most Australian artists have continued to move to and fro. The exchange residencies of Asialink, the exchanges between tertiary teaching institutions, the contacts made by contemporary art spaces and artists' initiatives in the region, have fostered a more two-way flow of traffic than that which flows to Euramerica.

It might still be representation in Euramerican galleries that lies top of the food-chain in the minds of most aspiring Australian artists, but it will be interesting to see the extent to which the plummeting stock markets of those regions will affect the ardour of Australian artists' careers. And even more so within the context of the burgeoning of secondary sales in the Asia-Pacific region that has flowed on from the surge of interest in the Chinese and Indian markets.

The interest in the biennales has been matched by interest in the art fairs, but there's no real think-tank that might foster debate about the pros and cons of backing participation in these international events. And although such events are "spotlit" as being of primary importance in marketing the national image, it may well be that the plethora of smaller people-to-people or community-to-community exchanges may afford the most mutually beneficial outcomes – exchanges that develop and deepen over the years, that become more complex and inclusive, and that establish grounds for intricate and intriguing cross-cultural comparisons. These exchanges and collaborations don't fit within the biennale model. They thrive from community interaction that takes place across official boundaries. And so often they occur across space/time zones, traversing technological field-sites that borrow from nationalistic or traditional frameworks of identity in order to extend or morph or challenge them.

And yet the old patterns of funding continue to be welded tightly to structures that are becoming increasingly repetitive. There's a certain jadedness among artists who participate in the Biennale circuit, and it even seems to be affecting the responses of those who follow the international art biennale carnivals. A lot of muttering about the same-old same-old.

Many of them come home from these pilgrimages to re-ignite all sorts of smaller scale projects: conversations and exchanges and projects that engage with globalization in smaller, more nimble ways. It's difficult to legislate or control or limit the nature of such undertakings, and that's what's best and worst about them. In recent years NAVA has established a network of international arts advocacy organisations through which organisations across countries can exchange ideas, tactics and recipes for success. Organisations in the loop get a bi-monthly newsletter that keeps in touch with what's going down and when. These kinds of small-but-mobile undertakings back up what's already happening, rather than trying to reinforcing old frameworks or set up new ones.

Decisions about the best way to inform and encourage and foster the best of international exchanges take time, and are best made when they engage as wide a survey of the coalface as possible. Consultation takes time. It's often as messy as it is contentious, and settling for the office-based decisions of bureaucracy often seems to be the most efficient decision.

However, the laboriousness and inefficiency of leviathan institutions and organisations have become palpably obvious in the current climate of economic melt-down. It may well be that the small and lithe will survive the retreat of the global economic tide best. Whatever way is best for the future, what emerges most clearly is that organisations like NAVA need to survey what's sustainable and what's not, where the best effects of globalization have occurred and why. It's a time for exciting considerations about a more culturally diverse future, one that doesn't collect together all its cultural eggs into one basket.

Pat HOFFIE is a visual artist who has had extensive experience in the Asia-Pacific region. A monograph on the past fifteen years of one aspect of her work titled *Fully Exploited labour*. Pat HOFFIE, edited by Sally Butler was released by Queensland University Art Museum this month. She is a Professor and a director of the research centre SECAP (Sustainable Environment and Culture, Asia-Pacific).