

11th Biennale of Sydney

every 

Artistic Director  
Jonathan Watkins

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The Art Gallery of New South Wales  
Museum of Contemporary Art  
Pier 2/3  
Goat Island  
Ivan Dougherty Gallery  
Artspace  
Australian Centre for Photography  
Government House  
Sydney Opera House  
Royal Botanic Gardens

# Every Day

There is a growing interest amongst contemporary artists, world-wide, in quotidian phenomena and the power of relatively simple gestures. It constitutes a rejoinder to played-out operative tendencies and an overloaded academic (often pseudo-academic) discourse in visual arts, engendered by early post-modernism. The imminence of the year 2000 makes this artistic sea change at once paradoxical and timely, a foil for the portentousness of millennial cultural events. Emphasis here is placed on the significance of every day, and any day, not on the distance between now and arbitrary past and future dates in Western history.

The fundamental proposition of this exhibition arises out of current artistic practice. Selected works are characterised by efficacy and unpreciousness. They are unforced artistic statements, incidentally profound observations on the nature of our lives as lived every day, in contradistinction to supposedly fin-de-siècle appropriationist, neo-surrealist or mannerist strategies — all-too-familiar in living memory — and likewise new-age transcendentalist gestures. Their impetus, derived from what is ordinary, is not unlike that which led nineteenth-century French artists to their realist and subsequently impressionist positions. It is more human than spiritual, more empiricist than idealistic, more philosophical than ideological.

Though this project springs from a current Western context, there is significant correspondence with a wide range of cultural traditions increasingly being acknowledged through a new internationalism. As every day occurs everywhere in the world, participating artists hail from each of the five continents. The curatorial challenge arises from the relativism of what is everyday, the differences between what is familiar, common or ordinary within the diversity of cultures represented. The aim is to communicate the nature of every day and to be culturally specific, declaring differences without resorting to exoticism particularly in the presentation of non-Western art. Whereas a sublime and prescriptive world-view of contemporary art is out of the question, a more balanced and ultimately more constructive global dialogue is certainly feasible.

The Biennale presents an opportunity for the telling juxtaposition of work by artists whose distance from one another is normally vast. Here, for example, On Kawara (Japan/USA) meets Georges Adéagbo (Benin), Frédéric Bruly Bouabré (Ivory Coast) and Jean Frédéric Schnyder (Switzerland) in works that all resemble personal journals. The single-image colour photographs by Roy Arden (Canada), Noa Zait (Israel) and Pekka Turunen (Finland), so evocative particularly of the places they depict, can be readily compared. The minimalism of paintings by Katherina Grosse (Germany), Rover Thomas (Australia) and Ding Yi (China) seen in proximity suggest an affinity in spite of the virtually incommensurable thought systems which inform them.

The broad area covered by this exhibition is articulated by various concerns and stances. Pronouncements with respect to style or medium (the dominance of one, the redundancy of another) are deliberately avoided, deemed pointless now, but the artists clearly do share various attitudes. Above all perhaps is an aspiration to directness, as opposed to gratuitous mediation or obscurantism. A break is made with art about art — art here is about things other than an interrogation of its own artistic identity — and continuity is affirmed between phenomena within and beyond the art world.

Much of the work exhibited embodies or marks the passage of time through traces of the process of production, thereby stressing its place in our material world. Time is measured out in gestures analogous to the coming and going of every day, reminders that all is temporary and mutable. Concomitant with this is the acknowledgement that the everyday is manifest as much in natural phenomena as it is in common man-made or urban subjects.

Carl Andre's work epitomises the directness at the heart of this project, diametrically opposed to theatricality. Its concrete nature, its "this-is-this-ness", at once conveys the artist's feeling for basic materials and a tough logic which does not distract from the fact that they are simply there. Denise Kum and Ernesto Neto similarly encourage an apprehension of material fact. The latter, who is working

◀ On Kawara  
*Date Paintings Jan 1-7, 1997*  
Liquitex on canvas  
20 x 25cm; 25 x 32.5cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photography Hiro Inara

in a Brazilian tradition notably developed by Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, seems to encourage a revelry in stuff — ranging from lead shot to powdered spices — and recently his exhibitions have included lycra tent-like structures which can be entered and experienced from the inside. Kum takes raw chemical substances and combines them with extraordinary results, an abstract insistence on the possibility of invention.

Bernard Frize's paintings involve procedures which the artist has likened to recipes. Self-imposed limitations, the ingredients — paint, brush, canvas — and a rigorous set of actions, provide a basis for work which yet accommodates an engaging informality. Like Kum, like Andre, Frize suggests the survival of originality, even in a doodle (far from the realms of art), and simultaneously asserts the concrete nature of his work. It is self-referential to the extent that it does not actually depict anything, but metaphorically it is referring to an unstoppable creative impulse (also in this respect it corresponds with the work of Peter Fischli and David Weiss) so that there always seems to be other ways of painting — other things to make, and other ways of making them.

Katherina Grosse's ongoing project is to make painting easy, thus challenging the hidebound and loaded nature of this medium, working with the broadest brushes to create large areas of overlapping translucent colour. Her work is site-specific to the extent that she often paints directly onto existing walls and responds to formal cues within the vicinity. Likewise the wall drawings of Perry Roberts, recently in Turin and various locations in Belgium, are determined to a large extent by their circumstances, impinging colours and so forth, and thus correspond with a new sort of impressionism as much as with modernist geometric abstraction. What this artist does is in direct response to what confronts him, implying a subservience to what already exists at the same time as adding to it. Another British artist, Martin Creed, summarises this position with an equation: "the whole world + the work = the whole world".

Creed works by himself and with the band *owada*, also in this exhibition. In many ways their work is a musical equivalent of Bernard Frize's painting, a hybrid of relaxed contemporary pop and the stringency of John Cage. The same holds for David Cunningham's generic

sound installation, *The Listening Room*. Through a simple electronic system, Cunningham sucks the ambient noise of a found architectural interior into a wave of sound which breaks and subsides before building up again, in an endless cycle. This work responds acoustically not only to the interior but also to the presence of its audience, fusing the object of the work seamlessly with its subject.

In the examples of figurative work, directness is manifested in relatively unembroidered images — images, for example, which have not been set-up, cut and pasted — and often close to hand. Heavy-handed symbolism and didacticism are avoided, as it is accepted that the viewer easily can do without such pushes towards understanding. Lisa Milroy has long abandoned the structure of her earlier paintings, grids of isolated (often archetypal) objects against a plain ground, in favour of a more familiar pictorial space derived from personal photographs. Fischli and Weiss' sequences of still images, virtually an anthology of snap-shots, in their video installation *Visible World*, 1997, are as easy to watch as they are meaningful. Thomas Struth's recent video portraits require his sitters to look into the lens of the camera for one hour but there is no straining for effect. The small involuntary movements in their faces are more eloquent than any superimposed commentary might be, the time-based nature of this work enabling a rare intimacy.

By contrast Beat Streuli's photographs are usually taken without their subjects' knowledge, in streets, city squares and other such spaces where casual social interaction takes place. The subjects, more often than not, are young and thus relatively transparent as a medium through which a current cultural milieu can be ascertained, not too muddied by personal nostalgia. Their demeanour and look, their clothes and manners are up-to-date, particularly telling as to what constitutes a here and now. Streuli's work in this exhibition is based on photographs he took in Sydney and Melbourne around New Year 1998.

The unhindered flow of information from everyday life into the art world was made conscious and deliberate with Marcel Duchamp's introduction of the Readymade, and not surprisingly, readymade objects are found throughout this exhibition. José Resende is a choreographer of cranes and shipping containers, Virginia Ward resurrects

discarded machinery. Desmond Kum Chi-Keung works with bamboo bird cages, while Marijke van Warmerdam invites us to gamble on one-armed bandits.

It is a truism that art can be made from anything. Rasheed Araeen's recent works are made from scaffolding, Tadashi Kawamata's from garden sheds. Peter Robinson (3.125% Maori) treads a tightrope stretched between political correctness and heresy as he picks up awful nationalist clichés and racist taunts, as readymades, and then throws them back.

Vladimir Arkhipov's *Post-Folk Archive* puts a further twist to the tale of the Readymade, consisting as it does of home-made gadgets, all ready made, collected from people living around Moscow. The ingenuity of these gadgets, in the face of shortages of the most ordinary manufactured goods, inspired him to stop being a sculptor and start collecting. Now Arkhipov's art practice bridges the gap between the useful lives of these gadgets and their acquired identity as components of an art work. The twist lies in the fact that these are not manufactured objects, as readymades usually are, but instead unique creations which might be mistaken for folk art, implying a curatorial effort to somehow "elevate" them. This could not be further from the truth, Arkhipov suggests, because the art world clearly does not occupy elevated ground.

Bangkok has an artistic community, largely orbiting around the About Café, which places an extraordinary emphasis on audience participation, asserting not only a democracy of objects through the use of readymades, but also an interdependence between artists and non-artists. In the spirit of Jorge Luis Borges, who argued for the recognition of the crucial role of the reader, many Thai artists are literally making work with their audience. Rirkrit Tiravanija has at different times provided take-away food, a recording studio for passers-by and art workshops for children. Surasi Kusolwong recently organised an exchange of everyday objects with gallery visitors. Chumpon Apisuk, in a long-term project concerned with the plight of local sex-workers, especially with respect to HIV and AIDS, exhibits a continuing correspondence by fax and recorded messages.

Navin Rawanchaikul's work for this exhibition developed out of his Navin Gallery, Bangkok, an ordinary working taxi in Bangkok which is also the venue for an exhibition programme. It is based on recorded conversations with

Sydney taxi drivers. These are transformed into a small comic story book, *Another Day in Sydney*, freely available in taxis around town, and a sound installation involving a taxi parked inside the exhibition.

Guy Bar-Amotz, an Israeli artist now based in London and Amsterdam, also derives his work from an identifiable professional group, buskers, and karaoke is the chosen form of audience participation. The gruesome cathartic sing-a-long of the overworked middleclasses with under-privileged accompaniment, an increasing phenomenon around the world, is a characteristically edgy mix.

Perhaps as an antidote, the home has come to signify, more than ever, a refuge, as Nikos Papastergiadis observes in his essay here: "Not only are more and more people living in places which are remote and unfamiliar to them, but even those who have not moved increasingly feel estranged from their own sense of place." Whether or not this is directly experienced by artists, a preponderance of current art works refer to the nature of the home, often problematically, and reflect a basic need for shelter.

Desmond Kum Chi-Keung's birdcages allude to the overcrowded housing conditions in Hong Kong. Gavin Hipkins' photostrips make up an obsessive unedited analysis of the various rooms he inhabits. Howard Arkley's choice of the suburban Australian home as a subject for his spray paintings could not be more apt. Maria Hedlund's white photographs suggest the corruptible nature of the domestic spaces we create for ourselves.

Absalon's actual-size white prototypes for houses epitomise a very particular daily life and at the same time anticipate his tragic early death. Ostensibly, the *Cellules*, to be built in various cities around the world, were to be small buildings in which the artist lived alone, with room enough for only one visitor at a time. With interconnected spaces for eating, sleeping, working and toilet activity, the designs betray the formative influences not only of classic modernism but also the artist's native middle-eastern culture. Ideas from Arab architecture and Bedouin life are combined in this project for the accommodation of an endlessly travelling individual.

The appeal of the *Cellules* lies largely in the viewer's identification with Absalon's need to make a place for himself. Henrietta Lohtonen's work *Nest*, 1995 subtitled "Reconstruction of a nest I built five years old. At the age

of eighteen I started to study architecture”, strikes the same chord. Sofas, rugs, blanket, pillows and a coffee table are rearranged in order to create a child-sized refuge, one to keep the adult world at bay.

Other works by Lehtonen have referred directly to childhood and in this too, she is not alone amongst contemporary artists. There is a distinct revival of interest in the world of children. This is not sentimental and more than a simple acknowledgement that children are equally part of everyday life — it springs from an appreciation that children’s perception is relatively unhabituated and their expression of thoughts and feelings is refreshingly candid. Furthermore, children are indicative of an imagined future and thus their significant figuring as subjects in contemporary art tends to contradict notions of a washed-up decadent culture.

Both Ann Veronica Janssens and Suchan Kinoshita involve their own children in their work, not as if it were a remarkable fact but rather as a logical consequence of an inclusive art practice. Joël Bartoloméo’s video works document scenes of his family life — tense as one child descends from out-of-frame feet-first down a cliff-face, frustrating as another fumbles, seemingly forever, with a camera to take a holiday group portrait, upsetting as they bash the pet cat.

Julian Opie’s recent stylised drawings, scaled up and transformed into installations, are derived as much from children’s book illustrations as they are from corporate graphics and industrial design. A wide range of details is eliminated and yet we respond immediately to the simple shapes and colours. This is a cow. A dog. A tree. A car. A building. It is as if we see ourselves seeing for the first time.

Shimabuku’s projects to date have included the presentation of found children’s drawings and a collaboration with children as part of an outdoor sculpture commission. In the same spirit On Kawara is exhibiting seven *Date Paintings*, from the first seven days of 1997, in a local kindergarten to coexist with the children’s counting and reading lessons. It is hard to imagine a more effective way of proving the potentially broad appeal of an uncompromising conceptualism.

On Kawara’s work is canonical, direct and economical, marking time as it passes — in the case of his *Date Paintings*, against an unseen backdrop of newspaper

pages which reiterate his continuing existence. His famous statement “I am still alive” (at once too much and not enough, wonderfully funny and deadly serious) is implicit in everything he does. Parts of his *I Met* and *I Went* projects (from 1968), recording everywhere he went and everyone he met on the same days thirty years ago are also in this exhibition.

The measured continuum of time embodied in On Kawara’s work features in many works in this exhibition. Frédéric Bruly Bouabré’s postcard-sized pictures are drawn from daily life in his village of Zéprégühé on the Ivory Coast. Hung in long rows they suggest both a spelt-out pictorial language and, as each is dated, the regular diurnal cycle. The dates assert the fact that he was actually there, then.

Jean Frédéric Schnyder exhibits a row of forty paintings, each depicting a sunset over the Zugorssee, the lake near his home. Riding his bicycle to the same place every evening during several months last year, he set about painting the same scene *en plein air*, one painting per day, thereby recording the incremental movement of the sun in relation to the horizon and a spectrum of impressions and meteorological effects. Intersecting in Schnyder’s work are a number of concerns which exemplify the thesis of this exhibition. They include a response, as direct as possible, to his subject, a subject that is at once familiar and taken as it is, and a concern with the effects of temporality.

In addition, Schnyder is declaring his unabashed interest in landscape and natural phenomena. Many other artists here, such as Roni Horn, Patrick Killoran, Olafur Eliasson, Greon Lepper, Kim Young-Jin, Dieter Kiessling, Joyce Campbell, Jimmy Wululu and Rover Thomas, are doing the same. This does not signify a sentimental or reactionary tendency, somehow in opposition to an avant-garde; it is rather the artistic expression of what happens every day, as innovative as it is uncontrived.

The serial nature of Schnyder’s work, and that of On Kawara and Bouabré, suggests another pattern which can be extended to include those artists in this exhibition whose practice involves small repetitive gestures, a certain orientation towards craft activity. There is reference to the marking of time, and a light touch on the subject of mortality, for example, in the work of Fernanda Gomes

and Germaine Koh. The latter's ongoing project, *Knitwork*, is an accumulation of her knitting with wool unravelled from second-hand garments. Its present sixty metre length has Sisyphean implications and becomes increasingly a heavier burden. Ani O'Neill's crocheted circles have affinities with the project of Katherina Grosse and, at the same time, bear witness to her ancestry in the Cook Islands.

The woven works of Aboriginal artists Margaret Robyn Djunjiny and Elizabeth Djutarra also derive from traditional culture. Ding Yi uses paintstick on tartan fabric, playing off the pattern or mimicking the weave with a technique which clearly betrays the influence of Buddhist philosophy, through calligraphy. Kim Soo-Ja conflates fabric bundles, potent symbols of the role of women in Korean society, with video images of their movement.

The reference to craft is taken to an extreme by those artists who simulate the everyday, not in games of double-take or due to a latter day Pre-Raphaelitism, but because the subject suggests itself as absolutely sufficient. The meticulousness of the process signifies a fascination with

the smallest detail, and simulation is the logical conclusion. Fischli and Weiss produce painted polyurethane sculptures of the most humble objects, such as orange peel and cigarette ends, and Yoshihiro Suda makes painted wooden flowers and weeds. Clay Ketter and Joe Scanlan use the actual materials of their chosen subjects — respectively, plasterboard, nails and plaster for sculptures of sections of prepared walls, and timber for a coffin sculpture — and their aspiration to directness could not be clearer.

Ketter and Scanlan operate within the realm of the everyday, and every day, as do Fischli and Weiss, Carl Andre, Lisa Milroy, On Kawara, Virginia Ward, Joyce Campbell, Georges Adéagbo, Rirkrit Tiravanija and all the other artists in this exhibition. Such diversity with respect to media, style and subject matter, such interest in all areas of life and unpretentiousness, however, does not mean this is an art world where anything goes. Never does anything go. Then again, never before has an art world been so open, and so accessible.