

Alongside the big video is big sound: Rufus Wainwright's unmistakable voice in Gordon's *Phantom*, 2011; Sonia Leber and David Chesworth's eerie *This Is Before We Disappear from View*, 2014; the brutal sound track of Ignas Krunglevicius's excellent *Interrogation*, 2009; and the remarkable interaction between the sounds of children and geothermal energy in Mikhail Karikis's *Children of Unquiet*, 2013–14—to name just a few examples.

Anthony Byrt, Artforum, 24 March 2014

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Water's Edge

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Left: Artist Ignas Krunglevicius. Right: Writer Daniel Palmer, Biennale of Sydney curator Juliana Engberg, and artist Mathias Poledna. (All photos: Anthony Byrt)

SYDNEY IS A BRISTLING harbor city that evolved as a haphazard solution to nineteenth-century economic questions—build fast and build close to the water, to get stuff, and people from all over the world, in and out as quickly as possible. Despite its being one of the region's most contemporary cities, you can still feel its colonial pulse: the crush of people from all over Asia and the Pacific, the heat, the ever-present potential for violence, and the constant, unavoidable relationship with the water. For several iterations now, the Biennale of Sydney has placed the city's frontier past at its heart by using Cockatoo Island, in the middle of Sydney Harbor, as one of its major venues. "Cockatoo," as Sydney-siders call it, has at various times been a brutal prison, a "reform school" for young women who'd ended up on the wrong side of the law, and a major shipbuilding yard. It's a physical encapsulation of Sydney's violent trajectory, and one still deeply scarred by it, both psychologically and architecturally.

Curator Juliana Engberg does psychogeography well, so the scale of the Nineteenth Biennale of Sydney, its utilization of Cockatoo, and its interaction with its host city, were always going to be welcome tests of her abilities. It was also clear from the very first press release that "You Imagine What You Desire" was going to be a classically Engbergian show: romantic, affective, and charged

with erotic encounter. As Engberg said to me, she'd wanted to "unleash some energy," activating the biennial's multiple sites and creating poetic links across Sydney. Indeed, in her address at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Wednesday night, she spoke openly and passionately about metaphor and the sublime. The night before, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, she'd delved briefly into Prometheus and classical mythology. And on stage with Douglas Gordon for the keynote on Friday evening, she spoke of sin, fairy tales, and archetypes.

Throughout the vernissage week, I heard people refer to her time and again as an "artist's curator." It was clear, from the artists and the projects she'd selected, that she'd also wanted to create an "artist's Biennale," and that she wasn't going to take a backward emotional step. The show is full of big video from the likes of Gordon, Pipilotti Rist, Wael Shawky, and Yael Bartana.



Left: Artist Shannon Te Ao. Right: Artist Callum Morton.

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There are also strong contributions from Australasian artists, with several important figures such as Callum Morton, Mikala Dwyer, and Susan Norrie included alongside comparative newcomers from the region like Angelica Mesiti, Joseph Griffiths, and Shannon Te Ao. The opening events seemed to have been planned with the same undulation between grandeur and intimacy that the work displayed, with large-scale official openings often followed by smaller "artist parties"—access to which was staunchly policed by well-intentioned but slightly scary young PR staffers, armed with tablets and guest lists.

But this was never going to be an opening week about parties. It was going to be about Engberg's curatorial agenda and how it held up in the wake of the events leading up to the biennial, which had threatened to scupper the entire show. Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, and in particular "boat people" who pay human traffickers to put them on overcrowded, unseaworthy crafts bound for Australia's coastline, has become one of the country's most divisive issues. When it emerged that one of the biennial's major corporate sponsors, Transfield, was involved in Australia's controversial offshore detention centers for asylum seekers, around half of the participating artists signed an open letter requesting that the biennial sever its ties with the company, arguing that it put them in a "chain of connections that links to human suffering." The pressure increased dramatically when a riot on February 17th at the Manus Island facility left one person dead and many others injured. The irony that Cockatoo was once an island detention center itself wasn't lost on many of the artists scheduled to exhibit there. There were calls for a boycott, which led to nine artists withdrawing.

The letter and the boycott, heartfelt though they were, placed a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" cloud over everyone involved. Several artists who'd decided to stay in the show spoke off-the-record of the immense pressure they'd been placed under to withdraw. The standoff also

inadvertently oversimplified a remarkably complex issue that all of us in the art world have to take a position on: not the detention centers, which are a horrific response to a humanitarian problem, but global art money's relative cleanliness. Then there is the fact that a huge amount of arts funding in Australia, including for the biennial, comes from the Australia Council, which in turn is funded by the Australian government—the same one implementing the detention-center policy. The dispute may also have a nasty tail for the future of the biennial. In early March, one government minister, speaking on national radio, labeled the protest an act of “vicious ingratitude,” while the Federal Arts Minister called for a change in the Australia Council's mandate, which would see recipients of funding penalized for turning down corporate sponsorship on “unreasonable” grounds.

In the end, a temporary fix came not from the artists but from the biennial board, when it announced that the biennial would immediately cut its financial ties with Transfield, and that it had accepted the resignation of the board's chairman, Transfield's Luca Belgiorno-Nettis. It was a workaround that didn't leave anyone—including the protesting artists—looking particularly good. Belgiorno-Nettis's family had been instrumental figures in the Biennale of Sydney for decades, so while for some participants his resignation illustrated the power of protest, for others it left a lingering, sour taste. But it did at least open a pressure valve that enabled the biennial to get back on track. Nonetheless, there was a residual electricity from these events that couldn't be avoided throughout the opening week. The huge media turnout for the preview suggested that this biennial was about more than just art. Belgiorno-Nettis was pointedly thanked in several opening speeches. The roars and hoots of support for Engberg each time she spoke seemed as much for her stoicism as her curatorial vision. A few boycotters had returned, and a handful of artists, including an anonymous contributor at AGNSW quoting Edward Said in bright neon, had attempted to address the asylum issue head-on in their work. Perhaps the least helpful consequence was that some vernissage attendees seemed to think Engberg's show was without polemic; an unfair characterization of an intelligent, sensual exhibition marked by many moments of transformative, disruptive power.

Douglas Gordon's keynote address on Friday night offered one final opportunity to prove that art doesn't have to be didactic to be political. Gordon and Engberg opted for a loose, conversational format, which started stutteringly and quickly became awkward. Several moments hovered on the brink of revelation: the significance of tears, reflections on the difference between faith and belief, accounts of early visual experiences, disclosures of childhood traumas. It felt like we were close to making an important discovery, not only about Gordon's work, but also about Engberg's curatorial logic. Ultimately, though, Gordon didn't seem to want to play ball, evading solid answers and leaving half-formed provocations hanging uncomfortably in the air. If his erratic performance was deliberate, it was the wrong approach, and in the end it was a relief—probably for Engberg as much as anyone else—when they left the stage. But whatever else you could say about it, it was unmissable, and a fittingly bizarre end to a strange, charged week. Engberg, with the help of Gordon and her other artists, had certainly unleashed “something”; but quite what that is, and what its consequences will be, might take us a long time to truly know.

— *Anthony Byrt*