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 Toni Ross, 19th Biennale of Sydney, Artforum, New York, Summer 2014

flat-screen on the floor, we see the astronomer in the observatory's planetarium, while the second channel projected onto a large domed screen echoes and abstracts to simple lines and visual effects the rotating motions of the planetarium covers and winding of mechanical devices on the telescopes seen on the flat-screen. Although the shape of the screen obviously refers to the planetarium, Sawa uses the curved surface as an arena in which to evoke such devices as the zoetrope, clock, or kaleidoscope.

The mysterious video installation *Envelope*, 2014, shows a woman in a white dress undertaking a sequence of ritualistic acts: She bows, swings back and forth, lights and then snuffs out a candle, picks flowers, breaks a teacup. More than Sawa's previous works, this one relies heavily on the theatrical, abstract, and unmistakably metaphoric performance of its protagonist. Fragmented actions with abundant symbolism, however, do not add up to a comprehensible narrative, and the piece not only is cryptic but sometimes feels contrived. Nonetheless, the setup of the installation is masterful: Three large mirrors facing the vertical projection stand behind the viewing benches, reflecting in darkness both the video and the viewers; viewers are sandwiched between dynamic crisscrossing reflections that seem to merge the real world with the image world. The title and credits appear reversed in the beginning and at the end, as if to emphasize the dominance of the mirror images over direct experience. The hyperclarity of the images and the high and agitating notes of a piano on the sound track further the icy tension of this work. Viewing the show was like sliding into the dark tunnel of a dream, experiencing dramatic changes in moods and contrasts of scale—taking a tumble down the video rabbit hole.

—Shinyoung Chung

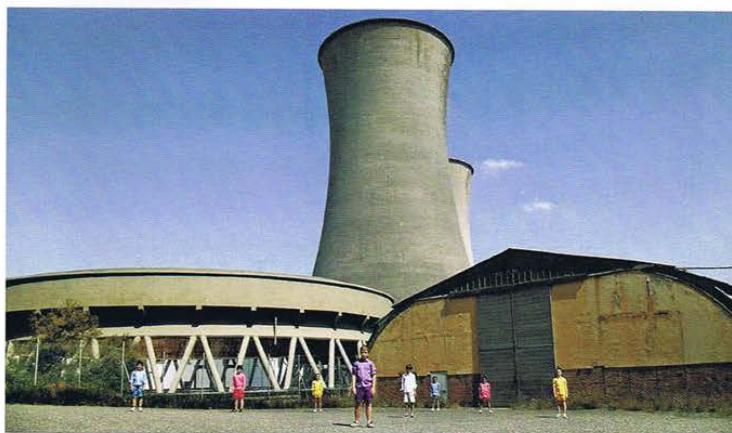
## SYDNEY

### 19th Biennale of Sydney

VARIOUS VENUES

The Nineteenth Biennale of Sydney may be remembered more for a boycott by participating artists than for the curatorial vision of artistic director Juliana Engberg, who subtitled the show "You Imagine What You Desire." It is the blackest irony that the curator's vision of art "imagining a world beyond the prosaic grounded life" should be ambushed by the festering political controversy surrounding Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. The target of the artists' protest was the Biennale's sponsorship by Transfield Holdings, a shareholder in Transfield Services, which runs Australia's offshore detention centers on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru. These camps are central to a government policy of deterring "unauthorized" refugee arrivals. While one local politician accused agitating artists of "vicious ingratitude" and another advised them to confine political statements to their art, the threatened boycott got results. The son of Transfield's founder resigned from his position as chairman of the Biennale board, and the reconfigured board severed financial ties with the company.

While the Biennale's lead-up was overshadowed by these events, Engberg put together a show overflowing with aesthetically engaging, thoughtful, and—yes—political works. As in the past, the exhibition sprawls across vastly different inner-Sydney sites, from conventional museum spaces at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Museum of Contemporary Art to the abandoned maritime and penal architecture of Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. Artists from Australasia and Europe (East and West) are plentiful, with a smattering of low-key works from Chinese artists (among them Zhao Zhao and Yingmei Duan) and big-production videos from Wael Shawky and Yael Bartana.



Especially bountiful and impressive this year are offerings of moving-image art, ranging from displays of hypervisual grandeur to more intimate, meditative, or gritty works. At the MCA, a new video installation by Pipilotti Rist, *Mercy Garden Retour Skin*, 2014, opts for eye-popping spectacle. Visitors are assailed on all sides by color-saturated, high-definition, and magnified video footage of stunning terrestrial and ocean environments. Other videos at the MCA contrast starkly with Rist's extravaganza. The washed-out interiors and unresolved detective story of Corin Sworn's *The Rag Papers*, 2013, cater to the pleasure of watching almost nothing happen for twenty minutes. Ann Lislegaard's shorter 3-D animation work *Oracles, Owls . . . Some Animals Never Sleep*, 2012–13, presents the uncanny spectacle of owls talking sexual politics and science fiction. Also at the same venue, "Tombeau de Ferdinand Cheval" (Tomb of Ferdinand Cheval), 2013, a series of luminous black-and-white photographs by Aurélien Froment, inventories naive decorative motifs from an architectural folly built by a postman in rural France.

The challenging spaces of Cockatoo Island traditionally test Biennale artists and curators. To Engberg's credit, the island is not cluttered with artworks, as in the past, and most artists have engaged meaningfully with their allocated sites. Among the highlights here are a sculpture installation by Mikala Dwyer, video works by Mikhail Karikis and Ignas Krunglevicius, and a sound piece by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth. Dwyer's constellation of large transparent plastic sculptures *The Hollows*, 2014, was free-formed on site with a heat gun and suspended from the roof of a decaying dockyard building, with a view onto the sea. Situated in a disused bureaucratic space, Krunglevicius's video *Interrogation*, 2009, is based on the transcript of a police officer questioning a woman suspected of shooting her husband; palm-sweating tension is imparted simply by visualized words on two video screens and a throbbing electronic sound track. The audio work by Leber and Chesworth, *This Is Before We Disappear From View*, 2014, is installed in an old coal bunker, where an antiquated loudspeaker transmits an authoritarian voice speaking with poetic obliquity of submission and resistance to penal systems. In Karikis's sixteen-minute video *Children of Unquiet*, 2013–14, a group of children play, sing, chant, and read aloud amid the ruins of an abandoned Tuscan village, surrounded by industrial detritus and geothermal activity. The children's falsetto vocals and recitation of philosophies of biopolitics intermingle with sounds of hissing steam, bubbling geysers, and straining metal. Engberg is no fan of didactic or analytical art, preferring conceptually layered and poetic practices in all media. Luckily, her eye for established and emerging artists working in this vein is at its most discerning in this Biennale.

—Toni Ross

Mikhail Karikis, *Children of Unquiet*, 2013–14, digital video, color, sound, 16 minutes 30 seconds. From the 19th Biennale of Sydney.