

Art in America

REPORT FROM SYDNEY

Remapping the Art World

BY LILLY WEI

The most recent Sydney Biennale focused on the shifting encounters—cultural, political, economic, symbolic—that increasingly characterize our globalist century.

“Zones of Contact,” the 15th edition of the Biennale of Sydney, was a wide-ranging exhibition of 85 artists from 57 cities, but it was “without a theme,” insists Charles Merewether, the show’s artistic director and curator.¹ A native of Australia with a doctorate in art history from the University of Sydney, and formerly the collections curator at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, Merewether prefers the terms “conceptual framework” or “concept” to “theme,” noting—in an ironic and authoritative baritone—that “concept is a word actually used on television, so it isn’t difficult.” For the 2006 Sydney Biennale, Merewether calculated that, between 2004 and 2006, he spent approximately 300 days traveling, visited over 50 cities in 47 countries and met with 1,500 artists in search of distinctive works and artists who responded to his framework. In the process, he gathered a large group of politically and socially engaged works in all visual disciplines, from painting to performance (and including sound), loosely bound by the “concept” of “zones” or of “mapping,” as he writes in the introduction to the catalogue. “In each case, these zones constitute different discursive practices, with their own rules of operation and accompanying values” and address the “increasing occurrences of the use and experience of being faced with demarcated zones in daily life.” He then lists more than two dozen examples: e.g., war zone, hot zone, strike zone, buffer zone, transit zone, Western zone, Eastern zone, trade zone, comfort zone, erogenous zone, symbolic zone—although, tellingly, most of the zones refer to conflict and combat.

“Zone,” as he deploys it, is locked onto other words like a universal suffix, but nonetheless, “Zones of Contact,” which Merewether describes as a threshold to the global (and as a refresher course in geography and its implications) is as good a framework as any, expansive enough to successfully hang a biennial on. Many of the artists included were already well-known, of course, and were chosen to lend ballast to the event, but many others were not, coming from countries not frequently represented on the worldwide circuit. Taken together, the participating artists give an idea of what a sector of the international scene is like at the moment and how many active sites

of contemporary practice there are. Approximately half of the work was specifically made for the Biennale, Merewether explained in a patchwork interview snatched at various points during the opening days, so “zones of contact was essentially a general brief that I wanted the artists to think through and react to. It was a risk, but worthwhile. I wanted it to be a show about articulating problems, about colonial legacies and contemporary situations, such as Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey and so on. And I was surprised. Some works far exceeded my expectations and endorsed my belief in enterprises of this nature as an opportunity to make work under different circumstances and on a grand scale, limited only by budgetary considerations. Biennales are not gallery shows.” [...]

Homographies (2006), an interactive installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (b. 1967 in Mexico City; lives and works in Montreal and Madrid), was the first work one saw upon entering. Over 70 white fluorescent-light tubes were placed in rows on the ceilings, rotating 360 degrees in response to viewers’ movements, tracked by several computerized surveillance systems, with monitors along one wall to capture images of the visitors walking through. Conjuring up an Orwellian world—one with a show-biz slant—Lozano-Hemmer’s light display was an impressive and entertaining spectacle, as the fluorescent tubes swiveled like a well-trained, synchronized chorus line.

On the other wall was an immense installation of 7,000 little canvases by John Reynolds (b. 1956 in Auckland, where he lives and works). For this work, which was arranged as a cloud formation, Reynolds went through a Maori-English dictionary from A to Z, painting a silver word or words referring to things New Zealand on each white support, forming a lexical portrait of the country.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: *Body Movies*, Relational Architecture 6, 2001, mixed-media installation with xenon projectors and computerized tracking system, dimensions variable. Photo Arie Kievit.