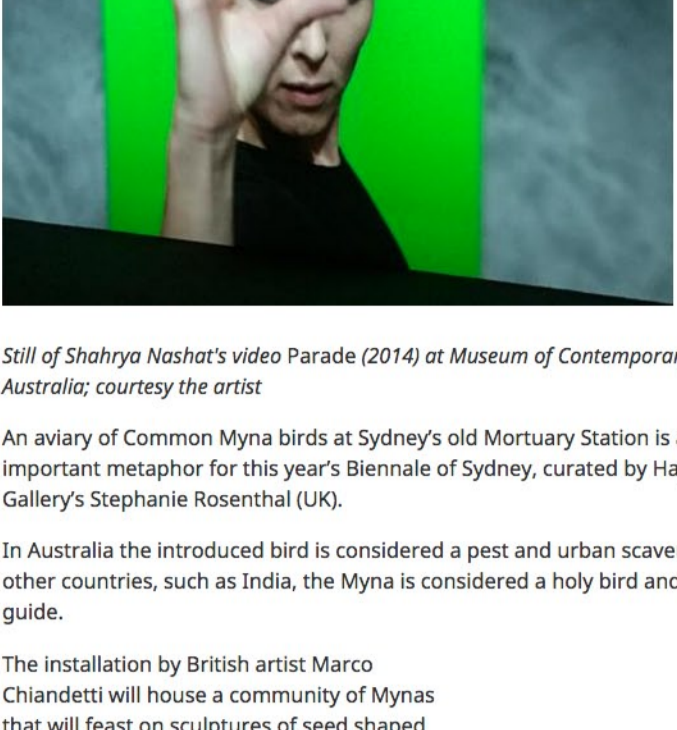


Biennale of Sydney: How a bird beats a boycott

GINA FAIRLEY

After the trauma of the last edition, the 20th Biennale of Sydney re-patterns resistance with a softer but powerful tune, and asks what future do we want?

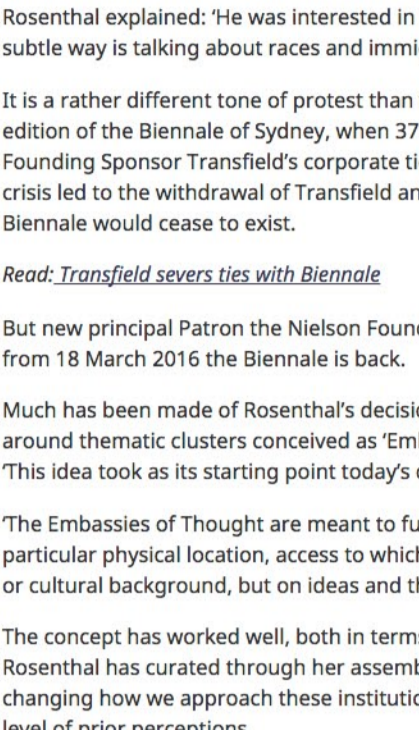


Still of Shahrya Nashat's video Parade (2014) at Museum of Contemporary Art Australia; courtesy the artist

An aviary of Common Myna birds at Sydney's old Mortuary Station is an important metaphor for this year's Biennale of Sydney, curated by Haywood Gallery's Stephanie Rosenthal (UK).

In Australia the introduced bird is considered a pest and urban scavenger but in other countries, such as India, the Myna is considered a holy bird and divine guide.

The installation by British artist Marco Chiandetti will house a community of Mynas that will feast on sculptures of seed shaped to his own body parts. As they are eaten over the duration of the exhibition, the "art" disappears and the seeds dropped will sprout a carpet of new growth.



Installation view of Marco Chiandetti aviaries at The Mortuary Station for his work Heavenwards (2016); courtesy the artist

Rosenthal explained: 'He was interested in the change of context, and in his subtle way is talking about races and immigration.'

It is a rather different tone of protest than the one that nearly toppled the last edition of the Biennale of Sydney, when 37 artists boycotted the event over Founding Sponsor Transfield's corporate ties to off-shore detention centres. The crisis led to the withdrawal of Transfield and fears from the Board that the Biennale would cease to exist.

Read: [Transfield severs ties with Biennale](#)

But new principal Patron the Nielson Foundation rode in as a white knight and from 18 March 2016 the Biennale is back.

Much has been made of Rosenthal's decision to reframe the exhibition venues around thematic clusters conceived as 'Embassies of Thought'. She explained: 'This idea took as its starting point today's challenges surrounding immigration.

'The Embassies of Thought are meant to function as spaces for ideas within a particular physical location, access to which is based not on one's nationally, race or cultural background, but on ideas and the potential they offer,' she continued.

The concept has worked well, both in terms as a navigation of the ideas that Rosenthal has curated through her assembly of artists, but also as a device for changing how we approach these institutions as audiences, stripping back a level of prior perceptions.

Resistance takes many forms

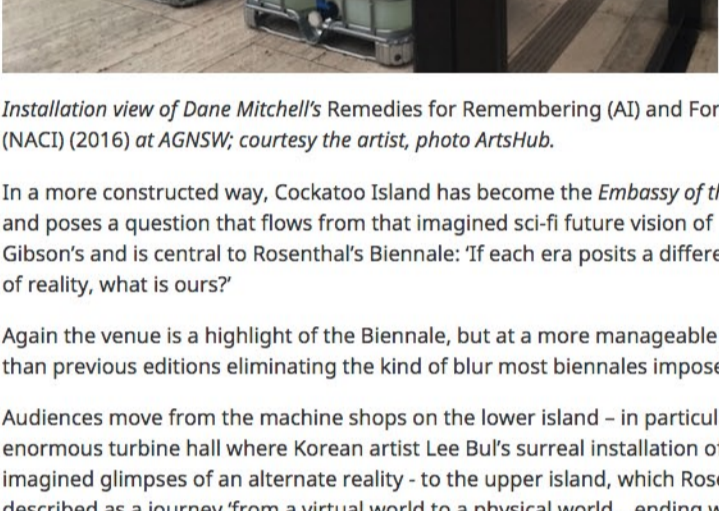
Rosenthal said that in her preparations for her Biennale she spoke to a lot of artists who were thinking of how art is a way to resist. 'That idea of resisting, and a silence in art to resist, is in all the venues,' she said.

The title of her exhibition is: *The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed*. She explained: 'As we have seen with the influx of political refugees not just into Australia, but internationally, one consequence of this uneven distribution is social upheaval on a scale unprecedented in recent world history.'

It is a rather different picture than that imagined by the science-fiction author William Gibson, from whom Rosenthal borrowed her title. While questions for the future resonate across many works – and even a futuristic tech-tone to some – rather it is this subtle thread of "push-back" that probes us to question the status quo that is seeded – just like Chiandetti's pesty Mynas offering regeneration.

Perhaps that intersection of a *real* future and the role that artists play was best demonstrated by an "unplanned collaboration" at the Art Gallery of NSW. The work of New Zealand artist Dana Mitchell punches from the gallery space to the outdoors, a line of vessels are paired with tubing in a cyclical system and are labeled 'For Remembering' and 'For Forgetting'.

Nearby a homeless person has set up a tent. My guess is that the curator would not mind a bit. If anything the street life sings to the song she is delivering in this exhibition.



Installation view of Dane Mitchell's Remedies for Remembering (AI) and Forgetting (NACI) (2016) at AGNSW; courtesy the artist, photo ArtsHub.

In a more constructed way, Cockatoo Island has become the *Embassy of the Real* and poses a question that flows from that imagined sci-fi future vision of Gibson's and is central to Rosenthal's Biennale: 'If each era posits a different view of reality, what is ours?'

Again the venue is a highlight of the Biennale, but at a more manageable pace than previous editions eliminating the kind of blur most biennales impose.

Audiences move from the machine shops on the lower island – in particular the enormous turbine hall where Korean artist Lee Bul's surreal installation offers imagined glimpses of an alternate reality – to the upper island, which Rosenthal described as a journey 'from a virtual world to a physical world...ending with a heart beat.'

She was referring to the sound work by Cedvet Ereğ in the old colonial barracks, a palpable reverberation that is a physical pleasure to experience.

Ereğ didn't visit Cockatoo Island but rather built up his layered imagining of the site through other means, fusing personal narratives, spatial and architectural dynamics and documented histories. Is "the real" then a contested or actual account in his hands? It is a curious conundrum to ponder when felt so strongly by one present in the space.



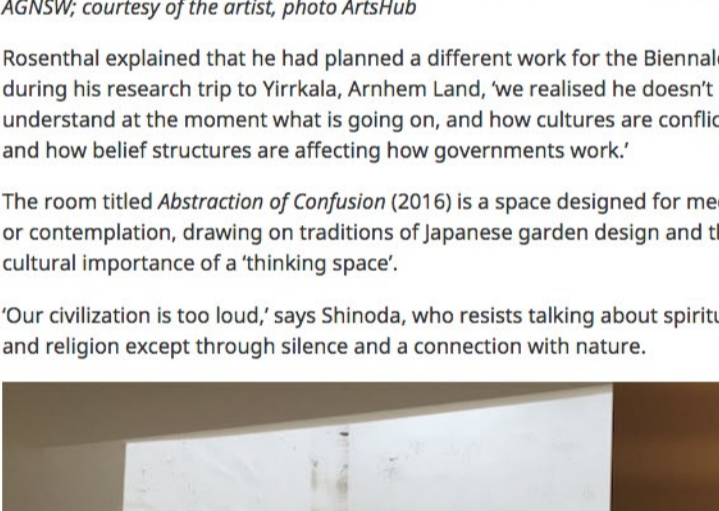
Room of Rhythms – Long Distance Relationship (2016) detail of installation at Carriageworks, a sound work by Cedvet Ereğ; courtesy the artist, photo ArtsHub

Other highlights at Cockatoo Island include Chihari Shota, Miguel Angel Rojas, William Forsythe (but you must experience it) and Korakrit Arunanondchai.

A smaller grouping of works at the Museum of Contemporary Art has become the *Embassy of Transition* with a new suite of paintings by Daniel Boyd, a large body of textile works by the Israeli artist and choreographer Noa Eshkol and a dynamic video piece by Shahryar Nashat (pictured top); while the Art Gallery of NSW has been renamed the *Embassy of Spirits* – a theme superbly played out by artists Taro Shinoda, Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, and Jumana Manna.

Rosenthal spoke of Eshko's work: 'I was interested in how one can resist in different ways by doing different artworks. Noa did her wall carpets during the war when her main dancer had to go to the military and she decided that instead of continuing to choreograph and make stage pieces without him she would do these amazing colourful intuitive wall carpets.'

Rosenthal continued on the idea of non-participatory resistance explaining that Shinoda's white clay and red ochre lined room central to the exhibition at the AGNSW was about resisting the noise to make a statement.

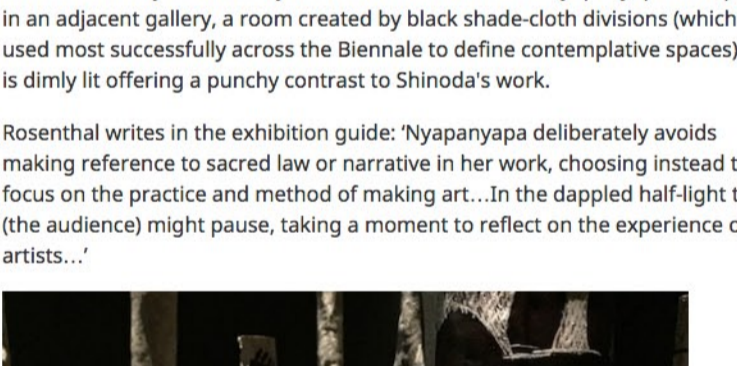


Detail of Taro Shinoda's site-specific installation Abstraction of Confusion (2016) at AGNSW; courtesy of the artist, photo ArtsHub

Rosenthal explained that he had planned a different work for the Biennale but during his research trip to Yirrkala, Arnhem Land, 'we realised he doesn't understand at the moment what is going on, and how cultures are conflicting and how belief structures are affecting how governments work.'

The room titled *Abstraction of Confusion* (2016) is a garden designed for the meditation or contemplation, drawing on traditions of Japanese space design and the cultural importance of a 'thinking space.'

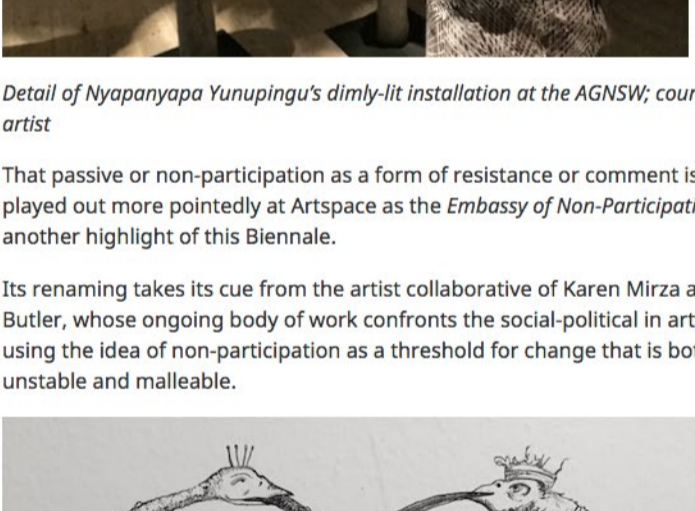
'Our civilization is too loud,' says Shinoda, who resists talking about spirituality and religion except through silence and a connection with nature.



Taro Shinoda meditating in his installation Abstraction of Confusion (2016) at AGNSW; courtesy of the artist, photo ArtsHub

It is a beautifully balanced by the work of Yirrkala artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu in an adjacent gallery, a room created by black shade-cloth divisions (which are used most successfully across the Biennale to define contemplative spaces), and is dimly lit offering a punchy contrast to Shinoda's work.

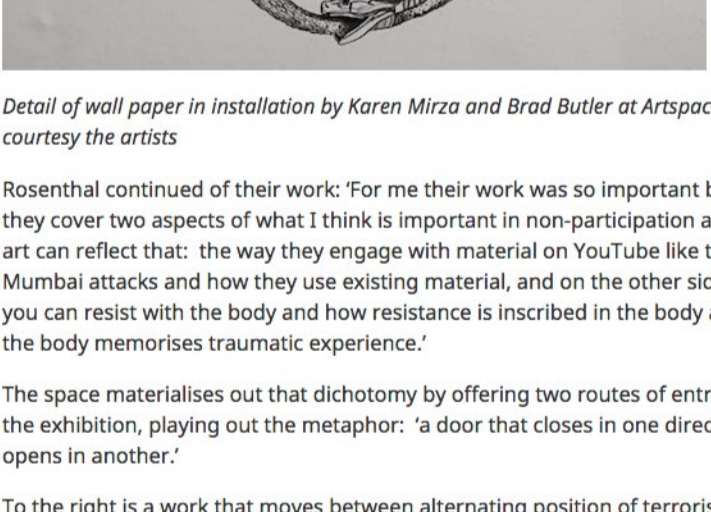
Rosenthal writes in the exhibition guide: 'Nyapanyapa deliberately avoids making reference to sacred law or narrative in her work, choosing instead to focus on the practice and method of making art...In the dappled half-light they (the audience) might pause, taking a moment to reflect on the experience of the artists...'



Detail of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu's dimly-lit installation at the AGNSW; courtesy the artist

That passive or non-participation as a form of resistance or comment is a theme played out more pointedly at Artspace as the *Embassy of Non-Participation*, another highlight of this Biennale.

Its renaming takes its cue from the artist collaborative of Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, whose ongoing body of work confronts the social-political in artworks by using the idea of non-participation as a threshold for change that is both unstable and malleable.



Detail of wall paper in installation by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler at Artspace; courtesy the artists

Rosenthal continued of their work: 'For me their work was so important because they cover two aspects of what I think is important in non-participation and how art can reflect that: the way they engage with material on YouTube like the Mumbai attacks and how they use existing material, and on the other side, how you can resist with the body and how resistance is inscribed in the body and how the body memorises traumatic experience.'

The space materialises out that dichotomy by offering two routes of entry into the exhibition, playing out the metaphor: 'a door that closes in one direction opens in another.'

To the right is a work that moves between alternating position of terrorist and spectator of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and to the left is the work *Hold Your Ground* (2012) inspired by the event of the Arab Spring and the artist's discovery of the pamphlet 'How to protest intelligently'.

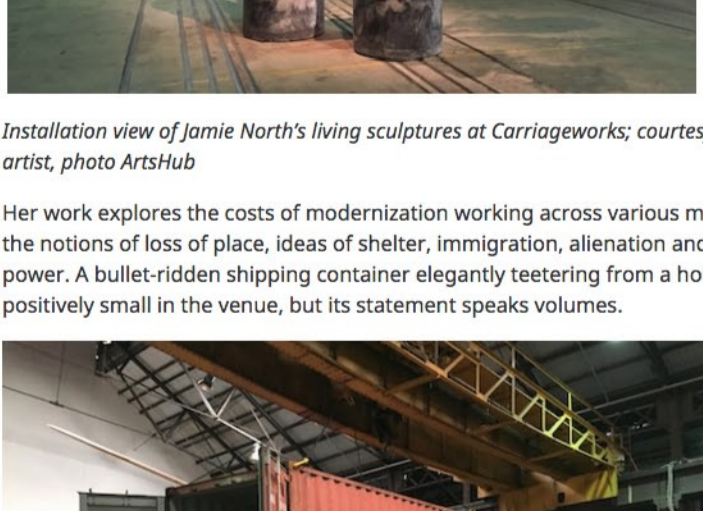
Rosenthal added: 'In a way this *Embassy of Non-Participation*, which feels small, is somehow woven into all the other embassies.'

It is perhaps the most politically urgent across the Biennale, an breathing space that is alleviated from the usual 'pummel-mentality' and allows exhibition space for the viewer's own considerations to surface.

Memory, rather, is a more active for seeding resistance and we witness its many and divergent conversations through works such as Jumana Manna and Yin-Ju Chen's work at the AGNSW, Korakrit Arunanondchai and Chiharu Shota's work at Cockatoo Island and Yuta Nakamura and Chen Chien-Jen's work at Carriageworks, for example.

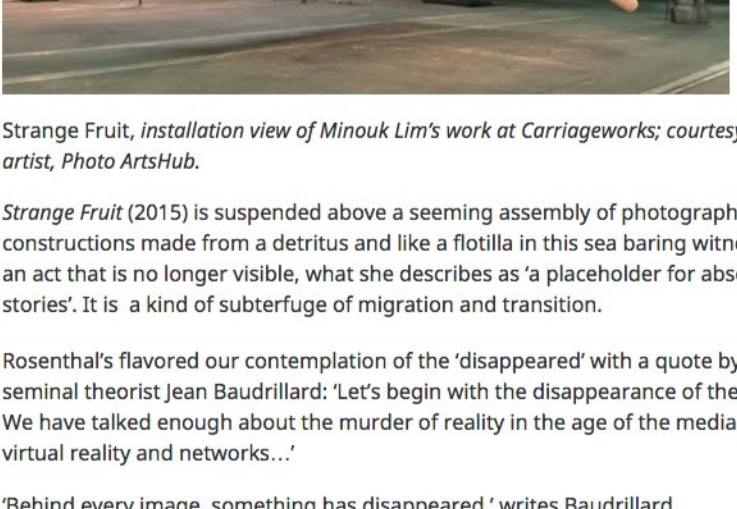
Memory and disappearance go hand-in-hand with transformation, and Carriageworks has been labelled the *Embassy of Disappearance* to flesh out those ideas. While the term disappearance evokes frail threads drifting from view, rather works of scale placed here hold their own in this vast venue making a bold statement, and in that speak of a power in resilience.

A good example is Jamie North's plant consumed cement structures that speak of their own resistance and parallel ideas to Chiandetti's work that embraces change, while Minouk Lim's has an uncanny conversation with the improvised addition to Mitchell's containers at the AGNSW.



Installation view of Jamie North's living sculptures at Carriageworks; courtesy the artist, photo ArtsHub

Her work explores the costs of modernization working across various mediums the notions of loss of place, ideas of shelter, immigration, alienation and political power. A bullet-ridden shipping container elegantly teetering from a hoist looks positively small in the venue, but its statement speaks volumes.



Strange Fruit, installation view of Minouk Lim's work at Carriageworks; courtesy the artist, Photo ArtsHub.

Strange Fruit (2015) is suspended above a seeming assembly of photographers – constructions made from a detritus and like a flotilla in this sea baring witness to an act that is no longer visible, what she describes as 'a placeholder for absent stories'. It is a kind of subterfuge of migration and transition.

Rosenthal's flavored our contemplation of the 'disappeared' with a quote by the seminal theorist Jean Baudrillard: 'Let's begin with the disappearance of the real. We have talked enough about the murder of reality in the age of the media, virtual reality and networks...'

'Behind every image, something has disappeared,' writes Baudrillard.

These are important lessons in Australia's current "out-of-sight" policy for dealing with political refugees and, more specifically, within the cultural sector's current climate of economic funding. To remember history and to stand strong in the face of an adverse future is the resounding walk away.

'I feel there is this urgency at the moment to talk about now,' said Rosenthal, adding that its time to move beyond the (Hollywood) themes of love.

This is exactly the kind of silent resistance that Rosenthal's exhibition out across her exhibition and its voice is louder than the protest of the artists' last edition.

Those discussions of what has disappeared reach perfectly across venues to the Mortuary Station where we started with the *Embassy of Transition* and a flow of Mynas.

Chiandetti flocked installation sits alongside an installation by Charwei Tsai of incense spirals inscribed with an ancient text offering lessons in mourning, that are slowly burning into non existence during the course of the exhibition. The ephemeral nature of the work is beautifully intertwined with the site's history as a place of pause and transition, before the dead were transported for burial.

We start to build those links – Chiandetti to Mitchell, Lim to Nyapanyapa and Shinoda, Tsai to Ereğ – and as indication of a well curated exhibition they sink into our consideration within our own time.

'I am interested to have these changing elements in the exhibition, where objects or sculptures are slowly disappearing and take another form,' Rosenthal added.

Perhaps, the walk away from this exhibition is our own capacity for transformation and re-emergence in this artistic and social climate.

So often curators fail to leave enough space for that in their exhibitions, especially within the biennale vernacular, and Rosenthal has delivered an exhibition that has a more empathetic approach.

20th Biennale of Sydney
18 March—5 June 2016

FIRST PUBLISHED ON WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH, 2016

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