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All our relations: The 18th Biennale of Sydney connects continents

McMaster, Gerald

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ALL OUR RELATIONS

The 18th BIENNALE OF SYDNEY connects continents • BY GERALD McMASTER

Since he took a leave of absence from the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) to work on the 18th Biennale of Sydney with Catherine de Zegher, a former AGO colleague, Gerald McMaster has been hard to pin down for news: he has been travelling the world and looking at artists for the show, which opens at the end of June. We caught up with him via email and asked a few questions.

Canadian Art: What's your role in the 18th Biennale of Sydney?

Gerald McMaster: Along with Catherine de Zegher, I'm the artistic director for the Biennale, which will open this June in Sydney, Australia. As collaborators, we began in conversation, with the idea that our dialogue would develop outward into other conversations. Essentially, we are a curatorial partnership, something that isn't new to me at all. Catherine and I had worked on an exhibition for the Drawing Center almost ten years ago, and then we connected again for the rehang of the Canadian and European galleries at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

During this time, Catherine and I had been talking about working on a large exhibition such as a biennial, since we found our curatorial styles simpatico. The fact that we come from two completely different backgrounds didn't deter us, as we have talked about these differences for years. Thus we began to talk about ways of going about making connections and linkages. So, without a preconceived notion—such as deciding what themes we were going to address and then going out into the world choosing artists to fit the model, so to speak—we began with the simple premise that if we looked at art by visiting artists, curators, dealers, collectors and so on, then we could slowly make the connections. This is not the usual practice: as curators, we're more likely to create a theme with set objectives and then move toward achieving the results. We didn't want this; instead, we considered a more organic process where we had to find our own way. We had frequent discussions about those we visited and the kinds of art we saw, from which we could begin drawing certain inferences. The entire process took less than a year from our first to our final selection of art and artists. In retrospect, it was both a daunting and an exciting process: daunting in the sense that there's so much art and so many artists that you're not sure what path to take, but equally exciting in that you come across artists who surprise you. I am certainly thankful to all the kind folks along the way who participated in this conversation.

To this end, I'd say that we decided against taking the roads most travelled, such as large-scale overviews of the most current art, along with big names. It seems to matter to many that a biennial is about the new and recent. Instead, we were much more mindful in creating a stronger curatorial position. Sometimes we found existing or older works that are more in tune with the present moment; other times we were interested in

Aerial view of Cockatoo Island, Sydney
COURTESY SYDNEY HARBOUR FORESHORE TRUST



artists who have returned to an idea of skill or craft that's articulated through a present-day lens. Ephemerality and recyclability were also ideas that interested us, since some artists were no longer interested in just creating more objects; collaboration was another idea that led us to think more along the lines of relations and interconnections, ideas that eventually underpinned our exhibition, which is how we got to name it "all our relations." We wanted to position artists in the foreground of our curatorial practice because it is their ideas that constantly inspire us and provide us with new and meaningful stories.

What are the key works in the show? The key Canadian works are significant in their way. Most are newly commissioned works, a few are existing works, and others involve collaboration. Cal Lane, for example, will fill a space almost the size of a skating rink, sprinkling red desert sand in a way that shows her signature lace patterns, while a metal shipping container that has been delicately cut by a plasma cutter will sit in the middle of the field. Ed Pien collaborates with the Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq for his large-scale paper installation; his work will be juxtaposed alongside work by the Berlin-based artist Monika Grzymala, who is also collaborating with a group of Aboriginal Australian artists. Together, their installations will fill a space roughly the same size as Cal Lane's. Philip Beesley's hylozoic, interactive landscape (which premiered at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2010, and which Toronto audiences later saw at *Nuit Blanche*) will create some visual excitement in the industrial precinct of Cockatoo Island. The Winnipeg-born, Los Angeles-based artist Jon Pylypchuk takes the ubiquitous cooler—which in Australia is known as an "esky"—and creates coal miners, mining for gold in one of the island's tunnels. Nadia Myre will work each day on the *Scar Project*, in which participants will be asked to sew threads onto canvas as a way of representing various physical, emotional and psychological scars. Erin Manning will spend the entire Biennale using audience participation to fashion clothes that will stimulate the trading of stories, thus creating a relational atmosphere of composition. The Syria-born and Montreal-based Kurdish artist Khadija Baker will do three different kinds of performances, the most interactive of which will be the one performed on the free ferry to Cockatoo Island, where she will ask audiences to empathize with her as they listen to stories through headphones attached to the ends of her long hair. Shuvina Ashoona and John Noestheden will present a new iteration of the street-long banner they collaborated on in Basel and at *Nuit Blanche*. Finally,

ABOVE: KHADIJA BAKER **Coffin-Nest**
2007 Recycled clothing
and strings Dimensions variable
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Sydney audiences will get to see Iris Häussler's new visual narrative at work, in which visitors' sense of reality will be strangely reshaped.

The key non-Canadian works are several. For example, there will be a piece from the Nigeria-based artist El Anatsui, whose works are made from tin and resemble woven cloth; Toronto audiences were recently treated to his work at the Royal Ontario Museum. There are many new works to be discovered on Cockatoo Island. This space has become quite a magnet—not just for audiences, but also for artists who are interested in working in unusual spaces outside the white cube. The Turbine Hall always features spectacular work, and this year is no different. It will be a work by Reinier Rietveld that takes the many sounds of artworks in the 18th Biennale of Sydney and turns them into a masterful soundscape; it will be complemented by a light-and-fog work by the Belgium-based installation artist Ann Veronica Janssens. The Beijing-based artist Li Hongbo will present *Ocean of Flowers* (2012), a 17,000-piece work in honeycomb paper of weapons that reveal floral shapes when unfolded. Robin Rhode's *Variants* (2011) features eight videos in which actors interact with the chair designs of the Dutch designer Gerrit Rietveld. The Japanese performance artist Sachiko Abe will spend the entire Biennale on site performing her *Cut Paper Cloud* (2012). Australian Lyndal Jones will use a decommissioned ferry called the *Barragoola* for a version of a work called *Rehearsing Catastrophe*. And, the Phoenix-based collective Postcommodity will cut a hole in the floor of the Art Gallery of NSW—this is rapidly garnering buzz.

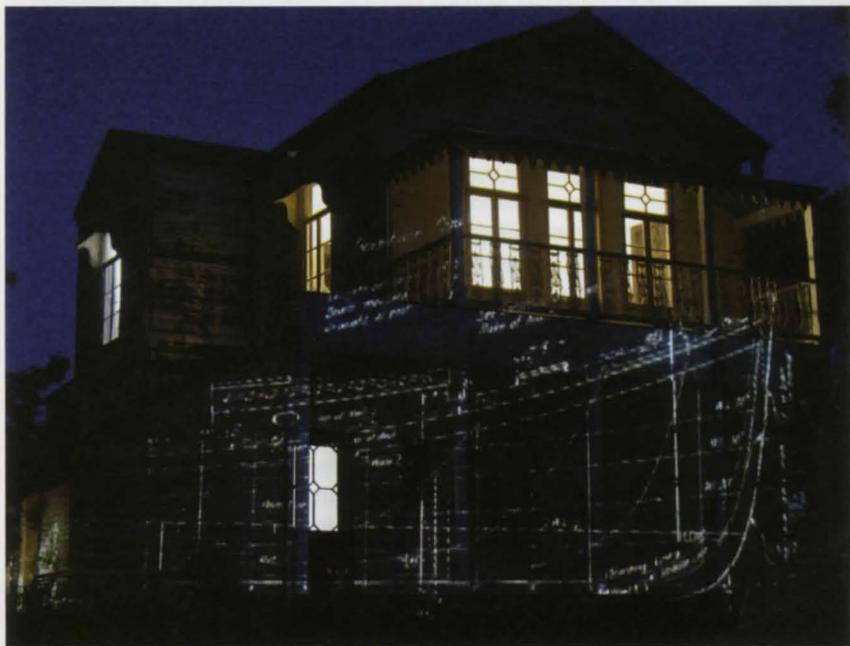
What has the process of co-curating been like? I'd have to say that over the years I've enjoyed working with other curators, for the simple idea that the conversation can lead somewhere. Although I've done exhibitions as the sole curator, I find it much more invigorating to work out ideas alongside another curator. While I still think of working on ideas for future shows that only I can do, in the world today it seems that forming curatorial relationships has significantly more rewards.

The other thing I'd say is that throughout the process of developing the Biennale of Sydney we met many curators who were invaluable to helping us understand the local art scenes. With such a large project, you cannot do it alone without having good connections with other curators. They are usually more aware and have special knowledge of their areas. After discussing our project, they were often very helpful in targeting specific artists or artistic practices. So, in a way, this might be a type of co-curating.

As I said, Catherine and I have known each other for many years as friends, then later as colleagues. Catherine's strength has been working with women artists; mine has been working with historic and contemporary Aboriginal artists. Together, these underrepresented and marginal voices needed to come together to influence change. Though we didn't focus on this point for our exhibition, the strategy did inform how we would go about articulating the ideas. We felt that artists on the peripheries across the globe were now about to take an important and timely step in the art world that for so long had marginalized their practices semantically and intellectually. There was a book years ago called *Woman, Native, Other* by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, the title of which seems to sum up a kind of forward thinking that moves away from earlier modernist thinking and to a degree reflects the new thinking on which Catherine and I have expounded in our respective work.

OPPOSITE TOP: POSTCOMMODITY
Do You Remember When? 2009
Cut concrete, exposed earth, light

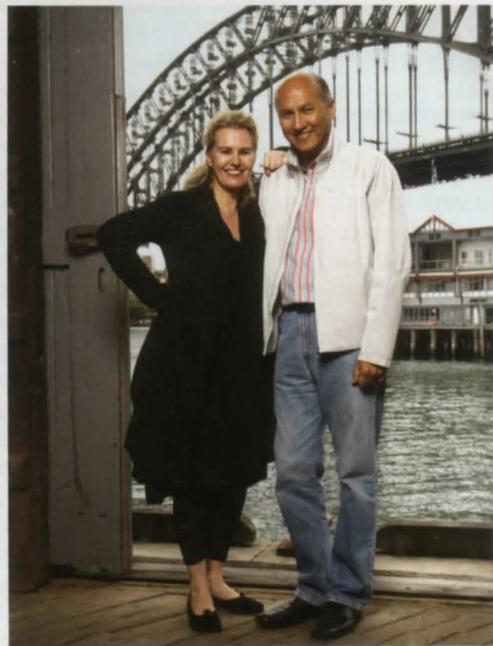
and sound **Dimensions**
variable COURTESY THE ARTISTS
PHOTO JASON GRUBB



LYNDAL JONES **REHEARSING
CATASTROPHE: THE ARK**
IN AVOCA: study 2010

Colour photograph from a
projection onto Watford House,
Avoca Dimensions variable

COURTESY THE ARTIST/ANNA SCHWARTZ
GALLERY, MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES



Catherine de Zegher and
Gerald McMaster at the
Biennale of Sydney's Pier 2/3 site,

September, 2010
PHOTO SEBASTIAN KRIETE

How would you define Sydney in comparison to other biennials? In 1995, I was our country's commissioner to the Venice Biennale, which is the oldest of its kind and unique in many ways. It's a model that isn't replicated elsewhere. São Paulo is next oldest, and in some respects it follows Venice as a model, where there is national representation alongside international presentations. documenta isn't so much a biennial by definition, but has become the standard by which others are measured. Where Sydney might differ is not only that it's the third longest-running international biennial and the first biennial in the Asia-Pacific region, but also that it did away with the nationalist-pavilion model. Also unique is its use of distinct spaces throughout the city. For the 18th Biennale of Sydney, we will once again use the two main art galleries—the Art Gallery of NSW and Australia's Museum of Contemporary Art—as well as Pier 2/3, which is the last undeveloped waterfront pier, and Cockatoo Island, which is accessible only by ferry.

What I also find unique is the character of the country and how it affects the Biennale to some degree, and that is that it is, like Canada, a colonial country. Though Brazil is a colonial country, it provides absolutely no voice to its Indigenous inhabitants—in other words, this aspect of their identity is completely lacking—whereas in Australia it is almost celebrated. To be sure, artists who happen to be Indigenous have become an important part of the Biennale. The last Biennale, directed by David Elliott, placed a palpable emphasis on art from these often overlooked areas of artistic production worldwide.

With more than 150 biennials across the globe, being distinct can be difficult, because each biennial wants to be new and different. The Biennale of Sydney is a significant celebration of contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific region. Sydney as a city is an unquestioned destination for visitors from around the world, and so it goes without saying that the city is built for being an international venue for contemporary art. An added dimension of the Biennale of Sydney is Cockatoo Island, an artifact of the past that provides a superb backdrop for many artists. In fact, its non-white cube character is now attracting many new kinds of visitors, such as families who feel that galleries are a bit too severe.

What makes the Biennale of Sydney a successful biennial? The Biennale of Sydney broke from the nationalist-pavilion model early on, opting instead to work with one artistic director who knew enough of the contemporary international art world to introduce Australian audiences to radical practices previously unseen in the area. As well, as a biennial it was a platform for new artists who went on to establish their careers. For example, the Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya was in the second Sydney exhibition in 1976; she has gone on to do great things with fog as sculpture. We have included her in the 18th Biennale of Sydney as an artist who remains very relevant, not only for the way she makes us see fog differently, but also for the way her work will be juxtaposed with sound artists for this exhibition. Artists create works that either open up a way to see the world differently, or make sense of the present. The fact that Sydney has fog isn't the issue—it's that an artist like Fujiko can make us see the world differently.

Speaking of Sydney, it has a lot going for it as an international city with its own unique natural characteristics. Though the Biennale began in the now-famous Sydney Opera House, we're not using it at all this time. Instead, the city offers dynamic new spaces. With the introduction of Cockatoo Island as a venue in 2008, the Biennale of Sydney has almost

doubled its attendance. Cockatoo Island is an old industrial site—which formerly housed a prison, a home for young women and a shipyard. It's been decommissioned since the early 1990s.

Is the Biennale intended for national audiences or international audiences? There's a sense of internationalism at play, in that Australian audiences want to know what's going on in the rest of the world, to be connected. This is what "all our relations" is about.

Australia has a curious history: not only are its original inhabitants among the oldest in the world, but it's also a country/continent that appears to be far away from its colonial antecedents, but close to large Asian powerhouses such as India and China. Indeed, its history of relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific spans more than 5,000 years. Despite this history of engagement with the region, it's the more recent colonial history where the question of distance seems to persist—especially in the art world.

How far is Australia! To some, it's a great and unique place to visit, especially for those from as far away as North America or Europe. To others, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, it's a chance to visit and renew relations, and to judge the Biennale in relation to other events in the region. International audiences account for 17 per cent of attendance and come specifically to see the art, whereas the greater number of Australians attend because it's free (like *Nuit Blanche*), because they get to experience art in unusual spaces, and because they get to see international artists. Sydney prides itself on seeing the world (through the Biennale) and on having the world come to Sydney (in the artists).

Curators of big international shows once drove the story of contemporary art by focusing on issues, new talents and important new works by established artists.

Is this still the case, or do curators play a different role? Indeed, some curators have become stars, as much as the artists. It seems the market conditions and all they entail drive this kind of world. It's difficult not to be influenced in some way by the circumstances. As curators, we like to think this way because it's a model that we've inherited and have been driven by, but now the circumstances of the 21st century have different assumptions. Catherine and I understood the 20th century to be heavily influenced by a kind of modernity that often appeared colonialist—focused only on Europe and the US—and was characterized by the underrepresentation of women, the fragmenting of otherness almost to obliteration, and so on. For the exhibition we curated, we were very mindful that conditions in the 21st century have brought us to a point of "composition," as Bruno Latour argues in the forthcoming Biennale catalogue. In other words, Latour says that "critique," where we pick things apart, has passed, and that the moment of breaking things down into discrete parts no longer holds; instead, he says, we must now think of new ways of bringing disparate parts back together. This includes curation.

What Catherine and I have discovered is that there's a certain malaise with modernity and its global impact on the 20th century; now that we've stepped into a new century, there seems to be considerable rethinking, retooling and rearticulating of the character of modernity and its penchant for breaking, fragmenting and disrupting, often through violent means. What "all our relations" offers up is a new kind of thinking that's more about healing or recomposing—about compassion and empathy for the world around us, and not just one another, but our natural world as well.

We travelled the globe with open minds, having conversations wherever

"ARTISTS EITHER OPEN UP A WAY TO SEE THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY, OR MAKE SENSE OF THE PRESENT."



we went. Our focus was always on the artists. Of course, we're still looking for new talents, and like other curators you look in unusual spaces. We've also looked at works by established artists and felt their practice was relevant to these times. We weren't interested in novelty and innovation; what we examined and thought about was historical continuities. We're interested in artists engaging with audiences, and creating new relations of meaning-making through various kinds of conversation. And instead of taking encyclopedic samplings from around the world and plunking them around, we thought more about weaving a narrative. In the end, we're more interested in connections—in how artists and audiences interface with each other in ways that impact our subjectivity. It's a way of coming into being.

What defines success for a curator? There'll be considerable disagreement about this. But from my experience, starting with the AGO and including the Biennale of Sydney, I still believe art has a particular power to elicit meaning from, and for, many kinds of audiences. I say this because we are now at a point where audiences are so much a part of the experience, and the relation between artist and audience seems much more important today. I don't mean as a way of generating revenue; rather, art is more important to us than ever, and audiences are becoming more interested in discovering art. I find *Nuit Blanche* an example of this. The fact that the Biennale of Sydney is free encourages even more opportunities for engagement. We are always going to compete with many other events, so it is important to consider the artist as someone who makes us see and experience the world differently. What Catherine and I have put together is an exhibition that delights the senses—all the senses, from the visual to the auditory, from the casual to the interactive, and from the responsive

to the directed. Artists continually open up our senses to seeing and understanding the world in new ways. The success of our show will be what audiences take away and what they remember long after it's over.

Do we need a major biennial in Canada? Going through the experience of the Biennale of Sydney, I would have to say that Toronto—and, by extension, Canada—could benefit from such an ongoing endeavour. It is a very large undertaking that would require many levels of governments to participate, as well as the private sector. As I see it, biennials allow host cities or countries to engage the contemporary art world; as well, they open up opportunities for local artists, as the stage is so much larger. Montreal has long had an international art biennial, Vancouver has more recently followed suit, and now the National Gallery of Canada is organizing an international quinquennial for contemporary Indigenous art. The National Gallery quinquennial is focused, as are others internationally: Brisbane, Australia, for example, centres on the Asia-Pacific for its triennial; more recently, Denver, Colorado, has created the Biennial of the Americas. The fact that there are more than 100 biennials happening at any time says there's a proliferation, but it also says how important they are to local economies. Judging from others, it would appear that visitors are starting to come to terms with seeing and experiencing art in unusual settings. This isn't intended to take anything away from our great institutions, but in Sydney, Cockatoo Island breathed some much needed fresh air, and now the Biennale of Sydney is reaping the benefits; artists, too, are equally drawn to spaces that are rough around the edges. ■

Find more coverage of the 18th Biennale of Sydney at canadianart.ca/sydney

ROBIN RHODE **Arm Chair** (video still)
2011 Single-channel digital
animation 1 min 20 sec COURTESY
THE ARTIST/WHITE CUBE, LONDON