Artworks in the 20th Biennale explore in-between resources like information and the internet are day-to-day lives, but also reminds us that basic us to think about the technology that is in our fiction author William Gibson. The title prompts distributed future is already here — it’s just not evenly
when you are neither here nor there.

The 20th Biennale of Sydney

This exhibition started with a question: if each era suggests a different view of reality — what is ours? We live in a world where the distinction between the virtual and the physical has become difficult to define. We understand ‘virtual’ as that part of our lives that is spent on computers, devices and on the internet — a simulated reality — and the ‘physical’ as ‘real life’. But is it really the case that one is more real than the other? Is there something in-between these two realities? Think about when you talk on the phone, when you are on the internet or when you see yourself in a mirror — these are all times when you are neither here nor there.

The title of the 20th Biennale of Sydney: The future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed is taken from a quote by science fiction author William Gibson. The title prompts us to think about the technology that is in our day-to-day lives, but also reminds us that basic resources like information and the internet are not equally available to everyone in the world. Artworks in the 20th Biennale explore in-between spaces, our interactions with the digital world and different aspects of how we live today. They blur the boundaries between different art forms and investigate how things can be simultaneously interconnected and disconnected, whether it be in our local area or globally.

The Embassies

The 20th Biennale of Sydney is structured around several thematic clusters conceived of as ‘Embassies of Thought’. An embassy is an office or official residence set up by one country within a foreign country. The host country allows the embassy to control and occupy the territory it is on so that the embassy can help or protect the citizens of its home country. Just as an embassy is a safe space for these citizens, the Embassies of the 20th Biennale are safe spaces for thinking. They aim to promote dialogue and understanding, and are meant to function as spaces for ideas within a particular physical location, access to which is based not on one’s nationality, race or cultural background, but on ideas and the potential they offer. These Embassies are located within both traditional and non-traditional settings for art, ranging from museums to unique locations, including an old train station and a mobile book stall.

The Embassies are: Embassy of the Real (Cockatoo Island); Embassy of Spirits (Art Gallery of New South Wales); Embassy of Disappearance (Carriageworks); Embassy of Non-Participation (Artspace); Embassy of Translation (Museum of Contemporary Art Australia); the mobile Embassy of Stanislaw Lem; and Embassy of Transition (Mortuary Station).

...and in-between spaces

For Stephanie Rosenthal, the Artistic Director of the 20th Biennale, art is something that can surprise you or be stumbled upon on your way to the shops. In the in-between spaces of the exhibition, visitors can discover the city and experience art outside the museum context.

The 20th Biennale Student Newspaper

For each exhibition, the Biennale of Sydney produces and prints a free Student Newspaper for secondary school students containing information about the current exhibition’s theme, ideas, artists and artworks. In 2016, secondary school students were invited to develop and write content for the 20th Biennale Student Newspaper, and asked to submit written or pictorial responses to a set of questions devised by the Biennale Public Program and Education team. This publication is a collection of responses to those questions, as selected by Biennale staff. Inside these covers, you can read about the Biennale’s Embassies, artists, artworks and audiences as well as think about some of the key ideas in the exhibition: does the body still matter in a time when the use of digital technologies is so prevalent? Why restage historical works in the present?

Students were invited to respond to one of the following questions:

Embassies

Select an Embassy that interests you the most and describe the concepts that are explored at that venue. How does the Embassy reflect or sit within the overarching framework of the 20th Biennale? How does the Embassy reference the history, architecture or function of its venue?

Artists

Look at the key words that relate to each Embassy. Select the word or idea that appeals to you most. Compare and contrast the ways in which artists in the 20th Biennale explore this idea in their work. How do they make connections between this idea, their practice and the 20th Biennale?

Audiences

Refer to three artworks in the exhibition that incorporate the audience in some way. How do audiences experience the work physically, emotionally and conceptually? How might this shape their understanding or experience of the 20th Biennale exhibition and its ideas?

Artworks

Write and/or design a gallery wall label about your favourite artwork at the 20th Biennale. Consider who will be reading this wall label and what key information you would need to include in telling people about your favourite artwork. Be creative, be critical, or be both.

Restaging and translation

Discuss the role and significance of restaging and reinterpreting historic works for a contemporary context. What purpose does restaging serve? How might it impact our understandings of the original work?

In-between spaces

To what extent are artists in the 20th Biennale investigating notions of the ‘in-between’ in their practice? Consider writing about a diverse range of artists who blur the boundaries between our notions of what an artist, audience, artwork, genre and exhibition space can be.

Physical and virtual reality

Discuss the difference between a physical and a virtual experience. Choose artists in the 20th Biennale whose works relate to physical reality and the experience of the body, to digital technology and virtual reality.

The internet

Research artists who reference the internet and technology in their practices. Discuss the impact of the internet on society and our day-to-day lives. What possibilities has it opened up? What role does it play in the construction of artistic and personal identity? To what extent are our real and digital lives intertwined?

Performance and documentation

Performance as an art form may be documented, or exist as a live event to be experienced in the moment. What is the importance or necessity of documentation? Present a case for or against documentation, referring to different artists in the 20th Biennale to support your argument.

The Embassies of the 20th Biennale make us re-examine the traditional terms on which our exhibition takes place. We honour and recognise their continuous connection to Sydney Harbour and its surrounds, and we pay respect to their stories, past, present and future.
Select an Embassy that interests you the most and describe the concepts that are explored at their venue. How does the Embassy reflect or sit within the overarching framework of the 20th Biennale of Sydney? How does the Embassy reference the history, architecture or function of its venue?

India Herzel-Wood
St Scholastica’s College, Gladesville

The Embassy of the Real at Cockatoo Island explored ideas of virtual reality, human’s relationship to technology, visions of the future as perceived through science fiction and current realities. This Embassy sits within the overarching framework the future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed by exploring the ways in which individuals perceive reality in a globalised and digitised world. The artists explore the blurred line between virtual and physical reality in the 21st century. An example of this is the video Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 2, 2015-16, by Thai artist Kosin Kritprakornsrit. Arnoumontchail explores his spiritual connection to technology through a diorama that observers see on the world as a means of interaction.

Cockatoo Island has a rich history of being a shipyard, convict centre and reform school; many of the artworks referenced these historical and architectural functions of the venue. For example, Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota’s work Conscious Sleep, 2016, is a site-specific installation set in the former prisoners’ barrack of the convict precinct. This is referenced in her artwork through the architecture of the space which feels tight and enclosed as imitating the audience. It is also seen through the beds, which give the work a prison and reformatory atmosphere. The network of fibres also adds to the sense of imprisonment, creating the perception of being trapped, unable to escape the interwoven threads. Another artwork which responds to the environment and architecture of Cockatoo Island is the installation Willing To Be Vulnerable, 2015-16, by South Korean artist Lee Bul. This artwork incorporates materials from the venue, which are features of the landscape of Cockatoo Island. The work references both construction and deconstruction, and this concept is similar to Cockatoo Island’s history having many purposes including being an old shipyard.

Cockatoo Island gives artists the opportunity to situate their work in an environment rich in history and atmosphere — the Embassy of the Real, through its connection with the past, present and future uses this opportunity to enhance the works presented.

Juliette Shelley
Lake Macquarie High School, Bateau Bay

Before walking into what would come to be a conglomeration of many different worlds, two tour guides briefed me on who and why the venues were called ‘embassies’. I imagined the exhibition to contain a small part of a far-flung planet science is yet to discover. In, and out, it turned out, I wasn’t really wrong.

The first artwork was Willing To Be Vulnerable, 2015-16: a dystopian-themed scene; a world of fallen towers and crashing zeppelins. It was created by South Korean artist Lee Bul, and it made me think of walking into a cardboard diorama. My head was constantly turned upwards at the ceiling, where painted figures were hung, motionless on serrated strings. In Lee Bul’s artwork, the never-ending quest in search of the perfect world had slipped and stopped, became numb and frozen. Leaving that first room, I felt like waking up after a nightmare.

I was notified by the tour guides prior to entering the second artwork not to touch any of the pandalums. Confused, I accepted and wondered what relevance this information could possibly hold. Stepping once again at the ceiling, countless wires were attached to countless more beams that rotated them slowly in a swaying action — hundreds of pendulums swung above the concrete floor, like a living, moving maze. I struggled to understand how I would not accidentally touch one of them; they were all within half a metre of each other and constantly invading each other’s space. This artwork (Nor’easter and Eyewitnesses to the Time Time, no. 2, 2015) was my favourite on the Island — it was created by choreographer William Forsythe and required one to effectively dance to move through the pendulum field. I found it beautiful and inspiring, and I know that everyone else in the group had as much fun with it. It was interesting to see students interact and deconstruct this artwork — to hear theories behind its meaning and goals. I thought Forsythe’s, and his work’s contribution to the Island’s outlook on technology: we are intrigued by it and long to have it but once we do, we aren’t sure exactly what to do with it.

Another highlight of the Island was Chiharu Shiota’s Conscious Sleep, 2016, an artwork that took twelve days to install. This work acted as a living, moving maze. I struggled to understand how I would not accidentally touch one of them; they were all within half a metre of each other and constantly invading each other’s space. This artwork (Nor’easter and Eyewitnesses to the Time Time, no. 2, 2015) was my favourite on the Island — it was created by choreographer William Forsythe and required one to effectively dance to move through the pendulum field. I found it beautiful and inspiring, and I know that everyone else in the group had as much fun with it. It was interesting to see students interact and deconstruct this artwork — to hear theories behind its meaning and goals. I thought Forsythe’s, and his work’s contribution to the Island’s outlook on technology: we are intrigued by it and long to have it but once we do, we aren’t sure exactly what to do with it.

Cockatoo Island is a place with so much history it’s impossible to have an insight into it all in one visit. But I learned so much about how artists and their art work together, and how they take into account their surroundings. Concluding with something as astonishing as Lee Bul’s dystopian world or as widdled with simple complexities as Forsythe’s choreographic machine, I would recommend the Biennale to anyone.
The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) houses the Embassy of Translation. The 20th Biennale Artistic Director, Stephanie Rosenthal intended to utilise the role of embassies to address the overarching framework of the exhibition and also to represent individual conceptual themes and histories of specific venues through showcasing selected artworks. In reference to William Gibson's quote, the exhibition's title, The future is already here — it's just not evenly distributed explores the diverse range of technology available to modern society and the simulated physical and virtual reality as a result of this. This Embassy is focused on negating conflicts between translation and writing as they are simultaneously linked thus blurring the boundaries between both contexts.

The Embassies represent transient spaces of thought. The Embassy of Translation specifically explores this concept of contemplation which is translated through visual experiences conceived by artists. The Embassy of Translation specialises in works that revisit historical material. Audiences can reference these through the recontextualisation, reinterpretation or reimagining of the artworks including works Shohrya Nassari's Parade, 2019, which references representations of the body in art history, and Daniel Boyd's series of Untitled paintings from 2015-16 that reference colonisation. The works ultimately demonstrate the contemporary society's reliance on historical memory to perceive and relate to the reality of the present world.

The conceptual framework of the Embassy of Translation specifically references and is based upon the MCA's physical site and its rich, multifaceted history. The MCA was built on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. The significant site of the MCA has a reputation for having undergone numerous transformations and re-developments ever since the First Fleet arrived in 1788. As this site became the first convict settlement, it signifies the beginning of the interaction between Aboriginal and European peoples. The notion of rewriting history in the context of the MCA's colonial history ultimately mirrors the key concepts of the Embassy of Translation.

The Embassy of Translation specifically references and is based upon the Embassy of Translation, 2015–16 that reference colonisation. The works ultimately explore the diverse range of technology available to modern society and the simulated physical and virtual reality as a result of this. This Embassy is focused on negating conflicts between translation and writing as they are simultaneously linked thus blurring the boundaries between both contexts.

Both artists explore the battle between the political and religious power structures which strive for authority in their lives. The artworks, The African Twintowers and Adda Manok Mo, Pedro! (Do You Have a Rooster, Pedro!), adhere to the theme of the 20th Biennale, both exploring the relationship between subjective experiences and the environmental or political world surrounding them. Belief structures are key influences causing the crossover of the physical and virtual worlds – the two works assist in the aim of the exhibition to reflect and challenge our reality.

The concept of ‘belief structures’ is a major focus within the Embassy of Spirits and is one of the central themes in Christoph Schlingensief’s installation The African Twintowers, 2003–07 and Rodel Tapaya’s painting Adda Manok Mo, Pedro! (Do You Have a Rooster, Pedro?), 2015–16. In the early twenty-first century, belief structures act as highly influential and powerful systems where religion and spiritual beliefs are woven into political and contemporary life. Schlingensief’s multimedia installation of 18 flat-screen monitors displaying 18 different videos, without sound, explores the ideas of politics, colonialism, suffering and salvation. Schlingensief created The African Twintowers as an experiment to re-stage the events of September 11, 2001 in Africa in order to provoke themes of life, death, artistic vision and refusal of death. Through the 18 different films, Schlingensief emphasises humanity’s ‘refusal to make peace with dying’, which also reflects his personal experience of suffering from lung cancer, which eventually caused his death in 2010.

This belief structure of the personal consciousness crossing over with the external, political world is shared with Rodel Tapaya’s acrylic on canvas painting Adda Manok Mo, Pedro! (Do You Have a Rooster, Pedro!), 2015–16. Tapaya addresses the theme of belief structures through his chaotic assemblage of mythological and spiritual creatures and deities to portray the interconnectedness of politics, morality, theology and legend in contemporary life. Similarly to Schlingensief, Tapaya combines significant contemporary and historical events with personal interpretations and personal experiences — in particular, political issues within the Philippines, Tapaya’s home country, where a conflict of religious beliefs powerfully causes a struggle for influence and control.

Belief structures are key influences causing the crossover of the physical and virtual worlds – the two works assist in the aim of the exhibition to reflect and challenge our reality.
Look at the key words that relate to each Embassy. Select the word or idea that appeals to you most. Compare and contrast the ways in which artists in the 20th Biennale explore this idea in their work. How do they make connections between this idea, their practice and the 20th Biennale?

The key words that relate to the Embassy of Spirits are belief, spirituality, nature and ritual. The idea that appeals to me most is ‘ritual’. Through the 20th Biennale framework I have been able to explore how ritual has been impacted by technology and the changing world.

The artists who have explored the idea of ritual are Ken Thaiday Snr of the Meriam Mer people in collaboration with Jason Christopher, and the joint artists from Erub Arts, including: Ellerson Savage of the Mariam Mer people, Florence Mabel Gutchen of the Kulkalgaw Ya people, Racy Oui-Pitt of the Meriam Mer people, Lynette Grilletta and Marion Gaimancers.

Both groups of artists have made connections to ritual by maintaining their traditional rituals. They have both been able to portray a connection to the sea, customs, and their environment. As in common practice in rituals and customs, both artworks have been produced collaboratively. Through this collaborative approach, as audiences, we are able to gain a sense of community and connection to nature. Through exploring rituals both art works have been able to prompt the audience to question the future of their lifestyles and ecosystems.

Both groups of artists have created different forms and have used different man-made and natural materials in creating their artworks. Solwata, 2015–16, was created by Erub Arts, a group of indigenous and non-indigenous women from the Meriam Mer and Kulkalgaw Ya peoples. The group used rubbish discarded in their waters such as huge fishing nets left out at sea. Long after the fishermen have gone, sea life continue to get stuck or strangled by the ropes and are left to waste rather than be eaten. The women made this sculpture to bring awareness about this problem, as it is not only affecting fish but also other very important creatures such as turtles and sharks.

Ken Thaiday Snr and Jason Christopher used both man-made and natural materials in Thaiday Snr’s Beizam, 2021, and the collaboratively made Beizam Triple Hammer Head Shark, 2016. Beizam is made from natural resources such as bamboo bent into the shapes of a shark. It has feathers at the front of the sculpture to represent the white wash of the ocean. Beizam Triple Hammer Head Shark is made from man-made materials such as plastic, metal, and computer-operated hydraulics to program the sculpture to move and open its mouth, re-creating a traditional dance performed by the Torres Strait Islanders.

Beizam Triple Hammer Head Shark, 2021. This artwork made possible with generous assistance from Vicki Olsson. Photograph, Document Photography (top left, left)

Beizam, 2015–16 (detail). The statue depicts the coming together of eastern and western cultures. The artist achieves this by referencing the conventions of Greek art (realism) to build close-to-scale replicas of sculptures of classical Greek gods. However, the majority of their heads are missing. Fused into the necks are the upside-down statues of Buddhist deities. Creating a mirror-like effect, on one side we see traditional Asian works. In terms of the overarching theme of the 20th Biennale, The future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed, this work fits right in. It is clear that this piece is a comment on the vast differences between the western and eastern areas of the world. This could relate back to many areas such as technology, politics, state of economy, wellbeing, etc. There will always be vast differences between each of these cultures, whether they are positive or negative. Xu Zhen has created a visual representation of the fusion of cultures, clearly present in the combination of both art forms literally coming together. This work is found on Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia. This work blends seamlessly into the warehouse space surrounding it. The warehouse walls are plastered white at the bottom, with pale brown, aged bricks beginning at the middle of the wall. In terms of the structure the work, the white plinth sits perfectly in line with the edge of the white plaster of the wall. Although completed in 2019, the aged look of the statue adds to the effect that the work has been with the building for quite a long time, creating a fitting environment in which to display the work.

Beizam Triple Hammer Head Shark, 2021. This artwork made possible with generous assistance from Vicki Olsson. Photograph, Document Photography (top left, left)
One of the opening scenes of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey shows a black monolith at the dawn of civilisation. Primates gather around, confused and energetically irritated by the intrusion of the slick geometric form in their territory. After much jumping up and down the emboldened primates come closer until one brave soul eventually touches the monolith. Soon, all are quietly stroking the slick, shiny surface and entranced by the purity of its abstract form. Visiting the Embassies of the 20th Biennale of Sydney can be likened to the experience of the primates in Kubrick’s film, initially confused and threatened by the weight of conceptual meaning and then relieved and soothed as you gradually find yourself reflected in the polished surface of the work.

Justene Williams references a work that features another famous black quadrilateral for her work in the 20th Biennale. Victory Over the Sun, 2016, is a restaging of a 1913 futurist opera where a superwoman (in the version made by Williams with Sydney Chamber Opera) triumphs over man, and which references the famous abstract painting Black Square, 1915, by Kazimir Malevich. Williams makes the connection between the symbolism of Black Square and the screens of our smart phones and the endless space of the internet. The original futurists were determined to embrace the future and all it has to offer and Williams revisits the work to remind us that although the internet has given us access to different places, information and experiences we need to be mindful of the destruction that followed those visionaries. Victory Over the Sun is a visual and audible feast, crazy costumes and the unanswerable tones of futurist (anti-)operaic voices combine to create chaos that reminds us how over-saturated in media we have become.

How do you tell the story of the universe? Where do you begin? When was the universe created? How? By whom? Which theory do you believe? Artist Camille Henrot, armed with a slam poet, computer screen and access to the largest museum and scientific complex in the world, attempts to address these fundamental questions of human existence... in the space of 13 minutes; a monumental task to say the least. The result is a reflection of the fast pace of modern society in an ever active, digital landscape.

The audience of Grosse Fatigue, 2013, is presented with a continuous stream of visual stimuli, which the artist documented through film and photography over multiple visits to museums of the Smithsonian Institution. Taxidermied fauna, books, records, ancient artefacts and primitive carvings (just to name a few) are presented across multiple opening and closing windows and internet browsers on the all-too-familiar face of a computer screen. The seeming rambles and incessant repetition of ‘In the beginning…’ delivered by slam poet and musician Joakim Bouaziz and Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh, with the aid of surround-sound, consumes the space, an endless, nonsensical incantation. The stream of words becomes the backbone of the piece, repeating phrases from different cults, not trying to produce any objective truth, but to bombard the viewer with the infinite mass of information that will forever remain in the excess span of thirteen minutes.

Many of the works featured in the 20th Biennale have visibly used technology, but William Forsythe’s installation Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time...
Time, no. 2, 2013 subtly explores technology through architecture and dance. Indeed the title of Forsythe’s work hints at his ideas about the ubiquity of technology in our everyday lives. Forsythe’s installation employs a set of complex ratcheted frames, almost unperceivable strings and silver plumb bobs that move in an organized sequence. As the strings seem to be swaying themselves we forget about the technology involved in the workings of the installation, making comment on the omnipresent nature of technology. The sequence set to 4/4 time controls the audiences in the same way technology has permeated our lives and sets the tempo of our modern existence.

Physically, the viewer is invited to participate in the installation by moving through the work whilst trying not to disrupt the strings. The plumb bobs, a tool for engineering and architecture, has now become a tool of movement with the strings acting as a choreographer. The elegant swaying of the plumb bobs quickly becomes chaotic and the movement of the viewer begins to reflect the urban action of people in cities. Stopping and starting, stepping sideways and trying to weave a path through a crowded street, always careful not to encroach into another person’s space. The emotion of the viewer changes throughout the journey of the installation, self-consciousness quickly subsides as you become totally immersed in the work. The plumb bob is now orchestrating the joyful aesthetic of movement.

The 20th Biennale offers the audience a dose of raw collaborative energy. The fertile fruit of cross disciplinary exploration creates exciting and thought provoking works that challenge the way art is viewed and enjoyed. Technology both visible and invisible reflects humankind and poses questions about how much we value knowledge, culture and the individual in the global village.
The artworks in the 20th Biennale have incorporated the audience in ways that allow them to gain a more involved experience while being a part of the artwork itself. One of the artworks able to give the audience a conception of an event was *A Walk in Fukushima*, 2016–ongoing, created by Don’t Follow the Wind and including the work of many different artists, such as Chit Pum and Al Weive. In this particular artwork the audience is involved by going through a virtual reality experience of the events at Fukushima. By having a virtual reality artwork, the audience is able to experience and understand the tragic events that happened there with more depth. This could shape their understanding of how many different technologies are available, such as virtual reality, but have just not been understood of the artwork and gain a better understanding of the theme of the 20th Biennale. By being able to be a part of this artwork, many individuals are able to become emotionally connected to it as they develop their own path to take and concentrate on where they are going and what their own body is doing; not what someone else around them is doing.

Another artwork that was able to give the audience a greater understanding of the 20th Biennale was *Eva’s Room of Rhymes – Long Distance Relationship*, 2016, a piece that incorporated lots of speakers placed around the historic guardhouse on Cockatoo Island that each played a slightly different version of the same sound, that each played a slightly different version of the same sound, or even to evoke something emotional within their own lives.

When walking away from the installation, participants are relaxed, emotionally connected with what they just absorbed and informed by the heavy topic of Arunanondchai’s focus. Japanese-born, Berlin-based Chiharu Shiota is an artist who explores the dynamic relationship of body and mind through intricate detail and large-scale installations. Amongst the use of thread, common objects that evoke certain emotional responses within viewers are woven through expansive frames to trap individual memories and even comment on the surrounding space. Shiota’s installation on Cockatoo Island Conscious Sleep: Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time, 2015–16, provides a comfortable setting with denim shoes and step onto the installation, later falling onto a pillow to mindlessly devour the artist’s ideas and comments through large-scale motion picture. Reactions provoked surround the overall viewing of aforementioned changes on the globe by the all-important spirit guide Chastri. When walking away from the installation, participants are relaxed, emotionally connected with what they just absorbed and informed by the heavy topic of Arunanondchai’s focus. Questions are raised like who is Chastri? How much has our culture become appropriated? Within their mind, viewers then accept their new grasp of Arunanondchai’s concept and begin to contemplate issues he’s raised within their own lives.
Write and / or design a gallery wall label about your favourite artwork at the 20th Biennale. Consider who will be reading this wall label and what information you would need to include in telling people about your favourite artwork. Be creative, be critical, or be both.

Six Women, 2013-15, encompasses the idea of femininity, the body and the female. The delicate six-piece sculpture was cast using seated women and explores the different female body types, as no woman being the same. Each person in the work has a different body type which places emphasis on the audience to eradicate the idea of the ‘ideal’ female body from their mind whilst viewing the work. Kher’s decision to cast women is a significant part of her work and the concept behind it. The technique shows that Kher’s sculptures are not works of her own perception of the human body but are actual examples of what the female body looks like. This links closely to her idea of leaving behind the ‘ideal’ of the human body and rather encompassing the true physical rendering of the female body. The nakedness of the woman allows for all parts of the female body to be exposed, allowing the casting process to be a more intimate connection between artist and sitter.

The casting doesn’t only just capture the wrinkles, rolls and crevices of the body but perhaps also their thoughts and emotions. A story is then carried on through the casting process to the final artwork, each story different for each woman and their personal experiences. The fragility of the medium, plaster of Paris, highlights the vulnerability and the delicate nature of the body. The fact that the women are all sitting goes against romantic representations of the body and the work takes a stance against art historical views of the female and her body. Although each body is different they each express beauty in a different way and encapsulate their own within.

The Unreliable Narrator, 2010, by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler is a two-screen video essay that recounts and analyses the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which terrorists attacked and executed guests in the Taj Mahal Hotels in the city. The Unreliable Narrator challenges questions regarding terrorism and civil unrest with varying degrees of success. To assemble the video, Mirza and Butler pulled together CCTV footage of the terrorist attacks, cell phone recordings between gangsters, segments from a Bollywood movie portraying the events, and interrogation footage of the offenders. A through-line is provided by a dispassionate female narrator, who is relatively naive and critiques the attack as a kind of surreal event staged for, and enabled by, the media. The use of CCTV footage combined with the telephone recordings suggest that the event was carried out for the benefit of news cameras and newspaper articles. ‘This is just a trailer; the main feature is yet to come’. The Unreliable Narrator attempts to address today’s key political issues, but ends up staging a critique that raises more troubling questions than answers. The Mumbai attackers spent most of the attack on their phones, uploading their massacres to the internet. One of the attackers shot at police and filmed at the same time. The movie the attack generated, most notably The Attacks of 26/11 (2013) and the TV-movie Terror in Mumbai (2009) gave the attackers the ‘oxygen’ they yearned for, as Tom Seymour suggests. Both Mirza and Butler were in Pakistan when the Mumbai attacks occurred, and the immediate differing global interpretations of events alerted them to the diverging forces of interests involved in situations like this. They began ‘to think of an Unreliable Narrator not as a character but as a condition’, a condition where ‘some global players gain from maintaining a feeling of “permanent emergency” in society.’

The choreographer’s latest Biennale work is a modified piece. With originally 40 pendulums, the choreographic object was created for a solo dancer in an abandoned building in New York. Although the piece was formerly used as a prop to assist the portrayal of movement, Forsythe’s work translates beautifully into the 20th Biennale – it deals with multiple concepts from both this year’s exhibition theme as well as the key themes of the Embassy of the Real, for example body, choreography, communication and space. The installation invites visitors to weave their way through the moving weights, swinging at various tempos, individuals create spontaneous, unconscious movement and choreography through their interaction with the artwork.

Artistic Director, Stephanie Rosenthal, describes the interactive piece to be ‘about the gravity of the body, the moment where we really experience ourselves’. Forsythe is inspired by Duchamp’s idea that the spectator or audience completes an artwork. When one navigates their way through the suspended mobile not only do they become a dancer but also a performer in the work. One is forced to form a relationship with the work, recognising their own body and physical reality.

The Unreliable Narrator was made out of natural and man-made materials. These columns can be seen as soaring upward, crumbling, or both at the same time. Intertwined with these columns, are vines of native Australian plants. These plants seem to be engulfing the columns, and in time, may cover them fully. North’s installation explores concepts of conflict and harmony between the natural and man-made world. He has achieved this by contrasting by-products of industrial processes with native Australian plants. North’s installation has been given the name Succession as it demonstrates a process of change within an environment.

The plants and concrete columns of Succession work together to portray a sense of harmony. North was inspired by the native Port Jackson Fig, which grows from the cracks of mortar in buildings in Sydney. He wanted to convey through his work that the Sydney area is so used to colonization and nature is able to thrive in, and work with, an unfamiliar environment.

Succession fits into the theme of the 20th Biennale (The future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed) and the Embassy of Disappearance as it explore how different things disappear, but also how these things can come back and regenerate. While the world is not not so inhabited by humans or buildings, plants would flourish. North’s installation shows the battle for land and the destruction of the natural environment for buildings and other human sites. The installation also portrays concepts of regrowth and the reclaiming and recapitulation of nature. Succession is referred to as a sculptural installation rather than just a sculpture as it is site-specific and mirrors the double columns supporting the roof at Carriageworks.

The Unreliable Narrator

The Unreliable Narrator was made out of natural and man-made materials. These columns can be seen as soaring upward, crumbling, or both at the same time. Intertwined with these columns, are vines of native Australian plants. These plants seem to be engulfing the columns, and in time, may cover them fully. North’s installation explores concepts of conflict and harmony between the natural and man-made world. He has achieved this by contrasting by-products of industrial processes with native Australian plants. North’s installation has been given the name Succession as it demonstrates a process of change within an environment.
Discuss the role and significance of restaging and reinterpreting historic works for a contemporary context. What purpose does restaging serve? How might it impact our understandings of the original work?

For the 20th Biennale Justene Williams, along with the Sydney Chamber Opera, reworked historic works within the context of the 20th Biennale theme The future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed.

By reinterpreting historic works, Ming Wong reinterprets significant works of our cultural visual history to try and find a Chinese identity. Ming Wong is most known for working himself into classic film scenes, projecting his identity into those that are so seminal that they become ideal national identities. It can therefore be said that Ming Wong uses the historic works to further his artistic agenda of exploring identity.

In his work for the 20th Biennale, Windows on the World (Part 2), 2016, Ming Wong looks at the visual language created by the science fiction films of the 1960s and 1970s. This almost cliché aesthetic gives a retro-futurist look into a future still unattained by modern Chinese culture, that reflected the rapidly expanding industrialism now dominant. The work alludes back to Cantonese opera, a foundation of Chinese culture with a history that extends far prior to modernity. This distinctly Chinese influence parallels the western influence of the science fiction films referenced, creating a conflict of paradigmatic identities.

The work is chaotic as it has become convoluted with Western science fiction works, Chinese science fiction works, Communist propaganda, Chinese Feudalistic fiction works, Chinese science fiction works, Communist propaganda, Chinese Feudalistic fiction works, Chinese science fiction works, and extends the opera’s original ideas around exploring the future.

Where Williams restaged Victory Over the Sun to extend its meaning into the twenty-first century, Ming Wong reinterprets significant works of our cultural visual history to try and find a Chinese identity. Ming Wong is most known for working himself into classic film scenes, projecting his identity into those that are so seminal that they become ideal national identities. It can therefore be said that Ming Wong uses the historic works to further his artistic agenda of exploring identity.

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which is reflective of the multidimensional reality in which we live and try to make sense of. By abandoning the individual stories of each text presented we gain a detached and confused impression of the rapidly changing national identity of China. Ming Wong places a spectrum of realties alongside each other to reveal the lacunae of each paradigm, suggesting that nothing is ultimate or true, suggesting that a future, definite Chinese identity is yet to be realised. This is how Ming Wong reinterprets historic texts in the context of his artistic practice to reveal the matrix that is Chinese identity.

Shahryar Nashat’s work in the Biennale is a cinematic translation of the 1917 Ballet Russes production Parade, based on an interpretation of the work by dancer and choreographer Adam Linder. The original work was a cubist ballet, where performance and choreography met with visual sets and costumes by Picasso to create a dialogue between mediums of art. Among the issues raised was the representation of the body between visual and performance art and the significance of a structured visual and dramatic language to our perception. Nashat attempts to mediate our understanding of representation with this work, and his interpretation extends Parade’s meaning to encompass our new understandings of work presented not live but cinematically.

By re-representing this dance cinematically, Nashat documents the form of performance and reduces it to a visual form, as the work exists in two-dimensional space: on a screen, not live. This loss of immediacy and depth communicates a removal from the performance nature of the choreography. We as the audience are removed from the live performance, and even more so the original Parade. While the distancing effect of the camera presents us with a somewhat unbiased intervention into art, we are left confused, and our perceptions become distorted as the visual language of the stage is lost. Having a completely empty mise-en-scène, Nashat makes us look for identifying features, familiar visual codes in the work, as if we need to be shown how to perceive the work. In place of the original visual language of the stage, the sets and costumes absent in the work, Nashat presents an alternate understanding in his use of cinematic language. Studio lighting, green screens, shot types and a lack of cuts provides us with a cinematically understanding of the work. It is because of this that the camera is shown as an ‘interlocutor’ and not just a tool for documentation.

Nashat suggests that the camera influences perceptions, and as such his version of Parade is ‘an act of revision across time and media, ultimately marked by its displacement of the stage.’ By cinematically reinterpreting the work, Nashat offers similar insights to the original in which he explores the current visual languages of art, now present through the medium of cinema, which is specific to the present-future of the twenty-first century. Nashat suggests that our overarching visual language within the present is that of the distancing camera, offering both an unbiased ‘pho evidence’ perception, but also an incredibly deceptive set of interpretations. This conclusion ultimately re-states the original meaning of Parade in that perception is the result of relationships between many factors. Within the new context of the future, Parade offers that the relationships between the camera, set, performer, audience, history and work all intermingle to help create our perception – the work Parade in its original and revised versions explores the complexities of perception, across mediums of art and ways of seeing.

It is important to separate historic works from their newer interpretations. Restaging a work brings forth the original meaning for contemporary artists to change. We gain new understandings of the work under new contexts, both from viewing them in hindsight and by applying them to the future. By restaging an artwork, artists create new meaning and build off the work of others. In doing so, a progression or adaptation in understanding and ideas is shown. This progression highlights the work’s original meaning, new meaning and perhaps most importantly the change and difference between these meanings. This change is indicative of our advancement through time in becoming the future. Under the 20th Biennale theme of the distancing camera, offering an understanding of the present, past and our identity that is moulding, and becoming, the future.

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Back cover
Shahryar Nashat
Parade
11.11.15.
Back cover
Charwei Tsai
Over the Sun

Footnotes
[1] For a complete list of venues, please see biennale.com.au. 17.04.16.
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