

# New models of knowledge, uncharted areas and hidden narratives: *Adelaide International* back to the future? Or arrival of the present?

**Broadsheet editor Alan Cruickshank discusses with UK-based artist, writer and curator Richard Grayson, artistic director of *Adelaide International* 2014 and *Artists Week* his vision for the exhibition's third outing and its attendant public forum**

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: The original concept for *Adelaide International* proposed in 2008 by the CACSA was to host a biennial contemporary visual arts event of internationally established artists that would promote Adelaide's position as a "major international centre for the production and presentation of visual art in Australia". It would have brought together a group of five key local arts organisations for the first time in a unique event seeking to reflect Adelaide's capacity to exhibit cohesively significant international visual art. This concept was hardly original, deliberately appropriating the vision and aims of the *Glasgow International*, the thought being that if Glasgow, a city of comparable size, could achieve such a successful outcome why couldn't Adelaide? But the stars could not be positioned in alignment and the proposal did not materialise.<sup>1</sup> Enter the Adelaide Festival in 2010 with its inaugural *Adelaide International*, its "purpose... to feature work by contemporary international artists that addresses the overall theme of [that] Festival", acknowledging along the way that "the idea of an Adelaide International was already under serious consideration". The two concepts are not quite the same. Both the 2010 and 2012 presentations had as their premise "work... that addresses the overall theme", thus complementing the Festival's performing arts construct and not necessarily presenting Adelaide's capacity as a major international platform for the presentation of visual art in Australia. So already after just two iterations the *Adelaide International* has some baggage in that regard, slightly resonated by the fact that 2013 saw the Festival relinquish its engagement with contemporary visual art organisations for the first time in more than thirty years. Adelaide, and *Adelaide International* 2014 then have some expectancies. What is your vision for the project and its projected (physical) scope?

RICHARD GRAYSON: There's a lot there to consider, and I can't really answer regarding the development of the ideas and the vision, other than to echo Ghandi's response when he was asked what he thought of Western democracy and replied he thought it would be a good idea. A project that echoes the approaches of the *Glasgow International* would seem ideal for Adelaide. But that's a very different beast from what I'm hoping to put together, or from what I understand has been put together for the first two exhibitions. None of these exhibitions are really addressing Adelaide's capacity to operate as a major international platform for international art in any way, in the way that I think you mean, other than staging what's hopefully a good exhibition of art that's been produced outside Australia. In that way they are relatively straightforward and modest in their formal conception. A model predicated on what happens in Glasgow (and elsewhere) would have to be very differently structured and funded, as it would be about supporting the productions of new work (eg. commissions). This makes specific demands on resources and organisations. Especially in the context of Adelaide—as



opposed to Scotland where you can bring your artists across to the city by a budget airline and a cheap rental van—a place that requires you to fly artists in on longhaul routes, freight work, and more. In fact in Scotland they extend their funding strength through many of the artists being either based in Glasgow or elsewhere in Scotland, or south of the border. So quite a lot of the "international" is only in the title and that's how they get to present over one hundred and thirty artists and get a bouncy Stonehenge (Jeremy Deller). So you'd need a lot more money, and a different structure to get the stuff happening. With 2014, I think that there will be perhaps fewer artists in the exhibition than usual, but I'm hoping that each representation will have a bit of presence, either a reasonable body of work or quite a chunky project, so that the works/installations have their own gravity in each site. The exhibition will still be using much the same format as previous iterations where it occurs in different venues across the city. This seems effective to me and appropriate, for when Adelaide is in 'festival mode' the locals will engage with it in a slightly different way while the visitors to the city will explore it.

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: Given that *Adelaide International* falls within the Festival rubric and after two editions it does not, cannot hope to have a national 'brand' as such, so much favoured by museums and Festivals (similarly, *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* does not really have much of a brand after twenty years, comparative to *Perspecta* which ran alternatively and with much expectation to the *Biennale of Sydney* for a similar length of time: 1981-1999). And with a plethora of city-biennials now globally—Asia and the Middle East having come online in a big way over the last ten years—such presentations find themselves very much at the small end of the greater art profile spectrum, seemingly more domestically recognised, given this overall reality. Is the 2014 *Adelaide International* retaining its thematic direction from the Festival's, and if so what influence will these boundaries have over your curatorial vision?

Opposite: Joana Hadjithomas+Khalil Joreige,  
from *The Lebanese Rocket Society, Elements for a monument*, 2012  
Photos courtesy the artists and Third Line Gallery, Dubai

RICHARD GRAYSON: The 'brand' thing for the *Adelaide International* is one that just takes on more layers the more you zoom out from it. Hopefully it is something that might resolve itself in time. Just look at the possibility for confusion. Its held once every two years, which technically makes it a biennial, but it's not *the Adelaide Biennale (of Australian Art)*. Unlike practically every other biennale or biennial art exhibition across the globe, the *Adelaide Biennial* isn't international in its scope. Whereas the *Adelaide International* is. On top of that the Adelaide Festival, since it has become annual, will sometimes have visual arts events that aren't associated with either the *Adelaide International* or the *Adelaide Biennial*. Every two years they all happen at the same time. What chance does anyone without an unhealthy interest in the structures of the visual arts in South Australia and a flow chart have in sorting that out?

To further confuse the issue, especially for those outside of Australia, the *Adelaide Biennial* (which isn't international) and the *Adelaide International* (which is biennial) in 2014 will take place just prior to the *Biennale of Sydney*, which is the Australian biennale that people know of. I'm not certain if this *Adelaide International* is directly taking its thematic direction from the Adelaide Festival as I'm not entirely clear what the thematic directions are in 2014. It's been more a question of morphic resonance. What has happened is that Festival Director David Sefton and I have had several meetings since my involvement has been confirmed, and wide-ranging conversations—sometimes about what sort of approaches that the *International* might take and what some of the concerns might be—but as often as not about other things. He has a passionate interest in and knowledge of some of the obscurer expressions of rock and post-punk music. So the recording career of Pere Ubu has come up a couple of times, and its become clear that there are crossovers in our interests, concerns and excitements. David founded the Meltdown Festival, where he approached musicians and asked them to curate seasons of performance on the Southbank in the UK, so this idea of giving space to someone because of what they do, and then seeing what unfolds, is something he's happy with. Having said that, I'm informed by people who are more involved with the main Festival program that there are intriguing echoes and relationships between what the 2014 Festival is doing and what the *Adelaide International* is doing, which is great.

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: What might be these "intriguing echoes and relationships"?

RICHARD GRAYSON: It's something that people who know more about what's in the 2014 Festival than I do have said, rather than my own firsthand knowledge. Our conversations have allowed me to get a feel—nothing more scientific than that—for the sort of texture of the thoughts and approaches that might be shaping the Festival, work that's shaped by concerns that lie outside mainstream approaches, ideas of spaces of popular culture and how they might inflect and shape high culture—an interest in the transformative and psychedelic, in messing with codes and a sort of bricolage of high and low. And rock and experimental music means a lot to us both, though I suspect he's more able to put up with a truly tremendous racket than I can. So we have an interest in a certain energy, in those spaces where popular ideas or forms collide with avant-garde expressions, with a certain generosity, an in your face-ness. Basically he mentioned some things that were engaging him, I mentioned some ideas or practices that were interesting me, and there was a feeling of sorts that the trains were running across roughly the same countryside and had a couple of landmarks that we might triangulate by.

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: While to a large degree the global art world, both its market and academia, either taps into or is dominated by the Euro-American, some regions are taking on a non-White European character of sorts, though it is true to say that the Made in China phenomenon of the past two decades and the new art developments in the Middle East have both been circumscribed by the money machine and art language of the West. Situated in the UK from your perspective what (or who) do you consider to be the more compelling current art movements/makers and might this be reflected in your curatorial directions for *Adelaide International*?

RICHARD GRAYSON: It is interesting that given all the new developments you mention, there seems to be little feeling of any compelling Movements in the sense of one of those gestalt shifts that generally changes and influences how people imagine how art might be made and imagined—like modernity, post-object art, post-modernity or god help us, relational aesthetics. Of course, I am saying this from the point of view of someone who is not from China, the Middle East or South America. Obviously, if you are a Chinese or Brazilian artist the world is significantly changed by the fact that new vocabularies seem to be developing and there's an international interest and a market in the work, moreover that you're part of something that is shaping the way that the culture you're in operates and is perceived. But in the weird international space that also contains the art world, this specific activity seems to become subsumed into a general frenzy of activity and product. The markets are part of the problem. It's difficult given their effect to make any clear distinction between things that might be significant and new and what is just new stuff. So any development is happening at a time that the market seems to have eaten much of the world. It's not quite like anything we've seen before, and it is far more difficult to locate quite where things are coming from, what's shaping them. Given the market's role in supporting and representing much of this new activity, how much of the desire of the rich in the emerging economies to possess and support art working as a signifier of being part of the new transnational group of the Rich, in the same way as owning an Aston Martina or Ferrari? Luxury Goods. There's another function of buying contemporary art, which is to indicate that you're part of the progressive enlightenment project. After all, arts a 'good thing', which is a useful branding function if you're making your money from dark deals and dodgy operations in Russia or elsewhere. And the involvement of Western-based galleries in representing new non-Western practices, how much of it is an excitement at new bodies of work and practice and the dismantling of previous cultural hierarchies, and how much an excitement at reaching new strata of the über-rich to sell stuff to, especially given that the centres of economic gravity are shifting resolutely into these areas? And how much is it just branding ideas of innovation and radicality, and sell this to banks and corporations who want to buy this aura.

This commercial frenzy has a knock-on effect upon how we like to imagine art functioning. These new markets, this international oligarchy, are often underpinned by a set of socio-economic relations—in terms of how workers are treated and paid, the environmental toll, ideas of law—and are often more extreme and brutal than those that apply in the older economies even after recent decades of neo-liberalism. In turn these are used to undermine conditions elsewhere under the name of competitiveness. What does that do to any of the vaguely progressive ideals that we've liked to wrap this art thing in? Does it all become bling for the capitalist classes? How does any 'progressive' practice survive the embrace of an oligarch or being collected by a museum that's funded by a multinational?

The lack of any feeling that there is a compelling Movement, in that sense of there being a radical shift, is partially because of the art world's and art market's constant clamour that there has to be one taking place. Now. Everything is somehow predicated as The Next Big Thing. Novelty is very important in a market economy. And it is so overt that even stuff that might be the next big thing at the moment looks like a new line or product range. This seems to apply both within the market and in those institutions that seem to operate outside the market—museums, independent art organisations and so on.

In the midst of all this activity, and perhaps in reaction to it, I do think however that there is a sense—in different places and different people—of some sort of reconsideration of how we might imagine contemporary art and its functions. This seems to me to be very tentative. Some of this reconsideration is triggered by more access to art made in non-Western contexts, as these can bring into play ideas and approaches outside the accepted methodologies of the mainstream. Practices that are predicated on other models of art are disrupting and invigorating.

Part of this desire, and it is a desire without any sort of suggested resolution, is expressing itself in a number of artists and writers and curators walking the dog back a bit and looking again at ideas of the counterculture, ideas that underpinned alternative cultures that were emerging in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and which helped shape avant-garde art practices, music, social organisations, and also found expression in the development of ideas that shaped the dynamics of the world-wide-web. It was a time that saw people looking outside of their own cultures to investigate non-Western expressions and understandings, looking for ways to step-outside world-views that they considered limiting. You can see this expressing itself in exhibitions—I'm writing to you from Berlin where there's a big exhibition at the House of World Cultures that's predicated on Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue*, and looking at how cultural practice of the 1960s shaped the ways we imagine the world—but also in popular culture—the freak folk movement and new psychedelia, etc., its an intriguing strand, and its one that the *International* is going to be touching on.

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: It seems to me that the Western Contemporary might not have much going for it these days when the driving forces seem to be multiple layers of money manipulation. The economic platforms in Europe and now Australia hardly seem positive for the career-pursuit of artmaking or indeed art administration. Europe's economic travails seem to have a domino affect, just when things appear to settle up pops another bankrupt country to torpedo equanimity, with Australia just coming to the realisation that its political masters have mismanaged a once in a lifetime resources boom and maybe it's downhill from here for the next decade regardless of political outcomes... but perhaps poverty and adversity might be the parent's of invention for a society that knows nothing else but to have an economic privilege? Since the beginning of the 2000s Australian visual art has had all the appearances of art as (career-pursuit) product (for either superannuation investment/lifestyle consumption) with a 'show me the Australian pavilion in Venice' as a horizon point. Unlike elsewhere—ex-Soviet Bloc, MENASA regions, central Asia etc., it has conspicuously been apolitical; when in minor instances it did engage the political it presented itself as more hysterical and histrionic than of any other quality, characteristics currently quite apparent in daily life. So it's back to the future then?

RICHARD GRAYSON: When everything started overtly unravelling around 2008 there was a significant part of *bien-pensant* opinion that thought that there might be a re-addressing of alternative ideas of economic and social structuring, as was demonstrated in those essays that spang up stating that people might take another look at Marx. And there was a similar occurrence in the arts, a feeling that this surely had to mean something and mark an end to certain ways of looking at things. I was definitely part of this tendency. You published my text in *Broadseet* titled 'Planet Finance'—which was republished elsewhere—that was full of certainty and hope that, in the words of the song, "a change was gonna come". Half a decade later it hasn't and I couldn't have been more wrong if I'd done evening classes in being wrong! There's been no shift in the social context other than

that the poor are paying for the excesses of the rich, banks and bankers are protected while the disabled are penalised. And there's a whole load of art that looks like art. So this situation remains very much linked to what was before, but worse and more unjust. In the arts, this activity that's meant to be about possibility, imagination and alternatives, looks pretty much the same—fewer commercial galleries maybe and a greater interest in blue chip art like Mondrian to protect your investment. Again, very much as it was before, but worse; emptier, more absurd, with claims made for the transformative utopian possibilities becoming more demanding, more hysterical, as art practices—as a whole—that manifestly fail to come up to snuff to the challenge. Until there is an approach that emerges that is up to the task, then perhaps it is back to the future, where the desire for a radical change animates an investigation of what happened before that might be of use in constructing something fit for the purpose. This is not necessarily entirely retrograde or nostalgic. Music has seen people digging around in what had happened with the MC5, with the Stooges, Can, dub-reggae, looking for practices that informed and shaped their gut rejection of the commodified approaches of mainstream popular music that was later expressed in punk. And that was a rich and worthwhile investigation, because a year zero is rarely the year zero that it seems to be. There have been emergencies and crises before, which have triggered somebody somewhere into a reaction that may be of use in how we imagine possibilities of practice, of engagement, and of imagination, that might help shape the present, when the present finally arrives.

BROADSHEET/ALAN CRUICKSHANK: You will also be programming Artists Week, something that you attended while resident in Adelaide during the 1980s-90s, so you have some historical knowledge of it. Artists Week has had as its narratives the themes of the Festivals and/or visual arts programs over the past decade if not longer. In the two events corresponding with the 2010 and 2012 Festivals and *Adelaide Internationals*, it articulated "the broad themes of the Adelaide Festival" as "a forum for an exchange between international and national perspectives on the key issues that shape contemporary art". I emphasise "key issues" here as the direction of the former might not necessarily inform the outcomes of the latter. Artists Week over time has had a variation in its length and intensity, usually the first days being of resonant international focus then dissipating towards the end through domestic issues. As Artists Week has become both a forum for critical discourse on the Festival's themes and a branding agent for its visual arts program, might you have a different intention in what it does and how?

RICHARD GRAYSON: It's more so that I have a hand in the program of Artists Week rather than programming it entirely. There will be other voices and inputs. At the moment it is a work in progress. And "key issues", there's a phrase—obviously one wants the discussion to be of interest and relevance, but, as I touched on earlier, one of the defining things about this moment is a sense of a compass spinning but no determining field giving any particular direction, so I don't think we can claim that it will be a "key issues" thing either. What it might be is a discussion about a certain number of ideas and approaches that might be illuminating, exciting or interesting to think about at the moment, some idea which might suggest patterns of thought or associations that could be useful indicators of approaches and strategies that bring us to a position from where we start sketching out what a key issue (amongst many) could be. And some of these things will relate to what's going on in the *Adelaide international*. It will touch on those amorphous bodies of interest and approaches that are, to an extent, to one side of or underlying approaches directly derived from scientific rationalism, alternative models, hidden histories, an interest in revealing events, some of which, historically, helped shape ideas of countercultures and alternatives, and which still shape some of the ideas and cultures of today. Is there anything there that might be useful in the task of imagining new models at a time where, despite a number of shocks and challenged mainstream understandings and orthodoxies remain surprisingly monolithic?

Note

<sup>1</sup> The project's "international" quotient was subsequently domesticated in 2010 to become *CACSA Contemporary 2010: The New New* with forty-four South Australian artists being presented