

## BIG BROTHER



### New Zealand and Australia at the 50th Biennale of Venice

It's become all too normal now for people to write about how boring the Venice Biennale was this year. How quickly they tired of the contemporary art and rediscovered Venetian glass and Renaissance painting. I agree that this (my first) Biennale did seem lack lustre. The general (largely un-stated) theme was an attempt to re-engage with the "political" but everywhere this seemed impossible. As if the Western (can I say Northern Hemisphere?) mainstream art world had forgotten the last time it was actually "sort of" political (1968, the Vietnam War) and seemed genuinely perplexed at how this had happened. The general feeling of furrowed brows was real and on one level endearing.

One also got the feeling many of the big political hitters remain sceptical of these big, supposedly globalised events and decline to be involved (or maybe they just weren't asked). Considering all this I think the prize should probably have gone to Santiago Sierra's off-limits-to-all-except-Spanish-passport-holders Spanish Pavilion: slightly obvious and perhaps not his finest work, but then, after the Tampa events

Michael Stevenson, *This is the Trekka*, installation view, New Zealand pavillion. Photo: David Hatcher.

in Australia, this obviousness seemed appropriate. Instead the prize went to Luxemburg for a classically standard (and exceedingly dull) piece of international art.

As for my country's pavilion, I'll just say that it doesn't pay one to voice a counter position in the current climate in Ozworld. I am an admirer of much of what Patricia Piccinini's practice involves. However, instead of choosing an artist who would analyse or touch on Australia's place in the New Globalism we get a faintly quaint anachronism, caught somewhere between Jeffrey Deitch's 1992 *Post Human* exhibition and out-takes from *Lord Of The Rings*. However, it must be said that in an event devoted to the visual arts but strangely light on things photogenic Piccinini's work stood out. (For a considered and insightful piece on Piccinini's pavilion see "The Piccinini Effect at the 50th Venice Biennale" by Astrid Mania in *Broadsheet* Volume 32 No.3 Sept/ Nov 2003 p.16-17.)

I am also ashamed to say I missed Mike Stevenson at the New Zealand pavilion as I (a Venice novice) took the long way round the canal to AND from the rather disappointing Latin American show. But I made sure I was thoroughly informed of what I missed and as I am a sworn fan of the ANZAC David Koresh I found myself holding forth on it to a few bemused Northern hemisphere types.

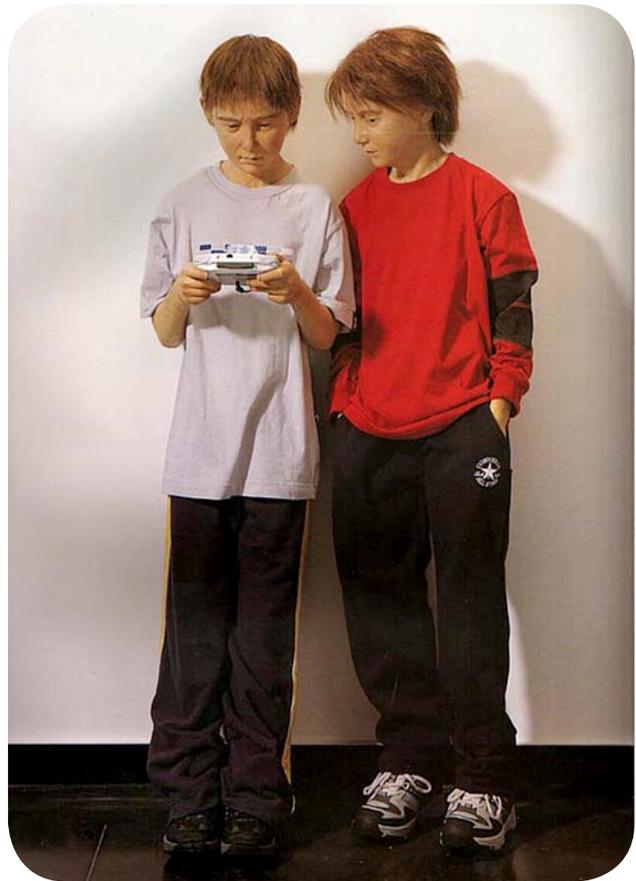
Actually it was Mike's stance on how to present NZ culture that was probably the most personally involving idea I took away from Venice. Instead of presenting the Antipodes as the exotic other, Stevenson set forth to tell the tale of NZ as Western Cold War outpost. Thereby giving the Americans and Europeans a way into New Zealand that didn't exactly dispense with freak value (butter boxes equivalent to the weight of the Trekka!). Instead Stevenson made NZ's outsider status a quality rather than to be savoured and enjoyed. Few actually made the journey to the NZ pavilion (why so far away? like NZ itself?) but those that did were impressed it seemed.

What Stevenson shows us Antipodeans is that we need to rethink the way we present our cultures at such international events. For too long Australia, for instance, has trafficked in the outback, snakes, sharks and big spiders. Australia and New Zealand actually do present far-flung, strange hybrids of Western European culture that should have a lot to offer. But as I write this a number of alarm bells go off in my brain. Apart from the Australian and NZ pavilions, the two countries were absent from the other supposedly global exhibitions at Venice. Not even the very real and pressing dilemmas of the Aboriginal and Maori populations made a dent on the international curators of the Arsenale etc, let alone any white Antipodean artists. In the recent "Globalism" issue of New York's *Artforum* (November 2003), Australia and New Zealand don't rate a mention. In fact only Africa does outside the cosy triangle of the US, middle Europe and Japan. In this "round table", someone who should know better, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist lets the cat out of the bag:

"One can't emphasize enough the importance of the "peripheral" biennials in the 90s, which helped a generation of artists from different cultures become internationally visible."

So here we have the concept of the periphery as talent scout for mainstream international art. Much like soccer talent in Latin America! More and more my thoughts on Venice move towards what could be done to make my country's presence there actually meaningful to the general Australian public rather than trying to woo an inward looking and increasingly irrelevant "international" art world. An episode of *Big Brother* where the smallish Phillip Cox designed pavilion is home to a bunch of Aussie surfies who spend their time attempting to pick Venice kids. All filmed on camera and broadcast back to Australia. Lots of fun and at least the Australian public would feel it was getting its money worth.

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**Scott Redford is a Brisbane-based artist who recently spent a year in Berlin at the Australia Council Residency at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien.**



**Above:** Patricia Piccinini, *Game Boys Advanced* (2002) silicone, acrylic, human hair, clothing, hand-held video game. **Below:** Michael Stevenson, *This is the Trekka*, installation view, New Zealand pavillion. Photo: David Hatcher.

