



Left and right: 'Remember New Zealand', installation views, Sao Paulo Bienal.

The exhibition concept supposedly addressed the way that the souvenir disperses around the world via the tourist. After reading the local exhibition's catalogue I was dubious about some of the things stated, such as: "They [souvenirs] represented and influenced the taste of the times and served as points of entry into foreign cultures." This talk of entering cultures and influencing taste has strong colonialist connotations in the missionary sense; and souvenirs, though a lively part of most human interactions with new places, embodying memories of an experience, reflect a distinctly materialistic rut of human behavior that seems also tainted by a residual colonial kind of conduct – travelling for acquisitions' sake?

Another thing I was dubious about was "This big collection of different artifacts not only underlines New Zealand's wide range of different cultures, but serves as a critical voice to biennials and cultural tourism." Mainly, the thing I am not convinced by is how is getting artists to make souvenirs of their work a critique of this aspect of cultural tourism? How does it do their work justice given that souvenirs by definition tokenise and exoticise? Firstly, over-use as a critical strategy is not really a good one, and, furthermore, if souvenirs are things that humans collect, keep and attach meanings to, why send souvenirs somewhere, only to have them return home again?

So, what was the experience of being curated into this show? One of the participating artists talked about the biennial system, saying: "...the biennial model, although having risen to ubiquity in the last twenty years, is an old model. Venice has been going for about a hundred years now. As such there may be hundred-year-old ideas embedded within the format... an emphasis on vaguely competitive nationalist politics might be one of them. A colonialist discourse about centers and margins might be another."

By merely presenting a model of the biennial system this show is more a re-enactment of it; one that is informed, but that doesn't really operate critically ("...a colonialist model imposed over a post-colonial context being sent to another post-colonial context?"). Surely, I wondered, there are more effective ways of critiquing the biennial, given that this was a stated intent of the show? If there is any parody operating here, it is more of a small country trying to get noticed. ("Revealingly, one is not likely to remember any of the artists' names – there were too many of them, and they weren't listed in the main part of catalogue where the artists representing other countries were, just the curator's name was.").

Another artist in the show shed some light on the goings-on from the inside out:

"Many of the artists initially saw the invitation to be involved as a fairly generous offer, countering the usual 'artist of the moment choice', but soon realised that the net was cast so wide as to render the catch, at best, fairly meaningless; at least subservient to the project as a whole, encapsulated as it was within an overpowering conceptual and literal frame; and at worst self-serving to the fisherman in question. If a show has no star artist, whose the star if not the curator?"

Of course it's nothing unusual that the curator has a central role, but increasingly shows seem to engage their practice more than those of artists, they seem to be the 'primary producer', the artist the 'raw material'. To ask artists to make artworks as souvenirs and then use them to represent the country in a way that doesn't allow them to critique that role is absurd, especially when the locality they are sourced from is so rich in such critique. One wonders how aware of that locality such a curator might be. Instead, we got to engage in the epitome of the cringe many of us actively seek to avoid if not negate."

Because the artists were not involved in any of the project's conceptual development together, there was only a veneer of democracy. As a group show, but with no sense of collective activity, only a vague kind of group was formed by artists' work being displayed together. The overall concept managed to stagnate the great collective potential by idly using the artists as numbers adding up to a whole, as a curator's work of works. In the case of "Remember New Zealand" I think it's noteworthy to consider why it was that this country was asked to be remembered by the seemingly vague translation of our supposed Antipodean quaintness. As it appeared, the show allowed much less to happen than it could have. Potential is okay, but what's the point if those in driver's seats don't allow it to get moving?

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