

Panel IV  
Dislocated spaces

## Experiences at the Sydney Biennial, 2004

Isabel Carlos

Good afternoon, everyone, and my thanks to Ivo Mesquita for inviting me to be here, and to SITAC for everything. Please excuse my *portunhol*—my mixture of Portuguese and Spanish. I ask for your understanding and patience in this.

*Dislocados, dislocada, dislocamiento...* I think Ivo asked me to participate in this round table because of my involvement with the 2004 Biennale of Sydney. There couldn't be anything more dislocated than a Portuguese woman working in Australia. Leandro Erlich would say that this is truly crossing hemispheres, because if you dig a hole in Portugal, you'll eventually get to Australia. These two countries are veritable antipodes. Given that fact, what I have done as a curator has been to attempt to create a series of bridges between my culture and the Australian culture.

The first idea that came to me—though it may seem like a cliché—was that Australia is in the southernmost continent, and Portugal is a country in southern Europe. I wanted to play with the idea of the South. As Susan Sontag has stated, there is always something further south than the South. The South is always linked to passion and indolence—the opposite of the North which is work, rationality, organization. From there I laid another bridge based on the work of a Portuguese neurologist, Antonio Damasio, who has proven scientifically that emotion—something associated with the South—is the first step toward reason.

The Biennale wound up being called *On Reason and Emotion*, playing on those clichés of Anglo-Saxon culture versus Latin culture. There were a number of artists from the South, largely unknown in Australia.

An idea that came from Roland Barthes was also present there: that the last continent left to be discovered is the human being itself. This idea of discovery and the human being as a continent is very important to me, because Australia is a post-colonial country. It is very common to think of the English as having *discovered* Australia, but it was inhabited before they even got there. The whole issue of the Aborigines is very important in Australia, and I wanted to work on that in some way, without creating any conflict, but with a clearly postcolonial awareness in the work. This was the most conceptual part of the project.

To move on to art practices, the first thing I did was travel to the different Aborigine communities around Australia. I've been places that most Australians have never seen. This was very important to me because it seemed that if I was going to work in Australia, the first thing I had to do was become familiar with the culture and the context—the Biennale's public.

I was dealing with a Biennale which, unlike many others, was held in museums and galleries. It wasn't as alluring as some of those abandoned spaces, like ruins and castles: it had white space. The use of the museum space was fine with me: I didn't have to spend money to put up walls, only on the work—the production of new, site-specific work, created especially for the context. I prefer the word *context* to the word *site*, because many of the works dealt not only with the physical space but also with Australia's political, cultural and social context. So I also came to the conclusion that I preferred to include more works and fewer artists. Only fifty-one artists participated in the Biennale. The idea was to show more than one significant work from each artist, though that would take a lot of time.

Also, the Sydney Biennale gave me a job for two years. I was hired in 2002 to organize a Biennale for 2004. They gave me plenty of time, so I thought I should give the artists time too. This was a major concern of mine. A lot of the artists came to Australia in early 2003. Some of them did residencies which gave rise to many of the works. I'll just mention two of them here. Javier Téllez had a five-week residency in Sydney, leading to a collaboration with the Rozelle Hospital—a Sydney psychiatric institution—which resulted in the project *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Rozelle Hospital)*.

The other residency was that of Jimmie Durham, whose approach to Australian culture was very interesting. He had a friend named Cheryl Buchanan, whom he knew from New York in the 1960s when he was lobbying for human rights at the United Nations. In Jimmie's case, he was focusing on the rights of the Cherokee Indians, while Cheryl was working for the rights of the Australian Aborigines. Jimmie told me that what he wanted to do in Australia was have a conversation with Cheryl Buchanan twenty years after the fact. This was his introduction to the Biennale and to the Australian public. He wound up doing something that had a lot to do with the country's history: I knew

that for a long time, Jimmie had had the idea of denting a car with a rock. The thing is, in Australia, cars are a symbol of wealth and comfort to the Aborigines, and so as soon as they have a bit of money, they buy a car. But then they don't gas it up, or repair it when it breaks down, and it winds up abandoned in the desert. As such, cars are at once important and unimportant: to an Aborigine, a rock is more important than a car.

The entire Biennale was permeated by a workshop spirit and a mixture of generations. As there were three museums, it occurred to me that I should unify them through the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney, which lie on the same road as the three institutions.

We did a series of works for the Gardens. The director of the Botanic Gardens was so enthusiastic about them that he asked me if it wouldn't be better to leave some of them in the Gardens on a permanent basis. I told him no, partly because of what we had first discussed about public art and its relationship to the city. I believe that good public art is something ephemeral—a mere impertinent provocation.

What I have been showing you here are works from the Biennale. I would have liked for there to be audio so that you would be able to hear the voices of the Biennale.

I want to wrap up by saying one thing: you see me as more of a curator than a creator. But like Harald Szeemann, who called himself a curator-author, I see myself as more of a curator-producer. What interests me is providing artists with the necessary conditions for production—to me, that is the most important aspect of being a curator.

Could I get some audio on the film please?

In closing, thank you, and please excuse my *portunhol*.

Translated by Michelle Suderman.