

On “Past Disquiet” and “NIRIN”

A conversation between Rasha Salti, Nick Aikens, Kristine Khouri and Anthony Gardner

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Abstract

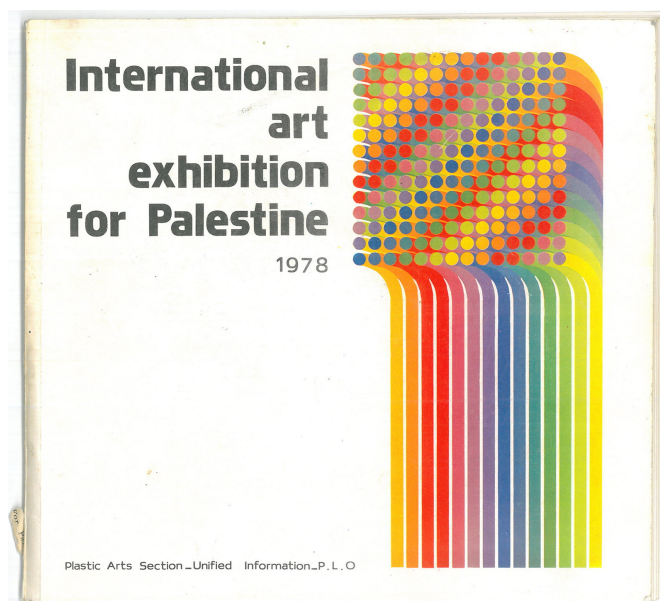
In this panel discussion curators Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, and art historian Anthony Gardner discuss two recent exhibition projects. The ‘Past Disquiet: The Ghosts Narratives and Ghosts from The International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978’ was a ten- year research project carried out by Khouri and Salti that resulted in a series of exhibitions between 2015–2018, and NIRIN, curated by artistic director Brook Andrew (2020) – positioned as a ‘first-nations led’ exhibition, that was realized in under two years and responding to the specific context of the Sydney biennial.

The discussion aims to address the exhibitions themselves. The focus is less on what these exhibitions were ‘about’. Rather, to explore the relationship between the form of the exhibition, the research and the object of study. By looking closely at the Past Disquiet and NIRIN, Khouri, Salti and Gardner address how might we come to understand the affordances of the exhibition and the ways in which they bring forth and speak with different political imaginaries, as well as institutional and exhibition histories. The discussion turns to specific strategies and display devices within the exhibitions – from the ways in which images of art works migrated in different forms across ‘Past Disquiet’, to close readings of vitrine cases in NIRIN that formed dialogues with institutional contexts and exhibition histories – both emancipatory and exclusionary. What emerges from the conversation is a series of reflections and speculations from the contributors on how we might consider the exhibition in relation to notions of repair, restitution, emancipation and forms of instituting.

Nick Aikens (NA): The focus of this conversation is two exhibitions “Past Disquiet” and “NIRIN”. “Past Disquiet” was a ten-year research project that evolved into different exhibition iterations. “NIRIN” was the title of the 22nd Sydney Biennale, which was much more of an event with a shorter research period and responding to the conditions of the biennial. I would like to talk about the exhibitions themselves, and specifically the relationship

between the form of the exhibition, the research and the object of study. I am less interested in discussing what these exhibitions were “about”, but rather in thinking through what the form of the exhibition afforded: its relationship to processes of research, to the thing that was being studied, and how different political imaginaries were transmitted or evoked in the space of the exhibition. Within curatorial discourse, curators myself included are very good at talking about what exhibitions are “about”, as well as institutional contexts of exhibitions. But I sense there is less vocabulary to talk about specific strategies, tools, affordances of the exhibition itself. I hope by looking closely at these exhibitions we can start to get at some of these tools or strategies. Rasha and Kristine, I was wondering if you could just take us into “Past Disquiet”, to where the research project started and its gradual evolution.

Kristine Khouri (KK): In a way “Past Disquiet” started before we found the catalogue. It came out of an interest that Rasha and I shared in the social history of modern art in the Arab world. One prism through which to understand that history was through exhibitions. The project “Past Disquiet” started when we found the catalogue for the “International Art Exhibition for Palestine” in the library of a gallery named Agial in Beirut, in 2008 or so. We started looking through it and were pretty astounded by what we saw. It was an exhibition organised in 1978 in Beirut at the Beirut Arab University by the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s Department of Plastic Arts under the Unified Information Office. There were 200 artists from almost 30 countries who participated in this exhibition. So the breadth of the show was vast for the time, for this city, for the country, and amidst the context of a civil war. This catalogue was our guide we were looking at the names of the artists who participated and the people who contributed to making the exhibition possible. We were not interested in the fate of the artworks in the exhibition, but trying to understand how it came to be.



English Cover of bi-lingual catalogue for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978. Plastic Arts Section, Palestine Liberation Organisation.

There were two lines of inquiry that guided us and that subsequently framed our exhibition. One was that this exhibition, which was a solidarity exhibition, was meant to be a seed collection for a future museum for Palestine. What we found out was that there were other similar projects like this around the world. And secondly, we wanted to understand who these artists were and why they had participated. What networks of artists and solidarity existed behind those names? We started interviewing people in Beirut, Damascus, Jordan. An encounter with an artist, Claude Lazar, in Paris opened up the idea that the museum in exile or solidarity

collection, was partly inspired by the International Resistance Museum for Salvador Allende. Interactions with other artists showed that there were two other collections or museum collections in solidarity with other political causes that had similar formats. One called the *Art against Apartheid* collection, and one that comprised two exhibitions in support of the people of Nicaragua. The research went into a number of directions and eventually, starting in 2015, we transformed this research into a documentary and archival exhibition at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in Barcelona. It included facsimiles of documents of photographs, with videos containing narratives that told the stories of these different exhibitions, of the collectives and events that took place tangentially related to these different projects. We toured that exhibition to different cities and we also published an edited volume.

Rasha Salti (RS): If I were to describe the phases of the research, the first few years we were “Palestine centred”, so to speak. The most cumbersome obstacle to contend with was that the fate of the artworks was mired in controversy. If the artworks had been destroyed or stored somewhere, the research would have been a lot easier. The controversy cast a shadow over our research. We had to explain that we were not on a mission to recover or reclaim the artworks, parse through the “fog” of rumour, quell rancour and reassure different protagonists that the story of the exhibition was exclusively our interest. In other words, the story of the 1978 international exhibition was an unscarred or open wound and our motivations were not immediately understandable.

Until we met with Bartomeu Marí, and had a concrete end goal to transform the research into an exhibition, we were not sure what the research was going to lead to whether it was going to produce an article or a book. Given that the catalogue was our prime forensic source, we could conduct our research in myriad ways, by investigating primarily the list of artists. For instance, given the fact that we were working from Beirut, and that there were only four Lebanese artists listed as having donated artworks, the obvious question was “why only four?” Was it that the organisers disregarded Lebanese artists or that the artists refused to donate artworks? The question of the “absent” names was one way to pursue the research. At some point we abandoned that approach. There was a practical question that occupied us for some time, namely identifying the artists whose names had been transcribed into English phonetically, or whose names were simply misspelled. The Algerians, Moroccans, Iraqis and other Arab artists we recognised, but some of the European and Japanese artists were very difficult to track down. At some point, we shifted the angle of our approach, and decided to focus on why the largest number of artists donating artworks hailed chiefly from France, then Italy, Poland, Japan, Iraq and Morocco. This angle drew out a potent framework that made visible the networks linking the artists. The catalog contained another interesting list, namely those acknowledged and thanked for having made the exhibition possible. It was peculiar, and in a sense unique: there was Jacques Dupin, who was a poet and worked with the Maeght Gallery; Max Clarak-Sérrou, one of the most influential curators and writers in the surrealist movement in France; and the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Arts. Predictably, our first step was to conduct Internet searches and map who was who, and who was still alive. The research was intimately connected to the exhibition, because with the prospect of “presenting” the research, “filling gaps” (so to speak) or answering blanks became a priority between 2015 and 2018.



'Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978', installation view, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), 2015. Photo: La Fotogràfica

NA: Could you say a bit more on how the invitation to present the research in exhibition form affected the research?

RS: We felt we owed it to our interlocutors to try to tell “complete” stories, or at least to have the least amount of gaps possible. In other words, we were compelled by a sense of duty, and we are compulsive by nature. For instance, we could have opted to accept that the Nicaraguan chapter was simply beyond our reach (and means). In the first two iterations of the exhibition, at MACBA and at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), that chapter is minimal. Audiences or visitors were not pressing us to deliver more. We felt the pressure or compulsion to push the research. Moreover, given that our exhibition did not include artworks, the “usual” budget line associated with costs of shipping and insurance were redirected (to some extent) towards funding research. The exhibition’s edition at HKW was “enriched” with research pertaining to the GDR. And we were only able to conduct research in Nicaragua after the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA) in Chile committed to producing a new edition. They marshalled resources, but also mobilised a network to enable research there.

NA: When you presented the exhibition at the “Transmitting, Documenting, Narrating” seminar in October, there were a few things that really struck me about some of the decisions that you made. For example, the use of the catalogue and the posters.

RS: We were aware that the PLO waged the battle for political representation by mobilising artists to produce a visual representation of the reality of Palestine, its struggle and people the reality and the significance, allegorical, symbolic, that speaks to political emancipatory imaginaries. The PLO was structured a little bit like a government in exile, the Office (or department) of Unified Information was effectively the equivalent of a Ministry of Information, and usually these don’t have a “Plastic Arts Section”. For instance, if you examine the legacy of posters commissioned by the Office of Unified Information, the polyphony of voices, the incredible breadth of styles, of approaches, is breathtaking. Furthermore, the PLO militants and intellectuals presented Palestine as a metaphor for the world’s injustice, and therefore the Palestinian struggle was a realm of projection and connection, and the posters incarnated that. This is one element to keep in mind.

The other is about the historical contexts that preceded these exhibitions that we were researching. The movement of non-aligned countries was losing steam and the Cold War was still ongoing. The Soviets had devised the programme of “solidarity” or “friendship” with the so-called Third World, i.e. Asia, Latin America and Africa, as the basis for cultural diplomacy in their contest for hegemony. That is how the PLO were able to operate in the former Eastern bloc for instance. In this context, the question is how come so many artists from Western Europe were involved. This explains why so many of the Italian artists involved in the exhibitions were either card-carrying members of the communist party or very close to those circles, or that the French were close to the extreme left. The 1970s was also the decade when the communist parties in France and Italy were losing popularity and share of the vote. So we broached these histories from the question of the Palestinian struggle. We came into contact with chapters in the history of artistic practices at a moment when artists felt that art belonged in the street, in public space, when murals were considered remarkable political artistic interventions, and when political exiles were not “refugees”. Our awareness of the shift in perception (in thinking historically) was sharpened as we were thinking through the exhibition. In 2015 we used posters in the videos as “documents” and iconic incarnations of how struggles were projected into imaginaries, but by 2018 we treated them as signposts of a political history of struggles, as more formal documents. You can also trace how our relationship to documents changed, and we felt the necessity to introduce a hierarchy.



Exhibition view, Past Disquiet, Sursock Museum, Beirut, 27 July-1 October 2018. Photo: Christopher Baaklini

AG: It’s fascinating to think about the constant transformations of the exhibition especially what you just said about entering the universe through Palestine I think it’s a beautiful way of framing the various situations of “Past Disquiet” and what “NIRIN” as a first-nations project was trying to do, and what exhibition histories, curatorial histories or however we want to frame what we’re talking about what they might do and what their manifold starting points might be.

RS: Approaching these histories from the perspective of the Palestinian struggle was incarnate or made manifest in the fact that the catalogue for the “International Art Exhibition for Palestine” was always placed prominently at a central location within every iteration of “Past Disquiet”. We did not reproduce it, we filmed our hands leafing through it and that video was playing on a monitor that “hovered” at a higher or high level in a central and prominent position. To acknowledge that we were dealing with a history with a lot of gaps, and to make sure that we didn’t have a self-assured curatorial upper hand. It was very important for us that we did not resort to any of

the techniques of making an exhibition look neat, of “masking” the exhibition tools; for instance, all the wires of the monitors were visible, as well as those used to hang screens and panels. And we experimented with how to reproduce documents in different formats and media. At MACBA, we reproduced documents on long thin banners made from fabric that was thick enough not to undulate, to create the impression of a “forest” of documents. At HKW we reproduced them on very thin boards, like placards. At MSSA in Santiago we made metal rectangular frames that stood on the floor in which we presented reproductions of posters on two sides. And we also used thin shelves that were stuck on the wall at a low level on which we placed reprinted documents. And in the last edition of the exhibition in Beirut, we used shelves and metal frames with cork boards on which we pinned documents.



Past Disquiet. Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978, 19.3.-9.5.2016, Installation view © Laura Fiorio / Haus der Kulturen der Welt

NA: And interviews were an important part of the exhibition display as well?

KK: The main components of the exhibition were texts, wall texts that were more expansive than maybe traditional wall texts facsimiles of documents and other materials and the videos. The videos were central to the exhibition; they were the sites where the stories were properly told if you just read the wall texts, you wouldn't get the full story. The videos most often contained interviews with people, with artists who participated in any of those exhibitions, PLO representatives such as Abdallah Hijazi speaking about the commissioning of posters in Poland and having artists travel to Tunis from Poland. Or a Japanese historian, Itagaki Yuzo, about Japanese solidarity for Palestine. We did upwards of seventy interviews for this project. We were relying on people's memories and on these interviews because in the case of the Palestinian exhibition there is no cultural archive to go to, there is no single place with all those “truthful” documents that may tell that story, and the making of the exhibitions. So we relied on people to tell their story of what they remembered of the exhibition and their practice overall. The other element that was important in editing these videos was that our voices were present we were mediators who acknowledged our own presence and responsibility in doing this research and narrating these stories. There is no claim that this is an objective history that this is the story that we are telling we acknowledge that there are gaps and that memory is complex.



Exhibition view, Past Disquiet, Sursock Museum, Beirut, 27 July–1 October 2018. Photo: Christopher Baaklini

NA: It also assembles the different actors around this project from 1978 to the early 1990s within the space of the exhibition in a way that can't be done in any other form. That's a very powerful and apt way to transpose the politics of solidarity that was at the heart of this project into a formal, spatial, visual resolution.

KK: Yes, it's a substitute for bringing them all physically into one place, which is impossible. I think Rasha often refers to the exhibition as an exhibition of stories, and it is as if you are walking into a website in a way: you get to choose your own path and one of the things that was very important to us was to not just have one voice in one place, but to start realising that there were links and connections in the same way that images appeared multiple times within the exhibition.



Exhibition view, Past Disquiet, Sursock Museum, Beirut, 27 July–1 October 2018. Photo: Christopher Baaklini

NA: I want to touch on the decision not to include the artworks. You have talked before about not wanting to fetishise the object, but it also does something very specific to the exhibition. We're looking at an exhibition in

which the artworks aren't there, they are ghosts to use your phrase and the exhibition itself becomes much more about the relationships between the different actors, your relationships with the history, with the material. Was it really early on that you decided that the artworks themselves wouldn't play a part in the exhibition?

RS: It was. In the framework of "Past Disquiet", the artworks would have been regarded as documents, as forensic evidence. We found a few in Beirut, they were in a private home, placed there by the 1978 exhibition's custodian in 1982 for safekeeping. A couple were actually torn from shells that had exploded in that apartment during the war. When I visited the house and saw them, it was a very emotional moment, but I was more moved by the back of the painting, seeing the label marking the 1978 exhibition, than by the painting itself. Conceptually, showing the label would have been more meaningful. At MSSA, there were artworks in the museum's storage facility, and during the exhibition of "Past Disquiet" on the first floor of the museum, there was another one on the ground floor that showed artworks from the 1972 solidarity with Chile collection. In fact, it was the first ever iteration of an art collection in solidarity. In "Past Disquiet", we only see a single artwork as a "ghostly" projection, and it was made by a Palestinian artist, Abdul Hay Mossalam, as an homage to the Plastic Arts Section, after the PLO left Beirut and the Office of Unified Information was destroyed in 1982. That painting had the key to the office of the Plastic Arts Section encrusted in it. We projected its image on the wall, flickering between its face and back, to create the effect of an "apparition" and reduce its presence as a forensic document.

NA: If we turn now to "NIRIN". Anthony you are talking about this exhibition from a very different position as an art historian and an interlocutor with Brook Andrew, the exhibition's curator. It's worth considering the differences that distance affords when thinking about the exhibition. But maybe to get us into the space of "NIRIN" could you introduce the project?

AG: The way that I'm exploring this kind of vocabulary, is to be thinking through exhibitions not thinking about exhibitions, or with exhibitions but thinking *through* exhibitions. Not as a curator of those exhibitions, but as somebody who is interested in the history and ongoing persistences of those exhibitions. Thinking through exhibitions is a way of thinking of the exhibition, the curatorial history, sometimes long after the exhibition itself has come down, or indeed before it has even been put up. So "NIRIN" was the title of 22nd Biennale in Sydney. The Biennale started in 1973 in part to help inaugurate the Sydney Opera House, and this was the 22nd edition. It was initially scheduled to take place from mid March to 8 June 2020, but because of the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia it closed on 24 March and reopened in early June for some venues and mid June for others, and was extended to September 2020 for some venues and October 2020 for others. As well as having iterations online and satellite presentations of a set of artworks, particularly moving image artworks, in other locations including Naarm/Melbourne, later in 2020. It included 98 artists and groups, 8 main venues, initially 7, but the National Art School was closed because of the pandemic and the works that were in that space were shipped to another venue called Carriageworks.



Left: Musa N Nxumalo, Moonchild Sanelly – Anthology of Youth, 2016. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020) at Art Gallery of New South Wales. Presented at the 22nd Biennale of Sydney with generous assistance from the Sherman Foundation. Courtesy the artist and SMAC Gallery, Cape Town / Johannesburg / Stellenbosch. Right: Kunmanara Mumu Mike Williams, Tuppy Ngintja Goodwin, Sammy Dodd and the artists of Mimili Maku Arts, Kulilaya munu nintiriwa (Listen and learn), 2020. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Art Gallery of New South Wales. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous assistance from Australia Council for the Arts and Fondation Opale. Courtesy Mimili Maku Arts. Photograph courtesy of Anthony Gardner and the Biennale of Sydney.

So Brook Andrew, the artistic director of the Biennale, is an artist of Wiradjuri background. He was the first Indigenous artist to be the artistic director of the Sydney Biennale, which was a very significant aspect to what Brook was trying to do. He called the exhibition “NIRIN”, which is the Wiradjuri word for edge, Wiradjuri being the country of his mother’s heritage. A lot of what Brook is exploring, both in his artistic and curatorial research, has been to look at the kinds of language, vocabularies and ways in which culture might operate to disrupt the kind of international art English that has transpired within the contemporary art world, especially biennales. Brook has been an influential artist in and from Australia since the 1990s. I came to the exhibition as an interlocutor with Brook as well as just an audience member with a vested interest in a sense, thinking about what “NIRIN” was trying to do when Brook was emphatic about it being focused on artists, First Nations and queer-led. Like you Nick, I’m less interested in what exhibitions represent so much as I’m keen to explore curatorial passages or episodes within exhibitions. To think about what it is that an exhibition does, and perhaps what curatorship does.

NA: To speak about one of those episodes in the exhibition, could you talk about “Powerful Objects” in “NIRIN”?

AG: In some respects, I think “NIRIN” is the reverse of some aspects of “Past Disquiet”. In “Past Disquiet”, instead of showing the artwork, Rasha and Kristine engaged with the discourse, histories and apparatuses around the art works. Brook was almost doing the opposite of that with a series of presentations or modes of display that he called “powerful objects”. These were a series of artefacts, artworks and archives that were presented at different moments in the exhibition, with little contextualising information or other curatorial accoutrements to distract from how the objects resonated in and of themselves. On the one hand it is a typical artistic device to present something as a readymade, not necessarily having to take a stance in relation to that which is being presented. But at the same time, what happens with these objects when you strip away the discourse and the matter just speaks for itself, or speaks in a way that it wants to speak? It is simply the presentation of the thing. It could be something that has a more spiritual resonance, it could be something that has different resonant

materialities, it could be an AIDS quilt or it could be a dendroglyph design from Wiradjuri country or archives relating to the 1989 exhibition “Magiciens de la Terre”.

To focus briefly on one vitrine, which included material from Bernard Lüthi’s archive: Lüthi was involved in curating a section of “Magiciens de la Terre” focusing on Indigenous Australian artists, and he was co-curator of the lesser known 1993 exhibition “Aratjara” that started in Düsseldorf in Germany. In the vitrine, Brook included the image from “Magiciens...”, of the well-known presentation of the sand paintings of members of the Yuendumu community and Richard Long’s *Red Earth Circle* behind it. Alongside these were Bernard Lüthi’s personal archives from the exhibition. Included on the left side of the vitrine were some clippings, faxes from curators to artists and writers and others, but also some of the dirt and sand from the work in “Magiciens...”. There was also a blueprint with drawings and designs on them, photographic contact sheets and so forth, material that wouldn’t necessarily have been presented in 1989 or 1993. I’m interested in that sense of layering of work and material. Firstly, what does it mean for these two exhibitions to be presented as part of “NIRIN”? One very well known, one lesser known, but very important in terms of thinking about the international, global presentation of Indigenous Australian material, particularly to European audiences. Why did these particular exhibitions become a powerful object embedded within the 22nd Biennale in Sydney, given its context of being artist-led and First-Nations-led? And why was the material sometimes very legible to an audience member, and sometimes not at all, with material layered on top of each other so that a lot of the archival material was present but hidden? In speaking with Brook, he was talking a lot about how both “Magiciens...” and “Aratjara” were thinking about Indigenous artwork presented within large-scale international oriented exhibitions. And while “Magiciens...” became this kind of “cornerstone” of a global exhibition of art, there was a lot of Indigenous pushback against it, particularly in Australia. A lot of elders and artists were resisting the flattening out of material the comparison with Richard Long that becomes a spectacularisation and simplification of engaging with land, being on land and being in land. The assumption of Indigenous material below the desacralised Richard Long and the framing of all practitioners as magicians in the first place was deeply troublesome for some Indigenous critics.



Bernhard Lüthi Archive, 1953–2014. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Art Gallery of New South Wales. Courtesy Fondation Opale, Lens. Photograph courtesy of Anthony Gardner and the Biennale of Sydney.

“Aratjara”, on the other hand was very much an Indigenous-led exhibition through the work of Djon Mundine, Gary Foley and others. It gave agency to artists and curators from Indigenous communities, in accordance with

this material, and subject to protocols in terms of what can be made public. So “Aratjara” is a far more significant exhibition than “Magiciens...” for thinking about First Nations-led exhibition presentations. But what I find interesting is knowing how expansive and bizarre this archive is. It is not often you have sand in the archive, these remnants of a work, and here it is presented as part of an archive, along with these curiously pristine faxes, lacking all those signs of age or fingernail marks we usually find with faxes, or the discolouration that comes from the faxes’ life. The material condition of the archive connects quite nicely with “Past Disquiet”, especially in terms of the element of time. You can’t think of these exhibitions, their archives, their residues and their reiterations without thinking about what the material ramifications are for those histories, including how those material ramifications kind of erode, block, challenge, represent and demand a rearticulation or reimagining of what those materials might be.



Bernhard Lüthi Archive, 1953–2014. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Art Gallery of New South Wales. Courtesy Fondation Opale, Lens. Photograph courtesy of Anthony Gardner and the Biennale of Sydney.

NA: That relates very much to Rasha and Kristine’s decision in “Past Disquiet” to not show images of certain works, but instead show a blank screen.

AG: Yes, it insists on having a kind of imaginative engagement with these histories. I’m reminded of Saidiya Hartman’s approach to what she calls ‘critical fabulations’ and how she insists on injecting imagination or curiosity into the ways histories are presented, how they’re thought through and thought with, which I think is a really interesting pedagogical device. Sometimes what is often missing, particularly with the overabundance of google as an archive and wikipedia as a source of knowledge, is curiosity itself; of going through the unexpected loopholes and wormholes and dead ends, and the tricks that might come from that as a way of thinking and learning. In this respect “NIRIN” was continually thinking about itself and its constituents but also its histories, the sense of curiosity and imagination and reimagining, precisely through what might be missing and what might not be available to know.

RS: Listening to Anthony, I would like to point to another significant point, namely, the desire to restitute and restore. Our research involved often interviewing men and women who were written out of the canon, who were wounded, whose stories were not deemed worthy of recording, and we were researching museums and collections that did not matter to art historians. In other words, we were conducting a form of restitution and

restoration.

AG: It is not just a restitution of objects or even of bringing these marginalised or forgotten exhibitions or histories back it is about a restitution of conversation, dialogue, anecdote, affect, emotion, those things that slide away or leak away from the archive as documents, as things that can't somehow be captured but which are essential to history, to knowledge and to modes of surviving. What is interesting here is that which can't be captured, but can still be engaged, experienced, presented, sensed these sometimes very spiritualised or ineffable aspects that are a kind of a constant of a lot of exhibitions and yet are very rarely brought into the ways that certainly historians and writers and editors might be thinking about when making that exhibition, precisely because they can't be easily photographed.

NA: I would like to ask you about another of the “powerful object” presentations Anthony, that included the shackles and helmet.



Installation view of “powerful objects”: Younosuke Natori, Grosses Japan, 1937; James Gillray, Praetor-urbanus: Inauguration of the Coptic mayor of Cairo, preceded by the procureur de la commune, 1847 (published); Maker unknown, Leg Manacles, c. 1772-1868; Anna Borghesi (designed by) produced by Working Title Australia, Helmet, part of armour, part of film costume, worn by Heath Ledger as Ned Kelly in the film ‘Ned Kelly’, 2002. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Campbelltown Arts Centre. Courtesy private collection, Melbourne; and the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Sydney. Photograph courtesy of Anthony Gardner and the Biennale of Sydney.

AG: Sure. So what we’re focusing on is a cabinet presented at the Campbelltown Art Centre, in which a set of shackles was presented alongside a helmet that looks like it could have been worn by a nineteenth-century bandit or bushranger, but was actually from a film set of the film *Ned Kelly* (2006). Next to it was a late-nineteenth-century drawing, a pretty horrific colonial cartoon with a racist depiction of people of colour and the settler controller, and finally a document with a personal handwritten dedication from Hitler about eugenics. What was presented here was not the fact these shackles exist, it is what remains unspoken. What does it mean to have this simulacrum of a helmet that connects to a particular myth of Australia’s development as a nation in the nineteenth through to the twentieth century? But also: what has been historically precluded from those myths of nation the enslavement of Indigenous peoples, the cultural and physical genocide of those peoples that are known but rarely articulated, and that are part of that mythic history through their absence? Here they

were made present again not just presented in an earnest way, but actually framed within a challenging set of objects, including a simulacrum. The tin helmet resonated with a history of the nineteenth century but actually it was a prop from a film from 2006. And at the same time Australia's history is quite different from the Nazi genocides of the 1930s, and yet here the shackles were presented alongside a colonial cartoon and a dedication about eugenics from Hitler to a friend of his. The personalisation that emerges through and despite what might otherwise be captured is exactly what Brook was trying to think about with the notion of "powerful objects". Is it designed to speak to audience members? Is it designed to be photographed or catalogued for posterity? Or can powerful entities speak to each other through their own conversation, in their own dialogue without the need for archives or audiences or other kinds of intervention that speak for them rather than with them?

NA: I remember you were saying that there was little text given for these powerful objects. Brook opted not to get into a kind of semantic, categorical dance with how these things fit within or outside institutional histories. Rather he presented them as objects, as material things in the present, rather than as categorised, historicised objects that are over.

AG: Exactly, they are in the present and still have a lot to say to the past, the present and the future through their silent witnessing. Different temporalities met within the space and we came to recognise that actually these entities, these powerful objects, have been restituted to the present rather than just relegated to the past. Because the history of genocide is fundamental to the ways we are thinking about the present.

It is an interesting comparison with what Fred Wilson did in "Mining the Museum" and the cabinet titled *Metal Works, 1793-1880*, which included the presentation of the shackles that had incarcerated slaves in the United States. The comparison between "NIRIN" and "Mining the Museum" is there on a formal level as well as on a material level. But what was equally striking with Brook's presentation was what was different from Wilson's. Brook was thinking through not just the presence of these materials from the nineteenth, twentieth or twenty-first century, but those other exhibition episodes that would be recognised by quite a number of people that might be seeing this display or thinking about the museological vocabularies and tropes of display more broadly, and their own colonial heritages. There was a continuation of the urgencies that Wilson presented, but also substantial differences between 2020 and 1992-93, and the relationships between the Indigenous incarcerations and the slave trade. Both, however, were fundamentally exploring the twin sides of modernity and coloniality. And again, the quite disparate dialogues within the vitrine in Campbelltown compared with those in Baltimore, which was more overt and direct, whereas in Campbelltown the objects were from quite disparate contexts and a wide expanse of time, from the nineteenth century through the 1930s right up to 2006. I wonder what they might bring to a conversation that Brook could be having with Wilson, or that an audience member of "NIRIN" might be having with an imaginable audience member of "Mining the Museum".

NA: I wonder how we might consider the different research frames of the two exhibitions and the relationship to the forms of display that they used. "Past Disquiet" began with a single book, and a single exhibition. From here it expanded, but there was a very clear starting point, a very clear object of study if you like. "NIRIN"'s "edges" were porous from its beginnings. There is a way in which Brook invited us to consider different relationships political, art historical, institutional within the space of the exhibition. Whereas with "Past Disquiet" the strategy was very different.

RS: "NIRIN" happened within an institution, the curator was fully aware of what he was doing by placing these objects and this archive in a vitrine in that institution. Basically, the institution cannot write its history in the same way after this biennial. "Past Disquiet" on the other hand was an itinerant exhibition, Kristine and I don't carry

affiliations to an institution, we were always guests. In decentring the canon, it was less an address to a colonial imaginary, more to the modern day imaginary of emancipation. Listening to Anthony and the notion of the “powerful object”, I was thinking that perhaps the resonance between “Past Disquiet” and “NIRIN” is that thread or motif around the migration of images. In militant artist practices, the painting is neither precious nor sacrosanct; it is reproduced as a book cover, a poster, a postcard or a calendar. The painting that is the cornerstone of the art market, of the object that the artist produces and is supposed to be unique, this desacralisation (profanation), the free circulation of images is a circulation of political imaginaries, of iconographies. So in the same way that these objects were presented in the vitrine to inspire or provoke evocations, shift the gaze and awaken buried histories, the migration of images did something similar or resonant.

KK: I see a relation in the way we chose not to show the artworks. It asked people to figure out what those works are and see them on the cover of books, see that they are posters, they are calendars. We also didn’t afford the opportunity to spend too much time with the works in the same way that we are not afforded the opportunity to truly access those works today.

AG: And also the agency of objects or entities to persist in different ways. I’m also thinking about infrastructures, because what you were saying is absolutely right; the Biennale in Sydney is itself an institution. What came out of Brook’s insistence on being artist- and First Nations-led has been a radical rethinking of the construction of the Biennale in terms of board members. Now there has to be Indigenous representation on the board, and with “NIRIN” the Biennale found that it needed Indigenous curators, Indigenous curatorial assistants, Indigenous researchers, as an ongoing and sustainable institution for the future.



Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020) at Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Photograph courtesy of Anthony Gardner and the Biennale of Sydney.

KK: Maybe we can add the word repair to narratives, in addition to restitution. I think the reparative work in thinking about the canon, in thinking about these histories that challenge museographic practice, or are part of that history, because they are not alternative, they have not quite yet been written into the history of art.

NA: In a recent seminar I took part in, curator Elvira Dyangani Ose talked beautifully about exhibition-making as an instituting gesture. Thinking about the original impulse for “Past Disquiet” as this kind of seed collection,

thinking about what Brook was doing in terms of his relationship to those collections and the institutions at the Sydney Biennial, thinking about how “Past Disquiet” assembled these different alliances in history, it seems that in very different ways, there is a form of instituting that happened through the exhibition.

AG: It’s a really interesting one in terms of those three key terms of emancipation, instituting and repair. Can you have emancipation without repair? Because to repair might actually suture precisely the means through which emancipation might be possible. I haven’t quite worked out what those relationships are, but I think that it’s very pressing that exhibitions, including the next Berlin Biennial, will be thinking through these matters. These questions of presentness, pastness and futurity, through emancipation, instituting and repair. But in terms of what Elvira said, is this instituting gesture in the work of exhibitions alone? This is where you can talk about curatorial work separately, perhaps; maybe the exhibition is doing something different as a set of events that makes palpable, gives presence to that which is behind the scenes? The exhibition, then, gives a form, however precarious, however temporary, to not just the possibility but an actuality of institutional change that has taken much longer and required dialogue and trust to develop behind the scenes through curatorial negotiation and research rather than just the selection of artworks and their installation in a show. Which of course brings us back to the impulse behind the original exhibition in Beirut in the 1970s and the urge to project a solidarity museum through a single exhibition and in some sense for Rasha and Kristine to enter this history through Palestine as it were.

RS: The solidarity museum was “invented” in Chile, with Mario Pedrosa, José Balmes and the whole cohort around Salvador Allende. They carried the idea with them after their displacement to Europe and elsewhere in Latin America. However, because of the continuous dispossession of Palestinians we were driven subconsciously towards threading that history from the entry point or perspective of Palestine. In undertaking the international exhibition and the “museum of solidarity with Palestine”, the Palestinians became agents of their own destiny. I never ever lose sight of that generation’s mindset, what it meant for them, who that first generation of refugee and militant men and women were. They were around seven, eight, or nine-year-old children when they became refugees, so most of them grew up in refugee camps. These children, growing up in camps, totally dispossessed, believed they could build a museum of international art fifteen years later. They rebelled against their dispossession as well as their representation in the international media, and they rebelled against their parents, their immediate kin, who took the handouts and sought through the institutional means afforded to them (via NGOs) to get out of poverty. Instead they chose a risky, dangerous and dramatic path. First they started a student union, then they found ways to establish offices of representation worldwide they understood the rules of the game and found ways to stake a presence in the public sphere and mobilise solidarity around their cause.