

ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L APRIL 1993

SYDNEY

BIENNALE

BOND STORE 3/4 AND
ART GALLERY OF NEW
SOUTH WALES

An examination of borders—of conditions at the edges of culture, politics, and science—is clearly timely, given the dubious credibility of cultural convergence. The Ninth Biennale of Sydney indexed the strategies of postcolonial art: bricolage, mimicry, and hybridization. Curator Anthony Bond focused on art about boundaries and transgression, stressing recombinative bricolage as crucial to border art. Romero de Andrade Lima constructed androgynous cult figures from composite parts; Orshi Drozdik combined medical props and theories of cultural control in a literalization of the gendered subject's borders; Giulio Paolini's installation of chairs and canvas *L'Ospite* (The host, 1992), elegantly constructed the illusion of reflected space seen in reverse, suggesting an affinity between *arte povera* and the marginal. On the other hand, Narelle Jubelin's *Dead Slow*, 1991, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña & Coco Fusco's *The Year of the White Bear*, 1992, destabilized the idea of borders using metaphors of intercultural mobility. Jubelin recorded the links between Bombay, Scotland, and Australia by tracing the intertextuality of sewing manuals and translating these sources into painstaking *petit-point* embroidery. At the Australian Museum, Gómez-Peña & Fusco exhibited themselves as caged Amerindian savages from a recently discovered island in the Gulf of Mexico. As a reenactment of the scandal that greeted the discovery of New-World cultures in 1492, *The Year of the White Bear* resonated with a different set of associations in Australia: awareness of comparatively recent trade in aboriginal bones intersected with, in Gómez-Peña's words, an affront to contemporary "cultimulticulturalism."

The Biennale also inadvertently marked the probable demise of installation as a means of rewriting identity. Though installation, bricolage, and the ready-made have a long tradition as "survival practices" in peripheral societies, the most interesting

installations in this exhibition were by artists with considerable reputations. Ashley Bickerton's *Seascape: Floating costume to drift for eternity*, 1991, was a lifeboat made of fiberglass, webbing glass, and an embalmed Christian Dior suit. Melanie Counsell's glassed-off warehouse space defined borders as the almost imperceptible framing edges of art. For these artists, as for Paolini, the border represented an aspect of Duchampian tradition. If boundaries were everywhere present, transgression was remarkably absent, with the exception of Swedish artist Dan Wolgers' wall of smashed windows—shattered glass littered the gallery floor. However, sanctimonious conformity often smothered the Bond Store's vast space: the illustration of social activism tends toward sentimentality.

An exclusive reading of bricolage through assemblage artificially limited the range of the Ninth Biennale. Fiction and deliberate misinterpretation emerged as the most challenging aspect of contemporary border art: Wim Delvoye's *Labour of Love*, 1992, continued the artist's displacement of Flemish decorative tradition. In an allusion to Dutch East-Indian colonial furniture, Delvoye hired traditional Indonesian craftsmen to carve roadworks equipment. Like Narelle Jubelin, Delvoye examined the complex networks of global trade; art represented the fantastic overexpenditure of an Other's labor. In an impressively manipulative, expressively eclectic critique of museum spectacle, Gómez-Peña & Fusco addressed the instability of the identities conferred upon them as Hispanic Americans. As in *Labour of Love*, the deliberate outcome was cultural-border kitsch in which straightforward complicity was avoided. Similarly, *The Year of the White Bear*, savages hi-tech joggers, supermarket kitchen ware, lap-top computers, and exotic native headgear. The "native Americans'" availability for representation coincided with their exploitation of the audience. Delvoye, Gómez-Peña & Fusco rewrite authenticity as border art.

—Charles Green