I’d like to start with a quotation from the philosopher Spinoza, who lived in Amsterdam and was Portuguese Jewish, an early product of diaspora.

“I really wish I could write to you in the language in which I was brought up,” Spinoza (1632-1677) expressed in one of his letters, referring to the fact that he was unable to speak Latin and Dutch nearly as well as Portuguese, his own native language.

With the distance separating one of history’s greatest philosophers from a mere biennale director well in mind, I would nevertheless like to enunciate this gap at the very beginning, for while it is perhaps not decisive, it is fundamental. As the Brazilian writer João Ubaldo Riberio wrote:

“In the first place, I’m not really bilingual, as some generous English speaking friends of mine would like to pretend (…) But honesty commands me to add that I also make a lot of not so subtle mistakes, even gross ones (…) I mix categories, elocutions and word arrangements from the several languages I like to play with, and the result, of course, makes no sense. And if I get carried away when writing a text in English, I unconsciously let my native language slip into it. For instance, there is no neutral gender in Portuguese, so everything is either he or she”.

I’m announcing this gap not only as a subjective issue but because through the biennale exhibition the dimension of translation is present. An international event, even if mainly visual carries the need for the translation of words, realities and worlds. This is more than changing the subtitles in some videos, and it can even in a radical sense be the translation itself that is the artwork.

To return to my point of departure for the Biennale: in Descartes’ Error (1995) the neurologist António Damásio analyses several neurological case studies to show that emotion is crucial to human intelligence. In another book, The Feeling of What Happens (1999), he discusses the importance of emotion and feeling in the construction of the self. In Looking for Spinoza (2003), Damásio elaborates his ideas further:
“Feelings are not mere decoration added on to the emotions, something one might keep or discard. Feelings can be and often are revelations of the state of life within the entire organism – lifting the veil in the literal sense of the term. Life being a high wire act, most feelings are expression of the struggle for balance, ideas of the exquisite adjustments and corrections without which, one mistake too many, the whole act collapses. If anything in our existence can be revelatory of our simultaneous smallness and greatness, feelings are.”

In other words, we have an emotional brain. The “emotional” in Western societies, has been connoted, almost to the point of cliché, with the south. As Susan Sontag states in *The Volcano Lover* (1993):

“Every culture has its southerners – people who work as little as they can, preferring to dance, drink, sing, brawl, kill their unfaithful spouses; who have livelier gestures, more lustrous eyes, more colourful garments, more fancifully decorated vehicles, a wonderful sense of rhythm, and charm, charm, charm; unambitious, no, lazy, ignorant, superstitious, uninhibited people, never on time, conspicuously poorer (how could it be otherwise, say the northerners); who for all their poverty and squalor lead eviable lives – envied, that is, by work driven, sensually inhibited, less corruptly governed northerners, clearly superior. We do not shirk our duties or tell lies as a matter of course, we work hard, we are punctual, we keep reliable accounts. But they have more fun than we do. Every country, including southern countries, has its south.”

Australia is the only true southern continent, but its predominantly Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic culture fosters (again, almost as a cliché) exactly the opposite of what is considered a “southern culture”. Sontag writes:

“(…) it was important not to change the way they had always lived. They cautioned themselves as people do who know they are part of a superior culture; we mustn’t let ourselves go, mustn’t descend to the level of the… jungle, street, bush, bog, hills, outback (take your pick). For if you start dancing on tables, fanning yourself, feeling sleepy when you pick up a book, developing a sense of rhythm, making love whenever you feel like it – then you know. The south has got you.”

Within the exhibition, the emphasis on the “south” does not mean an exclusive focus on “southern” or post-colonial practices. The south is present not only geographically – witness the number of artists namely from southern Europe and America – but also in the way many works deal with topics that, to return to the clichés, we associate with southern culture: the body, sensuality, recycling (Michael Sailstorfer) and the use of “poor” materials (Jimmie Durham, Annette Kapon, Koo Jeong-a), a community involvement and physical proximity.
After a year and a half of work guided by these ideas, and by the artworks and artists that it makes sense to show in Sydney, I would like to clarify my conception of what a Biennale ought to be. I believe such an event should be conceived of by taking into account the place where it will be held, a conviction that led me to travel throughout Australia before beginning research anywhere else. And it is also why many artists planned site visits and residencies for the creation of site-specific works. And when I say site-specific works, it is not only the site as a physical space but an economic, social and political space; some of these works deal with Australian issues ranging from the flora (de Rijke/ De Rooij) to immigration (Jens Haaning’s Vietnamese chairs at the MCA cafe).

While I believe that a curator’s primary concern should be the artists and their works, I also believe that potential viewers should never be forgotten. Hence the space around the Sydney Opera House, the Museum of Sydney’s cube and the Royal Botanic Gardens imposed themselves from the beginning as exhibition sites. I must particularly mention the Royal Botanic Gardens, not only because they are an axis-path linking the two main venues (the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Art Gallery of New South Wales and, further down, Artspace), but also because it is a non-museological space. These gardens are a space with neither fences nor walls. Rather, they are a true human architecture of nature and a sort of micro-map of Australian history, first as a place of aboriginal culture and then as a site for the Governor’s house. I call it an architecture of nature because nature is ordered, catalogued, preserved; species are placed according to rigorous co-ordinates for differentiation and protection, so that everything seems natural or even wild. Biennale works situated in the Royal Botanic Gardens that play with our notions of natural and artificial include Pravdoliub Ivanov’s *Water Monuments*, and *Secuencia Ridicula* by MP & MP Rosado.


If to colonise is to ‘clone’, the attempt to transform the other into the same, to transform the different and unknown into something similar (almost always by force, as we are well aware), then the Royal Botanic Gardens are a powerful tangible metaphor of a post-colonial society. I must add here that I am a post-colonial product, as Portugal was the European country which maintained a colonial regime until the mid-1970s. And it is not just the colonised but also the coloniser which are nowadays living through a post-colonial situation. Even if not directly enunciated, the post-colonial situation is the subterranean vein running through the entire exhibition, although this is clearer in some works (Fernando Alvim, Loulou Cherinet, Gordon Hookey, Melik Ohanian) – underlining that, with a last glance and playing somewhat with these concepts, nothing has been more colonised than emotion, the south and woman.


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Speaking within the old dichotomy we would say that the south is the body and the north is the mind, but believing that this is a false dichotomy, one of my aims was to bring together artworks that create a total physical and psychological experience. For example, the decision to keep the Biennale venues within walking distance has to do with this concern about creating an event that will be a gratifying experience for viewers, not only in artistic terms (the works they confront, which please or displease them, call on all their senses, not just the retinal), but which also allows them to experience the city and the urban space of Sydney.

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Emotional reasons or rationalised emotions, to continue with the Cartesian terminology. It will probably take some time before we find the appropriate vocabulary to speak about the inextricable connection and interdependence between emotion and reason, between body and mind, human and nature; until we find concepts that reflect the purpose of those central dualisms to all Western culture.

We are aware that the old and ancestral association between emotion and the feminine comes from a theoretical, philosophical and scientific construction built up from a masculine viewpoint and which, in the process of equalising the different, swept under the rug things it had problems understanding. For example the paintings of Mari Sunna are portraits of feminine vision and sensuality, more than many naked representations of the female body in the history of art.
“The more we know about human nature, the more we reveal how objects and situations cause and lead us on to feelings, the more we know the mechanisms by which emotions are processed, especially the more complex ones that I call ‘social emotions’, the more we will be able to beneficially influence the way we regulate life, deliberately, in matters of all the instruments we have at hand to make life better” (António Damásio, interview in the newspaper Público, Lisbon, 2/11/2003).

An ethics of emotion, so to speak, to shorten the path. And what about the association between emotion and aesthetics? Emotion is a word that artistic, critical and aesthetic discourse has carefully and surgically removed, especially since modernism. Yet when we speak to artists about what the departure point was, or what was behind this or that work, we come across the word emotion, as made clear in a call for conference papers organised by the Tate Modern titled “user mode = emotion + intuition on art + design”:

“Artists, designers and critics frequently refer to ‘emotional engagement’. What is meant by this? Is it immersion, rapture, agency, reflection? This question is crucial to interactive art and design practice where the user’s response is sensitive to context and can not only influence the form and content of the work but also, in some cases, the future direction of technological development.”

Today’s world is one of fast and comprehensive information, in which everything (from wars to scientific discoveries to the weddings of the famous) reaches us instantly and simultaneously. So just what kind of distance, logic and reflection does this kind of world allow us? Will we not face all this as children dazzled by increasingly complex weapons and devices in a landscape that makes war more aestheticised every day, and transforms human beings into glamorously warlike figures, as in the photos of AES + F?


Permanently linked by means of mobile telephones, e-mails, cable television channels and a number of technical-information devices (whose waste Xing Danwen transforms into beautiful abstract landscapes), today we are implicitly involved, made to feel and be moved. (Matias Faldbakken). Our feelings are functionalised everyday. We must be aware of those feelings, and the way they may be controlled and manipulated. Specifically due to the highly technological bent of contemporary communications, I sought to show works that would in some way counter that reality, works that are based more on sophisticated concepts than on sophisticated technologies.

In the global village we have become increasingly emotional, and simultaneously urged to participate and involve ourselves continually in the permanent world. We are forced to live without much room to step back and reflect. Therefore, when one mentions or calls attention to emotion, it is not so much to do with the feeling of emotions, but the raising of awareness of them. Yet in no way does On Reason and Emotion seek to show works that raise particular or exacerbated emotions. The
exhibition does not aim to be a compendium of emotions or feelings but rather a raising of awareness about emotion, its functional mechanisms and how we are manipulated by emotions. The political and ethical aspect of stating that reason and emotion are inseparable is then easily understood.

In this context, art is quite often that space to step back to, the place to deal with problems. Today, instead of inventing or creating yet another visual or communication-related paradigm, what the artists show us is what’s left inside or out of the big picture. This gives us the space for reflection. These works are displacements that make us look in another way at what we had already taken as a given, works which want to connect rather than express.

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Images courtesy of the artists and the Biennale of Sydney.