

Sydney's Biennale: All futures lead to now

Exploring the idea of disappearance shows how smart thinking about the present may help shape the future, says **Mel Rumble**

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By Mel Rumble



Jamie North's "Succession"
Jamie North/Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney

These days, anyone wanting to play with the future had best be very careful if they want to avoid being effortlessly wrong-footed.

That awareness seems to be the spirit in which Stephanie Rosenthal, artistic director of the 2016 Sydney Biennale, has recycled William Gibson's quote about the future already being here, just not very evenly distributed. It is a way of loosely binding the hundreds of artists, artworks and events in the festival.

On leave from her job as chief curator at the Hayward Gallery in London, the point of the Biennale for Rosenthal, and indeed of Gibson's quote, is not to focus on the future. "We are thinking about now," she emphasises, adding that she wants the festival to create a space to observe "what's happening right in front of us".

But given the loose framework, the festival's long timeframe and the large number of venues, it benefits from a filter of seven "Embassies of Thought". Rosenthal says the Embassy of Disappearance (Carriageworks, Sydney's former Eveleigh Rail Yards, reborn) is what she would have chosen if she could have had only one.

That's because disappearance is an idea that many artists closely relate to, she says. Why? Because, says Rosenthal, we have to try to make some futures disappear. Gibson's point is that the future is here, now, and that we always make the future from the present, so let's think as well as can about where we are now and about which futures we want to imagine.

Otherwise, "things" will just end up happening to us.

Embassy of Disappearance

Among the 20 artworks at the Embassy of Disappearance, three by Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui underscore the idea of unwelcome futures by focusing on Christmas Island's endangered or extinct species, and the recent attempts to deal with invasive species.

Renhui spent eight weeks on Christmas Island, speaking with ecologists and documenting attempts to deal with what happens in dynamic ecosystems when invasive species, such as feral cats, dogs and yellow "crazy" ants, are introduced. His works include *Memorial to the Last Cat on Christmas Island*, and a fictional conservation plan, *Life After Humans – Rewilding Island Ecosystems*, which explores what happens when you take the removal of "invasive species" to its logical end – relocating the island's human communities on the Australian mainland.

Renhui develops this in *Christmas Island, Naturally*, a book written for an audience in 2066, long after the humans have been relocated. His pieces play with unintended ecological consequences, such as the successful captive breeding of the Christmas Island Blue-Tailed Skink which can never be released into the wild because its natural habitat will never be safe for it.

And he asks deep and perennial questions about what we mean by "natural" and "pristine" when human intervention and invader species come into play.

As an ironic counterpoint to ideas about fragile island ecosystems and invasive species, Christmas Island is currently an offshore detention centre, a place to keep what some consider another form of "invasive species" – asylum seekers.

Sea cables

Alongside Renhui is disappearance of another kind. Charles Lim's *silent clap of the status quo*, is a collection of "inspection videos" of underwater sea cables (which the majority of the world's internet communications run through). He uses them to show how artificial infrastructures, often driven by the politics of economic expansion, transform the maritime environment and challenge the cultural idea of the sea as unoccupiable.

Jamie North's *Succession* with its towering, derelict concrete pylons and vibrant plant life bursting through, also calls to mind a post-human world, where plants thrive and grow without us.

One of the most intimate pieces comes under the banner of The Future of Disappearance, curated by writer André Lepecki. Here, Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* builds on the plot of Ray Bradbury novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, where people secretly memorise books to preserve them in a society where banning and burning of all written texts is the norm.

Edvardsen's performers have selected a book and memorised it, thereby turning themselves into "living books" who can "read" a particular book to visitors.

This creates a surprisingly intimate experience as you listen to a performer who is always on the edge of remembering and forgetting: an uncomfortable meditation on the nature of the ephemeral.

In an "after" talk, Lepecki underlined one of the less obvious upsides to disappearance – the freedom it can create and how being without reference points opens up a huge array of future options that can be taken from the present. This connects to another work in his collection, also by Edvardsen, called *No Title*.

Here Edvardsen gradually removes all reference points, with a seemingly never-ending list of everything that has "gone": walls, compass points, and eventually lights, so that part of the work is performed in the dark. "In total disorientation what happens is you have a total potentiality to reorient life," says Lepecki.

Now there's an interesting way to deal with the future, spread evenly or otherwise.

The 20th Biennale of Sydney is on until 5 June