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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/68041>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.68041

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Translation(s):

Brook Andrew - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/68032> [fr]

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 November 2020

Number of pages: 71-75

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Menene Gras Balaguer, "Brook Andrew", *Critique d'art* [Online], 55 | Automne/hiver, Online since 30 November 2021, connection on 15 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/68041> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.68041>

This text was automatically generated on 15 September 2022.

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Brook Andrew © Zan Wimberley

- 1 Images work as iconographical sites of reference which can have different meanings according to the contexts they are made for. What is art then? Brook Andrew (Sydney, 1970) was the artistic director of the 22nd Sydney Biennale (14 March-6 September 2020) and also received the 2020 Australia Council Award for Visual Arts last March. He chose the word *NIRIN* for his project, taken from the language of the Nation of Brook's mother, the Wiradjuri people of western New South Wales. It means *edge* but also *periphery*, although he went further, comparing it to a kind of spider's web that can always be increased, insofar as it can be ascertained that there are no limits for the circles surrounding overcrowded cities. *NIRIN* is also, according to him, a world of endless interconnected centres; a space to gather and to share, rejoice, disrupt, and re-

imagine. This is how he brought together over one hundred artists from all over the world for his project. When asked what art is and how he would define it, he is not afraid to dive into the debate about what art should be and how art practices can respond to what its commitment is expected to be. To him, the essential issue is to reflect and activate processes in order to geographically connect histories and places, people to people, and people to the world they live in, as well as to promote transmission through narration.

- 2 Art practices have to be involved not only with the world we live in and our environment but also to our own lives. His own personal journey is committed to connecting to land, place, people and history. He listens to the water and the earth to the extent that their histories are the histories of people everywhere. His choice of artists for the Biennale shows his own way of understanding the art world from an interdisciplinary perspective and from an all-inclusive aesthetic thought, giving priority to the artists' self-engagement. He wanted to make visible the relationship between the arts and the human condition at the same time, by working with the international arts community in his own country, which also meant taking into account the indigenous communities and those communities around the world that need visibility. In order to do so, he revived the topic of *Magiciens de la terre* (1989), an international exhibition that for the first time brought together artists from all over the world, becoming an unprecedented event which is usually remembered in the all-inclusive art projects that are meant to change "the way we are and look at our world", challenging the power positions and dominant cultures that manipulate our identity and memories as well as our own history or histories. In his almost three decades of experience in the art world, Brook Andrew has had numerous individual exhibitions and has participated in as many collective projects. He consistently works on the topics that are present throughout his work, showing the relation between literature and the visual arts. He himself writes poetry and speaks about *philosophies* as an alternative to *philosophy*, dominated by Western thought.
- 3 As a poet he has written poems like *The Chart* (2017), in which each word is a verse, as follows: "seed | rainy-season | earth | full-moon | thunder | plant | timber | Stone | jewellery | carving | weaving | axe | war | feathers | bird | food | gods | logging | cape | language | ancestors | bones | spirits | museum | anthropology | song | cycle | ignorance | reduction | politics | end". Each word equals an image by itself, but the sequence made by all of them together opens a constellation of optional compositions. In another way other poems like *1 to 4* (2009) narrate his own experience of loneliness facing the world around him: "Inside you it travels | Meandering stream | Outside you it devours | The ocean | Touching the screams | No more humanity | All below, sweet beds of boils | [...] | Surviving". His journey as an artist started in 1993 after he graduated from Art School, with *White Word I*, and later on *Sexy and Dangerous* (1996), which shows an iconic image of Aboriginal virility and resistance. Since then, he has always tried to map the world, keeping in mind his personal dual belonging to the Aboriginal world on his mother's side and the West on his father's. He said he would have liked to include all the indigenous local communities in Australia in his project as the artistic director of the Biennale, seeing his position as an opportunity to be in contact with people from all over and to connect art practices and works from around the world. "I am very passionate about histories" he often says, warning us that we are all responsible, all the while breaking down the boundaries between the artist's stories and history itself.

Focusing on memory, he never ceases to vindicate, time and again, the need for reinterpreting history and re-framing our inherited experience.

- 4 The artist is a collector of artefacts and material objects of any kind, because he believes in the need of archiving them for the stories they possess. He also works with museum collections and archives in order to gain specific information and knowledge about the cultural identity of the different communities he may be interested in, among other things. Objects narrate and communicate as well as people do, and Brook believes art should be a mirror of both, showing how they are connected to each other. He insists on the relational status of any art language. Art and literature, art and the moving image, art in the form of painting, performance, sculpture, video or installation is always a mode of expression that contains all these elements that allow us to explore the world from the particular to the universal, advocating for knowledge. Brook Andrew insists on the need to look around and see that connectivity is a fundamental issue nowadays, in our global interconnected world where the most important devices are the screens as physical places where images become true. His last project *This Year* (2020) puts together a series of images invoking disaster and the difficult times we are entering by saying “this year be prepared”.