



*Axon: Creative Explorations*, Vol 10, No 2, December 2020

## MANIFESTI FOR A PLASTIC-FREE BIENNALE

Lucas Ihlein and Kim Williams

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In 2019, we (Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein) were invited to take part in NIRIN<sup>[1]</sup> — the 2020 Biennale of Sydney.<sup>[2]</sup> Artistic director Brook Andrew commissioned us to create a project focused on plastic. Andrew's vision involved artists at every level of the festival — from publication design, to food, education, and even transport infrastructure — and, with our project, an intervention into the Biennale's environmental impact.

Our project emerged slowly, over a few years, beginning well before the start of the public exhibition, and continuing throughout the live time of the festival (and beyond). One of the main aspects of the project was a 'consultancy' with the Biennale organisation. In the spirit of Barbara Stevini<sup>[3]</sup> and John Latham's<sup>[4]</sup> 'Artist Placement Group'<sup>[5]</sup> from the 1970s, the model of artists-as-consultants pushed us into thinking of our role beyond the standard production of content for an exhibition. Rather, we took on the challenge of trying to re-design what a biennale (and what *this* biennale) could be, both behind the scenes and in the public eye.

As this trio of blog posts explores, the attempt to create a manifesto for a Plastic-free Biennale became one of the many strands of the project. It was fraught with difficulty for us — not least because (as you will discover), it turns out that making a manifesto (in the traditional sense) *isn't really our thing*. But we tried, and we enjoyed the struggle, and from the process lots of fragmentary texts, poems, prints and word-drawings emerged.

*Go to: Manifesting (29 January 2020)* <http://www.plasticfreebiennale.sydney/2020/01/29/manifesting/>

It may be worth commenting briefly here on the use of blog posts within this contribution to *Axon*. For about 15 years or so, Lucas Ihlein has worked with blogging as an integral part of socially-engaged art projects. Indeed his PhD thesis, entitled 'Framing everyday experience: Blogging as art' (2010), dealt head-on with the question of how a blog can be a form of art in its own right. So the use of a series of blog posts here is in keeping with this long-running practice, which allows a project to speak about its processes and problems *as an integral part of the project itself*. These blog posts occupy a hybrid space — they are exegetical texts which speak about particular artworks (the *manifesti*), as well as being a part of the same overall artwork superstructure.

*Go to: The Growing-Up Hub: A New Proto-Manifesto Emerges (25 August 2020);*  
<http://www.plasticfreebiennale.sydney/2020/08/25/the-growing-up-hub-a-new-proto-manifesto-emerges/>

At the time of writing (September 2020) the Biennale of Sydney is about to shut (after its extended COVID re-run). We are still working with the Biennale staff who, after many delays beyond their control, are in the throes of drafting a workable Environmental Management Plan and policy — something that hasn't been done since 2014 (that earlier attempt was put into a filing cabinet and forgotten).

Our dreams of a 'proper' plastic-free biennale have not come to pass (the skip bins are still full of trash) but we hope we've tweaked the DNA of the festival enough to have baked in some changes for the future life of the festival.

*Go to: This vs That (29 August 2020), <http://www.plasticfreebiennale.sydney/2020/08/29/this-vs-that/>*

In fact, in announcing its next Creative Director, the Colombian curator José Roca, the Biennale has committed to a set of principles and actions which depart significantly from 'business-as-usual'. Their media release suggests the forms this transformation might take:

Roca will reduce the environmental impact of the Biennale limiting international travel during the research process by working with a worldwide network of colleagues, (re)producing works locally, and working inter-institutionally to optimise resources. Roca will move to Sydney as soon as travel restrictions permit and stay for the entire duration of the process.[6]

Was any of this thanks to our multifarious, fragmentary manifesti? Who can say?

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[1] 'Nirin', the theme for the 2020 Sydney Biennale, is a Wiradjuri word meaning 'edge'. Biennale Director Brook Andrew (whose mother is Wiradjuri) says of the theme: '**NIRIN** is not a periphery, it is our centre, and it expresses dynamic existing and ancient practices that speak loudly. **NIRIN** decentres, challenges and transforms dominant narratives, such as the 2020 Captain Cook anniversary in Australia and reorients Western mapping, shining a light on sites of being that are often ignored or rendered invisible' (from Biennale of Sydney media release, 9 April 2019, <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/media/media-releases/biennale-sydney-announces-2020-exhibition-nirin/>)

[2] Initiated in 1973, the Biennale of Sydney is a premier international contemporary art event. NIRIN was the 22<sup>nd</sup> Biennale, and Brook Andrew the first Indigenous Australian artist appointed as its director. <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/about-us/>

[3] Barbara Stevini (1928—2020) was part of the Fluxus art movement during the 1950s and 1960s, and then co-founder of the Artist Placement Group (from 1965), later renamed as O+I (Organisation and Imagination). Her project *I Am An Archive* (begun in 2002) records APG and O+I from her perspective. See Context is Half the Work, <https://en.contextishalfthework.net/exhibition-archive/barbara-stevini/>

[4] John Latham (1921—2006), who married Stevini in 1951, was co-founder with her of Artist

Placement Group. A conceptual artist he too has an online archive project, located at <https://www.ligatus.org.uk/jla/>, which is as much art event as archive.

[5] Artist Placement Group (APG) initiated the practice of artist residencies in UK local government institutions and corporations, and provides an important example of creative collaboration, innovation in the arts, and also models of engagement that can effect positive change. See Simon Rycroft 2019 ‘The Artist Placement Group: An archaeology of impact’, *Cultural Geographies* 26.3: 289—304

[6] Biennale of Sydney media release, 9 September 2020.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Lucas Ihlein** uses socially-engaged art to explore human-environment relations. Major projects include *Environmental Audit*, *The Yeomans Project* (with Ian Milliss), *Baking Earth* (with Allan Yeomans), and *Sugar vs the Reef?* (with Kim Williams). Lucas is a student at **Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation**, and a researcher at University of Wollongong. See [lucasihlein.net](http://lucasihlein.net)

**Kim Williams** works with environmental projects using socially engaged art. Her most recent work is *Sugar vs the Reef?*, in collaboration with Lucas Ihlein. For this project, the artists worked with farmers, Australian South Sea Islanders, Yuwibara custodians and natural resource managers, creating public agri/cultural events to demonstrate transformative farming practices. See [sugar-vs-the-reef.net](http://sugar-vs-the-reef.net)

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