Introduction: The World and World-Making in Art

Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette

This special issue of *Humanities Research* offers a selection of papers presented at the international conference 'The World and World-Making in Art: Connectivities and Differences' held at The Australian National University (ANU) from 11–13 August 2011.¹

The conference inspired significant interest nationally and internationally and attracted scholars from the United States, Europe, Asia, the Pacific and South America. It formed part of the program organised by the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) at ANU under the overarching theme: 'The World and World-Making in the Humanities and the Arts' and complemented other conferences relating to the concept of 'world-making' in history and literature.² We would like to extend our special thanks to the Head of the HRC, Dr Debjani Ganguly, who suggested we undertake a conference focussing on art and to our co-conveners Zara Stanhope and Jackie Menzies and to Leena Messina and Sharon Komidar for their assistance with both the conference and this special issue of *Humanities Research*. We also extend our thanks to Professor Paul Pickering

1 Held as part of the Humanities Research Centre's 2011 theme, 'The World and World-Making in the Humanities and the Arts', 11–13 August 2011. Co-convened by Caroline Turner, Michelle Antoinette, Zara Stanhope and Jacqueline Menzies. The conference included 56 papers and was attended by a capacity registration of over 130 delegates. There were a number of lead speakers including a number of artists: lead speakers (in order of presentation): Professor Patrick Flores (University of the Philippines), Professor Howard Morphy (Australian National University), Xu Hong (National Art Museum of China), Professor Marsha Meskimmon (Loughborough University, UK), Professor Pat HOFFIE (Griffith University), Dr Charles Merewether (Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore), Professor Terry Smith (University of Pittsburgh, USA), Professor Jaynie Anderson (University of Melbourne), Dr Anthony Gardner (The Courtauld Institute of Art/ Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts, University of Oxford, UK), Tony Ellwood (Director, Queensland Art Gallery), Professor Jill Bennett (University of New South Wales), Lisa Reihana (Contemporary Artist + Tohunga a Toi, Unitec School Design and Visual Arts, Aotearoa/ New Zealand), Professor John Clark (University of Sydney), Mella Jaarsma (Artist and co-founder of Cemeti Art House and Indonesia Visual Art Archive, Indonesia).

2 The conference topic proved to be one which inspired significant response and an extremely high standard of papers. Speakers came from a variety of countries apart from Australia including the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, the Philippines, Brazil, Indonesia, China, the Netherlands and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The interest in the topic has resulted in several publications: this special issue focusing on contemporary art; papers by Professor Jaynie Anderson, artist Nusra Qureshi and a joint essay by Zara Stanhope and Michelle Antoinette published in the international journal *World Art* (Stanhope, Z. & Antoinette, M. 2012, 'The World and World-Making in Art: Connectivities and Differences', *World Art*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 167–71); and a selection of papers related to Asia in *Asian Connectivities* (forthcoming), edited by two of the conveners (Antoinette and Turner). As well, individual authors have published a number of other papers in books and journals.

and the Editorial Board of *Humanities Research* for supporting our proposal to publish this special issue of the journal on the topic of 'The World and World-Making in Art'.

Art historians have often resisted the term 'world art', although the concepts of world literature and world history have been more accepted in the humanities. One of the aims of our conference was to explore key issues in art discourses today, and also to address a central concept of the HRC's theme in invoking an idea of world-making 'beyond a cultural divide' and instead speaking 'to a domain of human connectivity'. We have selected papers which we believe present new and illuminating perspectives on the theme. As Zara Stanhope and Michelle Antoinette argue in their paper in the international journal *World Art*, 'If the term "World Art" designates a flux—a multidisciplinary synthesis of history, critical analysis and practice—the notion of "world-making" describes processes involved in its generation.'³

The conference was organised around four key sub-themes, which are represented in the selection of papers included in this volume:

1. World-Making and the Idea of 'Global Art'
2. Cosmopolitanism
3. Indigenous World-Making in Art
4. Crossing Borders: Artists, Institutions, Exhibitions and Audiences

While there were a number of very fine papers at the conference on the historical dimensions of 'world-making' in art, we have concentrated in this publication on what Terry Smith has called (in assessing the 1950s as prefiguring the roots of this change) the shift from 'modern to contemporary' in art. The papers selected for this special issue of *Humanities Research* under the four sub-themes focus on the critical period from the post-World War II era to the present. They also examine changing definitions of art in a time of increasing globalisation and of dramatic economic, cultural and geopolitical change.

As Stanhope and Antoinette state in their essay in *World Art*: 'The conference proceeded from the acknowledged position that world-making in art is a platform for research aiming to challenge the hegemony of EuroAmericentric perspectives or to register alternative world views. Papers were invited to focus on the potential of connections and diversity within world-making, particularly cosmopolitanism, art practice, institutions, exhibitions and audiences crossing borders, and indigenous world-making.' In seeking to explore a number of key

3 Stanhope and Antoinette, 'The World and World-Making in Art', p. 167.

issues in art discourses today and speaking to 'a domain of human connectivity' the conference 'generated dialogue on subjects that went beyond geographic, state or cultural communities.'⁴

A key issue of the conference that is reflected in the essays in this volume relates to the critical question in contemporary art discourses as to whether art and art history are now truly global. Our special issue begins with three essays from Smith, Marsha Meskimmon and Ian McLean, which together provide a broader theoretical context for discussion of the practical implications of present-day world-making in art. These essays are followed by a series of more detailed case studies by the other authors exploring the concept of 'world-making' in art in specific locations and contexts.

Smith's insightful essay in this volume, 'Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art: Planes and Connectivities', takes up the critical concepts both of 'connectivities' and of 'world-making', and he nominates the latter as a topic at the core of contemporary art. As argued also in his influential 2011 book *Contemporary Art: World Currents*,⁵ Smith suggests that art now comes 'from the whole world, from a growing accumulation of art-producing localities that no longer depend on the approval of a metropolitan centre and are, to an unprecedented degree, connected to each other in a multiplicity of ways, not least regionally and globally.' In his recent writings, and in this essay, Smith identifies three key currents in art that taken together, he argues, 'constitute the contemporary art of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries'. Smith's position, central to the ideas expressed by many delegates at our conference, is that there has been a historical shift from EuroAmerican hegemony, geopolitically and economically, over the last 50 years, and recently at a more accelerated pace. 'Geopolitical change has shifted the world picture from presumptions about the inevitability of modernisation and the universality of EuroAmerican values to recognition of the coexistence of difference, of disjunctive diversity, as characteristic of our contemporary condition.'

In defining the characteristics of contemporary art as different from art in the modern era he noted in his conference abstract that this change 'occurred in different and distinctive ways in each cultural region, and in each art-producing locality within these regions. Cultural patterns with quite distinct temporalities co-exist, develop separately or together, connect then part ways. Precisely in its grasp of this experiential complexity, contemporary art is—perhaps for the first time in history—truly an art of the world. It comes from the whole

⁴ Ibid., p.167.

⁵ Smith, T. 2011, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, London, Laurence King Publishers; Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson/Prentice Hall.

world, and frequently tries to imagine the world *as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole*. This is the definition of diversity: it is the key characteristic of contemporary art, as it is of contemporary life, in the world today.⁶

As with Smith, the recent work undertaken by Meskimmon seeks to define the new cultural and aesthetic adjacencies in the world that are elicited by contemporary art's global dimensions. In particular, Meskimmon is interested in critically examining new kinds of perspectives on ethics, aesthetics and subjectivity that are afforded by contemporary art's *cosmopolitan* possibilities. Cosmopolitanism, one of the key sub-themes of our conference, is also the subject of Meskimmon's important 2010 book, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, in which she articulates contemporary notions of home and belonging through theorising a new 'cosmopolitan imagination' in art.⁷

In her essay in this volume, 'The Precarious Ecologies of Cosmopolitanism', Meskimmon continues her explorations into the cosmopolitan imagination by focusing on the notion of 'precarity' in three contemporary art projects—*After the Fact* by Catherine Bertola, *A Tether of Time* by Joan Brassil, and *Speak Rhymes with Beak* by Johanna Hällsten. In so doing, she likens the processes of world-making as akin to a 'precarious ecology', as 'ongoing, mutable processes of relation ...' In turn, by positioning art as a world-making ecology, Meskimmon registers art as 'a dynamic and sustainable system between subjects, objects and their environment.'

Significantly, through exploring these art projects, Meskimmon does not seek to offer them as mere reflections of cosmopolitan ideas, or as images of the cosmopolitan, but instead examines 'how particular works (re)make worlds that open the possibility for the interpellation of cosmopolitan subject-positions and inter-relationships' and argues the "'possibilising" force of imagining' and wonder as integral to this. She argues that art has the capacity to 'interrupt our dulled continuity by bringing us to our senses and connecting us to change and opening us to difference', and she suggests that 'world-making in art is one of the ways in which we might instantiate the wondrous and precarious ecologies that enable us to glimpse the potential of the cosmopolitan imagination to "open the fabric of the ordinary and change it forever".'

McLean suggests in his essay, 'Contemporaneous Traditions: The World in Indigenous Art/Indigenous Art in the World' that 'The widespread incomprehension of art historians and critics before Indigenous contemporary art remains a feature of art-world discourse'. McLean's cogent analysis of the

6 Smith, T. 2011, 'Contemporary Art: World Currents', conference abstract for the HRC conference, 'The World and World-Making in Art: Connectivities and Differences', ANU, Canberra, 11–13 August, 2011.

7 Meskimmon, M. 2010, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, London and New York, Routledge.

elusive concepts of multiculturalism and of Indigeneity and the new narrative of 'multiple modernities' in the context of globalisation provides significant insights into the ways Indigenous art is accommodated into contemporary art discourses. He writes that: 'From about 1990 global capital began delivering a completely deterritorialised contemporary art practice. Even Indigenous art, previously considered a primitive artifact of pre-modern times, was claimed (by a few) for contemporary art'. As he goes on to say 'While Indigenous artists working in Western-derived styles have been readily accepted into contemporary art-world discourse—their art meets the condition of global modernity—those working with traditional styles and subjects have not. Nevertheless the latter have had a profound impact on the global contemporary art-world'. He notes that '... when they did finally win citizenship rights [Indigenous cultures] ... refused to surrender their ancestral identities', and that '... many Indigenous people sought to negotiate a path between the modernity of the nation state and their ancestral identities—identities that are simultaneously traditional and contemporary'. He argues that, despite the emergence of 'a new meta-narrative of world art that comprises multiple currents of art practice, including Indigenous ones', and the fact that Indigenous art now seems to have been accepted by Australian institutions as contemporary art, that acceptance is not universal. The conference included sustained discussion of Indigenous art as a critical intervention into current notions of 'world art' and 'contemporary art', and as a key area of contemporary art practice. This important topic was also addressed by other speakers including lead paper presenters Howard Morphy and Lisa Reihana.

The multiplicity of individual practices and issues of ethical, individual and locational identity identified by Meskimmon and McLean are central to the thoughtful and nuanced analysis provided by Jen Webb and Lorraine Webb in their essay, 'Making Worlds: Art, Words and Worlds'. They are especially concerned with how artists' individual approaches to the making of worlds might lead to new conceptual frameworks and, 'possibly, new grounds for human connectivity' at a local level in Aotearoa /New Zealand. Utilising 'the twin concepts of plurality and practice', they investigate how art might 'enable an exploration of connectivities and differences, and how it might form a venue for the making of worlds that are not fully in accord with contemporary logics and "truths"'. They do this through discussion of a recent exhibition of the work of seven artists, including Indigenous artists—Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Kate Lepper, Faith McManus, Lily Laita, Lorraine Webb, Chaco Kato and Helen Manning. The exhibition entitled 'Making Worlds' was held in a regional city in New Zealand, Whanganui, a major site for indigenous rights protests in Aotearoa. "'The world,'" they write, 'seems, often, to be more a proposition than a place, more a theory than a thing-in-itself. The fluidity of its meanings means that the dominant discourse tends to focus on the conceptual,

the economic and the political, rather than on lived experience, phenomenological encounters, or the multiple ways of being in what each person might consider “the world”. As they state in their conference abstract, ‘Art is perhaps under-determined compared with linguistic and political mediums, but it may have equally profound effects on how lived worlds emerge and are understood.’

Mark Nicholls and Anthony White’s essay, ‘*Il gesto*: Global Art and Italian Gesture Painting in the 1950s’, is an illuminating case study of an Italy emerging from Fascism to reconnect to a cosmopolitan, international, post-war art world and to become a cosmopolitan centre for art practice. This was an extraordinary time in modern European history, when ‘Italy emerged from wartime chaos and ruin to become one of the world’s great post-war democratic and economic successes’, as the authors put it. The essay explores what role art played in this recovery and how the ‘vibrant and cosmopolitan art scene in post-war Italy helped to shape a society undergoing a difficult period of transition.’ That ‘the visual arts were considered important to this recovery’, they argue, ‘is demonstrated by the enormous effort put into art and cinema in Italy at the time of the European Recovery Program (Marshall Plan)’. The ways artists responded to the postwar challenge and to forging relationships with new global communities is the key focus of the essay. These included ‘exchanges at the micro-level between individual artists and artistic groups across Europe, the Americas and Asia’. Nicholls and White demonstrate ‘how, contrary to earlier accounts which have interpreted the presence of American Abstract expressionism in countries like Italy as a weapon of “soft power”, the Italian response in its international dimensions allowed for distinctive, regional responses to broader transnational developments in art’.

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green address our sub-theme of ‘crossing borders: artists, institutions, exhibitions and audiences’ with an insightful analysis of the early years of the Sydney Biennale, which set out in the 1970s to connect a regionally isolated Australia to the international art world. This was a time when art was still dominated internationally by what Gardner and Green call, ‘crushingly hegemonic centre/periphery relationships’. Their essay draws on jointly written research towards a forthcoming book by both authors on mega-exhibitions and landmark international survey shows, characterised by them as one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary global culture. Their main focus in this essay is the Sydney Biennale of 1979, curated by Nick Waterlow, with the title ‘European Dialogue’ and excluding American artists because of concerns in the context of the Cold War that are outlined in the essay.

The 1979 Biennale, the authors argue, set out to do more than bring international artists to Australia. It also set up a model of new international artistic dialogue. It also, however, created negative Australian criticism. On a local level, they write, the Sydney Biennale had begun in 1973 ‘with the mission of engaging two

separate groups—on the one hand, local artists, students and intellectuals; on the other, the general public—with the latest forms of contemporary art’. In the 1970s, however, it offered a confused and contradictory place for local art. The authors write: ‘In effect, Waterlow wanted to create a Biennale that would be a popular exhibition for a regional public as well as the expression of local artists groups’ wishes for a fuller representation of Australians and women artists. It was to be a dialogue with living artists’. But, despite his close consultation with local artists, the actual lack of local representation and of women artists led to the publication of a ‘book-length manifesto’ by frustrated local artists: *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring. Comments from the Art Community 1979*, from which the Gardner–Green essay derives its title. Yet, it was the 1979 Biennale that, for the first time, attracted international attention: ‘After 1979, the Sydney Biennale had become Australia’s mediator with the global—or more accurately the “global” art world of Europe and North America’.

The authors provide us with a larger understanding of the transformations taking place internationally: ‘For its founders, the Biennale initially appeared to be Australia’s lifeline to the outside art world. Even at that time, for many artists, it was simply one forum amongst many. For some—even in 1979 for the local artists who were most likely to be invited into these biennials—Australia, like other “marginal” centres like Brazil or Argentina, possessed a more complex and cosmopolitan art scene than simply that of a collection of small, parochial, provincial cities’.

Ironically, although this is not discussed by Gardner and Green, it was the art of Aboriginal Australia which was to be the Australian art that the world would respond to most over the next few decades. In this sense McLean’s essay, and that of Gardner and Green, each provides a fascinating counterpoint in terms of Australian art and its connection to the ‘world’ at a critical time for Australian art.

The papers by Zara Stanhope and Claire Roberts both also take up the issue of local artistic activity in different local contexts: Amsterdam, the Netherlands and contemporary China. Stanhope does so in relation to an artistic project that attempted to give residents a stimulus to question the socially engineered world of a newly designed European cityscape, where artists interrogated the new urbanism through relational art practices; and Roberts through a case study of the art of internationally prominent Chinese artist Yang Fudong, whose work has been shown in many mega exhibitions throughout the world, including the Venice Biennale.

Stanhope’s essay is an examination of Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk’s social art project, *Het Blauwe Huis* (‘The Blue House’), and explores the project’s capacity for world-making from the local, urbanised context of IJburg, in Amsterdam.

As Stanhope explains, *The Blue House* was essentially 'a villa, an exceptionally large home with a distinctive blue interior' based in the new neighbourhood of IJburg. More than a physical space, *The Blue House* was also a social art project involving artists and others researching the new IJburg neighbourhood over a three-and-a-half-year period, from June 2005 to December 2009.

Situating her discussion of *The Blue House* within the recent turn to what has been variously argued as 'relational', 'socially engaged' or 'participatory art' projects, Stanhope's analysis of *The Blue House* explores van Heeswijk's intentions for the project and examines these against the participatory art methods employed for it, as well as the project's final outcomes. In so doing, Stanhope outlines various individual projects supported by *The Blue House*, some proposed by local residents and others initiated by the diverse members of *The Blue House*, including artists, architects and academics. The result of these projects, Stanhope suggests, is a 'creative milieu' under van Heeswijk's leadership, with potential to extend the intentions of social art to world-making elsewhere.

While Stanhope's essay explores the notion of 'world-making in art' at the localised level of *The Blue House* in IJburg, she also points to other worlds within which *The Blue House*, against its desires for autonomy, became enmeshed, including state policy and the global forces of creative industries. Thus, Stanhope's essay reveals the social or participatory aesthetics of *The Blue House* as an effect of *both* local and transnational intersections demonstrating 'the relational nature of the world' and practices of world-making.

Contemporary artists from China have been at the forefront of the transformations of global art over the last two decades that have witnessed the diminishing significance of a EuroAmerican centre. There are, of course, underlying economic and geopolitical reasons that help explain why many Chinese artists have become prominent in the twenty-first century international art scene.

Roberts explores critical themes of individual practice and the broader issues of today's international art world in her essay 'Tolerance: The World of Yang Fudong'. She begins her essay by pointing to 'the difficulty of comprehending the complexity of contemporary Chinese society with its historic overlays of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Republicanism, Communism and state capitalism'. She writes that 'Today Chinese artists live and work in a globalised world of a kind that was impossible to imagine 30 years ago, a unique mix of Communist control and free-wheeling economics. Chinese experimental art reflects world trends.' There is, however, a continuing issue of 'a dichotomy between state or collective and individual perceptions of what constitutes reality'. As she says: 'Like many of his contemporaries Yang Fudong regards himself as an artist rather than a Chinese artist. He has ready access to information

about contemporary art from around the world and chooses to live and work in China rather than sojourn abroad as was the case with an earlier generation.' She goes on to provide us with a sensitive analysis of cultural nuances underlying this artist's work and of the concept of 'tolerance' in relation to 'people, art and life' and how the Chinese notion of tolerance is 'imbued with particular cultural and political resonances'. In so doing she gives us significant insights into the 'worlds' of Chinese contemporary art and of the simultaneously interconnected art worlds of the global, the regional and the local that constitute contemporary art today.

It is perhaps fitting that Roberts' essay closes the volume as the world is realigned and re-pictured yet again in the twenty-first century, and especially in view of the renewed economic, political and cultural significance of Asia in the world today. Art is undoubtedly a tremendous impetus in reshaping perspectives of the world and narratives of world-making. Significantly, however, as the wide range of papers from the conference also demonstrates, the world and world-making in art are not homogenous projects, but differentiated by plural and situated perspectives that compete for visibility and recognition in art historical debates and discourses. Perhaps this has always been the case in history but what seems particular to this moment in art historical discussions is a new approach and a determination to recognise connectivities and differences *at the same time*, to harness art's critical possibilities for embracing difference as part of the very process of forging new and more complex notions of connection with others.