



## Media Release Wednesday, 3 June 2009

'**THE BEAUTY OF DISTANCE: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age**' was today announced by **David Elliott**, Artistic Director, as the exhibition concept for the 17th Biennale of Sydney, 12 May – 1 August 2010.

Elliott said: 'There is no more suitable stage than Sydney for this exhibition. It will take place against the iconic backdrop of the harbour and Sydney Opera House at the site where British explorers first encountered the local inhabitants. At that time, colonial powers believed western civilisation was invincible and that they had the right to collect and possess universal knowledge. We now recognise such an ambition is both infantile and dangerous.'

Elliott continued: 'In a land that has traditionally regarded distance as a disadvantage, the art specially chosen for this exhibition will celebrate the many different beauties of distance by showing contemporary perspectives from all around the world. It will be an exceptional experience – challenging, but above all enjoyable.'

Since 1973, the Biennale of Sydney has showcased international and Australian contemporary art and is one of the most celebrated and respected biennale exhibitions. The 17th Biennale of Sydney will take place in venues and sites around Sydney Harbour, including Cockatoo Island, Pier 2/3, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney Opera House, Royal Botanic Gardens and Artspace.

Elliott said: 'Distance allows us to be ourselves despite the many capacities we share. We are all the same, yet different, and it is our differences that make us – according to the circumstances – beautiful, terrifying, attractive, boring, sexy, unsettling, fascinating, challenging, funny, stimulating, horrific or even many of these at once. The idea of distance also expresses the condition of art itself. Art is of life, runs parallel to life and is sometimes about life. But for art to be art (a medium of numinous, sometimes symbolic power), it must maintain a distance from life. Without distance, art has no authority and is no longer special.'

The subtitle of the 17th Biennale of Sydney – 'Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age' – is inspired by experimental film maker, anthropologist and musicologist Harry Everett Smith (1923–91), whose compilation of historic recordings, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, appeared in 1952 at the height of the Korean war and Senator McCarthy's political witch hunts in the USA. A program of concerts, performances and events will coincide with the exhibition.

Elliott remarked: 'Smith's offbeat intuition, integrity, unique sense of popular history, and eye and ear for quality provided inspiration and guidance for generations of future musicians, listeners and artists. The breadth of Smith's interests and his commitment to all forms of art – from abstract films, to folk music, blues and Native American dance rituals – are a guiding example I have followed in conceiving this Biennale. I have also tried to reflect his political belief that creativity – and the honesty that it demands – is the liberating birthright of us all.'

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**Marah Braye**, Chief Executive Officer, Biennale of Sydney commented: ‘David Elliott’s inspiring talent and passion will deliver a groundbreaking Biennale and demonstrate the vibrancy and importance of contemporary art. Its impact will be resounding – for Australian and international artists and visitors alike.’

Braye continued: ‘The Biennale of Sydney consistently meets the challenge of presenting engaging contemporary art to the broadest possible audience. The exhibition and public programs are free and have time and again provided inspirational and visionary art to Sydney and (inter)national audiences.’

### **Artistic Director**

David Elliott is a curator, writer, broadcaster and museum director primarily concerned with modern and contemporary art. Elliott was Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England from 1976–96, Director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden from 1996–2001, the founding Director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan from 2001–06 and in 2007, the first Director of Istanbul Modern, Turkey. From 1998–2004, he was President of CIMAM (the International Committee of ICOM for Museums and Collections of Modern Art) and in 2008, he was the Rudolf Arnheim Guest Professor of Art History at Humboldt University, Berlin.

### **Biennale of Sydney**

Since its inception in 1973, the Biennale of Sydney has provided an international platform for contemporary art. Presented free to the public every two years over a twelve-week period, the critically acclaimed, large-scale exhibitions have showcased more than 1355 artists from over 82 countries.

With a tradition of innovation, the Biennale of Sydney was among the first to celebrate Australia’s cultural and ethnic diversity; the first to show indigenous art in an international contemporary art context; and the first to focus on Asia and the contemporary art of our region. As Australia’s largest and most exciting contemporary visual arts event – with 436,150 visits in 2008 – the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010) will celebrate the organisation’s 37th anniversary.

### **Further information**

To arrange images and interviews, please contact:

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The Biennale of Sydney gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the many organisations and individuals that make the exhibition and its programs possible

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