

Arts & Entertainment

Culture transforms convict isle

There is a new arts venue in town and it is pulling in the crowds, writes **Steve Meacham**.

It is the Sydney venue for a newly acquired \$440,000 art installation by the South African born William Kentridge, a luminary of the international contemporary art scene – but it is not the Museum of Contemporary Art.

It has been the stage for rock musicians such as Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds – but it is not the Sydney Opera House or the Metro.

It currently features exhibitions by the revered sculptor Ken Unsworth and the students of the National Art School – but it is not the Art Gallery of NSW. And it was recently the set – and spectacular launch site – of Hugh Jackman's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* – but it is not Fox Studios.

Suddenly, Cockatoo Island – once Sydney's equivalent of Port Arthur, a virtually inescapable

Last year's Biennale 'brought a whole new audience to the island'.

Geoff Bailey,
Sydney Harbour Federation Trust

convict prison for repeat offenders – has become the city's most unlikely arts venue and cultural precinct.

Last Friday evening, many of the city's arts elite gathered on the island again. Luca and Anita Belgiorno-Nettis were unveiling their latest gift to the city, having bought Kentridge's critically acclaimed multimedia work *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, one of the standouts of last year's Sydney Biennale. It is on free public display until at least next March.

Meanwhile, Unsworth's memorial to his late wife Elisabeth –

A Ringing Glass (Rilke), which is installed inside the island's huge turbine hall – has proved so popular it has been extended for another month.

Even professionally cynical critics have been impressed with Cockatoo Island as a spectacular arts venue. Reviewing last year's Biennale in the *Herald*, John McDonald described the island as "a textbook example of 'the industrial sublime'". Getting on the ferry to the island, he wrote, "one feels like one of the revellers in a painting by Watteau, taking the boat to Cythera. On alighting, viewers find themselves in an environment where even the slightest, most ephemeral works are imbued with a strange vitality."

The Australian Financial Review called the island "with its docks, enormous sheds and convict barracks ... the real highlight" of the entire Biennale. Quite a rap for a former industrial wasteland that has been fully open to the public (and accessible via ferry) for only two years.

How has it been achieved? And what is planned in the future?

Geoff Bailey, the executive director of the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, which operates the island, points to this October's two-day comedy festival (which has billed Cockatoo as "the world's funniest island") and the return of the Biennale next year as evidence that its reputation as an alternative arts venue is secure.

Bailey points out the first big arts event held on the island was a rock music festival in 2005, but admits last year's Biennale was a turning point.

"It brought a whole new audience to the island," he says. "Seen through the prism of contemporary art, the island shows itself in a



Industrial sublime ... Cockatoo Island houses a thriving arts scene, with musicians including Nick Cave playing there. Photo: Janie Barrett

new and interesting light." Because it was exhibited for three months, the Biennale had a much larger impact than the more usual two- or three-day events.

Likewise, the *Wolverine* film crew, who used the island for three months last year, contributed heavily to the trust's revenue. (Any income earned on any of the trust's eight historic sites around the harbour is retained to improve public facilities, safety and access.)

Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, whose late father, Franco, founded the Sydney Biennale, says using Cockatoo Island as a venue was a

no-brainer for anyone who has seen how Venice's Arsenale – its historic naval dockland – had re-energised the original Biennale.

Bailey also quotes what he calls "the Venice option" when emphasising what Sydney should be doing to capitalise on its natural beauty.

"The parallels with Venice may be slender but we have this fantastic body of water, with 250 kilometres of shoreline. We haven't exploited the lovely land/water interface to anything like the extent we should have. Cockatoo Island is a really important part of that."

Not that the trust envisages the island being a permanent arts venue or even a rival to Sydney's mainstream arts facilities.

"We see ourselves being complementary to other bodies," says Bailey. "A venue for those things which don't fit other spots easily or which reflect the unique character of the site."

Other activities – particularly marine service industries and tourism – will be as much of the island's future as art. Yet the island's turbine hall has already proved its potential as an arts venue. "Frankly, we thought the turbine hall would be used for

maritime activities," Bailey confesses.

"But now we've seen it hold 3000 people as a concert hall, we realise it is just too good for that. It is a wonderful public space."

Bailey compares the turbine hall with the larger example that is now a feature of London's Tate Modern gallery. And like that London space, he can foresee a time when its Cockatoo Island equivalent becomes "the site of an annual sculpture prize".

There is a pause, before Bailey adds, "Ken Unsworth's exhibition may be a nice initiation of that idea".