

# 'The ark of catastrophe': Guido van der Werve and Lyndal Jones in the 18th Biennale of Sydney

Two of the works that are most memorable for me in this year's Biennale of Sydney are Guido van der Werve's film work *Nummer acht: everything is going to be alright*, and Lyndal Jones's performance and installation at Cockatoo Island, *Rehearsing catastrophe: the ark in Sydney*. In the spirit of the biennale's linked-in themes of establishing relations between works, peoples and things and the necessity of taking on board an ecological way of thinking, these works do for art what Slavoj Žižek has done for weighing up the state of mind of 'living in the end times'. 'Art and catastrophe' can seem like a glib catchphrase exploiting the spectacle of disaster, but these two works are richer than that in harnessing the dilemmas of the relentless path towards progress bound up with the loss of frontier.

Van der Werve's short-film piece, which already has a global cult following, shows the artist striding ahead of an ice-breaker like the twenty-first century version of Caspar David Friedrich's intrepid explorer negotiating Das Eismeer. Seemingly just steps ahead of the vessel carving its path of destruction (due to the clever confusion of distance in a featureless landscape), the artist in a state of magnificent momentum channels a rather heroic last symphony as he strides through the landscape about to disappear. Like the somewhat over-employed metaphor of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, propelled into the future as it looks back at the ruins of the past, our man at the front (the artist himself) is a paradoxical figure of fearlessness.

In a work that is, in contrast, remarkable for its tentative steps in harnessing the very ordinary, everyday world of preparation for departure, Lyndal Jones's *Rehearsing catastrophe: the ark in Sydney* creates a different kind of event space. This work, which has a Victorian origin in its first manifestation for the Avoca Project in 2010, is here cleverly restaged on Cockatoo Island, a place linked to former histories of maritime services and settlement. Rising to the occasion of this mythical space of embarkation, a motley crew of characters assembles in the courtyard by the wooden hull of the ark wedged into the wall of the ship-building

precinct. Masquerading as animals, kitted out in simple handmade masks, they line up in pairs with suitcases in hand like postwar refugees to the new world. Intrepid, nervous, they look at us as we look at them before realising that (for today at least) nothing is going to happen.

[18th Biennale of Sydney: all our relations](#), Sydney, 27 June - 16 September 2012.



Guido van der Werve, 'Nummer Acht, everything is going to be alright', 16 mm film transferred to digital video, 2007



Lyndal Jones, 'Rehearsing catastrophe: the ark in Sydney', installation and performance, 2012.  
Photo: Bronia Iwanczak



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