THRESHOLDS OF TOLERANCE

Caroline Turner & David Williams

RSH & SofA GALLERY, ANU
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>Howard Morphy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Caroline Turner &amp; David Williams</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limiting Tolerance: Art and Human Rights</td>
<td>Caroline Turner</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Not Wanted on Voyage’: the Politics of Tolerance</td>
<td>Jennifer Webb</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Limits of Tolerance/the Mutability of Tolerance:</td>
<td>Pat Hoffie</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about Reality and Representation in an ‘Age of Terror’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to be Proppa: Aboriginal Artists’ Collective, proppaNOW</td>
<td>Anna Edmundson &amp; Margo Neale</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Cattapan</td>
<td>Chris McAuliffe</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadang Christanto: The Head as the Site of Memory</td>
<td>Caroline Turner</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Gough: If History is a Picture Puzzle</td>
<td>Anna Kesson</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do All the Pieces Fit?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Hoffie: Memories of Justice</td>
<td>Caroline Turner</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: Working through Death</td>
<td>Leigh Toop</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Mel: Reconciling the Irreconcilable</td>
<td>Caroline Turner &amp; Glen Barclay</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Collectives, Prints and Politics: ‘We Refuse to Become Victims’</td>
<td>David Williams, Angie Bexley &amp; the Artists</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Artist Biographies and Exhibition Checklist**

**Curator Biographies and Acknowledgments**
The exhibition *Thresholds of Tolerance* is the third in a program on ‘Art and Human Rights’ led by Caroline Turner. The project acknowledges art as a fundamental way of acting in the world and a means of communicating ideas and experiences. Art and creative practice in general should not be seen as separate from the core activities of a University as a research and teaching institution, but as an integral part of the overall project. Hence this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue make an excellent inaugural event for the recently established Research School of Humanities of the Australian National University.

The essays in the book are provocative and challenging, providing a dialogue with the artworks that complements them without reducing their impact and provides insights into the motivations of the artists.

Tolerance is one of those difficult words. Its meaning shifts radically according to context – how close is an intolerance of injustice to a tolerance of difference? Many of the essays in this book toy with the idea that tolerance is not quite the right word, it is too soft and too accommodating, while intolerance, as a position, usually seems too harsh and too lacking in understanding. And yet within the dialectic between tolerance and intolerance exist a whole series of words and phrases – understanding, forgiveness, empathy, appreciation of difference – that mediate the extremes of tolerance and intolerance and allow for the working out of solutions and the sharing of experience.

The artists in this exhibition are communicating complex messages in subtle ways. Art can be persuasive because it brings people into the aesthetics and complex semantics of its forms, and encourages them to go further in their thoughts, often further than the artists themselves envisaged. Art has the capacity to reach diverse audiences who go to see it because it is art, even if it undermines the very premises of the world in which they live and unsettles their relationship with the past and the presuppositions of their present. Audiences must seem at times almost annoyingly tolerant of the motivations of the artist, not taking the message too seriously, but able to find another reason for looking at it – appreciating its aesthetics, its technique, its place in art history. Artistic practice itself often demands tolerance – when it breaks the boundaries of established taste. Art can combine challenging form with challenging content, both of which demand action and reaction. Many artists in this exhibition have used the form of their art works as an integral part of their message. It is almost necessary to appreciate the message to be able to fully experience the form – at least the form as the artist intended it to be seen. As Julie Gough says: ‘the viewer of art is forced and freed to make fresh sense of the story before them.’

The themes of many of the artworks – representing the results of fire or pollution, violent death, mass murder, death without burial or ceremony – are uncomfortable, things that demand a reaction, a statement that this should not happen. These are events that require a degree of intolerance. And yet in many cases the artist’s message is also one of survival and, in the case of the Gembel, Taring Padi and Culture Kitchen collective of artists, a ‘refusal to become victims’. The audience is confronted with images that shout out the pain, but in ways that, as Dadang Christanto argues, require reflection and recollection. The artists in this exhibition are all making an intervention into the ways in which people think about the world, representing the things we would rather repress, bringing forward traces from the past, provoking strong likes and dislikes, but in an environment that causes the viewer to think and reflect. In Chris McAuliffe’s apposite phrase, art is ‘performing like an active citizen’, or as Michael Mel expresses it, ‘through artistic performance the “personal” negotiations and experiences that occur between people could “change” them as participants in the process’. Art, through exhibitions and publications, reaches different audiences from conventional print publications but also has the capacity to communicate ideas in different ways. In particular art can convey the experiential dimension of life and involve people in the process of creating meaning and appreciation of the world by participating in the artist’s imagination.

Professor Howard Morphy is Interim Director of the Research School of Humanities at The Australian National University.
This exhibition *Thresholds of Tolerance* at The Australian National University’s School of Art Gallery is a joint project of the School of Art and the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) and Research School of Humanities (RSH) at ANU. Indeed, this is the first exhibition mounted by the Research School of Humanities, which came into being formally in 2007.

The exhibition is the latest in a long series of collaborations between the School of Art and the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) which now forms part of the Research School of Humanities along with its sister centre, the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (CCR). It is also the product of a research project on ‘Art and Human Rights’ underway at the HRC since 2000 under the HRC’s ‘Creativity and Human Rights’ research platform. The project has been supported by an ARC Discovery grant entitled ‘The Limits of Tolerance’, focussing on art and human rights in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. There have been several international conferences, workshops and two previous exhibitions: *Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights* at the Drill Hall Gallery and School of Art Gallery, ANU and the Canberra Contemporary Art Space in 2003; and *Future Tense: Security and Human Rights* at the Queensland College of Art Gallery, Griffith University in 2005.¹ *Thresholds of Tolerance* is the third exhibition in the series. A further exhibition, *Recovering Lives*, is planned for 2008 at ANU.

Nearly forty artists have so far participated in the three exhibitions. Over a hundred scholars, human rights and art specialists from many different backgrounds, many different disciplines and many different countries have participated in the exhibitions, conferences and workshops since 2000. A significant number of Graduate students have been involved throughout these projects. Visitors to the first two exhibitions have numbered over 3,000. These artists, scholars, Graduate students and human rights specialists and practitioners have informed and enriched our study. This exhibition then is the product of long term research in the humanities at The Australian National University, which has for many years played a leadership role in research in the humanities in Australia. The exhibition is also part of the extensive cross-disciplinary Human Rights network of scholars at ANU: the ‘Cultures of Human Rights Network’ (CHuRN).²

The relationship between the School of Art, Humanities Research Centre and Centre for Cross Cultural Research has been a long and productive one where creative practice and humanities research come together providing a striking example of collaborative research in the humanities. The link with the School has involved the specialist Workshop staff and students, School of Art Gallery exhibitions, Art Theory teaching staff and most prominently the Visiting Artists. Here, the School policy has been to relate the visitors’ expertise to the academic activities and where possible to complement the annual themes of the two Research Centres. Their participation through exhibitions, artists’ floor talks, Art Forum Lectures and seminars has provided a high profile visual dimension to the issues of war, poverty, refugees, intolerance and the environment which have been concerns of a series of the Research Centres’ conferences. Creative artists have long been concerned to raise our consciousness about the victims of human rights violations through their artistic expression and are often among the few voices speaking out about these issues in conservative times.

The ‘Art and Human Rights’ theme, begun in 2000, continues to bring academics specialising in law, humanities and the arts together, now within the new Research School of Humanities. At the School of Art, artists and curators have been invited for their particular expertise as it relates to the interconnections between art and human rights issues. Their participation has provided special insights in understanding the human issues under discussion. In several instances, the audience reach and impact of the presence of artists and curators in residence have been enhanced by the simultaneous presentation of their exhibitions at the School of Art Gallery, Drill Hall Gallery, the Contemporary Art Space and Canberra’s national cultural institutions. The 2003 HRC focus on human rights is a good example of this kind of collaboration.

In 2003, the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research and the School of Art co-ordinated a year long series of events interrogating the concept of ‘Fusion’. Of particular
relevance to the human rights theme in that series was the *Translocality: Reevaluating Indigenous Crafts* symposium, exhibitions and master classes. Artists and curators in residence at the School of Art played significant roles once again, highlighting the importance of their presence and activities which informed the research project. The ‘Fusion’ events dealing with issues related to Indigenous people built on an earlier success with the 2001 Drill Hall Gallery exhibition project *Outside-in: Research Engagement with Arnhem Land Art*, which also involved School of Art staff and visiting artists in collaboration with the CCR.

The outcomes, their impact and audience reach highlight the value of an interdisciplinary approach to these research projects. The University campus in general and the ANU in particular present an ideal opportunity to combine elements of different traditions, disciplines and world views in research themes which focus on human rights and cultural issues. With this kind of platform, researchers and creative artists will be involved in reflecting on the ramifications of collaboration for artistic practice, theoretical understanding and action which will help develop decency and tolerance in the global community.

Exploring the connections between art and human rights has been a journey of discovery. Of the large number of artists who have been included in this exhibition each exemplifies in his or her work the importance of art to communities and they all raise critical issues of common humanity for the twenty-first century. In selecting the artists for this exhibition we have not focussed on ‘political’ artists (although some of them have argued all art is political) but on artists who, in their lives and work, have confronted human rights as a significant, sometimes overwhelming necessity of their art.

*Caroline Turner and David Williams*  
*Curators*

This project has been funded by the Research School of Humanities and School of Art at ANU and we thank the Directors and staff of both the Research School and the School of Art, and especially Howard Morphy and Gordon Bull, as well as James Holland, the Program Coordinator and Gallery Administrator at the School of Art. Research for the project has been undertaken on an ARC Discovery grant (Chief Investigators Caroline Turner, Pat Hoffie, Margo Neale and Jen Webb). Aspects have been supported by the ARC's Asia-Pacific Futures Research Network and we thank Louise Edwards for this support and also by the ANU's Freilich Foundation for the study of Tolerance and Bigotry and our thanks go to Herbert and Valmae Freilich and to Freilich Executive Fellow Renata Grossi. We also thank previous HRC Directors Iain McCalman and Ian Donaldson and Director of Graduate Studies Paul Pickering and current HRC Head Debjani Ganguly for their invaluable support. We also thank the National Museum of Australia for support of the Michael Mel performance.

**ENDNOTES**
...art is to do with our relation to the time in which we live. So if we want to understand society we should look at society’s artists...’
— Christian Boltanski

‘Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human.’

‘Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. In no circumstance can it be used to justify infringements of these fundamental values. Tolerance is to be exercised by individuals, groups and States.’
— UNESCO’s Declaration of Principles on Tolerance adopted in 1995

Three exhibitions have been held thus far for this research project on ‘Art and Human Rights’: Witnessing to Silence (2003), Future Tense: Security and Human Rights (2005) and the current exhibition Thresholds of Tolerance (2007). A fourth exhibition, Recovering Lives, is planned for 2008.

The question of human rights underlies the challenges of our contemporary society and world, as well as defining the limits likely to be set on humanity in the coming centuries. And ‘tolerance’, as the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995) suggests, is fundamental to human rights.

Human rights is emerging as perhaps the most critical issue for the twenty-first century. In his book The End of Human Rights, published in 2000, Costas Douzinas stated: ‘The twentieth century is the century of massacre, genocide, ethnic cleansing, the age of the Holocaust. At no point in human history has there been a greater gap between the poor and the rich in the Western world and between the north and south globally.’ Quoting Jacques Derrida he continued: “No degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before in absolute figures, have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on earth.”

Nevertheless, it could not have been envisaged when the ‘Art and Human Rights’ project began seven years ago that the twenty-first century would prove be a time of perhaps unprecedented challenge to the regime of human rights established in the second half of the twentieth century by governments around the world and to the concept of the universalism of rights in legal frameworks established since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948. Dipesh Chakrabarty noted in 2002 that, while the concept of human rights is established in national and state constitutions and is part of international law, at the beginning of our new century significant challenges had been made to the framework of ideas underpinning such legislation and on their implementation.

Hopes for a culturally tolerant and diverse future, a ‘vision of human dignity’, as Christine Chinkin put it in her eloquent introduction to the 2003 catalogue for our exhibition Witnessing to Silence, are still questions of hope rather than achievements of our times.

In the context of 1948 a Declaration of Human Rights was deemed essential. Chinkin observes that the provisions of the Declaration ‘offer a vision of human dignity and choice through the affirmation of a broad range of civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights’. Among these rights are freedom of religion, an adequate standard of living, equality before the law and a number that she argues are especially pertinent to artists, especially ‘freedom of expression and communication’ and the rights of individuals ‘freely to participate in the cultural life of the community; to enjoy the arts...’ As a result of the Declaration people in every nation today, including creative artists, are more aware of the concept of ‘universal’ rights and of international fora to which they can appeal. The European Court of Human Rights has declared that: ‘Those who create, perform, distribute or exhibit works of art contribute to the exchange of ideas and opinions which is essential for a democratic society.’ Art is significant to communities in many ways, as Chinkin has argued. Art can help individuals to reach their full potential as human beings and can help in the preservation of identities and cultures. Art can help in the fight for free expression in a political context. It can be an important tool for communication between peoples and in promoting tolerance. Chinkin and others have referred...
to the need to further develop a rights culture to advance the promotion and implementation of human rights and to help people know their rights. Art offers ways to extend this culture through education, including in local settings. The role artists can play in cultural and social transformation by engaging at community level with issues of violence, social justice, and reconciliation has been shown to be a critical one. Concepts of tolerance, diversity, rejection of injustice and acceptance of the rights of others underpin the relationship between art and human rights.

What does ‘tolerance’ mean in the context of our project and why choose tolerance as a theme for this third exhibition in the series on ‘Art and Human Rights’? We chose the theme, in part, to suggest the limitations and challenges to human rights in our time and also to emphasise how much definitions of humanity depend on and are limited by the ‘tolerance’ of others. Professor Hilary Charlesworth, a distinguished human rights lawyer, has for example drawn attention to the fact that there are many marginalised groups including women, children and Indigenous peoples who through their lack of power within their own societies are often excluded from human rights discourse and practice.7

If one examines the context of the word ‘tolerance’ one finds references from philosophy over the centuries, including many to one of the continuing themes of human conflict: religious intolerance. There is the UNESCO Declaration on Tolerance quoted above, following the United Nations Year for Tolerance, 1995. Museums and educational organisations have programmes related to tolerance and there are Foundations devoted to tolerance. The Herbert and Valmae Freilich Foundation which forms part of the Research School of Humanities is devoted to studies of tolerance and bigotry and is committed to education programmes to promote tolerance and counter bigotry, of which the recent summer school for School Teachers on ‘Understanding Islam’ is one example. Dr Freilich has written movingly of his own encounters with bigotry that led him to set up the Foundation.8 But a search of the internet also reveals many sites which criticise the concept of tolerance itself and particularly the UNESCO principles and advocate concepts of tolerance which limit its application to their own beliefs. Tolerance is a term then which has been seen as both limiting and limited.

Article 1 of the UNESCO Declaration on Tolerance defines it as ‘respect, acceptance and appreciation of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human’. The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have said in similar vein that Allah could have made us all the same, but made us different so that we might come to know one another. John Gray argues less optimistically that toleration ‘is a virtue appropriate to people who acknowledge their own imperfectibility. Such people will not demand that their preferences be accorded special rights or privileges, or expect that their style of life will receive universal respect. They will be satisfied if left alone. Rather than pursuing a delusive utopia in which all ways of life are given equal (and possibly unmerited) respect, they are content if they can manage to rub along together’.9 This might seem to presume a society seriously deficient in shared values or cohesion of any kind other than the sense of all being in the same boat. ‘Can tolerance’, Jennifer Webb asks in her essay in this catalogue ‘be more than just a capacity to put up with irritants or indulge those who are different?’ Possibly not: she suggests that ‘what is needed is not the dream state of tolerance . . . but legislation; not the value of respect, but sanctions for expressions of disrespect’. And it is here that the artist has a fundamental role: ‘Artists are, manifestly’, she proposes, ‘no more tolerant than anyone else . . . But those who choose to examine, consciously, what it is to be a human being – a human being in concert with other human beings . . . may help us identify just how much play there should be to allow our society to function smoothly’.10

The artists in this exhibition and series of exhibitions in a sense are all witnesses to tolerance or lack of tolerance and many are testifying to terrible and traumatic circumstances of human existence, as did Goya in The Disasters of War or Picasso in Guernica. Dadang Christanto, an Indonesian artist now teaching in Australia, endures the memory of his father’s murder in 1965. Yet his own suffering has given him an extreme empathy with the personal suffering of others. Confronting the legacies of Western colonialism and the injustices of some regimes of the independence era and concern with social justice have
been very much characteristic of art outside the West: from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America in the last half of the twentieth century. Jon Cattapan’s drawings from the ‘Carbon’ series are allusive and mysterious, but immediately bring to mind long histories of oppression, even torture; and their most frightening aspect is that they are set in our times but have no clear reference points. The Australian artists in our three exhibitions have pointed to the obvious fact that we cannot continue to believe that human rights abuses occur only somewhere else and not in this country. Many of the themes of the art of Guan Wei, Jon Cattapan, Juan Davila and Pat Hoffie, for example, such as treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, have happened in Australia. Guan Wei’s extraordinary painting *Dow Island* about the tragedy of migration and its perils in every time and place was inspired by the Tampa incident in 2001, when the Australian Navy refused to allow refugees who had been rescued from drowning by a Norwegian freighter to enter Australian waters.¹¹

The Australian artists in the exhibitions have also reminded us that our own history is one of conquest and colonialism. Australian artists of Indigenous descent Fiona Foley, Gordon Bennett, Julie Gough and *proppaNOW* (Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert, Vernon Ah Kee and Richard Bell) in particular confront issues of race and identity in Australia today. Julie Gough affirms: ‘A different national focus with a properly embraced Indigenous culture and a shared history – with all its bad intentions and outcomes – would construct the idea and place of Australia as less of an invention overlaid upon silenced pasts...’¹²

Pat Hoffie in this exhibition also takes up another strand of Australian history, that of the Pacific Islanders who were brought as indentured labourers, many by violence, to work on the cane fields of Northern Queensland. Our forgetting of colonial history and its ramifications for present populations through the destruction of Islander economies, cultural traditions and ways of life is a theme explored in this and previous exhibitions including by artists of Pacific Islander descent: Michael Mel, John Pule, and Michel Tuffery.

The curators of the ‘Art and Human Rights’ series of exhibitions have not focussed on ‘political’ artists, although some artists included, such as Alfredo Jaar and Pat Hoffie, have argued that all art is political, but on artists who, in their lives and work, have confronted human rights as a critical and often overwhelming necessity of their art. As the late Philippines artist Santiago Bose, whose art was included in 2003, said: ‘We struggled to change society, which is difficult and dangerous, and we also sought to preserve communal aspects of life... The artist takes a stand through the practice of creating art’.¹³ Many artists, as Jennifer Webb pointed out in her essay in the 2003 catalogue on William Kentridge, see their art as a ‘beacon against forgetting’: in Kentridge’s case, in relation to the ‘brutal society’ spawned by apartheid in his native South Africa.¹⁴ This was movingly brought home in that same 2003 exhibition by Chilean-born Australian Juan Davila’s *Panorama of Santiago* about a ‘diaspora of mourning’. The faces in his painting of the Australian Chilean community reflect the tragic realisation that their country, Chile, after 140 years of constitutional government, had in 1973 fallen under a military dictatorship which murdered or tortured some 80 000 people.¹⁵

Art responds to the human predicament. It is therefore an essential quality of art to elicit compassion for those deserving compassion: the marginalised, the alienated, the disadvantaged, the enemy. Graham Greene said in an address upon receiving the Shakespeare Prize from the University of Hamburg that it ‘has always been in the interests of the State to poison the psychological wells, to encourage cat-calls, to restrict human sympathy. It makes government easier when the people shout Galilean, Papist, Fascist, Communist’, or in our day Terrorist, Muslim Extremist, soft on terrorism, or guilty of sympathy for ‘illegals’. ‘Isn’t it the storyteller’s vocation’, Greene asked, ‘to act as the devil’s advocate, to elicit sympathy and a measure of understanding for those who lie outside the boundaries of State approval... to draw his own likeness to any human being, to the guilty as much as to the innocent – There, and may God forgive me, goes myself’.¹⁶

But this does not of course imply an obligation to tolerate the intolerable. Investigating the limits and thresholds of tolerance presupposes that there are indeed limits.

Mbulelo Mzamane, a South African poet and activist, spoke at the 2003 HRC ‘Art and Human Rights’ Conference...
of the need for human rights definitions to be broadened
to encompass issues such as cultural survival or health –
life and death issues for those in poorer countries – and for
artists/writers to invest their creative energies in building
more humane communities. At the same conference
other speakers reminded us that in Australia too,
Indigenous people have taught us about the continuing
relevance of religion, spirituality and tradition (especially
since, for Indigenous peoples, their past is their future),
and about cultural survival, including within nations as an
issue for Indigenous Australian artists.

Christine Chinkin has defined another role of art in
the context of human rights as that of being ‘an essential
element in the preservation of the identities of people
and their cultures’. The most astonishing demonstration
of this function of art is the explosion in the late twentieth
century of Australian Indigenous art, the essence of which
is to represent the spiritual traditions of Aboriginal people,
particularly in terms of their relationship with the land on
which they have lived for over 40 000 years. Much of this
art is in effect ‘spiritual maps’, using traditional images of
sand drawings and body painting to create new work and
to share their culture with the world outside. The images
of Australian Aboriginal art are both overwhelmingly
beautiful and at the same time powerful statements of
cultural survival and affirmation. The works of these artists
have not only had a great impact internationally, but have
also been used to establish legal claims to traditional
lands, as well as providing economically for the physical
and spiritual survival of their communities. The art of
Indigenous Australia and the Pacific region today is above
all a testament to the power of art to contribute to the
enrichment of the human spirit.

But Papua New Guinea artist Michael Mel has noted
that cultural survival is also to do with a whole range of
issues and a dominant agenda of those who wield power.
Anna Edmundson and Margo Neale in their essay on the
proppaNOW group of Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Richard
Bell and Jennifer Herd point to specific issues for urban
based Indigenous Australian artists today. But this is
only one facet of the existential Australian problem, that
Indigenous realities are substantially obscured by non-
Indigenous interpretations.

The artists from Indonesia, East Timor and Australia
thatform the groups Taring Padi, Gembel and Culture Kitchen,
who declare that ‘We Refuse to Become Victims’, bring to
the present exhibition the raw energy and immediacy
of street art. They include many of the architects of the
radical art activities of Yogyakarta-based Taring Padi who
contributed to the protest movements across Indonesia
in 1998 that led to the fall of Suharto. Many of the East
Timorese Gembel artists are in fact living in refugee camps
today in East Timor, responding to very current issues of
continuing violence and political upheaval, which have
captured many disadvantaged youth in their country.
They also protest economic injustice, including by
Australia over the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. Some
argue that the link to politics distorts art and can diminish
its aesthetic focus, reducing it to the level of propaganda.
But as Glen Barclay has noted, propaganda is of its essence
unconcerned with issues of justice. True protest art is the
expression of the victims of injustice, who in this case
assert their human dignity by refusing to be victims.

The ultimate limit of tolerance must be that between
life and death, the last enemy, in the words of St Paul.
Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s allusive communicating with
unclaimed bodies in a Thai morgue is thus testing western
tolerance especially, as Leigh Toop notes in this catalogue,
the Christian concept that the body can be only an empty
shell once the soul has departed.

In our 2005 exhibition on the connections between
‘security’ and human rights John Pule, Wong Hoy Cheong,
Tran Luong and eX de Medici all dealt with the fear
inspiring our concerns with security today in the context
of the events of 9/11 and responses to terrorism but also
the continuing long-term effects of colonialism and wars.
These are natural targets of a Pacific artist like Pule, whose
work is such a brilliant elucidation of the family stories of
Islanders as well as passionately denouncing the arrogance
of power in his ‘American series’ and the subjection of the
human, echoing Dadang Christanto’s words that ‘Human
beings are not objects’. Vietnamese artist Tran Luong
explored his personal memories as a child in another war
about ideology, fleeing American bombing of Hanoi. Tran
Luong, a Buddhist, has previously stated that ‘we were not
taught to hate Americans but to hide’.
Art by Christian Boltanski and Luc Tuymans in the 2003 exhibition revealed that the loss of idealism is very much a characteristic of the ‘new Europe’. Boltanski suggests in his art, which evokes a sense of loss and catastrophe and mourning despite the lack of allusion to specific events, that human beings are all potentially capable of great crimes and can only make a difference in small local ways. Belgian Luc Tuymans also reflects this renewed spirit of existential despair, declaring that: ‘Every art has failed. How we fail is another matter’.21

Alfredo Jaar’s work shown in 2003 is particularly relevant today as that of a US and Latin American artist. Latin American artists have been in the forefront of exposing abuses of rights over the last fifty years. Jaar’s is an art about racially-motivated violence, poverty, exploitation, war and genocide throughout the world, including most recently in Rwanda, manifesting a deep commitment born of his personal experiences in Latin America and also as an exile in the US.

Nalini Malani, Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo in 2003 produced art works on the many difficulties in respecting and understanding another’s culture and way of life. Mella and Nindityo also pose the question, relevant for many artists across the series of exhibitions, as to whether art is for self or community. They and other artists in Indonesia associated with Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta have undertaken communal projects in the face of post-revolution issues and the 2004 tsunami to allow the community to overcome trauma. Malani has explored issues of violence and war in the West as well as local histories of violence in the Indian Subcontinent. She is particularly concerned with feminist perspectives that reflect on the vulnerability of women and children in histories of oppression – a theme taken up by many other women artists, including Saira Wasim (shown in our 2005 exhibition) in her treatment of the so-called ‘honour killings’ of women by their relatives in Pakistan. In 2005 the message of Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong, whose work has been about racial and religious separation, social injustice and discrimination, is that anyone can be colonised and anyone can be a coloniser or anyone can be a bigot and anyone can be a racist.

The art in this current exhibition Thresholds of Tolerance suggests, in Dadang Christanto’s terms, that anyone can be a victim and anyone an oppressor. And the fact is that as Pat Hoffie has proposed, ‘the ones who take up the responsibility of keeping memories of justice alive are the artists. Memories of justice, of compassion and memories of the price of fear and terror’.22 Justice, compassion, fear and terror are the existential concerns of our age. They compose the inspiration of the artists in this series of exhibitions.

Caroline Turner

ENDNOTES

7 Hilary Charlesworth, speech at Humanities Research Centre, 2002, unpublished. Many women artists have in their art shown the sufferings of women and children and social and religious injustice in our times. Navjot Altaf and Vasudha Thorzhur from
India have explored the rapes and attacks on women in the 2002 Gujarat religious riots in India; Nilima Sheikh treated the deliberate murder of brides burned by their in-laws for their dowries in India; and Saira Wasim from Pakistan denounces honour killings and the culture of power brokers, crooked politicians and terrorists in works of ironic delicacy.

11 The painting shown in the 2003 *Witnessing to Silence* exhibition was purchased by the then National Gallery of Australia Director Brian Kennedy. Kennedy also purchased Dadang Christanto’s *Red Rain* from the same exhibition.
12 Julie Gough, quoted in Anna Kesson, ‘Julie Gough: if History is a Picture Puzzle, How do All the Pieces Fit?’, in this catalogue.
15 Conversation between the author and the artist, 2003. Davila created the panorama especially for the exhibition *Witnessing to Silence*. It was also shown in his important retrospective in Sydney and Melbourne (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, and National Gallery of Victoria) in 2006.
17 Mbulelo Mzamane, speech at the Humanities Research Centre, 2003, unpublished.
Jon Cattapan, *Untitled (Carbon Group No. 11)*, 2003. Alkyd modified oil paint and pencil on paper. 50.5 x 66 cm (57 x 72.5 cm framed). Image courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery.
In February 2007, a visitor to Australia advised us to be careful about how many Muslim people we allow to take up residence here. If their numbers reach more than about ten per cent of the population, he said, ‘life can become untenable’. The visitor, Professor Rafael Israeli, was sponsored (ironically) by the Shalom Institute of UNSW. All his discussion as reported in the media was about the special nature of Muslims as violent and unreliable people: ‘Greeks or Italians or Jews’, he went on to say, in a breathtaking forgetting of both history and current affairs, ‘don’t use violence’.

The nature of Israeli’s discourse, at once daffy and racist, makes it fairly clear that his perspective on the world is framed by his internal compass, and not by considering the evidence. Not surprisingly, spokespeople from the Muslim community were quick to pick up on the inconsistencies and inadequacies in his statements. The Jewish community responded institutionally by withdrawing support for Professor Israeli’s visit, and in many critical expressions in the media (and, one assumes, in private). Such responses are inevitable; he had voiced intolerant and racist attitudes, and necessarily provoked reactions. All the same, it is worth bearing in mind that he was sponsored by an official Australian organisation. Is it possible that the Shalom Institute was entirely unaware of his opinions, or that the good professor came up with these ideas on the plane to Sydney? Probably not; Israeli is a member of the Ariel Center for Policy Research, a group that comes across in their website as pretty doctrinaire, and that is considered ‘blatantly anti-Muslim’ by Muslim commentators; and is frequently discussed both in hardline Israeli blogs and in Muslim-watch blogs.

What is interesting (and alarming) is how quickly one intolerant remark can spark off a spate of copycat intolerance. The professor made ill-considered and in fact racist comments about Muslims. These drew a response both in the media and as heard in casual conversation, over the few days this was in the news. The response was couched in terms that were at best intolerant if not actually anti-Semitic. Professor Israeli’s use of ‘Muslim’ as a synecdoche for terrorist was turned against him, and he became a synecdoche for ‘Jewish’ – read as ‘oppressor’ or with any of the other negative inflections familiar to anyone who lived through the twentieth century. Had the event not blown over so quickly, we would no doubt be hearing the next stage of unkind comments – perhaps this time targeting Anglo-Australians. Once it has been set in motion, it seems, intolerance develops its own momentum. Melville describes the same effect with respect to workplace bullying. He wrote, in Moby Dick:

however much they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everyone else is in one way or another served in much the same . . . and so the universal thump is passed around.

The principle of the universal thump can be observed in any number of domains or social situations. I may not like something that is done to me, but I am just as likely to treat someone else badly as to ignore the intolerance I have experienced, and move on.

I recount the story of Professor Israeli because it is an instructive tale of the universal thump, and of how intolerance circulates in Australian society, despite the anti-vilification laws. I did not see any media comments, or hear any personal discussion, about the possibility of using the law to remedy any damage done by Israeli’s assertions. But there was acknowledgment that things could be managed better. David Knoll of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, for instance, wrote to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald to insist that the Jewish community is not racist. He agrees with Professor Israeli that, ‘regrettably, there are radical Muslim community leaders, both religious and secular, who have encouraged violent behaviour against non-Muslims’. But rather than suggesting we exclude Muslims, he states that:

the Jewish community would welcome a combination of effective politics that: first,
strengthen education about the evils of racism, prejudice and the need for mutual respect and not merely tolerance.⁴

Do we demand respect, or do we accept mere tolerance? And can tolerance be other than ‘mere’? We bandy the term about, but rarely stop to be explicit about what it means, beyond the rather vague idea that intolerance equals racism equals UnAustralian behaviour (the lack of mateship, the absence of the fair go). Can tolerance be more than just a capacity to put up with irritants or indulge those who are different? Not really, according to the dictionary definition that forms the epigraph for this essay. That posits tolerance as a quality of passivity, or absence: it is enduring; indulgent; patient but not, in this reading, available for action and engagement. Moreover, tolerance as a social value is based not on the robust framework of law and sanctions, but on the more fragile foundations of social mores and the goodwill of the person being tolerant. Worse, it tends to the diminution of the people being tolerated: they lose subject status, and become irritants to be indulged – like children or pets. We may be fond of children and pets, but do not, typically, offer them respect or expect it in return. We offer them patient indulgence; they offer us obedience (or disobedience), compliance (or resentment).

I do not mean to dismiss tolerance; it is an important element in the long complex business of social intercourse. Without going as far as WH Auden and his ‘we must love one another or die’, I do assert that we must indulge one another’s annoying or confounding differences (or die). But tolerance alone, as David Knoll points out, is not enough. He demands mutual respect and not merely tolerance. Regrettably, I find ‘mutual respect’ as insufficient as he finds ‘mere tolerance’. Like tolerance, respect is reliant only on the sanctions of social obligation. If someone chooses to be either intolerant or disrespectful, there is little to require him or her to behave otherwise – and little to define what reasonable (tolerant, respectful) behaviour might include. Outside the publications of case law and all their interpretations, we have only a value idea of ‘being nice’ to delimit our intercourse. Both respect and tolerance leave us with the problem of society – how to engage with one another, especially when the other seems radically different from ‘me’.

I bumped up against this limit some years ago while conducting research into the community of artists in a regional, remote area of Australia. The (unidentified) area is, as are many rural Australian areas, identified on the one hand as a hotbed of narrow-minded racism and, on the other, as the heartland of Australia and Australian values. The artists I interviewed were mostly local to the area (the wives of pastoralists, for the most part), but were statistically different from others in their community: better educated, possessed of different literacies, and more heterogeneous in their outlook and life experience. They also took pride in being, as one artist said, ‘opposed to local red-neckery’. There also lived in this region a large Aboriginal community, a large community of South Sea Islanders, and many people from various parts of Asia. I knew, from other research, that these three communities included a number of artists, some of them very successful not just locally but nationally. And since the art world has always been at least open to difference, if not precisely tolerant, I expected when I began my research to find a very diverse art community, with people from a range of social, ethnic and racial backgrounds, all at least conscious of each other if not actively co-producing work. But though I surveyed or interviewed something like 600 identified members of the art community, Indigenous arts and artists were, to all intents and purposes, invisible. Among my respondents, only one person identified as ATSI, and during the many hours of interviews, focus groups and conversations, the single reference to Aboriginal artists was pejorative.

Does this suggest that the art community in this region is intolerant, or just as racist as the other people in the towns and villages nearby? Maybe. Possibly the Indigenous artists were the intolerant ones. I suppose it’s possible that they simply excluded themselves from the mainstream art community; but then surely they would have popped up in conversation, if only to discuss how difficult it is, in the bush, to get everyone together; or in a discussion about the relationship between the ‘mainstream’ and Indigenous art communities. They were simply not mentioned (except once, to complain that
‘they are always after arts grants’). They were simply not
visible, except once: in an exhibition of the work of a local
photographer. In among the shots of rural life – haysheds,
saddlery, rusting machinery – and the portraits of local
white adults, labelled with their names and honorifics,
was a portrait of a small untidy child, titled ‘Mischief’;
and another portrait of a dreadlocked Aboriginal youth,
titled ‘Modern Primitive’. It hardly needs to be said, but I
will say it anyway: particular types of people (white, adult,
‘respectable’) were granted subject status and discrete
identity, while other types (young, black, ‘disreputable’)
existed only as difference, as the other against which the
former’s status could be claimed.

It seems to me that what I observed in my research
into this region was a fresh instance of *terra nullius*, and
further evidence of the impossible nature of our society,
the presence of a rift that cannot be sutured by tolerance
or by respect. To make sense of this, I drew on theories
of society – particularly, philosophies that explore the
constitution of communities and the individuals within
them. For anyone trained in contemporary European
theory, society is understood as Hobbesian (grounded on
exclusion and sustained by threat) or Hegelian (predicated
not on positivity but on negativity and antagonism).
As Slavoj Zizek writes, ‘negativity as such has a positive
function, enables and structures our positive consistency.
. . . It is a negative movement which opens the very place
where every positive identity can be situated’.9 We are not
who we are because we are *us*, that is, but because we
are *not* *them*. Yet we *must* depend upon the co-presence
of *them* in order to distinguish community as a discrete
entity. This means that we and *they* are caught together
in an agonistic dance, always with the possibility of the
terms or the status being reversed.

‘Society is impossible,’ write Ernesto Laclau and
Chantal Mouffe, not just to be provocative, but to point
out that society can never be pinned down to just one
set of imperatives, one set of values.6 It cannot be a
fully determined or unified entity; but will always be a
mishmash of inarticulable bits. This was pointed out to
me by the artists I interviewed. They told me – in almost
the same breath – that ‘Artists aren’t different from the
local community; we’re all the same here’, and that ‘Artists
are different; you can’t tell people you’re an artist, you
have to be the same here’. Because art is not understood
locally as a legitimate practice, and because artists do
not fit into the originary myths of identity (stockmen,
swagmen, squatters, shearers), the artists experienced a
contradictory set of identities. As local people, many of
them associated with pastoral concerns, they were part of
the social domain; as artists, they were part of its other.
Their recognition of this (‘We’re all the same here’ vs ‘You
have to be the same here’) amounted to a negation, or at
least a problematising, of their claims simply to belong.
Perhaps this is one explanation for their refusal to engage
as fellow human beings with Aboriginal artists – yet
another example of the universal thump.

Certainly tolerance would help, given this context.
There is no possibility of our inhabiting a self-identical
community, so we’d best learn to put up with differences,
to respect others, and draw the story of the universal
thump to a close. All of history, though, tells us that this
is not possible. What is needed is not the dream state
of tolerance, I suggest, but legislation; not the value of
respect, but sanctions for expressions of disrespect. I
don’t mean we should live in a police state; but I do take
seriously Michel Foucault’s long and thorough discussions
about the centrality of official discipline to the constitution
of society. The community is a ‘field of differences’7 rather
than a unity; but law can speak us into the same space,
formally identify us as being of equal value before the law,
and require of us that we at least leave each other alone
rather than torment or abuse one another.

However, that might not be enough either. Gilles
Deleuze, speaking with Michel Foucault about the work
of power, said, ‘There is no denying that our social system
is totally without tolerance; this accounts for its extreme
fragility in all its aspects and also its need for a global
form of repression’.8 A simple reliance on legislation may
well provide a better set of affairs for all people; it might
equally lead to less horizontal violence, and more vertical
violence. So let me revisit the idea of tolerance, this time
from a different point of view, a different domain of use.
In engineering tolerance has a very particular meaning: as
technology curator, John White, told me:

it has to do with the fit of parts, where that fit is
fundamental to a mechanism. Degrees of tolerance [the space between parts of a machine] permit extended and smooth operation. If tolerances in a machine are not to standard, it will batter itself apart; if the tolerances are out, eventually they will throw the weight onto the one thing that will fail.¹

This I find interesting because it suggests another way of looking at tolerance – not as a value, norms-bound set of approaches to practice, but as a robust and measurable set of standards for behaviour, in the absence of which we will batter ourselves apart, or otherwise fail. Engineers pay extraordinary attention to tiny clearances across the whole mechanism; the more risky a machine may be, the less play is possible and the more care afforded its tolerances. Consider, for instance, how loosely and casually the plunger of your cafetiere fits within the glass jug, compared with the brakes in your car. If the coffee plunger fails, at worst you might be splashed with a bit of hot liquid. If the brakes fail . . .

Obviously, I am not able to draw any definite conclusions, or offer any definite advice. Society is impossible; we should be nicer to one another; maybe we need laws to enforce better behaviour; but wouldn’t that just lead to more repression? And so on. Thousands of years of careful contemplation by highly skilled philosophers and social scientists have come up with little more than this. But it is important, and is something that should still be pursued – and not just by philosophers and social scientists. Writer Hanif Kureishi insists, the ‘one subject for an artist [is] what is the nature of human experience? . . . What is it to be a human being?’² How any of us answer this question adds to the body of knowledge and the history of interaction. Artists are, manifestly, no more tolerant than anyone else, no freer from the constraints of their society and the effects of Hobbesian and Hegelian pressures. But those who choose to examine, consciously, what it is to be a human being – a human being in concert with other human beings – may help to decipher the tolerances required, in an engineering sort of way, between you and me in any community; may help us identify just how much play there should be to allow our society to function smoothly.

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ENDNOTES


⁴ Knoll, ‘Opinions and Letters’, p. 34.


⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p. 111.


⁹ John White, Australian War Memorial, personal communication, 2 March 2007.

Theorists have always explained that art as a mode of communication is a way of treating the problem of violence, or of anxiety, or of terror, and that the question is why such an activity is indispensable, in forms which persevere from highest antiquity but which must ceaselessly be reinvented and revolutionized. The reason why is precisely because art is not culture, in the sense of cultural supplement, a prosthetic for ‘the social tie’.¹

1. THEN AND NOW

The word tolerance relates to a patient disposition – a demeanour that accepts endurance uncomplainingly; the term conjures attitudes of quiet perseverance, of calmness in waiting. All of which may seem like fiddling while Rome burns in terms of the current ‘age of terror’.

As a way of thinking through this essay I somehow fell upon an approach where I found myself looking more closely at the words of poets and writers rather than the images of visual artists. I’m not sure why; perhaps it had something to do with the fact that so much of the interpretation of representation in the age of terror has been dominated by the writing of one man – Jean Baudrillard. Even the analysis of images in this time is so heavily influenced by his overarching interpretation of the event that it seemed to make sense to listen to other words, by other artist/poet/philosophers writing in times of conflict not too far distant. This essay is an attempt to seek for any parallels and disjuncture in the ways that they dealt with their own dilemmas about the role of the artist in times of conflict, and to see whether these gaps might suggest possibilities for thinking through the impasse of the time.

2. ‘THE TRUTH’: REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

In the opening lines of his poem The Truth² Pablo Neruda expresses the desire shared by so many artists that their work might be able to bring together a sense of the time in which they have lived, and their response to that time:

Realism, idealism: how I dote on you both, like water and rock, both parts of my world, light and the tree of life packing its roots underground.

And I pray that my eyes never shut, even for death:
I who need all my vision to learn, see at first hand, and interpret my dying.

Need my mouth to sing in the aftermath when the mouth comes to nothing:
my body as well as my soul, and the arms that replenish our loving, beloved, as before.

All of it hopeless, I know – but I dote on it still. . .

Neruda’s paean to his love of both realism and idealism acknowledges the compelling impossibility that is harboured in the struggle to make art capable of responding to the magnitude of the experience of its age. And his words also articulate the improbable hope of the artist that the artwork may continue to resonate beyond the present to replenish the future. The improbability of the hope makes it all the more sweet, all the more seductive. He demands of his craft – his idealism – a commitment to engage with the real in a way that can provide both sustenance and solace for the future. This demand harbours the secret hope that there may, even, be a way through to the future through the very act of dealing with the present.

Neruda’s eloquent words echo an ongoing tradition of artists who have chosen to continue to work in the full face of their realisation of the mesmerising futility of art’s role. It is this acknowledged incommensurability of art to deal with the experience of reality that makes Neruda’s writing so poignant and at the same time so compelling; a kind of utterance of hopelessness that is defiant in the very act of its abandonment of hope.
The past is punctuated by not only utterances but images that have been created at this juncture – those images that forestall indefinitely the tidal wash of annihilation – Goya’s *The Disasters of War*, the haunting humanity in the work of Käthe Kollwitz, Picasso’s *Guernica*. But the subject of war is not the sole theme of such works; the seductive hiatus between representation and the real has emerged as the most compelling of conundrums within a range of subject matter – from attempts to make spiritual matters visible in religious paintings to attempts to make the link between the living and the not-living in as deceptively simple a subject matter as still life.

Towards the end of his poem Neruda inserts a stanza that is held in place via the sloping cut of italics. The change in font serves as a kind of visual shock – the stanza seems to stand alone as a slice of warning, a reminder incised like a precise wound into the body of the poem:

... 
*The real? It is there,*
never doubt it – the power of the real to augment
and enlarge us, to make our teeth chatter,
still able to write on the card of our hunger
an order of bread and an order of soul for the table.
... 

Here Neruda’s equivocation, his prevarication, his stalling even as he writes the lines, seems to have echoes in the unconfessed moment of hesitancy-within-profound-doubt that can be found in the writing of Beckett or Eliot or Brecht.

And if works such as these can be understood, in part, as memorials to the emptied-out meaning of life, as elegies to futility, then it can also be said that each of them seems to prepare spaces where the writing has been allowed for a moment to stammer – to catch its tongue – to elongate the moment before the numbing, inevitable moment of returning-to-itself. At such points writing functions as a space that invites a little silence before the lapse into total silence is complete.

And yet how antiquated this anguished plea for the real sounds against the deafening cacophony of critical responses to the ‘age of terror’, in which so many interminable discussions on the endless deferral of ‘the real’ collapse into flaccid self solecisms.

The analyses of Jean Baudrillard have dominated attempts to articulate what this ‘new’ age might mean, what it might look like, and how it might be mediated. So much debate about what responses might be possible in the aftermath of the single event that has come to stand as the symbol that epitomises the era has circled around Baudrillard’s assertion that the real and fiction are inextricably folded into a heavily seamed entity. He writes,

But does reality really prevail over fiction? If it seems so, it is because reality has absorbed the energy of fiction, and become fiction itself. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image... It is as if they duel, to find out which is the most unimaginable.

Baudrillard posits the violence of the terrorist attack on 9/11 as ‘worse’ than reality – he identifies it as symbolic, as belonging to a realm that goes over and above experience – that frames and structures and presses experience flat. The dark huggeness of the real that is there like a deep lower heart beat at the very core of Neruda’s work has been replaced by an interpretation of the real that is more akin to a surface sheen – a veneer that seeks to reflect and refract the fiction of illusion. There is a dispassionate coolness to this analysis that seems impervious to Neruda’s reminder to never doubt the ability of the real to act with a power capable as much of augmentation as of threat.

Instead, Baudrillard’s interpretation of the conflict of this era is of a compressed, seamlessly presented spectacle. He emphasises the intertwined roles of media and terrorism in producing a representation of a ‘deathless’ war that is dependent on a series of spectacular productions that stand in for war itself. He talks of this age of terror as the fourth World War – a war that haunts and affects every corner of our daily lives.

**3. TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE**

Set against the media hype that provides an ongoing background of white noise to this ‘new’ era, Baudrillard’s assessment of possible reasons for 9/11 could be interpreted as a model of tolerance. His writing steadfastly refuses to attach blame to the event. When charged, in
his famous interview with Der Spiegel, with deflecting attention from the fact that the attack was a criminal act, and even with blaming the United States for 'rousing the desire for its own destruction', Baudrillard responded with a defence, if not a retraction, of his refusal to blame the terrorists. In so doing, Baudrillard's argument argues for terrorism as an inevitable outcome of a globalisation that has reduced everything into 'a negotiable, quantifiable exchange value'. However, his concentration on the symbolic nature of the attack on the Twin Towers is so intense that the intensity of the focus blurs the potential for any peripheral action to be considered– the specificity of realities that may exist at other sites never arises. In terms of his writing, the entire world is in the grip of the media, and that threat exceeds any others.

There is a strong sense that Baudrillard's analysis is spoken from a place over and above the commotion of the Western world's struggle to 'make sense' of the event. It is as if he holds his response in a flight pattern of ever diminishing circles, refusing to land on any specific considerations of context that might suggest cause refusing to make any direct contact with any realities of affect.

If Baudrillard's writing epitomises the cool clarity of tolerance, then perhaps the epitome of intolerance lies in the writing of the poet Artaud who, during another war in another place, took on the events and the outcomes and his disgust at the society that had caused them in a totally personalised way. If Artaud had a pessimistic view of the times in which he lived, he was as much in revolt against the outmoded traditions of his craft. Unlike Baudrillard, he believed that text had played a strong role in tyranny over meaning and reality. On March 29, 1943 Antonin Artaud wrote to Frederic Delanglade,

You saw with your own eyes that I am here at the center of a fearful battle, where heaven and hell do not cease to clash at every hour of the day and night; for as you have long felt in your heart and in your soul, we are in a crucial period of the world's history.\(^6\)

Artaud took on the torment of the outside world as an inner responsibility, as Jean-Francis Chevrier points out,

To the very end of his life, Artaud did not cease to imagine himself in a war, given to battle, destined to lead an incessant struggle to remake life in his own body: “Only perpetual war explains a peace which is but passing,” he writes in Van Gogh.\(^7\)

Artaud's artistic expression can be seen as an attempt to embody the vortex of artistic muteness in the face of the horrors and trauma of war, and to use that non-verbal void as the locus to produce an extraordinary counter-offensive. Through a mimicry of all those aspects of fragmentation, absence, nothingness and delirium of that time, he reinvented an expression that is as violent and palpable as the time from which it was spawned. Chevrier writes,

This is the rigor of Artaud's writing, violent in proportion to the culture it unthinks, cultivated in proportion to the violence which it expends to destroy the frozen forms of culture.\(^8\)

There is a sense in which Artaud’s expressive, passionate and even convulsive responses to the era in which he lived can be explained as his intolerance for the tolerance of his time.\(^9\) The violence of Artaud's work is extreme in proportion to the passive violence of moral puritanism that he understood had to be blown apart by creative physicality if an audience was to be brought out of their desensitisation in order to confront themselves and the outcomes of their actions.

4. INTOLERANCE OF INTOLERANCE

Since September 11, 2001, each of our days has been marked by daily accounts of outbreaks of 'terror': cameos of little skirmishes, a bomb going off, descriptions of the ongoing slow friction of occupied territories. And since that date, since the morning the satellites beamed back the images of the burning buildings of the Twin Towers, the off-shore-ness of it all has gradually seeped through the screen of 'elsewhere' and into the ways we construct our own personal lives. For daily we are reminded that we must be vigilant, we must be afraid, and that we must leave the action to be decided by those who are best qualified to identify and define the spectres of elusive meaning behind the daily tumours of the pandemic. Questions about who those might be are not invited.

It is told to us as if it is a new thing. We are told that this global war on terror involves us all, and that those
things that we hold most dear to us are the things that define us from that other thing that perpetually threatens to take it away. That other thing – that otherness – cannot be clearly defined. It has come to be associated with a wraithlike phantasm of the Islamic world, and it inevitably seems associated with a vague concept of the ‘middle east’. But overall it seems to be most able to be associated with a concept of ‘out there’ – that place, any place, beyond a ‘homeland’ and ‘security’.

The porous and liminal borders that define such concepts have been tightened up. Security checks and surveillance have been stepped up in almost every aspect of our daily lives, from aeroplane terminals to shopping malls to workplaces.

It may seem, therefore, a good time to be tolerant; a good time to exhibit patience and fairness to those whose practice or opinions are not one’s own. Tolerance is expected as the privacy of our daily lives is eroded. Tolerance can work in favour of a system that invites complacency and obedience and a willing surrender to an enforced order.

The question hovers: which opinions and practices that are not our own should we meet by tolerance?

For the outcomes of the freeze-by-terror are that there are no longer any ‘sides’ that can be morally and ethically taken. The side of terrorism is morally unsustainable, as is an acceptance of the real ramifications of globalisation. Zero-tolerance for either.

Or, perhaps, total tolerance for all.

For theories about the appropriateness of impasse as an appropriate response to a system that is imploding have been dominated by Baudrillard’s viewpoint that explains the event of 9/11 as an almost natural entropy. His writing interprets all acts of terrorism as unavoidable outcomes arising from the totalising global system; as outcomes that are set within the system itself. In Baudrillard’s analysis, the terrorism that we have today is different from any acts of terrorism before the event of 9/11; it is devoid of ideology, empty of revolutionary spirit and lacking in any struggle for equality. Instead, Baudrillard describes, it is akin to a virus – as something that sits at the very heart of the culture that fights it, and even, at the very heart of the human species itself. But it is at this point that his argument seems most akin to the kind of universalising traits he most abhors – here there is a sense in which the inevitability of the terror is something that little can be done about. This interpretation suggests that all the old frameworks for conflict – an identifiable enemy, demarcation lines, frontiers for battle – are all redundant, and that, therefore, any self-declared ‘war against terror’ is futile.

Where, then, do the margins for activity lie in terms of responses to a global situation described as devoid of any moral and ethical implications? Inbuilt within this explication is a kind of self-regulating ennui – a terror-freeze where inevitability seems to have gained the upper hand. In his foreword to the online version of the Der Spiegel interview, Dr. Gary Genosko laments the endlessly onanistic tendencies of theoretical musings about the event when he writes,

Even this argument about the deterrence of the real by TV virtuality has become just another story angle for self-promoting high-brow columnists. I am as guilty as the rest. The question is to what degree can this accommodation of the war’s hijacking by mass mediation allow for some creative, affirmative, counter-mobilization, an escape from this estrangement from the real and the maternal massage with which television placates us.11

Yet it is not easy to dismiss Baudrillard’s argument so wholeheartedly. And Baudrillard himself resists any charges of pessimism or fatalism. He makes clear that, although he remains committed to the conviction that any attempts to combat evil might be senseless, his personal goals of working towards ‘clarity’ and ‘a lucid consciousness’ remain intact. And this is the point at which Baudrillard’s act of refusing to stop writing seems to share something with the activities of Neruda and Artaud, and with the work of artists who have continued to work through and against the hijacking of sense and sensation throughout the ages.

5. ART AND POISON

There is another interpretation of the word tolerance: in its medical sense, tolerance is related to an ability to resist the action of a drug or a poison. In this sense the word suggests
a more active potential than that of mere acceptance. It is in this sense that the word seems to suggest more productive possibilities than simply that of patience. And in terms of considerations about the values of tolerance in ‘an age of terror’, it may be the interpretation that suggests a more fruitful way forward.

Neruda’s writing calls for a poetic silence that makes the political audible. He writes as a poet who hunts down those junctures where poetics and politics intersect. He writes with a hunger to whisper out the secrets of his times, to write against the stiffened slander of the era in which he finds himself. He writes,

... Whisper it out! I say
to the virginal forest:
speak your secret in secret; and to truth: never
withhold what you know
lest you harden the truth in a lie.

... Artaud’s call for truth is also at the intersection of poetics and politics, even though it is of a more raw nature; a scream from the belly and bowels:

amid the fumes,
amid the special humors of the atmosphere, on
the particular axes
of atmospheres wrenched violently and
synthetically from the
resistances of a nature which has known
nothing of war except
fear.

And war is wonderful, isn’t it?
For it’s war, isn’t it, that the Americans have
been preparing for
and are preparing for this way step by step.²¹

Artaud wholeheartedly rejected all forms of politics and refused to join the French Communist Party, a stance that contributed to his expulsion by the Surrealists. His life reads like a series of rejection letters from publishing houses and admission invitations to mental asylums. However, he remained committed to the power of theatre, and his refusal to denounce it as a bourgeois and decadent art form was another reason for his rejection by the Surrealists.

Neruda, on the other hand, used political positions as another aspect of his role – during his life he held a number of political positions including a number of honorary consulships that took him to a range of destinations around the globe.¹³

Neruda’s use of language is precise and poised; Artaud’s use of language incorporated screams, cries and guttural outpourings that both tore language apart at the same time it reinvented it.

Perhaps the only things that these writers share are their passion against the destructive forces of their era. And their commitment to their role as artist. And their belief that the act of making art that cries against the tyranny of its age, however apparently futile, can stave off the inevitable descent into nothingness for a few more stanzas.

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ENDNOTES

⁴ Norman Bryson’s eloquent consideration of the ways in which still life has been used as a means of addressing the fundamental questions of human existence traces the history of the genre to the frescoes and mosaics of Pompeii, where the magical transformation between the sacred and the profanity of everyday objects was a powerful vehicle for suggesting ideas. Norman Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked. Four essays on still life painting, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1990.
9 As Glen Barclay has pointed out, ‘But how much tolerance of any kind was available anywhere in 1943? This was the year of the last German offensive in the East, the year of the Battle of Kursk, the year of the beginning of the British destruction of German cities by terror bombing, the beginning of the German slide to defeat, the Holocaust, etc. And Artaud was at the time of writing in a psychiatric hospital in Vichy France.’ Email to the author, 28th March, 2007.
13 In a series of honorary consulships, Neruda travelled to Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Java, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Barcelona and Madrid between 1927 and 1935. He was appointed consul for the Spanish emigration in 1939 and shortly after he was appointed Consul-General in Mexico. Neruda was also elected in 1945 to the position of Senator of the Republic and was a member of the Communist Party of Chile. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1971/neruda-bio.html (01/15/2007 10.15am).
Richard Bell, *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem)*, 2003. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 360cm. Telstra Collection, Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Image courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery.
INTRODUCTION
In 2003 Brisbane-based artist Richard Bell won the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award with a painting emblazoned with the words *Aboriginal Art / It's A White thing*.

In *Bell's Theorem*, the manifesto which underpins the work, he highlights some of the long-standing inequities in the Aboriginal Art market. Bell notes that while Aboriginal people produce the artworks, it is non-Aboriginal people who define and control the market. In a later statement he adds, ‘White people say what’s good. White people say what’s bad. White people buy it. White people sell it.’

For many non-Aboriginal people, the discontent expressed by Bell seemed excessive. Surely the emergence of the international Aboriginal Art market since the 1980s, and the subsequent efflorescence of Aboriginal art production, have brought great benefits to Aboriginal communities and artists throughout Australia; including improved access to the cash economy, international renown for many artists, and new venues for a political voice. From a people once classified as ‘without art’, Aboriginal people in Australia are now recognised as the largest producers of art per capita. Over 50% of Australian artists are Indigenous, and this coming from a group comprising only 2.4% of the total population.

So why should Richard be so discontented?

Like a tricky virus, discrimination mutates into complex forms adapted to avoid detection, unless you’re a marginalised group and/or Aboriginal. Undoubtedly many of the racist ideas of previous centuries have filtered through to the present day in this way. One particularly pernicious idea which arose during the 20th century is that Aboriginal populations can somehow be divided along a North-South axis of authenticity. In its most vulgar form this is expressed in the belief that only Aboriginal people living in remote communities are ‘real Aboriginals’. Only these communities, perceived to be somehow ‘frozen in time’, are seen as leading authentic cultural lives with attendant authentic cultural expressions.

As Indigenous art curator Djon Mundine has commented, The problem of contemporary innovations versus classical Aboriginal art has vexed art historians since at least the turn of the century. This has happened in two ways: the refusal to see classical Aboriginal art (bark paintings and sculpture, and ‘dot’ paintings) in a contemporary sense, and the refusal until the last ten years to see non-classical, so-called ‘urban’ Aboriginal art as true Aboriginal work.

The double edged racism of this paradigm presents Aboriginal people in remote communities as museum artefacts while portraying urban Aboriginal people as culturally extinct. They are clearly not White Australians, not Multicultural Australians, nor are they truly Aboriginal. Left to haunt the grey zones, the descendants of those Aboriginal communities who were most heavily displaced by colonisation are now effectively rendered invisible, marginal and mute by the hegemony of the colonising state.

It is this sense of discriminatory abandonment that motivated a group of Brisbane-based Aboriginal artists, including Richard Bell, Jennifer Herd, Vernon Ah Kee and Tony Albert, to form the collective *proppaNOW*. Individually these artists had reached the limit of their tolerance and the collective became a strategy for cultural survival and a site for activating Indigenous agency. Their voice would now have amplification.

WHY HERE. WHY NOW

The collective bears the evocative name *proppaNOW* echoing the call for rights. Weary of 200 years of being told how to behave properly (from the perspective of the colonising culture), ‘proppa’ refers effectively to the Aboriginal way of doing things. It references the Indigenous colloquial expression, ‘proper way’; that is to do things with due regard to appropriate protocols and community respect.

Although *proppaNOW* was first conceived in the 1980s, the group formalised their commitment in March 2004. Meanwhile, Queensland’s Premier, Peter Beattie, established QIAMEA (Queensland Indigenous Artists Marketing Export Agency) to promote and market Queensland Indigenous art. The artists were concerned that QIAMEA’s focus was initially directed towards the
remote regions of Queensland such as Mornington Island, Aurukun and Lockhart River, thus reinforcing the cultural stereotype.\(^7\)

Their past efforts as individuals to get government funding had invariably met with responses that indicated that they did not need the same degree of support as those from remote regions. They were not getting the opportunities, support, funding and recognition that their brothers and sisters in north Queensland were getting. Instead it was presumed that as educated city blacks they had better access to galleries, agents, studios and other sources of funding. Their hope was that this new initiative would redress the urban art exclusion experienced in the art collecting world.\(^8\) As Jennifer Herd comments,

I think urban artists are often put on the back burner so to speak. I’ve always felt that there are a number of urban artists, some of them from within our group right now, that have been overlooked, and deserve much more attention than they have received. You see some of these remote area artists . . . get good representation, and a lot of attention. . .\(^9\)

In addition to the bias towards the authenticity of so-called traditional work, the remote communities had a structural advantage. They had a collective identity. They were from named communities, often with distinct recognisable art styles, and they worked through government funded art centres with access to a range of networks not available to any individual artist.

The formation of a collective such as \textit{proppaNOW} hoped to address this structural disadvantage by providing the collective voice necessary to give the artists equal access in a way not afforded them as individuals.\(^10\)

Herd saw them forming a community:

So we decided that the only way urban artists could have a voice was maybe get together in a collective with some like-minded people.\(^11\)

As artist and art critic Mark Alice Durant has famously commented, community-based art collectives ‘gives voice to the voiceless.’\(^12\) In this sense activist artist’s collectives such as \textit{proppaNOW} consciously claim space for marginalised and excluded peoples within the public spaces of mainstream cultural institutions. They provide a public face for groups and issues which might otherwise remain invisible.

According to their mission statement, the central premise of \textit{proppaNOW} is to advocate and produce artists and exhibitions that question established notions of Aboriginal art and identity.\(^13\) Many of these artists are cultural activists reclaiming their space after decades of displacement and dispossession as Indigenous people.

**THE ARTISTS AND THE ART**

The exhibition, \textit{Thresholds of Tolerance}, brings together several new and recent works from the \textit{proppaNOW}
collective. At the root of these works is the issue of race discrimination presented through the lens of four urban Aboriginal artists whose communities have borne the brunt of colonisation, displacement from ancestral lands and marginalisation by the dominant colonial culture. In combination, their work forms a narrative which underlines the cultural alienation and displacement of Aboriginal people since 1788.

The story begins with Tony Albert’s Welcome to Australia series, an Indigenous take on the foundational myths of Captain Cook as part of every Australian child’s primary education. Albert parodies the story of Cook’s landing, the mythologised foundations of White Australia by re-appropriating and re-presenting apparently neutral illustrations from a Bicentennial children’s book. Images which show Cook encountering a bemused group of Aboriginal people are de-neutralised by being meticulously coloured in by an Aboriginal artist and given back to the audience with the words (a direct copy of the lower case cursive script of the school text book), Welcome to Australia. In Albert’s primer, settler myths such as Terra Nullius and the peaceful invasion of Aboriginal Australia are exposed as cartoon accounts – fictional stories that serve to amuse children but cannot be taken seriously by intelligent adults. But as urban artist Gordon Bennett points out in his watercolours of 1991 (featuring alphabetical building blocks), this is where the building blocks of racism start, at school.

In Jen Herd’s delicately formed work Cruciform from Walls of Resistance, the narrative takes a more sombre turn, analysing the aftermath of Cook’s Terra Nullius. The nine boxes installed in the form of a crucifix serve as a memorial to the death of Aboriginal people and culture. Like the crosses erected on road sides after fatal accidents have occurred, they signify a site of a tragedy.

Herd’s works are mediations. With forensic attention to detail she liberates herself from a past of injustice and loss through creating miniature works of intricately constructed shields using cane, cotton and pearl buttons, which play out the fragility of Indigenous culture against the brutality of the invasion. She investigates the massacres of Aboriginal people and their consequences in the Cairns region of North Queensland, her ancestral country, with particular reference to the little known Irvinebank Massacre 1884, in far north Queensland. The pinhole drawings on cartridge paper refer to the rainforest shields punctured with bullet holes. As Christie Palmerston, an explorer at the time wrote,

Their shields may answer very well for the purposes of their wars, but my rifle drilled through these as if they were sheets of paper. 14

Framed in dark wooden boxes, like coffins, the shields, like the Aboriginal people they were meant to protect, are now boxed in, institutionalised, pigeon-holed, defined and confined.

The work also recalls the culpable influence of Christianity in the erasure of Aboriginal culture. Herd is consciously playing on the irony of using a memorial form
Tony Albert, *Welcome to Australia*, 2006. Acrylic and texta pen on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist.
which is a symbol of both the destroyer and the protector. The artist knows only too well the pain of loss of culture, of institutionalisation and confinement. After a childhood being passed from one children’s home to another, the need to reconnect with culture, country and community was a matter of individual survival. For Herd, her art is activism both on a public and deeply private level.

She comments,

When something important is taken from you, you have to overcome the loss. Land Rights compensation does not do it, . . . does not overcome . . . only getting your land back does . . . it give us back our self-respect. Our standing in the nation. Our standing in our own Land. I think about this every time I do my work. It is my way of asserting my sovereignty. My way of doing land rights.\textsuperscript{15}

In Vernon Ah Kee’s work that chillingly spells You Deicide, his commentary on the impact Christian-based religions have had on Indigenous societies is evident through ‘deadly use of precisely sharpened language.’\textsuperscript{16} ‘To deicide’, meaning to murder God, with its clever play on ‘you decide’ compels the viewer, once they discover it is not a spelling mistake, to become an accomplice in this act of cultural terrorism, pressured to take sides. There is no neutral position.

In Ah Kee’s work, one is seduced by a cool minimal appearance deceptively underpinned by intellectual scaffolding deliberately designed to unsettle. Ah Kee uses a heavy bold sans serif type font, minimal in appearance, devoid of emotion and with maximum impact in its scalpel-like clarity. The neutrality of his text-based work can be juxtaposed against his large sensitive portraits that reveal the same degree of restraint as the text to which they covertly refer.

Ah Kee in his ‘attempt to revision the Aborigine’\textsuperscript{17} as he describes his engagement with portraiture, liberates his people from the process of colonising the Aboriginal body through visual misrepresentation. He takes back the control of the image of how Aboriginal people are seen. Images of the wretched, the romantic and the exotic are replaced with images of contemporary Aboriginal people. And like Herd, Ah Kee draws on the personal. He draws male members of his family, warts and all, avoiding all overt attempts at glorification. He individualises his subject by varying the style of marking, not unlike the traditional use of mark making for assigning identity.

As Timothy Morrell astutely observes in the catalogue essay for Ah Kee’s exhibition, Mythunderstanding in 2005, the artist unsettles the viewer by not engaging in ‘quaint naïve draughtsmanship’ or the ‘savagely expressive condemnations’ expected of the political activist artists. Instead he simply invites people to think. He cuts to the brain.

Morrell writes of Ah Kee,

He uses Anglo Australia’s verbal and visual language that is so refined that it presents white viewers with the rather intimidating prospect of being beaten at their own game.\textsuperscript{18}

Exploitation of the language of the coloniser is one such tactical device used by all four proppaNOW artists to engage in what cultural theorist De Certeau would describe as,

\ldots a way of using imposed systems [to] constitute resistance to an order constructed by others \ldots the rules can be deployed tactically in a ‘non-compliant compliance’.\textsuperscript{19}

Previously captive to anthropological discourse and unequal power relations these artists, individually and collectively, interrogate the histories that defined them as
Jennifer Herd, Detail of shield boxes from *Cruciform from Walls of Resistance*, 2005. Oxide painted boxes, glass, tissue paper, mother of pearl buttons, cartridge paper, 9 boxes of 12 x 12 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Michael Aird.
‘other’ and ‘lesser’. They engage in self-liberating strategies through techniques of inversion, parody, irony and wit to strike at the heart of the guilty.

In Richard Bell’s works, words take a different turn. More akin to sloganeering and graffiti, they are delivered like blows to the gut belonging to a tradition associated with protest art and political activism. They are either slashed across the surface with a directness born of anger, imbedded in flung paint or scrawled atop appropriated patterning from European modernists, or at other times they are in a more subdued note-taking style. Emotion and intellect collude in his exploitation of sources ranging from western art, political and legislative texts to history.

The issue of land rights is at the heart of Richard Bell’s work Another Bint Bites the Dust,20 which forms the next chapter of the narrative. Bell’s ‘whitewashed’ painting, which includes the text ‘if I don’t paint my story someone will get away with stealing my land’ also talks about continuing land theft and the erasure of history and culture. He articulates the Indigenous triangulation between land, story and art in a process of demonstrating the different nature of Indigenous ownership of land and inheritance through oral and visual transmission.

Bell explains the difficulties this poses for urban Aboriginal communities.

The NTA [Native Title Act] specifically requires Aboriginal people to prove that Native Title exists (in the claimed area) by means of song, dance, storytelling, etc. . . . to prove that we are related to the birds, the animals, the insects, the microbes, the earths, the wind and fire. This is an extremely difficult task even for the Aboriginal people with minimal ‘White’ contact.

Adding,

The task for Urban Blacks becomes monumental and mostly impossible.21

The nature of this requirement is a double edged sword. While on one hand in the exigencies of the Native Title Act there is a stated acknowledgement of Aboriginal ownership of land through story (oral history), yet on the other, demonstration of this ownership is barely possible as it depends on a degree of continuity denied by the world’s greatest land grab. Inversely the discriminatory nature of the requirement to use story as evidence is exposed in a saying by an old Cherokee elder to a settler: ‘if this is your land where is your story’ (emphasis is the author’s). In other words, rules of ownership are not equally applied to the settler, thus exposing a profound ethical dilemma.

The ending (though far from final) chapter in this story comes with Jennifer Herd’s, We deeply regret. In this installation, a one metre long canoe is covered in a canopy of cloth stitched in with the provocative words ‘We deeply regret’. Words that resonate deeply with Aboriginal people who understand the Government’s intent to avoid saying sorry for generations of human rights abuses. Her use of the ‘we’ is also intended to be ambiguous. It acknowledges that, as Australians, we are all in the same boat so to speak, on this issue and we too regret what happened. The canoe plies its way through history like a warrior messenger with a memory of injustice and misdeed as its troublesome cargo. As Herd states, ‘it becomes the carrier of what it means to be different and to be treated with indifference in your own land.’22

Other words stitched on copy paper cascade from a tobacco box above the canoe cataloguing the crimes against Aboriginal people. The quality of hand stitched words in cloth and paper are also reminiscent of messages one might find in a bottle at sea or smuggled from prisons and other sites of confinement. They become personal message from the heart – poignant and urgent.
CONCLUSION

Unable to wait for the nation to right the wrongs, the proppaNOW collective of artists, having breached the thresholds of tolerance, are applying the brakes to further extinguishment of their rights to the urban expression of their aboriginality.

Bell writes,

Urban Aboriginal Art . . . is the work of people descended from the original owners of the heavily populated areas of the continent. Through a brutal colonisation process much of the culture has disappeared. However, what has survived is important . . . The Dreamtime is the past, the present, the future. The urban artists are still telling dreamtime stories albeit contemporary ones. The Dreamings (of the favoured ‘real Aborigines’ from the least settled areas) actually pass deep into Urban territories. In short, the Dreamings cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed real Aboriginals of the North and supposed Unreal or inauthentic Aboriginals of the South.23

Acting as visual manifestos their exhibitions and works become both political and cultural statements in the vein of protest art. They are also Dreamings for a new order.

At the most fundamental level, proppaNOW addresses what the then Commissioner of Social Justice Mr Mick Dodson articulated so succinctly at the National Reconciliation Convention in May 1997,

If you take the land
you take the ground of our culture . . .
If you take the children
you take the future of our culture...
If you keep on taking
there will be nothing left to take. . . 24

They are cultural terrorists of a new order. As a unit, they are highly trained, focused and on a mission. And they know where you live!

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ENDNOTES

1 Bell writes, ‘Aboriginal Art has become a product of the times. A commodity. The result of a concerted and sustained marketing strategy, albeit, one that has been loose and uncoordinated. There is no Aboriginal Art Industry . . . The key Players are not Aboriginal.’ Richard Bell, ‘Bell’s Theorem: Aboriginal Art: It’s A White Thing’, Koori Web, November 2002 (http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.htm, accessed 28/3/07).


4 Adrian Newstead, Director, Lawson Menzies Art Auctioneers, personal communication with Margo Neale, March 2007.


7 Much of the early efforts of the collective were directed at canvassing QIAMEA for increased government recognition and support of urban Indigenous artists.

8 See Richard Bell’s ‘I had a Dream’, Artist’s Press release, 2005.


10 Collectivisation (coming together to form long term, resource-sharing, mutually beneficial groups) is a particularly useful strategy for artists coming from communities who are historically poor, voiceless, marginalised and lacking access to resources and representation enjoyed by the mainstream.
14 Cited in Henry Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, p. 81.
16 Ibid.
17 Vernon Ah Kee on AWAYE! Radio National, 17 February 2007

24 Mick Dodson, Speech at the launch of the *National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* at the Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, 26 May 1997.
For Jon Cattapan, as for many Australian artists of his generation, addressing human rights is not a straightforward matter. The notion of universality – integral to the concept of human rights and explicit within its written declaration – lost currency in the art world of the 1980s. Scepticism towards such ‘grand narratives’ was one of the more commonly accepted elements of postmodern theory. Art larded with universal truths was no longer convincing, in spite of the fact that key postmodern theorists were prominent in human rights campaigns. The affirmation and defence of human rights appeared out of place in an art world moving from issues-oriented ‘political art’ towards a more discursive conception of politics. Meaghan Morris marked 1975 (the year Cattapan entered art school) as ‘the end of a whole period of classical political activism’. A direct address to human rights (or any other political issue for that matter) waned when it was no longer ‘a matter of taking politics to various cultural activities’ but of exploring the densely coded connections of a scene in which ‘everything has become, obscurely, Cultural’.

Earlier projects within the ANU ‘Creativity and Human Rights’ research platform have declared the necessity of the political in art and have charted processes of witnessing and response in artists’ work. But how does an artist engage with human rights after having developed his practice in an era of relative disengagement, when the education of a young artist seemed a process of deradicalisation? In the early 1970s, Cattapan attended a Melbourne high school where a radical climate saw students producing a newsletter in support of the Viet Cong. By the early 1980s, radicalism had the character of classical art world agonism: opposition was articulated in terms of personal symbols, diaristic narratives and explorations of the ego in extremis.

In this context, a personal voice and a painterly style over- rather than underwrote the political in art. A 1987 painting, The street, was a response to the Hoddle Street shootings of August that year, in which Julian Knight killed 7 people and wounded 19 because he ‘wanted to see what it was like to kill someone’. Cattapan struggled to negotiate a balance between the world’s realities, art’s fictions and the demands of ego: ‘[The street] is both an observer’s recollection and an invention of images that allow me a kind of diaristic overview’. The artist’s capacity to witness was further diluted by a postmodern consciousness in awe of the image’s power and sceptical of its veracity. In the early 1990s, Cattapan developed a recurrent motif of a 19th century photographer hunched beneath a cloth behind the camera:

The idea of the early cameraman became a self-portrait, compelling because it was like using a displaced person, out-of-time, situating him in a postmodern context. The hood gives the sense of looking outwards but it is also an internalised canopy, a dark, enveloping, womb-like structure.

Observed by a displaced and distanced artist, the world became ‘a personalised generic tableau’ whose homogeneity left only an ‘implied humanity’.
Reconnecting with the world and its politics was a slow process for Cattapan. For a Melbourne-based artist living through the Kennett government era from 1992–1999, fundamental rights such as education, social services and local democracy became the stuff of headlines. For a postmodern artist, however, politics did not simply appear in a painting: it had to emerge in and through studio practice.

This process began when Cattapan began to reflect more on what he was processing in his art, not just how he was processing it. *Footscray chemical fire*, 1989, was one of a series of paintings of disasters – floods, fires, car accidents – conjuring a mood of urban apocalypse; part Ballard, part *Blade Runner*. An actual event triggered a painting that veered quickly into a nocturnal realm of heated sexual desire. But the subject carried an unavoidable sting: the chemical fire was generic not only because of Cattapan’s broad symbolic treatment but also because there were simply so many such incidents in Melbourne’s industrial west. Having endured the 1985 Butler Transport fire, the 1989 United fuel depot fire and the massive 1991 blaze at the Coode Island chemical dump, community groups began to draw attention to such notions as ‘freedom from fear’, ‘better standards of life’, and ‘the right to . . . security of person’ [*Universal declaration of human rights*, preamble and Article 3]. The artist was wrenched back into the real world of a community subject to risk, to indignity or an outright assault on their rights.

This consciousness of a bigger picture – the passage from a given urban incident to the recognition of a larger erosion of rights – developed over the course of the 1990s. After winning power in late 1992, Premier Jeff Kennett subjected Victoria to a stringent course of neo-liberal shock treatment: a 10% across the board reduction in public expenditure, massive reductions in health spending, the closure of schools and the reduction of local government from 210 councils to 78.

The latter two issues – education and local government – were of particular importance to Cattapan, as a committed teacher and an active member of the St Kilda community. The Kennett era opened with the demonising of local government as inept, the suspension of municipal elections, the imposition of neo-liberal policies such as compulsory competitive tendering and the arrogation of local authority to the state government. By the mid-1990s, the change in culture was such that ‘Councils are now expected to be more business oriented, focus on citizens as customers and be less driven by local social welfare concerns and community group input’.

A different human presence appeared in Cattapan’s paintings. The isolated derelicts, *flâneurs* and voyeurs of the 1980s gave way to small clusters of people gathering against urban backdrops. The abstract personages of the earlier paintings were replaced by purposeful, connected people. The paintings registered something essential to the articulation of citizens’ rights: the capacity of a community to connect, to articulate a shared understanding of rights and to demand these vocally. In short, the need for active citizens rather than passive clients.

*The taking of Richmond*, 1999, embodies the events and ideologies provoking this turn to community politics. (That the painting was completed some six years after the events themselves shows how long the rapprochement between politics and art took.) Richmond Secondary College was one of the many state schools closed or restructured during the Kennett era. In 1993, parents, community members and activists occupied the school in protest for 360 days, before being forcibly evicted in a baton charge later described as an ‘unreasonable’ action using ‘excessive force’.

This and other incidents in Victoria may not have begun with a direct awareness of human rights being at stake. All the same, the Richmond Secondary College events can be equated with such rights as parents’ ‘right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children’ and the ‘freedom of peaceful assembly and association’ [Articles 26 (3) and 20 (1)]. Likewise, the claim that ‘most critics of the Kennett government were concerned specifically about the devaluation and destruction of social bonds in society, citizen participation and an active civil society’ suggests that what was at stake was ‘the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives’, ‘the right of equal access to public service’ and the principle that ‘the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government’ [Article 2].
The Carbon group drawings of 2003 are a sustained reflection of the artist’s passage from romantic agonist to political allegorist. The return of the human is emphasised by the scale and number of figures, and by the elimination of the dense webs of data flows and urbanism in Cattapan’s metropolis paintings of the 1990s. A consistent frontal point of view and a common ground plane makes for clearly presented and strongly connected figures. Although there is still some sense of distance – the figures are blotchy, third- and fourth-generation tracings and transfers of found media images – there is equally a suggestion that Cattapan is trying to unearth figures, and agency, buried within a muddied social sphere. Clusters and huddles of figures suggest the formation of communities. Signs of protest suggest direct opposition to power, itself explicitly represented in the form of riot police or suit-wearing fat cats. Fundamental to these drawings is the idea of active citizenship; personal liberty and freedom of speech engendering ‘collective decision making processes’.

One of the earliest of these clustered communities appeared in The group discusses, 2002. The source was a group of art students, photographed by Cattapan at the beginning of a studio critique at the Victorian College of the Arts. As a microcosm of a community of active citizens, the motif of the art school allowed Cattapan to take cultural activity to politics, rather than vice-versa. In the Carbon group works, Cattapan literally expands this initial community: displayed as a series, the works show multiple clusters spreading across the wall. While each is a small group in itself, the series as a whole suggests that local agency can develop into larger social momentum.

This is not a redemption narrative: if Cattapan now directly addresses issues of human rights in his work, this does not mean that politics has come safely home to art. Possible histories: Keys Road, 2006, shows Cattapan’s passage from the private symbols of the 1980s, through the distanced observation of the 1990s into an art directly committed to the declaration and defence of rights. On the left, a ghostly image of the SIEV 4 laments Australia’s lack of generosity in the dispensation of the right to refuge: ‘Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution’ [Article 14 (1)]. In the centre is an image of mass protest against the
erosion of rights relating to ‘free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment’ [Article 23 (1)]; a protest against the Howard government’s industrial relations laws. On the right is an image of two utes parked outside the artist’s studio in Moorabbin. Cattapan’s work is equated with the labours of other tradespeople in the industrial estate where his studio is located; an idea almost unutterable in the postmodern ‘80s. There’s a forlorn air to the vehicles; static and isolated, they suggest that the artist’s sense of distance from the world still lingers. Can a painting perform like an active citizen?

Dr Chris McAuliffe is the Director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne. He is currently writing a book on Jon Cattapan to be published in 2008.

ENDNOTES
1 Jean-François Lyotard’s full articulation of this scepticism was translated in 1984 as The Postmodern Condition, (tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi), Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984.
4 Peter Haddow, Hoddle Street: The ambush and the tragedy, Strategic Australia, Melbourne, 1988, p. 169.
6 Anne Kirker, ‘Jon Cattapan’ [Interview], Eyeline, no. 22–23, Summer 1993, p. 35.
7 Kirker, ‘Jon Cattapan’ [Interview], p. 36.
For Dadang Christanto, an artist whose work is about memorialising injustice, trauma and violence, the human head is the site of memory and intelligent thought. And it is only through memory and intelligent thought, through recollection and reflection, so the artist believes, that trauma caused by violence can be cured and reconciliation achieved.

There are multiple dimensions of poignancy in the series of works in which Dadang has depicted the human head: they serve both as memorials to victims of violence and an evocation of the need to remember and to reflect on our common humanity; they evoke with clinical precision the manner in which many died in the maelstrom of the Indonesian massacres of 1965–1966; and they testify to the intensely personal tragedy of Dadang’s own family in what he refers to as ‘The Unspeakable Horror’.

It was this experience that impelled Dadang Christanto to become a human rights activist during his early years at the College of Art, Yogyakarta. He has worked with organisations committed to social justice and with the Bengkel Teater founded by poet and activist W.S Rendra. He was associated in the 1980s with the Indonesian new art movement, young artists who challenged the existing art and political establishments. Dadang’s first solo exhibition overseas was in 1991. Since then he has exhibited or given performances in Japan, the USA, Cuba, Thailand, Italy, Brazil, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Korea and in Australia where he now lives with his family.

I first met Dadang Christanto when I was selecting work for the First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1993. That exhibition was a revelation to Australian audiences who knew almost nothing of contemporary Indonesia. His installation For those: Who have been killed, Who are poor, Who are suffering, Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe evoked spontaneous and empathetic response from the audience who interpreted the work as a memorial to suffering ‘in every time and place’ as the artist had indicated it was and, in response, left hundreds of flowers, poems and notes in front of the work. These generally had nothing to do with Indonesia: many referred to the brutal violence then raging in the former Yugoslavia and to the tragic death while in police custody of a young local Aboriginal dancer, Daniel Yok. This personal and emotional response by audiences who know nothing of the artist’s background and personal history has been repeated in many countries.

Dadang Christanto’s art is very much an appeal to the human conscience and about thresholds of tolerance. It is also about uncertain endings. In his Count Project, begun in 1999, he set out to count those killed by violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dadang started the project ‘when the world was celebrating the . . . third millennium’. He felt ‘worried about what has happened in the twentieth century. In the past century there have been massacres everywhere, bloodshed everywhere. Violence just to make people suffer’. And the fact was that ‘we have always failed to stop violence, instead we have more violence. September 11, 2001, the War in Afghanistan, the Bali bombing and the War in Iraq’ all were ‘actual global evidence that violence is becoming the solution to problems. This is a strong sign that we are living in the barbarian age’. He had accordingly been ‘counting the victims of violence’ in his work for this project: ‘The images of different sized heads or even the small dots in my drawings represent the victims. Each head of the victims has scratches of red and black in the brain as a record of the darkness and violence of the memories of these events. Human beings are not objects’.

As a small boy in Java the artist experienced violence and trauma firsthand. In 1965 when he was eight years old his father ‘disappeared’, taken away by soldiers. He has never been heard from since and was presumably one of the estimated hundreds of thousands of people who were murdered in Indonesia between November 1965 and May 1966 for alleged or imagined Communist sympathies. Robert Cribb concluded in his authoritative study on the subject that the ‘killings were precipitated by a national event, the attempted coup in Jakarta’ – the event that brought General Suharto to power – but had many local resonances. Although research suggests the Chinese were not the especial targets in the killings, many of the victims, such as Dadang’s father, Tak Ek Tjioe, were

of Chinese descent and small businessmen. Chinese were natural targets, for exactly the same reasons as Jews were in Europe: for their different ethnicity, different religion and real or supposed prosperity. After the killings Chinese culture was suppressed in Indonesia.6

The massacres constituted without question one of the most appalling violations of any concept of human rights committed anywhere since the end of the Second World War. ‘This ‘65 incident’, Dadang told his old friend and fellow-artist Hendro Wiyanto, ‘carries permanent wounds in our heart and memory . . . it is fresh in our memory because it holds bitterness so very deep, so dark in the history of the Indonesian Nation as the blood and tears of its victims were never measured. . .’ And it may well be a trauma that can never be exorcised, precisely because the blood and tears of its victims were never measured. Reconciliation is impossible when the truth has never been spoken, the victims have never been counted and the perpetrators have never been identified, let alone condemned. Indonesian historian Hermawan Sulistyo refers to the period as ‘The Forgotten Years . . . all newspapers from 1965–1966 are missing from Indonesian library stacks . . . All documents and studies of the period 1965–1966 are also subject to tight security or even held by the military authorities themselves . . . Not a single document, account or study dealt with the killings . . . until the late 1980s, to most Indonesians, documents on the subject from outside Indonesia had been not simply inaccessible but non-existent or unheard of.’ Dadang himself did not publicly reveal his personal history until after the fall of the Suharto regime and until he moved to Australia in 1999. But Dadang has always been resolved that those years should not be forgotten. The symbolism of the heads in his art extends also to the manner of many of the killings. Sulistyo (among others) records how as a child he witnessed ‘quite a number of bodies floating in the Bengawan River almost on a daily basis. Many of the bodies were without heads’.9

The head for Dadang thus becomes among other meanings a symbol of violent death. Many seeing his work have drawn such a conclusion without knowing his personal circumstances. Alexandra Munroe in her review of his art in the 1996 exhibition Traditions/Tensions in New York described his work in this way: ‘Several hundred terracotta heads are arranged in eight pyramidal tiers, echoing the ninth-century Buddhist monument of Borobudur near Yogyakarta. But their gaping, vacant eyes and mouths suspended as if in a dumb scream, and their distorted shapes lacking foreheads, also recall the endless rows of skulls piled in abandoned caves and school buildings, the grim remains of the Khmer Rouge terror in nearby Cambodia . . .’10

Dadang’s most dramatic use of the head as a symbol of commemoration was the anguished but extraordinarily beautiful work Hujan Merah/Red Rain, displayed at the School of Art at The Australian National University in 2003 as part of the exhibition Witnessing to Silence, curated by myself, Nancy Sever, David Williams and Christine Clark, and subsequently bought by the National Gallery of Australia.11 Images of 1,965 faces were mounted on the ceiling of the gallery, a reference to the year in which the killings had begun. A red woollen yarn fell from each face to the floor, symbolising a rain of tears and of blood. Red Rain was allusive, not only a memorial to the victims of 1965 but a universal memorial, designed to make people think about their own humanity. Like so many of Dadang’s art works it has a haunting presence. The small but elegant drawings of heads (related to the series of larger drawings on paper in this exhibition) are encased in plastic, evoking the idea of official identity cards, required by the state to authenticate personal identity.12 But personal identity is not the issue in death. The faces were sketched on Chinese joss paper, which is also the medium used as prayer paper in Buddhist ceremonies for commemoration of the dead, or in ‘the Confucian tradition of making offerings to the dead . . . the victims are still with us because they have never been allowed a memorial nor been written into history books’.13 The Chinese references are especially relevant because it is only recently that the artist has made such references in his work to his cultural background.

His second great work for the National Gallery of Australia, Heads from the North, was an installation of 66 heads floating in a pool within the National Gallery’s Sculpture Garden. They are formed of patinated bronze, his first work in that medium. The heads were made during a residency arranged by Professor David Williams, then
Director of the School of Art at The Australian National University. The number of the heads refers to the events of 1966, as the 1,965 heads in *Red Rain* had referred to the year 1965, when the killings began. Yet these faces are not twisted with emotion but strangely transcendent and peaceful, as if beyond human pain, and bear a strong relation to the drawings in this exhibition. And there is a further commemorative aspect to *Heads from the North*: the faces of the heads are those of his mother and father. There is nothing to indicate the meaning of the work. One Australian viewing the installation thought that it must refer to the incident of the *Tampa*, when a Norwegian container ship rescued refugees whom the Australian Government had ordered should not enter Australian waters, potentially leaving the refugees to drown.

In the performance which he gave during the exhibition *Witnessing to Silence* in 2003 and in two different versions in 2004 and 2005, *Litsus*, Dadang recalled the silence surrounding the killings as well as the stigma in Indonesia attached to the families of those who disappeared. They could never publicly speak of the dead and of the complicity of a whole community and nation in that silence and suppression of memory. The audience must either stand by or participate in violence by throwing missiles at Dadang (or in the first performance of this work in 2003 also at his young son Gunung who was then the same age, eight years old, as Dadang when his father disappeared). The two sat silently, their heads bowed. The second part of this performance, *Searching displaces Bones*, at the Humanities Research Centre as part of the ‘Art and Human Rights’ project in 2004, was inspired, the artist has said, by the bodies discovered at Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia.

Dadang’s use of the full figure and not just the head has been seen especially in three monumental works using larger than life size figures: *1001 Manusia Tanah/Earth (Soil) people* (1996), *Api di Bulan Mei 1998/Fire in May 1998*, and *They give evidence* (1997–1998). In the first, displayed at Ancol Marina Beach in Jakarta in 1996, the figures represent displaced human beings, eloquently expressing communal grief at the loss of their farming lands to development. The 1000 male and female figures (the artist himself is the thousand and first) simply stand in the sea, arms dangling helplessly at their sides, facing the beach, confronting the beachgoers, amusement park visitors and fishermen with the symbolism of human beings displaced in the interests of the bourgeois beneficiaries of globalisation. His most emotionally searing work may have been his installation for the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial, *Api di Bulan Mei 1998/Fire in May 1998*, ‘a tribute . . . to the people, mainly Chinese, who died when mobs torched businesses and homes in the Indonesian riots’ that occurred in Jakarta in May 1998. The 47 larger-than-life papier-mâché figures, their hands raised in supplication, were set alight as a memorial. The Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased Dadang’s great sculptural installation *They give*
evidence in 2003. This installation represents figures of the dead who have returned to bear witness to the wrongs inflicted on them and on others. The design of the figures with their huge shoulders is patterned deliberately on traditional representations of the Buddha (as at Borobudur), partly to differentiate them from traditional European sculpture, but also for symbolic effect: the shoulders are huge because they have to bear the weight of so much suffering. The heads, like the drawings and sculptures in this exhibition, are shaved. They are manifestly representations of ordinary people, they include men and women, representing a vast body of suffering humanity, equally silent but eloquent witnesses. They transcend time and place. Through the offerings proffered they plead for humanity, even as they remind us of our complicity in allowing such atrocities to occur over the centuries of human existence.

Trauma and suffering can indeed be cured only by recollection and reflection. And Dadang’s art is dedicated to ensuring that human suffering shall not be forgotten.

Caroline Turner

Note: This essay has been based on interviews with the artist as well as other published sources. I would also like to thank Dr Glen St. J. Barclay for his help in preparing this essay.

ENDNOTES

1 His work in their 1987 exhibition was dedicated to a poor becak (pedicab) driver who killed himself when the becak, his only livelihood, was banned in the city of Bandung. For a discussion on Indonesian contemporary art see Caroline Turner, ‘Indonesia: Art, freedom, human rights and engagement with the West’, in Caroline Turner (ed.), Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific, Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2005, pp. 196–217. For a longer discussion of this artist’s work see Caroline Turner, ‘Wounds in our hearts’, in Kathryn Robinson (ed.), Asian and Pacific Cosmopolitanisms, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, forthcoming 2007.

2 Dadang was not able to reveal the true emphasis of his work at the time because that would have led to repercussions under the Suharto regime. When asked in 1993 if this work was about Indonesia, he replied that it was about universal human suffering. In 1999 he revealed the work had been inspired by the Dili, East Timor, Santa Cruz cemetery massacre in 1991. In a speech (13 May 2005) to open the Arafura Craft Exchange at the Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Dadang Christanto said that some of his artist friends from Indonesia, including FX Harsono in Perth, Western Australia in the early 1990s and Heri Dono in 1996 in Townsville, Queensland, as well as all the Indonesian artists at the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1999 had suffered from those who identified all Indonesians with the human rights abuses associated with the Suharto Government. The Suharto regime has been criticised for human rights abuses in the years after 1965–66. These include human rights abuses in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh, provinces with strong independence movements as well as issues related to internal control of dissent.


4 Much of his art takes its starting point from ‘the unspeakable horror’ of the Indonesian massacres of November 1965 – May 1966, in what the Library of Congress has described as ‘the

Robert Cribb concluded in his authoritative study on the subject that the ‘killings were precipitated by a national event, the attempted coup in Jakarta and they involved avowedly national actors – the army, the PKI, organised Islam – and yet the relatively scanty evidence we possess suggests that a host of local factors in each region determined the scope and scale of each bout of killing’. (Robert Cribb, (ed.), The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: studies from Java and Bali, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash, Clayton, 1990, p.21).

Ariel Heryanto, State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging, Routledge, London, 2006 suggests Chinese were not the main focus but as Martin Stuart Fox has noted, ‘Nowhere else (with the exception of Malaysia) has the Chinese community been so poorly assimilated’ (Martin Stuart-Fox, A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003, p. 238). Abdurrahman Wahid began to relax anti-Chinese discrimination after he came to power in 2000: Indonesian Chinese literature and culture were encouraged, stores could show Chinese characters openly in their windows and Chinese ceremonies like the Lion and Dragon Dances could be shown in public, sometimes without official permission. His successor Megawati Sukarnoputri designated the Chinese Lunar New Year a national holiday, and in July 2006 the Indonesian Parliament removed the most serious remaining discrimination by granting Indonesian nationality to anybody born in Indonesia, regardless of ethnic origin.


Hermawan Sulistyo, ‘The Forgotten Years: the missing history of Indonesia’s mass slaughter (Jombang-Kediri 1965–1966)’, PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 1997, UMI, 49, 25. What is so much more difficult to understand is that the massacres have attracted far less international condemnation or even comment than other acts of state terrorism occasioning immensely fewer victims. ‘The silence and indifference shown worldwide by the mainstream media about the 1965 killings’, Heryanto observes, ‘makes the hysteria over the Tiananmen incident’, where fewer than 3000 people were killed, ‘appear ludicrously hypocritical’ [Ariel Heryanto, State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 1–2].

It is not surprising that those who were most closely associated with the massacres are the most anxious that their circumstances should remain hidden in mystery: attempts in March 2001 to have the remains of 24 victims returned to the village of Kaloran in Central Java for reburial by their relatives had to be abandoned as a result of attacks by a crowd of some 300 villagers demanding that ‘no bodies of the alleged communists or their associates and kin should be buried or reburied in their surrounding areas’. (Heryanto, State Terrorism, pp. 1–2).


Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds.) Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights, Humanities Research Centre and Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003.


Communication from the artist with author.

A prone human body is carried by two men and then gently subjected to forensic examination by a child, who represents a new generation of possible victims The work was inspired, the artist has told me, by seeing the bodies carried out from the excavations of mass graves of Muslims killed at Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia but also by the thought that one day perhaps his father’s body may be found. The performance has in its title a resonance with the very nature of commemoration – the displacement of the past with an artistic creation which stands for the memories of the past and disturbs and displaces the forgetting that might otherwise prevail.

‘The modern condition’, in the words of Gadi Algazi, Professor of History at the University of Tel-Aviv (Gadi Algazi, ‘Un mur pour enformer les Palestiniens’, Le Monde diplomatique, 592, juillet 2003, p. 10).

Seeing the ways in which histories take shape, the possibilities that remain outside what is passed down and what is left unexplained, requires a certain sort of trigger. Asking how narratives of survival and loss, of ownership and reclamation, of travel and displacement, wrap around our lives (and our memories), involves a certain sort of reassembling. Artist Julie Gough offers viewers a peripheral vision, a view through which the language of history might be examined in the landscape of Tasmania or through kitschy Aboriginal dolls or the problematic lyrics of Rolf Harris. These kinds of views are unsettling: like the crazy mirrors at Luna Park they twist and turn into eerie shapes. Comprehension becomes a process: a slow or sudden realisation that we are within her works, our deciphering effecting the reconfiguring of voices elided and pasts subsumed. In these optical re-workings the key to the puzzle lies in acknowledging the ways in which (other) histories resurface, reclaim and reorder the pieces.

In Gough’s work, it seems, however, that questioning the past requires accepting its co-residency with the present. Postcards of Tasmanian landscapes reveal the ways in which settlers could not forget the presence of those they sought to erase. In Gough’s *Driving Black Home* the adjective ‘black’ becomes a cartographical nomenclature, mapping the landscape with haunting traces of the Indigenous people who were collected, categorised and displaced. Troubling the past through re-reading the present is a strategy for negotiating the tensions at work within Gough’s artistic and personal lives. Between longing and belonging, culture and memory, Gough’s work evokes the pleasures and secrets of teasing out identities, of the struggles of definition and the ways in which past and present are carried on her or your person. These notions are played out through the aesthetic and thematic elements of Gough’s oeuvre. Her works are like points of unease and disquiet. They are reconfigurations of material culture, landscapes and time, in which art becomes a visual language for deciphering, opening and acknowledging the national and personal entanglements of past and present. Incorporating the immensity of vocabulary like history, memory, culture and time into her artistic expression seems to provide Gough with a visual lexicon. Thus her work might be thought of as a kind of linguistic device that re-presents, or rather, asks viewers to re-view, the stories we tell ourselves.

In this interview with Julie Gough I ask her about some of these negotiations and re-assemblages within her work, in order to reflect a little more on the threads of history, memory and culture that are woven through her work.

**AK:** Would I be correct, Julie, in saying your work has a sense of ‘uncovering’ about it – a sense of history as a trace? I find this interesting particularly in works like *Promissory Note* that deal with historical events. Unlike what we think of as the traditional ‘historical method’ that often seeks to actively ‘find’ the past, you seem to allow materials/sources to reveal themselves. How has this developed in your work? And do you see your artistic expression as offering another mode for ‘seeking’ the past?

**JG:** Yes and yes! For me art is an ‘other’, additional, language that bypasses the written, and effects understanding more rapidly across what are often prohibitive borderlines of age, race, gender etc. Art is a different system of making sense of things: I imagine our brains can be mobile to work our way to different understandings through art. A viewer, not able to use preset ‘tabs’ to ‘read’ art is somehow forced, and freed, to make fresh sense of the story before them. In the instance of my work, these are often about unfinished historical encounters and open ended cross cultural dialogues/disruptions.

In terms of materials revealing themselves, my intention is to keep working towards work that is poetic and perhaps shocking if the ‘real’ impetus/story is found/understood in the work.

I work first to make a successful visual piece, and second towards the ‘story’ that has compelled me to make the piece. I wish to lure a viewer forward to engage with the work so they realise what other, deeper narrative/situation lies beneath the surface. I think that multiple uses of materials enlivens objects into incantation, whereby an almost magical, spell-like possibility charges the work beyond what text can achieve. Some materials, from special places, of perhaps descendants like myself, of the original beings of a particular place and event, can,
Julie Gough, *We ran/I am*, 2007. Journal of George Augustus Robinson, 3 November 1830, Swan Island, North East Tasmania – ‘I issued slops to all the fresh natives, gave them baubles and played the flute, and rendered them as satisfied as I could. The people all seemed satisfied at their clothes. Trousers is excellent things and confines their legs so they cannot run,’ 2007. Calico, 14 photographs on paper, earth pigments, c. 2.0 x 7.5 x 0.05 m. Photography by Craig Opie.
I believe charge an artwork with a power of presence and can recall, and give urgency to, the idea of the unfinished past that is mostly informing me and giving me intent and duration as an artist/maker.

**AK:** It seems that viewers must literally entangle themselves in your works – this engagement, as I have already suggested, is more like a process in which our understanding develops through, and alongside, the work. Can you comment on this process and also how you negotiate the effect of your work as both mediating and reconfiguring the viewer’s experience?

**JG:** Yes, good reading. I hope the viewer sinks into the work and is drawn in, along a piece, so that what is revealed to them is their own possible, and my own definite, personal place/connection, that is otherwise often elusive, in the work. I hope to encourage, not an instant understanding, but a 2 or 3 step ‘opening’ of the work, so that it unfolds to them between the materials, the title, the location, etc. I hope to make things that are alluring and beautiful, lyrical, balanced on the surface yet tainted and uncomfortable ‘sightings’ of national ‘problems’ within.

**AK:** For me, as a migrant from Sri Lanka where notions of land and identity/history and ‘the’ future continue to be violently contested, the sense of living alongside memory, living with history is significant, and perhaps this is one of the reasons I find such a resonance with your work. Memory, whether they are yours or memories of family members, friends, strangers, underpins works like Locus and Brown Sugar. In these works in particular you seem to use memory as a way of talking back to the past whilst simultaneously making space for it in the present. There is something unsettling in this perhaps because in Australia the past is often thought about nostalgically, through the language of myth, or as something to be moved on from. There is no room for yearning, for connecting with the past in a way that allows it to be in our present. Are these some of the ideas you are triggering with your work?

**JG:** Again you are raising great and important ideas. Yes, I am dismayed when I go to a place that celebrates and remembers palatable pasts, at the expense of working through and recognising the other stories that hover...
– (and are surely sensed by all) – of Indigenous places and celebrations and of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, often violent, encounters. I think that the strong urge for national pride by making national stories from recent myths at the expense of, in particular, Indigenous experience renders us all unwell and unable to cohabit properly. This shifts Indigenous people into a space of ‘victim’ and into remembrance mode permanently, rather than enabling us to effect a regular everyday contemporary life.

A different national focus with a properly embraced Indigenous culture and a shared history – with all its bad intentions and outcomes – would construct the idea and place of Australia as less of an invention overlaid upon silenced pasts, and where any account more than a few decades old, is blurred into ‘history war’ disrepute.

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**AK:** I am fascinated by your use of the landscape you are in. The way you use the landscape as the artwork itself, your ability to re-form the gallery space with found objects from the land, and their importance as connections between you and your ancestors provided me with a kind of ‘punctum’; a forceful reminder of what I don’t see in the landscape around me. Landscapes become cultural refractors. What does using the land, and objects from it, mean for you in terms of artistic expression and negotiating your own identity/ies?

**JG:** Landscape has become increasingly important since the last 1990s when I started venturing outdoors beyond books, archives, op shops for text and materials. I started work for the Parks and Wildlife Service in 2000 and with more time and good collaborative work with other Aboriginal people in Tasmania, I found place pulling more than text. I also realised that the places have often maintained a power that is both unsettling and confirming for me of the stories that are often untold, half unspoken, one sided etc. Working outdoors has given me a less bleak sense of identity and connection to Ancestors than what the archives allow. Sometimes I bring both place and text together so as to create a work that outsider/insider (everyone) can hopefully intercept and understand.

**AK:** Finally, identity and culture are often contested. There is a lot that is left unsaid or missed out or ignored when these words are used. Your work speaks to these gaps: in fact many of your works seem to powerfully make use of margins or interstitial places (Locus/Intertidal Zones/Sleeping Mountain). Furthermore you discuss, in some of your artist’s statements, feelings of ‘inbetween-ness’ or other/ed/ness. How do you negotiate these spaces? And as an artist who is critiquing and reconfiguring and creating a visual language through which to re-view, among other things, our national history, how do you work through the risks of, as you once quoted from Joseph Beuys, being seen as a ‘kind of enchanter’ within the academic and artistic circles you operate within?

**JG:** I wish I wasn’t so binary and black/white about everything, so the emergence of this in-between/ third space has been liberating for me. I am definitely unable to fit into expectations of an Indigenous or of a ‘white’ person. I am that undercover detective, working to perhaps unravel and disturb given stories. I have wished I was more of an insider, but since primary school I have been solo and observer. The world is not my own and so I think I found the journey to art as the language to try and communicate how I feel, a quite solitary attempt to work-through and ‘out’ this position of knowing things are not quite right. But to also work through the different histories I carry within, and am, in myself and that are not easy for any ‘side’ to work with fully. I think that my history – not taking art in secondary school – wanting to become an archaeologist,
shows my mode: solitary, seeking from the mysteries the
clues to what we are made of/from.

I fell into art, and the possibilities for communication, at this time, are great in the field, so I am staying! I am happy walking the interstitial line, it gives me freedom from given ‘party’ Indigenous organisation lines. I am not trying to represent all 5000 Tasmanian Aboriginal people’s perspectives, that otherwise is what galleries, curators expect from an artist/community exhibition. This can’t work for me because I was born and grew up in St Kilda, Melbourne – not in Tasmania. I will always be the perennially seeking person, like David Carradine in the Kung Fu TV show: confused, following a trail of enlightenment that is sometimes funny and sometimes awful.

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Pat Hoffie is a writer, teacher, academic and intellectual as well as an internationally honoured artist. A Professor at Griffith University in Brisbane, she has had a long and distinguished career of rejecting exploitation whether past or present. In so doing she has tested the limits of tolerance in our society.

In her keynote address for the South Project in Chile in 2006 Pat Hoffie explored the critical issues for an artist of identity, location and the role of an artist at this time in our world. She quoted James Clifford’s injunction to re-think the notion of identity and to perceive it as something that might better be associated with ‘an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations.’ In many senses Hoffie’s own site of artistic practice is encapsulated in this concept of a cross-cultural journey.

Hoffie has treated colonial exploitation in many works over nearly two decades. The series ‘Fully Exploited Labour’ had its beginnings in a three month Asialink residency in the Philippines in 1993 when she produced for the walls of the Australia Centre in Makati, Manila, a large billboard declaring: ‘transnationally speaking, cultural exchange is the lubricant for economic intercourse’. This was painted for her by the Galicia family in Manila whose work then was to paint the huge cinema billboards which used to be seen everywhere in the city. She has since commissioned them (with acknowledgment) to reproduce her work in the form of large billboards or banners in the series Fully Exploited Labour.

Hoffie has said in an interview with Alison Carroll: ‘Everyone who pulls a t-shirt over their heads in the morning starts feeling uncomfortable when they start getting conscious of the real costs and conditions of labour in a global economy. How do you walk that fine line between being a bleeding heart and just thinking it’s all too big to solve? This series has always mentioned the names of those who were involved in its production, where it was done and the costs. It’s not called the Fully Exploited Labour series for nothing.’

At the 1994 Adelaide Festival the artist showed the huge banner NO SUCH THING as a LEVEL PLAYING FIELD, hung with great significance and considerable panache above the hallowed Victor Richardson Stand at the Adelaide cricket ground. It is a reproduction on huge scale, again by the Galicia family, of a nineteenth century painting by J.M. Crossland showing a young Aboriginal boy holding a cricket bat. The subject, Nannultera, was raised by missionaries at the Poonindie Natives’ Training Institution, where, as Timothy Morrell describes it, ‘Nunga people were sent . . . to be (in the words of its founder Matthew Hale) “reclaimed from barbarism and trained to the duties of social Christian life”’. Crossland’s work was modelled on detailed life studies of colonial subjects, such as from India, but the young Aboriginal’s eyes express so much more than the artist probably intended.

One of the most extraordinary works in this series is her powerful Inadequate Language (2002), using footage from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Four Corners program which was then worked on by the artist with a computer. The print outs were sent to the Galicia family who enlarged them as they had done with cinema billboards by using a grid and then hand painting the image. It evoked the incident when the Australian Navy confronted a sinking boat of refugees whom Australian Government Ministers, in the context of a Federal election where ‘border security’ had become an issue, accused of throwing their children overboard to force the Navy to pick them up. The claim was later revealed to be false.

In this image an Iraqi man is holding up his child, not to throw the child overboard but to plead for rescue, as was indeed what the refugees had actually been doing. The Galicia family working in the still strongly Catholic Philippines were unaware of the Australian story and the image in their hands takes on, as many commentators have noted, Christian references to Christ’s miracles by the Sea of Galilee.

Hoffie took up the theme of refugees’ incarceration in prison-like structures in the Australian desert as ‘illegals’ in other banners painted by the Galicia family such as Woomera 2003. Her work in the Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney’s 2005 exhibition Interesting Times, entitled Maribyrnong: no place to weep, was also on the subject or refugees, though not a painting by the Galicia family. The artist recreated the exact dimensions of one of the rooms allocated to refugees at the Maribyrnong detention centre. Many visitors were moved to tears in the tiny, claustrophobic space with its atmosphere of incarceration.

Hoffie’s latest series, shown in this exhibition, is entitled Blackbirding and deals with a shameful period in Australian nineteenth century history and another scandalous instance of ‘fully exploited labour’. ‘Blackbirding’ is the term given to the nineteenth century practice of bringing Pacific Islanders, called ‘Kanaks’ or ‘Kanakas’, to work on the cane fields of Queensland. Some were kidnapped, some persuaded by other means. The official website of the Queensland Government estimates that some 62,000 were brought to Australia over a period of forty years. The website also notes that ‘much of the history of the episode has been written by white Europeans whose analysis and interpretation of events are often markedly different from those of the descendants of those first South Sea Island labourers’. However, it records that ‘the Queensland Government has acknowledged that many Islanders were kidnapped or “blackbirded” and this term has entered the historical vernacular to describe “a Kanaka” kidnapped and transported to Australia as a slave labourer’.6

The history of slavery and especially of the exploitation of black people under colonial governments and the continued trafficking of human beings in the 21st century is an ongoing civil rights abuse. Hoffie became interested in the particular episode of ‘blackbirding’ because it is part of the history of the place where she lives. Queensland once had ambitions to annex Papua New Guinea, and there is still a significant Islander population in the State. Two examples of Islanders who have made a major contribution to Australian life are civil rights and peace advocate Faith Bandler who founded the National Commission for Australian South Sea Islanders in the 1970s and whose father was kidnapped from Vanuatu when he was 13 to work on the cane fields, and the sportsman Mal Meninga, who was perhaps the most successful captain of the Australian international Rugby League side, the Kangaroos.

The works in the installation consist of small wooden bowls which can be purchased in markets in the Pacific and Asia. Two shaped like fish probably came from New Guinea. Hoffie finds the bowls in Queensland, in ‘op shops’ or at garage sales and in places where junk is sold. They were once popular souvenirs from trips to the Islands, and were used to hold cocktail onions and the like. She now buys them very cheaply for some 20 or 50 cents. She has commented that we forget that they are hand made and that wood is a resource, like water. They should be worth more – but like water we don’t value the wood or the handmade qualities.

Hoffie painted historical images on the bowls, some on top of photographic images which have been transferred. She also lined each of the bowls with fake Hawaiian prints and poured plaster into the bowls which was then incised with help from an assistant, Andrew Rewald, one of her ex-Honours students, to create a fake ‘scrimshaw’ effect – such as European sailors would have produced carving bone on board ships to pass away long hours at sea, and as sailors on blackbirding ships would undoubtedly have done.

The paintings are all of the Islanders, settled in Queensland. Some of the images are graphs of populations of Islander groups in terms of when they came. Many are details of the ‘slave ships’ and their names and when they sailed. These are the images that are carved like scrimshaw. The entire installation is composed of data (pie charts) images of ‘Kanak’ schools, people on board the ships and people working on the plantations.

Timothy Morrell in his catalogue essay for Hoffie’s retrospective at the Queensland University Art Museum...
in 2006 notes perceptively that there are many layers of meaning in these ‘apparently modest trinkets’. The monkey pod tree, for example, from which the bowls are made, was transported around the world after Spanish conquests in Central and South America.7

These items were most popular immediately after the Second World War, when Australia administered PNG under a UN mandate, and many young Australians went to work there as ‘patrol leaders’. But the trinkets lose their value as souvenirs as Australians become more sophisticated and Papua New Guinea becomes more alien and less attractive as a tourist destination, except perhaps for indulgences in trendy war nostalgia, like climbing the Kokoda Trail.

But Hoffie has remained committed to Australian engagement with Asia and the Pacific and is part of the organising team for a major collaborative contemporary arts project, QPACifika, a joint project between Griffith University and the Queensland Museum and Queensland Performing Arts Centre. It included performances, lectures, an art exhibition and a huge Pacific feast, a component that was central to the entire event.

In her essay for my book Art and Social Change Hoffie wrote, demonstrating a keen sensitivity to the past exploitation of Melanesians and current lost opportunities for Australia to have a bridge to the Pacific through PNG: ‘In terms of the Asia-Pacific region, that other side of the hyphen, the cultures of the Pacific, seemed, to an Australian way of thinking, more easily accessed through New Zealand, even though Australia’s national borders shared international waters with the shoreline of Papua New Guinea.8

Blackbirding was thus intended in part to impel viewers to think in new ways about all our histories in Queensland and our past connections with the Pacific. Pain sited in the past still exists in the present. But she is emphatic that Blackbirding is not a ‘memorial’. There is indeed sadness, not to say tragedy, in her work, but she wants humour to be there as well. She hopes it is not ‘gloomy’ but rather opens up curiosity to the richness of life. Her work is indeed never just about past history, but about history in the present. ‘Australia’, she has said, ‘has a richer history than we remember’; and we suffer from ‘enforced amnesia’. And she intends the work, as framed by her as the artist, to be as well about hope for the future, as
she observed in Chile, with reference to the South Project: ‘If the current global state of fear is to be challenged, then new ideas of homeland, and belonging and identity must be re-imagined.’

Hoffie is herself a powerful presence, intellectual, persuasive and passionate. She is frequently asked to be a keynote speaker. In the Sydney Biennale or other contemporary projects such as the Asia Pacific Triennial forums she has played a major leadership role. She has also been a mentor to many younger artists. Small and slight, she would be at home in a European University but equally so in Asia, as when working with Philippines artists creating ‘igloo in the jungle’ out of books discarded from one of Imelda Marcos’ fantastic projects, creating images that stay in the mind to haunt the viewer, or weaving words to conjure with.

Hoffie stated in the interview with Carroll that she had been surprised to find her work referred to casually as ‘protest art’: ‘all art is political, and if you choose to say that your art has nothing to do with politics, then that’s a political position too. It means you are happy with the status quo as it is.’ She has also said in another context, but which I think is also in part about her own work: ‘There is a sense in which this project might be seen as being utopian, or naïve. It may be seen as more like playing on the side-lines than shaping moves under the spotlight. There are risks in any journeys, and this one will be no exception. The outcome will depend very much on how much of our points of origin we are going to hold on fast to, and how transparent we are prepared to be about them. It will depend on how much of that sense of identity we are prepared to sacrifice. The success of the journey will depend on the extent to which we can negotiate in order to communicate across different situations and contexts in order to search for new interpretations and cultural counterpoints.’

Her artistic credo is summed up in her piece on Nobel prizewinner J.M. Coetzee’s novel Waiting for the Barbarians for an exhibition on art and security and republished in The Australian newspaper: ‘And the ones who take up the responsibility of keeping memories of justice alive are the artists. Memories of justice, of compassion and memories of the price of fear and terror. Artists allow us brief, liminal glimpses into what we might be. They dare to dream dreams that are, in Virilio’s terms, “pitiful”, and dare to unsettle our understanding of who we think we are. They remind us of what each of us is capable of: terror, and hope.’

Caroline Turner

Note: This essay has also been based on interviews with the artist.

ENDNOTES
1 Pat Hoffie ‘Speech for the South Project’, Santiago Chile 2006, author copy of paper.
2 Alison Carroll points out that Hoffie’s work on this topic started in the series ‘Hotel Paradise’ of 1989–90 which reproduced clichéd images of Asian women seen in cheap reproductions of the type hung in many Australian homes in the 1950s and 1960s. Alison Carroll, ‘Pat Hoffie: A take on life’ in Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds.), Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights, Humanities Research Centre and Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003, pp. 28–31 (this quotation p. 28).
3 Timothy Morrell Fully Exploited Labour, Catalogue essay for exhibition, Queensland University Art Museum, Brisbane, 2006 (unpaginated).
4 Alison Carroll, ‘Pat Hoffie: A take on life’, p.31.
5 Timothy Morrell, Fully Exploited Labour.
7 Timothy Morrell, Fully Exploited Labour. Morrell points out the wood is used for souvenirs in places such as Hawai‘i but probably made elsewhere such as the Philippines.
9 Pat Hoffie ‘Speech for the South Project’, Santiago Chile 2006, author copy of paper.
10 Hoffie, interview with Alison Carroll in Witnessing to Silence, p. 30.
11 Pat Hoffie ‘Speech for the South Project’, Santiago Chile 2006, author copy of paper.
Araya Rasdjarmreasooks initial and post-graduate training in Thailand and in Germany was in printmaking. She gained recognition as a printmaker, winning a number of national awards in Thailand and exhibiting in several international print shows. During the 1990s she put printmaking aside in favour of making sculptural works and installations. This work led to invitations to exhibit in the first Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, the 10th Sydney Biennale, the 1st Johannesburg Biennial and the Traditions/Tensions exhibition in New York.

In 1998, she embarked on a very different project when she approached the Chiang Mai Hospital for permission to use the unclaimed dead bodies stored in the hospital morgue in her work. Araya hoped to combine her interests in language, communication and death by reading to corpses. She conceived of such an action as a sign of care for the bodies that had not received the normal cremation rituals.

The hospital authorities found her request strange and a panel of 23 physicians finally questioned her about her proposal. One female physician asked her whether she knew if she could communicate with spirits of these dead people. Araya admitted that she didn’t know but was going to try. Official approval was granted and Araya started to work, creating a number of remarkable video installations which have received critical recognition around the world.

Araya admits she found the process taxing. She started working with a single corpse but knew nothing about the dead woman or her life situation. Believing that everybody has a love story in their life and that the experience of love serves as a common thread, Araya chose to read the corpse a love story from the Thai classic Inao. Inao, based on a Javanese text, was reworked by King Rama II (r. 1809–1824) in the early Bangkok period. It was a text Araya was familiar with from her school days and the excerpts she read dealt with the value of love, of being in love and the difference of love between the genders.

In the beginning she broke down frequently, overwhelmed by the sad story of leave taking and by the ‘rancid smell of a putrefying body’. She pressed on, weekend after weekend, and with time was able to calmly render her chosen service. She started by documenting her activity in black and white photographs but became dissatisfied with still images and decided to film the readings. The art for her was in the reading and in the relationship with the body, not in the photos or the video.

In the work Araya draws on two contemporary art forms – performance art and video installation. Araya wrote about the experience and relationships she had created,

Empty space is important for the relation between the living persons (the viewers) and the dead. It is very important to hear the sounds of the reading and the music and especially the sound of the mind during walking, standing and feeling. The sounds of the reading are transmitted by a living person towards a dead person with the hope that a new kind of relationship might be established, inviting the dead person to participate in the process of time, the present, and the content of the readings.

During 2001 and 2002 she created a number of video installation works in which she read Inao to a single corpse or to a number of corpses in the morgue setting. The sense of stillness and the golden light suffusing corpse and reader create an elegiac mood.

As she became more familiar with working with corpses, Araya’s interaction with them changed. In Conversation and 3 Female Scapes it is as if she is now intently studying the bodies. She notes the textures of, and interaction between, flesh, fabric, moving water and reflections. From this intimate study, she draws parallels with landscape (sea, land and sky) and with natural processes such as the water (life force) draining away.

In I’m Living and Sudsiri and Araya, she takes a more personal role in ‘dressing’ the female corpses, tenderly draping pretty dresses or coloured fabrics over the female corpses as if preparing them for some ceremonial occasion.

Araya was invited to represent Thailand at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. She returned to the hospital morgue, after a break of several years, to make new works for Venice. The video installations selected for this
Perfomance, The Class III.
Sala Sabrina, Anatomia Patologica dell’ Universita.

exhibition at ANU – *The Class* and *Death Seminar* – belong to this second period of creative activity.

In *The Class* and *Death Seminar* Araya’s earlier approach of providing comfort is gone. These works have a different quality and the unconventional classroom situation she sets up is stark and confronting. Araya is now in the more demanding role of teacher, seeking responses from the corpses about their death experience – positioning the viewer among the corpses in her exploration of the nature of death.

All her videos have a spare elegance. The camera’s steady focus operates like the watchful gaze of the viewer and Araya intensifies this experience of complete engagement by strictly limiting the colour palette and removing all superfluous details. The smell of decaying bodies or of preserving fluids that would distract the viewer from poetic communication with the dead is circumvented with video installation, her chosen form.

At another level, her work triggers a sharp awareness of our personal threshold of tolerance. This unease seems to apply whether the viewer is a visitor to an international art exhibition or is a Thai seeing her work in the National Gallery in Bangkok. A sense of apprehension and fear in the presence of a corpse appears to resonate across cultures and the conventional ritual practices for the dead serve to channel these powerful emotions.

It may not be possible to predict how an individual viewer will respond to Araya’s work when such a complex mix of cultural and religious ‘meta-narratives’ and personal experiences and fears is involved. Some responses, however, shaped by underlying religious or cultural constructs, do appear to be invoked in one cultural context but not in another.

For the Western viewer there is the initial shock at the apparent organisational ‘collusion’ in this activity. The possibility of securing official permission for the use of dead bodies for art purposes is almost unimaginable. Although dead bodies may be used for anatomical studies, any other use of a corpse would probably be considered a breach of the deceased person’s rights to human dignity. In the West, dead bodies are largely withdrawn from view and from awareness.

Araya’s decision to read a Thai literary text to dead Thai women would seem unremarkable. Her voice is suitably soothing and gentle. But for the Western viewer, the gentle sound does not smooth away troubling questions about Araya’s purpose. Who is she seeking to communicate with and what is she hoping to gain from the encounter? People from a Judaeo-Christian background are likely to regard the corpse as an empty shell from which the soul/spirit has departed. From this perspective, reading to a corpse may be seen as satisfying a need in the reader rather than as providing any comfort to the departed spirit. Others may wonder if Araya is using an artistic conceit which permits her to engage the viewer’s fascination with death.

Rather different ideas about death and dying circulate within the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition. The ephemeral nature of human experience and the human body itself is well understood. The processes of sickness, decay and death are regarded as evidence of impermanence (*anicca*), and as a source of human suffering. Impermanence is part of the nature of existence. The anthropologist Herbert Phillips reported that ‘...Understanding this, many Thais find nothing inherently frightening or ugly about an old or emaciated person. Such conditions represent natural stages in the cycle of interminable change’.

Furthermore, meditation on decaying corpses is a recognised canonical spiritual practice for monks in Buddhism, although it is not often practised today. The Buddha himself specified the corpse as one of the objects of meditation, with the objective of instilling a sense of the impermanence of the body. Such precedents in Thai culture for the use of corpses for spiritual growth may have occurred to the Chiang Mai Hospital authorities.

Thai Buddhist viewers will see Araya’s reading to the corpses in terms not available to the Western viewer. Firstly there will be the recognition that these bodies, unclaimed in the hospital morgue, have been denied the normal cremation rites. These rites are designed to facilitate the release of the spirit from the dead body and Araya’s service of reading may, initially, be interpreted as an act of merit or compassion.

These viewers will be familiar with Thai cremation rituals – the taking of the corpse to the monastery, the presence of family and friends who gather over three days...
or so to farewell the body, the presence of Buddhist monks chanting stanzas of the Buddhist canon *Abidhamma* over the dead body and finally the cremation within the monastery grounds.

They will compare Araya’s action with these familiar rituals and note the way she references these rituals but then distances her performance from them. Her reading is not conducted in the religious setting of the monastery but rather in the clinical hospital setting. Instead of the monks chanting in the presence of a crowd of family and friends, there is just a solitary lay woman. Instead of the familiar religious text, she reads a familiar but secular text. It is likely that Araya’s process of alluding to a conventional ritual but then changing the nature and import of each dimension will puzzle and disturb the Thai viewer.

I suggest that for many viewers (Thai and non-Thai alike) Araya has deliberately undermined the conventional function of funeral rituals to help the living manage their powerful emotions of fear and apprehension. In removing the familiar comforting rituals, she has taken the viewer into a new ‘empty’ space where a fresh response, a new relationship to the dead, is possible.

These are the terms in which the curator Dan Cameron sees her work,

Her work seeks to illuminate an area of culture that is very little understood even by those who present themselves as experts in it, and by way of her insistence that there is a much stronger bond between the living and the dead than our death-phobic culture permits . . . We know that the cadavers in her best-known works do not ‘understand’ her as she reads them poems relaying the joys of the living senses, but this seems far less important than the fact that we, her living audience, can understand her perfectly well, and it is no exaggeration to say that we are really her intended audience.

In *The Class* and *Death Seminar* Araya further tests the threshold of tolerance by seeking to engage the corpses in her discussion of death. Even if the Western viewer accepts her respectful demeanour, at this point, they may regard her as failing to respect the right of the dead person to ‘rest in peace’. Will the Thai viewer be more accepting and see Araya trying to communicate with the spirits of the unclaimed corpses that have not been released to pursue their karmic journey?

Araya wrote of her intention to establish a relationship with the dead which might draw the dead back to life, into the present, into the time of the reading. Perhaps in these works there is simply evidence of her struggle to achieve equanimity (one of the seven factors of Buddhist enlightenment) in the presence of the most important and problematical life-crisis.

Does ambiguity about the meaning of her work really matter? Given Araya’s subject matter, there are inevitable allusions in her work to Thai concepts of death and dying and to ritual behaviours. This cultural knowledge is not shared by most Western viewers. Is our viewing experience, then, less meaningful, less compelling?

Araya has created a rare and poetic experience for us and perhaps it is sufficient to be mindful of our reactions. We have been alerted to our personal threshold of tolerance of death and become aware of its parameters. We have been taken into death’s presence and come to see our common fate in the unclad corpse. Above all, we may have briefly entered a state of acceptance and equanimity in the presence of death. We may even have come to share Araya’s final insights from *The Class II*:
In any case, we should not understand death as a negative thing. Because we are confused, we take the state before death to be the state of death. Death is a state of stillness – not of pain. It is above having or not having, being or not being.

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ENDNOTES
1 Araya is regarded as a leading artist in Thailand. Her work has been selected by the Thai art historian, Dr Apinan Poshyananda, for inclusion in several landmark exhibitions of contemporary Thai and Asian art including Traditions/Tensions in New York in 1996.
2 Program notes for Araya’s collaborative work Lament of Desire with Elision Ensemble, Fremantle Gaol, Fremantle, 1999.
3 Araya’s talk given in Singapore on August 15th, 2006.
4 These comments were gathered in an interview with the artist in Chiang Mai, September 2006.
5 Araya’s correspondence to the Elision Ensemble prior to the collaborative project Lament of Desire.
7 Personal communication with scholar of Thai Buddhism, Dr. Peter Jackson, December 2006.
8 Dan Cameron’s catalogue entry on Araya in Dirty Yoga, 2006 Taipei Biennial.
9 Phillips, The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand, p. 211.
The distinguished Trinidadian Marxist historian C.L.R. James observed that ‘the great artist is the product of a long and deeply rooted national tradition . . . He appears at a moment of transition in national life with results that are recognised as having significance in the whole civilised world’.1 There is no question that Michael Mel’s art and philosophy are the products of the long and deeply rooted national traditions of his people. Nor is there any question that Papua New Guinea is undergoing a protracted and excessively arduous transition in its national life, with 85 percent urban unemployment, a correspondingly high incidence of criminality, a literacy rate of 65 percent, 37 percent of the population living below the poverty line, a political culture that may moderately be termed turbulent and lately an ongoing confrontation with its essential aid donor, Australia, which would appear to be incapable of being reconciled without significant changes of heart on both sides.

But it is precisely the art of Michael Mel to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. Born a member of the Mogei tribe in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, he has achieved a PhD in Drama and Performance from the Flinders University of South Australia and international recognition as a performance artist, thinker, university lecturer, curator, teacher, mentor and supporter for young artists from PNG and the Pacific in general who would never normally have had these opportunities to develop and exhibit their work. He holds at present the position of Head of the Department of Expressive Arts and Religious Education at the University of Goroka in Papua New Guinea. He has worked as a curator for the Pacific in the Queensland Art Gallery’s Third Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1999 and was a major speaker at the two associated conferences in 1996 and 1999. He was also an advisor for the Centre Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Noumea, and the curator for Papua New Guinea for the Noumea Biennale in 2000, Co-selector for the Pacific Festival of Arts in 2000 and for the Shrines for the Next Millennium project with Susan Cochrane (a part of the Olympic Arts Festival, Sydney) in 2000, and is a participant in the South Project, Melbourne. As his profile in the South Project website also states: ‘Dr Mel was Co-Chair for the Indigenous Commission for the Eleventh World Congress of Comparative Education Societies in Seoul, Korea, 2001. As part of the ‘Art and Human Rights Conference’ (2003), Dr Mel also presented a paper entitled ‘Arts and Human Rights in an Indigenous Context in the New Millennium’ and a performance for the exhibition Witnessing to Silence at the National Museum of Australia, dealing with the theme of cultural survival.2

In 2006 he was honoured by being made Laureate, a most prestigious award, by the Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands, which is committed to issues of cultural survival, heritage and human rights. Sadly, his courageous wife Anna, who had also been his artistic partner over the years, died of cancer shortly before the award was announced.

Michael Mel has demonstrated as an artist an extraordinary ability to communicate with audiences in many different countries, to move, to inspire and to be positive about the capacity of human beings to build a better world. Cultural affirmation is the essence of his art and work. In his eloquent speech during the South Project conference Michael Mel spoke of working with others towards a journey to turning the world upside down.3

He turned at least a particular vision of the world upside down with his performance/installation presentation Ples Namel (Our Place) at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane in 1996, when he invited the audience to ‘touch a native’. As Principal Adviser (Indigenous) and Senior Curator at the National Museum of Australia Margo Neale described, ‘Plumed and painted in full exotic regalia by members of the audience, [Michael and Anna] stood enticingly behind a large wooden frame while Michael spruiked: “Come ladies and gentlemen to the world of the native. Located here for all to see. Framed and Captured”’. The point of the performance was of course that the term ‘native’ does not exist in the language of the colonised: the idea of ‘native’, as Neale observed, ‘is a construction that can only happen in relation to a colonising gaze, a gaze which from the native’s perspective is of the “other” and from the coloniser, a gaze upon the other’. And it was the essence of the performance that it confronted participating members of the audience with a disturbing experience of
complicity with such a construction of the ‘native’. It was the first major demonstration in the international art world of what Neale termed ‘the Mels’ signature style’, namely, ‘Confronting performances involving high levels of audience participation with compelling and illuminating messages about how the West constructs a fixed image of the Pacific native’. An early example of this style from PNG was Moni Tok (Money Talks) about logging in present-day PNG.

At the conference ‘Art and Human Rights’, which I convened with Margo Neale at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra in 2003 in association with the exhibition Witnessing to Silence, Mel performed the piece Il lamb Nai? Kundulil molga Pombral? (Who is this person? Black or White?). Dressed as a Pacific Islander, Mel, who had been working at the Museum as an academic on works from the Pacific Collections specifically related to PNG, noted that Museum rules did not allow him in the role of a Pacific Islander native to touch the works – that was reserved for white Museum staff wearing white gloves.

Questioning the boundaries between people and cultures does also question the limits of tolerance. Mel’s performance at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial was disturbing for many of those in the audience who watched or accepted the invitation to ‘touch a native’. It was clearly very difficult for Anna Mel to have strangers touch her body and breasts while putting on the body paint colours required for her costume. The Mels also tested the limits of tolerance in their own community when negotiating for the feathers and other precious objects used in the displays and performance in Brisbane. Some of the traditional owners chose not to lend to a far away exhibition in Brisbane, preferring to reserve their precious objects for their own ceremonies. The Mels were also held up by armed robbers on the dangerous Highland roads when going to negotiate with the owners for the objects. It was a frightening situation when as Anna later described it ‘Anything could have happened.’ She also said in an interview for a moving film produced by Ian Lang and later shown on SBS television in Australia that although such dangers were challenging she had chosen to leave her children and participate in the project because she hoped and believed in the end it would turn out to benefit her country and future generations.

What Michael Mel made clear to the audience in 1996 during the performance and his speech at the conference was that these personal negotiations and experiences that occur between people which could ‘change’ them as participants in the process are the essence of art in his culture. Art is not separated from life. Art is not for a distant museum in a far country but part of the ceremonies and indeed everyday living of his people. People do not become art by being put in a ‘frame’. And art is not about ‘cultural hegemony’ and losing cultural heritage in a quest for material prosperity and Western values.

The citation for Dr Mel’s Prince Claus award said in part: ‘Michael Mel is one of the few bridges between Papua New Guinea and the world, helping us to understand the complex cultures of the island, their philosophical concepts and cultural practices. Despite opportunities abroad, he stays in Papua New Guinea and works to encourage Papuans to take pride in their Indigenous knowledge. He is active in incorporating elements of local culture into the Papuan school curriculum and in promoting education from an Indigenous perspective.

Papua New Guinea is a zone of silence. By using Papuan methods of communication (music, song, dance, body painting and decoration) to act and speak for his communities and to challenge Western cultural dominance, Michael Mel both continues and develops Melanesian
cultural forms and creates spaces of freedom for the new generations.9

At his speech to the Prince Claus Fund Dr Mel spoke movingly about the loss of cultural values in contemporary PNG. He focussed in the speech as an example of a way to create such spaces the project Chanted Tales an interdisciplinary project to create in digital recordings traditional stories from the Highlands of PNG in Tok Pisin and English for children to learn their language, knowledge and values.9

Professor of International Law at the London School of Economics Christine Chinkin has observed that art is ‘an essential element in the preservation of the identities of peoples and their cultures’.10 And Mel’s mission is above all to communicate with audiences that PNG culture is a living culture, challenging assumptions that it has to be seen in terms of cultural loss and cultural annihilation. He wants audiences to be enriched through his sharing knowledge with them and to understand that the art of PNG is about communication, personal actions, behaviour, and negotiations which lead to real community engagement and that those processes of engaging with an art which is not separated from life go to the heart of understanding living culture.

Caroline Turner

Dr Glen Barclay is an historian and international relations specialist who is currently Ralph Elliott Librarian, Humanities Research Centre, Research School of Humanities.

ENDNOTES
4 Margo Neale, ‘Michael Mel: Touch a Native’ in Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds.), Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights, Humanities Research Centre and Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, 2003, pp.73–75 (this quotation p. 73).
7 Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport (eds.), Papers from the Conference of the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996.
This project has its origins in late 2006 when artist friends Bernie Slater and Julian Laffan, both ANU School of Art graduates, Jon Priadi, who studied Japanese Literature at University Gadja Mada in Yogyakarta and Angie Bexley, an ANU PhD anthropology student, joined forces to develop a collaborative work in East Timor, Indonesia and Australia. They have combined their talents and networks to pursue a shared concern for a community approach to art making with a social conscience. The series of four large scale ‘maps’ or banners create a dynamic visual dialogue between three geographically close countries. They depict political issues such as human rights, independence, concern for the environment, trade, security and the plight of refugees. The resulting works, completed in March 2007, together with the film documentation, present a powerful record of dialogue between the artists and between them and the communities with whom they worked. For the Australian artists, the project was their experience working in an international context and with such meaningful issues so relevant in many parts of the world today.

Although the prospect of presenting their banners in a conventional gallery setting is far from the artists’ ideal, the exhibition ‘Thresholds of Tolerance’ and the co-inciding Research School of Humanities ‘Art and Re-enactment’ Conference present an important platform from which to raise the profile and public debate about these pressing social justice issues which are of concern to us all. The artists’ stories are ones of commitment, courage and conviction. Thank you Angie, Jon, Bernie and Julian for sharing them with us.

OF COLLECTIVES, PRINTS AND POLITICS: ‘WE REFUSE TO BECOME VICTIMS’: ANGIE BEXLEY IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTISTS JON PRIADI, BERNIE LAFFAN AND BERNIE SLATER.

Menolak Jadi Korban (Ind.) ‘We Refuse to Become Victims’ is the title for the series of 4 large scale maps (3.30 metres x 2.50 metres) printed on cotton, incorporating Australia, Indonesia and Timor Leste, focusing on the Timor Sea.

The title ‘We refuse to Become Victims’ is a statement about wishing to speak, and give voice to, issues of social justice, environmental and resource destruction that the three countries have in common. It is also a statement of going beyond borders of an increasing sense of isolation sustained by government fuelled corporate media and a plea for ongoing initiatives in understanding and communication through collaboration.

The maps began their artistic journey in Canberra, where they were screen printed by Australian artists Julian Laffan and Bernie Slater as well as Indonesian artists Jon Priadi (based in Canberra) at Megalo Print studio and The Book Studio ANU School of Art in Canberra and Aris Prabawa (based in Lismore). The maps then travelled with Jon Priadi and anthropologist Angie Bexley to Dili, East Timor, where young print artists involved in the collective Gembel (vagrant) continued to work on them. The next leg of the journey saw the maps travel to Yogyakarta, where artists from the collective Taring Padi worked collaboratively with the Australian artists of Culture Kitchen. At each stage of the journey, the artists were involved in a dialogue of local and international issues and communicated this dialogue through a variety of imagery and print mediums of screen prints, woodcuts, stencil and hand drawn imagery. Through film documentation by Angie and Jon, a dialogue between all artists, both visual and conversational was made possible. Watching this footage of the Timorese artists in Yogyakarta was integral to the process by providing context and working conditions of the Timorese artists. The finished film is also an outcome of the project.

Angie and Jon met Bernie and Julian in Australia. The initial idea was to be a Canberra-based three-way project involving Jon, Bernie and Julian. The more they talked, the more the project grew in size and capacity to incorporate the East Timorese and Indonesian perspectives. To broaden the depth of collaboration, Bernie and Julian decided to travel to Indonesia to meet with Angie and Jon to work with Taring Padi on the maps. They spent one week in Yogyakarta living and working with Taring Padi.

Taring Padi refers to the sharp tip of the rice plant, and is a metaphor for people’s power. The group emerged in 1998 following the popular movement that brought down President Suharto. Many of those involved in Taring Padi were active in student politics throughout the
1990s and came from varied backgrounds including fine art, writing, Japanese literature and punk music; others were street kids. They were among the architects of the radical art actions that highlighted the Yogyakarta protest movement in 1998.

*Taring Padi's* creative ethos involves a collective, process-oriented production of artwork. They want to eliminate illusive notions of the artist as ‘genius’ or ‘eccentric’ individual, and of the artwork as somehow ‘sacred’. *Taring Padi* artwork does not carry recognition of the ‘individual’ artistic creator. It is stamped instead with the *Taring Padi* ‘kerakyatan’ (people orientated) insignia – a sprig of rice, red star and cogwheel.

*Taring Padi* is a group as well as an idea, an idea that promotes the concept of people’s art – *seni kerakyatan* – a loose term that defines the artist’s social commitment and popular orientation. And ideas and concepts have no geographical anchor.

*Gembel* is a direct reflection of how the East Timorese youth see themselves portrayed by development agencies, the government and international media. *Gembel* references ‘Maubere’ – initially a derogative term applied by the Portuguese during Portuguese colonisation of the tiny half-island (1511–1975). The East Timorese turned the meaning on its head and it became a powerful symbol of the East Timorese Independence movement, signalling pride and the very essence of what it means to be East Timorese.

In 2006, Dili was racked by a social political and security crisis, and many youth became caught up in violent conflict. *Gembel* decided to communicate a peace message. Nico, a member of *Gembel* said, ‘We realise the potential for building our new nation is in the hands of the youth, and yet so many young people are [taking part] in conflict. We want to say that the youth are capable of doing something else.’ Ako, another member of *Gembel* chipped in, ‘Before, we considered our artistic practice more of a pastime for unemployed kids. But we’ve also realised that over time, we can say something through our art and also learn about political processes. For example, during these last few days [working on the project] we’ve had lots of discussion on the role of Australia in the [2006] conflict.’

The situation of the Timorese artists is remarkable given the lack of funding and artist support and the fact that most involved in *Gembel* are living in refugee camps. The collaboration was an opportunity for the *Gembel* artists to communicate their experiences to a wider audience including the artists in Australia and Indonesia – stories and points of view that often go misheard in the media.

Canberra-based print artists formed *Culture Kitchen* in December 2006 with the objective of communicating their
art, social and political concerns. ‘We Refuse to Become Victims’ is their first collaborative project. The group intends to expand in the future, planning local projects in the Canberra region as well as further collaborations with overseas artists and collectives.

‘WE REFUSE TO BECOME VICTIMS’

Our experience and understanding of other cultures are often mediated by television and corporate-run news. This project was an opportunity for artists from different cultures to discuss common issues directly, from their own perspective, cutting out the middle man.

Jon says, ‘This project was a chance to bring the three perspectives along side each other... Our islands are what bind us together in time and space along with significant economic and social inequalities. The issues that affect Australia, West Papua or Aceh are issues that affect us all.’

THE IMAGERY

The images are deeply entrenched in the socio-political realities that all of the individuals and collectives experience every day. The maps of the Indonesian archipelago, East Timor and West Papua are featured on all of the prints. The other major points of consistency are the woodcut figure of a man with his hands covering his ears, telling of a culture of apathy within Australia, leading to widespread ignorance of important social issues relevant to the region. Screen printed television screens show Alexander Downer as a pirate, suggestive handshakes between Australia and Indonesia above the Timor Sea (without consultation with the East Timorese), SIEV X and East Timorese militias and violent images of 1999 and pre-1999 violence. The inspiration for these prints by Australian artists, Julian Laffan and Bernie Slater was based on initial discussion with Jon Priadi and Angie Bexley about East Timor’s painful history in which Australia became an accomplice.

The first banner or ‘map’ (‘Human Rights’), is a response to various social and political conflicts faced by the respective countries.

The Timorese artists responded to the realities they face in terms of ongoing conflict, fighting and political sabotage. Most are still living in refugee camps. The images are as strong as the messages, ‘Don’t try to split us, we are the little people. Let’s build a future’. ‘It’s our oil, it’s our future’. In working on the maps, Gembel held an initial discussion about the range of issues they wanted to cover: one person could draw the image, another would cut and another team of youngsters would print the image on the map. When it came to printing on the map, further discussion took place such as the preference for East Timor gas and oil issues, symbolised by a Kangaroo sipping from a pipe from a Timor Gas barrel, to be located on Northern Australia.

Although it is important to note the artists’ wish to retain a collective identity on the nature of the prints as a whole, there are a number of points of reference raised by individual artists that reflect their contextuality in the works as a whole.

Images of a sinking refugee boat greeted by a heavily armed naval ship evoke a response from Jon Priadi, an Indonesian artist living in Canberra, Australia, who over the past two years has found national discourses on security, refugees and asylum seekers an imperative starting point to interrogate the links between national issues and a global culture of fear experienced by citizens of Indonesia, East Timor and Australia.

Taring Padi artist Doddi Irwandi’s print of a distressed grieving girl cradling her face in her hands is deliberately positioned on the conflict areas of Indonesia: Aceh, Moluccas, Poso in Sulawesi, and East Timor. This is also a response to the television sets by Bernie Slater and Julian Laffan with images evoking Australia’s complicity in the Timor issue. The two images work together as a joint statement in rejecting the overwhelming sense of apathy, from governments and its citizens alike, towards such disasters.

The skeletal figures printed on Java are a reference to the socially buried memory of the 1965 communist killings that began on Java. To this day, there has been no public apology for this state-induced violence. The skeletal figures also float above waves and are a grave prediction of the future of an earth swamped by conflict and all that remains are floating corpses.

The corpses are also suggestive of corporate and government ineptitude. On the top left and right sides of the banner are two aeroplanes. One is flying up, the other is flying down, referencing an Adam Air (Indonesian domestic airline) recent crash, which occurred in early
January, 2007. The bodies of almost 100 passengers and six crew have not been recovered. It was suggested by some in Indonesia that the aircraft was carrying explosives (delivered by the Indonesian military) to fuel the conflict in Poso, north Sulawesi.

Another striking image is peasants with bloated bellies dragging their feet. The message is simple: ‘food’ is printed above it. Budi Santoso’s haunting image of a skeletal face figure is the plea, ‘Refuse to Become Victims’ (menolak jadi korban). Finally, at the top of the banner are menacing birds of prey hovering over the dismal scene of human suffering and self destruction.

The second banner or ‘map’ (‘Resources’) in the series presents another bleak picture of regional resource degradation. It’s about Oil. This large scale image is the only banner not worked on by the East Timorese artists because of the timings in departure dates of Angie and Jon to East Timor.

The centre point of this print locates stencils of tiny humans spiralling inward and being drawn into an oil pipe located in the Timor Sea. Aris Prabawa, an Indonesian artist living in Lismore, Australia, is making a statement on how East Timor, Australia and Indonesia have become embroiled over this one issue in a pursuit of wealth, power and greed on the one hand and justice and economic equality on the other. Oil drums and uranium signs also dot the ‘map’.

Issues of resources and military power are intricately linked on this ‘map’. Military planes and tanks are seen from the corners hedging towards the oil and uranium points. Following the eye from the left hand side of the banner, menacing looking waves and barbed wire wrapped in an angry fist lick the tip of Aceh, symbolising the 2005 tsunami and conflict that continues to affect the lives of the people in resource-rich Aceh.

However, in a final statement of hope and in contrast to the first banner in the sequence, the birds flying overhead are not birds of prey, but doves.
The third banner, ‘Environment’, continues the theme of environmental destruction through the medium of stencilling. The main stencil on the map is a female scales of justice figure whose right hand is tied to her body with rope; her left hand holds up a wad of cash. The stencilled text reads ‘greed, economy, power’ and the ropes tie her to the power centres of Jakarta and Canberra, through East Timor.

Stumps of trees cover the islands of Kalimantan, Java and Sumatra signalling illegal logging and burning. Tiny stencils of cities dotting the map on Java, Bali and Sumatra pump out polluting smoke.

The only faces visible to the audience are those of the power brokers; the TV set features Alexander Downer the pirate, and a stencil of the greedy overweight character holding the ropes. The faceless characters are the sad silhouettes of the ‘Victims’ who are being offered a flower as a memorial. Ghostly figures remain in Kalimantan among the burned down stumps of their forests.

The fourth and final banner, ‘Together’, uses multi-media of woodcuts and screen printing. The ‘map’ is bordered by small woodcuts sewn onto colourful fabric symbolising flags. The message is one of hope and offers peaceful solutions to the various political, economic and social conflicts that link the three countries.

Angie Bexley is completing a PhD in Anthropology at the Research School for Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University on East Timorese youth. Having been involved in Taring Padi since 2000 and Gembel in 2003, Angie combines her research interests of art social movements, visual anthropology and she co-produces films of social-political interest with her husband, Jon Priadi.
PROPPANOW

VERNON AH KEE

Vernon Ah Kee was born in North Queensland, lives and works in Brisbane. His recent works employ a conceptual use of text with minimal expression to explore the white/black dichotomy in Australian popular culture. Ah Kee holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts degree with honours and is currently undertaking a Doctorate of Visual Arts at the Queensland College of Art where he also lectures on contemporary Indigenous Australian art. Previous group and solo shows include Mythunderstanding at CASCA in Adelaide in 2005, Fantasies of the good at Bellas Milani Gallery in 2004 and If I was White in 1991 at the Metro Arts building Brisbane. He is a member of the proppaNOW collective.

You Decide, 2006
Ink on polypropylene, satin laminated
122 x 180 cm
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

RACE, 2006
Ink on polypropylene, satin laminated
122 x 180 cm
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

Leonard, 2006
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
177 x 240 cm
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

Jack Sibley (Uncle Jack), 2006
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
177 x 240 cm
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

TONY ALBERT

Tony Albert was born in North Queensland and lives and works in Brisbane. His recent works use wordplay and images to parody stereotypical representations of Indigenous Australians which appear in mainstream culture. He completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts degree from Queensland College of Art in 2004. In 2005 he was a Participant in the Young and Emerging Curators Initiative project at the Venice Biennale. Some of his previous group exhibitions are the 23rd Telstra National & Aboriginal Islander Art Award in 2006; The Bodies That Were Not Ours at the 2006 Melbourne Festival; and Nice Coloured Dolls at the 24hour Art Space in Darwin in 2004. He is a member of the proppaNOW collective.

Welcome to Australia and Welcome to Australia 1, 2006
Acrylic and texta pen on canvas
Each 180 x 120 cm
Courtesy the artist

RICHARD BELL

Richard Bell was born in Charleville, Queensland and lives and works in Brisbane. Bell’s work succinctly presents complex political ideas through short bursts of text presented on large multilayered canvases which incorporate newsprint, stencil prints and textural paint. At the centre of his work is the alienation of Aboriginal people from their land and culture as a result of European invasion. His work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally and is represented in collections including the National Gallery of Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of NSW. He was winner of the Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2003. He is a member of the proppaNOW collective.

Another Bint Bites the Dust, 2006
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 270 cm
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

Untitled, 2007
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 360 cm
Image courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

JENNIFER HERD

Jennifer Herd was born in Brisbane and lives and works there. Her current mixed-media works look at the impact of frontier conflicts in colonial Australia and reflect on issues concerning Aboriginal people. She holds a Master of Visual Arts degree from the Queensland College of Art and is currently undertaking a Doctorate of Visual Arts. Some recent exhibitions include: Teiss Prize First Prize Winner, QCA Gallery, Griffith University, South Bank 2003; Strand Ephemera, Perc Tucker Gallery, Townsville 2004; Cultural Copy at the Fowler Museum, Paul Getty Gallery in California in 2004; There goes the neighbourhood at the ProppaNow studios in 2006.

Cruciform from Walls of Resistance, 2005
Oxide painted boxes, glass, tissue paper, mother of pearl buttons, cartridge paper, 9 boxes of 12 x 12 cm
Image courtesy the artist and Michael Aird

We deeply regret, in the proppaNOW studio, 2007.
Cane, cloth, straw. tissue paper, thread, tobacco box, 100 x 50 x 52 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist

JON CATTAPAN

Jon Cattapan is a Melbourne-based artist whose works deal primarily with urban/social themes and representations of ‘the city’. His paintings, drawings and prints have been exhibited widely in museum and commercial shows throughout Australia and overseas over the last thirty years.

His work is held in numerous public, state, regional and private collections including the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Queensland Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

In 2006 The Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne held The Drowned World: Jon Cattapan works and collaborations, a thirty-year survey curated by Dr Chris McAuliffe.

Untitled (Carbon Group Nos. 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 1 1, 16, 20, 23, 24, 26), 2003–2004
Alkyd modified oil paint and pencil on paper
Each 50.5 x 66 cm (57 x 72.5 cm framed)
Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery (Nos. 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11)

Another Bint Bites the Dust, 2006
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 270 cm
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery

Untitled, 2007
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 360 cm
Image courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery
DADANG CHRISTANTO

Dadang Christanto is a leading Indonesian artist, with a considerable international reputation, who has been living in Australia since 1999. He was born in 1957 in Tegal, Central Java, Indonesia, and studied painting in the 1970s in Yogyakarta, graduating from the Indonesian Institute of Arts (ISI). A painter who is also known for his performance works, sculpture and installation art on themes of human rights, peace and social justice, he has been represented in many exhibitions, including in Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Switzerland, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Canada and the United States, and continues to exhibit in Indonesia. Major exhibitions include the First and Third Asia-Pacific Triennials in Brisbane (1993 and 1999), the Havana Biennale (1994), Traditions/Tensions at the Asia Society Gallery, New York (1996), Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the XXIV Biennal de Sao Paulo, Brazil (1999), and the Kwangju (Gwangju) Biennale in Korea (2000). He is one of the most internationally exhibited of Indonesia’s contemporary generation of artists, and now one of the two or three best known outside Indonesia. While currently living in Australia he retains his ties to his country of birth, exhibiting both there and in official Indonesian representation in international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale in 2003. He has also been a lecturer at the School of Art and Design, University of the Northern Territory and the College of Art, University of New South Wales, Sydney. His performance work has included participation in the Art and Human Rights project at the Humanities Research Centre ANU with the moving performances Litsus and Searching displaces bones created for that project.

- **Drawings:** Head with Gold A, Head with Gold B, Head with Gold C, Head with Gold D, Head with Gold E
- Ink, gold leaf, watercolour on paper
- Each 57 x 76 cm (79 x 100 cm framed)
- Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries.

- **Heads** from the Yogyakarta series 1997, Nos. 11, 12, 14, 19, 26, 34
- Mixed media on canvas
- Each 25 x 30 cm
- Collection of John Yu and George Soutter (Nos. 14, 19, 26, 34)
- Private collection (Nos. 11, 12)

- **Untitled ceramic head** (1 off)
- Glazed earthenware 1998
- 28 x 20 cm
- Private collection

- **Untitled ceramic heads** (2 off)
- Decorated unglazed earthenware
- 25 x 20 cm
- Collection ANU School of Art

For many years Hoffie has been exploring issues concerning social justice in her art practice. Over the last decade she has been particularly interested in cross-cultural artistic engagements in the Asia-Pacific region. She undertook the first Australian Council’s Visual Arts residency in the Philippines in 1993, where she held solo exhibitions, lectured at universities and wrote about her experiences and ideas in numerous national and international journals. The strong connections she developed with the Philippines have been reinforced by return visits and projects there and in Australia. Additionally, Hoffie has received grants to undertake residencies in Vietnam, Japan and Spain and in 2007 will undertake an Australia-China Council residency in Beijing China and in Auckland, New Zealand.

Hoffie’s recent work deals with refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, and offers a questioning of the Australian government’s...
current policies on migration, border patrol and refugees, and the media’s role in the social maintenance of such policies.

No such thing as a level playing field, 1994.
Acrylic paint on fabric, 308 x 400 cm.
Courtesy the artist.

Blackbirding, 2006.
Monkey-Pod Serving Bowls, Plaster, Watercolour, Oils.
Total installation approx 2.5 metres x 2.5 metres
Courtesy the artist.

ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK
Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook was born in Trad, Thailand in 1957 and currently lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She studied at Silpakorn University, Bangkok (BFA, 1980; MFA, 1986) and completed an MFA in 1990 at Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Braunschweig, Germany. Araya has worked in a number of different media – as a printmaker, as a sculptor and installation artist and, since 1998, as a video installation artist. She is a lecturer in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Chiang Mai University and a published author.

Araya has an impressive and extensive exhibition history. She has held solo exhibitions in West Germany, San Antonio (USA), Sweden and London as well as many exhibitions in Thailand. She has participated in major exhibitions held in Bern, Paris, Tunin, Berlin, Helsinki, Sollentuna (Sweden), Limerick, New York, San Francisco, Singapore, Tokyo and Sydney. In Australia, Araya’s work has been exhibited in the First Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane (1993), in the 10th Biennale of Sydney (1996/7) and in a collaborative work with Elision at Fremantle Gaol (1999). In the past few years, Araya’s video installations have been included in the 2006 Taipei Biennale, the 2006 Gwangju Biennale, the 2005 Venice Biennale, the 54th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, USA in 2004, and the 8th International Istanbul Biennial in Turkey in 2003.

Video installation: The Class, 2005, 16.25 minutes.
Courtesy the artist.

MICHAEL MEL
Michael Mel was born a member of the Mogei tribe in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea in 1959. He was awarded a PhD in Drama and Performance from the Flinders University of South Australia, and has won international recognition as a performance artist, thinker, university lecturer, curator, teacher, mentor and supporter for young artists from Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. He holds at present the position of Head of the Department of Expressive Arts and Religious Education at the University of Goroka in Papua New Guinea. He was represented in the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1996, worked as a curator for the Queensland Art Gallery’s Third Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1999 and was a major speaker at the two associated conferences in 1996 and 1999. He was also an advisor for the Centre Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Noumea, and the curator for Papua New Guinea for the Noumea Biennale in 2000, Co selector for the Pacific Festival of Arts in 2000 and for the Shrines for the Next Millennium project (a part of the Olympic Arts Festival, Sydney) in 2000 and is a participant in the South Project, Melbourne. He was Co-Chair for the Indigenous Commission for the Eleventh World Congress of Comparative Education Societies in Seoul, Korea, 2001, a keynote speaker at the Art and Human Rights Conference, Humanities Research Centre ANU (2003), presenting a paper: ‘Arts and Human Rights in an Indigenous Context in the New Millennium’ and a performance for the exhibition Witnessing to Silence at the National Museum of Australia. In 2006 he was honoured by being made Laureate by the Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands.

Performance
National Museum of Australia June 2007

‘WE REFUSE TO BECOME VICTIMS’

GEMBEL
Street kids, unemployed youth, school and university students meet, eat, play and make art at their ‘headquarters’ at the Borja da Costa Memorial Park in Dili, East Timor. Since 2003, they have been learning and producing woodcuts, etchings and recycled paper which they sell to fund their activities and existence on the edge of independent East Timorese society.

TARING PADI
Taring Padi (teeth of the rice plant) is a diverse and multi-skilled group of artists and cultural activists who have lived and worked collectively in Central Java since the fall of Suharto’s military regime in 1998. They were instrumental in organising some of the radical cultural protest and performance that animated the student movement of 1998, and continue to use their art to push for democracy, social justice and education amongst rural, urban and international settings.

CULTURE KITCHEN
Canberra-based print artists formed Culture Kitchen in December 2006 in order to communicate their artistic, social and political concerns. ‘We Refuse to Become Victims’ is their first collaborative project. The group intends to expand in the future and undertake local projects in the Canberra region as well as further collaborations with overseas artists and collectives.

We Refuse to Become Victims 1: Human Rights, 2006–07
Woodcut, screenprint and acrylic on fabric

We Refuse to Become Victims 2: Resources, 2006–07
Stencil, woodcut and screenprint on fabric

We Refuse to Become Victims 3: Environment, 2006–07
Stencil, woodcut and screenprint on fabric

We Refuse to Become Victims 4: Together, 2006–07
Woodcut and screenprint on fabric

Courtesy the artists.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project is part of the programmes of the new Research School of Humanities at ANU. We acknowledge the strong support of the RSH Director, Professor Howard Morphy. The project began in 2000, a theme year devoted to Law and the Humanities at the Humanities Research Centre. Christine Chinkin, a Visiting Fellow at the HRC and Caroline Turner, then Deputy Director of the HRC, began a discussion that would grow into this project. We have been joined by many other scholars and artists whose vision and ideas have made this project possible, including the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant Team for ‘The Limits of Tolerance’ (Caroline Turner, Pat Hoffie, Margo Neale and Jennifer Webb). Over the last seven years we have held two international conferences and several workshops. There have been associated events including involvement by visiting artists, postgraduate and undergraduate students. We have curated three exhibitions. The first, in 2003, was Witnessing to Silence, curated by Nancy Sever, Christine Clark, David Williams and Caroline Turner, with fifteen artists from twelve countries, at the Drill Hall Gallery and School of Art Gallery, ANU, and also with events at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, National Museum and National Gallery of Australia. In 2005 the exhibition Future Tense: Security and Human Rights, curated by Pat Hoffie and Caroline Turner, was held at the Queensland College of Art Gallery, Griffith University with eight artists from seven countries. We plan a fourth exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, in 2008: Recovering Lives. Further information can be found at http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/ahr.php.

SPECIAL THANKS:

The Artists, Michael Aird, Glen Barclay, Peter Bellas, Josh Milani and the Bellas Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Angie Bexley, Judy Buchanan, Gordon Bull, Professor Simon Bronitt, Ben Byrne, Professor Hilary Charlesworth, Professor Christine Chinkin, Christine Clark, Julie Cuerdon-Clifford, Christine DeBono, Professor Ian Donaldson, Anna Edmundson, Professor Louise Edwards and the ARC Asia-Pacific Futures Research Network, Caren Florance, Dr Herbert Freilich and Valmae Freilich, Dr Debjani Ganguly, Renata Grossi, Suzanne Groves, Stuart Hay and ANU Photography, Amanda Henry, James Holland, Sally Howe, the staff of the Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, Suzanne Knight, Jay Kochel, Simon Kronenberg, Julian Laffan, Michael le Grand, Professor Iain McCalman, Dragi Markovic, Leena Messina, Michelle McGinness, Professor Howard Morphy, Jodi Parvey, Dr Paul Pickering, Jon Priadi, Dr Chaitanya Sambrani, the Staff of the ANU School of Art, Dr Gene Sherman and Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Bernie Slater, Jeremy Smith, Dr George Soutter, the staff of the Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Glenn Thompson, Robin Tindale, Harry Wise and Dr John Yu, and the ANU cross-disciplinary Cultures of Human Rights Scholars Network (CHuRN) (http://law.anu.edu.au/nissl/churn.htm).

SPONSORS:

Research School of Humanities and the Humanities Research Centre, ANU (http://rsh.anu.edu.au/)
School of Art Gallery, School of Art, ANU (www.anu.edu.au/art)

CURATORS:

Caroline Turner and David Williams

SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY

James Holland

ARC ‘LIMITS OF TOLERANCE’ RESEARCH TEAM:

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Pat Hoffie
Margo Neale
Jennifer Webb

CATALOGUE WRITERS

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Angie Bexley
Anna Edmundson
Professor Pat Hoffie
Anna Kesson
Dr Chris McAuliffe
Professor Howard Morphy
Adjunct Professor Margo Neale
Leigh Toop
Dr Caroline Turner
Associate Professor Jennifer Webb
Emeritus Professor David Williams

CAROLINE TURNER

Dr Caroline Turner is a Senior Research Fellow at the Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University, where she co-ordinates the Public Culture Programme. She was from 2000 to 2006 Deputy Director of the Humanities Research Centre at the in ANU. Prior to this she spent 20 years as a senior art museum professional. As Deputy Director of the Queensland Art Gallery she organised over 60 international exhibitions. In the mid-1980s Turner also began working in the area of contemporary Asian and Pacific art. Co-founder and Project Director for ten years for the Asia-Pacific Triennial Project which, over three exhibitions in 1993, 1996 and 1999, attracted audiences of 60,000, 120,000, and 155,000, Turner was also the scholarly Editor of the three major catalogues and the book Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific, University of Queensland Press, 1993. Her latest book on this subject is Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific, Pandanus Books, 2005.

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DAVID WILLIAMS

Emeritus Professor David Williams is an Adjunct Professor in the Research School of Humanities and was Director, ANU School of Art, 1985–2006. His research interests are in contemporary Asian and Australian Art, and for 10 years he was a member of the National Advisory Committee for the Asia-Pacific Triennial Exhibition series at the Queensland Art Gallery. He is currently Chair of the ANU Foundation for the Visual Arts and Art Monthly Australia, and Deputy Chair of the Canberra Glassworks Board. At ANU, he is a member of the Campus Planning and Development Committee and the Drill Hall Gallery Committee. In recent years, Professor Williams has been a consultant to Art and Design Schools at Monash, Griffith, Swinburne and Sydney Universities, the University of South Australia and the Council of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS). He is also a regular contributor to art and design conferences and journals.

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