

6 June 2019

It is a delicate subject, but relevant nonetheless, and the couching of the question has the ring of stand-up comedy: “How long do you have to be in a particular place before you get called indigenous?” Not many people would doubt or dare to affront Australian Indigenous people with this question, given their ancient possession, and now recent dispossession of their lands and countries. But albeit in hushed tones, it is tenable to question claims of indigeneity by peoples like the Maoris just happened to arrive in New Zealand from Polynesia around four hundred years before European explorers.¹ Then again, if indigeneity is a relative term, it continues to be a potentially explosive notion for the reason that the grounds of its justification and contestation lie in the need for justification which arises when peoples are under threat. Yet we are living in an age when the flows of people are more plentiful, if not more visible and exigent, than ever before. “Refugeeism” is now a legitimate world, while the numbers of people existing in a permanently transitory state are enough to constitute small nation states in their own right. The series of exhibitions under the title *The Partnership Project*, curated by Pat HOFFIE, attest to the manifold states of mobility and exchange between cultures, the flows of transactions that are coaxed or coerced, and the ways in which these flows constitute and shape the changeable but still omnipresent concepts of identity and home.

Another loaded term for Australia in particular is “regionality”. Weighing against the generic meaning (a region is any place whatever) is the mild pejorative of provincialism and isolation. As the most urbanised country on earth proportionate to population, as one of the largest countries with proportionately the least amount of arable land, “regionality” can carry other implications of what is forbidding, remote, unassailable and last of all, undesirable. But the flows of information that comprise our understand of “globalisation” have changed the perception of “regionality” and in particular those who chose to participate in it. The amenability of information—from news and fake news to the Netflix, Facebook, Amazon and Google—ensure that there is next to no discrimination between regional and urban, provided that the internet connection works (another delicate subject for Australians). The new, indiscriminate status of information has afforded those

living in places that were once deprived of it a wholly new perspective on both their own status and of those who operate in more populated places. And perhaps these places—the more intermediate zones—can now be seen as privileged loci for observation, not least because they are less perceptible, less visited, less “named”. It is also in such places that the difference between what transpires from natural causes and social isolation, and what occurs in the universalising but still wildly dispersed information stratosphere, can be so pronounced. Put another way, now that remote communities have a sense of overlap with the rest of the world, what is out of conformity, what cannot be assimilated, becomes all the more noticeable. We are told that we are all “global citizens”, but then again, some still have more rights than others. The rhetoric of equalization masks a number of blind-spots and elisions that are conveniently maintained.

The *Project* was not strictly a touring show, but better thought of as a cipher, a material and conceptual receptacle, organised according to the principle of eight boats that in their siting in four regional galleries are then mediated upon by a new set of artists. With the boats as the connecting element, the emphasis was on mobility, understood on a number of levels. First, the migratory patterns of people over centuries and millennia, now seen against the cultural exchanges that also now occur on a virtual level. Second, the way art can be used as a vehicle for communicative mobility between different cultures and social groups. And third the changeable nature of the landscape itself, subject to seasonal floods, rising tides and sea levels. While the number of messages in your email in-box is rising, so are the coastlines, such that many atolls in the South Pacific are brought face to face with their imminent disappearance. As HOFFIE states in her exhibition statement, the emphasis on mobility also extends to art as a continuous act. She advises that “those of us involved in the project like to think of the word ‘art’ as a verb, rather than a noun. That is, it’s a kind of ‘doing, being or having or helping word’—a word that informs an action, rather than one that acts as a passive subject”.²

Seen this way, the exhibitions are better thought of as one exhibition, connected according to the different modes of action and reaction in each place. The “exhibition”, then, bears witness to the inexorability of time, where the different iterations, or better, dimensions, are connected according to the impulse to intervene and to invent. The artists in the exhibition

all have some involvement with the local communities, imbricating the inner walls of the gallery with the local world outside. After one venue has run its course, each boat brings the memory of the previous incarnation to the next, much as a piece of wood might be a staff then a spear then an axe and then firewood and ash. It was the philosopher Bergson who proposed a similar kind of lateral thinking when he said that one can either conceive of a block of processed sugar as such or as but one point in its evolution thus far, from the sugar cane to its refinement and packaging, to its eventual dissolution in a cup of coffee. The *Project* speaks to objects and being in transit, and to the peregrinations of objects in space and time. Philosophically the project places change and perpetuity in balance, in this case the way in which regions may respond to outside forces, but translating these force to integrate with what is specific to the local place in question, a form of osmotic social resistance that seeks to assure that place and community maintain its particular character and identity. Importantly, the final part of the exhibition will be held in the place where it was launched, in Burnie Regional Art Gallery. This is not so much to close the circle but rather to suggest the next set of exhibitions ad infinitum, as if the gallery were a symbolic equinox in the revolutions of the planet. While it lives on as a pregnant hypothesis (the exhibition as taking place into perpetuity, accreting with each addition), it will live on as a web presence, adding to the multiplying presences of “small”, molecular presences that push against the molar.

The late cultural literary and cultural theorist Edward Said theorised the term Orientalism as a specialised form of cultural repression by the West through the propagation of stereotypes and simplifications, ranging from linguistic usage to political decision-making. Since its publication, *Orientalism* has sparked heated debate and contributed in large part to cultural revisionism, as well as residual Western guilt. One such revisionist tack has been to emphasise that the relationship between Occident and Orient was not so one-sided, nor was it so neatly characterised as oppressor-oppressed. Many so-called Orientalist countries as distinct as Japan and Turkey actively engaged in their own self-Orientalising as a means of opening global markets and making themselves attractive to foreign tourists and trade, while also harnessing signifiers that could give them a particular national edge. One of the terms used under the rethinking of Orientalism is “exchange”, where the focus is more on the ways in which different countries absorbed and translated others, the selectiveness of the process, and the kinds of pressures, external and internal that precipitated these changes. Instead of “Orientalism” was can more broadly think of exoticism and difference as “Transorientalism”, especially considering that many people (and artists) identify as a national such as Palestinian or Iranian, in foreign

countries. It is indeed only in exile that they can manage to express their identificatory traits—what makes them as such—freely.³

The condition of the enforced or voluntary exile, the refugee, the displaced person, while nothing new, has renewed resonance in the age of globalisation, where the cost for the availability for communication, information and entertainment come at the as yet not fully felt price of overpopulation and climate change. While unprecedented peoples have been displaced because of natural or human-made factors, the condition is ongoing and promises not to abate, only accelerate. The current state of dual, or even multiple identity (take the artist Mona Hatoum who was born in Lebanon, identifies as Palestinian, and lives in England) will be far less of a chose but as a result of external impositions. It is also the case that societies are deployed from place to place. Language, as with family, association, and memory, once presumed rooted in place are now forcefully floating identifiers, avatars of identity, but also subjective anchors that bind people to one another. The present moment brings home to use the extent to which identity is invented across the flows of time, place and language. Despite being invented, that does not make such identities any less authentic.

As if in some kind of reckoning, in its second edition, *The Partnership Project* arrived in Townsville after the devastating floods that all but ruined the venue, Umbrella Studio. After the floods, the staff of the gallery were made to work off-site and were anxiously uncertain as to the future of the space. The exhibition finally opened in a temporary space not far from the main venue. Recent upheavals and the efforts made to surmount them made the salient issues of the exhibition more salient still. As Hoffie wrote in the catalogue to the exhibition, in addition to the themes already discussed, these included:

concerns about the environment; about the need to listen to Indigenous ideas regarding land management; about the ways in which traditional knowledges might be able to address critical environmental futures; reconsiderations about the way a longer historical awareness of the geography and geology of this country might be brought to bear on future planning for the country's arid north; issues that centre on immigration and refugees, and the contribution migrant communities are making to the country; issues dealing with mining and land-clearing; about gender and education and the necessity of consultation, communication and collaboration.

In addition to all of these concerns, *The Partnership Project* brought another important issue to the fore, which was how these were to be expressed in art. At the same time. back in Sydney, *The National* was on exhibit in three venues. But it has



long been commented that such large exhibitions, with their curatorial agendas and their marketing apparatus, have become increasingly toothless in the face of the “real” events and as means of authentic commentary. The Biennale which comes next promises to be another entertainment event that transforms cultural criticism into vaudeville. I am not the only one who believes that the future of art and exhibition lies in the more fragile, less prepossessing of arrangements. Unlike the Big Show, they are less seen and less known, and unlike the big show, their memory in fewer number of viewers remains stronger and more poignant.

¹The arrival of the Maoris from Polynesia is estimated at between 1250 and 1300, while Abel Tasman ventured to New Zealand in 1642. After decades of trade, New Zealand began to be settled in earnest by Christian missionaries in the early nineteenth century.

² https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ed0bcc_1523d1b00ce8443091c270672a878ed0.pdf; accessed 6 June, 2019.

³ See my *Transorientalism in Art, Fashion and Film: Inventions of Identity*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019.

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Background image: Lisa Garland *Mr Irby's Boat* (detail), 2017.

