

Under a Flag

In the introduction to his book *Violence* Slavoj Žižek writes that “the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent.”ⁱ He goes on to suggest that subjective violence is only one of a triumvirate that includes symbolic violence and systemic violence, the violence of representation, and the violent consequences of the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.”ⁱⁱ Žižek’s proposition recognises that the everyday ideological acts that construct community and identity are coupled with oppositional and exclusionary tactics which can result in symbolic and/or systemic violence against those excluded.

The works in this exhibition *What do you mean, we?* address instances symbolic and systemic violence in contemporary society. Violence that through its victims’ lack of visible, physical wounds is all too easily dismissed. Violence that is often justified by arguments for the protection of a way of life, concepts of ‘fairness’ and ‘equality of opportunity’, and as a defence against those who take advantage of society’s generosity. These kinds of arguments have been particularly visible in Australia as they are used to justify the treatment of asylum seekers arriving by boat in Australia’s western territorial waters.

The political and popular response to the waves of boat arrivals, which have occurred since 1976, demonstrates a hostility fuelled by a deep “fear that any trickle of boat people meant a flood was on the way.”ⁱⁱⁱ This anxiety of an invasion from the west is enshrined in the very idea of Australian Federation. In 1888 New South Wales Premier Henry Parkes put forward the argument that Federation would protect the colonies against “the countless millions of inferior members of the human family who are within easy sail of these shores.”^{iv} In a later speech he referred to the danger of invasion by “stealthy lodgement in some thinly-peopled portion of the country.”^v

New Zealand can not congratulate itself for having avoided similar prejudice against migrants from Asia. Our own history includes the Poll Tax levied against Chinese migrants between 1881 and 1948, and the exclusion of Chinese migrants from citizenship between 1908 and 1951. Neither are we free of asylum seeker scare mongering. In July 2011, in response to a boat of Sri Lankan asylum seekers carrying signs indicating they wanted to go to New Zealand, Prime Minister John Key said “You come through the normal channels as a refugee otherwise you are jumping the queue.”^{vi} These words echo those of successive Australian prime ministers over the years including Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, John Howard and Julia Gillard. Such sentiments deliberately ignore the fact that for many of these asylum seekers there is no queue to join.

These issues are directly addressed in this exhibition by Boat-people.org a collective of Australian artists established in 2001. *Muffled Protest* by Boat-people.org was organised as a protest action and artwork in the days before the 2010 Australian Federal election. It invited people to assemble at a given point and instructed them to “[s]tand silently and at 4.30pm slowly wrap your head in the flag.”^{vii} Seventy people took part in the Muffled Protest on Saturday, 2 August, 2010 on the Opera House Stairs in Sydney. Organised events also occurred in Federation Square, Melbourne (31 July, 2010) and Forest Place, Perth (20 August, 2010) as well as independent actions

around the country. The advance press release described the artwork as “fuelled by the disgust towards the use of border policy as electioneering rhetoric and fear mongering.”^{viii}

Muffled Protest was responding to the positioning of the asylum seeker as an enemy presenting a mortal danger to the integrity of the Australian nation-state. This practice of promulgating of a perception of danger, caused by unchecked waves of asylum seekers with values incompatible to the core values of the nation pouring, has been described as political dog whistling. While avoiding actively racist terms, politicians create firm divisions between them, the ‘illegal’ and unethical migrants, and ‘us’, in this case the ‘humane’ Australians. This kind of speaking at two pitches, one which only some can hear, is exemplified in John Howard’s publically broadcast statements during the 2001 election such as “We are a humane people. Others know that and they sometimes try to intimidate us with our own decency.”^{ix} Vietnamese born academic Kim Huynh who arrived in the first wave of asylum seekers said of the 2010 election, “There is some progress here as far as I am concerned,...The Labor Government right now panders to people’s prejudices ... as opposed to fear mongering, stirring up prejudice as in the past.”^x

Muffled Protest replied to the speaking and therefore creation of a particular negative visibility for asylum seekers, and through this a homogenised unified Australia, by activating silenced bodies in space. As an action, independent of its art context, boat-people.org intended it to be a way for those disappointed by the hostility of the election to present “an expression of dismay: ... A statement of ambiguous, personal and silent declarations that quietly linked borders and interventions, the edge and the interior, under the flag.”^{xi}

What is made visible through people willingly covering their heads with the Australian flag and standing in silence is the creation of a consenting public to a particular political construction of Australian identity. Created by symbolic and systemic violence against the other this identity isolates individuals within a political community scared of the outside. The absence of words or placards allowed the action to accrue other meanings, referencing broader uneasy attitudes to migration and events such as the 11 December, 2005 Cronulla race riots. During the riots “about 5,000 young Australians converged on Sydney’s Cronulla beach, many draped in Australian flags, (...) chanting ‘Kill the Lebs’.”^{xii} The physical violence enacted by Australians of both Anglo Saxon and Middle Eastern origin against each other in December 2005 reveals how ideas of national belonging are linked to race, language and arbitrary constructions of values, symbolised by the flag.

For me, *Muffled Protest*, with its dual role as both an act of political protest and an aesthetic document of a performance, raises the question of the efficacy of art as protest, or even more poignantly the ability of protest action to impact on the passing public. In the *Muffled Protest* video the people walking by are predominantly oblivious or disinterested in the action. The passing football fans seem more interested in mugging for the camera than engaging with the intention of the protest. This gap between intention and reception, occurring in the moment of its performance creates a parallel to the gaps that exist in dialogues around social, political and ethical issues, such as the treatment of asylum seekers, beneficiaries and the homeless, as well as questions of equality and tino rangatiratanga.

Perhaps, in *Muffled Protest* the impact of the action lies within those who perform it, not within the disinterested witness. Their choice to stand in a public place and realise this gesture allows them to refute the blind essentialism of narrow national identity within themselves. While the title and intention of this exhibition *What do you mean, we?* directly challenges the comfort zone of prejudice underpinned by symbolic and systemic violence, it is up to each of us individually to recognise our own prejudices that isolate us within an insecure and fearful mode of being. The choice to be open to difference and conscious of our own potential for intolerance one that each of us must make, and struggle to sustain. It is from our individual capacity to stand up and assert '*something is not right*' that communities of resistance and change are built.

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Afterword

In late 2011 the entire legislative edifice of mandatory detention and offshore processing for boat arrivals, that *Muffled Protest* was challenging, collapsed. Disappointingly, this was not due to a shift in popular opinion achieved by the advocacy and protest action of individuals and groups within Australia. Rather, it was an outcome of political infighting between the two major parties, resulting in the failure of legislation to allow offshore processing in Malaysia to muster sufficient parliamentary support. The legislative change was not about whether to have offshore processing, it was about where to send the unwanted. The debate is ongoing.

ⁱ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2009), 1.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ David Marr and Marion Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 90

^{iv} Henry Parkes, 1890, Speech at the Federal conference in Melbourne, 13 February, quoted in Anthony Burke, *Fear of Security, Australia's Invasion Anxiety* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 28.

^v Henry Parkes, "A Government suitable for the altered conditions of Australia, presented at the 1891 National Coalition," in Neville Meaney (ed), 1985, *Australian and the World: A Documentary History from the 1870s to the 1970s* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire).

^{vi} Michael Field, Key accused of scaremongering, *The Dominion Post*, 12/07/2011 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/5269049/Key-accused-of-scaremongering> (accessed 24/11/2011)

^{vii} Sarah Rowbottan, "pvi collective facilitate Muffled Protest the day before the election in Forest Place, Perth " in *Performing Lines WA media release Wednesday 18 August* (Perth: Performing Lines WA, 2010).

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} John Hward on 'A Current Affair', 28th of August 2001

^x Genevieve Jacobs et al., "Beyond the Spin 2010 election forum - Asylum seekers, immigration and citizenship," in 666 ABC Canberra and ANU 'Beyond the Spin' 2010 election series (Australian National University: 2010). 30:00 min

^{xi} Katie Hepworth, Deborah Kelly, and Boat-people.org, "boat-people.org." *Local-Global* 8 (2010) 44 - 49.

^{xii} Nahid Kabir *The Cronulla Riot: How One Newspaper Represented The Event* presented at the TASA / SAANZ Joint Conference 2007 <http://www.tasa.org.au/tasa-conference/past-tasa-conferences/2007-conference/> (accessed, 10 August 2011)