Unsettling Occupied Australia
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Invasion is not an event relegated to the past but a structure.\(^1\) If we accept this to be true, that invasion is a set of ideas, ways of thinking and acting, then it becomes apparent that it is a system, and one involving both overt or objective and perhaps more subtle or systemic violence. When we acknowledge that what we are dealing with in an Australian context is the systemic violence of invasion and its contemporary face we can unmask the silence of so many Australians about our occupation of this land we call our own. We can concede the lack of recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty with all its attendant problems. With systemic violence comes more subtle forms of violence; relationships of coercion, dominance and exploitation or simply the threat of violence,\(^2\) from which the beneficiaries of the system can more easily distance themselves claiming they do/did nothing wrong. Such systemic violence both creates and relies on the ‘othering’ of Indigenous Australians for two clear purposes: the legitimising of Occupier claims to land and sovereignty, and the construction of Indigenous Australians as a problem, to be ignored or paternalistically solved.

Many Occupier Australians reject the notion of guilt and responsibility for past wrongs, claiming they didn’t commit any crime. It is this focus on invasion as an event or series of events cryo-vacced in the colonial past, carried out by individuals whom we can now see to be flawed, that allows contemporary Occupier Australians a way to distance ourselves from our role in the current socio-political landscape. Thus individual agents who perpetrate obvious or \textit{subjective}

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violence,3 matter less than the violent economic and political systems themselves. The invasion and occupation of Australia, the largest single land grab in history, was perpetrated by political and economic systems rather than the actions of a few rogue individuals. However, those individuals were the progenitors of many of today’s Occupier Australians, the beneficiaries of those events. It is this disconnect between past and present that allows present day Australians to ignore the fact that the same systemic violence that enabled the dispossession and attempted genocide of Indigenous populations in the past still exists today. The results are clear to see in almost any current statistical analysis of living conditions, health, wellbeing, employment or education of Indigenous peoples in Australia. The compartmentalising of colonialism allows us to distance ourselves from the distasteful acts of our anonymous ancestors and claim that they were misguided but that we are somehow different.

But are we any different? The Stolen Generations have been relegated to history and our Prime Minister said sorry for what was done in an act designed to achieve closure and absolution for the non-Indigenous population and to shut down avenues for fiduciary compensation. Indeed in our capitalist society one of the most common measures of value, loss and harm is certainly that it can be calculated in dollar terms. Yet the issue of financial reparations to Australia’s Stolen Generation has been squarely removed from the table, and in fact the crime itself continues today with the removal of Aboriginal children from their families actually increasing since the Apology in 2008.4 Again, historicising invasion and occupation allows us to omit any analysis of the systemic violence embodied by threats such as those made as recently as 2015 by both state and federal governments to close remote Indigenous communities by removing essential services and relocating people from their traditional lands to larger population centres.5 The broader Australian community refuses to see such acts as symptomatic of a contemporary program of

3 Žižek, Violence, 2–3.
occupation because it views itself as a tolerant multicultural sovereign democracy to which such systemic violence is supposedly antithetical. Non-Aboriginal Australian identity is built on a perception of innocence fostered by willed amnesia and any position that calls this innocence into question by asking Settlers to take responsibility for the violence of dispossession is quickly shut down by mainstream commentators as being un-Australian. A national identity built on avoiding responsibility so as to maintain Settler innocence has created the conditions for perpetuating the myth of terra nullius. Thus, our conservative historians have rendered the battle for Australia a sweaty, dusty battle against nature (not a native in sight!) and as such our founding fathers (and mothers) can be rendered ‘essentially settlers and only accidentally occupiers’.

Australian democracy faces a conundrum, in that it was illegally constituted through land theft and denial of Indigenous sovereignty. When Indigenous peoples assert their sovereignty it makes these truths uncomfortably apparent. What is at issue in the political conflict between the Australian Settler state and Indigenous peoples is exactly that: sovereignty. By their very existence, let alone resistance, Aboriginal Australians prove to be a ‘problem’ for the Australian nation state, and one that cannot be solved without acknowledgement of their sovereignty. The Occupier state has tried to occlude Indigenous sovereignty through various means from outright murder to assimilation, but more recently liberal democrats have resorted to occlusion through inclusion of a political kind. Although the 1967 referendum to include Aboriginal people as citizens of Australia was passed by 90 per cent of Australians, no Aborigines

9 Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier, 21–22.
voted. As Indigenous activist Kevin Gilbert explains, Indigenous peoples ‘…never voted to be incorporated with non-Aboriginals. Australian citizenship was imposed on us unilaterally.’

Today’s ‘Recognise’ campaign to acknowledge Indigenous Australians in the nation’s constitution follows the same pattern of eliding Indigenous sovereignty by attempting to incorporate it into non-Indigenous democratic frameworks. When Aboriginal peoples refuse to be assimilated they inflict what Paul Muldoon describes as a ‘narcissistic injury’ on the national ‘ego-ideal’ of the coloniser. A narcissistic white Australia finds it incomprehensible that ‘others’ might reject the opportunity to become ‘honorary whites’ but rather insist on their own subjectivity. Thus Aboriginal peoples must be re-colonised through a process of reconciliation that avoids a treaty and absorbs them into the national polity. In Australia the moral redemption of the colonial state has been given priority over justice for Aboriginal people. The movement for reconciliation is grounded in the belief that the process of colonisation contains nothing so heinous as to unsettle ‘the nation’s ideal image of itself as worthy of love and reconciliation’.

Any ‘mistakes’ can surely be apologised away, safe in the knowledge that Aboriginal Australians won’t actually be given the option to refuse the apology. Once again colonial violence is concealed: to paraphrase one Aboriginal Elder, colonisers ‘coverem up’…with a…‘big swag.’ What kind of nation might we be if our Occupier selves could find a way to be incorporated into an Indigenous framework of sovereignty?

Our Occupier mind-set precludes us from asking the right questions: indeed some would say it prevents us from asking any questions at all. In re-thinking a way to be non-Indigenous in Australia that has integrity and rejects an Occupier subject position unconditionally, many questions must be addressed: among them we

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must ask ourselves how we can unsettle our Occupier subjectivity. What processes might we use to enable a new becoming? Here I want to emphasise the importance of processes and conceptualising unsettlement as an on-going journey and not a destination. We should not be looking for an event that provides a closed solution; rather our becoming will only have integrity if it is constantly renegotiated. This is because subjectivity is about relationships, about the space between people; and it is because our identities and motives are always changing and are relative also to the place where encounters occur. Thus naming and situating ourselves become not only actions, but actions perpetually in flux. However, as the ancient Greeks stated, first ‘know thyself’: if we are to change we first need to understand that there is a problem and that the problem is us, in our present ontological configuration. In Australia, self-reflexivity on the issue of invasion does not appear to be our strong point.

That all but a few white Australians are happily ignoring our Occupier subjectivity is clearly reflected in the cultural products of our country; the grand narratives certainly contain very few troubling thoughts to tweak our consciences. There have perhaps been minor incursions into the vast pallid sago pudding of white settler culture in Australia with an errant novel, film or artwork here and there, and most often any challenge to this cultural void has come from Indigenous artists themselves. When it comes to memorials to acknowledge particular events from our traumatic past, again they are few and far between.\(^14\) The National War Memorial in Canberra refuses to include any form of recognition for the warriors who fought and died defending their country and families against the British invaders.\(^15\) Pointedly, there is no national monument to recognise Indigenous resistance to invasion, suffering or survival. Perhaps the closest thing we have to a national memorial is provided by the world of visual art in the form of a sculpture in the National Gallery in Canberra titled \textit{The Aboriginal Memorial}. This is an artwork consisting of 200 hollow log coffins made by artists from central

\[^{14}\] Some examples might include Fiona Foley’s \textit{Edge of the Trees, Witnessing to Silence} or \textit{Black Opium}.

Arnhem Land that commemorates those Indigenous peoples who died fighting for their country.

If Occupier Australians are to re-imagine ourselves there must be a linking of past and present: we need to acknowledge the past and understand its impact in today’s world. There is an ongoing debate about the usefulness of memorials of the statuary or monumental kind because they may be seen to aid in the enablement of forgetting, in that once we build the monument we can forget about what happened. Memorials are erected to provide closure, thus while traditional monuments may have a role in marking what is considered important in the collective cultural memory and thus the identity of a nation, they also close down opportunities for more reflexive participatory processes to take place. Monuments themselves take place, they are sited in a place and as such displace other possible uses of that location because monuments do not share; they are by their nature definitive, and simultaneously inclusory and exclusory. Audrey Walen reminds us that ‘space cannot be neutral, because it is the site where life occurs.’ Space is culturally inscribed and, especially in occupied territory like Australia, monuments become contested ground, geo-psychic hotspots for competing narratives. As such they fall a long way short of the healing processes required by a nation with as much psychic trauma to address as Australia.

Memorials present the best hope for healing where they attempt to be processes or events rather than closed objects. When speaking of memorials architect Julian Bonder reminds us that ‘remembering is in the present, that it’s an action. It’s not an object. The purpose is not to physically manifest memory as an object, but actually to invite people to think, which is an action’. Memorials should bear witness to testimony. As Dori Laub states, testimony is a process of discovery that should not be foreclosed on by the witness; it is more than facts to be reproduced and should be understood as

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19 Bonder in Bonder and Wodiczko, “Memory is a Verb”, 47.
‘an event in its own right’. When artists, architects and designers make spaces for memory work, we are inviting people to participate in the works as witnesses, and viewers become instruments of witnessing by participating in the process of the work. It is not possible to represent the suffering of others, but as Cathy Caruth says, ‘to bear witness to the truth of suffering over a traumatic event is to bear witness to that event’s incomprehensibility’. As artists we will never speak *that which cannot be spoken* but we might make a space to listen to and reflect on its silence. This is our gift; this is what art can do.

This new space needs to be outside of coloniser concepts of vertical space (typified by an understanding of land as a commodity to be bought and sold) and outside of linear time if it is to accommodate ethical interactions between indigenous and settler peoples. New World colonists build our nations on hope and faith in progress (economic growth and technology) so we are always future focused. Our linear conception of temporality feeds a notion that positive change is something that happens tomorrow, meaning our creative energies never focus on solving the issues at hand and making a world we can all live in today. I would argue that if instead we use a concept of ‘everywhen’ to think of time we will attend to what is needed now and the future will take care of itself. In short, Occupier nations need a new spatio-temporal register. For sculptors, *space* allows an object to come into being, whereas *place* is culturally inscribed by class, race, nation, gender, concepts of minority, foreigner, insider and outsider. What is needed for us to create an ethical space is a new sort of action, a kind of thinking without place, a creation that can be transnational and nomadic in the Deleuzean sense. This needs to exist beyond place, in a way it should be inexistential, deterritorialised. It is a space that can be brought into being through art.

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21 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 156.


In asking how art can address violence it is perhaps most successful to cast a sideways glance that allows us an indirect though no less truthful articulation of the traumatic impact of violence. Politically engaged art can enable such witnessing. Affective non-representational art resists linear narrative structures of storytelling and as such is more accommodating of the testimonial style of trauma survivors’ remembrances. Visual art does not need to ‘make sense’ of an encounter; it resists the desire to place structures of artificial order on people’s experiences and in such unsettled spaces it can open a site for both testimony and witnessing. Whether the memory work takes the form of a memorial or an installation, print, painting, or other work, its essential quality must be that it provides space to think. The memory work involved in works of visual art offers methodologies that are more open and inclusive of the fragmentary nature of trauma memory. It is this openness to the halting, hesitating and at times overwhelming and conflicting testimonies produced in a continued process of remembering that is perhaps more akin to what is needed for witnessing to occur. Visual artists can create spaces for thinking and interactions or processes that are more response-able and effective at making us reflect on terrible events in a meaningful way.

History and the way it is re-presented is largely about who controls the systems of public record and memory. Collective social amnesia allows the unthinkable to happen, but visual art can make space for a social memory that refuses to historicise or memorialise events out of existence but rather draws the viewer into a relationship of witnessing. It is this slowing down, suspension of time, speaking without words, making space to listen and use of affective means to communicate the unspeakable that visual art can offer to healing. The field of sculpture is especially well versed in the relations of time, space and bodily perception, elements which are all required to evoke an invitation for reflection and conversation. However, this conversation does not have to be quiet, controlled or passive but will likely involve disagreements and conflict as memory is slippery at best and one can be certain that unified memory is unlikely to be anything

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24 Žižek, *Violence*, 3.
but constructed and lacking in truth. Rather, it should be allowed to be agonistic and open.

An example from my own practice that attempts to engage with these ideas is a work that concerns the 1828 massacre of Indigenous families by shepherds at what is now called Cape Grim in northern Tasmania. I don’t profess to tell this story through my work but rather to reflect on it, to express through materials an affective response to this horrific event. A materially driven work allows the viewer to fill in the gaps and come to their own conclusions, but in doing so it draws the viewer in, making them part of the work. Thus it is inclusive rather than exclusive, suggestive rather than didactic. To this end, the cliff, over which the people were driven, is represented in the piece by layers of lead sheet (a material with strong connections to death and the afterlife in the principles of Alchemy). A text describing the event is embedded in the work but is partially obscured with paint and bees wax as it falls down the length of the canvas. Sand is mixed in with the paint and wax at the bottom of the panel and delicate grey/black mutton bird feathers have been crushed and drift among the text in reference both to the birds the families were hunting when they were ambushed and the falling people themselves.
Once we have the attention of our audience, we need to keep it for long enough that they invest something of themselves in the experience and are reminded that the past is not cut off from the present. We need to slow down their encounter and involve them in the work. Techniques for this may involve using massive scale combined with tiny detail (as in my work *Your World is my Oyster*), layering, partially obscuring or obfuscating elements of the work (as
illustrated by my use of bees wax to blur the text in the work about Cape Grim) or revealing aspects of a work over time. These choices mean the viewer must make an effort to look in a different way. We also need to open a space for the viewer to engage with the work so that they can be active participants in the art, not merely passive receivers of a message that is already decided for them. In slowing the viewer down the work obliges them to give something of themselves, to allow themselves to be moved, to ponder the title and perhaps to feel something. This is witnessing, it is acknowledging someone else’s pain. The theorist Mieke Bal states: “The past is always out of our grasp. We always arrive too late. What can art do? It can know. To know is important”

Rachel Joy, Your World is My Oyster (Cove) [detail], 2017.

But can one ever really know? To speak of searching for truth can mean a demand for an immutable representation of the state of things as they really are or as they were; truth then becomes the provision of something that is missing and must be established. However, if we consider truths to be already extant but latent and only in need of revelation, then art, with all its disruptive creative force, holds great promise. If one conceives of art not as an object fixed in time or place or meaning but as itself an active, emerging thinking, more verb than noun, something interesting happens. The ability of a work of art to reveal truth is a matter of its capacity to transfer to the viewer something of the significance or meaning held by an event. The truth-value of art lies in its ability to evoke, through non-mimetic sensory experiences that produce different affects in the viewer. Making art is a process, a risky one, and one can never predict its outcomes at the beginning; that is the point, art-making is less about the creation of an object and more about the process through which it, or the experience of it, emerges. In opening oneself up to the possibilities of feeling and thinking that art offers, one runs the risk of experiencing truth and truths can be unsettling. This is what is at stake when we recognise the relationship between art and truth.

When art reveals disturbing truths it wrestles with silence. The Great Australian Silence\(^{28}\) around the dispossession of Indigenous peoples by British invaders has been and remains profound. Occasionally there has been a ‘whispering in our hearts’\(^{29}\) that stirs some of us to action, but more commonly Occupier Australia keeps the public secret\(^{30}\) that we all know but refuse to speak; there has been a failure to witness occupation, a silencing. As part of a process of becoming, as David Gaertner puts it, ‘better guests’, Occupiers must surrender our power, acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous ontology and listen.\(^{31}\) It is through listening that we might become

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\(^{28}\) Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, 258.

\(^{29}\) *This Whispering in our Hearts* is the title of Henry Reynolds 1998 history of white attempts to engage with indigenous dispossession.


ourselves in a new way that has integrity. Cherokee scholar Daniel Justice reminds us that if First Nations people and Occupiers are to move forward together, ‘collaboration is a necessity not an option’. Part of this process of becoming will involve bearing witness, ‘taking the role of a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone’. In witnessing, Dori Laub suggests we must

\textit{listen to and bear the silence,} speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech. He or she must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect – and knowing how to wait.

In sharing these qualities, art can be a form of witnessing colonial violence and may in turn enable a process that opens a space for ethical encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, thus envisaging new ways of thinking and of being in Australia.

\footnotesize{public address, University of Melbourne, 6 November, 2014.}
\footnotesize{33} Laub, “Bearing witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, 59.
\footnotesize{34} Laub, “Bearing witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, 58.