

# ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

## BLAIR FRENCH

### VERNON AH KEE'S 'GLORIOUSLY INFLAMMATORY' DESIGNATION: ONE RESPONSE TO THE BIENNALE SITUATION

I am going to start with a disclaimer. The following two one-line statements are not mine. They do not reflect the views of the speaker. I seek only to deploy them strategically, just as I do, in fact, this disclaimer. By this I mean, whilst I do wish to distance myself from these utterances, in claiming to do so I also refocus their potency – I seek to engage or release something of their volatility.

The real purpose of simultaneously uttering and distancing myself from this citation, however, lies in the mimicry this entails of the strategic response to site on the part of the artist whose work I am about to discuss.

“All Blacks Smell Like Shit.”

“Kill Wogs and Abbos.”

I could go on. It would be easy to do so – there is plenty of material to draw from. But I will stick with these two lines as they found their way into the pages of Sydney's populist tabloid morning daily, *The Daily Telegraph*; again, of course, as a citation.<sup>1</sup>

Here is another citation from the same piece in *The Daily Telegraph*:

“The boy peered down at the evil browny-black liquid in the bottom of the grimy dust-caked toilet bowl.

‘Is that coffee?’ the lad asked his dad.

‘It’s grown a skin,’ the father replied, before he and the boy promptly exited the toilet block.”<sup>2</sup>

This is how arts journalist Elizabeth Fortescue begins her short comment piece titled, ‘Racism makes chilling impact at the Biennale of Sydney’. She is describing Queensland artist Vernon Ah Kee’s *Born in this Skin* (2008) – his designation of a decrepit, long disused, heavily graffitied dockworkers’ toilet block on Cockatoo Island as a work of art – authored under his name – via the simple acts of claim and title (and think of the potent history of those two actions in Australian history).

Unsurprisingly, the work attracted a fair degree of media attention, oscillating at its poles between mock horror at the prevalence and apparent ferocity of racist attitudes revealed in the graffiti and a predictable ‘how is this art?’ form of questioning. (Interestingly, though, even in commentary interrogating the status of the action as art, the validity of Ah Kee’s interest in or claim upon this site was never imputed.) Fortescue’s piece was interesting in this regard. Even in its necessarily cursory framework the writer performed an act of self-reflection, starting from a point of admiration for Ah Kee’s practice generally, and specifically his finely-honed portrait drawings — the type of work originally commissioned for the biennale — whilst acknowledging her advance misgivings about *Born in this Skin*.

She inferred a sense of repulsion in the act of viewing the work, both with regard to the squalid environment and the brutal sentiments of the graffiti (which, it should be noted, were not limited to racist commentary but included scrawlings also deeply homophobic, misogynist, or derogatory with regard to issues of labor relations and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Elizabeth Fortescue, ‘Racism makes chilling impact at the Biennale of Sydney’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 2008 [[www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph](http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph)]

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*.

class).

But it was the title that prised an opening for Fortescue – the only evidence of the artist’s conceptual, or creative intervention. The title acted for her at least as an evocation of the artist’s own experiences of racism refocused (through displacement) in the form of a violent inscription upon a material surface (a skin), and concentrated within a site that so manifestly bore the effect and trace of such hatred. She ended her piece thus: “It was the title that got me. I suddenly saw something of what Ah Kee must have seen in that graffiti, and it was both sad and at the same time chilling.”<sup>3</sup>

The work functioned as a form of memory act. Designation was an active mode of memory recall, with memory itself as ever inseparable from representation. Fortescue’s text perhaps unwittingly imputed the function of ‘deep memory’ – a term theorist and writer Jill Bennett has attributed to Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo – encompassing unintelligible experiences that “cannot be interpreted against the backdrop of everyday experience or described in conventional language.”<sup>4</sup> These experiences are felt as impressions. They are visceral. They are frequently triggered by the most immediate sensory experiences – of sight, taste or smell for example. Yet they do nevertheless require representational forms or manifestations through which they may be recalled – may gain shape and presence. But Ah Kee’s *Born in this Skin* functioned also as a fundamentally public or social declaration – and in this sense it might be considered as a form of ‘common memory’ (again Bennett has attributed the term to Delbo) – a set of experiences that can be mapped against shared frames of reference legible across a social strata. In this instance, memory is not solely that of being subject to racism, but also that general field of recall regarding an attitudinal register that encounters with the work may evoke in viewers – the social space of their upbringing perhaps, or places of continued social discourse; their home, school, leisure clubs, workplaces.

*Born in this Skin* occupies an interesting place within Ah Kee’s practice. On one hand, it appears to sit at odds with the detailed portrait drawings bearing the mark of the artist’s hand and the condition of extant, discrete art objects that move from one spatial, temporal and cultural location to the next.

---

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jill Bennett, ‘Within Living Memory’, in Jill Bennett and Jackie Dunn, *Telling Tales*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, 1998, p.

On the other, it might be treated as a perhaps unconscious extension of Ah Kee's portrait practice. A sense of the artist's location of self accumulates through his ongoing portrait project. This is mirrored somewhat in his treatment of the toilet block as a body, a social body – a site of collective consciousness – as well as a vividly sensate personal body bearing graffiti scars.

More overtly, *Born in this Skin* bears some structural resemblance to the temporary text installation works Ah Kee makes utilising vinyl lettering fixed directly to gallery walls.<sup>5</sup> These are bold, declamatory and depersonalized – or universalized – through their use of modern, generic font, in distinction to the idiosyncratic yet furtive hand-scribbling of graffiti. Yet there is a similar strategic deployment of site and even, through the basic act of designation, a manipulation of existing text. There is an important history of citation in Ah Kee's practice, even if his extrapolations and semantic inversions are often drawn from a broad cultural vernacular in general rather than specifically authored sources. There is a sense of wordplay cast in relief; of the magnification of the words of others in text that folds back over its audience destabilizing the cultural substructure of viewing positions, particularly with regard to race and power in Australia.

Think of 'hybrid today gone tomorrow' in his *Cantchant* exhibition at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane in 2008, or from the same exhibition, on a wall alongside suspended surfboards painted in adaptations of traditional designs from Ah Kee's home region in far north Queensland,<sup>6</sup> 'hang ten'. Ah Kee immediately followed this exhibition with a project at Artspace in Sydney including a hanging board damaged by gunshot, and a video of boards being lynched and shot projected onto a further set of suspended boards. The exhilarating surf cry of 'hang ten' rapidly blurs with a precise, murderous instruction aligned to imperial expansion. In both IMA and Artspace exhibitions Ah Kee also used the phrase 'we grew here', in part 'borrowed' from the rallying cry of Anglo-Australian rioters on Sydney's Cronulla Beach in 2005 aimed at people from Middle Eastern communities: 'you flew here, we grew here'. As my colleague Reuben Keehan notes in an essay on this work, in Ah Kee's hands this text comes to mean, *no, it is we who really grew here*.<sup>7</sup> In short, walls lined with eye-popping declamatory text are central to Ah Kee's *modus operandi*.

---

<sup>5</sup> He does also make discrete, framed conceptual text pieces, as well as use text on multiple forms such as t-shirts that can traffic through a culture.

<sup>6</sup> Ah Kee is of the Kuku Yalanji / Waanyi / Yidinyji / Guugu Yimithirr people.

<sup>7</sup> See Reuben Keehan, 'The Odd Angry Shot: On the Beach with Vernon Ah Kee', *Column* 2, 2008, p. 109

*Born in this Skin* was an extraordinary work in so many ways, publicly described by Philip Brophy as “gloriously inflammatory”. “You want to know what people think?” Brophy wrote in *Photofile*, “Go to the toilet.”<sup>8</sup> And it is a work that could lead us down any number of paths of enquiry. But I introduce it into the context of this symposium because of the manner in which it specifically addresses three of the issues that frame this event:

‘Artists’ challenges to conventional notions of permanency and monumentality in public sculpture.’

‘The manners in which ephemeral, performative and viral forms of contemporary art demand active engagement outside the gallery or museum.’

And most pertinent here:

‘How artists approach and produce places as unstable, contested sets of relations rather than fixed sites.’

And I want to add to this, the fact that the work addressed these questions within the particular situation of the biennale context.

The work appropriated site, history and a form of voice (or here, vocal carchophony). But crucially, it also appropriated the occasion of the biennale (only existing as a material work of art per sé, for the period of the biennale – its temporary coordinates determined by the occasion),<sup>9</sup> and in this instance an occasion that saw the biennale function to draw large crowds to a historic and scenographically glorious but hitherto little known location in Sydney Harbour. There can be little doubt that in both curatorial and marketing strategies, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s 2008 Biennale of Sydney (*Revolutions–Forms That Turn*) fully deployed the sublime spectacle of the post-industrial ruin. But in general, the biennale drew on what we might term an aura of the historical and of a form of architectural haunting signifying the scale of both modernity’s ambition with regard to industrial progress – to occupying space and projecting into the world via mechanical production – and the rather brutal, rapid obsolescence built into its structures (be they technological, economic or social). More specifically, this particular biennale with its strong affection for leftist European

---

<sup>8</sup> Philip Brophy, ‘Pseudo Zeitgeist’, *Photofile* 85, 2008, p.80

<sup>9</sup> Some photographs of the site along with a new suite of portrait drawings and a text work were subsequently exhibited under the over-arching title ‘Born in this Skin’ at Milani Gallery, Brisbane, 13-29 November, 2008.

revolutionary movements tended to cast into relief the rich labour history associated with the island, but again in vague, associative terms.<sup>10</sup> (To be fair here, confirmation of the site as a biennale venue came rather late in the overall development of the exhibition, leaving limited scope for artists to develop works in sustained dialogue with its social and historical complexities as distinct from the specific features and qualities of its physical environment.)

For all the mannerism of an apparently almost off-hand gesture, in the context of the overall biennale Ah Kee's work was a rare moment in which the concept of 'place' as being constituted in an unstable, contested set of social, intercultural, historical and political relations was brought to the fore. In highlighting the subjection of Indigenous Australians to a form of violent dismissal, even erasure, *Born in this Skin* tangentially provoked some key issues regarding the history of Cockatoo Island itself: its pre-European contact inhabitation and probable use by peoples of the Eora nation as a fishing base; the ongoing absence of a meaningful recognition of Cockatoo Island itself as Aboriginal land; the possibility of an Indigenous presence within and component of its industrial heritage – its workforce (and so, by extension, their possible direct confrontation with this or similar graffiti and more broadly the attitudes contained within); and indeed the very grounding of this particular heritage narrative in an implicit disregard for forms of Indigenous subjecthood. After all, there is no reference on the otherwise thorough history section of the Cockatoo Island website to the brief occupation of the island by an Aboriginal tent embassy in 2000 claiming sovereignty over the site, or to the rapid refutation of their claim by the Commonwealth Supreme Court.<sup>11</sup>

None of these issues, conjectures or histories were conveyed explicitly in Ah Kee's work itself. But all were activated within the fissures it opened up.

'Place' here has particular temporal dimensions also.

---

<sup>10</sup> The first post-European contact use of Cockatoo Island was as a penal colony established in 1839. Convicts built the first dock – Fitzroy Dock – and the island developed as site of both incarceration and maritime industry. Ship building repair activity developed extensively during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during the two world wars. Final shipyard activity ceased in 1992 with the island left dormant for the best part of a decade, before responsibility for its redevelopment as a public site was handed to the then newly established Sydney Harbour Federation Trust. See [www.cockatooisland.gov.au](http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au) for more details.

<sup>11</sup> See Ellen Connolly, 'No trespass, Cockatoo is ours declare Aborigines', Sydney Morning Herald, 23 December 2000. The 44-page kit prepared by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust in 2008 to assist teachers in planning visits to the island devotes all of a three-sentence section to the island's Aboriginal heritage.

We might first consider the temporal location of the biennale at a point in the history of Cockatoo Island, specifically a moment when much attention was being given to opening up the island to a broad public as a heritage site and place of cultural tourism (the biennale was not the first art-focused event on the island, but certainly brought a new degree of public attention, and literally masses of bodies, to bear on the site). In this regard in particular *Born in this Skin* acted as an irritant to a tourism agenda, but also as a point of fascination – literally a draw-card. (This is perhaps strangely in keeping with much of Sydney’s heritage tourism focus upon so-called tainted aspects of its history.) Indeed, a key motivating factor for Ah Kee in creating the work was simply finding a way to ensure the site – the toilet block – was open to viewing by visitors during the biennale rather than being closed off as many similarly despoiled non-exhibition locations on the island were – a simple desire to undermine the sanitization of visitor experience.

Second, we might pay attention to the temporal coordinates of the biennale being those of the work itself. Obviously, the work existed in its fullest form as an authorial designation concentrating an experiential encounter with site only for the time and within the framework of the biennale. It was both ‘inflammatory’, as Brophy would have it, with regard to the occasion of the event – the use of the site for acts of art production and display – and utterly dependent upon the ‘art’ contextualization provided by the event, a conundrum consciously played out in the work. (This is generally the case with the intelligent readymade in the present moment, unavoidably bound to a consciousness of its own historical status.) That Ah Kee chose a whole toilet block to designate as art in the manner of a readymade of course keys rather humorously into that particular strand of art history. But it also points to an interesting inversion: whereas Duchamp physically placed the toilet within the gallery – the art context – in order to designate it as art, Ah Kee exploited the occasion of the biennale to designate the toilet as art by wrapping the art context around it. ‘Art’ colonizes everyday site rather than the residue manifestations of the everyday infiltrating art. I make no judgments here regarding relative efficacy of these relationships, simply note the distinction as one indicator of fundamental changes in the ‘art’-‘world’ relation over the past century.

I began work towards this paper wishing to consider some of the ways in which what I was terming the ‘biennale situation’ creates particular conditions for artistic production, curatorship and spectatorship with relation to temporary, site-specific and relational practices and more importantly how artists are working to utilize often highly determining exhibition locations along with the cultural moment of the

biennale to engage in critiques, implicit and explicit, of its form. I was, and remain, particularly interested in how artists respond to the discursive, interventionist curatorial strategy of designating environmentally and historically redolent places as sites for artistic research, production and display – as places ripe for the biennale’s particular blend of laboratory, community centre, production house, trade hall and grand exposition, and yet at risk of over-determination of artist activity therein. Cockatoo Island is obviously such a location, but just from my own recent viewing experiences I was thinking also of Tanglin Camp, Singapore from 2006; or Atatürk Cultural Centre and Istanbul Textile Traders Market, Istanbul from 2007.

And there were four case studies from Sydney 2008 that I wanted to look at, four strategies. In addition to Ah Kee’s **designation** of site as art I wanted to consider **collaboration** in the form of New York-based artist Michael Rakowitz’s *White man got no dreaming* (2008), a large-scale version of Vladimir Tatlin’s model for *Monument to the Third International* (1919) built with materials from empty, condemned properties on the Redfern Aboriginal Housing Company site in inner-city Sydney, and with assistance from the that community. I wanted to look at a form of **proclamation** on the part of Los Angeles-based artist Sam Durant and his *You Are On Indian Land Show Some Respect* (2008) lightbox sign on the facade of Artspace in Woolloomooloo. And I wanted to consider **conversation** through the form of Tony Schwensen’s *Fundrazor (Fuck you Pay me) Or who gets to sit at the pointy end of the plane?* fundraising BBQ ‘performance’, which as I wrote recently in *Art and Australia*, was undertaken in response to the biennale’s inability to fund his initially proposed durational performance work.<sup>12</sup> (In this work Schwensen operated a sausage sizzle outside the Museum of Contemporary Art during the opening period to cover the costs of his own presence, with surplus ‘profit’ being donated to the Biennale to assist in funding future artists’ projects.)

It rapidly became clear, however, that this scope of material could not be presented in anything other than the most cursory manner in this short paper format. I note this broader field of inquiry here solely to widen the context in which I present these still provisional comments upon Ah Kee’s work, and indeed that in which it actually appeared and functioned.

All four of these works and their respective strategies – at least insomuch as I infer a form of conceptual intent from my encounters with them – operated in a manner identified by Mayray Hsu in his catalogue text for the 2006 Liverpool Biennial – as

---

<sup>12</sup> See ‘Tony Schwensen: Love It Or Love It’, *Art and Australia* 46/2, 2008, pp. 266-275



instances of ‘archipuncture’: projects sensitive to (but still potentially disruptive within) the nuances of their localities; projects that served to release pressure points in the social, cultural, political and even psychic systems of the locality; projects that served, in his terms, to ‘unblock the flows’ of the locality.<sup>13</sup> There can be no more apt image upon which to end than Hsu’s allusion to the biennale and plumbing.

**Dr Blair French is Executive Director, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney**

**A revised version of this text has been published as ‘Born In This Skin: A ‘Gloriously Inflammatory’ Designation’, in Robert Leonard, ed., *Vernon Ah Kee*, Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2009**

---

© Blair French and Litmus Research Initiative, Massey University. Published by Massey University, 2009. The person using One Day Sculpture Academic Papers online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation, including author, attribution, date, article title, One Day Sculpture Academic papers Online, and the URL <http://www.onedaysculpture.org.nz>

The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.

---

<sup>13</sup> Manray Hsu, ‘The Liverpool Model: From Local Knowledge to Archipuncture’, in Paul Domela, ed., *Liverpool Biennial: International 06*, exhibition catalogue, Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial, 2006, pp. 11-13