



to become australia(n)



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*The Evil Which Is Dead.
The Howard Regime May Not Be
In Power. But, The Horrid Stench Still
Pervades The Nation. It Will Be Two Generations
Of Uncontaminated Humanity Before Australia Can Truly Be
A Dignified Country.*
Gordon Hookey, 2008¹

WHAT STARTED AS AN EMAIL TO THE EDITOR:

The discussions on the 'Nation "too parochial" to engage meaningfully with culture' article published in a previous issue of *Broadsheet* this year, intrigued me.² Then again, as a newcomer to this country one is never sure when it is time to speak and when one needs to shut it. I clearly cannot afford to be labelled 'un-Australian', especially having lived here for only seven years and still holding Dutch citizenship. However, I do carry an Australian drivers-licence, so maybe this earns me the right to initiate a spin on this topic.

What strikes me is how the notion of "too parochial" has perhaps been taken too literally—a simple narrow-mindedness, which may in itself signal a form of deep-seated parochialism, or at least feeding the anxiety of being too isolated from the outside world. Clearly we are not talking about provincialism, as was brought up in the discussion by Terry Smith when writing for *Artforum* in 1974. Then again, perhaps it is important to reiterate the opening statement of Smith's article, on how "Provincialism appears primarily as an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values."³ Following this argument the issue of seclusion becomes related to the unrelenting intrusion of complex interaction between the 'metropolitan' (or should we perhaps say 'cosmopolitan') and the 'provincial'.

Some of these interactions make me think about the more recent overture of the 'glocal', as a way of addressing the idea to 'think globally, and act locally'—used for the first time during the 1980s in Japanese business communities, and transposed to global art discussions during the 1990s. Convolved exchanges between the 'metropolitan' and the 'provincial' continue to encroach upon the art world, and even more so now that the art world has become an universality.

At least, in 1974 the global art world had one clear target, namely to enter the New York art world. Now, the premiere target may be getting exhibited at Art Basel, but there are multiple targets to aim for, including the vibrant marketplaces and gallery networks that have surfaced in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai. Despite some attempts at introducing Australia to the global expansion of contemporary art in these 'cities on the move' that are spread across Asia and the Middle East, the overall acquaintance with these urban centres is clearly overdue, and highly deficient.

This brings me to the issue of the "Nation 'too parochial' to engage meaningfully with culture". However, rather than using this statement as an opportunity to focus upon the deficiency in paying attention to an energetic outside world, I would like to begin by asking whether the engagement with culture has perhaps been "too parochial" for there to be even a Nation (or national identity)? In other words, what constitutes the 'Nation' in the context of 'being', or rather to 'become' Australia(n)?

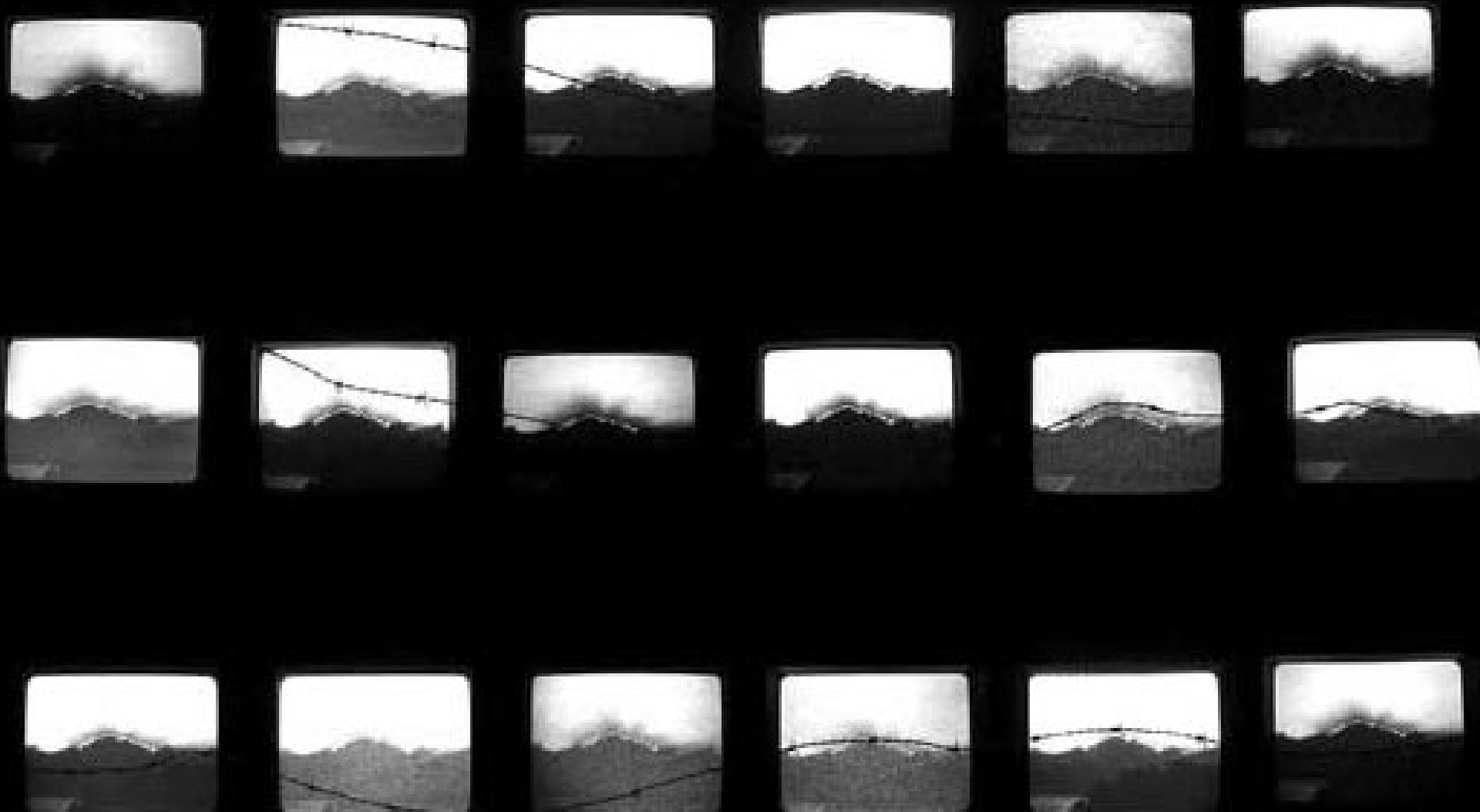
TO BECOME AUSTRALIA(N), OR WHY WE SHOULD CONTINUE OUR 'HISTORY LESSONS':

The debate around the "Nation 'too parochial'..." article started—as so many discussions do in Australia—with a departure from its shores. In this instance, Charles Merewether had been appointed to a prestigious position in Abu Dhabi. The questioning of the notion of engagement that comes with departure can be connected to the way similar issues tend to surface amongst people who are arriving at these same shores.

In order to come to terms with this equation of departing and arriving, I can see how a great part of the process of the notion 'to become' Australian sums up the equation of 'be + come', as in the Old English expression *becumen* (to come to a place). Hence, the process of existence (be) adds to a (continuous) process of approaching (come); thereby summing up the construction of 'to become' Australia(n). This notion also restates the idea that "we are all boat people", and pays reference to this campaign that began in 2001 and continues to resonate.⁴

Ever since I arrived in Australia, I have been surprised by the way so many people still tend to struggle with defining even the most fundamental character of what they like to call "the nation". I am thinking of the fundamental need to acknowledge and to show appreciation for this continent's long and exceptional history; not just in a score of symbolic gestures, but in actually situating the foundation of a cultural identity. The historical presence of this nation can only be based upon the notion of an indigenous country that asks *all* its inhabitants to pay respect to the traditional custodians of the land. From there on, the enduring process to become Australia(n) leads towards a progression of sharing our (his)stories, shaped through a constant set of dialogues; sharing stories about our everyday-life experiences in order to create understanding of what it means to 'be + come' Australia(n). In sum, to 'become Australian' constitutes an infinite process of story-telling and of story-listening.

This brings me back to the issue of "too parochial" and the ideological meeting points of 'parochialism' and 'contemporaneity'. The first perspective I would like to examine concerns parochialism in relation to the revelation of the idealist, who wishes to grasp the mundane, daily routines of the contemporary world in a broad universalist intellect that can somehow be eternalised. Part of this idea follows the discourse of the seventeenth-century rationalist Spinoza, in which idealists asserted their transcendental doctrines, in order to surpass a particular culture's parochialism. This notion is perhaps useful in reiterating one of the lasting visions of the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney—Zones of Contact*,



that of Charles Merewether's constant presence on carefully situated monitors at each venue of the *Biennale*—a point that was also made by David McNeil in *Broadsheet*,⁵ like the custodian of a parish wanting his congregation to embrace his unremitting intellectual vision.

Rather than following an idealist claim that one's intellect can somehow transcend parochialism, perhaps being parochial might be a prerequisite in positioning oneself at the centre of the process of developing a cultural identity. Being parochial may indeed be beneficial to engaging in a process of assembling a national identity—to 'be + come Australia(n)'. Maybe parochialism is an intrinsic condition of contemporaneity—of contemporary culture and art?⁶

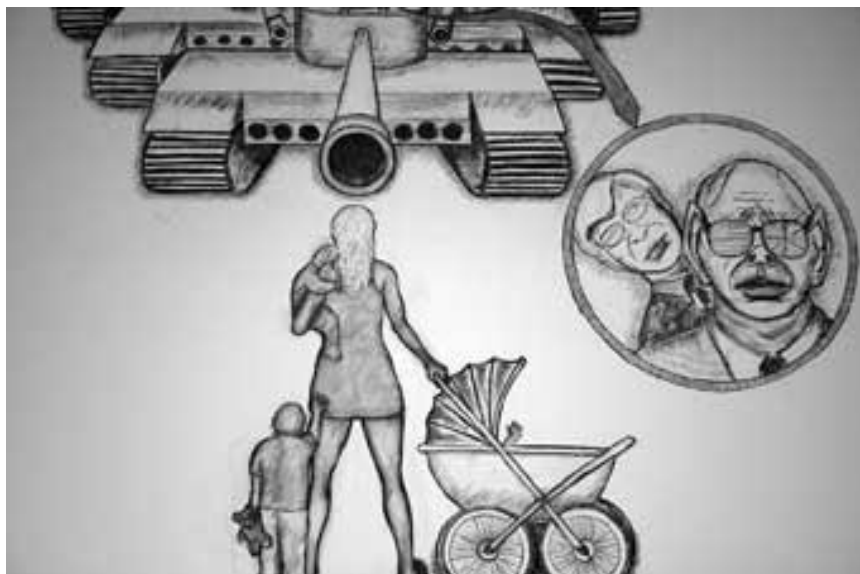
In preparation for this text, I initiated dialogue with several people in the Australian visual arts sector on the issue of the 'parochial'. During one of these conversations in Sydney, Suhanya Raffel, Head of Asian and Pacific Art at the Queensland Art Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane—referred to a presentation on the issue of 'the parochial' by the artist, writer and recently appointed Professor at the Sydney College of the Arts, Ross Gibson.⁷

At that time, Gibson has been working on a project with the 2008 *Biennale of Sydney*, titled *Conversations II*, in which people could book for a conversation at an open cubicle in the lobby of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I booked a conversation with Gibson. Before moving into the topic of the parochial, Gibson spoke about the Sydney Push—the 'libertarian-movement' in Sydney during the late 1940s until the early 1970s—which included cultural advocates such as Margaret Fink, Germaine Greer, Clive James, and Robert Hughes (to name a few).⁸ It could be conceivable that Charles Merewether, as well as Terry Smith, were also inspired by this movement. This would explain some of their concerns towards the interaction between local and global world

views; a view that could also be related to the way that Alex Gawronski pointed out how "Merewether's *Zones of Contact* was at the very least admirable for its purported aim to address an Australian national and disturbingly re-emergent nationalist culture, by means of injecting critically alternative and contradictory local and world views."⁹

The analysis of Sydney as a "money town" is another pertinent issue brought up by Gawronski, and relates to another part of my discussion with Ross Gibson on how Australia has been "run by a corporate level, for over forty years". Unfortunately, a full analysis of this intrinsic national corporatism moves beyond the scope of this text. Instead I would like to explore a second angle on 'parochialism' as a possible precondition for contemporaneity ('being in time') and in the (infinite) construction of a nation ('to become Australian').

A second perspective for examination concerns the conscious choice of 'living in Australia' versus experienced notions of 'living in the world' (marked by those who travel to and from other parts of the globe). This angle follows my conversation with Gibson and relates to his presentation in Melbourne in 2004. Recollecting Gibson's words, the choice of 'living in Australia' becomes one of seeking "encounters with the people and cultures of Australia"—including within "indigenous cultures and in their complex and difficult interactions with European culture and a multiplicity of global cultures that have settled in Australia". Gibson's deliberate choice to live in Australia is one of developing, in his own words "interconnectivity, which needs people sitting in their node"—in a way, "that is parochial, and that is my parish". However, he follows this idea by pointing at the difference between a "radical" and "communicative parochialism", which in the process of building up conversations can be related to the notion that was broached earlier, how the process of to 'be + come Australian' constitutes an infinite process of story-telling and story-listening.



WHAT ABOUT THAT 'OTHER DISCUSSION':

Finally, and by means of a postscript, it feels necessary to present a few words about that 'other discussion' that occurred recently, one that was (somewhat surprisingly) continued in *Australian*. This 'dialogue' began as a debate between a select group of the world's top curators on distinct understandings of the 'spectacular field' of exhibition-making, curatorial conceits and a strong call for history lessons. I am referring to the discussions between Robert Storr, Jessica Morgan, Francesco Bonami, and Okwui Enwezor. In Sydney, their discussion became further redirected towards the need to reconnect the artist to the artwork, the artwork to the spectator and all of them to the indispensable constellation of the curator, during a keynote speech by Storr at the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the *Biennale of Sydney* public events.

This 'discussion' played out in *Artforum* has already been addressed in a text by Reuben Keehan published in the previous edition of *Broadsheet*, including the important dominion of "embedded criticism" which is perhaps an example of a 'radicalised parochialism' rather than a 'communicative parochialism'.¹⁰ Unfortunately the use of the "past tense" by Keehan was optimistic.¹¹ The debate descended even further into personal condescension, and there was even an undertone of bigotry to be felt. I am sure that the continuation of this debate will be disseminated elsewhere, so I will not comment further. However, the key issue, as pointed out by Keehan, may indeed be that "the critical potential of large-scale exhibitions is up for serious reassessment."

As far as I understand, such a "critical assessment" is already underway and not only in the work of a number of art historians. In effect, the principal critical reassessment seems to have been made more recently by some of the key funding bodies. In particular by those that are located in the western world, and this reassessment can be seen in the way that funding is being redirected from biennales and triennials into self-governed networking structures.

The art market is where the other challenge for the biennale-system lies, especially now, amidst an expanding field of art fairs, gallery exhibitions and auction houses. This is particularly the case in Asia, but certainly also in the more familiar centres of the international art world—Europe and North America. Clearly, one has to accept the fact that an increasing number of artists, curators and critics prefer to work directly with commercial galleries, collectors and art dealers, in order to attain a prominent profiling at one of the art fairs, gallery exhibitions or at auction houses. This is where much of the anxiety over the composition and function of large-scale exhibitions must surface, from some of the existing constraints that are being imposed on the endowment and sovereignty of the biennale as the legitimate institution in the diffusion of global contemporary art.

As a way of concluding and in line with the original focal point of this response, it is perhaps much more useful to pay attention to some of the timely and ongoing undertakings (in the production and engagement with culture) in the process of to 'be + come Australia(n)'. This includes the intricate level of critical assessment that is transmitted from these shores, and the way a great number of artists are capable of producing remarkable and highly vigilant works; also well before they catch a ride on the biennale caravan. This text is dedicated to these important processes, and to the people that facilitate them. The prospect of a 'provincialist bind' or a 'communicative parochialism' may be obligatory in order to start a gradual (and conceivably infinite) process of developing—in the words of Gordon Hookey—a "dignified country".

Notes

¹ Quoted from Gordon Hookey's artwork *Deneo C*, 2008, produced for the *Australian* exhibition at Casula Powerhouse, 5 April–7 September, which was curated by Nicholas Tsoutas. See www.casulapowerhouse.com/temp08/australian.html

² This response was triggered by the discussions in *Broadsheet* Vol 37 No 1, 2008 in response to an article by Sebastian Smee, titled 'A Nation "too parochial" to engage meaningfully with culture' published in *The Australian*, 5 November 2007. In Smee's article, the artistic director of the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney*, Charles Merewether, challenged the visual arts culture in Australia on his departure to a new position as Deputy Director of the Cultural District on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.; see <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22701458-16947,00.html>. The two articles in the March 2008 issue of *Broadsheet* that form the basis of this response are by David McNeil, 'Cultural Dialogue—And Exchange': 28–30 and Alex Gawronski, 'New Worlds Inc.': 31–33

³ Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, September 1974: 53–59

⁴ For more information, see: <http://boat-people.org>

⁵ McNeil, op cit: 28

⁶ This would also be related to the "provincialist bind" that Terry Smith identified as being capable of producing "Australian artists (who) have created as much 'interesting' work as they have." See: Smith: 56

⁷ Gibson's presentation was part of the conference 'Empires, Ruins + Networks: Art in Real Time Culture', Melbourne, 2–4 April 2004. See Nikos Papastergiadis and Scott McQuire (eds), *Empires, Ruins and Networks: The Transcultural Agenda*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005

⁸ General information on the 'Sydney Push' can be found online. In this discussion, I make some general reference to Alan Barcan, *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002

⁹ Gawronski, op cit: 31

¹⁰ See Reuben Keehan, 'On Criticism, Institutional and Otherwise', *Broadsheet* Vol 37 No 1, 2008: 99–101

¹¹ See footnote 1 on page 101 of this article, where Keehan writes how, "The past tense used in relation to the exchange assumes, perhaps optimistically, that it is complete at the time of writing."

Page 186: Tony Schwensen, *Fundrazor (fuck you pay me) or Who gets to sit at the pointy end of the plane?*, 2008 (performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008 *Biennale of Sydney*)

Page 187: Tony Schwensen, *Harrowing Plow from the Plow & Harrow* (performance), 2007

Photos courtesy the artist and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne

Opposite: Khaled Sabsabi, Ali or ʿi, (video installation), 2005

Photo courtesy the artist

Above: Gordon Hookey, *Deneo C (The Verry Verry Really Deadly Devine Sublime*

Bitchewmen Bhharbee Blhaktjinn) (installation detail), 2008

Photo courtesy the artist