

When the image looks back...

What's in a name? For the moment we will go nameless which is probably a good place to be or at least an accurate place to be, not because I have any sense of having to name things, having to name names (a national condition the 'whistleblower'). In the interim let us call it 'whistle stop'.

I like that name. A quick survey between here and there. Being in the interim.

Don't give us that, they say. There's always someone who will say, don't give us that. In general we don't think to challenge them. But if we did? If suddenly we said, "well, where are we then, in the certainty, in the great certainty?"

I don't know what they would say. I do know what they would say – something dismissive, a swear word of two a "get on your bike santa and go back to..." There's always a place where we belong in the conceptions of the dismissive. That's because they think they belong right here – wherever that is. If this talk is about anything, I'd like to think it is that – about here, about being here, about belonging, about not just a sense of place but about viability, something more than viability, what I'll call livability, (an ugly word for an important reality), livableness, not just being able to make do, splutter along, "do-the-best-you-can" but having a sense of control, being able to utter but not in the name of the treacherous and misleading "freedom of speech", and not a control that announces itself principally and relentlessly as a desire to control – or even to be controlled.

I don't know what other fruits or apparitions take their place in my zodiac. In my first talk here it was a root: the tapioca – an invitation to the dance, specifically the tap dance; the second and third talks (a massively extended double-header) were under the tutelage of nothing in particular which may or may not have been a good thing; maybe it was something like scrambled egg – or birthday cakes decorated in the style of beautiful bark paintings from Arnhem Land (we need a new name for Arnhem Land; perhaps we could ask the dutch!); today – talk number 4 – is under the sign of the pineapple. The referents are many; a trick of language (a bunch of bananas without the b: ananas); the introduced something (where shall we put it, somewhere between the cane-toad and the rabbit); Nambour; King Kev; and an early photo of Tracey Moffatt. Yes, it has an incantatory quality (indeed, the golden circle cannery in brisbane); it has a "crush-on-you-baby" quality; a former deputy prime minister had a huge pineapple plantation just outside bangalow. It touches on many of the themes I wish to deal with today. It is a private talisman, the mace to my own court; the embodiment of the monarchical gaze. Better to destroy the structure of that stern abstracted judgmental absent gaze than worry about, well, the republic, for example. Let's get our priorities right. Let us consider the real conditions of our being; our livability – and to resist those forms of action that constitute a mere tampering, an attempt to paper over difficulties, to find "solutions", in order, you know what, "to make a difference" (Peter Beattie, Kevin Rudd)

Provide a frame. That's what people say. I won't do that though i hope i just have. The frame is precisely the framing of the state – and of the colonial order. When those given to the tireless cliché talk about thinking outside the box what they are really saying is 'how do we

extend it? How do we put what's outside the box inside the box?' Of course it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the box is eternally empty. It's a sort of Pandora's box in reverse that feeds endlessly on the "problems of the world" and is never happier than in times of crisis – and never more able to exert and to extend its control than in such times. [limits?]

Waywardness is a way of handling or mishandling control; even dismantling it. It provides a moment of relief; respite. It asserts its own control. It relates to the notion of perturbation, disturbance. This is less disquiet than an actual awakening. Disquiet is on the side of anxiety and engages a form of panic. The perturbation, the perturbing thing, gives a shock, a shake. It can shudder the sense of disquiet into something – a first step in giving things shape and signalling a movement to somewhere other than repetition performed in the name of duty or expectation. It escapes the fixing gaze through a momentary shattering. The fixing gaze is the gaze we fix on ourselves; it represents the other. [critique of otherness?] What we might wish for the self if a self that escapes the gaze entirely: not just the inimical gaze but even the approving gaze, not just the gaze of the other but also of the self.

This invokes the notion of a certain impersonality. At the same time it calls forth the notion of a gaze that looks outwards rather than towards, that enters the zone or arena of attentiveness rather than judgment. I make these remarks in order to make brief reference to the issue of enlivening. Against enlivening we may order up our death troops: sterility, pulverisation, the death wish, death, itself; deadening, all that deadens.

What did I wish for myself from today? For one thing I'm seeing some conceptual clarity beyond a certain playfulness that I will put on the side of enlivening, disruption, pleasure. For another I take seriously the notions of impersonalisation – a movement towards a certain objectivity in relation to what I shall call the state of affairs (as opposed to the state itself which is itself a form of objectification but limited and territorialising in its intentions, as I have already suggested; we might ask ourselves what these desires to limit and to encroach upon really signify). The state of affairs of course embraces as a matter of course our own state of being. There is of course no position of exemption from the general condition – and the movement towards impersonalisation and objectification is not intended to achieve this result. (cf. The real and how it is invoked to maintain the status quo). I am reminded of a remark made by Deleuze to Foucault – maybe it was the other way round! – in which he says something to the effect that we all encounter walls. He means both in theory building and in practice (in being they can hardly be separated and should not be conceived of as sites of displacement). Not that I recall what he suggests about getting round the wall, or over, under, bulldozing it, dismantling it stone by stone, brick by brick, wishing it away, suppressing all knowledge of it, or any of the other strategies we are apt to bring to bear. Without making any special claim I suggest that one strategy is to enact the wall, to exaggerate it, to magnify it, to accentuate its properties, to make it present in a field of representation. This is why I have become increasingly interested in the notion of performance – not that the notion of wall has to be its starting point or anywhere near it, but to discover the unexpected or veiled impediment, and not as a problem to be overcome but as an incitement to thought and action; precisely to an enactment.

And rather than an enactment of the sort I am enacting now an enactment in the form of a series of tableaux or scena which incites participation to a high degree and/or confrontation. Of course inveiglement can be part of the strategy.

Nicolas's text is a terrible text. It is a dreadful text about dreadful matters. It lies at the heart of his books, its terrible centrepiece. I'm not sure he would disagree; indeed, he endorses my view. Yes, he says simply. Its spectre hangs over this talk and is now part of it – not through any choice of my own, simply because it is there. We might take it as a wall but it is in fact an enactment, an enactment. It becomes a performance the moment it can be performed. It is performed every day. It is the performance that is not a template to its own performance and of a million other performances; it is the block or impediment – I might even say incitement – to other performances.

A performance of sterility:

Who's in occupation

The speaker instead of speaking begins to sweep the room. He sweeps around people, annoying them. (a whispering voice: who's in occupation, who's in occupation?) He produces a vacuum cleaner: bzzz bzzz bzzz

Cleanliness, cleaning up performing the perfunctory, routine, issues of priority, the show must go on, domestication (note the bottle of domestos in the corner).

We record this event. We replay the video. We note that there is an uncanny resemblance between the vacuum cleaner and the video camera: they absorb, they sweep clean, they feed off...and we might note, both can object.

Which takes us back to nicolas's text: identifications (the writer and the dingo bitch; the outsider; the "lone wolf"; the writer whose writings – "offspring" – die in the pages of the daily newspaper; the writer forced to feed off the excreta of daily life; life itself as excrescence; and the knight of salvation ready at hand with his big pop gun, ready to play god. And delete. Redemption through extermination. The avenging angel. Tabula rasa. Terra nullius. We might reflect on the meaning of the well-springs of oblitative action, its triggers (see, the beginnings of an eruption, the waywardness of words...). Its passion for purity, the final solution...

To say that there has to be an answer says that there is one

The opening shot in lurugu – the first ethnographic film in which i participated (1973 whitlam; ucko new at the institute) – is yet another gÖttedämmerung. Show, see, the ubiquity of structures, tropes.

Yes, odd göttedämmerung indeed, in a land where there were never gods!

But hold on, what of Giuseppe di Lampedusa's ii gattopardo, the leopard. The count speaking to the envoy from the risorgimento, the new government: 'what you don't understand is that these people are gods. All you see is poverty, backwardness...'

Despair, despairing, kick the bucket.

We might give another reading of this opening shot: x has just had a fight with y, or been told something that means a fight with y is inevitable. Some retaliatory action anyway. This “ennui”, this apparently futile gesture – kick the bucket, right it (a very adept move) – this substitution of a futile action for a futile inaction, may well be the exaggerated restraint that typically precedes action – not love but war; a public display of agonistic intent; that really x would like to knock y’s head off...

[show it again]

Similarly is there any way we can (a) disrupt nicolas’s reading of events at Georgia Well; or (b) intensify his reading (account); or (c) put something alongside it that realigns it, creates an echo other than the one we expect. In PNG it’s not exactly unusual to see pigs running round villages and feeding on excrement; do we bring the same judgment to them as the trigger-happy bushman brings to the dingo, with his self-legitimizing armoury of pseudo-scientific “knowledges” (truth and power). There can be no certainty that the dingo would not survive; or that the excreta is not a first resort rather than a last resort...

Or I could think about tommy eileen and his pig, tiger, that appalled the locals by getting into the kuna pits. This was at edward river (pormpuraaw). Tiger would follow Tommy on his long walks back to his country on the Kendall River: luscious river of pure sands, drooping ti-trees heavy with blossom and honeyed waters. When the manager through a devious ruse managed to have tiger “expunged” no one bought the meat. (it was put up for sale at rock-bottom prices.) The whitefellas interpreted this as a consequence of tiger’s dietary predeliction; it may however have had something to do with tiger’s special place in tommy’s heart. Not that one should underestimate the scruples of the mob at Edward River who were fascinated and horrified by the gastronomic practices of others, including the french and their fondness for frog’s legs. “Aagh”, they would say, “filthy creatures. They piss in the water.” This is why, one of the reasons, why wells are so carefully filled in after use. They are never left open.

MY DOG, YOUR DOG

- READ THE TEXT
- SHOW LURUGU OPENING
- PEOPLE CALL NAMES OF DOGS (5 PEOPLE)
- ONE EMPTY CHAIR

In the silence of the sleeptime: occupation and beyond

Some times we require the voice of the other to tell us how things are. ‘I told them’, he said, ‘Australia was a society under occupation. They looked at me. Was I right?’ the question threw me. I thought for a moment he meant under occupied, insufficient population. But then i realised: ‘no, he meant under occupation, as in a war. Poland, he’s polish. There can be no mistake what he means: kraj pod okupacją. A country under occupation,

What a relief it is to have things named, identified, and allowed to escape the cotton wool padding of euphemism. ‘the problem is’, said certain colleagues when i told them, ‘it’s not going to go away’ as if occupation must by its very nature be a temporary affair. Of course temporary is a relative matter. An aboriginal friend of mine considers the current condition of the aboriginal art scene a very momentary affair: less than 2 minutes of the ‘real history’. We might of course contest what the real history of aboriginal art looks like.

If aboriginal societies are societies under occupation where does this place the rest of us? As part of the occupational forces? The simple analogy to Poland would be to say ‘yes’ and at the same time to argue that all those aboriginal people who lend themselves to public institutions and the institutions of the state as collaborators. This may seem too strong, too exaggerated. Against that it is often the case that the truth – the bitter truth, the unsayable truth – is dismissed as hyperbolic. Reasonableness of course is in the hands of those who have the power to define it; it is always a natural condition and presented as natural. My own position as a native-born Australian is that I am of here – a here that has become increasingly problematic as I have sought to make sense of my engagements with aboriginal people and societies and with a state that has always seemed to me authoritarian, and insensitive, to say the least. Working in Queensland in the late 1960s and early 1970s one could be under no doubt as to the state of affairs. Oddly one could say whatever one liked to students. The university had more subtle ways of censoring; what I call the metonymic effect; you take on the status of your client group. To ignore was to ignore – and business as usual. My German name has always been an impediment – a sign of strangeness, aberration. To play the game the outsider, the aberrant, must side most with the most conservative and conforming elements of the inside. If for no other reason I have never thought of multiculturalism as particularly progressive. In my own case my ‘German’ ancestors left Germany by the mid-1730s, never to return. My great uncle on my mother’s side was a man called Australia Clarke. Very hard to get more oz than that.

I have no real interest in appealing to these personal histories. It is surely more interesting to get at the structural features of one’s situation. Yes, without an Australian name it is hard to be Australian.

Jumping forward, i wish to propose that the occupying thing is not the nation it is the state. That the colonised thing is, if anything, civil society; and that aboriginal societies, while ‘under occupation’, are not colonised. If anything they are subject to a more and more ruthless exclusion. There is of course a view that the state represents and in representing

constitutes an objectification of the society at large – that there is, in fact, no difference between the interests of the state and civil society at the end of the day. The state promotes this view; it represents the very strategy and means not only from the point of view of legitimation but of colonisation itself. It is the state that colonised the lifeworld; not the lifeworld that colonised itself. It is particular interests that colonise the state and objectivise it in terms of those specific and partial interests. Need, crisis, pathology, inequality: this is the language of supplication that presents itself not as the voice of reason or reasonableness (there is no notion of the total social fact, not in any sense vaguely approaching that of Mauss) but as a demand – a right. The demand for evidence-based research creates an immense circularity in which the evidence is constructed precisely in accordance with pre-established values which themselves remain unexamined but which establish, effortlessly, what I term ‘the good of the good’. The commitments to programmes such as universal literacy participate in this mode of thinking, just to give one instance.

These are not matters that I wish to pursue here. My aim is more limited – though hardly for that lacking scope. The evidence for what I am talking about is everywhere – and I mean the modes of distortion that afflict social living as a simple and more or less direct consequence of a refusal to confront certain basic facts. I mean, the quandaries we face in daily life – and for the purposes of today’s discussion, specifically in the zone of cultural production – precisely because certain rudimentary or elementary facts or structures are not acknowledged. It is a slightly tricky argument to present but easily grasped through concrete instances – and through a shift of perspective that, instead of demanding that we somehow resolve the quandaries, the impasses, the conundrums, we focus at least in the first instance on identifying them. Performing an anatomy, as it were, a vivisection. For what makes it painful is the fact that we are dealing with living bodies, actual lives not some anaesthetized subject lying abandoned in Eliot’s wasteland.

In everything I write or do a quandary arises – a set of puzzles, an insuperable awkwardness. If one deliberately brackets off the ‘need to play politics’ which is itself after all only a form of acknowledgement of the constraints one operates under without necessarily making them explicit, one may be forced to make them explicit.

Imagine my dismay in writing a piece on the importance of aboriginal languages when, arguing that aboriginal languages are not just sitting there waiting to be written down and that in fact certain serious consequences follow at the level of history and embodiment and the capacity for responsible social acting if languages are stripped from speakers and turned into scripts. But then realising irrevocably: but here I am writing, how come?

Or creating an installation for a recent show on drawing at the tin sheds in Sydney and working with the idea of

[show slide show]

drawing and dragging and drafting and the creation of the tract and the idea of circumscribable private property (some very basic semantic-conceptual issues in western thinking and practice), and playing these ideas off against the reality of the sea which endlessly and remorselessly self-inscribes itself on the shore (the very notion of self-inscription); and ‘objectivising’ this idea by unleashing video tape into the sea to create a parallel and analogous inscribing and paying, in this instance, a secret homage to Derek Jarman and his experiments with light and film and discovering as if by accident the dominant motif of Ben Flugelman’s sculptures...

Later I devised a performance – with Slawek Janicki, my polish colleague responsible for the ‘under occupation’ remark. In the course of thinking this out and preparing the text I encountered a wall, an impasse, at least an imponderable. A set of them. In using this piece of beach was i not myself engaging an act of colonisation – a casual taking of occupation? And in imposing my thoughts on this ‘landscape’ (sea-scape) – a notion and a practice i abjure, ever since thinking the issues out in relation to native title, even earlier, and speaking them to an aghast audience at the art gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney (2004), was in not commandeering it in some way? I make it spectacle. And I delete precisely those elements of the setting that might draw the interest of say my mob in Cape York which would be relentlessly utilitarian: as my great friend and enduring point of reference peret arkwookerum put it to me, ‘if I can’t hunt it’s not good. This rubbish place’. He was speaking of cairns; he was speaking of Howard Springs outside Darwin where there were fish in abundance but a total embargo on taking them. This to him was absurd and exclusionary in the most brutal sense.

[show ‘we go for fish’ sequence]

Recently I have written an essay of Toni Warburton’s work for the museum of contemporary art in Sydney. I argue among other things about the tension involved in protecting the things we love – between strategies of privacy and secrecy, and revelation and announcing. These are of course directly germane to the aboriginal world: and the politics not just of the secret/sacred but of claims to cultural distinctiveness and therefore to political standing as something like sovereign people. (we need a special term to cover this situation.) There are also problems with what i identify as a continuingly romantic perspective which privileges the individual relationship to the world as against the social.

However, Toni is here and she can say something directly about her own work and the conundrums she encountered in its production

Earlier we saw a film by Jennifer Deger from Gapuwiyak. I have asked Jennifer too if she would be willing to say something about her own practice and the conundrums it entails

When I speak of distorted realities I do not speak casually. The whole of Australian cultural production is distorted and skewed and compromised by the compromised circumstances in

which we live. But as I have suggested, instead of making this the subject of our work we reconstitute them as problems rather than facts and seek thereby to ‘overcome’ them. The unacknowledged circumstance tends, in cultural terms, as often as not towards the grotesque. I can mention Patrick White; but I can mention others. I might mention book launches and other occasions at which the aboriginal presence is acknowledged – acknowledged as presence (the first) but not as what it is, as a living reality in the now.

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