

In 1982 the British Commonwealth Games was staged in my future home base of Brisbane. At that time, I was working for the NSW Aboriginal Legal Service as a Field Officer. The protests were attended by Aboriginal people from all around Australia. Of course the protests became violent and many of us were jailed by police in our attempts to seek an outside voice through the media - we knew the eyes of the world were on us for a brief moment. We had called publicly on the Governments of the world to boycott Australia as they had done to South Africa. We strongly believe that South African apartheid had its origins in the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Opium Act of the Queensland Government which was at least as draconian and equally brutal. We began to re-name the event the 'Stolenwealth Games', drawing attention to the injustice, theft and brutality at the heart of the British Empire's history of colonisation.

Forty or so years later, the issues for my people have not changed. If anything they have gotten worse, after repeated waves of neo-liberal erosion of our economic, social and political rights. Neo-liberalism was just another form of colonial paternalism with catch phrases like 'mutual-obligation' and 'practical reconciliation' - but it was still about mining rights and taking our land, an aggressive on-going form of colonialism justified this time around by the Chicago School of economics.

When I came back to making art full time in the early noughties, Australia was in the middle of a racist resurgence under the Government of John Howard. Ironically Aboriginal art was booming but it was the 'traditional' and ultimately 'non-political' work that was getting the funding, attention and support. I wrote Bell's Theorem to stake out a position for myself but also to address the connections between the ongoing discrimination and dispossession of my people and the way our art is presented, represented, controlled and distributed in an art world that is primarily white-controlled. The second Bell's Theorem essay, which was written last year and is published in abbreviated form below, asks what, if anything, has changed in the 20 years since my first essay? One thing it tries to address is the implications of indigenous art becoming a trans-national, international movement which is and will be like Aboriginal art in Australia - controlled by white forces. That is, the market will inevitably choose mostly non-political art to promote in its museums and galleries. It's essentially a form of art-washing, with the art as the botox of capitalism.

That's why this moment at the Tate is so important to me and what I want to say for my people. I want them to feel empowered by this. I want to ask difficult questions. I want to find solidarity amongst peers in both the activist and artistic arenas so we can discuss positively how the situation can be improved. As blackfellas we cannot get a voice through the media because it is white controlled. So for us, art is one of the few spaces left to seek an audience. As far as art spaces go, the Turbine Hall is a pretty decent megaphone.

Perhaps the most important work for these discussions and events will be my sign *Pay the Rent* (UK), which calculates the amount of rent the UK owes Aboriginal people for its occupation of our lands from 1788 until 1901, when the overtly racist Australian Government was federated (they have their own rent to pay). As Britain has a discussion around reparations for profiteering from slavery, I reckon it's a good moment to broaden the conversation to ask: what are the costs of the damage done to indigenous people and their lands all over the world? The truth is, the costs of colonialism can never be fully repaid.

We Have To Share.
Richard Bell April 2023

FOREWORD Art as Revolution

Richard Bell's significance is located in the criticality of his thinking, in his keen observations, and in the dialogue and discourse his work creates. Using witticisms, humour and the language and aesthetics of appropriation, Bell's paintings, installations, video and performance-based works respond to art world concerns, the ongoing "complexities of oppression" still experienced by Indigenous Australians, and the "double binds within which Aboriginal people and particularly Aboriginal artists have been trapped".²

His polemical essay *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* (2002), and painting of the same name that won him the 2003 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, sets him apart as an artist. *Bell's Theorem* was revolutionary. Its astute one-liner, *Aboriginal Art it's a White Thing*, formulaically, and with precision and ease, unpacked the art market developed to commodify and control Indigenous art. It permanently altered the discourse related to that art. His equally pithy proposition that followed in *Australian Art it's an Aboriginal Thing* (2006), another axiom not able to be quashed or ignored, set in motion a new reality not only for Indigenous art in Australia but for all Australian art. In 2022, Bell wrote the follow-up essay *Bell's Theorem (Reductio ad Infinitum): Contemporary Art—It's a White Thing!*, which further critiqued contemporary art and the art market's relationship to Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples and lands globally.

A conceptual artist, Bell is a Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang man from Charleville, western Queensland, who describes himself as "an activist masquerading as an artist".³ His work is grounded in the Indigenous politics of the 1970s and '80s, "from the Aboriginal Embassy protest of 1972 to the massive expression of resistance on Australia Day/Invasion Day, 1988".⁴ Shaped by that context, Bell's unapologetically politically direct and scaring critiques not only condemn the conditions of Indigenous Australians, but also speak to the conditions that he lives within.

Bell is a leading artist of his generation, an unyielding insurgent, a visionary, and a truth teller. His artworks raise collective consciousness; they work "against the ethnociding"⁵ of First Nations Australian art and in solidarity with Indigenous art more broadly. Uncompromising conceptually, embodied by Bell, and centred within his being, his work is "the ultimate expression of black resistance".⁶

Bell has been a constant presence in Australian art for over three decades and has featured in major shows across the country, including many solo projects. His largest solo show to date, *You can go now* (2021), was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, bringing together thirty years of his art practice. Bell's work, which has developed in scale and ambition, is increasingly recognised internationally and included in significant art world contexts. A recent solo project curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and conceived for Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy, opened in April 2022, followed soon after by his inclusion in documenta fifteen, in Kassel, Germany, from June to September 2022.

Richard Bell Reader, which was first published to mark Bell's inclusion in documenta fifteen, has been updated for the presentation of his seminal work *Embassy* (2013—ongoing) at Tate Modern, London. These essays give context and background to the specific histories he draws on. We would like to thank Professor Chelsea Watego, Professor Larissa Behrendt, artist Alan Michelson, Emeritus Professor Andrew McNamara, Professor Sylvia McAdam and ruangrupa for their dynamic and insightful contributions.

Richard Bell Reader: Tate Modern has been developed to contextualise Bell's work for the international audiences who will experience it. The production of this publication has been made possible through funding from Griffith University, and we acknowledge Professor Carolyn Evans, Vice Chancellor, and Professor Scott Harrison, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Arts, Education and Law), for their support. We also acknowledge the support of the Australia Council for the Arts and Arts Queensland, both of which recognise the importance of supporting Australian artists in an international arena. We sincerely thank the staff of Tate Modern, with special thanks to Sook Kyung Lee, Tamsin Hong, Helen O'Malley, Odessa Warren, Frances Morris CBE, and Gregor Muir. We would also like to acknowledge Tate supporters, with special thanks to Cav, Simon Mordant AO, Gretel Packer AM, Andrew and Amanda Love, Mark Nelson, and Geoff Ainsworth AM, and those who wish to remain anonymous; the artist's representative Josh Milani and his staff; designers Ziga Testen and Stuart Geddes; and most importantly, artist Richard Bell for his generous support and participation in this project.

Angela Goddard and Megan Tamati-Quennell
Editors

Contents	
2	Foreword: Art as Revolution Angela Goddard and Megan Tamati-Quennell
4	Embassy Alan Michelson
6	Richard Bell's History Paintings: The Defiance of His Colonial Counter-narrative Larissa Behrendt
8	Embassy, Venice, 10 May 2019 Sylvia McAdam
10	Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a white thing! Richard Bell
12	Bell's Theorem (Reductio ad Infinitum): Contemporary Art—It's a White Thing! Richard Bell (edited by Rachel O'Reilly)
19	The Dadaist Richard Bell: Inhabiting the Dislocations between Aboriginal Art and Contemporary Art Andrew McNamara
21	"When You Think of Warriors, You Better Think of All of Us" The Art and War of Black Protest Chelsea Watego
23	Richard Bell In conversation with ruangrupa Kassel, Germany, 14 November 2021

COLOPHON
Richard Bell Reader: Tate Modern

Authors
Larissa Behrendt
Richard Bell
Angela Goddard
Sylvia McAdam
Andrew McNamara
Alan Michelson
ruangrupa
Megan Tamati-Quennell
Chelsea Watego

Publisher
Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia

Editors
Angela Goddard
Megan Tamati-Quennell

Editorial assistant
Carrie McCarthy

Copy editor
Evie Franzidis

Design
Ziga Testen
Stuart Geddes

Print management
Rik van Leeuwen, Wonderful Books

Printer
Dkzet Offsetrotatie B.V.
Edition of 5000
ISBN: 9781922361646

Photography
Unless otherwise credited, all images courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.
Photographer: Carl Warner

Artist representative
Milani Gallery, Meeanjin / Brisbane: Josh Milani and staff

Project support
Professor Carolyn Evans, Vice Chancellor, Griffith University
Professor Scott Harrison, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Arts, Education and Law), Griffith University
Professor Elisabeth Findlay, Director, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University
Queensland College of Art Advisory Board
Tate staff Sook Kyung Lee, Tamsin Hong, Helen O'Malley, Odessa Warren, Frances Morris CBE, and Gregor Muir
Caitlin Arveyd, and all staff and volunteers of Griffith University Art Museum

Image permissions
Vasily Sadovnikov, *Parade at the Horse Guards Manege 1840*. © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.
Emory Douglas, *The Black Panther Newspaper (1969: Year of the Panther)*, Vol. 2, No. 19, 4 January 1969. Two colour ink on newsprint, 44.8 x 29.2cm. Publisher: Black Panther Party © Emory Douglas. Artists Rights Society (ARS)/Copyright Agency, 2023.

Supporters
Tate Modern
Tate supporters Cav. Simon Mordant AO, Andrew and Amanda Love, Mark Nelson, and Geoff Ainsworth AM, and those who wish to remain anonymous
Griffith University Art Museum, Griffith University

This project is supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland, and the Australian Institute of Art History in partnership with the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand.

© This work is copyright and all rights are reserved. Apart from any use permitted under the *Australian Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without the prior written permission from the publishers.

Author biographies
Larissa Behrendt is a First Nations woman from the Euahlayai/Gamilaroi nations. She is Distinguished Professor at the Jumbunna Institute at the University of Technology Sydney, a lawyer, writer, broadcaster and filmmaker.

Angela Goddard is a curator and writer of settler descent. She is Director of Griffith University Art Museum, Brisbane, a Board Member of Sheila: A Foundation for Women in Visual Art, and Chair, University Art Museums Australia.

Sylvia McAdam (Saysewahum) is from the Treaty 6 lands in what is now called "Canada" and is from the nēhiyaw Nation. She is co-founder of Idle No More, a global grassroots movement for Indigenous sovereignty, rights, and the respect for the treaties to protect the environment and create economic and social equality. She is also co-founder of "One House Many Nations", which designs off-the-grid sustainable tiny-homes to address unacceptable proportions of homelessness especially amongst Indigenous/Original peoples.

Andrew McNamara is an art historian and writer. Recent works include *Undesign* (2018); *Surpassing Modernity* (2018–19); *Bauhaus Diaspora and Beyond* (2019); and the exhibition *Bauhaus Now* (2020–21). He is Emeritus Professor at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

Alan Michelson is an internationally recognised, New York-based Mohawk (Six Nations of the Grand River) artist, writer, and curator. His exhibitions include the recent *2021 Greater New York* at MoMA PS1, and the upcoming *Ancestral Weavings* at the Tate Modern, and his essays have appeared in *Frieze*, *Aperture*, and *October*.

ruangrupa is a not-for-profit Jakarta-based collective established in 2000 that provides a platform for organising exhibitions, events, and festivals, as well as publishing services, workshops, and research. It supports contemporary art within the urban and cultural contexts of Indonesia and beyond, often involving artists and practitioners from other disciplines such as the social sciences, politics, and technology. Its nine members were selected as curator of the fifteenth edition of documenta in Kassel, Germany, in 2022.

Megan Tamati-Quennell is a leading curator and writer of modern and contemporary Māori and Indigenous art, with a career spanning over thirty years. She is the Associate Indigenous Curator, Contemporary Art | Kairauhi Taketake Toi Onāianei, Govett Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Māori and Indigenous Art, Museum of New Zealand | Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. She is of Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Mūtunga, Ngāi Tahu and Kāti Māmoa, Māori descent.

Chelsea Watego is a Munanjahli and South Sea Islander woman born and raised on Yuggera country. First trained as an Aboriginal health worker, she is an Indigenous health humanities scholar, prolific writer and public intellectual.

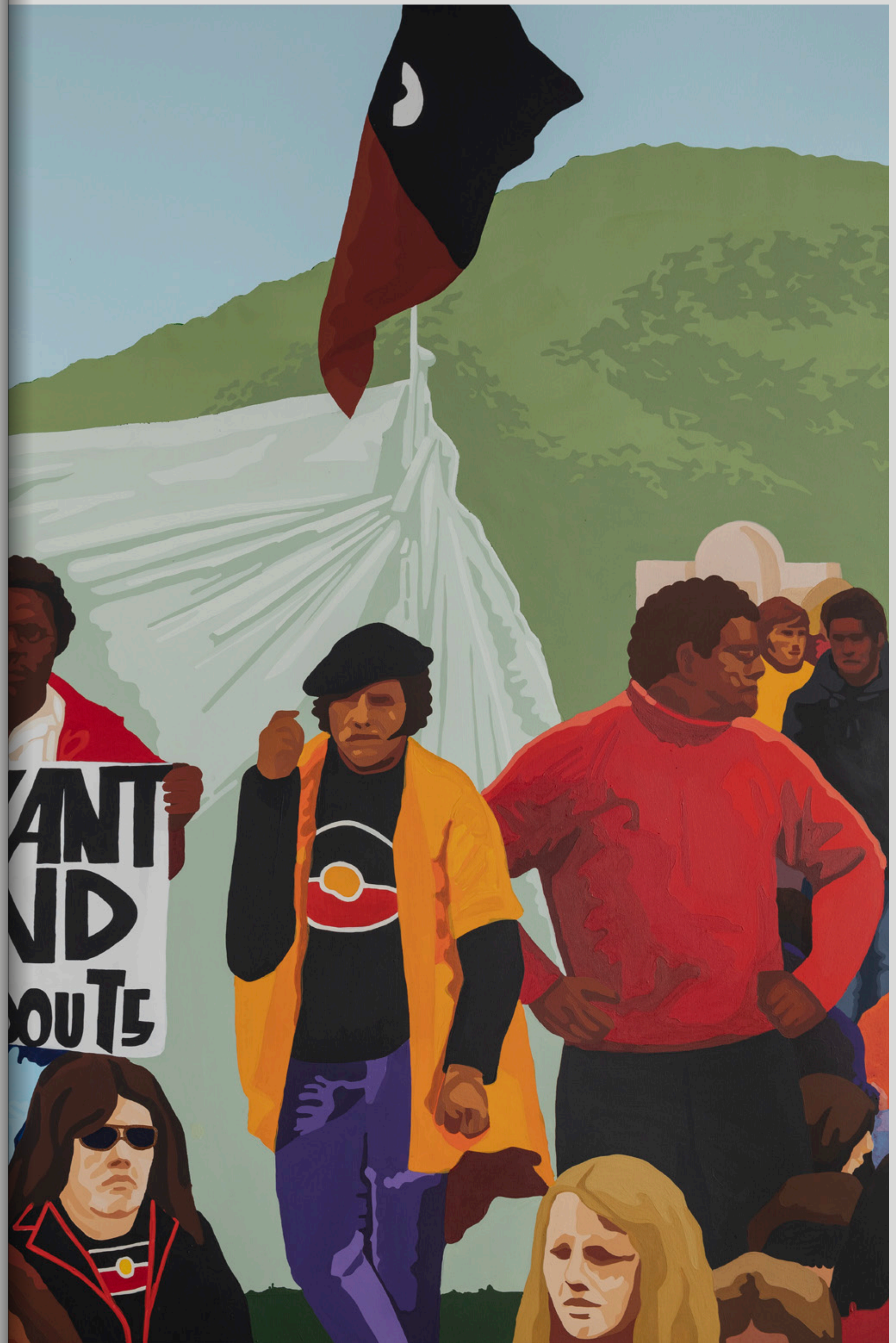


Fig. 1

Pay the Rent (2022) displayed a constantly updating figure, representative of the proposed amount (in Australian dollars) that is owed to First Nations Australians for land use in Australia. Using an algorithm to create a numerical figure that continues to accumulate over time, Bell demonstrates the impossibility of the Australian settler state to ever be able to repay, in monetary terms, what is actually owed to First Nations Australians.

Bell has made this work knowing that Indigenous Australians have been systematically locked out of the country's economic wealth since colonisation. However, *Pay the Rent* is not presented as a pointless mathematical exercise or a colonial conundrum. It instead illuminates, like many of Bell's works, that the real currency to be negotiated is that of power. The work suggests that the only truly equitable way to create redress in Australia is through the sharing of power. *Pay the Rent* references Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzler's *Metronome* (1999), Union Square, New York.

Fig. 1: Richard Bell *Pay the Rent* (January 2022, digital sign, 100 x 11000 x 50 cm, installation view, documenta fifteen, Kassel, Germany, Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



1 Nicholas Thomas, "Richard Bell's Post-Aryanism," *Art Monthly Australia*, March 1995, cited in *Richard Bell, Positivity*, ed. Robert Leonard (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2007), 75.
2 Ibid.
3 Museums and Galleries of NSW, "Richard Bell: Imagining Victory," <https://mgns.wa.gov.au/sector/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/richard-bell-imagining-victory/>.
4 Ibid.
5 Gary Foley, "Cultural Warrior," in *Richard Bell, Positivity*, 6.
6 Ibid., 5.



Moscow, September 2013
It's the 5th Moscow Biennale, and among its seventy-four far-flung artist participants assembled by curator Catherine de Zegher are many from non-Western nations or communities whose art does not number among the 180,000-odd objects in the State Tretyakov Gallery across the river, nor the 700,000-odd holdings of the nearby Pushkin Museum.

A Molotov cocktail's throw from the Kremlin, the exhibition fills the 90,000 square feet of the Manege, the former military riding academy built in 1817 in honour of the 1812 Russian victory over Napoleon. Its colossal Neoclassical exterior, with its arched windows and Doric columns, gives it the look of a bloated temple, and its colours of cream white



Fig. 1

and scrambled-egg yellow echo breakfast at the drab hotel on the outskirts where some of us artists are lodged for the week.

Every biennale is an epic artwork amassed from dozens of individual ones, and this one is called *bošhe sveta*—"more light"—which were supposedly Goethe's last words. It's also de Zegher's heartfelt wish for a country that's known its share of darkness. Staged 201 years after Napoleon's rash invasion, in which more than half a million perished, the curator's intervention is one of love, hard but urgent truth, and the transformative powers of art. On the main floor, interspersed with installations including the airborne bulk of Panamarenko's zeppelin and the sad junk of Song Dong's *Waste Not*, is a warren of white walls, on one of which hangs a large painting by my friend, the Australian Aboriginal artist Richard Bell, whose colourful work, you could say, *unwhitens*.

Entitled *One Day You'll All Be Gone* (Bell's *Theorem*) (2006), what first draws you to it is its vibrant patchwork of tiles, some striped, some spotted, suggesting Aboriginal motifs filtered through a pirated modernism inflected with Op, Pop, and AbEx elements. Jasper Johns's cross-hatched works come to mind, motifs that appealed to Johns for their "literalness, repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness, and the possibility of a complete lack of meaning".¹ But Richard's paintings trade on modernist



Fig. 2

opacity, only to deliver wallops of meaning in the form of direct, pithy texts that shatter its hermetic conceits and let the rolling turmoil of the world in. To the local pantheon of squares, Moscow's Red Square and Malevich's *Black Square*, now must be added Bell's Blackfella squares. "The first shall be last and the last shall be first", proclaims the canvas in bold block letters, quoting the Bible, whose white Christian followers, untroubled by its ethics, stole so much from Black and Indigenous people, and who continue to ensure that the first stay first and own nearly everything.

Like works by Barbara Kruger or Jenny Holzer, Richard's paintings are textually provocative and pull no punches in their blunt manner of address: ABORIGINAL ART—IT'S A WHITE THING, WE WERE HERE FIRST, YOU CAN GO NOW. In his satirical video *Uz vs Them* (2006), Richard, in boxing gear and surrounded by bikini-clad admirers, spars with an angry white opponent, transposing racial and political struggle to the gaudy spectacle of the ring. And like the

great Muhammad Ali, Richard channels bravado, talent, humour, and charm not only into a champion career but also one at the service of Black pride and liberation, the very definition of what used to be called a "race man". "Heshowzoff" is Richard's username, but in showing off he calls out and shows up his adversaries—those who perpetrate or perpetuate racism and colonialism. Unlike most charismatic attention seekers, he also likes to show off his friends and fellow travellers, which he's doing with a project upstairs called *Embassy* (2013–ongoing).

Pitched and perched above the conference room is a green army tent, sourced locally, recycled from one of the brutal Chechen campaigns. Radically rebranded by a sign reading "Aboriginal Embassy", it references the raising of a similar tent in front

of the Australian Parliament by members of the Aboriginal Black Power movement in 1972. Pointed political burlesque that successfully drew media attention to Aboriginal demands, the original Aboriginal Tent Embassy inspired the eighteen-year-old Richard watching it on live television, and it remains an avatar inspiring Aboriginal youth forty years on. Such were the reasons behind Richard's tent revival.

Though the tent is a compelling spectacle in its own right—with its painted signage (WHITE INVADERS...YOU ARE LIVING ON STOLEN LAND)—the curated conversations housed inside it are the heart of the work. Something similar could be said for the artist himself. Like a Beuys or Warhol, Richard's persona is integral to his art. In his signature pork pie hat and stylish clothes, he cuts a striking figure, the former rugby player frame still discernable in the artist gear, the resonant voice as loud and outspoken as his kit. But what is inside the man, soon to turn sixty, is even more remarkable, what he has seen and lived and what he has made of it—the engine of his art and the activism that preceded it.

Richard was born in a tent on the Charleville Aboriginal Reserve in Queensland, in which he and his family lived until they could salvage enough corrugated iron junked by the white people to build a tin shack. Such beginnings are a powerful incentive to understand why such appallingly deplorable

conditions fell to your family and community, while others prospered at your expense. Such conditions can harm you at your core, or galvanise you to fight against those that imposed them, and for those so grossly imposed upon.

The world debut of Richard's *Embassy* in Moscow is a muffled, modest affair. It consists of five artists from the biennale—Alfredo Aquilizan, Ed Plen, Jumadi, Gisèle Gordon, and myself—speaking about our work to each other and to a small audience of fellow artists, friends, family, and functionaries. Introduced by our playful host wielding the microphone, speaking or listening, watching the parade of slides, we absorb and applaud the rich array of practices and perspectives presented. In its roost among the rafters, *Embassy* draws few locals, not so much because of its isolated location within the building as its locus in an isolated Russia, where critical perspectives like ours—on migration, environmental extraction, colonisation, history, resistance,

Indigeneity—have little traction. By diplomatic convention, an embassy is a sovereign, secure space. Like Richard's, the 5th Moscow Biennale is itself an embassy, a temporary sanctuary for the troubling worlds presented in *bošhe sveta*.

New York, November 2015
Richard has folded up his tent and moved on to my home city of New York, where *Embassy* is being featured in Performa 15, the performance art festival founded by Rosalea Goldberg. The venue this time is a vacant storefront on a grey stretch of lower Broadway in Tribeca. Four hundred years ago, under the care of the Lenape, the site was a large shell midden on the western shore of a large freshwater pond. Later polluted by colonial industry, the pond was first drained, then buried. The site evolved much as the rest of the island, Lenapehoking yielding to colonial farmland, farmland yielding to streets and residences, residences yielding to industry, industry yielding to globalisation. In the late 1960s and '70s, artists colonised the empty lofts, from which they were eventually displaced by bankers and celebrities.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The tent stands to the left of the entrance, its green bulk and painted signage visible from the street through the storefront glass. Instead of housing the planned discussions, as it did in Moscow, here the tent serves as something akin to a visitor pavilion, more portal than port, more sculpture than shelter. The right side of the space is populated with rows of chairs for an expected large audience. Richard's reputation precedes him in New York, as it does for most of his invites, particularly that of his friend and collaborator Emory Douglas, Revolutionary Artist and Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party (BPP).

In 2011, Bell and Douglas painted a mural in downtown Brisbane based on the iconic photograph of the black-gloved, raised fist Black Power salutes of African-American Olympic medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos in 1968. Entitled *White Hero for Black Australia*, it includes the third athlete in the picture, white Australian Peter Norman, who, in a quiet gesture of solidarity, wore the same Olympic Project for Human Rights badge as Smith and Carlos. A striking work of Black memory, homage, and transnational solidarity, Bell and Douglas's historicising revival of the image in the mural prefigured Richard's revival of the original 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy in *Embassy*. Himself a powerful icon, Douglas designed the Black Panther logo and served as art director, illustrator, and cartoonist on their weekly national newspaper.



Fig. 5

"Panther Party paper, Panther Party paper" was the alliterative, rhythmic chant of the street hawker in Boston from whom I, aged fifteen, bought my first issue, for a quarter, in 1968. Its content blazed off the pages—Black revolutionary journalism, manifestos, art, and poetry. Douglas's hard-outlined, political cartoon figures—of racist cops, LBJ, or US imperialism rendered as pigs—reflected the clear hard lines drawn by the party against white racist America. And his 1968 posters—such as *Black Studies*, of a Black student holding a rifle in one hand and

a book in the other, or *Hope*, of a Black mother with a baby on her shoulder—expressed the militancy informed by knowledge as well as the protective, custodial role of Black Power in the community. The ten-point party platform, printed in every issue, began "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community". A later point stated, "We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people".

In his role as Blackfella ambassador, Richard is all about building coalitions between People of Colour, and *Embassy* is his diplomatic invention. In addition to his outreach to Black communities over here is his parallel outreach to Red ones—to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Red Power is ancient but took modern form with the founding of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis in 1968, one of the cities where Native people were relocated from reservations under the *Indian Relocation Act* of 1956. The act was part of the era's Indian termination policy dismantling Native sovereignty and forcing assimilation, but it did not anticipate the seeds it was sowing of urban Native resistance. Like the BPP, AIM arose to defend Native communities from police brutality, racialised unemployment, substandard housing, and poverty. Following in the Panthers' footsteps, AIM issued a twenty-point document, released during its dramatic 1972 occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Building in DC, which sought to remake relations with the federal government through an emphasis not on rights, but on treaties, sovereignty, and the restoration of 110 million acres of land taken by the US.

Back in Lenapehoking, *Embassy* unfolds, with its first evening devoted to a screening of Aboriginal filmmaker Darlene Johnson's *The Redfern Story* (2014), her tribute to the storied Aboriginal community in Sydney in which she was raised, and to the National Black Theatre, whose street theatre was a stirring vehicle of Aboriginal protest. *Embassy*'s first day begins with Melbourne artist Stuart Ringholt's participatory *Anger Workshops*, followed by art historian Terry Smith, who introduces more film screenings. In the evening, Richard and Emory Douglas discuss art and propaganda, before a screening of Alessandro Cavadin's *Ningla A-Na (Hungry for Our Land)*, a 1972 documentary about the original Aboriginal Tent Embassy, with footage from the land rights demonstrations and arrests, which is followed by a discussion with the director.

Day two repeats this pattern of workshop, film screening and discussion, with a luminous presentation by Douglas on his work with the Black Panthers and a presentation of Vernon Ah Kee's searing four-channel *tall man* (2010), chronicling the 2004 events on Palm Island in which a local Aboriginal man died in police custody, provoking protests and the burning of a courthouse and police barracks. Directly following it is a discussion moderated by curator and writer Maura Reilly.

Day three substitutes the screenings with presentations and discussions by Cree artist Duane Linklater; Altitud artist Tanya Lukin Linklater; Cree lawyer, activist, and author Sylvia McAdam; and myself. Sylvia's presentation, informed by her position as a co-founder of the grassroots, global, Indigenous-led movement Idle No More, is deeply affecting. Sylvia's homegrown eloquence, nurtured on her Treaty Six homeland in Saskatchewan—the land she labours to protect from clearcutting—charges the entire space, re-Indigenising it. Sylvia is a fighter and reminds us of the good fight that must perennially be fought.

Richard's *Embassy* is the deadly artwork of the good fight, as well as its theatre, its workshop, and its sanctuary. Outside on Broadway, the pavement covering the Wickquasgeck trail that ran up the spine of the island seems to recede. *Embassy* is blazing a trail of Indigenous solidarity and empowerment that spans the world, and I'm honoured to tread it.

Fig. 1: Vash Steinhilber. *Prank at the Home Guards Meeting 1940*. © The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photographer: Vladimir Tereshchenko. Fig. 3 & 4: Richard Bell. *Embassy* (2013–ongoing). Performa 15, New York, 2015. Photographer: Paul Gaur.

Fig. 5: Emory Douglas. Cover illustration of *The Black Panther Newspaper* (1968; Year of the Panther) 2, no. 19 (January 1969). Two colour film on newspaper, 44.8 x 29.2cm. Publisher: Black Panther Party. © Emory Douglas. Artists



1 Jasper Johns, cited in Art Institute of Chicago, *Corpe and Mirror II*, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/118981/corpe-and-mirror-ii>.

RICHARD BELL'S
HISTORY PAINTINGS:
THE DEFIANCE
OF HIS COLONIAL
COUNTERNARRATIVE
Larissa Behrendt

If history is written by the victors, then the role of the First Nations artist in a colonial society is to challenge the dominant narrative—to counter it, subvert it, and to foreground the history that is being rewritten. Artist Richard Bell does more than stare down the dominant narrative. With his hypnotic text-based paintings, he calls it out—“We were here first”; he crushes it—“Pay the rent”; he exposes its legacy—“Aboriginal Art—It’s a white thing!”; and lastly, he dismisses it—“You can go now”. As well as displacing the colonial narrative, he produces a counternarrative that speaks to a First Nations perspective and lived experience.

In his History Paintings project, Bell both decolonises and asserts sovereignty. He has long been a chronicler of radical and transformative history, providing his visual interpretation of important moments: Prime Minister Gough Whitlam passing dirt through his hands to Vincent Lingiari as a symbol of returning land, Gary Foley protesting at the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the Black Power salute made at the 1968 Olympics. These new History Paintings continue Bell’s documentation of the Aboriginal rights movement of the 1970s. It was then that Bell had his political awakening, and this new body of work captures significant figures and political actions that occurred during this intellectual revolutionary period. They focus in part on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, one of the great acts of performative activism when a group of Aboriginal men set up an ‘embassy’ on the lawn in front of the then Australian Parliament House.



Fig. 1

Umbrella Embassy (2021) shows the four men who set up the Embassy: Bertie Williams, Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, and Tony Coorey. Bell replicates a photograph of the men by Noel Hazard, bringing colour and vibrancy to this iconic image of a historic moment. *Hand-outs Protest* (2021) shows those young men as the protest gathered momentum, drawing people from around the country and providing a political platform for activists such as Foley, Sam Watson, Paul Coe, Pat O’Shane and Bobbi Sykes. *Sol* (2021) captures a youthful Sol Bellear, a key campaigner for Aboriginal rights who had spent time in the United States with the Black Panthers.



Fig. 2



Fig. 7

How to Launch a Book (2021) shows a young Craigie throwing a book into Sydney Harbour. Bell was inspired by an episode where a man who had written a book on Australian history had asked several Aboriginal people to launch it. Many declined; Craigie accepted. As he spoke the words “I launch this book”, he hurled it into Sydney Harbour. The image captures both the audacity of activism along with an important symbolic act of rejection of the white telling of Australian history. It is not surprising that this act of defiance and its symbolism resonate with Bell.

I Am a Man (2021) is an important part of Bell’s conversation. It links the Aboriginal rights movement in Australia with the civil rights movement in the United States. As Aboriginal people had visited the Black Panthers and African American activists had visited Aboriginal communities, there was an exchange of ideas going back to the 1920s. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) was a key text for many of the young activists of the era, and it built on the connections between Aboriginal Australians and African Americans and other People of Colour who embraced the ideas of Garveyism. Today, the similar experiences of the inappropriate violent force used by law enforcement makes the messages of the Black Lives Matter movement as relevant in Australia as they are in the United States.

One of Bell’s significant creative collaborations has been with Emory Douglas, the former Minister of Culture and Revolutionary Artist of the Black Panther



Fig. 6

government the power to make laws for them. The changes were the result of an almost two decades-long campaign led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who believed that the transfer of power from state to the federal government would lead to changes that would assist in addressing the poor socio-economic position, marginalisation and segregation of Aboriginal people, and would alter the policies driven by notions of assimilation and white superiority. However, the referendum result did not alter the day-to-day lived experience of Aboriginal people. They still had to navigate the structural and systemic racism around them. They were still denied employment and educational opportunities. Their children were still being removed. Begging for equality wasn’t working. The children of those who had fought for the change in the Constitution were done asking. They wanted revolution.

It was within this milieu that Bell moved from his home in Queensland to Redfern, a suburb in inner-city Sydney that had become a locus for those Aboriginal people displaced or actively seeking to move



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 3

from towns that were racially divided and offered little opportunity. Despite the poverty and aggressive and brutal police surveillance in this inner-city slum, Redfern was a place strong in ideas and a spirit of community.

Nothing symbolised the boldness and brazenness of this period more than the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Its political manifesto demanded land rights, sovereignty, self-determination. It was a radical reformulation of long-made claims by Aboriginal people since colonisation for the rights to their land, culture, livelihood and the right to make the decisions that affected their own lives.

This political agenda was not just aspirational; it was intellectual and practical. People such as Foley, Coe and Bellear joined the Redfern community in establishing Australia’s first Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Medical Service, Aboriginal childcare centre, and Aboriginal aged care service. Community-controlled organisations that were Aboriginal led and that targeted the needs of Aboriginal people were a key achievement of the era, and they remain in place to this day. Bell himself was employed at the Aboriginal Legal Service, working on cases and advocating on behalf of Aboriginal people around New South Wales. He came to his art practice with a political apprenticeship and real-world experiences and insights into the systemic racism that makes true freedom illusory.

Bell’s installation *Embassy* (2013–ongoing) pays deep homage to the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and its legacy. It provides an opportunity for us to remember that important time and the ideals it represented, but it also creates a space in which to continue the conversation, to debate new incarnations of political aspirations and ideals. It takes on the idea that art should provoke conversations literally. Bell’s *Embassy* is a space that has facilitated drawing lines between the political agenda of the past with the one of the future, the connections between the experiences of colonised people around the world, and the synergies with the experiences of other People of Colour.

Bell has described himself as a propagandist, a label claimed as an act of cheeky insolence. Although he can seem elusive, a trickster, his work hits with little room for equivocation. The 1970s does not just provide subject matter for Bell; it is a period central to his practice and theoretical framework. Like the movement and the politics his art speaks to, there is a deep intellectualism in his work supported through his influential polemic of 2002, “Bell’s Theorem”.¹

In that essay, Bell took the art world elite to task for their colonial gaze and their embrace of the art that they choose to champion. He challenged the legitimacy of the British claim to Australia on the basis of *terra nullius* (vacant or ungoverned land) and, through that positioning, the legitimacy

of the modern Australian state. He ridiculed the notion that the colonisers understand the true meaning of Aboriginal art and mocked the way they willfully overlook its political implications and meanings.

In an attempt to erase the psychological *terra nullius* that has long permeated the colonial approach to Aboriginal art, Bell’s History Paintings reinsert Aboriginal people into that narrative. They populate both the landscape and an historical timeline, ensuring that the acts of revolution—and the people who carried them out—remain as reminders of a time when there was hope the world could change for the better.



Fig. 1: Richard Bell *Umbrella Embassy* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 × 240cm
Fig. 2: Richard Bell *Hand-outs Protest* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 × 240cm
Fig. 3: Richard Bell *I Am a Man* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 300 × 200cm
Fig. 4: Richard Bell *Sol* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 176 × 250cm
Fig. 5: Richard Bell *Embassy* 2013–ongoing, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 × 240cm
Fig. 6: Richard Bell *How to Launch a Book* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 300 × 200cm
Fig. 7: Richard Bell *Umbrella Embassy* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 × 240cm
Collection: Parliament House Art Collection, Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra

Fig. 5: Richard Bell with Emory Douglas *We Can Be Heroes* 2014, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 × 240cm
Fig. 6: Richard Bell *How to Launch a Book* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 300 × 200cm
Fig. 7: Richard Bell *Umbrella Embassy* 2021, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 180 × 240cm
Collection: Art Gallery of NSW, Photographer: Jenni Carter

1 Richard Bell, “Bell’s Theorem, Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing!”, November 2002, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html>.



Fig. 1

Richard Bell (RB): [Sylvia McAdam is the] co-founder of Idle No More, lawyer extraordinaire. Look I'm very pleased to have seen you win that struggle, that court battle which you're going to have to mention. Now we have a PowerPoint. And I'm going to go back into the audience and watch this because I really want to see this.

Sylvia McAdam (SM): As Richard said, my name is Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum. I am fluent in my people's language only because my parents were hidden away and I'm going to talk a little bit about that history as I'm going through this PowerPoint and I'm going to move very quickly because some of the images I want to get to in some of the PowerPoint I have to move quickly.

So the Indigenous people, we made treaty with Canada, with the British Crown more specifically, and Canada became the successor state to it. But instead of honouring all of this, we became imprisoned, and I want to talk about that a little bit. By 1920–1927, there's all kinds of things we did that we could get imprisoned for, even gathering in a group of three. We were jailed. In 1951–1958, it depends on which area of Turtle Island that we were on, we started taking the coloniser to their court and also we were taken to court. So that spiralled into a sea-to-sea protest. In the middle of Idle No More, the colonisers and the settlers asked us "well why don't you guys do something before?" And of course being a researcher, I said "I'm pretty sure we did". But a good friend of mine and I started researching, and this is the result of this. We went back about thirty years, and everybody has heard of Oka — Oka is a huge resistance and that's one of the things that's predominant when you go onto the Internet, and then we have the Mohawk people. They have done a lot of blockades. They've been jailed. And they have been armed. There's been armed confrontations against the coloniser on our lands.

And then the Lillooet in British Columbia as well. They have done numerous resistances and there's one that's going on right now, and they've been blocking the roads and different things. And there's the secwepemc. They had a Sundance, that photo is one of our most sacred lodges. It's very sacred, and while they were having the Sundance, the neighbouring farmer, his cows kept entering the lodge. So they built a fence and as a result the police came and there were several thousand rounds of ammunition that were shot at them. And there was a landmine that exploded. And then there is the Ipperwash Crisis. If you go in and research this, Dudley George was killed. He was fatally shot by the police and these are Indigenous lands. And here in British Columbia, the hereditary chiefs they are currently still making a stand. This is the terrible part of it. They're still making a stand and they were jailed. And then in 1995 was the first time they were jailed and then again in 1997. And Grassy Narrows. Again, it's in the media a lot in Canada, but this as well as ongoing.

The Lubicon Cree are my people. I am of the Cree Nation, but in my language we call ourselves Enowuk. And this is their traditional life. They follow this and my friends here know the food I keep talking about and they're hanging around with me. I'm like, "Oh, the food!" But this is what their lands look like today, and this is the Tar Sands Development

that is predominantly in the media now. [With] the extractive corporations, there's a process to how they take the oil and gas. They go for the trees first—that's the surface resources—and then they go underground. I want you to remember that because that's important, that's important for my story later on.

And this is the Burnt Church Mi'kmaq people. They won a Supreme Court decision that says they have a treaty determined promise to fish commercially, but every time they go onto the water, they still get charged and they still have to go to court.

The missing and murdered Indigenous women. If you go and research this, it's gotten global attention. Indigenous people, Indigenous women go missing and murdered in epidemic proportions. And it's really important that you know this because it's totally connected to the extractive industry that's happening in Canada.

This is again my people. The Athabaskan and Mikisew Cree. They have won a series of court cases. These are their lands. This is what their lands look like today. It is horrible and there's no repairing this. There's no repairing us. That damage is beyond any human ability to repair.

Again, the hereditary chiefs. They stood their ground on industrial salmon. These are salmon that are shipped all over the world and they're toxic. They're not good for human consumption, and yet the Canadian state still ships them all over the world. And the Indigenous people are trying to prevent that from happening.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

And this one in particular, it just really bothers me. Again, it's Indigenous people trying to stop a ski resort from being built on their mountain. And this is treaty lands. So they built lodges on the road. The coloniser ploughed through it and they still build the

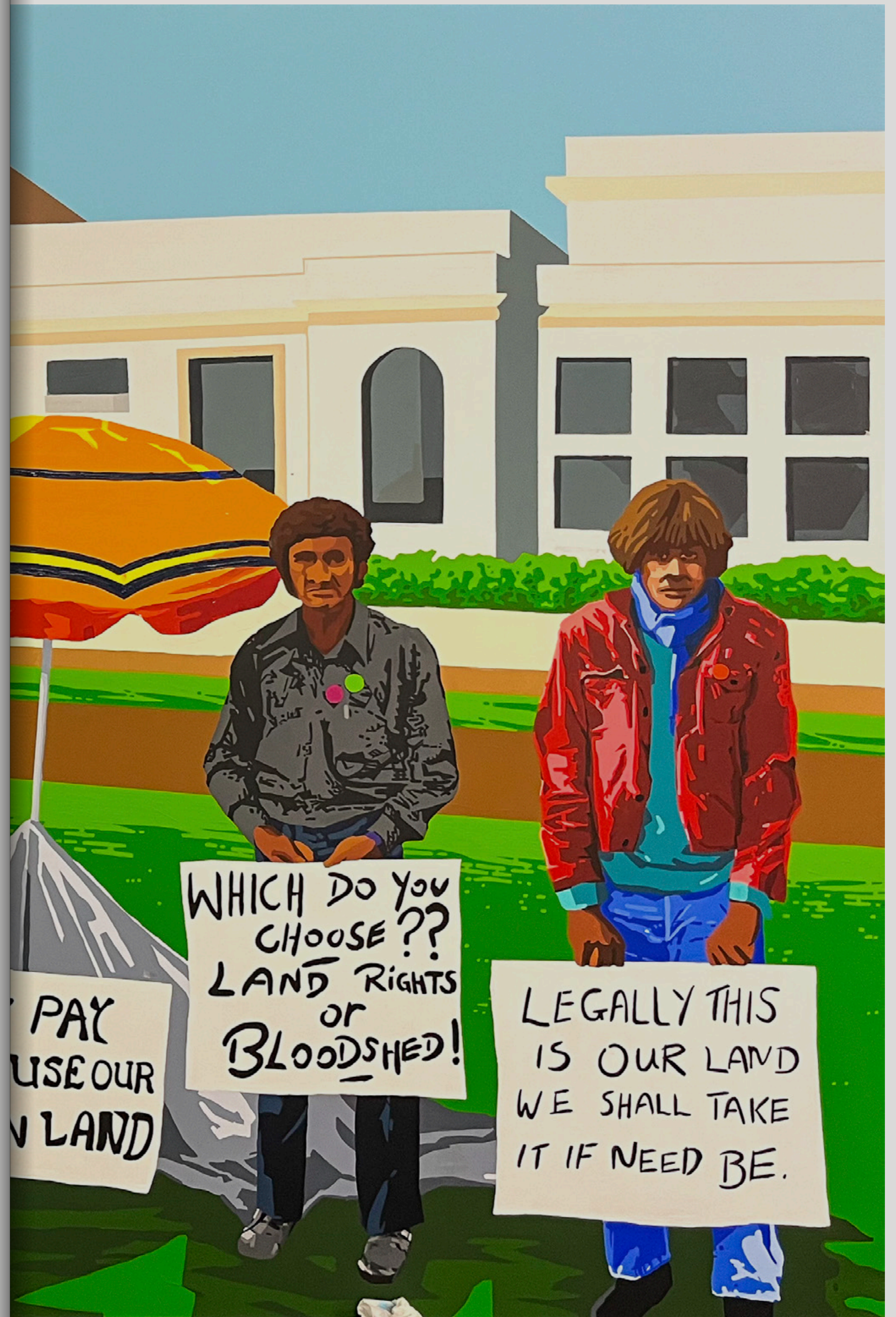
ski resort, but as they were building it, they put up these signs. That's 2004. "No Indians Allowed". This is Caledonia, Ontario. I was recently invited to a law conference there and they asked me, what would justice look like? And I answered, give the land to the Indigenous peoples. This is the clearest treaty that you could ever read. It is to the point. It's their land. But the coloniser still has that land. They refused to give it up.

There was development that was going to happen on their lands, and they refused. They didn't agree with the development or the consultation process. As a result, they were jailed. This is the leadership that was jailed, and they were imprisoned for two months and after they were imprisoned, they had to pay the company to stay out of their lands. And this was the development looks like from the sky when you were flying over British Columbia, and this is all the toxic sites all

over our lands. And again, these are images of Elsipogtog. And then Bill C-45 happened. If you know anything about legislation and the ...

[Text continued on p. 17]

Fig. 1: Richard Bell Embassy (2013—ongoing), University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 2021.
Fig. 2: Richard Bell Embassy (2013—ongoing), Adam Thomson, Alberta, 2015. Photographed by Ina Jull.
Fig. 3: Richard Bell Embassy (2013—ongoing), Adam Thomson, Alberta, 2015. Photographed by Ina Jull.



This is a transcript of Sylvia McAdam's appearance at Embassy at the 2019 Venice Biennale. It is reproduced here as an exemplar of the significant discussions and important themes that are facilitated in the Embassy space.

A recording of McAdam's presentation at Embassy, Venice Biennale 2019, is available on YouTube: https://youtu.be/0jUd_kwT1sU

**BELL'S THEOREM:
ABORIGINAL ART – IT'S
A WHITE THING!**
by Richard Bell

Introduction

This paper has been written to articulate some thoughts on this subject that may not yet be in the public domain. I am the primary source for most of the information gathered (often through personal experience or discussions with numerous people). I must say here that I am not an academic. Consequently, the style and tone of delivery will chop and change. It will be conversational, playful, serious, tongue in cheek, moralistic, tolerant, sermonistic and informative.



Fig. 1

Aboriginal Art has become a product of the times. A commodity. The result of a concerted and sustained marketing strategy, albeit, one that has been loose and uncoordinated. There is no Aboriginal Art Industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginal. They are mostly White people whose areas of expertise are in the fields of Anthropology and "Western Art". It will be shown here how key issues inter-relate to produce the phenomenon called Aboriginal Art and how those issues conspire to condemn it to non-Aboriginal control.

Western Art: Its effect

During the last century and a quarter Western Art has evolved into an elaborate, sophisticated and complex system. This system supplies venues (museums, galleries, etc), teaching facilities (art education institutions, drawing classes, etc) and referees (art critics) and offers huge rewards for the chosen few elite players in the game (including artists, curators, art critics, art dealers and even patrons). This arrangement is not dissimilar to modern spectator sports. It is also not unlike ancient religions – substitute Gods, sacrificial offerings, High Priests, etc. Like some voracious ancient God, Western Art devours all offerings at will. Sometimes the digestion will be slow and painful. However, it is resilient and will inexorably continue on its pre-ordained path that is to analyse and pigeonhole everything. Western Art is the product of Western Europeans and their colonial offspring. It imposes and perpetuates superiority over art produced in other parts of the World. For example, the African Masks copied by Picasso. Westerners drooled at Picasso's originality - to copy the African artists while simultaneously ignoring the genius of the Africans.

Any new "art movement" is, after the requisite hoopla and hype, named and given an ISM, that is duly attached to the end of a noun, e.g., "Modernism". This "nounism" doesn't transfer to non-Western art. Words like primitive, ethnographic, provincialist or folk-art suffice. Below the ISMs are "Schools". A noun followed by School. For example, the Heidelberg School.

Aboriginal Art is considered a "movement" and as yet has not graduated to ISM status by being "named". I shall do so now. I name Aboriginal Art **HIEROWISM**. It is the modern hieroglyphics. Also, there is always controversy (lotsa rows) so I think it's appropriate. So, how is it that an unqualified Black can't name an Art Movement?

Prior to the 20th Century, art produced by Westerners from former colonies was not considered to be up to the standard of art produced by resident Europeans. The North Americans demanded, and begrudgingly attained, parity with their European cousins. In fact the axis of power has actually shifted away from Paris to New York and their artists are at the forefront of Western Art today. Not so their Antipodean counterparts who struggle with what has been called The Provincialism Problem (Terry Smith in his 1974 article of the same name). This has produced a cultural cringe of massive proportions that requires artists from provincial outposts to be able to merely aspire to mediocrity.

Provincialism permeates most levels of Australian society. Consequently, it weighs heavily on the industry catering for the art of Aboriginal Australians and renders most of those involved in that industry unworthy of the roles they have given themselves. It is unwise to market Aboriginal Art from

the Western Art aesthetic and attach an Aboriginal Spirituality (an exploitative tactic that suggests that the purchaser can buy some). Perhaps it would be wiser to market this form of art from a purely Western construct. Demand that it be seen for what it is – as being among the World's best examples of Abstract Expressionism. Ditch the pretence of spirituality that consigns the art to ethnography and its attendant "glass ceiling". Ditch the cultural cringe and insert the art at the level of the best in western art avoiding the provincialism trap.

Through a brutal colonisation process much of the culture has disappeared. However, what has survived is important. The Dreamtime is the past, the present and the future. The Urban artists are still telling dreamtime stories, albeit, contemporary ones. The Dreamings (of the favoured "real Aborigines" from the least settled areas) actually pass deep into Urban territories. In short, the Dreamings cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed real Aborigines of the North and the supposed Unreal or inauthentic Aborigines of the South.

Spirituality and Ethnocentricity

There is no doubt that attaching Spirituality during a sale of Aboriginal Art helps greatly in closing a deal. Western dissatisfaction with Christianity since the 1960s has sharpened focus in this area. However, important matters haven't been given due consideration. Matters such as:

- The number of artists holding the knowledge is declining rapidly and the younger people are reluctant to take up the "Old Ways";
- Given the above, A dying, soon dead, culture is being raked over;
- The image of the "Noble Savage" (from whence comes the spirituality) implies a position of racial superiority (consciously or not);
- It is not necessary to invoke spirituality when promoting artists as individuals. Who they are. Where they're from. What they know. What they've done. These things become crucial. Perhaps the curators of the early shows were in such a rush to show the works that they hid their unprofessional (and superior) behaviour behind the "collective CV";
- That a proliferation of white experts is belittling the people who own the culture. For example, the *NAMÉZ* white expert is far better known than the mostly unnamed Aboriginal artists from the famous *Papunya School* of painters;
- That the lack of Aboriginal input into areas of concern is continually overlooked has created the feeling that the culture is being stolen, etc.

Other important issues arise out of the "Ethnographic" approach to Aboriginal



Fig. 2

Art. Anthropologists play a crucial role in the interpretation of Aboriginal Art. Their approach is, by definition, ethnographic and its classification system fits cosily into Ethnographic Art. Consider the classification of "Urban Aboriginal Art". This is the work of people descended from the original owners of the heavily populated areas of the continent.

costs) that other Australian artists receive. In any event, the amount of money an Aboriginal artist gets, rarely, if ever, stays in his/her pockets. Generally, it is shared among family and friends or their community.

The Government's continued financial support of the Art Centre movement ensures some level of Government control over the

industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. Their considerable contribution makes it look good. They think it justifies their appropriation of Aboriginal imagery in advertising campaigns, etc. They think that they have bought our culture. Well, soorreee. It never happened.

The New Tribal Order

It is now approaching the fourth decade of Art Centres and they have spawned a new tribe of people called **BINTS** (been in the Northern Territory). It must be said, though that the largest tribe in Australia is the *Lyarra* who get their name from their ability to tell very convincing lies – especially to themselves. There is emerging, as we speak, a tribe of honorary Bints known as the *bookee* (because they learn everything about Aborigines from books and fully fledged Bints). The *Bookee* rarely, if ever, deign their presence upon the Aboriginal People about whom they have become recently *expert*.

Bints get close to Aboriginal People and culture to ultimately return South where they proclaim their newly acquired "pseudo-Aboriginality". They believe this modern form of *Aboriginality* is superior to the Urban Aboriginality of the Blacks from these long ago conquered lands. And, if they don't actually believe this to be true, they have a sneaking suspicion that it is.

This phenomenon further clouds the authenticity or "realness" of Urban Blacks. That is, we (urban blacks) can be authentic Aboriginal People. We are not purebred *Aborigines*. Our culture was ripped from us and not much remains. Most of our languages have disappeared. We don't all have black or even dark skin. We don't take shit from you. We look disdainfully at you bringing our people from the North to parade them like circus animals to your audience. An audience ever curious to see a live version of the noble savage and one no less keen to congratulate themselves for not wiping out the entire Aboriginal race. We resent how you keep them away from us and we feel sorrow and sadness for OUR People. We have been consigned to the dustbin of history. Still, we survive.

The Regional System

You have erected and maintain barriers between us Aboriginal Peoples. Those barriers serve to re-enforce the *Regional System* (classification of Aboriginal Art based on geographical areas - for example, Western Desert, Eastern Arnhem Land, Urban, etc).

Within this system does there lie an insidious, sinister co-incidence to ponder? Whether or not, the racial purity of the artists is a serious consideration. Given the previously discussed issues of spirituality and noble savages it is difficult to believe that it is not. Then, is this system of classification not therefore racist? Or, should we believe that it is a coincidence and purely accidental? That it is not a postcolonial plot to divide and rule.

That Australians are indeed the kindest, most humane colonialist power in the history of the World and that Australia is without doubt the best country on the Planet Earth.

These questions are intrinsically and inextricably enmeshed within the Australian legal system, its society and in its national psyche. The Native Title Act, 1993 (NTA) is the manifestation and embodiment of these issues – its flagship is Aboriginal Art. It is the new symbolism of the new Nation.

The Native Title Act

The NTA specifically requires Aboriginal People to prove that Native Title exists (in the claimed area) by means of song, dance,

storytelling, etc. We have to prove that we are related to the birds, the animals, the insects, the microbes, the Earth, the Wind and fire. This is an extremely difficult task even for the Aboriginal People with minimal "White" contact.

The Government's continued financial support of the Art Centre movement ensures some level of Government control over the

Fig. 1: Dreamtime photo, Richard Bell, Fantasy, 2012, Norderbank, Kunst-Galerie, photo, Martin, Pichler
Fig. 2: Richard Bell, NAMÉZ, Monochrome, Collage, 2012, 2012, and 2012, 240 x 360 cm overall, Courtesy of the artist and Migrant Gallery, Brisbane



**BELL'S THEOREM
(REDUCTIO AD
INFINITUM):
CONTEMPORARY ART—
IT'S A WHITE THING!**
by Richard Bell
(edited by Rachel O'Reilly)



Fig. 1

My painting *Scientia E Metaphysica* (Bell's Theorem), or *Aboriginal Art: It's a White Thing*, won the 20th Telstra National Aboriginal Arts Award in August 2003—it was an important moment in many ways. The accompanying essay, "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing!," was written to come to terms with my position in Contemporary Art, given the aesthetic prejudices against urban Aboriginal artists and practices and the persistent white hold on, and ignorance of, our power. There wasn't a position, so I made one. I'd moved away from activism in 1992, the year of the Mabo court case, which marked the beginning of the defeat of the political possibilities of a national, pan-Aboriginal and rights movement. Mabo reexamined the absent legal foundations of the British invasion of what is now Australia. One of its main outcomes was an extremely weak "cultural" category of Indigenous land title called "Native Title," made up entirely out of thin air, to placate the case for land rights. My essay aimed to just map out, for a settler-dominated art institutional landscape, the direct links between the ongoing white control and exploitation of Aboriginal identity by the "Aboriginal" art market, and the pernicious "divide and rule" impact of post-Mabo Native Title legislation, which had already taken its hold of our people, and, I still argue, strongly constrains white imagination. In the intervening years, "Bell's Theorem" has pretty much held up as a manifesto for my art practice. It came from discussions over decades with Aboriginal people not just about art, but culture, life, politics, everything—the actual situation we are in.

Around the time of "Bell's Theorem," the politics of fine art was beginning to recede from public debates and was replaced by a flat-out race war, which dominated the scene in Australia as elsewhere from 2001, continuing up to and beyond the 2008 global financial crisis. A conservative prime minister, John Howard, had clung to power by accusing Muslim refugees of throwing their children into the sea whilst seeking asylum. The Australian government had already built refugee detention centers in the desert that resembled concentration camps. After the "children overboard" affair, it embarked on the Pacific Solution, which was to dump these people unlawfully and indefinitely onto remote Pacific islands in detention prisons. Many of these people are still there, living the hell of offshore terra nullius, twenty years later. The Yorta Yorta case was the major Native Title decision around that time and it was a whitewash, the judges imagining the "tide of history" had "washed away" people's laws and customs. I reckon you could track that history of manufactured race wars against actual land grabs through the rise and fall in Aboriginal Art sales, but not many people think about it in this way.

An Aboriginal Critique

To the Australian art world, and its broader public, what was shocking about "Bell's Theorem" was that it showed how badly positioned our work was, given that the total number of sales of Aboriginal Art was ten times the number of non-Indigenous Australian art sales internationally. Also for value of sales, Aboriginal Art just monstrous the sales figures of non-Aboriginal artists. It was bigger, better, and far more significant than the non-Indigenous Australian art scene, which had never happened before in any of the Anglo colonies. As late as the 1980s, when national Aboriginal land rights were still a political possibility and had unprecedented support from the Australian people, 80–90 percent of Aboriginal Art was still going overseas and was hardly being collected by Australian art institutions. The prices of individual artworks by painters like Emily Kngwarreye and Rover Thomas were going through the roof. So it was shocking to people

that there was so little Aboriginal control, and so little benefit, or return of value. It was an entirely unspoken and unspeakable reality up to that point. And it went against all the white fantasies of pomore reconciliation that the Australian art world and the legal establishment, the museums and Mabo, were aiming at to mystify their dominance.

Art was always a part of what we were reclaiming as our rightful, stolen inheritance. It was and is inseparable from the maintenance of our culture and economies. Without getting our land back, our culture—which was illegal to practice—is everything, is all we have. Right up until the 1960s and '70s, many Aboriginal people who were wards of the state had to ask the permission of welfare and missionaries to buy or sell anything worth more than ten pounds! That kind of thing is why the everyday extractivism and selfishness of the art world we put up with is just so painful, pointless, and banal. It is a banal missionary culture we experience each and every time when white curators and institutions think they are inevitably helping us, when merely offering us professional opportunities for our projects. When Redfern activists Billie Craigie and Cecil Patton stole the paintings of Yirawala from a commercial "Aboriginal" gallery run by a white man in Sydney on a mischievous night in 1979—important paintings by an important Arnhem land artist almost wholly under the control of a white woman—their defense was that since they were Aboriginal, and the paintings were Aboriginal-community owned, they believed they could take them legally to protect them, and they won the case. That is the kind of political solidarity and nonaligned imagination that was totally eviscerated by Native Title.

Australia was the first officially white-supremacist nation in the world. The genocide was unceasing, and legal until the twenty-first century. When the country "internationalized" its economy via US state power through Southeast Asia from the 1950s and '60s, it still paid poor colonial attention to Aboriginal art practices, "traditional" or otherwise. The inaction and backwardness of the major Contemporary Art organizations in the areas of collecting and displaying work, in taking a genuine interest in Aboriginal people, was a disgrace. It took land rights and the activism of urban Aboriginal artists for the inattention of settler art institutions to be too obvious to ignore. Arguably, the peak of the Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Art was not 1995 or 2020, but 1975, when the first state-sponsored Aboriginal Arts Board had a majority of fifteen Aboriginal members. They favored outreach collaborations and mobile production units, educational training and touring, black film and black theater, not replacing traditional forms but engaging grassroots people in the formal issues of the day and in the media forms directly affecting them. We knew we needed art and we had sophisticated media tactics. That's how I became an artist—I learned how to use the media when numbers are not on our side, which they are never. We are 3 percent of the population, and the majority of us live in the cities far away from our rightful territories, so decolonization in the way it was defined and strategized by the Algerians was just not an option.

After three years of running the place, the Aboriginal Art Board was disbanded. Sothey's set up its "primitive" art department in London in 1978, and later an auction house in Australia, but the national impact of those years was significant, impacting multiple generations. As I wrote in "Bell's Theorem," "the Dreamtime is the past, the present and the future ... The Dreamings pass deep into urban territories and cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed 'real' Aboriginals of the North and the supposed 'unreal' or 'inauthentic' Aboriginals of the South." The main brake on these crossings of solidarity, which are

material (it was shared ecosystems and people's lives that we were defending!), was always the colonial project. "Bell's Theorem" named its cultural arm: the ethnographic approach to Aboriginal Art, the authority of anthropologists, the tendency of Westerners to classify the shit out of everything for them to make their world picture, the hidden exploitation of "remote" art centers, and the clear capitalist tribal order that ranks white specialists as more knowledgeable on Aboriginal Art and identity than Aboriginal people themselves.

Anthropology Regained?

Today, many Aboriginal people are confused as to why white anthropologists continue to be asked to adjudicate the value of our practices in art spaces internationally. After 250 years of extraction, sixty-plus years of Aboriginal Art being treated seriously by art and historians (despite their limited authority for judgment), and just a few decades of Aboriginal-curated exhibitions, the time for white experts to be forging "practical" careers upon our land rights struggles in transition to neoliberalism is nearly coming to a close (because the claims themselves have been intentionally limited to a fraction of the total land base). When I wrote "Bell's Theorem," anthropologists were entirely upon our asses. Europeans today seem to think anthropologists must have all decolonized because the reckoning itself was so necessary. Given that their employment and colonial power of interpretation over our people, lands, and families only shifted from art into law in the contemporary era, with great consequences of land loss as part of the land rights legislation, how could this have been possible? Aboriginal people can't turn up to a land court and have our rightful claims heard without the verification of some white scholar from Sydney, New York, or Melbourne. That is the reason anthropologists are still on our land. The onus should always have been on white title holders to argue for their occupation of our land under claim.

What we now know was that Mabo and Howard's Ten Point Plan is what neoliberalism looked like in the South. To Europeans and settlers, neoliberalism was about wage freezes and privatized infrastructure, the sell-off of public assets, utilities, and housing. In the South and on Indigenous-governed lands, calls for the Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Art was not 1995 or 2020, but 1975, when the first state-sponsored Aboriginal Arts Board had a majority of fifteen Aboriginal members. They favored outreach collaborations and mobile production units, educational training and touring, black film and black theater, not replacing traditional forms but engaging grassroots people in the formal issues of the day and in the media forms directly affecting them. We knew we needed art and we had sophisticated media tactics. That's how I became an artist—I learned how to use the media when numbers are not on our side, which they are never. We are 3 percent of the population, and the majority of us live in the cities far away from our rightful territories, so decolonization in the way it was defined and strategized by the Algerians was just not an option.

After three years of running the place, the Aboriginal Art Board was disbanded. Sothey's set up its "primitive" art department in London in 1978, and later an auction house in Australia, but the national impact of those years was significant, impacting multiple generations. As I wrote in "Bell's Theorem," "the Dreamtime is the past, the present and the future ... The Dreamings pass deep into urban territories and cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed 'real' Aboriginals of the North and the supposed 'unreal' or 'inauthentic' Aboriginals of the South." The main brake on these crossings of solidarity, which are

breaks for art appreciation, is a nightmare for my people and it is what continues to do us all in. Tell them they're dreaming.

Against Art Industrial Assimilations

The Western hold on Art and cultural critique is not just a problem for art, it is a problem for the way we can think about culture as a space of survival, imaginative thinking, and responsibility. Museums are loot rooms to colonial patriarchy and white welfare nationalism, and yet when we take a serious look at their cultural power they are also very naked. We may engage with them or walk away from them, but they are some of the last semi-public spaces where cultural practices and debates are not entirely under corporate control, or entirely subjected to entertainment principles (though this is debatable in Australia). We can use words like "decolonization," "demodernization," "rematerialization," "feminism," and so on to describe a position or practice. But only a genuinely nonaligned art movement defecting from the status quo can deal with these things systematically, genuinely, and cooperatively as very unevenly shared problems.

In response to "Bell's Theorem," there was no real capacity of Australian or international institutions to begin to deal with the critique. If you listen to the establishment's version of history covering the successful "inroads" of Aboriginal artists into the Australian art world over the last decades, you will hear that we have all come to a place of being taken seriously by institutions and critics, that Aboriginal artists and curators are everywhere, and so on. Some will even say our work is the most contemporary! The end. Of course, we have been collected. There are now two generations of Aboriginal curators, working since the 1980s and 2000s. Institutions are dependent now upon their Aboriginal Art collections for their value propositions. Indeed, they have to put the Aboriginal Art right at the back of the institution to force visitors to walk through white specialists as more knowledgeable on Aboriginal Art and identity than Aboriginal people themselves.

Anthropology Regained?

Today, many Aboriginal people are confused as to why white anthropologists continue to be asked to adjudicate the value of our practices in art spaces internationally. After 250 years of extraction, sixty-plus years of Aboriginal Art being treated seriously by art and historians (despite their limited authority for judgment), and just a few decades of Aboriginal-curated exhibitions, the time for white experts to be forging "practical" careers upon our land rights struggles in transition to neoliberalism is nearly coming to a close (because the claims themselves have been intentionally limited to a fraction of the total land base). When I wrote "Bell's Theorem," anthropologists were entirely upon our asses. Europeans today seem to think anthropologists must have all decolonized because the reckoning itself was so necessary. Given that their employment and colonial power of interpretation over our people, lands, and families only shifted from art into law in the contemporary era, with great consequences of land loss as part of the land rights legislation, how could this have been possible? Aboriginal people can't turn up to a land court and have our rightful claims heard without the verification of some white scholar from Sydney, New York, or Melbourne. That is the reason anthropologists are still on our land. The onus should always have been on white title holders to argue for their occupation of our land under claim.

What we now know was that Mabo and Howard's Ten Point Plan is what neoliberalism looked like in the South. To Europeans and settlers, neoliberalism was about wage freezes and privatized infrastructure, the sell-off of public assets, utilities, and housing. In the South and on Indigenous-governed lands, calls for the Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Art was not 1995 or 2020, but 1975, when the first state-sponsored Aboriginal Arts Board had a majority of fifteen Aboriginal members. They favored outreach collaborations and mobile production units, educational training and touring, black film and black theater, not replacing traditional forms but engaging grassroots people in the formal issues of the day and in the media forms directly affecting them. We knew we needed art and we had sophisticated media tactics. That's how I became an artist—I learned how to use the media when numbers are not on our side, which they are never. We are 3 percent of the population, and the majority of us live in the cities far away from our rightful territories, so decolonization in the way it was defined and strategized by the Algerians was just not an option.

After three years of running the place, the Aboriginal Art Board was disbanded. Sothey's set up its "primitive" art department in London in 1978, and later an auction house in Australia, but the national impact of those years was significant, impacting multiple generations. As I wrote in "Bell's Theorem," "the Dreamtime is the past, the present and the future ... The Dreamings pass deep into urban territories and cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed 'real' Aboriginals of the North and the supposed 'unreal' or 'inauthentic' Aboriginals of the South." The main brake on these crossings of solidarity, which are

Fig. 1: documenta fifteen Richard Bell, Embassy, 2022, Norderdorpark, Kassel, Germany, photo: Martin Friedl

Extinguishment's Place-Making

The Australian museum system and art gallery system has paid lip service to urban Aboriginal Art since the 1990s, but it is only through our outspokenness and our support of each other, including through all-Aboriginal collectives, that we have gained the space to show our work and some degree of notoriety. Institutions are afraid to invite us in as self-determined collectives. And there is almost no understanding still of why we needed and still need to organize like that, in the non-Aboriginal art world, because there is such limited understanding of the relationship of Indigenous art histories to the control of people across space, in an international perspective.

When art professionals do not understand the regional, global, and family histories of our movements, they easily repeat the divisive favoring of "A team" "Aboriginal assimilationist players over the long history of B team commitments and operations. What was the A team? The A team aimed at Western legal solutions to only-cultural recognition. They gave up on our demand for land rights as a political and economic problem that still haunts us, and that increasingly haunts white people also trying to defend our lands and waters from predation. They turned us into a cultural development art of the state and limited our future legal possibilities to the benefit of a small number of already legally empowered communities. They eliminated real reparations and anything close to black radical or abolitionist politics from our demands, for an obsession with constitutionalism that is entirely favored by transnational corporations. The Howard-style con job of the Statement from the Heart already happened years ago in Eva Valley. Most blackfellas know fuck all about the Statement from the Heart, for reasons that should be obvious. But they will be as disappointed by the outcome as they were then, maybe more so. This is not "personal" critique—what continues to divide our people is part of a global regime of control and assimilation—it is no different to what is happening to Indigenous and racialized peoples' movements in wanted territories all over the world. Domestically, we write and acquit decolonial art project grants according to evaluation criteria for beauty and community set by the cultural policy of the RAND Corporation. No one bats an eyelid about this. This is wholly connected to the problem with reading our finest art practices through political minimalism—the ease of alignment with any neoconservative agenda available. But this is seemingly no concern for settler cultural industry workers, or they would speak up about it. They don't seem to even notice.

It was only through the global financial crisis that the neoliberal consensus was broken in Contemporary Art, though that never happened in Australia. In the US, artists and activists connected the crisis of subprime mortgages to histories of redlining, as an exorbitant amount of wealth was extracted from black families. In Western Europe, liberal institutions belatedly dealt with the populist right by glorifying Keynes, Marxist and feminist critiques of capitalism for the first time in decades. The communist horizon was revisited, while artists from the Former East also addressed entanglements with imperialism and colonialism. There was a more general recognition that the postwar good life, white and assimilationist, was unravelling. In Australia during this period, a large-scale Intervention into remote Aboriginal homelands rolled back years of flailing self-determined policy agendas and Indigenous-led land reform, while citizens were told the mining boom saved them from the global financial crisis

Notes

- Gary Foley, "Native Title Is Not Land Rights," Koorweb, September 1997 (native title is not land rights.pdf (koorweb.org)).
- David Watson, "Claim of Right: Defense to Theft of Sacred Bark Paintings," Aboriginal Law Bulletin 1, no. 8–9 (1981) (Weisbrot, David — "Claim of Right Defense to Theft of Sacred Bark Paintings" [1981] AboriginalLawB 11; (1981) 1(1) Aboriginal Law Bulletin 8 (austlii.edu.au).
- The first act of the new Australian parliament was the Immigration Act, otherwise known as the White Australia policy. There was no mention of Aboriginal people in the constitution. See Irene Watson, Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law (Routledge, 2014).
- Watson, Aboriginal Peoples. See also Irene Watson, "There is No Possibility of Rights without Law: So Until Then, Don't Thumb Print or Sign Anything!" (2000) (Watson, Irene — "There is No Possibility of Rights without Law: So Until Then, Don't Thumb Print or Sign Anything!" [2000] IndigLawB 44; (2000) 5(1) Indigenous Law Bulletin 4 (austlii.edu.au); and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Virtuous Racial States: The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," Griffith Law Review 20, no. 3 (2011) (Moreton-Robinson-2011-VirtuousRacialStates.pdf (sfu.ca)).

(which was impossible, because the profits aren't kept in the country—only 15 percent of mining interests are Australian owned). A persistently conscientious corporatism has left no space for a shared, let alone intersectional, understanding of art's actual conditions of production beyond a neoliberal multicultural agenda that is traumatizing for almost everyone because it is so devastatingly meaningless.

Art institutions today seem to prefer to focus on the problem of extinction over the problem of capitalism. Precisely by not connecting these, they limit their relevance. There is no fear of the damage of such conservatism in daily institutional decision-making. Directors and curators update themes, and try to invite more diverse artists to the performances and parties, but the mode of production is exactly the same. Some artists are doing double the work through practices that do not perpetuate colonial modernity, but without major turns at the level of direction and organization, our best interventions become sensational and singular, almost in spite of what they actually are. A just-in-time mode of production and a lack of understanding and respect reduces our work to just another commodity, sold up to whiteness. Meanwhile, capital's hold on the real and the possible, in and outside of art, continues apace. When Occupy Wall Street was accused of itself occupying the lands of the Lenape (the original Indigenous people of Greater New York), it was a teachable thing that happened for the urban left in New York City. We need that kind of literacy at the center of Empire and at the frontiers, shared between all kinds of people. Instead, we have manufactured identity wars watched over by very poorly educated urban settler cultural industry professionals, who have no idea how to reproduce anything that matters.

**The Limits of Ethical Consumption
(More Ooga Booga)**

Europeans love nothing better than to indigenize their racist humanism when they themselves are in crisis—it is one of their most dearly loved moves (all of the Enlightenment guys did it, not to mention the modernists). While the Western world has now fully penetrated the globe with their most easily commodified globalisms, the political economy they've violently assigned our communities cannot address the situation that any of us now face together. There is no more planet or time left. An Indigenous and nonaligned conversation about genuinely independent and collective politics is what was always needed. We also need to remember that the very concept of comparative civilizational recognition is a white thing.

Consider, for example, the gargantuan problem that some of the most ornate, land-based forms of Australian Indigenous paintings today—paintings which testify to the intergenerational resistance and survival of peoples, their intimate ancient knowledge and maintenance of lands, waters, and songlines—are so freely offered up as non-political consumption to the most colonial and the most easily commodified globalisms. People still misread the urban Aboriginal artists' critique of what we call Ooga Booga. Ooga Booga is not a critique of land-based or "traditional" practices. Ooga Booga is not even the work itself. It is what is cultivated and harvested by the white traders. It is the market niche that attaches spirituality as supplement to the work, although what is sacred has already been shielded away by the artist and community. The real magic of the important knowledge is not given over to the buyer, but this point is academic. It is the white-managed fantasy of access to our very being that they want. In France, Germany, the

- See Lindy Nolan, Driving Disunity: The Business Council Against Aboriginal Community (Spirit of Eureka, 2017) (BusinessCouncilAgainstAboriginalCommunity.pdf (eureka.org)).
- SEED is Australia's first Aboriginal youth climate network (https://www.seedmob.org.au/).
- Brisbane Blacks, "Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance: Manifesto," November 24, 2014 (Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance MANIFESTO by Brisbane Blacks - Issuu).
- Slavery is almost never associated with black Indigenous politics in Australia. We had slavery until the 1970s in some areas, and our movements were in conversation with black internationalism from early days. See John Maynard, "In the Interests of Our People": The Influence of Garveyism on the Rise of Australian Aboriginal Political Activism," Aboriginal History, no. 29 (2005).
- "Update August 1993: Eva Valley Meeting. 5th August, 1993," Aboriginal Law Bulletin 3, no. 63 (August 1993) (Aboriginal Law Bulletin — "Update August 1993: Eva Valley Statement; People * Place * Law; Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles; Fourth Australian Law and Literature Conference; Mabo: A Symbol of Sharing" [1993] AboriginalLawB 28; (1993) 3(63) Aboriginal Law Bulletin 3 (austlii.edu.au).
- For the RAND Corporation, see (RAND Corporation - Wikipedia).



Fig. 2

Netherlands, New York, they will always want painting, weaving, dance, and sand drawings, but the appetite for our spirit in the absence of a critical curatorial and noncorporate economy participates in a broader depoliticization and aestheticization of all of our practices. Europeans want the finest work, of course, to be viewed in a vacuum, shielded from the rest of humanity, and even from their capitalism!

The fact that art remains relevant in this voracious stage of unlimited total

production is indeed a testament to art's power. But what we get, what the public gets, are the most easily commodified globalisms, viewed through Western minimalism still. Such curation says nothing about our struggles to maintain life against our disempowerment. The unprecedented "Aratjara" exhibition was occluded to tour Western Europe by land rights activists in 1993. "Aratjara" was one of the most important, collectively deliberated, large-scale, Indigenous-curated exhibitions seen anywhere. Each work across all media stayed attached to a rightful argument about our different land relationships with the group, but that show is almost always missing from the international exhibition histories

reflected by white art historians. The few places that collect urban Aboriginal practices in Europe update their representations to be "inclusive," but they rarely show the broader ethnographic system that essentializes us ahistorically into place.

When we insist on our internationalism, our solidarity and communal traction, shared professional commitments to the field of "Culture" might involve more accountability. What Aileen Moreton-

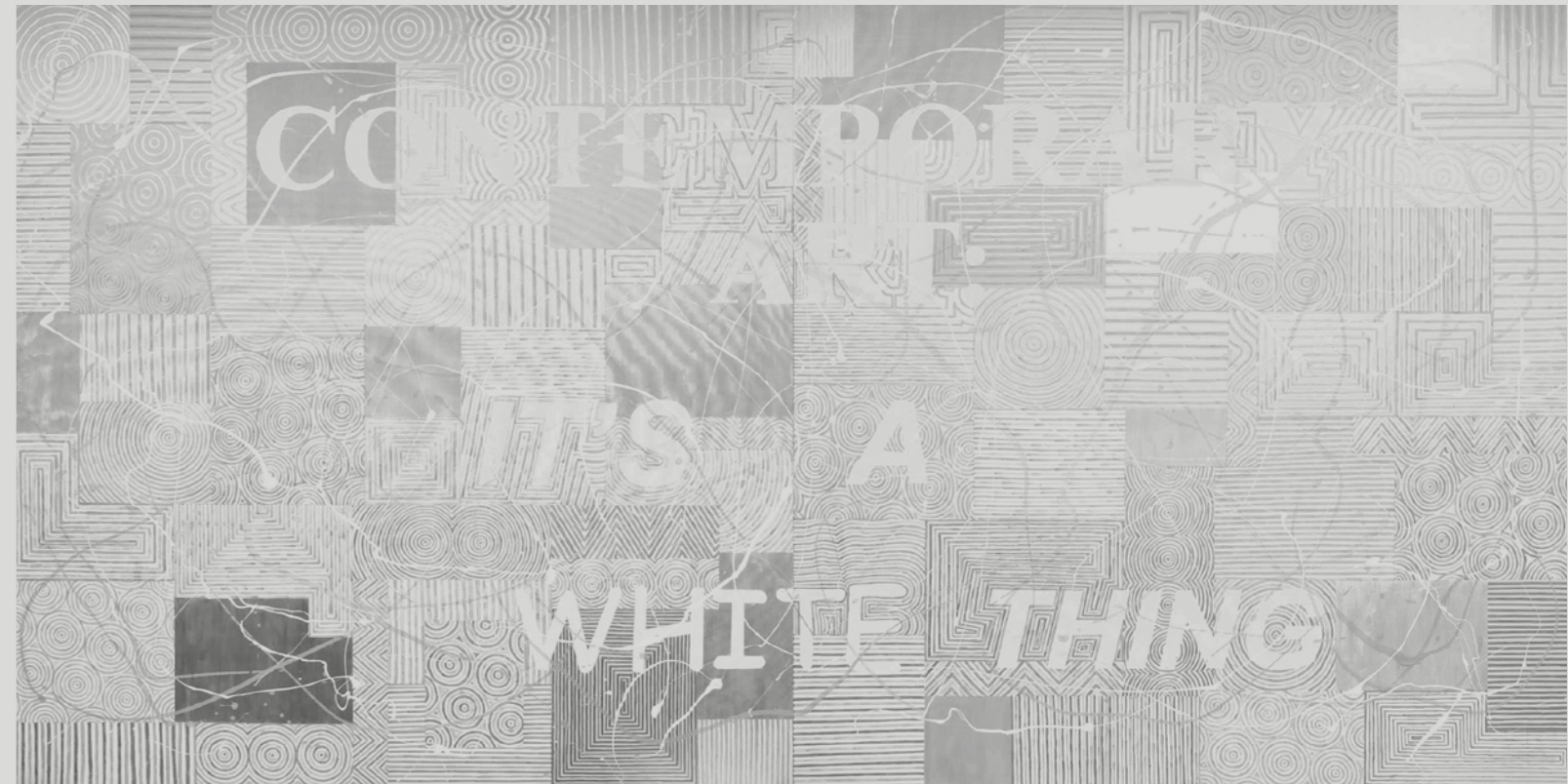


Fig. 3

Robinson called "white possession" will always be in the room. So the question is—whether you are in an artistic, curatorial, academic, or managerial position—how are you going to respond to the real generativity, the serious generosity of the call for accountability that is coming from the nonwhite position and from artist groups? "You scratch my back, I piggy-back on yours" is not a very edifying professional experience for any of us. Can the traffic in Aboriginality that non-Indigenous spaces profit and benefit from—indeed can't do without in the Anglo colonies, despite no returns of value or profit to our communities—can it ever be deployed otherwise? Based on the last forty years, perhaps not. Or at best, rarely so. Much more often, revisionist takes on our history and practices do deep colonizing damage, wittingly and often unwittingly, offering little to nothing on the side of a broader collective sense of well-being.

Reductio ad Infinitum

- See Rachel O'Reilly and Danny Butt, "Infrastructures of Autonomy on the Professional Frontier: Art and the Boycott of Art," Journal of Aesthetics & Protest, no. 10 (Fall 2017) (https://joaap.org/issue/10/oriellybutt.htm).
- "Aratjara" translates as "messenger" from the Arrernte language. See the catalogue Aratjara: Art of the First Australians: Traditional and Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists (DuMont, 1993).
- Aileen Moreton-Robinson, The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- Talia Berniker, "Behind Closed Doors: A Look at Freeports," Center for Art Law, November 3, 2020 (https://isartlaw.org/2020/11/03/behind-closed-doors-a-look-at-freeports/).
- Noëlle BuAbbud, "Nightmare at the Museum: An Interview with Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum," Berlin Art Link, February 5, 2021 (https://www.berlinartlink.com/2021/02/05/interview-coalition-cultural-workers-against-humboldt-forum/).

Documents is a marker for Europeans of their turn away from race, but not their racial entanglement with the Global South and East. What actually occurred in the so-called "postwar" era was a switch towards gross national product as the measure of all things. You can't celebrate doing away with fascism while maintaining global capitalism. The postwar biennial space is a good thing, but looking inwardly, all the Europeans can see is themselves. Outside that whiteness, the rest of the world isn't. The fact is, 90 percent of the world's population is not white. But this is not reflected in the art market. There may never be a reckoning, because of the simple fact that the art market is driven more by the need to avoid regulatory control and taxation (of "whatever") by sovereign states, than by any historical focus on literacy. New terra nullius zones like freeports, designed specifically for lawless art operations, are built in direct response to the climate crisis, while carbon smokes from the NFTs. The market attention has moved through Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, through blackness, but this is a calculus, and Indigenous Art is next to have its moment. It's presented now as contemporary, but it will still be "a white thing."

Documenta fifteen is not going to look like any other previous iteration and the usual audiences may well find it difficult to navigate. They may feel under attack, or affronted to not be able to recognize themselves or

their cultures. How will they react to the multitude of issues and ideas unleashed by such unfamiliar practices? The previous documents and the Berlin Biennales of the past were just a precursor to this, and shows like "Diversity United" may be used as a bit of a distraction from it. There will be many unrecognizable names that have never been in a prestigious biennial before, and certainly never shown in a major institution. It is the fault of the institutions, and the curators, that they haven't been able to find these people. Questions need to be asked. Why have the museums and curators not been able to find them? Why have these artists been ignored? The reason is clear, Contemporary Art is a white thing.

As I write this, a major and important exhibition of Aboriginal songlines from the middle of the desert of Australia will soon be showing in Plymouth, the port of Cook, before heading to the Musée du Quai Branly (so blatantly anthropological and primitivist), and landing inside the gargantuan Prussian Palace of the Humboldt Forum, one of the most neo-imperial museum projects of the twenty-first century in Western Europe. When ordinary Germans see this kind of important show in that kind of place, that is the kind of show that is presented to them as Aboriginal, and only that kind of art is the kind of art that they will be looking for in the future. How do we deal with this kind of aestheticization and depoliticization of really significant practices? This is a project driven by progressives, and conservative institutions have grabbed it and will turn it into a neo-ethnographic experience. They are pretending to care for our culture and knowledge but will take no interest in the Arrernte situation. It speaks to the lack of iterative venues for complex contemporary work, and to the central fact that even when Aboriginal Art is assumed to be contemporary, it is ghettoized

and essentialized as a white thing. I don't believe this institution has the capacity to enact a duty of care for this exhibition. Rest assured, the Humboldt will not be the only major institution to stage shows like this. To be very, very clear, this is not a criticism of the exhibition, but of the venue, and of the kinds of institutional entanglements we have to deal with. It is a judgment on the unworthiness of the Humboldt to hold it.

I believe that in the next decade or so, as the hunger for Indigenity, for ecology, for a new black market of unfamiliar "Indigenous Art" practices becomes more widespread, and that the most popular work on the market will be the least political, the least offensive, and the least critical. The market will choose the winners. It will try to wholesale ignore the most outspoken and dispossessed people in my country, rendering the most critically engaged Contemporary Art the least valued. Gagosi Gallery has already tipped its hand with two Emily Kngwarreye shows and we have Steve Martin as an overnight "influencer." The direction they are taking is a familiar one. It always starts out and finishes in the same way. The market will continue to exoticize to destroy Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples and lands globally, and the art market will be a frontline.

No land, no compensation, just an easily ignored voice. Hope less. Do more.



Fig. 3: documenta fifteen Richard Bell Embassy, 2022, Nordendpark, Kassel, Germany; photo: Martha Priddy



Fig. 3

The task for Urban Blacks becomes monumental and mostly impossible. To date, every determination by the Federal Court of Australia has been appealed to, or is on appeal, to the High Court of Australia.

The degree of difficulty facing Aboriginal People in proving their right of inheritance is in direct contrast to non-aboriginal people who merely have to prove they are related to another human being. Is this not therefore racist?

The High Court, during its Mabo decision (which precipitated the NTA), overturned the legal fiction of *Terra Nullius*. Under both International and British Law at the time of settlement of Australia there existed three methods by which Sovereignty could be acquired by foreign States:

1. Conquest
2. Cession
3. Terra Nullius (Latin for 'land with no people' or 'empty land').

The British Government chose the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* as its method of acquisition of Sovereignty over Australia. It is safe to assume that they did this to avoid the need to negotiate with the Native Peoples about the terms of the exchange of Sovereignty (Treaties) which was required had they chosen to invoke either *Conquest* or *Cession*.

The High Court of Australia must be admired for its creativity. It invented a NEW element to enable acquisition of Sovereignty. They called it *IMPLIED CESSION*. This element has no legal precedent in either British Law or international Law. It is another legal fiction. They have inserted a lie for a lie. As it must be admired for its creativity so the High Court must be condemned for its audacious land grab.

- The relationship between the NTA and Aboriginal Art is undeniable. The relevant requirements of proof are inextricably linked.
- The relationship to the land - with the song, the dance, the painting,
- The White interpreters - with the Art critics, the anthropologists;
- Law versus lore - with lawyers, anthropologists;
- The legal industry and the "industry" that caters for Aboriginal Art trot out from within their respective ranks "experts" who are interchangeable between them.

White Australia uses Aboriginal imagery and native fauna and flora to promote tourism and other industries. These things belong to the Black Fella. However, an underlying assumption that arises out of this use of our imagery is that there has been a conciliation process through which an equitable partnership between Black Australians and White Australians has been created. Patently, blatantly, gratefully, this is not true. Never ever has the White Fella sat down and talked with us about all of the things they now call their own (they even call us *their* Aborigines - as if we are their chattels). It is true, however, that they have talked to and at us on many, many occasions. But only on relatively minor matters like Native Title.

Paternalism

The paternalism and social engineering of the old colonial regimes are cynically matched and even surpassed by the new postcolonial ones. The Australian Government continues

to assert Aboriginal People don't have rights - that we have privileges. Of course, this is also conveniently misconstrued to project to their electorate that Aboriginal People are somehow more privileged than are Whites. Another recent example is the "Reconciliation" process that once again suggests conciliation at some prior date. It never happened. Reconciliation was a con. Now they find that they have to begin to re-own their silly nation. Denial is a crucial part of Government strategy.

The underlying essence of land tenure in Australia is paternalism. That Aboriginal People don't own the land; couldn't own the land; never owned the land; that we don't understand ownership of land; that we couldn't/can't understand ownership of land. That Aboriginal People aren't/weren't fully evolved human beings. That we can't manage our own affairs. That we can't do without you. That we were lucky that the English "settled" our lands. That you have been here too long to be denied your *Land Rights*. This IS the prevailing attitude in this country.

You don't believe this is to be true? Then ask yourself the following questions.

1. Please circle either Yes or No.
2. Do you believe, and I mean REALLY believe, Aboriginal People:
3. Once owned all of Australia? Yes/No
4. Still own all of Australia? Yes/No
5. Still have rights to land that have not been properly negotiated? Yes/No
6. Had a recognisable form of land tenure? Yes/No
7. Were "civilized"? Yes/No
8. Are "civilized"? Yes/No
9. Deserve to own all of Australia at any time? Yes/No
10. Deserve to own all of Australia now? Yes/No
11. Deserve to own any of Australia at any time? Yes/No
12. Deserve to own any of Australia now? Yes/No
13. Deserve to own any of the good parts of Australia? Yes/No
14. Can manage their own affairs? Yes/No
15. Should be thankful for everything you have done for us? Yes/No
16. Should be thankful for some things you have done for us? Yes/No

Now, Ask yourself what you believe. Then what you think the average punter believes. And don't Bullshit.

Having confirmed your paternalism, if not racism, consider your view and position in relation to Aboriginal Art and indeed Australian Society. Perhaps you should also consider that you are an uninvited guest behaving like a "Star Boarder".

No one ever consults Aboriginal People on important matters. No one asked if they could take our gold out of our land. No one asked us if they could run up a credit bill for hundreds of millions of dollars. Little wonder then that people like Osama bin Laden think they can interrupt our peaceful resistance without having to consult the Aboriginal People. If you can do it. He can do it.

Appropriationism

It is time, now, to discuss the distasteful and discomfiting subject of the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery. This practice has been accruing for centuries throughout the World (according to Jacques Derrida et al). It has

become an accepted movement in Western Art called, appropriately, Appropriationism. The Aboriginal People of Australia and people from other former colonies are most upset about Appropriationism and consider it to be stealing. We couldn't care less about Western artists appropriating one another. But, we object strongly to the appropriation of "our" artists' work by non-aboriginal people.

There are several causes of distress arising from appropriation and its so-called "death of the author" argument. Firstly, the artist may not be the sole owner of the copyright of the "story" or the imagery contained in the artwork. Secondly, the "sharing" of imagery between the coloniser and the colonised is suggestive of an equitable agreement between the artists. Not true. Otherwise, the works would be collaborations. Thirdly, Aboriginal People all over the world are adamant that their respective cultures are not for sale - that our cultures are the only things we still own and that we will own and that we will struggle mightily to maintain that ownership.

Aboriginal People have stated our case against Appropriation. We are not asking artists to do the impossible or even to do something that is difficult. A vow never to pick your nose is impossible to keep. A vow for monogamy is difficult to uphold. That a desire by non-Aboriginal artists to overcome the aforementioned provincialism problem may urge them to appropriate Aboriginal imagery is not an excuse. Artists appropriate because they can. So too, a dog can lick his balls because he can. To all those artists who have resisted the temptation or who now desist, congratulations and thank you.

Anthropologists

Aboriginal cultures throughout the World have been infested by plagues of Anthropologists down the Ages. Never more so than during the last three decades here in Australia. We have been the most studied creatures on earth. They know *KNOW* more about us than we know about our selves. Should you ask an Aboriginal how they're feeling, the most appropriate answer would be "Wait 'til I ask my Anthropologist." They are stuck so far up our arses that they on first name terms with sphincters, colons and any intestinal parasites. And behold, the DO speak for us.

Countless books have been written about Aboriginal People by White folks. All their information (including photographs) is taken *as and for free*. Come the book launch and the Aboriginal informants are nowhere to be seen, *naturellement!* Of course, this shabby treatment is readily rationalised thus: "But they were so nice. I thought they didn't mind". Or: "But I didn't have any money then". Whaatt! No advance from your publisher? Perhaps they're just burns. However, it is suspected that they and their publishers are of the opinion that we are so desperate to talk to them, that they are sooo kind to be even talking to us that we must be thankful. How superior! I should suggest that the Australian Government advise publishers and the oligists with their praying mantras that it is prudent (and decent) for them to budget for these costs as a matter of due process. Information costs. The bank should also equip all Aboriginal People with an EFTPOS facility to rectify this blatant exploitation.

The work of anthropologists merely serves to perpetuate the prevailing hegemony

inserting their anthropocentric-theological twist on the studied culture thereby paving the way for their religious allies to wreak their havoc.

Essentially, it is felt among Indigenous Peoples, that the anthropologists really have better things to do than to delve into our cultures. For example, they could analyse the colonialist cultures to understand the relationship between the imposition of powerlessness and terrorism. This would be an extremely useful (and welcome) contribution that would go a long way towards redeeming anthropology's appalling reputation.

Exploitation

The most emotive issue to arise out of Aboriginal Art is the "E" word. No - not ecstasy. Exploitation. Despite or in spite of the Aboriginal Art centre system, exploitation of Aboriginal artists has proliferated. In fact exploitation has become an art form that is so proficient that it is thoroughly deserving of an ISM. I give you *Exploitationism*.

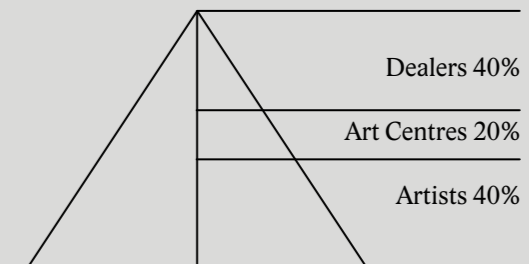
There are numerous instances that can be quoted of Artists relinquishing works at extremely low prices to unscrupulous dealers to resell to realise exorbitant profits. One profitable and exploitationist practice is to bring the artists to the "Big Smoke" to paint for a wage. In these cases the artists are paid a weekly sum that negates any further claim for payment. The dealer is not required to set aside any percentage to the artists even though the works are sold for considerable sums of money. Don't believe it? Consider whether any dealer would bring to the smoke anyone other than the artists whose work is saleable and at good prices. This practice should be monitored and audited.

There is also the example of profiteering by accident. A teacher at a remote settlement is delightedly surprised at the artistic abilities of the natives and begins to collect (cheaply alright! Ridiculously cheaply) the earliest examples of those works. Some of those works surface decades later at auctions with reserves that resemble telephone numbers. The profit margin in the reserves of these works in some cases was upwards of 1000%. Is the teacher the sole beneficiary of this "accident"? Or, is there an arrangement in place where the artist (or their families) too benefit? If not, is this not also an example of gross exploitation?

The Triangle of Discomfort

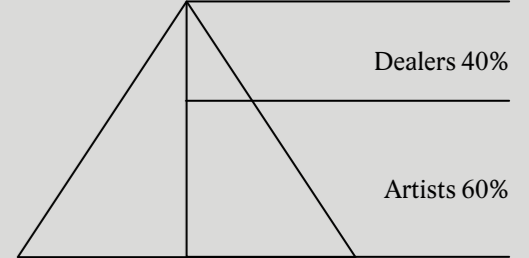
Earlier in this essay, reference was made to the fact that the artists (through the Art Centre System) receive 40% of the consigned retail price for their work. While this is not ideal, there is a strong argument that it is fair. Let us assume it IS fair, for example, a work sells for \$1000, the artists receive the obligatory \$400, the Art Centre receives its \$200 and the dealer gets their \$400. See diagram 1.

(DIAGRAM 1)



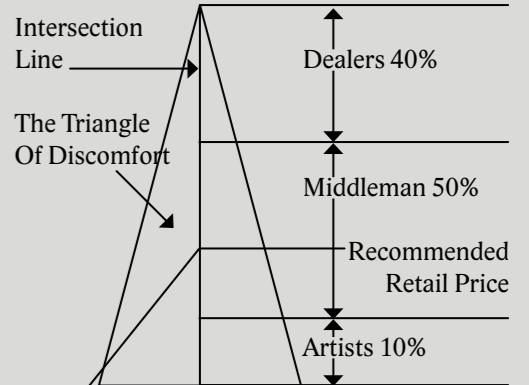
Of course if the artist is directly involved the artist (Black, White or Brindle) must receive 60% (or \$600) of the retail price. See diagram 2.

(DIAGRAM 2)



Unfortunately there are severe variations to these scenarios. For example, a work retails for \$1000. The dealer takes the requisite \$400. A middleman emerges who takes the remaining \$600 having already paid the artist (or promised to pay) \$100 or 10% of retail. Clearly, a case of exploitation. In this situation, what I have called the Triangle of Discomfort comes into play. See diagram 3.

(DIAGRAM 3)



The Triangle of Discomfort measures the excess above the recommended retail price, which is 1.5 times whatever the artist receives. It can be seen in diagram 3 that the dealer and the carpetbagger do exceedingly well in comparison TO THE ARTIST. Ultimately the co-operation of dealers is essential to overcome these sorts of problems.

Should an Art Centre not be involved in the sale of Aboriginal Art, and instead a middleman is involved, then that person should be permitted no more than 20% of retail as commission. Please note, these middlemen are there in numbers and they won't go away. They need to be regulated in order to avoid the Triangle of Discomfort.

It might be said that this is difficult, almost impossible, to do. Not so. The Art Centres are well equipped, with the latest technology widely available to them. Due diligence towards the authenticity of the work would confirm the price paid to the artist should an Art Centre not be involved. There must be cooperation between the dealers and the Art Centres, even when the middlemen are involved. Any dealer or Art Centre not prepared to go through this process should be liable to legal sanction. Or, they must engage in some other activity.

Conclusion

It is a great source of discomfort to Aboriginal People that Aboriginal Art is not controlled by Aboriginal People. Indeed that is so for many other people. It has been shown that there are numerous issues and mechanisms that impact on the phenomenon known as Aboriginal Art. Its sustainability and the ability of the artists to reinvent themselves are not discussed here.

Aboriginal Art is bought, sold and promoted from within the system, that is, Western Art consigns it to "Pigeon-holing" within that system. Why can't an Art movement arise and be separate from but equal to Western Art - within its own aesthetic, its own voices, its own infrastructure, etc?

Please permit the proposal for the recommendation of an Ombudsman for the Arts in Australia to look after the interest of all of its artists. The Ombudsman must be able to intercede on behalf of artists with investigatory powers and with legal sanctions available to effectively deal with issues such as those mentioned above and any other important matters that may arise from time to time.

It is extremely doubtful whether Aboriginal People in Australia will ever be able to regain control of this important part of our culture. Obstacles and barriers have been cruelly and thoughtfully placed to deprive us of an equitable future. For example:

- The Native Title Act;
- Stereotyping of Aboriginal People as lazy-good-for-nothing drunks;
- Valourising one group of Aboriginal People whilst demonising another on the basis of racial purity;
- Inflicting anthropologists upon us;
- Sanctioning a new tribal order;
- Subjecting us to paternalism and exploitation;
- Appropriating our images etc.

All these crimes serve the purpose of dehumanising us to justify to ALL non-Aboriginal Australians that it's okay to deny us justice. Forever.

There is no hope.

Acknowledgment

I would sincerely like to thank all the Aboriginal People who have kindly shared their knowledge and experience and to whom I owe everything and I dedicate this to them. Richard Bell November 2002.



Fig. 4: Richard Bell Embassy (2013–ongoing), Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2014. Photographer: Aaron Brinkwood.

Fig. 5: Richard Bell Embassy (2013–ongoing), Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2014. Photographer: Aaron Brinkwood.

Fig. 6: Richard Bell Embassy (2013–ongoing), Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2014. Photographer: Aaron Brinkwood.

Fig. 7: Sylvia McAdam and Richard Bell, Embassy (2013–ongoing), Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2014. Photographer: Joshua Maguire.

Canadian state, they are using legislation now to eliminate Indigenous peoples also as a form of extinguishment and genocide. And this is the first bill in a series of very problematic bills. And then [showing photo of the Idle No More original organisers] we didn't know each other. There was Nina Wilson, Jessica Gordon, Sheila McClain and myself, and we said "we can't stay quiet". Silence is considered consent. Remember that I know the colonisers, that's their law, and so it's probably happening in Australia and New Zealand. So, if you're quiet that's considered consent.

But it doesn't work in cases of violence and sexual assault and children. It only works in reasonable minded people like ourselves. That's the only time it will work. So a little more happened. And then we went to Montreal, Edmonton, Toronto. And remember how cold Canada is? This was like minus 40. And we're still out there dancing. And then in Whistler, James Bay to Ottawa, Attawapiskat, Cape Britain, Windsor, Vancouver and Victoria, Ottawa, Lethbridge. And the young people stood up. That's what made it really powerful. The young people stood up because they have the energy, they have the creativity. You wouldn't believe some of the stories I could share with you—if I had more time I would share them, but for now just know that they are powerful group of

young people. And then it went international. Across the Americas overseas by Twitter. And here's my story. That's my people's lands. Isn't it beautiful? Don't come there in the middle of winter! I love the winter. When it's minus 52, the trees sing a different song. It's so beautiful. It's so beautiful. And this is what it looks like today. We made a symbolic blockade in the middle of this road on my people's, on my family's hunting lands. These lands are supposed to be protected by treaty. My nephew and I we built, we made a shelter and that one day we had been out there for like three months. They came for the trees the coloniser came for our trees remember? They go for the trees first. And so my nephew and I said, "No, we're going to go out there. We're going to live out there". They must have been watching us because that one day we left and we're going to go get supplies and we were gone for about four hours. When we came back, my nephew has a really good sense of humour, so we're laughing and we're driving up there. And as you drive up you see that sign that says "No trespassing". Somebody had shot that up. It wasn't shot up when we left. And if you know anything about weaponry, a 22 gun will not kill a human. It will hurt you, but it won't kill you. Those are not the bullets of a 22 gun, that's a rifle. A rifle is lethal. It will kill you. It's meant to kill. So my nephew, we didn't say anything, we just went silent. And we drove up that road. That's where our shelter is. And that's my nephew in the red, he was only twelve at the time, and that's my other nephew. He came and went. My family supported this whole thing, but it was my nephew and I that went and lived out there for about four months.

So we went back to our shelter. And we sat there. I think we went into automatic mode. I started cooking. He started chopping the wood and we made a fire. We didn't even talk to each other. We were like "Oh my God we've got to keep busy". Then after we're done, after we ate, we sat down at the fire and we're looking at the fire and my nephew said, "Auntie". I'm like, "Yeah?". He said "I'm scared". And he said "You know, that was a death threat". And he's only twelve and he figured that out. And so I said "Yeah, probably". He said "I want to go home". So I said "OK". So we went home. It's about an hour's drive to the reserve that I'm registered in as an Indian under "The Indian Act". It's about an hour's drive. We drove home. In the morning, the phone rings about 10:00 o'clock and I pick it up and again he's like, "Auntie?" I'm like "Yes?". He said, "We've got to go back". I'm like "Yes". We got in our vehicle, we went back. And then... they took our trees. I'm not talking about ten miles. I'm not talking about twenty miles. This is hundreds and hundreds of miles. How many of you have heard of the Amazon rainforest? What they're doing? Canada surpasses the Amazon rainforest, and a lot

of people don't know that. It's incredible the destruction that's happening. And look at that. We told my dad "Don't go, don't go out there. No matter what you do, don't go out there". These are hunting lands. These are lands that he grew up hunting. We had a cabin, where he's standing just a little ways, we had a cabin. The coloniser burnt them all down. And my dad stood there and my brother took this picture. This is the pillaging and the plundering of the coloniser. And you think it's historical. It's not. This is the doctrine of discovery at play, and it's working and it's unfolding. We have graves out there, they don't care, they don't care. And we never ceded and surrendered our lands. We keep telling that to the coloniser.

Good news—we did save some of the land, we did. And that forest still stands today and I'm going to be living out there in July and August to keep continuing to protect it because we have to be diligent all the time, all the time. If I turn my back for a little while, they'll go in there and take the trees constantly, it's like there's no peace. There's no peace at all.

So we're building homes as a form of resistance. This is a gentleman that was homeless for a very long time. And that wood stove. It can generate electricity. There are ways to live on the land without having to rely on electricity. And this is one of the things that I'm involved in. In fact, after I'm done here, this is where I'm headed. It's called Opaskwayak Cree Nation, and we're working on building homes that do not put a demand on the coloniser's material like plastic. I have such an issue with plastic. And all the materials that are created from oil and gas. And the trees that are being taken away from our lands... it is just incredible. It's an incredible devastation. This is one of the houses that we built. We didn't want to build homes that had plastic or anything. We tried to minimise that. This is cross-laminated timber and radiant heating. And if you want more information, just go into Facebook and search One House Many Nations.

And these are our allies. That's Jacob Mans, the really tall white guy. He's leading it. We're feeding him our ideas, our Indigenous knowledge and he's supporting us by creating things that support our ideas of how to live on the land. Of course, we always need money and we always need donations. We do not accept any money from extractive industry, oil and gas, from the government, nothing. All donated from our allies and people who support our work. And this is what we do. We do teachings. We provide information. If you go into our website, we have various packages and different things that you can use for free to inform people. And every year we have campaigns. Right now, there's a huge resistance against the Trudeau government because the situation has gotten worse. And so when I go home I hit the pavement running again. It's like just no peace for Indigenous peoples.

This is one of my favourite pictures. It's young women. We want freedom, liberation, and self-determination. In this day, in this era, to talk that way is really problematic. I hope that I live to see that—that my people will have freedom—because right now we don't. We do not have freedom. There is an apartheid system happening in Canada right now, and it's called "The Indian Act" and I'm subject to that. Come and visit me and I will walk you through the lands that I'm describing here. I always invite people, but I'll be there for July and August. But you're welcome to come and see. I don't want anyone feeling guilty because of the information that I provide here. I want people if you feel some form of guilt, feel it, let it go. Guilt has no place in a revolution, in a resistance. Hope, love. All of that drives me. And the people I work with and I don't want you to think that I work alone. I work with amazing people like Wanda, Richard, Sheila McClain, Alex Wilson, Janice McCocus. And you know what? It seems to be, the people who seem to know the most injustice, are the ones that I work with and that's the LGBTQ community, Two-spirit people, Trans. They are the ones that seem to come and support. I don't know more than most. I don't know what that is, but it's powerful. And I love them for that. So

that's my presentation. [applause] RB: Look, you just had a win in court. SM: I did. RB: Would you like to tell us about that. SM: Alright, thank you for reminding me. OK, so my brother and I got charged. Remember I was telling you the cabin got burned down? The shelter got burnt down so we wanted to replace it. So the coloniser said, "No, you can't." And we said "Yes, we can." So, it was back and forth like that for like two or three years. And we were like "Yes, we can." So we started building and they came and charged us. And these are lands that we have been on for thousands of years. But they wanted us, and for the people who are from countries who are doing this, they wanted us to get a permit from them first, after they burnt down our shelter.

OK, so we said "We're going to rebuild." They said "No, you need a permit from us first before you rebuild." And we said "No, we're not, we've always been here." And my people are buried just right there. And so we started building. They came and charged us and then it was on going. We try to talk some sense into them. It didn't work. And then, so we went to court. And we ended up in court and it was back and forth, back and forth. And then a decision came down. I really thought we were going to lose because the judge looked directly at us and he said, "Sylvia McAdam, Curtis McAdam, you are being charged with blah blah blah blah blah, right?" I thought "Oh my God". I kind of sunk into my chair. And then all I heard was "The Crown has failed this, this." And the

thing I heard was "They failed to prove their jurisdiction." And we won! [applause] It was an amazing win because no one ever wins against the Province. The coloniser has set it up that we can never win even if we go to court. So that alone was an incredible victory. But we're not dancing the victory dance yet because they have six days to appeal. And that will bring them to May 21st. So, if you see a victory dance happening on May 21st, you know that they're not appealing, and we're good to go. And we're going to build. We're going to build and replace that shelter that they burnt down. And we're not going to get a permit. We refused to get a permit. RB: You also ran for Chief. Talk to us about that. [laughter and comments from the audience] SM: Exactly! Right! See, she knows. Like our systems, our leadership has mimicked the coloniser so well, that we no longer need the colonise to dehumanise and oppress us. We're doing that to ourselves so well. When I ran for Chief, I'm not a politician, let me be clear about that. But I watched on TV when politicians would go door to door, and I thought "I'll go door to door!" that was crazy because I ended up finding children alone. I went to one home, I thought they were not home. And I drove up and it was late evening. I drove up and then it was dark. But I thought I saw a fire going and then I went out there and here it was, children building a fire outside, trying to cook and there was no electricity. You know, different things like that. And then I ended up at this guy's home

and it looked like it was a chicken coop. That's what it looked like. It looked like a chicken coop. But there was a car there. There was a car. And so, I went up there. I knocked on the door. And I hear this voice say phtikok which means "Come in." So I go in. And it looked like someone dug a hole and put some boards together and here there was this man living there and he had been living there for sixteen years. Imagine that, in the cold! Minus 52 and he was living in there for sixteen years. So I told him if I get in for Chief, I'll try to do something. Even if I don't get in for Chief, and

it created a void. Imagine being told you cannot ever go to church. You can't ever go see your therapist. You can't ever go, see, to a song ever again. That's what happened to my people. We weren't even allowed to sing until 1958. RB: Sing Hallelujah! [laughter in audience] SM: We were allowed to sing that! RB: But doesn't all these possessions go into a big pot? SM: Yes. RB: Then you come along, you have a turn and you reach in. But if you grab that, it's yours, and this is the best, the most valuable gifts that these people have. The most valuable possessions, if they have them, they have to put them into the pot. SM: Yes. RB: That's part of the culture. And everybody who wins something, even if it's maybe just a little knife that somebody made, that person might have had the most

wonderful gift in the whole potlatch. But that person who got that tiny little gift would treasure that because that is the most valuable gift or possession that that person had. So, it's a wonderful tradition. SM: Yes, I had to give up my bike when I was eight. That was my most valued possession. My dad said if you're going to go you're going to have to give up something of value to you. So I brought my bike and I loaded it up and gave it away. [Sylvia laughs] RB: Let's thank Sylvia for her stories. [applause]

I didn't get in for Chief. But I couldn't walk away. It was against my people's laws to walk away. So that's where the idea of One House, Many Nations came from. And we gave him a little mini home. But something happened that we learned from, and I want to share that with you. He would move into that, he would go stay in that little mini home and then go back to his chicken coop and then go. You know he was back and forth. And then we were like, "What is going on with him, like what's going on? Why is he not moving in?" And then a good friend of mine, one of my best friends



Fig. 5



Fig. 4

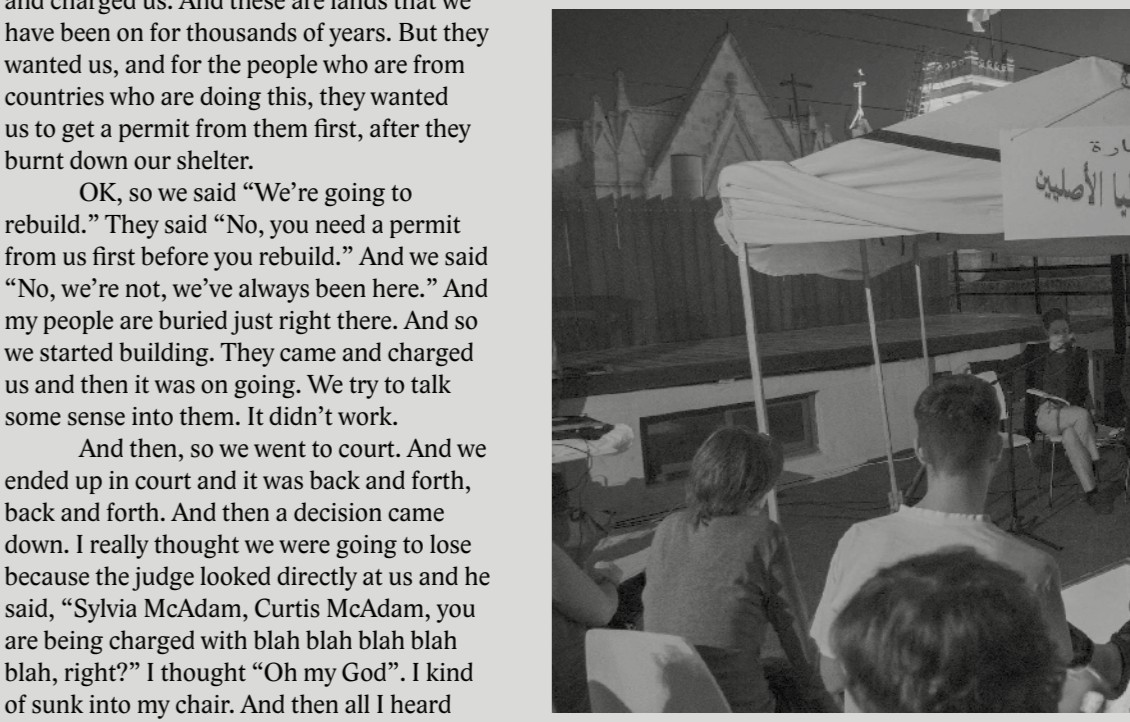


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

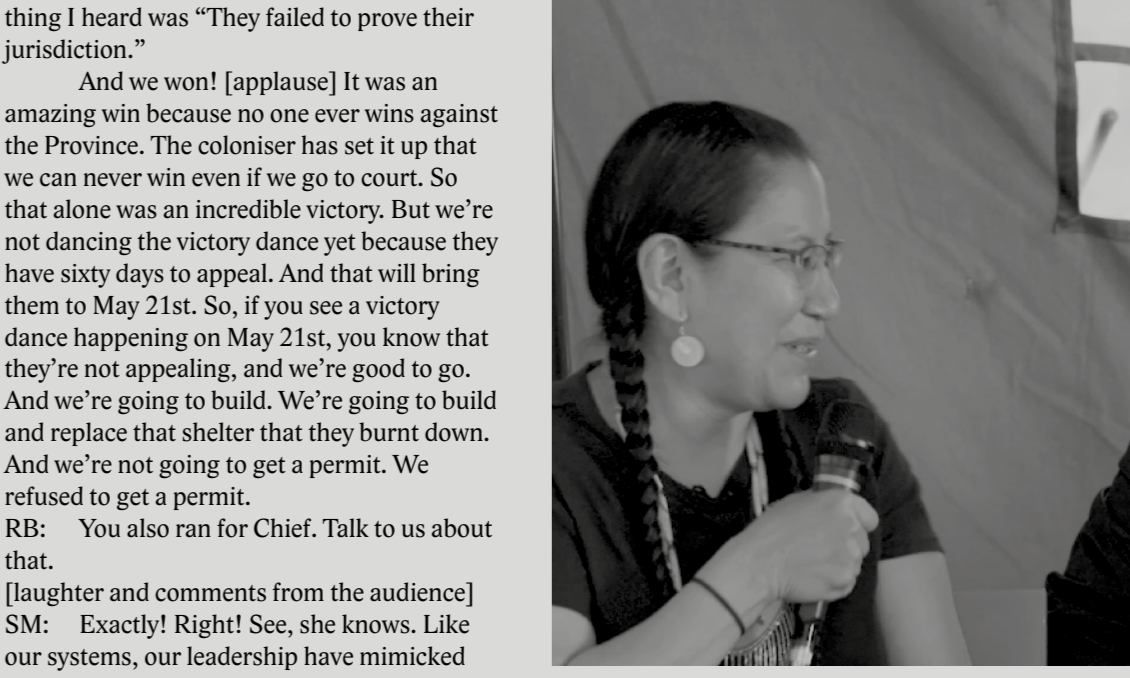


Fig. 8



Fig. 1: Richard Bell *Embassy* 2013, synthetic polymer paint on plexi; format transferred to single-channel digital video, black and white, sound archive, installed: 306 × 600 × 79cm. Photo: Greg Bennett. 01 × 180 × 25cm, 90 × 124 × 3cm, 90 × 90 × 5cm, 180 × 120 × 25cm, 111:52:40 hours. Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and Tate, London with support from the Queensland Art Centre, Brisbane. Purchased 2015.

Fig. 2: Richard Bell *Vincent an' Gough* (From *Little things good things grow*) 2017, synthetic polymer paint on polyester, 180 × 240cm. Collections: The University of Queensland, Queensland, Purchased 2017.

Fig. 3: Richard Bell *Western Art* (2019–20), synthetic polymer paint on polyester, 180 × 240cm. Collections: The University of Queensland, Queensland, Purchased 2017.

THE DADAIST RICHARD BELL: INHABITING THE DISLOCATIONS BETWEEN ABORIGINAL ART AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Andrew McNamara

Richard Bell and I live in the same area in Brisbane. We often bump into one another on the street. Our conversations usually involve Richard cheerfully detailing his latest plans for provocation and outrage. A few years back, there was some commotion in the neighbourhood and the police were swarming around the area. I remember later telling him that I resisted leaving the house and going to the shops for fear of being arrested. After only a momentary reflection, Bell quipped with a characteristic grin, “welcome to Blackfellas’ world!”¹

Bell often combines the deadly serious with caustic wit. “Blackfellas’ world” is the experience he seeks to capture. His recollection of having his home in Mitchell, outback Queensland, bulldozed by white authorities when he was a mere fourteen,² is the subject of a new work *No Tin Shack* (2022) exhibited at the Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy, in 2022. The juxtaposition of *Embassy* (2013–ongoing) with this newly recreated structure is poignant as they are both humble structures: two dwellings that lay outside of mainstream white society. From a childhood experience of bewildering dislocation and hurt, Bell has conjured an affirmative, disruptive voice that fights back against injustice and the overly long shadow that paternalist colonialism has cast over Australian society.



Fig. 1

Bell’s voice is prominent in his art and in everything he does. Boisterous and unremitting, it combines two defining aspects. First, contrary to appearances, there is a *conservative* or conserving element to Bell’s project. I mean this in the sense developed by Walter Benjamin, who argued that a genuinely *critical* historical mission conserves moments of resistance that have been lost to history. Real lived history is messy and littered with the wreckage of unfulfilled possibilities. Official accounts, such as colonial histories, bury these possibilities within a tidied-up “winner’s” narrative, which portrays their

version of history as the inevitable march of progress. The conserving mission, for Benjamin, retrieves such lost alternatives for the present day; it also narrates history from the perspective of those who have been repressed or did not make the winner’s list.³ *Embassy* provides an apt example. It seeks to revive memory of a significant Indigenous moment of resistance to White Australia: the original Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which was first erected outside Australian Parliament House in 1972. This recovery mode of historical memory is equally evident in a series of works by Bell dedicated to outlining an alternate First Nations history. These works recover the memory of figures or events ignored or marginalised by official Australian history—for example, the work *Vincent an’ Gough* (From *little things good things grow*) (2017) features the Gurindji Aboriginal rights activist Vincent Lingiari (1908–88), who led a strike by Aboriginal stockmen over better rights and conditions, an act of collective struggle that can be recognised as an early land rights struggle.⁴



Fig. 2

The second and more familiar aspect of Bell’s critical voice is, however, his vociferous insistence on self-assertion and contestation. Another Benjaminian term, the “destructive character” helps to explain this approach too. Its motto is to “make room”. For Benjamin, this amounts to claiming a space for new trajectories from which to forge fresh perspectives.⁵ Making room means clearing a path through the most impenetrable of impasses, whether conceptual, cultural, historical, or political. “Where others encounter walls or mountains”, Benjamin writes, the destructive character “sees ways everywhere”.⁶ The destructive character is not simply content to tear things down; the crucial thing is to find a way through the ensuing rubble. In Australia, this has meant dismantling the Biggles-like nature of the colonial narrative. In 2006, Bell declared that his “mission is to redefine Urban Aboriginal Art”.⁷ His strident efforts aim to make space for his own position and for other artists in his position. It is easy to forget how contested and marginal this term once was: Bell bristled at the way the “popular image of Aboriginal art”—equated with “dots and bark paintings”—was deemed “authentic” cultural expression whereas art associated with the label “Urban Aboriginal Art” was considered fabricated or “inauthentic”.⁸ This evaluation was interpreted by Bell as another way of maintaining colonial supremacy.

His essay “Bell’s Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing!”⁹ refuted essentialist claims associated with identity politics, particularly as they apply to Indigenous art, and famously dismissed them as “a White thing”, even an ethnographic conceit.¹⁰ He went further: the prevailing distinctions between urban Aboriginal art and remote customary practices are not only a conceit of Western projection, they are also good for business because the banner of authenticity enhanced the ability of the White art market to sell the art. “There is no doubt that attaching spirituality during a sale of Aboriginal art helps greatly in closing a deal. Western dissatisfaction with Christianity since the 1960s has sharpened the focus in this area.”¹¹ Bell sought to invert the hierarchy: “the only authentic Aboriginal people in this country are the urban Aboriginal people, they’re the only ones that behave autonomously ... the only ones whose lives aren’t wholly and solely determined by white construction.”¹²

While this claim might sound exaggerated, the critically “destructive impulse” to make room helps to explain why—although Bell proclaims he is proudly Aboriginal—he follows many other artists in insisting that he makes contemporary art rather than “Aboriginal art”. What makes Bell different is that the destabilising of categories is practically routine to him—even those he must rely upon or those most sensitive to the unsettling effects he puts into play. If Bell sought to make room, then he made room by upsetting prevailing White assumptions separating Indigenous and contemporary art.¹³ The opposite of the destructive impulse, Benjamin argues, is the act of passing “things down to posterity by making them untouchable”.¹⁴ The rendering of Aboriginal art as untouchable is what Bell dismisses as “Ooga Booga”, which he parodied as “the stuff made by real Aborigines for white consumption”.¹⁵ This is very different to the increasingly common assertion that urban Indigenous art or customary art and practices should be considered “one and the same”.¹⁶ This is clearly not Bell’s position. His stance is even difficult to assimilate to the familiar imperative declaring that Indigenous cultural axioms uphold cultural continuity, and are “grounded in traditions, guided by ancestors”.¹⁷ Bell’s primary provocation in using the derogatory term Ooga Booga is to clear some space for the recognition of “urban aboriginal art” and its critical mission.

If one talks about an “Aboriginal avant-garde” emerging from the late 1980s until the present, as Ian McLean does in *Rattling Spears*, then it certainly reads like a fair description of the situation and aspirations of Bell and his contemporaries.¹⁸ But what does it mean and what space is being cleared when conjoining these terms “Aboriginal” and “avant-garde”? What is incongruous about Bell’s practice is not the presence of a conserving historical mission alongside a radically disruptive one, but the bid to combine the two. If we collapse the tensions and say they are simply one and the same, then we risk losing sight of what is confronting or jarring and thus specific to Bell’s practice. After all, if Blackfellas’ world is difficult, why should their art be less so? As Bell points out, he must deal with the destructive legacy of colonisation: “The fact that I have to use the language of the coloniser is a statement in itself. That I don’t have the stories from the six tribes that I descended from is appalling. I’ve gone the other way. I’ve borrowed from European artists.”¹⁹

Going the other way entails some adherence to Western, critical cultural formulations.²⁰ While he always emphasises shared struggles and aspirations, Bell is at the same time an ardent individualist, uncompromising when it comes to his art practice, and much else besides. Critique is his mainstay. Bell certainly does not fulfill the criteria of a customary artist in any conventional sense, yet this does not mean that Bell is simply accepting of Western imperatives. He resists the polite axiom which insists that politics is better in art if immanent to the work. “Aboriginal people need to be more open [about what we want]. Directness is needed. We can’t just talk in metaphor”, Bell declares.²¹ This reflects Bell’s oft-repeated claim that he is more of an activist than an artist: “I describe myself as an activist who masquerades as an artist.”²² Authenticity, for Bell, ultimately means possessing the directness of an activist.²³



Fig. 3

Bell is not so much a painter as an artist who puts barbed representations into play. He does not paint landscapes, nor scenes in the conventional sense—until his relatively recent History Paintings. The viewer is immediately thrown into a maelstrom of rhetorical positions: accusations, cajoling, racist taunts, fighting back. Text intermingles with appropriated styles that mix, for instance, Pop Art with its once antithesis Abstract Expressionism. White privilege, negative stereotyping, a history of invasion, displacement, dispossession are often the chief themes. Bell’s paintings are a forcefield of discourse. Similarly, while *Embassy* commemorates Aboriginal activism, it also constitutes an open, public forum for the discussion of a range of issues: globalism, capitalism, empire, colonisation, patriarchy, whiteness, and the issues affecting people’s daily lives.

Bell’s work *Western Art* (2019–20) appropriates Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). With its helium balloons pinned to a miniature replica of art’s most famous urinal, the work plays the playful side of Bell’s debunking treatment—this time of avant-garde “posterity”. The strongest parallels with Dada, however, lay elsewhere beyond this teasing appropriation. Bell’s use of text in his art also has echoes of Dada.²⁴ I am reminded of Hugo Ball’s prophetic utterance in 1916 that the key thing to concentrate on when using text is not the conventions,

such as syntax, but rather the space between words: “I want the word where it begins and ends.”²⁵ In Bell’s hands, this Dada-like propensity translates into a concentration upon the space between utterances, between competing worldviews, where one ends and a new proposition begins, between the colonial history of dispossession and Blackfellas’ experience. Dadaist artists were inspired by a quest for an uncontaminated origin—to explore a pure sound, or thoughts before rationality—all in the name of a protest against modern irrationality; in particular, the xenophobic nationalism and its devastating consequences in World War I. Despite the historical distance, other parallels remain. In wartime exile, Ball proclaimed, “For art, it is not an end in itself ... but an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in.”²⁶ This could be read as a precursor of Bell on art and activism. At the same time, Dada sought to evade the clutches of the market, and capitalism’s commodification of everything, even if it meant reviving art: “A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by stockbrokers’ hands, hands worn smooth by coins.”²⁷

I am not saying that Bell was directly influenced by these specific examples. Instead, they have established long roots that have passed down like so many mutations during the past century. These avant-garde influences do not amount to a tradition, but rather a legacy from which one picks and chooses as Bell has done in his own very deliberate take on art history. Bell could be likened to an Indigenous Dadaist, but without the urge to find some pure return. In fact, this is what he criticised about the reception of Aboriginal art with his proclamation “Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing!”²⁸ Yet, there is a wider dynamic or tension they share. Dada exalts in avant-garde axioms of critical challenge and creative reinvention, but as Bell’s words also make clear, Dadaists were aware that without the critical-cultural act of reinvention, the market

inhabits the void as the primary arbiter of value within modern cultural practices. Such concerns would be echoed by many subsequently, such as Bell, who is just as critical of Western art as a construct. The avant-garde impulse, like Benjamin’s destructive impulse, is inclined to critique and challenge, which explains how both conjoin so well within Bell’s practice. At the same time, there is a counter movement that pulls toward shared ambitions. What we tend to forget is that the historical avant-garde generally stressed collective goals.²⁹ Bell’s *Embassy* can be seen as striving to bring together the two contradictory motivations that underpin the artist-activist conjunction—that is, an avant-garde drive combined with a community-focused or collective ethos. I would not say *Embassy* reconciles the tension between the two as much as it serves as a site for how they can be thought about again, linked, while remaining in active tension. The critical side of Bell’s art is best evident when it conveys a visceral sense of dislocation. Between colonial dispossession and “going the other way” by recruiting an avant-garde critical-destructive legacy, Bell has marshalled a defiant voice that turns the violent destabilisation inflicted on Aboriginal people into a cultural weapon. It disturbs because it communicates this dislocation as a widely felt condition of the postcolonial world, which that same world would otherwise seek to ignore.

1 Bell recalls this experience in *Richard Bell: My Art Is an Act of Protest*, uploaded by Tate, 8 June 2019, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDXksMvx2gk>.

2 For example, Benjamin wrote “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history”; “They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers”; “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it”; Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana, 1982), 256–57.

3 See also works such as *The Sign, Sign It* (2017) or *A White Hero for Black Australia* (2011).

4 Benjamin, “The Destructive Character” (1931), *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1985), 157–59.

5 *Ibid.*, 158–59.

6 Richard Bell interviewed by Archie Moore, 2006, reprinted in *Richard Bell: Positivity*, ed. Robert Leonard (Brisbane: IMA, 2007), 84.

7 *Ibid.*, 83.

8 Richard Bell, “Bell’s Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing!” reprinted in *Richard Bell: Positivity*, 27–32.

9 *Ibid.*, 27.

10 Bell interviewed by Moore, *Richard Bell: Positivity*, 84.

11 “That’s what they presented us with: authentic Aboriginal art, then inauthentic Urban Art. Now they’re trying to backpedal”, *ibid.*, 83.

12 Benjamin, “The Destructive Character”, 158.

13 Bell interviewed by Moore, *Richard Bell: Positivity*, 83.

14 See, for instance, Clothide Bullen, “Introduction,” *Richard Bell: You Can Go Now*, ex. cat. (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2021), 14; “The storytelling that Richard Bell engages in carries with it the implication that we are all one and the same, albeit from dissimilar geographical locations.”

15 See, for instance, Kaimana Barcase, “Grounded in Tradition, Guided by Ancestors: Indigenous Business in Uncertain Times,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (December 2020): 4–5.

16 Referring to *Koori Art ’84* as the “first exhibition to announce the idea of urban Indigenous art”, Ian McLean describes it as “a rallying point for artists, they organized similar exhibitions over the next few years, creating a collective identity, the sense of a black avant-garde”, in *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 209.

17 Richard Bell, “Interviewed by Michael Eather,” 2002; reprinted in *Richard Bell: Positivity*, 77.

18 This legacy is difficult to acknowledge because modern critical-cultural axioms infuse the vocabulary of those who seek to object to the Western system due to its history of colonial exploitation and its capitalist appropriation of the present. Terms such as “the liberated voice”, disruptive challenge, the emphasis on individual or collective dissent that prompts social change do not stem from customary or traditional cultures. I believe Bell intuitively grasps this dilemma. See Maura Reilly, “Speaking Truth to Power,” *Richard Bell: You Can Go Now*, 33–37.

19 Aisha Fairley and Agnes Portalewska, “Reclaiming Aboriginality: Richard Bell,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, December 2011, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/reclaiming-aborigeneity-richard-bell>.

20 Emma-Kate Watson, “Richard Bell Calls for a Reckoning” (interview), *Ocula*, 4 June 2021, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/richard-bell-calls-for-a-reckoning/>. The first utterance Bell makes in his short film for Tate Modern is “My shows are an act of protest. They’re activist”.

21 Activism in art became a way for Bell to show mainstream white audiences the reality of colonial injustice. As Bell often explains, “I found out that I could say whatever the fuck I wanted to in art and not get arrested.” *Richard Bell: My Art Is an Act of Protest*.

22 “My art has always been quite direct. That reflects me as a person as well. There’s an authenticity. What you see is what you get,” Bell, cited in Watson, “Richard Bell Calls for a Reckoning,” which is quite apt; Reilly, “Speaking Truth to Power,” 33. The link with Dada in relation to Bell’s work was first raised by George Petelin, but only tangentially and without developing any stylistic parallels; see George Petelin, “Richard Bell: Prospectus 22,” *Richard Bell: Positivity*, 75.

23 Hugo Ball, “Dada Manifesto” (1916), in *Past-Impressionism to World War 2*, ed. Debbie Lewer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 34.

24 *Ibid.*.

25 *Ibid.*.

26 See Sascha Bru, *The European Avant-Gardes, 1905–35* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 206; Eva Forgács, *Hungarian Art: Confrontation and Revival in the Modern Movement* (Los Angeles: Doppelhouse Books, 2016), 93.



**“WHEN YOU THINK OF WARRIORS, YOU BETTER THINK OF ALL OF US”¹
THE ART AND WAR OF BLACK PROTEST
Chelsea Watego**

I remember stepping onto the lawn of West End’s Bunyapa Park one warm Saturday afternoon of spring in Meanjin (Brisbane),

after having been invited to present within Richard Bell’s installation of *Embassy* (2013–ongoing) for the 2020 Brisbane Festival.

I feel the memories on my shoulder, I hear the melodies of the warriors.²

The original Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established on the lawn of the then Parliament House in 1972, an act that Richard describes as a “distress signal” and a “symbol of resistance to the colonial power structure that still oppresses us”.³ Having recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, it represents the longest continuous protest for land rights in the world.⁴ In taking the “aesthetic”⁵ of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to the rest of the world, Richard explains that it represents a line in the sand that Blackfellas have drawn. He asserts “that line in the sand is a work of art”.⁶

Entering Richard’s *Embassy* that day, I wasn’t coming to perform as an artist. I was coming to speak as an academic. It was here that I would speak of some things that had previously been unspoken. I had been

on a period of extended sick leave from my workplace. The University of Queensland (UQ), against which I was in the process of pursuing a race and sex discrimination case. It was during this time that my body appeared to have failed me, and in so doing, I was failing in being able to turn up in any productive sense. What I could do during this challenging time was to theorise both the metaphorical and literal bruises upon my body. Theorising the violence was a means to write my way out of this physical and mental debilitation, or at least drive through it. During this time, I wrote my debut book *Another Day in the Colony*,⁷ in which I found a way to speak of Australian Aboriginal peoples’ survival amid the unrelenting racial violence we experience.

We are the eyes and ears of the land and we have seen everything you’ve done And as we heal the body that your colony has shattered Say now that black lives matter or fucking run.⁸

It was against this background that I entered *Embassy* to deliver a paper tracing my thinking about those bruises, entitled “Institutional Racism: F**k Hope”.⁹ It marked the first time I spoke publicly about my experience with UQ, as well as of a violent encounter that I had had with the

Queensland Police Service, incidents that had occurred within months of each other. In so doing, I would emerge from that dark period in my life into the blazing sun, and I would do this not by speaking of hope and rainbows, but instead of the uselessness of hope as an emancipatory strategy.

Crying in the dreamtime there’s a broken soldier, Crying in the dreamtime there’s a broken warrior.¹⁰

I was apprehensive about the occasion of speaking and how my talk would be received. As I walked across the lawn and through the crowd to take my seat inside the tent,

I noticed white male colleagues from the same school within the academic institution that I would speak of and the violence I had encountered there.

I bear every grievance that has befallen me.¹¹

The anxiety I felt was not about what I had to say, but about the impact of what I had to say, because invariably when we speak of the violence we are subjected to, we are met with more of the same violence. Moreover, I hadn’t had my speech ‘legalised’ to ascertain the defamation risk it posed, even in its truth telling. During my talk, which I read out,

I would occasionally glance up. I noticed Richard’s unwavering gaze as he sat across from me. I didn’t know what he was thinking, but his presence in that space allowed me to feel safe and emboldened to speak. I thought less about the white gaze and more of the Black minds that were present.

There’s something sacred about where I stand today and it’s not just the stories beneath my feet. It is the strength of those who have stood here before me; my ancestors, my elders, my uncles, my aunties. Without their voices I wouldn’t have mine. Without their bravery I wouldn’t have agency. Without their selflessness, we would still be seething silent rage under the hands of those who govern us.¹²

In that moment, I realised that this festival installation was not only a work of art but also a new space that was being created for us so that we could safely and fearlessly meditate upon our experience of racial violence. More than an aesthetic representation, it was a

re-creation for a new generation who had not been conceived when the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was first erected, but a re-creation that conceived and foretold their political yearning nonetheless.

Because the battle isn’t done.¹³

Since the publication of my book, I have found myself at festivals and writing circuits that are slightly removed from the stages of lecture theatres, classrooms and reading groups I would normally think out loud in. I feel a strange discomfort with these new stages, with their glaring lights that shine so bright you cannot see who it is you are speaking to; and where one’s voice is captured and amplified so crisply that you feel it must be at the expense of all others. What I have struggled with the most, however, is the applause that such performances are met

with. I much prefer the awkward silence of thinking, because that is what our work—politically, intellectually, and creatively—is meant to do: engender awkwardness and discomfort. I worry about the performative nature of Black protest in these festival places, where we are applauded and bestowed laurels for our ability to understand and articulate the violence visited upon us as a people. In the act of being lauded and our words consumed by rapt audiences, does our writing lose something of its power to move and disrupt?

We will not die, we will not be wiped away We will shudder and we will cry and we will feel the pain that you have forced into our veins But we will most certainly fucking remain And we will push back with more power in each push And heal and heal and heal...¹⁴

Returning to that day in Richard’s *Embassy*, I did not know at the time that there were Blackfellas listening with the express purpose of creatively responding to the conversations being held in that space. Two years later, I would view the performances of artists from Digi Youth Arts, a young Black performing arts collective, and I could see that, like Richard’s *Embassy*, theirs was not so much as a performance but a kind of thinking out loud,

theorising that I too had been practicing. Their continued theorising has shaped and structured this personal reflection. Our best Black minds sit not in the academy but stand in the streets. Our best Black theorists find stages not only in lecture halls or festival spaces, but also on top of police cars, on the steps of coroners’ courts, on the walls of art galleries, and at Black kitchen tables. Black thought is everywhere.

And for them, I am grateful. And for them, I pick up the torch, for them, for us, for the future, for the future’s future.¹⁵

The power of Black thought cannot be measured by the stage that platforms it, but rather the audiences to which it is directed—those whom it seeks to be in conversation with. Its power is found in those spaces that bring Black people together to think out loud together. Our best work, after all, is that which we do for each other, despite the risk and the cost. It is the work that is in conversation with each other, not that which directs us how to understand the world from the podium or lectern, that talks down to us. Our best work need not be pretty or palatable

and it most definitely should not pander to or perform for white applause. The power of Black thought resides in its commitment and accountability to the collective whole, and an unwavering belief in Black power, wherever it finds expression. Black thought is relational; it is embodied and enacted every day. There is not one way of knowing, capturing or expressing it, nor is there a divide between the academic, the artist, or the activist—at least not among the Blacks of the sovereign kind, of the warrior kind, of the ancestor kind.

When you think of warriors, you better think of all of us.¹⁶

Almost one year later after delivering my talk, I was again in conversation, this time with the proppaNOW collective that Richard helped form and is an integral part of.¹⁷ Here I would talk not about my powerlessness, but instead showcase the power of the intellectual collective I had managed to build despite all odds stacked against us in that same institution that was still brutalising me. And we would be in conversation between our collective and theirs, undertaking the

kinds of strategising that has taken place in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy for decades. It would be there among the protest signs on display at the UQ Art Museum that we would enact a protest of our own. It was there that I publicly announced my resignation from that institution, leading a walk out from an exhibition space.

It was me drawing a line in the sand—not as art, but as an act of war.

War, don’t mistake, this is what we found, don’t break because we need boots on the ground, but the weight I know slows us all down, that’s why we’re here together, because together we are always more, more flesh, more blood, more love, more chance of winning this war. And if it ever feels hopeless, well you just let yourself cry because it won’t get any easier watching mob die. But even if you don’t how, at least you know why.¹⁸

1 Will Probert, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim* (2020), Brisbane Festival, remake-regenerate-reclaim – Brisbane Festival.
2 Cormac Finn, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
3 Richard Bell, Projects: *Embassy*, 2014, <https://richardbellart.com/project/embassy/>.
4 “A Short History of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy – An Indelible Reminder of Unceded Sovereignty” <https://www.moadoph.gov.au/blog/a-short-history-of-the-aboriginal-tent-embassy-an-indelible-reminder-of-unceded-sovereignty/#>.
5 Alice-Anne Psaltis, “Systems of Black Power: Richard Bell’s Aboriginal Tent Embassy,” *Runway Journal* 33 (Power issue), <http://runway.org.au/systems-of-black-power-richard-bells-aboriginal-tent-embassy-2>.
6 Bell, Projects: *Embassy*, 2014.
7 Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (St Lucia, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2021).
8 Loki Liddle, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
9 Chelsea Bond, “Institutional Racism: F**k Hope,” lecture delivered at Brisbane Festival, 2020, <https://www.brisbanefestival.com.au/whats-on/2020/embassy>.
10 Cormac Finn, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
11 Ethan Enoch, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
12 Emma Healey, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
13 Will Probert, Nadia Morrison, Loki Liddle, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
14 Loki Liddle, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
15 Emma Healey, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
16 Will Probert, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.
17 See *OCCURRENT AFFAIR: proppaNOW*, curated by Amanda Hayman and Troy Casey, UQ Art Museum, 13 February – 19 June 2021, <https://art-museum.uq.edu.au/whats-past-exhibitions/occurrent-affair-proppanow>.
18 Reece Bowden, performance as part of Digi Youth Arts, *remake-regenerate-reclaim*.



RICHARD BELL In conversation with ruangrupa Kassel, Germany, 14 November 2021

ruangrupa (r): Richard, when did you first engage with collectives in your work?
Richard Bell (RB): I've been a member of a collective pretty much ever since I started making art. I started the first one in 1987 [The Campfire Group], which ran until about 2002–03, and then we set up proppaNOW in 2004.
r: Do you think of the term "collective" as both a noun and a practice?
RB: It's a noun, it's an adjective, and it's a practice. I've always had a collective approach to life. I grew up in small communities; it's just my natural go-to method of operation really.
r: Can you tell us about your childhood or art experiences that formed your idea to work collectively?
RB: I've been observing people since I was about eight years old, and of course I noticed that Aboriginal people did things collectively. I also noticed that white people didn't. That was when I knew that there was more separating us than just skin colour. For us there was the loss of land, the loss of culture, the loss of dignity, and for the white people it was their fear of loss to us. Ever since then, I've noticed that the government makes it harder and harder for us. They fear us so much that they need to oppress us in every possible way, some of which are illegal internationally.
r: In Australia, we have more than 186 separate laws just for us that nobody else in the country has to live under, so it made the idea of wanting to work against the system very popular in my mind. When I moved to Redfern, Sydney, I met people from the so-called Black Power Movement and became friends with them. They had the most interesting conversations around, and their method of working was also collective.
r: As for art, my mother was an artist. She could paint landscapes or portraits. When we were short of money, she'd paint and sell works to the white people. And my father comes from a family of painters. So it was there, but I just didn't realise. I was obsessed with sport. Now I work with a team, you know. I have a community around me: I have a gallerist and he has staff; I have assistants; I have my friends and fellow artists. They're all around at different times. We have different needs and we share, even if it's just time or conversation. I can't imagine life without acting collectively. Like if I want to do something, I look around and see who I need to help me to do this thing, to get this from here to there. I'm just wired that way.
r: Richard, the point you made about separate government laws because they're afraid that you're going to take their land...
RB: Absolutely. This is a real fear.
r: Exactly. We have been working collectively for a long time to fill the gaps in government actions by working together but we didn't actually know what collectivity was then, we just knew some common themes that were also being acknowledged by Indonesians and other cultural societies, and that we needed to work together. So collectivity is now the term we use, but you mentioned you were always working with others because you saw it as different from the white way of working. Is this how you regard your practice now, embedded within organisations or communities like Black Power to address different policy making?
RB: For Aboriginal people, if they're asked what they want the government to do most, the most popular answer is I believe to leave us alone! The other thing is that it's really hard being Aboriginal in Australia—I found this out when I was on the streets—so we have to work together. We couldn't survive what happened to us if we didn't work together. We have to share resources, which embeds that kind of thinking.
r: It's embodied in us, but we have to think about how we define it and explain it.
RB: I think that's, you know, white people... they want to name everything. As soon as they name it, they kill it.
r: Because it's about categorising and exclusivity.
RB: Yes and being able to be controlled.
r: I find it very interesting when visiting libraries, for example, and trying to understand why Western thinking tries so hard name and categorise, because in many cultural societies, things have already been named. They even have nicknames for us. But the West, if they collect it, they try to find the relationships to other genres, and they put all these resources into giving a name to one species. Can you imagine how many communities you could have been helping, and NGOs you could be creating? Do you feel that people are afraid of you?
RB: I do [laughing].
r: OK [laughing]. Yes, we do too, but at the same time we don't understand why they're afraid when they come to us.
RB: Yeah, yeah.
r: Let's say in the southern hemisphere of the world—Indonesia or wherever—people come as money, as investment, as networks. They come as scholars, researchers, curators, tourists. We are never afraid of them. We welcome them very warmly, so it's not us who come to them. But now they have asked us to come to them, and they're afraid. We spoke to other people who said "they just don't understand" and that's why they're afraid.
RB: It's fear, and the source of that fear is ignorance. But, you know, ignorance is very easily dealt with. You can just get the knowledge to deal with it. Ask somebody. People should be more childlike in that regard—they should be more inquisitive, you

know. Do you feel that ruangrupa is part of this system?
r: I think we're an experiment, and people expect to see us make mistakes, but we always acknowledge mistakes as a part of our process. I don't know how you formulate mistakes as a part of your process Richard, but for us mistakes are part of our weapon. It's like the things that we acknowledge in daily activities that are experimental. The oldest traditions, such as making pickles or fermenting yoghurt, they probably still say it's experimentation or experimental, right? But to look at them now, they are not made with experimentation.
RB: Correct. All the mistakes that I make in paintings make the painting better, because I've got to work harder to fix that mistake. And people feel...it's supposedly mystical but it's not. Like everything is about vibration and people have the ability to pick these things up, but not everybody has that ability. Some of the art critics know fuck all about this kind of reality. They just haven't got that capacity. I never make anything the same. Never. I'm always experimenting.
r: That's why we ask people "Why don't you believe in us?" We are experimenting and fermenting like kimchi. They would love to see us make mistakes but, actually, when we make mistakes, they eventually become like dry aged meat, pickles, kimchi, or even soju and sake. We make a mistake, and then suddenly it becomes very delicious to taste.
RB: Or when a white guy does it, it'll be contemporary art.
r: [laughing] Yeah, exactly. And it becomes contemporary art. Strange. But I think they don't sense that the grotesque things we are growing are a part of that growing. They only see the flowers in it. But how grotesque it is, you know, to be dealing with this rotten decay... they don't realise this. And when they try to farm us within this process and turn it into contemporary art, they tame us, they tame us.
RB: Name us [laughing].
r: And name us [laughing].
RB: Tame us and name us.
r: It's for us to see Western categorisation as a preservative.
RB: As a museum.
r: A museum object, yeah. You don't want to go against the contemporary art world, but you question what your own place is in this society nowadays. I don't know how you maintain it. There's a Balinese tradition called "Ogoh-ogoh", a burial ceremony where effigies are burned and then put into the sea, but now they keep the object. From our point of view in regard to our Balinese friends, it's always been said that these Ogoh-ogoh should be burned afterwards, but they're preserving them to mystify this idea that there's still a soul in it [laughing].
RB: So, we were talking about collectives; how would you answer questions about whether it's appropriate or a good decision to have a collective direct documenta? Because that's what white people are going to ask you.
r: The one thing that we believe is that society was made by collective spirit until the Industrial Revolution came, capitalism came, liberalism came, and made everything more individualistic. The idea of working together allows us to help each other not only in times of crisis but also to enjoy moments of happiness, but it's become very... how do I say this... parts of this have disappeared. For documenta to decide to select a collective group of people, rather than an individual, to act as the artistic director means we're able to look at this again.
r: We are approaching documenta fifteen through the concept of lumbung, which is still practised mostly, we believe, in the southern hemisphere. We come from Indonesia, but many places in the southern hemisphere practice the same thing. lumbung is a collectively governed architecture for the storage of food that serves the community through communal resources and mutual care, and it is organised around a set of shared values, collective rituals, and principles. We don't consider lumbung merely as a chosen "theme" for documenta fifteen; instead, it's imbued in our everyday practice and is a summary of our methods and values. As a collective, we share resources, time, energy, funds, ideas, and knowledge among ourselves and others.
RB: Yes, it's identifiable.
r: Art practices give more space for these ideas, and documenta fifteen as an art and cultural event wants to... see this practice as a way of experimenting in this time of individualism. It's not always easy, there are ups and downs in applying this culture of lumbung, of working together collectively.
RB: But this is also a challenge for all of us of course. We believe in natural farming, the farming that doesn't use any chemical fertiliser. We don't use toxic materials like pesticide, fumicide and herbicide, and at the same time we really believe in natural selection. But modern society isn't patient; it wants immediate results. But this is not possible in the natural world, and this is what we understand and have understood for thousands of years. It's something that you can't rush. That's why I agree that there are ups and downs; it's not easy—there's supposed to be adaptation, from us and from them.
r: That's true. It's not a one-night affair.
RB: It's like love.
r: Yeah, yeah.
RB: You can't hurry love [singing].
r: You can't hurry love [laughing]. It's definitely not a one-night affair, not a week

affair, not a month affair. When documenta decided to bring a collective to work on this and they invited us, what we did was we invited them back. They have the capacity to invite us, and at the same time we have our own capacity to invite them back because we are... resources, and they are also resources. They have their history, we have our own history. They have networks, we have our networks. They have friends, we have friends. There you have an institution around you that supports you, and we also have the institution that we're a part of to work with. And this is how you meet in the middle. As we say again and again, it's not easy, there's ups and down, but lumbung means that if there are problems, we bring them to the table and find solutions. And if there's no problems, then let's not make problems, let's enjoy the moment. lumbung is not only a storage place for everything to face future crises, but also a place to enjoy the happiness, the result of the harvesting afterwards, and the sharing among us.
RB: Just this week here for me has been really fulfilling—it's been great just to come here to this kitchen every night, you know. Somebody will cook, and we'll all be able to eat a home-cooked meal. It's fantastic. And the friendship that comes from this interaction at the table, it's really quite extraordinary. I can imagine this place when all the artists are here, and how dynamic this space is going to be.
r: We find that there are some friends who really easily understand this concept. documenta fifteen is 100 days of exhibition, which is important, but what happens beyond documenta fifteen is also important for us. How do we maintain this relationship with you, not only for future collaborations but also friendship, as a human being that has basic needs, basic failures, basic tendencies, basic motives? We have these visions about how documenta could be collective in the future. On one hand, there will be intersections where different documentas cross over. But on the other hand, this feels like an historic part of documenta. We don't know about the future of documenta—and this is my personal point of view—and documenta might not continue if people are worried that future documentas will be in the collective mode and they won't see anything different between them. So part of our strategy is to see that future documentas should probably not be like this one [laughing]. It's a kind of defensive method. But documentas could happen in the very collective sense, because if you believe that documenta is a big resource, then it should be governed collectively because it's efficient. We've learnt about this from afar—we've learnt many of the ingredients that make up this so-called Western context, and we want to acknowledge and articulate that back. We are also trying to fill in the gaps. We don't want to separate or create new structures, new systems, things like that, but we try to exist where the Western style fails.
Richard, you probably know much better than us the experience of previous documenta editions, particularly documentas 4 to 14. We are trying to research and read up on some of the history, or hear from friends who have already experienced a few documentas. From our perspective, documenta has a capacity to acknowledge different kinds of risk—to challenge different methods, different artforms, cultures, politics, and even societies. documenta has become a very important event in the world of contemporary art. That's why we consider documenta as part of our resources even though none of us will have the chance to actually travel to Kassel while documenta is being held.
RB: Well, every documenta has been controversial for some reason or other. Every single one of them has had, you know, artists or artworks that people hate, and artists and artworks that people love. I don't see this as being any different.
r: Suddenly, the way we work seems like homework [laughing]. I mean, we always try to work together as a holistic process, with a holistic approach. But suddenly it feels like this is part of our homework—to generate policies, to negotiate with cities. I mean, how come you have to wait every five years for documenta, when every hour, every second, we live with the same difficult problems? To me, it's bullshit. I mean if we Indonesians think about colonialism, let's do it radically. Bring back everything that you stole from us. Let's not just talk about colonialism, let's do something about it. Give back, leave us alone, acknowledge our independence, something like that, something radical. But we also need to have conversations. I mean, we don't want to, you know, disturb individuals, we would like to have discussions. We make things that give us a reason to talk logically and consider thoughts, alliances and motivations. That helps us to continue the conversation, rather than putting us in the position of negotiating morally in this very transactional way. I think that's why we mostly get ignored, you know. They just play the victim.
r: We have approached collectives, organisations, and institutions from around the world to gather and develop lumbung together. Yes, we have invited individual artists such as yourself Richard, but each of the lumbung members will contribute to and receive diverse resources, such as time, space, money, knowledge, care, and art. We are extremely eager to work with and learn from other concepts and models of regeneration, education, and economy—other lumbungs practiced in different parts of the world. We

admire and are inspired, even envious, of your practice because you deliver a different contemporary sensibility for present times. We really want to see your process and would love to learn from you.
r: Past documentas didn't have this. They only saw Jimmie Durham as one person, Richard Bell as one person, as names. That's a part of the communications, the marketing and alignment of publications, but how you see or learn from these particular individuals has a different articulation, or challenge or criticism even, when they're reviewed in the sense of the collective at this present moment.
r: But then the pandemic happened. Through our collective experience under COVID-19, we reflected again on the value of solidarity. We need to go even further in fostering new networking models and questioning how to make small to medium art initiatives models sustainable. Consequently, we need to rethink further what artistic practice and event making is, what they could and should be. If operating on a large scale means losing relevance in respect to our own practices, should we "degrow"? What does it mean to be locally and globally rooted today, and what potential does locality currently hold? What does materiality mean in contemporary art today for art and artists? How should we use space to redefine our relationship with the public? In considering regenerative economies, we should examine and develop new strategies, parallel to well-tested practices.
r: When ruangrupa initially proposed the idea of lumbung as a collectively governed pot of surplus resources, it was speculating artistically on how to build such a common structure over time. Under the current conditions, the concept of lumbung and its values of solidarity and collectivity has never been more vital and relevant. In moments when so many are experiencing the inequality and injustice of the current systems, lumbung can act as an effort (alongside so many others) to show that things can be done differently. We are therefore not suspending lumbung, but accelerating it. This is part of the challenge for us now—how we struggle to bring people together within the context of Kassel. It's part of our survival to have this event, but we have questioned how we formulate this and bring all this together.
r: That's why we asked the question of where you grew up, because this is part of your dealing with your own process of sense of collectivities.
RB: Because I can't do what I need to do here without you so, yeah.
r: As we've mentioned since the beginning, lumbung is process based, and when people are resistant to lumbung, we try to explain it's because, for example, when we say we are inspired by you and envy your practice, it's not because you are Richard Bell with your installation of *Embassy* that's travelling all over the world and making you one of the most acknowledged artists in the southern hemisphere, but because we know you, we know your process. We know how hard it has been for you since you were born up until now. We really know it's not easy being Richard Bell in an Australian context and that's the reason why we're really inspired by your practice, by your process, not by who you are today.
r: At the same time, maybe people are also resistant because they haven't seen us before. People only see "ruangrupa, artistic director of documenta fifteen" and that's it.
They didn't see anything that comes earlier before us.
r: This is why we really like meeting and hanging out with people. I always say "I haven't seen you in ages", because it's actually like a funny statement to emphasise that "Hey, let's sit together, hang out, cook together, and that's how we can get to know each other, we can ask where you got your last name", because that's how we get to know you, your process as a social entity, or your process as a political entity, or process as cultural entity. When you are around the table of lumbung, everyone and everybody is equal. It's also a manifestation of appreciation as a human being to the other human being and also to ourselves.
RB: And they question the existence of the director of documenta being a collective. They can question that, but not something as profound as culture.

