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# *What is a ‘National’ Exhibition? Understanding Australia’s ‘The National’*

Any exhibition that invokes nationhood courts an interrogative position. It makes a claim, or rather a number of claims that it must address, one of which begs the acceptance of the viewer, namely, to know and accept what that nation is, in this particular case, Australia. To do so is to be able to proceed relatively seamlessly to what that nation consists of, how it is reflected, how it is represented – in this case with regard to its artistic production. Moreover, the undertaking assumes that such a premise is tenable from the outset: socially, historically and philosophically. Then again, all such considerations are perhaps just a case of exhaustive overthinking: invoking “nation” may be a necessary convenience for making sense where there is none, in the effort to support a handful of artists and to give them a sufficiently appreciative audience. For the purposes of this discussion, let us shelve the last caveat as it hangs under the weight of the *Australian Perspecta* (1981–99), of which *The National* is a rebadged revival,<sup>1</sup> except of course with the exception of the many assumptions and promises pregnant in the naming itself. The final interrogatory is whether such a title can bask in the same sureness or innocence in its simple factuality as it thought it might. For could it ever? No, but the forces that threaten to discredit and debunk it are more salient than ever. There has arguably never been a time when global events and forces have not pressed home to us that nationhood, far from being an imperturbable socio-historical monolith, is far more a set of shifting circumstances, a linguistic carapace, and a horizon of possibility. But that horizon is no longer so optimistic, because we have come to know too much about the world, as we have learned how little we know, shaken as we are by the lapse of the old certainties, accelerated by fragile ecologies: political, technological, natural.

Perhaps only twenty years ago, it was customary to analyze the status, meaning and relevance of an exhibition with such a title, using an example from one of the main Euro-American cities as a nodal point, such as London, New York, Paris, or Berlin. Instead, to begin with Australia is arguably more apposite for a number of notable reasons. One is its very contested nature as a sovereign nation against the background of its relatively recent colonial past, formally settled by Great Britain in 1788, and only federated as an independent nation-state in 1901. Another is the marked difference of Australia’s history from that of most other countries in terms of the relationship between political and religious upheaval and national identity. Let us call this Australia’s relational global narrative: this is the narrative that stands alongside that of other major (Western and related peripheral) states in terms of shared historic experience, which includes wars of religion and Reformation, or revolution. On these terms, relative to the evolution of other Euro-American, and also South American and Asian histories, Australia has never experienced a global war on its soil, a civil war, or any such upheaval that has become the rallying point for a national identity.



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Many of such upheavals come from a supplanted, displaced (or rebadged) ruling class, the change of which is associated with heroism and freedom. There is nothing in this nation's fabric to celebrate any graphic glory, only the surmounting of hardship, thereby aligning us with the Irish contingent of settlers, whose consolations are those of the oppressed, of survival as opposed to conquer. Thus Australia's rural heroes, for example, of 'the swagman' and 'the drover'<sup>2</sup> simply cannot compete with the likes of Japanese Samurai, Napoleonic vainglory or a Russian revolutionary. If anything, Australia's rogues gallery of legends that have grown out of the twentieth-century have been strongly if not overwhelmingly, drawn from sport. (A key area of national contention continues to be Test Cricket with England, a battle against "the mother country" which is yet another affirmation of increasingly otiose national links.)<sup>3</sup>

The point about the comparative anaemia of Australian national symbology needs to be treated gently, however, because to the Indigenous population it has its heroes, and it certainly has had its cataclysms, but they are deemed incommensurate or irrelevant. Finally, there is the conundrum of what I have called "The Australia Effect."<sup>4</sup> This is the condition in art and culture of being of minimal consequence as a country, partly because of its relatively colourless (white) history, because it is remote, not sufficiently exotic, and insufficiently war-torn or deprived, or needing the kind of condescending attention for which the artworld is so good at lavishing. Within Australia, it is a now an accepted feature of culture to expect guidance from others, although still specifically oriented toward Euro-America, not Asia, whose artists are 'guests' as opposed to figures of deference. This patten is so strong that it is fair to assert that the 'cultural cringe' as it is long called in Australia, is now firmly built into the national pathology. A mutated form of herdemasochism, it is an expectation that any large scale exhibition enjoys the patronizing from specific elsewhere (London, New York and to a lesser extent, Berlin), or else have artists pay lipservice to their counterparts in such hyperzones of cultural power. V. S. Naipaul stirred up a great deal of antagonism in his assessment of Indian culture after it gained independence from Britain in 1947, to the extent at which he titled one of his earlier books, *The Mimic Men* (1967). While Australian art is one of profound mimicry, it is also one based on so many unquestioned certainties, especially regarding whom to mimic, where Euro-America still casts a long dark shadow.

For an example of the symptoms of the 'Australia Effect', let me give this a more concrete reference. Steve McQueen's *Gravesend* (2007) shown in the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, is a work that continues to be referenced today, mainly due to the artist's successes in mainstream film, as an alibi to his artistic and especially moral credentials. The film is a claustrophobic documentation of anonymous miners in the Congo digging for coltan, the mineral essential for mobile phones and related digital devices. The concept and message were clear, too clear, where the viewer is in thrall with the-artist-as-brand and intimidated by the grisly circumstances that it blandly describes. Its frankness is unmistakable and is of an artistic genus that is now trusted, fêted fare in contemporary art, in rapping a comfortable gallery-going public over the knuckles for their privilege. Luckily, not all critics saw it for what it was, another savaging of capitalism, neo-imperialism, etc. Yet the question remains whether an Australian artist would attempt such an artwork. While there is now a steady stream of Indigenous protest art—to the extent that it has become a genre unto itself—it is uncertain whether an Australian artist would be so brazen to make and take such a commentary off-shore, which exposes the imperialism that McQueen, being British, is taking advantage of at the same time he criticizes it. And if Australian artists would not venture outward with such chutzpah, it is also questionable whether an artist like McQueen would choose to make such an artwork in Australia.

From a contemporary perspective—the worker slave-trade in Dubai to the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip—Australia is not a place of horrors or dangers, nor is it a capitalist hub. And if it is a place of migration it is nugatory in comparison to states such as Pakistan, Egypt or Germany, nor does it share common borders with other countries from which come histories of overlapping ambition and struggle. In short, Australia is a continent without a lobby. Where does this leave *The National*, three exhibitions in six years presenting over 160 artists? McQueen arguably made an error with *Gravesend* (although his work still enjoys notoriety) but the kinds of errors that Australian artists might make, are too culturally specific and too local, to capture anything but a short interval of national (not international) attention.

Another insight about the ambiguities facing Australian artists comes from South African author J. M. Coetzee, who settled in Australia in 2002, the year before he won the Nobel Prize. In a book from 2003, *Elizabeth Costello*, when his perceptions of the country were by accounts still relatively fresh, he makes a remarkable statement about the interwovenness of extremes of distance and cultural obscurity, and what that does to the cultural psyche. A character in the novel, Elizabeth is asked about being an Australian writer on “the far edges,” and she replies:

*The far edges. That is an interesting expression. You won't find many Australians nowadays willing to accept it. Far from what? they would say. Nevertheless, it has a certain meaning, even if it is a meaning foisted by history. We're not a country of extremes – I'd say we're rather pacific – but we are a country of extremities. We have lived out extremities because there hasn't been a great deal of resistance in any direction. If you begin to fall, there isn't much to stop you.*<sup>5</sup>

The first is intentionally clichéd (Australians are part of the global village, extremes depend on the vantage point, etc.), then elliptical, and then the punchline, suggesting a lack of tension and of having lamentably little at stake. While Indigenous artists contemplate the tragedies of their history, the omnipresent cultural tragedies of the ‘Australia Effect’ have yet to find their deepest recognition. Most likely it never will.

Thus, on the scales of cultural performativity, Australia doesn't much rate. Leaving Indigenous history out of the equation, Australia's national image is insufficiently heroic or tragic. As a (relatively) safe and fun place to travel, and as a haven for natural resources, the socio-economic benefits of being an innocuously benign country have their dividends, but in art and culture, far more questionably<sup>6</sup>—the ‘Australia Effect’ that of having no discernible effect, globally.

#### EXHIBITIONS AND NATIONALISM

Anyone beginning to consider such issues in any depth would best be alerted to the fact that the origin of ‘the exhibition’ is closely aligned to national-affirming missions, from statecraft to revolution to colonialism. Before the inception of public museums, the first museums were instigated largely through science and the advancement of naval trade. The *Wunderkammern* or “cabinets of curiosities” that originated in the sixteenth century were confused collections of all manner of objects, more profane than sacred, intended to inspire awe, conversation and scientific inquiry.

From an artistic perspective, and uncannily relevant here, the first major showings of art en masse came with the establishment of the art academy (then known as the Academy of Painting and Sculpture) in 1648, which was the first of a succession of other academies (science in 1666, architecture in 1671 and music in 1672). While naturally at the service of advancing these disciplines, the tacit motivation was centralization, to be able to control and observe what was taught and



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which people were chosen as representative of the discipline. It quickly became a powerful, if not implacable legislative body. From 1667, under the auspices of the Academy of Fine Arts, came the Salon, an annual or biannual event featuring the work of artists largely trained by the academy and chosen by its recognized officials. The first major event for exhibiting art in the world, which would be a benchmark for what is sanctioned and seen for the next two centuries or more, was state-owned and state-driven. Artists' reputations rested on the level of approbation that the Salon bestowed. Its executive leadership arbitred on the significance of genres (still life at the bottom, history painting at the top), while divvying out medals, all mirroring a grand artistic horse race. Like all such ventures unto our present day, it was subject to the capriciousness of taste, to cronyism, nepotism and labyrinthine chains of prejudice and self-interest. It is sobering to reflect how a significant portion of our grasp of Western art until the end of the nineteenth century was effectively shaped by the Salon and the artists and works it chose to lionize, and only later with the birth of the avant-garde, whom they chose to reject.

The resonances with today are persistent and uncannily clear. As a centralized body established by the state, it was expected to uphold state values and intended for the state's aggrandizement. While we are not necessarily dealing with literalizing socialist realism here, lapses into what we now call socialist realism were many and frequent, which we now know retrospectively is a casualty of art that affiliates too closely with governmental power and policy. Works of art (painting and sculpture) were expected to maintain moral values, and were rewarded accordingly. Both explicitly and tacitly, artists were expected to make favourable commentary on the regnant state of affairs. One famous example of slipping under the institutional radar was Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), to which Louis XVI responded favourably and purchased, since it seemed to offer the message of family loyalty. The upraised arms of the brothers depicted in the painting became an emblematic gesture of fraternity rallied by the Revolution to which the king eventually lost his head. It was also the Revolution that made available a newly nationalized collection to the public. While enlightened princes and monarchs had made their collections available to viewing by a select few, the first public museum space was the Louvre, which opened its doors in 1793. Consisting then of works gleaned from royalty and confiscated from the church, it was the first time a public was given the prospect of a national collection while also having the opportunity to consider, against the work from other countries, what might constitute a national art.

It might need restating that notions of national art and national style are attendant upon the burgeoning concept of a state consisting of a free and active citizenry, hence the enlightened relationship between state and polis. In Germany, thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Georg Hamann drew attention to the properties of national character in relation to language and cultural inheritance, such as local architecture and folklore. Artists would begin to draw from such influences in depicting scenes and activities that were germane to their locality, belonging to their known and experienced life-world, as opposed to relying on the purported universals of antiquity. Even when Greco-Roman tropes were used, they were given a particularly national (French, German, English) inflection that tended to emphasize how they could be adapted according to the materially present codes and practices that aggregated to mean a nation. Folklore, that is, the stories that were deemed to have grown organically from the soil of one locality with its features (forests, mountains, weather), were by the early nineteenth century given greater value than before, not just in and for themselves, but as they were graphic records of the constituents that comprized personal identity in its material and historical belonging to a place.

From a more recent perspective, the ‘national’ exhibitions that appeared after the slow rebuilding following the Second World War, such as *documenta* in Kassel, were strongly informed by the devastation of those recent events. While not limited to German art, its *raison d’être* was strongly informed by it: the first *documenta* in 1955 curated by Arnold Bode was a return to the avant-garde artists (mostly German, but not exclusively) that the Nazi regime had tried to discredit under the *Entartene Kunst* (Degenerate Art) label. This exhibition, while not contemporary, tended to set a tone for artists, from Germany and internationally, to consider works about ethics and inclusion. In 2002, *documenta XI* had its first non-German director, the late Okwui Enwezor, an exhibition that remains a landmark in thinking about the nature, trajectory and responsibilities of both art and curation for the millennium. For our purposes here, it is worth considering how a ‘national’ exhibition—not billed as such but firmly tied to Germany, its history and its political mission of acknowledgment and rebirth after WWII—is defined first as a response to crisis, and from its beginning reticent, of confining itself to German art and artists. It persisted in the legacy of how noxious such an idea of national art, when pushed to its uttermost conclusion, can have grotesque consequences. *documenta* and its history is something of an alibi to knowing that to uphold the need for a national art will beg more questions than it answers, given that nationhood is a concept becoming more porous and fragile by the day, exemplified yet again in the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis.

Two other predominant national exhibitions are the Whitney Biennial in New York and the Tate Prize in London, conveniently citable as occurring in the two principal commercial art hubs. The Whitney Biennial is confined in its selection to US citizens and for artists who have been residents for a length of time (several Australian artists have shown there), held in the original Whitney Museum of American Art designed by Marcel Breuer, one of the Bauhaus greats. It would be disingenuous, however, to compare it to Australia’s *The National*, if only for the weight of history and persistence. It also grew out of a time when the exhibition of national artists was less questionable, in an effort to see what something like a national art might look at, a mode of inquiry that is today far less tenable. Founded in 1930, it arrived at a time when there was immense pressure to define a national art and to nurture American culture which had already benefitted immeasurably from the influx of art treasures before and after the First World War, and would continue to do so as a result of the second. Moreover, its emphasis is on younger and lesser-known artists to assist them in the next stage of their careers, an aim that has tended to overshadow the earlier one of making claims about national styles or tendencies. (The subheading to the Australian exhibition “New Australian Art” was more a promise about the art, not that of the age of the artists.) The Tate Prize, also with its focus on supporting young and emerging artists can only be called a national exhibition by default, not design, and it hardly insists on being representative of artistic tendencies or tastes.

#### BACK TO ‘AUSTRALIA’

Postmodern and Contemporary Art (if we can agree on that term as to what follows Postmodernism), with its return in large part to figuration, revels in crisis, guilt, injustice and discord. This is (again) where Australia falls short. In 2021, with the television miniseries *Gallipoli* launched on Netflix on the same weekend as the commemorative celebrations of ANZAC Day,<sup>7</sup> Australians were given little doubt that the identification with this event had not yet abated. It has long been said that the Gallipoli Campaign’s failure in Turkey by allied forces in 1915 was Australia ‘coming of age’, given that it had been federated as an autonomous nation-state in 1901, only fourteen years before. This was supposed to be Australia’s tragic reckoning to which it could then ‘come together’



as a nation. It was the event where the people of the vast states and territories of a continent as spatially expansive as Europe, could feel commonality. If anything, it (reasonably) emphasized its continued reliance upon and identification with Great Britain. While the commemorative day is now an opportunity for recognizing servicemen and servicewomen (from all wars and United Nations peacekeeping operations), the inescapable tenacity of its symbolism tends to highlight the imbrication in white, male colonial history.

The other national day, Australia Day, on 26 January, remembers the landing of the First Fleet<sup>8</sup> of British convicts and settlers at what is now Sydney Harbour, thus inscribing Australia's nationhood along Anglo-Saxon lines. While there have been efforts to recognize the Aboriginal servicemen who fought in both world wars, and demonstrations by both white and black Australians over what they prefer to call "Invasion Day" instead of the national holiday, these efforts have as yet not altered the regnant myths and narratives. While there have been accelerating debates about having a national day that is more expressive of unity rather than division, it is as yet hard to envisage what such discussions will amount to from a tangible perspective. A conclusion we may draw is that the national image, despite its dogged and increasingly untenable symbolic dependence on Great Britain, is rooted in uncertainty. Hence the question: is the need to title an exhibition "The National" the very symptom of such epistemic fragility, as a symptom of a deep crevasse of disavowal?

Writing for the inaugural catalogue for the 2017 exhibition, art critic Helen Hughes states from the beginning of her essay that "[t]he historiography of Australian art has, from the very first attempts, been vexed by the notion of 'Australia'."<sup>9</sup> However, she denies the provocation devised and publicized by the Indigenous artist Richard Bell via the incendiary text on an award-winning painting that "Australia does not exist." Hughes admits that Australia had a rather nebulous beginning, citing the various historical names since ancient Greek, Roman and Christian cultures, and Ptolemy's hypothetical unknown land, *terra incognita*, all of which emphasized its remoteness and obscurity. When settled (as a penal colony) it was already a continent of different Indigenous languages and customs comparable to Europe at the time, but it was quickly renamed. It was earlier called New Holland, the name first applied by Dutch seafarer Abel Tasman in 1644. The first colony was called New South Wales, which was then over an unknown horizon more an amorphous landmass than belonging to a homogenous country. As a result, 'Australia' is built of an amalgamated set of fragments and rebadgings, never birthed as a noble idea, such as the nineteenth century unifications of Germany or Italy, or originated after a protracted struggle for independence, as for example what Simón Bolívar achieved from Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia and several other South American states. Hughes concludes in her essay by stating that 'Australia' may exist but not as a unified type – what in Marxist language would be called a "universal" – but rather as the moniker for an ongoing shifting of co-ordinates and "multiple perspectives."<sup>10</sup> This conclusion, as sound as it is philosophically, still needs to be held for scrutiny against an exhibition that courts such a title. For the most pressing question is whether any other country would think to do the same in this present global climate.

DIASPORA, INDIGENEITY, BLACK LIVES MATTER AND REFUGEEISM

“Refugeeism” is a relatively new terminology necessitated by the increasing flows of enforced migration over the last four decades. Multiculturalism, sounded in pride or scorn, developed out of the 1970s when Australia rethought its post WWII Assimilation Policy to begin to accept a wider variety of migrants, partly sparked by the calamity of the aftermath of the Vietnam War. But multiculturalism has tended to lapse into a rather vague term, as opposed to a challenge to what had been a largely British-oriented status quo – this notwithstanding European migrants fleeing during and after the Second World War (when the byword used to be “tolerance”). Refugeeism, along with its attendant conditions of forced migration, statelessness and transitionality, is now the new ‘state’ of the new millennium, the state-without-a state, or meta-state, where people live in protracted expectation, hollow hope and despair. Thus temporary is the new permanent. This is not to disregard the *favela* and ghetto-dwellers, and the societies based in undefined peripheries, such as the large number of people amassed at the edges of Indian airports, surviving off the airlines’ detritus. What becomes of these groups in light of COVID-19, we can only begin to speculate. What is sure is that there are now a multiplicity of social subgroups whose very status is that of not being accounted for, a voiceless underclass with no provision for any kind of upward mobility. Regarding the new configuration of stateless people, Slavoj Žižek offers a useful gloss:

*In our global world, commodities circulate freely, but not people... new forms of apartheid are emerging. The topic of porous walls, of the threat of being inundated by foreigners, is strictly immanent to global capitalism: it is an index of what is false about capitalist globalization. It is as if the refugees want to extend free global circulation from commodities to people... The way the universe of capital relates to the freedom of movement of individuals is thus inherently contradictory: it needs “free” individuals as cheap labour forces, but it simultaneously needs to control their movement since it cannot afford the same freedom and rights for all people.<sup>11</sup>*

That such a statement seems to have cursory importance to Australia’s case only helps to advance the points made so far. Australia, relatively insulated from the recent crises at the doorstep of Europe and the Middle East, can continue to presume upon a ‘national’ exhibition unperturbed and untrammelled. Countries like France and England are feeling the pressure, especially among those who thought they had a firm grasp on what their state constituted. Uncertainty has spilled from disgruntlement (always a healthy feeling in society) to hysteria, manifested in the *gilet jaunes* (yellow-vests) in Paris and in the debacle of Brexit. Meanwhile, Germany wheezes politically with a rise of the far Right after its intake of over a million refugees (constituting about 1.5% of the population). Despite this, recent commentary suggests that these numbers are salutary, as they will accommodate for dwindling ageing workforce numbers as against Germany’s continuing industrial growth.<sup>12</sup> Under such conditions it would be quixotic to mount an exhibition called ‘The National’. It would be greeted with contempt as a solecism, or just a misfired attempt at humour. Or as a veiled attempt at scabbling for vestiges of nationalism in support of neoconservative agendas?

While multiculturalism is always a convenient crutch—device, strategy—of a curator of exhibitions small or large to demonstrate acceptance, the concept of multiplicity and difference runs aground with refugeeism when it comes to an exhibition touting some form of national representation in particular. There are perhaps more artists than ever in Australia’s history who identify as ‘hyphenated’ (Chinese/Indian/Lebanese/Iranian-Australian), have dual citizenship, or



indeed identify more with their cultural original while at the same time comfortably affirming that Australia is their home. These are all destabilizing factors. The criteria, including the most prosaic, of having citizenship, are simply too diverse and porous. If the criterion is art produced in Australia, is citizenship necessary? What of Australian nationals working abroad? What if the work was made in the few weeks when an Australian skipped town to London, New York, Paris, or Berlin? In short, an exhibition named “The National” crumbles under the weight of its own contradictions, its concept made yet more fragile by the very precarity of global events.

When we consider current global racial sensitivities we are faced with yet more problems regarding divisions that are cultural, economic, linguistic and demographic, not to mention the sorry proportions of Indigenous people, and ‘people of colour’ in prisons. Here, Australia does have a competitive edge on the United States, which has an acknowledged incarceration crisis—except that the statistics are more parlous. For Australia is not in the same critical situation and yet its Indigenous population is proportionately the most incarcerated, a fact that is conveniently relegated to one remote side of both public education and popular discourse. What a ‘national’ exhibition might mean or entail, needless to say, to an Indigenous person is immeasurably disproportionate to someone indifferent to their history or present plight. Žižek has made a very good point on YouTube that the riposte against Black Lives Matter, that “all lives matter” is misplaced since it ignores that the BLM call is more than a categoric statement, it is a push against those lives that have long had a negative status. It is a spillage of anger to correct that state of -1 to be mere degree zero.

#### BACK TO THE ART

*The National* was an initiative to support and exhibit Australian art. It was given a narrow time-frame and not intended to be an indefinite affair in the way that, by contrast, the Biennale of Sydney is something of an entrenched, and expected, cultural fixture. Looking at the three exhibitions as an aggregate, one can observe a decisive partitioning between black and white.<sup>13</sup> This may be a needed corrective to years of repression, but in broader terms, that decision is left to the observer, especially one that is not Australian. It is a binary that, one suspects, is driven by the expectations of those who fund such exhibitions, which drives us back to the venerable history of state-driven presentations as following a state-driven agenda. (Let the Indigenous artists complain in the artworld so it can look like there is something being done—a cheap alternative to government policy and resolute action.) Unfortunately, the cultural binary that these exhibitions have presented is neither in dialogue with other internationally perceived binaries—it has been exceedingly inward-looking—and at the expense of cultural shades of grey. It is as if such exhibitions in Australia that tout Australian-ness are built in reprisal: that a more representative (if that’s possible anymore) breadth (Chinese, Pacific Islanders, from West Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, etc.) would dilute the, or even vitiate, the concept of ‘Australia’ from the outset in ways I have attempted to describe. It may be worth reflecting on what such exhibitions seek to achieve for their audiences, whether it is serving a local public, which it does logistically, or a hypothetical international audience, which it might consider philosophically. In so doing, there is a confrontation with the ideological motives of artist, curator, and funding body. And thus we are confronted with myth and propaganda on one hand, and an opportunity for new perspectives and strategies on the other.

There is an urgency to our present that requires more than compliance to vague certainties. ‘Australia’ has never been a certainty and the art that seeks to represent it—the sum total of historical fact, juridical frameworks, habitual reference, and points of convenient reference for the

sake of social cohesion and economic coherence—should begin to reflect such uncertainty with courageous and rebarbative vigour. The burden should also not fall on the curators and exhibition organizers but the artists as well, who believe that there is success in following orders. A messy situation calls for art that is not messy in the same way. Any exhibition named ‘The National’ is surely a call to social and historical coherence. It is not a title that accommodates the truth behind any nation-state, but is that of being a constant work-in-progress, an agonistic working-through, and that the age of abiding by the fixed notions of nationhood is a redundant and damaging illusion.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Australian Perspecta* was a biennial event first presented by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1981 to showcase Australian contemporary art. In 1997, it expanded to include the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Australian Centre for Photography. For *Australian Perspecta 1999*, the curators were asked to address the theme ‘Living Here Now—Art/Politics’, taking a critical look at contemporary Australian nationhood and testing the limits of Australian nationalism. Similarly, to suggest that curatorial envisioning had not changed much in nearly two decades, the directive for the first presentation of *The National* in 2017, was “not pitched at presenting an identifiably ‘national’ (Australian) art, or at composing statements regarding national tendencies, characteristics or identities. On the contrary, there is a provocation in the title, certainly towards the manner in which concepts of nationhood and the nation-state are engaged and destabilized by the practice of contemporary artists... In so much as they address any idea of ‘Australia’, these works do so through a questioning lens and a wider regional and global consciousness.” *The National* catalogue introduction; <https://www.the-national.com.au/essays/curatorial-introduction/>; accessed 11 May 2021

<sup>2</sup> Propagated around the end of the nineteenth century, the swagman, or itinerant labourer, and the drover, the cross-country cattle herder, are not exclusive, but are cited here as among a number of low-key types that are part of Australia’s (white European) past. It is also worth mentioning that Australia is the world’s most urbanized country that nonetheless defines itself predominately using rural tropes

<sup>3</sup> Test cricket between Australia and England continues to be held over a series of five games, an exception to the three-game scheduling for most other countries

<sup>4</sup> Adam Geczy, ‘The Australia Effect’, *Contemporary Visual Art+Culture Broadsheet*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2010, pp. 239–40

<sup>5</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, New York: Vintage, 2003, p. 15, emphasis in the original

<sup>6</sup> To extend the argument a little, the recent Australian film, *Palm Beach*, released by Netflix early in 2021 can be said to typify much of what is intransigent and anodine in art and culture. As a post-millennial, Australian version of the *Big Chill*, it was rightly criticized as overly Anglo-white, having poor dialogue and weak direction—in short it lacked edginess

<sup>7</sup> ANZAC is the acronym formed from the initial letters of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. This was the formation in which Australian and New Zealand soldiers in Egypt were grouped before the landing on Gallipoli in April 1915

<sup>8</sup> The First Fleet, comprising eleven ships carrying between 1000 and 1500 convicts, marines, seamen, officers and free settlers, established the penal colony of New South Wales in 1788. The first ships reached what is now Botany Bay on 18 January, 1788, the original proposed site for the colony, but relocated to what is now Sydney Harbour, landing at Sydney Cove on the 26 January, now celebrated as Australia Day. In between these two dates, on 24 January, two French ships on a scientific expedition also arrived at Botany Bay

<sup>9</sup> Helen Hughes, ‘Upside down/right way up: Historiography of contemporary ‘Australian’ art’, *The National New Australian Art*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales/Carrigeworks/Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2017, pp.44–49; see also <https://www.the-national.com.au/essays/upside-downright-way-up-historiography-of-contemporary-australian-art/>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles With Neighbours*, London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2016, p. 54

<sup>12</sup> For example Thomas Rogers, ‘Welcome to Germany’, *The New York Review of Books*, 29 April, 2021, pp. 29–31

<sup>13</sup> Only circa 12% of the participating artists in the three exhibitions identity as Asian-Australian