DJON MUNDINE

An Assertion of *Continued Presence*

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert… Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies whose frown,
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that the sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed,
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.[1]

When I first went to work in a Methodist mission in northern Australia in 1979, a missionary cautioned me that even if one worked there for a lifetime, it was under the assumption that your 'career monument' could be obliterated within twenty-four hours of your departure. Wikipedia claims that there are around 28,000 monuments across Australia. It is a given that in every country town there is a sandstone obelisk with a list of names of those who died or served outside Australia defending the British Empire in two world wars, and other conflicts. Given the selective vision and focus in the writing of Australia's history, monuments to Aboriginal people killed (in the colonial Black War[2] for example) are practically non-existent.

At the 2016 National Indigenous Music Awards in Darwin it was pointed out to me that an award with the name of a now-deceased prominent rock singer had been discontinued. I was told his family had requested that the usage of his name be terminated. Historically, Aboriginal people commemorate past relatives and the memories of others through social ritual. When people die their names aren't spoken, and other people with the same name use the term "no-name", or existing in name only (*yakumirr*)—that name isn't spoken or used again for around four generations. This practice is changing in current times. Many Aboriginal people's names are totemic names and in fact either directly or obliquely names of antecedents and spirit beings.

Still, a large number of Aboriginal people, performing or in some form of action, in human form, exist physically etched in silhouette outline into the Hawkesbury sandstone of the Sydney Basin, memorialising creative spirits, ancestors and contemporaries. They are lines cut into the rock, and like petroglyphs, pictographs and other painted images, were created with the expectance to remain for some time, in memoriam. In the case of the Sydney rock figures they are dated back 5,000 years, being reworked or re-grooved periodically in successive rituals.

In Virginia Woolf's *A Room of My Own*, in laying out the setting to her novel the writer refers to a number of poets, both male and female, but throughout there is a constant narrative of before the war, and after the war. The war it appears, is a dividing wall—a swinging gate—in the imagination and emotions of all her social circle of Western intelligentsia. It would appear there is no Aboriginal word for "massacre" or "holocaust" other than saying something is "finished". Words in English suggesting the annihilation of a race also come in and out of fashion. I wondered if there could be a similarly constructed word from an Aboriginal language(s)? Why don't we (or do we Aboriginal people) talk

of "before the plague" or "after the plague", of the arrival of the British with the First Fleet in 1788? There is of course the continuous debate within Australia on the use of the word "invasion". Until the more recent work of Henry Reynolds[3] and others that prompted the "Culture Wars"[4], there has been a continuous denial of massacres of Aboriginal people and the devaluation of such research statistics to diminish the overall colonial crime.

In the 1988 *Australian Bicentenary* year (recognising two hundred years British colonisation), I conceived of and negotiated with Aboriginal artists to create the two hundred burial poles of the *Aboriginal Memorial* [5] (one pole for each year of white occupation) in order to make an active, positive statement from an Aboriginal perspective on the *Australian Bicentennial* celebrations. It was exhibited in the *Biennale of Sydney* that year and purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra. After completing the *Aboriginal Memorial* project I thought that, in a continuation of pre-(colonial) contact practice, any monument cannot stand alone—there needed to be a 'talking to the dead' through a periodic ritual.

For the second project I conceived an attempt to bring into being a public artwork for Bennelong[6] at Bennelong Point[7] and after many proposal iterations over twenty-five years it has now developed into the *Song of Barangaroo, Bennelong and Pemulwuy*. In both the *Aboriginal Memorial* and my *Song of…,* my action was directed by an assertion of existence and continuity of Aboriginal presence within contemporary Australian society.

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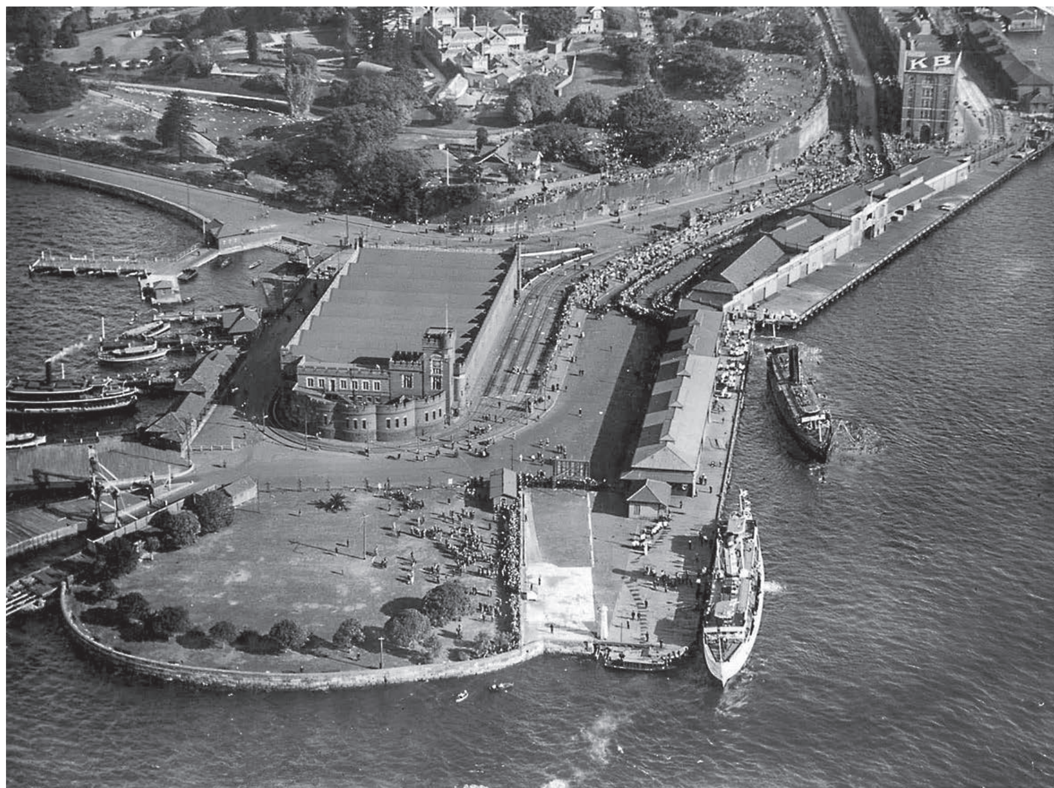
In 1990 after the *Australian Bicentenary* had washed over the nation I began working at the newly opened Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, from where I looked out from my window across Circular Quay to what was then a bare rock wall, the old buildings at Bennelong Point blocking this view having been knocked down. This was when I thought about making that 'assertion of continued presence' rather than a memorial. In this context I knew there were three known individuals (Bennelong, Barangaroo and Pemulwuy[8]), about whom we now had enough knowledge to create a character for each person. In colonial times such people had a very short known history; but now we seem to know more about them as people—from researching historical documents and records of the time—they have become more three dimensional personalities. My concept therefore was for an assertion of continued Aboriginal presence in Australia, and in Sydney at this particular location, the project being a reclaiming of the site, in a sense.

At this time we were preparing for the 1992 exhibition *Tyerabarrbowaryaou* (*I Shall Never Become A White Man*)[9] for the MCA, and through Director Leon Paroissien it was later shown at the 5th *Havana Biennial* in 1994. The rationale for this title was that these were the words spoken by the young Aboriginal woman Patyegarang, who had a close relationship with Lieutenant William Dawes (the astronomer of the First Fleet and the colony's engineer and surveyor, who studied the local Eora people, their culture and languages), who when watching her take a bath one particular occasion said "if you scrub hard enough you'll get the black off you". Her response was "I shall never become a white man."[10] As this occurred quite close to where the MCA is located we took Patyegarang's retort for our title.

Prior to this, during the 1980s I was working for the Art Gallery of New South Wales as a curator-in-the-field and lived in the Northern Territory, researching and adding information for their bark painting collection that came from this particular area I lived in. During this period I found a book on rock art sites in Sydney produced in 1898 by the (state of) New South Wales Department of Mines.



I was intrigued by this book and its information, and wanted to make an interpretation of this with two Aboriginal figures. I wanted to etch these figures into the rock which faces the Sydney Harbour Bridge (rather than facing the Sydney Opera House), directly across Circular Quay from the MCA and my window, with outline drawings or silhouettes of two men, as a binary, of good and evil, Caine and Abel, war and peace, of engagement and resistance; of Bennelong and Pemulwuy. This vertical rock face was originally cut from the rocky escarpment between 1818 and 1821 to allow for a road to be built around the point from Sydney Cove (now Circular Quay) to Farm Cove (east of the Sydney Opera House). As a public artwork I thought it better that it be on this rock face rather than in the ground—usually rock art is engraved or etched into ground-based rock. As this time I began to call the work *The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy* rather than just *Bennelong and Pemulwuy*. Calling it a song means that it's alive, it has another dimension as an artwork but I didn't quite know then how to bring that song into being.

Following the *Australian Bicentenary* celebrations, the City of Sydney (Council) encouraged artists to create permanent artworks in the city, the majority of *Bicentenary* public artworks having been ephemeral; for example, dance festivals and performances—very few indigenous and non-indigenous public artworks were permanent. But at this time the policy for public artwork was that they be incidental to place or site, discreetly rather than overtly situated in the landscape, such as small designs and plaques inserted into footpaths and paved areas. The presentation of my proposal therefore was something of a

shock perhaps; its overt scale was met with disinclination. Subsequently, the momentum of the proposal came to a halt as it was recognised as being too monumental, conceivably too much of an affront or provocation, that there could be such a large Aboriginal public artwork in the city landscape. But as a monumental Aboriginal public art concept it was not alone; there was another proposal at the time to have a large Aboriginal warrior bronze statue in Circular Quay as a memorial.

As an example of the gradual developmental changes in thinking at that time there were other projects being advanced in the city landscape. In 1995 the Museum of Sydney was established on the ruins of Australia's first Government House, built in 1788 by the first Governor of the colony, Arthur Phillip. Non-indigenous artist Janet Laurence in collaboration with indigenous artist Fiona Foley proposed the site-specific artwork titled *The Edge of Trees*—an overt "forest" of twenty-nine large vertical sandstone, wood and steel pillars evoking natural and cultural histories—located in the forecourt of the Museum.[11] It was here, at this place in 1788 that the local Aborigines observed the British, from 'the edge of the trees', as they first came ashore. This was an outcome of forward thinking by the Museum Director at the time, and won an award in 1995 from the Australian Institute of Architects.

The proposal for the *Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy* has been recycled and represented over the years. Its monumentalism and physicality have seemingly been problematic from its first conception; it has been seen perhaps as too permanent a marker with its bold engraving into the rock wall. Some responses have even suggested that its intended location is a historic site, which seems dubious given that it was carved from the original landscape by the early colonists to create a road. The figures in the proposal are up to six metres tall, their scale adding to the power of the figures, so it would be quite conspicuous. To the northern end of this rock face there are several plaques commemorating the departure of soldiers for the Boer War, First World War and Korean War, and also towards the southern end there can still be seen the "Stop the Vietnam War' graffiti. As a public site—opposite the Sydney Opera House, one of the most iconic buildings in the world and a cultural tourism attraction for international visitors with the Sydney Harbour Bridge adjacent—it presents some interesting correlations with these visual markers for wars, over centuries—in the context of my proposal, referencing a war of annihilation.

In 2010 the work was proposed to the *Biennale of Sydney*'s Artistic Director David Elliott, it's participation flagged in the *Biennale Free Guide*.

> *The* Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy *(2010)… signifies two great themes of Aboriginal History since 1788—resistance and engagement—and is based on enlarged figures of men from traditional rock art, which will be carved into the tall rock face on Tarpeian Way, a part of the Royal Botanic Gardens opposite the Sydney Opera House. The project will stand as the first permanent Aboriginal memorial in Sydney and refers to the freedom fighter Pemulwuy (c. 1750-1802) who fell in battle, and Bennelong (c. 1764-1813) who first taught the English colonists about Aboriginal culture.*[12]

There was an asterisk caveat at the bottom, "This project is in the process of being realised." It wasn't. The *Biennale* Board Chairman Luca Belgiorno-Nettis was quoted at the time in the local print media saying that Sydney did not have "one significant site of Aboriginal tribute—not one… it's a damning indictment on our respect for the original custodians that we have nothing."[13] Over this lengthy period of re-conceptualising and re-proposing the project it has sustained the support of the greater Sydney Aboriginal community (elders from La Perouse and the Darug people from Blacktown), and given that the Royal Botanic Gardens is responsible for the wall, it had received their support as well. The project was canvassed widely amongst all possible interested parties but still it has failed to materialise.

In its latest propositional incarnation (*Song of Barangaroo, Bennelong and Pemulwuy*) I've endeavoured to orchestrate this work as a song cycle, with a set of songs which go through their seasonal year, of when birds, fish, animals appear—this is the time you eat kangaroo, this is the time you eat oysters, and so on. More recently I was researching again this particular book on Sydney rock art and discovered that there are hundreds of examples of eels in the rock art galleries around the greater Sydney region. The eels migrate from Sydney to New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean, give birth and return to Parramatta at the far eastern end of Sydney Harbour, and the ponds in suburban Centennial Park.[14] So I've now added into the design what can be called a "river of eels".[15]

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I have spent quite a lot of my life living in a traditional lifestyle with the Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. I was very deeply involved in that community, about who they were, about why they were, which part of the land they related to, and so on. When I came back to Sydney I wanted to have the memory that all this land (of Australia) is Aboriginal land, as there is a great Australian silence of no Aboriginal people written into histories up until that time. In 1968 the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner presented two Boyer lectures (commissioned by the then Australia Broadcasting

Commission), titled 'After the Dreaming', the second of which was titled 'The Great Australian silence'. In this he proposed that major areas of indigenous and non-indigenous history—invasion, frontier violence, land theft and massacres—had been ignored by Australian historians as a "cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale" that emerged in the late nineteenth century as the country experienced a growth in nationalism and a desire for Australian Federation, up until the 1960s.[16]

Several decades later the Danish historian Robert Ørsted-Jensen came to Australia to write about fellow countryman Carl Feilberg, a late nineteenth century newspaper journalist, editor, political commentator and activist who wrote about human rights abuses towards indigenous people in Queensland, and was the author of the policy-influencing *The Way We Civilise; Black and White; The Native Police*, published in 1880. Ørsted-Jensen also researched and wrote about the number of Aboriginal frontier casualties perpetrated by the Queensland Native Police Force (1848-1905) who were notorious for conducting a war of annihilation upon the indigenous inhabitants and to remove them from the landscape, for over thirty years. Ørsted-Jensen was intrigued by the history that was not written, this veil of silence, ultimately proposing that more aboriginal people were killed in Queensland over this period by the Queensland Native Police Force than Australian soldiers killed in the First World War.

With all this in mind I wanted to bring Aboriginal people back into memory, into the memory of things passed, and bring the city of Sydney into that context, as Australian society then thought of Aboriginal people being 'out in the desert', in the tropical north, somewhere else, but not in Sydney. There are a great number of statues of European people in the city, but there are no statues or monuments to Aboriginal people. In making this public artwork it would be about bringing the presence of Aboriginal people back into the middle of the city, asserting that memory, and the truth of that through art. And if this point could be made, then a greater historical conversation had begun. I realised further that what would be needed is a periodic event, either a performance or ritual of some form at this site, where the Aboriginal voice could be heard. It might be as straightforward, for example, as an annual Anzac Day Service[17] when the public stand before a memorial in a minute's silence and then recite the ode to the fallen: we will remember them. It can become a simple gesture, and it should be moved by the Aboriginal people themselves; perhaps on Bennelong's or Pemulwuy's death date.

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Monuments are for dead things. I wanted to assert that Aboriginal people are still alive and active, not dead. Monuments are erected when a society is in recovery and growing, not in decay or retreat. Memorials are about remembering—but shouldn't be about remembering dictators, despots and murderers. The fact that we Aboriginal people exist in any form in the Australian historical-public record is an astonishing actuality. How do the deaths of Aboriginal 'common folk' be named and remembered in Western terms? I'm an Australian Aboriginal, to date invisible, anonymous; all I can do is speak and make my people and me visible.

In the 1980s in Arnhem Land, I would travel annually with large groups of near naked, painted Aboriginal males often hundreds of kilometres to attend religious gatherings. We carried spears, and guns in case we saw game, and may have appeared threatening to some unsophisticated people. In the official historical records and personal diaries of colonists are two interesting writings of incidents in their meeting with Aboriginals—apparently a regular monthly if not weekly killing of Aboriginal people (most often un-named). In these accounts there appears a regular sighting by the colonists of large numbers of Aboriginal people in groups, often described, for no apparent reason other than fear, as "war parties". My own experience is that Aboriginal people only gather in large numbers for two reasons —for hunting particular seasonal game, and for religious ceremonies. At Risdon Cove in Tasmania[18], and what is called "The Battle of Parramatta"[19] we find colonists firing upon gatherings of Aboriginal people; in the former case definitely a religious ritual, and in the latter more than possibly the case. In Australia's history there is never any thought of a memorial to such incidents, hence my endeavour to establish a form of memory—monuments to known, named Aboriginal individuals.

Notes

[1] I'd like to thank Professor Emeritus John Clark for his contribution through numerous conversations, towards writing this text. *Ozymandias* quote: Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *Shelley: Poetical Works*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 550

[2] The Black War was the period of hostilities between mid-1820s and 1832 between Aborigines and British soldiers and settlers in Tasmania (then called Van Diemen's Land), which resulted in the virtual extermination of the original Aboriginal population of the island

[3] Australian historian whose writing has focused on the violent conflict between colonising European settlers and indigenous Australians

[4] During the conservative government of John Howard (1996-2007) an adversarial political debate, referred to as the "Culture Wars", concerned varying interpretations of Aboriginal and white Australian history and its presentation, especially in the National Museum of Australia and high school history curricula

[5] Commemorating Aboriginal Australians who died as a result of European settlement, the work comprises two hundred painted traditional hollow log coffins made by artists from Ramingining and neighbouring communities of Central Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory

[6] Woollarawarre Bennelong (c. 1764–3 January 1813) was a senior Eora man who served as an interlocutor between the Aboriginal people of the Sydney area and the British. When married to Barangaroo he was captured by Governor Phillip as part of his plan to learn the language and customs of the local people. He later travelled to England with Governor Phillip and returning to Australia to a prominent position in Eora political and cultural life

[7] The site of the Sydney Opera House, named after Bennelong

[8] Barangaroo was the second wife of Bennelong. The East Darling Harbour area of Sydney (currently being developed into residential, commercial and civic buildings) was renamed Barangaroo in her honour in 2007. Pemulwuy (c.1750–1802) was an Aboriginal warrior who began a twelve-year guerilla war of resistance against the British, which continued until his death in 1802

[9] This exhibition was the first of contemporary Aboriginal art at the MCA. The title's words signified a contemporary act of resistance by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in continuing their artistic practice in the face of historical and ongoing oppression. The title was used again in a 'sequel' to this exhibition, *Tyerabarrbowaryaou II*, which was curated by Fiona Foley and Djon Mundine for the 5th *Havana Biennial*. The exhibition sought to redress the dismissive attitude of European and white Australian galleries and collectors towards Aboriginal art. It provided an opportunity to engage with and inform the wider public about the inherent social and cultural importance of these works. Each of the artists represented in this exhibition was concerned with the history of the white invasion of Australia, its personal, political and historical impacts. *Tyerabarrbowaryaou* aimed to present a new voice of Aboriginal culture, one which embraced new media and ancient tradition, to give voice to a wounded history and speak with pride of an enduring relationship with land and culture; see https://www.mca.com.au/collection/exhibition/644-tyerabarrbowaryaou-i-shall-never-become-a-white-man/

[10] According to his notebook entry, this was the exact exchange; "Tyera barr bowar yaou I shall not become white. This was said by Patyegarang after I [Dawes] told her if she would wash herself often, she would become white... William Dawes"; http://www.doryanthes.info/pdf/Dawes%20Language.pdf

[11] See http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/exhibitions/edge-trees and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edge_of_the_Trees

[12] See https://www.scribd.com/document/124409305/2010-Biennale-Sydney-Free-Guide

[13] Andrew Taylor, 'Between a rock and an arts place'; http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/between-a-rock-and-an-arts-place-20100605-xlu6.html

[14] In Sydney's Centennial Park, adult eels make their way from the ponds to Botany Bay, either using the stormwater drains that link the ponds or leaving the water to slither overland to the next water body, compelled by instinct and nature to journey to the warm waters of the Pacific to reproduce their species; see http://www.centennialparklands.com.au/about/environment/animals/long-finned_eel

[15] The Parramatta rugby football team has been known as the "Eels" since the late 1970s, the rationale being that the name Parramatta, anglicised from the Aboriginal dialect "*Barramattagal*" meant the "place where the Eels dwell", Alan Whiticker & Ian Collis, The History of Rugby League Clubs, Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2004

[16] W.E.H. Stanner, 'After the dreaming: black and white Australians–an anthropologist's view', Boyer Lecture Series, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969

[17] A national day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand on 25 April, originally to honour those armed forces who served in Gallipoli, Turkey during World War I, then to include both World wars, subsequent conflicts and peacekeeping roles

[18] On 3 May 1804 there was a violent clash between British troops and a large group of aboriginals on a kangaroo hunt at Risdon Cove near Hobart

[19] In March 1797, Pemulwuy led a large group of aboriginal warriors in an attack on a government farm, following which government troops and settlers followed them to Parramatta, twenty-three kilometres to the west of the Sydney settlement. A number of aboriginal warriors were killed in the ensuing and uneven fight, now referred to as the Battle of Parramatta