

SOUCHOU YAO

Nation of Signs



Avid WhatsApp users, my family's latest message comes as I write. It is not the usual snapshots of Hakka peasant dishes of their culinary attempts, of a grandchild's birthday, or a European tour to celebrate a wedding anniversary. The COVID19 pandemic has put a stop to overseas travelling, so people's attention turns to what is happening at home. Malaysians, fractured by ethnic division and power struggles within the ruling party Barisan Nasional, are being put to the test. Astonishingly, a kind of COVID-nationalism has arisen: a feeling that Malaysians are 'in it together' as the pandemic does not select its victims along racial lines. In one of the photos, my brother and sister and their spouses are waiting for their COVID19 shots at the Malaya University Hospital vaccination centre. The waiting hall is sparse and orderly, everyone—Malays, Chinese, Indians—wear masks and social distancing breaks the usual Third World chaos. My family is proud of getting the vaccine. "We have received the shots earlier than you in Sydney," my sister writes. The pandemic has brought out the best in people; ethnic dissension is replaced by a sentiment of collective purpose. It has achieved what the state has failed since independence in 1957. COVID-nationalism is nationalism of amnesia. The ethnic grievances and contentions are for the time being forgotten. Perhaps this is an immigrant's fancy; people in the home country deserve to live in peace. Yet the tranquillity at the university clinic feels awkward; like when you 'jack-rabbit' restart your car that has broken down on the highway. You are lucky, but you do well to remember the incident, the serenity may not last, the car might stop again.

LIFELINE

"The National 2021: New Australian Art is a celebration of contemporary Australian art," the exhibition website usefully informs. "The third in a series of biennial survey exhibitions, it showcases work being made across the country by artists of different generations and cultural backgrounds."¹ Thirty-nine artists were commissioned to produce new work that would respond "to the times in which they live, presenting observations that are provocative, political and poetic."² True to the curatorial statement, the exhibition was overwhelming its range of artists and subjects, it was epic, and expressly political. The progressive agendas—from social justice to diversity, from anti-racism to addressing the social deprivation of the Aboriginal communities—pulled you in and thumped you with their feverish expression.

The National was first opened in 2017; its original aims were to commission new Australian art that observes "moments in our collective histories,"³ and would "in some modest way shape the conditions of our immediate futures."⁴ These aims have not changed. As Matt Cox, of *The National 2021* curatorial team opines, "[W]e find in this third iteration practices that share time with the past and remain, despite post-modern and post-truth cynicism, optimistic of the transformative value of art."⁵ The other curators, evident in their essays, comradely aligned themselves with Cox's sentiment. Much of *The National 2021* was an emanation of what it boldly proclaimed. The over-ambition, the theoretical wrong-headedness, the sweeping Leftism, the confident functionalism ("the transformative value of art"): they stalked every step of the curatorial approach that chaperoned the audience at their viewing. To the overwhelmed audience however, Cox has thrown a lifeline, through his essay 'Sharing time with the past and caring for the future', but the assuring tone is self-undermining. The "post-modern and post-truth cynicism" appears in the first paragraph, but the ringing words sound like a rush to judgement. Post-modern is not post-truth. As for cynicism, it belittles the grand philosophic suspicion of postmodernism and post-structuralism which, though impoverished in historical materialism, derive their analytical thrust from post-Marxism. In the

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vast and uneven terrain, we find too the postcolonial critics of the subaltern studies, and the work of Edward Said, always a blend of brilliant insight and promiscuous hope for the oppressed. Still, deficient academicism should not here matter; art professionals need not get into that racket.

PAST AND PRESENT

In art writing, Cox believes, “there remains a risk of reciting formulaic interpretations of ‘our’ times as ‘challenging’, ‘uncertain’ and ‘unprecedented’, with the inference that we stand at the cusp of a rupture between present and past.”⁶ The ‘past in the present’ notion of history is a reminder that time’s passing does not brush off the cobwebs of yesteryears. The sentiment evokes the old despairs in Australia, the old wound of history festers. *The National* of 2021, as did that of the previous years, featured prominently the deprivation of Indigenous people since British colonization. The experience persists; it is the language of resilience and adaptation, Cox believes, that denies the truth about its real effects. On this issue, *The National 2021* called for a radical correction. And that is how it should be, what little ‘transformative power’ art can muster should address this issue of national trauma.

Yet, *The National 2021* is a survey exhibition. It is meant to cover the latest in the Australian society as reflected by the (visual) arts. Thus, an ecumenical slant is forced upon it. The Indigenous peoples’ painful past and present is of national concern—so is multiculturalism, refugees and immigration, impacts of late capitalism and globalization. *The National* is pressed to show up the virulent effects of these national and global happenings. Clearly though, it does not see itself only as a survey. More ambitiously, it wants to submit what it sees as the pulse of the Australian nation as it lives through the past and present, in the context of local and transnational forces. All the same, it is “the national” that hangs most heavily over the exhibition. “The national” dictates the theme; it cannot sidestep the fraught notion of nation and nationalism. Its hands are tied, so to speak, by the progressive agendas it proudly proclaims. As it sets down the fault-lines of Australia’s social and political life, if only to list the wrongs and their remedies, what figures The Nation is the collective stain of horror—less joy, contentment and even patriotism. It comes across almost as an aside. *The National* has to deal with an inconvenient fact: The Nation, any nation, is not recognized only by its fractures; it is more powerfully identified by the sharing of customary commitments and values that give a nation a sense of solidity amongst its people.

MAGICAL COMMUNITY

The Nation is up to its sleeve in trickery; a shibboleth, constructed, a made-up job; yet it demands from us obedience and loyalty. We are sentimental about our nation, and in the right circumstances, will easily set ourselves against our collective enemies. In *Imagined Communities* (2007), Benedict Anderson sets out the social and historical conditions that explain how and why we take The Nation for real.⁷ The book is replete with terms like “dream,” “sleep,” “awakening,” “invention,” “fantasy” as it explores the nature of nationalism, particularly in modern Southeast Asia. The idea of The Nation is lodged in the cavern of secrets. When allied with the state, nation or nation-state, it comes across as something we know, yet it’s true appearance and purposes we can barely latch on to. “Imagined Communities” is an enticing title, but a substantial part of the book describes the institutions—the state apparatus, the print media and so on—that are at least half the reason why nationalism works. The “imagined” of “imagined communities” comes across as somewhat misleading.

Nonetheless, when we give over to the pull of The Nation much of it is experienced in our imagination, as a force in our consciousness. The idea of The Nation is invariably associated with a certain legerdemain; that is true. As it makes a claim in our mental realm, nationalism delivers a set of munificent feelings largely positive: collective identification, the joy of communal belonging, the virtue of sacrifice and loyalty. The Nation may be a fantasy, but for its citizens it is also real and morally affirming. And this is because it is always married to a particular history. Nationalism invites the notion of a nation's heroic arising from a momentous event in the past — revolution, war, the fall of old regimes, the end of empires, the opening of the country by settlers. The vessel of national consciousness is filled with the sense of historical break: an optimism and a new opportunity to achieve social-economic progress.

The question is, out of the events and prevalent passions of the past, which ones we would choose to remember, and which ones cast into oblivion? This is recognizably a question of politics. In the selective remembering and forgetting, all kinds of political interests are at play. In the shaping of communal memory, the struggle for progress and social improvement would not be the only game in town. "If nationalism was the expression of a radically changed form of consciousness," Anderson asks, "should not awareness of that break, and the necessary forgetting of the older consciousness, create its own [false] narrative?"⁸ Everyone falsifies, so it seems — the nationalists, the conservatives, the reformers, and the Left.

THE MAGICAL NATION

With nation and nationalism, our feeling is always half bafflement. The Nation both oppresses and inspires, it brings out the best and the worst in people — loyalty, sacrifice, collective impulse over individual interests, xenophobia, the (WWII-)Blitz spirit of the British people. The Australian nation is no exception. It is marked by conservatism and systematic inequality and injustices, and many believe in it as a commonwealth of collective good, the best institutional form to achieve democracy and security for its citizens. In many people's eyes, each high and low of The Nation somehow compensates for the other.

But the mystery lingers. Australia is more than what *The National* has so harrowingly depicted; nor is it about the good life people — not least the immigrants and refugees — enjoy and are grateful for. *The National* is notable for the way it flattens the uneven relief of the Australian nation and the ways it is imagined. It is as if the singular aim has been to dust the continent of its inscrutability. The curators' habit of affixing "Australia" to its multiple political ills and their passionate agenda-setting in righting the wrongs: they tend to make this rumbling discord the dominant face of Australia. Remember the ontology of The Nation? It is communal, it inspires loyalty — just as it conceals the strife and dissension within the social collective. The opposites never manage to reconcile; a terse polarity drives The Nation. For *The National*, no matter how many historical and ideological connections it makes with Australia's past (and present), the viewers retain their curiosities and convictions. They hold fast to their puzzlement. And this may well be the biennial exhibition's dilemma: The Real in the Australian nation is consolidated by the institutions and perceptions; it is even more so by the Byzantine process of exegesis and the making of meaning.

POETICS OF THE REAL

My first encounter with Australia, as a sixteen-year-old, was the discovery of Patrick White's novel *The Tree of Man* (1955) at the British Council Library in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. White's is a harsh, forbidding territory; there are no suburban greens of the quarter acre blocks, no beaches, nor the innocence of television's Skippy the kangaroo. At a farm in the outback, life for the husband and wife is a Darwinian struggle for survival. It is a shocking depiction. Decades on, at a Sydney University first-year anthropology class, my quiz on which Australian writer won the Noble Prize for literature elicited no reply. But the students knew about the more populist Steve Erwin, the naturalist TV entertainer who had just drowned at sea. You take your pick what best represents Australia. *The Tree of Man* is not for everyone. But over the years—as a student, then as a lecturer—I have held on to White's epic novel as a counterpoint to the simple pleasures and generous amenities of life 'down under.' I have never forgotten the dark abyss in which the book's protagonists Stan and Amy Parker have fallen into, a sign of the other side of 'The Lucky Country.'⁹

These days even more agile judgement is demanded of me. As an immigrant, I find little relevance in the annual ANZAC Day celebration, with its Dawn Service for the fallen and 'two-up' (heads or tails coin) game at the pub afterwards. Coming from an ex-British possession, I, unfairly, take the national event as hankering for the post-imperial nostalgia turned emblem of Australian nationalism. Yet one holds back the postcolonial grudge. The men and women on the ANZAC Day march, spirited in their advanced years, have done their duty and served the nation, while we are 'guests' graciously admitted by the host country. Call it good manners. And one is reminded how unfair any similar censure can be. Once, spending my sabbatical in a university in Melbourne, the vice-Chancellor's Christmas greeting embraced a multicultural compromise. His email reminded the staff to tone down the exuberance of Christmas parties, so as not to upset colleagues of other faiths. We, the Buddhists and Koranic worshippers, were made to feel a tad small-minded, like snowflakes in the 'culture war'; not what the Vice-Chancellor had in mind.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Of course, the truth about Australia is a matter of social and economic facts, too. The changing population, its age structure, the economic-industrial changes, the pattern of social and economic parity, the volume of the annual immigrant and refugee intake: they spur and decelerate the changes and how we think about Australia. Then there is the question: do facts come before perception, or does perception decipher and transcribe the meanings of facts? The effects of social and economic lives are uneven. The capitalist economy exploits and oppresses, but there are just enough winners in it to make it a viable system for most people. And to say a good word for the immigrants: who is to say the Australian Dream of a job and house ownership is a fantasy they have been duped into believing? However, social and economic reality and our mode of perception do not lock into each other like two pieces of Lego blocks. There is no simple ontology where perception would correctly align itself with facts (as we understand them). For where would we leave the hope, the optimism, the future-altering project we dream up for ourselves and our families? Faced with these questions, the temptation is to erect an iron cage in which facts are lodged and understood: the method of conventional social science. The facts and their meaning cannot be shifted; they are innocently transparent and speak only for themselves. In the battle against social injustices and cross-generation deprivation, those of the progressive Left should do well to remember the enigma, the impenetrability, that clouds table-turning.

ART THE REDEEMER

The National has pitched us a listing of Australia's ills and art the great redeemer is urged to do its job. Not for it the mystification, emotions and dreams that complicate The Nation. The clarification of ills and remedies is a major misstep: it forgets how elusive the situation is, how indeterminate is the horizon of the social facts that define the exhibition. *The National* has banished the mystery, while in political life as in art we are giddy with colliding realities pressed upon our minds. Our (postmodern) age is an age of uncertain semantics and fragmentation of significations. Everything is a moving target in the psychic economy that infects the way The Nation is imagined. Only a certain kind of philosophic fancy would take the social and the political as having a solid façade, innocent of mystery, free from the phantasmagorical. In the terrain of radical metaphysics, what appears as social fact is full of epistemological tricks, where outward mien is the child of concealment, meaning is actually meaning-making. In any political agenda, even that enunciated by *The National*, social facts present themselves as truth, then as discourse, and finally as authority for action.

Perhaps there is no simple resolution of the epistemological problems of our age. The splintering and decoupling of certainties make us question the central structures of social forms and values. *The National* has tried to save us from the confusion and incoherence which plagues our thinking on politics and art—and on political art. It is a strange gift, for what aids our contemplation of late capitalism is precisely the confusion and incoherence that firm up what we experience of the world. The clarity and agenda-setting offer, in contrast, poor comfort. For what we need is to have one's face rubbed in the sludge of existential anguish where nothing stands still, where "all that is solid melts into air."¹⁰ We need the deep experiences of drowning, the wisdom of near death before we can harvest the confidence that the world can indeed be saved through art's power.

ALTERNATIVE IMAGININGS

Eventually, in regards to philosophy and art, what we can hope for is to fix The Nation, the floating signifier of its wavering referents and align its agendas with a set of ethical standards. However, each political interest, each ethnic community, would want to imagine its own version of The Nation. Each mode of imagining would massage The Real, and mould it to embrace its own desires and preferences. As a process of democracy, it is a dilemma that *The National* cannot escape absolutely. But then through The Nation's ills it avidly accounts, through the multiple wrongs it aims to undo, through the remedial moves invested in the arts, *The National*, too, is deeply in the game of authorizing The Real. All the curatorial rhetoric is devoted to reinventing the poetics of actuality in the way of advancing progressive causes. To say again: people imagine the idea of 'the national' differently; they are busily drawing and redrawing the symbolic relief of Australia in order to imprint on it their own wishes and propositions. In this enterprise, *The National* aims to be a participant. It stands out by its blustering self-confidence, by its counter-hegemonic mission, and by the understanding it is ideologically on the right track.

Try as it did to cover a diversity of forms and themes of engagement, this sample of contemporary Australian art felt confined, caged in. Some of the artists are of diverse ethnic backgrounds, each with a particular tie—local born, through marriage, through migration—to Australia: Korean, Indian, Balinese, Thai, Pakistani, Malaysian/Filipino, notably. However, as 'Australia'-the-signifier casts its shadow over the artwork, the artists' ethnic origins and their multiple cultural positions are muted. To me, their unity and coherence felt unsettling. *The National/*



'the national' is supreme and insoluble in the way of corralling the artwork into a singular frame of reference, but comes across as half-attempted, unfinished. Is it fair to expect from it an apprehension, a self-problematizing of the aims and execution it so prodigiously laid out? So assured it is of its mission that one may ask: who are the culprits of wrong-doing and false consciousness that this (three-part) biennial has heroically set out to redeem? At its end, *The National* comes across as a project of double irony. If the viewers and the Australian public are victims of The Real, is it this that *The National* has helped to construct and reify? You need a certain kind of Australia to make real the ills and their perpetrators.

DISCOURSE OF HISTORY

Power and its effects are objective, coherent, intelligible. It is little trouble to know where to look, and power's oppression and injustice presents no mystery. A totalizing vision—a national unity—forces itself through diverse social practices and clumsy desires that constitute Australian culture. This is the conceit of *The National*. After Foucault and de Certeau, we have come to see power as double-faced; its effects both exacerbate and undermine the potency of oppression. With state power, the administration of justice and social delivery is half the story. The other half are systematic ills, the way it is in league with The Real, how its sense of actuality is discursively ratified.

For Roland Barthes, history writes itself (in the manner of 'facts speak for themselves'). A literary theorist, he saw history as narrative, one that keeps company with fiction, myth, and the ancient epics. History is in every aspect infected by the author's presence. Barthes urges the reading of history as discourse, as literary form packed full of authorial labour and desires. The apparent objectivity, the transparency of historical discourse is achieved by artful concealment in the writer's design and purposes. Barthes shunned this talk of aim and design and achievement, however. For the authorial presence features in traces, in shards of signs, not in formal, recognizable intimations. The reading of history is an onerous task, requiring both a philosophic mind and a penetrating eye. Since history conceals, the best approach is to make historical referents stand outside the discourse that shapes them. Historical events have to be wrenched out of the womb of discourse, so that it appears in the world innocent, naked. This from 'The Discourse of History':

*Historical discourse supposes, one might say, a double operation, one that is extremely complex. In the first phrase, at one point (this decomposition is, of course, only metaphorical), the referent is detached from the discourse, it becomes exterior to it, grounds it and is supposed to ground it... but in a second phase, it is the signified itself which is repulsed, merged in the referent; the referent enters into direct relation with the signifier, and the discourse, meant only to express the real, believes it elides the fundamental term of imaginary structures, which is the signified.*¹¹

Note the two-step manoeuvre. First the referent's detachment from what authorizes its meaning and significations. Next, the referent's return to its signifier nestled in the system of discourse; and discourse, lest we forget, is sorely "meant to express the real."¹² The result is that "'objective' history, the 'real' is never more than an unformulated signified, sheltering behind the apparently all-powerful referent."¹³ What chance of understanding history do we stand against discourse's stunning feat? Barthes' answer is to have us return to the philosophic suspicion of conventional epistemology. He quoted Nietzsche who said, "There are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact."¹⁴ To which Barthes adds, in history as discourse, "what is noted derives from the notable... from what is worthy of being noted."¹⁵ So what

do we want from *The National*? As from any art exhibition, to immerse ourselves in its ambivalence and complexity. We want it to guide us through the labyrinth of what defines the Australian nation and leave us to find our way out. *The National* took the lid off a troubled world, then smoothed this world into summation. The Nation is indeed full of grieving, we want an art project to let us explore this lament and discover the feasibility of its correction. It is perplexity, less the agenda-setting, that we prize.

Notes

¹ <https://everi.events/event/13324728-a/the-national-2021-at-agnsw>

² Ibid.

³ Michael Brand, Lisa Havilah, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, 'Directors foreword', *The National 2017: New Australian Art*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Carriageworks, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p. 9

⁴ Blair French, 'Through time: Continuity in the contemporary', *The National 2017: New Australian Art*, p. 30

⁵ Matt Cox, 'Sharing time with the past and caring for the future'; <https://www.the-national.com.au/essays/sharing-time-with-the-past-and-caring-for-the-future/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 2006

⁸ Anderson, p. xiv

⁹ "The Lucky Country" has become an epithet to describe Australia since academic and public intellectual Donald Horne's 1964 book of that title, in its context the phrase being negative, but generally used favourably. He portrayed Australia's power and wealth based mostly on luck, as opposed to a national strength of its political or economic structure, while also bemoaning the absence of art and an indifference to intellectual matters

¹⁰ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, New York: Penguin Books, 1988. The title comes from *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels, chapter 1, in *The Portable Karl Marx*, Eugene Kamenka ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1983, p. 207

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, Richard Howard trans., New York: Hill and Wang, 1986, pp. 138–139

¹² Barthes, p. 138

¹³ Barthes, p. 139

¹⁴ Barthes, p. 138. Barthes does not give the source of this quote

¹⁵ Ibid.