

De-Colonizing Art Institutions

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police brutality and contemporary art

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Casa da Xiclet
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**ONCURATING
PROJECT SPACE**

For a moment they forced his arms and his legs behind his back

He was hog-tied for a moment like that

Then he saw me filming

Then he stopped

But still wasn't letting go

This image is incident I witnessed on Noongar country, now known as Perth, Western Australia in a public area known as the “cultural centre”.

The “cultural centre” is comprised of a number of institutions. These are the State Library, The Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), The Western Australian Museum, and the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA). Not officially part of this space across the road is East Perth Police Station, which is known to locals as the East Perth Lock up.

The State Library has records that I would access while working with the Link-Up program, which is a service to help people of the Stolen Generations to find their families. The Western Australian Museum is similar to any museum of natural history, while also speckled with histories particular to the state. The Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) is like any other major art institution where you can see the travelling exhibitions of European masters. Each year there seem to be more events that place Indigenous knowledge, culture and creativity at the centre. As well are more events designed and led by Noongar community or communities from other parts of the state. Even so, there are still disappointing steps backward. Only last year AGWA had an exhibition of their colonial era collection, with the absurd title *Unknown Land*, and further perpetuating the myth of *Terra Nullius*.

These galleries and museums encircle an area that is extremely tense through a long history of the over policing of Indigenous people. Prior to its more recent incarnation this area was subject to apartheid policies. During the 1940's in particular Indigenous people were controlled by a curfew, meaning they could not be in this area or any part of the city centre after 6pm. If people were caught they would spend a night in the East Perth Lock up.

When I took this video I was on my way to the opening event at PICA. I had a piece in the group show *Radical Ecologies*. This was first time I had the opportunity to show work at a major institution. It was also significant because an undergraduate while other students in my course were applying for residencies, volunteering, or going for paid positions at PICA, I did not. This was a space that as a younger person I felt I did not belong. Perhaps it was not

necessarily PICA itself, but the circumstances directly outside the doors certainly shaped my anxieties.

Only a week prior to seeing this incident security footage from a juvenile detention centre in the North Territory was aired nationally. I could not watch the footage. I could not bring myself to see more images of our bodies experiencing overt and systemic racism. I did see a still image of a young boy in a chair with a white bag over his head, and his arms tied behind his back.

In my mind with this image is the face of a young woman known as Miss Dhu. They ignored her screams of pain as her body tried to fight the septicaemia taking hold due to untreated broken rib. Later at the inquiry (that only happened because her family and community made sure it did) found that if they had checked her temperature she would have been admitted and treated immediately. Instead both police and health professionals decided she was either faking it or a drug addict coming down. Miss Dhu was in custody for unpaid parking fines. She was only 21. Watching this young person being held on the ground all I could think to do was film. The risk of Indigenous people being harmed or even dying in custody is very real. This is just one aspect of the social disadvantage that the Indigenous population experiences in Australia.

To respond to these circumstances in my own practice I work to embody a *Custodial Ethic*. According to this philosophy the two most important relationship in life exist between the land and people, and then amongst people themselves – human relationships are shaped by our relationship with the land. (Graham, 2008) These connections are grounded in two basic principles – *You are not alone in the world* and *the law is the land*. These statements correspond with the fundamental questions – *How do we live together (in a particular area or nation, or on Earth), without killing each other off? How do we live without substantially damaging the environment? And – Why do we live? With the disclaimer – We need to find a way to answer this question in a way that does not make people feel alienated, lonely or murderous* (Graham, 2008).

Our relationship with human and non-human beings never changes, and for this reason it is a philosophy that is reflective and responsive to the more-than-human world as it materializes. As individuals or communities involved in the arts we work to continue or renew a way of being in the world inherited from our ancestors.

<http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-2008/graham.html>

