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Bordertown paper (August 2008)

TITLE: the imaginary border

Introduction

Bordertown is a contemporary artwork in the form of a sculptural sound installation created for exhibition at Artspace, Sydney, and Conical Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne in February and March of this year. The work is comprised of a 10-channel surround sound installation housed within a curved black structure, emulating a wall. A 76-minute soundtrack narrates a partially fictional story of two women living in a divided community called "Bordertown" that straddles two Australian states. One woman has been dispatched as migrant labour to an internment camp on the outskirts of town; the other is an angry and disenfranchised young local from one of the poorest suburbs. Their existence consists of daily confrontations with an impassable barrier; a wall built along the border that divides the community into "North" and "South". Both are witness to escalating antagonisms across the divide, and the social exclusion of women and other minorities in Bordertown.

Rather than describe the work I would like to perform a kind of archaeological excavation of the surrounding contexts of social partition, conflict, and border construction in Australia. This will effectively encompass the underpinning concerns of this quasi-documentary work. Approximating the form of a border this paper is divided in two sections: part one deals with the cultural and political terrain of the work; and part two looks at the metaphysical and mythical dimensions of borders.

Part One: excavating the border

The two primary contingencies for any frontier are, one, its location and, two, that its physical parameters are not always manifest. The fixing or defining of a border often presents a spatial and conceptual impasse because impossibility is at the crux of its power. For, while in physical form borders are normally detectable, in their functional and subjective role as means of division or distinction they are predominantly imperceptible. Invisibility configures the frontier as an exclusionary zone or non-place. Yet walls are also notable for their paradoxical function as both barriers and voids.

The contested relationship of self (or the individual) to the State is part of a psychological terrain in which the frontier exists as a kind of schizophrenic. It follows, therefore, that the border is dual or split *because* it is schizoid. The notion of the "split subject" can be read from two philosophical standpoints. On one hand, in psychological terms, this term denotes a person whose relations between the world and themselves are dichotomous and consistently ruptured. The other perspective, explicated by Michel Foucault's theories of power and sovereignty, is where the binaries of self and State are co-extensive, and entwined in co-dependant and reciprocal relations of power.[1]

Australia's troubled relationship to its territory and the attendant absurdity of all attempts to secure the perimeter highlights the complexity of borders. A useful explication of Australia's contemporary constructions of State, sovereignty and militarisation, can be made in a comparison with the "border's" antecedents in a colonial framework. Historically, as a subsidiary of the British Empire's incessantly advancing and colonising frontier in the 18th century, Australia, like America, has an anxious relationship to space. Prior to Federation, the Nation's fears were acted out in antagonisms between the separately governed states or colonies. After 1901, because of the impossibility of any external physical security cordon and its distance from the protectorate of the "Empire", Australia's

[1] See Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Tavistock Publications, London 1972, and *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Allen Lane, London 1977.

vulnerability to "invasion" was suddenly too apparent, so a psychological defence system became the necessary and best means of border protection.

With nature governing its territory and human traffic testing its limit, Australia could be said to possess a "creeping" or "porous" border. Australian policies associated with the ocean are exemplary, seen in the Howard Government's excision of migration zones, or their *exorcism* or reconfiguration as non-borders (the possible continuation of this policy should be acknowledged here). Shorelines are poor boundaries anyway for the obvious reason that water is not solid matter and it is always in a state of flux. Australian maritime restrictions constitute the geographic characteristic of this territorial predicament and the complexity of using the sea as a security cordon, evident in a total of four maritime zones. Frequent confrontations with refugees and Indonesian fishing boats occur in Australia's northern waters, as the government assertively draws and redraws the outer perimeter.

Physical adaptations of the landscape should not be underestimated for their part in the hegemonic structuring of the border. All such alterations are part of a system of defensive and exclusionary practices within a territory, including its militarisation and the alienation of local "undesirable" inhabitants. Meanwhile, the exclusionary zone of the camp or detention centre (a condemnatory space in continuous use since British settlement) sets apart outsiders caught up in an internal classification of the limit or boundary.

The conveyance of the physical to metaphysical or psychological forms of defence comes into play as a key role in border politics at this point. This is because the literal border is impossible to fix on soil, human bodies stand in to reinforce or constitute precisely (or imprecisely) who is beyond or outside the limit in the minds of the populace. Australia's war on refugees functions exactly in this way. In the sinking of "illegal entry vessels" and the indefinite incarceration of asylum seekers in detention centres a limit is demarcated.[2] This imaginary and terrifying form of border control stretches exclusion beyond bodies to the minds of those on either side of the frontier. These tactics, while coercive, are simply implemented through a model of identity and otherness that is transferable to interpersonal relations on a local, national and global scale. Yet psychological defence systems and practices are not in any way unique to Australia. They are identifiable in European Economic Union's invisible eastern perimeter, along which surveillance and thermodynamic detection systems now defend and define the boundary with an idea instead of fences.

Australia's sovereignty hinges on paradoxical constructions of the border precisely because what is identified as internal can only be known by what is defined as external, or outside. The functioning of this kind of society requires the organisation of the entire population, but this is not a new concept. The understanding that a polis, or a body of citizens, are incorporated by sovereign power under the rule of the Law is pivotal to theories of western democratic politics from Plato's *Republic* of 350 BC to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* of 1651, yet is critiqued by contemporary philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben.[3] Although negotiations between a self and its sovereign are dependent on an individual's state of mind, the psychological game of social partition is part of a model of interpersonal relations that operates on a larger scale. Citizenship is just one way to define the membership of the State, and its terms are an important exclusionary device.[4] The principal means of population control, however, is through hegemonic practices, or the maintenance of control over the people via internal social stratification and the dominance of one group over another. This arrangement of authority requires the complicity of the subordinate members as well as those in power.

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[2] For more on incarceration and sovereign power refer here to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, but also to Foucault's earlier study of confinement and civilization, *The History of Madness,* (Jean Khalfa ed.; Jonathan Murphy, trans. London, Routledge, 2006) particularly in terms of the historical connection between exclusion, imprisonment, the British hulks and off0shore imprisonment in British colonies.
[3] Plato, *Republic*, 350AD; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Allen Lane, London 1977, Giorgio Agamben, *Homer sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Standford University Press, 1998); and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
[4] See *Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty Post-2001,* ed. Suvendrini Perera, Network Books, Perth, W.A. 2006, and Michel Foucault's '*Society Must be Defended*' Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76, trans. David Macy, Picador, New York, 2003.

While this reciprocal power structure seems overly complex and is potentially indiscriminate, psychological borders are terribly precise in their identification process. This is because the barrier demarcates the outsider as *whoever* is on the other side of the fence.

Part two: the mythical and narrative scope of the border

While the historical and physical account of a border can be fixed in a particular place or at a certain time, frontiers have archetypal connotations that summon up a mythical dimension too**.** Like a parable, the authority of the border is reliant on a metaphoric relationship to the past. The allusive devices of Franz Kafka found in *The Trial* and *The Castle* are exemplary of this power, as is Kafka's preoccupation with ritual and transformation, or unseen, omniscient authoritarian rule. This evokes what Jacques Derrida designates in *Specters of Marx* as a historical "haunting", or a cultural past that is perpetually reactivated by the people who continue to "live" it.[5]

The spectres that inhabit frontiers are similarly yet paradoxically embodied in the walls (and objects) that are erected to demarcate them. But instead of an absolute delineation, the bricks, concrete and wire swallow up those that they seek to separate. The experience of haunting is further heightened because of the barrier's sublimation of bodies; for walls are both an enclosure and a trap, and the disembodied and segregated voices of the people on either side are the captives of their estranged communications. This relates to Foucault's contention in *Discipline and punish* of the way the prison Panopticon induces conformity by incorporating incarcerated individuals as part of its psychological and physical body and organisation.[6]

The study of social partitioning compares to another Kafka tale, *Great Wall of China,* in which the narrator commences with a perplexed questioning of the haphazard construction of the wall because it is in pieces. The storyteller goes on to speculate that the wall functions symbolically rather than physically. This is illustrated in the account of a messenger sent from the Emperor, whose mission it is to bring an edict to a village on the other side of the wall; only the official's heavy dialect is the source of ridicule and the instant dismissal of the messenger and his announcement. The metaphysics of walls are noteworthy in this context. As in radio broadcasting, loudspeakers employ omnipresence to subordinate the listener to the idea of an absent yet totalitarian and authoritarian voice. This kind of oratory power is aligned with cinematic form because the disembodiment of the voice is exacerbated by the viewer's bodily identification with the blackened iconoclasmic screen, or cinematic "projection". Stanley Kubrick assigns a comparable tyrannical clout to the buried totalitarian artefact in the opening sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In its auditory iconoclasm, Kubrick's black monolith stands for all that is "ineffable", or what cannot be described and what must remain unspoken. Sometimes the voices of the people caught up in walls project their thoughts as if the object were a giant speaker, and in the case of borders this entails the "unnaming" of an abolished or exiled people.

The meanings attached to the physical form of walls as a partitioning device have an additional relationship to the use of curtains as they are commonly found in cinematic, theatrical and religious spaces. The curtain announces the schism between the "real" and the representational format of the viewing experience, as does the proscenium arch. Its symbolic lineage is in religious contexts as an archetype of the partition (once a curtain) that separates the congregation from the Holy of Holies in Jewish temples and Christian churches. Furthermore, the use of curtaining for ritualistic acts of concealment is seen in the covering for the Old Testament tabernacle, over the Kaaba at Mecca, and in the use of fabric as shroud to conceal a powerful figure. This latter usage is the cloak that conceals the priest in the confessional box, whose voice – like God's – is omniscient because of the lack of its specific location, which causes the voice to be disembodied and thus projected in both religious incantations and performative modes of speech in theatre and film (behind the curtain or off-screen). This is a diagnostic analysis of religion that aligns its hegemony and social control with the

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the state of debt, the work of mourning and the new International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York, Routledge, 2006.
[6] Michel Foucault, *ibid.*

form that images of power take in dispensation of faith (such as in architecture). I take this approach because religions are political bodies, designed to organise humans under whatever overarching scheme of belief they hold to.

These are subtle forms of aesthetic social control that are constantly wielded by religions, governments and capitalist corporations. Yet where there is power there is always resistance, and this is not in numbers or by force but in ordinary forms of opposition. Michel de Certeau purports in *The Practice of Everyday Life* a philosophy of everyday forms of political subterfuge – which he calls "tactics" – accessible to the general population.[7] For de Certeau the resistor is like an actor, whose impact on their oppressors comes through the repetition of daily practice. While walls are by nature insurmountable, such methods of insurgency are available to those who have the consciousness and courage to take them up. The same argument can be applied to the problem of how art might involve the viewer as an agent within the context of an aesthetic work. This is an ongoing topic of debate for philosophers, art critics and theorists today, more voluble for the recent popular revival of Jacques Rancière's treatise on art and politics from 1970, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*.[8]

Leaving the snarl of philosophical disputes aside, I would like to culminate by mentioning Bertolt Brecht's rupturing of theatrical representation with the "alienation" method or *Verfremdungseffekt* as a model of artistic and aesthetic resistance. For I would argue that the recalcitrant actions of the characters or the subjects represented in the realm of contemporary art are able to shatter the customary reflection the viewer sees in the mirror, piercing through the historical continuum and order of things.

[7] de Certeau draws these idea on speech from John Searle's linguistic philosophy of human agency and speech, in common with Foucault, who went on to develop kindred ideas about discourse as a political practice. See *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau, Steven Rendall, trans. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

[8] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* Jacques Rancière ; Gabriel Rockhill trans., London, Continuum, 2004.