

# **Semiotics of Disillusionment**

Protesting and Reframing Australia's Political Spectacle Through Détournement

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Australian Politics, Disillusionment, Contemporary Art, Semiotics, Visual Cultures, Dysfunction, D etournement

## Abstract

This practice-led research project explores and expresses my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia. This is achieved by reframing the visual elements of political spectacle through the installation of video, audio and sculpture, deployed in public and gallery settings. The research is enacted through a Rancièrian lens and uses a practice-led methodology, deploying the Situationist method of *détournement* to de-stabilise points of symbolic reference appropriated from Australian politics.

The body of creative work that forms the majority of this research appropriates political symbols and motifs from mainstream and activist politics to reflect my concerns regarding the current jingoistic status quo of Australian political discourse. Further, these creative works experiment with how digital technologies can augment material forms and spaces such as in sound and video sculpture and installation, and site-based projections to expand their interpretable potential. This project is contextualised through reflection on the work of artists including Raquel Ormella, Matt Mullican and Robert MacPherson. I see these artists as exemplifying the same kinds of Rancièrian lens' and Situationist methods of *détournement* as in my work in order to de-stabilise the spectacle of politics and examine how capitalism works to transform citizens into spectators.

Contemporary politics can be seen as highly visual and driven by affect and brand rather than facts and ethics. Thus, through its contribution to the field of contemporary art practice, combined with an exegetical document that frames this practice, the project also makes contributions to broader discourses surrounding themes of politics and aesthetics. These research outcomes comprise a body of artwork and exhibition comprising 60 per cent of the project with the accompanying exegesis contributing the remaining 40 per cent.

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## **Statement of Original Authorship**

The work contained in this exegesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: [QUT Verified Signature](#)

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020

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## Introduction

This practice-led research project explores and expresses my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia.

Using creative practice, I seek to address the problematic reductionism of Australia's political spectacle, and the corrupting influence of capitalism on our democracy. I achieve this by reframing the visual elements of political spectacle through the installation of video, audio and sculpture, deployed in public and gallery settings. These visual elements are appropriated as a means of critiquing the toxic jingoistic narratives which underly Australian political discourse, and to produce a more complex, ambiguous meaning from them.

This research applies a practice-led methodology, deploying the Situationist method of *détournement* to de-stabilise points of reference appropriated from Australian politics including iconography, audio recordings and framing paraphernalia. These creative/studio-based strategies are informed by Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), a Neo-Marxian text which considers the commonalities between art and politics in order to release aesthetics from the constricted, depoliticised boundaries to which it is frequently reduced.

The body of creative work that forms the majority of this research appropriates political symbols and motifs from mainstream and activist politics to reflect my concerns regarding the current jingoistic status quo of Australian political discourse. Further, these creative works experiment with the way that digital technologies can augment material forms and spaces, such as in sound and video, sculpture and installation, and site-based projections to expand the scale and scope of the work beyond the gallery space. This project is contextualised through reflection on the work of artists including Raquel Ormella, Matt Mullican and Robert MacPherson. I see these artists as exemplifying the same kinds of Rancièrian 'lens' and Situationist methods of *détournement* as in my work in order to de-stabilise the spectacle of politics and examine how capitalism works to transform citizens into spectators. Reflection upon these art practices serves to further my own creative expressions of political disillusionment.

This disillusionment can be characterised as an intersection of my feelings of hopelessness and a mounting anxiety about the future; with a sense of indignation at the promise of a free and democratic society being broken by increasingly powerful corporate lobbyists and a political system which favours 'optics' over integrity (Denniss, 2013, p. 8; Australian Conservation Foundation, 2020, p. 7; Wood, 2018, p. 20). I am furious at the shambolic spectacle of Australian politics and its

demonstrable inability to deliver solutions to the mounting crises we face (water, fire, land degradation, climate) and the injustices wrought on Indigenous Australians, refugees, migrants and queer people. This disillusionment and fury directly inform my creative methods and processes, such as the distortion of semiotics and the demolition of materials.

Contemporary politics can be seen as highly visual and driven by affect and brand rather than facts and ethics (Downer, 2013, p. 11). With my Neo-Marxist theoretical frameworks and practice-led methodology, I am able to explore and critique this state. Thus, through the production and exhibition of a body of creative work (60%), combined with this exegetical document (40%), this project seeks to contribute to contemporary art practice and broader discourses surrounding themes of politics and aesthetics.

# Chapter 1

## Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will review the theoretical framework and methodologies that inform this practice-led research project, outlining the ways that I create and present my artworks and ultimately make meaning in this research project. This discussion is split into two sections: my practice-led research methodology and my interpretative paradigm. The former denotes the broader conceptual/philosophical field through which I understand my practice and the theoretical frameworks that frame it, and the latter represents how my art-making methods create meaning and knowledge.

### Practice-led Research Methodology

The processes of art-making that generate knowledge differ from traditional approaches to academic research. Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett's *Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2014) delineates the methodological features of art practice as a mode of research. Through a practice-led research methodology, artists employ inquiry, reflection, and response as modes of critical and creative research (Barrett, 2014, p. 29). As a mode of research, art-making involves intuitive and systematic experimentation, resulting in conceptual and aesthetic outcomes that can have effects beyond the artist's original intentions (Barrett, 2014, p. 31). I apply Barrett and Bolt's model of practice-led research to form this project and better understand its outcomes.

In contrast to traditional research methods, artistic practice explores subjective concerns, which are dependent on the author's internal perspectives, as the artist takes the role of "practitioner-researcher" (Gray, 2007, p. 21). This is significant in considering my creative work and its application as research, as my critique of 'dysfunction' is entirely dependent on my personal perspectives. Crucially then, my investigation of political motifs is not conducted to clarify their expression, but to complicate it. The resulting works are embodiments of my subjectivity rather than aiming to reveal an essential truth or objective reality. To further scrutinise this subjectivity then this methodology also incorporates experimentation with materials, reflection-informed writing, as well as supervisory and peer critique (Barrett, 2014, p. 30). In this way, both my experimental studio processes and their outcomes are evolving and cyclical. Utilising these critical praxes, as Barrett and Bolt state, establishes "a dialogical relationship between making and writing" expressed by the body of work and the exegesis which supplements it (2014, p. 31).

In my project, semiotics is understood as the study of symbols, and their usages and analyses (Berger,

2011). Utilising elements (including semiotics) from Australia’s political spectacle as tools to enact critique, I work through variations and combinations of imagery, materials and sound, using a mix of digital and material processes. I then deploy the resulting banners, flags, and other materials in public settings, and document this process. These elements are then re-used in the gallery space in further combinations, forming new installations. For example, banners produced for my collaborative exhibition *Status Unknown* were installed in a public setting in Brisbane City. This installation process was documented in video and photography and was displayed in the gallery space.



Figure 1 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Dornoch Terrace Intervention (Process Image)*. [Digital Image].

The banners were shown alongside this documentation, hung in combination with new materials to form a new installation. In this way, my research is not limited to just the artworks themselves, but their creative methods of distribution in public space. Barrett and Bolt describe such multivalent research outcomes as the “materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice” (2014, p. 31). Practice-led research differs from qualitative and quantitative modes of research, in that it rarely addresses a singular question, nor produces a singular answer. This attitude reflects my aims as a practitioner.

This methodological approach is significant because my practice-led work cannot develop if it attempts to emulate other models of research. As Daniel Mafé states, practice-led research needs to account for an epistemological unknown or uncertainty central to the practice of art (2010, p. 12). This is reflected in the content of my works. As an act of protest, they are unusual because their

messaging is ambiguated, distorted and hijacked. The work itself and its underlying processes do not conform to ‘traditional’ research goals of producing replicable knowledge. For practice-led research this inherent epistemological unknown is not a shortcoming, but central to its generative qualities (Mafé, 2010, p. 61).



Figure 2 Sargeant, A and Newkirk, M. (2019). *A scene (for Anastacia Palaszczuk)*, [Sculptural Installation: 3x PVC banners, concrete, steel 281 x 584 x 375cm]. Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.

The aim of this project is not to produce conclusive answers. Whilst I am drawn to the idea that my work can mobilise viewers to engage in direct action and disrupt the status quo, this may be overstating the capacity of the work - and indeed much of contemporary art. Instead, my creative practice responds to and expresses my own perspectives, understandings, and interpretations of the dysfunctions of the Australian political establishment. All of these aforementioned elements form my investigations, and as per Bolt and Barrett’s formulation, are equally important as research (2014, p. 135). Broadly, I hope through the dissemination of my work into the public sphere - and by extension through this exegesis - I can engage viewers in a critical dialogue about the dysfunctions of contemporary Australian politics.

### **Interpretive Paradigm**

The interpretive paradigm through which I understand my practice is Neo-Marxism. Unlike orthodox Marxism as defined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Barrow, 1993, p. 14), a unified ideology of Neo-Marxism does not exist (Cowling, 2013, p. 657). However, Neo-Marxism can be understood as an “updated” Marxism which acknowledges political and economic developments which Marx and



Engels did not anticipate (Cowling, 2013, p. 656). Like Marx, Neo-Marxians have a dualistic theory of the economic system, which reduces all individuals into two classes: the bourgeois (capitalists, owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (working class people regarded collectively) (Grunchy, 1984, p. 551). Unlike Marx, however, Neo-Marxists hold a naturalistic view of economic reality, which leads them to view the economic system as an evolving historical continuum, or process (Grunchy, 1984, p. 550). Neo-Marxists seek a decentralised socialist system in place of the current capitalist system. This decentralised socialist system is complete democratic socialism, wherein the private ownership of the means of production are entirely eliminated, along with all private incomes. At some point in the future, this fully realised socialism would bring forth the establishment of a communist (stateless, classless) society (Grunchy, 1984, p. 551). For a classical Marxist, comparatively, this reactive, evolving process toward a stateless society is not defined so clearly (Cowling, 2013, p. 656).

The Neo-Marxism I adopt augments Marxist philosophy with Max Weber's broader understanding of social inequality (power and status) (Cowling, 2013, p. 656). Rather than only considering class, Neo-Marxism considers the role of ideas and culture. For example, a Marxist perspective on racial inequality suggests that class is the most significant factor in explaining racial social inequalities, and that these inequalities are the same as those experienced by the white working class. A Neo-Marxist approach, on the other hand, argues that this traditional Marxist view - the theory that social relations and constructs alone determine individual behaviour, as opposed to biological or objective influences - is outdated and deterministic (Barrow, 1993). In other words, the Marxist view discounts the racism experienced by racial minority groups, and the Neo-Marxist perspective asserts that classes are racialized (Miles, 1989). Crucially, this philosophy is consistent with the persecution of LGBTQIA+ individuals, relevant to my personal experience as a transgender woman.

Max Weber also applies the theory of social classes to examine wealth and status. In both classical Marxism and Neo-Marxism, social class can be defined as a large category of similarly-ranked people located in a hierarchy and distinguished from other large categories in the hierarchy by such traits as occupation, education, income, and wealth (Waters, 2015). For Weber however, social class is intrinsically linked with privilege and prestige (Löwith, 1993, p. 124). Marx argued that there were two social classes (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat), but Weber contests that stratification and social class are more complicated than this. Social class, in his view, is based on a person's market position (Barrow, 1993). In other words, this refers to how much wealth they possess, and their bargaining power to maintain it. Weber's theory also clarifies *social reproduction*, meaning the tendency of social classes to endure, unchanging across generations, preserving their inequalities (Waters, 2015, p. 8). For example, these inequalities comprise disparities in income, wealth, access to

education, pension levels, and social status. As a central tenet of Neo-Marxism, Weber's theory of social classes is particularly relevant to my research.

Importantly for my art practice, Neo-Marxism is able to respond to the dysfunctions of the contemporary world, most significantly through Weber's social class theory. The potentially outdated Marxist theory which places great emphasis on determinism is not adequate in addressing the mounting crises of inequality we face today such as climate change, injustices faced by refugees, people of colour and queer people. In 2020, global inequality has reached historically unprecedented levels, with more than 70% of the global population living in countries where the wealth gap is widening. Australia is one of these (*World Social Report 2020: Inequality In A Rapidly Changing World*, 2020). Wealth here is just one example, rather than a direct equivalence for all kinds. As my project responds to the dysfunctions of Australia's political establishment, utilising Neo-Marxism as an interpretive paradigm is crucial in addressing this present condition. In Chapter 2, I will address how Neo-Marxist theorists problematise the role of the artist in the face of these challenges.

Neo-Marxism informs my view of art practice and the function of the art I make. As a politically engaged individual and a Neo-Marxist, I view my actions in organising, protest and art-making as part of my engagement in class conflict: the battle of interests, social tensions and economic struggles existing in society, consequent to socio-economic disparity among the social classes. In the political and economic philosophies of Karl Marx, class conflict is a central principle and a practical means for effecting radical political and social changes for the social majority (Bullock, 1999, p. 127). Through my art practice, I seek to directly engage in class conflict, by utilising the Situationist method of *détournement* to disrupt business-as-usual outside the gallery space, and present my explorations within it.

## **Summary**

Through this research project, I have demonstrated that my work has the capacity to generate spectacle and garner the attention of those the work critiques. For example, my collaborative exhibition *Status Unknown*, undertaken as part of this research project, triggered a complaint from the office of the Queensland Premier, a comment from the Vice Chancellor of Griffith University, and media coverage (Moore, 2019). This is further detailed in Chapter 4. The controversy generated by utilising semiotics derived from Australia's political spectacle as a tool with which to critique dysfunctional jingoism has become a key outcome of my project. As I have said, I do not believe that the mere act of viewing my work will mobilise viewers to go out and take part in direct action. However, my work has demonstrated an ability to produce other unexpected political impacts which

further class conflict, such as those resulting from the *Status Unknown* exhibition (see pp. 59 below). Therefore, there are distinctly tangible political outcomes which may be derived from the display and dissemination of my art. My Neo-Marxist interpretive paradigm acknowledges political and economic developments unanticipated by Marx and Engels (Cowling, 2013, p. 656). Through Neo-Marxism, I am able to better situate my work within theoretical frameworks which acknowledge the present condition of rising nationalism I respond to, better situating my explorations of disillusionment.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will review the various theoretical frameworks that inform this practice-led research project, establishing the specific contexts of my disillusionment with the political establishment in Australia. First, I will examine the work of the Situationist International, specifically Guy Debord's text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). I will outline the Situationist International's strategy of *détournement*, where components of visual culture are recycled to produce new arrangements as a weapon in the class struggle. Second, I will address Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) which pursues the reclamation of 'aesthetics' from the confines to which it is often reduced, through consideration of the similarities present between art and politics. My reading of Rancière is further supported by Matthew Lampert's evaluation of this relationship (2017), and his evaluation of art-making as an intrinsically political act. Lampert's contention that the politics of art should not be limited to the outcomes of its consumption, aligns strongly with my own intentions for my creative practice. I will also discuss Thomas Olesen's *Global Injustice Symbols and Social Movements* (2015) which dictates that the analysis of symbols is fundamentally an analysis of society (2015, p. 139). Olesen's sociological perspective examines how symbols of global injustice are created, adopted, and adapted by political movements.

#### The Situationist International and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*

The Situationist International (SI) was a Paris-based collective of revolutionary, anti-authoritarian artists that formed in 1957 and dissolved in 1972. Their actions profoundly shaped the revolutions of the late 1960s, most notably in the Paris civil unrest of May 1968 (Cooper, 2017, p. 11; Stracey, 2014, p. 11). With a range of contributing influences including Surrealism and Dada, the SI problematised Marxism, claiming authoritarianism as a fatally corrupting influence upon the application of Marxist theory (Stracey, 2014, p. 4). In response, the SI developed methods for bringing about non-authoritarian communism, reinvigorating the central Marxist theme and praxis as the workers' struggle – a battle to be fought via their method of *détournement* (Stracey, 2014, p. 9). Marxism was revived in their ranging investigations, theories of the 'spectacle' and ideas about the *constructed situation* (Stracey, 2014, p. 123). In 1967, SI leader Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), a book detailing his theory of how *the spectacle* works to transform citizens into spectators, whose sole purposes are to consume commodities and to live de-politicised, passive, and secluded lives (Trier, 2014, p. 7). For Debord, *the spectacle* was "the autocratic reign of the market

economy” – a phenomena visible on every screen we view, every sign we see (1967, p. 16).. The spectacle reduces reality to a limitless supply of commodifiable fragments, and in essence is the entire system of capitalism as we experience it (Debord, 1967, p. 16). To challenge and subvert this spectacle, Debord and his SI allies conceived of and applied an anti-spectacular critical art process which they called *détournement*, a process that translates into English as ‘hijacking’ (Cambridge University Press, 2018). This involved the appropriation and subversion of imagery and text (usually related to institutional or commercial contexts) to interfere with their straightforward expression/communication. By ‘hijacking’ consumer imagery and using it to convey disruptive/dissonant ideas, Debord believed *détournement* had the potential to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of tangible class struggle (Trier, 2014, p. 16). I have adopted the method of *détournement* as a means of subverting elements of Australian political spectacle to address the problematic reductionism of Australia’s political spectacle, and capitalism’s corrupting influence on our democracy.

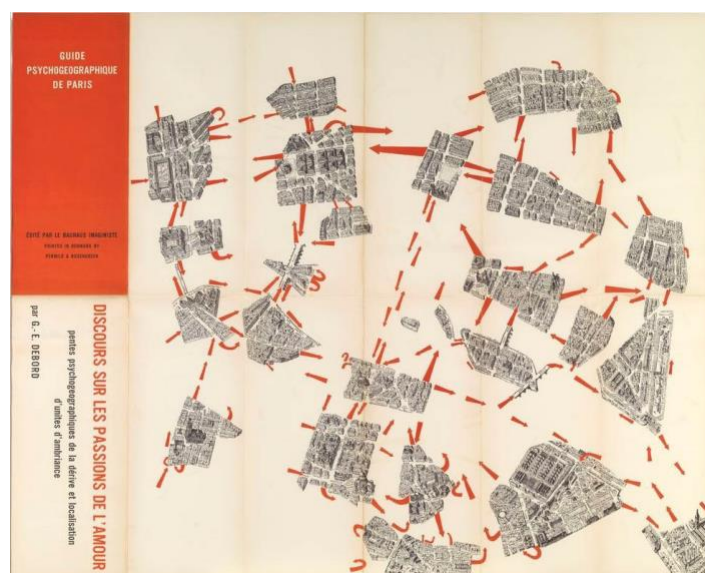


Figure 3 Debord, G. (1957). *Psychogeographie de Paris. Speech on the Passions of Love*. [Lithography, print on paper]. Frac Center-Loire Valley, France.

The early development of *détournement* can be seen in Debord’s artwork *Psychogeographie de Paris. Speech on the Passions of Love* (1957) (Figure 4), an artwork illustrating a segmented and rearranged map of Paris. Between the split pieces of geography, Debord inserts fragmented arrows to generate new and confounding pathways (Debord, 1955). Debord’s conventional city map is appropriated and *détourned* by the artist to produce a new immaterial geography of Paris. It is as though the structures depicted could be expanded beyond the dimensions of the artwork, producing further confounding conduits for the viewer to follow. At the time, Debord understood the work as a visual manifestation of *dérive*, a means of navigating the urban environment as a revolutionary act,

though it is today also understood as an early example of *détournement* (Debord, 1955; Trier, 2014). In my view, Debord is here drawing our attention to the arbitrary nature of these representational documents, demonstrating how easily they can be made to propose new relations to our surrounding environments, a process he describes in his essay *Introduction to Urban Geography* (1955). He is deconstructing the physical manifestation of spectacle, the urban environment, as a means of class struggle. *Psychogeographie de Paris* (1957) went on to influence the SI's widespread use of collage and *détournement*, which continued to appropriate and repurpose materials derived from the *spectacle*, like posters and tourist maps (Stracey, 2014, p. 9).

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) aimed to comprehensively map out a new moment of capitalist development and expansion in which the processes of commodification complete the total subsumption and occupation of not only economic activity or labour, but of one's whole life (Stracey, 2014, p. 4). The opening paragraph of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) paraphrases Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), with Debord stating that in societies in which the modern conditions of production predominate, the whole lives of said societies are a colossal accumulation of spectacles (1967, p. 10). He goes on to state that everything that was once directly lived is now merely representation (Debord, 1967, p. 10; Stracey, 2014, p. 5). In other words, capitalism not only reshapes workers' functional existence, but the way our world is rendered around us. In this way, Debord is expanding on Marx's initial ideas in a manner relevant to the emerging image- and consumer-based society.

Debord continues to paraphrase Marx throughout *The Society of the Spectacle*. Importantly for my research project, he substitutes Marx's notion of 'commodities' for 'spectacles'. Stracey claims that this signifies Debord's search for a new *diagnostic terminology*, one that is appropriate for the SI's historical context within the post-war consumer society of the late 1950s (Debord, 1967, p. 10; 2014, p. 5). This is because the 'spectacle' is understood as a new form of abstract general equivalence between all products (Debord, 1967, p. 11). Where Marx presents the monetarily-enabled exchange of goods as a process disconnected with the totality of the social world, for the SI, it is the spectacle itself that represents the totality of capitalism (Stracey, 2014, p. 5). Likewise, in my creative practice where I am critiquing capitalism's influence on our democracy, the SI's understanding of an all-encompassing spectacle is germane to my criticism. As I will discuss below, the flows of imagery in my work suggest the enfolding of consumerist branding and politics creates a fluid field of elements where both democracy and capitalism dissolve together. There are further nuances to characterise regarding the spectacle and semiotics, however.

The spectacle and the field of political iconography are distinctly different. As Debord makes clear, spectacle is not simply "...a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (1967, p. 10). In relation to my project, if political 'images' (or semiotic signs) mediate social relations (including those I would consider nationalistic, consumerist or dogmatic), then my hijacking of them is to *reveal* the broken social relations that they mask in service of political means (1967, p. 10). In other words, my application of *détournement* serves to expose the social dysfunctions and political failings hidden by the façade of the spectacle.

The Situationists said that individuals can use the tools of the spectacle to bring about its own destruction (Trier, 2007, p. 70). In other words, the ideological apparatus I am critiquing can be undone. This is key to how the SI project informs my practice, as it directly aligns with my methods of appropriation and subversion of the spectacle as a means of critique. This can be seen in all aspects of my creative work – the theatrical lighting, slick materiality, bold graphics and colour – all these features are a means of deploying the spectacle against itself. For me, this spirit of critiquing the spectacle using its own motifs informs all aspects of my practice. This project's aim, to express my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia and capitalism's corrupting influence on our democracy, is a process of critique actualised through the methods of the SI. Like the SI, I am critiquing the *spectacle*, in my case, the current nationalistic political condition in Australia, through the manipulation of political motifs from mainstream politics, activist iconography, symbols and visual cultures. I utilise appropriation as a means of transplanting motifs from the spectacle of Australian politics into my artwork, so the structures they represent may be critiqued. Pulling these elements into my practice to be questioned is the way that I problematise and respond to the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia.

Behind my utilisation of Debordian theory and methods is the subtext of critiquing capitalism. The symbols I appropriate and subvert via the SI's method of *détournement* are often what I would argue are neoliberal in their inferences in that they are part of the language of the political marketplace of ideologies. By this I mean that in my aggregation of semiotic elements from across the Australian political spectrum, I am drawing a correspondence between these visual commodities to suggest that every Australian political party and entity has its own version of jingoistic tendencies and stridencies and as such, they all ultimately reinforce this notion of the political marketplace. In doing so, I am riffing across the political spectrum. After all, every Australian political party and entity has its own unique jingoistic tendency and stridencies. This resonates with Debord's writing about the marketplace of the spectacle. Debord's writing is not just focussed on critiquing conservative political values - he is particularly critiquing the capitalist economics (which are now essentially neoliberal) that are entangled within the marketplace of *spectacle* (Debord, 1967, p. 43). With the SI's method of

*détournement* in mind, I am reframing signs from the spectacle of politics to control them, and draw attention to the dysfunctional structures they represent. By appropriating these elements, I can utilise them as a means of revealing their brokenness. In doing so, I am forcing my audience to confront them, and by extension the broken structures they seek to hide.

The Situationist project remains of critical importance to today's investigations of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in contemporary society (Cooper, 2017, p. 1). Like the SI, I am drawing attention to the corrupting influence of capitalism, and the problematic reductionism of the *spectacle*, through the manipulation of political motifs from mainstream politics, activist iconography, symbols and visual cultures. The SI's example demonstrates how aspects of the spectacle may be hijacked through the production and dissemination of creative work, and is thus germane to my project.

### **Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics***

Jacques Rancière's text *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) informs the theoretical lens through which I view my creative practice. The text considers the intrinsic commonalities between art and politics in order to repossess 'aesthetics' from the constricted boundaries to which it is frequently reduced (2004, p. 32). Rancière is one of the seminal figures in contemporary debates on aesthetics and politics, offering a distinctive approach in this broad field by clarifying the specificity of the artist's task in the bringing about of critical and creative transformation (Lampert, 2017, p. 181). He portrays how the dominant order recognises which groups have political importance, or voices that are worth listening to. This perceived hierarchy of identities and ideas are determined by what he calls the *distribution of the sensible* (Papastergiadis, 2014, p. 5; Rancière, 2004, p. 42).

Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) informs how I consider my practice of critically examining semiotics, dysfunction and disillusionment. In the text, Rancière outlines a history of art and politics, from the Greek polis to the present, to argue that artistic egalitarianism is analogous to the breaking down of real social and political hierarchies (2004, p. 13; Tanke, 2011, p. 72). Rancière presents three "regimes" of the arts: the ethical; the representative; and the aesthetic (2004, p. 21). Rancière's regimes are polemical concepts which delineate the ways in which a given era perceives the nature of artistic representation (Tanke, 2011, p. 71). In essence, these regimes are a framework which underlies Rancière's explanation of art's perception in a given space and time. The philosophical equation of Rancière's three regimes is an exercise in combining art history and labour history in order to challenge the ideas that inform narratives of art, and affirm art's capacity to directly impact social relations (Deranty, 2010, p. 119).



Rancière suggests that conceptions of what artistic representations are (and achieve) take place within a broader understanding of society in general (Rancière, 2004, p. 45; Tanke, 2011, p. 77). In other words, Rancière believes that social relations are themselves aesthetic inasmuch as they are a function of the perceptual realm, or the senses (2004, p. 36). The arts, after all, are based in what can be seen, heard, and represented (Papastergiadis, 2014, pp. 6-8). Contemporary art seeks to produce new aesthetic encounters, and therefore has the capacity to directly impact on social relations (Greteman, 2014, p. 428; Rancière, 2004, p. 36). These new aesthetic forms produce new encounters between people, identities, and ideas. In the context of my creative work, my engagement with public installation and distribution, and processes of collaboration are activating the social aspect of art which Rancière describes. Likewise, my process of *détourning* symbols to form new combinations is a means of making these images social – they are interacting with one another more freely than is typical in the spectacle of politics.

Rancière states that aesthetics are bound to the battle of a rising underclass, a battle that takes place over the aspects of social relations that are unrepresented by the image of society (2004, p. 36). According to Mackin, Black Lives Matter activism (BLM) is a notable contemporary example of these forces in action – an under-recognised group asserting itself into the image of society (2016, p. 461). From a Rancièrian perspective, BLM activism introduces new perceptions into the field of the perceptual realm, or the senses (Greteman, 2014, p. 425; 2016, p. 460). Mackin states that in an effort to reshape the image of society, “...(BLM) activists insert these new perceptions into the world of their opponents, transforming the dominant sensory world from within” (2016, p. 461). LGBTQ+ activism has likewise sought to reshape how queer people are unrepresented by the image of society, as Rancière describes (Greteman, 2014, p. 423). This is relevant to my creative practice, where queer iconography and established signifiers of national identity are hijacked and made to ‘dance’ in graphic and material ways. In doing so, I am not just utilising the SI’s *détournement*, but also seeking to disrupt what Rancière describes as the *distribution of the sensible*.

Rancière portrays how the dominant order recognises which groups have political importance, or voices that are worth listening to. This perceived hierarchy of identities and ideas are determined by what he calls the *distribution of the sensible* (2004, p. 42). The *distribution of the sensible* can be further understood as the composite of individuals and discourses that are effectively visible and audible, or invisible and inaudible, together with the implied assumptions about the political capacities of different individuals and groups in society (Rancière, 2004, p. 14). For example, in some cultures the poor, the unemployed, blue-collar workers, immigrants, ethnic minorities, queer individuals and other groups may be politically unrecognised. These groups’ aspirations, complaints,

and concentrations are not so much rejected as they are unseen or unheard in the first place. Correlatively, workers as a class may be perceived as ignorant and lazy. For Rancière, politics is the rebellious struggle by those who are oppressed by unjust social orders to affirm themselves on the same level as those with power and privilege: not just institutionally, but also through the sensual realm. Affirmation as part of the image of society is crucial, and without it the status quo is maintained. To the extent this struggle is successful, the *distribution of the sensible* is reshaped in more egalitarian ways (Rancière, 2004, p. 17). For Rancière the voices of the excluded are heard by the dominant order through processes of perception; not as part of traditional political structures like party politics or government legislation, but through transformative episodes of perception and experience, and most importantly for this project, through art (2004, p. 42). Rancière calls this method *dissensus* - the process by which actors (artists) disrupt the politics of the establishment (Greteman, 2014, p. 422; Papastergiadis, 2014, p. 18). From my standpoint as an activist artist, Rancière offers agency in my explorations. In concert with Debord and the SI's method of detournement, Rancière's text *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) provides a robust basis for my critical examinations of disillusionment.

### **Matthew Lampert's Counterpoints on Rancière**

There exists a vast array of literature that is critical of Rancière's ideas and their simplistic adoption by the art world (Greteman, 2014, p. 422; Papastergiadis, 2014, p. 6). Matthew Lampert contributes to this discourse, suggesting that contrary to popular belief, Rancière is overly dismissive of any direct relationship between politics and art. He suggests Rancière's ideas about politics of art, whilst constructive in many ways, are modest about the capacity for art to intervene in politics in our contemporary reality. He extends his critique to clarify that the act of art-making itself can be intrinsically political. Lampert states:

Rancière limits the political importance of artworks solely to an aleatory process of their reception and appropriation. He seems to suggest that there cannot be anything necessarily political about any particular work of art before (or outside of) the effects it might happen to produce in an unintended spectator or reader. I argue that the politics of art need not be limited to the (unpredictable) effects of its consumption. (Lampert, 2017, p. 182).

By this, Lampert tells us that the act of art-making and the methods of its dissemination can be political acts too. He shows that while Rancière's account of the politics of art is worthwhile, Rancière's ideas limit the political status of artworks solely to the undesignable process of their reception. Lampert believes that in presenting this limiting view, Rancière contradicts himself and

that it is he whose critique proclaims the assumption he criticises. That is, that an artwork must move the viewer somehow to have any political effectiveness. In essence, Lampert suggests Rancière's account of the politics of art is a 'deflationary' view, one of the *politics of art's reception*, instead of the *politics of art itself*, and that instead the act of art-making itself can be inherently political (Lampert, 2017, p. 182).

Lampert's view on Rancière is integral to this project because it aligns *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) directly with my intentions for my creative work - to provoke change by drawing out the dissonances and inherent toxicity of Australian nationalism, through the artistic method of *détournement*. It is my belief that my activist art has a significant function outside of the gallery space, that it has the potential to influence political action, open the viewer to new revolutionary ideas, and mobilise allies who may already agree with the ideas I present. However, as Lampert suggest, even if these aims are not realised in all cases, the political intent of my work is not negated, as the act of producing and deploying the work in-situ is a worthwhile political act in and of itself.

Thomas Olesen expands on my reading of Rancière, stating that the process of forming icons and symbols involves a degree of idolisation, and consequently, reduction and simplification (2015, p. 146). For Olesen this is an unavoidable process, intrinsic to the very nature of semiotics. He states that this reduction occurs "when a wider social, political, and cultural problematic is condensed in such a way that they come to be *represented* by certain people, images, or events" (Olesen, 2015, p. 146). Thus, when I hijack and amalgamate symbols of Australian national identity, I am problematising not just the oppressive system they signify, but the reductive façade these symbols facilitate for the public.

Having surveyed Rancière's ideas and Lampert's critique, I believe that both viewpoints are valid. Similarly to Rancière, I believe that in producing new aesthetic encounters, art has the capacity to directly impact social relations – reshaping who and what is portrayed within the image of society (Greteman, 2014, p. 428; Rancière, 2004, p. 36). I also agree that, as Lampert responds, the art which precipitates this process has function beyond the effects of its consumption (Lampert, 2017, p. 182). Artmaking itself can be a political act – as is the case with my view of my creative practice. The SI provide the creative method (*détournement*) by which I enact my protest art, and Olesen provides the basis by which I understand that my work has function in constructing moral and political ideas. My Rancièrian theoretical framework and Olesen's semiotic study allow me to critique the problematic reductionism of Australia's political spectacle through art. Together, my outlined theoretical frameworks affirm my work's capacity to impact social relations, contributing to a reshaping of the

image of society (Deranty, 2010, p. 119). My project is further contextualised by the creative practices of other artists.

### **Thomas Olesen's *Global Injustice Symbols and Social Movements***

It is important in this research to make clear the importance I perceive in the appropriation and subversion of symbols from Australia's political spectacle. Thomas Olesen is an Associate Professor of Political Science in Denmark who, like Rancière, believes that the analysis of symbols is, fundamentally, an analysis of society (Olesen, 2015, p. 139; Rancière, 2004, p. 16). His book *Global Injustice Symbols and Social Movements* (2015) scrutinises societies' shared moral and political maps, full of symbols and iconography shaped by political dynamics, acting beyond their local origin. Olesen's text offers a methodical sociological treatment of this phenomenon, examining how global injustice symbols are created, adopted, and adapted by movements. The relevance of Olesen's text to my project relates to how political figures themselves, and their associated semiotics can act as icons from which I can appropriate meaning.

As I will discuss in Chapter 4, my work appropriates iconography from Gough Whitlam's 1972 election campaign to recontextualise the semiotics of a bygone era. Olesen's study of political symbols and icons establishes how political figures and their associated semiotics can act as representations of broader ideals. Utilising Nelson Mandela as an example, Olesen exemplifies how an individual may act as an icon across left-right political divides and geographic differences, becoming a signifier amongst politicians, activists, celebrities, and "ordinary" people alike. Olesen says that "Mandela ... has come to embody a range of human qualities and political-cultural values such as solidarity, reconciliation, democracy, and human rights for global audiences: he is, in other words, a political icon" (Olesen, 2015, p. 39). By extension, the semiotics and imagery associated with an individual may act as signifiers of these archetypes (Olesen, 2015, p. 9). In my case, I utilise Whitlam's 'It's time' iconography to juxtapose the progressive ideals associated with the early Whitlam era with today's political circumstances.

The text focusses on three questions: How are global injustice symbols formed; how are they employed by political actors; and to what extent are they reflective of a global society? (Olesen, 2015, p. 2) In my research, I have focussed my attention on the first and second questions, which are of most use to my creative practice. Olesen describes how social movements expand to a global scale through the mediation of such symbols (Olesen, 2015, pp. 115-116). In doing so, he provides an historically established framework for manipulating symbols to tangible ends. In my creative work I draw on and manipulate activist and nationalistic motifs from Australia's political spectacle. For

example, when I create the image of a figure with a sledgehammer (a tool historically associated with anarchism, revolution and worker's rights) against an orange background (an inversion of the Australian flag's blue hue), I am drawing on Olesen's recipe for effective semiotic deployment (Olesen, 2015, p. 70).

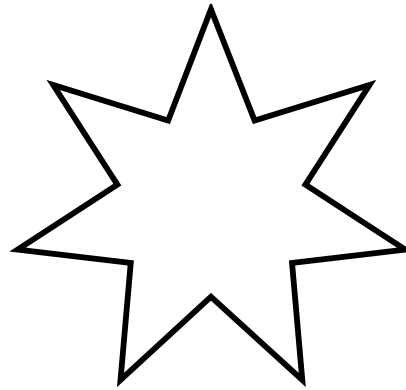


Figure 4 Australian Commonwealth Star

He states "...society rests on a set of shared values and meanings enacted in rituals and often inscribed on and expressed through symbols" (2015, p. 6). In my work, drawing on the spectacle of Australian politics, the Commonwealth Star is a recurring symbol. The symbol (Figure 5) signifies the Federation of Australia. The seven segments of the star are representative of the Australian states at its time of creation ("The Commonwealth Flag," 1908). The Star is thus a plain example of Olesen's value-bearing symbols. It is a symbol of Federation, thus by extension, a tenet of colonialism. In my practice, with Olesen's text in mind, the Star is appropriated and subverted to operate as a menacing symbol of totalitarian nationalism. The logotype produced for my *Status Unknown* exhibition (Figure 6), for example, contorts the Star into a code. According to Olesen, symbols like these "...simultaneously *draw on* and are important actors in the *construction* of the moral and political ideas and values that undergird society" (2015, p. 7). Echoing Rancière, Olesen goes to state that symbols and social relations are closely interlinked, because symbols are "...carriers of collectively held values and meanings about right and wrong, good and bad, desirable and undesirable. As such symbols are, at least potentially, highly political" (Olesen, 2015, p. 139).

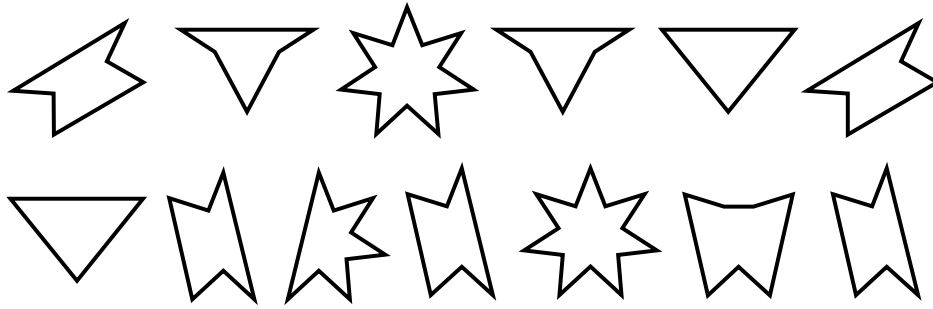


Figure 5 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Status Unknown logotype*. [Digital Design].

In Chapter 1 I outlined the aims of my project, one of these being to address the problematic reductionism of Australia’s political spectacle. I achieve this by reframing the visual elements of political spectacle – symbols. Olesen provides a backdrop to my feelings regarding problematic reductionism, claiming that the process of forming icons and symbols involves a degree of idolisation, and consequently, reduction and simplification. For Olesen this is an unavoidable process, intrinsic to the very nature of semiotics. He states that this reduction occurs “when a wider social, political, and cultural problematic is condensed in such a way that they come to be *represented* by certain people, images, or events” (Olesen, 2015, p. 146). Thus, when I hijack and amalgamate symbols of Australian national identity, I am problematising not just the oppressive system they signify, but the reductive façade these symbols facilitate for the public.

Olesen clarifies the way in which some symbols, like those I work with, may be adopted by diverse groups to represent opposing ideas. This is relevant to many of the symbols I appropriate, such as the Eureka Flag and Southern Cross, which have been appropriated by various groups to signify varying ideas. Olesen says that adoption of symbols by groups necessitates a “degree of adaptation” in which the adopting group “construes the (symbol) according to their worldview and belief systems” (Olesen, 2015, p. 123). For example, the Southern Cross was recognised by Indigenous Australians as a symbol inhibiting their social, cultural and religious life long before its colonial appropriation as a fixture of the Australian flag (Bhathal, 2006). Cognisance of the dual meanings which inhibit many symbols of Australian national identity allows me to hijack them in informed, culturally safe ways.

## Summary

With the theoretical frameworks outlined above in mind, I am able to explore and express my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia. The SI provide the creative method (*détournement*) by which I enact my protest art, and Olesen provides a robust empirical basis by which I understand that my work has function in constructing moral and political ideas. My Rancièrian theoretical framework and Olesen’s semiotic study allow me to critique the

problematic reductionism of Australia's political spectacle through art. Together, my outlined theoretical frameworks affirm my work's capacity to impact social relations, contributing to a reshaping of the image of society (Deranty, 2010, p. 119). My project is further contextualised by the creative practices of other artists.

## Chapter 3

### Contextual Review

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will review the principal creative practices which inform this research project. These include the work of Matt Mullican, Robert MacPherson and Raquel Ormella. I will outline the relevance of these practitioners, and how their practices have informed my own production of creative work over the course of this study. Matt Mullican's creative practice draws out dissonances from the 'spectacle' through the hijacking of semiotics from mainstream consumer visual cultures. Robert MacPherson appropriates aesthetics and semiotics from Australian *spectacle* which he subjects to processes of repetitious subversion. Finally, Raquel Ormella's work is an example of *détournement* utilised in the context of Australian political *spectacle*, again intersecting with two major concepts central to my project.

#### Matt Mullican

Matt Mullican is an American-Venezuelan artist who combines performance, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and video as a means of exploring the subjective through the intersection of communal signage and personal semiotics (Follin, 2008, p. 68; The Museum of Modern Art, 1989). Mullican distorts and ambiguates the visual syntax of semiotics, utilising multiples and combinatory methods to reveal the broken models of the constructed world (Leddy, 2015, p. 83). In my view, like the Situationist International, Mullican draws out the dissonances from the 'spectacle' through the manipulation of semiotic codes from mainstream consumer visual cultures. In doing so, the artist's work exposes the reductionism of the free-market-driven neoliberal societies we inhabit. Mullican utilises the banner form as a means of referencing the messaging tools of activism, linking his work to a similar revolutionary context as my own. Lempesis believes Mullican's banners are an effective vehicle for bringing his explorations of market codes to "the street" (2019). Mullican's work utilises these forms as a means of revealing the contradictory nature of our constructed world (Mullican, 1989). Holman states that Mullican's reconfiguration "...of the institutional devices that are implanted into daily life, like sign systems" is a means by which he "ignores conventional hierarchies of importance" (Holman, 2016). This echoes Rancière's vision for art as a political tool as addressed in Chapter 2. From a Rancièrian perspective, Mullican's work produces new aesthetic encounters which reshape the social hierarchy of the *distribution of the sensible*.

In my view, Mullican's work also evokes corporeal affect through his use of scale. In Mullican's exhibition *Banners* (2019) at the Skulpturenhalle in Germany (Figure 8), banners touch and overlap,



forming an interactive context in which the combination of signs perceived by the observer shifts as they pass through the gallery space (Lempesis, 2019). His appropriated and hijacked semiotic elements, featuring minimal and bold iconography, are elevated physically above the viewer, engulfing the gallery space and create an imposing impression upon the viewer (Creischer, 2012). Concerning Mullican's use of scale within space, Creischer writes that "being unable to view the works in any continuous frame ... creates an intensity far stronger than does scale alone" (Creischer, 2012). Likewise, I seek to evoke similar outcomes in my display of ambiguated protest banners that consume the gallery space and tower over my audience. Mullican's use of the primary colours of red, yellow, black and white, give a threatening quality to his *Banners* (2019) installation. Lüscher's method of reading colour as outlined in *The Lüscher Color Test* (1969) can be applied to further unpack his calculated application of colour. Looking to *Banners* (2019), Mullican is triggering a stimulating effect on the nervous system. Lüscher's writing suggests that, upon encountering this installation, the audience's blood pressure can be expected to increase along with their respiration rate and heartbeat (1969, p. 72). This affect combined with the intimidating scale of the work imposes an inauspicious reading of our constructed contemporary society through Mullican's semiotic world.



Figure 6 Mullican, M. (2019). *Installation view: Skulpturenhalle* [Dimensions variable]. Skulpturenhalle, Neuss, Germany.

By reframing signs from the spectacle of politics, I am exploring and expressing my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the Australian political establishment. Whilst not as explicitly tied to a set of political motifs as my work, Mullican's practice occupies a familiar space with regard to his appropriation, manipulation and combinatory use of semiotics. In exploring the ambiguities triggered by shifting communal signage and personal semiotics, Mullican demonstrates the potential of these methods to deconstruct the hierarchies and systems of our constructed world. My disillusionment is

triggered by perceived dysfunction inherent in this branded landscape of *spectacle*. Mullican is engaging in this highly visual culture, utilising ambiguated iconography to reveal how the alienating visual world which surrounds us evidences deeper systemic dysfunction.

## Robert MacPherson

Robert MacPherson is an Australian conceptual artist, often working with painterly processes and sculpture. His 'serial' works combine notions of stereotype, jingoism and humour with commentary on contemporary art through the use of sequenced objects. This serialism suggests continuity through repeatable units, indicating that the work is a detail within a wider system, a complex grid of dynamics which delineates the identity of elements which make up the *spectacle*. MacPherson's practice is not overtly concerned with protest or activism, yet he often appropriates aesthetics and semiotics from Australian *spectacle* which, like me, he subjects to processes of repetitious subversion. Writer Daniel Thomas states that "though notably conscious of class, MacPherson is best positioned not as a Marxist but as an Australian bush philosopher, a comforter and uplifter of the poor..." (2015). As I aim to do in my own practice, MacPherson's work invites the viewer into a layered, coded system to engage with language and form (Anderson, 2016). MacPherson's practice is of central relevance to my ongoing investigations of the repetitious semiotics of Australia's political spectacle. When developing the graphic language and methods of *détournement* utilised in this project, I was specifically inspired by MacPherson's artwork *Queensland Series* (1978).



Figure 7 MacPherson, R. (1978). *Queensland Series*. [Sculptures: Acrylic paint on plywood, a: 51 x 43.5cm; b: 54.5 x 42cm; c: 51 x 42.5cm; d: 60.3 x 47.5cm; e: 54.2 x 42.2cm; f: 52 x 43.2cm; g: 60 x 46.1cm; h: 59.3 x 45.5cm; i: 53.5 x 42.5cm; j: 57.2 x 50cm; k: 54 x 42.5cm; l: 54.9 x 42.5cm]. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland. Retrieved from:

*Queensland Series* presents a repeating series of twelve forms constructed from plywood, which trace an abridged outline of the state of Queensland. These objects are hung on the gallery wall, spaced at equal intervals, with white acrylic paint adorning their interior and embossed silhouettes. The work's variable semiotic ambiguation and its serialised nature has informed my own sequential investigations of activist iconography, symbols and visual cultures. In my view, the work is suggestive of the limited, disillusion-fuelling abilities of these semiotic elements which are evocative of Australian (and Queensland) identity. Thomas expands on this, stating that MacPherson's repetitious work portrays a "vocabulary of Queensland underclass" through his appropriation of iconography (2015).

MacPherson is "poking fun" at the jingoism associated with Australian identity, revealing the inadequacies of these notions (Goddard, 2015). Expanding on this critique of national identity, I believe MacPherson is laying bare the border outline of the state as a means of questioning the nationalistic associations it evokes. Viewing the work, I was immediately struck by how MacPherson draws attention to the inadequacy of the forms he presents – in my view, this is Macpherson's questioning of the intangible reality of borders through his repeated investigation.

The Queensland state icon exists within the language of Australian political semiotics. Viewed in the current context (post-2019 Australian Federal Election), Queensland is stereotypically characterised as conservative and regressive (Horn, 2019). Macpherson's depiction of Queensland through semiotics is much more indistinct. I view *Queensland Series* (1978) not as an investigation of Queensland identity itself, but of the limitations and ambiguations that these disaffecting semiotic portrayals mandate. The faceless, blank forms which signify the state of Queensland are, to me, a perfect visual expression of disillusionment, one which I have drawn continual inspiration from in my practice.

MacPherson's serialised works were a central inspiration in the development of my own codes and languages based on Australian political motifs. I am mutating symbols to draw out their inadequacies, appropriating them as a means of critiquing the toxic jingoistic narratives which underly Australian political discourse, and to derive a more complex, ambiguous meaning from them. MacPherson's investigations of Australian identity through repetition and deconstruction suggest the limits of semiotic messaging. This closely links with my creative practice, in which I address the problematic reductionism of Australia's political spectacle.

## Raquel Ormella

Australian artist Raquel Ormella examines how contemporary art incites reflexivity, social action and political consciousness (Dean, 2008). Her practice includes diverse approaches to art-making including video, painting, installation and zine production (Ormella, 2010, p. 30). She leads the viewer to become implicated in and challenged by her work; a notion which ultimately aligns with the broader social concerns that underscore her practice: those of social justice and environmental activism (Dean, 2008; McGrath, 2019; Ormella, 2016). Like MacPherson and I, Ormella also utilises repetition. In particular, her work studies the relation of the audience to artwork through use of multiples (McGrath, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2019). For example, Ormella's installation *Constantly Changing Ecosystem* (2008) for the 2008 Sydney Biennale, featured electronic whiteboards that printed illustrations produced by the artist, and which the audience was invited to take from the gallery (Dean, 2008, p. 46; O'Sullivan, 2019). Ormella's work is an example of *détournement* utilised in the context of Australian political *spectacle*, intersecting with two major components of my project.

Wall-based flag deconstruction *This dream* (2013) is an example of this intersection. The work evolved out of Ormella's ongoing practice-led enquiries into identity and nationhood, and the methods by which values prescribed to flags can be altered to communicate new, revolutionary meaning (O'Sullivan, 2019). The work is comprised of the flags of Australia, Nauru and Papua New Guinea, which have been altered and re-presented by the artist aligned with her aforementioned activist investigations (Alves, 2018).

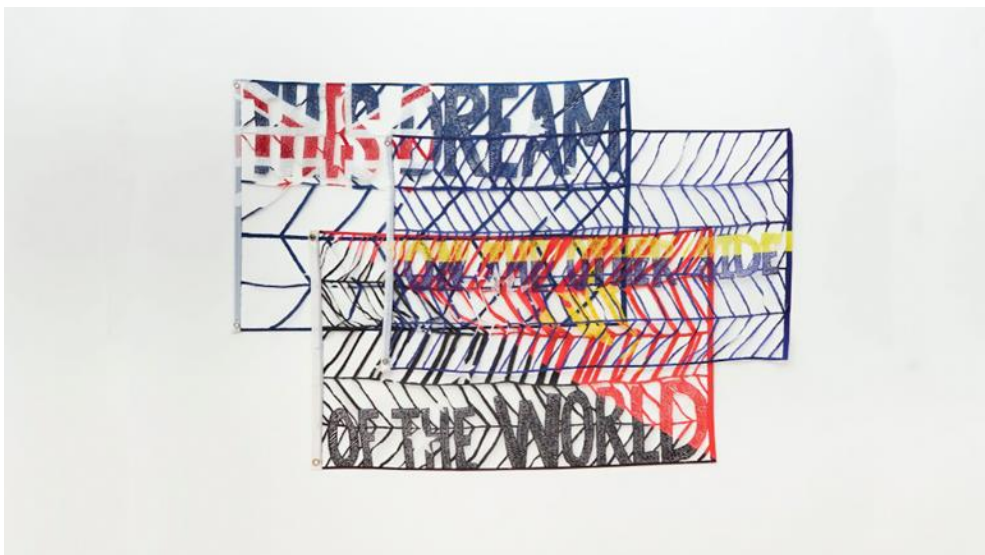


Figure 8 Ormella, R. (2013). *This Dream*. [Nylon flags. 150 x 210 cm]. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales

Writer Tim Alves states that through *This dream* (2013) Ormella is reasserting art's capacity to engage with activism, foregrounding the "open-ended, and thus aesthetic, character of her politics" (2018). In this work, the flag - a symbol of a country, and moreover of its system of beliefs and values - is assumed by the artist as a powerful visual signifier of nationalism; however, her treatment of each flag opens it up to new possibilities of meaning. Each flag has been manipulated by the artist to create words and patterns in its fabric. The charred edges of the fabric - evidencing Ormella's method of burning its fibres - reference flag desecration as an act of political activism and protest against a country and its policies. Ormella's process of cutting and burning the flags into incredibly fine slices and letterforms creates a skeletal structure for each flag, and also creates a window to see, or be seen, through. I consider Ormella's act of revealing this underlying skeletal structure to be not unlike the SI's efforts to uncover the oppressive structure of the *spectacle*, or my own critical semiotic deconstructions. Interestingly, in comparison to Mullican's or my own work, Ormella's process of revelation is to reducing the flag to a skeleton - reducing its visual volume and solidity altogether.



Figure 9 Ormella, R. (2013). *This Dream*. [Nylon flags. Detail. 150 x 210 cm]. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales

The text that can be read across the flags: *'This dream ... on the other side ... of the world'*, alludes to the plight of asylum seekers and refugees who have left their country of origin due to a fear of persecution. This work speaks to the domestic politics of Australia, but also to the effects of war and the prospect that Australia may hold for those seeking refuge. This text, together with the artist's

selection of these specific flags, is suggestive of the 'Pacific Solution' and the Australian government's ongoing diplomatic negotiations with the governments of Nauru and Papua New Guinea in relation to asylum seekers.

In my view, Ormella is activating the method of *détournement* in her appropriation and subversion of national flags as a means of highlighting injustice and questioning the status quo. Her modes of appropriation and the contortion of the semiotics of the flags mirrors my own applications of *détournement*. Viewed from a Rancierian perspective, I consider that in creating and displaying these works Ormella is disrupting the *distribution of the sensible*, and enacting an incisive critique upon the image of Australian society through *dissensus*. She does this by making the flag a figure of fragility, rather than national certainty, and making visible the rarrk of Arnhem land Indigenous culture – here the highly codified spiritual cross-hatching is turned into a motif of white hollowness.

## **Summary**

The principal creative practices informing this research project are the work of Matt Mullican, Robert MacPherson and Raquel Ormella. Matt Mullican's creative practice draws out dissonances from the semiotics of 'spectacle' through the appropriation and manipulation of semiotics from mainstream consumer visual cultures. Robert MacPherson adopts aesthetics and semiotics from Australian *spectacle* which he subjects to processes of repetitious subversion, producing work which informs my use of repetition as a form of investigative critique. Raquel Ormella's work is an example of *détournement* utilised in the context of Australian political spectacle as a means of highlighting injustice and questioning the status quo. These creative practices inform my own body of creative work.



## Chapter 4

### Reflection on Practice

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will examine the creative works, which form the major component of this research project. The body of creative work I have produced appropriates political symbols and motifs from mainstream and activist politics to reflect my concerns regarding the current state of Australian political discourse, which I believe is rife with blind nationalism. The creative works also experiment with digital technologies used as a means to augment material forms and spaces, such as in sound and video sculpture and installation, and site-based projections to expand the potential of my applications of *détournement*. I will first discuss the experiments that determined my critical creative processes, before analysing the form, content, context and processes of the resulting artworks. Finally, I will discuss my exhibition *Flash Point*, and how it acts as a culminative display of the body of creative works produced throughout this project.

#### Colour Theory

Use of colour emerged as a means by which I convey conceptual ideas in my practice, but as colour also has the potential to activate psychological effects in the viewer it also is an important feature of the affective qualities of my work. Psychotherapist Max Lüscher's colour test informs my use of colour, by clarifying how colour choices can impact a viewer of my work. This test is an instrument for quantifying a subject's psychophysical state based on their interpretations of colour. The book *The Lüscher Color Test* (1969) details the quantifiable stages of the test, ascribing specific relations between colour use and human response (1969, pp. 25-26). While producing creative works, I have referred to Lüscher's test to recognise how my use of colour might impact the viewer of on a psychological level. Further, insights drawn from Lüscher's text inform how I may strategically deploy colour as its own signifier, and how this, when coupled with other semiotic elements (for example, stars or hammers), can combine to create new meaning. I interpret Lüscher's findings with a creative discretion that is also augmented by my reading of Zena O'Connor's critical companion text (see following section).

Lüscher's findings bear relevance not just in my choice of materials, but also in my use of light in the gallery space. In my work *Slope 2* (2018) for example, spotlights are shone onto a 10-metre slope of iridescent orange satin fabric (Figure 7). This presentation gives the work a luminous quality, bathing the installation space in orange light that radiates from the reflective synthetic fabric. Lüscher's text suggests that such a quality would have a stimulating effect on the nervous system; triggering

increases in blood pressure, respiration rate and heartbeat (1969, p. 72). These effects and their utilisation in my creative works are further detailed in Chapter 4. Utilising Lüscher's text, I am able to support these ideas. Thus, I am able to deploy two instances of direct aesthetic subversion in the work, and Lüscher's colour research supports my findings in studio. Max Lüscher's test is a beneficial tool for understanding political branding and colour, as well as deconstructing the affective use of colour in my source material. It is crucial in my project to grasp a full understanding of the outcomes of choosing specific colours to deploy in my work, beyond intuition or what appears optically correct. Through incorporation of this text I am able to achieve this.

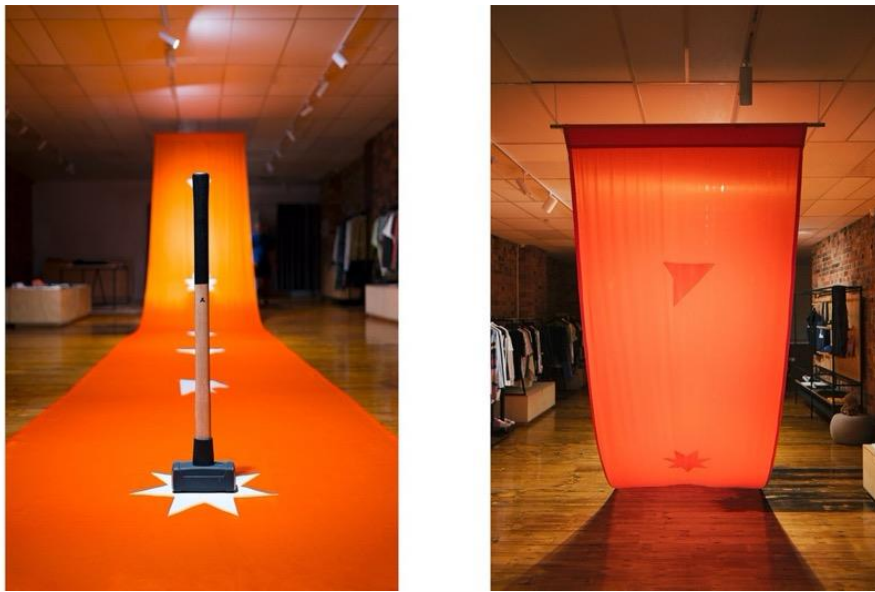


Figure 10 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Slope 2 (Against)* [Sculptural Installation: satin, drill cotton, chain, aluminium, adhesive bonding, sledgehammer]. *Contra*, Brisbane, Queensland.

While Lüscher's theory has been challenged by some researchers, his theories remain a useful way of thinking about the broad signification of colour brought about through physiological responses. These interests play out in my work in adding to the sense of foreboding, stridency and threat of the work. Zena O'Connor acknowledges the importance of *The Lüscher color test* (1969) in the field, but believes Lüscher is occasionally too general in his ascriptions of consequence (O'Connor, 2011, p. 231). With respect to my own work then, I certainly acknowledge that kinds of potential meanings created by my use of colour remain subjective and ambiguous.

### **Experimentation and 'It's time'**

Early in this project, iterative experimentation emerged as one of the central tenets of my creative practice. Certainly practice-led research methodology prioritises this experimentation with materials, in combination with self-reflection on creative outputs shaped through writing, and supervisory and



peer critique (Barrett, 2014, p. 30). Utilising these critical praxes, a dialogical connection between making and writing is produced and embedded throughout the body of work and the exegesis which supplements it (Barrett, 2014, p. 31).

Thus, both my experimental studio processes and the outcomes these produce have evolved throughout this project. Utilising elements from Australia's political spectacle as tools to enact critique, I work through variations and evolving combinations of imagery, materials and sound. I then deploy the resulting banners, flags, and other materials in public settings, and document this process. Banners which have been deployed in protest settings are then re-used in the gallery space in further combinations, forming new installations. For example, site-based installation *Flag 4* (2018) was initially displayed and documented in a university car park. It was later displayed in clothing retail location *Contra*, and later in a new format at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA).



Figure 11 Sargeant, A. (2017). *Flag 3*. [Sculpture: Pinewood, cotton, plywood, inks]. QUT Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, Queensland.



Figure 12 Sargeant, A. (2017). *Flag 3*. [Flag: cotton, plywood, inks]. QUT Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, Queensland.



Figure 13 Sargeant, A. (2018). *Flag 3*. [Flag: Pinewood, cotton, plywood, inks]. Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, Western Australia:

## Hatched 2018

The form of *Flag 3* (2018) was revised for its display at PICA. Outdoor installations of the artwork relied on environmental wind to lift the fabric in order to allow the text to be legible. The subsequent installation of the flag at retail space *Contra* (Figure 13) was a valuable experiment. However, the

removal of the flag hardware (pole, fittings, base) obscured the direction I hoped to take, by utilising this appropriated political symbol as a corporeal gesture. In other words, the symbol applied to fabric, hung on the wall in a retail space spoke too directly to the language of the market, and less to the language of Australia's political spectacle, embodied by the flag or banner. The notion I was taking a symbol from the past for renewed reflection was thus undercut by this mode of display. Further, the static presentation of the work, hung flat against the wall, removed the kinetic qualities of its original outdoor presentation. Thus, the artwork was entirely re-devised for its PICA outing.



Figure 14 *Flag 4* (2018). [Technical Illustration].

Approaching how to reinvent this artwork (with flag elements restored) for PICA, I needed to devise a new mode of composing the 'flag', which could be installed inside yet retain its kinetic and flag-like qualities and simultaneously keep the 'It's time' phrase visible. Initially, I had considered use of a fan to move the fabric and create the effect of an outdoor flag in motion. I also considered installing of the flag outside PICA (facing the Perth Cultural Centre forecourt). Through consultation with PICA's then Senior Curator Dr. Eugenio Viola, it was determined the most effective method of installation would be inside the gallery on the upper floor, hung over PICA's upper railing, visible from the ground floor of the gallery. I preferred this mode of display to an external presentation because it allowed the work to be visible from both floors of the gallery, acting as a semiotic 'beacon', broadcasting itself over the exhibition spaces below. As well as this, positioning the work inside the gallery removed it from the visual noise of outdoor advertising present in the Perth Cultural Centre forecourt.



Figure 15 Perth Cultural Centre forecourt, facing PICA in 2018 during Hatched 2018. Initial site-based documentation of the artwork is displayed on the billboard outside the gallery.

The reinvented *Flag 4* (2018) was hung using customised steel fittings. The specific 30-degree angle which the flag hangs from was devised to be congruent with the new parallelogram shape of the flag – giving it a fluid appearance, while remaining flat – allowing the ‘It’s time’ logotype to be read unobscured by any folds in the material. The white fabric of the flag was a thin drill cotton, chosen to be as light as possible to allow the flag to be carried by the air currents in the gallery, slowly sweeping back and forth above the space.





Figure 16 Fletcher, G. (1972). *Whitlam and Little Pattie*. [Image]. Retrieved from: Getty Archive

The most radical shift in the new presentation of this work for PICA is the new sideways orientation of the 'It's time' logotype. The decision to shift the symbol on its side developed after reconsideration of the central conceptual ideas which informed its original creation. The 'It's time' symbol, for myself, is nostalgic – referential of a period of progressive reform and renewed hope in Australia. Campaigning on the perceived need for change after 23 years of conservative government, Labor campaigned on a range of major progressive policy proposals, supplemented by a television and print advertising campaign featuring notable Australian celebrities singing the jingle "It's Time" (Hocking, 2014). Writer and presenter Myf Warhurst writes "these catchy political tunes and group singalongs are, sadly, no more", replaced with contemporary televised election campaign materials that condemn opponents' platforms with "solemn advertisements full of serious voices", a state she labels ultimately depressing (2014).

The early days of the Whitlam Government would rival the 100 days of President Roosevelt in its scope and initiatives. ... There (was) a flow of legislative and administrative activity unparalleled in the history of national government in Australia. (Lance Barnard, 2014, p. 10)

I am portraying the Whitlam era as an optimistic, exciting period, and am referencing it nostalgically. Appropriating this loaded iconography from the 1970s, and applying it to a white flag in 2018 is my method of casting the audience's minds back to this period, expressing dismay at the depressing political circumstances of our current time: heightened jingoism, authoritarianism, and political

leaders espousing far-right philosophies rising to power across the globe. Thus, to skew the flag form into a slanted shape and turn the logotype on its side is to apply the anti-spectacular critical method of *détournement*. The regularity of the rectangular flag has been ‘pushed over’ to form a parallelogram, disrupting the visual stability of the text in the process. The declaration ‘It’s time’ rests uneasily in this new white silhouette. As detailed in Chapter 2, the Situationists of the 1960s utilised *détournement* by appropriating and subverting current artistic and mass-produced components to produce new combinations and assemblages (Trier, 2014, p. 16). My creative work centres on the spectacle of Australian politics, thus I have montaged this iconography to form a new critical assemblage.

The placement of *Flag 3* (2017) in a barren setting in its original presentation reinforces my feelings of dismay toward the current political climate. However, I also consider the PICA iteration of *Flag 3* (2018) a site-based installation. Appending this work to the wall of a state-owned institution produces a new assemblage of components through which *détournement* is actuated. The dissenting view of the state carried by my work has moved from its solitude in the barren Australian landscape and infiltrated the state institution, lodging itself as a fixture on the wall. Institutional critique enacted through *détournement* has emerged as a recurring element of my creative practice, re-appearing in my *Status Unknown* exhibition the following year.

At this early stage was also when Rancière was entering my conceptual frame of reference. As discussed in Chapter 2, Rancière supposes that the voices of the excluded are heard by the dominant order through processes of perception: not traditional political structures like party politics or government legislation, but through transformative episodes of perception, experience and art (2004, p. 42). In this work, I am beginning this process of engaging with Rancière’s ‘processes of perception’, highlighting the discordance between the hopeful Whitlam era’s nostalgia with the disheartening tonalities of contemporary Australian politics.

### **Contra Collaboration**

In December 2018, as part of my early efforts to permeate the public landscape with my hijacked semiotics, I released a collaboration between myself and clothing retailer Contra. The collaboration resulted in a T-shirt design, released with an installation exhibited inside the Contra retail space. The installation comprised one artwork, made with the Contra space in mind. The T-shirt and installation opening was promoted through the distribution of stickers and digital propaganda posters. The centrepiece of this project was the installation and display of *Slope 2 (Against)* (2019). A 10-metre slope of salamander orange satin fabric was hung from the gallery ceiling along a steel bar, falling for

half its length in a gradual descent to the gallery floor, where it lay flat for the remaining five metres. Deconstructed variations of the Australian Commonwealth Star in white drill cotton adorned the banner vertically at 1.5 metre intervals, spelling the word 'Contra' in code.

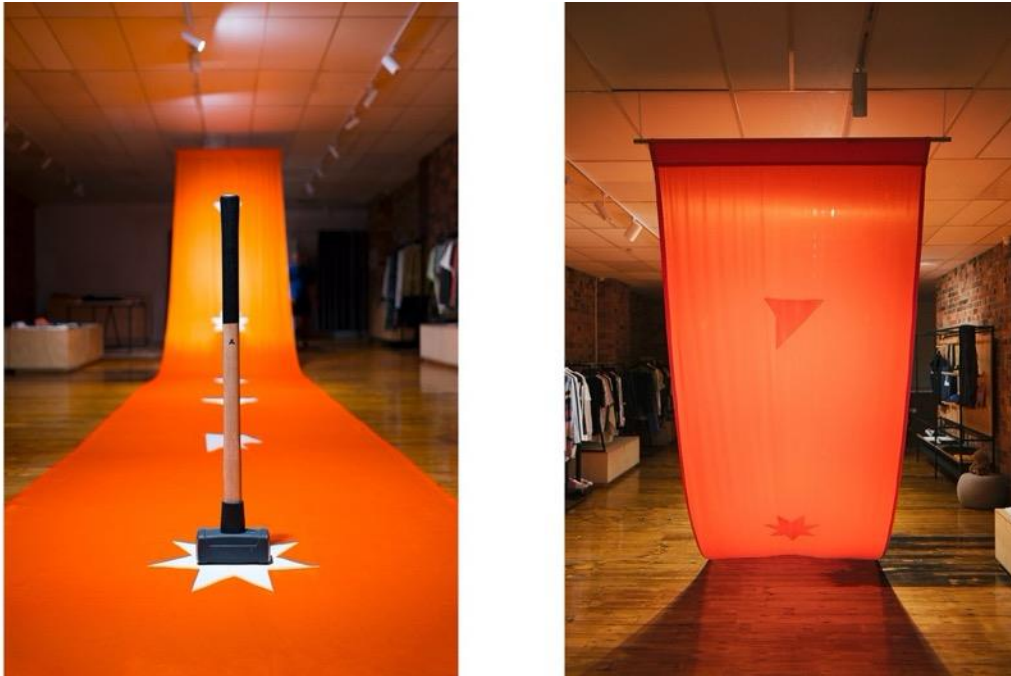


Figure 17 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Slope 2 (Against)*. [Sculpture: satin, drill cotton, chain, aluminium, adhesive bonding, sledgehammer]. Contra, Brisbane, Queensland.

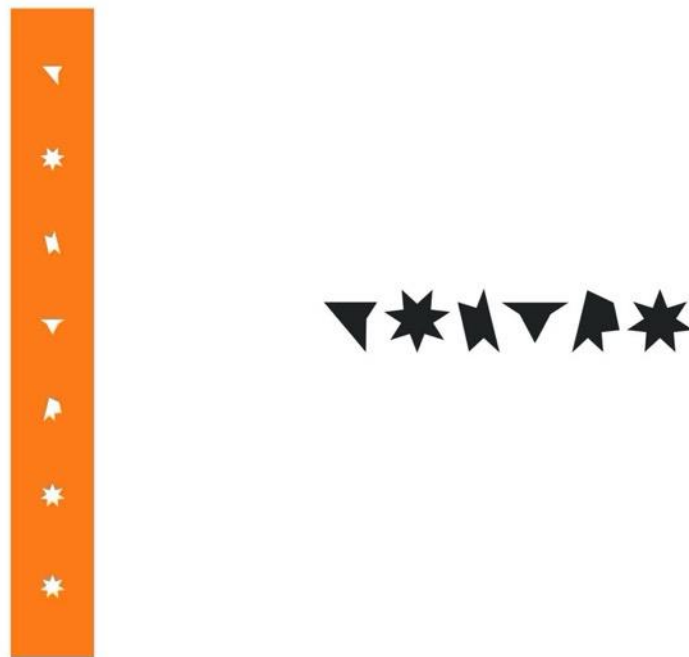


Figure 18 *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018) [Process image]

Salamander orange satin fabric is utilised in the work to present a direct inverse correlation with the Australian national flag's berry blue. On a standard 12-colour wheel, these colours sit on exact opposite sides. Thus, linkages are made with the chosen artwork title: '*Against*'. Max Lüscher, who developed and published the *Lüscher Color Test* (1969), studied the affective characteristics of four basic colour groupings, which he referred to as psychological primaries: Orange-red, bright yellow, blue-green and dark-blue. Through experimentation, Lüscher assigned precise associations and affective characteristics to each psychological primary. For example, red-orange has a stimulating effect on the nervous system, blood pressure increases, respiration rate and heartbeat both increase; while blue-green has the reverse effect, blood pressure falls, heartbeat and breathing both slow down (O'Connor, 2011). Lüscher's findings informed my decision to subvert the colours of the Australian flag, in seeking to evoke these concentrated affective characteristics in my work. In other words, through my use of 'inverted Australian orange' presented on a giant, dramatically lit orange banner, I aim to evoke Lüscher's described stimulation of the nervous system. My motivation for activating this physiological response is to produce a 'heightened' translation of the spectacle itself.

The signs I am working with are representative of a *spectacle* I feel detached from and disillusioned by. The Commonwealth Star for example, a symbol of Australian federation, is in my view a farcical semiotic gesture that is representative of colonisation, genocide and immorality – the drawing of imaginary borders upon the face of land which was never ceded. And yet, to those within the Australian political establishment, the Commonwealth Star and adjacent symbols are national icons to revere. In my view, the Commonwealth Star is a semiotic veneer concealing a malevolent premise.

The sloping banner, in its form, colours and symbolism, bombastically inverts the patriotic values of the Australian flag. The prefix 'contra', dictating 'against, opposite, in opposition to' further reflects the colour choice employed in my work, and the artwork title (Bullock, 1999). It is not expected that a lay viewer of the work will decipher this coded expression of language, thus the fragmented Commonwealth Star symbols also act as a representation of chaotic jingoism in their own right. This coded expression is at odds with the unconcealed methodology applied in *Australia Rising #1* (2007) by Ormella, where a recognisable 2007 John Howard quotation is presented in unambiguous bold text.





Figure 19 Ormella, R. (2007). *Australia Rising #1*. [Textile Sculpture: cotton, felt, metallic thread, ribbon]. 180 x 380 cm. Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland. Retrieved from:

Similarities can be drawn between Raquel Ormella's methods of reduction, and my own engagement with Australian political discourse. However, my work engages in differing forms of appropriation. Like Ormella, I am chiefly concerned with semiotic relationships, and their association with the Australian political spectacle. Ormella's forms are similarly reductive in their use of graphic devices, however they differ significantly from my work in regard to material outcomes. Ormella's work *Australia Rising #1* (2007) uses a range of embroidered embellishments, with ragged and fragmented sections of green and yellow fabric decorating an elongated, deconstructed Australian flag. Pieces of tattered and de-threaded fabric hang from the banner, pooling on the gallery floor. Conversely, my practice often seeks to produce more seamless and minimal material forms. This is because in my work I wish to produce graphics and materials that appear as though they could be the product of an exaggerated reality. In other words, I want my work to not just appropriate semiotics from the spectacle of Australian politics, I wish also to appropriate the clean, synthetic nature of its production values.

This is manifested in *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018) in a number of ways. Firstly, I wished to produce a satin banner so cosmetically seamless that there were no visible sewn hems. To achieve this, I produced the banner from raw fabric, fusing the seams with heat-activated hemming strips. The lettering was produced through a process of laser cutting thin MDF stencils of the star-forms, then tracing these onto white fabric for cutting. My initial experiments in attempting to laser-cut white fabric resulted in charring along the edges, and so the stencil method was used instead. The aluminium rod and chain used to hang the banner from the ceiling were likewise custom-made for this work. Initial test installations of the artwork revealed the importance of lighting upon the work's reception. Under dispersed, naturally lit conditions, the fabric appears vibrant and glittery, but much

more ‘matte’ than when displayed in a dimly lit space, with dramatic halogen spotlights. This discovery would go on to inform the dramatic ‘stage lighting’ I would apply in my *Flash Point* exhibition. This sits at odds with the below image, depicting a test installation of *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018) with the above finalised installation. In the *Contra* retail location under intense spot lighting, the fabric produced a glowing effect, casting an orange hue across the space. It is difficult to re-create the optical effects of this in documentary photography, however the produced intense ‘glow’ notably elicited exclamations of surprise from viewers entering the space. As stated previously, I want my work to not just appropriate semiotics from the spectacle of Australian politics, but also to appropriate the clean, synthetic nature of its representation. Employing this intense, theatrical lighting is a reflection of this aim.



Figure 20 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Slope 2 (Against)*. [Flag Installation: satin, drill cotton, chain, aluminium, adhesive bonding, sledgehammer]. QUT Kelvin Grove Z13 Studios, Brisbane, Queensland.



Figure 21 Sargeant, A. (2017). *Intro to Slope*. [Installation with sound, acrylic paint on cotton, aluminium, dimensions variable]. QUT Kelvin Grove Z13 Studios, Brisbane, Queensland.

The sloped banner is a recurring form in my practice. *Intro to slope* (2017) was an installation produced during my undergraduate studies. This initially emerged through experimentation with warping and distorting the Australian flag. According to handling conventions flags should not touch the ground. But I found the idea of stretching these grand objects out to the point where they do not fit on the wall and must drape across the floor quite disarming. In doing this, they resemble protest banners, or nationalist banners that are draped over buildings.

The scale of *Slope 2 (Against)* (2019) imposes a similar authority upon the viewer. In this way, I am appropriating the affectual qualities of national flags and nationalist propaganda to my own ends. The sledgehammer is a symbol of protest and the worker's struggle. In this work I have pinned the Australian federation star to the gallery floor, in a grand banner gesture referencing the Marxist paradigm of my practice. The work takes over the space it is placed within, illuminating the room and its occupants with its glitzy materiality, mirroring the affectual qualities of the physical marketplace: retail spaces.

Early in my project, I had supposed that the *white cube* gallery space in contemporary art practice might imbue an inherent criticality upon the objects placed within it. I believed that an Australian flag hung within the gallery space encourages analytical thought. This process is less innate when I

encounter the same flag in a residential backyard, for example. In other words, a backyard display of an Australian flag can be assumed as a display of national pride and jingoism, whereas in an art gallery this is less direct. I had thought that the criticality imposed by the gallery space was a significant element informing how my work is read by an audience. This criticality, then, is removed when working in the context of a T-shirt, worn in public, or encountering my work in a retail space. Regarding my work installed in non-gallery locations, there is no white cube there to generate the critical lens which informs its reading. I came to discover through this project that contemporary art does not necessarily require a gallery to function critically.

Regardless, the retail space applies its own unique influence over the work. Likewise, the public reading of a political art T-shirt worn by a person applies its own unique interpretive lens. Mainstream political T-shirts are often precise and direct in their messaging, not requiring deep analysis to unpack layers of meaning. Thus, through experimentation, some semiotic elements present in my art practice were deemed less effective when utilised the T-shirt context. Over a period of eight months, various designs were trialled and considered in consultation with *Contra* director Matthew Kyte. Through this process, it became clear that large, bold graphic elements suited the T-shirt context best. The graphic elements making up the T-shirt design were as follows:



Figure 22 Aden Sargeant for *Contra* - T-shirt. (2018). [Product Technical Illustration].

When worn, the shirt acts as a mobile display of *détournement*. Debord said *détournement* is “the reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble” (Trier, 2014, p. 88). In the case of this T-shirt, I am producing a new ensemble of elements derived from Australia’s political spectacle. The back of the T-shirt features a screen-printed fluorescent orange ‘It’s time’ graphic, reappearing as a

reference to my *Flag 3* (2018) artwork. During this period, my appropriation of the ‘It’s time’ logotype became a recurring graphic element in my practice. The orange variant of this print links to the *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018) installation’s inversion of Australian flag blue. While the original ‘It’s time’ campaign T-shirts used as promotional material for Labor’s 1972 election campaign was printed black on white, here I am hijacking the symbol, using it as a Neo-Marxian, anti-establishment sign (Parr, 2020; Warhurst, 2014).

In *Flag 3* (2018), the ‘It’s time’ graphic was re-used to reference historic context and juxtapose an era of hope and excitement with the current period. For this T-shirt, I have once again referenced this historic context, but this time turning the historic logotype into an anti-nationalist, anti-imperialist, Neo-Marxian gesture. On the front of the T-shirt is a graphic derivative of the proportions of the Australian national flag. Australia’s flag, 2:1 in proportion, is split into four quadrants. I have simplified the flag into a 2:1 white box, and cut out the upper left quadrant, where the Union Jack would be found. This subtraction can be interpreted as a reference to the Australian Republic Movement, however through the T-shirt design and the body of work produced as part of the Contra project, I seek to specifically question the Anglo-centric, nationalistic, colonial, nature of our nationhood. This is extended in the *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018) installation, where a sledgehammer is placed on top of an inverted Commonwealth Star.



Figure 23 Aden Sargeant for *Contra - T-shirt, Front Detail*. (2018). [Product Technical Illustration].

The direction taken with the Contra project was informed by my Rancièrian lens. As detailed in Chapter 2, for Rancière, politics is the rebellious struggle by those who are oppressed by unjust social orders to affirm themselves on the same level as those with power and privilege. To the extent this struggle is successful, the *distribution of the sensible* (how the dominant order recognises which groups have political importance) is reshaped in more egalitarian ways (Rancière, 2004, p. 17). For Rancière the voices of the excluded are heard by the dominant order through processes of perception. For my Contra project I am engaging in ‘rebellious struggle’, because I am utilising *détournement* to affirm my ideas on the ‘same level’ as those with power and privilege by appropriating their aesthetics. I am hijacking the visual language of the dysfunctional establishment to reveal its failure. For example, appropriating the Commonwealth Star in *Slope 2 (Against)*, a symbol of federation, and adapting it as a series of coded glyphs, recoding the name of the retail space to form a new meaning.

Given the commercial setting of this work, the political dimension of my gestures with Contra could be perceived as ambiguous, or indeed complicit. I am, after all, critiquing capitalism’s corrupting influence on our democracy, and political motifs are regularly recycled as fashion adornment (Fisher, 2017). However, the retail space was not an afterthought in this project: it was intentionally sought out and occupied. Moving from the gallery space, to public installations, to a retail space allows me to further the Situationist idea of the *spectacle* undoing itself. As discussed in Chapter 2, the spectacle envelops both itself and its lack. The Situationists said that we can therefore use the tools of the spectacle to bring about its own destruction. In other words, the ideological apparatus I am critiquing can undo itself (Trier, 2007, p. 70). This is crucial to how the SI project informs my practice, as it directly aligns with my methods of appropriation and subversion of the spectacle as a means of leftist critique. This can be seen in all aspects of my creative work – the theatrical lighting, slick materiality, bold graphics and colour – all these are deploying the spectacle against itself. In my Contra installation and T-shirt production, the tangible construct of the marketplace itself becomes a part of this process.

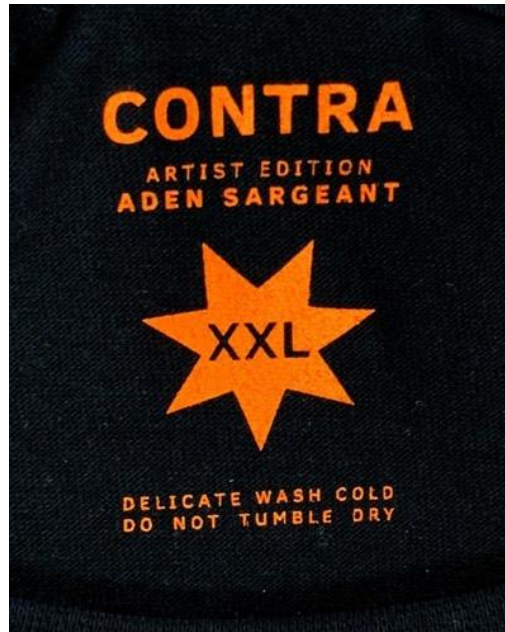


Figure 24 Aden Sargeant for *Contra* – T-shirt main label (2018)

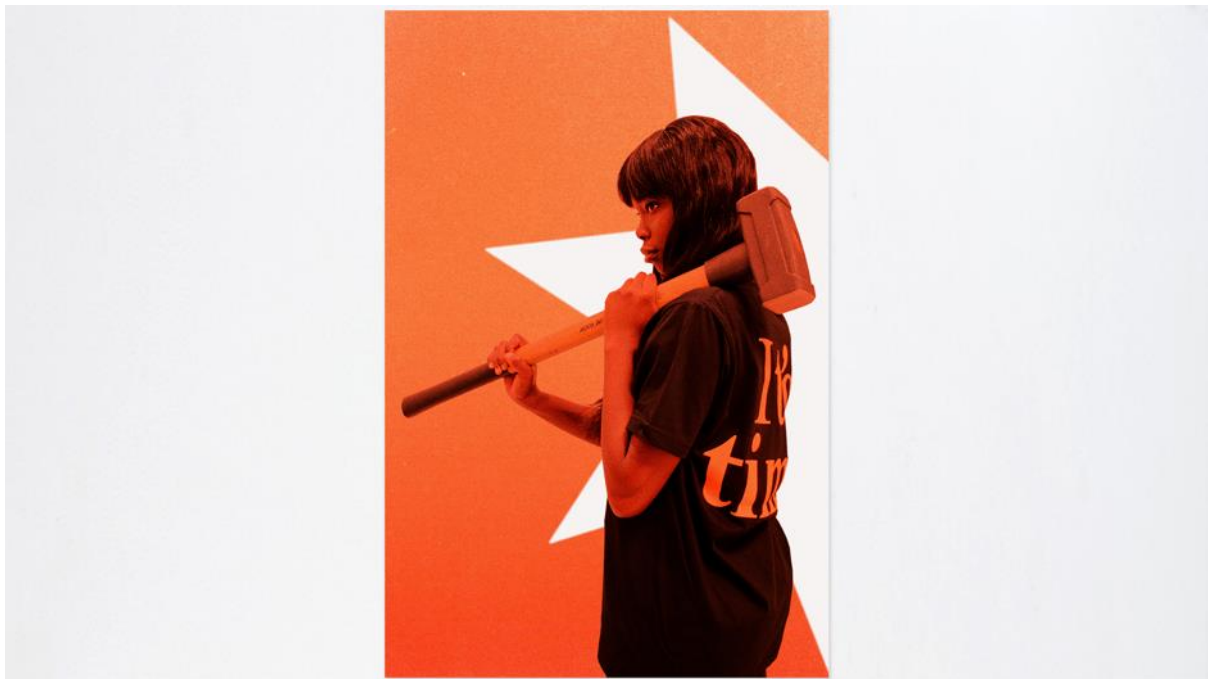


Figure 25 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Poster 1 (Cynthia)*. [Digital print, 100cm x 152cm].

I produced a series of ‘propaganda’ posters to coincide with the T-shirt release and installation. They served not only as promotional material for the show, but acted as a contextual device for the shirt and installation. *Poster 1 (Cynthia)* (2018) depicts Cynthia Taylu, an actor, activist and model in three-quarter view, on an orange gradient backdrop with a sledgehammer resting on her shoulder. An inverted Commonwealth Star, like that seen in *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018), is positioned behind Taylu.



The digital image derives inspiration from propaganda imagery, particularly Maoist posters of the 1970s, but simultaneously operates as an advertisement. Taylu is portrayed in the work in side-profile, assuming a stance I hoped to appear 'heroic'. Upon reflection, it has become clear the stance assumed by Taylu in this work is more evocative of a modelling pose. After all, fashion advertising has long co-opted the kinds of staged poses associated with Agitprop (political propaganda) (Lobanov-Rostovsky, 2017). The hammer, a motif historically associated with anarchism, revolution and worker's liberation, is here combined with other semiotics in an act of *détournement* (Olesen, 2015). The orange colour utilised in the poster, like in *Slope 2 (Against)* (2018), is the inverse of the blue of the Australian flag. This direct subversion conceptually ties to the inverted federation star, which appears bisected on right side of the composition. While this work was produced entirely in a digital workspace, I have superimposed film grain and print-like qualities onto the image, making further links to protest art and propaganda posters. Small imperfections have been introduced into the graphic elements of the work, such as the overspray of spray paint being added to the edges of the white federation star. While this may appear to be at odds with my previously stated efforts to produce clean, seamless physical work, I have found that in the digital domain, where everything is sterile by default, imposing analogue qualities and minor imperfections heightens the visual energy of the work.

As well as Debord and the SI's method of *détournement*, Rancière informed the shape of my Contra project. As detailed in Chapter 2, Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) articulates how the dominant order recognises which groups have political importance. This perceived hierarchy of identities and ideas are determined by what he calls the *distribution of the sensible* (2004, p. 42). For Rancière, politics is the rebellious struggle by those who are oppressed by unjust social orders to affirm themselves on the same level as those with power and privilege. To the extent that this struggle is successful, the *distribution of the sensible* is reshaped in more egalitarian ways (Rancière, 2004, p. 17). Importantly for my Contra project, Rancière believes that the voices of the excluded cannot be heard by the dominant order through traditional political structures like party politics or government legislation. Excluded voices, for Rancière, are heard through transformative episodes of perception and experience, and through art (2004, p. 42). In my Contra project I sought to operate on multiple levels of reception: site-based installation, digital propaganda art, commercial dissemination of my own 'propaganda' T-shirts. In doing so, I pursued some semblance of the kind of *episodes of perception and experience* Rancière details. It is my view that while I did not necessarily trigger said episode, the project succeeded in transforming the straightforward exchange processes of this commercial setting - radical politics masquerading as a slick brand insignia. However, the reverse could also be said: slick branding masquerading as politics - an ambiguity challenging both orthodoxies. Arguably, the logic of the consumer space can be suspended momentarily, and radical



politics, perhaps by necessity, needs to engage in the process of sign-commodification in order to be disseminated. Whichever the case, the result is a disruption to both orders, at least temporarily.

## Investigations of sculpture



Figure 26 Sargeant, A. (2018). *flag destruction*. [Video Stills: Three-channel 9:16 video].

I went on to produce sculptural forms that explored and expressed my disillusionment. One of these was a large and heavy sculptural form which replicated the 4-quadrant design displayed on my Contra project T-shirt. As well as now inhabiting three-dimensional space, the form was rendered in a deep matte black. This decision drew correspondence with anarchism, intending to be the opposite of the white flag denoting surrender. As such, a black flag signifies that those who bear it refuse to submit to a master (Evren, 2014, p. 32). I engaged in experiments and critique with this large, heavy sculptural form, working to understand how it might function in an installation. Experimental installations were produced, combining the form with sound and materials such as sand. Ultimately through peer and supervisory feedback, it became clear the form alone needed something more to engage with my ideas of *détournement* and Rancièrian philosophy. Thus, the work was amended into a performance, documented on video and displayed across three monitors.

*Flag destruction* (2018) is a three-channel video work comprising documentation of a demolition exercise I carried out in response to my disillusionment. The production of this work was not largely pre-meditated, rather, an intuitive response to my feelings and need to release my frustrations directed at the state of politics in the midst of the 2018 Liberal Party leadership spill. Following a week of

leadership uncertainty, on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2018, the Liberal Party moved to adjourn parliament as a means to avoid opposition questioning (Norman, 2018). As I sat in the QUT visual arts studios watching this shirking of accountability, I felt compelled to release my emotions tangibly. In the three-channel video, I use a sledgehammer to destroy a large wooden model of the Australian flag-inspired form previously seen in my *Contra* project. While the Australian federal government was seemingly shunning culpability, I felt the need to materially engage with the form I produced, emblematic as it was, of dysfunction and disillusionment.



Figure 27 Roberts, M. (2018) Labor MPs waved and shouted as Liberal MPs left the House of Representatives after a shocking early adjournment. ABC News. Retrieved from:

The resulting video is displayed across three portrait orientation HD screens, each displaying intermittent fragments of the destructive process documented. I opted to display the footage in this way to avoid a ‘linear’ representation of degradation. Instead, the three panels display a symphony of destruction in nonlinear, fragmented format. In doing so, I intended to produce a more arresting visual spectacle of demolition. The full, un-edited footage of this performance is long and slow. Wielding the heavy sledgehammer against the sturdily built sculpture was tiring and, for me, unenjoyable after a short period. The process of desecrating this form began to feel like a job, as opposed to a means of releasing disillusionment. Toward the end of the video, I sit amongst the rubble, contemplating the potential futility of my actions.

Unlike most of my installation work, *Flag destruction* (2018) was produced spontaneously and with little pre-meditated understanding of what the final outcome would look like. The decision to make this a three-channel video work was only made in the editing process, after I had time to reflect upon the footage and how it could be best displayed to heighten the emotive and spectacular qualities of the work.

Use of the sculptural form as a radical Neo-Marxian gesture links closely to my reading of Jacques Rancière's text *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), in which Rancière argues that artistic egalitarianism is comparable to the *breaking down* of real social and political hierarchies (2004, p. 13). Here, I am enacting a physical representation of Rancière's proposed artistic disruption of the *distribution of the sensible* (Papastergiadis, 2014, p. 5; Rancière, 2004, p. 42). In other words, by producing this monument to overturning nationhood, and proceeding to break it down (physically deconstruct it), I am engaging in a performative gesture inspired by Rancière's writing.

## **Status Unknown**

*Status Unknown* was a collaborative exhibition with Matthew Newkirk, on display at the Griffith University POP Gallery in November 2019. The exhibition presented a series of works responding to our shared disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia by reframing a range of political motifs through site-based installation, video, and audio. We sought to produce a graphically intense, highly sensory exhibition experience. This was achieved through cross-media experimentation, resulting in a show with banner installations, digital photography prints, multi-screen videos, a projection of documentation footage and a dark installation space with sound and lighting. Each of these works utilise détournement to destabilise motifs from Australia's dysfunctional political spectacle. Fittingly, the exhibition received criticism from the state political apparatus. The exhibition was conceptually formed during a period of high protest activity in Queensland, and thus drew on the heightened tone of this period. Through collaboration, contradictions of material divergencies between our practices were negotiated to form a cohesive whole.

The premise of the exhibition was that Newkirk and I would enact a series of site-based installations, applying projection and physical materials to augment public spaces, activating them with our messages of dissent. The completed works traversed multiple Brisbane landmarks, including Dornoch Bridge, Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland College of Art and Brisbane City Council CBD offices.

The medium of projected light excited me with its potential to produce works of scale and impermanence in public spaces. Whereas painting messages onto a building is indisputably classified as vandalism, brief instances of projection are less defined in their illegality. On a series of night-time outings, armed with a portable projector, tripods, and cameras, we were able to swiftly compose imagery on the sides of buildings, document these, and move on without detection. Interestingly, security guards and police who did question us during these guerrilla installations did so curiously – a different response than might be expected had we been creating a spray can graffiti intervention.

The methods applied when installing these projections were unfamiliar. The public setting is an unpredictable environment, and one that is difficult to prepare for. Further, there is an urge to produce and complete the installation of work quickly, before a potential complaint or police intervention can take place. This need is amplified when the content of our work is one of dissent. To allow our full focus to remain on producing the installations, we enlisted the aid of videographer Nate Vandore to document the production of this exhibition. This was a new experience for me, as I am used to applying tight control over documentation of my work. Nate is an artist in his own right, composing the video shots of our night-time expeditions and public installations. Because of this, myself and Matthew Newkirk were able to ‘forget’ he was there, and focus on creating installations, without the immediate worry of effectively documenting what we were producing. Typically, if someone else was documenting my work, I would want to be staring down the viewfinder before every shot, adjusting the framing and giving close direction. With Nate, I did not feel this need at all. There is undeniable irony in performing surreptitious activist interventions with a videographer in tow. In a way, the spectacle is being reinforced, even as we seek to challenge it.



Figure 28 Newkirk, M. and Sargeant, A. (2019). *Flag 5 (acid bath)*. [Sculpture: bleach, polyester, aluminium, cotton, steel, water, plastic. 250 x 45 x 250cm. Installation View Detail.] Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.

The exhibition became noteworthy in the press due to our public display of a bleached Australian flag in the Pop Gallery’s main display window, facing onto a busy intersection in Fortitude Valley. On the opening night of the exhibition, we were notified that a complaint had been lodged by the office of the Queensland Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, regarding the content of our exhibition. The gallery manager said the Premier’s office had called the Vice Chancellor of Griffith University, seeking

removal of our window artwork *Flag 5 (acid bath)* (2019), and potentially the removal of our entire exhibition. The Pop Gallery is on the ground floor of Festival House, a state government owned building, so technically the Premier's office could opt to have our exhibition shut down at any moment. Given the urgency of this matter, a meeting was convened with Griffith University representatives and a Premier's office staffer at the opening of our exhibition. That is to say, while our exhibition was opening to the public and more than one hundred people were inside viewing the show, myself and Matthew Newkirk stood outside on the footpath with the Director of QCA and others, describing why the show should not be shut down that instant. Subsequently, a decision was made to keep the show open, but it was an open matter. Discussions were ongoing at Griffith in the following days which we were not privy to, however we were directed to publish a press release describing our work and intentions. In it, we responded to the allegations levelled against us, citing contemporary art's rich history of challenging the status quo.

The complaint generated significant media attention, with journalists contacting myself and Newkirk, and visiting the gallery for comment throughout the show's duration. The Sydney Morning Herald reported that in response to the Premier's complaint, the POP Gallery had sought the counsel of the Vice Chancellor, Professor Carolyn Evans, a barrister and Rhodes scholar. Evans examined the exhibition, determining our work was "artistic comment and had to stay" (Moore, 2019). Thus, the show remained on display until its final day.



Figure 29 Newkirk, M. and Sargeant, A. (2019). *Shame*. [Digital print on archival matte paper 59 x 43cm].

A series of six prints fronted the exhibition space, displaying still documentation of our site-based installation efforts. Initially I was hesitant to include printed imagery of our installations, fearing the photographic documentation had not been executed to a standard I was happy with displaying. After spending time labouring over the RAW photo files in Photoshop, however, I realised the imagery we had recorded was salvageable, and could be printed at large scale and presented while retaining slick production aesthetic consistent with my body of work, and the rest of the work in the exhibition.

Because, for me, the appearance of high production values are important in the physical manifestations of this work. Corporeal displays of the spectacle of politics are often highly synthetic, highly graphic, and austere executed. My work utilises *détournement* in my appropriation of this commercial slickness. I do not want to produce work which appears like a student's imitation of a 'screwed up' political spectacle - I want these forms in space (flags, images) to appear as though they could be plucked from an alternate reality, where the toxic jingoism of nationalist semiotics is laid bare. Positioning these works at the front of the show, as the viewer enters the space provides an overview of what we hoped to achieve with the *Status Unknown* project in one field of view.





Figure 30 Newkirk, M. and Sargeant, A. (2019). *Status unknown*. [Digital print on archival matte paper 59 x 43cm].

*Status unknown* (2019) renders this eponymous text using my the 'star field' code (See pp XX above). Flipped on its side, the phrase is written in code five times across a nondescript building in Brisbane's inner city West End area. The exhibition was titled after the graphic portrayed in this work. Newkirk and I had imagined enacting these site-based installations would garner attention on-location, requiring us to work quickly and move on without arousing complaint from the public or authorities. However, through early experimentation to refine our installation methods, we discerned that in most cases, civilians are not concerned by our actions. Thus, we were allowed a broader freedom in producing these site-based installations than we first imagined. Working to produce these site-based installations without immediate fear of interruption allowed us to carefully adapt our graphics and projections in situ. For example, in *Status Unknown* (2019), the graphic projected was custom-made on location to fit the building façade (West End, Brisbane). In this way, the work appears more like a coordinated installation, as opposed to a 'slapdash' instance of protest art. This is part of my use of *détournement*. Here, it is operating in both directions: I am disrupting both the language of corporatised politics and the language of protest. This reflexivity connects to the reflexive, evolving nature of Neo-Marxism itself. According to Debord, the spectacle reduces reality to a limitless supply of commodifiable fragments, and in essence is the entire system of capitalism as we experience it (1967, p. 16). In this work, that line is blurring, and my implementation of the method of *détournement* is oscillating between corporate politics and the language of protest. Once again, this

was part of the idea in appropriating the elements of the spectacle of Australian politics. The spectacle of Australian politics is highly refined and graphically intense. We wished to mirror this through our careful installations.

Many of our selected sites for projection do not have a significant public exposure and are presented only briefly. Thus, a potential criticism of is that while we are appropriating tropes of activist art, the works themselves are not public facing enough to engage viewers outside the gallery space. This is a potential critique Newkirk and I grappled with during the conceptual development of the *Status Unknown* project. Ultimately, it was decided that our intention was not for the projected works themselves, in situ, to engage with our audience, but for our documentation of these fleeting events in real life locations to lend a material, corporeal element to our protest gestures in the gallery. Newkirk and I anticipated mixed reception to this work when presented in *Status Unknown*, as Newkirk is a postgraduate student at Griffith university, and the POP Gallery venue is run by Griffith University's College of Art. Response from Pop Gallery's staff and director was overwhelmingly positive, however, as these individuals were similarly impacted by the negligence we critique in the work.



Figure 31 Newkirk, M. and Sargeant, A. (2019). *Dornoch intervention*. [Digital print on archival matte paper 59 x 43cm].



*Dornoch intervention* (2019) is the fifth image in this series. The work depicts the site-based installation of banners which appear physically in the gallery space as part of *A scene (for Annastacia Palaszczuk)* (2019). The three elongated banners, six meters in length each, were dropped and hung from the top of a bridge which intersects Dornoch Terrace and Boundary Street in West End, Brisbane. This location was chosen to link our work with a recognisable inner-city landmark, which we could engage with without disrupting traffic. Use of this bridge also recalls the kinds of emblems and banners used to welcome the Queen during her 1954 visit to Queensland (McCarthy, 2010). The coordinated installation of this artwork is documented in the video *Praxis I* (2019). The print depicts the scene: midday in October 2019 in West End, the banners hung above the main road, a car beneath, and our videographer Nate Vandore below capturing video documentation of the moment. In reality, the site-based installation of these banners was very short – just a minute or two. Capturing this moment through photography allows this ephemeral protest action some permanency in our exhibition. A wide-angle lens was utilised to capture this scene in a more visually dramatic fashion. This drama was sought as further means of linking our acts to the theatrical spectacle of politics.

Beyond being dramatic, the spectacle of politics is also distinctively staged and rehearsed. To spontaneously present this confronting iconography in a public setting is a further instance of my usage of *détournement*. In other words, I am utilising elements from the *spectacle* of politics to reveal its flaws. These flaws, the root cause of my disillusionment, are the problematic reductionism of Australia's political spectacle, and capitalism's corrupting influence on our democracy. This work achieves this in its unorthodoxy, its spontaneity and confronting visual qualities. The denotation of an stylised Maltese Cross (part of the Queensland State seal), placed over a red and black union jack, hung in a public setting is unclear. This realm of uncertainty is where many of my semiotic studies reside. This ambiguity is the realm in which I have stripped power from these symbols. Through these exercises, I am infiltrating the spectacle to critique its dysfunctional nature.



Figure 32 Newkirk, M. and Sargeant, A. (2019). *White noise*. [Digital print on archival matte paper 59 x 43cm].

*White noise* (2019) is the final in the six-part print series. Here, we see the title phrase projected onto the Brisbane City Council offices on St Paul's Terrace in Fortitude Valley. The phrase projected can be read in a few different ways: *White noise* can be read as a critique of the nature of the spectacle of Australian politics, of which the city council is a part. Like noise, the product of the council is released into the spectacle through propaganda (advertising campaigns). *White noise* can also be seen as an indictment upon the policies of the Brisbane City Council, which we view as dogmatically propping up a colonial, imperialist mainframe. Through my Neo-Marxian interpretive paradigm, I would say the Brisbane City Council is one part of maintaining the white ruling class hegemony and imperialist superstructure. In light of this, 'white noise' is wordplay referring to those who make up the highest powers in council, and those their decisions ultimately serve. Reflecting on these photographic works, the scaling of our projected text at times appears modest. With access to higher grade equipment, we could theoretically envelop entire buildings in our text, but on location we were battling surrounding ambient light to produce clarity in our applications of light on surfaces.



Figure 33 Sargeant, A and Newkirk, M. (2019). *A scene (for Annastacia Palaszczuk)*, [Sculptural Installation: 3x PVC banners, concrete, steel 281 x 584 x 375cm]. Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.

*A scene (for Annastacia Palaszczuk)* (2019) is an installation comprising three large PVC banners, hung together from the wall to produce one large, rearranged Queensland flag. At the foot of the banners is the remains of approximately thirty concrete bessablocks, smashed into rubble and obtuse pieces. The PVC banners appear creased and marked from use. The viewer recognises these banners from *Dornoch intervention* (2019), one of the six prints on the wall adjacent. The banners are later seen in video form being carefully installed at the Dornoch bridge site in *Praxis 1* (2019). What was once an element of a site-based installation has now become ‘white cube’ installation. This work epitomises the dance between politics and consumerism of the *spectacle* we are performing in this project. A public intervention (which could be read as threatening, even if short-lived) is revised in the gallery as more of a set piece – as with the *Contra* project, a staged design backdrop of sorts. Once more my application of *détournement* is operating in both directions: I am disrupting both the language of corporatised politics and the language of protest. The line is again blurring, and my implementation of the method of *détournement* is oscillating between corporate politics and the vernacular of dissent. This reframing of the visual elements intends to replicate the reductionism of Australia’s political spectacle, and expresses my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia. This is manifested in the creative processes I engaged with – material, semiotic and graphic destruction and ambiguation.



Figure 34 Newkirk, M. Sargeant, A. and Vandore, N. (2019). *Praxis I*. [Video: exhibition view. 22 minute 16:9 HD video projection, 2ch sound]. Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.

*Praxis I* (2019) is the centrepiece of the exhibition, a 22-minute HD video projection in the centre of the gallery, showcasing Nate Vandore's documentation of our guerrilla installations and protests. The footage captures night and day outings in Brisbane, edited into a linear format. The work includes our mediations with the Australian Federal Police, who direct us to move on and cease projecting our imagery onto the Queensland Art Gallery. Vandore's full, un-edited capture of our installations spans more than seven hours. We directed him to keep the camera rolling, even during ostensibly unimportant instances, because of the unpredictable nature of site-based installation in busy public areas. This resulted in the capture of moments when unsuspecting members of the public question what we are carrying out. Displaying this exchange, then, in the gallery setting, highlights our need to escape the white cube gallery space and speak to people who may not come to see our exhibition in the gallery. It also speaks to the social context of the project: art, here, has created an opportunity for social exchange. The video depicts multiple encounters with curious passers-by. Through their inclusion in this work, their questions and comments became part of the soundtrack of the exhibition space. While viewing *A scene (for Annastacia Palaszczuk)* (2019), for example, the sound of a woman saying "Art? Really?" might be overheard. This emerged as a potential Neo-Marxist crux of the *Status Unknown* project – it invites direct engagement with the public and a chance to discuss politics, both inside and outside the gallery setting. Art becomes a talking point, but this is different to détournement (which aims to momentarily disrupt) and thus creates a space for new ideas and relations in the viewer. This cross-pollination of sensory elements forms the spectacular nature of the show, and an intensity in the exhibition space.







Figure 35 Newkirk, M. Sargeant, A. and Vandore, N. (2019). *Praxis I*. [Video Stills. 22 minute 16:9 HD video projection, 2ch sound]. Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.



Figure 36 Newkirk, M. and Sargent, A. (2019). *Panic room*. [LED panel and 2ch sound, infinite loop] Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.

*Panic room* (2019) is an installation comprising a storefront LED display and stereo sound in a darkened, black room. The low resolution, dated promotional display presents scrolling red text, derived from Matthew Newkirk's practice. The text is a series of poetry, previously appearing in artist books, responding to the spectacle of Australian media and politics. Specifically, the text in this work mimics the 'ticker' seen in some news broadcasts, in which brief headlines scroll across as a band of text below the broadcast. The audio played in the space is a new sound design piece I produced for the exhibition, intermingling field recordings from our night-time installation explorations, Queensland urban environments, and political rallies and speeches. The drone of a Queensland rail train travelling through a tunnel into Roma St. Station is processed to produce an eerie reverb tone which permeates the whole gallery space. The sound for *Panic room* (2019), in essence, acts as a soundtrack to the whole exhibition. Specifically, it affects the reading of *Praxis 1* (2019), which was intentionally left devoid of music or soundtrack, so that *Panic room* (2019) could take this role.



Figure 37 Newkirk, M. and Sargent, A. (2019). *Panic room*. [Detail: LED panel and 2ch sound, infinite loop] Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland.

At times, the sound of *Panic room* (2019) overpowered the sound produced by the video projection work adjacent. Identical bookshelf monitor speakers were utilised for the reproduction of sound in both works, and the audio of each was tuned in the space to resonate and reverberate accordingly within the Pop Gallery. This tuning of compression, reverb and coordination of layers of sound was designed to create a feeling in the space evocative of ‘doomsday’, shifting the audience to a headspace where they are compelled to face the anxiety and intensity of our current political situation. The tone of the sound makes clear the fact the fascistic imagery on display is not to be lauded, but is a scary presence to be feared and critiqued. The darkened space of the installation allows the viewer to only see the LED text scrolling by. The advertising display itself on which the text appears is obscured and only the light emitting diodes themselves can be seen. The speakers, too, are cloaked by the darkness (aided by black custom mounts installed in corners of the space), amplifying the unnerving qualities of the installation. There is a sense within the gallery space of wanting to know where the sound is emanating from, though through this lighting technique, it is never made blatantly clear. The viewer never sees the speakers, and the lights on the front of the speakers were hidden with coverings built for the show to further ensure this. Like *Chorus* (2019), the tools of the marketplace are utilised to convey an anti-market, anti-capitalist rhetoric of dissent. In this way, like the Marxist Situationist International, we seek to utilise the *spectacle* as a means of producing a Neo-Marxian gesture, via *détournement*.



The distortions of quintessentially Queensland symbols in this exhibition intentionally are distorted to read as oppressive. A constant colour scheme of red, white and black is sustained through all works in the exhibition. This persistent reference was a conscious, direct response to the controversial actions of the Queensland Government in silencing dissent through its anti-protester laws, which were justified through the display in state parliament of allegedly fabricated evidence (Smee, 2019).

Utilising all our documentation and recorded materials has empowered us to speak truth to power. The entire *Status Unknown* exhibition is about site-based installation, using place to imbue our provocative imagery with conceptual amplification. It is fitting, then, that the exhibition itself also serves as a site-based installation which would go on to produce controversy as a result. Holding this exhibition within the confines of a state-owned building was an act of *détournement* in itself. We are utilising the tools and resources of the dysfunctional spectacle to rebel against it.

The collaboration central to the *Status Unknown* project was unique in its ease and steady momentum. In the catalogue essay that accompanied the exhibition, Professor Ross Woodrow referred to the metaphoric ‘third-hand’ in two-person art collaborations, with reference to Charles Green’s 2001 text *Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (2001). Woodrow describes the nature of our collaboration:

An original fusion occurs in a number of the works here, which seem to occupy a space outside the compass of each practice. This is illustrated with the extended use of the imperfect code, constructed from the slicing up of Aden’s white stars, which is used to replace Matthew’s more familiar letter fonts on some of the projected and printed works (Woodrow, 2019) .

This act of collaboration reflects our shared Neo-Marxian politics. The most basic expression of this is the act of solidarity and shared purpose required to produce this project. Reflecting upon the project, I believe collaboration, and working under the *Status Unknown* pseudonym, allowed us both to branch out into previously unexplored territory in our respective practices, for example in our engagement with protests and interventionist actions. The work produced for this project did not manifest in my own solo show the way it has here: it is the product of a shared goal – to explore and express our disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia. My utilisation of *détournement* in this collaborative setting evolved to operate in both directions: to disrupt both the language of corporatised politics and the language of protest.

## Excerpts



Figure 38 Sargeant, A. (2019). *Slope 3 (Live Room)*. [PVC banner, inks, projector, steel fittings, pinewood, acrylic paint]. 823 x 155 x 1240cm. *The Block*, QUT Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, Queensland.

In late 2019, I was invited to contribute to QUT's postgraduate showcase exhibition, *Excerpts*. The exhibition was shown in QUT's The Block soundstage, a space my work had not previously inhabited. The darkened soundstage environment allowed projection and rigging of large banner forms, similar to those executed in situ for *Status Unknown*. I devised my work *Slope 3 (Live Room)* (2019) in response to the allowances of this space, utilising a roof-mounted projector to display a spinning Maltese Cross in white on the banner's lower portion. On the upper portion of the banner, approximately ten meters above the viewer, the symbol of the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion is illuminated on the banner with a mounted spotlight.

The axes I have produced through this work are, in my view, the axes of our times. This links directly with my reading of Rancière, in that in this work I am portraying how the dominant order *should* recognise the Extinction Rebellion's political importance, and that their voices that are, in Rancière's terms, "worth listening to" (2004, p. 42). As detailed in Chapter 2, this perceived hierarchy of identities and ideas are determined by what Rancière calls the *distribution of the sensible* (2004, p. 42). Rancière tells us that through art-making, the *distribution of the sensible* can be reshaped, and the implied assumptions about the political capacities of different individuals and groups in society may shift (Rancière, 2004, p. 14). He states that artistic egalitarianism is analogous to the breaking down of real social and political hierarchies (2004, p. 13). Through the display of *Slope 3 (Live Room)* (2019), it is my hope that viewers may engage with this dichotomy in a new way, seeing the

Extinction Rebellion cause imbued with the slick, bold, theatrical qualities associated with mainstream establishment political representations.

Through this work, I am utilising the SI's method of *détournement* to appropriate the Maltese Cross (part of the Queensland seal) and the Extinction Rebellion's symbol. The Cross spins on the floor, turning at a ominously slow speed. In the darkened space, the movement of the glowing Cross appears almost physical or real – as if an object is rotating before the viewer. Subconsciously, the viewer is likely aware it is not a tangible object. Projection and movement were introduced as a Neo-Marxist gesture, to symbolise the apparition-like nature of the capitalist state itself. Ultimately, this work serves to explore and express my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia. In *Slope 3 (Live Room)* (2019), this is achieved through producing a banner form which imposes a menacing bleakness, through scale, slick graphics and seamless use of multimedia.

### **Flash Point**

*Flash Point* presented the culmination of my Master of Philosophy (Creative Practice) project. In it, juxtapose the semiotics of the political establishment and nationalist icons with symbols of protest. I portray the spectacle of Australian politics and the 'distribution of the sensible' through the affectual qualities of sound. In response to my feelings of disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the Australian political establishment, I physically collapse constructed pieces of political spectacle, physically demolishing elements within the space and combine protest forms into semiotically dissonant installations.



Figure 39 From left to right: Sargeant, A. (2020). *Slope 5 (Bombtrack)*. [PVC banner, bessablocks, sledgehammer, steel fittings, pinewood, acrylic paint]. Brisbane, Qld: QUT Kelvin Grove; Sargeant, A. (2020). *Chorus 2 (Revolver)*. three channel HD video, 20:20 min, continuous loop, no audio. Brisbane, Qld: QUT Kelvin Grove

*Slope 5 (Bombtrack)* (2020) comprises a PVC banner, sloped from the top of the wall to the gallery floor, consumed by shattered Besser blocks. The PVC banner displays distorted variations of the Australian Commonwealth Star, on a static red background. Utilising ideas from Lüscher (1969), I seek to evoke heightened nerves in the viewer with this colour scheme, and make links to fascist banner displays. The sloped banner is a recurring form in my practice. Installing bombastic political banners so large they cannot be hung within the gallery space speaks to the overblown, frenzied dynamics of Australia's political spectacle. Dragging a banner or flag on the ground is a gesture of protest. I am utilising the Situationist method of *détournement* in my appropriation and distortion of the jingoistic Commonwealth Star. The fascist banner form is further undercut through its enveloping by a toppled stack of concrete Besser blocks. I have demolished these blocks in the gallery space as a gesture of rage at the dysfunctions of the Australian political establishment, and a climate of jingoistic nationalism.

Previously in this chapter, I discussed the idea that there is irony in the fact that the *spectacle* may be reinforced, even as I seek to challenge it. Upon reflection, it has become increasingly clear to me that there is a self-reflexivity – a performing of dissent – that underpins all of my work. This is evident in my site-based projections, banner drops and material demolitions. In *Slope 5 (Bombtrack)* (2020), there is once again a spectacular nature to the way I am occupying space with materials and shattered remnants. It is as though I am drawn to the allure of the spectacle, I cannot envision a reality outside of it. This notion is something I plan to investigate in my future work.



Figure 40 Sargeant, A. (2020). *Crosstalk (Feedback)*. [plywood, acrylic paint, bookshelf speakers]. 22 mins. QUT Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, Queensland.

*Crosstalk (Feedback)* (2020) is a two-channel sound installation comprised of wood, acrylic paint and a stereo pair of bookshelf speakers. When considering how I might respond to the length of the hallway site, I noted the conspicuous sound reverberation that the space created. Claps and speech created extended reverberation, evocative of a call and response in a cavern or hall. This work does not portray a binary dialogue between ends of the political spectrum, rather, *Crosstalk (Feedback)* (2020) intends to generate an affective portrayal of the spectacle of Australian politics, through sound. A disjointed, back and forth dialogue between entities occurs within the space. The two sentinel-like speaker towers project back and forth at one another, but sit far apart, and on different planes. This disparity in height speaks to the fact that, physically and sonically, these two entities are communicating at, rather than with, one another. I am additionally drawing parallels with the 'distribution of the sensible' through the differing elevations by which the speakers sit. The viewer, standing between the two towers, experiences a cacophony of jittery textures and stabbing tones. Facing one another down this acoustically reflective hallway, the sound expands into a bewildering disharmony. The tones are derived from the Australian National Anthem, transcoded as musical notations. Through my appropriation of this musical piece, I am activating the Situationist method of *détournement*. The two sculptural entities engage in a discourse of distorted tones, frequencies and textures, producing the frenzied, blunt affectual qualities of the spectacle of Australian politics. The sound produced by this work and its resulting affectual qualities permeate the entire gallery space.

*Chorus 2 (Revolver)* (2020) is a three-channel video installation, displayed on three 9:16 HD displays. The three screens form symbolic panels on the gallery wall, continually shifting elements to form new combinations. Each screen displays unique variations of imagery, and the combinations presented are entirely random, with more than two thousand possible combinations. Through this piece I wish to characterise the folding together of signs and symbols within the spectacle of politics, and my own distorted interpretations of these forms, distilled in a maelstrom of sliding combinations. Elements from Australia's national and state flags are intermingled with antifascist and Marxist imagery, and combinations resembling the iconography of Australia's Anglophonic allies. Through this exercise, I am exploring the combinatory nature of these semiotic elements, and my concerns regarding the current jingoistic status quo of Australian political discourse. As the forms slide along and produce a variety of image sequences, the viewer inevitably reads narratives into their portrayal. An inverted union jack alongside Antifa icons suggests anarchy, whereas an Australian map alongside grids of white stars suggests our reliance on international allies. The unpredictability of this work unravels my attempts to control the semiotic elements making up my graphic repertoire, producing an automated *détournement* generator.



Figure 41 Sargeant, A. (2020). *Axis in space collapse, finding a way*. [PVC banners, steel fittings, flag poles, flag mounts, pinewood, acrylic paint. Detail]. QUT Kelvin Grove, Brisbane, Queensland.

*Axes in space collapse, finding a way* (2020) is an installation comprising various banners and fixings produced over the course of my candidature. These banners have been deployed in protests and site-based installations, and here culminate in a cataclysmic unfurling of semiotic and material elements. The composition of these elements was developed through exploratory methods of arrangement.



Initially, I had planned to install these banners in a reduced, more orderly format, however through experimentation it became clear that to evoke the true chaos of the shambolic spectacle of Australian politics, their arrangement must be disrupted. What has resulted is the apparent aftermath of a chaotic clashing of ideologies, displayed through signs and symbols.

Once again, I am drawn to performative acts of deconstruction in this work. When installing these works, I feel compelled to release my emotions tangibly upon these signifiers of *spectacle* and jingoism I have produced. As with my previous investigations of sculpture, I felt the need to engage with these forms in a manner that was physically emblematic of dysfunction and disillusionment. I found great appeal in the unplanned composition of this work. Positioning the banners and assorted pieces in the space, it became clear the best result could be derived by not ‘overworking’ the composition – letting it fall freely to maintain a sense of disruption – *détournement*. Reflecting upon its presentation in the gallery space, I see great potential for future works to pick up where this final piece left off.

## **Summary**

The body of creative work I have produced has appropriated political symbols and motifs from mainstream and activist politics. Through these processes, I have been able to reflect my concerns regarding the current state of Australian political discourse, which I believe is rife with blind nationalism. In doing so, I have established a critical vocabulary for understanding both the limitations of art and the vital contribution that it can make to political discourse. I have experimented with digital technologies as a means to augment material forms and spaces, such as in sound and video sculpture and installation, and site-based projections to expand the potential of my applications of *détournement*. This has manifested as immersive sound environments, projections intersecting with sculpture and place, and video interacting with material form to produce meaning.

## Conclusion

This practice-led research project has allowed me to explore and express my disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the political establishment in Australia. Considering and creating artwork through a Rancièrian lens has urged me to re-evaluate the political function of my work. I have been able to situate my work in an academic context through my application of practice-led methodology.

Researching the legacy of the Situationists and their methods enabled my application of *détournement* to produce new critiques of the *spectacle*. That these works generated attention from the political establishment and press was a surprise that further underscored the contentious nature of the nationalist icons I appropriate, and I consider to demonstrate the necessity of such critique.

The principal creative practices which informed this research project are the work of Matt Mullican, Robert MacPherson and Raquel Ormella. Matt Mullican's creative practice draws out dissonances from the market-driven 'spectacle' through the hijacking of semiotics from mainstream consumer visual cultures. Robert MacPherson appropriates aesthetics and semiotics from Australian *spectacle* which he subjects to processes of repetitious subversion, producing work which informs my use of repetition as a form of investigative critique. Raquel Ormella's work is an example of *détournement* utilised in the context of Australian political spectacle as a means of highlighting injustice and questioning the status quo.

As I reflect upon the body of work I have produced between 2017 – 2020, an undeniable irony has emerged. Looking back at this project and the imagery and material outcomes derived from it, I have no doubt that *spectacle* has been reinforced at every stage, even as I seek to challenge it. In reflection, it is clear that self-reflexivity – a performing of dissent – underpins all of my work. This is evident in my site-based projections, banner drops and material demolitions. It is as though, even as I am drawn to the allure of the spectacle, I cannot envision a reality outside of it. This notion is something I plan to investigate further as a result of this work.

At the outset of this project, I sought to address the problematic reductionism of Australia's political spectacle, and capitalism's corrupting influence on our democracy. I believe I have achieved this, through the reframing of visual elements of political spectacle through the installation of video, audio and sculpture, deployed in public and gallery settings. I believe my appropriation of these elements has functioned as a valuable critique of the toxic jingoistic narratives that underpin Australian political discourse, and has derived a more complex, ambiguous meaning from them. While at no point did I assume that the mere act of viewing my work would spur the viewer to revolutionary acts, it is my hope that it may elicit some kind of awareness or consciousness of the dysfunctions I critique.



A significant outcome of the work has been establishing a critical vocabulary for understanding both the limitations of art, but also the vital contribution that it can make to political discourse. Thus, this project may be better understood through its transformation of my political consciousness than that of the viewer. I may not be able to get outside the spectacle, but I can tamper with some of its predictability and logic by making that which it hides, seen.

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