

*silences
between
ticks
of
a
clock*

Curated by Karl Halliday and Matt Siddall
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silences between ticks of a clock

Absence and Erasure in an Age of Cultural Palimpsest

Rosanna Blacket, Madeleine Lesjak-Atton, Nina Sanadze,

Gail Smith, Tina Stefanou, Mimmalisa Trifilò

Curated by Karl Halliday and Matt Siddall

rosanna blacket

madeleine lesjak-attton

nina sanadze

gail smith

tina stefanou

mimmalisa trifilò

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, we find ourselves anxiously situated upon the precipice of an unprecedented set of cultural conditions. The once-clearly defined parameters distinguishing ‘the real’ from ‘the virtual’ are continually unsettled, as our social relations, economic structures and industrial programs are ever more mediated by digital networks, ensuring our lives are constantly surveilled, our communications recorded, and our behaviour tracked and analysed. And yet, beneath the relentlessly accelerating hum of the production, preservation and consumption of information via Big Data, online social media, cloud-based storage, GPS tracking and the like, the totalising archival condition we see unfolding today has unexpectedly manifest what media theorist Andreas Huyssen diagnoses as a shift in “the experience and sensibility of time”[1]. As an increasingly globalised economy sees digital networks expand at an exponential pace, the margins of space and time that once defined the new and the now are shrinking unlike ever before.

Under these elevated conditions, memory takes on a new role as a kind of counterweight to what Fredric Jameson calls a ‘loss of bearings’.[2] In response to our growing uncertainties, we have now become accustomed to participating in practices of memorialisation en masse. This is evidenced by such mounting phenomena as the popular revival of retro clothing and vinyl records; the commercial marketing of nostalgia; the photographic invention of personal ‘profiles’ online; the proliferation of private museums and heritage sites; the emergence of co-existent feminist histories, queer

histories, Indigenous histories, histories of people of colour, and other counter-narratives; the upsurge of visual art practices dealing with found objects, archival material and documentary practices; the repatriation of cultural artefacts and the rise of public commemorations, anniversaries, monuments and reconciliations by political and religious leaders redressing the failures of previous administrations in an attempt to heal the wounds from the past. As subjects in search of self within a landscape that denies stability, we have symptomatically come to locate and generate identity within collective histories, with memory serving as both watch and compass, providing us with brief moments of orientation as we navigate through a forest of ceaseless movement and change.

Of course, the ubiquitous integration of digital networks in our lives is not without its benefits. Unlike ever before, the Internet grants all connected a platform to record, to speak and to act in a diverse, democratic, decentralised public space. Digital networks transcend the confines of borders, class, and language. They have been responsible for uniting communities, for mobilising revolutions, for exposing hidden truths and for amplifying the voice, suffrage and presence of the marginalised. Consequently, what we are experiencing is a complete uprooting of the edifices of fixity, linearity, centring and hierarchy that for so long sustained dominant systems of power and exchange. Instead, digital networks have introduced the potential for a heterogeneous, complex, multi-directional set of relations composed of links, layers, networks and rhizomes.[3] Put into metaphor, we have entered an age of cultural palimpsest.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a palimpsest as “a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another.”[4] It is a model fostered from the layering of multiple records that perpetually emerge and erase and re-emerge in a complex

intertextual structure of mutual traces.[5] Amidst its violent entanglement of co-inhabiting texts, records, histories and authors, the palimpsest generates manifold meanings, fracturing the possibility of a singular interpretation into a chorus of perspectives. The Internet may well be the ultimate example of a palimpsest, eternally contracted by its emphasis on immediacy to be in a tireless state of refreshing, reproducing and renewal. Meanwhile, the digital network’s false guarantee of permanence has triggered widespread fears of inevitable material loss in the physical world, in which everything, valuable or not, must be digitised, stored and immortalised into virtual systems of memory. The outcome of this excess, as Brian Dillon asserts, is opacity, to which “nothing is erased, but overlaid to the point of illegibility”[6]. Simply put, if everyone speaks, then nobody hears.

In the wake of our current preoccupation with archiving, performance and productivity, do acts of forgetting, disappearance and silence become forms of political resistance? *silences between ticks of a clock* invites the critical insight of six graduate Fine Arts students from the Victorian College of the Arts to meditate upon concepts of absence, erasure and mortality through six diverse approaches to contemporary art practice. Engaging with themes of historical remembrance and amnesia, public and private memory, ageing and death, and institutional inclusion and exclusion, *silences between ticks of a clock* considers and challenges the roles that memorialisation performs in shaping contemporary experience and the public consciousness, bringing about new understandings of what it means to act and *not* act today.

Karl Halliday
Co-curator

- [1] Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia' in *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 2000), 28
- [2] Geoff Eley, 'The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory, and the Contemporary' in *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 3 (2011), 556
- [3] The Chicago School of Media Theory, 'palimpsest', available online: "<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/palimpsest/>"
- [4] "Palimpsest, n and adj." *Oxford English Dictionary*
- [5] Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London/New York: Continuum, 2007), 2
- [6] Brian Dillon 'The revelation of Erasure', *Tate Etc.* (2006), available online: "<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-8-autumn-2006/revelation-erasure>"

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this exhibition takes place, the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge that this is stolen land and that sovereignty was never ceded.

We would like to give special thanks to Dave Attwood, Sandra Bridie, Martin Wills, Henry King, Elias Redstone, Brendan McCleary, Rachel Ciesla, Jack Burton & Julia Suddenly. Without your guidance and support, this exhibition would not have been possible.

Rosanna Blacket

Shore Break (2019)
bicycle wheel Parts, cotton
sheet, wiper motor, trans-
former, ball bearings

Shore Drift (2019)
human hair, seabird
feathers

Informed by a background in architecture, Rosanna Blacket constructs acoustic and kinetic assemblages from found objects. With a practice grounded in a detailed knowledge of material and processes of making, Blacket's sculptural inventions symbiotically merge sound and movement to poetic effect.

In *Shore Break*, the artist has engineered a mechanical device from 're-cycled' bike parts, in which a cotton sheet is fastened to a bike wheel to produce a revolving drum skin suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space. Small ball bearings are released onto the wheel's percussive surface, slowly orbiting the circular plane in an endlessly repeating rhythm that hypnotically evokes an auditory experience reminiscent of the delicate transience of waves rippling across a shore. Cross-referenced with seabird feathers laced together between strands of the artist's hair, Blacket's work creates transportive situations that intimately bond times and places far apart; a poignant meditation on the biography of memory and the interconnectedness of all things. - KH

In the artist's words:

“That beautiful machine, the bicycle.
Measured against the body of man
Matching his movements in fine engineering gestures
Its wheels hum along Beach Road
Mapping the edge of the Bay
Discarded in a frenzy of consumption
Testament to the ephemeral reality of life.
Yet the memory of the form of the land
Salt air on the full breeze
And the slow even break on the shore
Lingers.
Adjusting the racing heartbeat
Into the pull of the moon”



Madeleine Lesjak-Atton

Untitled (2020)

charcoal

In Madeleine Lesjak-Atton's practice, the competing yet co-dependent pressures of presence and absence are amplified by the inevitability of the physical work's erasure. Through a fluid, expanded approach to mark-making, Lesjak-Atton executes site-responsive drawings that are applied directly upon the walls, floors and ceilings of exhibition spaces, and are therefore doomed to disappear once the exhibition ends. Acknowledging the confines of its ephemeral existence, time functions as an integral material in Lesjak-Atton's projects. Her spatial interventions serve as a kind of *memento mori*, embodying a prescient awareness of the artwork's own mortal fate. In this respect, Lesjak-Atton's work is highly situational, in that the short lifespan of her drawing-based installations ensures that any experience of the work will be ineluctably anchored to a particular point in time. To borrow from art scholar Miwon Kwon, this type of affiliation between the artwork and its site is specified by "the recognition of its unfixed *impermanence*"[1], as a transient interaction between the artist's outward-facing gestures and an inward-facing space, thereby wilfully courting the imminence of its own passing.

The sensitive relationship Lesjak-Atton's drawings share with time is intensified in *Untitled* (2020). Commissioned for *silences between ticks of a clock*, *Untitled* is a large-scale charcoal drawing that the artist progressively shapes throughout the course of the exhibition period, culminating in a live performance of the project's termination (or perhaps more accurately, *abandonment*). Expanding and contracting over the duration of the show, *Untitled* is a nomadic entity. Its shifting, volatile temperament insists upon a continually renewed need to negotiate space, denying the artwork any promise of formal resolution. It is then telling that Lesjak-Atton describes her



practice as a series of 'investigations', as her parasitic drawings reflect the artist's research into the site of inscription, a quest in search of outcomes unknown, in which intuition and doubt act as her only guides.

By forging shapeless, idiosyncratic renderings of space, *Untitled* actively opposes the enclosure of the grid – an ideal, mythic geometry that imposes a fixed spatial order onto a flattened map. As art critic Rosalind Krauss contended, the structure of the grid prefigures the entire aesthetic order of Modernity[2] and arguably, the homogenous 'white cube' of the gallery space itself, the architectural container of display that Lesjak-Atton's demarcations seek to at once activate and subvert. The tendency in art to mathematically organise space stretches as far back as Renaissance perspective, a linear modelling of space dependent on the stability of a horizon and of a centred and empowered viewer to whose eye all lines meet. Lesjak-Atton rejects such a hierarchical construct. Not only does this fantasy of centring imply a single 'correct' way of looking at the world (drawing connotations to masculinist, racist and colonial attitudes)[3], the impermeable rigidity of the grid negates space's fertile potential for alternate modes of adaptation. It is this organic, open-ended, spontaneous possibility of action within and without geometry that Lesjak-Atton's fleeting interventions set out to prove. - KH

[1] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 24

[2] Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids' in *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), 50-64

[3] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2011),

Nina Sanadze

Curtain Call (2020)

aluminium composite panels, marble head of Russian Emperor Alexander II by Baron Peter Clodt (1805-1867), fabric, adhesive vinyl, acrylic paint



Witnessing first-hand the emancipation of her native Georgia from Soviet governance and the cultural insurrection that ensued, Tbilisi-born artist Nina Sanadze is no stranger to the overwriting of political history. Now based in Melbourne, Sanadze has since developed a practice of rescuing and re-presenting former public monuments to explore how ruling powers employ and destroy visual symbols to reorganise collective memory in support of particular ideological values.

In *Curtain Call* (2020), a new work by Sanadze commissioned for the exhibition, the artist theatrically decorates a stage for the display of an original marble head of Russian Emperor Alexander II by renowned sculptor Baron Peter Clodt (1805-1867). Decapitated from the Emperor's body, the head was once part of a colossal public monument installed before the Central Palace in Tbilisi, Georgia sometime between 1855 and the sculptor's death in 1867. Following the violent Russian Revolution in 1917, leader of the Bolshevik government Vladimir Lenin issued a 'Plan of Monumental Propaganda', decreeing that all public vestiges erected in honour of the old Tsarist regime were to be abolished and replaced with monuments propagating the communist ideas of the new reigning command. Soon after, in the early 1920s, Alexander II's statue fell victim to Lenin's order and was dismantled and discarded.

Fortunately, the Emperor's head was salvaged by young sculptor Valentin Topuridze. At risk of his life, Topuridze secretly kept the contraband sculpture in his possession. The head remained hidden within Topuridze's family home for as long as 40 years following his death, not to be moved again until 2019 when it was shipped to Australia together with Topuridze's surviving studio archive. Ironically, Topuridze's own bronze Lenin sculpture would later stand beside the original location of the Emperor, only for the monument to be torn down yet again following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.[1] On either side of the head, the silhouetted figures of Queen Victoria and her son Edward VII watch over the beheaded sculpture like shadows cast from the violence of history.[2]

Curtain Call marks the first time Clodt's sculpture has been shown in public since the statue was demolished 100 years ago. By restaging the fallen monument, Sanadze showcases a dramatic

allegory that equates iconoclasm with cultural amnesia. If history is written by the victors, as the old saying goes, Sanadze offers a platform to those lost, directing our attention to the roles exclusion and erasure play in the reformation of public memory. After all, as Sigmund Freud reminds us, remembering and forgetting are indivisibly connected in that one constitutes the other, and both are derived from the same psychical process - the same has been said about the manufacture of collective memory.[3] However, what is at stake in *Curtain Call* is not just a concern for rewriting the past. Rather, Sanadze utilises history as an instrument for interrogating the forces of memorialisation that supply our political realities today. In this sense, *Curtain Call* encourages us to reconsider the master narratives of governments, mainstream media and the powers that be, and to instead look to the ways in which public acts of counter-memory and giving voice to the muted can positively transform future histories to come.[4] - KH

[1] This contextual information was acquired from the artist, whose family had long been in close contact with the Topuridze family.

[2] Queen Victoria and Edward VII were British Royalty during the Emperor's reign. Edward VII was father to King George V, cousin of the last Russian tsar Nicolas II. For more on the relations between Russian Emperors and British Royalty, see Marc Ferro, *Nicholas II: Last of the Tsars*, trans. Brian Pearce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

[3] Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia' in *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 2000), 27

[4] For a brilliant and concise reading on counter-memory practices, see T.J. Demos, 'Sites of Collective Counter-Memory', (2012), available online: "http://animateprojectsarchive.org/writing/essays/tj_demos"

Gail Smith

The Envelope (2018)

paper envelope, vinyl record, turntable, lounge chairs, coffee table



Gail Smith's *The Envelope* (2018) re-enacts a domestic setting within the gallery space, inviting visitors to sit in vintage lounge chairs and listen to a vinyl record, played on a turntable placed on a wooden coffee table. The vinyl recording contains a recorded conversation between Smith and her mother. Facing the furniture is a wall adorned only with an enclosed envelope as its curious centrepiece. The lighting is dim. The

envelope is blank. The contents of the envelope remain mysterious. In the recording, Smith's mother instructs her on what steps to carry out in the inevitable advent of her passing. These instructions are based on a letter that Smith's mother listed in the sealed envelope that Smith and her sister Faye have never opened.

The recording, whilst casual in tone, deals with the common yet sensitive topic of processing the event of a parent's passing, and how to memorialise their life once they have passed. In Smith's family home in Hull, England, the envelope - according to Smith - "is the elephant in the room"; taking up a space of importance amongst the family's collection of ephemera. The envelope is placed on the mantelpiece in her mother's living room, with 'Gail and Fay' written on the envelope's front side. The absence of a name on the envelope in the gallery space communicates that death, dying and grief are unavoidable facets of human existence. By authoring the contents of the envelope, Smith's mother gains power by being able to control the proceedings following her death.[1]

The installation reiterates the inevitability of death and its inescapability.[2] Smith's installation acts as a structure of catharsis, where the collaboration between herself and her family members 'guides' her to accept the inevitability of death and the feelings of grief that may follow.[3] The comfortable domestic scene, aided by the recorded conversation between Smith and her mother, reminds the viewer that one's body will eventually 'surrender' into an entropic state.[4]

The Envelope materialises Smith's determination to question the structural systems that render the labour that women undertake to repair and maintain familial kinship structures as invisible from the perspective of the patriarchy. By privileging the actions of women in the grieving process, Smith's installation explores the gendered division in emotional labour within Western society through documenting the sensitivity and intuitiveness present in the conversation between herself and her mother.[5] Smith's recording of her mother as calm and informed exists in opposition to the privileging of male representation as publicly associated with a professional, 'stoic' emotional state when collectivising images of death and dying; framing the cultural representation of the grieving woman as irrational and emotionally uncontrollable.[6] - MS

[1] Gail Smith, *Universal Inevitability*. Victorian College of the Arts (November 2019), 25-26. Accessed 13 Feb 2020.

[2] Raymond Tallis, *The Black Mirror: Looking at Life Through Death* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015), 11-12

[3] Smith, *Universal Inevitability*, 31

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Jenny Hockey, "Women in Grief: Cultural Representation and Social Practice," in *Death, Gender and Ethnicity*, eds. David Field, J. Hockey and N. Small (London: Routledge, 1997), 90

[6] *op. cit.*, 93-94

Tina Stefanou

Antiphonea (2019)
HD projection (09:10)

Horse Power (2019)
HD projection (08:00)



Still from *Horse Power* (2019)

Tina Stefanou's *Antiphonea* (2019) and *Horse Power* (2019) expand upon the artist's compositional audio practice explored in her Honours degree. Stefanou uses sound as a medium to explore cultural perceptions of ageing and absence.

In *Horse Power*, Stefanou collaborates with her grandmother and three elderly horses to create an auto-ethnographic moving image work that reflects upon the gradual loss of her grandmother's voice. The work documents three elderly horses decorated in nets constructed out of keys and bells 'shimmering' across a rural pastoral setting. The horses' movement transforms them into sonic instruments that act to 'compose' the work. The processes of stitching and sewing involved in creating the nets are described by Stefanou as a 'labour of love'; materialising as a

personal tribute to her grandmother's job as a worker in a textile factory.

The term 'shimmering' is adapted from Deborah Rose Bird's writing about the Australian Indigenous concept of the 'shimmer', or '*bir'yun*'. The term '*bir'yun*' translates from Yolngu to English to mean 'brilliant' or 'shimmering'. To 'shimmer' is an aesthetic that allows one to "see and experience ancestral power"; exceeding the limits of human knowledge and action.[1] The concept of the 'shimmer' falls outside Western systems of categorisation, meaning that the term transgresses human and non-human activities. Stefanou's horses evade the human urge to categorise animals as mere 'things', which Bird argues is an attack on life's beauty, complexity and diversity.[2]

Horse Power documents the correlation between her grandmother's disappearing voice and the elderly state of the horses to imagine if the contributions of elderly beings (human and non-human) to the socio-cultural and biological 'success' of life on Earth were valued as highly as the contributions of youth and the able-bodied. It is argued that in Western society, the elderly are viewed with apathy and indifference as having seemingly 'completed' prescribed social (working towards retirement) and biological (reproductive) roles; rendering them as 'roleless'.[3] Stefanou's work asks the viewer to view the elderly as deserving of giving and receiving love; reflected in the idea behind the work as homage to the love that Stefanou has for her grandmother.

In *Antiphonea*, three nude males walk together in a circular motion, playing a vocal chant by medieval artist Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), referred to as the "grandmother of Western art music"[4]. The work explores the absence of

grandmothers in the history of music from the Western world, the way bodies have had to negotiate space within contexts of traditional rituals, and how von Bingen's achievements have been obscured by history's patriarchal lens upon the Christian tradition. Stefanou's recording of three men playing von Bingen's compositional chant on their double basses, with bows made out of horsehair, centres on her historical achievements as a visionary, nun, doctor, artist and prophet.[5] The actors in the work are professional double bassists. The physical acts of whirling and playing their instruments simultaneously while naked 'obscures' their virtuosity; forcing them to be vulnerable while their movements effect the sound of the instruments. As a recorded 'action', the work exists to critically subvert Judeo-Christian historiographical traditions to document and preserve the achievements of the patriarchy; obscuring their achievements and situating their stories within historiographical paradigms of suffering and oppression.[6] - MS

[1] Deborah Bird Rose, 'Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed,' in *Art of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, eds. Anna Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan & N. Bubandt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2017), 54

[2] *op.cit.*, 55

[3] Herbert C. Covey, *Images of Older People in Western Art and Society* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 2

[4] This information was acquired through personal communication with Stefanou

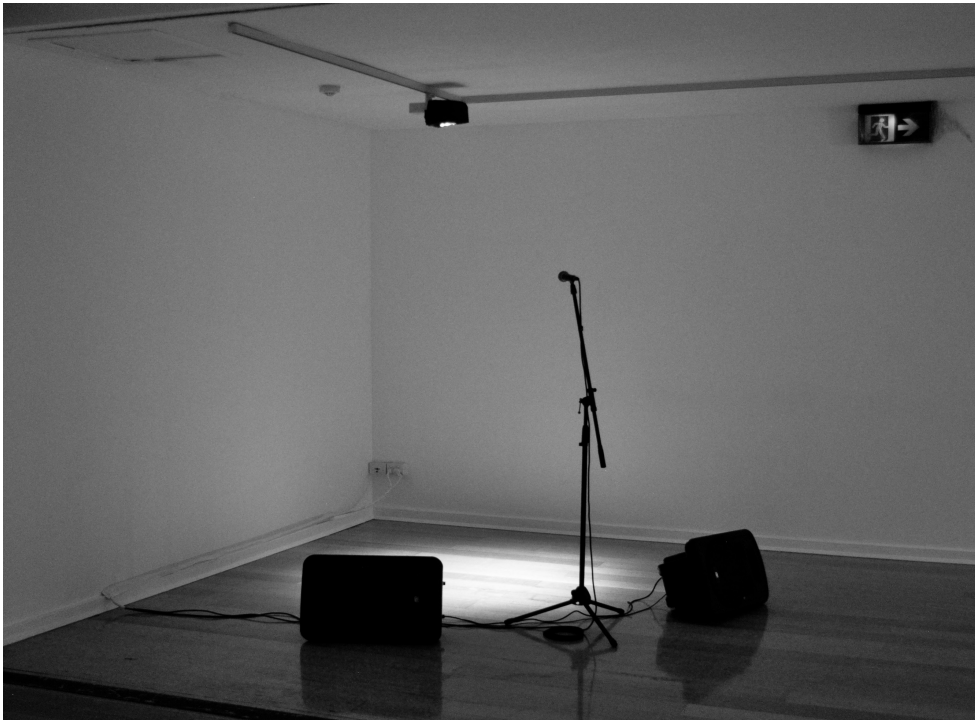
[5] Gisela Hommel, "Hildegard von Bingen," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 21, no. 1 (1987), 24

[6] *Ibid.*

Mimmalisa Trifilò

Past. Present. Future. (2019)

public address system, spotlight



In *Past. Present. Future.*, Mimmalisa Trifilò, a Melbourne-based artist of Italian descent, stages an installation consisting of two PA speakers, a microphone, a microphone stand and a spotlight with no palpable presence as an act of resistance against what she describes as the tokenism of First Nations voices and presences in the Australian contemporary arts sector. The PA system is wired, switched on and ready to be used. The speaker, for whom it has been arranged, is absent from the space.

Trifilò's installation stages a resistant 'non-performance'. This action subverts the histories of colonial fascination with First Nations cultural performances from the perspective of the white settler's gaze. The implicit power structures existing through this way of 'looking' inverts and erases

the traditional function of public performances between Indigenous cultures as systems of solidifying social prestige between communities, cross-community economic exchange, and power structures.[1] As Candace Bruce and Anita Calloway argue, images of corroborees produced by white settlers fulfilled the visual consumption of First Nations peoples as a "white spectator sport"[2]. In the centuries following colonisation, First Nations performances were controlled and appropriated by and for white audiences, reducing their cultural significance to pandering 'entertainment' for white settlers.[3] These actions erased the complex layers of economic and social exchange between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in an assertion of Otherness.[4]

Trifilò's 'non-performance' strategically inverts Western, white expectations of Indigenous cultural performance that often functions as 'cultural tourism' for the purpose of encouraging social cohesion in the arts sector.[5] In contemporary times, the corporate and cultural symbolic recognition of First Nations peoples as a portrayal of equality and acceptance is described by Charles Jacobs as an act of "performative anti-racism", where organisations strive to portray images of social harmony through equality. In some cases, this can lead to a hollow bolstering of the company's self-interests as a 'feel-good' gesture without taking real action to achieve genuine reconciliatory acts between settlers and First Nations peoples. *Past. Present. Future.* deftly criticises superficial attempts to ensure images of equality, where First Nations participants in corporate or cultural events such as cultural festivals are pressured to perform for no reasons apart from other than identifying as Indigenous.[6] - MS

[1] Maryrose Casey, "Cross-Cultural Encounters: Aboriginal Performers and European Audiences in the Late 1800s and Early 1900s," *Double Dialogues* (Summer 2011)

[2] Candice Bruce and Anita Calloway, "Dancing in the Dark: Black Corroboree or White Spectacle," *Australian Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (1991), 88

[3] *op. cit.*, 86

[4] Casey, "Cross-Cultural Encounters"

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Charles Jacobs, "Symbolism and Substance in Indigenous Affairs," *Policy: A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas*, 33, no. 4 (2017-2018), 46