

Empires Ruins + Networks  
Australian Centre for the Moving Image  
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Reflections  
by Guy Strazzullo (M.A.)

This forum examined the context of art in a world sharply divided by the fear of terrorism. It provoked a dialogue driven by the tensions between art and politics. The panel proposed alternative and innovative models of artistic/cultural collaboration.

The keynote address by Nigerian international scholar and historian Okwi Enwezor *The Artist in Times of Crisis*, raised and extended questions influenced by the work of thinkers Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukacs.

Enwezor's spirited delivery proposed "... *a critique of the poverty of language of contemporary art in the face of large-scale commodifications of culture, which have merged the identity of the artist with the corporate logo of global capitalism*". He also referred to Walter Benjamin's question: "*What is the attitude of a work to the relations of the production of its time?*" These questions suggest widespread ramifications on the position of the contemporary artist in time of crisis, particularly when the artist is viewed as the only producer of a work. Enwezor juxtaposes the position of the artist as the *soloist* against the artist collective and more specifically the process of collaboration across a broad geographical area. Citing the African-Congo based artist group AMOS, he showed photo stills of this collective and their work, which is helping to re-establish identity within their rural community and influencing similar collectives in urban areas. Enwezor states that "*the idea of sovereignty becomes the next level of intervention to counter the crisis over colonial infiltration*". He also points to the emergence of the position of the individual artist as 'producer in times of crisis' when he says that "*In collective work we witness how such work complicates the modernism's idealisation of the artwork as the unique object of individual creativity*". Enwezor's juxtaposition clearly indicates art collectives as holding greater social and political power of self-determination over the position of the individual artist.

The forum presented a number of thought-provoking international and local artists and thinkers; I had the pleasure of meeting a few of them. South African Kendall Geers poignantly underlined his identity through an image of a broken bottle of Hineken beer in a South African backdrop, scattering his Dutch heritage into crisis.

New Zealand's Lisa Reihana presented her impressive and beautiful work with *Virtual Marae 2020 AD*; a contemporary cultural magnification of the Mara, the

Maori tribal gathering place. This is a community-based concept that provides a network and the basis for artists to create their work. Reihana presented “*Let There Be Light*”, a striking visual exploration of a woman’s perspective to challenge traditional values within her culture. An example is how Rehana, against tradition, creates a personification of the Maori goddess Hinepoko Hurangi as a human being. Another is the cityscapes with super imposition of Maori women. Lisa employs digital video, photography and sculpture as her artistic medium.

Melbourne author, Tony Birch, exposed the alarming relationship between young indigenous people and policing agents through the work of film director Ivan Sen’s *Beneath Clouds* (2002). Here we witness colonial-type violence enforced by two police officers onto teenage Kooris for no reason other than blatant discrimination; sharpening our awareness of the insidious undercurrent of innate colonial hatred by some white Australians towards indigenous people. The main male protagonist, Vaughan, played by actor Damian Pitt, strikes back at the cop... Birch poses the question: “*What is (the) collective response?*” of a society that often replies with a ‘*Whitewash response*’ of careless apathy.

Drawing from the narrative of V.S. Nigle, J.G. Ballard and Amitav Gosh, Singaporean Simiryn Gill, presented an interesting series of photographs depicting unnurtured traditional houses and incomplete new buildings that form the old and new *Ruins* landscape of contemporary Malaysia. I was fortunate to have visited a number of such houses in the Malacca region of Malaysia, so, Gill’s work seems very familiar to me. She juxtaposes the past colonial period of these abandoned and decayed houses with economic determination as the driving force behind modern structures that stand incomplete as a result of the Malaysian economic collapse in 1997.

Other artists included Carlos Caplan with *Talking South*, proposing a horizontal link of disparate cultures between Southern Hemisphere nations.

American Don Bates is the architect/designer of Melbourne’s Federation Square. He presented the dichotomy of the *pyramid experience* as an iconic object – Bates cites Frank Gehry’s numerous iconic structures such as the Guggenheim’s *labyrinth experience* in Bilbao, which creates a performative experience as an interactive approach between artist and community such as Eura Lille in France.

In 2000, I visited a scale/model exhibition of Gehry’s works at the Guggenheim in New York. Based on this experience I could relate to Bates’s narrative. It is possible to see the labyrinth and pyramid experience in the *piazza* of Fed. Square, as the community becomes an interactive part of the architecture. Bates suggested the NO WAR Peace March of 2003 to strengthen his argument. However, there are distinct elements of pyramid-type experience where the icon symbolises the aesthetic licence of the artist - Enwazor’s “*unique object of individual creativity*” - such as the numerous sharp corners and angles inside the building and the obliqueness, which is arguably comparable to Gehry’s Nationale-Nederlande Building (1992) in Prague.

Due to synchronicity in the program I am not able to comment on all the other outstanding guest artists/thinkers at the forum whose works deserve investigation.

They are Joseph Grima, Eddie Berg, Virginia Perez-Ratton, Marina Fokidis, Ross Gibson and Nikos Papastergiadis; more information is available at <https://www.mup.com.au/items/9780522852189>

I share the opinion of many in my group - I was in the red group – that the ‘Peer to Peer Participation’ discussion sessions were too brief to digest the lectures and formulate an incisive number of questions to the various panels. Perhaps a future forum could invite a smaller number of guest artists, allowing for a greater interactive process to take part between all. Considering the intrinsic nature of collaboration in music, I thought that the lack of inclusion of a guest speaker in this area music could have provided a valuable contribution to cross-cultural practices. and experience to the forum. Some reference was made to this oversight by both Owenzor and Nick Papastergiadis (Melbourne University) and again in the last hour of the forum, which I unfortunately missed due to my flight schedule.

Finally, OzCo, ACMI, and Melbourne University must be congratulated for organising such an important Forum.