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ART AND CONFLICT

Editors: Bilquis Ghani, Chrisanthi Giotis, Luis Eduardo Quintão Guerra, Timothy Laurie, Katharine Sands & Jen Webb

Jahan Ara Rafi, *Silence!* 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30cm

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EDITORIAL

Between Art and Conflict: Prefiguration, Heterotopia, and the Archive

Bilquis Ghani
Chrisanthi Giotis
Luis Eduardo Quintão Guerra
Timothy Laurie*
Katharine Sands

* Authors listed alphabetically. Send correspondence to Timothy.Laurie@uts.edu.au

EDITORIAL
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Introduction

'Creation and existence in the face of death and colonial violence will always be an act of insubordination,' writes Kency Cornejo, 'to the nation-state, to hegemonic narratives, to the violence of erasure, to empire, and to the art world and its institutions' (2024: 234). In *Visual Disobedience: Art and Decoloniality in Central America* (2024), Cornejo explores the ways that anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism open onto myriad forms of intersecting and overlapping harms: sexism, class-based exploitation, border violence, and persecutions against gender and sexually diverse communities. Indigenous-led art practices from Mayan artists, and Indigenous-led narratives about art practices, provide an existential challenge to the roaming powers of the imperial State. Insubordination is not a mere theme or a point of view, but rather a precondition for expressive sovereignty and collective meaning-making. And along the way, Indigenous-led art in response to State violence 'has unearthed new forms of witnessing sorrow, testifying to injustice, and insisting on accountability from systems of power' (236).

The Art and Conflict Special Issue edited by members of Hunar Symposia arises from an approach to art and art-making as sites of witnessing, and as scenes for the making of communities to bear witness. Art made in relation to conflict makes a claim upon its witnesses and audiences: 'this happened', 'this is the effect', 'this is what it was like', or 'this is what could be'. These mixed tenses of witnessing link together what Grabska and Horst (2022), in a special section on art for *Conflict and Society,* characterise as the capacity of art to generate alternative 'ways of knowing' with the potential for art to create or disrupt visions of the future. It is this potential which led to the existence of Hunar Symposia, and its inaugural activities in 2022 consisting of the *Art/Conflict* researcher and artist conference at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS); the *Missing Time* art exhibition at UTS Gallery; and the mural painting at the Addison Road Community Centre (Sydney), led by Afghanistan-based art collective ArtLords and by Aboriginal Elder and Kaanju-Birri woman Aunty Kathy Dodd Farrawell. Taken collectively, these Hunar Symposia activities aimed to cultivate a relational art community that could participate in knowledge exchange and foster a reciprocity of ideas and creative practice, especially between professional academics and those working primarily in the arts through involving members of the public as witnesses.

In this article, we first consider the critical paradigms and challenges for art understood as a form of witnessing and sense-making around conflict, and in doing so, build on this interdisciplinary scholarship across arts, aesthetics, and the study of trauma and conflict. We identify three ideal contributions of art in the domain of conflict: art as moral compass, art as descriptive and analytic tool, and art as a forum for experiencing the unknowable of conflict. The article then turns to consider the real lived problems that arise with these ideal conceptions by way of examples arising from the inaugural activities of Hunar Symposia in 2022. In particular, we consider the affordances of public and participatory art through a collaborative mural painting activity at Addison Road Community Centre in Sydney, with a focus both on political prefiguration, or the ways that art can be positioned within social movement studies as

showing that 'another world is possible', and on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which allows for an understanding of the ways that the contradictions and incongruencies subtending 'art and conflict' can create new knowledge. Similarly, consideration of the *Missing Time* exhibition hosted at the University of Technology Sydney in 2022 also points toward the strength of contradiction and incongruence for those Australian Indigenous artists reimagining colonial histories and interrogating violent archives. Finally, we briefly reflect on the promises and pitfalls of these collaborative approaches in relation to the multiple conjunctures of art and conflict.

The promise of art in relation to conflict

The study of art and conflict is inherently interdisciplinary, and a considerable diversity of approaches is available in the study of art and aesthetics and in the study of violence, trauma, and war.[1] Nevertheless, there may be benefits in providing a provisional schematic for the ways that art can be understood as contributing to understandings of or responses to conflict.

In its most ideal form, art has the capacity to create and affirm a collective 'we'. Practices of art and art-making presuppose a collective human orientation toward the sharing of ideas and experiences, even as this pushes toward and works within non-human entanglements (see Meskimmon 2020). Art engenders a shared process of meaning-making, even when it is obnoxious, revolting, or misanthropic, The open-endedness of art as creative endeavour naturally summons either a real community or a potential community to come. Some approaches to art do, of course, strive against humanist or human-centric understandings. In *Semblance and Event,* for example, Brian Massumi suggests a provisional exploration of 'elements brought together in such a way as to become-immanent to the coming event' (2011: 154), wherein questions of artistic intention exist downstream from process and combination. Elsewhere, Joanna Page's *Decolonial Ecologies* (2023) draws on decolonial approaches to natural history to consider the ways that Latin American artists challenge the Western colonial and 'scientistic' frames for understanding nature, in part by exploring pre-modern understandings of aesthetics that sidestep the Enlightenment separation between artistic agency and the passivity of nature. But even when art refuses to communicate social messages or ideas, and even if humans are decentered *vis a vis* the non-human as privileged agents of aesthetic invention, the 'we' of art would still seem to persist - as a community that witnesses, that explores its own boundaries, that allows itself to be swept up in movements toward other times and places (see Douglas, Geczy and Lowry 2022). The 'we' of art may be unintentional or have fuzzy boundaries, but it is a 'we' nonetheless. As a condition for its possibility, art affirms plurality, diversity, and heterogeneity.

The 'we' of art is also not a harmonious 'we', as much public policy discourse and arts funding criteria might suggest. Writing about the 'Schackville' protests in post-apartheid South Africa, Nomusa Makhubu coins the term 'art-rage' to describe 'the role that creative forms of protest play in opening up and uncloaking underlying racialised rage and the fault lines of racial segregation that engender alienated civic engagement and separate and materially different "publics"' (Makhubu 2020: 216). Citing campus-based creative protests at the University of Cape Town, and subsequent police violence toward artist activists, Makhubu reminds us that art may usefully amplify collective feelings of those injustices and inequalities that remain unreconciled within the dominant racial order. Despite mobilising the seemingly destructive affects of anger and frustration, art-rage has the capacity to cultivate and affirm communities bound by shared experience and political desire.

Against the 'we' promised or invoked by art is the undoing of the 'we'. Human diversity, plurality, and heterogeneity are actively destroyed through violence, and through the dehumanization implied and enacted through acts of violence. Dehumanization can occur through the engineering of situations in which perpetrators feel authorised to commit mass violence against victims (see Ajour 2025; Kelman 2017), and through technologies of war that allow aggressors to distance themselves from places of human habitation (see von Heinegg, Frau, and Singer 2018). Dehumanization can also happen slowly to those communities seeking to escape conflict, who may be subjected to further impoverishment and devastation by global securitization and border control regimes (Schindel 2022). Conflict can destroy practical opportunities for art making, but it can also destroy the forms of human multiplicity and heterogeneity affirmed by artistic practices. Commenting on ongoing colonial violence directed toward Central American communities, Cornejo (2024: 2) notes that collective 'deletion' can occur 'through blatant exclusion of historical narratives, reduction into objects of gaze, disappearance into homogenized groups and geographies, or existence as targets of empire'.

Art may appear well suited to help to ward humanity off its most inhuman impulses, and to affirm those diverse ways of thinking, feeling, and being that armed conflict seeks to delete. The 'we' of art nourishes empathy, relationality, and interdependency against the undoing of the 'we' demanded and pursued by acts of dehumanization. Scholarship on art and conflict therefore foregrounds not only the ways that art can represent conflict, but also the affordances of art in generating new ways of knowing about conflict itself. In *Aesthetics and World Politics* (2009), for example, Roland Bleiker positions aesthetic practices as offering different epistemologies to those in the social sciences:

> Aesthetic sources can offer us alternative insights into international relations; a type of reflective understanding that emerges not from systematically applying the technical skills of analysis which prevail in the social sciences, but from cultivating a more open-ended level of sensibility about the political. We might then be able to appreciate what we otherwise cannot even see: perspectives and people excluded from prevailing purviews, for instance, or the emotional nature and consequences of political events. (Bleiker 2009: 2)

More recently, Daniele Rugo has extended this argument, pushing against the rationality of Bleiker's approach by elevating the role of art in communicating the unknowable:

> We should look at the arts not because they have a descriptive power, but precisely in what is non-descriptive about them and not simply because they lead to an epistemic rethinking of the foundations of studies of conflict, but because the very non-descriptive, sensuous, non-identical elements of arts find an echo in experiences of conflict themselves. They find echoes and resonances in those residues of experience that are not easily expressed, precisely because their density resists being channelled into an intelligible whole. (Rugo 2024: 87)

Rugo's argument for the role of art in conflict aligns with the philosophical positions adopted by Juan G. Ramos in *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Arts* (2018), which considers art not simply as endeavouring to present the world 'as it is', but as an opportunity to enhance and diversify our affective capacities outside of dominant regimes of representability.

Taking these approaches together, we might consider three distinct contributions of art in the domain of conflict: first, art as a moral affirmation of human relationality, interdependency,

and diversity; second, art as an epistemological resource not only to identify but to analyse and explain conflict; and third, art as an experiential forum for exploring those aspects of conflict that reach beyond the wholly describable or knowable. But each of these conceptions of art and conflict faces a common problem. The normative role ascribed to art in relation to conflict rarely aligns with the multiplicity of really-existing connections between the two. As a preliminary sketch of such connections, we might consider the use of art in propaganda to justify war (Staal 2019); the appropriation of art objects as an extension of extractive relations between oppressor and oppressed social groups (Black & Barringer 2022); the epistemological violence involved in redescribing diverse cultural practices within the narrow Eurocentric discourse on art (Juneja 2011; Ramos 2018); the persistence of art critical discourse that valorises disembodied contemplation over forms of meaningful social or political action (Sonik 2021); and the reluctance of many artists themselves to strongly align their works with a particular conflict, community, or identity, often for fear of being pigeonholed or marginalised *vis a vis* art institutions (Ralph & Gibson 2023). Finally, the categories of 'conflict' and 'violence' are themselves troublesome. The violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed are by no means equivalent, and artists cannot claim political neutrality when choosing to document violence or conflict. Indeed, as Sawsan Malla Hussein (2025: 33) has recently argued in discussion of comics journalist Joe Sacco, the concept of witnessing in art leads 'away from detached objectivity and toward a participatory and accountable position, where truth is relational and grounded in the experience of those whose lives are most impacted by violence'. Taking this line of argument further, Duncan MacIntosh (2022) has provocatively argued that justifications may exist for the destruction of cultural works in the context of some conflicts, should such works have been commissioned and employed in the service of oppression. Art is by no means a panacea to conflict or a reliable path away from the kinds of forces mobilised in acts of cultural deletion and mass dehumanization.

These are not new concerns. Many artists, curators, and community arts professionals have been attentive to the tensions and challenges attached to artistic practices, art critical discourses, and arts institutions as bearers of, and sometimes as continuations of, historical practices of exploitation, colonisation, and dehumanization (see Pitman 2021). To the extent that curatorial practices within the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) sector can enact change, there has been a push toward understanding the situatedness of art practitioners and audiences within and beyond gallery walls, including a heightened awareness of the ways that public art connects to advocacy, activism, and social movements (see Tait 2023; Zebracki 2020). Commenting on Palestinian graffiti art on the Segregation Wall separating Israel from occupied Palestine, Hasan and Bleibleh (2023) argue that 'everyday nonviolent practices, such as singing, trading, and walking, are all considered "tactical in character" to resist and transform the traumatized sites into empowering *resistancescapes*' (10, emphasis in original). What is the use, in such contexts, of such traditional aesthetic notions as curator, artwork, and audience, if not to simply contain and depoliticise the radical challenge posed by these resistant practices against an oppressive occupying force?

We have been involved in organising events and activities for the Hunar Symposia project[2] as one way to explore these sometimes fraught intersections between art and conflict. The organisational premise has been to prioritise the involvement of artists, activists, and academics in shared decision-making around the emergent priorities of a group concerned with conflict and with forms of social justice connected to conflict. Diverse and possibly incommensurable theories of art and conflict inhere within the different strategies and events supported under

[1] Addison Road Community Centre mural painting, November 2022

the Hunar Symposia umbrella, and in this respect, we borrow our approach from those working in participatory art and art as an 'educational' practice, wherein the focus is on the process rather than product (see Birchall 2017).

Process in practice: experiencing the mural as prefiguration

Through its academic conference, gallery exhibition, workshops, movie nights, and mural painting, Hunar Symposia's activities united a diversity of voices from different nationalities to exhibit different forms of artistic expression and debate their potential to contribute to what Paulo Freire (2005) has famously called a critical awareness of and intervention into reality. In the process, participants produced temporary collective experiences that sought to challenge the epistemological, disciplinary, and ideological borders that potentially restrict our understanding of both contemporary artistic practices and political conflicts.

On 20 November 2022, Hunar Symposia organised a collaborative painting of a mural at the Addison Road Community Centre. The mural [1] was led by Afghanistan-based art collective ArtLords, key members of which work in exile, and by Aboriginal Elder and Kaanju-Birri woman Aunty Kathy Dodd Farrawell. The artwork moves from the colonisation of Australia and the continuing Aboriginal heartbeat of Country to the ongoing military conflicts in Afghanistan, including the involvement of Australian soldiers. Drawing on their own creative approaches and inclinations, members of Hunar Symposia, Conference attendees, and friends, were all encouraged to pick up a brush and join the painting process – regardless of any prior painting skills. In keeping with practices now widely understood as 'participatory art',[1] everyone could be an artist, and Artlords and Aunty Kathy became facilitators of a convivial experience that

troubled professional boundaries and that affirmed non-institutional means for creating, exhibiting, and responding to art.

Social movement studies provides useful conceptual resources that dovetail with key themes in the study of participatory art. Coined by Carl Boggs (1977), 'prefiguration' describes the present instantiations of the social relations and human experiences that orient the future goals of social movements, and Marianne Maeckelberg (2011) has shown that some social movements deliberately prefigure alternative social structures so that people can experience them in the present. As David Graeber (2002: 72) puts it, 'it's one thing to say, "another world is possible"; it's another to experience it, however momentarily'. By linking together artists and non-artists from different nationalities to collaborate on the wall mural at Addison Road Community Center, Hunar Symposia supported participants to experience a mode of artistic production that challenged the conventional distribution of roles between artist and audience. Those involved were empowered to embrace their roles as active agents in reflecting upon and reacting to political conflicts. In this context, the production of the mural prefigured a world in which communities are more democratic and inclusive spaces for building shared social and political worlds.

Prefigurative politics may seem most suited to utopian social movements that advocate for completely different political and social structures in the future, although as Aragorn Eloff argues, these news worlds must still be created 'in the shell of the old' (Eloff 2019: 44). But we might also consider prefiguration in an affective register, or a register not organised around the primacy of shared principles. By 'affect', we mean the

> impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those ... resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1, emphasis in original)

The circulation of affect through common projects has the potential to activate a shared social imagination for a different world. Affect can contribute to prefigurative politics by 'galvanising protesters, creating a shared sense of purpose, and widening people's sense of what might be possible' (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021: 653). But to better understand the link between art, conflict, and prefigurative affects (654), we need to recognise that affect is not only a tool of resistance: it can also be a tool of repression. For example, fear is an affect often cultivated to foster social and political division, and has often been theorised in relation to the biopolitical control of bodies as part of the neoliberal assault on all aspects of life. Ben Anderson (2012: 34) has argued that 'all of life is assayed in ways that may reproduce forms of racialised suspicions or fears… At its limit, security becomes war and life is killed to protect valued lives'. The 'politics of fear' is also routinely promoted by right-wing (and sometimes even 'moderate') political actors in relation to refugees seeking asylum (see Heins 2021; Noble and Poynting 2016). Yet affect can never be fully controlled or exhausted by power, and shared affects can become a source of shelter or line of escape from the affective worlds built by fear. 'A politics of fear is always possible,' writes Volker Heins, 'but so is a politics of hope' (2021: 501).

Repurposing public space is one way to activate an affective politics of hope against the affective malaise of fear. By connecting ArtLords' public art practices to the important local community

and artistic work of Aunty Kathy, and doing this through a participatory and public art practice, the Addison Road Community Centre mural sought to activate hope and confidence in the possibilities for international collaboration and connection against colonial and neocolonial violence. This approach also linked to a longer history of public works and interventions led or co-led by ArtLords in Afghanistan. For example, a key part of the international securitization of Kabul in the conflict post-2001 were 'blast walls' designed to shield specific people and buildings against attacks. These walls also divided the city and signalled a separation of life: they communicated to the population of Kabul that some lives were more valued than others. Through an ArtLords project, these walls were transformed into art murals with giant eyes acting as sentinels for the public watching those inside. Adding a multiple reading to the wall changed the affective experiences of those walking past: it could no longer be a wall of fear and division, for it now also spoke of a potentially changed future (see Ghani forthcoming). Later on, as the ArtLords collective grew, murals across the city tackled a multitude of social issues.[4] Building on this approach, the Addison Road public art mural strived for a multiplicity—and indeed, juxtaposition—of meanings. Painting images of war and colonisation, and doing so in a collaborative spirit of improvisation, solidarity and love, opened the possibility for alternative visions of the future to be imagined.

This multiplicity of meaning brings us to the theory of 'heterotopia', which has historically been drawn from the work of philosopher Michel Foucault. In the context of social movement studies, Zembylas and Ferreira (2009) argue that

> heterotopias constitute certain structures of feelings and produce particular forms of socialization through which new identifications and alliances may be formed between individuals and groups. This process takes place through the construction of alternative affective spaces that oppose, for instance, identities grounded in hostile emotions about the Other. (6)

Heterotopias are not simply utopian spaces that celebrate or buttress a shared ideology. Rather, Robert Topinka (2010) notes that while many scholars discuss heterotopias as sites of resistance, they can also be understood to create 'an intensification of knowledge' (55) through juxtaposition of multiple differences. This juxtaposition is seen in the amateur and professional artists, but also in the images within the Addison Road mural itself. The mural brings together ideas about Australian colonialism and its ongoing legacies for First Nations Australians with a critical commentary on Australia's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. It also happens that the mural emerged at the same time as shocking news reports of Australian soldiers having engaged in war crimes in Afghanistan.[5] When the different panels of the mural are read together, this gives a reading to the shadowy soldiers within the legacy of colonial violence extending from white settlement.

Returning to the concept of prefiguration, we can see how heterotopias can also function as prefigurative spaces. Following Topinka, Beckett, Bagguley, and Campbell (2017: 172) describe heterotopias as

> real experiments in thinking and being differently, lived in the present. They provide escape routes from the norm, enlarging the possibilities for self-determination. They are spaces that facilitate and organize resistance practices. In enabling practices that are rule-breaking, they have the potential to effect a rupture in the current order of things. (Beckett, Bagguley, and Campbell 2017: 174)

The prefigurative act of the art mural encaptures many of these aspects of heterotopia. While not actually 'rule-breaking', professional and amateur artists working collectively on a public wall is certainly outside of norms and a rupture of the art order. Heterotopias are also described as 'spaces that are connected to the rest of space, and yet somehow at variance with it' (171), thus for a participant familiar with the history of the site, the transgressive art practices may have mattered less for 'enlarging the possibilities of self-determination' than the place of the mural itself. Somewhat ironically, given the anti-war message of the mural, the Addison Road Community Centre is a former army depot (see Castrique 2018). Together with the important ongoing cultural events promoted by the Addison Road Community Centre,[6] participatory art on this site contributes to a reworking of the historical meanings of the location, while also pushing against the commodification and gentrification of inner city Sydney by saving some interstitial spaces for creative practices. Further, the organisations using the Addison Road Community Centre have historically included multiple, specific multicultural and multilingual communities, such that some mural participants may also have brought affective associations and memories connected to culturally specific community events hosted at the site. Bringing together the experiences of diverse migrant communities with the histories of First Nations sovereignty on Gadigal Country, the mural asks non-Indigenous participants to reckon with their own complex roles as settler migrants (see Birch 2020; Pugliese 2002), and with the new realities of conflict in Afghanistan that produces mass displacements in ways that may be both similar and different to the experiences of multicultural diasporas in Australia.

Finally, we need to acknowledge some shortcomings to this prefigurative interpretation of the mural. A process-oriented approach can run the risk of pushing more conventional means of advocating for political change to the background, such as the advocacy and protest work that commonly emerges within social movements. Further, as noted in a study by Matthew Reynolds (2012) of public art in Hollywood , there are ways in which art in ostensibly public locales can still contribute to, or become complicit in, urban transformations that reinforce existing hierarchies of physical, social, and cultural access. Our argument is certainly not for a uniform celebration of collaborative public mural-making as a guarantee of egalitarian or democratic community building. However, we do think that these experiences have the capacity to support less alienated and individualised forms of creative expression and knowledge production, especially in the capacity of collaborative arts projects to connect differently oppressed or marginalised communities who share the same urban spaces. As Paulo Freire (2005: 72) puts it, 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other'.

Missing Time and archival recovery

The work of both local and international artists in the exhibition *Missing Time* (UTS Art Gallery and other spaces, 2022), organised in conjuncture with the Hunar Symposia Art/Conflict conference and Addison Road Community Centre mural, and with a focus on loss, erasure, and disappearance in the context of political conflict. In the curatorial rationale, *Missing Time* curator Chrisoula Lionis invoked the notion of 'missingness', pointing to a tension in the exhibition between art and archive that manifested in a range of material and conceptual ways. Numerous artists across the Global South are engaged in the decolonisation of the historic record through the radical repurposing of materials and records amassed in colonial archives (Al-Zayed 2024). Where the artists' context is authoritarian repression, those historical records,

like the victims of these regimes, may be missing without official explanation. In the situational urban guerrilla art of Brazilian collective *Coletivo Aparecidos Políticos*, people who had been 'disappeared' under Brazil's anti-Communist military regime were named and referenced in ceremonial public actions and displays (see Mourão et al. in this issue). Radical artist and cartoonist Badiucao explored historical erasure in the People's Republic of China through his work *Tick-tock* (2021), which included a commemorative watch that the Communist Party of China (CCP) had awarded to those members of the armed forces involved in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Kani Kamil and Shero Abbas drew attention to unacknowledged histories and stories of women in Iraqi Kurdistan in video work *The Spot* (2015), which left most of the screen black and deliberately obscured all but tiny fleeting circles of archival domestic footage. In related ways works by Australians First Nations artists Fiona Foley (Badtjala) and Megan Cope (Quandamooka) engaged critically with colonial histories and archives, but we want to briefly provide some contexts for First Nations artists in the Australian art field before discussing these specific works.

For First Nations peoples in Australia, British colonisation and post-Federation settler governance constitute foundational and ongoing crises of conflict, dispossession, and decimation (see Moreton-Robinson 2015). The artistic practices of First Nations artists bear a complex and heterogeneous relation to this history. At one polarity, in the face of loss and destruction there is art that preserves and revives traditional knowledges, material practices, and ceremonial cultures. For example, since the inception of the Central Desert dot painting movement in the early 1970s (see Barden & Barden 2004: Johnson 2010), work by First Nations artists drawing on traditional methods and ceremonial designs has been produced and commissioned for both museum collections and private sale (Thomas 1999: 216). Such community artmaking practices challenge dominant public discourses that fixate on deficit and disadvantage (see Stringer 2007) and contribute instead to community development and cohesion (Myers 2020). At another polarity, although sometimes overlapping with works that foreground traditional methods, there is art as guerilla resistance directly oriented against the settler colony and against the ongoing erasures of frontier violence in Australian public culture (see Perkins 2022; Thomas 1999).[7] For example, Badtjala artist Fiona Foley is a founding member of the radical Aboriginal art collective, proppaNOW, and her large wall work, 'Dispersed' (2008), spells out this term DISPERSED – a colonial euphemism for the killing of Aboriginal people – in bullets. Despite sometimes sharp contrasts between traditional works and those that thematise protest and resistance, the relationship between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' Aboriginal art is more complex than might first appear (see Gilchrist 2019). For example, the Tjanpi collective uses traditional grass weaving techniques to create sculptures ranging from ancestral dreaming figures to elements of contemporary community life. As Richard Bell has noted in his influential essay 'Bell's Theorem' (2018), non-Indigenous art discourse in Australia has produced overly narrow conceptions of acceptable and authentic Aboriginal creativity, such that certain comfortable versions of "Aboriginal art" come to attract commercial value and institutional accolades, while other less comfortable versions continue to be marginalised.[8] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art has often been dehistoricised under the umbrella of the 'traditional' (or even 'primitive'), in tandem with the wider erasure of Indigenous histories in non-Indigenous public culture. For these reasons and others, many artists across the Global South are engaged in the decolonisation of historical records through the radical repurposing of materials and records in colonial archives (see Al-Zayed 2024; Page 2023; Pitman 2021). In Australia, artists are destabilising the Social Darwinist premises of many Western historical records (e.g., exoticising

ethnographic photographs) by repurposing and retrofitting archival objects into decolonial and anticolonial works (see Andrew & Neath 2018). Artistic appropriations of archives enable artists to reclaim and reframe received histories, instantiate alternative scenarios, and reimagine collective futures (see McMillan 2019).

In the *Missing Time* exhibition, works by Fiona Foley (Badtjala) and Megan Cope (Quandamooka) engage with colonial histories and archives through a range of approaches and across different mediums. Fiona Foley's inkjet prints were drawn from two photomedia series, *Horror has a Face* (2017) and *The Magna Carta Tree* (2021), which both play on and subvert the visual conventions of 19th and early 20th century settler colonial photography, and in doing so affirm the sovereignty of those Badtjala communities either exoticised or infantalised in European photographic archives. Writing on *Horror has a Face* (2017) as part of Foley's exhibition 'Who Are These Strangers and Where Are They Going?', Odette Kelada observes that Foley 'strips through this haze' of foggy (and criminal) settler colonial memory 'by creating the sets and stages, characters and costumes, enacting the story of the opium dens and the role of church and state in the violent erasure of Aboriginal culture, language and life' (2019: 9). Working with similar themes in the effort to counter historical erasure, the three lithographs by Megan Cope in the *Missing Time* exhibition were from her series *The Black Napoleon (Eulope)* (2019). This series engages with a historical figure that disrupted false narratives of Indigenous passivity in the face of settler colonial invasion. 'For me the story of the Black Napoleon is just one of the many stories of powerful and clever people defying Empire at the turn of the 19th and 20th century throughout Australia' writes Cope (2024). The works from both Foley and Cope resituate archival elements within an alternative social imaginary, a re-staging of Eurocentric colonial histories and a reframing of stories about place and identity. The artistic reframing of the language and tools of the coloniser subverts archive, history and place alike by challenging the seemingly fixed subject positions of coloniser and colonised, self and other.

Conclusion: On collaboration and conflict

An interdisciplinary conference, a gallery exhibition, a public art project. To have been involved in the collaborative effort of any one of these would be a thrill; to be entwined in all three does create an emotional intensity that makes critical distance difficult. Nevertheless, to contribute to an idealised notion of art as a panacea to conflict does not progress the aims of this Art and Conflict special issue of *Axon*. We hope this brief survey of a collaborative art project between academics and artists has illuminated, at least in some way, the reflexivity required when seeking to sidestep or overturn traditional hierarchies of knowledge and knowing. In practical terms, the effort to collaboratively mix an art exhibition, a conference, and a mural work, can create significantg organisational and personal challenges, especially given that each part of the Hunar Symposia project has required quite different kinds of trust and reciprocity. But collaborative tensions may be a necessary result of trying to stage quite different relationships between art and conflict, and as Hunar Symposia members, we experienced these events as heterotopic. In a world where the promise of art in relation to conflict is too often unmet, collaborative processes may help to centre the claim of the 'we' at the heart of art's promise for a more humane world.

Notes

[1] For a significant interdisciplinary effort to bring diverse approaches together, see the chapters collected in Bjering et al. (2024).

[2] See URL: https://hunarsymposia.com/

[3] On participatory art, see the examples collected in Claire Bishop's *Participation* (2006).

[4] After regaining power in August 2021, one of the Taliban's first acts was to paint over these murals with victory slogans. See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/07/the-soul-of-kabul-taliban-paint-over-murals-with-victory-slogans

[5] See *War crimes in Afghanistan: the Brereton Report and the Office of the Special Investigator.* URL: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Briefing_Book/47th_Parliament/BreretonReport

[6] The centre also seeks to support subsided rents for a diverse range of community organisations. See the Addison Road Community Centre website at URL: https://addiroad.org.au

[7] A high profile example of this latter approach was the work collected in 'Culture Warriors: the National Indigenous Art Triennale' (2007-8), curated by Brenda Croft.

[8] On the problems attending distinctions between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' Indigenous arts, see also Thomas (1999: 223).

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Cover Artist Statement by Jahan Ara Rafi

I am an Afghan born artist who fled Kabul with the return of the Taliban in 2021. I have continued to pursue my art practice, now from diaspora. My subject is the voice of women. I paint portraits of women who have problems in their lives, but these deformed faces have something to say.

I see myself as a quiet and calm person on the surface, but inside I have a lot of energy and passion. This inner energy and passion drive me to strive for freedom and to work toward the well-being of my Afghan community and the defense of human rights. I have always struggled with the idea of true freedom in my life. Unfortunately, society has never been able to give me a clear understanding or definition of individual freedom.

Most of my works are centered on women; their identity and their social role are recurring themes in my paintings. Most importantly, I question, why is it that women are made to experience gender differences when aiming to find their place in society. The Works remind the viewer of the limitations, and the "silence" imposed on women that they have inherited from history. My work is meant to partially break this silence through artwork. I have lived in societies where individual freedoms have not been understood and defined clearly.

The symbols and portraits in my artworks are generally drawn with bent necks and closed eyes at the end of motionless and mobile roads. They are as red as twilight, and they have withdrawn into themselves. They are filled with the cold feelings of hurried passersby and travelers.

Tired bodies with tall and bent necks, counting the lines of the ground while sighing and searching the footsteps of the sun.

Silence in my artwork has another meaning. Within the thoughts of these giraffe necked women, they want to break free from small thinkers, they seek freedom from the thoughts of others.

Silence isn't the lack of sound here, but it is the sound of the other side; from hidden secrets behind the closed walls in the eyes of a woman when she is stoned, when she is buried alive and when…

Women are the best subject of all my artworks.