

Language and Resistance: Colonisation and the limits of institutional critique

Review of Tyson Campbell's performance, Beyond Text

Hannah Beilharz, December 2017

This text is a critical exploration of the uses and limits of artistic practice within the contexts of colonisation and institutional critique. This year I have had the privilege of working alongside and collaborating with Tyson Campbell, an emerging artist who has completed his Honours in Fine Art at RMIT University in 2017. Using performance, the body and text, Campbell examines the institution and systems of oppression through the lens of Indigenous experience. This review came about through working closely with Tyson on a recent performance work, and observing the ongoing ways in which his work operates both against and within an institutional frame.

Beyond Text was a final work for the assessment of a yearlong honours project, and it began with an invitation to the assessors to view Tyson's performance at Blak Dot, a contemporary Indigenous arts space. This invitation encompassed more than the project's conceptual relations to site specificity, it was also a symbolic act of reconciliation that welcomed the institution into a space of First Nations knowledge and community. Unfortunately this offer was refused, and he was forced to perform the work onsite at the university.

The institution's rejection of a reconciliatory gesture is prescient; particularly in the way it reflects the current political debates and the actions of our government around the issues of constitutional recognition and Aboriginal sovereignty. Following the actions of RMIT University, a key question that emerges is how can any real change occur when the offer to engage in dialogue is constantly refused? The work that was subsequently created is an attempt to respond to the conditions that this question describes. How might an Indigenous person make work within a context in which the significance of their sovereign voice and specific knowledge and connection to place is denied and refused?

Beyond Text reveals the ways in which political resistance is both neutralized and systematically denied within institutional frameworks. As a student at RMIT, I have both witnessed and experienced racism, sexism and classism not as visible or prosecutable actions done by perpetrators to victims, but as an invisible and constant part of the university experience. The condemnation of the visible aspects of these issues is not enough to address the structures of oppression we are faced with. I would argue that this is largely because they are only coming from the perspectives of white people and the people already in power.

This suggests that representation is one of the key solutions to this complex issue, because without people who have lived experience of oppression in positions of power, these structures will be continually re-performed. I also argue that what is crucial now is not only discussion but in particular listening to the voices of those lacking representation. It is only through ongoing conversations (that RMIT refuses to have) and

listening that we may continue to work on breaking down the structures of colonisation. In fact the way in which this necessary step is constantly and actively refused is indicative of the way in which colonisation operates as a structure, and not an event. One of the key elements of the colonial systems of power have been to continually repeat the fictions and mythologies of the colonial imagination, for example the originary notions of terra nullius, which still constructs Australian identity.

In relation to Beyond Text, the placement of the letters in the landscape could in part refer to the ways in which colonisation may be invisibly experienced by white people and the white institution, and this is further highlighted by the way the work is interacted with. Many passers by looked on with curiosity; some read one to two lines before passing on, and very few took the time to read the full text. This interaction shows how the text or structure of colonisation may only be visible in a fragmented and unreadable way, in particular to white people and the institution.

Beyond Text, like much of Campbell's practice, both assimilates and works against a landscape and context written and inscribed by colonisation. It also suggests that although the structures and mythologies of colonisation are continually repeated they are also prone to rupture at that very moment of repetition. The placement of the text within a space that has already been architecturally and artificially created and written through a white colonial gaze further exemplifies this point. The text both responds to the containment and rigid pattern of the space delineated by concrete lines, while simultaneously spilling over and becoming an excess of speaking back, a writing and rewriting of borders both physically and philosophically.

The centrality of the text used within this work and written by Campbell calls further attention to where, how and why the institution continually fails. The text aims to question the position of white people on decolonisation, from the perspective of a First Nations person, and is influenced by the work of decolonial theorist Alison Ravenscroft. What is asked in this text is how we might come to a meeting place of mutual respect and understanding, and asks what roles white people are willing to play in working towards decolonisation. Clearly the current attitudes from the institution are inadequate, and reveals how far we still have to go, to even have a discussion or reciprocal exchange. But the institution is made up of bodies, and through this is it is also a community. While the institution may have erased Beyond Text, it is our responsibility as the bodies that make up that institution to continue to protest, write, rewrite, inscribe, and deny the colonial mythology that limits all of us.

Original text for artwork by Tyson Campbell:

As invaders, uninvited guests to unceded Kulin Nations territory, how can we move beyond text to undermine and rearrange the classics. To generate a new language, a hybrid of new materialism, that speaks of story, body and country?

For if 'the sign never appears the same twice' (Saussure), our memory of an event, idea or happening is overwritten when we revisit it. Text in this case, is always writing and rewriting itself, shifting and rearranging its value, creating connections and

disconnections, that project and possess understandings beyond binaries, in time and space.

Forgotten communities never forget, and the institutions that don't represent them never remember. How can we collectively bridge this gap beyond text that divides us?

I acknowledge that land never stops writing to its bodies, and that our bodies are entangled and woven into the stories of land.

Can and will an invader adopt a new language, that respectfully rides at that boundaries that the academy of the land writes to us

Us indigenes tried to learn your language, would you learn ours?

With love, from a noble savage- inspired by a white woman.