

## **Artists and Human Rights: Witnessing to Silence**

**Caroline Turner**

*This exhibition 'Witnessing to Silence' and the international conference on 'Art and Human Rights' with which it coincides are part of a research project at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, that began in 2000 to bring together scholars in many disciplines but especially law, the humanities and the arts. In the last three years we have held a number of conferences, invited many Visiting Fellows from around the world who have informed and enriched our study, and involved many academics and artists from different backgrounds and countries. This exhibition is the product of their generosity and commitment.*

George Orwell wrote in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 'If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.'<sup>1</sup> Orwell's frightening metaphor of violence is also a prediction of a future where human rights may not exist. It is particularly discomfiting to reflect that Orwell wrote these words in 1949, the year after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations. It is even more disturbing to reflect that human rights are emerging fifty four years later as the most critical issue for the twenty first century. The present time is in fact one of extraordinary challenge to human rights by governments around the world and in particular to the concept of universalism in legal frameworks of rights established since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. The tragic fact is that hopes for a culturally tolerant and diverse future, a 'vision of human dignity,' as Christine Chinkin says in her introduction to this catalogue, remain to a great extent unfulfilled in our time.

In this context our research project to explore the interconnections between art and human rights is all the more urgent. This is particularly true since the traumatic events of the last three years – 11 September 2001 in the US, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as events in 2001 and 2002 in Australia related to refugees – could not have been

predicted when we began our study. We have focused this exhibition on contemporary visual artists, although without question contemporary writers, musicians, playwrights, film makers and performing artists all reflect in their work similar human rights concerns. Our project is based on the belief that art and artists provide special insights in understanding the world. While the power of art is to mirror the failures and the aspirations of humanity, at the same time it highlights our common humanity. Power, propaganda, nationalism, competing ideologies and world views – these are all critical to understanding the context of art. There is a difference between an art of propaganda and an art concerned with great human issues, transcending time and place. Though art cannot always change the world, it can – as many artists have shown – protest greed, environmental degradation, cultural loss, poverty, gender and other discrimination, exploitation, injustice, war, racism, oppression and human rights abuses. It can be a significant factor in key areas including witnessing, response to trauma, reconciliation and cultural survival.

### **Truth and Reconciliation?**

The powerful work related to the work of the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in South Africa, 'Ubu tells the truth', by William Kentridge, from a prominent South African human rights family, was an obvious starting point for this exhibition. Kentridge reminds us not only that some artists stood against apartheid but also of the need to keep remembering what such a regime does to a society. And the forgetting applies to those outside South Africa who were silent because they saw no injustice in apartheid for many years. But Kentridge does not see himself as a 'political artist'. He has said, 'I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and films are certainly spawned by and feed off the brutalized society left in its wake. I am interested in a political art, that is to

say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures, and uncertain endings; an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay.<sup>2</sup>

### **The New Europe**

Adorno declared that poetry was impossible after the Holocaust. If the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a product of the idealism born of the post Second World War, a war that had torn Europe apart and produced the Holocaust, then the loss of such idealism today is very evident, despite the leadership role being undertaken with regard to rights by the new Europe. It has been said that this is the post-postwar generation in Europe, the grandchildren of those who perpetrated, witnessed or some cases resisted the atrocities of 1939-45. It can therefore legitimately aspire to a new Europe in a new world order characterised by the human values which their grandparents had rejected and their parents were hardly in a position to proclaim. But the problem of this generation is not the rejection of values but in many countries the loss of hope. The passionate concern with human values in the New Europe does not just reflect a resolve that the violations of human rights in the Europe of two generations ago should not recur: It also reflects a growing fear that they might.

This is especially true of the work of Christian Boltanski and Luc Tuymans. Boltanski was born in France in 1944. His Jewish doctor father had spent much of the war in hiding from the Nazis. He grew up in a France of the 1950s, a France still marked by anti-Semitism and wounded psychologically by the trauma of collaboration. We could see him also as a product of the idealistic generation of 1968 and the students' revolutions. What Boltanski suggests in his art, which evokes a sense of loss and catastrophe and mourning despite the lack of specific allusion to specific events, is that horror, death, loss are not confined to any particular groups of individuals. He thus suggests that human beings are potentially all capable of great crimes and can only make a difference in small local ways. He has said:

*...art is to do with our relation to the time in which we live. So if we want to understand society we should look at society's artists. ...but I don't think art has real power. It does however, have small power... but if the*

*fascists were to take over France, say, my art's not going to stop them. I think what's more important for all of us is to be witnesses of what has happened ...<sup>3</sup>*

Luc Tuymans, also young at 43, reflects this renewed spirit of existential despair which for an artist or any individual may nonetheless be an incentive to positive action: one fails of course; what matters is how one fails. He is also an artist immensely sensitive to the historical circumstances of his own time and to a Western society compromised inevitably by the record of colonialism, nationalism, xenophobia and war, and now faced with the rise of racism and neo Fascism in Europe and of collective 'paranoia' in the US. Tuymans' art explores these issues, forcing us to confront a violent heritage and some of the most fearful aspects of humanity.

### **The non First World**

Mella Jaarsma is another example of the new Europe – a young Dutch artist who married an Indonesian artist – Nindityo Adipurnomo – and who chose to live and work in Indonesia to contribute to her adopted country's social change through her work. Both Jaarsma and Adipurnomo are committed to respect for others. The question she poses – how to understand and respect another's culture and way of life – extends far beyond Indonesia and could not be more relevant to today's globalising but at the same time fracturing world where religious and different divides are threatening universal precepts of human rights. In her art and in Indonesian contemporary art, idealism still exists in spite of, or perhaps because of, great denials of human rights. There is still a faith and belief that society can be different and that artists can contribute to making a better society, as many indeed have done in the non First World. This faith is exemplified also by Philippines artist, the late Santiago Bose, who devoted his life to community and to securing indigenous identity. Bose has said:

*The artist cannot but be affected by his society. It is hard to ignore the pressing needs of the nation while making art that serves the nation's elite... We struggled to change society, which is difficult and dangerous, and we also sought to preserve communal aspects of life. I too am haunted by visions of hardship, poverty, disenfranchisement of the 'primitive' tribes, but between outbursts of violence and exploitation are also tenderness, selflessness and a sense of community.*



Mella Jaarsma, *The warrior*, 2003 (detail), used military clothes and seaweed. Image courtesy the artist.

*These will always remain unspoken and unrecognized unless we make art or music that will help to transform society. The artist takes a stand through the practice of creating art.*<sup>4</sup>

Like Kentridge and Bose, Nalini Malani has explored issues of reconciliation, but her works are more overtly political in many ways than either, concerned with reflecting on Western as well as on local histories of violence in the Indian Subcontinent. She is particularly concerned with feminist perspectives that reflect on the particular vulnerability of women and children in these histories of oppression. A great deal of Malani's work is concerned with colonialism and the neocolonialism of twentieth century Western culture. Such concerns extend far beyond the local.

### **The US and Latin America**

Alfredo Jaar's presence here in this exhibition is of particular significance as being the only US artist. But Jaar is also Latin American, being born in Chile. Latin American artists have been in the forefront of exposing abuses of rights over the last fifty years. As a Latin American he is concerned with being an 'outsider' in the US where he has lived since the early 1980s. But like Malani he is also an 'insider' in respect to racially – motivated violence, poverty, exploitation, war and genocide: 'Once in a while I am accused of being an outsider, and I am asked what the hell I am doing in, for example, Africa. I believe in the power of being an outsider. You see things that others on the inside do not see... I probably make mistakes in the process but I prefer to make mistakes rather than to condemn certain urgent situations to complete invisibility'<sup>5</sup> Commenting on his work in memoriam to immigrants who have died attempting to cross the border from Mexico into the US - Jaar has said, 'It is an unacceptable tragedy that in the 21st century people still die trying to simply cross a border between two countries.'<sup>6</sup> He has also condemned the lack of political will for action on social injustice in the US calling it too 'privileged' an environment.<sup>7</sup>

### **Australia and Human Rights**

Juan Davila who has lived in Australia for many years is another Latin American emigre, like Jaar from the Chile of the dictators. The passion with which both he and Jaar address issues of human rights may well reflect not only their past experiences in Latin America but the intensity of hope with which they came to their chosen countries of exile, and perhaps

the extent to which those hopes have been disappointed. Australia is facing major challenges today not only with respect to reconciliation with indigenous people, but also a new crisis over refugees and the rejection of boat people. Both issues have brought historians, legal experts, activists and artists together to protest Government policy. Davila has produced a number of works about refugees and detention centres for people who come without visas (mostly today from Afghanistan and Iraq) and are forcibly detained. He has expressed disillusion not only with Government policy but also with the reaction of the art world as he sees it to artistic work about such issues. He has written 'When I mention the word Woomera, a notorious refugee detention camp, there are several immediate reactions of note in the Australian cultural scene. The first is an assumption I am reviving the lineal pamphlet, the protest poster of activist art...' and 'For many of my peers, it seems easier to take refuge in the fantasy that the personal is political. There has been almost a complete silence on social issues for many years.'<sup>8</sup> Alfredo Jaar also tackled this question, quoting Jean-Luc Godard: 'It is true you must choose between ethics and aesthetics, but it is also true that whichever one you choose, you will always find the other one at the end of the road. The definition of the human condition is in the mise-en-scene itself.'<sup>9</sup>

Other Australian artists are responding to recent events in this country.<sup>10</sup> Guan Wei, born in China and an artist who came to this country after Tiananmen, is now representing events in Australia not as an outsider but as someone who came himself as an immigrant after 1989 and has a right to help shape our society. His monumental work in the exhibition about people moving between countries and cultures is pertinent not only to his own life and to Australia and the refugee crisis but to such crossings in every time and place.

### **Cultural Crossings and Cultural Survival**

Pat HOFFIE's work in this exhibition is also about refugees. In her work she challenges the idea common in Western countries that violations of rights occur somewhere else. And she raises the question, is art for self or community? HOFFIE has made some eloquent statements about experiences of displacement and disjuncture and transcultural crossing and made a plea for space for hyphenated territories and 'for time and space

in the present to recognise those identities that can no longer enjoy the luxury of being fixed.<sup>11</sup> In this catalogue she also takes up the challenge of 'political' art. She writes: '... there is a sense in which all art is political; those that claim their art is NOT political, are by deferral declaring their acceptance of the status quo.'<sup>12</sup>

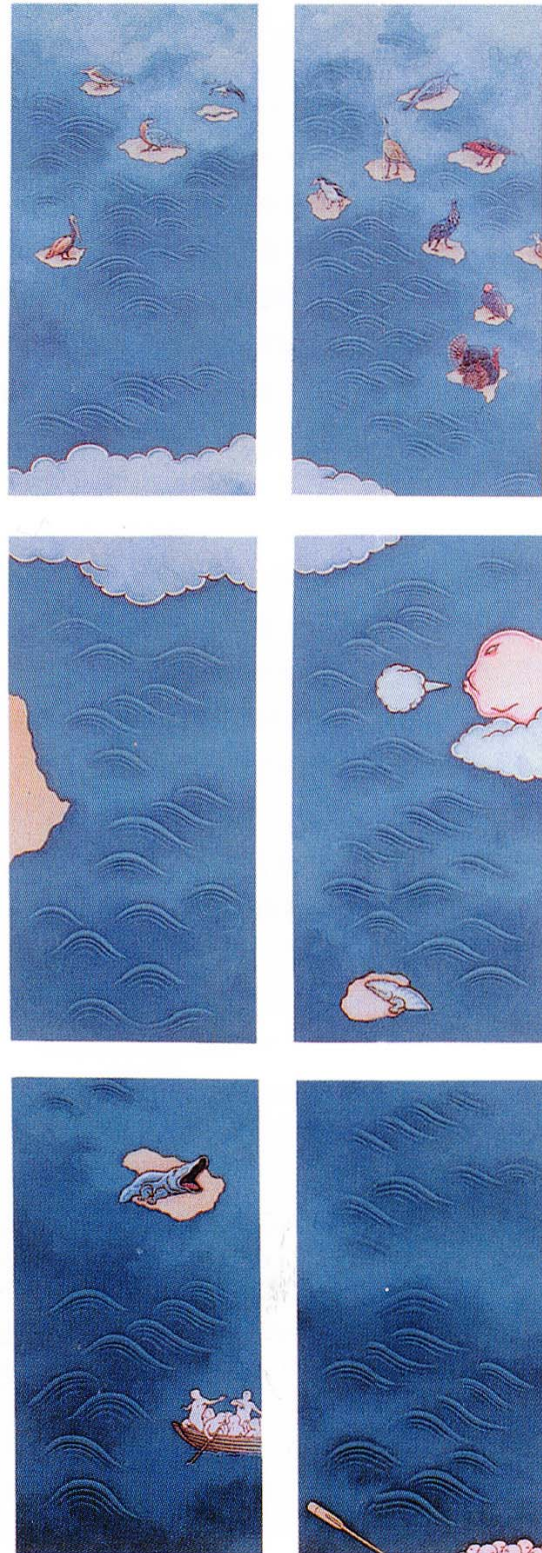
Fiona Foley has dealt with issues in Australia such as Aboriginal deaths in custody and returning human remains kept in museums worldwide as scientific specimens to their Indigenous communities. Some of her most moving works have to do with restoring voices to those deprived of them through colonisation and conquest. Foley has stated: 'I have always known that I was Aboriginal because my mother brought us up to be extremely proud of our culture...' and:

*...It doesn't matter how dysfunctional a community is or how much it has been affected by colonisation – as pretty well all Aboriginal communities have been, some quite severely – you still have strong cultural leaders, people who give hope and strength to those struggling to survive bi-culturally in Australia. This helped me realise that I had a choice too, that I could make a difference.<sup>13</sup>*

One of the key themes in this exhibition is cultural survival and cultural change, and this is critical in the work of many artists. Indonesian Nindityo Adipurnomo writes about a conflict of values in a rapidly changing world where cultural exchanges and crossings are to be negotiated by artists: 'I constantly experience a terrifying confrontation of Western and Eastern values. But it is fascinating because in this confrontation the flames of tradition, change and renewal are contained.'<sup>14</sup> Papua New Guinea artist Michael Mel puts it this way:

*Cultural survival is to do with a whole range of issues in relation to culture and cultural activities... There is a lot of 'lip-service' on appreciating and acknowledging cultural difference but these are only made possible in the contexts of the rules of engagement that satisfy or conform to the dominant agenda.<sup>15</sup>*

The contemporary art of the Pacific region has much to tell us about the role contemporary art can play in social transformation by engaging with such issues as environmental degradation, as has Michel Tuffery in his work. Pacific artists have taught us much about the continuing relevance of



Guan Wei, *Dow 岛 Island*, 2002 (detail), acrylic on canvas (48 panels), 317 x 013 cm installed. Image courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

spirituality and tradition, especially for indigenous peoples for whom their past is their future, and about cultural survival, including within multicultural societies.

### Testimony

The artists in this exhibition in a sense are all witnesses, many testifying to terrible and traumatic circumstances of human existence. Dadang Christanto, an Indonesian artist now teaching in Australia, is also a victim of his father's murder in 1965. Yet his own suffering has given him an extreme empathy with the personal suffering of others. The response of the Australian audience in Brisbane, at the *First Asia-Pacific Triennial* in 1993, to a work by Christanto dedicated to those who had suffered in every time and place was to leave hundreds of flowers and notes in front of the installation to create a memorial. These notes were not about Indonesia but overwhelmingly referred to the recent death in Brisbane of a young Aboriginal dancer at the hands of the police, as well as to the war then tearing apart Bosnia.

The question of human rights is intensely personal as the work of these fifteen artists reveals.<sup>16</sup> Human Rights also underlies the changes in our contemporary world, as well as defining the limits likely to be set on humanity in the coming centuries. Art can communicate across time and place and art can speak for and to our common humanity. As Christian Boltanski has noted 'Art is always a witness, sometimes a witness to events before they actually occur...'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Santiago Bose, 'A savage look at Indigenous art' reprinted from Wayne Baerwaldt, *Memories of Overdevelopment* (1998), <http://www.cpcabrisbane.org/Kasama/2002/V16n4/Bose.htm>. (20 June 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Alfredo Jaar interview with Kate Davidson 1996 in Kate Davidson and Michael Desmond, *Islands: Contemporary Installations from Australia, Asia, Europe and America*, National Gallery of Australia, 1996, pp. 66-70; p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Jaar <http://www.insite97.org/artistfinal/Jaar> (May 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Jaar, *Islands* op cit. p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Catalogue, *Juan Davila: Works 1998-2002*, Drill Hall Gallery, 2002, p 13; Davila, *Artlink* vol 23, no 1, 2002, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Jaar, *Islands*, op.cit. p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Deep disquiet among a number of Australian artists at the events of the refugee crisis has resulted in a variety of exhibitions: See Museum of Contemporary Art's and ANAT's (Australian Network for Art and Technology) *BORDERPANIC Reader* (<http://www.borderpanic.org/>; Canberra Contemporary Artspace, *Queue here*, 2002; Ivan Dougherty Gallery, *Isle of Refuge*, 2003; and *Artlink* vol 23, no 1, 2002 on war, terrorism and refugees.

<sup>11</sup> HOFFIE in Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport (eds.), *Papers from the Conference of the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, pp. 124 -129 p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Communication with the author.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Benjamin Genocchio, *Fiona Foley: Solitaire*, Piper Press, Annandale, 2001, p. 32; p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Adipurnomo, Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport (eds.), *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996, quoted by R. Fadjri p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Artist statement, *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*. Unpublished.

<sup>16</sup> Many other artists of course could have been selected and critical issues related to art and human rights in different parts of the world and especially the Middle East, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq will be addressed in the Conference in August 2003

<sup>17</sup> Boltanski, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949, Part 3, chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kentridge in conversation with Christov-Bakargiev, 1999: website: <http://www.revuenoire.com/anglais/S11-4.html> (June 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Boltanski in conversation with Tamar Garb in Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, Donald Kuspit, *Christian Boltanski*, Phaidon, London and New York, 1997, 2001, p. 37.