Insurgence of the 'Politizen'

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye.[1]
Homi K. Bhabha

It is not helpful to understand 'Australia' as some isolated sanctuary of a mystical and unchanging national identity, but rather it is more useful to try and conceive it as an unstable product of global forces and exchange; as an incomplete project.[2]
David McNeill

The Lebanese politizen is located at the outside of the inside, which also means that it understands that there is really no outside (no outside Australia, no outside of 'Lebanon').[3]
Grant Farred

Homi K. Bhabha has observed the nationalist trend of looking to the distant past of a land in order to create a nation and more importantly perhaps, a cohesive sense of a national identity and collective memory. Bhabha has pointed out that nationalism, or nation building, is created in the mind's eye. That is to say that national identity is largely a creation of our own imagination, a sentiment echoed by Benedict Anderson.[4] If we are to accept Bhabha's proposition, we can assume that this mind's eye is built upon a nostalgia toward a time, place or way of living that a group of people, or indeed nation, feel is lost and worthy of retrieval. Further, it would seem that the national mind's eye relies upon a projection of itself onto the landscape. It looks to the land as a signifier, gatekeeper and witness to the distant and idyllic national past to which the eye frequently retreats. This is perhaps the greatest resilience found in any given landscape; its ability to act as and maintain a repository of collective memory.

In the age of globalisation, rapid political and cultural exchange, air travel and the internet, the national wandering eye must make certain accommodations. That is to say, national imaginations, particularly since the events of 'September 11', have been increasingly called into question. In our age, nationalism appears both to be running rampant and yet also to be teetering on the edge of extinction. For commentators like David McNeill, this is symptomatic of the decline of nationalism, for he has argued that "nationalists become most aggressive when faced with their immanent subjugation to historical forces of a global kind".[5] McNeill, along with Phillip George and Khaled Sabsabi appear to have conceived and executed the exhibition *The Resilient Landscape*, as a way to not only reveal the crisis facing Australian nationalism, but also to suggest a way forward. *The Resilient Landscape* proposed a new form of national identity and citizenship and another way of addressing the incomplete Australian project. The exhibition advocated a national mind's eye that takes its cue from citizens of the globalised world and as such moves constantly, without a fixed gaze.

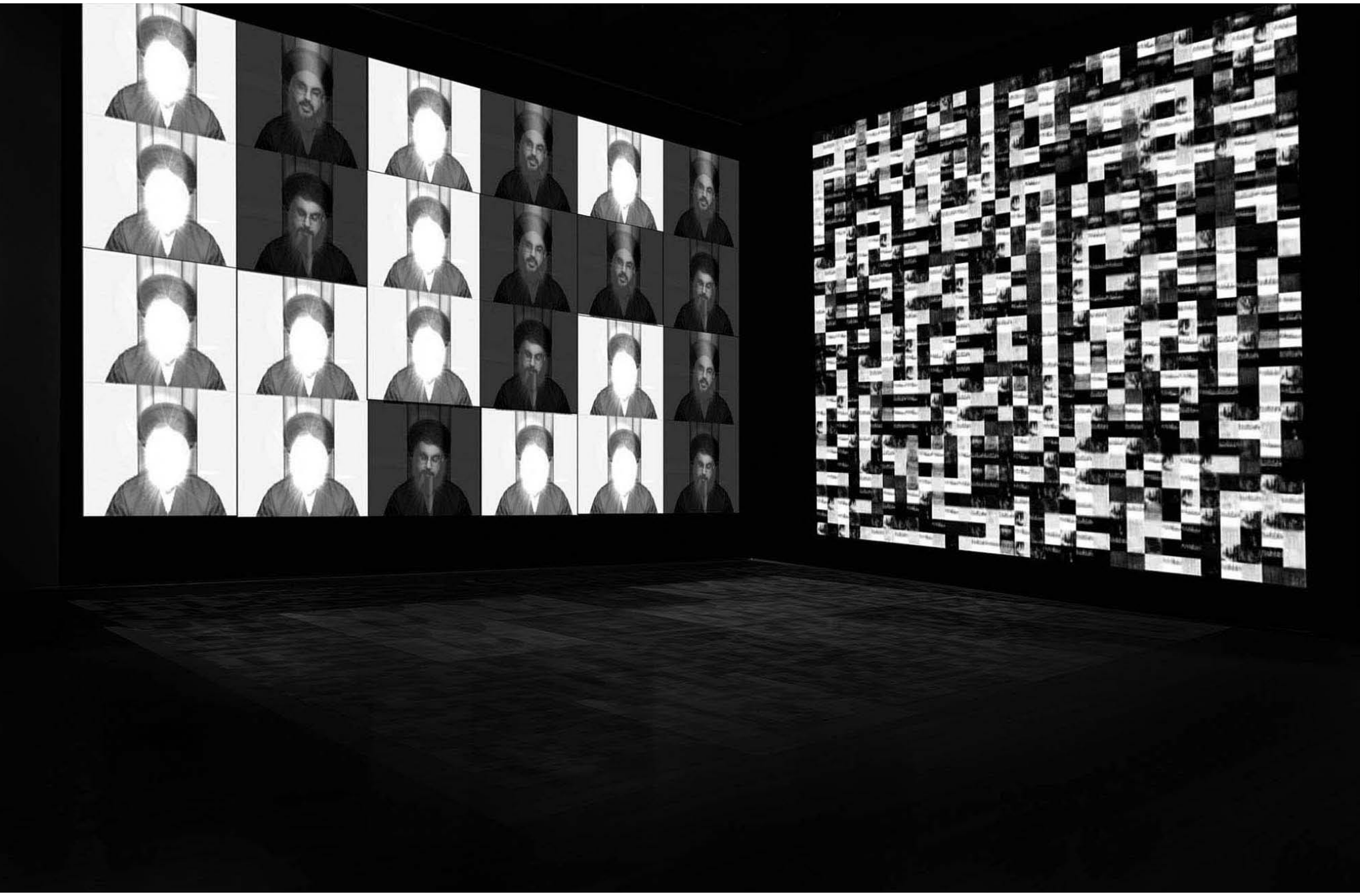
The Resilient Landscape located its focus on a distinct breed of this new national eye, one that is simultaneously Lebanese and Australian. It revealed an eye that retains trans-cultural and trans-national allegiances; looking both to Australia and to Lebanon as its concurrent and mutual focal points. Having resisted the urge to maintain a fixed nationalist gaze, *The Resilient Landscape* problematised the notion of national archival and collective narratives, challenging the fixed national gazes of both Lebanon and Australia.

In the exhibition, the events of Sydney's Cronulla riots in December 2005 and the Israeli Defence Forces' incursion into southern Lebanon in July 2006 (subsequently known as the 'July War' in Lebanon and the Second Lebanon War in Israel) were presented, though disparate in consequence and space, as mutually significant and inter-connected. Significantly, *The Resilient Landscape* consisted mainly of artists who are both Australian/Lebanese and Lebanese/Australian. The collective and archival narratives of both Cronulla and Lebanon were challenged in the exhibition with the inclusion of these artists, by exposing the instability and subjectivity of the collective national narrative. *The Resilient Landscape* revealed all that nationalism discards—the memory, experience and trauma of those whose voices are absent from the archival narrative—the 'other'. The exhibition's curators David McNeill, Phillip George and Khaled Sabsabi rested considerable weight upon the ideas of Étienne Balibar, who has suggested that border areas, including zones, countries and cities rest not at the periphery or margin of the public sphere, but rather form its centre.[6]

To demonstrate Balibar's theoretical hypothesis one might look to two photographic works exhibited in *The Resilient Landscape* by artist and co-curator Phillip George. The first of these is a photograph of a spectacularly green, mountainous landscape dotted with wildflowers. Interestingly, the beauty of George's image works to undermine the viewer. Upon closer inspection of the image and its title, one comes to realise that the work, *Borderlands* (2006), is an image of the border between southern Lebanon and Israel. In turn, one feels confronted with a sinking visceral feeling that perhaps the wildflowers dotting George's image are in bloom from all the blood and bone that has been spilt on this impressive landscape. No immediately discernible border or geographical difference is apparent in this seemingly arbitrary periphery and yet apparently it is here, and not in some distant city or national centre, that two nations define their borders and their national differences.

In the case of Australia, it would seem that our public sphere is also formed at our own border —at our beaches. Meaghan Morris has told us that the beach is not so much representative of Australian identity as it is Australian nationalism.[7] Morris' assertion is reinforced by the perception that the beach is both an enduring and timeless landscape.[8] Such a perception renders the beach as an ideal resilient landscape and repository of national memory, a place where the nostalgic memory of our idealised Australian past and quintessentially 'Australian' behaviour maintain their place. In his photograph *Inshala (God Willing)* (2007), Phillip George manipulates Australian nationalist perceptions of the beach. Here, George locates himself at our own national border at Cronulla Beach. In the photograph one finds George dressed in black and captured in close proximity to the Cronulla RSL (Returned & Services League) club, while standing with a white surfboard inscribed with Arabic text. Understanding fully that the beach "is a privileged site for the understanding and exploration of Australian identity", George operates as a slippage at our national hem.[9] The artist has a Greek background and is not Lebanese. Yet this is precisely the point of the photograph and of the significance of Cronulla and the events that took place there in 2005. The media and physical attacks at the time were not targeted directly at the Lebanese, but rather at any individual who was of "Middle Eastern appearance". Seemingly from a non Anglo-Celtic background, George plays the part of the Australian 'other' in *Inshala*. Holding a surfboard emblazoned with Arabic text, he appears to be both stereotypically Australian and yet not quite. Put otherwise, one might choose to look upon *Inshala* as a depiction of the Australian 'politizen'—a political actor that has, since the Cronulla riots, become increasingly relevant and apparent in the Australian political landscape.

In *Foreigners Among Citizens*, Grant Farred has described the 'politizen' as "a figure whose name and acts mark the limitations of citizenship".[10] As political actors, 'politizens' are defined by their status as citizens, who are forever condemned to national 'hospitality'. Though they are citizens and no longer refugees, 'politizens' are never afforded full rights of citizenship, for as 'others' their rights may be revoked at moments of political or cultural



crisis. The 'politizen' is the foreigner among citizens and as a result, their political actions exist outside and apart from the State. They are neither members of the subaltern or the mob; they do not partake in union representation or political organisations, nor do they seek to control the State. Rather, as Farred has suggested, 'politizens' are distinguished by their political dormancy, acting sporadically and intuitively, fully aware that their actions will not result in any sustained change or conclusion. For Farred, the Lebanese/Australian, or Australian/Lebanese, comprise our own national 'politizen' and are 'others' in the Australian political landscape. 'Politizens' are never able to achieve full citizenship; they are our own non-native natives.[11]

Many works included in *The Resilient Landscape* appeared to be symptomatic of the hand of the 'politizen'. It appeared that many artists in the exhibition acted and created as any 'politizen' must, responding sporadically and at times intuitively to what is being denied to them. These artist 'politizens' appeared to act in response to the exclusion of their voices, personal narratives and responses. The works featured in the exhibition may be seen as documents of a struggle against exclusion and disenfranchisement. Significantly though, the events of Cronulla and Lebanon differ enormously in their social, political and economic consequences. This served to highlight the fact that the 'politizen' is, in Rancièrian terms, "the part that has no part".[12]

A majority of works in *The Resilient Landscape* focused upon the 2006 war in Lebanon. Despite the curators' intention to portray the events of Cronulla and Lebanon as mutually significant, it was no surprise that the Lebanon works overshadowed those on Cronulla. Co-curator Khaled Sabsabi, whose video installation *You* (2007) was one of the more resonant works, explained that "art has a duty, a *waajab*, to make a statement and to be responsible, [and] this *waajab* extends to the artist".[13] It is Sabsabi's view that artists engaged in political art cannot ignore their context or background. It is understandable then, that *The Resilient Landscape* was filled with work acutely aware and informed by their experiences and emotions.

Both the 'politizen' act and the artist-'politizen' revealed and confirmed Christine Tohme's argument that "war is global at the moment".[14] War moves beyond and between borders and as Catherine David has suggested, is both a territorial and ideological.[15] As a consequence, Australians might not longer look upon themselves as simply an island separate to the turmoil faced by others. The artists in *The Resilient Landscape,* in documenting their experiences, remind us that whether one is on their own seaboard/border, or at the border of southern Lebanon with Israel, conflict and ideological war are generated globally.

The transcendence of a border of another kind, one inherent in art criticism, was also interrogated in *The Resilient Landscape*. A distinction between 'art' and the 'documentary' has taken a centre stage in art criticism and many writers insist on maintaining a distinction between these two so-called separate disciplines. The exhibition however, actively defied this delineation, with John Rodsted's *Cluster Bomb Documentation* (2006), a series of photographs accompanied by his personal anecdotes. Though these were obviously documentary images, their horrifying content in addition to the photographer's anecdotes were not wholly objective, for they could not escape his own experience and subjectivity. These photographs alongside those of Phillip George presented an interesting juxtaposition. This exhibition of 'documentary' and 'art' served to reinforce two significant certainties—that 'art' is not a domain existing unto itself, as it always engages with the world outside of itself, and that the 'documentary', though seemingly bestowed with objectivity, always maintains an element of subjectivity, a characteristic that is reinforced and revealed when the 'documentary' object is placed alongside that of 'art'.

Also potent were Mazen Kerbaj's cartoon blog drawings produced between July and August 2006, recording his experiences during the fighting in Lebanon. Interestingly, his cartoons operated simultaneously as both documentary objects and works of art. With Jalal Toufic's and John Rodsted's images, Kerbaj's cartoons revealed personal experiences, images and narratives excluded from the official historical archive of those events in 2006. *The Resilient Landscape* and its juxtaposition of objects, reinforced an often neglected potency in visual art, that it has the ability to record history in a unique and different way; it is able to bridge the binary between personal narrative and the historical archive, thereby eliding the dogma of objectivity so highly esteemed in the historical discipline.

The Resilient Landscape may be seen as an alternative recording of the events of Cronulla and Lebanon—riots and warfare were given a personal face. The exhibition functioned almost as a collection of personal counter-narratives to that of 'the history' of those events. The artworks, like the 'politizen', existed both inside and outside the national landscape, memory and archive. The artists did not unite under any political or activist agenda. Rather, they responded fully aware that their actions would not achieve a sustained result, knowing that they would succeed simply in being seen, heard and recorded.

Notes

[1] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Nation and Narration*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990: 1

[2] David McNeill, 'Australia: An Unresolved Problem', *The Resilient Landscape* (catalogue), Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery: 6

[3] Grant Farred, 'Foreigners Among Citizens', *Cultural Critique* 67, Spring, 2007: 154

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York: Verso, 1991

[5] David McNeill, op cit: 6

[6] Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson, New York: Princeton University Press, 2003

[7] Meaghan Morris quoted in John Hartley and Joshua Green, 'The Public Sphere on the Beach', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*

[8] John Hartley and Joshua Green, 'The Public Sphere on the Beach', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*: 349

[9] Frances Bonner, Susan McKay and Alan McKee, 'On the Beach', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol 15 No 3, 2001: 270–74

[10] Grant Farred, op cit: 144

[11] Grant Farred, op cit: 151

[12] Jacques Rancière quoted in Grant Farred, op cit: 150

[13] Khaled Sabsabi, 'Eight About Ali or Eli', *Ali or Eli: Khaled Sabsabi* (catalogue), Sydney: Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 2005: 5

[14] Christine Tohme quoted in Sandra Dagher, Catherine David, Rasha Salti and Christine Tohme, with T.J. Demos, 'Curating Beirut: A Conversation on the Politics of Representation', *Art Journal* Vol 66 No 2, 2007: 107

[15] Catherine David quoted in Sandra Dagher, Catherine David, Rasha Salti and Christine Tohme, with T.J. Demos, op cit: 100

The Resilient Landscape
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts University of New South Wales, Sydney
22 November–22 December 2007

Artists: Marian Abboud, Murmur Ahmed, Roukyh Akkawi, Mireille Astore, Ali Cherri, Farah Fayed, Zena el-Khalil, Phillip George, Tim Gregory, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Mazen Kerbaj, Fatima Mawas, Eliane Raheb, John Rodsted, Khaled Sabsabi, Jalal Toufic
Curators: Phillip George, David McNeill and Khaled Sabsabi

Page 60: Phillip George, *Inshala (God Willing) Cronulla Beach*, 2007
Photo courtesy the artist
Opposite: Khaled Sabsabi, *You* (video installation view), 2007
Photo courtesy the artist