A Post-Apology Carceral Regime: Encountering Refugee Art in Australia

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Aesthetic judgments and ethical choices take place as face-to-face experiences
Susan Stewart (17)

I. A Post-Apology Carceral Regime

ON 13 FEBRUARY 2008, THE NEWLY-INSTALLED AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER OF THE day, Kevin Rudd, made a now-landmark speech saying 'Sorry' to the Stolen Generations. Symbolically, the Apology was considered 'a turning-point in the process of reconciliation' (Kossew 171), a way of righting a historical wrong that would lead to a new chapter in the nation's history. We can compare this speech to statements made by Rudd on his brief return to leadership prior to the September 2013 elections, when he introduced a strict refugee resettlement policy whereby all refugees arriving to Australia by boat were to be resettled in Papua New Guinea, and none would be allowed to settle in Australia, even after their claims for asylum had been processed. Despite widespread criticism from members of his own party, Rudd refused to back down over his hardline refugee policy. He repeatedly said that he made 'no apology' for the fact that he had to make some tough decisions (Uhlmann; Scarr and Jones). Ostensibly the policy was to stop people perishing on the treacherous journey from Indonesia to

Australia in unseaworthy boats but it was also clearly a political manoeuvre in an effort to appeal to more conservative forces in a last-ditch attempt to win an unwinnable election.[1] Since then, Rudd's political opponents have made similar statements of being 'unapologetic' for their own asylum seeker policies (Borello; Whyte)[2]. It is this period of Australian cultural and political life that I refer to as 'post-apology'.[3]

In its treatment of asylum seekers, Australia's post-apology period is instituted as a carceral regime for refugees and asylum seekers.[4] Under the *Migration*

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[1] The term 'boat people' first entered the Australian vernacular in the 1970s after the arrival of the first wave of boats carrying people seeking asylum in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Over half of Vietnam's population was displaced, most fleeing to neighbouring Asian countries with some by boat to Australia. A second wave of Indochinese asylum seekers arrived in November 1989, with approximately 300 people from Cambodia, Vietnam and southern China arriving each year during the 1990s. From 1999, a third wave of asylum seekers, predominantly from the Middle East, began arriving, in larger numbers, due to continued conflict in the Middle East (Phillips and Spinks 1). Nevertheless, Australia's intake of refugees is still relatively small compared to other destination countries (in 2011, when approximately 4500 boat people arrived in Australia, Pakistan hosted 1.7 million Afghan refugees and Iran almost 900,000) (Phillips and Spinks 4). Australian public opinion on the issue, however, has grossly exceeded the reality of the situation. Initial sympathy towards the first wave of arrivals quickly soured into issues connected with rising unemployment rates and protestations of people 'jumping the [immigration] queue'. By the late 1970s, discourses of 'invasion', 'flood', and the 'yellow peril' began circulating. These discourses of being 'swamped' by refugees continue to circulate, and this anger and resentment has disproportionately informed public policy.

[2] Statement by Prime Minister Tony Abbott: 'I don't, as it were, apologise for what happens when people come to Australia illegally by boat, because I am determined, as the new Government is determined, to stop this dangerous, this horrible business' (Borello n.p.); statement by Minister Scott Morrison: 'I make no apologies for being up front about the reality of the situation that transferees are now faced with. This is in stark contrast to the lies told to them by people smugglers and the false hope being peddled by others who claimed the government would not follow through with our policies' (Whyte n. p.).

[3] In the context of asylum seekers arriving by boat, this post-apology period has also been shaped by an earlier, constitutive event involving the Norwegian freighter, the MV *Tampa*. The *Tampa* incident occurred in August 2001, when the Howard Government refused entry into Australian waters to the *Tampa*, which was carrying 438 refugees, mostly from Afghanistan, rescued from a distressed fishing vessel in international waters. When the *Tampa* entered Australian waters, then Prime Minister John Howard ordered that the ship be boarded by Australian special forces. Within a few days the government introduced the *Border Protection Bill* and outlined its so-called 'Pacific Solution'. Under Howard's 'Pacific Solution', asylum seekers would be intercepted in the water by Australian special forces and removed to detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea where their claims for refugee status would be processed, rather than on-shore, in Australia. As part of the so-called 'solution', thousands of islands were excised from Australia's migration zone and therefore no longer comprised Australian territory. By redefining the area of Australian territory that could be landed upon and legitimately used for claims of asylum (the migration zone), and by removing any intercepted people to third countries for processing, the aim was to deter asylum seekers through the knowledge that their trip would most likely not end with a legitimate claim for asylum in Australia.

[4] The 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (and its 1967 Protocol), to which Australia is a signatory, defines a refugee as: 'Any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country' (n.p.). An asylum

Amendment Act 1992, asylum seekers arriving by boat are subject to a carceral regime of mandatory detention and are kept in Immigration Detention Centres under prison-like conditions with electronic surveillance, razor wire and electrified fences, while their claims for asylum are processed.[5] Joseph Pugliese refers to the passing of the *Migration Amendment Act* as an '*event-trauma* that has been instrumental in transforming Australia's refugees and asylum seekers into *carceral post-humans*' (65; original emphasis); that is, people whose human rights have been suspended while they are imprisoned.

Beyond the physically dehumanising conditions of the detention centres, there are further cultural and symbolic consequences of this carceral regime. American anthropologist Erik Mueggler defines a *regime* in two ways: firstly, he notes that in physical geography a regime is that which 'creates the quality of flow of a river or stream: the amount of rainfall, type of bedrock, and shape of channel that generates its ripples, waves, [and] dunes' (169). A regime is also more commonly known as 'a politico-bureaucratic authority, multiple and contradictory in experience, but sustained by an imagined unity' and '[f]ounded on the state's authority to punish' (170; 187). This idea of a regime as something variable and meandering can be aptly applied to the Australian context; Australia is not a totalitarian 'regime' as we might understand the term; it is a country full of freedoms. Yet the state is able to institute a carceral system that moves and shifts, and is hard to pin down given the backflipping policies and one-upmanship of the two major political parties.

In order to effect a shift in public sentiment and institute political change, how can we encounter, and accept responsibility, for refugees and asylum seekers we have no access to, kept away from the broader public under carceral conditions? Australia's 'post-apology' period does not mean that an apology has been given and that the nation has moved on; rather, it refers to the fact that the nation-state is unapologetically 'over' giving apologies, and regards itself as no longer having to apologise for wrongs done or continuing to be done to refugees or those seeking asylum in Australia. In this current political context what is central is the *non*-apology, a government (indeed successive governments) that remain unapologetic for continuing to break international humanitarian law and instituting ever more carceral conditions without the possibility of legal redress (including judicial review of administrative decisions). This non-apology is manifest in both the physical and symbolic barriers between asylum seekers and

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seeker is a person who is seeking protection as a refugee and is still waiting to have his/her claim assessed.

[5] Prior to 1992, unauthorised boat arrivals were held in detention under the *Migration Act 1958* on a discretionary basis. Mandatory detention was introduced by the Keating government in 1992 under the *Migration Amendment Act 1992*, with the rationale that it would facilitate the processing of refugee claims and save the cost of locating people in the community (Phillips and Spinks 12).

the broader community, for example with some members of the public considering incarcerated asylum seekers to be 'criminals' kept behind bars for seeking a right to asylum.

While there has been a rise in the number of nation-states around the world offering official apologies (and in some cases compensation or restitution) for past atrocities and injustices, since the Second World War most of the academic approaches to this phenomenon have focused on inter-state relations, or what Tessa Morris-Suzuki refers to as 'thin' reconciliation (13). In contrast, 'thick' reconciliation between societies involves the shaping of popular historical consciousness through representation and commemoration. Morris-Suzuki posits the notion of 'reconciliation as method', which is concerned not with reaching an 'end-point in which consensus on history is achieved' (13), but rather valuing the important role cultural forms, including art, play in mediating new forms of social and political recognition. While 'reconciliation as method' examines the cultural tools and creative strategies through which people retell their past, the main point of distinction between Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and other historical events is that this event is still ongoing; this is not a past wrong. In this situation, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of *responsibility* rather than reconciliation, which, as Sara Ahmed notes, requires one to acknowledge an event that is not yet completed. How do we continually encounter, and accept responsibility, rather than reconcile when there may be no hope of an apology?

In this essay, I explore the work of The Refugee Art Project, a group that is focused on highlighting the important role of art in mediating an encounter between incarcerated subjects and the broader Australian public from which they are sequestered. I suggest that the artwork produced by refugees and asylum seekers in detention is not only expressive of their trauma but it is also relational, in the sense of staging an encounter between those in detention and their audience in the wider public. Analysing examples of artwork utilising portraiture and images of the face, I argue that these artworks allow us to come 'face-to-face' with refugees and asylum seekers, with the work of art functioning as the site of an ethical encounter that cannot otherwise take place physically and in place of an official apology that may never be forthcoming.[6]

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[6] Man Booker Prize-winning author Richard Flanagan published a piece in *The Guardian* (2015) saying, 'One day, many years from now, another prime minister will stand up and to a teary gallery apologise for the damage done to refugees in detention. We will be told that we didn't know then what we know now. We will hear testimony of destroyed lives. But we did know. We always knew. We just chose not to hear and to silence those who tried to remind us of the truth' (n.p.). Calling for an apology to survivors of immigration detention modelled on Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations, Caroline Wake concocted a 'Draft Apology to the Survivors of Immigration Detention': 'To be delivered by the Prime Minister of Australia, at the time of her

II. The Refugee Art Project

The Refugee Art Project is a non-profit organisation conceived in October 2010 by three artists/academics Safdar Ahmed, Omid Tofighian and Bilquis Ghani.[7] Other participants include Fernanda Miranda, Zeina Iaali, Anjali Vishwanathan, Daz Chandler, Agnieszka Switala, Anton Pulvirenti, Ahmed Salameh, Mona Moradveisi and Susan Nelson. The group began by providing art workshops for asylum seekers and refugees in the Villawood detention centre but has also worked with asylum seekers in other detention centres around Australia and with refugees who have recently been released into the community. Since February 2013, the group has also held art workshops open to anyone from a refugee background living in the Western Sydney area. The artwork, which includes drawings, oil and acrylic paintings, photography, video, computer art, and readymades, has been produced by refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, with most participants spending an average of two years in detention (Safdar Ahmed, 'Art, Ingenuity and Refugees'). Much of the commentary on refugee art has focused on its role in facilitating the self-expression of refugees who are otherwise denied a public voice (McArdle and Spina; Rodriguez-Jiminez and Gifford). In contrast to this approach, I seek to understand how art functions as a form of mediation that potentially allows us to engage with, and to encounter, the refugee 'other'; that is, art that is relational, rather than merely expressive. Specifically, I focus on the visual arts in the form of paintings and drawings produced under the rubric of The Refugee Art Project, which comprises artwork made by refugees and asylum seekers living in mandatory immigration detention.

Thus, while it is important not to discount the significance of art as a therapeutic outlet for refugees and asylum seekers in detention, I wish to focus on the valuable role art can play in mediating encounters between refugee artists in detention with the broader public. Due to the government's restrictions on access to Immigration Detention Centres (including bans on cameras, mobile phones and most journalists), these forms of self-expression by refugees would

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choosing'. The phrasing and cadence of this apology is almost identical to Rudd's Apology to the Stolen Generations.

[7] Safdar Ahmed graduated from The University of Sydney's Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies; Omid Tofighian completed his PhD in Philosophy at Leiden University and is currently a lecturer at The University of Sydney's Department of Philosophy, teaching Rhetoric and Composition. Bilquis Ghani is a Sessional Academic in Social and Political Science and Project Coordinator in the Equity and Diversity Unit at the University of Technology, Sydney. All three have a long history of activism stemming out of their research in relation to refugee and asylum seeker causes.

otherwise be inaccessible to those outside. Safdar Ahmed notes, 'Because no form of recording equipment is allowed inside detention, artmaking has become a way of bearing witness to what would otherwise go unseen. We hope such work challenges and educates the wider Australian public to think more deeply and morally about the people who come to our shores seeking protection' (Safdar Ahmed, 'Bearing Witness'). While it is difficult to measure or gauge public empathy and more directly its possibilities for initiating social change, I draw attention to examples in which the artwork opens up opportunities for dialogue and creates possibilities for action. Particularly as language can also function as a barrier to communication, art allows a form of engagement that exceeds linguistic barriers and impediments (Richards).

Under the auspices of The Refugee Art Project, over 500 pieces of artwork created by men, women and children in detention have been exhibited to the public at over 25 exhibitions in local galleries, internationally in Vienna, and at high profile national events at the 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014) in collaboration with European artists Libia Castro and Olafur Olafsson, and at the *Telling Tales: Excursions in Narrative Form* exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, 2 June - 9 October 2016. While these exhibitions remain an important avenue through which to reach the public, arguably the group's widest public exposure is through its online presence.[8] The Refugee Art Project maintains an up-to-date website and an active social media presence through Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Pinterest, Tumblr and Instagram. The group's first exhibition, *fear + hope* (20 June - 9 July 2011, at Sydney's Mori Gallery) was well attended, although 90 percent of the participating artists were not able to be present at the exhibition. Nevertheless, Safdar Ahmed notes that the exhibited artwork functioned as 'something of a bridge' between the asylum seekers and the wider community, with audiences taking photographs of themselves beside the artwork and posting these on the artists' Facebook pages with a dialogue ensuing in the comments section. While asylum seekers in detention have limited access to the outside world, Facebook is one of the few portals they are permitted access to (Safdar Ahmed, 'Art, Ingenuity and Refugees').

At his TedX talk in Paramatta, Safdar Ahmed recounts the many ways in which artists in detention must demonstrate ingenuity not only in the ways they can make art, but also in the ways this art is circulated to the public.[9] Ahmed describes how the artist Majid Rabet created paint brushes using a TV antenna with the bristles collected from a cat who wandered in and out of the Villawood

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[8] Whilst it is difficult to gauge the impact of online and social media, The Refugee Art Project's Facebook site, for example, has over 7000 'likes', meaning potentially a much larger (national) audience for any artworks posted online than attendance at their art exhibitions.
[9] TedX talks are independently organized TED events. TedX Parramatta was held on 3 August 2012 and featured 12 speakers presenting ideas on the theme of 'Beginning, Becoming and Beyond' in relation to the diverse communities living in the Western Sydney region.

detention centre (Ahmed is quick to point out that the cat was not harmed in the hair collection process). Another example of artists' ingenuity is in the form of coffee paintings, made by diluting instant coffee in water. In the following sections I explore the work featured in the 'Coffee Paintings' gallery on The Refugee Art Project website (http://www.therefugeeartproject.com), several of which are portraits. These coffee painting portraits utilise the figure of the face in order to facilitate a particular encounter with refugee artists, with the work of art functioning as a 'face' that mediates an ethical encounter.

III. Coffee Paintings

Coffee paintings, made with diluted instant coffee, are one way that asylum seekers have had to be resourceful while in detention by employing quotidian materials in order to create art. Yet what was initially a strategy based on limited access to paint and other materials has now become a technique passed on between detainees. There are two main coffee painting artists featured on the Refugee Art Project website: Alwy Fadhel and Mohammad.

Alwy Fadhel, a national of Indonesia, was taught how to paint with coffee by an Iraqi detainee. He has been detained at the Villawood Detention Centre since November 2007.[10] In *The Scream* **[Figure 1]**, Fadhel shows a woman wearing a niqab-like covering revealing only her eyes. The silent scream conveyed expresses an otherwise interminably silent condition for both short and long-

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[10] On 15 November 2007, Alwy Fadhel arrived in Australia by plane using a fake passport and was refused immigration clearance. He was detained at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre and in March 2008 his application for a Protection visa was refused. The Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) re-affirmed the Minister's decision. Fadhel's application for judicial review of the RRT decision was dismissed by the Federal Magistrates Court in December 2008. He was placed in community detention in September 2011 when the Minister made a residence determination, but returned to Villawood in May 2012 after the Commonwealth obtained a travel document for his removal in order to facilitate his return to Indonesia. Fadhel's removal from Australia was scheduled for 3 May 2012 but on 2 May 2012 Fadhel commenced proceedings in the High Court of Australia to challenge his removal. In 2014, the Australian Human Rights Commission commenced an inquiry in response to a complaint lodged by Fadhel that he had been arbitrarily detained. Gillian Triggs, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, found that the failure of the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to place Fadhel into community detention or another less restrictive form of detention was inconsistent with the prohibition on arbitrary detention in article 9(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In addition, the AHRC found that Fadhel's continued detention caused a level of mental impairment that amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment within the meaning of article 7 of the ICCPR. The AHRC recommended that the Commonwealth pay Fadhel compensation of $400,000 and should refer his case to the Minister to grant Fadhel a Bridging visa or make a residence determination. The Department of Immigration and Border Protection responded to these findings and recommendations in a letter dated 13 June 2014 reiterating its position that Fadhel's immigration detention was lawful and carried out in accordance with the procedure prescribed under the *Migration Act.* No further actions were taken in relation to the AHRC recommendations. At the time of the report produced by the AHRC, Alwy Fadhel remains detained in VIDC (*Alwy Fadhel v Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Immigration and Border Protection)* [2014] AusHRC 82).

term detainees. It also gestures towards the apparent futility of communication with an audience; the audience cannot hear or decipher the subject's words, she (and the artist) remain unintelligible. Yet the contexts of reception for such art are not silent. Besides the therapeutic or self-expressive function of art, art can also facilitate an encounter with others. In particular, for asylum seekers in detention, kept away from the public, it allows them to express their experiences to the broader Australian community. Artwork on the website portrays a range of topics and emotions, from nostalgic memories of home to whimsical and fantastical images of freedom (from winged horses to flying humans). While commonly portrayed to the public 'only through the prism of their persecution and suffering' (Hawkins), the fact that we are provided access to diverse images and experiences of refugee artists requires us to 'resist a singular narrative where refugees are concerned' (Safdar Ahmed, 'Art, Ingenuity and Refugees').

Figure 1: Alwy Fadhel, 'The Scream', coffee on paper, 29x38cm.
With thanks to the Refugee Art Project for permission to reproduce this image.

Figure 2: Mohammad, 'Double Eye', coffee on paper.
With thanks to the Refugee Art Project for permission to reproduce this image.

Mohammad (no surname is provided in order to protect his identity while his claim for asylum is being processed) is an asylum seeker from Burma who has spent over four and a half years in detention. He is a member of the Rohingya Muslim community, a religious and ethnic minority in Burma excluded from citizenship by the Burmese government and persecuted by the military regime and civilian organisations. Mohammad's painting, *Double Eye* **[Figure 2]**, is one of several portraits he has produced. The female subject of Mohammad's painting offers an unsettling dual perspective on her incarceration. As with Fadhel's coffee paintings *Psychosis* and *Bound* **[Figures 3, Figure 4]**, the eyes feature prominently, either as an invitation to engagement (in the form of making 'eye contact'), or in order to represent the omniscient surveillance of the carceral system in which asylum seekers are held. In *Bound*, the bowed head of a tightly bound figure is overseen by the glowering eyes of another, looming, being; and hands placed over the eyes in *Psychosis* do not avert the inescapable horror of realising one's ongoing incarceration.

Figure 3: Alwy Fadhel, 'Psychosis', coffee on paper, 38x29cm.
Figure 4: Alwy Fadhel, 'Bound', coffee on paper, 29x38cm.
With thanks to the Refugee Art Project for permission to reproduce these images.

Painting with coffee is time-sensitive as the paintings will eventually fade, and if they get wet they will disintegrate. As a medium of the present, coffee paintings express an acute sense of ephemerality. What these images overwhelmingly emphasise is the *presentness* of the artists' experience, the immediate and direct experience of incarceration that is all the more confronting when viewed in retrospect. In the case of refugee art, the present becomes a primary preoccupation, arguably over representations of the past, and also much rarer images or imaginings of the future. Being trapped in detention is representative of being outside time (particularly in the case of indefinite or 'arbitrary' detention), as well as outside space (outside community). However, because the paintings have been 'frozen' in their online state, made permanent (as long as the Refugee Art Project website remains active), the artwork continues to reach an audience, signifying the trauma of a perpetual present.

Trauma is classically defined as 'beyond the scope of language and representation' (Bennett 3); 'beyond acknowledgment and assimilation' (Tello 556). Because of the unrepresentability and unintelligibility of (another's) trauma, art theorist Jill Bennett describes trauma-related art as 'best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the "secret" of personal experience' (7). Trauma art is relational, rather than expressive, political, rather than merely subjective. This description of art as transactive aptly describes the ability of refugee art to mediate emotional and ethical encounters between incarcerated artists and audiences living at a comfortable distance on the outside. Although we are not able to talk to the artists or see them face-to-face, the emotions conveyed through their artwork gives audiences some window into their experiences. As the product of creative expression and imagination, art has the ability to function as a mediating presence, permitting an 'encounter' with asylum seekers in

detention who are otherwise kept outside of public view, thought, imagination and, for the most part, political action. Although Australians may be living side-by-side in the same cities and towns where Immigration Detention Centres are in operation, asylum seekers have been demonised in mainstream public perception as alien 'others', incarcerated for an ostensible breach of the borders of the nation.

Asylum seekers in detention in Australia are rarely given a voice, or even a name, and are usually known only by an identifying number assigned to them by the Immigration Detention Centre; in this sense they are 'faceless', although the Refugee Art Project does name its artists where it is safe to do so. Yet the art produced by asylum seekers in detention becomes an important vehicle for 'the interpersonal transmission of experience' (Bennett 7), an experience of going face-to-face with the other.

Faces are the first thing we notice about people, and facial expressions are often said to facilitate social responses. Levinas suggests, 'The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility' (Levinas and Kearney 23-4). The face elicits a response and invites an encounter; an encounter which Levinas describes as alterity. Alterity does not arise from difference; it is 'not the reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same' (38). Instead of an other that is always already known, the other is other 'with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other' (39). Thinking about alterity in this way puts the self under an infinite obligation to the other. For Levinas human existence is relational and Levinas focuses on the ethical responsibility of the self when facing the other, an other who is always absolutely 'other' in that they can never be fully known.

Where Levinas rejects any true intersubjectivity for fear that we will project our own subjectivity onto that of the other, art theorist Susan Stewart recuperates a secular form of intersubjective potential in our encounters with art: 'we are able to recognize the common human position of others without projecting upon them the features of our own interiority, just as the way we recognize faces in general is separate physiologically from the way we recognize particular faces' (20). In a face-to-face encounter, what is important is not emotional identification or sympathetic unification but an interaction of differences resulting from an affective response to (a piece of) art that 'emerge[s] from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work' (Bennett 7). Safdar Ahmed, notes, 'If I could elicit just one reaction from this project it would be that people might be so swayed by a drawing or painting, and the story of the person who made it, as to challenge their opinions and understand the refugee issue in greater depth and complexity, whatever their prior views might have been' (Day n.p.).

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*, Sara Ahmed describes the difficult task of living in proximity with others without reifying their difference. Ahmed suggests that differences can be understood through 'everyday encounters in the forming of social space' and that such differences are not to be found '*on the bodies of others* … but are determined through encounters with others' (Sara Ahmed 9; original emphasis). Having to 'look someone in the face' and acknowledge their humanity describes the operations by which the figure of the stranger is produced—'not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as a "stranger"' (3). Strangers exist along a border, between the human and the non-human, and the borders of the nation space; to be an alien is to be defined by the Law as not belonging, and hence a carceral being (3). These borders differentiate who we let in and allow a relation of proximity or closeness with, and who we treat with kindness and hospitality.[11] In the case of refugee artists in detention, our encounters are mediated through artistic representation. Art lays claim to an experience, a particular event of violence or loss that is 'fundamentally owned by someone', but it also 'invites a wider audience to partake of this experience in some way' (Bennett 3).

In addition to the work of The Refugee Art Project, there have been a number of art initiatives involving refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, either those in detention or those living in the community. These involve a range of community arts, from theatre and performance, to film and video, to the visual arts. In 2011 the Ownership Project, a not-for-profit organisation funded mainly by local council grants, was established in Fitzroy, Melbourne. Specialising in printmaking, the Ownership Project brings together artists from culturally diverse backgrounds, including but not only refugees (artists also come from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, South American, East-African and Pacific Islander communities). The Good Starts Arts Project, which began in 2007, has engaged three groups of refugee youth from Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan to make collaborative short films. The project has been funded by the Australian Research Council, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, the Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture, and La Trobe University (Rodriguez-Jimenez and Gifford). The *A4 Refugee Project*, an initiative of Austcare for Refugee Week 2002, sought to have non-refugees create art in support of the refugee cause. Letters, flyers and emails were sent to contemporary Australian artists asking them to submit a piece of artwork on A4 paper as a show of support for

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[11] In *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century*, Agnes Woolley centralises the notion of hospitality in relation to nation state responses to non-citizens. Woolley writes, 'contemporary asylum seeking denotes a specific set of claims and restrictions which negotiate between a resurgent national authoritarianism and the condition of statelessness' (14). Although Woolley focuses on films, plays and literature in the British context, her description of resurgent national authoritarianism contra hospitality in response to individuals seeking asylum is relevant to the post-apology carceral regime in Australia.

refugees. One hundred and sixteen works were submitted and exhibited in the Metro Arts Building in Brisbane, although it is reported that the exhibition was only viewed by about 100 people (Gallagher 68). AMES Australia (Adult Migrant English Services), in collaboration with Multicultural Arts Victoria, hosts the Heartlands Refugee Art Prize featuring work created by artists from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds during Refugee Week in June. These efforts are aimed at bridging the gap between refugees and asylum seekers with the broader Australian community in the hope of initiating positive social change and exchange.

On rare occasions, particular images of refugees have had the effect of galvanizing the international community towards wide-spread action. When Nilüfer Demir's photograph of drowned Syrian toddler, Alan Kurdi,[12] was published in September 2015 and quickly became viral in online news outlets, the emotional and political reaction was extraordinary. In response to public campaigning and support following the photograph's circulation, British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that Britain would accept 'thousands more' Syrian refugees (Dathan). The photograph and subsequent story of the Kurdi family's efforts to seek asylum in Canada gave a human face to the Syrian refugee crisis, humanising the plight of countless thousand other 'faceless' refugees. Yet as Sukhmani Khorana notes:

> the problem with empathy when it comes to comprehending the asylum seeker situation anywhere, and especially in Australia [is that] … while it would be ideal to let every citizen have contact with refugees so that they can begin to feel where the shoe pinches, this isn't entirely feasible given we all inhabit silos of one kind or another. Therefore, the way politicians and the media mediate refugee identities and issues become our only route to walking in the shoes of refugees. (n.p.)

Khorana argues that while empathy 'has long been understood as crucial to the attainment of cross-cultural and transnational social justice[,] … the evocation of empathy in refugee narratives is often accompanied by a depoliticisation of systemic issues. This occurs by shifting responsibility onto the feelings of the ethical citizen rather than the imperative of international obligations and/or the power imbalance in regional relationships'. Khorana points to the ongoing tension between the need for 'thin' reconciliation and state responses in the form of hospitality and the importance of 'thick reconciliation', representation and commemoration, to a sense of shared social responsibility. The distance or gap that both forms of reconciliation seek to close are understood in Khorana's

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[12] Initially reported as 'Aylan Kurdi'.

argument as enabled by acts of witnessing, which entail 'responding in way that is dialogic and political, and leads neither to apathy nor to consumerist sentimentalism'.[13] Khorana points to how multi-platform narratives such as the volunteer-run *Behind the Wire* (http://behindthewire.org.au/) encourage such forms of witnessing. An oral history project documenting the lives of asylum seekers who have been kept under mandatory detention in Australia, the first-person refugee narratives represented in *Behind the Wire* are akin to the artwork produced by asylum seekers in detention in the Refugee Art Project. Both facilitate acts of witnessing, recognising the role of art and narrative as crucial to an ethical encounter.[14]

Veronica Tello has also noted the transformative role of witnessing in relation to Rosemary Laing's photograph, 'Welcome to Australia', a stark image of the Woomera Detention Centre in South Australia, closed in April 2003 after widespread public pressure following a series of riots from 2000. Tello observes, 'The deferred, repressed, traumatic sublime often returns to us, for secondary witnessing, via the traces of the past. Such traces and negative images of absence have the power to strike, disturb and astonish us long after the event' (558). On the belatedness of Laing's image, Tello writes:

> it is as if history is at a standstill. Laing arrives too late to capture the decisive moment—the news media image of riots outside the detention centre; documentation of refugees pressed up against the fence, or, as one refugee did, jumping onto the fence and its razor wire as an act of protest. But Laing arrives in time to capture for posterity the empty architecture of the Woomera Detention Centre. (559)

The missing figure of the refugee in this 'welcome' to the country is, as Tello notes, 'a reflection of the historical juncture out of which this image emerges. That is, it is a contingency of Laing's belated arrival' (559).[15] The 'postness' of

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[13] Nikos Papastergiadis has written extensively about how art enables an imaginative reach towards the other and a recognition of mutual equality in the case of migrant and multicultural communities. Papastergiadis describes art as crucial to an understanding of ethics and politics and for 'imagining' multicultural communities.

[14] Maggie O'Neill has combined approaches in criminology with art practice to explore the transformative role of art and narrative/biography as participatory methodology in her ethnographic research with refugees and asylum seekers. Describing her practice as ethno-mimesis, O'Neill suggests that this practice can potentially open up a reflective space for dialogue. She writes, 'through the mimetic moment of cognition we can develop a critical perspective that includes "empathy" as sensuous knowing. … Knowledge is produced forcing us to abandon instrumental rationality and reach towards a more sensuous understanding that incorporates feeling involvement as well as cognitive reflection' (n.p.). O'Neill advocates for the creation of 'a reflective/relatively safe space for dialogue, images and narratives to emerge that approach the world and research in a different way, facilitating "understanding"' (n.p.).

[15] Tello notes that Laing's belatedness is also a condition of the fact that was impossible to capture images of protestors or refugees inside the detention centre in the mid-2000s, with the

Laing's image signals the post-apology period to follow, however what we are left with is an image that invites a belated 'secondary witnessing', a trace that allows a belated encounter. In the case of work created by artists in detention, the act of witnessing by non-refugees becomes even more important to an encounter and exchange in place of an apology.

The question is how we might extend a *particular* encounter, in this case with one photograph, one work of art, or one artist, into a series of encounters that can be regarded at the level of taking collective responsibility. The argument that it is not possible to help everyone is often used a means to disclaim the futility of helping even one person. Sara Ahmed suggests, 'We need to recognise the infinite nature of responsibility, *but the finite and particular circumstances in which I am called on to respond to others*. A responsibility that does not respond to the particularity of the call for a response would be one that fails…' (147; original emphasis).

Encountering the faces or bodies of refugees and asylum seekers represented in art is not to assume a particularity. In encountering an individual work of art, or series of artworks, we can consider how the particularity or singularity of our responses might also allow us to arrive at a new kind of collectivity.[16] 'The collective … is not simply about what "we" have in common—or what "we" do not have in common. Collectivities are formed through the *very work that we need to do* in order to get closer to others, without simply repeating the appropriation of "them" as labour, or as a sign of difference. Collectivity then is intimately tied to the secrecy of the encounter: it is not about proximity or distance, but a getting closer which accepts the distance, and puts it to work' (Sara Ahmed 180). This is a politics predicated on close encounters, of finding an approach to activism that can break through various forms of mediation and imagines a different kind of political community. We can see in the artwork produced by Refugee Art Project artists such as Alwy Fadhel and Mohammad a direct engagement with audiences through the figural use of the face, especially as this is conveyed through a (transient) medium of the present, painting with instant coffee. By employing the face as the 'basic mode of responsibility' audiences are invited to move beyond the particular circumstances of their encounter with an individual work of art or artist to participate in a nascent collective politics that involves a continual encounter or re-encounter with an other whom we cannot otherwise come face-to-face with, for now.

detention centre located within the restricted military site of the Woomera Prohibited Area (559).

[16] In 'The Art of the Future' Susan Stewart also distinguishes between art in general and particular works of art. Stewart writes, 'what the practice of art in general might be for is the carrying forward of a practice of ethical encounters between persons' (17). We cannot necessarily 'explain' a work of art away but we can 'enrich our apprehension, to challenge our usual habits of making the world intelligible' (20).

IV. Conclusion

Artists in detention seek to visualise a present from which there is currently no way of imagining a future as yet. For those of us encountering this artwork, it is a means of coming face-to-face with the 'other' in our midst, whom we otherwise have no access to and hence somewhat limited means of engaging with. How might we face up to our collective responsibility, while recognizing what is at stake in a mediated encounter through artistic representation? It is the art that performs the initial work of ethical engagement, or at least that initiates and facilitates this, in the case of The Refugee Art Project by creating an affective public space online, and through exhibitions and the circulation of zines. We are shaped by implication and are called to take responsibility for the present, if not the past.

There is a complexity to the temporality of the encounter: from the presentness of the trauma of incarceration (in particular, arbitrary and indefinite detention experienced as a perpetual present), the transience of coffee art (recast in an online context as frozen permanence—the only way we are able to widely encounter this art), and future collective action (or hope). Our encounter with the artwork of asylum seekers is in a sense belated (after the fact of their incarceration), while it also marks a meeting that is yet to come. Intersecting with this is the timeliness of the issue of asylum seekers and the political preoccupation with their regulation in Australia and regionally in the Asia Pacific, all of which is tainted and marked by the belatedness of the federal government's ethical (in)action in an age that is unapologetically 'post-apology'.

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