

Political Kunst - Postcard from Germany

JENNY FRASER



Beds at concentration camp, Dachau, 2008. Photograph by Jenny Fraser.

'Will the state accept Indigenous Authority, generally or institutionally, in respect of all aspects of Indigenous decisions or will we have to wait for the state to embrace human rights and establish our own subordinate position within it?'¹

Upon invitation of the Dachau-based Netzwerk Collective, *in the mean time* recently toured to the Neue Gallery in Dachau, Germany by Brisbane's Raw Space Galleries. The exhibition responds to the governmental refusal to sign the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which was recently considered by the United Nations General Assembly. The process was brought to a stalemate during the 61st session in September last year by Australia, USA, Canada and New Zealand.

The artists featured are representative of these four countries, commenting on the times that we live in, true soldier-of-culture style. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is considered a milestone, having been in draft form for over two decades, and now adopted by a majority of 143 member countries. It outlines for the world's 370 million Indigenous people a best practice approach for governments, and recognises human rights in international law. The Australian Government's reasoning for the decision against the Declaration described it as 'divisive', 'unworkable' and a 'symbolic gesture'. Embarrassingly, John Howard felt so strongly he had also lobbied Stephen Harper, the new Canadian Prime Minister, against the Declaration's guiding principles. Yes, Australia has a new Prime Minister, however support for the Declaration shall remain to be seen.

Meanwhile, it is important to get the word out about such issues because the silence has been deafening



Jenny Fraser, overlooking Dachau. Photograph by Ralph Hanreider.

(and censored?) in Australia's mainstream media. Not surprisingly, the German audience couldn't understand how a government would treat people so badly in their own country. Maybe they have short memories? Dachau is infamous for its concentration camp in World War II. However, maybe Germany's intent to right past wrongs is genuinely heartfelt now. There is an upcoming Human Rights Museum planned for Dachau so our exhibition provided a platform for ongoing dialogue and subsequently received a two-page spread in the southern German newspaper, and other press. Not a bad way to mark 'Australia' Day.

Dachau is a small town in Bavaria about twenty minutes outside of Munich and features some sacred Celtic places (with Catholic churches built on top) and, accordingly, has a cafe nearby that translates as 'the Heart of the Devil'. I acted as 'art mule' because it was actually less expensive to fly the artworks and myself than it was to freight them. I met Bree Jackson (of Raw Space Galleries) there as she swung by on her round-the-world journey. The Neue Gallery is a council-run venture with a regular program of local and international art. We were hosted by members of the Netzwerk Collective, and their greatest supporter, the Dachau mayor, opened our show. They all treated us with great hospitality and generosity in the spirit of Art Family. Reciprocally, the Netzwerk Collective will be exhibiting at Raw Space Galleries in Brisbane this September, visiting along with the mayor.

We did visit the Dachau concentration camp and I have to admit I was worried when I could only purchase a one-way ticket there! The camp is now featured like a living museum, supposedly maintained in a similar way to what it was then. It reminded me of some remote-area Aboriginal communities that I have visited. I was



Adam Martin, *Young warrior*, 2006, collage on press paper. Courtesy the artist.

surprised at the number of concentration camps featured on a map covering not just Germany but wider Europe, and the extent of condemnation directed at all people of difference: including gypsies, immigrants and gays (not

perpetration



**if we riot, if we fight back
we become the vandals
and they become the law**

Jenny Fraser, *Name that movie* (still image), 2007, digital video. Courtesy the artist.

only Jews), excluding them from the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or National Community. The Racial Hygiene Research Office (is this sounding familiar?), founded in 1936, mainly directed persecution at the 'Gypsy Half-Castes' who were categorised as being 'racially particularly dangerous'.

In Bavaria, they consider themselves the first people, or 'Natives'. I'm not exactly sure what that means but they imparted the touch of sadness felt at the gentrification and subsequent loss of the old ways and of old Bavaria. Therefore our voice wasn't lost in translation and they took the meaning behind the exhibition themes seriously, also finding great delight in the humour of works by Gordon Syron, Andrew Hill, Sharyn Egan and Adam Martin. The Network Collective includes some electronic musos who obviously maintain a practice reliant on technology and other trends, yet are also vehemently passionate about their traditional music and the old ways. I can relate to that.

Another invitation has been extended for us to exhibit at Kunst Pavilion in Munich, 2009. It has a history of showing political art, particularly since World War II days, and is situated in a square just around the corner from Hitler's old Nazi headquarters and also the hangout of students in the White Rose movement who were shot for their views and anti-Nazi sentiment.



Christine Christophersen, *Truth denies Justice (Palm Island)* 2006, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy the artist.

Notes:

Jacqui Katona, 'A Mean Citizenship', from the catalogue *in the meantime*, 2008.

in the mean time was shown at Brisbane's Raw Space Galleries from 7 December 2007 to 2 January 2008, and is at Dachau's Neue Galerie from 24 January to 9 March 2008.

Jenny Fraser is a Murri artist and curator. Curatorial credits include *in the meantime* and *Hand in Hand* (with Shigeyuki Kihara, see ArtNotes NSW).