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Art, Nationalism and a ‘Once in a Lifetime Crisis of Capitalism’

by
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Summary

Studio Work

My two major studio works are contrasting responses to the ongoing ‘border protection’ discourse and policy that surrounds the Australian Federal Government’s punitive treatment of asylum seekers. *Vault* is a socio-critical, large-scale gallery installation. Its central feature is the iconic Hills Hoist clothesline, an emblem of the supposedly innovative national character. The Hoist is reoriented such that the cold wire and steel of the familiar appliance connotes a space of incarceration akin to an immigration detention centre, inferring a relationship between celebratory and exclusionary forms of nationalism. *Uncontainable* is a creative activist response to the same phenomenon. In many remote immigration detention centres the accommodation for detainees consists of converted shipping containers. The artwork involved constructing a ‘Reverse Detention Centre’ that informs, criticises and inspires empathy through recreating and subverting the built environment of the detention facility using a shipping container situated on University of Sydney’s busiest thoroughfare. This work differs from *Vault* in that it is explicitly linked to the broader campaigns against the Government’s policies.

Dissertation

Amid the economic fallout that has followed the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, governments in badly effected countries have often sought to heighten exclusionary forms of nationalism as a palliative for worsening social conditions. My studio project responds critically to exclusionary nationalism in Australia, particularly as it is embodied in the Federal Government’s punitive treatment of asylum seekers. A Marxist analysis is employed to demonstrate the links between the global context and these local issues, and to examine the relationship between art and political agency implied in such a studio project. This reveals the potential for a reciprocal relationship between working class agency and anti-nationalist art practices. However, this potential exists alongside a danger; the critical power of contemporary art may be denuded through its incorporation
into the ideological order it aims to oppose. Such an examination of art and agency is not new, but is key to situating and assessing my own studio project within with the economic, political and social polarisation characterising the current intractable crisis of capitalism.
**Introduction**

This Paper critically discusses two studio works completed during my MFA candidature, *Vault* (2012) and *Uncontainable* (2012). They deal with nationalism and racism in the current politically charged global context. Chapter I introduces the economic and political crisis that has emerged in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and establishes a clear conceptual framework in which this discussion can take place.

In order to do so, the political fallout from the economic crisis is unpacked in a degree of detail. In particular the nature of the primary social agents within the capitalist political economy is discussed from a Marxist perspective. Firstly, it is shown that the capitalist class and the working class are the two fundamental classes within this social system and are necessarily locked into a hierarchical and antagonistic relationship due to the competitive forces characteristic of capitalism. Statistics and examples from Australia are used to substantiate these claims. Secondly, the relationship between these classes is discussed in terms of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s (1891-1937) concept of hegemony, the combination of force and consent through which the capitalist class maintains political authority. Particular attention is paid to ideology, the social beliefs that ensure that consent is maintained, again drawing on the work of Gramsci and his notion of ideology as simply the consciousness through which the interests of collective agents are articulated.

Discussion in Chapter II shifts to the specific ideology of nationalism. Its history, political economy and class directionality are explained in Marxist terms. The aim here is to account for the general intensification of extreme nationalism in the liberal capitalist democracies worst impacted by the crisis. In doing so the mode of response my studio project represents can be discussed and assessed from a well-grounded perspective.

To begin, it is shown that nationalism is historically contingent and socially constructed. This is done to dispel the pervasive myth that nationality is natural. Drawing on the writing of British historian Chris Harman (1942-2009), the emergence of nationalism in
Western Europe will be connected to the transition from feudalism to capitalism that began to take place in the 15th century and the corresponding emergence of nation-states. Further, the particular flourishing of nationalism in the late 19th century is shown to have established the model for nationhood that is now pervasive through the fostering of national identity or what British Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) refers to as ‘inventing tradition’. Importantly it is established that such a process was initiated by the ruling classes to establish loyalty and consent for their rule amid the social upheaval of the period.

Finally, beginning a discussion of my studio work, the understanding and framework hitherto established is applied to the current political and economic crisis. A dramatic anti-immigrant, border-control policy of the current Greek government is used to indicate the role nationalism plays in maintaining hegemony under the post-GFC conditions. This explains nationalisms intensification in the policies and discourse of centrist political parties, far-right parties or in the violent actions of conspiratorial groups on the social fringe.

In Chapter III Vault (2012), my large scale gallery installation, is discussed as a socio-critical response to Australian border protection policies that is undertaken with cognisance of the implications of the political dynamics of extreme nationalism thus far outlined. Specifically Vault is examined through the lens of détournement, an artistic technique conceived of by French Situationist Guy Debord (1931-1994).¹ This is both because of loose affinities with this artistic technique and because the concept of détournement itself raises the questions surrounding art and agency in a particularly relevant way. It consequently functions as a useful analytical tool for both contrasting and assessing my two thematically united but methodologically divergent studio works.

¹ The Situationist Internationale was a small and highly influential French artistic movement founded in 1957 and dissolved in 1972. Marxist and politically motivated, the group is perhaps most known for its involvement in instigating the May 1968 uprising in Paris. Détournement is a technique whereby political exchange takes place through the creative reconfiguration of elements. See Chapter III, Vault : Undermining Celebratory Nationalism.
The large scale installation *Vault* featuring a Hills Hoist clothesline, is described and the Australian government’s ‘border protection’ policy and discourse sketched. This is followed by the analysis outlined above with a particular focus on the way détournement is applied in *Vault*. Here it will be argued that it is used to subvert the usual associations the Hills Hoist carries as a national icon and articulate the ideological reciprocity between celebratory and exclusionary nationalism. There is also a comparison with the 2009 installation *Swinging Doors* by contemporary Turkish artist Ahmet Ögüt, likewise dealing with the connection between state violence and popular icons. This serves to clarify the understanding of détournement applied to *Vault* as well as to situate the work within contemporary socio-critical art practice.

Chapter III ends with a focused consideration of the limitations of socio-critical art, specifically the way that ‘absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial un-freedom of the whole.’ Here the writing of British art historian Julian Stallabrass is used to point out that while *Vault* clearly interrogates the politics of celebratory nationalism, it doesn’t entail any attempt to engage with the ideology embodied in the contemporary art institution. This is important because while the anti-nationalism of *Vault* is counter-hegemonic, according to Stallabrass the contemporary art institution itself is part of a system of ideas and practices whose function is to trumpet the progress of liberal capitalism. Such a critique sets *Vault* up as a counter point to the second of my works to be discussed, *Uncontainable* (2012).

Chapter IV is concerned with my large scale public installation *Uncontainable* which shares with *Vault* the theme of government border protection policies. However, it is shown to embody a fundamentally different mode of response. Where *Vault* is a socio-critical gallery piece *Uncontainable* will be shown to be instrumentally opposed to the Australian government’s border protection policies and tied into activist practice, particularly to the Sydney University Anti-Racism Collective and the Sydney Refugee Action Coalition (RAC). After a description of the work its specific connections to the

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organisations and activities of the broader refugee-rights campaign are delineated. It is argued that the mode of practice embodied in the work is different from straight out activism because it emerges from the very logic of rule breaking valued in the art institution (as described by Stallabrass). Comparable practices are shown to have emerged out of the Conceptual Art movement, what Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn (1939-1993) terms ‘Transitional Practices’, and in the contemporary Indonesian artists collective Taring Padi (Fangs of the Rice Plant). Finally, the specific emphasis on class in Transitional Practices and Uncontainable through its association with RAC, are shown to have important implications in terms of both instrumental cultural opposition to extreme nationalism and its vertiginous logic in times of crisis, and a progressive radical response to this same tumult. It is shown that class politics is important to defensively opposing nationalism but has more far reaching implications as an offensive response to crisis within a Marxist framework.
Chapter I
‘A Once in a Lifetime Crisis of Capitalism’: A Marxist Framework

The Crisis

Of late the German revolutionary socialist Karl Marx (1818-1883) has come to salience even in the Wall Street Journal. A barometer for the mood, George Magnus — senior economic advisor to giant Swiss bank UBS — recently said ‘the 2008/2009 financial crisis has bequeathed a once in a lifetime crisis of capitalism, the footprints of which can be found in widespread challenges to the political order, and not just in developed countries.’³ That the crisis is the expression of a deep, intractable systemic malaise is confirmed by the comments of International Monetary Fund adviser Nouriel Roubini who paraphrased Marx in an interview with the Wall Street Journal claiming ‘Marx was right about capitalism self-destructing’.⁴

The above indicates that the ideological and political consensus that emerged in the post-Cold War period is undergoing a serious de-stabilisation, surpassing that caused by the bursting of the dot-com bubble close to the turn of the millennium.⁵ When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 it marked the collapse of historical Communism and Western leaders looked on, confident of the global triumph of liberal capitalism. Neoconservative political theorist Francis Fukuyama gave the most influential intellectual pronouncement of this new era. In The End of History and the Last Man (1992), Fukuyama contended that the collapse of Communism effectively meant that the long series of turbulent struggles between conflicting conceptions of the ideal political regime had ended. The combination of parliamentary democracy and free-market economics prevalent in the West was the

⁵ Vinay Kothari, Executive greed: examining business failures that contributed to the economic crisis. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), XV.
only legitimate governmental form left. These pronouncements were vindicated in the sense that free market liberalism was assumed as unproblematic on both sides of politics in the West in the decades following 1989. Parliamentary politics shifted to the right with different political parties competing on the basis of different styles of managing a social system which was assumed to be fundamentally neutral and unproblematic.

As Magnus makes clear, the current crisis of these post-1989 assumptions has economic roots. His dramatic comments reflect the consensus among many economists that world is in the grip of the fallout from the most severe financial crisis since 1926. In the U.S. a record 47 million people are using food stamps, in Britain over 20% of youth are unemployed and in Spain and Greece this figure has alarmingly exceeded 50%. Yet amid this carnage the number and wealth of millionaires in the world has increased. There are now 10 million High Net Worth Individuals (HNW-I’s) and their wealth increased by 18.9% in the year immediately following the GFC. It is unsurprising that under these polarising social conditions there has been a corresponding political polarisation. In 2011 in the U.S. the populist far-right Tea Party movement gained unprecedented influence while at the same time the anti-corporate Occupy movement saw millions around the world occupying public squares to protest against corporate greed. Similarly in France and Greece there has been a rise in the influence of the far left and at the same time ultra-nationalist and fascist groupings are gaining ground. In the recent French election the first socialist government was elected since 1988 while the

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7 ibid.
10 The Capgemini and Merrill Lynch Global Wealth Report define a HNWI (High Net Worth Individual) as a person with over $1 million USD in financial assets.
fascist National Front broke all its previous records by getting almost 20% of the vote.\textsuperscript{12}

The crisis emerging in the wake of the GFC is both global and intractable. This can only mean a future deepening of the current social and political polarisation to which my MFA studio project is an artistic response. Leading mainstream economists have been consistently speculating that if Greece defaults, the consequences will be global. For example Richard McGuire, Rabobank bond strategist explains that despite Greece’s economy being small it ‘is as important to the Eurozone as a plug is to a bath’.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, the Eurozone is the largest economy in the world meaning this would likely result in another economic collapse having global ramifications.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{The Marxist Theory of Class and Capitalism}

In order to unpack the political fallout from the economic crisis in more detail it is pertinent now to move to a discussion of the primary social agents within the capitalist political economy. This is crucial to understanding the dynamics that aggravate extreme nationalism and thus to discussing my studio project as a response to it. First, from a classical Marxist perspective it will be argued that the primary agents are the capitalist class who rule and the working class who are subordinated. Secondly, their relationship will be explained in more detail through the lens of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s theories of hegemony and ideology.

The classical Marxist theory of class contends that capitalist society is necessarily divided into two hostile camps: the capitalists who own and control the means of production and the workers whose survival depends on selling their labour to capitalists. While there are contradictory and intermediate positions within the social structure it is this class division

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\textsuperscript{13} Peter Wilson, “Greek Banks ‘close to collapse’,“ \textit{The Weekend Australian}, May 19-20 (2012), 9.
\end{flushleft}
which fundamentally defines capitalism.\textsuperscript{15} For example in Australia the wealthiest 5% of families owned 76% of shares and similar investments, 46% of bank deposits, 46% of rental properties and 29% of private business equity. The situation in Australia is reflective of global inequality where 1% of households have 39% of the world’s wealth.\textsuperscript{16} Simply put, this ruling class substantively controls the economy and thus the means of producing food, clothing, shelter and everything else that is required to live decently. The remaining majority of the population — workers or their dependants — consequently have to sell their labour to the capitalist class in order to get money, gain access to these things and survive.\textsuperscript{17} In Australia workers and their dependants are a large majority making up about 70% of the population.\textsuperscript{18}

Furthermore, this relationship is not one of parallel existence but of direct antagonism. While greed is undoubtedly a feature of capitalism, competition is the fundamental force which drives employers to necessarily undermine workers’ wages and conditions. This is because capitalism disperses control and ownership of production across a multiplicity of competing decision centres, producing commodities for the market. By making employees work as hard as possible for as little pay as they can get away with capitalists can produce products more cheaply than average and thereby increase their profit margins if selling at the average price. If they fail to do this they will have nothing to reinvest into expansion and the latest technology. Production will be relatively expensive and they will lose market share and be driven out of business by rivals.\textsuperscript{19} For instance Qantas CEO Alan Joyce received an enormous $5 million salary in 2011 after announcing 1000 job cuts, which reduced labour costs by increasing the exploitation of the remaining workers. However, Joyce’s own personal remuneration was less than 1%
of the company’s annual profits; these were overwhelmingly reinvested back into the airline for fear of competition.\(^{20}\)\(^{21}\)

**Hegemony and Ideology**

The economic relationship between the capitalist and working class outlined above is maintained and reproduced through a political relationship structured through the institutions of the state and ideology. This political dominance is explicable in terms of Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’ which refers to an historical bloc of classes exercising political authority and leadership over subordinate classes. This is achieved through reciprocating balance of force and consent whereby the ruling classes always seeking to make force appear to be based on consent.\(^{22}\) Indeed the legitimacy of the liberal democratic state’s use of force is premised on such a social contract.\(^{23}\) However it is the ideological construction of this order as representing the common good of the national community that is of concern here. This is the key to situating my artwork within the political contestation that the crisis provokes.

In order to explain to what extent such ideologies can be challenged and in what manner it is first necessary to establish a definition of ideology. Here such a definition is outlined in the form of a modified version of the Marxist ‘dominant ideology thesis’ based on Gramsci’s pragmatist definition of ideology as simply the articulation of interests. To begin with a rudimentary theory of ideology, according to sociologist Goran Therborn, ‘ideology’ refers to the condition under which human beings live as conscious actors in a world which makes sense to them in different ways.\(^{24}\) Moreover, following political


theorist Jon Elster the investigation of ideology aims to explain why individuals in similar social situations accept the same views and/or produce them. In other words the analysis of ideology pertains to social consciousness rather than individual pathology or intellectual verity.25

The Gramscian definition of ideology modifies the most well-established Marxist explanation for social consciousness which has come to be called the ‘dominant ideology thesis.’26 This theory explains the existence of prevailing ideas in society in terms of the ruling class’ control of the ‘intellectual means of production.’27 It contends that since the media moguls, vice chancellors and government ministers who have the most power to shape ideas in society are also beneficiaries of capitalism, they and intellectuals aligned with them promote ideas which identify their interests with that of society as a whole, reinforce the legitimacy of their rule and undermine the ability of the working class to form a coherent alternative.28 This definition has the shortcoming of casting the subordinated classes as overly passive and elevating the ruling classes and those that consciously challenge them to a position somehow outside of ideology.

Remaining in the Marxist tradition, Gramsci rejects this problematic theory of ideology as necessarily top-down, deceptive and false and considers ideology simply as an articulation of interests.29 Here ‘interest’ means to be conscious of a want or wants while also knowing how to realise them.30 So ‘a capitalist, so long as he remains a capitalist, can only realise his wants by exploiting workers, while the latter’s realisation of their wants is likely to depend on collective organisation against him [sic].’31 Thus, capitalist ideology is not necessarily false as it often successfully explains real practical activity,

27 ibid.
although it does so from a biased class perspective. Ideology is inseparable from the process of class struggle through which antagonistic social agents attempt to consciously articulate their respective interests.

However, it does not follow from a pragmatist understanding of ideology that there is an equal ability of the ideologies of workers and capitalists to articulate their respective interests. For the reasons outlined in the ‘dominant ideology thesis’ the level of class consciousness is usually asymmetrical in favour of the capitalist class who do overwhelmingly control the production of ideas. This doesn’t mean workers passively accept these ideas, however they normally lack the coherent world view that would enable them to fully articulate their own interests. This capacity to do so is referred to by sociologist Anthony Giddens as revolutionary consciousness; the ‘recognition of the possibility of an overall reorganisation in the institutional mediation of power . . . and a belief that such a reorganisation can be brought about through class action’.  

In other words, the dominant ideology retards the capacity to conceive of an ultimate end to the misery caused by cycles of boom and bust, war and gross inequality whose cost is borne by the working class, and in doing so benefits the ruling class. In the words of Slavoj Žižek the force of this ideology is such that in contemporary society ‘It is easy for us to imagine the end of the world—see numerous apocalyptic films — but not the end of capitalism.’

Finally, the conflict between ideologies is manifest in the mind of the individual. Gramsci articulates this as a conflict between ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’. The phrase ‘common sense’ here refers to Gramsci, meaning an ‘incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any given society, [it is opposed to] “good sense” meaning practical empirical common sense in the English sense of the term.’

31 Alex Callinicos, Making History: Agency Structure and Change in Social Theory. (Brill Leidon: Boston, 2004), 147.
34 Gramsci, p.626.
35 Barker, p.67.
points to the process whereby indirect experience and struggle can contradict the prevailing ideology and lay the basis for counter-ideologies, especially in times of economic, political or military crisis. At the same time the hegemonic ideology must constantly adapt to remain an operable means of explaining the experience of the subordinated.

The current global crisis of capitalism is the broader context in which my studio work is positioned and to which it responds. Given the social, political and historical context that this crisis has created a theoretical Marxist framework is apt. This is not just because it is useful in evaluating the economic phenomenon of the crisis and the political fallout arising from it, but also because of the working class agency that Gramsci’s theory of ideology allows. Such a perspective provides good grounds on which to discuss the potential and limitations of an artistic response to these conditions. While my project is located in the broader context of the crisis, it specifically focuses on exclusionary nationalism in Australia. The next chapter will consider nationalism as an ideology and explain its class directionality and the political role it is playing amid the fallout that has followed the GFC. This will refine the specific links between my project, the post-GFC crisis and class agency hitherto established.
Chapter II

Nationalism and Hegemony

Nationalism: The Invention of Tradition

This chapter moves from the class dynamics of capitalism, to the specific ideology of nationalism and its history, political economy and class directionality. It will be argued that nationalism is a mechanism for maintaining capitalist hegemony historically and that this continues to be the case both in crisis wracked countries as well as in contemporary Australia. Such an argument establishes the general alignment between working class agency and an artistic challenge to exclusionary nationalism. However, the specific tensions and potentials of this alignment as regards Vault and Uncontainable will be the subject of Chapters III and IV.

National identity is one of the most important forms of social consciousness and agency. It depends upon both the institutional structuring of society around the nation state and the production of a sense of national belonging through the ideology of nationalism. During the post-GFC crisis the emergence of extreme forms of nationalism has been pronounced, whether in the policies and discourse of centrist political parties, far-right parties or in the violent actions of conspiratorial groups on the social fringe.\textsuperscript{36} This has especially been the case in Europe.

An elementary definition of nationalism is that it consists of a sense of belonging to a community connected by common language, history and descent with a correlating reverence of the nation-state above all else.\textsuperscript{37} Since almost every member of the human race is now the bearer of a national identity it may appear as an inherent attribute of

humanity. However, the first step to understanding the role nationalism is playing in the post-GFC world is to establish that it is historically contingent and socially constructed.

The emergence of nationalism was underpinned by the emergence of the nation-state during the gradual transition from feudalism to capitalism taking place in Europe since the 15th century. It is through this process that the practical basis for nationalism emerged, crystallising and producing the model which was to be exported around the world. Over this period merchant trade networks connected previously isolated feudal estates to each other and to cities or towns. This fostered the development of common dialects to enable effective trade. At the same time the local domains characteristic of military feudalism gave way to centralised absolutist states with standing armies and taxation to pay for them. Such state machinery depended on a bureaucracy which strengthened the development of common languages. These institutionalised military, economic and linguistic structures are what united the internal territory of a nation and demarcated it externally, laying the basis for the development of nationalism proper.

The political revolutions taking place between the English revolution of 1688 and the French revolution of 1789 were key in shaping nationalism as we understand it today. While the concept of the nation existed previously, these revolutions imbued it with a sense of collective belonging among those who lived within the new nation-states, at least to an extent. Such an understanding was represented in the new political structures established, for example the Bill of Rights in England, which increased the powers of parliament and limited the arbitrary rights of the monarchy. Such an understanding was also practically forged through the necessity of mobilising at least a large minority of the population to carry out a successful revolution against Absolutism. To mobilise support

for such a project it had to be pursued in the name of a national collective interest and identity among the various social classes involved.

The consolidation of nationalism culminated in a decisive push to establish national consciousness in the mass of the population in the late 19th century. This happened in a host of European states. The breakdown of feudal social hierarchies, linked doctrines of political equality, industrialisation and urbanisation all posed problems in terms of how the nation-state could establish and maintain loyalty, cooperation and compliance among its subjects.\textsuperscript{41} Despite being Europe’s most nationally conscious major state ‘French peasant school children in the Lozère were unable to say in 1864 to which state they belonged.’\textsuperscript{42} By the late 19th century the arms race preceding WWI posed the question of conscription and thus loyalty particularly acutely and domestic problems with cooperation compliance were also evident. In 1871 the working class and petit-bourgeoisie of Paris revolted, seized cannons from the French government and declared independence. Their revolutionary government, the Paris Commune ruled for two months before being defeated by the French military.\textsuperscript{43}

An important element of the effort to remedy this situation was a strategy of ‘inventing tradition’. National iconographies and tailored national histories were established along with the state schools, monuments and celebrations to transmit them. For example in France’s Third Republic state schools were set up as the secular equivalent of the Church from the late 1860’s and Bastille Day was created in 1880.\textsuperscript{44} The resulting sense of common identity and destiny is what Benedict Anderson calls an ‘imaginary political community.’ The members of a nation will largely never meet each other or even hear of each other, yet ‘in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.’\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{41} Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870 - 1914.“ In The Invention of Tradition, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 266.


\textsuperscript{43} Hobsbawm, p. 269.

\textsuperscript{44} ibid. p.271.
Nationalism, Class and Crisis

Despite the progressive role nationalism often played in the overthrow of arbitrary feudal rule and extending political rights and participation, it is important to consider its basic features in terms of the class antagonism under capitalism. If the capitalist class necessarily exploits the working class, and is compelled by fear of competition to lower wages and worsen conditions, nationalism becomes problematic because it presupposes a form of cross class unity. The idea of a common destiny, identity and interests between the workers and capitalists of a given nation obscures the extent to which capitalism is structured by a class antagonism of which the capitalist class is the beneficiary. Furthermore, nationalism is intimately connected to the idea that the capitalist nation-state can represent common good. As a result, it encourages workers to identify with the means of their own exploitation, that is, the nation-state that protects the capitalist’s right to substantively own and control the economy through property rights. If the privileged position of the capitalist class is maintained through a combination of force and consent then nationalism is a key element of maintaining the latter and justifying the former.

Finally, before commencing the discussion of my studio work, the understanding and framework hitherto established must be applied to the economic and political crisis currently sweeping the globe. First it must be said that the history of capitalism has been one of such crises. Under capitalism all production is tied to the profitable sale of commodities on the market. Periodically the conditions which ensure profitability and thus production itself are undermined. This results in an exacerbation of class antagonism as employers seek to extract greater profits from existing employees by reducing wages and worsening conditions. In addition, unemployment increases as investment is withdrawn, compounding the downturn by further reducing the ability of consumer markets to absorb products.

47 Alex Callinicos, The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx p.170-77.
While such processes have historical and national specificities, the fundamental conflict between the drive to profit and the material interests of the working class remains the same. Such conflict engenders social upheaval as workers attempt to defend their standards of living and livelihoods through various means. As episodes like the 1871 Paris Commune demonstrate, there is nothing inevitable about capitalist hegemony. From a capitalist perspective, the danger of such situations necessitates a range of responses. This often includes an intensification of nationalist ideology, a proven means for maintaining consent for capitalist rule and justifying the use of repression. Indeed, such episodes of upheaval were part of what provoked the decisive push to establish widespread nationalist consciousness in 19th century Europe.

In the present situation the social conditions created by the post-GFC crisis are particularly pronounced in Europe. Not because the poverty and disenfranchisement there is the greatest in absolute terms, but because living standards and employment have suddenly and sharply declined. Many governments have embraced austerity measures, or cuts to state spending as the solution to the ongoing sovereign debt crisis within European Union. This deepens the recession which provoked the cuts in the first place by decreasing the effective demand usually generated by public sector employment and welfare.48 As such, the popular hope for decent living conditions, security and full employment is either lost or tied to class struggle.49

In Greece class antagonism has reached a particularly intense point due to the extreme economic and social conditions which are now at Great Depression levels.50 As such it is a country where the relationship between crisis, class and nationalism is dramatically and emblematically illustrated. Immense cuts to state spending since 2009 have seen social

services reduced to the extent that state hospitals are now running out of basic necessities like gauze and syringes.\textsuperscript{51} However, the immense social problems and the fundamental absurdity of the austerity agenda have also triggered mass resistance. In the last 2 years there have been 17 general strikes against the austerity measures.\textsuperscript{52} This process of radicalisation represents a level of breakdown in consent for the rule of governments implementing austerity policies. Given that the European ruling class generally sees these as necessary to restore profitability this represents an immense problem from their perspective.

The current Greek government has attempted to propagate nationalism in an extreme and exclusionary form as one way to maintain control over the situation. In August 2012, while planning the next wave of austerity measures, the Greek Public Order Minister Nikos Dendias announced an anti-immigrant crackdown. 6000 ‘suspected illegal immigrants’ were detained with around 1200 transported to concentration camps.\textsuperscript{53} The justification given was that ‘What is happening now is [Greece's] greatest invasion ever. Since the Dorian invasion some 3,000 years ago, the country has never received such a flow of immigration.’\textsuperscript{54} However, the 2011 census shows Greece’s population is declining. Further, thousands of immigrants are leaving the country annually and the overwhelming majority of those detained in the raids were later released.\textsuperscript{55} These facts suggest that the crackdown was politically motivated. As has been shown, nationalism is

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54 ibid.
a proven mechanism that shaken elites can use to confront class solidarity, foster a popular identification with the government and set up a scapegoat for popular anger. This xenophobic political approach legitimises the Greek Fascists who have now won seats in parliament.

The scapegoating of ‘foreigners’ in this scenario is something that must be mentioned in more detail as it is the central to understanding the most disturbing forms of nationalism. Such a phenomenon emerges from the fact that the national ideal is fundamentally structured by exclusion. This is embodied in the state sanctioned notion of citizenship but usually extends to language, culture, religion and race to varying degrees. Confronted with struggle that must be suppressed, the ruling class resorts to intensifying nationalism and the state use of force it legitimates. If successful, the intensified feelings of despair and impotence in the population increase the appeal of extreme national pride as a form of psychic compensation. Simultaneously, the exclusion inherent to nationalism works to set up scapegoats at whom popular anger can be channelled through the kind of policies and rhetoric Nikos Dendias is pursuing. It is the feedback loop of despair, anger and scapegoating, fed by the centrist parties and rooted in vicious material deprivation, that sees the disturbing rise of the Nazis in Greece and the far-right increasingly across Europe.

**Australian Nationalism and Border Crimes**

The brand of nationalist border control currently evident in Greece is echoed in contemporary Australia. Since 1992 the Australian government has had a unique system of mandatory detention for all ‘unauthorised non-citizens’. Introduced by the Hawke-Keating Labor government, this depended on a system of largely desert-based detention camps isolated from the country’s civil institutions. Within the centres it was widely documented that even young children were drawn into systemic patterns of self-harm and violence. It was this system that laid the basis for even more extreme policies of the

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56 Grewcock, p.76.
conservative government of John Howard which was elected in 1996. 57

The emblematic scenario in the unfolding of these policies was the 2001 *Tampa Crisis.* On the 26 August 2001 the Norwegian vessel the MV Tampa rescued 433 asylum seekers from a sinking ferry in Australian waters. In response Howard’s government deployed the navy to apprehend them and prevent them from landing on Australian shores and claiming asylum. They were taken to the desolate island of Nauru off the Australian coast and detained in isolated and brutal conditions in what became the model for the Australian government’s use of ‘offshore processing’. After this, all asylum seekers attempting unauthorised entry to Australia were detained offshore as their claims were processed, forcibly removed to dangerous environments with the intention of their resettlement in countries other than Australia. This extended the alienation of interned asylum seekers from civil institutions and oversight and further curtailed their access to the Australian legal system and human rights protection.

The political discourse that accompanied these deterrence policies portrayed asylum seekers as a serious threat to the Australian population. They were painted as criminal given their association with people smuggling and also as potential terrorists launching an ‘assault on our borders’. 58 Such rhetoric wilfully disregarded the fact that the right to claim asylum is guaranteed by the 1951 Convention for the Protection of Refugees to which Australia is signatory. Furthermore, the logic of border protection precluded any acknowledgement of the individual stories or humanity of those claiming asylum. Despite the bi-partisan support for deterrence policies their impact was widely documented and debated. There was intense and sustained extra-parliamentary opposition and this ultimately culminated with the election of Kevin Rudd’s Labor government on a pro-refugee mandate in 2007. 59 Since then ‘border protection’ discourse and policy has continued. Amid strident calls to stop the evil of people smugglers, offshore processing

57 Grewcock, p.6.
was re-instated in August 2012.

Despite the social conditions being much less extreme than in Europe, the connection between border protection policies and class antagonism is just as evident in the Australia.\textsuperscript{60} For example, as Howard constructed asylum seekers as an enemy from which he had to protect the Australian population, he was introducing policy which directly attacked rights and living standards. The effects were such that, in 2000, some of the poorest people in Australia were found to be more concerned about asylum seekers than the imminent introduction of the regressive Goods and Services Tax which would make them even poorer.\textsuperscript{61} Similarly, as Julia Gillard re-instates offshore processing she hands back $60 billion p.a. in revenue to mining companies by abandoning a plan for increased taxation at the same time as announcing cuts to welfare.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Australian ‘border protection’ policies also have an ideological connection to the foundational illegitimacy of the Australian state. Australia is a settler colony that was predicated on denying the existence of indigenous peoples through the doctrine of Terra Nullius meaning ‘land belonging to no-one’. Given no treaty with indigenous peoples has ever been signed, Ghassan Hage argues that the absence of a legitimate basis for the Australian state haunts the national psyche, pathologically expressing itself through paranoia about border control. See Ghassan Hage, Against paranoid nationalism: searching for hope in a shrinking society. (Annandale, N.S.W.: Pluto Press, 2003).

\textsuperscript{61} Griffiths, passim.

Chapter III

Vault: Undermining Celebratory Nationalism

A Description of Vault

My artwork Vault is an artistic response to the Australian government’s nationalist border-protection policies. It is a large scale architectural installation made out of pine, medium density fibre board, white paint and a fully assembled Hills Hoist rotary clothes line. A false wall will be constructed, dividing a rectangular gallery space into two sections. Into the false wall there is a two meter deep alcove with a horizontal Hills Hoist clothes line extending out of the centre of the back wall. The alcove is constructed such that its entrance matches the dimensions of the top of the clothes line. It thus can function as a kind of vault door. When the winding mechanism that usually raises the line is used it opens the door and when it is lowered the door closes. This can be operated by the viewer. (see Figure 1)
Visually and physically the structure is prison-like. This prohibits access to a small enclosed space through a combination of a steel frame and taut wire. These materials are cold, hard and evoke a detention centre, cage or prison-like environment when the structure is configured in a physically restrictive manner. The taught wire, arranged in parallel rows evokes electric fencing, particularly in conjunction with the raw steel tubing of the Hills Hoist.

**The Hills Hoist as an Australian National Icon**

This section considers *Vault* as a socio-critical response to Australian border protection policies. It will be argued that through the re-orientation of the Hills Hoist in *Vault* the celebratory associations with the national character usually carried by the object are undermined by new associations with imprisonment and violence. Moreover, by turning the physical properties of the Hills Hoist against its prevailing celebratory associations, this re-orientation has strong affinities with the Situationist practice of détournement.

It is pertinent to begin with a brief history of the Hills Hoist, charting its construction as a national icon. The Hills Hoist is a rotary clothes line designed by Adelaide man Lance Hill. Unemployed after returning from WWII, Hill turned to marketing a clothes line he had originally improvised at the request of his wife. It is a curious fact that the first batch was produced using steel tubing salvaged from the dismantled anti-submarine boom which ran across Sydney Harbour during the war. After Hill successfully marketed his invention, its widespread use saw it constructed as a national symbol of Australian home life in the post-war boom period. Nearly every suburban home had one and its mythologisation represented the general tendency of nationalism to personalise the political identity embodied in citizenship. There is often an abundance of familial imagery in nationalist narratives that blur the distinct public and private realms characteristic of liberal capitalist society. For example, repression, war and exclusion are often justified in the name of defending the ‘mother country’ or honoring the ‘founding
fathers.’ 64

The construction of the Hoist as a national icon occurred through a number of overlapping processes. The fields involved are diverse including academic discourse, the mass media, state museums and state sponsored celebrations and rituals. These are united ideologically around the attempt to construct a particular kind of ‘inventiveness’ as a feature of the national character.

In academia industrial design objects have been used as evidence of the ‘inventiveness’ of the Australian people since the early 20th century.65 One important example is Australian historian and journalist C. E. W. Bean’s survey of the national ability to innovate in 1909. Bean wrote:

It is still a quality of the Australian that he can make some-thing out of nothing...he has had to do without the best things, because they do not exist here. So he has made the next best do; and, even when these are not at hand, he has manufactured them out of things which one would have thought it impossible to turn to any use at all. He has done it for so long that it has become much more than an art. It has long since become a part of his character, the most valuable part of it.66

The Hills Hoist fits comfortably within this image of rustic and resourceful pioneer innovation. It was originally an improvised invention made with scavenged resources and is characterised by a crude and functional simplicity. It is an example of making ‘the next best do.’ This is one of the reasons why the Hoist has consistently featured in processes designed to affirm national identity. An instructive example is its incorporation into the

64 Grewcock, p.76.
1988 Australian Bicentenary. This date marked 200 years of permanent European settlement, the celebration of which is central to maintaining Australia‘s foundational legitimacy as a settled colony. To this purpose the Federal government established the Australian Bicentennial Authority to fund, coordinate and plan projects. Extensive funding was given to attempts to identify an ‘Australian Style’ in all aspects of cultural life, including industrial design. Design objects were elevated to a level previously reserved for sports stars and colonial explorers in scores of celebratory publications. Peter Luck’s book *Australian icons: things that make us what we are* (1992) was a typical example of the bicentennial genre, in which the Hills Hoist is accorded an iconic status.67

![Image of the Hills Hoist in the Sydney 2000 Olympics Opening Ceremony](image)

**Figure 2.**

More recently, the Hills Hoist featured in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. As part of the opening ceremony a Hills Hoist was mounted on the back of a stilt-walker dressed in a silver jump-suit and helmet. The games are generally seen as a way to promote the host

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nation and the opening ceremony in particular is a platform on which to project such a national image. (see Figure 2)

**Vault and the Détournement of the Hills Hoist**

In *Vault* the celebratory, innocent, nationalist associations the object carries are undermined by the carceral connotations that arise from the way its installation restricts movement and re-casts the raw wire and steel as prison-like fencing. This act of subversion strongly resembles the Situationist practice of détournement. Détournement is French for ‘turnaround’ or ‘reversal’. It is an artistic practice conceived of by the Situationist Internationale, a small and highly influential French artistic movement founded in 1957 and dissolved in 1972. Marxist and politically motivated, the group is perhaps most known for its involvement in instigating the May 1968 uprising in Paris, although the extent of their involvement is still debated.68 A seminal definition of détournement was put forward by key Situationist theorist Guy Debord (1931-1994) in *A User’s Guide to Détournement* (1956). In essence, the practice consists of the creative disfiguration of elements and their recombination in new and surprising ways. This is done for the purpose of communicating radical political ideas by breaking down what Situationists call the ‘Chinese Walls of understanding.’69

Importantly, the ‘elements’ to be drawn on in such a practice are not exclusively artistic. They can come from literature and advertising as well as painting and sculpture for example. According to Debord détournement can encompass architecture and even entire neighbourhoods. This disregard for art as a discrete field or specific institutional practice issues from the premise that art and creativity should be used to change society rather than passively reflect its existing structures. This was a product of the group’s adherence to the Marxist dominant ideology thesis. Accordingly prevailing cultural rules such as those of high art were considered to be the product of capitalist domination and thus to

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67 ibid, p.3.
simply present a radical political message within their confines is contradictory. As a solution they offer détournement: a process where the negation of cultural or artistic rules coincides with a radical message resulting in a particularly powerful form of political communication. ⁷⁰

A classic example of the strategy was the ‘Notre Dame affair’ in 1950. During Easter mass at Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, Michael Mouře, an associate of those who would later go on to form the Situationist Internationale, took the pulpit dressed as a Dominican monk. In front of the massed audience he proceeded to read aloud a Nietzschian pamphlet proclaiming the death of god, provoking his arrest and violent outrage among the crowd.⁷¹ The customary religious and institutional authority accorded to the time, place, characteristic clothing and physical arrangement of the Easter Sunday mass were all turned against it for political ends. Although the political value of the act was much debated, it is this ‘turning’ that is the strategic heart of détournement.

Vault shares a number of affinities with détournement including a primarily political motivation, the use of reconfiguration and the use of materials from outside of common use in art. Further, it involves a literal, physical ‘turning’ that generates a semiotic ‘turning’ of the Hills Hoist. The shadow of violence and coercion is cast over its self-congratulatory nationalist aura.

**Vault as a Politically Communicative Juxtaposition**

In addition to its negative relationship to the Hills Hoist Vault consists of a politically communicative juxtaposition. The emblems in the work denote celebratory nationalism on the one hand and violent nationalism on the other. The reconfiguration of the Hills Hoist evokes a prison or detention centre at a time when the punitive imprisonment of

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⁷⁰ ibid.
⁷¹ Geczy, loc. cit.
refugees is central to Australian political discourse. The carceral connotations in Vault can be specifically linked to the contemporary Australian context and the mainstream media discourse surrounding punitive policies directed at asylum seekers. Here the image of a detention centre fence has featured centrally and frequently. Whether in tabloid coverage of conditions in detention, broadsheets covering the opening of new centres or television news reporting on protests, the detention centre fence has been an emblem of these policies. (see Figures 3 and 4)

Figure 3.
The juxtaposition of emblems of violent and celebratory nationalism — the Hills Hoist and the immigration detention centre — can be understood as politically communicative when considered in light of Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein’s (1898-1948) concept of ‘dialectical montage.’ ‘Dialectical montage’ is a montage effect where the juxtaposition of two shots, between which there is some kind of conflict, has the ability to make an abstract concept tangible. Tensions and discord between juxtaposed images generate political insights through inference.\(^2\)

A seminal example is Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The film is a dramatisation a mutiny that occurred in 1905 during the failed revolution against Russian Tsarism. Aboard the battleship *Potemkin* the crew revolted against their oppressive Tsarist officers after being served an inedible soup made of rotten meat. Upon refusing to eat it a group of them were lined up to be shot, triggering the mutiny. Scene 5 of the film...
cuts between rapid action shots of the crew throwing officers overboard and an extreme close up of maggots on a rotting slab of meat. (see Figure 5) The jump from an action sequence to a stationary piece of meat makes no sense in terms of a conventional narrative sequence. However, when considered in terms of ‘dialectical montage’ it can be read as a powerful piece of political communication. The jump between the conflicting shots creates an abstract analogy between the decomposing meat and the decomposing social order embodied in the mutiny. This is significant because Russia under Tsarism was dominated by a static feudal world view according to which all natural objects, from God, to the Tsar, to peasants, animals and pebbles were considered chained together in a hierarchy that reflected God’s perfectly ordered universe. The dynamic conception of the social order inferred in the analogy with rotting meat contradicts this view and validates the revolution. Society is subject to the laws of change and transformation just like common matter.


Within this framework the clashing juxtaposition of associations in *Vault* can be read as politically meaningful. As has been shown, the celebratory nationalism associated with the Hills Hoist is part of an ideology that fosters the illusion of unity between the political figures like John Howard and Julia Gillard and those whose living standards they undermine. Simultaneously, the prison or immigration detention centre evoked by the reconfiguration of the Hills Hoist denotes a nationalism of exclusion that scapegoats...

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74 As regards an interpretation of the physical and semiotic ‘turning’ of the Hills Hoist in *Vault*, the temporal juxtaposition of images in filmic montage can be substituted for the spatial coincidence of clashing physical and visual associations within the gallery installation. Despite formal differences, the key element of politicised juxtaposition remains at play in both cases.
refugees to channel the anger caused by disenfranchisement and exploitation away from those that benefit from it. These ideological functions are two sides of the same coin, both operating to ensure capitalist hegemony and the misplaced loyalty of the exploited. Within an Eisensteinian schema their conflicting spatial coincidence in Vault infers this very link. Furthermore, it is a message that takes on heightened relevance given the pervasive political use of exclusionary nationalism as a palliative for the social devastation wreaked amid the fallout from the GFC as it continues to unfold.

Figure 6.

A comparison between *Vault* and the installation *Swinging Doors* (2009) by contemporary Turkish artist Ahmet Ögüt is useful for situating my *Vault* in relation to contemporary art practices (see Figure 6). In *Swinging Doors* Ögüt attaches two Italian police riot shields to either side of a narrow corridor linking two sections of the gallery in
Milan, Italy. Whenever anyone passed through the corridor the shields would slap together, recreating the intimidating sound of riot police beating their shields with batons to disperse protesters. The installation also recalls the saloon doors typical of Italian ‘spaghetti Western’ films.

Like Vault, Swinging Doors employs a technique approximating détournement to critically deal with the violence of the state by creating a coincidence of conflicting associations. On the one hand the real police violence is evoked through the use of authentic riot shields, and on the other their reconfiguration re-creates the saloon doors typical of the spaghetti Western. As with Vault, the tension between the two infers a political collusion. Perhaps the real violence of the state is obliquely legitimated by the glorification of renegade violence in popular culture, in this case the Italian ‘spaghetti Western’ genre, known for its strikingly choreographed combat scenes. Specifically, this work probably speaks to the memory of the dramatic police brutality in Genoa, Italy surrounding the 2001 protests against the G8 summit. Police savagely beat scores of protesters leaving one British man in a coma in what Amnesty International described as the most severe suspension of democratic rights in any Western country since World War II. Here the renegade outlaws, the cowboys, were not the protesters but the police themselves.

Art and Agency

The previous analysis has shown that Vault represents a socio-critical mode of art practice that contests nationalist ideology through a process approximating détournement. However, for the purposes of addressing the questions that surround art and political agency more generally, it is useful to consider the work critically as regards the Situationist view of the strategy. Ultimately, through détournement the Situationists reject

art practice as such. Since the group adheres to Marx’s dominant ideology thesis the prevailing cultural rules such as those of high art are considered to be the product of capitalist domination and thus any attempt to simply present a radical political message within their confines is bankrupt. In *A User’s Guide to Détournement* Debord says uncompromisingly: ‘art can no longer be justified as a superior activity, or even as a compensatory activity to which one might honourably devote oneself.’

In this vein, it could be argued that while *Vault* clearly interrogates the politics of celebratory nationalism, it does not entail any attempt to detourn the prevailing rules of the contemporary art institution. Since, contemporary art is highly integrated into both corporate culture and the imperatives of the state this perhaps represents a failure to expose the extent to which the prevailing assumption that art is a zone of free criticism and dissent is itself ideological. Julian Stallabrass describes the contemporary art world as one where transgression and novelty are rules in themselves. It is a world of ‘sharks and vitrines, paint and dung, boats and modernist sculpture, oval billiard tables.’ Further, it is a cultural sphere often characterised by an unremitting negativity that contrasts starkly with the sentimentality of popular culture. Such relentless breaking of convention ideologically functions to send the message that a zone of freedom and critique can be nurtured by a capitalist system that subordinates all life to the generation of profit. As has been shown, it is this very underlying crisis prone, hierarchical and exploitative social system that exclusionary nationalism functions to preserve. At a fundamental level there is the potential for *Vault* to be critically denuded through ideological recuperation into the socio-political order it is supposed to criticise.

The tension within *Vault* that such a critique illuminates is emblematic of the broader dilemmas that have historically surrounded socio-critical art practice. In *Aesthetic Theory* German philosopher Theodore Adorno (1903-1969) says that ‘absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into conflict with the perennial un-freedom of the

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78 Debord, passim.
80 ibid. p. 6.
81 ibid. p.6-7.
whole.\textsuperscript{82} *Uncontainable*, represents a shift away from the particular freedoms of art towards an activist intervention into broader society.

\textsuperscript{82} Adorno, p.1.
Chapter IV

Uncontainable: Intervening in the Un-Freedom of the Whole

A Description of Uncontainable

Uncontainable (2011), shares with Vault the theme of government border protection policies. Specifically the conditions in Australia’s immigration detention centres inspired the concept for the work. It was a large scale public installation located on the main avenue of the University of Sydney’s Camperdown campus for a period of several weeks and funded by the University of Sydney Union as part of their annual Verge Arts Festival. The project was designed, coordinated and conceived by myself and refined and executed collaboratively through the Social Justice Art Group83 set up within the Sydney University Anti-Racism Collective84 and subject to its democratic decision making processes. At the time of its production around 7000 asylum-seekers were in immigration detention centres scattered around Australia. In the Curtin detention facility forty hours North of Perth the accommodation for detainees consists of converted shipping containers pushed together and fitted with bunk beds. This is also the case in other centres.

The artwork involved constructing a ‘Reverse Detention Centre’ that informs, criticises and inspires empathy through recreating and subverting the built environment of the detention facility. It was a multimedia installation where artists made-over both the inside and outside of a shipping container with a range of materials. This consisted of painting the container white like those used for immigration detention, surrounding it with rented fencing, erecting signs, fitting it out with bunk beds and installing a projector and horn speakers. (see Figures 7 and 8) The intention was to subvert this usually institutional environment and make it do things one wouldn’t expect it to do. The horn speakers were

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modified so that instead of blaring instructions they played audio recordings of testimony gathered from refugees who have experienced detention. Likewise, the mock-official signage was designed with the intention of subverting the signs usual function of instructing, ordering or warning. The modified signs were official in style but offered information about the locations of detention centres. A projector inside the container played a short documentary outlining the past successes and current challenges of the pro-refugee campaign with viewers able to use the bunk beds as cinema seats.

Figure 7.
Social Justice Art Group. *Uncontainable* (2011) (concept art). Shipping container, fencing, bunk beds, speakers, mixed media. Approx 5m x 3m x 3m.

\[84\] This is an activist group funded by the University of Sydney Student Representative Council.
Opposing ‘Border Protection’ Policies

In *Uncontainable* the creative dissemination of information about the Federal government’s mistreatment of asylum seekers was complemented by a number of practices that tied the work to the broader campaign against these policies. This reflected the fact that the artwork’s production was tied to the Sydney University Anti-Racism Collective that is in turn associated with Sydney Refugee Action Coalition (RAC). RAC petitions against mandatory detention and offshore processing were attached to the bunk beds giving the audience the opportunity to take a clear stance on the policies, while the fact sheets were provided to equip them to argue against the policy. The date of the upcoming RAC protest was also displayed at the end of the documentary playing inside the container giving the audience a public outlet to express opposition to the policies and
an opportunity to begin organised involvement in the campaign. These impersonal modes of communication were combined with regular stalls out the front of the container providing good chance to initiate discussions with passers-by on the university’s busiest thoroughfare, convince people of our position and build contacts for the Sydney University Anti-Racism Collective.

The effectiveness of such campaigning was demonstrated during the Howard era. In 2001 the majority of the population supported turning back all refugee boats in Australian waters. By 2004 this was a minority and in 2007 Kevin Rudd was elected on a pro-refugee mandate to end offshore processing and get children out of detention. Over this period the large broad based community campaign disseminated information and held protests to build the confidence of opponents of the policy and intervene into mainstream media discourse. The campaign encompassed grassroots activist groups like RAC and Rural Australians for Refugees, NGOs such as Amnesty International, trade unions, religious groups and student groups such as the Sydney University Anti-Racism Collective.

RAC’s emphasis on trade unions was of particular importance to the success of the campaign, and reflects the Marxist class politics of the socialists who established the group in 2000. The group encouraged unions to pass motions against the policies, laying the basis for unionists to speak on the platform at rallies and opening the way for them to bring contingents of their activists and members along to protests. Such an approach also saw pro-refugee information circulated in union publications and enabled pro-refugee activists to address union meetings. As well as building community opposition this strategy utilised the Australian Labor Party’s connection to trade unions whose delegates make up half of the delegates at the ALP national conference that sets the party’s platform. Said approach enabled opposition in unions to flow into the ALP and undermine bi-partisan support for both offshore processing and mandatory detention. By the 2004 National Conference the pro-refugee group inside the ALP, Labor for Refugees,

85Shand, passim.
86Griffiths, passim.
had the support of the party’s entire left faction with the exceptions of Julia Gillard, Jenny Macklin and Martin Ferguson. RAC’s approach also laid the groundwork for organised workers to use their power to disrupt the policy directly. For example in 1998, after calls from the U.N Committee on Torture and Amnesty International, action by the Transport Workers Union in Perth prevented the deportation of a Somali asylum seeker.

Uncontainable and Transitional Practice

In both its form and its aims Uncontainable is comparable to what Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn has described as Transitional Practice. Emerging out of the diverse and contested Conceptual Art movement, Transitional Practice was comprised of a range of radical cultural practices. These were difficult to categorise, diffuse and often involved work with community groups, trade unions, campaign groups and radical political parties.

The fact that such practices emerged out of the Conceptual Art movement is significant. It points to the way the rule-breaking logic of art itself was built into their development. Emerging in the 60’s, Conceptual Art sought to push the limits of the kind of criticism that could be pursued through art. Burn’s definition of Conceptual Art was a practice that ‘inquires into the nature of the concept “art”…[its] intention…is to devise a functional change in art…’ In other words it was a self-reflexive practice that interrogated the unquestioned assumptions of art itself and to an extent their ideological function. However, by the early 1970’s once critical practices were firmly re-incorporated back into the establishment. Sheets of typewritten paper were being exchanged as commodities on the art market and leading conceptualists had built successful careers within the

90 Stallabrass, p.1.
As a result, in 1981 Burn declared that Conceptual Art had failed, but that it was a failure that also marked a kind of success. The redeeming feature of Conceptual Art was that it was transitional, it exposed the ideological constraints of the dominant art milieu and illuminated the way out of art into a broader field of politically engaged cultural practices. An example of such practice is the School Press project set up by conceptual artists Paul Wood, David Rushton and others in Edinburgh, U.K. This worked to design and produce leaflets, posters and brochures for campaigns such as Rock Against Racism, rank-and-file trade union groups and political parties such as the Socialist Workers Party. Ian Burn himself was involved in the Art and Working Life project with Terry Smith, Sandy Kirby and others. This again produced material and posters for a range of trade union community groups and the campaign for Aboriginal rights. For example Art and Working Life designed material for the Combined Unions Against Racism Campaign in the 1980’s including the poster *The Workplace in no Place for Racism* (1985) (Figure 9.).

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92 Wood, p.54.
93 Piper, loc. cit.
94 Wood, p.66.
The practice of contemporary Indonesian artists collective Taring Padi (Fangs of the Rice Plant) in many ways parallels *Uncontainable* and the Transitional Practices identified by Ian Burn. The group was founded by artists and art students following the protests that toppled Indonesia’s authoritarian president general Suharto in 1998. On December 21 of that year a group of artists met at the Yogyakarta office of the Legal Aid Organisation and announced the founding of Lembaga Budaya Kerakyatan Taring Padi (Institute of People Oriented Culture: Taring Padi). Their credo is ‘Good art is art that serves the people. And that is easily understood by them.’

To this end, the approximately 15 active members of the group collaborate with grassroots political organisations to create posters, banners, paintings, puppets, t-shirts and performances to be deployed in campaigns. These range from those demanding rights for poor farmers and factory workers, to opposing corruption and environmental exploitation, to combating social inequality and violence. As well as being produced through collaboration with NGOs the work is produced collectively among the artists themselves through an informal process of group critique, paralleling the collective process undertaken to produce *Uncontainable*. Buruh bersatu (*The Workers Unite*) (2003) (Figure 10) is a large format print that goes beyond the group’s many slogan-based single issue posters to present a multilayered, witty depiction of the Indonesian workers movement, complete with workers sabotaging machinery and porcine faced capitalists throwing money like confetti. This imagery reflects the stark divisions and tensions within Indonesian society; along with Russia Indonesia has had the world’s highest growth in income inequality since 2006.

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96 ibid.
Figure 10.
Transitional Practice, Class and Crisis

*Uncontainable* is integrated into a campaign against the Federal Government’s border protection policies, placing it within a broader activist artistic tendency exemplified in Transitional Practices and the work of *Taring Padi*. Moreover, it engages critically with such policies at a time of acute global political and economic crisis when extreme nationalism is being politically mobilised as a palliative for deteriorating social conditions. As such, opposing these ideologies has implications beyond the immediate Australian context in that it involves confronting one of the key mechanisms that is used to maintain capitalist hegemony in periods of crisis.

Given this context, Gramsci’s theory of ideology and the working class agency it allows provides a useful lens to reflect on the mode of response embodied in *Uncontainable*. Gramsci points out that the way in which prevailing ideologies are contradicted is two-fold. First there is indirect contradiction, which in *Uncontainable* is evident in challenges to government policy that are pursued through the dissemination of information. The second is what Gramsci calls ‘good sense’ or practical action by the working class that directly contradicts prevailing ideologies. A dramatic example of ‘good sense’ is the eleven day strike that occurred in Port Phillip Mills in Melbourne in May 1993. To take place the strike required the practical unity of Serbs, Croats and Macedonians at a time when hostilities were high as their homeland was being riven with war and ethnic cleansing. However, on the 24 hour picket lines they not only displayed unity in action but developed an astounding friendship that continued long after the successful strike.98

This example illustrates the potential of working class struggle to provide a compulsion to overcome national and ethnic divisions where they exist. Conversely, indirect campaigns against exclusionary nationalism may weaken such divisions and enable struggle. This latter point relates to *Uncontainable* because the artwork forms part of the broader RAC campaign that places particular emphasis on trades unions. Unions are

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98 Griffiths, p.10.
organisations that exist for the exercise of working class agency and are thus sites where there is the potential to activate the aforementioned reciprocity between class agency and anti-racism or anti-nationalism. In a period where the popular hope for decent living conditions, security and full employment is increasingly either lost or tied to class struggle, the potential role of artistic interventions in enabling activity such as that took place at Port Phillip Mills or is currently taking place in Greece is highly relevant. This is the case whether it is in the form of artistic initiatives like the Combined Unions Against Racism campaign posters, an installation like Uncontainable or the woodcut prints of Taring Padi.
Conclusion

Across the globe post-1989 consensus about ‘the end of history’ is being fractured as people revolt against what was supposed to be the ideal social system. The immense social deprivation that has sparked the Occupy movement or the 17 general strikes in Greece has also created the impetus to struggle for an alternative to the inequality, exploitation and periodic crisis that characterise capitalism. At the same time this antagonism, unfolding along class lines, has seen governments across the world intensify exclusionary forms of nationalism. This is entirely consistent with Hobsbawm’s argument that nationalism has historically been a key mechanism of maintaining capitalist hegemony, doing so through justifying state violence, creating a false sense of common interest between the ruling classes and those they subordinate and setting up scapegoats through exclusion.

It is within this global context that Uncontainable and Vault respond to the Australian Governments indefinite detention of asylum seekers in remote onshore and offshore camps. The exclusionary nationalism embodied in these Federal ‘border protection’ policies has gone hand in hand with attacks on the working class, as successive governments pursued these policies in conjunction with regressive taxation and welfare cuts. In Australia the link between class antagonism and nationalism is just as evident as in Europe, albeit in a less intense form.

Both of my major studio works respond critically to the political use of exclusionary nationalism, but do so in markedly different ways. Vault is a socio-critical response to Australian border protection policies. In the large scale gallery installation, a strategy resembling Situationist détournement is used to undermine the Australian nationalist icon of the Hills Hoist which has been constructed as an emblem of the innovative national character in the period since World War II. The re-orientation of the familiar appliance complicates its positive nationalist associations with connotations of violence and coercion. Moreover, Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of ‘dialectical montage’ demonstrates how Vault articulates the connection between celebratory and exclusionary nationalism.
The clash between these conflicting associations in the work infers their political connection; both celebratory and violent nationalism operate to ensure capitalist hegemony and the misplaced loyalty of the exploited.

*Uncontainable* represents a fundamentally different mode of response. The large-scale public installation is primarily a vehicle for the dissemination of information and the mobilisation of opposition against the Federal Government’s ‘border protection’ policies. The fact-sheets, petitions and protests that made up a key aspect of *Uncontainable* reflect its connection to the broader refugee rights campaign through the Sydney University Anti-Racism Collective and RAC. The work was thus incorporated into a broader, long term campaign whose strategy saw public opinion shift dramatically against punitive asylum seeker policies between 2001 and 2007 when Kevin Rudd was elected on a pro-refugee mandate. However, the mode of practice embodied in the work is different from straight-out activism because it emerges from the very rule-breaking logic that is valued in art. Comparable practices were shown to have emerged out of the Conceptual Art movement, what Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn termed ‘Transitional Practices’. An illuminating contemporary parallel exists between these practices and the Indonesian artists collective Taring Padi (Fangs of the Rice Plant) that emerged from the protests that toppled the Indonesian dictator General Suharto. They work with activist groups, organised workers and Non-Government Organisations, producing everything from performances to posters to be used in campaigns.

It has been the contention of this paper that Gramsci’s theory of ideology provides a useful framework in which to consider the relationship between *Uncontainable* and class agency in a time of heightened class conflict. Following Gramsci’s theory of ideology, campaigns against exclusionary nationalism may weaken divisions based on nationality or race and enable working class struggle. This is pertinent to consider in relation to *Uncontainable* since it is connected to the broader RAC campaign which places particular importance on working with trade unions. These organisations exist as a means to mobilise class agency in defence of wages and conditions. Accordingly they are sites where there is the possibility of sparking the mutually reinforcing relationship between
class agency and anti-racism or anti-nationalism. At a time when the hope for reasonable standards of living, employment and social security is increasingly contingent upon struggle, *Uncontainable* points to the role artistic interventions can play in strengthening such activity.

In their different approaches, *Vault* and *Uncontainable* have contrasting strengths and limitations. Considered in relation to the writing of British art historian Julian Stallabrass, it can be argued that while *Vault* clearly interrogates the politics of celebratory nationalism, it does not entail any attempt to engage with the ideology embodied in the contemporary art institution itself. Contemporary art is highly integrated into both the market and the imperatives of the state at a number of levels, and this suggests the possibility that the critical potential in *Vault* may be denuded through incorporation into the ideological order it aims to oppose. However, this is not to set up a simple hierarchy whereby activist art is superior to socio-critical art. As Ian Burn’s concept of Transitional Practice indicates, as art becomes more politically instrumental its status shifts towards that of propaganda. Where *Uncontainable* extends its political import it diminishes the extent to which it exercises the particular freedom of art. What this mercurial freedom is exactly is beyond the scope and focus of this essay but remains an important theme for future discussion. Leaving this question unanswered, it remains that the pronounced tension between art and political agency in this body of work reflects the charged context in which it was produced. On the one hand *Vault* is a reflective and critical response to lamentable social conditions, exercising the particular freedom of art, and on the other *Uncontainable* is an attempt to intervene in the greater un-freedom of the whole. Both are situated at what is for better or worse a historical turning point brought about by a ‘once in a lifetime crisis of capitalism‘.
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