



ess
burgher
citizen

Population
citizenry
town dweller
burgess

city dweller townie

fringe dweller
metropolitan

suburbanite
commuter
exurbanite

slummer

suburban
peasant

colonist
squatter

migrant
alien

ethnic
native

aborigine
autochthon

ISLE OF REFUGE

ETHNIC CAGING

I have had no direct experience of the conditions in which 'boat people' and others find themselves following their 'capture' by the Australian State. Apart from having met and spoken to some refugees who have now settled in Australia, like many people, my experience is primarily through the media. Most vivid in my consciousness are intimations of caging practices: people behind fences, hands clutching wires, guards. I've seen the films and the photos, and listened to and read the reports of government officials justifying the way they 'handle' the situation. Of course, in the well-established traditional pattern of knowledge dissemination, the 'point of view' of the caged, from the budge to the prisoner, is seldom or never heard. The government categorises as 'non-persons' those who have attempted illegally to enter Australia's internationally recognised territories.

To many, the images of these 'ethnics behind cages' — for this is how they come across — are shocking. Even if one is supportive of the practice and does not feel particular empathy towards the 'caged', the practice still stands out as *extraordinary*. Indeed, a nationalist register is sometimes evoked to call this 'ethnic caging' un-Australian. It strikes many Australians as so shockingly 'other' to the Australia they experience in their everyday life. It is certainly different from the 'tolerant' Australia we commonly experience in our everyday life.

The reason why the images of 'ethnic caging' can shock in a tolerant society is obvious enough. At the most basic, ethnic caging appears as a negation of the *historical direction* Australia is pictured to have taken within multicultural discourse: multiculturalism as the historical rise of an ethic of goodwill towards ethnic otherness. If nothing else, multiculturalism encompasses a present struggle by the Australian State to appear to be 'nice' to ethnic otherness in contrast to a past history constructed as a time when Australia was 'not so nice' — the White Australia Policy, assimilation, etc. The 'then we were nasty, now we are nice' polarity clearly structures the imaginary history of multiculturalism and underlies most of its conceptual apparatus. In this context, ethnic caging *appears* as a historico-ethical reversal.

There is, however, a more recent comparative multicultural paradigm within which ethnic caging stands out as an equally shocking phenomenon. Here, the comparison is international rather than historical. It has emerged in light of the atrocities

associated with Eastern European nationalism, particularly the ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian wars. This comparison is structured around what is conceived as two radically different types of nationalism: a nationalism of extermination and a nationalism of tolerance. One is an 'Eastern' nationalism which always aims to eradicate ethnic otherness. The other is a 'Western' nationalism which always aims towards the appreciation and the valuing, and therefore the protection, of this ethnic otherness. Clearly, multicultural Australia is perceived here as very well entrenched in the 'Western' camp, while the 'Eastern' camp is constructed as totally other.

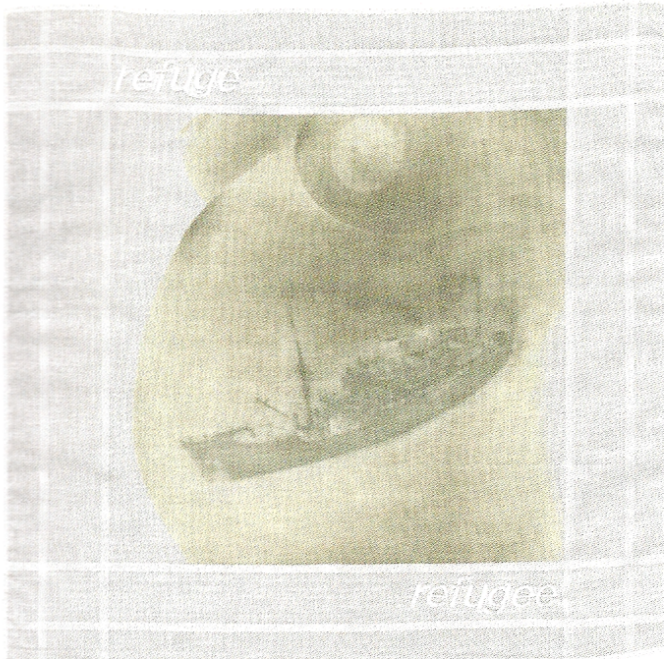
It is clear why ethnic caging shocks within the above dichotomy. The concentration-camp-like images it fosters make ethnic caging appear closer to ethnic cleansing than to anything remotely linked to multicultural appreciation and tolerance. The lack of respect for the humanity of the people concerned, the caging bureaucracy set up to deal with the 'non-people', accusations that institutional procedures are not being respected and that due process is not being followed in dealing with the 'caged', all of this works to position these practices further in the domain of 'Eastern otherness'. Are these remote northern outposts of Broome and Port Hedland really part of an Australia that wants itself to be so nicely tolerant? How can they be?

The government is clearly aware of this 'image problem', and many of its pronouncements on the issue aim at distancing the 'nature of Australian society' from 'what is happening at Port Hedland'. Port Hedland is 'not Australian society' in the same way the refugee seekers are 'non-persons'. At first sight, this *idea* of a non-social space inhabited by non-people does not seem like a credible idea, but the message the government intends to convey is implicitly quite efficient and credible: dealing with the illegal refugee seekers in this way does not reflect in any way on the values Australians hold regarding how their society should be internally structured. The fact that Australians are committed to kill, if necessary, the soldiers of an invading army does not mean that Australian society values killing. If we are willing to be nasty in protecting our nice nation, it does *not* mean that we have stopped being a nice nation.

So, the issues raised by the illegal arrivals are shown — convincingly, one must add — to have nothing to do with *how* Australians live their lives inside Australia. They have to do with a different set of issues such as: Does Australia have a territorial



Mahmoud Yekta *Sorry* 2003 still from video installation dimensions variable Courtesy the artist



Sue Saxon & Anne Zahalka *Displaced Persons* (detail) 2003 photographic images on white handkerchiefs 160 x 200 x 10 cm Courtesy the artists

integrity or doesn't it? Are we a nation capable of protecting our borders or aren't we? Are we capable of enforcing the international procedures set out for entering our nation, and that are followed by thousands of migrants, or are we going to allow people to 'jump the queue'? We can see how these questions are clear governmental questions: are we or are we not in control of the national social space?

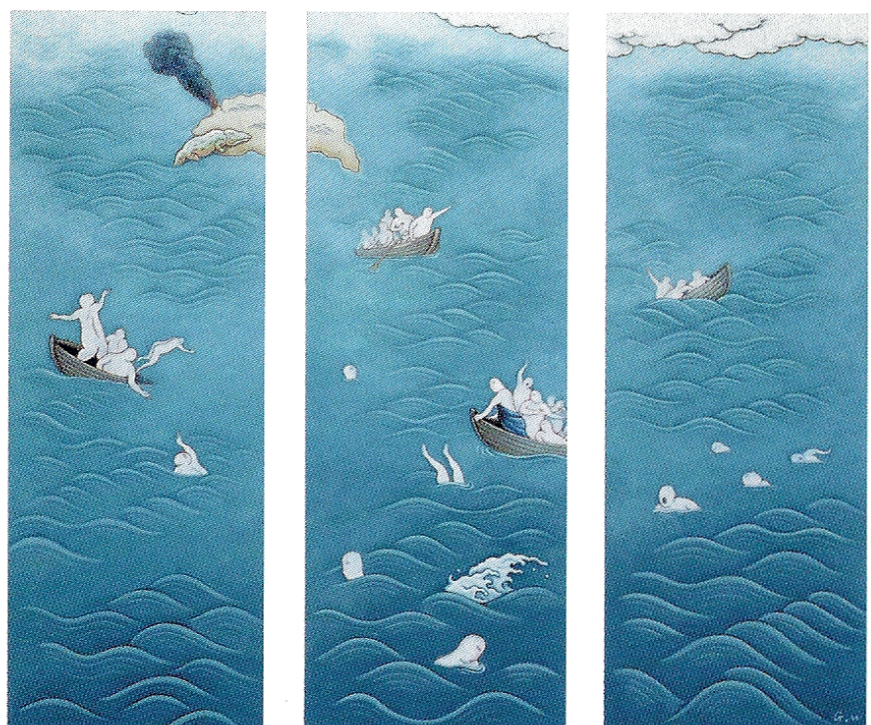
Although the practice of ethnic caging is morally abhorrent, the government does make sense in stressing that illegal border crossings cause problems for the nation in terms of the issues raised above. What is questionable, however, is the neat separation between the internal problems of a nation (social organisation, social values) and its external problems (defence of borders, sovereignty) that is implied by this mode of argument. Can 'we' really be nice to ethnics in the internal organisation of the nation and cage them in its external organisation without there being any relation between the two?

This does not mean that the way 'we' treat illegal refugee seekers is bound to affect the way 'we' end up treating ethnic otherness within the nation. My critical intent is more analytical than prescriptive. I want to argue that the mode of categorising and dealing with national otherness in the process of defending the nation from external threats is intrinsically linked to the way national otherness is categorised and dealt with internally. Both emanate from the same structure of categorisation of national otherness, but they are different deployments of this structure in different contexts. That is, as far as ethnic caging is concerned, the mode of categorising ethnic otherness implied in the context of perceiving it as an external threat to the nation is not at all unrelated to the way ethnicity is perceived internally within multiculturalism. In fact, I want to argue that ethnic caging is best understood in the same way a symptom is conceived in psychoanalysis: a phenomenon which expresses a repressed structure that constitutes and underlies all of the reality of which it is a part. In this sense, the categories of ethnic caging express a structure of perceiving ethnicity which

constitutes and underlies all of Australian society rather than being external to it. It reveals the whole construct on which the tolerant society is erected.

During the Bosnian war, when the Bosnian Serbs became nasty, it was not because they were inherently different from us or from anybody else as nationals. It was because what was at stake was the very formation of a Bosnian Serb national will. The Bosnian Serbs were not fighting over 'Who is going to live in my nation?' They were fighting over 'Will my Bosnian national will live and order the nation?' So, here we have an example of nation-building turning nasty and deadly precisely because what was at stake was not the health of the Bosnian national body, but the life or death of a Bosnian national will capable of governing this body. The quest for ethnic purity is the quest of an ethnic will that is still in formation and still aiming for dominance within the nation. The tolerance of impurity is the preserve of the already well-established ethnic will, secure in its domination of the nation. Nationalists in quest of a national will are not willing or capable of dealing and coping with other national wills. They exterminate them.

When we have a situation where the issue of the national will has been reasonably settled — where the national will has achieved an enduring, although never final, capacity to keep otherness in check, and feels secure in its capacity to stop this otherness from forming a counter-will — national wills are more easygoing with national otherness. This is when they tolerate/not tolerate, accept/not accept rather than merely exterminate. This is when we get a national managerial parlance: 'You come here, you go there.' 'I don't mind you living here.' 'We're better off if you live there.' At the same time, however, while being more pleasant when dealing with national otherness, the national will is still constantly aware of the danger of the otherness constituting itself into a national will and has to ensure that this otherness does not do so and so come to endanger the national will's existence as such. This is why national otherness, even when it is tolerated, has always to be under the threat of extermination to ensure it does not 'take over'.



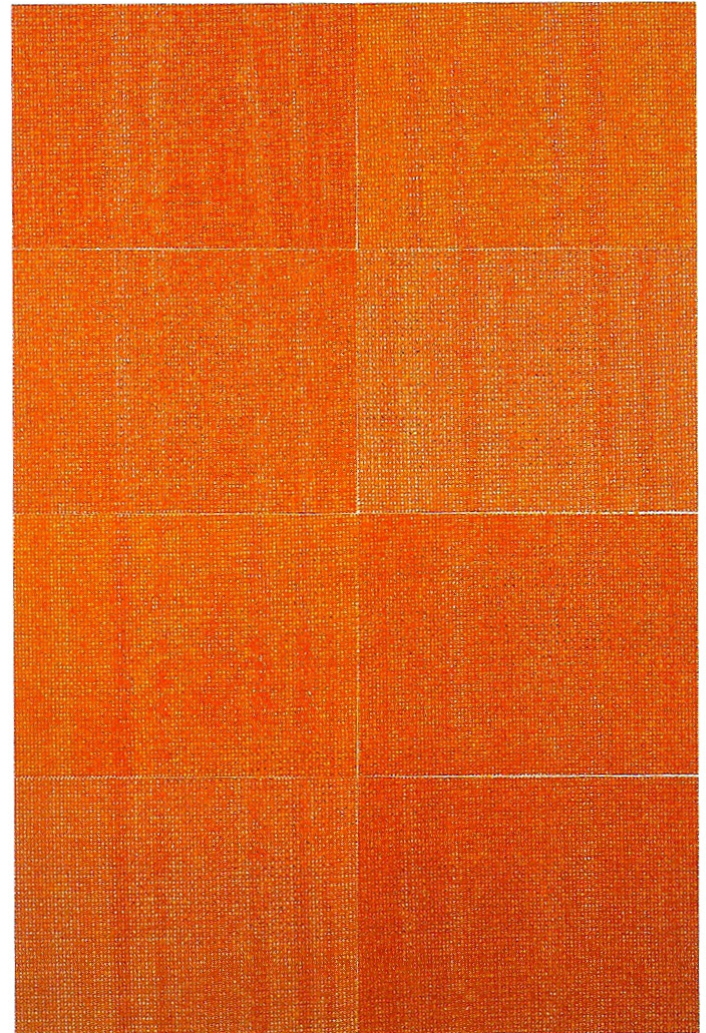
Guan Wei *Island no. 2* 2001 acrylic on canvas 137 x 165.5 cm Courtesy Sherman Galleries Collection: Anne Summers & Chip Rolley

If we take this brief analysis to Australia and examine the way in which national otherness is conceived within it by the White dominant culture, we find another reason why the series of differentiating criteria that Australian multiculturalism operates with in terms of 'nice'/'not so nice' nation-building, extermination/tolerance, Eastern/Western nationalism are not as dramatically different as multiculturalist discourse would like them to be.

White Australia has not, of course, always been tolerant, as the multiculturalists remind us. Well before the caging of illegal refugees, there were many examples of other instances of caging in Australian history. The Australian colonising national will exterminated and caged Aboriginal people literally and metaphorically, and, in an exemplary fashion, started valuing them when they no longer constituted a communal counter-will in themselves — when they were no longer capable of endangering the British-constituted colonising national will. More recently, Australians engaged in a massive exercise during World War II of caging and detaining 'ethnics', including some who actually held Australian citizenship.

Why were Italians and Germans who were 'tolerated' in the 1930s and early 1940s detained and caged during World War II? Because wars emphasise the problematic nature of the national will. Many things that are perceived as harmless in peacetime become perceived by the dominating national will as dangerous for national survival in wartime. This also explains anti-Arab violence during the Gulf War. The national will cannot cope with the idea of others who may potentially subvert it by acting in the name of another national will (potential spies, the enemy within, etc.) to roam freely within the nation.

Multicultural tolerance does not escape this logic of nation-building. The multicultural national will, like all national wills, tolerates national otherness, but only in so far as this national otherness is in no danger of constituting a counter-will. Indeed, within multiculturalism, we find many examples where, when the national multicultural will is threatened, multiculturalism starts showing a rather nasty side.



Savanhdy Vongpoothorn *Robe II* 2003 paper, acrylic on perforated canvas 95 x 72.5 cm Courtesy Martin Browne Fine Art and Niagara Galleries

To take an example from everyday life today, it is enough to examine the way the notion of ethnic concentration is perceived and turned into a problem by the committed multiculturalists themselves. Multiculturalists are, of course, always readily emitting statements such as: 'We like diversity' or 'We like ethnicity'. Once they see a concentration of ethnicity, however, it is remarkable how they turn a bit on themselves. Some even assert, in a matter-of-fact manner, that the whole point of multiculturalism is to avoid ethnic concentrations or ethnic ghettos.



Tim Johnson & Karma Phuntsok *Refuge Painting* 2003 acrylic on linen 100 x 132 cm Courtesy the artist & Mori Gallery

What does 'too many' mean in the expression 'too many Vietnamese' living together? Why aren't 'too many' Whites living together a problem? Why is the concentration of ethnic otherness such a problem? Because, as Elias Canetti intimates in *Crowds and Power* (1973), concentrations can produce collective will. For instance, what differentiates the concentration camp from the mere prison at the level of its communal effect is precisely that concentration camps, by being 'prisons of concentrations', imprison and break not just individual members of a community, but also the communal itself. So, otherness scattered

around the nation is fine. Once 'they' start concentrating, however, they could become an alternative will and the national will has to go in and disperse them.

Indeed, the multicultural discourse that perceives the concentration as a problem always ends up turning national control over it into a problem. Someone else, another, often dark, criminal forces, disease — these are often perceived by a collective White imaginary as controlling ethnic ghettos. So what is happening here? A typical national will perceives in the concentration a potential counter-will, and readies itself to exterminate it in order to transform it once again into a will-less ethnicity that can once more be appreciated and tolerated. This is all done lovingly from *within* multiculturalism.

Often, in the public discussion of illegal refugee-seekers, we hear things such: 'There's only sixty boat people', 'eighty boat people', etc. Also, people rightly point out that in terms of numbers, it's nothing. Australia has taken many more. So why all the fuss?

Indeed, if the question was about these ethnic others inhabiting the national body, it wouldn't have been a problem. When we are talking about people 'jumping the queue', however, we are not talking about people who are merely taking a position allotted to them in the national home. This 'queue' is nothing other than the manifestation of the national will. Having seen what this queue looks like in an embassy located in a Third World country, it may not be as civilised as the queue in a David Jones department store, but it is a part of the national order, the order imposed by the national will for entering the national body. This is why it is not a matter of numbers: whether two people or one hundred jump the queue, what they have done is engage the nation at the level of its national will. They have literally tried to subvert the national will. They have activated something no national will can perceive without turning nasty: they are ethnic others who have exhibited a will of their own. That is why they are so dangerous.

The national will does not care about the reason why the other hasn't followed the proper channels set out by that will for entering the nation. What it cares about is that it is a national will and it must be capable of enforcing its proper channels, its queues, its order. Otherness must not be allowed, under any circumstances, to show this national will to be weak. You make it shaky and the national will will have to act accordingly. Ethnic caging is not the caging of ethnic numbers, it is the caging of ethnic wills. It is, as the government itself argues, an example for others: don't try to activate your own will. One will rules in Australia and this is how it is going to be.

As the man falling from the skyscraper in the French film *La Haine* says to himself, 'So far, so good'. So far, so good because, if Australia did not have a sizeable ethnic population, ethnic caging as a message for other *external* ethnic wills about the wish of the Australian national will to keep on

ruling the nation would be relatively without problem. It is unproblematic, that is, in a world where the very condition of the existence of nations has to do with the capacity to enforce national procedures for crossing borders. Australia is a multi-ethnic country, however, and hence this message is not as unproblematic as it may first appear.

I do not think that these images of caged ethnics I started by referring to have grabbed my attention just as an academic. I think they affected me, in part, because I was watching them as an 'ethnic'. That is, because of the make-up of Australian society, we cannot escape the fact that the message of ethnic caging, even if directed primarily at ethnic wills external to Australia, becomes also a message directed at the ethnic wills inside Australia itself. In this process, ethnic caging obtains an added significance which needs to be explored.

Caging is a very interesting phenomenon. For a number of years, I have actually been studying the domestication of animals and its relevance for understanding the domestication of people within nations. That is why caging grabbed my attention almost immediately as an interesting mode of nation-building. As a result, I would like to refer here to the work of the early French naturalist, Geoffroy de St Hilaire, who, in 1861, wrote a book on the domestication of animals.

De St Hilaire differentiates between three states to which humans can reduce animals in the process of subordinating them to their needs. They can be captive, tame or domesticated. Captive animals are those who have to be caged or physically restrained to remain subjected to humans. Without this physical restraint, they would go back into the wild unaffected by their experience. That is, captive animals have not yet undergone any major transformation in their mode of conceiving how they should live. They still conceive of the 'good life', if one can say so, in the same way that they did when they were first captured. Tame animals, on the other hand, have internalised their state of captivity such that the physical restraints are no longer needed as an instrument of subjugation. Their idea of the good life has changed, and they are happy being around the humans who tamed them; caging is no longer necessary to retain them. The difference between tame and domesticated animals is even



George Gittoes *The Yellow Room (Afghanistan)* 2002 oil on canvas 171.5 x 257.5 cm Courtesy the artist

more important. For de St Hilaire, animals that are tame are always so as individuals of a species. What differentiates the domesticated from the tame is precisely that domestication involves the reproduction of the species in captivity. That is, the domesticated are subjugated as a self-reproducing community of tame animals.

De St Hilaire's differentiation of the three states is exceptionally interesting in light of what we have been discussing so far. What is the significance of the difference between captive animals and tame animals as far as our present analysis is concerned? One is tempted to say quickly that captive animals are caged, while tame and domesticated animals are not. There is an element of truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. Tame and domesticated animals are, in fact, often caged. They are not trusted to know that they are not supposed to go certain places and therefore may need to be fenced in. I think what is more important than the difference between caged and not caged is the difference in the function of caging. For captive animals, caging constitutes the main instrument of their subordination. Tame and domesticated animals have incorporated their state of subordination — cages are used to control their movement, to position them within domestic space, rather than as the main instrument of their subjugation. More importantly, however, what does it mean when we say that captive animals have not changed their conception of the good life, while tame and domesticated animals have?

In our terms, it simply means that captive animals still have a will independent of the human domesticator while, for both the tame and the domesticated animals, this will has become subjugated to the will of the domesticator. Here is my point: if we can easily recognise in the wilful caged animal the wilful refuge seeker who has not submitted to the order of the national will, are we not also invited to recognise in ourselves, those ethnics who have 'successfully settled in Australia', the tame and the domesticated animal whose will has been subjugated as the very condition of belonging to the domestic space of the Australian national will? That is, by virtue of the absence of a cage to subjugate us, are we not always post-caged? Mustn't we have undergone a real or metaphoric caging which has shaped our communal wills such that we can no longer constitute any possible counter-will for the Australian governing national will, as the very precondition of our becoming the subjects of tolerance rather than the subjects of extermination or caging?



Albertina Viegas *Untitled* (detail) 2003 mixed media installation, Legal Aliens Identity Card Photographs – Australian Department of Immigration 1976 – Mum, Me, Cissy, Bea dimensions variable Courtesy the artist

It is in this sense that Port Hedland works as a psychoanalytic symptom: what are these pictures of ethnic caging being offered to us but images of ourselves as domesticated Third-World-looking ethnics (TWLE as opposed to NESB) that constitute the very support for the reproduction of the White national fantasy of a multicultural Australia?

A dominant culture in which tolerance is grounded in the necessity of ethnic caging cannot possibly produce a politics which counters a racism which sees, in all Third-World-looking migrants, undesirable people who ought not be accepted into the nation. For it is a culture which is merely producing, through its enacting of the White nation fantasy, the very conception of Third-World-looking migrants proposed by the 'racists'. The difference is that it argues that, *despite this*, they ought to be tolerated. When the tolerant says to the racist, 'I know how you're feeling but ...', they indeed do know how they are feeling.

Ghassan Hage
Anthropology, University of Sydney



My Le Thi *Behind the Fence* 2003 wire fence, plaster, acrylic on paper & sound dimensions variable Courtesy the artist, friends in Villawood & Mori Gallery