

## **Kit Messham-Muir (Curtin) and Uroš Čvoro (UNSW)**

### ***Introduction: War, Art and Visual Culture***

I want to assure the American people that we're doing everything we can each day to confront and ultimately defeat this horrible invisible enemy. We're at war, in a true sense, we're at war, and we're fighting an invisible enemy... A number of people have said it, but, and I feel it actually, I'm a wartime president, there's a war, there's a war, different kind of a war that we've ever had.<sup>1</sup>

Donald J. Trump, 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, 23 March 2020.

This Special Issue of the *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art* follows a year after the symposium titled *War, Art and Visual Culture: Sydney*. The symposium held at the SH Ervin Gallery in Sydney on Monday 25 February 2019 set out to explore current international thinking on the art and visual culture of war, conflict, terror and political violence. Both this special issue, the Sydney symposium, and the symposia in London and Los Angeles that followed later in the year, are an important part of *Art in Conflict*, a three-year ARC Linkage project led by Curtin University, collaborating with University of Melbourne, UNSW Art & Design and University of Manchester, and partnering with the Australian War Memorial and the National Trust (NSW). The project aims to consider the politics of addressing war in contemporary art and visual culture, particularly the potential for conflicts, compromises and complicity. One of the major outcomes is an exhibition of recent contemporary war art, with curation led by the Australian War Memorial's Anthea Gunn. We are currently co-authoring a book on art and war, scheduled for publication in 2021, twenty years after 9/11.

In the process of co-authoring our book – which is informed by the symposia, interviewing artists and editing this special issue – we have realised the extent to which the political contexts of images of war today have so radically shifted, not only in comparison to that of the immediate post-9/11 moment, but indeed within the last four years. Just as we felt we were getting to grips with this new and complex, unsettled and unsettling environment —, and while the eight papers in this issue were being bedded-down for publication — the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic hit the world, impacting upon the western world in ways similar to the post-9/11 moment. At the time of writing, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and most of Europe, India and Asia are in lockdown, and during this rapid process of the great shutdown of 2020 we see patterns emerging in the seemingly unpredictable responses of nation-states to the crisis. More left-leaning governments, such as that of Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, impose a strict regime of collective responsibility, a *de facto* if temporary authoritarianism, while the conservative administration of Donald J. Trump seems (at this point at least) to be taking a *laissez-faire* approach aligned with neoliberal individualism and the free market economy. The American people will know how to keep their social distance, apparently; and the pandemic will resolve itself in its own way. This historical moment is rife with evocations of wartime rhetoric: the invisible enemy, Trump as a 'wartime President', the declarations of states of emergency and national emergencies; which is combined with the breathtaking speed of ongoing curtailed civil liberties and movement. In a world where political contest has raged over the openness of borders in a globalised world, governments' responses to COVID-19 have been to shut international,

state and even regional borders. None of this can be seen or understood clearly at this point in time, but this is the context into which this special issue arrives.

Therefore, this *War, Art and Visual Culture* issue of the *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art* now seems to possess a blind spot, a COVID-19-shaped elephant in the room, by simple accident of timing. In this sense, it captures a very recent moment immediately prior to the pandemic. And in a way, it feels somewhat like a letter to a post-pandemic future, in which we hope certainty is restored, acting as an urgent reminder of what remains at stake in the broader current context of art and images of war. The papers reflect a diversity of conceptual, aesthetic and methodological approaches to thinking about war today. The papers also reflect the ongoing relevance of the subject matter, which it seems continues to become more important for understanding the present in ways that are increasingly entrenched in our routines and institutions. As we continue to live in the shadow of a perpetual state of global war, persisting as a low-burn everywhere war, it remains now and into the future, more vital than ever to understand how we represent and think about war, and the ways in which art interprets, reflects upon and intervenes in that field. This special issue thus begins with Joanna Bourke's article, *Cruel Visions: Reflections on Artists and Atrocities*. Bourke is a world-leading historian of war who has made significant forays recently into the topic of war art, such as her 2017 edited volume, *War and Art*. As a keynote of our *War, Art and Visual Culture: Sydney* symposium, it is appropriate that this special issue opens with a developed version of the keynote paper that Bourke delivered. Bourke takes stock of the current dominance of tropes of affect and trauma in contemporary art that addresses war. Her paper serves as a counterpoint to our own contribution in the final article of this issue.

The article following Bourke's is co-authored by Kate Warren, Anthea Gunn and Mikala Tai, each curators of significant and recent contributions to this field in Australasia. Warren and Tai curated *I don't want to be there when it happens*, which ran in 2017 at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, while Gunn is Curator of Art at the Australian War Memorial, whose commissions and acquisitions constitute one of the most significant collections of contemporary war art. In their paper, they address three case studies from the perspective of the institution, which leads onto Andrew Yip's *Hypermapping conflict: war, art and immersive aesthetics*. Yip explores the way in which artists expand the aesthetics of immersive visualisation to produce new understandings of wartime experiences and leverage the technologies through which networks of meaning around war are constructed in order to interrogate the operations of the networks themselves. 'Immersion', argues Yip, 'whether bodily, sensory or through networked activism, offers a unique opportunity to engage with battlespaces during the process of their transformation rather than as a consequence of their enshrinement.' Yip's paper is followed by Darren Jorgensen's article on the enduring practice of Australian artist, George Gittoes, in an era of post-heroic, hyper-real warfare. In the course of making his argument, Jorgensen surveys key moments in Gittoes's expansive oeuvre, in art and filmmaking.

Catherine Speck's '*Thunder raining poison': the lineage of protest against mid-century British nuclear bomb tests in Central Australia*' discusses the truth-telling in Anangu artists dealing with the effects of secret atomic bomb tests in Australia from 1952-1963. Speck discusses this art in relation to the long history of protests surrounding the tests. As with

Bourke's article, Speck's article is a developed version of the paper she delivered in February 2019 at the *War, Art and Visual Culture: Sydney* symposium. Deborah Barnstone's article, *Paradoxes of War Critique on Display: The Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History*, examines the contradictions and complexities at play in the Dresden Military Museum's design. The Museum is an aesthetically striking clash of architectural styles, with a neoclassical façade split asymmetrically by a large shining and transparent arrowhead, designed by Daniel Libeskind. Barnstone's article asks in what ways can the aesthetics of architecture, and exhibition elicit critical engagement with the subject of war. The second-to-last article is Richard Bullen and Tets Kimura's *Japanese war art in Australasia*, which is one of the first significant investigations of this particular field. Bullen and Kimura discuss the art produced by Japanese war prisoners in Australia during World War II, demonstrating the richness and complexity of an experience that is at odds with the more expected heroic narratives evident in Australian war art examples.

In the final article, we (the editors) consider the rise and dominance of the affect-trauma paradigm in the humanities, particularly within art theory over the twenty years since the events in the United States of 11 September 2001. Our article, the last in this issue, acts as a counterpoint to this issue's first article by Bourke. In an interview we conducted with Bourke at the time of the Sydney symposium, she suggested that the affect-trauma paradigm has become entrenched in our ways of thinking about art and war: 'when we see "trauma" in the title of the book we actually know what the argument is going to be now.'<sup>2</sup> We argue that in recent years the affect-trauma paradigm has tended to homogenise discourse into consistent analyses with fewer productive surprises. As a coda to this special issue, the reviews section consists of two critical engagements with the work of two of Australia's recent official war artists and more generally acclaimed contemporary artists, Shaun Gladwell and Ben Quilty. The reviews by Tim Gregory and Francis Russell, respectively, both adopt incisively critical approaches to the mid-career retrospective exhibitions of Gladwell (at the MCA Australia in Sydney) and Quilty (at QAG/GOMA in Brisbane) in 2019. To declare interests here, we have variously close associations with both artists, personal and professional, as well as with both reviewers (who are our colleagues at UNSW and Curtin). In both cases, we requested solidly rigorous engagement from the reviewers, and they certainly delivered. We absolutely respect their arguments.

At this time, when public spaces are depopulated and physical exhibitions of art are all but impossible to stage, anywhere, contemporary art throughout the world is silenced by global disarray. Again, it is much too soon to even speculate how the larger situation will evolve and how our art might understand this moment in the longer term. In this present world of the 2020 pandemic we hear frequent evocations of war rhetoric — like Trump's claim to be a 'wartime president', fighting against an 'invisible' but, for him, an emphatically *Chinese* enemy — and we sense a worrying, potentially dangerous, shift in international geopolitics. We expect we will soon see that art that addresses contemporary conflict will also shift on its axis in ways that reflect this new reality. Nevertheless, many of the ideas at stake in this special *War, Art and Visual Culture* issue will persist. Within the coming months and years, this special issue will stand as a bridge between those ideas from the recent past that will continue into the post-pandemic future.

<sup>1</sup> Donald J. Trump, "'Invisible enemy': Trump says he is 'wartime president' in coronavirus battle – video", *The*

*Guardian*, Mon 23 Mar 2020 13.40 AEDT, URL:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/23/invisible-enemy-trump-says-he-is-wartime-president-in-coronavirus-battle-video> accessed 25 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Bourke, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, Sydney, 27 February 2019, transcribed by Monika Lukowska-Appel.