SIEV - X: LIFE, DEATH and LOSS

Bradley V. Burke

(Master of Arts in Fine Art by Project)

2005

RMIT
Acknowledgements

My time at RMIT University has been enhanced immeasurably through my contact with the staff in the Drawing school and in particular, my contact with both James Taylor and Godwin Bradbeer and, later, Phil Edwards. These three gentlemen have imparted to me a rare insight into contemporary art practice and have absolutely underpinned any successes I may have had in my own endeavor to produce artwork.

Sean Humphreys helped me with the hard, physical tasks in producing the final installation and the transportation of the mass of material needed for it. I wish to formally thank him for his contribution.

Karla Pringle gave me valuable assistance with the production of the digital records that make up this archive and I wish to thank her for her commitment.

Anthea Davis, Russell Powell and Adam Macfie assisted with the site-specific photography during the installation and final dispersal of the work. Their contribution was very appreciated and necessary.

COSPAK P/L. supplied me with the Blowpak bottles used in this artwork and I am grateful for their interest in art generally and in the SIEV-X incident in particular.
Contents

Acknowledgements

Contents

Project Proposal

Bibliography

Documentation of Study / Artist Statement

Transcript of 3CR Radio Interview

The Banner (Plates 1 - 3)

Afterword

List of Illustrations

Contact Prints - 100 Photographs

Major Work (Plates 4 - 6)

Selected Plates (7 - 20) from 100 Photographs

Curriculum Vitae

Exhibition List
PROPOSAL

BRADLEY VINCENT BURKE
Student Number: 9603388Q

DEGREE: MASTER of ARTS by PROJECT

TITLE OF PROJECT:
SIEV-X: LIFE, DEATH and LOSS.

SUMMARY OF PROJECT:
My intention is to create an installation of artwork addressing the SIEV-X tragedy. This installation will assemble objects in such a way as to create visual metaphor for this incident. The first stage of development will be to connect the number of refugees with the number of elements in the installation. These might appear as 353 glass vessels containing seawater. The installation is intended to acknowledge as memorial, using metaphor, the 353 individuals lost on the SIEV-X.

SIEV-X: LIFE, DEATH and LOSS.

Brief Description:
This part time, studio based Masters by Research project will produce an installation of three-dimensional works to be located within a public gallery space. Materials for this installation will be selected for their metaphorical or symbolic qualities and then assembled into a work reflecting life, death and loss. This Research Project is based around the incident in which 353 refugees lost their lives when the boat they were on capsized in the Java Sea off the coast of Indonesia. The people lost on the boat were from racial backgrounds including the countries of Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan and Afghanistan many seeking refuge from torture and oppression under the regime of Saddam Hussein and the Afghan Taliban.
The process for genuine migration to Australia is largely unavailable to these people with the closest, available Australian Embassy being in China. This causes desperate people to attempt the sorts of feats seen in the Siev- X case where people sought illegal passage across the seas to reach Australia. With no possibility of gaining Australian visas, this desperate journey caused risks that most Australians will never face. One account from a survivor, Faris Kadhem, recalls his attempt to reach his 7 y.o. daughter after the boat capsized.

"Zahra was wearing a lifejacket, but the waves kept tossing her and I tried to follow her like a fish. Then it was like when butter melts. She disappeared. I don’t know where."  

He then swam back to where his wife had been and found her floating, drowned. Forty-four survived with 353 declared lost. This incident occurred in October 2001 and has become known as the SIEV-X Tragedy.

I will situate the experiences of the refugees within the context of Australia's official and public response to refugee immigration.

The artwork will form an analogy of the experiences faced by refugees in their endeavor to come to Australia. The intended installation will be formed along the lines of an industrial storage system that could be found in any warehouse setting. 353 uniformly shaped glass bottles will be stacked in rows onto a pallet and the layers separated by sheets of clear "Perspex" so that the stack can be looked through to each layer.

These bottles will contain seawater and a glass slide with an application of ink to form the name of a victim. It is envisaged that these names will be written in Arabic. The installation will need to be housed in a small room of a gallery with subdued and directed lighting so as to create a quiet and reflective viewing experience. The timber pallet will be constructed from a mixture of Australian hardwoods and will appear as a very precise and cleanly dressed construction, rather than an actual pallet taken from an everyday factory usage.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS.

1. In what ways is it possible to explore the issues of life, death and loss through the creation of visual metaphor?

2. How can events be represented within an installation to create an empathetic response in the viewer?

Rationale for program:

The reason why I create any artwork is to communicate emotional and intellectual states of mind relevant to contemporary humanitarian issues. The SIEV-X Tragedy is to an alarming degree unremembered or unknown to many Australians and the prospect of it being forgotten or ignored by the arts community in general or by me in particular would be shameful.

In the modernist decades the Australian art community inherited from its European and American models an overarching interest in the formal elements of arts practice. Subsequent to this, meditations on the human condition have tended to be either within the European context or within their closed context of individual existentialism. There exists within contemporary practice, antecedents to aspects of this work (although nothing known to me on the SIEV-X). International contemporary art practices increasingly address issues that emerge from both the gradual diasporas and the violent displacements of peoples from their traditional locations. Many issues of a controversial nature emerge from such considerations but the intention of my research is to distil from this recent tragedy a visual work of authority and poignancy that underscores the universal themes of life, death and loss in a manner that has the gravity of memorial.

Certainly, issues related to race, identity, hardship, lands rights, religion and politics contribute to this and similar tragic events but these are outside the parameters of this research project.

Aspects of my conceptual intention are prefigured by the work of Christian Boltanski and Joseph Beuys in Europe and in the Asia region the artists Wang Guangyi and Guan Wei touch on elements of associated interest to me.

My gallery installation will contribute to the debate surrounding issues of immigration and Australia's relationship within the World community.
Methods:

Research for this project will be based in Melbourne and located at R.M.I.T. (City)
My sources for research will include media documentation and personal interviews with refugees and those who have worked closely with them. I will research various materials to determine their limitations/possibilities as elements of the gallery installation. These materials will include industrial pallets, glass vessels, inks that may be applied to glass and are waterproof, plastic bottles, "Perspex" sheeting as supports for rows of containers and other materials as may be required.
I intend to apply ink to glass slides, these then being placed into glass bottles filled with seawater. The names of some of the victims (depending on availability) of the SIEV-X incident will be written in ink on the glass slides, possibly in Arabic print. My research will look at the suitability of ink for this purpose and its ability to last in seawater. The ink I choose will need to be of a solvent based type and contain enough resins to withstand seawater without peeling off the glass or dissolving. Whilst these inscriptions don’t need to be clearly readable, they do need to be recognised as being names or Arabic words and will need to be seen through the glass and water.
My research will include the investigation of specific sites around Melbourne such as the Immigration Museum, Islamic Mosques, seafronts and a Detention Centre (for refugees).
This investigation will lead to the possibility of a site-specific location of a virtual installation.
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<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
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**Stage One**
- Complete Research Methods (AT.700)
- Construct a bibliography from both written and visual resources
- Visit locations for research purposes: Mosques, Detention centres and the Immigration Museum
- Research production techniques into the application of inks, dyes, and paints to glass
- Research the use of digital photography

**Stage Two**
- Analyse and co-ordinate data
- Examine photographic and documentary material
- Organise material supplies

**Stage Three**
- Experiment with technically based production of my installation
- Review and edit my collection of imagery
- Begin construction of the art work

**Stage Four**
- Complete the art work
- Edit and select resolved work, and consider the parameters of exhibition
- Bring together all relevant research and visual records for inclusion in the final DVR
- Present work and documentation for preliminary review approval
- Exhibit resolved installation at a suitable gallery space and arrange for Masters Assessment
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Not Wanted  The AGE (Lindsay Murdoch) 27 Oct 2001
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REPORTS

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Documentation of Study

Artist Statement

The Past

On October 19, 2001 a 19.5 metre Indonesian fishing vessel capsized in the Java Sea off the coast of Indonesia. The vessel was carrying 421 asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan. The loss of life counted 353 individuals mostly made up of children and women many from large family groups containing three generations.

I set out to construct an installation using symbol and metaphor, to remember this incident and to acknowledge the victims as individuals rather than a collective. The resultant work that emerged is an industrial, factory production in the form of 353 bottles arranged on a timber storage pallet in much the same way you would encounter in any manufactory around Melbourne. The metaphor is discovered when the viewer finds that each bottle contains a slide with the name of the known victim written on it and then the bottle filled with seawater.

The SIEV-X Tragedy was barely reported in the Australian media and remains to an alarming degree unremembered or unknown to many Australians. The prospect of this incident being forgotten or ignored by the art community in general or by me in particular would have been shameful. The minimal nature of this installation was my attempt to reflect the media coverage of this tragedy.

The Present

The installation emerging from this project has been exhibited at FIRST SITE Gallery (RMIT Oct 2004) and from that I had a request from the Counihan Gallery (Brunswick) to make the work available for a further installation. The exhibition that emerged from that request was housed at the Coburg Civic Centre during Refugee Week in October 2005.

The organizers of the SIEV-X Memorial Project, based in Tasmania, had discussed having access to the installation for part of their exhibition proposal to have a permanent memorial built on Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra. The SIEV-X incident has been documented as permanent installation through the
Lempriere prize for sculpture at Werribee in 2004 via that year’s winner, Richard Goodwin. His work will remain a permanent reminder of this incident at Werribee and is titled *Prosthetic Apartment B 2004*. Another artist in that year’s award was Arthur Wicks who also addressed the incident with his sculpture *Surface Tension 2004*. I decided to disperse my installation after a final, brief installation on the pavement outside the Melbourne Immigration Museum. This final installation took place in December 2005 and was documented for inclusion within this M.A. document. From that site, the installation was loaded onto a yacht in Williamstown and taken to sea for the final journey and ultimate dispersal. All 353 bottles were emptied in the sea along with their nameplates, and the empty bottles were taken to the recyclers. Once the last bottle had been emptied, the installation can only exist within the visual documentation, or in the memories of any person who had seen it installed at the three venues mentioned.

I have produced a banner of seven photos taken from the progressive stages through the project. The banner is a symbolic reference to publicity, advertising (as seen outside the Immigration Museum) and is a more permanent and relocatable summary of this project. It identifies a series of pertinent images in a manner that has several relevant associations. The fabric and format of the banner suggest both seamanship and political protest, referring to circumstances beyond the gallery and for this reason, this part of the project is located in a corridor adjoining the gallery. For purposes of this presentation, the gallery space is intended to be a location stark in its sense of absence.

The installation and dispersal processes for the project are now fulfilled.

**The Future**

My hope and desire in creating this installation is for a permanent memorial of this human tragedy to be accessible via the documentation contained within
these pages. I have attempted to not only contextualise my art within a political framework that is relevant to a contemporary art community but I have also attempted to reach the broader community, especially those national groups affected by this tragedy. The subsequent examination of my work may have, in some small way, a part to play in the documentation of Iraqi history in Australia. University records will contain this work and, for me, the true meaning of my endeavor will be found in the ongoing access to a community interested in the incident known as the SIEV-X Tragedy.

LIFE, DEATH and LOSS
A TRANSCRIPT FROM AN INTERVIEW
BROADCAST ON 3CR ON WED 26 OCTOBER 2005
DURING THE OPENING OF REFUGEE WEEK

A journalist from Melbourne’s 3CR approached me at the opening night of the Refugee Week exhibition at the Coburg Civic Centre in October 2005. This interview was recorded:

Brad Burke (BB) ………."It (the artwork) came out of the incident that happened in 2001, in October, where 353 refugees trying to get to Australia were in a fishing vessel that was later named the SIEV-X which is Suspect Illegal Entry Vessel and X because it didn’t have a name. It sank off the coast of Indonesia and the resultant death toll was 353 people most, of which were children, children’s mothers, grandmothers, a few men and older men. The coverage in the newspapers at the time was fairly minimal and I felt that it had largely been ignored by the media, and I thought …over a period of time… that it was the responsibility of the people acting in the arts and other areas to at least deal with some of these issues that hadn’t been dealt with in the mass media, so I decided to put this installation together and it developed into what it is now, a series of metaphors and symbols that I have used to represent the notion of loss of 353 individuals.

3CR. How have you represented that loss?

BB. My notion of the political views in Australia from our governments and even oppositions, is that a collective of people travelling to Australia without passports is seen as illegal, they're noted as illegal immigrants, and, collectively, I didn't believe we could pass a group of humanity off as just being illegal immigrants or whatever, so I attempted to individualize them and to look at a three year old child as a three year old child, it doesn't matter what country they come from, they go through the same horror when their boat sinks, and their mothers are lost and they're lost, so I didn't want to create a dreadful image of this, a graphic image, as you would maybe in a painting or something, so I used a very quiet, minimal medium using bottles… one bottle for each person and inside that bottle I put a slide with
the names of the known people that were victims, for
the people who were not known and names don't
exist for, I wrote a word in Arabic and represented
that person with just their language, if you like, even
though I am fairly naive when it comes to Arabic
language, I was able to represent those people who
were nameless and then I filled the bottle with sea
water to just make that connection of where these
people have ended up.

3CR. And next to those bottles with those names is a
book. what's the book signifying?

BB. It came from the SIEV-X passenger data base
which I got from the Memorial Project site that's
located in Tasmania and its got the known names of
each of the victims but many, many people were lost
who were nameless so I devoted a page to each one
of them and created almost like a Government
archive, a record that can be entered into, bound and
put away in a archive, but I wanted to use that as a
memorial to each of those people and I have made it
look like a, fairly much, a government document you
would find, you know, in any sort of archival
place…..but each page has the name of the known
person who drowned, the relationship to their family,
where known, and their nationality, which was…. the
large majority were Iraqi, a few Afghan. I noted their
country, where possible, their age and their gender so
you will see children with a zero after there name for
there age because it isn't known… how old they
were… and whether that were male of female.

3CR. Why do you think something like this is
important given the Federal Governments approach
to refugees at the moment?

BB. I guess it's really only important to me. If I
didn't produce this sort of work as a reaction to
hearing of these things, I'd probably go insane and my
view was, well, I can create this quite silently… if
people see it and walk past it....it means nothing,
that's fine, that doesn't worry me, there wont be any
coverage in the press anyway …it's just a step
towards developing an individualization of people who
have gone through dreadful struggles, who don't have
access to western finances and systems, who have to
struggle to save their children.

I've just honoured those people, individually,
regardless of who they were..................

they're just humans".
Afterword

On the evening of Feb 23, 2005 I attended the Melbourne exhibition initiated by the SIEV - X Memorial Project.

Faris Kadhem, the SIEV - X survivor who lost his wife, Leyla and his 7 year old daughter, Zahra, gave an impassioned speech outlining the horror, desperation and grief of his experiences as the SIEV - X capsized. He told of his ongoing sadness that resulted from the death of his loved ones, and tears welled in his eyes at the conclusion of his account.

I went to him with a photograph of this installation and when he asked me what these bottles were I told him one contained the name of his daughter, Zahra, and another with the name of his wife, Leyla.

He paused and his face broke into smile........ he asked me if I would like a picture of Zahra.

I couldn’t answer.
List of illustrations

PLATES
Plate 1. THE BANNER
Plate 2. WESTGATE
Plate 3. BANNER (Detail)
Plate 4. SIEV-X Installation in FIRST SITE Gallery
Plate 5. SIEV-X Detail - FIRST SITE Gallery
Plate 6. ENDING

COMPACT DISCS  (sleeves at the end of this document)

CD 1  Video at Sea
The final dispersal process of the installation at sea. December 2005 (1 min. 32 sec.)

CD 2  3CR Radio interview with the artist,
Refugee Week Oct 2005 (5 min.19 sec.)
**CD 3**

**100 Photographs**

NOTE: This list is followed by 3 pages of contact prints to assist with the identification of the contents of **CD 3**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Bound Journal</td>
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<td>Boxes of bottles</td>
<td>Cardboard box, plastic bottles</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Studio</td>
<td>RMIT studio, boxes</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Box</td>
<td>Box, plinth</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Bottles</td>
<td>Box, plastic bottles</td>
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<td>Writing the names</td>
<td>Desk, writing materials name slides</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Passenger data base</td>
<td>Passenger list, steel rule</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ink and pen</td>
<td>Ink bowl, pen, name slide</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>The text</td>
<td>Book (in Arabic)</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Brush and ink</td>
<td>Ink bowl, brush</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Language 1</td>
<td>Name slides written in Arabic</td>
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<td>The Sea</td>
<td>Photo of Altona Jetty</td>
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<td>Filling 1</td>
<td>Bottles, name slides, sea water</td>
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<td><strong>Filling 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Video footage</strong> (at end of disc)</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Loading for transport</td>
<td>Bottles, boxes Toyota van</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Installation process 1</td>
<td>First Site Gallery</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Installation process 2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Installation process 3</td>
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<td>Detail 1</td>
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<td>Sydney Road 1</td>
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<td>100.</td>
<td>Returned - still waters</td>
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</table>
Selected Plates from *100 Photographs*

Plate 7. The Text
Plate 8. Ink and Pen
Plate 10. Language 9.
Plate 12. Sydney Road.
Plate 13. Detail 3 (Coburg Refugee Week)
Plate 14. Street 2 (Immigration Museum)
Plate 15. Street 3 (Immigration Museum)
Plate 16. Street 14 (Immigration Museum)
Plate 17. Street 16 (Immigration Museum)
Plate 18. Dispersal 1.
Plate 20. SIEV - X Passenger Database
CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: BRADLEY V. BURKE

DATE of BIRTH: July 19, 1951

ADDRESS: Blankart Studio
Studio 16 / 8 Technopark Drive
Williamstown
Victoria. 3106
Australia

TELEPHONE: 0425 70 6667

EDUCATION

M.A. (Research) Fine Art
R.M.I.T. University. 2006

B.A. (Hons.) Fine Art
R.M.I.T. University. 1999

B.A. Fine Art
R.M.I.T. University 1998

Dip. Visual Art
Eastern T.A.F.E. 1996

Cert. of General Welding
Eastern T.A.F.E. 1994

Cert. of Forging
R.M.I.T. T.A.F.E 1984

Cert. of Architectural Drafting
R.M.I.T. 1972
EXHIBITION LIST

1995      THE BRIDGE
          Eastern T.A.F.E. Gallery

1996      IMACHI
          Eastern T.A.F.E. Gallery

1998      Graduation Show B.A.(Fine Art) R.M.I.T
          SPAN Gallery Melbourne

1999      R.M.I.T. at YUAN - ZE University
          Taiwan

1999      Graduation Show B.A.(Fine Art Hons.) R.M.I.T.
          PREVIEW Gallery Melbourne

2001      Moonee Valley Federation Art Award
          (Highly commended)
          CLOCKTOWER Gallery Moonee Ponds Melbourne

2002      R.M.I.T. Postgraduates Exhibition
          MINISTRY of ARTS Gallery Sth. Melbourne

2003      ARTS in BUSINESS EXHIBITION
          Moonee Valley Arts Week
          CLOCKTOWER Gallery Moonee Ponds Melbourne

2004      INCINERATOR PROJECT (Inaugural Show)
          INCINERATOR Art Space Maribyrnong Melbourne

2004      SIEV-X: LIFE, DEATH and LOSS
          (M.A. Research Project)
          FIRST SITE RMIT Union Gallery

2005      SIEV - X: LIFE, DEATH and LOSS
          (M.A. Research Project - Assessment)
          RMIT Faculty Gallery Bld2.

2005      SIEV - X: LIFE, DEATH and LOSS
          Coburg Civic Centre (Refugee Week Oct 05)