

# ROYCE NG

12 – 26 OCTOBER 2013

# SOMALI PEACE BAND



ROYCE NG - *SOMALI PEACE BAND*  
 CURATED BY LOUISE NERI, ALEXIE GLASS-KANTOR AND PIP WALLIS  
 TEXT: ROYCE NG IN CONVERSATION VIVIAN GERRAND, 8 September 2013  
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V: Australian artist Royce Ng and I met on Skype one Sunday night to discuss his collaborative artwork, *The Somali Peace Band*. The work is of particular interest to me as I have been researching representations of Somali belonging for the better part of the past decade for a PhD study. Royce is not accustomed to making works for festivals. It is the first time his work has featured in the Melbourne Festival.

V: What motivated you to create *The Somali Peace Band* for the Melbourne Festival?

R: *The Somali Peace Band* is a project I've been sitting on for a few years and I'd proposed it to Alexie (Glass-Kantor) as an exhibition at Gertrude Contemporary in 2012 and we'd had some discussions about how to go about it, though nothing concrete had really eventuated. It wasn't until Louise Neri approached me about doing something for the Melbourne Festival, actually a completely different work, that the idea of realizing a full scale exhibition based around my experiences working with Somali musicians in Melbourne and Nairobi became a possibility. Originally, I'd suggested to Louise that I could curate a performance by the Somali Peace Band. The idea was just to take the money from the festival and use it to bring the musician Daacad Rashiid to Melbourne for a performance.

V: What a great thing to do.

R: And reunite him with his bandmate Abdi Mohamed Abdi who lives in Melbourne who was a founding member of the Somali Peace Band. The idea was to 'take the money and run' and organise a performance and then also – when we submitted the application for Daacad's application for asylum in Australia two years ago that I'd worked with him to submit while I was in Nairobi, I tried to generate some publicity around the case to provide as supporting evidence. But it was really hard actually. I guess the thought behind my proposal for the Melbourne Festival was to generate a lot of publicity by organising this performance and then I could use that as supplementary material to help with the application, to show that he's got a strong fan base in Melbourne amongst the Somali diaspora and show that he would have a kind of support system here with family and friends. So that was my idea and I proposed that but it didn't work out the way I would have hoped.

So what I'm showing in the work is all the audio and visual material from the last three years that I've been editing together into this video installation which is all about the absence of Daacad.

V: Your work raises a fascinating set of questions about the role of art and the role of art and human rights. How does art speak to human rights? How can it work as a vehicle in the promotion but also where are its limitations? It seems like you've come up against them very strongly and the fact that the Melbourne Festival probably receives a lot of funding from the federal government...

R: Yeah, I mean that was part of my idea: to take public money and give it to refugees to bring them to here as opposed to the inverse of that which is the policy of the Australian government to spend millions keeping them in detention and out of the country. I guess what it's brought up for me a lot is the idea of the relationship between art and politics and artistic autonomy. In a way, this started off as not an art project. I just saw Abdi playing in Fitzroy at a Multicultural Arts Victoria performance and I was impressed and it just so happened that I was going to Kenya in a few days and I thought – yeah, it would be cool if I could help him meet up with these musicians.

V: Yeah, I read the story on your website. It's a really interesting genealogy. So was it from hearing Abdi play that you decided to go to Kenya?

R: No, we were going to Kenya anyway. My partner's an anthropologist and she was going to Kenya to do her fieldwork. I wanted to tag along cause I've always wanted to go to Africa. And so I got in touch with an artist's residency there. It so happened that I saw Abdi play and then a few days later we were going to Kenya and after I saw him I googled him and found out more information and was able to quickly arrange a meeting with him through Multicultural Arts Victoria.





V: Wow. I wonder whether you could tell me about your artistic practice. I gather you use video a lot in your artwork.

R: I'm quite post-medium specific. It's a long story but I studied art history and anthropology and was involved in making music and a little production before I came to art. So I do take a kind of inter-disciplinary approach and use strategies from different fields. I really like to work site-specifically. So in that sense every one of my works is specifically geared towards a situation and an experience. I have a bunch of artistic tools and basically, whatever the project is, I choose the right one for the project. Whether that ends up being film or performance or some kind of social experience. A large part of the work I'm doing for the Festival is animations, which are recreations of the experiences of Daacad and Abdi in the years prior to coming to Australia and their experiences in refugee camps. So I'm actually quite focused on digital animation at the moment.

V: I'm curious to know who your intended audience is – obviously the Melbourne Festival audience. Who else do you hope to reach, particularly when you're doing these works for the Melbourne Festival?

R: This is interesting because the Melbourne Festival is a much more mainstream audience than I'm used to communicating with because the guide goes into the newspaper and a lot of the other programmed events are a lot more accessible and so it has a much larger demographic. I'm happy to be able to reach this more general audience outside of the contemporary art world I usually address. With the work I'm doing I'm hoping to communicate something of the political points of the situation of Daacad and Abdi and also – because I'm working in the field of representation – present visual images of refugees and Somalis which they wouldn't see beyond Black Hawk Down or starving refugees in camps so that I'm focusing a lot on the 1970's and 1980's, pre-civil war Siad Barre era and the music scene in Mogadishu during that period. So I want to provide this kind of alternative vision of asylum seekers. I also want to communicate directly with the Somali diaspora in Melbourne, so to that end that's why we've got this parallel project of a community space in the front gallery and we're working with Nadia (Faragaab), Susan (Forrester), Katie (Jama) and the Aussom band also. I feel a little uncomfortable being this Chinese Australian kid pretending to represent the Somali community, especially to such a broad audience as the Melbourne Festival's, and I don't want to be mistaken as 'speaking for' the Somalis and wanted to have a direct voice coming from the Somali community itself. I guess the third audience would be the contemporary art audience which Gertrude Contemporary addresses – and it's usually young, middle-class, white kids, which is also the demographic I represent, though I am only economically 'white'. So I guess a part of it is to smash these three audiences together and force them to confront each other a little bit.

V: I think what you're doing is brilliant because what is contemporary art? Is it just conceptual art? Or is it something that can have a broader kind of investment in a conversation about politics, about human rights. Surely one of the functions of art can be to speak to those things.

R: Yeah, I think it's crucial. The beginning of Modernism is intrinsically linked with politics. I think our reading of Modernism has been dominated by the Greenbergian view, certainly the way I was taught about it at school, which is that it reaches its apotheosis in pure, formal abstraction. Now, people like Jacques Ranciere are coming along and rereading the key texts of Modernism as expressions of radical new forms of sensibility and bourgeois subjectivities. So what Louise is doing is really interesting in her choice of artists for the Festival, it reminds me of when the University of Massachusetts in the 1970's hired a so called 'radical package' of Marxist economists.

V: I'm not sure if you've read much of Ghassan Hage's work? He's an anthropologist and he's written a book called *White Nation*. He's also written essays about ethnic caging and things like this. He wrote a book called *Against Paranoid Nationalism*. But he talks about how, for example, at the year 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, he saw the opening ceremony and everyone was saying how fantastic it was and that was fine. But he was looking at it critically, thinking there's a sort of core kind of 'Aussie' if you like, Anglo-Celtic still perhaps legacy of a dominant idea of what it means to be Australian and then there are all these so-called 'ethnics' who get wheeled

out for these events and paraded so it's this wonderful diversity that we have, but not that we are necessarily. We have this, but we aren't this. He distinguishes between the multiculturalists that we are and the multiculturalists that we have and he claims that there's still a hierarchy between a core Anglo-Celtic, if you like, ghetto and the rest of Australia and that because there's this sense in which those in the center are ethnicity-free, as though they had no ethnicity, in spite of everyone in Australia having come from somewhere, even indigenous peoples have all come from somewhere. So what do you think about Australian multiculturalism?

R: That's a big question. I'm a direct product of it, of certain policies. My parents are from Hong Kong and they had immigrated to Melbourne and I was born here and I grew up in – I don't know if you know – Frankston?

V: Yes, I do, very well. My grandfather lives in Mt Martha. Not far away.

R: So I was born and raised in Frankston so I lived there for the first 20 years of my life and I was the only Asian kid all through primary school and secondary school. This is a big part of my artistic mythology. But at the same time I'd go back to Hong Kong every year to visit my grandparents and I'm not Chinese enough. I think maybe you've come across this a lot with Somali community diasporas. My Chinese is really bad. I just don't know the customs and Chinese culture is so hierarchical and familiarly coded and if you're not familiar with them, you just make faux pas after faux pas. So I'm kind of in between those poles. But I do see it as a kind of space of agency as well. Because I don't belong to any culture, I'm pretty comfortable anywhere really.

V: It's interesting though that you say there's a sense in which you don't feel completely Australian. I think that says a lot about the way multiculturalism has worked because that sort of discourse of tolerance that was quite alive in the 1990s is a really problematic one. The idea that there are some people who tolerate and other people who are tolerated.

R: (Laughs) What a word! It's like 'I tolerate you'.

V: So rather than a genuine interaction between cultures where each person comes away with something, slightly altered, if you like – When you come into contact with difference you can be changed by that difference. If it's a two way street, if there's reciprocity, you actually come away a bit different when you have those sorts of encounters. And I wonder about how Australian multiculturalism – or the degree to which it has facilitated those sorts of interactions, or whether it's reproduced a sense of Australianness that's quite exclusive and hierarchical.

R: Yeah I think so. Australia, it's been a short time, but it hasn't really produced a creole culture of any kind outside of that masterpiece of Australian literature, the TV show *Fat Pizza*. I don't feel like a hybrid. My real sense is that when I turn on the television and I open up the newspaper, I'm always outside looking in at another culture. They never could manage to keep an ethnic family on Ramsey street.

V: That's a powerful feeling to be outside looking in when it's actually the country of your birth.

R: Yeah. There's that line from Morrissey: 'When you walk without ease on these streets where you were raised.' I always felt like that living in Frankston.

V: That's fascinating. I think it's disturbing that that's still the kind of representation that we largely – I don't really watch television – see. Occasionally if I come across a television on, I notice that not a huge amount's changed. You know, we've got SBS, but in a way SBS sanctions a lack of cultural diversity perhaps on the other commercial channels.

R: Yeah, it's like they push it all to the outside – SBS is the excluded Other-while Seven, Nine and Ten represent the consensus culture.

V: So how do you feel about Somalia now?



R: I'm actually obsessed by Somalia.

V: (Laughs) I know the feeling.

R: Yeah, it's a weird thing. In a way it's because there's a relative dearth of information about it. So you can unearth these treasures, but in Hong Kong I've met a lot of Somalis and we've been co-teaching a discussion group with an anthropology professor here, Gordon Matthews to African asylum seekers. It's just that funny thing – you can meet Somalis anywhere in the world from the diaspora and talk about the same things. And there's a sense of a kind of common culture even without being rooted in a particular place for the past twenty years but the music is just amazing. Ever since I heard Abdi I've been getting deeper and deeper learning about the State band system they had there and the way that all these different influences from East Africa as well as American and Western influences fed into the music and produced something really unique. It just sounds amazing. I think there's something about Somalia as a – and I really hate using the term – 'failed state'. I feel like it's a really unique case. I was talking with my Somali friend the other day and we were asking what's the model for rebuilding a country? When they start to rebuild, it's from year zero, from scratch in a way. What's the model for rebuilding a culture with a twenty year ellipsis in between? I think there's something kind of utopian there – that as an artist maybe I'm really attracted to – at some point in the hopefully not too distant future, there are gonna be people rebuilding Somali culture based on the embers of what has been left over from the past. In a way, it reminds of the early post-revolution era in Soviet Russia when all the progressive, avant-garde artists and designers like Rodchenko and Lizzitsky got to align with the state and produce a new vision and visual language for the future of the nation.

V: Yeah. That intrigues me.

V: It's fascinating to think about all these connections.

R: Think about colonialism – I think about how I'm the product of varying versions of colonialism several times over: Portuguese colonialism in Africa, British colonialism in Hong Kong, British colonialism in Australia even, and how these echoes of history somehow shape the kind of person you end up being.

V: Yes. I love that turn of phrase: echoes of history.

R: Have you read *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* by T.J. Demos?

V: Sounds great.

R: He's basically looking at European artists who have gone back to Africa and done projects. But he's reading it through this idea of hauntology.

V: I've read a book by another theorist, Sneja Gunew, called *Haunted Nations*. Have you heard of that one?

R: No. This idea of all these historical eras existing in parallel as spectres of history especially in a place haunted by the colonial past is really interesting. Demos looks at artists who deal with this. Just reading that has influenced how I've approached this work. Dealing with my own subjective experience and my relationships with these Somali musicians over the last four years and then learning their stories – like 17 years in a refugee camp and then pre-war Somalia and its golden age in Mogadishu. All these parallel time periods all comes down to this little meeting. I was talking to Abdi in this poky little flat in Reservoir and there's all these things going on at the same time. It's really hard to assimilate it.

V: It makes one aware of the global power structures and the way that they circumscribe people but really, in reality, the traces are all there. The cultures are very much alive. By following the traces and unearthing these fragments, it is like a re-awakening. Many aspects of Somali culture have been dormant while the civil war has been going on: for example the way women dress changed in response to the dangers associated with the war.

R: It's been really interesting learning about the role of Somali women in Somalia before the war as well. It was really quite equal.

V: Very progressive.

R: The other thing which is interesting is the possibility now of Somalia stabilising and then how do you rebuild a society from scratch? Do you do what Siad Barre tried to do? To start this new scientific socialist regime where all clans and the past is basically – the slate is wiped clean, starting again with this new system? But now we're talking about how the ghosts of history always seem to come back. Always the return of the repressed. How the Somalis are going to approach rebuilding is really interesting. The closest thing to a functioning Somalia is Eastleigh in Nairobi and that's where most of the Somali diaspora live. That's a really interesting place at the moment. It's utterly neglected by the Kenyan government. So the roads are rubble, there's no sewage or anything but it's just filled with these massive malls where Somali businessmen bring all these goods from Dubai and China and distribute them all across Africa. There are these Somali women selling gold with AK47s under their counters.

V: Incredible.

It's getting late and Royce and I start to wind up our conversation. Not without a brief foray into the outcome of the Australian election, which saw the conservative Tony Abbott led LNP party elected. We express despair. Amidst this political landscape, we end our discussion by dwelling on the idea of utopia:

V: We need to find these utopias. When you were talking about the flat in Reservoir, I felt that the utopia is here now, we just need to unearth it.

R: I went and saw the Aussom band rehearse in Footscray. You go up these stairs and they'd rented out this whole level and it's just a khat chewing social club. It was like entering a little Somalia in the middle of Footscray and I felt like they had created their little Somali utopia in there. I really liked that.

This is an edited excerpt from a longer interview that is available in full on the Gertrude Contemporary website [www.gertrude.org.au](http://www.gertrude.org.au)

Dr Vivian Gerrand completed her PhD on representations of Somali belonging at the University of Melbourne in 2012. She teaches in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne and is co-curating the work of Sicilian artist Fabrice de Nola for the Mildura Palimpsest Biennale #9.





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