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Editorial: Peace, Responsibility and the Other

Peace, Responsibility and the Other

Out beyond ideas of right and wrongdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.
Dscalal ad-Din Muhammed Rumi.[1]

This issue of *Junctures* grew in part out of an interdisciplinary symposium on Art and Law hosted by the Dunedin School of Art and the Otago University Faculty of Law in October 2010. Mark Stocker's review of that symposium in this issue indicates how frequently speakers drew on law's function as a set of terms that resolve conflict through the delineation of 'right' and 'wrong' and how art tended to problematise simple divisions between those two terms. The very close relationship between the words 'peace' and 'law' can be found in the etymology of the word peace, which lies in the Latin word *pax*, meaning a contract or pact. This takes us quickly to the role of parliaments – that word itself derived from the French word *parler* 'to speak' and hence to come through conversation from dispute to agreement. For other cultures, for instance those with a Buddhist focus, relatively comparable terms and concepts present peace as a transcendent experience, or a value in itself, a state of being that is at rest. It was interesting, then, to find the fragment cited above from a text by the thirteenth century Sufi thinker Dscalal ad-Din Muhammed Rumi in Wolfgang Dietrich's exploration of differences in the nature of the term peace.[2] Rumi's suggestion that finding peace might require a transcendence of the issues around which disputes are formed is provocative and its relevance immediate.

Given those etymologies and the Eurocentric focus of this journal's readership, it should not have surprised us that responses to our call for submissions tended to find the idea only in opposition, that is, often only in a negative sense. If there is not war, then there is peace. If there is not violence, then there is peace. If there is not violation, then there is peace. Peace is degree zero, the *tabula rasa* from which conflict will again grow. For this reason, each author in this issue constructs peace as kind of dialogue, a process, a conversation and a negotiation. In this desire lies the active principle of peace; that it is always in production.

Symptomatic of this flavor, a further commonality has emerged in a concern with paradoxical states; undecidable situations that reflect suppressions, excisions and mirrored positions. Agreement in such cases is made difficult by a lack of common principles, or by an inherent ambiguity in the establishment of power relations and shared suspicion, doubt and uncertainty. As a counter to these situations, several of the essays draw on post-structuralism's methodologies, arguing in different ways that what is needed are tools that reveal underlying fault-lines, gaps or implicit rather than explicit power relations. The essays present complex situations in which competing and sometimes

equally valid claims need negotiation. Two such frameworks appear frequently, because of their recognition that some situations cannot be resolved through dialectical processes. These are Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agameben's study of "states of exception" and Emmanuel Levinas's sense that part of the human condition is the unknowability of other people.

For the first authors, Brendan Hokowhitu and Tiffany Page who, as tangata whenua, lead the sequence of texts, the state that is called peace within Aotearoa New Zealand is instead one of violence, the violence endemic to the process of colonisation and its inevitable suppression of difference and of subjectivity. Hokowhitu and Page carefully analyse the possibility that a unity constructed by the process of colonisation is one that remains dependent upon the action of colonisation and has little purchase without that.

Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the notion of the "state of exception" explains its history as a means of suspending the law of the state, a legal position which is both a limit to the legislative power of the state and a limit operating *within* the legislated field, in that the state can suspend its own laws.[3] Agamben explains how this state of exception is endemic in the histories of those legislated communities we know as nations. It is, for example, currently employed in the suspension of normal law in the region of Canterbury following the series of earthquakes in 2010-2011. That same state of exception was for a time employed in the 'terrorist' raids in 2009 in this country. Hokowitu and Page take this back to the suggestion that colonisation was not recognized as a state of war but instead as a suspension of law, leading to an intrinsic contradiction in the notion of a peaceful colony. If peace is the ability to live one's life supported by the law, then its alternative is the operation of the law against its own citizens. If the contract of law is the operational arm of the notion of peace, then any suspension of law is of great concern.

Today "states of exception" have as much to do with environmental events as they have to do with the naked exercise of imperialism, and with climate change this kind of absence of the law is likely to be more prevalent. Cameron Bishop considers the ways in which human subjectivity has been seen as a war with the non-human as well as with the human Other. He considers the ways in which climate change disasters re-present the human to itself through a re-focus on the specious division between the human and the non-human, emphasizing the ways in which this binary is unsustainable.

Brendan Hokowhitu and Tiffany Page, Cameron Bishop and Dorothee Pauli also draw on the ethical position advanced by twentieth century French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas around alterity.[4] Difference is generally seen to be the cause of dispute and, dialectically, its dissolution or synthesis the resolution. Levinas argues that difference is not dialectical – that is, it is neither oppositional, nor negatable. He was concerned with limit experiences. His experiences in the death camps and his subsequent life as a psychoanalyst led him to the position that there is no easy equivalence between beings, and that the recognition of difference is the ethical imperative that frames our lives. For him dialogue will produce a sense of strangeness, leading not so much to communication, as to responsibility:

> The face in which the other – the absolutely other – presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is predominantly nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless retains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace.[5]

As the feminist writer Heather McPherson reminds us, the need to make peace with our own wars, historic and familial, remains an active force throughout historical epochs and throughout generations, occurring in a matrix that inextricably links the private and the public, the immediate and the historical.

This inextricability is also articulated in the common use of the concept of biopolitics. Michel Foucault used this term in his understanding of the production of subjectivity within structures of power. The idea acknowledges the ways that all aspects of the human condition are invoked within political organisation, and that nothing escapes that organisation; value, spiritual life, ethnicity and cultural identity; nothing; all relationships are formed within it. Hence any negotiation – any contractual process, any negotiation with difference – has to be understood within this context, which will differ according to site and time and which engages the whole context of being.

 Using this notion and citing Agamben, Levinas and Gilles Deleuze, Cameron Bishop argues that humans are in three ways at war with our ecology, however much we might appear to be within it. As animals we fail to recognise other animals. As products of the biochemistry of this planet we fail to see our place within it. As humans constructed within relationships we fail to see our own part in the faces of those around us. These relationships are the subject of post-structural thought, which, growing from phenomenology, propose different ways to think about the 'Other'. Bishop's argument draws on a further concern in the work of Agamben, his idea of the human experience as founded on inhibition and disinhibition. The non-human in this model is characterised by its failure to have consciousness of otherness.

In what ways do humans make contracts, negotiate, broker peace, or prevent war based on a division between one group and another and the placing of one's group needs against the Other's? Is the most significant step in the making of a contract clear and equivalent communication, or is it, as Levinas would argue, responsibility for an ethical response to the Other?

Communication is certainly important. In their essay Willem Labuschagne and Johannes Heidema consider cognitive psychology's concern with language, discussing its firm belief in the possibility of the transfer of value-laden communication, given an understanding of the ways that humans frame communication through metaphor. George Lakoff, an American cognitive linguist, undertook a close analysis of the metaphors of war deployed by the United States government; his work alerts us to the simplicity of the narratives endemic in the rhetorics of power.[6] It is interesting to read that in the seventeenth century, German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz, as a diplomat, sought to develop a common European language in the relatively recent presence of the use of Latin for that purpose. His approach was to see diplomatic communication as a matching of objectives through the production of evermore accurate algorithms. Such attempts argue for the position that humans want to resolve conflict, and that conflict is something that can be resolved through the production of sameness rather than the recognition of difference. Problems with the take-up of universal, constructed languages such as Esperanto (the word is derived from the Latin word for hope) indicate that such solutions are as yet in their infancy.

Art is a particular form of communication. As Russian art historian Boris Groys argues, such events as the 9/11 bombings were produced by thinkers who had a clear understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic and political power of the imagery that would result from them; the role of artists is to counter the sublime dramas of such images with others that challenge and undermine that power.[7]

Dorothee Pauli's concerns lie with the ways that artists can engage critically in political life. There are histories of works that satirise, represent and challenge political acts. Sometimes they do this by presenting material in such a way as to produce an empathy with the subject of discrimination and violence. At other times, they present information in a more impartial manner. As Groys argues, such works are also evidence of the ways that art as a form is implicated in, or relevant to, political events. Pauli demonstrates how different approaches can undermine and challenge the images that are now common to our psyches and, without which critique will continue to function insidiously.

The subjects discussed by Pauli are again events which occur within "states of exception"; that is, events that occur in situations where the rule of law has been suspended by the state. Again, we might think of Levinas's argument that we must first acknowledge the responsibility each holds for the other before seeking consensus or agreement; and that such events occur within contexts that are at times undecidable.

Pornography is a term used to characterise another kind of violence that occurs within a state which is characterized as being at peace. Artists operate at the edges of experience, at perhaps limit places or occasionally, operating as "states of exception" in this regard; galleries negotiate with and mediate between their publics; artists and audiences, funders and administrators. Jenny Harper considers changing approaches to artists' freedom to exhibit given the increasing relationships between exhibiting galleries and state funding. Art is not always transparent to meaning and has particular conventions and particular and specific functions within societies. Harper's discussion presents very clearly the conflicts that lie not only between artist and institution but within the individual's own mixed position as agent for an institution and as herself the consumer and therefore the interpreter of an artwork's validity and power. Perhaps in such instances the term peace remains more closely with its Latin than its Buddhist nature: as in a conflict held in a temporal and perhaps tense stasis through the careful analysis of contextual issues.

The role of the artist is therefore complicated, and Gilbert May, in a review of Nina Katchadourian's *Seat Assignment*, discusses Plato's suggestion that the artist should by definition trouble the state but at the same time the state should exclude the artist to maintain its domestic peace. Does this place the artist in a perpetual state of exile, as is often argued?

If we take the notion of peace to be, as Dietrich argues, necessarily plural and "a dynamic equilibrium," then clearly ways of negotiating within difference are vital.[8] Willem Labuschagne reviews Poteete, Janssen and Ostrom's *Working Together*, a discussion of ways in which negotiations around the commons, and around specific instances of resources such as water, require particular and specific recognitions of difference and also different approaches to research, involving an acceptance that mixed methods are vital in the production of understandings around different values, experiences and needs. Interdisciplinary research is not only desirable but also necessary as we negotiate with positions that may never be reducible to a common understanding.

The common element in these texts then is the need for careful negotiation across difference, in order to achieve the non-violent sharing of life that is commonly regarded as peace. While we rely on laws to provide the frameworks that maintain a state of peace, these frameworks are fragile and easily placed in suspense. While information flows may also seem essential to the maintenance of peace, an understanding of the nuanced and contextual nature of information appears equally necessary. The resolution of disputes may occur only through the recognition of irreconcilable difference. We are writing in the context of the liberation of information through the Wikileaks process and the related but appalling hackings of personal data by the newspaper *The News of the World* with its subsequent closure. Is it information that we need for security? Or something less immediately satisfying but ultimately more stable, an understanding of personal responsibility in the careful, engaged and emotionally intelligent search for conversation with and across difference, meeting in that field beyond the contested positions of right and wrong?

1   Cited in Wolfgang Dietrich, "Beyond the Gates of Eden, Trans-rational Peaces" in *The Palgrave International Handbook Of Peace Studies, A Cultural Perspective*, Wolfgang Dietrich, Josephina Echavarria Alvarez, Gustavo Esteva, Daniela Ingruber and Norbert Koppensteiner, eds. (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

2   Dietrich, "Beyond the Gates of Eden, Trans-rational Peaces," 14.
Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

3   Emmanuel Levanis "Ethics and the Face" in *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

4   Levanis "Ethics and the Face," 203.

5   George Lakoff, *The Political Mind, Why You Can't Understand 21st Century American Politics with an 18th Century Brain* (New York: Viking, 2008).

6   Boris Groys, "Art at War" in *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass., London, England: MIT Press, 2008), 121-130.

7   Dietrich, "Beyond the Gates of Eden, Trans-rational Peaces."