

# *ThreeHundredandSixtyDegreesofSeparation*

*ThreeHundredandSixtyDegreesofSeparation*

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Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree at the National Art School or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the supporting documentation.

I also declare that the intellectual content and visual record of studio work of this supporting documentation the product of my own work, except to the extent that the assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

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Michael Roseth  
February 2006

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Michael Roseth  
February 2006

## **ABSTRACT**

*Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* offers another kind of narrative to cultural conflict. It focuses on the Israeli–Palestine situation through representation and re-imagination of sites and identities in this region. During the course of this MFA the main focus has been researching and producing a short animated narrative using charcoal drawing, erasure and video. Out of this process a number of other narrative works have developed in etching, video, drawing and animation. Together, these works re-imagine contested sites, and identities born in crisis. In a movement between, discrete, continuous, still and moving imagery, *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* establishes a polemical and an aesthetic experience that faces the harsh politics and social conditions of a seemingly intractable conflict.

This exegesis offers an explanation of the work through the lens of post-colonial social theory and philosophy. During the course of this project I became particularly interested in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Some of the key ideas found in their writings, and in secondary sources, have provided me with a useful interpretive framework through which to analyse and write about my work.

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## **PREFACE**

*Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* is an ongoing visual art project about difference and identity. As the circularity of its title suggests, the work encompasses both poles of this dichotomy within its wide embrace. On the side of difference live the other and the stranger. The stranger is also a sojourner. But the stranger is never strange to himself. Present to himself, he is strange to another. In this way the movement between strangeness, otherness, and the presence of identity work together to produce a journey. This journey moves in 360-degrees of separation - a movement in which the conditions of separation and unity coexist.

I have been no stranger to this journey. My project began in 2000, with a series of etchings depicting 360-degree views of two sacred sites in Jerusalem. The MFA portion of this project began in 2002 and is close to completion as I write this preface in January 2006. During this period I have lived in diverse places, following work and/or study opportunities. These have been: Israel; Byron Bay; Sydney; Singapore; back to Sydney; Darwin; back to Israel; back to Sydney. And now, as I finish writing this essay, I sit in a tree house on friends' property near the south coast of NSW. These movements have given me a good dose of both the experience of difference - feeling strange to a place, to a people - and identity - identifying with a place, and with people.

This exegesis offers an interpretation of my work through the particular theoretical framework known as deconstruction. I came to Derrida's deconstruction via post-colonial texts during my final undergraduate semester while researching the history of the Israel–Palestine conflict. My understanding of Derrida is retrospective to the work. The ideas presented here are a rethinking of my work through this theoretical framework. I do not make any claims to have made 'deconstructive art'. I have been drawn to Derrida and other contemporary thinkers because I have found a certain synchronicity between their ideas and my practice.<sup>1</sup> As such these ideas have become useful critical tools that

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<sup>1</sup> The main 'other' thinkers are Levinas, who exerted influence to Derrida, and some post-colonial theorists such as Irit Rogoff, Ammiel Alcalay and Homi Bhabha, who were influenced by Derrida.

opens my work to close scrutiny. I have approached theory as a maker, not as a theoretician. At times, during my research, the discursive elements of the texts have been difficult and time consuming to follow to a sense of comprehension or completion. At these times, remembering that image making is my specialised pursuit, I give myself an imaginative girth that affords the play between ideas and images. I have however attempted to maintain some rigour to my enquiry and to deal only with those ideas that I feel I have reasonable understanding.

As I got deeper into the theoretical material, I decided to separate out the information about techniques and processes, allowing for a more in-depth theoretical analysis. This information has gone into another document, *Ways and Means*, which gives a chronological account of the development of the work.

In this exegesis, '*Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*' refers to both the greater project and to the work produced for the MFA. Individual works within the MFA project are referred to by their names. Footnotes are used to reference and acknowledge authors, and for short bits of additional information. Endnotes, marked by Roman Numerals, are used to supplement an idea with longer bits of information.

*This way, preceded by no truth, and thus lacking the prescription of truth's rigor, is the way through the Desert. Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation...We must be separated from life and communities, and must entrust ourselves to traces, must become men of vision because we have ceased hearing the voice from within the immediate proximity of the garden...The poet – or the Jew – protects the desert which protects both his speech (which can speak only in the desert) and his writing (which can be traced only in the desert). That is to say, by inventing, alone, an unfindable and unspecified pathway to which no Cartesian resolution can impart rectilinearity and issuance. 'Where is the way? The way is always to be found. A white sheet of paper is full of ways'<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida and quote from Edmond Jabes, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book" in *Writing and Difference*, 1967, Routledge Classics, London, p 83-84

## **BACKGROUND**

*Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* began in July 2000 during a family visit to Israel and a trip to Jerusalem with one of my cousins. Though we had met previously, this was the first time there was no language or age barrier between us. We began to discover the threads that wove through our individual family histories, the differences and the commonalities. Both of us grew up in similarly secular households and had become interested in our cultural and religious background during our twenties. Jerusalem was the perfect place to talk about matters of culture and spirit. There, one becomes acutely aware of a past that has rendered the present thick with a sense of history. In Israel however nothing can escape contemporary politics and the strife that tears through life in that region. July 2000 was the final stages of negotiations at the peace summit in Camp David. Our journey in Jerusalem was set against this backdrop of tension and hope that there may be a lasting peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. At a friend's place my cousin pointed to a view out the window: "See there, on one side of that road, East Jerusalem, the Arabs. On the other side West Jerusalem, the Jews. How to separate the two?" The question was rhetorical. Indeed, looking at the jumble of houses and roads there seemed no clear delineation or boundary. Through looking at this view I became acutely aware of the impossibility of separation.

This awareness was confirmed the next day when we took a trip to two sacred sites in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Kotel is the site of the Western Wall, the only remains of the Second Temple, the holiest Jewish site. Directly on the other side of the Western Wall is the site of the Dome-of-the-Rock, the third holiest site for Islam, and the site of the original Jewish Temple of Solomon.<sup>1</sup> Though I had made several visits to these sites as a child, this was the first time I became aware of the proximity and historical relationship of these sites to one another. They are sacred to both Judaism and Islam and are geographically conterminous. More than just sharing a common boundary, the boundary itself is a sacred site.<sup>3</sup> The proximity of these sites to one another, coupled with

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<sup>3</sup> The Western Wall is also a retaining wall that forms part of the boundary to the Dome-of-the-Rock compound.

their particular history and imaginary force, struck me as a rich and potent symbol, both for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and to geo-political strife generally.

These sites have become the intense focus for religious, cultural and political attachment to all who identify with them. This operates at both physical and imaginative levels. At the physical level these are sites of religious worship, violence and intense political manoeuvrings. Archaeological research bears testimony to a history of blood and devotion. Security around these sites is extremely high. Access is limited depending on one’s identity and the current political climate.<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps a saner manifestation of the attachment to these sites is expressed at an imaginary level. For Jews, the attachment to the actual physical space of these sites is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to Zionist immigration to Palestine, these sites were conceived symbolically. When Diaspora Jews turned to pray towards the direction of the Western Wall, or uttered the incantation “next year in Jerusalem” the intention was not to invoke physical occupation of the site, but rather to connect imaginatively with a psychic space that would bring about the conditions for the Messiah.

Nevertheless, Jerusalem has witnessed a continuous and unbroken Jewish presence, from the days of the temple to this day. And it is an unbroken tradition, since the destruction of the second temple, to pray at the Western Wall, and to jam written prayers - texts of desire and devotion, white sheets of paper full of ways – into the cracks in the sandstone on the face of the wall. Jacques Derrida, not referring to these sites but appealing to generality, writes:

*When a Jew or a poet proclaims the Site, he is not declaring war. For this site, this land, calling to us from beyond memory, is always elsewhere. The site is not the empirical and national Here of a territory. It is immemorial and thus also a future. Better: it is tradition as adventure.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *opcit*, 1967, p 80

Nevertheless a Jew, Jews, We - but perhaps not a poet – have declared war, war as adventure, the blood of half brothers Isaac and Ishmael flow on the face of the rock, forging the national Here, within living memory victim becomes victimiser.

I decided to photograph the sites. Standing firm at both sites and, making 360-degree rotations, I snapped frames as I turned. When these photographs are joined together the result is a flattened 360-degree panoramic representation of the two sacred sites. These photos were to become the starting visual material out of which *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* would emerge. The first part of this project is a series of etchings describing the sacred sites as a metaphor for the greater site Palestine-Israel; sites that are simultaneously divided and unified. The later work has been made for the MFA program. These works develop this theme through drawing, animation, video, etching, projection and installation.

## POSITIONS

While at these sites the theoretical concerns that underpin my work became apparent. These concerns come in the play, the tension, the relationship, between apparent dichotomies that constitute our psychological and social environment: inside/outside; self/other; unified/separate; identity/difference. I understand these sites as a kind of constructed embodiment of these dichotomies. Here I would like to signal the work of Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004). Derrida's life's work - a sustained critique on Western Philosophy - has been an unravelling of the dichotomous structures that constitute our psychological and social environments. Derrida's thought – which has come to be known as deconstruction – works from within these dichotomous structures to show how the opposing forces in these structures always exist in interdependent and hierarchical relationships. Deconstruction overturns and displaces assumed and accepted hierarchies thus opening thought to a space in which it can move in-between and outside the limits imposed by thinking in binary categories.

An example of how this can be understood to operate in my work can be seen in the first scene of the animation piece *One Another*, in the typography of the title. First the words '*Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*' create a circle. The word '*Another*' appears inside the circle. Then the word '*One*', appears to the left and outside the circle. The circle fades out. In this word play we have deconstruction at work. The circle is an unstable boundary between the binary pairings. The relational movement of the words in time and space reverses and displaces the meaning of the text. Momentarily, inside and outside are confused. It is clear that meaning is contextually dependant and contingent on very particular relationships between the elements of the text, themselves never fixed nor stable.

Derrida initially deconstructed literary and philosophical texts, though he used the term 'text', or 'generalised text', to refer to the operation of any sign system. Therefore deconstruction can be understood to work within the field of vision whereby we absorb information from images. In this sense my project can be understood as a 'text', which is

the images I have produced, and the greater context within which these images were produced. The text *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* then signifies: the sacred sites in Jerusalem; the historical, religious and political dimensions of these sites; the geographical site of Palestine-Israel; the Israel-Palestine situation; the images I have made about this situation. All this is underpinned by the central question of identity, what is identity, how is identity constructed in times of strife? These questions come with a reflex that obliges an enquiry into positionality, therefore my own subject position, that is the psychological, congenital, cultural, and political position out of which I am able to work, also becomes an important element of the text. Further, the reading of these texts comes with the overarching reflexive issue of narrative and representation: how are these sites represented; by whom are these stories told?

In her preface to *Of Grammatology* Spivak writes: “*Derrida the deconstructor, for whom the critics self-hood is as vulnerable with textuality as the text itself.*”<sup>5</sup> Spivak is referring to that condition of self-reflexivity that comes with the post-structuralist understanding that meaning is constituted within a sign system at work; that it is not possible to think outside this sign system; that within this sign system there is a continuously mutable free-play of signification. In this case both author and critic are equally vulnerable to the interpretation of the other. Thus, facing the relationships between authority-authorship, artist-creator and audience-viewer, we can understand that “*the painter and the viewer are examined not as independent selves over and above the sign system of the work, but as entities jointly subject to the authority of that system and of its meaningful subsystems and connotations.*”<sup>6</sup> Turning further towards images and visuality I find an important elaboration of this idea in the following statement by Irit Rogoff:

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<sup>5</sup> Gayatri Chhakarvorty Spivak, *Translator's Preface* in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1974, p lxvii

<sup>6</sup> John Griffith, “Deconstruction Deconstructed” in, *Deconstruction Omnibus Volume*, p 94

*...the study of visual culture insists that images are the sites of identity-constitution rather than a reflection of the cultural and material conditions of their making.*<sup>7</sup>

If the production of imagery and the images themselves become the *sites of identity constitution* then visual art practice becomes simultaneously a process of self-discovery and self-creation. Further, research can be both a subjective and objective enquiry. The personal becomes transpersonal. In other words that which is personal, subjective, individual is understood to operate within, and be informed by, that which is impersonal, objective, social. I would like to use this ‘*transpersonality*’ as a key to discuss my motives for undertaking an art project about Palestine–Israel.

From its outset *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* set out to establish a polemic, framing itself within the genre of political and social commentary art. Within this framing however there is a certain ambiguity as to my political or ideological position vis-à-vis alliances and beliefs; what are my positions, motivations, reasons for representing these sites; what is my relationship to these sites; how do they configure into my own binary categories of self and other (identity/difference)? Here I would like to defer to a story about my own identity. The story illustrates how a person comes to a particular position is always more telling than the position itself. In this way I may also acknowledge my own cultural heritage and the realm of possible beliefs, biases and ways of being and thinking that may come with this heritage.

As a son of Israeli and Hungarian secular Jewish immigrants I live with a hyphenated identity: Secular-Jewish-Australian.<sup>iii</sup> A hyphenated identity is experienced in diverse ways, though there are common themes: distinction; alienation; strangeness; longing; creativity. For me it has been an identity born-in-crisis, forever balancing its own internal dissident register.<sup>iv</sup> However, during the trip to Israel in 2000 I was surprised to feel a sense of ‘being with my people’. Though I had visited Israel many times before, this was my first and only taste of this extremely alluring yet nebulous

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<sup>7</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma, Geography's Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 2000, p 149

experience. Returning to Australia I felt neither at home nor not-at-home. I felt detached, as if I could move fluidly in and out of identities, and inhabit the hyphenated space between apparent certainties. As I began the research for *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* I realised that I had an ability to look at the situation from the outside, at the same time I could identify with the inside. From the distance of Australia I had the possibility to look more objectively upon the situation than my cousins, whose lives are defined and pressured by political realities. Irit Rogoff, examining her own Israeli upbringing against Zionist ideologies writes:

*In a history so overdetermined by one overriding anxiety and one overriding concern, it is obvious that a totalising set of ideological imperatives would sweep aside any consideration of what we might today term 'difference' or differentiated experiences. Infact much of the purpose of producing a culture of belonging was to eradicate the concept of 'difference' which had served to create the radical differentiation that marked European Jews as those outside the culture in their host countries, those who do not 'belong'.<sup>8</sup>*

My opportunities to experience and contemplate difference are different. The complexities of this difference stretch into a realm of ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions that mark the history and legacy of the Jewish people right down to the present debate over Israel-Palestine, which encompasses within it Zionist and nationalist ideologies, the difference between diaspora and home, not to mention the infinite realm of differences within European, Islamic and Jewish Arab cultures.

To develop Rogoff, if images are the sites of identity constitution, then the artistic expressions we develop are the histories and mythologies we create. In that case, the narratives we re/present must take responsibility for and to this identity. Ammiel Alcalay

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 149

contests that while the political context of Jewish culture has transformed radically in contemporary times, the stories used to interpret this history and culture have ossified.<sup>9</sup>

*As a result of emancipation in the diaspora and national sovereignty in Israel Jews have fully re-entered the mainstream of history, and yet their perception of how they got there and where they are is most often more mythical than real. Myth and memory condition action. There are myths that are life-sustaining and deserve to be reinterpreted for our age. There are some that lead astray and must be redefined. Others are dangerous and must be exposed.*<sup>10</sup>

In September 2000, shortly after my trip, the second Palestinian Intifada broke out and the sacred sites in Jerusalem became the centre of the world media attention.<sup>11</sup> As the conflict waxes and wanes the mainstream media - offering a standard selection of stereotypical images of Jew and Arab - as well as various political interest groups - continue to report the story by perpetuating a narrative that gives the impression of two warring sides caught within endless cycles of self-referential victim-hood. To my mind this is unfortunate and irresponsible as it reinforces the dynamics of separation while denying the fact of unity. Part of my program is an attempt to address this imbalance, offering alternate ways of story telling that visually reframes the conflict as a means of re-imagining sites and self, and offering an antidote to the rested interests of partisan stakeholders.

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<sup>9</sup> Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p 1

<sup>10</sup> Yoseph Hayim Yerushalami quoted in Alcalay, *ibid*, p 4

<sup>11</sup> In July 2000 negotiations at Camp David broke down. In September Ariel Sharon, then the leader of the opposing Likkud party, together with party members and security guards, marched into the Dome-of-the-Rock compound. It was a strategic and highly provocative move. Palestinians in the area reacted by throwing stones. Israeli security counter-reacted. A battle broke out, which spread throughout multiple locations within Palestine-Israel. This fight initiated the second Palestinian Intifada.

## **THEORY REVIEW**

A white sheet of paper is full of ways. Here is one way to contextualise this project: This review charts a direction through the ethical dimension of Derrida's project, introducing Emmanuel Levinas and William Kentridge. This leads to a discussion of Derrida's *trace* and suggest links between trace and animation. A discussion on deconstruction and how I have applied a deconstructive reading to this project will then set out a broad context in which to discuss the work of *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*.

### **Derrida and the Logocentric**

In order to understand something of Derrida's ideas it has been necessary to inform myself, somewhat roughly, about the history and projection of Western philosophical thought. This research has helped me to understand how we - generalised Western culture - have inherited a way of thinking from the Greeks that divides thought into categories of binary oppositions, and how within this way of thinking we place the pairs of these opposites into hierarchical relationships. This relationship is structured by the privileging of one through the suppression of the other. The dominant position always relates back to the Greek ideal of truth as presence, or that notion that human reason can reach a perfect and unmediated access to knowledge and truth.<sup>12</sup> Derrida critiques this way of thinking as *logocentric*. Logocentric refers to the Greek word *logos*, which has a broad range of meanings. The Oxford Concise English Dictionary says: "*the word of God*" or "*divine reason*".<sup>13</sup> In a philosophical context *logos* refers to "*the rational, intelligible principle, structure or order which pervades something, or the source of that order, or giving an account of that order*".<sup>14</sup> In a theological context we can think about the New Testament and John I: 1-14 "*In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the*

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Norris & Andrew Benjamin, *What is Deconstruction*, Academy Editions, London, 1988, p 7

<sup>13</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, Revised, Oxford University Press, 2001, p 835

<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Edited by Ted Honderich, Oxford University Press, 1995, p 511

*word was God...*"<sup>15</sup> Derrida's program has been to unravel the ways in which Western philosophy, from Plato to structuralism, assuming the veracity of logos, has forced thought into binary categories where the dominant side instinctively defines its other through negation.

In the words of Spivak:

*...logocentrism – the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subject, and, closer to our time, the self presence of full self-consciousness...it is this longing for a centre, an authorising pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions.*<sup>16</sup>

When one reflects generally on thought and communication some of the common categories of binary opposites becomes apparent: good/evil, inside/outside, presence/absence, identity/difference. Thus, good is preferenced over evil, inside over outside, presence over absence and identity over difference.

Derrida, in summing up this broad sweep of Western philosophical thinking as the *metaphysics of presence*, has spent a life's work deconstructing this metaphysics, exposing the tyranny of reason, which is sustained by the disaster of repressing, excluding and reducing that which is uncertain, strange, different, other. Derrida's program is political and ethical. Political because this logocentric thinking ultimately and intimately defines, informs and re/constructs political institutions. Ethical because deconstruction works against the movement of logocentric thinking that reduces difference to categories of the same. The philosophical project that values identity over difference, that attempts to reduce knowledge to presence, that totalises thought to a

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<sup>15</sup> *The New Testament*, The New King James Version, The Gideons International, 1985, p 166

<sup>16</sup> Gayatri Chhakarvorty Spivak, *opcit*, p plxviii-plxix

speaking subject, is not far removed from a political project that constrains peoples' lives and identities within narrowly defined parameters.<sup>17</sup>

In Derrida's words:

*Once it has been demonstrated, as I hope to have done, that the exclusion of the parasite (of divergences, contaminations, impurities etc.) cannot be justified by purely theoretical-methodological reasons, how can one ignore that this practice of exclusion, or this will to purify, to reappropriate in a manner that would be essential, internal, and ideal in respect to the subject or to its objects, translates necessarily into politics.*<sup>18</sup>

### **Levinas and the Ethical Horizon**

Jacques Derrida's philosophy, being fundamentally concerned with ethics, was influenced by another Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1908 – 1995). Levinas's work, like Derrida's, is a critique on the totalitarian and identitarian ends of Western philosophical thought. Levinas developed a system of thought that proposes ethics, rather than ontology (being or logos), as "*first philosophy*".<sup>19</sup> This means that for Levinas the primary concern of all philosophical thinking is the relation with the other, rather than the question of being as presence. The ethical horizon in this sense is not about rectitude; the horizon is the direction towards which we face expansively, not the limitations of a moral code. Ethics is about the reliance of the self on that which is not self. Levinas and Derrida's claim is that "*the self is nothing without an other, or others, to which it has a*

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<sup>17</sup> Todd May, *Reconsidering Difference-Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, Deleuze*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p 4

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, Derrida quoted from *Limited Inc.*, p 133

<sup>19</sup> Jonathon Rolfe, *Understanding Derrida*, Edited by Jack Reynolds and Jonathon Rolf, Continuum, New York, 2004, p 40

*fundamental and fundamentally constituting relationship.*”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the self, the subject, the ego, only comes into being in relationship to the other. The other in this sense is s/he who cannot be known or thought by the subject. Levinasian ethics is about a non-totalising relationship between self and other, where the other is not reduced to categories of the same. For Levinas, because of the radical alterity of the other person, the encounter with the other denies the attempt of logocentric thinking to comprehend and control.

*This absence, this nonphenomenon, is not a lack but rather an irreducibility to presence. It reveals itself – as this absence - in the face of the other. The face of the other beckons me, calls me away from my own self-enclosure and from the presence that supports that self-enclosure, toward an I-can-never-know-what of the other. Such a call is the call of ethics; my acknowledgement of that call is the respect that instantiates an ethical relationship.*<sup>21</sup>

For Levinas the face of the other predicates the ‘face-to-face’ relationship, whereby the other summons the subject, “*calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question*”.<sup>22</sup>

Levinas’s thought is difficult to comprehend, for one reason because it flies in the face of our contemporary paradigm in which the self-enclosed individual is thought to be the initiator of his own actions and reasons for being. Levinas’s alternative calls for an unavoidable responsibility to others. These somewhat abstracted ideas are the ethical horizon that is both a hopeful invocation and a lived, if often denied, reality. In them I feel a push and a drive that lives in my art practice. There is a sense of searching for ways to tell this story; the tale of one relying on another/others for its own being; of making visible, breathing life into, those invisible connections between things. I have the sense that a similar drive lives in the work of William Kentridge.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p 38

<sup>21</sup> May, opcit, p 92

<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, Edited by Sean Hand, from the essay *Ethics as First Philosophy*, Basil Blackwell Ltd, United Kingdom, p 83

### **Kentridge's Double Bind**

On my first reading of William Kentridge's *Drawing for Projection* series I recognised a certain position that he seems to be occupying vis-à-vis the political and social situation in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>23</sup> In these animations the personal and transpersonal come together in an aesthetic production that faces and articulates the complexities of harsh social realities. Kentridge has talked about the ambiguities of his position as a white Jewish man whose ancestors came to South Africa to escape oppression, only to become part of the privileged minority.

*In South Africa...to be Jewish is to be other...But there is a palpable irony for South African Jews. Our Passover ceremony every year remembers the Jews as slaves in Egypt. And in the ceremony it is spoken about as if we ourselves had been slaves, while in fact we were the opposite. This contradiction did not change the fact that Jews have a historical context for understanding the desire to be free of fetters. But in the present, we are absolutely not part of those most oppressed. That remains an uncomfortable irony to live with.*<sup>24</sup>

Emerging from this irony is an art that explores “a zone of uncertainty and shifting meanings through the portrayal of a ‘double-bind’ where guilt and expiation express the condition of the privileged”.<sup>25</sup>

This ‘double-bind’ is applicable to the subject and themes of *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*, which also deals with dichotomous political situations

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<sup>23</sup> Kentridge's technique in the *Drawing for Projection* series is to animate images through a series of charcoal drawings and erasures drawn onto one sheet of paper. One of the effects of this technique is that an animated charcoal trace is left from the imperfect erasures.

<sup>24</sup> Quote by William Kentridge from *William Kentridge*, Exhibition Catalogue, Museo d'art Contemporanea, Skira Editore, Italy, 2003, p 31

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, essay by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *On Defectability as a resource: William Kentridge's art of Imperfection, Lack and Falling Short*, p 32

where power relations affect an erasure of the other in a struggle for the dominant position. The harshness of South African politics necessitates a kind of art that produces an aesthetic dependant on erasure. It is a model that is applicable to the historical context and current situation in Israel-Palestine – but one that is not readily available in an Australian art context, which operates within a much more comfortable aesthetic environment.

Included within this aesthetics of erasure is an embrace that draws in issues of vulnerability and responsibility – this is the success of an art that is both personal and transpersonal. These erasures, tracks and traces, animated through time and space, make visible the ineluctability of the effect of our actions on the world, on others. Kentridge has often suggested that an important aspect of being a visual artist is to find ways to make visible what one knows but cannot see.<sup>26</sup> These links between seeing, knowing and in/visibility are also at work in my project.

### **Trace and Animation**

I would like to use Derrida's notion of the *trace* as a way of talking about the process of creating a narrative through charcoal drawing and erasure, and moving images generally. Derrida's trace is that thing/no-thing that works the articulating moments of a text or narrative; that animates the space between signifiers and lends the possibility of meaning to the sign. In its absence it gives life to signification. The trace is the other of the sign, what is not said by the sign, both prior to the onset of meaning and left over by the chain of signification. The trace is neither entirely present nor absent, recoverable nor lost.

In her Translator's Preface to *Of Grammatology* Spivak writes:

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<sup>26</sup>See for example keynote speech by Kentridge, *Impact International Printmaking Conference*, <http://www.impact2003.uct.ac.za/pics%20&%20docs/site%20documents/keynotespeakers.html>, December 30, 2005

*Derrida suggests that what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but also the never annulled difference from 'the completely other'. Such is the strange being of the sign: half of it is always 'not there' and the other half always 'not that'. The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that which is forever absent.*<sup>27</sup>

Derrida's trace is intimately associated with his concept *differance*. Derrida's differance is a development on the concept of the sign that was presented through the then dominant philosophy of language known as structuralism. Structuralism contends that the sign marks a place of difference. Signification takes place because of an arbitrary relation of difference between signifier, that is the sound/visual image or written marks, and signified, that is the abstract concept. Derrida pushed this claim one step further by inventing the term 'differance'. In French this is a combination of the words difference and deferment. In this relationship of non-identity between signifier and signified meaning appears by virtue of the movement of differing in space *and* deferring in time. Derrida added time to the equation, or rather he showed that time was the repressed pair in a space/time dichotomy where time is reduced to a dimension of space.<sup>28</sup> Derrida understands that meaning comes out of an inherent impulse to construct language. This impulse he calls a "psychic imprint"<sup>29</sup> or *trace*.

*...it should be recognized that it is in the specific zone of this imprint and this trace... that differences appear within the elements or rather produce them, make them emerge as such and constitute the texts, the chains, and the systems of traces. These chains and systems cannot be outlined except in the fabric of this trace or imprint...The trace is the differance which opens experience and signification.*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Spivak, *opcit*, p xvii

<sup>28</sup> Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1990, p 38

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1974, p 66

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p 65

Derrida is trying to get at that which opens the possibility of consciousness, thought and language - “*a dynamic becoming that is itself the very stuff of our experience of reality*”.<sup>31</sup> I would like to use these ideas to attempt a parallel between thought and narration. Thus, this very nebulous *trace* and *differance* seem to me to be applicable to a process of constructing narrative through animating charcoal drawings and erasures. The connection to begin with is quite literal. The process of marking a piece of paper with charcoal and an eraser - drawing, erasing, redrawing etc - leaves an ineluctable trace on the paper. When working with a series of images each consecutive image, or frame, bears the mark or the trace of each previous image. In this way the identity of each image is constituted by the trace of its difference and “*the trace of each difference appears in every other difference*”.<sup>32</sup> The sequencing of the frames open the narrative, but it is the articulating moment-movement between each frame, the realm of differance and trace that gives rise to the possibility of meaning.

Here the link between Derrida’s trace and the trace of charcoal erasure on paper becomes metaphoric. It is in this metaphor that I see a possible connection between moving images generally, and Derrida’s vision of language and meaning that does not rely on Logos or self-presence. This vision, briefly stated: within the linguistic whole, that is the sign, the inherent force of the trace manifests into the opposing forms of inner concept (signified) and outer sound/visual image or written mark (signifier). Rooted within the holistic sign is the pregnant push towards sequencing, spacing, punctuation – differentiation within space and time.<sup>33</sup> Meaning comes out of the articulating moments-movements, the tension, the free play between signifier and signified. Because this movement of the sign is perpetual and perennial there is no possibility of pure presence, either the presence of God or Logos, nor of the individual subject. Moving images - film, video, animation – are also constructed by sequencing within space and time. “*Spacing is*

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<sup>31</sup> Coward, *opcit*, p 48

<sup>32</sup> John Griffith, *Deconstruction Omnibus*, Edited by Andreas Papadakis, Catherine Cook and Andrew Benjamin, Academy Editions, London, 1989, p 96

<sup>33</sup> Coward, *opcit*, p 63

*always the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious*".<sup>34</sup> A moving image relies on a differentiation in space - that is the dimension of film, or the separate cells of animation - and time - that is the pause between frames. Again there is no possibility for pure presence. Meaning is not individual. Meaning is produced through difference. Each frame relies on its other, and meaning comes out of the articulating moments-movements between each frame. No sooner is the sign/image present to itself than it is put under erasure, its absence recalled in the trace of marks not there, yet full of potential to the next image, always ready for the next erasure.<sup>35</sup>

### **Deconstruction and Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation**

Derrida says that deconstruction is always already at work within a text. In other words deconstruction is not a critical technique that one applies onto a text. It is rather a mode of analysis whereby a text's meaning is broken open from the inside by focusing on the inherent contradictions and excesses of meaning that exist within it when the sign is understood to mark a place of difference rather than a place of identity. This place of difference is the *trace* or the realm of *differance*, a kind of wellspring out of which deconstruction works. A deconstructive reading exposes internal contradictions and excesses in a text by focusing on binary oppositions within the text and showing that these exist in hierarchical relationships and that one term dominates by suppressing the other.

The first *phase* of a deconstructive reading *reverses* the order of the binary pair to subvert the expected hierarchy and thus show that meaning within the text is neither fixed nor stable.<sup>v</sup> The most obvious opposition in my project is Israel (or Jew) vs. Palestine (or Arab). When one thinks, reads, speaks or writes about these terms, Palestine/Israel or Jew/Arab, the order in which one places the terms already establishes a difference in

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<sup>34</sup> Derrida, 1974, *opcit*, p 68

<sup>35</sup> To me the process of making images move has the sense of embodying Derrida's *differance*. This is relevant for both video and animation, however this sense is more obvious in the marks and erasures of animation, which seem to magnify Derrida's *trace*.

meaning. The first term will dominate and be preferenced over the second term. Caught in this binary web, representations of Jewish and Palestinian identity will work to suppress and disavow one another. An important part of a deconstructive strategy is to look at the historical and political context out of which the dichotomous structure developed and is perpetuated. In this way one sees that the dominant term within the binary structure gains its position through coercion or force. This is the threat of logocentric thinking, the violence of privileging identity over difference. Since merely reversing the positions of binary pairs is to remain within logocentrism, deconstruction utilises a strategy of *displacing* the repressed term. According to Grosz:

*...Derrida's reading strategies involve both reversal and displacement together: the dichotomy must be reversed (showing that the terms are not logically necessary or unalterable in their hierarchical relation); and the repressed term must be displaced, not out of the structure altogether but by positioning it within the core of its dominant term, as its logical condition.*<sup>36</sup>

In a sense, the archaeology of the sacred sites in Jerusalem attests to this idea that reversing the hierarchy of a dichotomous structure remains within logocentrism. Throughout history as one temple, church or shrine was built on top of, replacing the other, the power relations changed, but the underlying structure of a violent relationship, that defines identity through disavowing difference, has remained.

There are many binary pairings working metaphorically in *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*. In the images of the sacred sites we have: divided/shared; continuous/discrete; imagined/occupied; religious/secular. In the images of walls and other boundaries there are: inside/outside; sacred/profane; diaspora/home; native/stranger; security/vulnerability; victim/oppressor; power/humility; hope/despair. In a socio-historical context myth is opposed to history, Zionist history is opposed to Israeli revisionist history and centre is opposed to margin. In the context of visual art practice there is material/conceptual. In this MFA exhibition images are installed in a dichotomy

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions, Three French Feminists*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p 30

between still/moving and continuous/discrete. Underpinning the project is the opposition representation and experience.

Progressing from the reversal and displacement of hierarchically ordered binary pairings are the categories of *hinge* and *aporia*, which gives way to *play*. The *hinge*, or hinge term, is a part of a text, or a term within a text that opens out the meaning of the text to something other than what it purports to mean. The hinge is often found at the margins of texts. By locating the limits in meaning of a text, the hinge implicates the central theme in that which is marginal to itself. The hinge can subvert the assumed meaning of a text and also the expected hierarchies of terms within a text. The hinge functions as a kind of opening. In a way the hinge relates to the trace in that it operates within the articulating moment-movement between the elements of a text, the phonemes, between the links in the chain of signifiers, and between the frames. The narrative element of my work are full of these hinges and openings; moments where one thing opens out/into another. In the larger context of this project the hinge can also be understood to operate as a kind of position that comes out of living a hyphenated identity (secular-Jewish-Australian); a position that allows for a moving between worlds, a seeing from both sides. In this sense the hyphen itself operates as a hinge.

In a deconstructive reading the hinge will always imply the condition of *aporia*. Opening the meaning of a text to its other will bring on a condition of doubt and uncertainty where the ‘on the one hand’ will cancel out the ‘on the other’. Aporias are the blind spots, the “*points of paradox or excess, sites of difference, non-identity, where the text spills over its conceptual boundaries*”<sup>37</sup> Again, *aporia* relates closely to trace. In deconstruction each articulating movement-moment can be thought of as an *aporia* since this space, which is the realm of the trace, which is both presence and absence, contains both a potential and an ambivalence to that which was and that which will be. When working with animation and video I have a sense of this *aporia* operating between every frame of the moving image. At every mark or every erasure, every layer and every frame,

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p 28

and in the trace of every other mark, the narrative flow always has the potential to become something other than what it is.

These elements of deconstruction: reversal; displacement; hinge; aporia, lead to a condition where a text is always in a state of becoming. Meaning is never fixed or stable, it is ambiguous and open in its evolution. This is the state of *play*. Play is a condition in which both the maker and the interpreter of a text have the freedom to re/imagine that text in a way that is not locked to the hierarchical thinking imposed by dichotomous structures. For art to work the condition of play is a prerequisite for the maker and the interpreter, who can both engage imaginatively with meanings of words and images. Here play becomes the departure point for a discussion of the works of *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*.

## PLAY

This condition of play, together with the particularities of my position and interests, has allowed me the privilege to engage imaginatively and aesthetically with harsh political and social realities faced by those embroiled in a seemingly intractable conflict. During the 4 years that I have been working with this MFA project the animation piece *One Another* has been the main focus in terms of time and expectations. The other works (videos, drawings, etchings, animations) that have grown out of the visual and theoretical research are not peripheral to any centre. The installation set up for the MFA exhibition is simply my first attempt at organising this material, which could be presented in any number of ways. In organising this material I have been conscious of playing with certain aesthetic dichotomies that are one of the outcomes of this project: that is the play between moving/still, and discrete/continuous imagery.

Playing with these dichotomies marks an evolution for my practice, which, previous to this MFA project, dealt only with still imagery. Working with the temporal dimension I experience another ability to communicate my interests in narrative and research alternate ways of story telling. Referring back to the trace – that force that animates the articulating moment-movement between static images – I find it is this between, these interstices, this other of the image, that opens the creative space of play, lending a way, a white sheet of paper full of ways, for image and imagination to face politics and social conditions, producing an aesthetic experience.

But in this still/moving, discrete/continuous dichotomy there is another sense that works metaphorically through strangely familiar experiences. In movement there is the journey: dispersal; displacement; migration. In stillness is the idea of the nation state. In continuity, there is the sweep of history, the blindness of the future and the cycle of life and death. And in discreteness there is the self-enclosure of presence-to-identity.

For the purposes of the following discussion I have divided the work into two sections. The first section will discuss *One Another* and *Tower*.<sup>38</sup> In the concluding section I will discuss the *Site Projections* video pieces. The differences in these two groupings of work can be characterised thus: *One Another* and *Tower* are linear narratives while the narrative of *Site Projections* moves in repetitive cycles. The former is more a story, the later more a mood piece. If *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* is talking to the idea that the conditions of separation and unity co-exist, then the linear narratives focus more on separation, while the cyclical narratives focus more on unity. However, I hope also to show that one is always implied within the other.

### **One Another and Tower**

*Representation mingles with that which it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representor. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be reduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source or a spring. There is no longer a simple origin.*<sup>39</sup>

I find in these ideas a synchronicity to the narrative of *One Another*. *One Another* begins and ends in darkness, with music, and then a name. When One walks forward, out of the darkness into the desert, he is immediately faced by Another, stepping forward,

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<sup>38</sup>*One Another* is charcoal drawing and erasure animation combined with video. *Tower* refers to three works: the short drawing-erasure animation piece; the series of etchings; and the short video made from the etchings. For more details on processes and techniques please refer to the supporting document *Ways and Means*.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, 1974, opcit, p 36

from the horizon, towards One.<sup>40</sup> Who are One and Another? When One walks out of the darkness is he bringing with him an identity born of history? Or does he walk into the desert unattached? When Another comes forward from the horizon does he step with the weight of memory or does he bare the lightness of human agency? To what degree are our identities atavistic or arbitrary?

The characterisation of the two protagonists in *One Another* is decidedly ambiguous. Are they one or two? That they exist briefly together within the same frames suggests that they are two characters. Different coloured shirts signify their difference. But both One and Another are performed by me. Does this double performance create an opposition between identity and difference – and is this sufficiently confused and overturned? Perhaps Derrida’s quote offers some clues. The representation, that is, images of One and Another, are a reflection of the representor, that is, me, for myself, or for an audience, the abstract idea ‘Michael Roseth’. “*For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles.*”<sup>41</sup> ‘Michael Roseth’ reflects One. One becomes Another. Another one another. As Derrida points out, in this play of being and becoming the idea of “origin”, which is also a question of atavism, is problematised. And in the convulsions of Derrida’s thought the problem itself becomes a problem:

*The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three.*<sup>42</sup>

In *One Another* the protagonists walk towards each other. In Levinasian terms they

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<sup>40</sup> ‘One’ and ‘Another’ are the names I have given to the two protagonists in the short animation *One Another*. The work presented for the MFA exhibition represents three scenes out of a larger narrative that I am developing. This work will be produced in 2006 with the assistance of an Australia Council New Work Grant.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, 1974, opcit, p 36

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p 36

walk towards the ethical imperative of the face-to-face relationship. Their walk is rudely interrupted by the appearance of the wall. Can we consider the wall in terms of 'promiscuity and complicity'? With these harsh words Derrida problematizes representation, implicating our immutable belief in images, as if there is a relationship of identity between reflection and reflected, that is, between image and reality, or representation and experience. Derrida has gone to great lengths to show us how only a relationship of difference exists between reflection and reflected. Yet the pull of identity, this 'nefarious complicity', remains strong and tempts a 'promiscuous' allegiance to faithless representations. For example, when we see a news item about a terrible situation of conflict, how easy is it for us to imagine that this reflection is the same as the event? How difficult is it for us to recall that there is a screen, delimited by a Cartesian framing device, reflecting an event removed (differing and differed) in space and time? And on the other side we sit, with a passivity that produces its own fears and desires, involved in a strange kind of interaction between perception, screen, image and imagination. Referencing Levinas, Anthony F. Beavers writes:

*It is a world in which "men find themselves side by side rather than face to face". Society, through the use of technological forces, spreads news as universal truth. It speaks everyone's language; it tells everyone's story.*<sup>43</sup>

Derrida and Levinas have indicated how this false identification itself is violent. It is an idea that is beyond the scope of this essay to expand. What I will say, though, is that this project is motivated by an ethical imperative that works against the violence of a complicit media and consuming public. For this we need to find new ways to tell the story. Coming back to the opening proposition, in *One Another* the wall can be read as the barrier that blocks the face-to-face relationship. But this barrier works another way. It

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<sup>43</sup> Anthony F. Beavers and quote from Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas and the Prophetic Voice of Postmodernity*, <http://faculty.evansville.edu/tb2/trip/prophet.htm>, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2005

is also the screen onto which we project our fears and desires.

Walls are the central leitmotif throughout *Three hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*. In *One Another* One walks to the wall and reaches up to put a piece of yellow ‘paper’ into its cracks. The wall then ‘lights’ up with other yellow ‘papers’. The paper here signifies a ‘prayer’. The Western wall inspires this kind of Jewish devotion. Throughout its history the faithful have come to pray at the wall, the last physical remains of the temple of old. This wall talks about Jewish autonomy, power, sanctity, distinction. The faithful are inspired by atavistic devotion, which is also tradition, to write a prayer on a piece of paper, and cram it into the cracks and crevices of the wall. The matrix of the ancient wall is full with nooks, cracks and crevices to receive our fears and hold our desires. The papers grip to the wall as if to defy gravity. This stone wall is like a membrane between man and God – full of hopeful potential: ‘*Dear God, Peace?*’

But the word ‘peace’ has become corrupted. We’ve often heard and read the words ‘Middle East Peace Process’. What peace? There may be a political process but it is not about peace. Peace is about the ethical relationship with the other. Its potential is in the face-to-face relationship.

In *One Another* and *Tower* the stone wall morphs into a concrete wall. The concrete wall describes the separation-wall/security-fence currently being built between Israel and the Palestinian territories.<sup>vi</sup> One is erased, and the paper prayers fall to the ground. They fall because they have nowhere to grip. It is a loss of hope. The smooth gravity of the separation wall is about despair. The transformation of the walls is about the movement between hope and despair. The tension in this movement is the trace, which works to overturn the opposition security/sanctity. In the animations the trace left by the erasure from the stone wall to the concrete wall gives evidence of the hope that is in despair. There is another transformation, an erasure, a hole, an opening. Here is another movement between despair and hope. This opening is the hope of the desert.

*This way... is the way through the Desert...as the moment of Separation...We must be separated from life and communities, and must entrust ourselves to traces, must become men of vision because we have ceased hearing the voice from within the immediate proximity of the garden.*<sup>44</sup>

In this quote Derrida sets up an opposition between desert and garden. In it we see a beautiful example of the way in which he pushes the boundaries between philosophy and literature. Images of the desert and the garden can only be understood metaphorically. The garden signifies agriculture, human culture, the social. It is about the horizontal dimension of human relations that culminates in political and social institutes. The garden also conjures images of Eden - the garden before the fall. Here we live the ideal of social relations. But the garden is corrupted. The desert is other to the garden. It is about the vertical dimension of human thought. On the way through the desert we leave the garden behind. Separated from the social the desert deals with the relationship between self and the ultimate Other, God. Here there can be no thought that seeks the allegiance of binary opposites. In the desert we focus on the energy that gives rise to the potential of opposing forces. This is the trace. It is the wellspring of writing, poetry, art.

In *Tower* the space of the desert asserts itself, and then fills and divides as other elements occupy its space: a pylon that morphs into a surveillance tower; a rock that transforms to a human figure; a high rise tower that becomes circumscribed by a wall; villages; a concrete wall that circumscribes the observation tower. This action begins to articulate the geographical and architectural conditions that hierarchically define the site of Palestine-Israel. By one interpretation this is a way of talking about how identities born in crisis become specialised and naturalised. George Bisharat's essay *Exile to Compatriot* looks at Palestinian refugee identity born in crisis. He sees social identity as a

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<sup>44</sup> Derrida, 1967, opcit, p 83-84

“continuing production based on sets of oppositions between self and other or multiple others”<sup>45</sup>

*If identities are elaborated only in confrontation with some categorical other(s) and are simultaneously freighted with implications and claims, it is but one step further to recognise that at least one context in which identities are specialised is on contests between groups for the control of space. The negotiation of identity is part of a more general narrative transforming blind featureless “space” to knowable, familiar, intimate “place” naturalising the links between a people and their “homeland” – the possessory aspect, above all else, implying the power and right to exclude others.*<sup>46</sup>

In *Tower* the space of the desert transforms into the place of culture. As walls, towers, villages and rocks morph into each other, or into something else, a number of oppositions are established, only to be overturned. The modernity of the high-rise and pylons opposes the ethnicity of the village, itself opposed by the architectural dominance of the settlement. The sanctity of the stone wall opposes the profanity of the concrete wall in its will to divide and secure. But whose protection is at issue when walls circumscribe towers? The metaphors produced in the composition and narrative of *Tower* work like a hinge that confuse the opposition security/vulnerability.

What can we make of the rock? Initially I was thinking about the rock in the Dome-of-the-Rock shrine. I was considering the ways in which the mythological manifestation of this rock is used by some Jews and Arabs to claim a ‘naturalised’ identity. This naturalised identity leads to the notion of a ‘divine’ right to occupation of the land. In *Tower* the rock morphs to a figure, but the figure is highly compromised, probably a cadaver wrapped in a body bag, and certainly a victim.

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<sup>45</sup> George E Bisharat in *Culture Power Place, Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, Edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1997, p 204

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p 205

In the chapter titled 'Bodies' in *Terra Infirma* Rogoff takes up this issue of 'naturalising' identities, calling for a deeper self-understanding:

*If the conflicts and struggles between Israelis and Palestinians are to be understood as more than territorial but as a struggle for the possession of an authentic and locally rooted identity, then a major part of our attempt to address and understand these struggles must be invested in the claims which we make for our own identity.*<sup>47</sup>

In her critique of the Zionist program she picks up on a historical irony that rests uneasily at the heart of the conflict. In the purview of recent history the Jew exists at a kind of pressure point between the binary opposites victim/oppressor, stranger/native. In a deconstructive reading the Jew is the hinge that throws open and overturns binary categories. The Jew is also the aporia that puts assumed hierarchical relationships into doubt.

I have begun to understand that the rock under the tower manifests a visual image of Derrida's aporia. Again I think about Kentridge's claim that part of the business of being a visual artist is to search for ways to make visible that which we know but cannot see. The rock is the tower's nemesis. It relates to the tower at its only vulnerable spot. A surveillance tower, whose function is to observe and control, has only one blind spot, that is directly below itself. In the animation the rock grows out of the blind spot, the aporia, the doubt, its expansion continues to excess, eventually overpowering and consuming towers, walls, villages, and the picture plane.

In *One Another* the desert offers a different narrative: Another, having reappeared behind the erased wall, squats in the desert earth as a reflective plane grows in from stage right. He squats to see his reflection. But there is a twist: birds fly above while bomber jets are reflected. Again I think of Derrida's "*dangerous promiscuity and ... nefarious*

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<sup>47</sup> Rogoff, *opcit*, p 151

*complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be reduced narcissistically*".<sup>48</sup> There is an explosion at the horizon. Another is not disturbed. He continues focusing on his reflection. His thoughts are vertically preoccupied. In his reflection he searches for himself and his Maker.

The reflective plane morphs back to the desert earth. Another draws a line in the sand. There is another border, another boundary.

*...the human condition should be understood in terms of its propensity to transcend and erect boundaries...(boundaries are) ambivalent because they are both constructive and destructive; they provide the conditions to construct an identity because they establish difference between self and other, and they can also provide the grounds to suppress and exclude the other.*<sup>49</sup>

In *Tower* a circular line appears spontaneously in the desert earth. In *One Another* Another makes a 360-degree rotation around himself tracing a red circle in the charcoal desert earth. This movement contains within it all the ambivalence and ambiguities of boundaries and borders. When Another circumscribes himself is he containing himself within, or defining himself without? Is he describing a position of legitimacy, or circumscribing a zone of influence? Is he asserting a presence-to-self, or demarcating a reflective space? Is this a matter of separation, protection, exclusion or definition?

Approaching these questions with a deconstructive reading I imagine the border to be a trace. In this sense it is a porous border, a border that breathes. A boundary between every articulating moment. A rhizomatic division with outer edges in perpetual exchange with that which is divided. The movement of the trace is also a border between

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<sup>48</sup> Derrida, 1974, *opcit*, p 36

<sup>49</sup> Vince Marotta, *The Ambivalence of Borders: The Bicultural and the Multicultural*, in *Race Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, Edited by John Docker and Gerhard Fischer, UNSW Press, 2000, p 177

past and future. Homi Bhabha characterises the border as a “*liminal space, in-between the designations of identity*”.<sup>50</sup> He theorises this ‘space’ as the interstices, a place in which culturally hybrid identities can thrive. Bhabha applies this kind of theoretical border to the area of cultural production:

*The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.*<sup>51</sup>

In *Locations of Culture*, Bhabha searches for a new kind of interstitial awareness that undermines the tendency to naturalise identities. This awareness would cognate the overlapping and displacement of domains of difference and focus on the moments-movements that are produced through the articulation of cultural difference, rather than considering the representation of difference as “*the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.*”<sup>52</sup>

In *One Another*, Another makes a 360-degree rotation to trace a line around himself. For a moment he is fully enclosed, striving for security in his own subjectivity. But it is not the hermetic seal of self-enclosure. On completing the rotation Another finds the paper that One put in the wall, the prayer recovered over the traces of multiple erasures. His security is ruptured by the call of another. He picks it up and unfolds it. Another opening comes in the image of a beating heart. The heart transforms into a map. The map is restless and unstable. Its boundaries in constant redefinition, subsuming, being subsumed.

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<sup>50</sup> Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p 4

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p 7

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p 2

*This is not a map of the place nor of its occupation but of the haunting that is the ongoing reality of co-inhabited spaces in which one presence is always at the expense of the other.*<sup>53</sup>

The '*Heartmap*' presents no particular geographic position but the generalised condition of a world in strife where competing identities vie for the possibility to coexist. These lines and marks are arrows of becoming, the topography of a trace, a map under erasure. A red creature worms its way around, drawing the eye to the edges. Centre and margin fuse into/out of one another. The eye is drawn back to the centre as all is subsumed. The map morphs back to a beating heart. The beating heart contracts into a stone heart as it becomes strapped with explosives. There is fire. Fire is about war, violence, destruction, transformation. Here, it also calls attention to representation, a story traced into a white sheet of paper full of ways. One way is to burn. There are credits and we are back to the beginning, again in darkness.

### **Site Projections**

The first and latest works of *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation* play with images of sites in Jerusalem, re-imagining them from divided to unified and shared. I will discuss the later works, (video projections), as the earlier works, (etchings) were made prior to the MFA, however many of the ideas are applicable to both.

The *Site Projections* video pieces are put together from footage shot in and around Jerusalem during a visit in 2004: the two sacred sites, an Arab market located adjacent to these sites, and the desert south of Jerusalem. The premise of the work is that opposing sides depend on each other for their being. Through reversing the order of the layering the opposition Arab/Jew is reversed. The use of luminosity and transparency filters displace one within the other; the bodies, the marks, the traces of one are seen

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<sup>53</sup> Rogoff, opcit, p 85

inside and through the sites and bodies of the other. Repetition lends a sense of circularity to the narrative, as if in working through logocentric cycles we sense absence within presence. Notions of an accepted hierarchy are overturned as the supposed dominant and subordinate positions meld together. At one moment/frame/image the Palestinian ‘side’ comes to the foreground, dominating the pictorial space over the Jewish ‘side’, whose trace appears *within* the other. At another moment the fortunes are reversed. The conditions of one are made visible within the other. A second video piece features these sites layered together with a panoramic desert view and a close up of the Western Wall. As the camera zooms back and forth scenes of the other sites are witnessed through the wall, and through one another, creating a sense of confusion, and an underlying order beneath the chaos. Here another dichotomy is overturned, as the opacity of the wall gives way to the transparency of the screen onto which we project our fears and desires.

In referring to the formation of an Israeli state in 1948 Edward Said writes about seeing with an “*ironic double vision*”.<sup>54</sup> Here he refers to the tragedy that unfolded histories pages as the formation of a nation state for the thousands of Jewish refugee survivors of the holocaust produced in its violent wake a new category of refugees, the Palestinian Arabs. Playing with Said’s phrase, I could say that the original etchings of the sacred sites employ a panoramic double vision<sup>55</sup> and that these *Site Projections* employ a transparent double vision, as a way of re-imagining this irony from one that divides place and culture, to one that articulates the unity inherent within separation. If *One Another* and *Tower* talk about erasure, that dynamic whereby power erases and replaces itself, these video pieces talk about repetition, transparency and luminosity, that dynamic whereby the opacity and singularity of space and identities are shot through by another – other people, other spaces, other times. Through articulating difference as transparent they reveal the raw and apparently unacceptable bond that exists prior to political and cultural separations.

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<sup>54</sup> Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1980, p xiii.

<sup>55</sup> This work is a series of etchings depicting 360-degree panoramic views of the two sacred sites.

The *Site Projections* works use the source material to re-tell a narrative of intermingling, playing together, playing with. Politics and aesthetics become intermingled in art as they are in life. In this play there is also the sense of a trace. It is not the trace of erasure, but the trace of the imperceptible moment-movement between frames. And here there is another sense of trace. In the synchronistic convergences between layered sites comes the sense of an absence within presence. Or is it an extra-to-presence? In the abstracted moments and eerie movements, the passages between sites and people layered together in time, comes a sense of another way of being that is not about the enclosure of self-presence. Two sites layered together in this way amount to more than an addition. In a tangential way I am reminded of “*one plus one makes at least three*”.<sup>56</sup> In this play a third creature is produced.

These video works imagine the presence of subjectivity in confrontation with an otherness that opens the pictorial space to a sense of the collective. Jean Luc Nancy discusses this confrontation between the individual and the collective:

*...we are brought into the world...according to a dimension of ‘in-common’ that is in no way ‘added onto’ the dimension of ‘being-self’, but that is rather co-originary and coextensive with it... Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated.*<sup>57</sup>

Do these works begin to impart a sense of visibility to that invisible relationship between the ‘in-common’ and the ‘being-self’? Perhaps we may begin to approach an idea of Levinas’s ethical position of responsibility to the other:

*Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the later already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another... the proximity of the Other is not*

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<sup>56</sup> Derrida, 1974, *opcit*, p 36

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p xxxvii

*simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself - insofar as I am-responsible to him.*<sup>58</sup>

*A responsibility for my neighbour, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me.*<sup>59</sup>

Which brings us back to the stranger and sojourner - myself, another. And the journey that moves in 360-degrees of separation - responsible yet unbound. In response, my work seeks visibility to what cannot be seen: that condition that Levinas has characterised as a unity lived in extreme separation. The call of this responsibility is not limited to Jewish experience, or the experience of any identity group. Rather, this responsibility bears testimony to human conflict lived in its ignorance, which is the violence of totalitarian thought. This text, of images and words, faces towards this conflict, presenting movements where sites of identity constitution produce narratives that culminate in the aesthetic experience called *Three Hundred and Sixty Degrees of Separation*. In the traces of these movements there are openings, questions, reflections, relations, things between, things beyond and things to be continued.

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<sup>58</sup> Levinas quoted in May, *opcit*, p 139

<sup>59</sup> Levinas, *opcit*, p 107

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## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>i</sup> The Temple Mount (Haram al Sharif in Arabic) is an ancient site that is sacred to both Judaism and Islam. Two iconic structures exist at this site: The Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock. The Dome of the Rock structure is built around a rock. The site of this rock, known to Jews as Mount Moriah and to Moslems as as-Sakhra, and the rock itself, are considered highly sacred. The origins of the sanctity of this site probably came from an ancient Semitic myth that stated that the rock on top of the mount was held in the mouth of the serpent *Tahum*, and that this place was the intersection between the underworld and the upper world. Certainly the rock is considered to be the site in the Biblical story (Genesis 22:2) where Abraham built an alter on which he prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. The First Temple of the Jews was constructed on Mount Moriah during the reign of King Solomon. It was completed in 957 BCE. In the 7th century BCE the Babylonians, lead by Nebuchadnezzar II, invaded and most of the Hebrew population went into exile. The temple was destroyed in 586 BCE. Shortly after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem. Reconstruction began and the second temple was completed by 515 BCE. Over the next five centuries Jerusalem was captured and controlled by Hellenistic, Egyptian and Seleucid empires, as well as brief periods of Jewish autonomy. In 74 BCE the Roman Empire gained control of Jerusalem, which it held for several centuries. After decades of Jewish revolt and struggle against the Romans the second temple was finally destroyed in 70 ACE. Today all that physically remains of the second temple is a sandstone wall that formed its western boundary. This iconic site is referred to as the Western Wall. It is also known as the Wailing Wall because religious Jews who pray there can often be heard chanting and wailing in cathartic abandon.

Over the next seven centuries Jerusalem was controlled by Roman, Byzantine and Persian empires. A Roman temple and then Christian church were built on Mount Moriah. In 638 ACE the capture of Jerusalem by the Moslem caliph Umar heralded several centuries of Ottoman and Muslim rule. The Dome of the Rock temple (Qubbat As-Sakhrah in Arabic) was completed in 691 ACE. This spectacular structure was built around the rock on the site of the Jewish temple for political and religious reasons. Islam, as well as acknowledging the biblical story, has its own story about this rock. The seventh Sura of the Koran, the auspicious “Night Journey”, links the prophet Mohammed with Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. In this story Mohamed, in a vision, ascended

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through the seven heavens into the presence of Allah, from whom he received instructions for himself and his followers. The site of this ascension is thought to be the rock of As-Sakhra.

In recent history these sites have been under the control of the Ottoman and then English empires. When Israel became a nation in 1948 the sites were controlled by Jordan as Jerusalem was divided East to West and the sites lay on the East side. After the 6-Day War in 1967 Israel gained control of all Jerusalem (and the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Sinai). This was a momentous epiphany in Jewish' history as Jews have not had autonomous control of these sites since the era of the Temples. Further, Messianic mythology purports that the Messianic age will come when Jews re-inhabit the Temple Mount (see below).

<sup>ii</sup> Security to these sites is always high priority for the Israeli government. One of the most ominous threats comes from within the extremity of Orthodox Judaism. It is a Jewish messianic belief that the Messiah will manifest when the Jewish Temple is restored on Mount Moriah. Some Christian sects also hold this belief. There are always those fanatic elements within these groups that plot to destroy the Dome-of-the-Rock building in the belief that this will herald the Messianic Age. Aside from this threat, the Israel Defence Force and Mossad keep tight surveillance and control on who enters and leaves these sites. Generally it would be difficult (or impossible) for an Arab to enter into the Kotel site and (these days) like-wise for an Israeli to enter into the Haram-al-Sharif site. The limitations and difficulties of movement in and around these sites increased greatly since the intifada began in September 2000. During my later two trips to Israel in 2001 and 2004 I have either not been able to enter the Haram-al-Sharif site, or have done so with great difficulty.

<sup>iii</sup> My mother was born in Palestine in 1944, her parents having arrived there from Eastern Europe just before the outbreak of war. My Father was born in Hungary in 1937. Having survived the Nazi terror he escaped the communist terror in 1950. He lived as a refugee in Austria before immigrating to Australia in 1952. My Father met my Mother during a trip to Israel in the 1960's. After a courtship and proposal Mum moved to Australia to

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marry. The idea that she would live here permanently did not cross her mind at the time, as leaving newly formed Zionist Israel was akin to being a traitor. The plan was always to marry and then move back to Israel. I was born in Sydney in 1968 but we spent the first year of my life in Israel. After this year Dad made the decision to move back to Australia. The reasons were complex but basically he could not stomach the Israel occupation and treatment of Palestinians, and foresaw the conflict that lay ahead. My parents adapted extremely well to their new life in Australia. I grew up in a secure and secular environment in middle-class Sydney. While there were regular family trips to Israel my mother did not give me Hebrew when I was learning to speak. Nor did my family associate with Jewish community groups. Nevertheless I was always aware of my difference. It has been a life learning process (and one that is not separate from my art practice) to understand how the tension that surrounded this awareness of difference has played a part in forming my personality and constituting my identity. I became actively interested in this aspect of my identity during my late twenties and, in an informal way, began learning something about Jewish history and thought.

Another tension, that plays an important and somewhat hidden role in my family relations is the separation of my Mother emigrating to Australia. This move created a wound that has not been healed. My Grandfather carried his grief to the grave and my Grandmother continues to grieve. Apart from the pain of a daughter leaving a long, long way from home, this grief should also be understood within the context of the social/political atmosphere of Zionist Israel in the early 1960's. The direct translation to English for the Hebrew word 'immigrate', *alyia*, is 'going up'. The translation for the word 'emigrate', *yerida*, is 'going down'. The value embedded into the language gives a good indication of the kind of social vilification that was directed onto those, and the family of those, who left. For my Mother the move to Australia was a difficult process, both for the emotional trauma of leaving loved ones, but also a long process of working through her own political identity in relation to the beliefs and ideology that she grew up with, and the new set of beliefs she was able to foster in secular Australia. So between my Australian and Israeli family there has always been this unspoken and multifaceted

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rift and tension that has to do with very personal feelings, as well as emotions that play into the transpersonal nature of political and social alliances and beliefs.

<sup>iv</sup> My maternal Grandfather, whom I remember as a passionate man and keen storyteller, tried his whole life to engage and enlighten my Jewish, even Zionist identity. One story that he recounted often during our annual family reunions sticks vividly in my memory. This story had the clear and pointed intention of alerting me to a boundary and characterising its two opposing sides. On one side of the boundary was the threat of danger. On the other side, the promise of home, security, purpose and even romantic love. This story was the account of how he found his Jewish identity. His story parallels the experience of many secular Jews in war torn Europe by recounting a radical shift in personal identification that occurred when the Nazi death machine absorbed into its terror all Jews, regardless of whether they identified as such. My Grandfather was one who grew up identifying primarily as an Austrian citizen, absorbing all the values, beliefs and patriotism that came with that identity. For him the rude turning point came when he was refused entry into University, which precipitated the radical shift to Jewish and Zionist identity and ultimately emigration to Palestine. His message to me was that I should not waste time being Australian, but embrace my Jewish identity and marry a good Jewish girl because the *goyim* (gentiles) would never accept me. The thing that always struck me as interesting about this story was the reactionary posture of an identity born in crisis.

Edward Said describes a similar dynamic of an identity born in crisis:

*Until the June 1967 war I was completely caught up in the life of a young professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University...All that changed forever in mid-1967. For the first since I had left to come to the United States, I was emotionally reclaimed by the Arab world generally and by Palestine in particular. (Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession, The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969-1994*, p xiii)*

<sup>v</sup> In applying a deconstructive reading to my work I have borrowed from Elizabeth Grosz's *Sexual Subversions* and Christopher Norris's *Deconstruction Theory and Practice*. Both authors discuss deconstruction as working in *phases*. Grosz's analysis

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includes seven phases of a deconstructive reading. These are: reading a text; identifying the aporia, binary oppositions within the text; overturning/reversing the binary pair; recognising that reversal remains within logocentrism; displacing the repressed term into the core of the dominant term as its logical condition; identifying the hinge term; which leads to a space of free play not captured in the web of binary categories. Norris identifies four phases. These are: locating the opposition of terms within a text; showing that these terms are hierarchically ordered; reversing this relationship; showing that a pattern of unstable relationships is characteristic of the text which is now open to a state of free play. I have found both of these models to be useful analytical tools for reading and writing about my work. Significantly both models conclude with Derrida's category of play, which is where my project begins and ends.

<sup>vi</sup> Since the second Intifada the Israeli government has under-taken a project to build a wall between Israel and the Palestinian territories in the West Bank. This wall is built from large concrete slabs. The plan for the wall is to roughly follow the 'Green Line', the border between Israel and Jordan designated by the United Nations in 1947 and the operational border used during the Oslo process to negotiate a Palestinian state in the West Bank. However, in many instances the wall has moved beyond this boundary thus appropriating Palestinian lands in the West Bank. It is a highly contentious issue. By official Israeli policy it is named the 'security fence'. There are claims, and some experience, that the fence decreases the amount of successful suicide bombers within Israel. Israeli policy states that it will be removed when there is a lasting resolution between the warring sides. It is more commonly known as the 'separation wall' and is seen by many, and experienced by some, as a strategic move by Israel to create a kind of apartheid system within the greater geographical area of Palestine and Israel.

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