Creating Cultural Memory:

Public Memorials to Asylum Seekers in Australia

by

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Abstract
This thesis identifies and interrogates a new genre of public memorial in Australia – those to asylum seekers who sought to settle here, but who died at sea during their journey, thus never making it to Australian shores. The research seeks to answer the question: what function/s do Australian public memorials to asylum seekers serve and how do they achieve these functions? Drawing on concepts of the countermemorial, community collaborative practices and prosthetic memory, I argue that these memorials were initiated to create cultural memory and to challenge dominant government rhetoric that sought to dehumanise, make invisible and suppress not only public memory of such asylum seekers but also public debate about how they should be treated. The memorials analysed achieve this by invoking the bodies of the dead asylum seekers and requiring the bodily interaction of both the creators of the memorials and the viewers of the final objects. The research reveals the complex responses of Australian communities to ‘the other’ through the processes and forms they deploy for memorialisation.

Declaration
This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma to any university. To the best of my knowledge and understanding, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made within the thesis itself. The thesis is more than 80,000 and fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Rebecca Cole

Date: 13 April 2017

Signed: [Signature]
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The human drive to memorialise the dead is both potent and ubiquitous across time and cultures. Public evidence of this can be seen in myriad forms: ancient burial sites; tombstones and plaques in cemeteries; memorials on online social networks; roadside commemorations of accident victims; impromptu outpourings of community grief in the form of flowers and mementoes placed in key locations on the death of celebrities; temporary and permanent memorials to victims of terrorist attacks and other crimes; and traditional monuments erected to figures deemed historically significant or national ‘heroes’, including war memorials. In all of these types of memorialising, the identities of the dead are (or were) usually known to those creating the memorials and the commemorative objects seek to prolong and culturally embed existing memories of the dead and the circumstances in which they died.

Public memorials do much more than simply commemorate the dead. Architect and philosopher Hélène Frichot explains that the function of monuments and memorials is to:

... generate meaning in response to past events. At worst, this is a fixed and stratified meaning that risks chaining a community to its past. At best, the monument produces a means through which a community can open up to unimagined formations of coming communities and future peoples.1

Through their placement in locations open to the broader community, memorials can give us clues as to the values, concerns and identities of the individuals and societies that created them. The ways in which current audiences interact with these memorials (or do not) can give us insights into the ongoing relevance of the memorials.

This thesis examines public memorials in Australia that deal with new subject matter – that of asylum seekers who sought to settle here, but who died at sea during their journey and thus never made it to Australian shores. Positioned within the literature on memory studies, memorials and countermemorials,

community collaborative practices, and agency and resistance, this research explores the functions of these memorials and how these functions are achieved. All the memorials seek to make visible the asylum seekers and the circumstances of their deaths, and to resist dominant rhetoric that seeks to dehumanise and make invisible asylum seekers and silence public debate about how they should be treated. Moreover, I argue that the memorials considered in this thesis create new cultural memory. They achieve this through a range of means: through prosthetic memory; as countermemorials; as impromptu community responses to mass drownings; and, in some elements of their form and content, as traditional monuments.

While they may differ in their visual and formal characteristics, my research demonstrates that the memorials considered here share a genesis in a grassroots, community and artistic desire to acknowledge the potentially deadly nature of perilous refugee journeys, and to intervene in the public debate on asylum seekers. In varying degrees, they all involve community participation and collaboration in the creation of the memorials. They all respond to loss, grief and trauma, as well as invoke the safety and refuge offered by settlement countries. In so doing these works compel us to question how we decide who is ‘worthy’ of public commemoration and what are the implications of different forms and sites for such acknowledgement.

The memorials analysed in this thesis all seek to open up debate: not to tell participants and audiences ‘what to think’ but rather ‘what to think about’. Nearly all of these memorials provoked a degree of controversy in the lead-up to their creation. Debates were had about whether it was appropriate to memorialise drowned asylum seekers and the implications this might have for how we understand those commemorated in other memorials. Questions were asked about where the memorials should be sited and what this might mean for their audiences. However, unlike other better-known memorials, there is no record of disquiet about the forms these memorials took – reflecting perhaps that these are not state-sponsored monuments, but are rather the result of community members
and art groups taking it upon themselves to create memorials to dead asylum seekers.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Australia – Social and Historical Context

To place asylum seekers and the memorials created to them within a broader social and historical context, it is useful to briefly consider Australia’s history of permanently resettling refugees and public policy responses to asylum seekers in recent decades.

Since becoming early signatories in 1954 to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and, in 1973, its accompanying 1967 Protocol, Australia has had a strong record of resettling refugees who meet the Convention refugee definition; that is, an individual who:

… owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.3

In addition, Australia has a humanitarian program that allows for entry of people who have a refugee-like background, but who do not necessarily meet all of the criteria of the Convention definition.4 For a geographically large nation with a relatively small population of 23 million people, Australia offers a comparatively high number of humanitarian resettlement places. In 2012–13, Australia issued just under 20,000 permanent visas to humanitarian entrants5 and just over 17,500

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5 Ibid. It is worth noting that this number declined for 2013–14 as the government returned to a quota of 13,750 for refugee and humanitarian visas. This was raised again in 2015–16 to take into account the increase in displaced populations due to the crisis in Syria.
in 2015–16. Hundreds of thousands of refugee and humanitarian entrants have been settled in Australia since the post–World War II period. While these numbers pale into insignificance against the 65.3 million people of concern to the UNHCR in 2015, they place Australia in the top three permanent resettlement countries in the world.

Along with this comparatively generous number of permanent refugee and humanitarian visas, Australia has one of the world’s most developed resettlement programs. This provides newly arrived residents of refugee background who have applied for, and been granted, humanitarian visas before their arrival with a suite of government-funded settlement services, including: assistance in finding accommodation and employment, and accessing education and general health services; specialist refugee health services, including torture and trauma counselling services; and free tuition in English language. All of these services, and the number of permanent resettlement visas available, are predicated on asylum seekers applying for resettlement while they are outside of Australia, which in turn allows the government to determine who will be granted a visa, thus controlling the number and profile of those who come to Australia and when they arrive.

In recent times, this system of control was challenged by asylum seekers who made their own way by boat to Australian shores to have their refugee claims

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8 Elibritt Karlsen, *Refugee Resettlement to Australia: What Are the Facts?* (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 2011), 8. The top resettlement country is the USA, followed by Canada.
9 See Chris Bowen, ‘Australia’s Moral Obligations toward People Seeking Asylum,’ *ABC Religion and Ethics*, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/10/17/3580590.htm (accessed 24 November 2016) in which the author cites then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, as saying that Australia’s refugee settlement services are recognised as ‘the best in the world’.
assessed here, particularly from 1999 to 2001 and again from 2009 to 2013.\textsuperscript{11} According to its international treaty obligations, Australia must assess these arrivals and, if they are found to engage our protection obligations, offer them sanctuary – although there is nothing in the Refugee Convention to require such sanctuary to be permanent. This distinction between ‘asylum seekers’ (those who claim to be refugees, but have not yet been recognised to be so by the Australian government) and ‘refugees’ (those who have not received such formal recognition) is significant in analysing the memorials considered in this thesis. Asylum seekers remain ‘outsiders’, while refugees are welcomed, at least officially, as part of the Australian community.

The so-called ‘asylum seeker problem’ in Australia is one that has garnered significant media and political attention. It has particularly exercised the public imagination, fed by politicians and the media, since the arrival in 1976 of the first in a wave of Indochinese asylum seekers fleeing post-conflict Vietnam.\textsuperscript{12} These arrivals were met with a mixture of fear and welcome: fear, fuelled by racist anti-Asian sentiment of an ‘invasion from the north’ of vast numbers of uninvited migrants; and welcome, as those fleeing the communist regime had fought alongside Australia and its allies in Vietnam. As refugees from a conflict in which Australia had been a significant participant, there was some acceptance that Australia had a responsibility to provide sanctuary to them, or at the very least be part of a regional response to their long-term resettlement. A second-wave of Indochinese boat arrivals occurred between 1989 and 1998.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Phillips and Spinks, *Boat Arrivals in Australia since 1976*, 1.
The memorials considered in this thesis are those created in the wake of a third wave of so-called ‘boat people’ who started to arrive in Australia in 1999.\footnote{Ibid.} Unlike the Vietnamese asylum seekers of a generation earlier, these asylum seekers came from further afield and from more diverse source countries, mainly the Middle East.\footnote{Ibid.} They also transited through third countries before making their way to Australia, thus, in the eyes of many Australians, lessening the immediacy of the conflicts they were fleeing. After the Hawke–Keating Labor Government established immigration detention centres in remote locations on the Australian mainland from 1991, the succeeding Howard Liberal–National Government (1996–2007) responded to unauthorised arrivals by: attempting to turn back boats to their points of departure; mandatorily detaining in remote detention centres all asylum seekers who arrived by boat until their refugee application was processed (those who arrived by air were not mandatorily detained); introducing temporary protection visas, which precluded family reunion, for those found to be genuine refugees; and excising territories from Australia’s migration zone so that asylum seekers could be sent offshore to third countries (Nauru and Papua New Guinea) for visa processing, with no guarantee of being resettled in Australia.\footnote{Ibid.} When it came to power in 2007, the Rudd–Gillard Labor Government abolished temporary protection visas, returned to processing of boat arrivals in Australia and introduced ‘community detention’, in which asylum seekers who had arrived by boat could live in the community, although without work rights, while their refugee applications were processed. The Labor Government then introduced temporary bridging visas, which allowed asylum seekers to live and work in the community pending an outcome on their protection visa application. As boat arrivals increased, community concern about uncontrolled migration again reached fever pitch, resulting in the Labor Government reintroducing offshore processing. When the Liberal–National Government led by Tony Abbott came to office in 2013, it did so partly on an election platform of ‘stopping the boats’ and

\footnote{There is a vast literature on the history of government asylum seeker policy and boat arrivals. A useful overview can be found in Phillips and Spinks.}
restoring an ‘orderly system’ for determining access to Australia’s refugee resettlement program.

Ten years before the election of the Abbott Government, the event that prompted the creation of three of the memorials considered in this thesis took place. It was the sinking of an asylum seeker vessel, subsequently named the SIEV X, on 19 October 2001, which resulted in 353 deaths (see the following section ‘The Memorials: An Overview’ for more on this incident). It occurred at a time of heightened public concerns about terrorism and border control in the wake of the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and increasing numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat. It also occurred during an Australian federal election campaign in which asylum seeker policy was a major topic of political debate, following two major asylum seeker incidents.

The first incident took place in August 2001, when the Norwegian ship MV *Tampa* rescued 432 asylum seekers from their sinking vessel in the Indian Ocean, as it was en route to Australia. The captain, Arne Rinnan, took his passengers to Christmas Island, the closest Australian land to the site of the sinking. For two weeks the *Tampa* remained offshore, within sight of the residents of this tiny island, while the Australian government refused to allow the *Tampa* to disembark the asylum seekers onto Australian territory. Eventually they were transferred to the Australian naval vessel HMAS *Manoora* and taken to an Australian-run detention centre on the Pacific island of Nauru for off-shore processing of their protection visa applications.17

The second incident occurred two weeks before the SIEV X sank and came to be known as the ‘children overboard’ incident. This came about when the asylum seeker vessel SIEV 4 foundered about 100 nautical miles north of Christmas Island. In this controversial incident, just before the federal election was

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17 Details of the Tampa incident are reported in numerous sources. For a detailed investigation of the affair, see David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003). For a brief overview and comment on the political impact of the event, see Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘*Lateline: Refugee Impact,*’ http://www.abc.net.au/archives/80days/stories/2012/01/19/3412121.htm (accessed 12 September 2013).
announced, senior government ministers claimed that asylum seekers had, while at sea, thrown their children overboard in an effort to force the Australian naval vessel HMAS *Adelaide* to rescue them and take them to Australia. Subsequent investigations by the Australian Senate revealed these allegations to be untrue.\(^\text{18}\)

The Howard Government attempted to discourage unauthorised boat arrivals through a range of policy and legislative deterrents, including, as mentioned earlier, the introduction of temporary visas instead of permanent resettlement for asylum seekers who arrived by boat and were subsequently assessed to be refugees. These visas also precluded their holders from returning to Australia if they left for any reason (such as to visit family members in a third country) or from sponsoring family members to join them in Australia. This is one of the reasons posited that so many women and children were on the SIEV X – they were trying to reunite with husbands and fathers who were already in Australia on such temporary visas. Much political rhetoric and media commentary during the 2001 election campaign sought to demonise these asylum seekers as non-genuine refugees, using epithets such as ‘illegals’ and characterising them as ‘queue jumpers’ who were getting on boats in an effort to somehow gain undeserved permanent settlement\(^\text{19}\) in Australia. However, the magnitude of the loss of lives on the SIEV X and the circumstances that led to such a delayed rescue, resulting in so few survivors, initially received scant media attention.

**The Memorials: An Overview**
The heightened public attention over the last 15 years on boat arrivals and deaths at sea has produced numerous visual culture responses, and there is a body of research in regard to these.\(^\text{20}\) This thesis contributes further to this literature by


\(^{19}\) The vast majority of boat arrivals were, once assessed, found to be genuine refugees. In 2010–11, 89 per cent were given protection visas; Refugee Council of Australia, ‘People Who Come by Boat,’ http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts寻求safe/apply/refugee-boat-arrivals/ (accessed 12 September 2016).

\(^{20}\) For consideration of a range of artistic responses to refugee and asylum seeker issues in Australia and abroad see, for example, Veronica Tello, ‘The Aesthetics of Counter-Memory: Contemporary Art and Australian Refugee Histories after Tampa’ (PhD thesis, University of
focusing on public commemorations of asylum seekers who drowned on their journey to Australia.

The memorials analysed in the chapters that follow are not those that may be traditionally envisioned by the use of the terms ‘monument’ or ‘memorial’. These terms tend to invoke visions of imposing, permanent structures constructed from traditional materials such as marble and bronze with engraved inscriptions in solemn, traditional serifed fonts. Such memorials are designed to dictate a clear and specific message, rather than pose questions or problematise an issue. They use classical forms to suggest that which is represented forms part of a timeless, unchanging memorial narrative. As Johannes Snyman describes it, monuments:

… are antidotes to forgetting victims of past injustices, monuments mark a decisive moment as a new beginning and embody the historical self-perception of the founders of the monument. 21

While perhaps intended as ‘antidotes to forgetting’, many such monuments in fact become so much a part of the urban landscape that they become effectively invisible to passers-by and, if perceived at all, the details of who they seek to memorialise, and why, are lost from active public consciousness. However, while the subject of memorialisation may fade from understanding, as cultural theorist Adrienne Burk argues, such monuments, when noticed, can still provide the


perceptive viewer with a glimpse of the power structures that created them as they can be seen as ‘inscriptions of power and hegemony’.\textsuperscript{22}

In the 1980s a genre of memorials that represented a new paradigm in memorial building began to appear in Germany in response to the Holocaust. Given the name ‘countermemorials’ by James E. Young,\textsuperscript{23} such objects eschewed traditional materials and techniques. This was because they were designed to shock viewers into a new level of consciousness about the Holocaust, and also because such traditional materials and techniques were understood to represent the very kind of unquestioning acceptance of hegemonic authority that had allowed the Holocaust to be carried out. Burk argues that countermemorials:

… directly provoke analysis of historical incompleteness, inherent errors, contradictions, and decay. These monuments are ‘counterhegemonic’ in that they are intentionally designed to unsettle social relations, rather than provide closure.\textsuperscript{24}

The memorials examined in this thesis resist the dominant discourse that sought to ‘disappear’ and demonise asylum seekers; they also challenge the idea that such people are undeserving of compassion and remembrance and belong to an undifferentiated group of ‘illegals’. These memorials seek to humanise those who are memorialised, to name them as individuals (where it is possible to do so) and to acknowledge their loss without any attempt to heroise them. In addition, these works reveal much about the host communities who created them, and their attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Four memorials are considered in detail in this thesis. Three commemorate the asylum seekers who died when their boat, the SIEV X, sank in the Indian Ocean, just south of Java, on their way to Australia (see Fig. 1.1 for a map showing the locations of the memorials and the disasters commemorated). The first of these is located in Canberra, the national capital; the second in Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria; and the third on Christmas Island, an Australian territory

\textsuperscript{23} James E. Young, ‘The Counter-Monument, Memory against Itself in Germany Today,’ \textit{Critical Inquiry} 18, no. 2 (1992).
\textsuperscript{24} Burk, 952.
approximately 1600 kilometres northwest of Australia’s west coast. The sinking of the SIEV X occurred on 19 October 2001 when over 400 asylum seekers, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, were crammed aboard a small wooden fishing vessel in Indonesia, hoping to reach Australia.

Their boat went down in international waters, but within Australia’s border protection surveillance zone. The boat sank quickly but the survivors floundered in rough seas for about 20 hours, with many dying during this time, before 44 were rescued and taken back to Indonesia (an additional survivor was rescued the following day). The survivor accounts speak to horrific and traumatic experiences while awaiting rescue (such as women giving birth in the water before drowning).

Survivors reported that they saw large ships that scanned them with searchlights as they awaited rescue, but the ships turned away and the survivors were eventually rescued many hours later by Indonesian fishermen. Of the only 44 survivors of the sinking, seven eventually were granted permission to settle in Australia. Of the 353 people who drowned, 142 were women, 146 children and 65 men. It is said to be the largest loss of life in a maritime accident in the Australian region since World War II.

A second memorial on Christmas Island commemorates asylum seekers who perished when their boat, called the Janga or SIEV 221, crashed onto the rocks surrounding the island on 15 December 2010. Naval and Customs personnel,

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25 The story of the sinking of the SIEV X has been reported in numerous media reports and other sources. A detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the SIEV X incident is provided by Tony Kevin, *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of the SIEV X* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2004). These are also covered in the Parliamentary Inquiry into the incident (see Senate Select Committee). A useful archive of material relating to the SIEV X can be found at Marg Hutton, ‘sievx.com’ at http://sievx.com (accessed 5 December 2016). See also Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia’s Response to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Wake of the Tampa* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002), 199-205.

26 See the detailed map of the likely sinking area in Kevin, 197.


31 This is an oft-cited statistic – see, for example, Kevin.
assisted by Christmas Island residents and visitors, were able to save 41 people, but 50 drowned.

The acronym ‘SIEV’ stands for ‘Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel’ and is the nomenclature used by Australian maritime authorities to identify boats seeking to arrive in Australia without prior permission. The numbering system is sequential using Arabic numerals (thus, *Janga* was the 221st SIEV identified). The ‘X’ in SIEV X stands for ‘unknown’, with this title first being used by former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin – the boat was not given an official SIEV designation as it sank outside of Australian waters.\(^3^2\)

The relevance of each of the sites in terms of their creators and audiences is discussed in detail in following chapters dedicated to each memorial. The memorials to SIEV X on Christmas Island and in Canberra and the SIEV 221 on Christmas Island are the result of grassroots community responses to the sinking of asylum seeker vessels and resulting mass drownings; they were initiated because a community member or community group felt moved to act – for reasons that will be explored throughout the thesis. The Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial* (fig. 1.2) is a humble stone marker with a bronze plaque embedded in it, surrounded by coral rocks painted with the names of those who died on the SIEV X. In a similar style, the Christmas Island *SIEV 221 Memorial* (fig. 1.3) is a modest memorial made from the mangled propeller of the sunken boat, a bronze plaque and coral stones like those on the *SIEV X Memorial*. In contrast, the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* (fig. 1.4) is a more substantial community-based public art installation, comprising nearly 300 wooden poles decorated by schools, church and community groups and individuals. The Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* (fig. 1.5) is different from the others both in its form and genesis. It was an ephemeral light projection work undertaken by the art collective boatpeople.org in response to a commission from the Art of Dissent Conference that ran in conjunction with the Melbourne International Arts Festival in 2002.

\(^{32}\) See Kevin.
These memorials have not been previously subject to the type of study presented here. I have not located any published scholarly analysis from a visual culture perspective on the Christmas Island memorials, nor on the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial (although there are a small number of publications about the group who created it, boatpeople.org, that make passing reference to this work). There is a growing body of scholarly literature on the Canberra SIEV X Memorial. Most of this literature discusses the memorial in terms of the history of its creation. The landscape designer involved in the memorial, SueAnne Ware, has written about the work in terms of its status as an antimemorial. The literature located contains only scant commentary on visitor responses to the memorial and no detailed analysis of the iconographic content of the 272 poles that comprise this memorial.

What unites these memorials is not their form but rather their function and, to some extent, the nature of their creation. All were created, and the permanent ones continue to be amended, as a result of community input into the actual making/construction of the memorial, with the intent of shining light on the deaths of asylum seekers and focusing on them as individuals, in direct challenge to government policy attempts to render the dead as invisible, faceless, nameless and, most likely, dangerous.

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34 See, for example, Ware, ‘Anti-Memorials and the Art of Forgetting: Critical Reflections on a Memorial Design Practice.’
Research Question
Various claims have been made for the memorials considered in this thesis, but there is a dearth of research about their functions and how these are achieved. My research aims to address this by using a qualitative method to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and experiences of those involved in the creation of the objects – instigators, designers and makers – as well as viewers. This occurs alongside visual analysis of the memorials themselves.

The key question addressed by the research is: what function/s do Australian public memorials to asylum seekers serve and how do they achieve these functions? In documenting the experiences of creators and viewers of Australian public memorials to asylum seekers, a range of sub questions are explored including:

- Why did the founders/organisers/artists instigate these memorials? What were their hopes for the memorials? Why did they choose the materials, design and sites that they did?
- How do people experience the memorials? What meaning, if any, do they infer from the materials, design and siting of the works?
- What do these memorials tell us (if anything) about public responses to asylum seeker issues?

Key Arguments
The key argument I develop throughout this thesis is that the memorials examined both create and maintain cultural memory. As will be further explored in the next chapter, I use the term ‘cultural memory’ in the sense employed by Jan Assmann; that is:

Cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image.\(^{35}\)

It follows from this that who and what communities choose to publicly remember through monuments and memorials, and how they do this, provides insight into their values, aspirations and perceptions of national and personal identity.\textsuperscript{36} I suggest that the memorials to asylum seekers propose a set of values that challenges dominant discourses regarding asylum seekers.

I argue that the memorials under examination create and maintain cultural memory through multiple means. These include the use of prosthetic memory\textsuperscript{37} in which those who have not lived through an event are able to ‘remember’ it through bodily experience and affective engagement. The interactive nature of each of the memorials, in which the participant’s body is implicated, is explored, as is the representation of the asylum seeker body. Other means include the siting of the memorials as an act of resistance. In this sense, while the memorials explored all share key features, the memorial on Christmas Island to the SIEV 221 disaster is unique in taking on the additional element of being a trauma site.\textsuperscript{38}

The research approach taken draws on methods and literature from multiple disciplines including social anthropology, ethnography, memory studies, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, literary theory and art history. The research design is qualitative, aiming to explore the nature of the memorials identified from the perspective of those involved in their creation (organisers, participants, designers and makers). Semi-structured interviews with relevant informants were undertaken, alongside visual analysis of the objects themselves. Archival research was conducted relating to the objects and their reception, including the historical contexts in which they were initiated and eventually installed. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, I reflect on my own position within the research as someone who has a long professional involvement in refugee and asylum seeker issues.


I argue that the visual and physical experience of objects and the sites in which they are located is at the heart of meaning-making for those involved in the creation and reception of the memorials considered. Meanings are therefore multiple and polyvalent, and may remain fugitive. Makers and viewers bring their own perspectives to the memorials and, in turn, these perspectives can be changed by their experience of the memorials. This is not simply a case of subjective over objective experience – the concept of ‘objective’ here is problematic as it posits a viewer or participant who somehow comes to a memorial as a *tabula rasa*, with no existing preconceptions, values, political alignments or opinions. Such a viewer does not exist; and, of course, there are no such researchers either. This is why reflexivity in research practice is at the centre of the method adopted in this thesis.\(^\text{39}\)

My conceptual framework sits within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, in that the research attempts ‘to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’.\(^\text{40}\) The phenomena in question are the functions of these memorials and the responses to them. In other words, the research aims to describe experiences and understand them through analysis, rather than explain or verify them.\(^\text{41}\) Implicit in this approach, but worth stating explicitly, is a belief that meaning is not fixed but rather is contingent, potentially changing over time, through context and by viewer.

The objective of this research is to document and analyse the experience of those involved in creating and viewing public memorials to asylum seekers. It also explores how the material aspects of the memorials and their siting contribute to

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the functions of the memorials and the meanings made of them by instigators, designers, makers and viewers. In so doing the research aims to contribute to theories of memorialisation and cultural memory as well as knowledge of the objects studied, their creation and reception.

**Thesis Structure**

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature from a range of disciplinary fields including memory studies, memorials and countermemorials, agency and resistance, and community collaborative practices. Within memory studies, I consider the literature relating to collective memory, cultural memory, countermemory, memory and history, memory and trauma, and prosthetic memory. As they inform the key arguments throughout the thesis, in this chapter I also explore and define the key terms ‘cultural memory’, ‘prosthetic memory’, ‘countermemorials’ and ‘complaisance’ and their implications in my analysis of and arguments regarding the memorials.

Chapter 3 provides a more detailed description of the methods used and methodological approach taken throughout the thesis. In it I set out: the qualitative research approach employed (the case study) and the reasons for such an approach; the underpinning theoretical framework on which the research is based (constructivist/interpretivist); the research design (including how memorials were identified and data collected); how data was managed and analysed; and the ethical issues involved in conducting such research. The elements in data collection are detailed, including archival and literature research, site visits, interviews (including format and recruitment strategies) and visual analysis.

Chapters 4–7 focus on analysing the data relating to each memorial in turn to answer the question of what is the function of each memorial and how is this achieved? Each of these chapters provides an overview of the history of the inception and construction of the memorial under consideration; analysis of data from organisers, makers, participants and viewers about the meanings made of the memorials considered; consideration of reception of the memorials; and a visual
analysis of each memorial including contextual, iconographic and formal elements.

The Canberra SIEV X Memorial is presented in Chapter 4 and I make two key arguments regarding its function. Firstly, I contend that in creating cultural memory it seeks to humanise and individualise the stranger/the exile/the ‘other’. In so doing the memorial asserts claims for how the Australian community should respond to asylum seekers and embodies philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics, which hold that ‘the other has an infinite claim on my protection and care’. Secondly, I argue that the memorial creates prosthetic memories through community participation in the creation of the work and visitor interaction with the memorial object. Theories of the countermemorial are interwoven with those of prosthetic memory to argue that this memorial relies on both affective and cognitive strategies to create prosthetic memories as a form of cultural memory.

Chapter 5 presents the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial. In this chapter I argue that this temporary light projection onto the bodies of volunteers can be understood as a ‘tactical intervention’ (in Michel de Certeau’s sense of ‘tactics’) that builds cultural memory by facilitating public debate around asylum seekers. Secondly, using theories of public collaboration, I analyse the nature of community participation and audience engagement in this memorial to demonstrate the importance of such participation to achieve cultural memory creation. Lastly, I demonstrate that the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial sits within a style of countermemorial practices that use unexpected interventions into urban spaces as a tactic to reinforce or create cultural memory.

Chapter 6 focuses on the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial. I argue that this memorial not only creates but also actively maintains cultural memory. This is achieved through the siting of the memorial, which I characterise as an act of resistance; and through commemorative rituals, involving bodily interaction,

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42 See also Andrews, 338, for a discussion of the memorial’s aim of humanising asylum seekers.
43 Donna M. Orange, Nourishing the Inner Life of Clinicians and Humanitarians: The Ethical Turn in Psychoanalysis (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 35.
which invoke the bodies and identities of the dead. Finally, I suggest that, as part of achieving its function, the memorial combines conventional and countermemorial techniques resulting in a commemorative object that can be classified as a ‘combimemorial’.44

Chapter 7 presents the SIEV 221 Memorial on Christmas Island and a range of memorial practices that preceded the installation of a permanent memorial. I make two arguments in this chapter regarding the creation and maintenance of cultural memory achieved by the multiple memorials to Jangal/SIEV 221. Firstly, I argue that in the memorial responses to the disaster, the agency of the Christmas Island residents is best described as ‘complaisance’, a term coined by anthropologist Yuson Jung to describe an inevitable negotiation between complicity and resistance.45 Such complaisance influenced both the content and form of certain memorial events and objects, but did not impede their ability to create and maintain cultural memory. Secondly, I argue that the memorials function in a manner akin to the ‘trauma sites’ theorised by semiotician Patrizia Violi.46 Such sites are those with an ‘indexical link to past traumatic events which took place in precisely these places’.47

The conclusion in Chapter 8 brings together the discussion of the separate memorials and makes suggestions for future research. Each chapter presents a close reading of one memorial and focuses on individual themes most salient to that memorial. In the conclusion I draw together these individual analyses and demonstrate the common approaches shared by the memorials. I conclude that, by mobilising community participation and creating opportunities for corporeal engagement, all of the memorials examined challenge hegemonic discourse to create cultural memory of events and people that would otherwise remain invisible and unknown.

44 The term ‘combimemorial’ was coined by Bill Niven in ‘From Countermonument to Combimemorial: Developments in German Memorialization,’ Journal of War and Culture Studies 6, no. 1 (2013).
46 Violi, 43.
47 Ibid., 36.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction
This thesis draws on concepts from the fields of memory studies, countermemorials, agency and resistance, and community collaborative practices to interrogate the functions of public asylum seeker memorials in Australia and explore how these are achieved. An overview of each of these fields is provided in this chapter. Mobilising theoretical insights from these diverse bodies of literature allows an analysis in subsequent chapters of the functions of the memorials, which addresses their position within counter-hegemonic discourse. While all areas of this literature are relevant to each of the memorials considered in this thesis, in Chapters 4–7 (which focus on each memorial individually), I focus on separate bodies of this literature to analyse the most salient aspects of the memorial under investigation.

Memory Studies
The founder of the SIEV X Memorial in Canberra, Steve Biddulph, has spoken of his desire to say ‘these lives mattered’¹ and to create a place for those lives ‘in Australia’s collective memory’.² The memorial designer, SueAnne Ware, explicitly invokes the concept of countermemory and antimemorials in describing her work.³ These concepts of ‘collective memory’ and ‘countermemory’ sit within the framework of memory studies, which draws from a range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, literature and history.⁴ It is characterised as a relatively recent field, having emerged from the growth in memory research in the 1980s and 1990s,⁵ although the phenomenon of

¹ Steve Biddulph, quoted in Andrews, 338.
³ See, for example, Ware, ‘Anti-Memorials and the Art of Forgetting: Critical Reflections on a Memorial Design Practice.’
⁴ Olick and Robbins, 106.
⁵ Many authors note the ‘boom’ in memory studies towards the end of the twentieth century. See, for example, Marita Bullock, Memory Fragments: Visualising Difference in Australian History
memory itself has been examined and theorised since antiquity.\(^6\) This section provides an overview of some of the key concepts in memory studies that are relevant to the analysis of the memorials in this thesis, including collective memory (as well as its variants), countermemory, the memory/history nexus, memory and trauma, and prosthetic memory.

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs developed the theory of ‘collective memory’ in the 1920s.\(^7\) This concept stresses the relationship between memory and social context and understands all personal memories as socially constructed and mediated.\(^8\) Collective memories are passed from generation to generation through socialisation, including events, signs, educational institutions, mass media, commemoration rituals and sites and monuments.\(^9\) For Halbwachs, individual memories – both what is remembered and how it is remembered – are limited by ‘social frames’: ‘no memory is possible outside frameworks used by

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\(^7\) The book of the same name was not published until 1952 – see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Jan Assmann notes that art historian Aby Warburg independently developed a theory of ‘social memory’ at the same time Assmann, 125.


\(^9\) Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory,’ 55-56.
people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections’. However, this creates no possibility of individual autonomy and the capacity for resistance to hegemonic frames, such as was intended, for example, by the creators of the SIEV X memorials. Cultural historian Wulf Kansteiner notes that many historians are uncomfortable with Halbwachs’s ‘determined anti-individualism’ and see it as writing the individual out of history. In a similar vein, anthropologist James Fentress and historian Chris Wickham note that ‘the individual in Halbwachs’s conceptualization of memory is reduced to a passive machine who unquestioningly assents to social dictates’. In contrast, literary theorist Lorraine Ryan argues that collective memory is not ‘monolithic’ and its mutability lends itself to individual or group agency. While this is consistent with Halbwachs’s theory allowing for multiple ‘communities of memory’ and for collective memories to change over time, Ryan’s position seems to overstate the capacity for individual or group resistance within the paradigm as laid out by Halbwachs. As the latter expresses it:

The past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present. It is necessary to show, besides, that the collective frameworks of memory are not constructed after the fact by the combination of individual recollections; nor are they empty forms where recollections coming from elsewhere would insert themselves. Collective frameworks are, to the contrary, precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society.

As can be seen here, Halbwachs explicitly rejects the possibility of individual memories coming together to form collective memory, rather in his schema collective memory can only be that of hegemonic forces, relying as it does on ‘the predominant thoughts of the society.’

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10 Halbwachs, 43. Interestingly, a number of authors point to recent neurological and psychological studies which are consistent with Halbwachs’s theory of memory construction as socially mediated – see David Gross, Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 4; Kansteiner, 185.
11 Kansteiner, 181.
13 Ibid., 161.
14 Wood, 126.
15 Halbwachs, 40.
The memorials analysed in this thesis seek to challenge such ‘predominant thoughts’ and create alternative ones. In this, memory is linked to identity, both individual and collective, and ultimately to that of nations. As social anthropologists Michael Lambek and Paul Antze observe, ‘In order to constitute themselves, nations need to discover (or construct) a past, a collective memory.’

The memorials considered in this thesis form part of this construction, one that goes beyond existing memory frameworks.

In addition to collective memory, many other group-based understandings of memory have been proposed, including memory theorists Jan and Aleida Assmann’s concepts of ‘communicative/social’ and ‘cultural’ memory. The Assmanns build on Halbwachs’s collective memory in their following definition of cultural memory:

Cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.

This is distinct from ‘communicative’ or ‘social’ memory that is based on everyday communications and is short-lived memory, extending only about 80 to 100 years into the past. However, ‘cultural memory’ is distinct from ‘collective memory’ in that it ‘highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication.’ As such, it does not perpetuate Halbwachs’s distinction between memory and history, but rather recognises the two as equally socially constructed and intertwined.

Kansteiner goes further and suggests that perhaps history ‘should be more

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17 Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’; Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory.’
18 Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,’ 132.
19 Ibid., 127; Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory,’ 55-56. See also Kansteiner, 182.
21 It is worth noting that not all scholars use the term ‘cultural memory’ in such a specific way, and that ‘collective memory’ is often used in a broader sense than Halbwachs’s definition. See, for example, Bullock; and for further discussion of definitions, French.
appropriately defined as a particular type of cultural memory’.22 This intertwining of memory and history is implicit in cultural theorist Marita Sturken’s definition of cultural memory as ‘a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history’, 23 although she distinguishes cultural memory from both personal memory and history, 24 she notes that cultural memory and history are ‘entangled’. As literary theorist Jonathon Crewe points out, despite some attempts to distinguish between them, there are significant overlaps and intersections between cultural memory and history. 25 As discussed further in the next chapter on methods, this understanding is consistent with my overall theoretical approach and I use the term ‘cultural memory’ throughout the thesis as it offers a more conceptually precise framework for analysis.

In contrast to the limiting ‘social frames’ of Halbwachs’s collective memory, the concept of countermemory, drawn from the work of Michel Foucault, provides a possibility of memory-making that affords opportunities for rupture, transformation and resistance – the formation of memories that challenge mainstream, mass-mediated, dominant histories. 26 In the words of philosopher José Medina:

[T]he Foucaultian approach places practices of remembering and forgetting in the context of power relations in such a way that possibilities of resistance and subversion are brought to the fore. … The critical and emancipatory potential of Foucaultian genealogy resides in challenging established practices of remembering and forgetting by excavating subjugated bodies of experiences and memories, bringing to the fore the perspectives that culturally hegemonic practices have foreclosed.”

22 Kansteiner, 184.
23 Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.
24 Ibid., 2-3.
In this sense, countermemory works to transform the political future, with creative practices, such as the memorials considered in this thesis, being potential sites of collective (‘cultural’) countermemory. Art historian T. J. Demos argues that:

[C]ollective counter-memory can be … positioned within creative practice … By remembering forgotten visions – of social justice, equality, solidarity and tolerance – they make them all the more possible to be realised in the future.\(^28\)

As will be seen in subsequent chapters, the memorials considered here explicitly foreground such ‘forgotten visions’.

Asylum seeker memorials in Australia seek to cast asylum seekers as individuals with families and common human desires, whose deaths deserved mourning, and assert that the events surrounding their deaths should not be forgotten. As such, by identifying and naming (as far as possible) individual asylum seekers, the works accord them a place in Australia’s cultural memory. SueAnne Ware, the consultant designer on the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* project, argues that the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*, and other countermemorials:

… explicitly engage in political activism as an unavoidable part of the search to understand and appreciate the forces which direct, constrain and control our memory and habits of remembering.\(^29\)

As will be seen in subsequent chapters, the instigators of each of the SIEV X and SIEV 221 memorials examined in this thesis challenge the cultural hegemony that presents Australia as unwelcoming to asylum seekers. I argue that in so doing, they engage in the practice of countermemory.

The discussion of memory is inevitably linked to a discussion of history. This nexus is brought out most strongly in the work of French historian Pierre Nora. He posits that we now live in a world where history has eradicated memory and in which we ‘experience a deritualization of our world’;\(^30\) and that ‘we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left’.\(^31\) He develops the concept of

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\(^28\) Demos.

\(^29\) Ware, ‘Anti-Memorials and the Art of Forgetting: Critical Reflections on a Memorial Design Practice,’ 75.


\(^31\) Nora, 7.
‘lieux de mémoire, sites of memory’ in opposition to ‘milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory’.\textsuperscript{32} ‘Sites of memory’ (both literal and figurative) include the archive, which Nora conceptualises as ‘dead’, while ‘environments of memory’ are alive:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.\textsuperscript{33}

Here we have history as text, memory as experience; a dichotomous pairing that evaporates in postmodern critiques. Such a dichotomy seems to equate history with culture and memory with nature, whereas poststructuralist critique collapses this distinction and sees both memory and history as ‘heavily constructed narratives’\textsuperscript{34} (the position I take throughout this thesis). Aleida Assmann proposes three stages in the relationship between history and memory: the pre-modern in which history and memory are intertwined; the second stage (modern) in which history and memory are polarised (as described by Nora); and the third (postmodern) stage in which there is an interaction between history and memory.\textsuperscript{35} As she explains, in the third stage:

[B]oth history and memory become self-reflexive; a sense is developed of their constructedness by discovering that memory has a history and that history is itself a form of memory.\textsuperscript{36}

While historian Jacques Le Goff also argues that history and memory are intertwined, with memory the ‘raw material of history’, he maintains that history must ‘seek to be objective and to remain based on the belief in historical “truth”’.\textsuperscript{37} In the postmodern stage of approaches to history and memory, issues of

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{34} Davis and Starn, 2. See also Daniel Abramson, ‘Make History, Not Memory: History’s Critique of Memory,’ \textit{Harvard Design Magazine} 9 (1999) for a discussion of the relationship between history and memory in a postmodern context.
\textsuperscript{35} Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory,’ 57.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 62.
authenticity/truth are no longer the focus (wherein history was understood as authoritative while memory was held as unreliable); rather, attention is turned to the use to which history and memory are put. Similar to the examination of memorials in this thesis and analysis of the comments of research participants, I am not seeking to uncover any ultimate ‘truth’, but rather to focus on how the memorials are conceptualised and received by those who created and encounter them.

Cultural theorist Susannah Radstone contends that memory research is concerned with the ‘impact of injuries of the past and the present upon memory, culture and identity’. As such, she identifies the predominant strands in contemporary memory studies of ‘writing on trauma testimony and witnessing’, arguing that the concept of trauma is used to ‘bridge the gap between the personal and the social’. In this regard, the memorials discussed in this thesis present an interesting case study in relation to memory and trauma. In the case of the SIEV X memorials, while they are clearly memorialising events that would have been highly traumatic for those on the stricken boat and their loved ones, the vast majority of participants in the development of these objects were not first-hand witnesses to the event, but rather sought to ‘bear witness’ to the event. In this they are akin to ‘remnants of trauma’ in philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s terms:

The remnants of Auschwitz – the witnesses – are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved. They are what remains between them.

Such witnessing, contends art theorist Jane Blocker, is traumatic ‘because to be a witness means by definition to stand outside events’.

Radstone’s metaphor of ‘injury’ is apposite given that a number of theorists have posited that memories which are created or evoked through corporeal action and sensual engagement are more likely to be perpetuated than those which are simply

38 Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory,’ 70.
39 Radstone, 33.
40 Ibid., 35.
42 Blocker, 37.
portrayed in a physical monument. In particular, cultural theorist Alison Landsberg’s concept of ‘prosthetic memory’ provides a useful theoretical lens through which to consider Australian asylum seeker memorials. Landsberg argues that prosthetic memory is a recently emerged form of cultural memory in which ‘the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live’. Landsberg argues that Halbwachs’s notion of collective memory is inadequate in the modern era both because of global flows of people and because ‘mass cultural technologies’, such as film, are able to operate across diverse social and cultural spaces to create ‘shared social frameworks’. Like other forms of memory, she suggests that prosthetic memory operates on bodily experience and affect, and goes on to argue that it has a ‘unique ability to generate empathy with and for ‘the other’. Such empathy allows for ‘negotiation of distances’ between subjects, or, as Landsberg puts it: ‘While sympathy presupposes an initial likeness between subjects, empathy starts from the position of difference.’


46 Ibid., 8. See also Landsberg, ‘America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,’ 66 and Landsberg, Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge, 3.


48 Ibid., 135. For further discussion of sympathy and empathy and their relevance in terms of prosthetic memory, see also Landsberg, ‘Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture,’ 147; Landsberg, ‘Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification.’

49 Landsberg, ‘America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,’ 82.
later chapters. As Landsberg invokes the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in her discussion of empathy, so do I when discussing empathy as the basis for ethical relation to the ‘other’, particularly in Chapter 4 in relation to the Canberra SIEV X Memorial.

Although Landsberg was writing about cinema and experiential museums, her idea can be equally applied to the memorials considered here, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters devoted to analysis of specific memorials. Joanne Sayner successfully used Landsberg’s concept of prosthetic memory to analyse three ‘immersive learning projects’ for British educators in which they were taken to memorial sites as part of a professional development program. Sayner argues, ‘Landsberg’s emphasis on bodily memory and performances allows for a wider applicability of her concept to other nontechnological sites of memory’, and identifies memorials as one such site. The analysis of discrete memorials in subsequent chapters supports this finding.

**Countermemorials and Memorials**

Since the boom in memory studies of the 1990s there has been a concomitant boom in neologisms to describe works that may have formerly been simply termed ‘monuments’ or ‘memorials’. These include the terms countermonument, countermemorial, antimemorial, and the more recently suggested

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52 Young coins this term in Young, ‘The Counter-Monument, Memory against Itself in Germany Today.’

53 Young uses this term inter-changeably with ‘counter-monument’; ibid.

contramemorial\textsuperscript{55} and combimemorial.\textsuperscript{56} This section reviews literature of the last 25 years relating to such commemorative objects, including more recent publications that critique the theoretical underpinnings of these terms and question the extent to which countermemorials can be considered to have been successful in reaching their aims. The various definitions of these terms and their connotations will be considered.

Before turning to the works that are considered ‘counter’, it is useful to briefly consider the terms ‘monument’ and ‘memorial’. American philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto differentiates between monuments and memorials in the following manner:

Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments we honor ourselves.\textsuperscript{57}

However, James E. Young, the American scholar of English and Judaic studies who coined the terms ‘countermonument’ and ‘countermemorial’, cites Danto’s characterisation and challenges it by proposing that the terms ‘memorial’ and ‘monument’ (and, by extension, their ‘counter’ versions) are suitably used interchangeably. He argues that monuments can also be sites of mourning and memorials can mark the site of past victories, noting that one object can function as both. As such, he posits that ‘there may be nothing intrinsic to historical markers that makes them either a monument or a memorial’.\textsuperscript{58} It is not difficult to cite instances in the Australian context which, as Young suggests, function as both monument and memorial – obvious examples being the Australian War Memorial in Canberra or the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. Through their use of classical forms and subjects, these buildings seek to honour a particular construction of Australian national identity by heroising the deeds of Australians who died in war and acknowledging their sacrifice. At the same time, these sites


\textsuperscript{56} Niven coins this term in Niven, ‘From Countermonument to Combimemorial: Developments in German Memorialization.’

\textsuperscript{57} Arthur C. Danto, ‘The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,’ \textit{The Nation}, 31 August 1985, 152.

\textsuperscript{58} Young, \textit{The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning}, 3.
provide quasi-sacred spaces in which visitors can honour those dead. Rather than enter a semantic debate about whether the terms are (or should be) used differentially and whether a building, artwork or object should be classified as one or the other, in this thesis I adopt Young’s approach and use the terms interchangeably.  

In his oft-cited 1993 text, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meanings*, Young uses the term ‘countermonument’ to describe a particular type of self-abnegating public artwork developed in the 1980s by German artists in response to the Holocaust. In their recent analysis of how the term ‘countermonument’ is used, urban design theorist Quentin Stevens and colleagues point out that Anglophone and German-language scholars tend to use the term in distinct fashions. Anglophones use the term to apply to a broad range of artworks that challenge the traditional notions of a monument or memorial in both form and content, while the German term ‘Gegendenkmal’ tends to be used in German scholarship more specifically to refer to a monument that has been created in specific opposition to an existing, earlier monument – a paired, dialogical artwork. I will be using the term in the former, broad sense as this is more relevant to the memorials under examination throughout this thesis.

Young argues that German artists developed the approach of the countermemorial as they struggled with the challenge of how to remember events that, in fact, many Germans may have preferred to have forgotten. The visual language of the traditional monument was deemed unsuitable, associated as it was with the very Nazi regime whose crimes the memorials were trying to return to public awareness.  

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59 See also Deleuze and Guattari’s idea that, ‘A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their re-enacted protestations, their constantly resumed struggle’. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 77-8, quoted in Frichot, 176-7.

60 Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*.


62 Ibid.

consciousness. In addition, this was a generation of artists who did not, themselves, have direct memory of the events they were dealing with in their artworks and were keen to distinguish themselves from the generation that was directly involved. According to Young, traditional monuments allow the viewer to displace their own memory onto the monument: ‘In shouldering the memory work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden’. In contrast, he suggests that countermonuments require the viewer to do the memory work themselves, and for that reason offer the possibility of moving visitors to action.

Young analyses a number of artworks that exemplify a countermonument. He devotes considerable attention to the Monument Against Fascism by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, erected in the working-class suburb of Harburg in Hamburg, West Germany in 1986 (fig. 2.2). This has become, perhaps, the archetypal example of a countermonument. This sculpture, the result of a public design competition, took the form of a 12-metre column encased in soft lead that was designed to be inscribed by the public (fig. 2.3) and then slowly lowered into the ground as it became covered in text, until it disappeared altogether (fig. 2.4). A plaque in seven languages explained the monument and how viewers were expected to interact with it:

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64 Ibid., 27. Crownshaw is critical of equating monumentality with what he terms ‘H’istory as it constructs a binary opposition between countermonument and monument and opposes history to memory, thus essentialising both. Richard Crownshaw, ‘The German Countermonument: Conceptual Indeterminacies and the Retheorisation of the Arts of Vicarious Memory,’ Forum for Modern Language Studies 44, no. 2 (2008). To avoid such dichotomising, Hart suggests a new term ‘contra-memorial’ to describe works that ‘while challenging hegemonic forms of history and memory-work – are not necessarily in binary opposition to these forms’, Hart.

65 Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning, 27.

66 Ibid., 5.

67 Ibid., 13.

68 The languages were German, French, English, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish; James E. Young, ed. The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History (Munich and New York: Prestel Verlag, 1994), 130. These were presumably chosen on the basis of the likely languages of visitors to the site (the population of Harburg included a significant number of guest workers).
We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.69

The artists’ intent is explicit, while at the same time echoing Roland Barthes’s poststructuralist idea that the author/artist is dead and it is the reader/viewer who becomes responsible for creating the text/artwork.70 This apparent assertion of artistic authority (by defining how the work should be used and predetermining its fate), while at the same time handing authorial control to the public, can be seen as part of the definition of a countermonument, challenging as it does traditional notions of monumental authority. However, this explicit statement of artistic intent, as part of the Harburg monument’s public display, in concert with the artists’ subsequent response to the unexpected inscriptions and use of the monument as a graffiti site, has drawn criticism for undermining the conceptual underpinning of its status as countermonument. How can the work be counter-hegemonic if it simply replaces one form of hegemony with another?71 In this vein, art historian Thomas Stubblefield suggests that:

… by starting with the monument itself, the Monument Against Fascism and indeed the very concept of the counter-monument not only leads the discussion back to the intentionality of the artist, but perhaps more troubling, posits the site itself as the primary determinant in its relation to history.72

Stevens and colleagues identify five characteristics that can be analysed to distinguish countermonuments or antimonuments from their traditional counterparts: subject, form, site, visitor experience and meaning.73 Applying this list to the Harburg monument, it is clear that it can be distinguished from a traditional monument in terms of its formal characteristics, its location, its relationship with its presumed public, its challenge of a grand narrative of history and its temporal status. Rather than the triumphalist white of traditional marble

73 Stevens, Franck and Fazakerley, 955.
memorials, the Gerzes’ work employed an industrial, light-absorbing, dark-grey, toxic metal skin – a skin designed to be scarred by the inscribing of those who interacted with it. It offers no familiar figurative representation of the hero conqueror, or even of the brave fallen, but rather presents a minimal form offering no obvious narrative to the viewer. There is no peaceful environment of contrived nature offered by the usual public park placement of monuments, but rather a busy commercial zone in which most viewers would be engaged in their everyday chores, rather than approaching a memorial in the sober fashion prompted by a traditional memorial space. As indicated, this is no formal memorial set apart from its viewer by plinth, spatial staging or zoning; on the contrary, it explicitly invites interaction, requiring the viewer to activate the work – both its conceptual content and the memory work it exhorts from its public. Arguably, the work prescribes no fixed meaning, but expects the viewer to make their own sense of what is presented. Finally, the literally self-effacing and self-destructive qualities built into the work by its lowering into the ground mean that the work’s success relies on it being in a state of constant flux and eventual near-invisibility – the antithesis of the eternal, static representation of a traditional memorial.

However, many of these same claims could be made of other, non-memorial, conceptual artworks, begging the question of whether the characteristics employed by countermonuments are specific to memory work, or more simply reflections of the particular art-historical moment in which they were created? Young acknowledges this when he writes, ‘these memorials also reflect the

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temper of the memory-artists’ time, their place in aesthetic discourse, their media and materials’. In a subsequent publication, he goes on to explain:

In its conceptual self-destruction, the counter-monument refers not only to its physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning and memory – especially that embodied in a form that insists on its eternal fixity.

Again, it could be argued that these are the characteristics of artworks of the postmodern era – works that problematise the concept of the grand narrative of history and view meaning as contingent on subjectivities and socio-historical construction, rather than specific to works dealing with memorialisation.

Whether these characteristics are unique to countermonuments or not, Young gives us an oft-quoted, clear definition of the aims of such works. When writing about the Gerzes’ Harburg Memorial, he concludes:

[I]ts aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desanctification; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet.

Literary theorist Richard Crownshaw suggests that countermonuments do not achieve a critique of the grand narrative of history and argues that the disappearance of the Gerzes’ monument:

… does not mark the disappearance of its authority but rather a moment of ‘finality’ by which the process of memorialisation reaches its conclusion, its constituent memories archived and contained, and this master narrative of the past shrouded by an act of disappearance. Ultimately then, the Gerzes’ monument fails to deconstruct its own presence – a presence upon which absence was always dependent.

Whether or not the countermonuments Young studies achieve the aims he articulates, the list of characteristics to consider when analysing memorials provided by Stevens and colleagues, along with the characteristics of

77 Andermann and Arnold-de Simine note that the same approach is taken in ‘new’ museums that ‘redefine their functions in and for communities as spaces of memory, exemplifying the postmodern shift from authoritative master discourses to the horizontal, practice-related notions of memory, place and community’. Andermann and Arnold-de Simine, 7.
79 Crownshaw, 222.
countermemorials identified by Young, provide a useful framework against which to consider Australian memorials to asylum seekers.

An oft-discussed monument seen as sharing the characteristics of the German countermemorials, as analysed by Young, is the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington DC, designed by architect Maya Lin (then still a student) and dedicated in 1982 (fig. 2.5). At first consideration this memorial might seem to represent a traditional memorial subject – war; however, further analysis shows that it does not follow traditional war memorial custom. It does not commemorate the Vietnam War generally, but rather, specifically, commemorates American defence personnel who died in that war (listing their nearly 58,000 names in the order of their deaths). Its form, invisible from a distance and comprised of minimalist and horizontally oriented black granite slabs forming a ‘scar’ in the ground, clearly sets it apart from orthodox memorial obelisks or figurative sculpture. The visitor experience at the site is often demonstrably emotional and highly interactive – visitors are frequently described as touching the names on the wall, taking a rubbing of a particular name, or leaving objects at the site. These characteristics combine to mean that the memorial is usually read as challenging traditional war memorial narratives of heroic sacrifice, which caused significant debate at the time its design was announced. In discussing this memorial, American cultural theorist Erika Doss explains these debates as stemming from its status as a countermemorial:

> Traditionally, public memorials in the USA commemorate triumphs and heroes. Counter-memorials – in attempting to raise public consciousness about loss, conflict and contradiction – become entangled in politicized machinations: hence the controversy surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.\(^{81}\)

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As will be seen in Chapter 4, the Canberra SIEV X Memorial was also the subject of ‘politicized machinations’ – not only its design and siting but, more significantly, its very existence was questioned by political leaders and members of the public.

One of the characteristics that is shared by countermonuments is their commemoration of ‘negative’ events. That is, rather than drawing public attention to ‘heroes’ or a victorious past, they instead seek to remember events that speak to unknown victims, to the darker side of humanity or to losses that did not lead to triumph. For example, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial focuses on the war dead and missing of a conflict widely perceived as a failure for the United States. Memorials have traditionally been state-sponsored and have sought to present a unified, or at least unifying, image.

In contrast, in the last few decades there has been an increase in memorials sponsored by community collectives or artists (such as those considered in this thesis) that instead emphasise previously unacknowledged loss, deaths in which the state is implicated, and mourning of the unknown and unwelcome. Cultural theorist Maurice Stierl has considered such memorials under the concept of ‘grief activism’ and observes that ‘public grieving and commemorating as radical political acts have become widespread practices’. Examples of such memorials are those to homicide victims in the Mexican city of Ciudad Juarez which, according to cultural theorist Corrie Boudreaux:

... attempt to effect social change by calling attention to the public causes of death and by reasserting the grievability of the lives lost.

Similarly, the temporary public Anti-memorial to Heroin Overdoses by the designer of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial, SueAnne Ware, can be read as an example of ‘grief activism’ and demonstrates her position that anti-memorials ‘prompt multiple readings of issues: politically, socially and physically.’

82 See, for example, Horsti, 126.  
83 Hite, 4.  
84 Stierl: 185.  
85 Boudreaux: 392.  
There are a number of examples of artworks/memorials mounted in Europe that focus on the subject of refugees and that could also be classed as counter-memorials. These include the activist arts group, the Centre for Political Beauty, bringing the bodies of dead asylum seekers to the Federal Chancellery in Berlin to create a cemetery.\footnote{von Bieberstein and Evren.} In 2014 the same group removed crosses from the Berlin Wall that commemorated those who died trying to cross from East to West Germany; they moved the crosses to the EU border regions where migrants trying to access Europe posed with the crosses.\footnote{Ibid., 458.} Another was the 2014 installation of a refugee boat in front of the Cathedral of St Jakob in the Austrian town of Innsbruck by artist Anton Christian.\footnote{Alonso and Nienass: xix.} The boat was subsequently vandalised and left in place unrestored. Much like the Gerzes’ monument, this public interaction meant that it became not just a memorial about past events, but also a contemporary commentary on social attitudes towards refugees and state responsibility for them.

Other European memorials are less obviously ‘counter’ in their memorialisation and have been critiqued for presenting a one-dimensional, reductive view of the asylum seekers commemorated. In this category, for example, is the 2008 Gateway to Lampedusa/Gateway to Europe memorial by Mimmo Paladino. This five-metre-high doorframe or archway, decorated with ceramic tiles containing bas reliefs of body parts and basic utensils, commemorates asylum seekers who drowned before they reached Italy.\footnote{International Organization for Migration, ‘Memorial to Migrants Perished at Sea to Be Unveiled on Lampedusa’, https://www.iom.int/news/memorial-migrants-perished-sea-be-unveiled-lampedusa (accessed 3 March 2017).} It sits on the promontory at Lampedusa, the island which houses the major Italian asylum-seeker reception centre through which thousands of boat people have been processed in recent years.\footnote{Muneroni.} Theatre historian Stefano Muneroni argues that the iconography of the bas relief images presents ‘a homogenizing view of the immigrants, a view that is both unflattering and essentialising’.\footnote{Ibid., 235.} Another example in Italy is the 2012 memorial to the
Albanian boat *Katër I Radës* by Costas Varotsos. Using the wreckage of the vessel and surrounding it with glass shards, this installation memorialises the sinking of an asylum-seeker vessel when it was accidentally hit by an Italian naval patrol vessel, killing 81 people, only 57 of whose bodies were found. Semiotician Daniele Salerno finds that the monument/installation neglected to draw attention to the Italian government’s responsibility for the sinking because this did not accord with cherished notions of local hospitality and welcome.

In addition to these European memorials to asylum seekers, there are also examples along the USA–Mexico border that memorialise those who died trying to access the USA. One example is at Sacred Heart Burial Park in Falfurrias Texas where markers are installed for dead border crossers with inscriptions of names where known, or ‘unknown male/female’ and a number. Like the memorials that I discuss in subsequent chapters, the markers in this Texas park attempt to make visible undocumented migrants who would otherwise go unnoticed and to bring to wider consciousness the implications of their deaths, which are estimated to number up to 500 each year since the late 1990s.

**Agency and Resistance**

Let us now turn to notions of agency and resistance, and consider how these might also provide useful analytical frameworks for the memorials that are the subjects of study in this thesis. Agency and its link to power are widely discussed in anthropological and sociological literature. In explaining his theory of structuration, sociologist Anthony Giddens clarifies that agency equates to actions, rather than intentions:

> Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power: cf. the Oxford English Dictionary definition of an agent, as ‘one who exerts power or produces an effect’). Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could,

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93 For discussion of this memorial, see Salerno and Muneroni.
94 Salerno, 135.
95 Ibid., 145.
97 Ibid., 433.
at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened.\textsuperscript{98}

This is reminiscent of language philosopher J. L. Austin’s ‘perlocutionary’ speech acts\textsuperscript{99} – one may say something with unintended consequences, but these consequences would not have occurred at all without the performative speech act in the first place. The analytical focus here is on the receiver, not the sender – on effect, not intent. However, this is not to imply that we should lose sight of the actor/agent, but rather is an acknowledgement that meaning, and indeed agency itself, is constructed. As hermeneutic sociologist Andreas Glaeser puts it:

Agency is neither just there (gracing a sovereign subject) nor just absent (leaving a mere object); instead, building on an innate potential, it is constructed, augmented, or diminished within the flow of process.\textsuperscript{100}

Or, as anthropologist Ivan Karp explains it, in exploring agency we are exploring ‘how we work upon the world and constitute it as a social entity’.\textsuperscript{101} Also from an anthropological perspective, Webb Keane suggests that the issue of agency has become an ‘ethical imperative’ as it is seen as a corrective to earlier ethnographic approaches based on assumptions of ‘tradition-bound natives and timeless structures’\textsuperscript{102}. These approaches operated from the position that the researcher was the agent who created theory, while the informants, trapped as they were in the limits of ‘doxa’, as defined by Bourdieu,\textsuperscript{103} were not able to bring to consciousness the rules by which they operated. This idea of the reflexive agent – a subject who is able to examine themselves as an object, and is thereby able to theorise about their social formation – is propounded by scholars such as

Anthropologist and cultural ethnographer Herzfeld strongly asserts this position on the basis of respect for his informants when he argues:

> Even in *The Poetics of Manhood*, I noted that my informants, mostly shepherds with only a few years of primary schooling, possessed impressive theoretical capabilities. Some colleagues scoffed; these people, they said, had concepts — but … theories? To insist on such a distinction, and such a radical separation of them-as-object-of-study from us-as-thinkers, strikes me as the most imperial form of Cartesian dualism, recalling the logic of colonialism and of nationalistic folklore studies. What makes theory so sacrosanct, if not the fear of scholars of seeing their privileged abstraction diluted and even dissolved?[^108]

In contrast to Herzfeld’s shepherds who had limited formal education, causing some to question their capabilities as theorising agents, many of the participants in my study are highly educated and have professional lives based on their theoretical aptitude (for example, psychology, history, theology, anthropology, refugee studies and art/design theory). A number of them have published peer-reviewed articles or chapters in academic publications on the memorials in which they were involved.[^109] To treat such informants as somehow less capable than I of theorising the activities in which they are and were involved would be the height of hubris; thus, I attempt to follow in Herzfeld’s footsteps.

[^104]: Giddens.
[^106]: Keane.
[^108]: Herzfeld, ‘Passionate Serendipity: From the Acropolis to the Golden Mount,’ 119-120.
This notion of the reflexive agent is consistent with the semiotic turn taken by some art historians, such as Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson,¹¹⁰ in which poststructuralist notions of the construction of meaning see the viewer as the creator of meaning, rather than the artist, calling into question modernist notions of intentionality. This is also consistent with the concept theorised in Roland Barthes’s earlier cited essay The Death of the Author, in which the text (or in this case the memorial) does not contain ‘a single “theological” meaning, but is rather ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’.¹¹¹

Keane cautions us that this search for agency may carry with it ethnocentric ways of conceiving of value systems when he writes:

> The quest for agency seems to be tacitly informed by the humanist assumption that self-transformation is not only a central fact of history … but also a good that exceeds local systems of value.

¹¹²

It seems to me that this dilemma can be addressed if, in seeking agency, we do so within a theoretical framework that understands power in the terms described by Foucault and in terms of Giddens’s theory of structuration. As explained by anthropologists Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch:

> From a strict Foucauldian perspective, the study of power and subjectivity ought to be conducted in a spirit of moral agnosticism that treats power as a relationship to be understood and renegotiated.

¹¹³

This notion of power as relational and mutable sits comfortably with Giddens’s argument that structuration theory is based on the premise that subject/object relations need to be reconceptualised as dualism (rather than duality).¹¹⁴ Giddens goes further, however, in calling for an end to the primacy of social (object) and actor/agent (subject), calling instead for a focus on ‘social practices ordered across space and time’.¹¹⁵ He explains:

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, ‘Semiotics and Art History,’ Art Bulletin 73, no. 2 (1991).
¹¹¹ Barthes, 146.
¹¹² Keane, 675.
¹¹⁴ Giddens, xx-xxii.
¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2.
Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction.\textsuperscript{116}

These understandings of agency and power as being constantly constructed are consistent with the interpretive approach I use in my analysis of the memorials identified for study.

If agency implicates power, then power implicates resistance. Benson and Kirsch point out that ‘the assumption that power pacifies resistance … contrasts with the Foucauldian argument that power and resistance produce each other’.\textsuperscript{117} In the case of the memorials discussed here, I argue that the agents who conceived of, designed, created and organised their installation were resisting dominant modes of political discourse about asylum seekers that sought to de-humanise such people and attempted to render them as formless and unknowable. There are various theories of resistance in the literature that offer different ways of conceptualising the resistance at play in these memorials.

Anthropologist James Scott’s studies of colonial and postcolonial peasant responses to development is oft cited in discussions of resistance.\textsuperscript{118} Scott posits that ‘everyday resistance [is] informal, undeclared, disguised’.\textsuperscript{119} This is consistent with Michel de Certeau’s notion of ‘tactics’, which he opposes to ‘strategy’ in \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}.\textsuperscript{120} For de Certeau, ‘strategies’ belong to the powerful; we can recognise in them ‘a specific type of knowledge, one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one’s own place’.\textsuperscript{121} ‘Tactics’, on the other hand, are used in everyday life by the weak to subvert this power; a tactic ‘operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. … It can

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item {\textsuperscript{116}} Ibid., 25.
\item {\textsuperscript{117}} Benson and Kirsch, 460.
\item {\textsuperscript{118}} Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,’ \textit{American Ethnologist} 17, no. 1 (1990); Benson and Kirsch; Michael Herzfeld, ‘Political Optics and the Occlusion of Intimate Knowledge,’ \textit{American Anthropologist} 107, no. 3 (2005); Jung; Reed-Danahay.
\item {\textsuperscript{119}} Scott, quoted in Reed-Danahay, 221.
\item {\textsuperscript{120}} Michel de Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, trans., Steven Rendall (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii-xiv.
\item {\textsuperscript{121}} Ibid., 36.
\end{thebibliography}
be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse.’\textsuperscript{122} As he explains, ‘users make *(bricolent)* innumerable infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules’.\textsuperscript{123} As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, it can be argued that the creators of the SIEV X and SIEV 221 memorials were engaged in the business of tactics – this will be particularly considered in relation to the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial, which is the subject of Chapter 5.

Cultural anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay builds on the conception of everyday resistance in describing the similar, yet slightly different, notion of ‘débrouillardise’ used by the French farmers (the ‘Lavaillois’) who she studied in the Auvergne region of central France. She explains débrouillardise as:

\ldots part of a more general notion of ‘making do’ or ‘making out,’ of artfully creating and wangling cultural meanings and situations. Such behaviors are most usefully viewed not simply as reactions to (or resistance to) dominance, but as modes for the creation of new cultural meanings.\textsuperscript{124}

Reed-Danahay notes that débrouillardise shares characteristics with the ‘poniria’ (cunning) that Herzfeld describes being displayed by his Glendi sheep-thieving villagers,\textsuperscript{125} while also noting that for the Lavaillois ‘cunning’ (‘la ruse’) carries different connotations from ‘débrouillardise’.\textsuperscript{126} These are useful conceptions for considering how the weak may go about resisting hegemonic forces on an everyday basis. However, the creation of Australian asylum seeker memorials seems to constitute a more explicit, overt protest – and has been described as such by their creators, media commentators and theorists. Consequently, anthropologist Yuson Jung’s concept of ‘complaisance’ offers a more useful theoretical framework for my research.

In proposing her notion of ‘complaisance’, Jung cites James Scott’s formulation of resistance as being understood as the agency of the powerless posited dichotomously against complicity:

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 36-37.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., xiii.
\textsuperscript{124} Reed-Danahay, 223.
\textsuperscript{126} Reed-Danahay, 222.
Submission to the existing power structure is considered the result of ‘hegemony’, which assumes ‘complicity’ of the powerless in the maintenance of the domineering power structure that marginalizes them. But does agency of the powerless or the marginalized only rest in the spaces of resistance and/or complicity when it comes to hegemonic forces? Could there be a space of agency that does not fall under the rubrics of either ‘resistance’ or ‘complicity’?127

Using Herzfeld’s framework of ‘the global hierarchy of value’ as her point of departure, Jung proposes the concept of ‘complaisance’ to understand ‘the intricate workings of power and agency’.128 Complaisance focuses on ‘“the inability not to follow” hegemonic forces’.129 In other words, complaisance is a result of compulsion, not coercion, but should not be assumed to mean that agents are consenting to, or accepting, hegemonic values. Jung suggests that the benefit of this conception is that complaisance:

… provides a useful vantage point to think about how power relations and dominant power structures are reproduced without necessarily excluding the possibility for socio-political change.130

As will be seen in subsequent chapters analysing individual asylum seeker memorials, the notion of ‘complaisance’ provides a useful lens for exploring the functions of these memorials – this will be specifically considered in Chapter 7 in analysis of the SIEV 221 Memorial. Using complaisance in this way extends its application beyond the context of the global hierarchy of value and applies it to analyses of local power dynamics and the ways in which community groups seek to engage with power structures such as the media, local and federal governments, and planning bureaucracies.

Community Collaborative Practice
Whether we characterise the efforts of the instigators of Australia asylum seeker memorials as demonstrating resistance, complaisance or complicity (or something else as yet untheorised), they were all the result of the involvement of a range of community members. As such, a fourth body of literature offers useful theoretical insights for the analysis of the chosen memorials – that of community

127 Jung, 318.
128 Ibid., 319.
129 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
130 Ibid., 330.
collaborative practices. In the mid 1990s, critics, theorists and artists began to discuss a genre of art predicated on interaction and dialogue. Such artworks were marked by collaboration between artists and community members, and the centrality of mutual exchange in the works. Writers coined various labels to describe this newly identified type of work, including new genre public art (Suzanne Lacy), relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud),

dialogical art (Grant Kester),

community-based site-specific art (Miwon Kwon),

art in the public interest (Arlene Raven),

cultural activism (Douglas Crimp),

dialogue-based public art (Tom Finkelpearl),

connective aesthetics (Suzie Gablik)

and conversational art (Homi Bhabha).

Examination of the theoretical underpinnings of these terms reveals that, while they share some common ideas and some of them can be used interchangeably, there are key distinctions between some of these terms. In discussing the key elements of the type of work discussed in this thesis under the general rubric of what I will call ‘community collaborative practices’, I will consider the applicability of these ideas to the selected memorials.

One of the concepts shared across writers is that meaning in community collaborative practices is to be found not in a finished art object (although, for some, such objects are not precluded in these practices), but rather in the exchange between the artist and the community members who collaborate in the creation of the work. It is this exchange/conversation/dialogue that becomes the

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133 Grant Kester, ‘Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art,’ Afterimage January (1995). In subsequent writings he notes that this concept derives from Mikhail Bakhtin’s argument that ‘the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation’; Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 10.
134 Miwon Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
work of art. As art historian Grant Kester explains, this represents a shift from traditional modernist notions of art as disengaged, noncontingent and possessed of immanent meaning to:

… works that openly engage the audience in an interactive manner. Rather than presenting the viewer with a predetermined and immanent meaning, these projects … only produce their meaning in a dialogical encounter between the viewer (understood as a socially specific subject) and the work.

Similarly, art critic Nicolas Bourriaud presents what he calls ‘relational art’ as a radical departure from modernism. In his book Relational Aesthetics, he discusses particular artistic practices of the 1990s citing exemplars such as the communal eating works of Rirkrit Tiravanija and the architectural interventions of Liam Gillick. He proposes that such art ‘tak[es] as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space’. For curator Miwon Kwon, new genre public art:

shfts the focus from artist to audience, from object to process, from production to reception, and emphasizes the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups (ideally through shared authorship in collaborations).

Given this shift from modernist conceptions of both the artists and the artwork, writers such as Kester, Bourriaud and Suzanne Lacy call for new criteria for evaluating these works. In discussing the conditions of relational art and its place in the art historical canon, Bourriaud suggests that, while relational art practices do not share ‘style, theme, or iconography’, they all use social exchange as their material. As such, an artwork’s success is to be measured not only by the extent to

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140 This concept is discussed by many of the writers cited. See, for example, Suzanne Lacy, ‘Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,’ in Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle Washington: Bay Press, 1995); Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art.
142 Bourriaud. The book was first published as Esthétique relationnelle in 1998. Many of the essays in the book were originally published throughout the 1990s in the journal co-edited by Bourriaud, Documents sur l’Art.
143 Ibid., 44.
144 Kwon, 106.
145 Bourriaud, 43.
which it is an object in space but also by the extent to which it is dialogic. He points out that these ‘relations between people’ occur through ‘aesthetic objects’ (and in this, Bourriaud’s conception of relational art is distinguished from some of the other writers cited, for whom objects are not necessarily relevant). By focusing on both interactivity and the aesthetics used to achieve this, Bourriaud privileges the position of both artist and viewer as makers of meaning. He characterises work of the 1980s (such as Neo Expressionist painting) as focusing on the visual and suggests that, in contrast, a relational artwork ‘turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor’.

Implicit in the work of many writers working in this field has been the idea that community collaboration has an activist goal of emancipation and social change; it has functional intent. Art historian Arlene Raven has argued that art in the public interest is ‘activist and communitarian’ and presents an ‘intersection of art and social issues’. However, as Lacy points out, there is a spectrum of positions about the goals of this genre of art, with functionalism valued at one end and eschewed at the other. For example, she says, Bourriaud argues for art that is ‘utopian and without application or “usefulness”’. For him, the artists he writes about are not concerned with envisioning, representing or creating a utopian future; rather, they focus on the relations possible between people here and now to create ‘microtopias’. As he puts it: ‘It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on a happier tomorrow.’

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146 ‘If a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sights beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion, and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called “the coefficient of art”, which is a temporal process, being played out here and now.’ Ibid., 41.
147 Ibid., 42. Later in the chapter, he is keen to point to the importance of objects in the works to differentiate them from conceptual artworks that were concerned with immateriality: ‘In the worlds constructed by these artists, on the contrary, objects are an intrinsic part of the language.’ Ibid., 47.
148 Ibid., 43.
151 Ibid.
152 This term, and ‘micro-utopia’, are used throughout the book.
153 Bourriaud, 45.
This assumes two things: that the artworks in question succeed in fostering relations at all, and that those relations are of a positive nature. This is the area of Bourriaud’s theory to which critic Claire Bishop takes most exception. She applies the idea of antagonism proposed by Laclou and Mouffe to analyse Bourriaud’s claims for the politics of relational aesthetics and finds them wanting.\footnote{154} She concludes:

[\textit{The relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness.}\footnote{155}]

There is also a seeming contradiction in Bourriaud’s assertion, on the one hand, that the open-ended and interactive nature of the artworks ‘ushers in all dialogue’\footnote{156} and produces ‘inter-human experiences’,\footnote{157} while on the other hand he notes that the works create ‘moments of \textit{constructed} conviviality’\footnote{158}. This sounds more like a scripted play or an advertisement than a ‘concrete space’ concerned with ‘negotiations, bonds and co-existences’.\footnote{159} The works that Bourriaud describes are marketed to art-going audiences (and sometimes take place in galleries), unlike the works under consideration in this thesis, which are all situated in public spaces and aimed at a general, not necessarily art, audience.

In contrast to Bourriaud, Kester’s position is closer to the functional end of the spectrum. He discusses dialogic art in terms of ‘activist art … premised on what Habermas has defined as an intersubjective “communicative action”’.\footnote{160} For Kester, dialogic art expands the practices of the 1960s and 1970s of Fluxus and Happenings beyond a critique of art itself ‘into a set of positive practices directed toward the world beyond the gallery walls, linking new forms of intersubjective experience with social or political activism’.\footnote{161} As such, for Kester, evaluation of

\footnotesize{\bibliography{references}}
dialogical art practices should focus on ‘analysing, as closely as possible, the interrelated moments of discursive interaction within a given project’.\textsuperscript{162} He points out that:

What is at stake in these projects is not dialogue per se but the extent to which the artist is able to catalyze emancipatory insights through dialogue.\textsuperscript{163}

However, he does not naively suggest that dialogue and exchange will, in and of themselves, effect positive social change, but rather acknowledges that some conflicts are not the result of a failure to communicate in the first place.\textsuperscript{164} Kester cautions against both the risk of becoming politically reductive in assessing dialogical artworks (if the ‘cause’ is good, then the artwork must be too), or of being constrained from critique for fear of being ‘seen as disparaging the issue or the community involved’.\textsuperscript{165} For Lacy, analysis of these works should rest on:

… the quality of the imagery, including the question of beauty and the relevance of invention; the artist’s intention and the effects of the work, whether measurable or hypothesized; and the work’s method of conveying meaning.\textsuperscript{166}

Kester also stresses the importance, for both artists and critics, of preserving ‘the specificity of activist art, as a practice that is discrete from other forms of political activism’.\textsuperscript{167} He points out that artists have particular skills to employ in the service of activist art in ways that challenge the ‘powerful images of pathologized Others’ used by the conservative movement.\textsuperscript{168} He argues that:

Artists are skilled in the modulation of symbolic meaning. In this respect, they are ideally suited to engage, and subvert, the image politics of the conservative consensus.\textsuperscript{169}

While not all of the objects considered in this thesis would necessarily be termed ‘art’, in accordance with Kester I argue that their visual, symbolic and material characteristics are essential elements in achieving their functions, hence making theories of community collaborative art practices relevant to my analysis.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{167} Lacy, ‘Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,’ 41.
\textsuperscript{168} Kester, ‘Ongoing Negotiations: Afterimage and the Analysis of Activist Art,’ 8.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 13.
Another concept implicit in the literature is that of ‘community’. Most writers agree that this is a problematic term subject to multiple understandings. For Kwon, it is a ‘highly charged and extremely elastic political term’\(^{170}\) that is used by both the left and right sides of politics, and it can invoke disenfranchised, specific social groups and general, dominant social forces.\(^{171}\) Kester provides the seemingly simple explanation that:

…‘community’ may be defined by such factors as geographic location, commitment to a specific political issue or movement, or identity based on race, gender, sexuality or class.\(^{172}\)

This then raises the questions of how community membership is determined and by whom. In the case of the memorials examined in this thesis, in Kester’s terms the ‘community’ to which I refer is essentially those who share a ‘commitment’ to the issue of memorialising asylum seekers. In her analysis of the *Culture in Action* new genre public art projects in Chicago, Kwon identifies four types of community: ‘mythic unity’, ‘sited’, ‘invented (temporary)’ and ‘invented (ongoing)’.\(^{173}\) She critiques Kester for his concept of the ‘politically coherent community’. According to Kwon, one of the problems of community art is its tendency towards affirmation:

[A] central objective of community-based site specificity is the creation of a work in which members of a community – as simultaneously viewer/spectator, audience, public, and referential subject – will see and recognize themselves in the work, not so much in the sense of being critically implicated but of being affirmatively pictured or validated.\(^{174}\)

As further described by Kwon:

[N]ew genre public artists seek to engage (nonart) issues in the hearts and minds of the ‘average man on the street’ or ‘real people’ outside the art world. In doing so, they seek to empower the audience by directly involving them in the making of the art work, either as subjects or, better, as producers themselves … For the proponents of new genre public art, this ownership of art, or more generally cultural representation, is the basis for the integration of art and everyday life and a powerful force toward social and political change.\(^{175}\)

\(^{170}\) Kwon, 111.

\(^{171}\) Ibid.

\(^{172}\) Kester, ‘Ongoing Negotiations: *Afterimage* and the Analysis of Activist Art,’ 15.

\(^{173}\) Kwon. These terms and their meanings and manifestations in the *Culture in Action* projects are discussed from pages 118-137.

\(^{174}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 107.
I do not argue that the memorials considered in this thesis constitute a new genre of public art practice; however, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, ‘ownership’ by ‘real people’ was central to the evolution of the SIEV X memorials in Canberra and on Christmas Island, as well as the *SIEV 221 Memorial* on Christmas Island.

Much of the writing on community collaborative practices is predicated on the idea of an artist originator who then engages non-artists in a collaborative fashion to create a work. In contrast, three of the works considered in this thesis evolved in the opposite way – non-artist community members decided on the need for a memorial and then engaged artists/designers to assist them in realising their plans. It was not simply a case of commissioning an artist, but rather instigators and artist/designers working collaboratively to determine the nature of the work and then to create it. In the case of the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*, the work itself is the result of a collaborative effort, with poles contributed by nearly 300 individuals and groups. They were given parameters within which to work, such as to decorate only the upper section of the poles, but within these parameters they could decorate however they wished. Similarly, the Christmas Island memorials bear the imprint of community collaboration and participation through the name stones that surround their base. The Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* would not have been possible without the participation of community members, forming as they did the human screen onto which images were projected.

Writers such as Kester and Lacy analyse community collaborative practices as placing the aesthetic locus in the relationship and interaction between the artist and their public or collaborators (rather than in the object itself). The works considered in this thesis are not primarily concerned with exploring the limits of the definition of art per se, although they can sensibly be considered in terms of their explorations of the concept of memorials and cultural memory. Rather, they are concerned with a response to events that came to symbolise a public debate about border control and Australia’s preparedness to resettle asylum seekers. My

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interest lies in deploying critical debates and models developed within the field of community collaborative practices to gain a stronger sense of the function of these works and how this is achieved. This involves understanding contemporary responses to the memorial objects, the contexts of their creation and reception, and what these might have to say about Australian responses to refugees and asylum seekers.

**Summary**
This chapter has demonstrated that a range of disciplinary fields are relevant for analysis of the functions of asylum seeker memorials in Australia and investigation of how these are achieved. Memory studies, specifically the notions of cultural memory, countermemory and prosthetic memory, the nexus between memory and history, and the use of memory studies to address trauma, all open up useful ways of understanding the memorials under consideration. Analysis of these memorials in terms of resistance to hegemonic norms and the nature of this resistance also provides a useful theoretical tool. Similarly, notions from visual culture of the countermemorial and community collaborative practices provide further insights into how the functions of the memorials are achieved. In the face of dominant modes of political discourse about asylum seekers that sought to de-humanise such people and attempted to render them as formless and unknowable, the memorials considered in this thesis construct and assert particular memories as a counter to these dominant hegemonic forces.
Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction
On a visit to Canberra to see my parents in 2008, my mother said to me, ‘If you’re free tomorrow, there’s somewhere I want to take you, something I want to show you. But it’s a bit sad.’ Such an invitation was, of course, intriguing, and I was a willing passenger the next day as we drove to experience this mysterious, if melancholy, sight. As the car approached Weston Park, a sprawling reserve next to Lake Burley Griffin and a familiar recreation site from my childhood, I was expecting to be shown, perhaps, an insensitively renovated playground that could ruin childhood memories. Instead, we pulled up next to what I initially thought was an art installation of Aboriginal burial poles – a series of hundreds of white poles that meandered up from the lake’s edge, and snaked along the hillside (fig. 3.1). We got out of the car and I walked to the poles, stopping to read the sign erected in front of them. It informed me that this was a memorial to the hundreds of asylum seekers who had lost their lives in October 2001 on the boat dubbed the SIEV X. Moving to look at the individual poles, I realised they each carried a plaque with details of the asylum seeker commemorated. As I read a plaque with the words ‘unknown child’, I did not hold back my tears. As a student of art history (I’d completed my Masters on Spanish and French medieval pilgrimage art and architecture five years earlier) and as someone who had spent the previous five years as the National Coordinator of the peak body for Australia’s rehabilitation services for survivors of torture and trauma from refugee-background, my personal and professional lives were interwoven in my response to this memorial.

It was two years later that I visited Christmas Island, a tiny Australian territory far to the northwest of the mainland, and the site of a newly reopened detention centre for asylum seekers who had arrived, without prior authorisation, by boat in Australia. I was there on a short-term assignment to coordinate the provision of torture and trauma counselling services to those in immigration detention who had
been identified as being likely to have suffered severe human rights abuses before their arrival in Australia. On this visit, as was usual for all newly arrived staff, part of my orientation to the island included a tour of the key sights, including a visit to a humble stone memorial to those who had died on the SIEV X, perched on top of a hill looking out to the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean.

And so began this research project, which married a professional career embedded in asylum seeker and refugee issues with an academic background in art history. The implications of my embeddedness are further considered later in this chapter.

This thesis contributes to the fields of visual culture and memory studies through a detailed analysis of the functions of four public memorials to asylum seekers who drowned while trying to reach safe haven in Australia. These are the only significant public memorials to asylum seekers that I was able to locate in Australia,\(^1\) thus this is a study of all examples of the ‘case’, rather than a selection of examples. As described in Chapter 1, the memorials include the memorials to the SIEV X in Canberra and on Christmas Island, discussed above, along with another on Christmas Island, dedicated in 2011 to the memory of those who died when the SIEV 221 boat crashed in December 2010, and an ephemeral installation memorial to the SIEV X that took place in 2002 in Melbourne. As will be seen in later chapters in which each of the memorials is described and analysed in detail, interrogating their functions requires understanding them both as discrete objects (in the case of the Melbourne memorial via documentary photographs) and as events associated with the memorials’ creation, installation and ongoing role.

This chapter describes the methodological approach I have taken to my research project. In it I outline the research question/s underpinning my project, the underlying epistemological orientation of the work, some of the methodological challenges of studying recently created memorials, and the ethical and research issues involved in interviewing participants. I provide a detailed description of the

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\(^1\) There is also a small memorial plaque on park bench in Tasmania, however this was not included in this research as it was not deemed a ‘significant’ public memorial.
methods used to locate, collect and analyse data so that the reader may better evaluate the analysis and arguments that follow in subsequent chapters.

Research Question
Postmodernist critique has called into question the grand, totalising statement of the supposedly timeless and universal form of the marble or bronze memorial. However, this has in no way diminished the desire of communities to acknowledge tragedies and deaths, whether individual or on a mass scale. This thesis poses the question: what function/s do Australian public memorials to asylum seekers serve and how do they achieve these functions? In answering this question, using a qualitative method, I consider the motivations and experiences of artists and communities in Australia to create and maintain memories of asylum seekers who met their demise in maritime disasters while trying to reach safe haven. In recent years, those seeking to create such memorials faced the challenge of a domestic public policy context hostile to the conception of asylum seekers as those deserving refuge; such a context seeks to demonise those who attempt to arrive uninvited, thus rendering them unworthy of memorialisation should they die in their attempt to arrive on Australian soil. As part of this agenda, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, there were also attempts by the government to further dehumanise such people by ensuring that their faces and names – and thereby their status as relatable individuals – remained suppressed.²

Research Approach
In addition to using traditional art-historical research methods (such as archival research and visual analysis), I have employed a qualitative research approach, the case study, to explore the function of the selected memorials and how these are achieved. The perspective of those involved in the memorials’ creation (artists,

² Judith Butler has written of such lives as ‘ungrievable’ because they are excluded from the public sphere: ‘The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths.’ Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence (London and New York: Verso, 2004), xx-xxi.
designers, community organisers, participants and planners) and reception (visitors to the sites) is at the heart of the study. As defined by Sharan Merriam: ‘A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system.’ In this thesis, the ‘bounded system’, or ‘case’ is public memorials to asylum seekers who arrived as part of the third wave of boat arrivals at the turn of the twenty-first century (as discussed in Chapter 1). As Merriam points out, a case study approach shares data collection techniques with other qualitative research approaches; however, it focuses on a single entity or phenomenon. Importantly, a case study explores a ‘real-life, contemporary’ case and, according to John Creswell, relies on ‘detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports)’. This is also consistent with grounded theory approaches in which it is acknowledged that, ‘data can take many forms – literature, interviews, images, memos, field notes, artworks etc’. As will be seen, in this thesis I employ multiple forms of data including observations, interviews, visual material, documents and reports, as well as newspaper reports and letters to editors.

The case study and other qualitative methods are more commonly used in the social sciences; however, I argue that they are a suitable, and perhaps necessary, approach to gain insight into the ways the memorials considered in this thesis function and how they do so. In her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, critic and art historian Claire Bishop notes that

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4 Merriam, 39.
5 Creswell, 97. Emphasis in original.
7 It should be noted that this is not a unique approach; Adrienne Burk describes a similar method used for her research into three public memorials in Canada relating to violence against women – see Burk.
positivist sociological approaches to participatory art are inadequate. She argues that the participatory aspect of socially engaged art:

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\ldots \text{demands that we find new ways of analysing art that are no longer linked solely to visuality, even though form remains a crucial vessel for communicating meaning} \ldots \text{one of the goals of this book is to show the inadequacy of a positivist sociological approach to participatory art} \ldots \text{[we] need to keep alive the constitutively undefinitive reflections on quality that characterise the humanities.}^9
\]

I build on Bishop’s argument that form remains a crucial communicative device and that one should avoid positivist approaches. Non-positivist approaches have been practised in sociology (and other social sciences to which we can usefully look, including anthropology and cultural geography) since the 1970s. Such approaches, including those described as constructivist/interpretivist, also seek to ‘keep alive the constitutively undefinitive reflections on quality’ that Bishop lauds. As grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz explains:

Interpretive theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon. This type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual.\(^{10}\)

As such, my research sits within this interpretivist/constructivist paradigm wherein the researcher attempts ‘to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’.\(^{11}\) In other words, the research aims to describe experiences (and the memorials under consideration) and understand them through analysis (including of their visuality), rather than explain or verify them,\(^{12}\) as the positivist approaches Bishop references would seek to do. In this respect, the research shares the viewpoint adopted by art historians Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson that, because ‘viewers bring to the images their own cultural baggage, there can be no such thing as a fixed, predetermined, or unified

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[^9]: Ibid.
meaning’.13 My research considers the perspectives of both creators and viewers of the memorials and considers sub questions that include: why and how were the works created? Why do people visit the site? How do they experience it? What meanings, if any, do they infer from the material, design and siting of the work? What do the works tell us about public responses to asylum seeker issues in Australia?

**Research Design**

**Identifying Memorials**

The first stage in the research was to identify memorials for inclusion in the research. As noted above, I already knew of the Christmas Island memorials and Canberra memorial prior to beginning my thesis. Literature and internet searching, along with discussions with informed sources, brought the others to my attention. Searching of a national database of Australian monuments14 revealed a number of memorials recently commissioned by Vietnamese community groups in four Australian capital cities. I made site visits to three of them (in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth). I also conducted two interviews regarding the Perth memorial. However, following initial analysis of early interviews and the memorials themselves, I assessed that the Vietnamese memorials, entitled *Monuments of Gratitude*, were very different in form, typology, intent and genesis from the asylum seeker memorials to the SIEV X and SIEV 221. The Vietnamese memorials employed more traditional monumental forms (figurative sculptures in steel, bronze and marble) than the other memorials; and they had been commissioned from known public artists by successfully settled refugee-background Vietnamese communities as a way of giving thanks to their host/receiving country, Australia. While acknowledging the challenges of the refugee journey and the lives of Vietnamese asylum seekers lost at sea, they also celebrated successful settlement in Australia. Given these differences, I decided they were a different ‘case’ from the memorials that commemorated

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‘unsuccessful’ asylum seekers; memorials created by community groups and artists who were not themselves from refugee-background communities. This leaves the other memorials for future research and perhaps comparison.

**Data Collection Strategy**
I used the following methods to collect data: archival and literature research; site visits, including documentation of sites through field notes and photographs; and interviews. Each of these methods is discussed in more detail below.

**Archival and Literature Research**
Searches of electronic databases and library catalogues were conducted to glean relevant material from scholarly journals and books, magazines and newspapers. In addition, internet searches were conducted to locate textual and photographic material on the memorials – a site dedicated to the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* (www.sievxmemorial.com) was particularly useful in this regard. In addition, a number of my interview participants made available to me their personal archives relating to the memorials (this included materials such as newspapers clippings, meeting minutes, letters, draft documents, speeches and photographs). While on Christmas Island I was also able to access the complete hardcopy archive of the local newspaper, *The Islander*, to search for articles relevant to the SIEV X and SIEV 221 memorials there.

**Site Visits**
I conducted site visits to all of the memorials considered in this thesis. A total of four memorials\(^\text{15}\) were visited, with some of them being visited multiple times (some before and all during the research for this thesis). Table 1 shows the site visits conducted.

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\(^{15}\) Only the site of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* was visited – it was a one-off projection event in 2002 and I was not at that event.
Table 1: Site Visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>SIEV X Memorial</em></td>
<td>Christmas Island</td>
<td>Visited in 2009 prior to beginning PhD (two visits to the site over two weeks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visited in July 2014 as part of PhD research (five days, daily visits to memorial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>SIEV 221 Memorial</em></td>
<td>Christmas Island</td>
<td>Visited in July 2014 as part of PhD research (five days, daily visits to memorial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>SIEV X Memorial</em></td>
<td>Weston Park, Canberra</td>
<td>Visited multiple times prior to PhD research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visited daily over four days in July 2013, one day in October 2013, and one day in October 2014 as part of PhD research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>SIEV X Memorial</em></td>
<td>Southbank, Melbourne</td>
<td>Site of projection work visited multiple times (I was not at the projection event in 2002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During site visits I photographed the memorials and their surroundings, took measurements of the size and relative placement of elements of each memorial, recorded field notes and, where possible, interviewed other visitors to the site (see section below for discussion of interview methods). I tried to visit sites for extended periods (at least one hour, often much longer), over multiple days and at different times of the day. This was both to maximise the chances of being at the memorials when other visitors might be there, and also to experience the works...
under different lighting and weather conditions. As with any work – but with three-dimensional works with interactive elements in particular – conducting analysis of them from photographs alone is a poor substitute for personally experiencing the site and the memorials first-hand. Unfortunately, this was what I had to rely on for one memorial at which I was not present (the one-off light projection work of the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial) and the unveiling ceremonies associated with the other memorials. Similarly, I was not present at the creation of any of the individual poles for the Canberra SIEV X Memorial, and have only seen limited photographic evidence of the works in progress and at completion before they were sent for inclusion in the memorial. As will be discussed in later chapters, these memorials sit on the periphery of ‘participatory art’/community collaborative practices, and as Claire Bishop has noted about such works:

To grasp participatory art from images alone is almost impossible: casual photographs … tell us very little, almost nothing, about the concept and context of a given project. They rarely provide more than fragmentary evidence, and convey nothing of the affective dynamic that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them.  

It is for this reason, among others, that it was essential to visit the sites on multiple occasions over a period of time. The memorials themselves changed over time, and it was important to understand the works within their broader physical contexts as their sites significantly affect the experience, and therefore insights into the potential functions, of the works. Similarly, the partial nature of photographic and archival documentation meant it was crucial to interview those involved in the creation and reception of the works.

**Interviews – Format and Participants**

In addition to seeking a fuller understanding of the memorials than that available through texts, images and secondary sources, I also wanted to place the voice of the instigators of the memorials, the participants in their creation, and those who visit them at the centre of this inquiry. To achieve this, I conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with individuals who were involved in the memorials. This included artists and designers of the memorials;

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community members who instigated/planned/organised the memorials; community members who assisted in the creation of the memorials and participated in their unveiling; and viewers of the memorials. In total, I conducted 20 interviews – a full schedule of interviewees is at Appendix 2.\textsuperscript{17}

Interviews were designed to elicit information about the person’s role in the memorial, their hoped for outcome and/or perceived function of the memorial, their own and others’ observed reactions to the memorial, and their response to the design and aesthetic features of the memorial, including its siting. As such, I used an interview guide (see Appendix 3), but did not necessarily follow it word for word or in the order of questions listed. Instead, interviews were conducted as conversations in which researcher and participant had equal status (if different roles).

Interviews lasted approximately one hour with most participants. Interviews with viewers were shorter, lasting no more than 20 minutes. Interviews were conducted wherever was most convenient for the participant (this included offices, cafes or the participant’s home). Some viewers of memorials were approached at the memorial site and invited to participate. If they accepted, interviews took place at the memorial. Other viewers were those who came to my attention through various networks who had visited the memorials prior to our interview.

Given the qualitative research design, quantitative issues relating to sample size (such as being representative) did not apply.\textsuperscript{18} For some memorials there was only one artist/designer/instigator to interview; for others there was a group of people. I expected that some memorials might be frequently visited by large numbers of viewers, while others might receive only scant public attention. As it turned out, there were very few visitors to the Canberra \textit{SIEV X Memorial} site on the multiple times I was there, and no visitors to the Christmas Island memorials during the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[17] I also conducted two interviews regarding the Vietnamese \textit{Monument of Gratitude} in Perth, but have excluded these from the interview schedule as this memorial was excluded from the case study.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
week I visited them (I sat at the memorials on multiple occasions each day for up to two hours at a time). As noted above, I was still able to interview visitors to these memorials, just not on the site. I was unable to locate visitors (other than those involved in creating the work) to the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial. These factors influenced the numbers of participants in the research.

I interviewed the key instigators of each memorial, the artists/designers (where they existed), contributors to the memorials, people who had been at the unveiling of the memorials, and visitors to the sites. The interviews were designed to gather in-depth, rich descriptions of how participants and viewers experienced the memorial. Their reasons for participation and the subjective meanings they assigned to the event were the focus of the discussion. This is in keeping with the approach articulated by psychologists and qualitative researchers Svend Brinkman and Kvale Steiner when they explain:

> The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world.

This is consistent with the constructionist approach discussed earlier, which further, in opposition to positivist approaches, understands knowledge as being ‘socially constructed during the interview process’. In this approach, meanings are understood as subjectively developed and, as Creswell puts it, ‘varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas’.

As I conducted interviews, it became clear that, regardless of what specific questions I might ask, participants often came to the conversation with a narrative they wanted to present. This has been noted by other researchers, particularly in relation to ‘elite’ participants who are considered to be leaders or experts in their

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19 As Patton explains, ‘[i]n-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information-rich’. Ibid.
20 Brinkman and Steinar, 3.
22 Creswell, 24.
field or community and who are used to being interviewed,\textsuperscript{23} as many of my participants were. For example, Brinkman and Steiner suggest that:

Experts … may more or less have prepared talking tracks to promote the viewpoints they want to communicate by means of the interview, which requires considerable skill from the interviewer to get beyond.\textsuperscript{24}

While I did not find it particularly difficult to steer participants back to the questions/issues I wanted more information about, at the same time as allowing participants time to tell their story, it did require tactful interventions.

Linked to the above issue is the fugitive and partial nature of memory. For participants who had been involved in organising/instigating/creating the memorials, the events I was asking them to talk about occurred between four and 13 years previously. Many participants opened the interview with a caveat that they may not be able to recall details and were unlikely to be very useful to me.\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, participants provided conflicting information about the chronology of events, the dates on which they happened, and the details of what occurred. In some cases this was a trivial detail, but in others it impacted on the meaning of particular events/activities. For example, one informant, an organiser of a memorial service made a point of emphasising that the flowers used in the event were brightly coloured – he had specifically requested the florist NOT to supply white flowers as he did not want the effect to be sombre and funereal, but rather wanted to use colour to introduce hope. Another informant who participated in the service recalled the flowers were all white. What is of interest here is not unearthing what was empirically accurate, but rather seeking understanding of the subjective meanings and expectations that people bring to memorials and their associated events. Presumably for the participant who recalled the flowers as being white this was because, in her mind, the event was a sombre one and her expectation was that such an event would require white blooms.

\textsuperscript{23} Brinkman and Steinar, 171.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{25} This experience is by no means unique. Connerton notes that oral historians frequently report that the ‘interviewee hesitates and is silent, protests that there is nothing to relate which the interviewer does not already know’. Connerton, 19.
The issue of impartiality/bias was one I considered throughout my research, particularly during the interview phase. As someone with a long history of working on asylum seeker and refugee policy issues, and as an art historian, I clearly came to this project with my own views on the memorials and the social and political contexts in which they were made. As rapport was established in interviews I found myself sharing my views with participants – sometimes this was partially in an effort to engage them and attempt to elicit their trust (and as a result their willingness to share their stories), but in listening to the audio recordings during transcription I judged this was sometimes done in a spontaneous and relatively unconsidered fashion. Brinkman and Steiner observe that:

A recognized bias or subjective perspective may, however, come to highlight specific aspects of the phenomena investigated and bring new dimensions forward, contributing to a multiperspectival construction of knowledge.\(^{26}\)

Indeed, I believe that the richness of data I was able to collect meant that my disclosures during interviews did result in ‘new dimensions’ that might not otherwise have been forthcoming from participants. I also sought to temper any bias by reliance on a wide range of data, not just that elicited from interviewees.

**Interviews – Recruitment and Data Management**

Recruitment of interview participants was achieved through purposeful sampling using a combination of criterion and snowball sampling strategies. As explained by Michael Patton, ‘The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth.’\(^{27}\) Within this method, criterion sampling is used for quality assurance by ensuring that each interview participant meets some criterion relevant to the study.\(^{28}\) Snowball sampling, also known as ‘chain sampling’, is used to identify interview participants by referral from other interview participants; that is, ‘people who know people who know people who know what cases are information-rich, that is, good examples for study, good

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\(^{26}\) Brinkman and Steinar, 198.


\(^{28}\) Ibid., 183.
interview subjects’. Snowball sampling is therefore a suitable method for connecting with research participants with in-depth knowledge of and information about the subject under research.

The criterion for selection was that the participant was involved in the memorials in some way. I began by interviewing those who initiated each memorial. Research of public records (including journal articles, newspaper articles and websites) was used to identify initial interviewees (such as artists, designers and planners). I approached participants by email using publicly available email addresses, introduced myself and my research and attached a short biography detailing my work in the refugee sector over the last 20 years as well as my academic work experience. Given that many of the people I was approaching were regularly approached for interviews by the media, I felt it important to establish my ‘credentials’ as a way of increasing their trust that I knew what I was doing, was familiar with the context of the memorials (both politically and artistically) and would not waste their time. Where potential participants were referred by participants I had already interviewed, I ensured that they gave consent for their email address or phone number to be passed on to me.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by first preference, or via Skype or telephone if that were not possible. Everyone I contacted consented to be interviewed, with the exception of one person on Christmas Island who did not think they would be able to add anything to what other people had already told me. Two other potential participants agreed to participate, but neither interview took place. One was a no-show and did not respond to subsequent contact and the other had a very busy schedule, which meant we were unable to find a mutually acceptable time for an interview.

All participants agreed to interviews being audio-recorded and signed consent forms to that effect. All but two were happy for their real names to be used, although I have chosen to keep viewers’ identities anonymous. Unlike other

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29 Ibid., 182.
30 Brinkman and Steinar, 198.
participants (such as designers, organisers and makers) whose involvement in the memorials was, with few exceptions, already part of the public record, I deemed that as viewers’ identities were not salient to the research, it was appropriate to maintain their privacy.

All interviews were transcribed by me. As I was not conducting discourse or linguistic analysis I did not record all material verbatim (for instance, I removed most ‘ums’ and other hesitations). Where I thought it relevant, I included non-verbal information in the transcript (such as laughter or lengthy pauses). In addition, I took notes during interviews in the event of machine failure and as an aide-mémoire.

Where participants asked to remain anonymous, their transcripts were assigned pseudonyms and the list of real names against pseudonyms was kept separately from transcripts in a secure location. As noted above, only two participants requested anonymity.

Photographs and documents relating to the memorials were collected from both publicly available sources and from private collections sourced directly from research participants. The latter were scanned, copied or photographed and the originals returned to the owner. I also took my own digital photographs of the sites (and in the case of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial, each individual pole from multiple perspectives): this generated a collection of over 1500 images. In addition to electronic file copies, I kept a database record of photographs (using descriptive titles) and documents (using bibliographic data).

**Analytic Strategy**

While I was not conducting a ground theory study, my data analysis drew on the grounded theory practice of collecting, analysing and interpreting data concurrently. As sociologist Kerry Daly explains, ‘the analytic process can be thought of as a braid with data collection, analysis, and interpretation as the

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31 The literature on grounded theory (both its methods and methodology) is extensive. For comprehensive overviews, see Charmaz, and Birks and Mills.
braided strands’. As such, data analysis and interpretation occurred from the very start and throughout the data collection process. This allowed for insights gained through analysis to guide subsequent interviews and data collection.

Analysis also occurred during interviews as the discussion prompted particular follow-up questions or discussions. Answers were reflected back to participants to check for meaning and I also tested my interpretations with participants during interviews. Once transcripts were completed, data was analysed for themes. That is, transcripts were subjected to repeated close readings and sections of text assigned a descriptive word or phrase.

Photographs and other primary source material was also coded in a similar fashion. The poles used in the Canberra SIEV X Memorial were individually photographed from all sides. These images were visually analysed with descriptive words or phrases assigned for their subject matter, iconographic content, and media used. These were recorded in a database. This data was then analysed and groupings made based on the similar content/media. While I did not use a quantitative or mixed methods approach, there were strikingly evident categories used by disparate pole creators. As such, where relevant in the analysis of the SIEV X Memorial in Chapter 4, I have noted the frequency of particular iconographic content and subject matter.

Field notes were kept throughout data collection and these were also analysed. Archival photographs collected from interviewees formed a significant data source for visual analysis, as did the extensive collections of photographs I was able to take over the last five years on visits to the various sites. As noted above, these were coded based on the content of the images.

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33 For a further discussion of this approach, see Janice M. Morse, ‘Designing Funded Qualitative Research,’ in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 229.
Ethical Issues
Consistent with University of Melbourne requirements and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, ethics committee approval was sought, and granted, for this research from the School of Culture and Communication Human Ethics Advisory Group (the research was considered low risk).

Consent forms and a written plain language statement were provided to all participants who were requested to be interviewed (these are provided in Appendix 4). I also explained the content of these forms to each participant. Consent forms were signed and oral consent given before the interviews were conducted (in the case of Skype or telephone interviews, participants scanned and emailed me their signed forms).

Some participants were highly identifiable from the content of their interviews (for example, artists, designers and key instigators were likely to be able to be identified). I discussed this with each participant, and for the two participants who wanted to remain anonymous I promised that any quotes I used from them would be carefully selected to protect their identities.

The risks of participating in this research were considered to be low. I predicted that the highest risk would be for any participant who personally knew any of the drowned asylum seekers (or their family members) as discussion of the memorials may have acted as a reminder of their grief and trauma and thereby trigger psychological distress. In the event, no participants did personally know any of the drowned asylum seekers, although a number of them did know family members of those who had drowned. Interviews were generally conversational, with light-hearted and more sombre moments. One participant was briefly moved to tears at the memory of the memorial event she had been involved in (and I was similarly moved), but was content to resume the interview after a moment’s break.

34 National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Canberra: Australian Government, 2007).
I was particularly careful in approaching viewers at memorial sites, given possible
distress engendered by visiting a memorial (particularly for those who may have
lost loved ones in the event commemorated). For this reason, I planned not to
approach individuals demonstrating heightened emotional distress; as it turned
out, there were no such visitors to the memorials at the time of my visits.

I also gave extensive consideration to the issue of whether I would seek out
survivors of the disasters memorialised. In the case of the Canberra *SIEV X
Memorial*, I knew that family members of the deceased had participated in
creating poles and had attended the unveiling of the memorial and subsequent
anniversary events. I learned through my interviews that in the case of the
Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* and the Christmas Island *SIEV 221 Memorial*,
survivors and family and friends of the drowned asylum seekers attended the
memorials and associated ceremonies. Through my experience working with
torture and trauma rehabilitation services, I was well aware of the potential for
retraumatising people by asking them to recollect events that led to their
involvement in the memorial. On the other hand, many survivors and family
members want to tell their stories and have their experiences witnessed. In the
end, I decided that I would not directly approach survivors, but rather inform them
of the research through other participants with whom the survivors had trusting
relationships. I asked participants to inform survivors and family members of the
asylum seekers of the research project and invite them to contact me if they
wanted to participate. In the event, no such contacts were made.

In the case of the *SIEV 221 Memorial* on Christmas Island, a number of my
research participants were first responders to the disaster. I was sensitive to this
throughout interviews and recognised that talking about the memorial would also
be likely to prompt memories of the disaster itself. I was therefore careful to allow
participants to choose what aspects of their experience they would, and would not,
speak about.
Considering the Recent Past

One of the challenges that some may suggest would be encountered in this research relates to the recency of the events and objects under consideration: the memorials were created within the last 13 years in response to one event that occurred 15 years ago (the SIEV X disaster) and another only five years ago (the SIEV 221 disaster). In this I follow the work of social historians Claire Potter and Renee Romano who study the recent past. They acknowledge the challenges involved in doing so, including the fact that some of their peers question whether they are engaged in history, or some other discipline. Romano enumerates the following four methodological and practical challenges that the researcher of recent history encounters: lack of access to sources considered ‘legitimate’ (especially archival material); limited historiography; lack of narrative closure as the events under consideration may still be ongoing; and lack of political and temporal perspective on the events.

Taking each of these challenges in turn, I argue that, in fact, these are not unique to the study of the recent past and that the same methodological problems beset (art) history of earlier periods. In terms of the archive, I question the extent to which an interview is all that epistemologically different from letters, diaries, inventories and contracts that are commonly core archival materials: why is text privileged as somehow authorised while voice is suspect? As Davis points out, ‘we need to be aware of the oral testimonies and traditions embedded in many written records’. Whether the researcher is dealing with a first-hand account provided through a discussion with a participant, or a written account in an archive, the same methodological issues apply in terms of both the researcher/participant and the primary source: none can be considered ‘objective’,

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as all players have – consciously or not and articulated or not – particular lenses through which they view the material under consideration.

The distinction (or lack thereof) between history and memory, which is being invoked in the caution regarding access to legitimate sources, has already been discussed in the preceding literature review chapter. As Olick and Robbins argue:

> History is written by people in the present for particular purposes, and the selection and interpretation of sources are always arbitrary. If experience, moreover, is always embedded in and occurs through narrative frames, then there is no primal, unmediated experience that can be recovered. The distinction between history and memory in such accounts is a matter of disciplinary power rather than of epistemological privilege.38

As for historiography, while it is true that the researcher of recent events may not have a significant body of secondary literature to refer to, at some point this was also the case for researchers of events in the more distant past – some specific scholar was the first to analyse a particular artwork or event and they did so without the benefit of extensive historiography. In addition, it would seem that to identify a lack of historiography as a problem implies that such work represents a truth-claim – a position that, as Olick and Robbins point out: ‘postmodernists have challenged … by questioning the distinction between knowledge and interpretation, and derivatively between history and memory’.39

Taking together the last two problems that Romano posits, to assume that both narrative closure and perspective elude students of the recent past is to assume that both are possible for those studying events further back in time. As Romano herself points out, ‘all historical interpretations are partial and incomplete constructions of a past that can never be fully known’.40 This is consistent with the interpretivist/constructivist position as explained by Charmaz, in which the

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38 Olick and Robbins, 110. Even writers who still draw a distinction between memory and history acknowledge that objectivity is no longer in play – see, for example, Burke: ‘Remembering the past [memory] and writing about it [history] no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be. Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases we are leaning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion. In both cases this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned. It is not the work of individuals alone.’ Peter Burke, ‘History as Social Memory,’ in Memory: History, Culture and the Mind, ed. Thomas Butler (New York: Blackwell, 1989), 98.
39 Olick and Robbins, 110.
40 Romano, 32.
views of both research participants and researchers are understood as ‘constructions of reality’. As such, this approach does not explain reality, but rather seeks to uncover multiple realities and consider how these realities are constructed and acted on.

Given this understanding of how meaning is constructed, and the fact that I seek to explore reception of the selected works, conducting interviews with people associated with the memorials I am researching was an essential method to employ. Like Corinna Tomberger in her study of German countermonuments, I engaged with instigators and designers of the memorials not because I considered them ‘creator[s] of original meaning’, but rather because of the ‘framing function’ that their insights could offer to an understanding of the memorials.

**Summary**

This chapter has provided details of the qualitative research methods I used in interrogating the functions of the memorials considered in this thesis and considering how these are achieved. The various methods and the challenges presented by them have been presented. I have also set out the theoretical understandings underpinning these research methods. As other qualitative researcher who have gone before me, I have attempted to ‘sustain a creative dialogue between different theories and the data’ and analyse the memorials within their social and historical context. The theoretical underpinnings and different data sources are woven throughout the subsequent chapters to provide a detailed analysis of each of the memorials under consideration.

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41 Charmaz, 10.
42 Ibid., 127.
44 Hargreaves quoted in Brinkman and Steinar, 271.
Chapter 4: Canberra SIEV X Memorial

Introduction

On the 15th of October 2006, approximately 2000 people gathered at a public memorial event in Weston Park on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Australia’s national capital, Canberra (figs. 4.1 and 4.2). They were there to participate in a ceremony to temporarily raise 287 white-painted, wooden poles. The poles had been decorated by schoolchildren, community groups and individuals to commemorate the lives of the 353 asylum seekers who had drowned at sea five years earlier when their boat, the SIEV X, foundered. This public memorial raising was the culmination of a national design collaboration with schools across Australia involving five years of planning, multiple site permit applications and community participation from thousands of individuals from all over Australia. The raising lasted only about 30 minutes – it would not be until the following year that authorities would grant a permit to allow a six-week exhibition of the memorial. This was followed by multiple permit extensions, leading to an in-principle agreement from the ACT government in 2012 to allow the memorial to stay until at least 2033, suggesting the memorial is now effectively permanent.

Throughout this chapter I analyse this history of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial’s creation along with its siting, design, iconography and reception. As I argue

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1 According to the Senate inquiry into the SIEV X disaster, 421 people boarded the SIEV X. Of these, 24 demanded that they be allowed to disembark on Indonesia’s Karakatau archipelago as they were worried about the vessel’s seaworthiness. This left 397 passengers and crew aboard. The sinking occurred after this, in which 353 are believed to have died and 44 survived. Senate Select Committee, 195.

2 I discussed the details of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial raising in interviews with Steve Biddulph, Beth Gibbings, Rod Horsfield, Sue-Anne Ware, Sue Hoffmann and an anonymous participant. The details are also related in a number of printed sources: see Andrews; Steve Biddulph, ‘Love Is Stronger Than Fear: The SIEVX Memorial,’ in Acting from the Heart, ed. Sarah Mares and Louise Newman (Sydney: Finch Publishing, 2007); Gibbings; Sue Hoffmann, ‘My Pleasure and Honour Always,’ in Acting from the Heart, ed. Sarah Mares and Louise Newman (Sydney: Finch Publishing, 2007); SIEV X National Memorial Project, ‘The Memorial’, http://www.sievxmemorial.com/the-memorial.html (accessed 16 October 2012); Ware, ‘SIEV X Memorial’, Ware, ‘Border Memorials: Where the Local Rejects the Global.’

3 Megan Doherty, ‘Govt Backs the SIEV X Memorial; Park Site Stays until “at Least 2033”,’ Canberra Times, 3 February 2012, 2.
throughout the thesis, in common with all the memorials discussed, the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* makes ‘visible’ asylum seekers who had been rendered ‘invisible’ and thereby asserts a place for the SIEV X story in the broader narrative of Australia’s history and cultural memory. In this chapter I make two key arguments about how this is achieved in the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*. Firstly, I argue that this memorial seeks to humanise and individualise the stranger/the exile/the ‘other’ and thereby asserts claims for how the Australian community should respond to asylum seekers. In this sense, the memorial embodies philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics, which hold that ‘the other has an infinite claim on my protection and care’.

Levinas’s conception of ‘the other’ as ‘truly separate, not the same as me’, however, is less clearly on display in this memorial. Rather, some of its decorations suggest a utopian and unrealised future in which the asylum seekers would have arrived safely, been welcomed and experienced an idyllic way of life in joyful integration with the host community.

Secondly, I argue that the memorial creates what Landsberg calls ‘prosthetic memories’ through community participation in the creation of the work and visitor interaction with the memorial object. Creators and visitors are given the opportunity to create prosthetic memories by empathising with the liminal status of asylum seekers through different elements of the memorial’s design. In this way, and others, the memorial is distinguished from traditional public memorials. Theories of the countermemorial are interwoven with those of prosthetic memory to argue that this memorial relies on both affective and cognitive strategies to create prosthetic memories as a form of cultural memory.

To provide background for a detailed discussion of these arguments, it is useful to begin with some additional details of the SIEV X disaster beyond those provided

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4 See also Andrews, 338, for a discussion of the memorial’s aim of humanising asylum seekers.
5 Orange, 35.
in Chapter 1. This is followed by an overall visual analysis of the memorial as it stands today to give the reader some sense of first-hand experience of the work.

**Background**

**The SIEV X Story: Additional Background**

As explained in the introduction in Chapter 1, there were 44 survivors of the SIEV X disaster. Following their rescue, a number of them made disturbing reports about the nature of the journey and what happened after the boat went down. One survivor spoke of the passengers being forced onto the clearly unseaworthy and overcrowded vessel against their will (he reported that the ‘smuggler’, accompanied by Indonesian police, ‘pulled out a revolver’ and forced them on the boat).\(^8\) Others reported that after the sinking they thought rescue had arrived when they saw large ships that scanned them with searchlights, but the ships turned away and they were eventually rescued hours later by Indonesian fishermen.\(^9\) Former diplomat Tony Kevin reports on these, and other, elements of the SIEV X story, including querying why an Australian naval vessel did not respond to the distress signal from the doomed boat, even though it occurred within Australia’s border protection surveillance zone (fig. 4.3).\(^10\) These reports led to speculation that the Australian Government was somehow complicit in the disaster as part of its people smuggling disruption activities.\(^11\) These allegations led to a Senate Inquiry, which eventually concluded that, despite gaps in the intelligence material made available to them, there was no ‘negligence or dereliction of duty’ by Australian authorities in relation to SIEV X.\(^12\) Nonetheless, disquiet over the

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\(^8\) Issam Mohamad Ismail in Nakhoul, ‘The Five Mysteries of SIEV X’ (from a translated transcript of the radio broadcast).

\(^9\) See comments from Haidar Ata in Nakhoul, ‘The Five Mysteries of SIEV X’.

\(^10\) See Kevin.

\(^11\) See ibid. These allegations were also reported in the mainstream press. See, for example, Megan Saunders, ‘Blame-and-Claim Game Trails a Human Tragedy,’ *The Australian*, 27 October 2001.

\(^12\) Senate Select Committee, xlii. See Kevin, 195-233, for a full discussion of the information that led the Committee to their conclusions.
Australian Government’s role in the disaster has persisted, and is evident in some aspects of the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*.13

**The Memorial Today**

The Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* consists of 287 pine poles 18 centimetres in diameter, painted white, with a decorative coloured band of about 60 centimetres deep near the top of each pole.14 Such poles are familiar from their common use in unpainted form in playground equipment and low barriers. There are two heights for the poles – the taller are dedicated to adults, the shorter to children. Anchored vertically into the ground between 75 centimetres and 90 centimetres apart, they form an undulating line leading from the lake’s edge up a gently sloping grassed hill. As noted in Chapter 2, a sign at the site (fig. 2.1) explains the memorial with the following text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The SIEV X Memorial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>remembers the 146 children, 142 mothers and 65 fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who died on the refugee boat SIEV X, at the height of the Federal election campaign in October 2001.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The memorial is a shared effort by over 300 schools, churches and community groups across Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each pole remembers one person who died, the smaller poles for children and larger for adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our message in making the memorial is that Australia is not a country defined by fear and greed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love is stronger than fear. Kindness is stronger than greed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 Memorial founder Steve Biddulph has repeatedly called for a Royal Commission into the circumstances surrounding the sinking of the SIEV X – see, for example, Steve Biddulph, ‘Tragic Legacy of SIEVX’s Fatal Sinking,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 2009; Steve Biddulph, ‘It’s Time for the Truth to Allay, or Confirm, Our Fears About SIEV X,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 2011. He suggests that: ‘The most plausible explanation of Australia’s role was that in carrying out the 2001 People Smuggling Disruption Program, activities instigated by the Australian Federal Police spun out of control, that Indonesian police or military played both ends of the game, setting up refugee voyages, but also, with our encouragement, sabotaging them.’ Biddulph, ‘Tragic Legacy of SIEVX’s Fatal Sinking.’

14 Every publication I have located that enumerates the number of poles in the memorial erroneously states that there is one pole for each drowned asylum seeker, but an on-site count reveals this is not the case. The organisers originally wanted one pole for everyone who was on the boat, including survivors. However, they did not receive sufficient poles to have one for each person. Steve Biddulph suggested the memorial is ‘incomplete’ and both he and SueAnne Ware suggested that poles could be added in future. Interviews, SueAnne Ware and Steve Biddulph.
At one point the line of poles forks to form an almond shape in the dimensions of the SIEV X boat, before rejoining to continue as a single line of poles (fig. 4.4). Another sign (fig. 4.5) explains the shape:

![Image](image-url)

From beginning to end, the memorial travels approximately 400 metres – walking its length and taking time to stop and look at each individual pole, and stand inside the boat shape, requires a considerable investment of time. The meandering line formed by the poles leads from the water’s edge up a gently inclined grassed hill and along the hilltop, and echoes the kind of gentle, meandering lakeside walk a visitor might take on a sunny day.

Two plaques are affixed to the lower portion of each pole: one provides the name of the asylum seeker commemorated; the other names the group who decorated the pole. Although the Australian Federal Police has a list of the names of those who died on the SIEV X, it has refused to release this to the public – to do so, the government claimed, ‘would compromise’ the source who provided the information and the ‘ongoing investigation’ into people smuggling activities in Indonesia. Instead, the organisers of the SIEV X used a list based on reports from survivors and family members; it is only partial, and many of the dead remain unidentified. As a result, over half of the poles record the name as ‘unknown’ and note the age and gender of the asylum seeker as far as it is known;

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16 This list was compiled by community activist Marg Hutton and appears on the website [http://www.sievx.com](http://www.sievx.com).
for example ‘unknown girl’, ‘unknown boy’. Notably, the unknown adults are identified only as ‘unknown mother’ or ‘unknown father’ (fig. 4.6), including on the sign that explains the memorial – despite the fact that some would not have been parents. Perhaps identifying them as mothers and fathers creates an image of connected, family members who were somehow ‘safer’ than independent adults without such connections? Whatever their characterisation, the juxtaposition of the named and unnamed increases the power of both – on the one hand evoking for the viewer a specific individual, on the other reminding them of the vast number of other ‘unknown’ asylum seekers at risk in the world. Reading one name after another, with families grouped together by name where possible, brings home to the viewer the volume of the lives lost – it is a relentlessly repetitive viewing experience that imparts a sense of the scope of the disaster. It also remains ‘everyday’ – unlike traditional monuments, there is no triumphant memorialising here, no sense of a greater good, or contribution to a better life, coming from these deaths.

The memorial does not prescribe a specific ‘start’ or ‘finish’ point, which means visitors experience it from many vantage points. Starting at the water’s edge, it is easy to anthropomorphise the poles and imagine them as weary refugees trudging away from the conflicts and persecution that cause people to flee from their homes. Equally, they can be imagined as asylum seekers taking the journey from conflict to peace. However, just like the doomed journey that this memorial commemorates, there is no ‘destination’ for these poles – they wind up a gently grassed hill from the water’s edge then meander in a sinuous line generally parallel to the shoreline until they simply stop – there is no sense of completion here, rather a sense of a journey suspended without resolution.

This work is experienced both as a whole and as individual parts; viewing the whole provides a quite different experience from examination of the parts. This synergistic quality is strikingly evident when comparing aerial photos (fig. 4.7)

17 As Quentin and Stevens note, this is common in what they call ‘contemporary spatial memorials’. Stevens and Franck, Memorials as Spaces of Engagement: Design, Use and Meaning, 28.
and those that privilege a view of the entire monument at ground level (fig. 4.8) with those that focus on individual poles and their decorations. Images of the overall memorial offer a vision of a coherent whole due to the repetition of form (the vertical poles) and colour (white). Up-close inspection reveals the poles to be made of wood with some evidence of damage and wear on them (fig. 4.9), while from a distance the poles seem pristine, belying the reality of their materials. Although overall still in surprisingly good condition after eight years of weathering, some poles have peeling paint, damaged plaques and evidence of woodborer damage; others are missing some decorative elements, and a few have chunks missing where wood has broken off. Closer viewing reveals a diversity of colour, media and potential symbolism in the decorations on each pole. Although these decorations are diverse in form and content (as would be expected by a work that involved over 200 contributors), themes emerge and these will be further discussed below. The vast majority of the decorations are painted, with a few carved, bearing mosaics or featuring the addition of terracotta or wood motifs (fig. 4.10). Not surprisingly, given the variety of contributors, a wide range of artistic skill is on display, from finely drawn figurative content to naive children’s paintings.

**Humanising ‘the Other’**

**Making the Invisible Visible**

In early 2002, three community members – psychologist/author Steve Biddulph, historian/artist Beth Gibbings and Uniting Church Minister Rod Horsfield – set out to create a national memorial to commemorate the SIEV X disaster and its passengers. They were responding to a lack of national public commentary on the demise of the SIEV X. A few months later, landscape architect SueAnne Ware joined the project. When Biddulph was asked what motivated him to initiate the idea for a memorial and what he hoped it would achieve, he responded:
I couldn’t get past that it was a national tragedy … we felt it needed to be very visible, kind of holding the nation to account in a way … it was to mark the significance of what happened in our national history.18

This desire to create a space in Australia’s history for the SIEV X story was echoed by many other research participants. For example, former ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope (who, as noted in Chapters 5 and 6, would later become the Administrator on Christmas Island) suggested that the memorial ‘is about recognising a part of our history’19 and refugee activist and pole decorator Sue Hoffmann noted:

[It] was also important that it was remembered in that way and it was kept in the public eye. SIEV X is now part of the Australian story; it’s not going to get forgotten. But there was a point at which we couldn’t be sure, but I think that the memorial has cemented it.20

This need for ‘visibility/presence’ was in opposition to the ‘invisibility/absence’ that the government was striving to create and maintain for boat people, or, as co-founder Rod Horsfield explained, ‘We wanted it to be a tangible representation of people that our government wanted us to forget.’21 In addition to the prevalent depersonalising language of ‘illegals’ and ‘queue jumpers’, government efforts to achieve this invisibility included allegedly banning documentary makers from filming the faces of asylum seekers,22 introducing changes to the Migration Act 1958 (Cth) to make it illegal for courts to use asylums seekers’ names,23 placing asylum seekers in remote detention centres24 and, in a specific case, the Minister for Immigration, Phillip Ruddock, repeatedly referring to an asylum seeker child in detention as ‘it’.25 Characterising asylum seekers as having no individual identity – as not even being human – and relegating them to effectively hidden

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18 Interview, Steve Biddulph.
19 Interview, Jon Stanhope.
20 Interview, Sue Hoffmann.
21 Interview, Rod Horsfield.
22 Julie McDougall and Don Fletcher, ‘Dehumanising the Boat People,’ Social Alternatives 21, no. 4 (2002), 33.
23 The reason given for this was to ‘reduce the possibility that publication of court proceedings would create further claims for asylum, or put families overseas at risk’: Cynthia Banham, ‘Name Blame: Judge Apologises to S200 and Blasts Migration Act,’ Sydney Morning Herald, 8 October 2002, 3. See s91X, Migration Act 1958 (Cth).
24 See Mares.
25 This was in the context of a television interview for the 7.30 Report on the national broadcaster, the ABC. For a transcript see Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘The 7.30 Report: Ruddock Replies to Community Concerns’, http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2001/s346319.htm (accessed 2 October 2016).
sites allowed for a public policy of exclusion and demonisation based on fear of an invisible, yet threateningly present, ‘other’. As Zembylas explains:

Fear works by enabling some bodies to inhabit and move in public space and by restricting the movement of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed, such as when nation–states create policies to prevent ‘illegal’ immigrants, ‘un–qualified’ refugees or ‘bogus’ asylum seekers to enter the state. It is the flow of fear among ‘legal’ citizens that establishes these boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – the fear that illegal immigrants, unqualified refugees and bogus asylum seekers, for example, threaten the well-being of a state or the character of a nation. 26

In an effort to counter such fear mongering and challenge the idea of asylum seekers as ‘bogus’ or ‘illegal’, the group who initiated the Canberra SIEV X Memorial invited every secondary school in Australia to submit designs for a memorial 27 (Biddulph recalls sending out 4000 envelopes). They took this as an opportunity to provide curriculum materials to educate students about the asylum seeker experience more generally and the events of the SIEV X disaster specifically. As Horsfield explained:

What we wanted to do was to somehow tell the next generation about asylum seekers and what they were fleeing from, what they were looking for in coming to Australia. … We wanted to tell the story and allow the students to make their own response. 28

Students were told their designs could be for ‘any kind of visual art – landscape, sculpture, visual panels, involve electronic or light elements, be on the water or the shore or both’. 29 The organisers stressed that the memorial would be a collaboration, rather than a competition to find a winning design. Approximately 200 entries were received and travelling exhibitions of the designs were toured around Australia in 2003 and 2004 30 (including to Christmas Island, as will be discussed in Chapter 6). In 2006, the proposal for the final memorial was

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27 SIEV X National Memorial Project; Ware, ‘SIEV X Memorial,’ 50; Interviews, Beth Gibbings, SueAnne Ware, Steve Biddulph, Rod Horsfield.
28 Interview, Rod Horsfield.
announced, based on the design of Brisbane schoolboy Mitchell Donaldson. Donaldson’s idea (fig. 4.11) was used as the basis of the design for the final memorial, which preserved his central idea of using poles to represent the asylum seekers and incorporating the shape and dimensions of the SIEV X boat.

Schools (including those who had submitted designs) and a wide range of church and community groups were then invited to decorate the top section of individual poles. They were provided with details about the SIEV X story as well as the design parameters within which they needed to work. In terms of their decoration, they were given relatively free rein, being told only that it could be, for example, ‘artwork representing your region or place, or your values or wishes’. They were also told the name (if known) of the person their pole would represent, and their gender and age. As will be discussed below, this resulted in a diversity of images, with some identifiable themes.

In the absence of the sought-for permission to erect the memorial for three weeks on the fifth anniversary of the SIEV X disaster, the organisers decided to go ahead with a ceremony that would display the memorial, if only for a fleeting time. The poles were laid out on the ground in the same pattern that they would have been emplaced, had that been possible. The crowd that gathered held up the poles for only about 10 minutes. This ceremony was, by all accounts, very moving. As SueAnne Ware described it:

> Before and after the ceremony crowds wandered among the poles, which lay in situ on the ground, inspecting and touching their surfaces. During the ceremony, the poles were slowly erected for a moment of silence. It was … a deeply affecting experience of grief, remorse and hope for the future.

Among those attending were two Iraqi men who, between them and another friend, had lost 22 family members for whom they had decorated poles (fig. 4.12). One of their supporters and friends, Sue Hoffmann, described the ceremony:

> A drumbeat starts. A procession of 500 people walks slowly to take up positions next to poles, until there are two people standing by each one. It

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31 The history of the development of the memorial is related in a number of sources including the memorial’s website (SIEV X National Memorial Project, ‘The Memorial’) and was confirmed in interviews with the founders of the memorial.

32 SIEV X National Memorial Project, ‘Be Part of the SIEVX Memorial Project’ (c.2006).

33 Ware, ‘SIEV X Memorial,’ 51.
takes some time, maybe 20 minutes. Only the arc of 25 is left unattended. The drumbeat stops. Silence. Then a drum roll. The 500 lift the poles so they’re upright. They wait. The drumbeat starts up again. The Iraqi men who lost wives and children walk to the 25 poles. They take their place by a pole named for one of their loved ones. Other people make their way forward until there are two people at each of the 25 poles. The drumbeat stops, then a pause, then a drum roll. The final 25 poles are raised.34

Another attendee at the pole raising was struck by the diversity of groups at the ceremony and their commitment to creating the memorial:

I was amazed, I guess, at the diversity of the people who were there who had brought their poles to Canberra who had obviously spent a lot of time and given a lot of thought to how best to decorate the poles. About people they obviously didn’t know, hadn’t met, and there was such love and care for those people … all sorts of different groups, different ages, school groups, a great cross section of people. So in a way, it felt to me as though Australians were well represented there in the participation in the memorial.35

This involvement of a considerable number of diverse contributors and their experience of being part of the memorial’s creation is a significant aspect of the prosthetic memory opportunities offered by the memorial, as will be further discussed below.

As described above, the poles are in two heights: 1.75 metres tall for adults and 1.2 metres tall for children.36 These human proportions invite anthropomorphism – not only are the poles surrogate grave markers in the absence of a grave, but they also act as proxies for the dead in the absence of their bodies.37 A number of research participants made reference to this when remembering the initial pole raising ceremony, with comments such as:

When the poles were laid down in that ceremony it was as if it was the laying down of the bodies.38

I think people had the sense that the poles represented people. So, in a sense, when the person was standing there with their arm around the pole holding it up, it was almost as though I was holding one of those people.39

When it came to lay the poles down, it was like it was putting people to rest … it was like they were putting their loved ones to rest.40

34 Hoffmann, 42.
35 Interview, anonymous participant.
36 There are parallels here with the Oklahoma City bombing memorial where the dead are represented by chairs with smaller chairs representing the 19 children who died in the building’s day-care facility. See Doss, 2002.
37 Gibbings, 28.
38 Interview, Beth Gibbings.
39 Interview, Rod Horsfield.
It’s not like a field of poles, but it’s quite literally like you’re walking through [a group of people], because of the heights of the different poles, it’s like walking through with others … they do, from, a distance, look like white figures.41

These reflections are consistent with the memorial founders’ desire to humanise the drowned asylum seekers by reminding visitors that they are looking at ‘people’ not just numbers. They also speak to the corporeal engagement that participants experienced at the ceremony. They were ‘laying’ down the bodies of the dead, ‘standing’ with them, ‘holding’ them, ‘walking’ alongside them and ‘putting’ loved ones to rest. In ‘doing’ these actions, the memorial was not being simply experienced but performed, with memories created through the bodily action of those doing the remembering in empathy with the symbolic ‘bodies’ of those being remembered.42

Naming is also an essential tool used to achieve the function of this memorial. As artist and academic Pat Hoffie argues in relation to state responses to terrorism and asylum seekers:

The need to keep the enemy faceless, nameless is essential to the role of fostering a state of terror. … Signs of the humanity of those we most fear is denied. … The more formless and un-knowable the barbarians can be rendered, the more efficiently the state of fear can be maintained and escalated.43

By naming those who were lost on the SIEV X (where possible), and by depicting scenes of the everyday, if idealised, life they might have led had they survived their journey, the memorial arguably de-escalates this fear of the unknown and humanises not only the victims of the doomed SIEV X voyage, but also other asylum seekers who attempt such journeys. Those remembered, far from being experienced as abstract and undifferentiated statistics, are brought into experience as fellow humans deserving of mourning and care.

40 Interview, Sue Hoffmann.
41 Interview, SueAnne Ware.
42 For a discussion of empathy and memory, see Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture; Sayner.
**Responding to the Stranger**

This ethical responsibility for caring for ‘the other’ was made explicit in speeches at the memorial raising ceremony. One of the memorial organisers, Rod Horsfield, said to the gathered crowd:

> And now you are here, representing thousands of other people who are determined to remember the people of the SIEV X, victims and the survivors. This gathering expresses a confession of what we as a country failed to do when they were on their way to Australia seeking asylum. It is our resolve that they not be forgotten. We will remember them. But this memorial … is a sign to the Australian community that generosity and hospitality to the stranger and sojourner, the refugee and asylum seeker are sacred duties that we will not allow to be diminished in our nation. As you stand there with your pole, you are representing the men, women and children who died. Imagine that! All those people who came seeking asylum now have Australians standing with them, holding up a memorial to their life and hopes and dreams, welcoming them finally to Australia. They will become part of us in a very deep and significant way. They are not alone any longer. We will stand with them.44

Horsfield’s words evoke the ethics of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who holds that we are ‘infinitely responsible to the suffering stranger’.45 As Levinas explains:

> The death of the other man puts me on the spot, calls me into question, as if I, by my possible indifference, became the accomplice of that death, invisible to the other who is exposed to it; and as if, even before being condemned to it myself, I had to answer for that death of the other, and not leave the other alone to his deathly solitude. It is precisely in that recalling of me to my responsibility by the face that summons me, that demands me, that requires me – it is in that calling into question – that the other is my neighbour.46

In this Levinasian ethical understanding of the world, we do not choose to respond to the face of the other – it is simply an imperative, as it is imperative not to see the ‘other’ as fundamentally like me, but rather to understand that s/he is truly separate from me, and therein lies my subjectivity:

> It is not because the neighbour would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other. The

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Community with him begins in my obligation to him. The neighbour is a brother.\textsuperscript{47}

As Alison Landsberg has discussed, Levinas’s ethical relations, ‘emphasize the alterity and unknowability of the other’\textsuperscript{48} while simultaneously having an obligation to ‘the other’.

In this respect, while the Canberra \textit{SIEV X Memorial} invokes an understanding of asylum seekers as people for whom we are ethically responsible and to whom we have obligations, it focuses less on portraying asylum seekers as ‘precisely other’ or ‘unknowable’. Rather, the contributors, many of whom were young schoolchildren, turn to their own, familiar experiences in choosing their decorations. In analysing the decorations on the poles it is striking that a significant number (approximately 20 per cent) include depictions of ‘Australiana’ images (fig. 4.13). These include illustrations of native fauna such as kangaroos, koalas, magpies, cockatoos, kookaburras and other native birds; native flora such as wattle sprigs, banksia spikes, waratah flowers and gum blossoms; tourist landmarks such as Uluru, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House; other Australian symbols such as the Australian flag; and indigenous-style artwork. A further 12 per cent portray typically Australian rural or bush landscapes (fig. 4.14). Designer SueAnne Ware said of these poles:

\begin{quote}
I thought, ‘Wow, in a memorial to people who died trying to come to this country why are there so many themed about Australia and Australian bush, indigenous Australian motifs?’ And, it has to do, I think with [saying], … ‘We wanted to show them the place that we hope that maybe their spirit feels at home and we wanted to welcome them to our place and show them they’re still welcome in our home’.
\end{quote}

As discussed earlier, while Levinas might call on us to understand that it is only through recognising ‘the other’ that subjectivity is enacted, these poles focus much more on the identity construction of those decorating them than those they are commemorating. In addition to the young age of many of the contributors

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{49} Interview, SueAnne Ware.
\end{flushleft}
being a possible reason for this, Michael Dillon’s analysis of why difference is denied gives a further possible explanation of the symbolic content of the pole decorations:

Given the horrors inflicted on the alien, it is understandable, indeed almost orthodox, to deny difference and urgently champion an all-encompassing inclusion so as to mitigate or eradicate the terrors of exclusion.⁵⁰

Indeed, in explaining the Australian icons used in their decorations, contributors made reference to wanting their images to symbolise inclusion of asylum seekers in their local area; for example:

The eucalyptus grows straight and stands tall and has many leaves so that all the birds can come and settle in its branches.⁵¹

I wanted the unknown woman to know the strength, beauty and peace of this place.⁵²

The Australian animals in the painting represent chances and opportunities.⁵³

In addition to the ‘Australiana’ imagery, the decorations on the poles employ a range of iconography, with the main subjects being, in order of prevalence: general ‘nature’ images (including flowers, animals, sunshine, clouds and butterflies); Australian native flora and fauna; seascapes and ocean subjects (dolphins, seagulls and beach scenes); landscapes (rural and urban); abstract decorative motifs; symbols of love and peace (hearts, doves and peace signs); starry night skies; symbols of childhood (toys, balloons and games); and written messages of hope, welcome and remorse. Overall, the impression is of the imagined (if idealised) hopeful future of the asylum seekers had they made it to Australia, coupled with expressions of remorse that they were not able to welcomed. Steve Biddulph interprets the decorations as symbols of wistful regret at the lost opportunity for welcoming and offering hospitality:

It was very clear that what they [the designs] were saying to that little five-year-old girl, or that thirty-year-old young mother: ‘We would have loved to have you living in our valley, we would have loved you to have been in our

⁵² Kangaroo Valley Rural Australians for Refugees, NSW in SIEV X National Memorial Project.
⁵³ Bateman’s Bay High School, NSW in SIEV X National Memorial Project.
primary school. [There’s] plenty of room for you in our town, we live in a nice place and we’d like to share it … We’ve got room, we’re safe, and we’d like to share that with you.'

There is a small percentage of poles that depict messages different from those described by Biddulph. Twenty-two of the poles stand out as distinct from the rest, both in form and content. These were created by the two Iraqi men mentioned earlier whose wives, sisters, nephews, nieces, sons and daughters, and those of another friend in Australia, had drowned when the SIEV X went down. They chose to decorate their poles in stark black and white with two bands of black stencilled Islamic stars, between which is stencilled the name of each family member in Arabic script (fig. 4.15). These poles function much more as traditional grave markers or tombstones, which is not surprising given the hands that designed and created them. For these men, the SIEV X Memorial was less a statement about how they wanted Australia’s refugee policy to change, and more a personal act of mourning. One of their supporters commented:

I realised that when he put the names on the poles – that was quite sad – I think they became the gravestones then. [When] we whitewashed, it was almost then just a painting job, but it was really when the names were put on that they became inscribed and they were his family. (See fig. 4.16.)

For these men, the Canberra SIEV X Memorial was a deeply personal memory, experienced first-hand. In the next section, I develop the argument that for those who did not have such personal experience, the memorial offers the opportunity to create prosthetic memories through their participation in creating the memorial or in visiting the site.

Only six other poles make reference to the countries of origin of the asylum seekers (through the use of silhouettes of mosques, palm trees, crescent moons and stars) (fig. 4.17). Even fewer reference the nature of the boat journey, with just two poles containing images of asylum seeker boats (fig. 4.18). There is only one pole that, through the use of wire superimposed on fake turf (fig. 4.19), provides a symbol of what would actually have happened to the SIEV X passengers had they arrived in Australia – they would have been mandatorily

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54 Interview, Steve Biddulph.
55 Interview, anonymous participant.
detained behind wire fences in an immigration detention centre, most likely on Nauru. Designer SueAnne Ware recalled that this pole caused some consternation among the organisers who wondered how family members of the dead might react to it – many of those family members in Australia had themselves spent time in immigration detention. Ware reported that, when asked, some of those family members responded along the lines of, ‘You know, it’s nice that someone else thinks it’s so horrible and it says a lot more than we ever could’,\(^{56}\) which alleviated the organisers’ concerns. That there was this reticence to display an image that actually showed the reality of Australian refugee policy is a telling indication of the memorial’s intent to present an idealised, hoped-for vision of Australia as a welcoming host country.

This is further evidenced in 11 of the poles in the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* that contain text. These words fall into three categories: explicit messages to the asylum seekers; biblical verses or proverbs; and hopes for the future that the asylum seekers never had. These unrealised future hopes are expressed through entirely idealistic visions of a welcoming and harmonious community. For example:

- A community in which strangers are welcomed, differences are celebrated and all people are valued (fig. 4.20)
- Welcome, love, peace, kindness, hope, friends, games, toys, hope, joy (fig. 4.21)
- IF YOU WERE HERE … ‘you would live in peace’, ‘you would be free’, ‘you could see the magic mountains’, ‘you’d be with me’, ‘you’d be loved, welcomed and accepted’, ‘you could be my friend’, ‘you would have [missing text] happi[,]’, ‘you could enjoy [missing text]’ (fig. 4.22)
- Spirit, hope, peace, love (fig. 4.23)

As the example of the ‘detention’ pole shows, had the passengers on the SIEV X arrived safely in Australia they would not, at least initially, have been ‘free’, ‘welcomed’, ‘celebrated’ or experienced ‘peace’ and ‘hope’; they would have been placed in immigration detention, possibly offshore, where they may have spent years awaiting news of their eventual fate. Even had they been settled in Australia, the image presented by these texts is far from the reality experienced by

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\(^{56}\) Interview, SueAnne Ware.
most refugee communities, at least in the initial years of settlement. However, the memorial can be read not simply as looking backward to an overly optimistic view of the fate of the SIEV X passengers had they become refugee-settlers, but rather as looking forward, to a time when such a vision could be realised (utopian though that vision may be).

Creating Prosthetic Memory
There are only 44 people in the world who have personal, ‘authentic’ or ‘natural’ memories of the sinking of the SIEV X – those who survived it – and only seven of these people settled in Australia. As discussed above, a tiny number of people in Australia had personal memories of those who were on the boat. Therefore, the vast majority of those who contributed poles or who visit the Canberra SIEV X Memorial have no ‘memory’ of the event or of the people who died. However, after visiting the memorial, I argue they may go away with prosthetic memories. As Landsberg explains, such memories are of events through which an individual did not live, but result from ‘mediated representation[s] of the past’ in which an individual experiences a ‘personally felt public memory’. Importantly, such prosthetic memories are not simply the result of learning facts about the event to be remembered (cognition), but must also be personally felt (emotion). As discussed earlier, such memories are able to evoke not simply sympathy but also empathy, allowing people to feel part of a narrative that goes beyond their own personal experiences.

Experiential Interaction
The bodies of those who died on the SIEV X are evoked in a number of ways in the memorial. As discussed above, they are strongly represented by the memorial poles that stand in as proxies for the dead. The other main way in which the absent asylum seekers are evoked, and in which the visitor is prompted to engage

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57 Landsberg, Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge, 3.
59 Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture, 152.
with them, is through the boat-shaped section of poles (fig. 4.24).60 As noted in the sign at the site, the wooden vessel on which over 400 asylum seekers were loaded61 was only about 20 metres long (about the length of four cars end to end) and 4 metres wide – this represents a level of overcrowding that is difficult for most people to imagine. By being invited to inhabit the ‘same space’ as the dead, visitors are provided with an unexpectedly visceral and shocking experience. Visitors to the site commented on the affective experience of entering the boat-shape:

Standing in the boat and looking at the poles stretching off, considering them as representing people, I was like, ‘How could you even fit the number of poles into that space?!’62

This gives some humanity, some reality to actually what happened, because otherwise it’s such an abstract concept, but going along I was like, ‘Oh my god, all these people’. And I actually, for the first time, connected with those people in the boat. I never have before, but this is the first time and it moved me.63

Landsberg suggests that prosthetic memories can shape an individual’s politics and subjectivity64 (as can natural memories). The experiences described by the two visitors above to the memorial site, and those at the temporary installation (discussed above), certainly meet the standard of a ‘deeply felt’ memory of an event they did not live through themselves. The Canberra Times newspaper described the initial raising of the poles as ‘striking and deeply moving’ and noted the importance of the collaborative nature of the memorial in achieving this affect.65 The comment from the second visitor, above, that the experience of the site made her ‘connect’ in a way she had not before, suggests a change to her subjectivity, and potentially her politics. The idea of ‘connecting’ suggests an

60 Stevens notes that the boat shape gives ‘physical expression to what otherwise could be experienced as a remote and abstract tragedy’; Julie Stephens, ‘Commemorating the SIEV X: On Memory and Memorial Activism,’ Arena Magazine, no. 93 (2008): 44.
61 The numbers of passengers and deaths relating to the SIEV X can be confusing. As noted in an earlier footnote, as described in the Senate inquiry into the SIEV X disaster, 421 asylum seekers boarded the vessel in Indonesia. Of these, 24 disembarked near the Karakatau island group (they demanded to be let off due to their concerns about the seaworthiness of the vessel). This left 397 passengers and crew, of whom 353 drowned when the boat sank. Senate Select Committee, 195.
62 Interview, site visitor.
63 Interview, site visitor.
64 Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture, 2.
empathetic response, a ‘seeing through their eyes’, rather than simply a sympathetic one. Such empathy is the goal of the Levinasian ethics discussed earlier in which the stranger is understood as ‘precisely other’, and to whom I have responsibility.

**Liminality**
The status of the SIEV X asylum seekers is ‘precisely other’ in the Levinasian sense, in that they inhabit a liminal space. Dying as they did on their journey, the passengers of the SIEV X never became the identifiable ‘foreigner’ – ‘a person who is not a citizen of the country in which he resides’. Even had they arrived safely, as Dillon explains:

> Neither a co-national nor another national, the refugee is, instead, distinguished precisely because s/he is located in the strange territory of estrangement that is located between the two; denaturalized … Neither in nor out …


67 Dillon, 101.


Those aboard the SIEV X were one step further away from this ‘denaturalised’ category, having never even achieved the status of ‘refugee’. They died neither in their homelands nor in any adopted country in which they found safe haven, but rather in international waters from which their bodies have never been recovered; their deaths occurred in both literal and figurative liminality.

Mitchell Donaldson’s original design for the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* was for multiple poles to be set vertically into the ground in a shape to mimic the size and general form of the boat as seen from above (fig. 4.11). Donaldson’s idea was to have one pole for each person who drowned on the SIEV X. The shape was to be half in and half out of a body of water, with sculptures of hands reaching out from the water at one end of the memorial. He said of his design:

> I designed this memorial to make people think about the mistakes we made when the boat people needed help. It’s designed to be partly on the land and partly in the water to represent how close the people were to safety. There are 353 bars, which is the number of people who died, and they are in the shape of a boat. The bars also represent that the people were trapped and the low bars on the side show that they could have been saved if we’d helped them.

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67 Dillon, 101.
This design, ‘neither in nor out’ of the water, and the symbolised precarious condition of the asylum seekers between deadly peril and safe rescue, can be seen as expressing the liminal state of those being memorialised. Similarly, attention is drawn to the dead as individual human beings through the reaching hands and separate poles for each drowned person, while at the same time the crowd of poles speaks of a mass drowning, in which the numbers are as relevant as the individual identities of those involved in expressing the scope of the tragedy.

This liminality is further expressed by the siting of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial. It is not in the ‘monument precinct’ of the parliamentary triangle – an area that houses multiple memorials to the separate armed services and specific battles, police and emergency services. Rather, it sits some kilometres to the west on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin on the edge of a relatively remote public park used for recreation. A newly constructed bike path runs next to the SIEV X Memorial and picnic and barbecue facilities are nearby (fig. 4.25). This is not a place that obviously dictates the ‘solemn reflection’ clearly expected in the memorial precinct; rather, it is a place that facilitates relaxation, enjoyment of nature, and ludic opportunities. Indeed, this is reflected by the observed activities that take place in and around the SIEV X Memorial (for example, picnicking, cycling and jogging), with some visitors apparently oblivious to the memorial itself.

Placed as it is outside of the urban centre and the parliamentary triangle, the siting of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial can be perceived as peripheral. We are reminded of Burk’s idea of the colonised space (as opposed to the valourised space) where public art is relegated if it ‘happens to challenge dominant social order’. One of the ways that the instigators of the Canberra memorial sought to mount this ‘challenge’ is through its visual relationship to Parliament House, seeking to create a figurative ‘pointing’ at those responsible for asylum seeker and refugee policy – the Federal Government. While the memorial may not be proximate to it, it nevertheless makes a direct link to Australia’s Parliament.

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69 Burk.
House, which is visible in the distance through the last poles of the memorial at the top of the hill (fig. 4.26). As SueAnne Ware describes it:

The last pole that’s towards the Parliament House side really points in a direct sort of way …, kind of [saying], ‘This is something that we think you’re largely responsible for, and how about you change it?’ So it’s very much about a direct visual relationship [with Parliament House], so the last pole is sort of pointing it out.\(^70\)

From the inception of the plans to have a national memorial, the organisers were determined that it be erected in the national capital, Canberra, somewhere on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin. This siting was desired for its symbolic import: proximity to water evoked the ocean journey on which the asylum seekers died;\(^71\) and placement in the nation’s capital would affirm that this was part of Australia’s story and that asylum seeker policy is a federal government responsibility.\(^72\) It was also thought that the memorial would have more exposure as children are often taken to Canberra as part of civics education and they could visit the memorial as part of such excursions: ‘You want it to be part of what school kids that come to Canberra got to see … it’s part of your whole civic sense of who we are as Australians.’\(^73\)

It is difficult to know if this hope for the memorial has been realised. During my fieldwork in 2013 the road to the *SIEV X Memorial* was cut off for public construction works, although it could still be accessed on foot. This meant that the number of visitors to the site was very limited (on three day-long visits to the site I was the only viewer). Even once the road was reopened, and on previous visits, I did not observe large numbers of visitors to the site. However, a visit to the site does not happen in isolation – the park is inhabited by a resident population of wild Eastern grey kangaroos and diverse birdlife (fig. 4.27). This makes a visit to the *SIEV X Memorial* a combination of a nature-park, gallery and shrine visit. The vast open spaces, panoramic views of mountains, bush and water, and picturesque setting of the memorial provide a telling backdrop against which this memorial can be read – and prompts some viewers to question why a country with such an

\(^{70}\) Interview, SueAnne Ware.
\(^{71}\) Interviews, Steve Biddulph, Rod Horsfield, SueAnne Ware.
\(^{72}\) Interviews, Steve Biddulph, Jon Stanhope, SueAnne Ware.
\(^{73}\) Interview, Beth Gibbings. SueAnne Ware also discussed this.
abundance of natural resources and developed infrastructure would not have enough to share with others (that is, asylum seekers). One viewer I interviewed had a particularly strong emotional reaction to the memorial, largely due to the siting:

[You’ve] got this enormous vista of space! This incredible, beautiful park; all I could see was, ‘There’s your sources of clean water, there’s your space where you could pitch some tents.’ … That park is huge. There are kangaroos hopping majestically, and I just felt, since when did we decide to make animals more important than humans?! That’s how I felt.74

When I asked her to be more specific in describing the nature of her emotional response, she said, ‘It was anger. It wasn’t sadness, it was injustice’. Again, we see here a strong emotional response to the site and a visitor who is prompted to see the landscape through the eyes of an asylum seeker seeking a space of refuge. It was the strength of her reaction, I suggest, which ensures that the SIEV X Memorial created a prosthetic memory.

**Challenging Memorial Traditions**

Traditional memorials are unlikely to create prosthetic memories. They are not designed to bring visitors into the experience of what is represented and are commonly physically positioned so that the visitor does not ‘share’ the space of those depicted in the memorial. They do not offer a view through the eyes of those remembered, but rather a view of those remembered. Most often, they are state-sanctioned and funded representations of heroes and those deemed as significant contributors to the nation-state, presented in materials that will remain timeless. In contrast, the Canberra SIEV X Memorial challenges many of these memorial traditions and orthodoxies.

Even the initial implementation of the memorial did not occur as planned. The raising of the memorial in October 2006, referred to in the introduction to this chapter, was fleeting; the organisers had hoped to have a three-week temporary installation, but planning permission was not granted by the agency responsible for approving public memorials in Canberra, the National Capital Authority.
Biddulph implies this was a result of, at best, incompetence and, at worst, political machination when he writes:

> We were shockingly mishandled by the federal body, the National Capital Authority (NCA), who claimed we had applied for a permanent memorial when in fact we had applied in writing for only a three-week standing of the poles, for the fifth anniversary in October 2006. We had been consulting with staff at the Authority for over three years, and to this day we cannot understand how they failed to properly read our application.

NCA guidelines for memorials in Canberra include a mandatory criterion that any event commemorated must have occurred at least 10 years previously – a requirement that the SIEV X Memorial did not meet. The guidelines assume that all memorials are permanent and make no mention of temporary works and the criteria that should be applied in deciding applications for them. By rejecting on time elapsed grounds, the NCA did not need to consider if other evaluation criteria relating to ‘national significance’ were met.

Throughout the planning of the memorial, the organisers maintained that their intention was that the memorial ‘not be political’, as Rod Horsfield explained:

> We did not want to pursue the government politically over this [the circumstances of the SIEV X disaster] and try to apportion blame. We wanted to focus on the people … to try to humanise them against the government that was trying to demonise them.

However, given the politically charged nature of discussions about asylum seekers, this seems a somewhat naive hope, and the political content of the memorial has been acknowledged by its designer. Indeed, in arguing that the memorial is ‘a vehicle for questioning Australia’s current geo-political situation’, Ware firmly positions the memorial as having a political purpose. The creation and installation of the memorial was also perceived by many others as

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75 Biddulph, ‘Love Is Stronger Than Fear: The SIEVX Memorial,’ 84. On the NCA’s refusal to grant a permit, see also Dan Harrison, ‘Row over SIEV X Memorial,’ The Age, 13 October 2006.
77 Ibid.
78 Beth Gibbings, Steve Biddulph, Rod Horsfield and SueAnne Ware all made this point in interviews, unprompted by me.
79 Interview, Rod Horsfield.
80 Interview, SueAnne Ware.
81 Ware, ‘Border Memorials: Where the Local Rejects the Global,’ 200.
inherently political. Then Howard Government Federal Territories Minister Jim Lloyd called for the memorial to be removed, saying: ‘The installation is protest art created by activists aiming to make a political point.’ While the organisers may not have had such intent, others have recognised that remembering can be, in itself, a political act. As Canberra Baptist Church Minister James Barr points out:

[...] any act of memory is a form of protest ... What we remember and what we choose to forget informs how we see the world and what we value.

Similarly, in writing about Holocaust monuments, James E. Young notes that they ‘reflect particular kinds of political and cultural knowledge’. Accepting then that all public memorials, by their very existence, can be read as making a particular ‘political point’, it is likely that what offended Minister Lloyd was not that it made such a point, but rather the nature of the point it made – one that did not sit comfortably with Howard Government policies.

In addition, Minister Lloyd suggested the memorial ‘trivialises existing memorials which stand in remembrance of those who gave their lives in service to our country’. Then ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope staunchly opposed this view and supported the permanent installation of the memorial. He commented:

There should be no sort of sliding scale of which human beings that perish in a tragedy, or in a particular situation or circumstance, those that might be remembered and those that might not be remembered or memorialised or respected. And I think it goes to just the inherent humanity of all of us and the fact that we’re all equal. But of course it summarises very much the view and attitude that successive governments have adopted towards asylum seekers for the last 20 years, or thereabouts, and is at the heart of the draconian policies that we now have.

Lloyd’s position is not only consistent with ‘draconian policies’ towards asylum seekers, but at base is also one that both stems from and perpetuates fear of ‘the

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82 See, for example, Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. Stevens suggests the memorial ‘simultaneously encourages and suspends a directly political reading’. Stephens.
84 James Barr, ‘Display a Reminder to Learn from Past,’ Canberra Times, 18 October 2007, 19.
85 James E. Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 173.
86 A similar point was made by Caroline Creagh in a letter to the Canberra Times newspaper in which she wrote: ‘No wonder the “Liberal” Government does not want this poignant memorial to remain, as a reminder of their greedy, fear-creating government record.’ Caroline Creagh, ‘Letters to the Editor: Truths of SIEV-X,’ Canberra Times, 15 November 2007, 18.
87 Alexander, 43.
88 Interview, Jon Stanhope.
other’. As cultural theorist Jill Bennett has argued, asylum seekers do not meet the memorial paradigm of the innocent victim because, in the post September 11 ‘climate of globalized fear’, anyone ‘without established credentials … or of Afghan, Middle Eastern or Islamic origin, became a potential threat’.89 Those who died on the SIEV X were, of course, both uncredentialed (seeking as they were to be recognised as refugees, but not yet having achieved this), and from the very ethnic backgrounds Bennett identifies. By pitting the asylum seekers who died on the SIEV X against those who died ‘giving service to our country’, Lloyd not only draws into question their worthiness for commemoration, but also implicitly casts them as anathema to Australian values and identity.

Six years after the memorial’s initial unveiling, politicians continued to object to the memorial on the grounds of its political content and as a disaster insufficiently significant for national memorialisation. Then ACT Senator Gary Humphries argued:

[T]he SIEV X Memorial was erected in some haste and with a short-term political objective in mind rather than with a sense of Canberra being the home of long-term commemorations of important events in Australia’s history.90

Over the course of the development of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial, many Canberrans wrote to the local newspaper, the Canberra Times, lining up almost equally on either side of the debate for and against the memorial being installed.91

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90 Humphries quoted in Megan Doherty, ‘Past Political Foes Clash over Future of Poles,’ Canberra Times, 3 February 2012.

Of course, we cannot tell if this is because the newspaper chose to publish evenly from both sides of the debate, or if it actually reflected an even distribution of letter writers on either side. Regardless, an analysis of the content of these letters provides useful insights into the reception of the memorial by at least some local residents. Warren Feakes agreed with Minister Lloyd that the memorial was an ‘unwarranted political statement’ and Tom Ruut described it as ‘a tawdry political stunt’. Some of those against the memorial were so not because of the political status or otherwise of the memorial, but rather on the basis that, as the event did not occur in Australia, and those who were on the boat were not Australian, it was inappropriate to have a memorial to them on Australian soil. This can perhaps be seen in the terms of the threatening ‘other’ as described above; as Nancy Wood reminds us, ‘events and historical figures that are deemed historically unimportant very often embody what is most threatening to the established order’. Some letter writers were also opposed to the memorial on urban planning grounds as they felt a memorial in a recreational space was inappropriate and/or intrusive. Those in favour of the memorial suggested that mourning the loss of one ‘innocent life’ does not diminish mourning the loss of another, and that Minister Lloyd was ‘doing the trivialising [by] ignoring the compassion of thousands of Australians who contributed to the memorial’. The words ‘compassion’ and ‘humanity’ are commonly used by those writing in support of the memorial and many make reference to the ‘poignant’ and ‘moving’ nature of the experience of the work.


92 Feakes, 18.
93 Ruut, 18.
94 See, for example, Emerton, 10; Chapman, 16; Quarterman, 14.
95 Nancy Woods, quoted in Ryan, 158.
96 See, for example, Edwards; Feakes; Ruut. The latter suggested that the ‘poles constitute alienation of public land and are a hazard to joggers’.
97 Perkins, 18.
98 Bray, 22.
This dialogue about the memorial was cited by the memorial designer, SueAnne Ware, as evidence that the discussion and debate about the memorial itself is the memorial. Burk takes this further when she argues that monuments (traditional or otherwise):

… provide insights into various social manoeuvres, as negotiations about which monuments should be created, where they should be, and what rituals around their planning, installation, and re-consecrating should occur all provide opportunities for memory-making.

Burk’s point is consistent with the ideas of Young regarding countermemorials and with Kester’s contention that the ‘art’ in works based on community collaboration occurs in the dialogic exchange. The ‘debate’ regarding the memorial did not just occur in writing on the ‘Letters to the Editor’ page. Soon after the memorial was installed, 17 of its poles were badly damaged (fig. 4.28) in a, possibly politically motivated, vandal attack. In responding to this vandalism, Steve Biddulph suggested that ‘in a way it is part of the job of the memorial to absorb the spectrum of feelings people have about the issue’.

These ‘feelings about the issue’ were at the heart of the originating motivation for the Canberra SIEV X Memorial. Significantly sized national memorials such as this are usually the result of government funding and commissioning, sometimes in conjunction with fundraising from private sources, individual, corporate or institutional. As Biddulph points out, the Canberra SIEV X Memorial ‘was created by ordinary people at no cost to the taxpayer, as an expression of real grief and concern for our fellow human beings’. Most of the costs of the memorial were met by private donations, principally by the memorial founders, with the cost of the poles and decorative materials met by the groups and individuals who completed the work. Ongoing maintenance of the memorial remains the

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99 Ware, ‘Border Memorials: Where the Local Rejects the Global,’ 198. See also Ware, ‘SIEV X Memorial,’ 51; Ware, ‘Design Activism and the Contested Terrain of Memorials,’ 7.
100 Burk, 952.
101 Interview, Steve Biddulph.
102 Steve Biddulph, ‘Letters to the Editor: SIEV X Memorial Made by Ordinary People Who Cared,’ Canberra Times, 4 February 2012.
103 Interviews, Steve Biddulph, Beth Gibbings.
responsibility of volunteers, and this was one of the conditions of the granting of a longer-term planning permit for the memorial.  

A similarly grassroots approach to another national memorial can be found in the American NAMES Project *AIDS Memorial Quilt*. In this project, family members, friends and lovers of those who had died from AIDS created (and continue to create) quilt blocks to commemorate and represent their loved one, which were/are then combined into an enormous collective memorial (fig. 4.29). Similarly, community members who contributed to the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* had a free hand in how they chose to decorate their individual pole and those individual works combined to create the overall work. In analysing the AIDS quilt, Sturken argues that the ‘tension’ between the ‘the quilt as a massive project versus the quilt as a product of intimate, local communities – is a major part of its complex effect’. The same can be said of the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* with, as noted earlier, multiple visitors to the site commenting on the impact of thousands of individuals contributing to the 287 poles.

As discussed above, the symbolic content of these poles was highly varied and at least one commentator, landscape architect William Thompson, was more struck by the individual decorations than by the impact of the vast number of contributors. In an editorial in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, Thompson questioned whether the choice of ‘cheery designs’ on some poles, particularly those representing children’s toys (see fig. 4.30), was a result of ‘volunteers struggling to put a benign face on the dark and terrible event’. He contrasted this with Maya Lin’s intent that the sombre and dark *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*

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104 Interview, Steve Biddulph.
106 Sturken, 186.
in Washington DC would bring people to tears.\textsuperscript{108} In the same edition of the magazine, critic Gweneth Newman Leigh, although moved by the Canberra \textit{SIEV X Memorial}, found the arrangement of the poles to be too ‘minimal’ in its footprint, too ‘orderly’ in its placement and unsuccessful in communicating the disaster of the SIEV X sinking. She asks:

If the purpose of this piece is to try and communicate the tragedy of the refugee crisis in Australia, do we really want such a piece to be arranged in aesthetically pleasing sun-kissed curves and surrounded by birdcalls?\textsuperscript{109}

In her response to this criticism, SueAnne Ware draws attention to the ground-up nature of community contributions, over which designers do not have aesthetic control. Indeed, such control would be anathema to the nature of community collaborative practices (as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis). Ware also addresses the placement of the poles as being, by design, non-hierarchical, with literal connection points at the start of the line of poles (at the water, referencing where the asylum seekers died) and the end (pointing towards Parliament House).

She likens the \textit{SIEV X Memorial} to the AIDS Memorial Quilt in that:

\begin{quote}
[T]hey are manifestations of the deep need for communities to do their own memory work. While officially commissioned monuments and memorials assist in the healing process, many people long to find their own ways to negotiate loss.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

Again we return to the idea of the Canberra \textit{SIEV X Memorial} challenging traditional memorial practices and presenting opportunities for the formation of prosthetic memories. This memorial places the burden of memory work on those who contributed to and visit it – it does not seek to do it for them.

\section*{Summary}

The Canberra \textit{SIEV X Memorial} is not just about remembering the dead, although it may at first seem to be so. It has some of the tropes of the cemetery – names and poles/headstones for each of the dead – but unlike a graveyard memorial, this is not the material artefact of a family grieving their dead. Nor is it a community

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{110} SueAnne Ware, ‘What Really Counts in a Disaster Memorial,’ \textit{Landscape Architecture Magazine} 9, no. September (2009): 31.
mourning its losses as we see in war memorials across the country – unless we say it is the community mourning the loss of its compassion, but this speaks to something quite different from the mourning of the dead. Perhaps this is why so many of the images used on the poles are fundamentally optimistic – it is an attempt to reclaim that lost compassion; to say to the dead, ‘Here is what you would have experienced had you lived to see your asylum seeking journey through to settlement’. It offers a picture of a bucolic, seaside Australia, populated for the most part with exotic but non-threatening animals and plants; a life filled with children’s parties and sporting pursuits. In short, an idyll such as would unlikely have been experienced in reality had any of those who drowned on the SIEV X made it here.

These utopian representations are, however, accompanied by the palpable sense of loss of hundreds of fellow beings. Prosthetic memories of them and their experience of being crammed aboard an asylum seeker boat are created through the design and siting of the memorial. These experiences lay profound foundations for memory for those who participated in creating the memorial and for those who visit it.

In seeking to ‘naturalise’ the dead, and to make them known and welcomed, the Canberra SIEV X Memorial draws attention to a loss that was never personally experienced by most of the Australian population. Much like the asylum seekers whose deaths it purports to remember, this memorial also both inhabits and represents a liminal space – it hovers between presence and absence, the political and the apolitical, past and future, hope and despair, mourning and celebration, centre and periphery, and inclusion and exclusion.

The collaborations and conversations demonstrated by this memorial were perhaps not all intended, but were certainly integral to its status as a memorial. It continues to create public dialogue about asylum seekers and their status in Australia today, thereby creating cultural memory.
Chapter 5: Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*

**Introduction**

In October 2002, a year after the SIEV X disaster and four years before the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* was temporarily raised, a collective of artists and activists working under the name ‘boatpeople.org’ created an ephemeral *SIEV X Memorial* on the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne (fig. 5.1). This memorial was a one-off, short-lived, light projection work involving volunteers acting as a human screen for images and text. It functioned as a polysemic action that was at once protest, vigil, memorial, ritual and contribution to public debate about asylum seekers seeking to come to Australia by boat. This memorial, literally and figuratively, illuminated the deaths that occurred as a result of the SIEV X sinking.

In this chapter I argue that the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* can be understood as a ‘tactical intervention’ (in Michel de Certeau’s sense of ‘tactics’¹) that builds cultural memory by facilitating public debate around asylum seekers. I argue that this tactical intervention was achieved through three key means. Firstly, similar to the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* analysed in the previous chapter, the bodily experience of community participants, and the vicarious bodily experience of the audience, produces a visceral engagement leading to prosthetic memory as described by Landsberg. Secondly, using theories of public collaboration, I argue the importance of community participation and audience engagement in this memorial to demonstrate the centrality of such participation in cultural memory creation. Lastly, I argue that the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* sits within a style of countermemorial practices that use unexpected interventions into urban spaces as a tactic to reinforce or create cultural memory.

I begin this chapter with an examination of the history behind the creation of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*, including the group responsible for it, boatpeople.org. This is followed by a visual analysis of the memorial itself.

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¹ See de Certeau.
Background

Boatpeople.org: Collaborative Activist Practice

Boatpeople.org is a collaboration of multiple players from different disciplines (including art, architecture, graphic design, photography, new media and social activism) who describe themselves as:

… a gang of artists, activists and media makers that has been producing public work about race, nation, borders and history since 2001. Not so much a collective as a disorganisation, the crew includes Safdar Ahmed, Zehra Ahmed, Stephanie Carrick, Dave Gravina, Katie Hepworth, Jiann Hughes, Deborah Kelly, Enda Murray, Pip Shea, Sumugan Sivanesan and sometimes Jamil Yamani.²

The group was established in October 2001 when its founding members attended the TILT (Trans-global Independent Lateral Tactics) tactical media conference and workshops in Sydney.³ This conference took place during a federal election (described in the introduction to this thesis) in which the conservative Howard Government campaigned on a platform of stopping asylum seekers reaching Australia by boat. In her keynote address to the conference, Australian artist Deborah Kelly called on participants to join her in responding to the Howard Government’s negative portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers as ‘queue jumpers’ who would endanger the lives of their own children to access an Australian protection visa. She describes her address in terms of a call to action:

Having the authority of the microphone gave me the opportunity to say, in relation to the manipulation of the truth that was being so effectively broadcast by the Howard regime, ‘Who would like to work together on talking back to this stuff? Isn’t it driving you all crazy? Who is tired of shouting at their bloody television on their own?’ Because I certainly was.⁴

This desire for collective public action was met by a number of attendees responding to her call. At the end of the conference, the group mounted their first, and perhaps best-known, event: the 15-metre tall slide projection onto the sails of

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² Hepworth and Kelly, 44.
⁴ Deborah Kelly, quoted in McIntyre, 276.
the iconic Opera House on Sydney Harbour of an image of a tall ship, such as those used by the European colonisers of Australia, with the words ‘Boat People’ beneath (fig. 5.2).\(^5\) The inspiration for this image came from another TILT speaker, Indigenous leader Rebecca Bear-Wingfield, who kept referring to non-Indigenous people in the audience as ‘boat-people’.\(^6\) Kelly took this as a call to make a public statement that: ‘We are ALL boat-people. It’s not a solidarity metaphor, it’s lived history. So, we are trying to be a kind of antidote to amnesia.’\(^7\) Importantly, the work did not stop with the projection (which lasted for about 10 minutes before security guards approached and the gathered crowd agreed to disperse).\(^8\) It was followed by printing 50,000 free postcards of the image, which were disseminated through cafes and other public sites,\(^9\) and the establishment of a website, www.boatpeople.org (this site is now defunct; instead, an archive of the works of the group can be found at www.boat-people.info). The boatpeople.org website offered not just a record of the actions of the group, but also information about asylum seekers and refugees in an effort to challenge myths that were circulating, and encouraged readers to take their own actions.\(^10\)

Such collaborative activist art projects follow in the wake of other issues-based artist collectives that have ‘tried to engage a public audience’\(^11\) in discussions about topics of social concern including, for instance, AIDS and feminism (for example, Gran Fury, ACT-Up and Guerilla Girls). As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, this intersection of art and activism has been given different names by art historians and critics, including ‘activist art’ by Donald Kuspit, who

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\(^6\) Deborah Kelly, quoted in McIntyre, 276 and Evans, 169.

\(^7\) Deborah Kelly, quoted in Evans, 169. For a discussion of how this projection work can be read as perpetuating notions of Australian nationality that excludes, if unintentionally, Indigenous Australians, see Kleist.

\(^8\) Deborah Kelly, in McIntyre, 276; Kleist, 670.

\(^9\) Hepworth; Kelly, 44.

\(^10\) Meikle, 11 and 16.

describes it as ‘art that claims to be a kind of action rather than a kind of reflection’;\textsuperscript{12} and ‘art in the public interest’\textsuperscript{13} by Arlene Raven, which she describes broadening the aesthetic options for public art through being ‘activist and communitarian’.\textsuperscript{14} Whatever the categorisation, curator and activist Nina Felshin proposes that common to these groups is the use of mass-communication techniques and reproducible forms;\textsuperscript{15} we see these in the website and postcards used by boatpeople.org. Working collaboratively, activist art groups such as boatpeople.com often include audience or community participation in the creation of their works. As Felshin argues:

> When activist artists extend their collaborative way of working to an audience or community, the process takes the form of a similarly inclusive activity – public participation. Such participation is a critical catalyst for change, a strategy with the potential to activate both individuals and communities and takes many forms.\textsuperscript{16}

The participatory element of the Opera House work took place after the event of the projection, as community members were empowered to distribute the postcards and use the information on the website to disseminate a view of asylum seekers alternative to the one the government was promulgating. As will be discussed further below, in the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial community participation took place during the event itself and occurred throughout the conceptualisation and realisation of the work. This, I will argue, was a key means by which the memorial created cultural memory.

**Memorial Context**

The Melbourne SIEV X Memorial came about as the result of a commission by the organisers of a conference entitled Art of Dissent, which ran alongside the Melbourne International Arts Festival. The conference spanned the Adelaide and Melbourne Arts Festivals in 2002 and was aimed at ‘artists and community

\textsuperscript{13} Raven, ed. *Art in the Public Interest*.
\textsuperscript{14} Kwon, 105.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
activists working at the frontier of social and cultural change’. The content of the conference was described in marketing materials as follows:

The program will explore the dilemmas and ethics of contemporary art practice created from artists’ deep engagement with communities in diverse social contexts. Passion and politics are the driving forces in a program that will attempt to go beyond the accepted jargon of ‘industry models’, ‘marketing strategies’ and ‘sponsor needs’ to explore a brave new territory where labels such as ‘community’ versus ‘mainstream’ are irrelevant.

To accompany the event, the organisers decided to commission an artwork that would be consistent with this conference content. They asked boatpeople.org to make a projection work; other than that, the nature of the work was left open.

Boatpeople.org began to plan their work, initially struggling to formulate the subject matter of the projection. As a group that had been founded based on a desire to challenge dominant rhetoric and facilitate social action and change, Kelly reports that they were uncomfortable with the contrived notion of ‘making some dissent’ for a festival. They were initially planning to make a work about ‘Who is a boatperson?’, but they were finding this ‘uninspiring’.

The idea of a memorial to those lost in the SIEV X disaster came about coincidentally as a result of one of the members of the collective, Katie Hepworth, having befriended a young Iraqi asylum seeker, Hassan, who was acquainted with people who had lost loved ones on the SIEV X. When she told him that boatpeople.org were making a work about asylum seekers, he decided to speak to bereaved families, who then provided him with photographs of their dead loved ones (mostly children) for boatpeople.org to use in their projection (fig. 5.3).

Hepworth notes that providing these original photos to boatpeople.org (who

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18 Ibid.
19 Deborah Kelly related that she was initially approached as a solo artist, but she insisted that if a projection work was required it would need to be made under the collective of boatpeople.org. Kelly notes that, as perhaps the best-known artist in boatpeople.org, on more than one occasion she has had to remind commissioners that she does certain work as part of a collective, not as a solo artist (interview, Deborah Kelly). This is not surprising given that, as Nina Felshin notes, collectives such as boatpeople.org challenge ‘art-world notions of individual authorship, private expression, and the cult of the artist’: Felshin, 11.
20 Interviews, Deborah Kelly, Katie Hepworth.
21 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
22 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
23 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
scanned and returned them) was indicative of the level of desperation felt by the donors (mostly fathers of children who had died on the SIEV X) to ‘get the story out’, and she experienced the loan of the photographs as ‘an amazing degree of trust’.  

One of the members of boatpeople.org had the idea of projecting these images and the names of the dead (fig. 5.4) onto the bodies of volunteers, who would be invited to participate in the work. The relevance and aesthetic rationale for this choice was described by Kelly in the following terms:

It seemed so poetic and resonant, especially because it was around the time of a lot of tropes around ‘not in my name’ and ‘bearing witness’, especially that the people who had died on the SIEV X had been made anonymous by the government in order, obviously, to dehumanise them. It meant that suddenly we had an actual political job.

This comment, along with Kelly’s earlier call to ‘be an antidote to amnesia’, points to the activist intent of the work. According to boatpeople.org members, the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial almost did not take place. Deborah Kelly reports that on the planned day of the memorial boatpeople.org members were advised that they had to cancel the event. The reasons for the cancellation are not entirely clear, but boatpeople.org member Enda Murray speculated that there was concern ‘that it [the projection work] might backfire and the funders or partners might not be very happy about an artwork that was, I suppose, out of their control’. Kelly surmises that the cancellation was because ‘feelings were running so high about refugees’. Whatever the reason, as a work involving community participation, it had effectively already begun as soon as community members had been contacted about the event. As such, members of boatpeople.org had a sense of responsibility: to the participants; to the asylum seeker family members who had entrusted images of their loved ones to them; to their potential audience; and to themselves as professional arts practitioners.

24 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
25 Interview, Deborah Kelly. Interestingly, when asked, the member of the group who Kelly credits with coming up with the idea replied that he could not remember and that ideas were generated collectively (email correspondence).
26 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
27 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
28 Interview, Enda Murray.
29 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
Having used considerable social and political capital to invite people to participate in the event, including members of the refugee communities whose country-people had died on the SIEV X, boatpeople.org members had to contact as many of these people as they could to let them know of the cancellation. Not surprisingly, Kelly felt it compromised the reputation of boatpeople.org and, more importantly, she said, ‘We had exposed people who are not art people, who are our political contacts in the world, for whom the work was not at all gestural but an act of public grieving’. They also cancelled media interviews they had planned for the day of the memorial to promote the event. For unknown reasons, on the afternoon of the planned memorial, there was a change of decision and boatpeople.org were informed that the work should go ahead and that festival organisers would do all they could to assist in seeing it take place. Boatpeople.org were originally expecting a few hundred participants to take part in the project as the human screen, but presumably due to the late cancellation and even later decision to go ahead, there were approximately 60 people present. As a result, Kelly felt that ‘it didn’t carry the level of respect to the people who were watching who were there, that we had intended’. As artist Virginia Maksymovicz has pointed out, activist work (such as that practised by boatpeople.org) is not like other public art or traditional memorials; rather it:

… seeks to integrate itself into everyday life. It is not a set of statements that are essentially personal [to the artist] it is an art that struggles to be intelligible to nonartists on multiple levels. It takes seriously the concepts of audience and communication.

Kelly’s responses to the cancellation of the event speaks to how seriously the group took its audience (and participants) and communicating with them. This is further explored later in this chapter in relation to community collaboration.

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30 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
31 We can speculate that it may have been due to behind-the-scenes influence. Enda Murray reported, ‘There was talk that we were being censored and it wasn’t going to go ahead, but then that changed and so it did go ahead and we carried it out.’ Interview, Enda Murray.
32 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
33 Maksymowicz, 155.
**Melbourne SIEV X Memorial: The Event**

The Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* took place on the evening of Monday 21 October 2002 (close to the one-year anniversary of the sinking of the SIEV X) at approximately 8.30pm (by which time it was dark). It was advertised in the conference program simply as ‘boatpeople.org projection event’.\(^{34}\) Participants were invited to attend a location at Southbank, a tourist precinct on the south bank of the Yarra River adjacent to the Melbourne city centre. This location was near the Victorian Arts Centre where the Art of Dissent conference was being held and is a busy thoroughfare for people crossing the Yarra to or from one of the city’s main public transport hubs, Flinders St train station. Participants were asked to wear white clothes so that, when they lay down next to the river, their bodies would become a ‘fleshy screen’\(^ {35}\) for images that would be projected onto them from 35 millimetre analogue slide projectors positioned on a balcony above the riverbank.\(^ {36}\) Organisers also brought white sheets, in case volunteers did not dress as requested,\(^ {37}\) and these were used to cover the bodies of the participants. Although the organisers’ intent in using the sheets was purely pragmatic to ensure clarity of the projected images, it achieved a potent resonance, evoking images of shrouded dead bodies laid out as they might be at the scene of a disaster. Although no bodies were recovered from the SIEV X, here was an enactment of how the scene might have looked had they been.

The images projected onto the human screen were portrait photographs of people who had died as a result of the SIEV X sinking (mostly children); text of their names and ages; and photographs of water (fig. 5.5). Adding to the ephemeral nature of the event itself, these images appear not just fleeting, but also barely tangible in their ghostly transparency. In addition to the projections onto the bodies, the names of the dead and a timeline of the events around the SIEV X disaster were projected onto a wall behind the organisers.\(^ {38}\) Boatpeople.org


\(^{35}\) Email correspondence, Pip Shea.

\(^{36}\) Interview, Deborah Kelly.

\(^{37}\) Interview, Katie Hepworth.

\(^{38}\) Interview, Katie Hepworth.
member Katie Hepworth recalled that during the event, a viewer spontaneously began to read out the names being projected, using one of the microphones intended for communicating with participants to organise them into suitable places. The power of this impromptu articulation of names in terms of embodied memory is further discussed below.

It is not clear how many people witnessed the projection, but the audience did include members of refugee communities (including Hassan, who had passed on the photographs of the drowned asylum seekers, and his friends), friends and associates of members of boatpeople.org, and presumably conference attendees and passers-by. Hepworth described the event as a ‘cross between a vigil and a memorial’ and noted the emotional impact on those who were watching, bringing some people to tears. She recalled Hassan saying, ‘that if he’d realised what it was going to be like he would have actually brought all the Iraqi community down, but he didn’t realise’. Embedded in this comment is perhaps a recognition of a lost opportunity for more people to share in mourning those who had been denied such remembrance, and also a lost moment of solidarity with strangers who wanted to resist hegemonic silence about these deaths.

**Tactical Intervention**

Many of those who witnessed the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* would have experienced the work as part of their everyday life as they walked through Melbourne city. Artists who are engaged in ‘art in the public interest’ are characterised as seeing their work not as a separate category of art, but rather as a merging of art and everyday life. This integration into everyday life brings us to Michel de Certeau’s notion of tactics. He differentiates tactics, ‘the art of the weak’, from strategies, ‘the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an

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39 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
40 Interviews, Deborah Kelly, Katie Hepworth, Enda Murray.
41 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
42 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
43 Kwon, 106.
44 de Certeau, 37.
army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated’. While de Certeau was analysing everyday practices, such as walking through a city on paths which subvert town planners’ intentions, his notion of ‘tactics’ is relevant in the analysis of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*. De Certeau explains that tactics ‘operate in isolated actions’ and ‘where it is least expected’. This is consistent with Hepworth’s characterisation of their work as ‘urban interventions’ – a ‘tactic’ used to intervene in the public debate on asylum seekers that was dominated and directed by the strategies of politicians and the mainstream media. As discussed in the previous chapter, this debate featured government voices attempting to keep the identity of asylum seekers hidden and seeking to ensure that asylum seekers were portrayed as the dangerous ‘other’ and therefore not to be accorded the same kind of mourning and commemorative rituals and objects reserved for those deemed socially worthy. The following comments from boatpeople.org member Enda Murray clearly situate the work of boatpeople.org in the realm of tactics against the strategies of keeping asylum seekers nameless and faceless:

I suppose our opinions on the treatment of asylum seekers were contrary to the general climate and it was a way to have some power in the debate by using our skills … it was really to have some agency in the debate.

He also likened the work of boatpeople.org to ‘taking the power of the adversary and turning it back onto itself’. This ‘power’ was to have a public event to create a cultural memory of asylum seekers in opposition to one in which they had no place.

As described above, the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* was installed in a site more usually used as a public thoroughfare than as the site of a memorial or artwork. This ‘least expected’ use of the zone for an ‘isolated action’ was not only a tactic to challenge the strategies of the powerful, but also would have functioned to heighten the interest of passers-by, thereby engaging an audience who might otherwise have remained oblivious to the SIEV X sinking. As de Certeau puts it:

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46 Other writers have also noted this – see Meikle, 13; Maravillas, 37.
47 de Certeau, 37.
48 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
49 Interview, Enda Murray.
50 Interview, Enda Murray.
[A] tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place to strike the hearer.\(^{51}\)

While obviously completely coincidental, this invocation of metaphorical ‘light’ and ‘hearers’ could not provide a more apposite commentary on both the figurative and literal nature of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*, combining as it did a slide projection with recitation of names.

### Embodied Memory

As noted in Chapter 3, a number of theorists have argued that corporeal action and sensual engagement are more likely to activate and perpetuate memory than simply being confronted with a physical monument.\(^{52}\) Indeed, monuments are often discussed in the terms of Robert Musil’s much-quoted (and now rather clichéd) observation: ‘The remarkable thing about monuments is that one does not notice them. There is nothing in the world so invisible as a monument.’\(^{53}\)

Ironically, one might argue that due to its ephemeral nature, the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* represents the necessary condition of an ‘invisible’ monument – it literally disappeared after the project work finished and the screen dissipated. As such, it was quite different from the type of memorial/monument on which Musil was commenting: it did not take a familiar monumental form; it was designed from the outset to be impermanent; and its subject matter was neither heroes on horses nor noble fallen soldiers. Such traditional monuments invite no explicit interaction from their audiences, nor does their semantic completion require it. Conversely, the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* relied for its existence on the bodily interaction of those who functioned as the screen.

As with the other memorials to the SIEV X considered in this thesis, the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* uses corporeal engagement in an effort to encourage participants and audiences to reflect on the deaths of those on the SIEV X, to

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\(^{51}\) de Certeau, 37-38.

\(^{52}\) See, for example, Connerton; Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*.

empathise with the asylum seeker experience, and to consider the policy context in which these occurred, thereby creating a new cultural memory. Cultural memory as defined by Maravillas not only requires shared memories, but also must be ‘negotiated and mediated through one’s own present corporeal encounter’.  

Perhaps more significantly, however, the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial (and other SIEV X memorials discussed in this thesis), was not attempting to foreground shared memories of an already commonly held experience for future reflection or to reinforce notions of national identity. Rather, it was seeking to create a new cultural memory of a previously obscure event in an effort to prompt political and social action – or at least questioning – from viewers and participants, relating to the nature of their national identity and their responses to asylum seekers. We see this demonstrated in Enda Murray’s expression of his motivations for creating the memorial:

I found to be really unjust and unfair, the conscious blackout on information, the conscious attempts by the government to make these people not human and to take away their agency. So, for me that was a part of it: reintroducing this incident into the public eye and giving a voice to people who had no voice and who were practically disappeared.

In this sense, as with the Canberra SIEV X Memorial discussed in the previous chapter, Landsberg’s notion of ‘prosthetic memory’ is relevant. As Landsberg argues:

Prosthetic memories circulate publicly, and although they are not organically based, they are nevertheless experienced with a person’s body as a result of an engagement with a wide range of cultural technologies. Prosthetic memories thus become part of one’s personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity as well as one’s relationship to the present and future tenses.

This idea of public circulation, and the possibility for multiple people to experience prosthetic memory (although the individual memories formed may be heterogeneous), is what links it to the creation of cultural memory. In discussing the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial, Deborah Kelly stresses that the memorial content of the work is strongly linked to individual action and agency:

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54 Maravillas, 39.
55 Interview, Enda Murray.
I’m interested in the performative aspect as a way to have a body memory, have a memory of something that you did, where you had agency and you exercised that agency.\footnote{Interview, Deborah Kelly.}

For Kelly’s collaborator, Katie Hepworth, the duration of time participants had to spend creating the memorial was important, as was the fact that their participation needed to be collective for the memorial to function:

> You would have to kind of embody it and stand there and be part of it, so there was something around the time that you would spend within it and taking on the names of people that had died. So it would only become visible if there was enough of a crowd for it to be projected on … You have to actively engage in the memorial to make it. … It is about saying ‘you’re not just a passive participant’; it disappears if you’re not there. The only way that this work gets remembered is through a collective.\footnote{Interview, Katie Hepworth.}

Landsberg stresses that attaining a prosthetic memory is ‘a sensuous phenomenon experienced by the body’ and, importantly, ‘derives[s] much of its power through affect’.\footnote{Landsberg, \textit{Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture}, 8.} In the Melbourne \textit{SIEV X Memorial} the prosthetic memory is generated in multiple ways: for the participants in the work through their transformation from volunteer to prone participant to human screen; for the unknown name reciter through the reading of names; and for viewers by witnessing these actions and whose affective response is discussed below.

Reading of names of the dead at memorial events to mass tragedies has become commonplace (the annual 9/11 memorials come to mind); they serve as acknowledgement of individuals who might otherwise be lost in a morass of statistics. Folklorist Jack Santino takes this further, and argues that such actions are ‘ritualesque’, by which he means they are ‘instrumental (rather than purely expressive) … done to make a difference, to cause a change in social attitudes and behaviours, to make something happen’.\footnote{Jack Santino, ‘Between Commemoration and Social Activism: Spontaneous Shrines, Grassroots Memorialization, and the Public Ritualesque in Derry,’ in \textit{Grassroots Memorials: The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death}, ed. Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sanchez-Carretero (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 103.} This desire for change is implicit in the Melbourne \textit{SIEV X Memorial}: it challenges the public to think differently about asylum seekers; it challenges dominant rhetoric that would render the victims of
the sinking faceless and nameless; and it challenges amnesia about the deaths of hundreds of people. All of this might have been achieved without the reading of names; however, this previously undocumented vocalisation serves to expand the work beyond the spectacle and into action (as does the involvement of participants in the screen). Jeff Weinstein describes a similar experience when viewing the American *AIDS Memorial Quilt*: ‘What the reading of names does for me is fill out the artwork into something temporal, multisensual, communicative: a ritual.’

One of the purposes of the ritual of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* was to be an act of grieving. Kelly describes how the work functioned at once as an activist statement and as the liberation of expressed grief:

> It was kind of a relief to be able to grieve in public with a kind of associated ritual … and collectively to be part of, I think, the zeitgeist in Australia, at that moment, against being made to collude with the forced amnesia of the Howard Government. So it was, even though a very quiet work, a way not to be silent and not to collude.  

It is noteworthy that there are elements of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* that are not captured in the public images which survive of the event – there is no visual record of the projections of names and timeline onto the wall; no images of the crowd who witnessed the event; and no visual or aural record of the reading of the names. Events such as these, by their nature, are to be experienced as they occur – the post-event viewer of the photographers and other documentation of the event can only hope for a glimpse of the event itself. SueAnne Ware (who designed the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*) describes such works as ‘anti memorials’, partly due to their transient status. She argues that this ephemerality embodies ‘the changing, fading nature of memory as opposed to a structure built to preserve memory and withstand time’. Others, such as historian David Lowenthal, have also mounted the argument that ‘forgetting is an essential part of the process of mourning, and therefore, of memorialization’. Certainly, the

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62 Interview, Deborah Kelly.  
63 Ware, ‘The Road-as-Shrine and Other Anti-Memorials in Australia,’ 80.  
Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* action was not intended to ‘withstand time’; however, while the projection itself may not preserve memory (as it is not preserved over time), the experience of it created prosthetic memories which may live on. As academic and architect Quentin Stevens points out:

> Old memorials might go unnoticed, but ephemeral memorials disappear, and only endure in memory. … What gives these ephemeral memorials great power is that they permeate the everyday public realm, taking advantage of its openness, and charging it temporarily with new meanings, potentially inspiring different thoughts and actions.\(^{66}\)

It is in such ‘thoughts and actions’ that the memory work is done and cultural memories are created.

**Community Participation**

In addition to being a tactical urban intervention involving embodied memory, the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* relied on community participation during its conceptualisation and realisation. Although the work was not conceived of by the members of boatpeople.org in terms of community collaborative practices, I suggest the work can still usefully be considered through the insights offered by ‘new genre public art’ theorist Suzanne Lacy. She links artists working in this genre to:

> … various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and media artists and other activists … who have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones), and collaborative methodology.\(^{67}\)

Social activism is clearly at the heart of the work of boatpeople.org, and this is particularly demonstrated in the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*. While boatpeople.org works collaboratively within its membership, in the case of the Melbourne memorial it did not set out to make a work in collaboration with community members; however, the eventual action would not have occurred without their participation. As discussed earlier in this chapter, work such as that undertaken by boatpeople.org takes its audience seriously. In her work analysing new genre public art, Lacy explains that such work communicates and interacts

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\(^{67}\) Lacy, ‘Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,’ 25.
based on engagement ‘with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives’.\textsuperscript{68} She presents a diagram of concentric circles (fig. 5.6, below) depicting the place of audience members in new genre public art, noting that the perimeters of each circle are permeable so individuals can move between each one. She uses this to analyse ‘to what degree audience participation forms and informs the work – how it functions as integral to the work’s structure’.\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{Figure 5.6: Suzanne Lacy: Audience Engagement}

![Diagram of concentric circles depicting audience engagement]

This diagram provides a useful framework for analysing the level and nature of community participation in the creation of the Melbourne \textit{SIEV X Memorial}. In the innermost circle of ‘origination and responsibility’ we can place the members of boatpeople.org (perhaps along with the conference organisers who commissioned the work) – the memorial would not have occurred without them. In the ‘collaboration and codevelopment’ circle we can identify boatpeople.org, Hassan and the people who provided photographs. As Hepworth describes, ‘for whatever reasons they gave us the photos of their children. It wasn’t something that we’d requested; that’s just what we happened to get.’\textsuperscript{70} While initially the group did not expect anyone but themselves to be located in this circle, in the event these people became, in the words of Lacy, ‘codevelopers, shareholders who have invested time, energy, and identity in the work and who partake deeply in its ownership’.\textsuperscript{71} Moving further out in the ripple of Lacy’s circles, the people who formed the human screen are ‘volunteers and performers’. The ‘immediate

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{69} Lacy, ‘Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art,’ 178.
\textsuperscript{70} Interview, Katie Hepworth.
\textsuperscript{71} Lacy, ‘Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art,’ 179.
audience’ are those who witnessed the work first hand (which also included those responsible for the origination and collaboration and codevelopment). As Lacy points out, this audience is ‘often more engaged than a standard museum-going audience’ and this is reflected in comments from boatpeople.org members who described audience reactions as emotionally intense and overwhelming, with audience members in tears. This affective response also feeds further into creating prosthetic memory, as discussed above. The ‘media memory’ of Lacy’s expanding circles diagram seems to be limited to the inclusion of selected images of the event on the boatpeople.org website (and perhaps, now, this thesis document); leaving the ‘audience of myth and memory’ circle to be filled by those who see the images, read this thesis or hear the story of the event from those who were there.

Clearly, the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial was an event that relied on community participation to come to fruition. More importantly, however, this participation (including witnessing and affective response) was at the heart of the ability of the work to create cultural memory and the means by which this was achieved. Boatpeople.org member Pip Shea describes that her hopes for the work were that:

… it would help people connect with the tragedy, and allow them to feel compassion and empathy towards those who died, their families, and towards asylum seekers in general. … This participatory happening – and fleshy screen – situated the work as one about human connection.

Shea’s words are reminiscent of Aleida Assmann’s description of the process that occurs when historical events become absorbed into active cultural memory and identity:

Abstract and generalized ‘history’ turns into re-embodied collective ‘memory’ when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective participation. In such cases, ‘history in general’ is reconfigured into a particular and emotionally charged version of ‘our history’ and absorbed as part of a collective identity.

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72 Ibid.
73 Interview, Enda Murray.
74 Interview, Katie Hepworth.
75 Interviews, Deborah Kelly, Katie Hepworth.
76 Email communication, Pip Shea.
77 Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory,’ 65.
In the case of the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*, organisers, participants and observers had the opportunity to create prosthetic memory through an affective experience, to potentially empathise with the asylum seekers depicted and, through their collective participation, to generate new cultural memory.

**Projecting Countermemories**

The Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* can be further understood by considering it within the context of countermemorial practices used by German artists in the late twentieth century. A number of such artists used ephemeral slide projections to intervene unexpectedly in everyday spaces and shock passers-by with remembrances of how those spaces had been once inhabited by now absent Jews.\(^{78}\) One example is Norbert Radermacher’s 1994 *Holocaust Memorial* in the Neukölln district of Berlin (fig. 5.7). This occurred on the former site of a forgotten forced labour camp. Radermacher used text projections, triggered as pedestrians passed by, to provide details of the site’s past.\(^{79}\) The text faded after a minute, reminding viewers that the past use of the site will also fade into oblivion if not actively remembered. Similarly, Shimon Attie’s work, *The Writing on the Wall*, 1991–1992 (fig. 5.8), involved slide projections. In this case, Attie used photographs taken of Jewish people in the 1920s and 1930s who had lived in the Scheunenviertel neighbourhood in Berlin, and projected them back onto the sites where the photographs had been taken, but from where Jews were now absent. Young describes the function of these photographs for Attie being to ‘reanimate these sites with his “memory” of what happened there. … he has literally projected the “after-images” in his mind back onto otherwise indifferent

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\(^{78}\) Forty notes that ephemeral monuments are a ‘feature of non-Western societies’. ‘[T]hese are artefacts with apparently memorial purposes, but which are made only to be abandoned immediately to decay – a practice that simply cannot be explained within the Western memorial tradition.’ Adrian Forty, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Art of Forgetting*, ed. Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), 4. James E. Young’s work has contributed extensively to ‘explaining’ such memorials as representing a new kind of European memorial practice.

landscapes’. Attie says of the work that ‘fragments of the past were thus introduced into the visual field of the present. Thus parts of long destroyed Jewish community life were visually simulated, momentarily recreated.’ Slightly differently, in the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial the projection of images of the dead onto the bodies of the living brought those perished asylum seekers into the memory of the participants and viewers. Unlike the works memorialising absent Jews in Germany, the Melbourne work projected the dead asylum seekers not into spaces they had once inhabited, but into a space they had hoped to inhabit.

Both of the German examples above have been analysed extensively by Young as examples of countermemorials, challenging as they do traditional memorial practices and placing responsibility for memory work onto those who activate the projections. The Melbourne SIEV X Memorial can be characterised in similar terms, and is clearly a practice of countermemory as defined by Demos:

Counter-memory designates a practice of memory formation that is social and political, one that runs counter to the official histories of governments, mainstream mass media, and the society of the spectacle. It involves the memorialisation – a collective practice of relearning – of forgotten, suppressed and excluded histories, which then becomes an act of political subjectification.

Until now in this chapter I have been discussing the function of the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial as a tactical action to create cultural memory using bodily memory and community participation. It is also, in the sense that it challenges mainstream debates which repress and exclude memorialisation of drowned asylum seekers, a countermemorial and an embodiment of countermemory.

As has been discussed, the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial relied on community participation as part of its creation. There are seminal cases where countermemorials also involved community members in their realisation; for example, Jochen Gerz’s 1990 Place of the Invisible Monument (fig. 5.9) in Saarbrucken, Germany where he and his students over three years inscribed the

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80 Young, At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture, 3.
82 Demos.
names of destroyed Jewish cemeteries on the underside of over 2000 cobblestones; Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s 1986 *Monument Against Fascism* (figs 2.2 to 2.4) in Harburg, Germany, which required visitors to write on a lead column before it was slowly lowered and eventually disappeared; or Horst Hoheisel’s 1991 *Denk-Stein Sammlung* (*Memorial Stone Archive*; fig. 5.10) in Kassel, Germany in which he asked students to research the lives of forgotten deported Jews, write a narrative about their lives and deaths, and wrap it around a stone to be placed in bins at Kassel’s railway station, from which Jews were deported during World War II. More commonly, the involvement of the community in German countermemorials is discussed in terms of the interactive potential of such works after they are installed; for example: ‘counter-monuments engage visitors in walking, touching, and other embodied experiences’.

Whether the participation occurs as part of the creation or through encounters with a finished object, countermemorials ‘become active producers of plural pasts and multiple memories’. In countermemorials, the memorial ‘work’ is not done by the physical memorial, but rather through the reception of the work and the debates and discussions this creates.

‘Not Just a Cultural Gesture’
As demonstrated in the discussion thus far, each of the boatpeople.org co-founders conceptualised the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* in different, albeit compatible, terms. Deborah Kelly understood it as being, for some participants and audience members, ‘an act of public grieving’ and therefore ‘not just a cultural gesture’. Assessed against this hope for the work, she rated it as disappointing since, due to the impact of the late cancellation and reprogramming of the event, she felt ‘the whole thing was such a painful and compromised event’. When I suggested that the images produced of the event portrayed a powerfully moving memorial, she grudgingly suggested it was ‘all right’ and that

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84 Mitchell, 448.
85 Interview, Deborah Kelly.
it was ‘good that it happened’. In Kelly’s terms, one of the measurements of the success of the work was the extent to which the participants and audience were respected, and she felt the cancellation, even though overturned, had fundamentally compromised the ability of the work to do justice to them.

Enda Murray saw the memorial as giving voice to the ‘disappeared’ and Katie Hepworth characterised it as an ‘urban intervention’ – both of these consistent with an understanding of the work as a contribution to public debates on asylum seeker policy. The extent to which the work might have achieved these aims is, of course, difficult to measure. As Meikle rightly argues, measures such as size of audience, number of participants and changes to government policy on asylum seekers would be ‘silly’ given the very limited resources of the group.\(^\text{86}\) As he also notes, boatpeople.org has focused on ‘creating images rather than gathering crowds’.\(^\text{87}\) In this sense, the photographs of the event (as seen in this thesis and on the boatpeople.org website) are as important as the action itself, and as much a part of the memorial.

Suzanne Lacy was one of the earliest theorists to raise the issue of how to critically analyse activist artworks that rely on community involvement. She suggests the following areas ‘as the beginning of a construct’ for analysis:

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\ldots \text{the quality of the imagery, including the question of beauty and the relevance of invention; the artist’s intention and the effects of the work, whether measurable or hypothesized; and the work’s method of conveying meaning.}\]

\(^\text{88}\)

Lacy is particularly concerned that assessment of collaborative work will focus too much on its social claims at the expense of ‘equal consideration to its aesthetic goals’.\(^\text{89}\) The aesthetics of the work was also of importance to the originators of the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial, as is evidenced from this quote from Murray:

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\text{I would see the photographs as being really important because the projections are like pavement art with light. So they’re not permanent and, you know, that’s part of their beauty; their beauty is that they are fleeting. And the photos, the image, of the work then is a way to preserve the}\]

\(^{86}\) Meikle, 14.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{88}\) Lacy, ‘Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,’ 41.
\(^{89}\) Ibid., 45.
memory, but not to take precedence in that. It’s not done just for the sake of having that image.  

Although he emphasises the event itself as the ‘happening’, in this he acknowledges that the visual documentation of the work also plays a pivotal role in the preservation of memory. While happy to acknowledge the beauty of the images used in, and produced of, the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial, Murray was not comfortable with describing the memorial as an ‘artwork’ (understanding this as a commodifiable product). Instead, he preferred to call it ‘a happening or an event’ because, he said, ‘I suppose it’s not the aim to … create something. I would say that it’s probably more to do with … messages’.  

He was also ‘uncomfortable [with] the idea of an “artwork” [as] there are just so many associations with a system that is totally foreign to the landscape of people who are on refugee boats’. This desire to resist commodification is also an element of the ‘disappearing’ German countermemorials discussed above.  

In terms of this preceding analysis, to paraphrase Meikle the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial is significant not for its capacity to influence government policy, but rather for the opportunities it offered to participants and viewers to create prosthetic memories, to actually see the asylum seekers’ faces and names that the government had tried to suppress, and for the imagery produced as a result of the event.  

Summary  
Throughout this chapter I have argued that, within its overall function of creating cultural memory, the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial functioned in various ways: it was a ritual, an opportunity for public grieving, a challenge to attempts to dehumanise asylum seekers by rendering them invisible and unknown, and a

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90 Interview, Enda Murray.  
91 Interview, Enda Murray.  
92 Interview, Enda Murray.  
93 Young notes this in relation to Radermacher’s memorial projections; Young, ‘The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,’ 68.  
94 Meikle writes: ‘In this analysis, the We Are All Boat People website is significant not for its capacity to influence policy, but rather for the resources it offers users to create their own media, to participate in the debates, and to act as citizens as well as audiences.’ Meikle, 16.
prompt for social action. It achieved these through tactically intervening in urban space using community participation for the creation of prosthetic memory and asserting countermemories.

While the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* work was created in response to a particular event – the sinking of the SIEV X, and the specific individuals whose lives were lost as a result – it speaks to a broader concern about asylum seeker policy in Australia. Bodies are at the centre of this work both literally and metaphorically – bodies of the dead asylum seekers, represented through their names, ages and faces being projected; bodies of the community members onto whose shrouded forms the text and images were projected; and, by extension, the body politic behind (either through active endorsement, tacit compliance or silent inaction) policies that some argued were a significant factor in the SIEV X disaster. The work itself both presents the ‘facts’ of the deaths – individuals with specific identities whose end was a watery grave (not the faceless, amorphous concept of ‘illegals’ used by government rhetoric to facilitate dehumanisation and seek to polarise community opinion) – and asks the viewer to question their own role in the ‘body politic’.

Landsberg tells us that the ‘practice of memory then, relies – metaphorically and metonymically – on the objects that remain’. This is one of the reasons that the memorials to the asylum seekers who died on the SIEV X take the symbolic forms they do – there are no remains of the bodies or their possessions. In the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*, photographs of the dead are used, not abstract representations like the poles in Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* or the stones in Christmas Island memorial (to be discussed in the next chapter).

This is a kind of reversal of the technique used in Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington DC, which partially relies for its affective result on the living seeing their reflection on the wall of the names of the dead. The

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96 Michael North suggests of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*: ‘the sculpture superimposes the living public on the dead, giving rise to a variety of emotions from shame to reconciliation to
Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* instead projects the faces and names of the dead onto the bodies of the living, because it is only they who can remember and put faces and names to those who were unable to realise their dreams of safe haven.

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Chapter 6: Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial

Introduction
The two SIEV X memorials explored in the preceding chapters are located in major cities on Australia’s east coast, thousands of kilometres from where the boat sank. This chapter focuses on a memorial on Christmas Island, the remote territory that the passengers on the SIEV X were trying to reach, and the closest Australian soil to where the disaster occurred. Although a territory of Australia, Christmas Island lies far closer to the asylum seekers’ departure point in Indonesia than to the Australian mainland. The Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial (fig. 6.1), made with Shire Council approval and funding, was initiated by community members who had a history of being advocates for refugees and asylum seekers. The design process of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial differs from its counterparts in Canberra and Melbourne – there was no artist or designer leading or directing an aesthetic vision for the memorial, although members of the group who created it certainly had artistic ability (one was a high school art teacher, another a practising artist). Also unlike the other two memorials, the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial had local government financial support and input into its creation. Its existence was the result of a grassroots, collaborative effort and, as shall be seen, elements of its design, content and construction were the result of a pragmatic acceptance of the limited resources available in a remote location.

The Canberra and Melbourne SIEV X memorials brought attention to issues that many visitors and participants would not have known about prior to their engagement with the memorial; as such they functioned to create cultural memory where none had existed previously. In contrast, interaction with asylum seekers and understanding of the perilous nature of their ocean journey is highly familiar to the residents of Christmas Island, who have long played host to unauthorised
boat arrivals.¹ Sinkings of asylum seeker vessels literally and figuratively hit ‘close to home’ for Christmas Islanders, so the resonance of these events within the community is perhaps more widespread and deeper than in distant metropolitan centres. That said, the specifics of the SIEV X sinking also received minimal attention on Christmas Island when it occurred. In this sense, the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial can be seen as both maintaining cultural memory (of asylum seekers and Christmas Islanders’ responses to them) and creating cultural memory (of the SIEV X disaster and those who perished in it).

In this chapter, I argue that the creation and maintenance of cultural memory is achieved through a number of factors. Firstly, the siting of the memorial is an important element in its function; I characterise it as an act of resistance designed to assert a particular local identity in comparison to national identity tropes as expressed in adjacent memorials. Secondly, the commemorative rituals, involving bodily interaction, that have occurred around the memorial, prompt visitor reflection on the asylum-seeking experience by invoking the bodies and identities of the dead (thus creating prosthetic memory, as do the previous two memorials discussed in this thesis). Finally, I suggest that, as part of achieving its function, the memorial combines conventional and countermemorial techniques, resulting in a commemorative object that can be classified as a ‘combimemorial’.²

The broader social and historical context on Christmas Island provides a particular local backdrop against which the functions of the SIEV X Memorial can be read. As Radstone demonstrates, there is a complex relationship between ‘texts [memorials] and their meanings’ and the social contexts in which these are created.³ Thus, to provide background and context for my arguments about how the Christmas Island memorial achieves its functions, this chapter begins with an

¹ The first asylum seekers are said to have arrived there in 1992; David Marr, ‘The Indian Ocean Solution: Christmas Island,’ The Monthly September (2009): 18-30.
² The term ‘combimemorial’ was coined by Bill Niven in Niven, ‘From Countermonument to Combimemorial: Developments in German Memorialization.’
overview of the island and its history before providing an analysis of the memorial itself.

**Background**

**Social and Historical Context**
Christmas Island is a tiny, remote tropical island located in the Indian Ocean about 500 kilometres south of Jakarta and 2600 kilometres northwest of Perth (the closest capital city on the Australian mainland)\(^4\) (fig. 6.2). Its isolation has been brought home to me each time I have taken the flight from Perth, which can be as short as four hours or as long as eight, depending on transit stops. Nearly the entirety of this journey is spent flying over the vast empty expanse of the Indian Ocean. Approaching Christmas Island, its 135 square kilometre area\(^5\) is first visible as a minute speck in the ocean, which slowly fills one’s field of vision. (fig. 6.3).

On landing at the single-runway airport and venturing across the tarmac (no aerobridges here) to a single-storey building to await baggage collection and customs clearance,\(^6\) the visitor is stifled by the constant oppressive humidity and tropical warmth of this rocky outcrop, the peak of an ancient submarine volcano. While awaiting clearance it is hard not to be struck by the significant proportion of government staff (Australian Federal Police, ASIO officers, Customs and Immigration officials, translators and detention centre guards) flying in, mostly to work at the island’s Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) or with other agencies in relation to asylum seeker matters. Leaving the airport and travelling the few kilometres to the island’s residential zones and tourist precinct, roadways are edged with lush green vegetation, cars slow for protected red crabs and robber

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\(^5\) As a point of comparison, the City of Melbourne LGA is 36 square kilometres.

\(^6\) Although part of Australia, flights to Christmas Island leave Australia from the international terminal in Perth and passengers, including Australian citizens, must clear customs at either end of the journey.
crabs the size of small dogs, feral chickens cluck over their chicks as they wander freely by the roadssides, and endemic bird species swoop across the ever-present, striking ocean vistas.

Discovered on Christmas Day 1643 (hence its name) by a passing English ship, the island was uninhabited and not settled until 1888 by Europeans seeking to stake a claim to the phosphate discovered there. The island was annexed by Great Britain that same year. It has been used as a phosphate mine since Britain granted a mining lease in 1891 to John Murray and George Clunies-Ross (then owner of the Cocos Keeling Islands 970 kilometres to the west, now also an Australian territory). A new mining lease was announced in 2013, extending the future of the Christmas Island mine to at least 2034. During the second half of the twentieth century, Chinese and Malay workers were brought to the island to work in the mine, and members of these ethnic communities continue to constitute the majority of the 2072 people who comprise Christmas Island’s permanent population (approximately 60 per cent Chinese, 25 per cent Malay and 15 per cent European).

During World War II, Christmas Island, still a British territory, was occupied by 900 Japanese troops who imprisoned residents. In 1946, it became a dependency of Singapore until sovereignty was handed to Australia on 1 October 1958 – a day that has come to be celebrated on the island as ‘Territory Day’. During the 1950s, the population expanded to service the phosphate mine, with labour

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10 Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development.
11 Department of the Environment, ‘Culture and History’. Relics of the Japanese occupation, such as bunkers, are still discoverable on the island and former Administrator Jon Stanhope has been vocal in advocating for Commonwealth funding for their conservation; however, he has so far been unsuccessful; Interview, Jon Stanhope.
12 Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development.
brought in from Singapore, Malaysia and Cocos Keeling Islands. In 1980 a national park was established, which has been extended to now cover nearly two thirds of the island.

Christmas Island has two main claims to international fame – the first is the annual migration of an estimated 100 million red crabs, notably captured by naturalist David Attenborough in his Trials of Life television series. During the migration, the island is covered in swarms of millions of the red crustaceans scuttling from their usual homes in the leaf litter on the interior of the island to the ocean to spawn, before returning to their inland homes. Even in non-migration times, the red crabs are prevalent on the roads and inland paths, and it would be impossible to visit the island without seeing at least a few. However, it is another kind of migration that has given Christmas Island its second claim to fame in the last 25 years – the arrival on the island of people from countries across the globe who come by boat to seek asylum in Australia.

Movement, then, is central to an understanding of Christmas Island and this is not lost on local inhabitants, as one of my research participants noted:

Look at this island. … Look at the symbolism of the red crabs moving across this island. I’ve lived here for seventeen or eighteen years, a lot of years, and this island does have a strong identity with migration. Whether it’s political, natural, whatever, it’s a big one.

This ‘migration’ (or, more properly, forced migration) aspect of Christmas Island’s character first came to national and international attention with the so-called ‘Tampa incident’ in August 2001 when a boat load of 432 asylum seekers attempting to come to Australia was rescued at sea by the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa. After unsuccessfully trying to take the asylum seekers back to Indonesia, Captain Arne Rinnan turned his vessel towards Australia. A delegation of asylum seekers had demanded to be taken to Christmas Island, but the vessel was denied landing access on Christmas Island. After a lengthy (two-week) and

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13 Department of the Environment, ‘Culture and History’.
14 Department of the Environment, ‘Christmas Island National Park’.
16 Interview, Robin Stevenson.
politically charged stand-off, the asylum seekers were eventually transferred to the Australian naval vessel HMAS *Manoora* and taken to the Pacific island Republic of Nauru for processing under the then Howard Government’s so-called ‘Pacific Solution’.

It was in the context of this event and the 2001 Federal election campaign that Prime Minister John Howard uttered the now much-repeated words, ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’. Significantly for the memorials considered in this thesis, Howard characterised asylum seekers as suspect and conniving. In cultural historian Kelly Butler’s analysis:

> Against criticism of their immigration policy, the government maintained that ignoring the claims of asylum seekers served to preserve the sovereignty and integrity of the settler nation. Through this discourse, Howard positioned asylum seekers as a nefarious group who tried to prey on the innate goodness of the Australian people: ‘We are a humane people,’ he argued, ‘and others know that and they sometimes … try to intimidate us with our own decency.’

As I discuss below, the *SIEV X Memorial* on Christmas Island challenges Howard’s characterisation by instead positioning asylum seekers as courageous travellers putting their lives at risk in an attempt to achieve the noble aspiration of a better life. It also suggests that Christmas Islanders are willing and empathetic hosts of such arrivals, rather than being manipulated by undeserving asylum seekers.

In addition to establishing offshore processing centres on the Pacific island of Nauru and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Solution included legally excising certain Australian territories from the Australian migration zone. This had the effect of removing the immediate legal right for asylum seekers reaching those territories to apply for refugee status in Australia and denying them judicial review of negative protection visa decisions. Christmas Island was one of

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17 Details of the Tampa incident are reported in numerous sources. For a detailed investigation of the affair, see Marr and Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*.


those excised territories. The decision by the local community to create a memorial to asylum seekers who had been trying to reach Australia is an assertion that, though legally severed, Christmas Island remains emblematic of the threshold to safe haven in Australia for refugees. As editorialised in the local newspaper:

The people on SIEV X, like many before and after them, were on their way to Christmas Island. Although we are now excluded from the migration zone, we are still a key focal point for government actions concerning refugees.

As noted above, Christmas Island has played host to asylum seekers arriving by boat for decades, with the first turning up in 1992 and more significant numbers of arrivals from 1999. This is not surprising, given its proximity to Indonesia, a common embarkation point for asylum seekers from a multitude of source countries seeking to access Australian protection. In 2002, the Australian Government, in response to an increase in numbers of asylum seeker arrivals and in an effort to deter boat arrivals, started construction of a high-security Immigration Detention Centre on Christmas Island to be used for the mandatory detention of such people. Boat arrivals then declined and this centre sat unused for years, until it was opened at the end of 2008 when asylum seeker boats again began to arrive. The detention centre is located on the western side of Christmas Island, 17 kilometres on a mostly dirt road from the main residential areas, and is surrounded by national park.

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20 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Global Population Movements: Sources and Destinations: Prepared for the Joint Select Committee on Australia’s Immigration Detention Network, 18.
22 Marr, ‘The Indian Ocean Solution: Christmas Island.’
23 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Global Population Movements: Sources and Destinations: Prepared for the Joint Select Committee on Australia’s Immigration Detention Network, 17.
25 There is another detention site on the island, adjacent to the island’s Recreation Centre and much closer to the residential areas, used by the Immigration Department to accommodate asylum seeker families and children. The Department classifies this site as an ‘Alternative Place of Detention (APOD)’ (to differentiate it from the more restrictive IDC environment), with the site known locally as ‘Construction Camp’ (a reference to the location’s former use as a residential site for construction workers).
As an outsider visiting Christmas Island it would be easy to remain unaware of the detention centre (assuming one had no interest in current affairs and failed to notice one’s fellow passengers at the airport) – there are no signposts to it on the main roads, and tourist activities are focused on the opposite eastern tip of the island, around Flying Fish Cove (fig. 6.4). This is the main port on Christmas Island; it functions as a shared commercial and tourist zone with a small jetty for the (now rare) reception of asylum seekers and use by diving daredevils and snorkellers exploring the plethora of tropical marine sights, and a loading site for phosphate ships. The cove sits in front of the Kampong, the main residential zone for the island’s Malay population and location of the island’s mosque – the call to prayer can be heard from the memorial discussed in this chapter, reminding visitors of the religious backgrounds of many of the dead asylum seekers.

The Memorial
The Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial comprises a roughly hewn local rock (about one metre high and wide) sitting on an almost square concrete base of approximately 1.75 metres each side; this lies almost flush with the surrounding lawn, but clearly demarcates the memorial from its surroundings. A rectangular bronze plaque (about 40 centimetres x 30 centimetres; fig. 6.5) inset on the northern side of the stone reads:

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SIEV X
19th OCTOBER, 2001

In memory of the 146 children,
142 women and 65 men who drowned on
their way to Christmas Island in search
of freedom and a better life.

AS YOU READ THIS PLEASE REMEMBER ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS
WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED THIS TREACHEROUS JOURNEY
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Around the base of the stone are piled ocean-smoothed rocks with hand-written names in black paint and marker pen (fig. 6.6).

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26 Actual measurements are 170 centimetres x 183 centimetres.
This memorial is a humble object, generally similar in design to other memorial markers on the island. One of its instigators fondly described it as ‘obviously a volunteer, amateur memorial’. Indeed other viewers have mistaken it for a ‘makeshift’ or ‘unofficial’ memorial, despite the fact it is neither. That it is read in this way is telling, however, and suggests that it has something of the aura of a ‘roadside’ or ‘spontaneous’ memorial shrine. Such memorials are not officially endorsed and are usually the result of family, friends or community members marking the site of unexpected and traumatic deaths (such as road accidents and murders) with flowers and other offerings, such as letters, photographs and memorabilia. Historian Paul Ashton and colleagues have analysed these sites as indicating ‘a more democratic approach to commemoration’, and more importantly they ‘reflect people’s determination to have some control over the rituals of mourning and to have some agency in the face of the chaos of death’. This emphasis on the agency of those doing the memorialising, rather than on the aesthetic outcome of the memorial, is succinctly captured in Christmas Island Shire President Gordon Thomson’s description of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial: 

It’s a very simple memorial – it’s just a bloody big rock – and I sometimes think, ‘Oh, it’s not adequate really’, but it is in a way. It doesn’t have to be a great work of art, which it is not. It’s very practical [laughs], a very practical renovation of our emotional house I suppose.

We see in this comment the function of the memorial being held in higher esteem than its physical characteristics. Thomson is referring here to the mere existence of the memorial having an affective result. While this may be an accurate assessment, later in this chapter I argue that the physical qualities of the memorial, specifically the hand-written stones around its base, facilitate commemorative rituals that allow participants and visitors to have a powerfully affective interactive experience.

29 Ashton, Hamilton and Searby, 7.
30 Interview, Gordon Thomson.
While no individual could recall the exact genesis of the wording on the memorial’s plaque, according to a Shire Council report it was endorsed by the Council ‘based on a suggestion from the Christmas Island branch of Rural Australians for Refugees’ (CIRAR). One participant commented that she was dissatisfied with the wording on the plaque as it seemed to reduce the dead asylum seekers to numbers; however, she acknowledged the limitations of what could fit on a plaque. The use of text on memorials as a substitute for the communicative power of their formal qualities has been critiqued by architectural historian Dell Upton when he suggests that:

[T]oday’s monuments are afflicted with logorrhea: they are covered with words by their builders, who seem to lack confidence in the ability of visual images to convey their messages.

However, as Stevens and Franck point out, such explanatory text has become both commonplace and necessary, given the increased production of memorials to diverse subjects that ‘may not be well known to the wider public’. This is precisely the case in the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial: some text is required to simply tell the story that would otherwise be unknown. The plaque provides sufficient narrative for the mound of rocks to make sense to the visitor – hence the creation of cultural memory. Gordon Thomson made a similar observation when he explained about the memorial:

It’s many things to many people, but it’s an essential memorial. People come at it from different angles, but I think people needed that sort of memorial so they’ve got a touchstone or some sort of physical manifestation of memory. That’s what memorials are about aren’t they? But it’s a reminder of something that happened that shouldn’t have happened. And it’s to say sorry about this to those people who were lost.

While Thomson used the term metaphorically, this idea of the ‘touchstone’ is central to interactive experience of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

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31 ‘Shire News in Brief: Memorial for SIEV X,’ The Islander, 19 November 2004, 3. Interestingly, none of my participants could remember who came up with the wording or the process for approval, but all agreed it was a collaborative decision between CIRAR and the Shire.
32 Interview, Lin Gaff.
34 Stevens and Franck, Memorials as Spaces of Engagement: Design, Use and Meaning, 84-85.
35 Interview, Gordon Thomson.
Although the *SIEV X Memorial* is sited in a grassed area that overlooks the ocean and Flying Fish Cove – the site where, had they been successful in their journey, the asylum seekers would have landed – reading the plaque requires the viewer to face inland. Looking up from the plaque, we see the land itself that was their goal. As it happens, this association is purely accidental as the original intent of the memorial organisers was for the plaque to be placed on the southern side of the memorial, which would have had the reader facing the ocean – the site of the disaster commemorated. The incorrect placement was only discovered after the memorial had been concreted in and it was deemed too late to change it. As CIRAR member Lin Gaff observed:

> I wanted it to be up there so that you could see the sea and I think perhaps the placement of the stone with the plaque facing the other way was just kind of a construction mistake. … We were all a little bit like, ‘Oh [sighs]’. But there was nothing we could really do. I think the work was donated, so we tried not to be too critical of it.

Similarly, CIRAR member Robin Stevenson noted:

> I was there at the unveiling, and one of the things that really struck me at the time, first of all, is that it’s facing the wrong direction … it was an error, a complete error … We were a bit upset, but we didn’t jump up and down about it.

This pragmatism and acceptance of ‘you get what you’re given’ suggests that for the Christmas Islanders involved in creating the memorial, its existence at all was ultimately more important than its design content or form.

Around the base of the plaque-embedded rock are scattered hand-sized white and grey stones (actually coral) that have clearly been smoothed by the action of the ocean. Each has a name and age of one of the victims of the boat sinking written in paint or marker pen (evidently by multiple hands). As with the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*, some rocks record ‘unknown’ or simply the gender of the deceased, while others explicitly name the dead. It is unclear at what point these stones were included in the memorial. Local media reports suggest the pile of rocks was used as part of the opening of an exhibition of designs submitted by school children for the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* which was touring Australia (see discussion in Chapter 4 above). This exhibition came to Christmas Island in 2004 and one of
the exhibition organisers commented that during the opening, ‘[d]rawing the names of the dead on the rocks was the most poignant moment for me’. 36

All of my research participants commented on the significance (in terms of both symbolism and affect) of the rocks – their collection from Flying Fish Cove, their volume, and the inscription of names. For some, the rocks denote Australian soil; one temporary resident (who participated in the rewriting of names on the rocks; discussed below) interpreted the stones this way:

[C]ollecting the rocks from Flying Fish Cove, which is a place where many boats have come and where people first step onto Australian soil, it was this marker of ‘this is where these poor people were trying to get to but actually did not make it here’. 37

For others, the stones symbolise both the individuals and the large number of people who died:

For me, like I said, the number [on the plaque] doesn’t work … when you start to see that pile … it gives you that real sense of what has been lost. I know a rock is not a person, but just the volume, when you actually start to collect, and I think actually for me being involved in the process of collecting and writing, it was like you were processing and going, ‘Okay, this is a person’ and each rock is special. It wasn’t like you just throw the rocks in a box. We were selecting a nice shape and placing it in. When we were inviting people to rewrite them, one thing I really remember is my daughter – she was only tiny at the time, I think she was only two or so – she said to me, ‘This is a lot, mummy’, and I said yes, and I explained to her that people had been lost at sea and we were putting the rocks there to help remember each person. And she said, ‘I feel very sad’, and I said, ‘Yes, we all feel sad, but it’s good for us to remember’ and she said, ‘I’ll put this one here for this [person]’, and we were talking about the names and I said, ‘Some of the people that died were little children like you’. And she put one there, and she put a flower there with it. 38

Another CIRAR member and memorial organiser expressed a similar interpretation: ‘Each rock represents a person to me. When I look at them I don’t see a pile of rocks.’ 39 This anthropomorphisation of the stones is reminiscent of similar responses to the Canberra SIEV X Memorial poles. In both cases the abstract representations, read as individual people, alongside naming, evoke an affective response that becomes central to the mnemonic effect of the object.

36 ‘Betty Cuthbert Inspires Remembrance,’ The Islander, 3 December 2004, 1.
37 Interview, Michele Dimasi.
38 Interview, Lin Gaff.
39 Interview, Robin Stephenson.
As mentioned above, the idea for a memorial on Christmas Island to the 353 people who died in the SIEV X disaster was initiated by the Christmas Island Shire Council and the community volunteer advocacy group CIRAR. Similar to World War I memorials that appeared in regional Australian towns, this was a case of, to paraphrase historian Jay Winter, a small group of men and women doing the work of remembrance, rather than a ‘grandiose national monument’.  

As literary theorist Anne Whitehead points out, and as can be seen in the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial, Winter ‘emphasizes the agency and activism involved in memory work, which is initiated by a defined group of people in a specific place and for a particular reason’. While its genesis may be unclear, CIRAR and the Council worked together to agree on the wording on the memorial’s plaque. As for the design and construction of the memorial, unlike those created by named artists or designers, in my research no individual (or even group of individuals) claimed creative responsibility for the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial. No one was able to clearly recollect who came up with the design of the memorial, the idea to include hand-written stones around the base of a cairn-shaped rock (did the idea come from, or before, the opening of the SIEV X design exhibition referred to above?), or the wording of the plaque to be placed on the rock. As one CIRAR member said of the design, ‘There wasn’t a lot of choice or leeway – “If you want a memorial, this is what we’ll give you”, I think. And the [hand-written] rocks obviously was us saying, this is what we can contribute.’

When asked why they thought they should have a memorial, in common with the organisers of the Canberra SIEV X Memorial, the Christmas Island memorial organisers’ replies related to a need to acknowledge and mourn lives lost, to claim the event as part of Australia’s and Christmas Island’s history, and to protest against what they perceived to be inhumane government asylum seeker policies. As one CIRAR member said:

41 Anne Whitehead, Memory (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 148.
42 Interview, Robin Stevenson.
The SIEV X [memorial] is so important because otherwise people may not even know that those lives were lost. And there are countless other lives lost that we don’t know about, so it’s like SIEV X represents all of those people … I feel like, at that time especially, I was in despair about the politics and I felt ashamed as an Australian really. And I just wanted the people on Christmas Island at least to connect that this was something that has happened right here. … It just wasn’t right for such a significant thing to have happened, so close to us, and for it not to be acknowledged and for people not to have a way to connect to that, because I feel like knowing that story was a way to understand what was going on for all of the people that were trying to come.43

Another CIRAR member commented:

A lot of history in Australia seems to be whitewashed … and I think it’s just – it’s part of our history, it’s part of Australia’s history, and it’s something that we need to remember and we need to remember that people died.44

This desire to assert a memory of unacknowledged deaths in order to speak to a broader national history and sense of both local and national identity is even more explicitly brought out in the following comments from Christmas Island Shire President Gordon Thomson:

We were shocked at the way things unfolded in 2001. Firstly the invasion by the SAS and their hijacking of the Tampa to turn the boat around and send the people on another Navy ship to Nauru. We had demonstrations, ‘Let them land’ type demonstrations at the cove. … A lot of people in this community were very disturbed at what had happened [when the SIEV X sank] and I think people need to be able to express their sense of loss, and it was a multifaceted thing, this sense of loss. It wasn’t just the politics, it wasn’t just concern for loss of those people, you know. It was also about a loss of a sense of what we are – a loss of what we, perhaps, might have thought was decent human practices or whatever. But it was essential for many of us to do something, to remember. … We have to have this memorial so that whoever comes to Christmas Island, we should be taking people and saying, ‘This is part of our history, this is part of what happened, it shouldn’t happen.’ … You have a memorial … and then you’re talking about it [and] that can start discussion about we should be doing, and that’s a very good reason to have a memorial.45

Thomson’s remarks reveal that the memorial is not simply an inert object; rather, it facilitates remembering and creates memories and history – he calls for it to be put to use, to act as a catalyst for consideration and social action.

43 Interview, Lin Gaff.
44 Interview, Robin Stephenson.
45 Interview, Gordon Thomson.
The Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial* was unveiled on Sunday 21 November 2004 at a public ceremony to which everyone on the island was invited – the invitation was published in *The Islander*, the widely distributed free fortnightly newsletter of the Christmas Island Shire Council. The SIEV X Memorial was unveiled on Sunday 21 November 2004 at a public ceremony to which everyone on the island was invited – the invitation was published in *The Islander*, the widely distributed free fortnightly newsletter of the Christmas Island Shire Council. More than 60 people were reported as attending the ceremony (a considerable turnout given the total population at the time of approximately 1500). Despite this significant number of people, a number of participants involved in the memorial’s creation made the point that attendees, clearly sympathetic to the plight of asylum seekers, were not necessarily representative of views across the island regarding boat arrivals. This is no surprise if we assume that the population of Christmas Island, like any other part of Australia, is likely to have diverse views on any particular issue, and on the asylum seeker issue in the early 2000s, views of groups like CIRAR were, nationally, in the minority. According to Butler:

> [P]olling undertaken shortly after the Tampa crisis indicated that 77 percent of Australians ‘agreed or strongly agreed with the government’s policy of preventing asylum seeker boats from entering Australian waters’. This could be compared with 18 percent who ‘disagreed or strongly disagreed’.

If the statistics on Christmas Island were similar to the national ones, there may have been a significant proportion of islanders who did not share the views of those involved in the first memorial ceremony. However, none of my participants could remember any objection or controversy in relation to the memorial being created or the site of its installation (unlike the clearly dissenting views publicly expressed about the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*, as discussed in Chapter 4). Nor has there been any vandalism or negative disturbance of the memorial site in the 12 years it has been there.

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46 ‘SIEV X Memorial Service (Advertisement),’ *The Islander*, 5 November 2004, 4. The planned service was also reported on in a story on the involvement of Christmas Island High School students in designs for the Canberra national memorial; ‘Remembering the SIEV X,’ *The Islander*, 5 November 2004, 12.
47 ‘Betty Cuthbert Inspires Remembrance,’ 1.
48 Richard Green, ed. *The Commonwealth Yearbook 2006* (Cambridge: Nexus Strategic Partnerships for the Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006), 113. As a point of comparison, a similar proportion in Melbourne would have 160,000 people attending an event.
49 Interviews, Lin Gaff Robin Stephenson, Gordon Thomson.
50 Butler, 157.
51 This point was made by Lin Gaff, Robin Stevenson and Gordon Thomson.
The unveiling of the memorial happened as part of a visit by former Australian Olympian and disability activist Betty Cuthbert. She was on Christmas Island to open the exhibition of the designs submitted from schools around the nation (including the Christmas Island High School) for the national Canberra SIEV X Memorial, discussed above. This served to bring greater local attention to the local memorial, which was reported multiple times in the local press, along with details of the story of the SIEV X sinking and testimony from survivors. Notably, the local newsletter reported that the events surround the unveiling ‘highlighted the caring and compassionate nature of CI residents’. We see here again a representation of the Christmas Island community as one that was at least sympathetic, and possibly empathetic, to the plight of asylum seekers, and one that resisted the characterisation of asylum seekers conveyed by national leaders.

A Site of Resistance

The Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial can be read as ‘rhetorical topoi’, a term coined by urban historian Christine Boyer, to indicate that they are ‘civic compositions that teach us about our national heritage and our public responsibilities and assume that the urban landscape itself is the embodiment of power and responsibility’. The invocation of power and the role of the memorial as an act of resistance are particularly relevant in the case of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial, given its siting within the island’s zone of civic authority.

The Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial is located on Smith Point, a cliff top overlooking Flying Fish Cove (fig. 6.7). It is accessed by road from the cove via a short, steep, single-lane road managed by a set of traffic lights (the only one on Christmas Island) at top and bottom of the hill. Two memorials to asylum seekers are located immediately to the right of the road once the cliff top is reached, with

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52 ‘Betty Cuthbert Inspires Remembrance,’ 1; ‘Betty Cuthbert to Visit Christmas Island,’ The Islander, 5 November 2004, 1; Interview, Robin Stephenson.
54 ‘Betty Cuthbert Inspires Remembrance,’ 1.
the SIEV X the first encountered (the second, to the SIEV 221, is discussed in Chapter 7). About a hundred metres further along the road on the left is Tai Jin House (figs. 6.8 and 6.9), an imposing two-storey colonial building constructed circa 1936–38.\(^56\) Now functioning as a museum, it was built to house the island’s Administrator, a statutory position similar to a state governor. Smith Point symbolises the seat of civil administration on Christmas Island, akin to Canberra’s Parliamentary Triangle. It acts as a ‘memorial zone’ and is the site of annual war memorial services. Former Christmas Island Administrator Jon Stanhope (who, as discussed in Chapter 4, was also the ACT Chief Minister when the Canberra SIEV X Memorial was being planned) describes it as follows:

Smith Point was, in an administrative and in a civic sense, perhaps the most significant site on Christmas Island. It was the Administrator’s residence for almost 80 years, or more. … It’s actually the place in which important ceremonies such as ANZAC day and Remembrance Day are conducted.\(^57\)

Similar sentiments were echoed in the words of a CIRAR member when describing the importance of the siting of the SIEV X Memorial:

Well, [Tai Jin House is] our Parliament House really … it is an official place, and it’s almost like lending some validity or authority or status or something by putting it there. It’s like when people see it, they’ll think, ‘There’s a really fancy building and there’s all these other memorials, so this is something this island is serious about’.\(^58\)

Those ‘other memorials’ in close proximity to Tai Jin House include: the SIEV 221 Memorial (discussed in the next chapter); a naval gun installed by the British forces in 1941 which now serves as a World War II memorial (it is specifically dedicated to members of the Royal Artillery who died defending Christmas Island against the Japanese in 1942; fig. 6.10);\(^59\) an individual stone memorial to

\(^56\) Department of Environment, ‘Australian Heritage Database: Administrators House Precinct, Settlement, Ext, Australia’, Commonwealth of Australia, http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?node=place_detail;search=state%3DEXT%3Blist_code%3DCHL%3Blegal_status%3D35%3Bkeyword_PD%3D0%3Bkeyword_SS%3D0%3Bkeyword_PH%3D0;place_id=105337 (accessed 2 February 2016).

\(^57\) Interview, Jon Stanhope.

\(^58\) Interview, Lin Gaff.

\(^59\) A plaque on the wall surrounding the gun reads: Lest We Forget / Capt. L. W. T. Williams R. A. / Sgt. W. Giles R. A; L/Sgt. G. H. Cross R. A. / Gnr. J. Tate R. A. / The above members of the Royal Artillery refused to surrender in the face of overwhelming force and were killed near this place on active service in the defence of Christmas Island in March 1942. / This plaque of remembrance, the gift of ex-servicemen of Christmas Island was unveiled by Major General M. E. Carleton Smith, CBE, during the 25th anniversary year of Australian Sovereignty of Christmas Island. / 4th June 1983.
Australian Navy Leading Seaman Cameron Gurr, who was lost off the coast of Christmas Island in 2002 while on operations on HMAS Darwin (fig. 6.11); and a memorial wall. A brass plaque on this wall (fig. 6.12) advises visitors:

| This Memorial wall was constructed by soldiers from the |
| 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment and the 9th Battalion Royal Queensland Regiment |
| whilst deployed to Christmas Island as part of OPERATION RELEX II |
| February to May 2006 |

Operation Relex II had been launched by the Department of Defence ‘to detect, intercept and deter vessels transporting unauthorised arrivals from entering Australia’. The visitor may be left wondering what, in particular, is being memorialised by this wall. The service of Australian soldiers involved in the operation? Particular events that occurred during the Operation, including the death of Seaman Gurr? Regardless of this semiotic indeterminacy, what is clear is that this memorial wall, in combination with the naval gun and the Gurr Memorial, seeks to celebrate a national identity built on ideals of military service and sacrifice, and defence of sovereignty in the face of threatening outside forces.

The placement of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial in this zone of civic and memorial authority can be read not only as a co-option of the power represented by the armed forces memorials, but also as an act of resistance and assertion of a specific local identity in contrast to that of the national identity emphasised by the military monuments. Where struggles exist over identity claims, memory sites  

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60 This memorial was instigated by the Royal Australian Navy and unveiled on 9 September 2003. The Darwin had been patrolling the waters around Christmas Island as part of Operation Relex II. Seaman Gurr died after falling overboard during an unofficial party to celebrate his promotion. He was not noticed as missing until the following day and his body was never found. A Senate Inquiry was held into the circumstances surrounding his death. See Parliament of Australia Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Reference Committee, The Effectiveness of Australia’s Military Justice System (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).
62 According to the Monument Australia website, this ‘wall commemorates those who have served in the various conflicts in which Australia has been involved’, Monument Australia, ‘Memorial Wall,’ http://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/103938-memorial-wall (accessed 24 September 2015); however, there is no indication of this general intent at the site.
will inevitably become sites of contestation and resistance.\textsuperscript{63} One research participant interpreted the siting of the memorial as epitomising this struggle:

I think a number of Christmas Islanders were very angry at government policy at that time. So this … in some ways would have been a bit of an act of resistance.\textsuperscript{64}

As such, the memorial’s presence asserts that the dead asylum seekers (and others who seek refuge here) should have been welcomed in to Australia, not kept out – as Operation Relex II was intended to do – and that their deaths represent a loss worthy of public commemoration, just as the death of Seaman Gurr did. It also functions to present Christmas Islanders as empathetic regarding the plight of asylum seekers, with whom they have first-hand experience.

**Embodied Ritualisation**

Since its installation in 2004, there have been repeated memorial services held at the Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial* site, demonstrating that it entered Winter’s ‘routinised’ phase in which the memorial becomes activated through ritual use.\textsuperscript{65} One participant recalled annual services being held around the anniversary of the sinking up until about 2010\textsuperscript{66} and another reported that a service had been held in 2007.\textsuperscript{67} The latter participant also gave details of her first-hand involvement in an anniversary memorial service in 2008. In preparation for this ceremony, she and others gathered new stones from Flying Fish Cove to replace the faded and, by then mouldy, original rocks. They spent a day rewriting the names\textsuperscript{68} in what they thought would be permanent paint (due to the ravages of the tropics these, too, have faded over time). At the service at the site the following day, in front of about 30 attendees, the names of the dead were read aloud (including ‘unknowns’), songs sung and fresh flowers placed on the memorial.\textsuperscript{69} As discussed in relation to the memorials discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the

\textsuperscript{63} Olick and Robbins, 126.

\textsuperscript{64} Interview, Michelle Dimasi.


\textsuperscript{66} Interview, Gordon Thomson.

\textsuperscript{67} Interview, Michelle Dimasi.

\textsuperscript{68} Without being certain, it seems that the same list of names was used as for the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* – those from the website http://www.sievx.com.

\textsuperscript{69} Interview, Michelle Dimasi.
importance of speaking the names was identified as an act of resistance against government attempts to repress them:

[We] read out every single person’s name. And ‘unknown’, which I think was really important, being able to give voice to these people …, given that the Australian Government had withheld all the names.70

As in most memorials, the practice of naming the dead is potent in this work, not only for the purposes of mourning individuals whose lives were lost, but also as a reminder to visitors that many of the dead remain anonymous, and therefore this memorial evokes memory of other asylum seekers who died in other journeys. As one visitor described her experience of the stones marked ‘unknown’: ‘It seems that they’re the people that we couldn’t see. The sea is full of stones … – it just seems the anonymity of it [is the message].’71 By at least acknowledging the fugitive state of the identities of many on the SIEV X, and of other asylum seekers, the memorial highlights that named or unnamed, known or unknown, this object is a reminder of specific human lives and the manner of their deaths.

Another memorial service for those that drowned occurred on 21 September 2009.72 On this occasion, CIRAR member Lin Gaff had been invited to participate in the Tibetan Buddhist Peace Vase Project. This project involves the distribution of over 6000 consecrated ‘peace vases’, small sealed yellow pots, to be buried across the globe. The vases are filled with ‘sacred substances and appropriate prayers and mantras’ and ‘are intended to assist in creating world peace and harmony’.73 It was decided that the pot ‘should be planted next to the SIEV X Memorial as kind of a balancing energy for that tragedy’.74 A memorial service was held as part of the peace ceremony to bury the pot, including speeches about commemoration of those who died on the SIEV X, the recitation of a poem about the disaster written by a local resident, and the reading of the global peace prayer.

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70 Interview, Michelle Dimasi.
71 Interview, site visitor.
72 Sharon Brockway, ‘SIEV X Remembered,’ The Islander, 2 October 2009, 1.
73 Siddhartha’s Intent Southern Door, ‘Tibetan Buddhist Peace Vases’ (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Siddhartha’s Intent, c.2009).
74 Interview, Lin Gaff.
Attendees were invited to write their own messages of peace or remembrance and these were buried alongside the peace vase.75

Such rituals of commemoration are part of cultural memory and, as discussed earlier, their “cultivation” serves to stabilize and convey a society’s self-image.76 In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton argues that social memory (akin to cultural memory) is perpetuated more by embodied acts and rituals than by material objects.77 In the case of the Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial*, while the rituals are an essential element in establishing a new cultural memory, the material nature of the memorial facilitates the embodied acts that become part of those rituals; most importantly, the name stones, which invite interaction, as discussed in more detail below.

In their book *Memorials as Spaces of Engagement*, Stevens and Franck write about people visiting the memorials of lost loved ones in lieu of visiting their graves when the sites of such resting places are far away or unknown (as is often the case for war memorials).78 The Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial* stands out as very different in this respect. As with the two other *SIEV X Memorials*, it was not built at the instigation of people related to those whose lives were lost, nor was the intent of its creation that it be visited by such people (although such a possibility was not precluded). The location of the memorial on the remote Christmas Island, and the fact that so few of those actually related to those who were lost are settled in Australia, means that the site is unlikely to be visited by family members. Unlike the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington DC, the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* or the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York, where many visitors seek out the name of a loved one, the names on the rocks at the *SIEV X Memorial* on Christmas Island are strangers to the vast majority of visitors. This is not to suggest they are not respected and cherished – one of the organisers of the memorial related that she ‘would sit with a stone if I was sitting

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75 Interview, Lin Gaff.
76 Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,’ 132.
77 Connerton. For further discussion of Connerton’s argument, see Forty, 2.
up there [at Smith Point], and then put it somewhere where that stone would stand out'. Another visitor reported:

Each day throughout the time I was there, I would pass the simple memorial to SIEV X on my early morning walk. Almost always, I stopped to offer a silent prayer, as I picked up the stones around the base and read aloud the names and ages written there.

This memorialisation of individuals personally unknown to those doing the remembering was particularly poignant for one of my research participants:

I was very moved when I went to Christmas Island several years ago and saw that there was a memorial to the SIEV X there. I knew it was there and I made a special point in going up to find it. I was quite touched that … there were so many people involved … who did not know any of those who drowned or any of their family members … I think it’s really quite amazing for people to be involved who’ve not known anyone really.

As originally placed, the name stones were piled around the base of the monument, akin to a makeshift grave marker (see fig. 6.13). However, over time the appearance and location of the rocks has undergone regular change. As can be seen in fig. 6.14, in 2014 the rocks were placed in a very different arrangement from their original one. I discovered that this was due to the rocks being moved to be cleaned, with some replaced, as part of the Chinese Festival of Qingming (in which the graves of ancestors are tended). Members of the Christmas Island Chinese community spontaneously decided to include the asylum seeker memorials in their traditions in 2014.

As current Christmas Island Shire Policy Officer and former Community Liaison Officer for the Immigration Department, Chris Su, explained:

[It] occurred to me that no one is looking after [the people who died on the SIEV X], it’s not their grave, it’s not their resting place either, but it’s the place where they are remembered.

This meant clearing out dirt and mould that had accumulated between the stones and a decision was made to place them in a more linear arrangement around the edges of the memorial rock and its concrete base to minimise the build-up of

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79 Interview, Lin Gaff.  
80 Carty.  
81 Interview, anonymous visitor.  
82 Interview, Chris Su.  
83 Interview, Chris Su.
grime and facilitate future cleaning.\textsuperscript{84} At the same time, the names on faded stones were rewritten.

The fading and rewriting of the names of the dead on the stones has been the most evident change to the memorial over time. The names have been rewritten a number of times and fresh stones have been used on each occasion.\textsuperscript{85} One organiser suggested this was an appropriate metaphor for an island that has ‘new arrivals all the time’.\textsuperscript{86} The replaced stones have been distributed around the cliff site or discarded over the edge of the cliff.\textsuperscript{87} A number of the memorial organisers commented that, on the one hand, they felt the stones were not suitable for an ongoing memorial, but on the other, the need to continue to rejuvenate them was the means of keeping the memorial ‘alive’:

So they’re not the perfect thing to continue on in that memorial – they go mouldy and they start to look awful in the end. However, the fact that they’re in some ways ephemeral kind of adds to it. Because I do like the idea of people, new people, new groups of people, coming and having that process of going through and remembering and having those realisations for themselves, rather than just being told that … as somebody else’s experience, and it enables them to connect to that story in a very tactile way.\textsuperscript{88}

The only thing is that each year we used to have to rewrite the names on those smoothed coral stones. And that was an observation of note, because you’re doing something practical, and remembering this person by writing their name, so that had a pretty significant ceremonial purpose and effect.\textsuperscript{89}

By regularly reinscribing the details of the identities of the lost, as far as they are known – their names, their gender and their age (even their anonymity becomes a salient identifier) – those who participate in writing the names and placing the stones enact and re-enact ritual mourning practices bodily, thus creating prosthetic

\textsuperscript{84} Interview, Chris Su. This spontaneous community caring for the memorial is reminiscent of the residents of Berlin polishing the brass plaques that mark former residences of Holocaust victims to mark the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht in 2013. Stevens and Franck, Memorials as Spaces of Engagement: Design, Use and Meaning, 109.

\textsuperscript{85} The most recent rewriting occurred in February 2014 when some stones were rewritten as part of the Qingming cleaning. Robin Stevenson commented that she has plans to rewrite all of the stones and has bought the paint for the task.

\textsuperscript{86} Interview, Robin Stevenson.

\textsuperscript{87} Interviews, Michelle Dimasi, Lin Gaff, Robin Stevenson.

\textsuperscript{88} Interview, Lin Gaff.

\textsuperscript{89} Interview, Gordon Thomson.
memory and embedding cultural memory. As cultural anthropologist Edward Schieffelin argues:

> Symbols are effective less because they communicate meaning (though this is also important) than because, through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than cognitive space, and the participants are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than merely being informed by them as knowers.  

Reading the stones as symbols of individuals, their absorption into the landscape once their work as identifiers is exhausted can be interpreted not only as returning the dead to the earth (‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’), but also as a physical integration of the drowned into the landscape of Australia – realising their unmet hopes as asylum seekers to become part of a new land.

Pierre Nora posited that ‘modern memory is, above all, archival’, and the writing and rewriting of the stones can also be seen as a means of maintaining the archive of names. However, in the case of the SIEV X Memorial this desire to archive may be less about preservation than it is ‘a manifestation of dissatisfaction with what is already mapped, or more precisely unmapped, on the terrain of cultural memory and public discourse’. As noted earlier, by writing ‘unnamed’ on the rocks, rememberers are not simply acknowledging dead individuals, but also the fact that the Australian government suppresses their names from public knowledge, thus creating a cultural memory in an effort to effect future change.

It is worth considering that the interactive nature of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial – the rewriting of the names, the picking up and moving of the stones – is perhaps as likely due to the nature of the location itself as it is to the nature of the memorial. As a tiny island, with a correspondingly small permanent population, individual people have a sense of ownership of their memorials to a much greater degree than in metropolitan centres. There is also a ‘casualness’ about this tropical location. As a result, islanders who have changed the memorial express no sense of needing to consult with anyone before they interact with the

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91 Nora, 13.
memorial – if the sites need tidying or the stones need rewriting, concerned islanders and visitors will simply undertake the work themselves, without deferring to any authority, enlisting the aid of other interested parties. Just as the memory (of dead asylum seekers) challenges dominant rhetoric (that posits they are not worthy of remembrance), this practice of interaction refuses to accept ‘rules’ about how memorials should be treated, including expectations that ‘the authorities’ will be responsible for their maintenance.

In recent years, major public memorials and monuments have changed to invite, or at least facilitate, visitor participation and interaction. Internationally recognised examples include the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain in London and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. Visitors also seem to have had no problem with physically interacting with the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial, particularly by picking up the stones. One of the memorial organisers reported that, from the outset, she ‘noticed that people had actually felt comfortable to handle the stones’. As discussed above, interaction is itself an act of memorialisation. The converse of this is that the mnemonic muscle embodied by a memorial will wither if it is not exercised through visitor engagement. Memory must be continuously performed to be preserved. As memory theorist Ann Rigney argues, memorials:

… need to be maintained, both physically and through new acts of remembrance, if they are to survive as mnemonic media … if you remove the attention, the monument ceases to function as a mnemonic medium and becomes ‘inert’ again.96

Winter argues that this third phase of memorials, in which sites of memory disappear or fade away, is appropriate:

93 For example, ‘While traditional monuments are intended only to be viewed, often from a distance, and their meaning requires little thought or interpretation, today officially sanctioned memorials are often designed to invite visitors to enter, to draw close, and even to touch parts of the memorial.’ Stevens and Franck, Memorials as Spaces of Engagement: Design, Use and Meaning, 5.
94 For a discussion of how these memorials are used, see Stevens and Franck.
95 Interview, Lin Gaff.
… since they arise out of the needs of groups of people to link their lives with salient events in the past. When that need vanishes, so does the glue that holds together the social practice of commemoration.  

A number of participants (none of whom was aware of the rewriting and tidying of the memorial undertaken in April 2014 as part of Qingming) suggested that the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial has entered this third phase, with each offering different reasons to explain this. One suggested it was due to a change in the nature of the relationship between Christmas Island residents and asylum seekers arriving there:

I was quite curious to see if other people would pick this up [the rewriting of stones] and would it happen again. But unfortunately no. … [This] correlates with a lot of what’s happened here with the community’s responses to asylum seekers where we’ve had a community that’s been really compassionate and hospitable to asylum seekers to where it’s completely changed to it being a major economy here, with a lot of locals having jobs at the [detention] Centre, and it’s completely changed that relationship now.

Another suggested that the lack of recent rewriting was due to fatigue:

It’s been the same group of people that have either been doing memorials, doing memorial services, doing activism, doing volunteering, doing visiting to the people that come in, raising awareness, getting the photos, witnessing, whatever, and you can only spread yourselves so far.

And another felt that the drop-off in maintaining the memorial was due to being discouraged as their hopes for positive changes to asylum seeker policy had not been realised:

I think people got really disheartened – a memorial like that should be saying, ‘Never again’, you know, ‘The world’s changing, the country’s changing’, and it did, it changed for the much, much, much worse … you just lost heart.

While elements of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial have literally and figuratively faded, its recent spontaneous addition to existing Qingming cultural practices of honouring ancestors suggests that it may continue to remain in the ‘ritualisation’ phase for some time yet as members of the Christmas Island community who did not initiate the memorial take on responsibility for its care and re-enact cultural memory.

97 Winter, ‘Sites of Memory,’ 324.
98 Interview, Michelle Dimasi.
99 Interview, Robin Stephenson.
100 Interview, Gordon Thomson.
Integration and Contradiction

By placing commemoration of asylum seekers in a public zone associated with civil and military authority and power, a juxtaposition is established which prompts the visitor to consider the relationship between the two. The Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial’s entreaty to viewers to remember with compassion drowned asylum seekers (and by implication to welcome others), alongside other memorials which valorise the defence forces charged with excluding them, may seem contradictory. However, in recent decades such apparent incongruities have become more common in memorial precincts. Lorraine Ryan suggests that:

[P]atriotism and acknowledgement of guilt are no longer mutually exclusive, but indeed sustain each other, as a nation’s integrity is now evaluated on its ability to confront and resolve past wrongdoings.

While no specific ‘wrongdoing’ is named in the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial, those who know of the circumstances of the sinking and are uncomfortable with the government’s exclusionary asylum seeker policies are likely to read it in these terms.

Political scientist Elizabeth Strakosch has pointed out that other Australian memorials have also attempted to at least acknowledge, if not resolve, past wrongdoings; specifically, Reconciliation Place in Canberra (fig. 6.15). Commissioned by the Australian Government, this is an urban landscape in the federal parliamentary triangle zone made up of a walkway and artworks. According to the National Capital Authority, it is a ‘place which recognises the importance of understanding the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and which reaffirms our commitment to Reconciliation as an important national priority’. Strakosch argues that such memorials ‘appear to allow the stories of victims and perpetrators to share a single representational space without either dominating, and are able to genuinely contribute to peaceful

101 Although beyond the scope of my arguments here, one cannot help noting that this relationship between the SIEV X Memorial and the other memorials at Smith Point seems to be a literal example of Foucault’s argument that ‘where there is power, there is resistance … resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’; Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Vintage, 1990), 95-96.

102 Ryan, 161.

103 National Capital Authority, Reconciliation Place: A Lasting Symbol of Our Shared Journey (Canberra: National Capital Authority, 2008), [3].
post-conflict coexistence’,\textsuperscript{104} but she concludes that \textit{Reconciliation Place} does not, in fact, achieve this. The main reason that Strakosch assesses \textit{Reconciliation Place} as unsuccessful is that ‘many Indigenous Australians … rather than seeing it as a genuine form of conversation, … feel further marginalized by the monument’s abstract, sanitized way of representing their long and arduous historical struggle for justice and equality’.\textsuperscript{105} As discussed above, the reception of the Christmas Island \textit{SIEV X Memorial}, visitors’ readiness to interact with it and its incorporation into existing island rituals suggests that it succeeds in engaging people in ‘a genuine form of conversation’, expressing as it does both shared, and sometimes contradictory, elements of national and local history and identity.

As discussed above, the form of the \textit{SIEV X Memorial} on Christmas Island is an essential element in engaging visitors. It uses elements of both traditional and countermemorial practices. Its materials and form echo the traditional memorial structure of a stone with an inset bronze plaque that has been historically commonly used throughout the island (and in many other places) to mark memorial sites. The inscription on the plaque functions in the same way as those on traditional memorials ‘to mute any conflict or controversy by striking either a redemptive or, alternatively, a succinct, reportorial tone’.\textsuperscript{106} Similarly, at first glance the stones piled around the base of the memorial seem to invoke the traditional form of a makeshift grave, using local rocks to mark the site of a burial.

However, closer examination reveals the name inscriptions on the stones, which invite the physical interaction of visitors (to pick up and read them) and require regular rejuvenation to maintain legibility. These rocks also make the memorial reminiscent of a much more individual, personal memorial like the bouquets of


\textsuperscript{105} Strakosch, ‘Counter-Monuments and Nation-Building in Australia,’ 269.

\textsuperscript{106} Burk, 950.
flowers placed by loved ones to commemorate those who died in roadside accidents. Just as those flower bouquets wilt and are replaced, so too are the faded stones discarded and new ones inscribed and piled in their stead. This is not a static memorial but one that relies on the activities of community members to keep its memory ‘alive’. It was this quality of continued community participation that was significant for one visitor:

When I saw it, it was maintained. There had obviously been recent things put on the memorial; it would have been around the anniversary time. So to see that there’d been people … years after the event who’d gone and remembered and put, and I can’t remember what they’d put there, whether it was flowers. I think I’d taken flowers up and put them around, but there were others who’d been there before me and taken, probably flowers, but there might have been little flags there as well.  

This type of interaction is congruent with Mitchell’s contention that visitor participation is one of the hallmarks of countermemorials:

> [V]isitors are expected to participate actively in the construction of the thing itself, as well as the festivities surrounding its commemoration. They thus become active producers of plural pasts and multiple memories, rather than consumers for whom a single, collective memory is fashioned ‘in stone’.

Not only was the means of its creation and its form consistent with encouraging the embodied and ‘active’ experiences offered by countermemorials, but the function is also consistent with an attempt to create a ‘collective counter-memory’; that is, a cultural memory that ‘works actively toward the positive transformation of social and political reality in the future’ by challenging dominant narratives about asylum seekers. This is precisely what the instigators of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial were hoping for in creating a commemorative object for people that the government would have preferred to never have had a place in the national consciousness. In this respect, it may function as a countermemorial. The impermanent elements of the work (the fading names) also speak to countermemorial tropes that challenge the fixed meanings represented by traditional heroic memorials.

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107 Interview, anonymous participant.
108 Mitchell, 448.
109 Demos.
This combination of conventional and countermemorial forms and functions can be considered through the concept of the ‘combimemorial’ theorised by Bill Niven. Writing of German responses to the Holocaust in the 1980s, he offers the following description of the intended function of combimemorials:

If ‘conventional’ memorials approach the topic of Nazi anti-Semitism in a sometimes rather elusive manner, while countermonuments seek to foster a post-modern dialogue of constructive scepticism, then ‘combimemorials’ pursue an integrationist approach which aims to overcome the pitfalls endemic to the fragmentation which traditionally informs processes of working over the past.\textsuperscript{110}

To paraphrase Niven, the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial can be seen through this lens as encouraging visitors to understand the nature of the asylum seeker experience (perilous, seeking freedom and a better life), by informing themselves of the fates of individual asylum seekers in specific events (the disaster of the SIEV X).\textsuperscript{111} By participating in the embodied tasks of creating a memorial, laying flowers, inscribing and holding the rocks, and rejuvenating the site, originators and visitors not only act as witnesses to the deaths of the SIEV X passengers they never knew, but also participate in the creation of new cultural memory in which compassionate treatment of asylum seekers becomes part of local, and national, identity.

**Summary**

Against a backdrop of the particular socio-historical context of the remote Australian territory of Christmas Island, this chapter has explored the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial as a site of resistance, a memorial inviting ritualisation through bodily interaction, and a combimemorial. Community members collaborated with one another to instigate, unveil and perpetuate a humble memorial that in many ways blends with its local memorial environment. As with others like it on the island, through the inscription on its plaque this memorial concisely details the disaster it commemorates and names those who were lost in it. However, through its invitation to visitors to interact directly with the material of the memorial it sets itself apart from other commemorative sites on the island.

\textsuperscript{110} Niven, 78.
\textsuperscript{111} See ibid., 89.
The names on most memorials are created in materials designed to be permanent and withstand the ravages of time and nature; they are etched in granite (the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington DC), inscribed in bronze (the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York), and printed in notebooks encased in glass (the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne). In contrast, the names on the stones around the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial are hand-written on ocean-smoothed, porous coral rocks using felt-tipped pens or paint. Both fade as they are exposed to tropical sun, rain and wind, and slowly the names meld into the rocks as they become covered in mould and dirt, until the surface writing becomes indistinguishable from its rocky ground. The continuation of the presence of names in this memorial depends not on an organised and well-resourced curation of the memorials, but rather on the interest and engagement of Christmas Island residents and visitors – the cultural memory is created and re-created through this engagement.

I have argued that, in addition to naming those who would otherwise remain nameless, the siting of the memorial in the grounds of Tai Jin House positions it as an act of resistance to government exclusionary policies on asylum seekers and contrasts with national identity tropes of sacrificial heroes presented by proximate memorials.

In terms of its formal qualities and reception, my analysis reveals that the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial uses some of the formal language of a traditional monument in combination with countermemorial intent and interactive, embodied practices. These merge to create a combimemorial that functions as an ongoing interrogation of what it is to mourn, remember, challenge hegemonic forces and assert local identity, and in so doing create and maintain cultural memory.
Chapter 7: *Janga/SIEV 221 Memorials*

**Introduction**

The SIEV X memorials considered in the previous three chapters share key characteristics, despite taking quite different forms. Most obviously, they all commemorated the same event – the deaths of 353 asylum seekers when their boat sank en route to Australia. Secondly they are, or were, sited far from the location of the sinking and subsequent loss of lives they seek to remember. Thirdly, the instigators and designers of the SIEV X memorials were not survivors of, or involved in, the sinking, nor did they have any personal connections to those who died in the disaster. Finally, they all sought to shed light on an event that received initially limited media coverage and that the government would have preferred remained outside Australia’s interest, and therefore history. I have argued they are instances of what Landsberg describes as ‘prosthetic memory’, primarily because those involved in their creation did not experience the event commemorated themselves.

In contrast, this chapter considers a permanent memorial, and a number of memorial events and objects on Christmas Island, that commemorate a maritime disaster that happened right on the shore of that territory. That event was the sinking on 15 December 2001 of the asylum seeker boat named *Janga* (subsequently classified as SIEV 221), in which 50 people drowned. Perhaps the most compelling difference between the memorials to this event and those to the sinking of the SIEV X is that those who participated in creation of the *Janga/SIEV 221* memorials were personally involved in, or directly touched by, the event commemorated – their memories are both personal and collectively shared. Unlike the SIEV X, the names of all those who perished on the *Janga/SIEV 221* are known and publicly available through the Coroner’s report into the incident.\(^1\) Also unlike the SIEV X memorials, the permanent public memorial to the *Janga/SIEV 221* on Christmas Island was not initiated by a

grassroots response to the disaster, but rather was instigated at the behest of a Commonwealth Government official, and in the face of some community resistance.

Like the SIEV X memorials, the memorial events and objects relating to the Janga/SIEV 221 create and maintain cultural memory. The SIEV X memorials created a place in the Australian narrative for the disaster and the circumstances surrounding it, which might otherwise have gone unremembered. In contrast, the event memorialised in the SIEV 221 ceremonies and objects was very well known, and personally experienced, by those who participated in their creation. As much as these memorials commemorate those who perished, I suggest that the Janga/SIEV 221 memorials primarily function to assist those involved in the disaster to process their own traumatic experiences. In so doing, the memorials present Christmas Islanders as heroic first responders, and acknowledge in visual terms the harrowing nature of the event commemorated.

I make two arguments in this chapter regarding the creation and maintenance of cultural memory done by the multiple memorials to Janga/SIEV 221. Firstly, I argue that, in the responses to the disaster, the Christmas Island residents were demonstrating neither complicity nor resistance to dominant forces. Rather, their agency is better described as ‘complaisance’, as coined by anthropologist Yuson Jung. Such complaisance influenced both the content and form of certain memorial events and objects, but did not impede their ability to create and maintain cultural memory. Secondly, I argue that, in some respects, the memorials function in a manner akin to the ‘trauma sites’ theorised by semiotician Patrizia Violi. According to Violi, such sites are those with an ‘indexical link to past traumatic events which took place in precisely these places’. The relevance of this, as Violi explains, is that ‘the semiotic trait of indexicality produces unique meaning effects’. That is, memorial sites located where the actual trauma took

2 Violi, 43. In her exploration of sites that she dubs ‘traumascapes’, Maria Tumarkin traverses similar issues; see Maria Tumarkin, Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005).
3 Violi, 36.
4 Ibid.
place (such as the Tuol Sleng museum in Cambodia, a former prison in which thousands of people were tortured) or objects that were part of a traumatic event (such as the remnants of a crashed aircraft) present embodied memories of those events, and visitors’ imaginations are activated by ‘the evocative power of indexical traces’.

These effects will be explored in relation to the permanent SIEV 221 Memorial installed at Smith Point.

To contextualise the various commemorative events and objects relating to the Janga/SIEV 221, this chapter begins with an account of the details of the tragedy. This is followed by an examination of the multiple community responses to the disaster in the form of memorial rituals and creation of installations and objects, including a close reading of the permanent memorial installed at Smith Point on the first anniversary of the sinking. As noted in previous chapters, it is ‘only through an interconnected examination of the conception (by “memory makers”) and the reception (by “memory consumers”)’ of memorials that we can gain understanding of means by which they produce cultural memory.

Background

The Janga/SIEV 221 Disaster

In the early morning of 15 December 2010, the residents of Christmas Island were brutally confronted with the deadly risk of asylum seeker boat journeys when they witnessed first-hand the Janga/SIEV 221 crash onto the jagged rocks of Rocky Point. This area sits in front of the district known as Settlement, on the far north-eastern tip of the island, which is home to tourist and residential accommodation as well as shops and restaurants. According to the Coroner’s report, at 5.20am that day, a small wooden fishing boat, carrying 89 asylum seekers, mostly from Iraq and Iran, and three Indonesian crew, was spotted approaching Christmas Island by

5 Ibid., 31.
6 Lupu, 132. Lupu also notes that sources for reception are always difficult. I had hoped to interview visitors at the site, but in the event there were no visitors in the days I was there. Instead, I have used personal interviews with people who participated in or visited the memorials at any time prior to our interview, and secondary sources such as media reports.
a local resident – simply by chance. The boat was presumably intending to reach the usually safe disembarkation point in Flying Fish Cove, a few hundred metres to the west. However, the monsoonal weather that morning – which was described by locals as ‘putrid’ and ‘amongst the worst weather ever experienced on the island’, with three- to four-metre swells, 40 knot winds and driving rain – made such a landing impossible. Telephone calls to Australian emergency services seeking rescue were made both by Christmas Island residents and asylum seekers on the boat. Christmas Island residents and visitors gathered on the shoreline, gesturing to those on the boat to go around Rocky Point to seek shelter on the lee side of the island (where an Australian Navy vessel, the HMAS Pirie, and a Customs vessel, ACV Triton, with asylum seekers aboard, were already sheltering). Reportedly, some on board the vessel mistook these gestures as locals telling them to ‘go back to where you came from’ and not try to land in Australia. Unable to manoeuvre in the heavy swell and with its engines failed, the boat hit the treacherously sharp rocks at the base of the low cliffs and the vessel began to break apart (fig. 7.1).

One man was able to survive by jumping from the wreckage onto the rocks and a further 41 of the asylum seekers and crew aboard the vessel were rescued from the ocean by Navy and Customs personnel from the HMAS Pirie and ACV Triton, who came to assist using rigid-hulled inflatable boats. Christmas Islanders were

7 Hope. The report from the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee into the disaster provides similar details; see Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, Report (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Some of my research participants also gave their first-hand accounts of the accident, which are consistent with the Coroner’s and the Joint Select Committee’s reports.


10 The ACV Triton had 108 asylum seekers on board who had been picked up near the Ashmore Reef, 610 km north of Broome, and had arrived at Christmas Island two days earlier. They had been unable to land safely at Flying Fish Cove, so were sheltering on the east side of the island until the weather settled sufficiently enough to allow disembarkation. The HMAS Pirie was also on this side of the island, having intercepted another SIEV with a small number of asylum seekers the day before. The Pirie was guarding this SIEV, awaiting suitable weather conditions to destroy the boat. Hope, xii-xiii. For a map showing the locations, see Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, 79.

11 Interview, Chris Su.
crucial in assisting the rescue effort by throwing life jackets and ropes to the asylum seekers and acting as lookouts to guide the rescue vessels to survivors – so much so that one survivor felt he owed his survival solely to the Christmas Islanders on shore:

We owe our lives to the people of Christmas Island, not the Australian Navy. The life jackets they threw us made us to survive. They were not thrown from the Navy boat – that came without life jackets. People from the houses – thanks to them – threw life jackets – they saved my life.12

Despite the rescue attempts, described by both the Coroner and a Parliamentary Joint Select Committee as extremely brave and heroic, involving rescuers putting their own lives at risk,13 50 people drowned as their boat disintegrated in front of one of Christmas Island’s favoured drinking venues, the Golden Bosun. Of the dead, 30 bodies were recovered and the Coroner found the remaining 20 had been lost at sea ‘from drowning or injuries suffered as a result of impact with the shore or debris in the ocean’.14

As discussed in previous chapters, the sinking of the SIEV X was the largest maritime disaster in Australia’s geographic region outside of wartime. Occurring in Australian territorial waters meant that the SIEV 221 tragedy invited greater reflection on the Australian character; as it was noted by the Coroner that it ‘involved the largest loss of human life in a maritime incident in Australian territorial waters during peace time in 115 years’.15 Its proximity to Christmas Island meant that Australians were called upon to act. This was an extraordinarily traumatic event in the history of the island, as is clear from media reports quoting first responders who described the disaster:

It was horrific, mate. I saw a person dying in front of me and there was nothing we could do to save them … Babies, children maybe three or four years old, they were hanging on to bits of timber, they were screaming ‘Help, help, help’, we were throwing life jackets out to them but many of them couldn’t swim a few metres to reach them. The waves just kept on

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14 Hope, [n.p.].
15 Ibid., 10. Emphasis added.
coming and smashed everything. When the navy boat came in, we just hugged each other. Just to see kids like that, I don’t know what to say.¹⁶

And:

Unbelievable horror. There were literally mothers holding babies up on the boat before it hit. There was just nothing any of us could do.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, many of the participants I interviewed made reference to ongoing adverse psychological effects for those who attended the rescue, and impacts of these on their families and the broader community. These trauma reactions doubtless played a key role in community perceptions of the permanent SIEV 221 Memorial, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Asylum seekers who survived the sinking were taken to immigration detention facilities on Christmas Island, where they were held while their claims for refugee status were assessed.¹⁸ Single men were taken to the Immigration Detention Centre and women and children and family groups were housed at the ‘Alternative Place of Detention’, known as Construction Camp, next to the island’s Recreation Centre. The bodies of the dead that had been recovered were taken to the island’s hospital, where a refrigerated shipping container was set up as a makeshift morgue.¹⁹ They were housed there for two months until they were sent to the mainland for burial in Australia or repatriation to their countries of origin.²⁰ At their families’ request, eight people were buried in Sydney as they had relatives resident there.²¹

In the aftermath of the Janga/SIEV 221 disaster, a range of memorial objects and events were created both to commemorate the event and to assist islanders in processing their trauma in relation to it. These were: an impromptu memorial installation near the sinking site; a public memorial service held three months after the disaster that included a memorial ‘installation’ and creation of a public

¹⁶ Christmas Island Councillor Kamar Ismail quoted in Sonti and others.
¹⁸ For a detailed report of how survivors were managed after the tragedy, see Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010.
¹⁹ Interview, site visitor.
²¹ Ibid.
message canvas (similar to a funeral condolence book); and, on the first anniversary of the disaster in 2011, a further public commemorative service to unveil a permanent memorial at Smith Point – an event that reprised visual and ritual elements from the memorial service held nine months earlier.

Since its installation, this memorial at Smith Point has had subsequent additions and interventions by members of the Christmas Island community. The fact that there were survivors of the tragedy – both asylum seekers and those who had come to their rescue – ensures the multivalence of this memorial. The memorials discussed in previous chapters serve the needs of the living, in that they seek to intervene in the cultural memory of the nation. In addition to this, the SIEV 221 memorials not only serve the needs of the surviving asylum seekers and some Christmas Island residents to grieve, but also pay heed to the needs of those involved in the rescue effort, by recognising their trauma, and contributing to healing from it. The following sections analyse each of these memorial events/objects in turn.

**Temporary Memorials and Events**

As has become frequent at sites of sudden and traumatic deaths, the Janga/SIEV 221 disaster was, in the days following the event, commemorated with a modest and impromptu temporary collection of objects (toys, flowers and yarn bombings) left by Christmas Islander residents and visitors (fig. 7.2). A literature has developed regarding such bricolages, which have been variously described: Santino uses the term ‘spontaneous shrines’, Margry and Sanchez-Carretero emphasise the community aspect of these in their use of the phrase ‘grassroots memorials’, and Haney and colleagues refer to them as ‘spontaneous memorials’. Whichever name they go by, such makeshift commemorative markers have become commonplace in the last 30 years, in response to events

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such as fatal traffic accidents, murders, terrorist incidents and unexpected deaths of celebrities.\(^{25}\) They serve both political ends and present cathartic opportunities.

Sociologist C. Allen Haney and colleagues interpret such ‘spontaneous memorialisation’ as:

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\text{… the integration of private and public grief; located at the site of death rather than somewhere pre-determined by church or state; open to any participant without prejudice; comprised of ‘personal ritualized objects’ which have significance for the mourner as much as for the deceased; not restricted by any regulations or conventions; and carrying with it the possibility of a social, or even a political, purpose beyond that of grief expression and memory making.}^{26}\]

Consistent with this interpretation, the spontaneous memorial to the Janga/SIEV 221 is reported to have simply appeared, without any prior community decision making, or appeal to authorities, as to its placement, design or content.\(^{27}\) Unlike the organised and sponsored memorials discussed in previous chapters, this impromptu memorial was unceremonious and unplanned, which allowed community participation through contributors leaving whatever object they saw fit. Santino notes that, when asked to explain why they leave mementoes at the site of unexpected deaths, people say they do so ‘because it is the last place at which the person was alive’, and he concludes, ‘thus the sites, and the shrines, often signify life rather than death, at least in a sense’.\(^{28}\) In this regard, the dominance of toys in the Christmas Island example can be read as signifying a wished-for, but never to be fulfilled, childhood for the asylum seeker children, much in the same way as some of the images on the poles in the Canberra SIEV X Memorial. It can also be read as signifying an assertion that life on the island will go on, even after this tragic event.

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\(^{25}\) See Doss for a discussion of the spontaneous memorials established at the sites of the Columbine High School Massacre, the Oklahoma bombing and objects left at Maya Lin’s Washington DC Vietnam Veterans Memorial.


\(^{27}\) Interview, Chris Su.

\(^{28}\) Santino, ‘Between Commemoration and Social Activism: Spontaneous Shrines, Grassroots Memorialization, and the Public Ritualesque in Derry,’ 99.
Ethnologists Peter Margry and Cristina Sanchez-Carretero suggest that these makeshift memorials are a way of healing and doing ‘justice’ to the ‘injustice’ of a premature death.\textsuperscript{29} The focus on children in the temporary memorial at the site of the Janga/SIEV 221 disaster speaks to the idea that the premature death of children strikes the living as somehow more unjust than the death of adults.\textsuperscript{30} Placing items at such memorials can also be a means of easing the pain of grief. As cultural historian Maria Tumarkin has argued:

> For victims’ loved ones and locals living around sites of tragedies, in particular, the objects placed at these sites could have a redemptive quality, connecting places of death to life, loyalty and love.\textsuperscript{31}

Local informants suggested that the crafted yarn items in the temporary Janga/SIEV 221 memorial may have been created by children, and the toys also selected by them. Such offerings can be read as an attempt to offer solace and redemption to other children in the face of not just untimely deaths, but deaths in terrifying circumstances.

Haney and colleagues, Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, and Santino all suggest that temporary memorials sited in the public landscape (both literal and figurative) are a form of social action. Santino argues that spontaneous memorials:

> … ask the spectator to take a position on those circumstances [of the deaths memorialised], that is, to condemn them or to change them. As such, these phenomena are inherently political.\textsuperscript{32}

Similarly, Margry and Sanchez-Carretero suggest that the ‘creation of memorial bricolages and makeshift memorials in public space [is] in order to achieve change’.\textsuperscript{33} It is not entirely clear what specific change the creators of the Janga/SIEV 221 spontaneous memorial might have been seeking. Although one

\textsuperscript{30} This idea, in relation to other temporary memorials, is also explored by Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, 32.
\textsuperscript{31} Tumarkin, 83.
\textsuperscript{32} Santino, ‘Between Commemoration and Social Activism: Spontaneous Shriners, Grassroots Memorialization, and the Public Ritualesque in Derry,’ 103. Margry and Sanchez-Carretero make similar reference to Austin’s speech acts; Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, ‘Rethinking Memorialization: The Concept of Grassroots Memorials,’ 3.
\textsuperscript{33} Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, ‘Rethinking Memorialization: The Concept of Grassroots Memorials,’ 2.
can speculate that beyond simply a wish that the disaster did not happen, the creators of this site may have been pointing to state responses to asylum seekers – both in the a broader policy sense and in a more immediate sense of emergency infrastructure and preparedness on Christmas Island. Intended or not, by creating this memorial they did change what had been the site of traumatic deaths of asylum seekers into a memorial site of reflection and possible consolation.

Given the desperate rescue efforts, the creation of the spontaneous memorial may also have assisted traumatised Christmas Islanders to process their own shock and grief in the face of the disaster. Erika Doss argues that many of these various unofficial and spontaneous memorials ‘seem less concerned with producing a critique of historical moments and tragic events than in catharsis and redemption’. In this sense, the spontaneous memorial may not be political in the sense of an intervention into asylum seeker politics, but rather contributing to the healing of those who not only bore witness to these events and directly sought to prevent the drownings. Having spent hours trying to rescue those aboard the boat, with only limited success and in the face of extremely hostile, seemingly hopeless, conditions, it is not surprising that some Christmas Island residents might have felt the need for a physical marker to act as a focus for their emotional response to such a traumatic event.

It is not clear when the temporary memorial was cleared from the accident site, but it was still there approximately three months after the sinking of the Janga/SIEV 221, when a public memorial service was held (and the spontaneous memorial was ‘tidied up’ in preparation for that memorial service). In his role as Community Liaison Officer, a government-funded position to facilitate communication between the Department of Immigration and Christmas Island residents, Chris Su organised the service, held at 10am on 5 March 2011. Su

34 Doss, 70.
35 Interview, Chris Su.
36 A private memorial service for the survivors, organised by the Department of Immigration, had been held in the IDC on 19 December, with three Christmas Island community leaders invited to attend. See Gordon Thomson, ‘The December 15 Tragedy,’ The Islander, 24 December 2010, 1; Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, 47.
Chapter 7: Christmas Island Janga/SIEV 221 Memorials

recalled that ‘there was some feeling in the community that we should have a memorial service of some type, but nobody knew who should have it. … So I said, “I’ll do it”’. The choice of timing for this event was largely pragmatic, as many Christmas Island residents leave the island for up to six weeks over the Christmas/New Year period, which is then followed by Chinese New Year. This meant that March was the earliest opportunity after the sinking for a community event that could be attended by those most interested in doing so.

The targeted audience for the memorial was broad and inclusive; according to Su it was intended for:

… everybody who wanted to come. The first responders, the residents, the various sort of umbrella staff that IDC had, a lot of Serco people were affected, IHMS were affected, so I suppose people wanted to come down to have a community memorial for what had happened.

Approximately 240 people attended the memorial: a significant turnout representing about 10 per cent of the total visitor and resident population (a proportional turnout in Melbourne would have 500,000 people attending). The Department of Immigration did not allow survivors of the disaster (who were at that time in detention on the island) to be present, despite the community planning for their attendance and desire for the opportunity to meet again with those whose lives they had saved. In their evidence to the Joint Select Committee Inquiry, the Immigration Department ‘explained that its decision was based on the best interests of the survivors, the Christmas Island community and the fact that the survivors were expected to have left Christmas Island by the date of the service’. Others interpreted the Department’s refusal as an understandable reaction to the scenes that occurred at the funerals held a month earlier in Sydney for eight people who had died on the Janga/SIEV 221. Images of screaming women and distraught children at those funerals (see fig. 7.3), along with

37 Interview, Chris Su.
38 Interview, Chris Su. ‘Serco’ was the company responsible for running the detention centre and ‘IHMS’ stands for ‘International Health and Medical Services’, the company responsible for delivering health services to all immigration detainees.
39 Interviews, Chris Su, Michelle Dimasi; Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010.
40 Ibid., 49.
41 Interview, Chris Su.
questions about the cost and questionable humanity of transporting survivors to and from Christmas Island, is unlikely to have been assessed as representing positive media coverage for the government – one can imagine they did not want a repeat performance. The fact that survivors were unable to attend was not well received by some community members. As local resident and asylum seeker advocate Michelle Dimasi explained:

[M]any Christmas Island people expected that the survivors would be allowed to come to the service, and they didn’t. … many people were really let down. I think that was really disappointing because they saw it probably as an opportunity to really heal from what had happened and acknowledge this tragedy together. The memorial service was some months after the actual boat crash, but what became apparent to me during that service was that many people hadn’t recovered. When the leader of the Islamic community spoke, the room just completely filled with sobs, and [it was clear] people had not recovered at all.

Memorial service organiser Chris Su echoed these sentiments:

[The community] wanted to have a sense of closure and they wanted to see [the survivors] again. Because we had rescued them from the water and from the beach. We were the first to help assist and bring them on the shore. And a lot of people were very affected by it. I think several people suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It’s such a challenging thing to have to do and see. So it was pretty messed up.

Department of Immigration officer Fiona Andrew informed the Joint Select Committee Inquiry that ‘the community was divided. Some felt that it was important that the survivors attend and some felt that should not attend.’ Although they were unable to attend the memorial, some of the asylum seekers wrote letters of thanks and appreciation to those who rescued them and these were read out at the memorial service. The general tributary tenor of these letters is captured in this example:

When the sun rose, angels were sent to an island in Australia called Christmas Island to rescue innocent people who were caught in the infinite ocean. They risked their lives to save the survivors of the broken boat. …

43 Interview, Michelle Dimasi.
44 Interview, Chris Su.
45 Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, 51.
Words are not enough to express our gratitude. We do not know how to thank them. May God bless them all.\textsuperscript{46}

The moving words referred to by Dimasi above were spoken by Zainal Majid, President of the Islamic Council of Christmas Island:

I cannot stop seeing the eyes, the faces, of the people on the boat as it was dashed against the rocks, the father desperately clinging to the boat with one hand and with the other clutching his child to his side. Then a child swept from the arms of the mother. It was horrible. We are sorry for the families who have lost their loved ones in their attempt to find a better place to be. On behalf of the Islamic community we are sorry we could not put their loved ones to rest in peace earlier.\textsuperscript{47}

The last sentence is a reference to the fact that some bodies were not able to be recovered and others were held in the morgue for months until they could be buried. This contravenes Islamic funeral traditions in which the dead are to be buried as soon as possible, preferably within 24 hours.\textsuperscript{48} As cultural theorist Lessie Jo Frazier has noted, the absence of the bodies of the dead places survivors ‘in a liminal position rendering impossible verification and resolution of loss through proper mourning’.\textsuperscript{49} In the case of the Janga/SIEV 221 Memorial service, the absence of the asylum seeker survivors also acted to place the first responders in a similarly liminal position – unable to come to terms with their traumatic reactions until they had seen the living whom they had saved. This focus on the living (the survivors and the rescuers) was one of the issues identified by the Department of Immigration as a potential source of conflict between Christmas Islanders and the asylum seekers survivors in detention, and further justification to keep the latter away from the memorial. As departmental officer Fiona Andrew told the Joint Select Committee on the disaster:

\textsuperscript{46} ‘Letters from Victims and Victim’s Family Members of SIEV 221,’ \textit{The Islander}, 11 March 2011, 3. It should be noted that the letters of thanks also included specific mention and thanks to Immigration staff, detention centre staff (Serco), interpreters and staff of the detention health service (IHMS).
\textsuperscript{47} Speech of Zainal Majid reprinted in ‘SIEV 221 Janga Memorial,’ \textit{The Islander}, 11 March 2011, 9.
\textsuperscript{48} Mohammed Iqbal Sultan, \textit{A Guide to Muslim Funerals} (Queensland: Muslim Funeral Services, 2010), 4.
[T]o my way of thinking the service was about the fact that 42 people were saved. I was concerned that the survivors thought that 50 people had died, so there was a slightly different perspective.\textsuperscript{50}

In the event, as asylum seeker survivors were not allowed to attend, their perspective on the memorial service is unknown.

Just as the timing of the memorial service was largely due to pragmatism, so too was the decision to hold it at the Christmas Island Recreation Centre (a sports and leisure complex) as it provided an all-weather venue with suitable facilities, sufficient space and power for a sound system.\textsuperscript{51} However, there was some objection to this location, with Su receiving an angry complaint that the event was not to be held at the site of the disaster at Rocky Point, which he paraphrased as:

This is where it happened, this is where you should do it, I know where I’ll be on that day, I’ll be down at the Point, not at some bloody Rec Centre listening to speeches.\textsuperscript{52}

In fact, as planned, official proceedings (including speeches) were held at the Recreation Centre and then attendees moved down to Rocky Point to lay flowers at the site of the disaster (fig. 7.4), in front of the spontaneous memorial discussed above.

At the memorial service, participants were invited to take a brightly coloured origami flower on their way into the ceremony.\textsuperscript{53} These were to become part of the ceremony in which attendees would be invited to participate in at the end of the service. The service consisted of speeches from government representatives, first responders, community leaders and island’s Catholic priest and imam. As mentioned above, messages from the asylum seeker survivors were also read out. The speeches and messages were also printed in full in the local newsletter, \textit{The Islander}.\textsuperscript{54} The majority of the speeches focused on the bravery and compassion of the rescuers, although a number of speakers gave their condolences to the

\textsuperscript{50} Department of Immigration and Citizenship Assistant Secretary Fiona Andrew quoted in Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, 50-51.

\textsuperscript{51} Interview, Chris Su.

\textsuperscript{52} As reported by Chris Su, interview.

\textsuperscript{53} Interview, Chris Su. These flowers were also noted in the Parliamentary enquiry report into the disaster; see Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010, 56.

\textsuperscript{54} See ‘Memorial Service for the December 15th Tragedy,’ \textit{The Islander}, 11 March 2011; ‘SIEV 221 Janga Memorial.’
family members of the dead. The reporting of the memorial service in *The Islander* noted that:

Speakers addressed the audience and spoke about the courage and compassion, resourcefulness and audacity shown by both volunteer and professional rescue teams as well as the resident rescuers who were the first on site that day helping those in need.\(^{55}\)

Again, we see an emphasis on the rescuers and Christmas Island residents, rather than on the dead asylum seekers. At the end of the speeches, participants were invited to place their paper flowers on an altar-like table at the front of the room (fig. 7.5) and take a coloured lily (which had been flown in from Perth) that they could take to place at the site of the accident if they wished.\(^{56}\) The organisers had specifically chosen coloured flowers in an effort to lift the mood; in Su’s words, ‘Colour is very important for people’s emotions’.\(^{57}\) Also on the table was a plaque that Su had prepared, which was eventually installed in the permanent memorial discussed below. At the time of the March memorial service there were no specific plans for the eventual siting of the plaque, nor on what type of object it would be affixed.\(^{58}\) As on the Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial*, white coral beach stones were used in the *Janga*/SIEV 221 memorial service. When I queried whether they had any symbolic significance, Su explained they were simply for decorative effect and to delineate space: ‘It’s just to make it look more organic. To break the colour of the floor, to zhuzz it a bit!’, and the choice of stones was yet another example of Christmas Island pragmatism: ‘We don’t have a lot of stuff to decorate things with … We can’t put something that’s green because there’s green everywhere already; the white colour I think is very comforting for people.’\(^{59}\)

Once the memorial service was complete, some participants moved down to the crash site, where the local member, Warren Snowden MP, threw a wreath into the water as an act of remembrance (see fig. 7.6). Also attending the service was

\(^{55}\) ‘Memorial Service for the December 15th Tragedy,’ 1.
\(^{56}\) Interview, Chris Su.
\(^{57}\) Interview, Chris Su.
\(^{58}\) Interview, Chris Su.
\(^{59}\) Interview, Chris Su.
Northern Territory Senator Trish Crossin.\textsuperscript{60} This attendance of federal government representatives endorsed the \textit{SIEV 221 Memorial} in a way that was clearly absent from the SIEV X memorials. This may partly speak to the focus on ‘local heroes’ (the Christmas Islander responders) rather than on ‘the other’ (the dead asylum seekers), as making it acceptable for political support.

**Power and Complaisance**
While the survivors were unable to go to the memorial, some of the memorial went to them. The remaining flowers from the recreation centre were collected by three community members and taken to the survivors being held in Immigration detention who had not been allowed to attend the ceremony. As Michelle Dimasi explained:

> [W]e took buckets of flowers into the centre and went and gave them to the survivors … and we just handed out all these lilies and said, ‘These are from people on Christmas Island. Hope you’re okay’.\textsuperscript{61}

This demonstrates the determination of some Christmas Island residents to include the survivors in the memorial, despite the attempt of the authorities to exclude them. The reading of the survivors’ letters at the service was a similar means of including the asylum seekers in the memorial service. These acts may seem like acts of resistance; however, I suggest they are better understood as acts of ‘complaisance’, a term coined by anthropologist Yuson Jung. As discussed in Chapter 2, Jung explains that rather than agency only being able to be exercised through resistance or complicity, the notion of ‘complaisance’ instead ‘focuses on the aspect of “the inability not to follow” hegemonic forces’.\textsuperscript{62} Jung’s typology of ‘complaisance’, as she argues, can:

> … provide a useful vantage point to think about how power relations and dominant power structures are reproduced without necessarily excluding the possibility for socio-political change.\textsuperscript{63}

The Christmas Islanders involved in the memorial service and the flower distribution were neither complicit in the Immigration Department’s decision to

\textsuperscript{60} Warren Snowdon was, and remains at the time of writing, the member for Lingiari, a Northern Territory electorate that includes Christmas Island. Similarly, Northern Territory senators are also the senators for Christmas Island.
\textsuperscript{61} Interview, Michelle Dimasi.
\textsuperscript{62} Jung, 319. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 330.
exclude the asylum seekers, nor simply resistant to it. They had no choice regarding the non-attendance of survivors at the memorial. In Jung’s terms they were ‘unable not to follow’ this, but were clearly not consenting to ‘hegemonic forces’, as would be the case if they were complicit. We might think of the reading the letters, subsequent visit to the detention centre and physically sharing an aspect of the memorial with them as giving vicarious voice to the survivors and, in effect, evidence of ‘reluctant compliance’.

This element of ‘complaisance’ was also evident in the previous chapter in discussion of the acceptance of the incorrect alignment of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial – there was an acceptance of the outcome, although no enthusiasm for it. Rather, organisers focused on the elements on the memorial they could influence: the stones surrounding the large rock. Similarly, in the memorial responses to the SIEV 221, as have been discussed in this section and will be further discussed below in relation to the permanent memorial, those seeking to commemorate the event did so within the limits placed upon them, while not allowing these limits to stifle creation and maintenance of cultural memory.

At the end of the memorial ceremony, before making their way down to the crash site, participants were also invited to sign or write a message on a framed canvas (figs 7.7 and 7.8). The canvas had been printed with a quote from one of the survivors, reading:

We would like to make special thanks for the memorial. It’s a great honour. Thank you for remembering those we lost and putting your heart next to ours: sharing the sad moments we went through. – Hardi 23.2.2011

This canvas remains on public display at the recreation centre, if not prominently so. On my visit in 2014 it was propped on top of a display cabinet (fig. 7.9). When I asked if I could take a closer look at it, the centre staff member who got it down commented to the effect that, ‘We should really find a better, more permanent place for this’. I suggest the location of the canvas and the disquiet about its display reflects the ambivalent feelings discussed below in relation to the

64 Ibid.
permanent memorial at Smith Point. On the one hand, there is a desire to keep the experience in memory and honour those involved (rescuers, rescued and deceased); on the other there is a desire to forget as a means of healing from the trauma of the event. However, recognition of the relevance of the memorial canvas also acknowledges that the terrain of memory and forgetting is a site of power, agency and complaisance.

Signing and writing messages on the canvas, along with depositing paper flowers and collecting cut flowers, were important performative acts in the memorial service. As memorial organiser Chris Su explained:

The act of creating something at the memorial helped to create something. As a group you’re beautifying that final display as a community. You’re taking something away, you’re putting something back – I mean creating something again – if you choose to write, which a lot of folks did, or … if you put the flowers down at the site. I think it was a process that helped … a community grieving for people they don’t know. I think that was about as emotionally productive as you were going to get.

What is clear here is that it was the interactive and performative elements of the memorial service that were seen as key to the mourning and trauma recovery process and to commemoration itself. As Margry and Sanchez-Carretero put it:

The performative, referring to the intention to accomplish change, is thus not limited to the memorial itself or its memorial space, but includes the agency of individual objects or texts and the behavior of the people involved.

Many of these processes were ephemeral, but their trace lives on in the memorial canvas; and (as shall be seen below) were restaged at the unveiling of the permanent memorial structure.

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66 Interview, Chris Su.

67 Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, ‘Rethinking Memorialization: The Concept of Grassroots Memorials,’ 3. See also Lynda Mannik, ‘it is only when traumatic experiences are given a voice through narratives that painful memories and losses can be integrated into the present.’ Lynda Mannik, ‘Introduction,’ in Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival, ed. Lynda Mannik (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 13.
**Permanent Memorial**

It would be another nine months until a permanent memorial to the *Janga/SIEV 221* was erected (fig. 7.10). It sits atop the hill at Smith Point next to the *SIEV X Memorial*, in the island’s memorial zone (as discussed in the previous chapter). It shares some design features with its neighbouring *SIEV X Memorial*, and both echo designs of other memorials on the island. In particular, the plaques on both memorials are similar to that used on the memorial to the unknown soldier from the HMAS *Sydney*, which is sited in the Old European Cemetery behind the Kampong (fig. 7.11). Like the nearby *SIEV X Memorial*, the *SIEV 221 Memorial* has a low, smooth concrete base, this time about 2 metres long and 1 metre wide, echoing the shape of a grave covering in a cemetery. The damaged steel propeller from the destroyed vessel sits atop this base and is the focal point of the memorial (fig. 7.12); its drive shaft points across Flying Fish Cove directly to the site on Rocky Point where the boat broke up (fig. 7.13). Given the destruction of the wooden vessel against the rocks, this is one of the few remaining elements of the boat that could be used for such a memorial. Like the Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial*, the concrete base was covered in stones, but according to Chris Su, who placed the stones around the base, this time it was simply a way of ‘softening’ its edges,\(^{68}\) rather than as symbolic of those who drowned. This changed later when the rocks were inscribed with the names of dead; however, at the original unveiling the rocks were blank.

Unlike the earlier memorial services and actions relating to the *Janga/SIEV 221*, reports from a number of research participants suggest that the decision to have such a permanent memorial may not have been widely supported by the community. The Joint Select Committee inquiry into the accident was supportive of the idea for a memorial as a means of trauma recovery:

> The committee believes residents of Christmas Island share a permanent emotional bond with those on board the SIEV 221, and many will carry memories of the tragedy throughout their lives. It is now an indelible part of the history of Christmas Island and its community. For this reason, the committee would support any decision the community might reach to erect a memorial on the island, at a site of the residents’ choosing, to serve as a

\(^{68}\) Interview, Chris Su.
reminder of those who lost their lives, and those who risked theirs to help fellow human beings in need. DIAC [Department of Immigration and Citizenship] has advised the committee that a plaque and memorial board will be placed at the wreck site, and the committee supports this decision. The committee urges that this be done with sensitivity and in consultation with the local community in order for it to help heal emotional wounds.69

According to Su, it was not the Immigration Department but rather the then Director of Territories (the most senior Commonwealth bureaucrat on Christmas Island, working for the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development) who pushed the idea of having a memorial to be unveiled on the first anniversary of the disaster.70 According to Su, islanders opposed another memorial on the basis that a service had already been held and that ‘it was very emotionally burdensome on people to say the least, and it was a very painful experience’.71 Former Christmas Island Administrator, Jon Stanhope, speculated that, as would be the case throughout Australia, a range of community views would have been held, not all of which would have been sympathetic to the plight of asylum seekers or resistant to government policies regarding them (the assumption being that a memorial would be an expression of both sympathy and resistance).72 Despite the reported opposition, a committee was formed to organise the public memorial and accompanying ceremony, comprising the Director of Territories, Chris Su from the Shire Council, a doctor from the hospital and a representative from the Department of Immigration.73

Trauma Site
As with the location of the March 2011 memorial service, the site chosen for the permanent memorial was somewhat controversial, according to some research participants.74 Some members of the Christmas Island community wanted it sited at Rocky Point where the disaster occurred, while others argued against that location as they did not want a daily, physical reminder of the trauma they had experienced (recall that the accident occurred just outside a favourite drinking

70 Interview, Chris Su. Other participants confirmed this perspective.
71 Interview, Chris Su.
72 Interview, Jon Stanhope.
73 Interview, Chris Su.
74 Interviews, Chris Su, Michelle Dimasi, Gordon Thomson. It is worth noting that other participants were not aware of any controversy about the location.
spot – a location where people go to relax and enjoy ocean views). Divergence in public views regarding memorialisation of traumatic events is not uncommon\(^{75}\) and the disagreement raised here points to the fact that sometimes forgetting is deemed more desirable than remembering (see earlier discussion). Equally, as Violi ponders in her work on post-conflict museums as trauma sites, ‘might traumatic memory conflict with social reconciliation?’\(^{76}\) Margry and Sanchez-Carretero give the example of workers at Atocha station in Madrid, after terrorist bombings in 2004, asking for a candle memorial inside the station to be removed as summer approached both because of the heat generated and, more importantly, ‘because they could not handle being emotionally confronted every day with the tragedy marked by the memorial site’.\(^{77}\) That said, Christmas Island Shire President Gordon Thomson speculated that the desire of local residents to not have a memorial at Rocky Point might be as much about anti-refugee sentiment as a desire to avoid retraumatisation:

> I was Shire President at the time and people that live in the area told me to make sure that we didn’t put a memorial on the site, because they were angry, they were anti-refugee. They didn’t want to be reminded. Yeah, I think they were traumatised even though they don’t care for refugees.\(^{78}\)

However, he also acknowledged that forgetting can be an important element in healing when he said:

> Well, I think you need to be able to forget, otherwise you wouldn’t sleep much would you? If your heart was burning bright over every tragedy, you’d just kill yourself.\(^{79}\)

Similarly, Jon Stanhope commented that ‘to be fair to everybody, it was an horrific event, and it scarred people [and continues to do so] even now, five years later’.\(^{80}\) Indeed, as Young reminds us, our wish to commemorate terrible events


\(^{76}\) Violi, 38.

\(^{77}\) Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, ‘Rethinking Memorialization: The Concept of Grassroots Memorials,’ 14.

\(^{78}\) Interview, Gordon Thomson.

\(^{79}\) Interview, Gordon Thomson. This sentiment is echoed in David Lowenthal’s comment that ‘Artfully selective oblivion is necessary to all societies. Collective well-being requires sanitizing what time renders unspeakable, unpalatable, even just inconveniently outdated.’ Lowenthal, xii. On the need to forget, see also Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, eds., *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999).

\(^{80}\) Interview, Jon Stanhope.
‘may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them’.\(^{81}\) This, he argues, is because traditional memorials are ‘detached from our daily lives’ and we only visit them ‘at our convenience’,\(^{82}\) thus allowing the memorial to do the memory work for us, and leaving us to forget the event commemorated. Notably, my research participants who were on the island at the time of the disaster reported that they did not visit the memorial on a regular basis, despite thinking it appropriate to have a commemorative object. Certainly, aspects of the *SIEV 221 Memorial* are of the conventional monumental nature described by Young; however, other elements of the work challenge the traditional form and function of the memorial, similar to the *SIEV X Memorial* (as discussed in the previous chapter).

While the community may have had little say in whether a permanent memorial was to be created, there was some consultation about its location. A public survey was held to determine the siting of the memorial, with respondents given the option of having it in the memorial zone near Tai Jin House at Smith Point, or at the site of the disaster.\(^{83}\) The community chose Tai Jin House. In the words of one resident and visitor to the site, this location was appropriate as it acknowledges the event of the *SIEV 221* disaster as being a significant part of the island’s history, as do the other memorials on Smith Point near the Administrator’s former residence:

> I mean it’s a really important part of the island’s history and for it to be up at that place where, you know, soldiers are remembered, and there’s the remnants of the war and the big house [Tai Jin] … It seems fitting really.\(^{84}\)

The direction of the propeller shaft – pointing to the disaster site, without being precisely at the site – can be read as an attempt to honour the wishes of both sides of the location debate.

While not located on the exact site of the tragedy, the location of the memorial in sight of that event and the inclusion of an object that was part of the disaster (the

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\(^{81}\) Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, 5.

\(^{82}\) Ibid.

\(^{83}\) Interview, Chris Su.

\(^{84}\) Interview, site visitor.
propeller) means that it functions as a ‘trauma site’ as it maintains ‘a real spatial contiguity with the trauma itself’.\(^{85}\) As Violi describes, such sites carry the indexical trace of, and embody, what actually happened in the event memorialised.\(^{86}\) For the memorial to function in this way requires visitors to recognise the propeller as an indexical trace of the doomed vessel and its destruction; and for it to activate their imagination about what happened when the boat went down.\(^{87}\) Again, we see here the memorial functioning in different ways for visitors and for those who were part of the events: for visitors, the inclusion of part of the wreckage evokes the experience of the disaster and its impact (thus potentially creating a prosthetic memory); while for those who experienced the disaster, it serves as a direct witness, along with them, of the trauma of that day.

Violi argues that such sites are more potent signifiers than other memorial locations:

> In bearing a direct witness to the past, trauma sites do not merely depict a given historical and political situation, but they actually take part in its cultural reconstruction and transformation. This active role depends crucially on their indexical nature. Trauma sites are in this respect much more powerful semiotic devices than any other kind of memorial site, since they already exist as genuine signifiers and testimonials of the past inscribed in the urban landscape, and deeply embedded in their wider historical and cultural context.\(^{88}\)

The debate about the location of the *SIEV 221 Memorial* can be read in terms of this power. Some clearly did not want a physical reminder of the impact of the *Janga*/SIEV 221 disaster on their cultural context.

Nonetheless, public memorials can act as an attempt to restore justice and come to terms with trauma.\(^{89}\) One of the means used in the *SIEV 221 Memorial* to this end is the words used on its plaque, which is attached to a small concrete plinth at the southern end of the concrete slab, in front of the propeller. This was the bronze

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\(^{85}\) Violi, 39.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 65.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 70.

\(^{89}\) Margry and Sanchez-Carretero, ‘Rethinking Memorialization: The Concept of Grassroots Memorials,’ 9.
plaque Chris Su prepared for the March memorial service. In the same font and relief-style inscription used on the nearby SIEV X Memorial, it reads:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIEV 221</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 December 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We will reflect on this day with sadness. The loss of each person’s life diminishes our own because we are part of humankind.

AS YOU READ THIS PLEASE REMEMBER ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED THIS TREACHEROUS JOURNEY

The words on the centre of the plaque paraphrase an excerpt from English poet John Donne’s *Meditation 17* written in 1624:

No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: _any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind_, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.90

The words on the bottom of the plaque are copied directly from the SIEV X Memorial, creating a link between the memorials and the disasters they commemorate (this is further discussed below).

Notwithstanding that different visitors will bring different interpretive lenses and visual/cultural competency to any memorial, Stevens and Franck note that, ‘the choice of imagery and text are key decisions in determining what story is to be told and what aspects of it and, relatedly, what will not be told’.91 The wording on the plaque was proposed by Su and accepted by the then President of the Christmas Island Shire, Brian Lacy.92 In explaining why he chose to use a paraphrased Donne quote, Su said:

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92 Interview, Chris Su.
I thought very long and hard about what words I wanted to put on that memorial plaque. I wanted those words to be profound, and I wanted those words to induce thought in people when they read it and it to be a fitting tribute to the people who made that journey. … I wanted to get people to start the journey to be able to understand why people move across borders the way that they do. Because they need help and we are all one – we’re all one unit here on planet Earth.93

This is a lofty, cosmopolitan and humanitarian ambition.94 However, the text can also be interpreted in different terms. Rather than focusing on those who died, their experiences and their needs, the memorial and its plaque could be read in terms of focusing on those who experienced and survived the disaster and their effort to come to terms with their trauma. It provides not just a focus for their grief, but also a sense of a ‘greater good’ – the unity expressed by Su above. As described by Rowland:

> A wasted, destroyed life that has proved to be of no importance is humiliating to the living. … people have to be given the means to reassert their mastery and to reconcile the trauma through the assertion of higher, positive ideals.95

Whichever reading one might favour, we see here a focus not on mourning the dead but on sustaining the living. Criminologists Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering describe the memorial as being about ‘easing the trauma of witnesses and rescuers’.96 As Lin Gaff, a Christmas Island local and member of Christmas Island Rural Australians for Refugees, put it: ‘I think that memorial [to the Janga/SIEV 221] was less about remembering the people themselves and more about healing for the people that survived’.97

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93 Interview, Chris Su.
94 Although outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that anthropologist Miriam Ticktin has critiqued humanitarianism in response to asylum seeker deaths as she suggests such an approach ‘relies on a very narrow emotional constellation and this in turn constrains our responses. Humanitarianism provides little room to feel and recognize the value of particular lives (versus life in general), or to mourn particular deaths (versus suffering in general); and little impetus to animate political change.’ Miriam Ticktin, ‘Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders,’ *Social Research* 83, no. 2 (2016): 258.
97 Interview, Lin Gaff.
Dell Upton suggests that traditional monuments depend on metaphor ‘rather than on expository texts to convey meanings’. As noted in the previous chapter, Upton is critical of such texts, noting:

Both the rush to memorialize and the verbosity often arise from an urge to fix the meaning of events quickly and, equally important, to forestall other possible interpretations of the events in question.

The *SIEV 221 Memorial* is not particularly ‘expository’. While the propeller used in the memorial is specific to the event, the text on the plaque exhorts the visitor to understand this event as part of universal experience. It gives a visitor no information about the particular event that prompted the memorial to be created or the source of its physical content. An uninitiated visitor would not necessarily know that ‘SIEV’ is the acronym for the Australian government’s nomenclature for a boat entering Australian waters without permission (‘Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel’). The date and the text below are probably sufficient for a reader to infer that people died on 15 December 2010, but there are no details of the scale, location or nature of the tragedy; nor, indeed, of who had perished. Instead, these details are conveyed by the objects used in the memorial and its very placement. The destroyed propeller of the boat (which visitors may or may not recognise as such) points to where the boat went down on Rocky Point; however, there is no explanatory material information available either at the site or the Christmas Island visitor centre explaining this symbolic element, so it would likely be lost on most viewers. The memorial perhaps speaks loudest to local visitors who would likely understand the acronym and remember the event memorialised. Su reported this contention:

I’ve heard that people are confused as to why a boat propeller is there and it occurred to me [that] nothing on the memorial actually says this is the propeller from the boat. So we all know that it is, but visitors who came here didn’t know what it was, what is was for … And also, nobody really knows the reason why it’s pointing where it is.

Again, this speaks to the memorial being as much for those who were involved in the incident as it is for any visitor. This was further highlighted when, on the first anniversary of the sinking of the *Janga/SIEV 221*, a memorial service was held at

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98 Upton, 13.
99 Ibid., 12.
100 Interview, Chris Su.
Smith Point to unveil the newly installed permanent memorial. It was a smaller event than the 100-day memorial service, with approximately 80 to 100 people attending (although this is still a significant turnout). Su, who organised the service and acted as Master of Ceremonies, suggested that the smaller turnout was because ‘most people were pretty over it actually; they didn’t want to go’. The order of ceremonies was quite similar to the one used at the 100-day memorial, with speeches, the use of the same origami paper flowers (saved from the earlier event) and cut flowers for participants to take down to the site of the crash after the ceremony if they wished. The key difference at this event was that three survivors from the crash attended. They had all previously been moved by the Department of Immigration to the mainland and were living in the community there. Local fundraising enabled them to return to Christmas Island for the ceremony and to revisit the site of the disaster. They had intended to read out a message thanking Christmas Islanders for their help; however, it was decided that Su should read out the message on their behalf to minimise their distress. This can also be read as an act of paternalism on behalf of the organisers, once again wanting to avoid scenes such as those from the Sydney funerals, especially with government representatives present.

In addition to the message from the survivors, a message from then Prime Minister Julia Gillard was reprinted in the local newspaper. In this, the dead and survivors are acknowledged alongside the rescuers:

> On behalf of the Australian people, I acknowledge with sadness the dreadful loss of life which occurred off Christmas Island on 15 December last year. … On this day of commemoration, I offer my deepest sympathies to the survivors and to the families of those who were lost. … To the Christmas Island residents and to the Customs and Border Protection and Royal Australian Navy personnel who rallied to save lives that fateful day, I pay tribute to your professionalism and courage. You responded instinctively to the oldest law of the sea – the duty to rescue those in peril – and you did so fearlessly. This was the worst shipwreck in Australian waters for over a

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101 Interview, Chris Su.
102 I was unable to determine if they had been found to be refugees or if they were living on temporary bridging visas awaiting protection visa decisions.
104 Interview, Chris Su.
...century, and those present will carry the sounds and image of that day in their hearts forever.105

Again, the impact on the rescuers – not the survivors or the dead – takes the focus, as it did in the closing speech given by Su, in which he said, ‘We are here today to recognise the valiant efforts of Heroes … the men and women of the HMAS Pirie and CV Triton, the hospital, the SES, the VMR and all the others who helped that day.’106

For some visitors, the memorial object was far less important than the ceremonial events that occurred at its unveiling. Michelle Dimasi explained:

I think probably the most significant thing that happened at that service was afterwards when the memorial had been unveiled and everyone came out to look at it. Christmas Islanders all came forward and were shaking the hands of and [giving] hugs to the survivors. And everyone was crying. I think just finally there was this reconnection from the people that the locals had saved in this tremendous rescue effort. Now they could actually see the people that they had saved … And then after the memorial service that morning, we did go down to the rocks where the crash site happened and, everyone was crying obviously – Christmas Islanders and survivors cried together. And then, for me, I felt there was this complete energy shift on the island; it was as if the place had healed itself. This sorrow, that was still so embedded in the past year, felt like it just had lifted, because people had come together and acknowledged what had happened to the survivors.107

It is notable that Dimasi’s memory of the event is that it was one of coming together of survivors and rescuers, despite the fact that the words used throughout the memorial ceremony focused only on the rescuers and the impact of the Janga/SIEV 221 wreck on them.

As noted earlier, the neighbouring SIEV X Memorial on Christmas Island commemorates an event that happened far from the land on which the memorial stands and, despite the dead individuals being named on the coral stones, the details of the disaster itself are not evoked by the memorial’s form. In contrast, the SIEV 221 Memorial is a harrowing reminder of a traumatising event that occurred within sight of the memorial. This is a confronting object – one participant described the use of the propeller as being ‘like putting a murder weapon on

105 Julia Gillard, ‘Message from the Prime Minister Julia Gillard: Anniversary of the Sinking of SIEV 221 Christmas Island,’ The Islander, 13 January 2012, 23.
106 ‘SIEV 221 One Year Anniversary Memorial Service,’ The Islander, 13 January 2012, 25.
107 Interview, Michelle Dimasi.
display’. It was an event that many locals witnessed and which reverberated throughout the community for long afterwards. The destructive power of the sea is on display, the propeller standing in for the smashed bodies of the dead. It also evokes the shattering of the vessel against the rocks and the subsequent detritus, a fact that one visitor found entirely fitting:

SIEV 221 was a boat that we saw … break into bits, and there were bits of debris of the boat all over the place, so it seemed appropriate that there should be a bit of the boat there [as part of the memorial].

There is little comfort to be found in this grave-like, crude structure. Rather it serves as a reminder not only of those who died but also the violent means of their demise.

Some might argue that the SIEV 221 Memorial focuses too much on the manner of death and too little on the individuals – those who died, those who survived and those who risked their own lives to ensure their survival. However, as Young points out, it is only through such challenging imagery/objects, unlike the classical ideals of conventional memorials, that visitors can be ‘jarred from complacency’ in order to ‘sear memory into public consciousness’. Young also notes that survivors of catastrophic events often want a literal expression of the event commemorated, because:

For survivors, the searing reality of their experience demands as literal a memorial expression as possible. ‘We weren’t tortured and our families weren’t murdered in the abstract,’ survivors complain.

Certainly, through the use of the mangled propeller, the SIEV 221 Memorial provides an entirely literal expression of the ‘searing reality’ of the horror of the disaster. Jon Stanhope describes it as ‘a powerful memorial, particularly with the bent propeller … recognising a dreadful event’ and Gordon Thomson experiences it in the following way:

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108 This participant requested this quote to remain unattributed.
109 Interview, site visitor. The range and volume of debris from the boat is evident from a public notice in the local paper two weeks after the event, which notified islanders that ‘Debris from the recently wrecked vessel is classed as Quarantine Risk Material’, warning that timber could carry termites, pests, or fungal disease and that foodstuffs were a ‘hygiene risk’. ‘Attention All Residents: Quarantine Risk Material,’ The Islander, 24 December 2010, 19.
110 Young, ‘The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,’ 54.
It’s raw and its savage and tough … It’s not something that makes you terribly thoughtful. I think maybe that’s because it was a horrific event.\textsuperscript{112}

Chris Su sees the memorial as aimed at a particular audience: the first responders and other community members who were affected by the disaster. He wanted it to become part of the healing process both for them and for the surviving asylum seekers: ‘I want to let them know that people on CI regarded them as human beings and we have a bond I guess, forged in the most unfortunate of circumstances.’\textsuperscript{113}

As mentioned above, rocks were placed around the concrete base of the memorial. The names of the dead were only added to these rocks in early 2014 as part of the Qingming clean-up of the memorials, three years after the memorial was unveiled, using the names listed in the Coroner’s report.\textsuperscript{114} As with the SIEV X, the names on the stones have already faded (fig. 7.14) and will possibly be replaced and their placement changed over time. Regardless of the nature of a memorial, it will only continue to have mnemonic value if visitors engage with it. However, according to Rigney, even if a memorial ceases to garner attention, its ongoing material presence means that ‘given different circumstances, [it] may always be revived’,\textsuperscript{115} although, ‘memorial culture cannot be sustained without the will of the public to remember and the desire to continue remembering’.\textsuperscript{116} It is too early to tell what the fate of the \textit{SIEV 221 Memorial} on Christmas Island will be in this regard.

**Summary**

This chapter has provided detailed documentation and analysis of the memorials created on Christmas Island in response to the foundering of the boat \textit{Janga}/SIEV 221, resulting in the loss of 50 lives, with 41 survivors. These memorials included a spontaneous memorial, a memorial service including creation of a message

\textsuperscript{112} Interview, Gordon Thomson.
\textsuperscript{113} Interview, Chris Su.
\textsuperscript{114} Interview, Chris Su.
\textsuperscript{115} Rigney, ‘Divided Pasts: A Premature Memorial and the Dynamics of Collective Remembrance,’ 93.
\textsuperscript{116} Adrian Parr, \textit{Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 5.
canvas, and the installation of a permanent public memorial in the island’s ‘memorial zone’ alongside other memorials. The sinking of the *Janga/SIEV 221* was a highly traumatic event in the island’s history and, despite reported ambivalent feelings about asylum seekers, local residents were an essential part of the rescue efforts and demonstrated remarkable bravery in their attempts to save lives.

The design of the permanent *SIEV 221 Memorial* evolved in a similar way to spontaneous memorials. It is a collage of elements that were available to the committee who came together to decide on the form of the memorial. Unlike other memorials, the *SIEV 221 Memorial* was not the result of an artist’s vision or input. Its key component, the twisted propeller from the doomed vessel, had been dredged from the ocean floor months earlier. The plaque had been made for the 100-day memorial held in the Recreation Centre and its text was itself a collage: a paraphrased John Donne quote and the reproduction of some text from the neighbouring *SIEV X Memorial*. The design of the plaque had been settled upon because it was similar to those used in other memorials on Christmas Island. The names on the rocks around the concrete plinth were added after the memorial was unveiled and, again, echoed the design elements used in the *SIEV X Memorial*.

These similarities suggest that the memorial organisers saw it as being comparable to other memorials already in place on Christmas Island; however, I have argued that the function of this memorial stands out as qualitatively different from them. Similarly, this memorial is different from the *SIEV X* memorials considered in the three previous chapters. While the *SIEV 221 Memorial* reminds viewers of the dangerous lengths to which asylum seekers are pushed to seek safety, its focus is on the experience of the local community, and the trace of the sunken vessel provides a physical reminder of the trauma of the rescue endeavour.

Where the other memorials considered thus far in this thesis have commemorated an event that might otherwise have never existed in Australia’s cultural memory, the sinking of the *Janga/SIEV 221* is likely to remain vivid in the minds of many Christmas Island residents and visitors who attended the scene. This memorial
truly is a ‘reminder’ of what happened and a memory that some people would prefer not to revisit.

Although the form and content of the final public memorial might suggest otherwise, the rituals relating to the *Janga*/SIEV 221 had a greater focus on healing of trauma experienced by Christmas Island first responders to the tragedy than on the asylum seekers lost on the boat. In this regard, the *Janga*/SIEV 221 memorial objects and rituals, while ostensibly asking the visitor to focus on those who died, speak to a deeper community need to have their rescue efforts validated as a means of both healing from the traumatic events they experienced and dealing with ambivalent community attitudes to unauthorised boat arrivals.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the case of four public memorials to asylum seekers who died at sea while trying to reach safe haven in Australia. The instigators, designers and creators of these works claim a place in Australian cultural memory for the deaths of asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia, producing commemorative works of particular boat sinkings and the individuals who died in them, as well as asylum seeker deaths more generally.

The memorials were each created as the result of a different catalyst. The Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* began as one man’s desire to take a public, national stand to say ‘these deaths mattered’ and, in concert with his memorial co-founders, to educate high school students and memorial visitors about the event and, thereby, influence broader government asylum seeker and refugee policy. The Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial* was created by a group of artists and activists as an ‘intervention’ into the public debate on asylum seekers and as a commissioned event within a broader arts conference on the topic of the ‘art of dissent’. The Christmas Island *SIEV X Memorial* was instigated because a small group of local refugee advocates living in a remote location wanted to acknowledge the perilous nature of refugee journeys and assert the status of their own local community as a welcoming receiver of asylum seekers. Lastly, the Christmas Island *SIEV 221 Memorial* came into being because one person thought the event needed a permanent public acknowledgement, as much to assist the local population’s processing of a traumatic event as to memorialise those who drowned. Each of the works also functions as an opportunity to publicly grieve the lives lost in the tragedies and express solidarity with those immediately affected by the deaths.

The specific research question, ‘What function/s do Australian public memorials to asylum seekers serve and how do they achieve these functions?’, has been answered using qualitative research methods alongside visual analysis and archival research. I have argued that these memorials challenge a master narrative that positions asylum seekers as ‘other’, ‘illegal’ and ‘invisible’, by creating and,
in some instances, maintaining alternative cultural memory. Following Aleida and Jan Assmann I have deployed the concept of ‘cultural memory’ as, distinct from ‘collective memory’, it understands memory and history not as binary absolute concepts, but rather as intertwined and socially constructed. Cultural memory serves to express a society’s self-image.¹ Such an understanding has facilitated the discovery in this thesis that the memorials considered do not simply narrate known and accepted events, but rather bring to public attention little-known tragedies resulting in deaths of largely unknown ‘outsiders’ and to propose alternative ways of understanding asylum seeker deaths and the Australian polity’s response to them. This cultural memory is achieved through a range of means: (a) community participation in the creation of the memorials to create dialogic exchange and the possibility for future social change; (b) the siting of the memorials in ways that maintain the presence of the dead in the lives of the living; (c) naming and picturing of the dead so as to make familiar the otherwise unknown asylum seekers; (d) viewer interactivity and bodily experiences that create prosthetic memory; and (e) acts of complaisance that both engage with and resist dominant narratives of asylum seekers and keep open the possibility of change.

As has been shown, the creation of each memorial was contingent on community participation and collaborative practice. Returning to Grant Kester’s notion that dialogic works are those in which meaning is not fixed and inherent to the object, but rather produced through exchange and interaction,² I have demonstrated that one way the function of creating or maintaining cultural memory is achieved is through just such a process of participation in the creation and reception of the memorials. The Canberra SIEV X Memorial relied on the contributions of decorated poles from hundreds of individuals, schools and community groups not just for its realisation, but also for its function as a didactic tool to be achieved and thus contribute to creating cultural memory. It also relied on community

¹ Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,’ 132.
participation during the design process and when raising the memorial at its initial unveiling. In both of the memorials on Christmas Island, through the inclusion of the name stones, and the evidence of the passage of time and different hands at work in the writing and rearrangement of the stones, the sense of community input into and engagement with the memorials is palpable. The Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*, conceptualised by a group of artists and activists themselves working collaboratively, depended on the presence of the volunteer human screen to bear the projected images – the names and photographs of the dead that had, in turn, been contributed by participating community members directly touched by the disaster.

Consistent with community collaborative practice, ‘ownership’ was an important element in how the function of creating or maintaining cultural memory was achieved in each memorial. Three of the memorials were initiated by concerned community members (rather than artists) and, in the case of the Canberra *SIEV X Memorial*, broad public input was sought not only into the design of the memorial, but, once that design was finalised, also into its construction and installation. In the case of the memorials on Christmas Island, community groups and individuals were responsible for the designs of each memorial, and the ongoing interventions in the maintenance and rejuvenation of the memorials speak of the extent to which the broader community asserts ‘ownership’ of the memorials. The ongoing relevance of these memorials will rely on this continued ownership.

The site of each of the memorials is another means by which these commemorative works create or maintain cultural memory. For the *SIEV X Memorial* in Canberra, the site of the nation’s capital was explicitly identified by the organisers as an essential location. This was because they identified the event they wanted to memorialise as one of national relevance; it was not simply one local community’s response, they wanted to elevate the issue to one that was relevant to all Australians. They particularly wanted to bring the matter to the attention of federal politicians – those responsible for policy responses to asylum
seekers. The specific site, the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, was also important as it provided a suitable topography for the work and evoked the nature of a water journey by its placement next to the lake. The site also provided an opportunity for the final poles in the line to function as a gesture towards the site of the nation’s parliament – invoking those responsible for developing and implementing border control policies and, through this, metaphorically calling on them to change those policies, or at least react to the deaths commemorated.

Similarly, the site of the Christmas Island SIEV X Memorial and SIEV 221 Memorial is significant to the function of these works. Their placement on a cliff overlooking Flying Fish Cove and the pier where asylum seekers land creates a visual link between the memorials and asylum seekers who do survive their dangerous journeys and arrive on Australian soil (remote though it may be from the mainland where they hope to settle). Sitting in the grounds of Tai Jin House, the original home of the Christmas Island Administrator, and proximate to significant military memorials, the site also serves to create a link between the memorials and political power and responsibility. Unlike the Canberra memorial, which sits on the periphery and can only gesture to the seat of government, the Christmas Island memorials, by being placed within the civic commemorative zone, can be read as being endorsed by local civic authority and having commensurate status with the war and defence force memorials nearby. At the same time, the memorials challenge the exclusionary national identity portrayed by those other memorials and instead create a more inclusive cultural memory.

As a means of creating cultural memory, the siting of the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial brought the issue of dead asylum seekers – and, by extension, border control policy – into the everyday lives of passers-by. This tactical intervention into an urban setting was a prompt to viewers to consider their own position on these matters and an assertion that the memorial was not just about a specific disaster, but also a national public policy issue worthy of public debate.

A crucial aspect of the memorials considered in this thesis is that they include names of the dead. While this is not an unusual practice in itself, naming the
deceased asylum seekers has additional resonance in this case. Naming is a means by which the dead are humanised and individualised, and provides an entry point for lost asylum seekers to take a place in cultural memory. At many contemporary memorials where the dead are named, visitors seek out the name of their own loved one (as discussed, this occurs at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, at the National September 11 Memorial in New York, and when the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is displayed). The nature of the refugee experience, and its fracturing of families and communities, means that the asylum seeker memorials in Australia are unlikely to be visited by the families of those they commemorate (with the exception of the very few who were at the Canberra SIEV X Memorial and Christmas Island SIEV 221 Memorial unveilings). The vast majority of visitors to these sites will not have any personal connection to those who died. Instead, the names on these memorials function not only to humanise the dead, but also to humanise and draw attention to any who attempt such journeys – to insist on their individual existence as fellow beings, not just as asylum seeker statistics, or policy ‘problems’ to be ‘solved’ by governments.

Importantly, the names on the SIEV X memorials also function to challenge and resist ideologically driven attempts by governments to deny the dead their existence and to contribute to fear of ‘the other’. In the case of the asylum seeker memorials considered here, naming functions to reduce the fear of the unknown and the unknowable – naming makes them grieveable. Such naming, along with prosthetic memory (discussed below), also acts a means of prompting empathetic responses to the dead, both in contributors to the memorials and visitors to the sites. Identifying the dead by name where possible, and by gender and age, can prompt participants and visitors to perceive the dead as people to whom ‘infinite care’ is owed in the Levinasian ethical sense.

Naming in these memorials also functions to create a ritual for the living to grieve the dead. The visitor to the Canberra SIEV X Memorial walks along the sinuous line of poles reading name after name; the visitor to the Christmas Island memorials sees a jumble of names and perhaps participates in reasserting their
visibility; and the viewers of the Melbourne SIEV X Memorial saw names projected and heard the litany of names read out. Such ritual elevates the memorials from being inert expressive objects, and instead allows for them to become active catalysts in the creation of cultural memory. This can potentially contribute to social change by resisting what Deborah Kelly referred to as the ‘forced amnesia’ of government attempts to suppress the names of the dead asylum seekers aboard the SIEV X.

While naming the deceased is one means by which the memorials bring asylum seekers into cultural memory, more corporeal mechanisms are also deployed in each work. Actual bodily experiences of participants and visitors created prosthetic memories for both those involved in creating the memorials and those that visit them – ‘memories’ of events which they never actually experienced and people they never met. Such memories are created not just through corporeal experience but also through the emotional affect this creates, and, significantly, have the ‘ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics’.\(^3\) Importantly, as Landsberg has shown in relation to film and museums, prosthetic memory has a particular ability to generate empathy. This allows the rememberer to understand that, despite the alterity of the remembered asylum seeker, they are nevertheless connected and therefore have ethical obligations to them.\(^4\) This thesis has extended Landsberg’s idea of prosthetic memory and demonstrated that it is also applicable to memorials that offer the kind of interactive possibilities of the SIEV X and SIEV 221 memorials.

The Canberra SIEV X Memorial provided those who participated in the temporary raising ceremony the opportunity to ‘hold’ and ‘lay down’ the dead using the poles as proxies. Visitors to the final memorial ‘stand in the boat’ in place of, and in solidarity with, the dead. They are prompted to ‘remember’ what it must have been like to have experienced journeying in such an overcrowded vessel – thus creating prosthetic memory. Similarly, the stones at the Christmas Island


\(^4\) Ibid., 9.
memorials are picked up and held by many who visit the site, as if cradling the dead, and their rewriting, cleaning and rearrangement of the stones rejuvenates through tactile experience and physical action a connection with the lost. In the Melbourne *SIEV X Memorial*, participants effectively became the shrouded dead, laid out as disaster victims often are. They also ‘carry’ the names and faces of the dead on their bodily screen. These embodied interactions with and through the memorials serve, through prosthetic memory, to create a collectively held cultural memory of the dead asylum seekers and the events that led to their demise.

The device of prosthetic memory is particularly apt in the case of the three memorials to the SIEV X disaster, as the creation of cultural memory occurs in the relative absence of public awareness of the vessel’s sinking. In contrast, the Christmas Island *SIEV 221 Memorial* memorialises an event that is still vivid in the living memories of Christmas Island residents and visitors who were involved in the rescue efforts and salvage operations. As demonstrated, this memorial, and the commemorative events that preceded it, maintain those memories and narrate the trauma associated with the disaster. Although the words at the memorial services and investigations into the disaster acknowledge the heroic efforts of the first responders, the final memorial itself focuses on the harrowing and destructive nature of the disaster – leaving only twisted metal (and traumatic memories) in its wake. This memorial is less concerned with the absence of the bodies of the dead than with the experiences of the living.

The realisation of each of the memorials considered in this thesis required organisers and participants to negotiate with authorities and sites of power. The inevitable concessions this necessitated are framed within Jung’s notion of complaisance, defined as an unavoidable compromise between resistance and complicity. The Canberra *SIEV X Memorial* was changed from a six-week installation to a 30-minute raising of the poles in the face of a lack of authorisation for a longer installation. The organisers ‘played along’ with the rules of planning permission required by the National Capital Authority because they felt compelled to do so, not because they necessarily felt these rules were
appropriate (in fact, they were effectively resisting the rule that memorials can only be installed after a minimum 10-year period has elapsed following the event they seek to commemorate). However, organisers were complaisant, rather than resistant, when it came to the planned memorial event – having failed to receive planning permission in time, rather than going ahead and installing the work (which would have been overtly resistant) or simply letting go of the idea of an event (which could be seen as complicit), they instead decided to have a temporary erection of the memorial via people holding up the poles.

Similarly, in the Christmas Island memorials, locals ‘reluctantly complied’ with the limitations placed on them either purposefully or accidentally. They accepted the incorrect placement of the *SIEV X Memorial* and instead focused on their addition of name rocks as a more potent element of the memorial’s form. In the *Janga/SIEV 221 Memorial* they reluctantly accepted that survivors were unable to attend the memorial ceremony, but ensured that they were represented at it through their words (and later arranged for some survivors to attend anniversary commemorations). They shared some of the material aspects of the memorial through the distribution of flowers to survivors in detention. While unable ‘not to follow’, memorial organisers found ways to negotiate hegemonic forces not through overt resistance or complicity, but rather through complaisance.

As has been shown, this complaisance – while not necessarily disrupting, and to some extent reinforcing existing power structures – means that socio-political change is not forestalled. In fact, by ‘playing along’ with the rules within which they were told they must work, the creators of the memorials and the participants in their unveilings were able to mount works which many have experienced as calling on governments, and Australian society more broadly, to conceptualise asylum seekers differently and respond to their plight with greater compassion.

In terms of future research, it would be instructive to compare the Australian memorials examined in this thesis with those that have been erected by other nations or groups, as discussed in the literature review, and consider commonalities or differences in how they function. In addition to the examples
cited in the literature review which have already been subject to study, there is also a memorial cross, now housed in the British Museum, created by an Italian carpenter from the wood of doomed asylum seeker vessels that wash up on the Mediterranean coast.⁵ There was also a concrete memorial plaque (now removed) at the Galang refugee camp in Malaysia, which memorialised Vietnamese refugees and asylum seekers. Text on one side of the plaque commemorated those who perished on their asylum seeker journeys, while text on the other side offered appreciation to the international bodies and receiving countries who resettled Vietnamese refugees.⁶

As noted in the Introduction and Methods chapters, there is also another body of memorials in Australia to refugees and asylum seekers – those created by the Australian-Vietnamese community as ‘Monuments of Gratitude’ – which warrant their own study. Very different in form from the memorials examined in this thesis, I suggest these monuments also have different functions, achieved through different means. In common with the memorials considered in this thesis, they recognise the perilous nature of the refugee journey by acknowledging that many died in their attempts to escape persecution. However, analysis suggests that they are significantly different in their function as they are created by a successfully settled refugee-background community to memorialise both their history of arrival and their status as an integrated part of Australian society. Their siting is also very different in that they are located in recreational and business precincts, again speaking to an integration with the receiving country both literally and figuratively.

As noted throughout this thesis, meanings and functions are contingent, and one of those contingencies is the passage of time; thus, it would be useful to return in the future to the asylum seeker memorials discussed here to consider if/how their function has changed. In the course of the research for this thesis, when I asked

participants if they thought the function of the memorials had changed since their inception, there was unanimous reflection that, in their view, the function had not changed, despite their hopes that it might have. They noted that asylum seeker and border control policies in Australia had returned to being as stringent, if not more so, than those in place at the time of the dedication of the memorials. This meant the need to keep asylum seekers and how they are treated in the public consciousness remained a necessary continuing struggle.

By demonstrating how the memorials examined here create and maintain cultural memory, this research contributes to understandings of the nature of the memorials studied and thereby to memory studies. It is clear that these memorials do not fit neatly into existing categories of memorial form or function: they are not quite countermemorials, nor are they traditional memorials, despite sharing some formal aspects; and they do not necessarily challenge the idea of memorials as antimemorials do. Rather, the works examined here all create cultural memory to resist and challenge hegemonic discourse which seeks to demonise asylum seekers or exclude their deaths from the nation’s memory; and they use whatever means most appropriate to their local conditions and intended aims to do so.

Those involved in creating the SIEV 221 Memorial on Christmas Island had themselves been involved in the event they were commemorating – they were not merely ‘remnants’ of trauma but direct sufferers of it. Those involved in creating the SIEV X and SIEV 221 memorials were not only vicarious and actual witnesses to the drownings, but were also first-hand witnesses to how the polity was responding to increased asylum seeker boat arrivals.

These Australian asylum seeker memorials are united in presenting the possibility of a compassionate response to the deaths of hundreds of strangers who were seeking to settle in Australia. By mobilising individuals and communities to engage in memory work about those who drowned on the SIEV X and the Janga/SIEV 221, and asylum seekers more broadly, these memorials seek to address the injury done to memory and identity by attempts to exclude asylum
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Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken July 2014)
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Fig. 7.1 Janga/SIEV 221 breaks up at Rocky Point, Christmas Island, 2010
Photo credit: Reuters
Fig. 7.2 Impromptu memorial to *Janga*/*SIEV 221* disaster, Rocky Point, Christmas Island

Photo credit: Chris Su (photo taken three months after memorial created)
Fig. 7.3 Press images from Janga/SIEV 221 funerals
Photo credits: Left: Courier Mail; Right: Sydney Morning Herald

Fig. 7.4 Laying flowers at Janga/SIEV 221 memorial service, Rocky Point, Christmas Island, March 2011
Photo credit: Chris Su
Fig. 7.5 Memorial plaque, Janga/SIEV 221 memorial service, Recreation Centre, Christmas Island, March 2011
Photo credit: Chris Su

Fig. 7.6 MP Warren Snowden throwing wreath, Janga/SIEV 221 memorial service, Rocky Point, Christmas Island, March 2011
Photo credit: Chris Su
Fig. 7.7 Canvas signing, *Janga/SIEV 221* memorial service, Recreation Centre, Christmas Island, March 2011

Photo credit: Chris Su

Fig. 7.8 Memorial canvas, Christmas Island, March 2011

Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken July 2014)
Fig. 7.9 Memorial canvas displayed at Recreation Centre, Christmas Island, March 2011
Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken July 2014)
Fig. 7.10  
**SIEV 221 Memorial, Christmas Island, 2011**  
Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken 2014)

Fig. 7.11  
**HMAS Sydney Memorial, Old European Cemetery, Christmas Island**  
Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photos taken July 2014)
Fig. 7.12  
*SIEV 221 Memorial*, Christmas Island, 2011 (with *SIEV X Memorial* in background)

Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken July 2014)
Fig. 7.13  *SIEV 221 Memorial*, Christmas Island, showing Rocky Point in the distance

Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken July 2014)
Fig. 7.14  Faded name rocks, *SIEV 221 Memorial*, Christmas Island
Photo credit: Rebecca Cole (photo taken July 2014)
## Appendix 2: Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memorial</th>
<th>Person interviewed</th>
<th>Role in memorial</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIEV X Canberra</td>
<td>Steve Biddulph</td>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>22 April 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beth Gibbings</td>
<td>Project Officer</td>
<td>23 October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rod Horsfield</td>
<td>Co-founder</td>
<td>22 May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SueAnne Ware</td>
<td>Designer/Consultant</td>
<td>4 March 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sue Hoffman</td>
<td>Pole contributor</td>
<td>7 July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Pole contributor</td>
<td>26 August 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Site visitor</td>
<td>17 March 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Site visitor</td>
<td>19 April 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Site visitor</td>
<td>19 April 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jon Stanhope</td>
<td>ACT Chief Minister</td>
<td>2 December 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>when memorial planned</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and installed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIEV X Christmas Island</td>
<td>Gordon Thomson</td>
<td>Planner, Shire Council</td>
<td>1 July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>President</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lin Gaff</td>
<td>Founder/organiser</td>
<td>3 July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robyn Stephenson</td>
<td>Founder/organiser</td>
<td>2 July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Dimasi</td>
<td>Site visitor/stone writer</td>
<td>1 July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIEV 221 Christmas Island</td>
<td>Chris Su</td>
<td>Organiser</td>
<td>27 &amp; 30 June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Site visitor</td>
<td>2 May 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorial</td>
<td>Person interviewed</td>
<td>Role in memorial</td>
<td>Interview date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIEV X Melbourne</td>
<td>Deborah Kelly</td>
<td>Collaborating artist</td>
<td>10 September 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Katie Hepworth</td>
<td>Collaborating artist</td>
<td>1 October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enda Murray</td>
<td>Collaborating artist</td>
<td>1 October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pip Shea (via email)</td>
<td>Collaborating artist</td>
<td>26 January 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Key questions/areas of discussion for those involved in the design and planning of the memorials included the following:

- How did you become involved in the [XX] memorial?
- What was your role in the creation of the memorial?
- What were your hopes for what the memorial would do/achieve?
- Tell me about the design of the memorial (including its siting and materials).
- How were community members involved in the memorial’s design and creation?
- What was the reaction to the memorial, both during the design phase and once it was unveiled?
- Do you think the meaning of the memorial has changed over time? If yes, how?

Key questions for community members who contributed poles to the SIEV X Canberra memorial:

- How did you become involved in the SIEV X memorial?
- What was your role in creating the pole/s?
- What were your hopes for what the memorial would do/achieve?
- Tell me about your pole design. Why did you choose the particular design/images?
- What was the reaction to the memorial, both while you were making the pole and once it was unveiled?
- Do you think the meaning of the memorial has changed over time? If yes, how?

Key questions for visitors to the memorial sites included:

- Why have you visited this site?
- Have you visited the site before? Do you think you’ll visit again?
- How did you feel about the memorial?
- What does the memorial mean to you?
Appendix 4: Plain Language Statements and Consent Form

Note: The following plain language statements and consent form were based on templates provided by the University of Melbourne. All were printed on University letterhead for participants.

Plain Language Statement for those involved in creation/planning of the artwork
"Remembering the unknown and the unwelcome: memorial and countermemorial practices for asylum seekers in Australia"

You are invited to participate in the above research project, which is being conducted by Dr Catherine Macneill (supervisor) and Ms Rebecca Cole (PhD student) of the School of Culture and Communication at The University of Melbourne. You have been invited to participate because of your involvement in the [insert name of relevant artwork]. This project will form part of Ms Cole’s PhD thesis, and has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

The aim of this study is to examine the creation of and response to public memorials to asylum seekers and refugees in Australia and to provide a public record of the perspectives of those who created and view these works. Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to contribute by participating in an interview (from 30 minutes to an hour) at a time and place convenient to you. In this interview, Ms Cole will ask you questions about your involvement in the [insert artwork name]. With your permission, the interview would be audio-recorded so that we can ensure that we make an accurate record of what you say.

In this type of project it is normal to give the names of people who have contributed information. We would like to seek your permission to use your name in the final thesis. If you would prefer some comments to be made off the record, you could indicate this during the interview. If for any reason you choose not to be named, we would refer to you by a pseudonym, and remove any contextual details that might reveal your identity. We would protect your anonymity to the fullest possible extent within the limits of the law; your name and contact details would be kept in a locked cabinet separate from the data you supply. You should note, however, that since the number of potential interviewees is small, it might still be possible for someone to identify you.

Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be sent to you if you wish. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences. The data will be kept securely in the School of Culture and Communication for a minimum of five years from the date of publication, before being destroyed.

Please be advised that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

If you would like to participate, please indicate that you have read and understood this information by signing the accompanying consent form and returning it in the envelope provided. Ms Cole will then contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time for you to view the web site and to complete the questionnaire and interview.

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either of the researchers; Dr Macneill: [telephone], Ms Cole: [telephone]. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 8344 2073, or fax: 9347 6739.
Plain Language Statement for viewers

"Remembering the unknown and the unwelcome: memorial and countermemorial practices for asylum seekers in Australia"

You are invited to participate in the above research project, which is being conducted by Dr Catherine Macneill (supervisor) and Ms Rebecca Cole (PhD student) of the School of Culture and Communication at The University of Melbourne. You have been invited to participate because you have viewed a selected memorial. This project will form part of Ms Cole's PhD thesis, and has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

The aim of this study is to examine the creation of and response to public memorials to asylum seekers and refugees in Australia and to provide a public record of the perspectives of those who created and view these works. Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to contribute by participating in an interview for 15-30 minutes at a time and place convenient to you. In this interview, Ms Cole will ask you questions about your experience of the artwork. With your permission, the interview would be audio-recorded so that we can ensure that we make an accurate record of what you say.

We intend to protect your anonymity and the confidentiality of your responses to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law. Your name and contact details will be kept in a separate, password-protected computer file from any data that you supply. This will only be able to be linked to your responses by the researchers. In the final report, you will be referred to by a pseudonym. We will remove any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity.

Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be sent to you if you wish. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences. The data will be kept securely in the School of Culture and Communication for a minimum of five years from the date of publication, before being destroyed.

Please be advised that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

If you would like to participate, please indicate that you have read and understood this information by signing the accompanying consent form and returning it in the envelope provided. Ms Cole will then contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time for you to view the web site and to complete the questionnaire and interview.

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either of the researchers; Dr Macneill: [telephone], Ms Cole: [telephone]. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 8344 2073, or fax: 9347 6739.
Consent form

Consent form for persons participating in a research project

PROJECT TITLE: Remembering the unknown and the unwelcome: memorial and counter-memorial practices for asylum seekers in Australia

Name of participant: ___________________________________________

Name of investigator(s): Dr Catherine Macneill; Ms Rebecca Cole

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher.

3. I understand that my participation will involve an interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:
   (a) the possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   (c) the project is for the purpose of research;
   (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   (e) I have been informed that with my consent the interview will be audio-recorded and I understand the audio recordings will be stored at the University of Melbourne for a minimum of five years and will ultimately be destroyed;
   (f) my real name will be used in any publications arising from the research unless I request that a pseudonym be used;
   (g) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this

☐ I consent to this interview being audio-recorded
☐ I consent to my real name being used in this research
☐ I would like to receive a copy of the research summary report
☐ yes  ☐ no

If yes to the research summary report, please provide email or mailing address

EMAIL: ___________________________________________

MAILING ADDRESS: ___________________________________________

Participant signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________
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