Lionis, Chrisoula. "Humour in states of occupation: Contemporary art and cultural resilience in Palestine, Greece and Australia." *Visual Histories of Occupation: A Transcultural Dialogue*. Ed. Jeremy E. Taylor. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 139–156. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350167513.ch-006>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:41 UTC.

Copyright © Jeremy E. Taylor 2021. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Humour in states of occupation: Contemporary art and cultural resilience in Palestine, Greece and Australia

Chrisoula Lionis

Introduction

With strategies of protest that range from giant diaper-wearing hot-air balloons, to the rise of the hashtag #nottheonion, the presidency of Donald Trump has ignited new debates on the politics and indeed potential of humour. Although at the outset of Trump's presidency many were quick to declare satire dead (as truth seemed to have indeed become stranger than fiction), what we have actually witnessed has been a spectacular resurgence in the use of humour in political commentary and public protest. This, in turn, has served to reinvigorate scholarly research and debate into the efficacy of humour as a political tool, particularly for marginalized or oppressed groups.

Humour is, as they say, all about the timing. Where vernacular forms of humour (memes, comics, cartoons, etc.) generate their virility in relation to how swiftly and innovatively they relate to recent events, the humour that operates in contemporary art follows a very different temporal register. In simple terms, art takes time. It takes time to be produced (particularly when commissioned); it takes time to be programmed for exhibition, time to be installed and time to be critically evaluated. The 'slow humour' of contemporary art thus functions very differently to other visual vernacular forms. Although we have seen a rise in analysis of humour as well as attempts to formulate new conceptual frameworks for understanding the spread of laughter through vernacular forms (particularly through digital platforms), leading scholars across the social sciences and Humanities continue to lament the lack of scholarly analysis on humour.¹ Although this paucity is felt across the Humanities more broadly, it is acutely visible in fields that critically engage with contemporary art practice.

This paucity of scholarship is surprising given the marked uptake in strategies of humour by artists from sites of emergency and/or occupation, and those dealing

with issues of collective trauma. Since the 1990s, visual culture and related fields have maintained a focus on the themes of trauma and emergency – something that is evident, for example, in the scholarship around aesthetic representations of emergency, research on migration, affect, and memory, and investigations of socially engaged art practices.² Underlying these projects is an approach that warns against the dangers of reducing trauma to a mere aesthetic concern. Moreover, within an increasingly globalized art world, the phenomenal growth in ‘mega-exhibitions’ (e.g. documenta, biennales such as Sharjah and Gwangju) has led to a situation where major art events are increasingly framed as cultural laboratories for the debate and analysis of urgent contemporary political, cultural and social issues.³ Given that this diversification of art making, consumption and criticism has run parallel to a view of trauma as the sensibility emblematic of the last century, it is in some ways not surprising that artists from sites of political upheaval are often framed as ‘local informants’ prescribed the task of narrating experiences of trauma, and ‘their’ social and political histories. This is most acute in the engagement with artists from sites of occupation.⁴

This chapter investigates how and why artists from around the world are increasingly turning to humorous aesthetic strategies for documenting and re-assessing experiences of emergency, crisis and collective trauma that arise from the experience of occupation. Critically engaging with diverse understandings of the concept of ‘occupation’, this chapter focuses on three key case studies to offer a comparison of how humour operates within contemporary art produced in diverse geographies currently under various forms of occupation: Palestine (military occupation), Greece (financial occupation) and Indigenous Australia (denied sovereignty). Focusing on the work of contemporary artists including Emily Jacir (Palestine), Richard Bell (Australia) and Panos Sklavenitis (Greece), and mapping changes to art infrastructure across these three sites, this chapter makes clear laughter’s unique ability to communicate the lived experience of occupation. Underpinned by a discussion as to why humour is crucial to the social function of art, this chapter thus aims to reveal humour’s capacity for operating as a tool of cultural resilience in three key ways: through political enactment, critical evaluations of collective identity and a reconfiguration of relationships to specific geographies.

Restoration of dignity: Humour as cultural resilience under occupation

The body of research investigating the relationship between humour and the experiences of crisis, trauma and marginalization from other disciplines (e.g. philosophy and sociology) has not been applied to visual culture. Cultural studies research on the subject is often dominated by literature reviews of seminal theories of humour (‘superiority theory’, ‘relief theory’ and ‘incongruity theory’). Where scientific fields such as psychology provide numerous in-depth investigations of the relationship between humour and trauma, focusing in particular on its potential as a ‘mature-defence mechanism’ and survival strategy,⁵ the bulk of work on humour in cultural studies is underscored by an enquiry into whether humour can hold the key to social,

political and ideological change and subversion, or whether it simply maintains the status quo. The analysis of the relationship between humour and marginalization is largely made up of analysis of the history and social impacts of ethnic and racially based humour.⁶ This line of enquiry is also bound to the investigation of humour as a means of re-enforcing collective and national identity.⁷

When beginning to think through the applicability of this scholarship in developing a framework for understanding humour as a form of cultural resilience in contemporary art, one is presented by two chief problems. The first of these relates to the idea of resilience in contemporary art as being most closely associated with 'social-practice' modes of art making: forms of art that not only represent social-political problems, but attempt to forge participatory art with a practical application in the service of 'real' world justice. The second, and no doubt more pressing problem is how to actually define 'cultural resilience'. Although there remains a lack of a comprehensive and unified definition of 'cultural resilience', leading interdisciplinary scholars in the field agree on a general definition of resilience as being a continual process that provides individuals with the ability to bounce back, and perhaps even thrive in the face of adverse life experiences.⁸

Whether we describe it as resilience, or with terms such as 'anti-fragility',⁹ there is a growing awareness of the need to build resilience in order to face a climate that is increasingly characterized as being in a permanent state of crisis. This is perhaps nowhere more important than for communities subject to systematic oppression, violence and collective trauma. For anthropologist Catherine Panter-Brick (a leader in the field of conflict, resilience and health), at the centre of resilience rests the issue of dignity, which is key to a hopeful future.¹⁰ It is these two issues – hope and dignity – that underscore the cultural resilience offered by humour in contemporary art from sites of occupation. Humour not only allows artists to evade 'trauma envy', it also allows for empowering narrations of contemporary experience and the imagining of alternative and hopeful futures. That said, cultural resilience (like humour) is undoubtedly context specific, shifting its shape and impact according to the specific histories, experiences and needs of diverse cultures.

Hierarchies of suffering: Forms of occupation

An investigation of how humour operates in the practice of artists living through diverse forms of contemporary occupation entails not only a critical evaluation of differing forms of art making and their reception, but also an unpacking of diverse contemporary understandings of what is meant by the term 'occupation'. Although the attempt to define 'occupation' is implicit across all contributions to this volume in one way or another – debates about definitions of the term 'occupation' are outlined in the volume's Introduction – the aim in this chapter is also to investigate why this term has grown in use across contemporary art discourse. The broad use of the term 'occupation' in contemporary art discourse in effect not only mirrors the growing use of the term across diverse disciplines, but also points to uncertainty behind the actual meaning of the term.

This uncertainty about the term 'occupation' is by no means new. It is something that can be traced across several centuries and, as Michel Vuethey notes, occupation is a term disputed across practically all contemporary conflicts, effectively rendering it juridically inoperative.¹¹ Confusion about the term is thus measured not only in the minds of those drafting military and legal conventions, but also in the minds of 'occupiers' and 'occupied' populations. Tracing the historical trajectory of the term, Peter Stirk proposes an essential conceptual distinction between 'conquest' and 'occupation' (the latter being 'a distinctive military government and temporary authority').¹² It is perhaps this emphasis on 'temporary authority' that underscores the association between 'occupation' and spheres outside of military conflict in recent years.

For the political philosopher Jacques Rancière, the broadened applicability of the term 'occupation' (in the political sphere) is a phenomenon that can be traced over the last decade. He explains that previously occupation was considered a 'side issue' that belonged to either the 'military sphere' (as epitomized by the case of Israel/Palestine) or the 'social sphere' (argued to be exemplified by 'sit down' protests described in French as *grèves avec occupation*). For Rancière the recent spike in popularity of the term in the political sphere is linked to movements alleged to emerge ephemerally, that do not strive towards a clear and specific outcome, and are pitted against representative politics; here he refers to the Occupy movement.¹³ This ephemeral and viral nature of the global Occupy movement (and its relationship to the so-called 'Arab Spring') is argued by art historian W. J. T. Mitchell to signify a shift in our understanding of the term 'occupation'. For Mitchell, the term is now alleged to embody 'unlimited grammatical flexibility', which, although signifying the reclaiming of public space for disenfranchised masses, involves 'a paradoxical temporal and rhetorical dimension'. In short, what Mitchell makes clear is that the term 'occupation' now may be said to stand for political, spatial and temporal activity that we might previously have associated with *counteroccupation*.¹⁴

Whilst Rancière and Mitchell's discussion around how this emphasis on 'occupation' centres on the attempt to transform the function of common (and therefore political) space is an important one, it is more pertinent here to consider how their arguments suggest that the critical evaluation of the term 'occupation' mirrors the rise of another key term over the last decade – 'crisis'. Whereas the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008 jettisoned popular use of the term 'crisis' around the world, the foundations for this popularity were arguably laid in the decade prior. This was when the idiom of 'exception' became central to international political discourse, and the ideas of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben (despite their differing emphases) became the locus of research not only in political and international studies, but also in visual culture.¹⁵

This trajectory goes some way in explaining why there has been an increased tendency to describe art practice as operating under a state of 'occupation', even when these environments are, at least strictly speaking, not under military occupation. Crucially, my decision here to harness the term 'occupation' to analyse contemporary art from the diverse geographies of Greece, Australia and Palestine is done with the full knowledge that the 'occupation' faced by each population is vastly different. Further to this, my aim here is not to compare the severity of diverse forms of occupation, as this would be a process akin to creating a hierarchy of suffering. Rather, my emphasis

is grounded on an assessment of how and why humour emerges as a strategy in the practice of contemporary artists living in sites frequently described as being under occupation, and how the experience of occupation is once perceived as a repeated process rather than a standalone event.

Each of these sites is legislatively understood as being in a political state of exception: military occupation in Palestine; the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) in Australia; and economic austerity in Greece. Thus, despite the geographical and cultural gulf that separates each of these examples, they share one vital thing in common – a loss of sovereignty. Although this absence of sovereignty is felt to varying degrees across all three sites, it goes some way in explaining why, over the last few years, discourse around contemporary art produced in these three sites has been increasingly tethered to the term ‘occupation’.¹⁶ This is, of course, not particularly surprising in the case of Palestine, where major projects such as the Palestinian Museum and events such as the art biennial Qalandiya International are continually framed as ‘art under occupation’. More recently, however, there has been an increased tendency to frame Indigenous art practice in Australia as operating under occupation – something compellingly argued in the work of anthropologist Jennifer Biddle.¹⁷ In the case of Greece, this shift in the conceptual framing of contemporary art practice became more pronounced with the advent of the German contemporary festival documenta 14 in Athens in 2018, when the city was increasingly framed as a ‘German colony’.¹⁸

An important dimension that cuts through all three of these examples is that they have each been harnessed as epitomizing political tropes centred on the idea of resistance. Although this is most obvious in the case of Palestine (epitomized perhaps with the catch-phrase ‘we are all Palestinians’), it is also clear in heroicized media representations of anti-austerity protests in Greece, and to views of Indigenous Australians as carriers of a ‘timeless’ culture.¹⁹ Though often linked to a sense of political solidarity, these essentialist framings too often cast these populations as rich in cultural capital but poor in critical and intellectual capital.²⁰ Moreover, the larger significance here is that, of course, we are not all Palestinians, nor are we all Greeks, or Indigenous Australians. This is to say that specificity matters, equally in politics as with humour.

Running parallel to this frame of ‘occupation’ has been a turn towards the use of humour in cultural output emerging from Greece, Palestine and Indigenous Australia. Whereas there has been in-depth analysis on this shift in studies of contemporary Palestinian art,²¹ it has only recently become the object of scholarly analysis in Greece and Australia, with particular attention paid towards ‘Blak’ comedy on television and in theatre in Australia,²² and mimetic strategies of over-identification in Greek contemporary art.²³

It is important here to make several things clear about the conceptual approach to humour in this text. Firstly, although discussion in this chapter engages with various typologies of humour employed in contemporary art practice (wit, irony, parody, pastiche, etc.), this is not the primary emphasis. Rather, focus here is geared towards understanding the impetus behind humour in contemporary art from sites of ‘occupation’ as well as its reception. Secondly, discussion here is based on an approach that assumes there is no such thing as a ‘Greek’, ‘Palestinian’ or ‘Indigenous’ sense of

humour. Rather, examples of humour in contemporary art emerging from each of these sites are informed by specific histories and collective identities. In this way, analysis herein seeks to affirm the idea that humour in contemporary art coming from each of these sites is idiosyncratic insofar as the events that shaped each of these collective identities and experiences are particular to each group. Thus, in order to glean insight into how the humour generated in contemporary art responds (or indeed intervenes) in the experience of occupation, it is vital to understand the specific experiences of occupation that run across these three sites.

Exile and connection to place: Humour and Palestine

Despite the number of military occupations underway today (e.g. the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus, or the Russian occupation of Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia), it is the Israeli occupation of Palestine that is most often understood and referred to as 'the' Occupation. Just as the term 'Palestine' changes meaning depending on the context (fluctuating between pre-1948 historical Palestine and today's Palestinian Territories), so too can the phrase 'Occupied Palestine'. This term is, however, most accurately attributed to the fifty-year occupation that followed Israel's success in the 1967 June War/Six-Day War – a topic examined in Maayan Amir's chapter in this book. Where the foundation of Israel in 1948 is referred to as *al-Nakba* (or 'the Catastrophe') and is considered the seminal moment in modern Palestinian history (responsible for the exile of 80 per cent of the Arab population of historical Palestine), the Arab defeat in 1967 is commonly referred to as *al-Naksa* (the 'set-back'). Marking the beginning of the longest military occupation in modern history, the *Naksa* is frequently understood as the moment that would define decades of conflict between Israel and Palestine. In concrete terms, Israel's victory in 1967 saw it occupy East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as the Golan Heights in Syria and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Despite Israel's resounding victory and the resulting devastating territorial losses, the *Naksa* also signalled the loss of faith in Arab allies, thus ushering in a new era of political self-determination (with Palestinian leadership over the Palestine Liberation Organization) and a re-energized revolutionary movement.

The move away from revolutionary politics towards international diplomatic negotiations came with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, when Palestinians achieved international recognition for their claims for sovereignty over territory. Establishing the Palestinian National Authority (PA), and commonly understood as the beginning of the 'peace process', the accords set out the general guidelines for Palestinian self-government over the West Bank and Gaza. Carving Palestinian territory into areas A, B and C, the accords were allegedly designed as a five-year temporary measure that would pave the way for transfer from Israeli military government and its civil administration to the creation of a Palestinian sovereign state. This process has now taken almost three decades. The result is that today Palestine finds itself in a state of arrested development, and Israel's military occupation continues alongside the siege over Gaza and the ongoing denial of the Right of Return for almost 5 million

Palestinian refugees living in exile around the world. Somewhat surprisingly, it is against this background that the international profile of Palestinian contemporary art has grown at an unprecedented rate.

Often described as a 'cultural renaissance', this growth is visible across almost all art forms, and can be measured in the growth in arts infrastructure, the international training of artists, the opening of new education centres, arts festivals and the establishment of art and museum spaces across the West Bank and Jerusalem. The establishment of these new initiatives is, on the one hand, a testament to Palestinian creative ingenuity. On the other hand, however, it is a reflection of the challenges faced by both artists and cultural institutions. Since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 and heightened restrictions on movement, Palestinians have been subject to a geographical, economic and cultural fragmentation brought about by the occupation. The result is that it is impossible to have a space that is open to all local Palestinian artists and the public; which is to say that Palestinians in Gaza cannot participate in exhibitions in the West Bank and Jerusalem; artists with Israeli passports cannot take up residencies in the United Arab Emirates or Lebanon; and Palestinians born in the Diaspora (particularly those with passports from countries in the Arab world) find access to Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem and Israel beyond their reach.²⁴

The point here is that Palestinians across the geographical spectrum (whether living in Israel, the Territories, the Diaspora or in refugee camps around the world) are all in diverse ways impacted upon by the experience of exile and occupation. This is an issue reflected directly in the work *Sexy Semite* by artist Emily Jacir. A relational artwork involving collaboration with Palestinians living in the United States, this work involved the commissioning of a series of advertisements in the personals section of the *Village Voice* newspaper. Routinely appearing in the newspaper across the years of 2000 and 2002, these advertisements all appeared to be by Palestinian readers, each seeking a romantic liaison with a Jewish reader as a means of facilitating a return to the homeland by way of the Israeli Law of Return. One advertisement, for example, reads 'Palestinian Semite in search of Jewish soul mate. Do you love milk & honey? I'm ready to start a big family in Israel. Still have house keys. Waiting for you.' The text in this advertisement demonstrates the conditions laid out by Jacir when commissioning participants for the project: namely that each advertisement should reference the continual denial of the Right of Return, and that it should also use the term 'Semite' as a means of undermining the terms frequent understanding as pertaining only to Jews.

Eventually this pattern of advertisements roused suspicion, and media outlets went so far as to speculate that the personals were part of a Palestinian terrorist plot.²⁵ Although this might seem laughable when considered in the context of a chapter focusing upon contemporary art, this (mis-)reading of the work highlights a significant feature of humour: namely, its ability to function as what philosopher Simon Critchley describes as a 'secret code'.²⁶ The 'secret code' of humour at play in *Sexy Semite* is twofold. Firstly, it presents a parody of genuine newspaper personals, drawing from acronyms characteristic of personals including 'LTR' (long-term relationship), or 'SKG' (seeking), and clichéd personality descriptors such as 'enjoying walks on the beach' and 'enjoying sunsets'. Secondly, and more importantly to our purposes here, these clichés are set alongside stereotypes of Palestine and Israel in each advert (e.g. olives, falafel

and 'land of milk and honey'). Most importantly, these advertisements draw reference to very particular Palestinian nationalist signifiers including citrus fruit, mention of house keys and a description of the city of Acre with the Palestinian name of Akka rather than the Israeli 'Akko'.

Sexy Semite thus seeks to 'return' Palestinian readers both literally (using the Israeli Law of Return), but also symbolically through a strategy of humour. The inclusion of these national signifiers in the work makes the initial advertisements in the *Village Voice* instantly recognizable to particular readers as a humorous act of multifaceted political subversion. For Palestinians (and to a certain extent for those who stand in solidarity with them) laughter precedes the context of the gallery because these banal objects are immediately understood as cultural signifiers and therefore do not require framing devices or contextualization. Put differently, although we might appreciate that having a sense of humour is a universal human trait, humour is undoubtedly context specific and, importantly, it serves as a form of cultural insider knowledge.²⁷ For Simon Critchley, humour is argued to validate a shared understanding of custom and place, but also disposition and character. With this in mind, humour is said to be the vehicle that connects us strongly to a particular place and leads us to predicate characteristics of that place while attributing certain customs and dispositions to its inhabitants. Humour therefore takes us back to the place where we are from (whether that is our neighbourhood or the nation), something of immense value for people who are not only occupied, but also in the seventh decade of their exile.²⁸

Importantly, *Sexy Semite* was produced on the heels of the outbreak of the Second Intifada – an event commonly understood as signalling the failure of the 'peace process'. It is here useful to draw attention to two important facts: (i) that the Second Intifada ushered in a surge of international interest in Palestinian cultural production; and (ii) that running parallel to this was a marked shift towards the use of humour in Palestinian contemporary art. The crucial point here is that although this shift towards humour can be argued to reflect the failure of the peace process and a decline in Palestinian nationalist hopes, it must also be understood as a reflection of international interest in Palestinian cultural production.²⁹ The example of Palestinian art outlined here is but one example of what can be described as a cycle enacted by the international art world for the extraction of cultural capital. This cycle is characterized by a progression that begins with international media interest into sites marred by an experience of 'crisis' (i.e. war, disaster and economic or political instability), followed by an influx of humanitarian efforts (NGOs, humanitarian volunteers, etc.), followed finally by international curatorial interest in art production from that latest site of crisis.

Stereotypes and curatorial othering: Humour and Greece

Whilst this 'cycle' for the extraction of cultural capital can be traced in Palestine for the better part of two decades, international curatorial interest in Greece is a much more recent phenomenon. That is to say the foreign investment and international curatorial and artistic interest came not only as a surprise, but also on an unprecedented scale. Where international interest in Palestinian cultural production is continually framed

by Israel's military occupation, engagement with contemporary art from Greece is framed by a sense of 'occupation' of a very different register: the imposition of economic austerity in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, when Greece found itself in the international media spotlight. This became most pronounced in 2010 when the country revealed the enormous scale of its deficit and was locked out of international bond markets. In the years that followed, Greece was subject to drastic austerity measures imposed by its creditors in exchange for three major bail-out packages. The so-called 'Troika' creditors (the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) imposed measures that included drastic pay cuts, cuts to pensions, privatization and major tax reforms. Where these bail-outs were consistently framed by the international media as 'rescue' packages that provided Greece with a 'life-line', the perception by Greeks themselves often reflected polar opposite sentiments; creditors were not saviours – they were 'occupiers'.

Public protests and clashes with police aside, this popular sentiment was made perhaps most visible in the suicide of a seventy-seven-year-old retired pharmacist Dimitris Christoulas in April 2012. Killing himself with a single bullet to the head outside parliament in Syntagma Square, Christoulas left a suicide note calling for the death of collaborators, likening the current government in Greece to the 'Quisling' administration of Giorgios Tsolakoglou during the Nazi occupation of Greece (1941–4).³⁰ Christoulas's suicide points to a prevailing feeling of exploitation by a national government perceived to have been selling off assets to northern European overlords – a sentiment no doubt bolstered by the insistent reminder by the Greek press of Germany's failure to pay for lawful reparations for damages to the Greek population, infrastructure and forced loans issued to the Bank of Greece during the German occupation during the Second World War. As social anthropologist Daniel Knight has convincingly demonstrated, the significant thing about this popular narrative is that it serves to condense the histories of both Ottoman and Second World War occupations with current feelings of dispossession, resulting in a sense of repeated history.³¹ This sense of a repeated history of occupation has also been evident in the continual reference to the Greek military junta of 1967–74. Perhaps most clear in the often-repeated slogan of the Greek Indignant (*Aganaktismenoi*) movement, 'bread, education, liberty; the junta did not end in 1973', there remains a prevailing sense that democracy has been suspended under austerity in Greece.³² Although this sense of suspension can be mapped across populist rhetoric in Greece over several decades, this is a sentiment now also traceable across international media coverage of Greece's debt crisis that have gone so far as to proclaim that Greece is being treated as a 'hostile occupied state'.³³

Studies focused on the self-image of Greeks in response to this sense of hostility have mapped the rise of humour as a form of transgression for Greeks of diverse backgrounds progressively defined as European subordinates in need of the tutelage of powerful northern European governments.³⁴ Where these studies have focused on vernacular forms of humour, there is a growing scholarship on the turn towards humour in Greek contemporary art as a response to perceptions of 'crisis-porn led tourism' in Greece.³⁵ This has become most pronounced in the wake of celebrated contemporary German art festival documenta 14's presence in Athens (alongside

Kassel), an event that cracked open the debate about art's role in the Othering of the Greek population during and following the global financial crisis of 2008. Despite documenta 14's attempts to critically engage with the contemporary challenges to democracy and to invert the aforementioned sense of North/South tutelage through its curatorial rationale of 'learning from Athens', the event came under severe fire by many for risking the repetition of a 'colonial dynamic' by bringing an enormous German exhibition to Greece (whilst securing venues very cheaply, or for free) at the very same time that Eurozone-imposed tax increases and pension cuts were enforced.³⁶

With accusations levelled towards it that ranged from 'agent of exoticization' and 'exploitation of communities' living in Athens,³⁷ documenta was characterized by a vague de-colonial ethos that framed Athens as a pinnacle of crisis. Criticized for the instrumentalization of refugee and migrant populations, and the expectation that Greek artists narrate life under the spectre of austerity, documenta chose to focus upon specific aspects of Greek society. For curator and artist Kostis Stafylakis this served to 'nurture nationalist self-victimisation of Greeks by painting them as guileless agents of indigenous resistance'.³⁸ This view was no doubt intensified by curator Adam Szymczyk's comments that the exhibition never sought to represent the local Athens art scene, adding if people do not feel represented 'they should think about why they are not heard'.³⁹ This paternalistic statement was taken up quite literally in Athens-based artist Panos Sklavenitis's 2017 video work *How to be Seen (and Heard)* (Figure 6.1).

First presented in Zagreb shortly after documenta 14's presence in Athens, the work presents a 'self-portrait' of Sklavenitis seemingly attempting to perform the kinds of behaviours that generate international visibility for Athenian artists living in a context of crisis. Parodying conventions of 1960s performance and conceptual art, and narrated

Figure 6.1 Panos Sklavenitis, *How to Be Seen (and Heard)*, 2017. Video (still). Courtesy of the artist. (See Plate 8.)

by a computer-generated female voice that narrates the artist's actions and speech from Greek to English, the work chronicles Sklavenitis' everyday life with an earnestness that translates as absurd; ranging from recordings of the artist as he showers, to close ups of his foot, and documentation of him at work with an awkwardly positioned life model. The humour in Sklavenitis's work can thus be argued to spring from an over-identification with two stereotypes. The first is the stereotype of the conceptual and performance based artist. The second is an over-identification with the stereotype of Greeks living under austerity. When coupled with the didactic narration that persists throughout the video, the strategy of over-identification serves to make clear the tropes that have consistently been used to frame contemporary art practice in Greece.

With a soundtrack punctuated by a soundscape of birds singing and gentle female vocals, the video is characterized by self-mockery that depicts the artist as a didactic simpleton seeking to frame his work around issues of austerity, protest and social instability. Presenting an opaque recording of the artist's bust against a moving montage of news images of protest in Greece, the video addresses the audience directly to ask 'please relate my name to these images'. Of particular interest here is the way the work taps into the trope of indignation that arguably has come to inflect all social orders in Greece. For Dimitrios Theossopoulos this indignation is argued to unravel in everyday discourse, not only engendering identification with new subject positions, but also linking the current predicament of austerity with previous crises – family, war, poverty and social inequality.⁴⁰

How to be Seen (and Heard) calls into question the dominance of the trope of indignation in contemporary Greek society, whilst also seeking to satiate the appetite and expectations of the international art market that consistently frame contemporary art practice around issues of austerity and crisis. Of particular interest is the way in which the video outlines the 'one rule' for visibility in the contemporary art circuit. Sklavenitis explains (via the video's narrator) that all sectors of culture and society can achieve visibility so long as 'women artists must do feminist stuff. Non-heterosexuals must do queer stuff, African artists must do African stuff, and so on and so forth.' Going on to explain that wealthy, able-bodied, white, cisgender, straight males 'can do what they want and be heard', Sklavenitis points clearly to what philosopher Jacques Rancière describes as a distribution of genre. For Rancière the world is divided between those who can, and those cannot afford the luxury of images.⁴¹ In such a world artists living in experiences of crisis and occupation are, as *How to be Seen (and Heard)* suggests, confined to the didactic and 'authentic' recording of life under the spectre of violence and oppression.

Sovereignty and authenticity: Humour and Indigenous Australia

Where the climate of 'crisis' in Greece has manifest in a conflation of multiple historical foreign occupations (whether military, fiscal or cultural), the undermining of sovereignty in Australia is one enforced within the same nation-state. To unpack what is meant by this, it is useful here to consider a joke that circulated in Australia in 2007 stating that Australia was the first member nation of George W. Bush's 'Coalition

of the Willing' to invade itself.⁴² To a non-Australian audience, the target of humour within this joke is very likely misunderstood. As opposed to the military occupation of Palestine and the Troika's demands over Greece, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (often referred to as 'the Intervention') is little-known outside Australia. Announced by the Australian government in 2007 following the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report, the NTER was a militarized 'emergency' intervention into Indigenous affairs framed by the government under the rubric of 'stabilise, normalise, exit'.⁴³ Effectively seizing control of seventy-three Aboriginal communities, the NTER enforced a range of disciplinary measures that included restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol, the prohibition of pornography, enforced school attendance, government management of welfare-supported spending, and compulsory leasing of community land.⁴⁴

The most significant aspect of the NTER to consider for our discussion here is that it served to clearly suspend all forms of self-determination for multiple communities across the Northern Territory. Furthermore, the framing of the intervention as an 'emergency' allowed the Australian government to harness a logic of militarism and racialized disciplinarity that served to organize, sustain, legitimize and give effect to 'white' sovereign power.⁴⁵ Although the NTER is often framed in material terms as a military occupation of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, it also, however, signifies a sense of ongoing occupation and undermining of self-determination experienced across the broad spectrum of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁴⁶ This sentiment is underscored by the continual denial of constitutional recognition via treaty. Today, more than three decades have passed since the historic signing of the *Barunga Statement*, when Prime Minister Bob Hawke promised to sign a treaty for Aboriginal self-determination and self-management, control of ancestral lands, compensation, and full civil, economic, social and cultural rights. Though the *Barunga Statement* is on display in Australia's Parliament House in Canberra, a treaty remains unsigned. In the last ten years, the persistent denial of both sovereignty and self-determination is clearly manifest in the failure of the 'Close the Gap' Policy, and the refusal of the government to approve the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.⁴⁷ The salience of this is amplified if we consider the irony of the treaty process, namely that treaties assume participation of sovereign parties and that Indigenous people never ceded their sovereignty – the Crown simply ignored it under the doctrine of *terra nullius*.

Although all social and geographical orders are impacted upon through the denial of sovereignty, specific government policies – notably the NTER – have worked to problematically expand political, social and cultural differentiations of indigeneity.⁴⁸ In the art world, this discriminatory preoccupation with differentiation over forms of indigeneity manifests most clearly in an emphasis on 'authenticity'. Market demands, cultural stereotypes and a blurred line between art and ethnography have come together to forge a perception of a hierarchy of Indigenous 'authenticity' that is centred on differentiation between 'remote' and 'urban' indigeneity.⁴⁹ This perceived dichotomy frames rural art production as representing 'timeless' and 'spiritual' artefacts, leaving 'urban' art to appear as disassociated with traditional culture, and therefore somehow unauthentic. This discriminatory dichotomy underwrites the motivation behind the foundation of the Indigenous art collective proppaNOW. Founded in Brisbane in

2003, the collective is notable for exploring current political issues and for re-enforcing a view that 'urban' Aboriginal art is testament to a 'living culture' that has evolved through time. This emphasis is particularly clear in the work of proppaNOW founding member Richard Bell's large 2003 acrylic painting on canvas *Scientia E Metaphysica* (*Bell's Theorem*) (Figure 6.2).

Emblematic of the artist's parody and appropriation of Western post-war art movements such as pop art and abstract expressionism, *Scientia E Metaphysica* draws simultaneous reference to abstraction in Aboriginal art and within abstract expressionist 'drip' paintings. In such a way, the work challenges the appropriation of Indigenous art by non-Aboriginal artists, suggesting that artists re-appropriate Western abstraction in return.⁵⁰ With large text splashed across the canvas that implores the audience to understand that 'ABORIGINAL ART it's A WHITE thing', the artist calls attention to the commodification of Aboriginal art. Expanding on this sentiment, Bell explains that 'there is no Aboriginal art industry. There is however an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginal.'⁵¹ Appropriating what is arguably the most celebrated form of Western abstract art in the post-war period, *Scientia E Metaphysica* clearly flies in the face of expectations that Indigenous artists be confined to 'authentic' forms of 'spiritual' abstraction, typically analysed through ethnographic frameworks.

Scientia E Metaphysica complements *Bell's Theorem*, a manifesto written by the artist that directly calls into question the linkages between an art market that demands

Figure 6.2 Richard Bell, *Scientia E Metaphysica* (*Bell's Theorem*), 2003. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Milani Gallery and the artist. (See Plate 9.)

cultural authenticity, and Australia's *Native Title Act* (1993). By deeming native title over territory to continue after Crown sovereignty only if a clan or group has maintained substantial legal and customary connection with the land, the *Native Title Act* privileges particular forms of indigeneity, locking out those living in urban areas from claims over land.

Considered together, *Scientia E Metaphysica* and *Bell's Theorem* present a parody of two forms of Western modernist artistic traditions: the manifesto and abstract painting. In such a way the close resemblance to these strategies can be argued as being akin to a strategy of colonial mimicry. Under Homi Bhabha's conception of mimicry, the colonized subject's mimicry of the colonizer's behaviours unsettles the boundaries of colonial order.⁵² Although this consequence of mimicry is traceable in Bell's work (calling into question, for example, the structures and players that continue to deny Aboriginal sovereignty), it is true also that this strategy of mimicry serves to embarrass and call attention to the power relationships at play within the art market.⁵³ This is to say that the work implicates the viewer, the curator and the buyer in something much bigger than the consumption of art; they too are tied up in the messy, brutal politics of ongoing dispossession and denials of sovereignty.

Occupation on repeat: Humour and temporality

Cutting across all three of the states of occupation discussed in this chapter is an appreciation of occupation as being much more than a standalone event. Rather, it is an experience repeated across generations. Although the concept of repeated occupation (and more widely the issue of temporality) can be traced across disciplines ranging from international relations to anthropology, the temporal experience of occupation and its legacies are rendered differently in visual culture – a point that is demonstrated across all the contributions in this volume.

Significantly, the so-called 'temporal turn' in contemporary art (one marked by practices focusing on 'contemporaneity' and geopolitical experiences of time)⁵⁴ has run parallel to the emphasis not only on 'occupation' in art discourse, but also alongside a proliferation of strategies of humour in art produced from sites of conflict. To understand how humour responds to this sense of repeated occupation, it is important to appreciate the close relationship between humour and temporality. The unique relationship between them is poignantly described by philosopher Simon Critchley who explains that humour is produced by 'the disjunction between duration and the instant, where we experience with renewed intensity both the slow passing of time and its sheer evanescence'.⁵⁵ Fracturing what Jacques Rancière describes as a 'distribution of genre',⁵⁶ and requiring audiences to bring together a series of diverse references including historical events and cultural signifiers in order to 'get the joke', the laughter produced by these works effectively signals a temporal 'snap', collapsing the space between the past, present and future.

In the cases of humour in contemporary art across Greece, Palestine and Australia, this temporal 'snap' makes clear the linkages between occupation and the present, and its intimate connection to experiences in previous generations. Importantly, although

this acknowledgement of repeated occupation might be interpreted as disheartening, it should also be understood as a symbol of resistance, and indeed cultural resilience. Furthermore, if resilience is contingent on the restoration of dignity and the facilitation of hope for the future,⁵⁷ the humour evident in contemporary art across Palestine, Greece and Australia is capable of nurturing vital forms of cultural resilience that facilitate hope for the future: namely political enactment, critical evaluations of collective identity and affirmation of connection to disputed territory. Above all else, however, perhaps the greatest capacity of humour is its ability to 'defamiliarise the familiar'.⁵⁸ It is laughter that makes strange the realities we take as 'normal', allowing us to imagine new realities in their place, and innovative approaches to burning political issues too often perceived as insurmountable.

Notes

- 1 Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2002); Elliot Orring, *Engaging Humor* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2003).
- 2 Examples of emphasis on the relationship between art and emergency include the work of Okwui Enwezor, Hal Foster, and T. J. Demos. Focus on migration, affect and memory includes the work of Jill Bennett and Luc Bolstanki. Key works in the field of socially engaged art practices include those of Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriard and Grant Kester.
- 3 Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions That Created Contemporary Art* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).
- 4 Uroš Cvor, *Transitional Aesthetics: Contemporary Art and the Edge of Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 87.
- 5 Raija-Leena Punamaki, Eyad El-Sarraj, Samir Qouta and Katri Kanninen, 'The Role of Psychological Defences in Moderating between Trauma and Post-traumatic Symptoms among Palestinian Men', *The International Journal of Psychology* 37, no. 5 (2002): 286–96.
- 6 Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage, 2005); John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987); Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, ed., *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- 7 Critchley, *On Humour*; Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2005); Orring, *Engaging Humor*.
- 8 Steven M. Southwick, George Bonanno, Ann Masten, Catherine Panter-Brick and Rachel Yehuda, 'Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5, no. 1 (2014): 25338.
- 9 Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (London and New York: Penguin Random House, 2012).
- 10 Southwick et al., 'Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges'.
- 11 Adam Roberts, 'What Is a Military Occupation?', *British Yearbook of International Law* 55, no. 1 (1985): 249.
- 12 Peter M. R. Stirk, *The Politics of Military Occupation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 10.

- 13 Jacques Rancière, 'Occupation,' *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/occupation-jacques-ranciere> (accessed 5 November 2018).
- 14 W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,' *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 11–12.
- 15 Jef Huysmans, 'The Jargon of Exception: On Schmitt, Agamben and the Absence of Political Society,' *International Political Sociology* 2 (2008): 166.
- 16 Ilias Bentakas, 'Sovereign Debt and Self-Determination,' in *Sovereign Debt and Human Rights*, ed. Ilias Bentakas and Cephas Lumina (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 272–3.
- 17 Jennifer Biddle, *Remote Avant-Garde: Aboriginal Art under Occupation* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 18 Cathryn Drake, 'Here's Why Greece Is Not Exactly Rolling Out the Red Carpet for documenta 14,' *Artnet* 29 (March 2017): <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/greece-not-rolling-out-red-carpet-documenta-14-905459> (accessed 21 November 2018).
- 19 Daniel M. Knight, 'The Greek Economic Crisis as Trope,' *Focaal-Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 65 (2013): 147–59; Laurie King-Irani, 'Exiled to a Legal Liminal Zone: Are We All Palestinians Now?,' *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (2006): 923–36; Ekaterina Pechenkina, '“It Becomes Almost an Act of Defiance”: Indigenous Australian Transformational Resistance as a Driver of Academic Achievement,' *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 20, no. 4 (2017): 463–77.
- 20 Michelle Grossman, 'After Aboriginalism: Power, Knowledge and Indigenous Australian Critical Writing,' in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michelle Grossman (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 1–14.
- 21 Chrisoula Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).
- 22 Lisa French, 'David Gulpilil, Aboriginal Humour, and Australian Cinema,' *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 8, no. 1 (2014): 34–43.
- 23 Kostis Stafylakis, 'Moralism and the (Greek) Crisis of Cultural Resistance: An Anti-Humanist Approach,' in *Political Power Reconsidered: State Power and Civic Activism between Legitimacy and Violence*, ed. Maximilian Lakitsch (Zurich and Münster: Lit Verlag, 2013), 127–39.
- 24 William Parry, 'Art under Occupation: The Challenges Facing Palestinian Artists and Cultural Institution,' *The National*, 19 April 2018: <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/art-under-occupation-the-challenges-facing-palestinian-artists-and-cultural-institutions-1.723211> (accessed 12 November 2018).
- 25 Dorris Bittar, 'Crossing Boundaries – Artist Profile: Emily Jacir,' *Canvas Magazine*, 31 December 2008: <http://www.dorribittar.com/DB-03-Writings.html> (accessed 13 February 2018).
- 26 Critchley, *On Humour*, 68
- 27 Ibid., 67.
- 28 Ibid., 68.
- 29 Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine*.
- 30 Elizabeth Davis, '“We've Toiled without End”: Publicity, Crisis, and the Suicide “Epidemic” in Greece,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 4 (2015): 1016.
- 31 Knight, 'The Greek Economic Crisis as Trope', 155.
- 32 Marilena Simiti, 'Rage and Protest: The Case of the Greek Indignant Movement,' *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* 3, no. 2 (2016): 43.

- 33 Takis S. Pappas, *Population and Crisis Politics in Greece* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 24; Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, 'Greece Is Being Treated Like a Hostile Occupied State', *The Telegraph*, 13 July 2015: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11736779/Greece-is-being-treated-like-a-hostile-occupied-state.html> (accessed 14 November 2018).
- 34 Kostantinos Kalantzis, "'Fak Germany": Materialities of Nationhood and Transgression in the Greek Crisis', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 4 (2015): 1038.
- 35 Poka Yio, "'Anti Anything'", in *Anti-: AB6 Athens Biennale* (Athens: Athens Biennial, 2018), 30–7.
- 36 T. J. Demos, 'Learning from documenta 14: Athens, Post-Democracy and Decolonisation', *Thirdtext*: www.thirdtext.org/demos-documenta (accessed 14 November 2018).
- 37 Helena Smith, "'Crapumental!' ... Anger in Athens as the Blue Lambs of Documenta Hit Town", *The Guardian*, 14 May 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/may/14/documenta-14-athens-german-art-extravaganza> (accessed 20 January 2019).
- 38 Quynh Tran, 'How Has Documenta Impacted the Local Art Scene: It Depends on Who You Ask', *Artnet News*, 14 July 2017: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/documenta-14-impact-athens-1023215> (accessed 10 November 2018).
- 39 Iliana Fokianaki, 'Documenting documenta 14 Athens', *Metropolis M*, 5 May 2017: https://www.metropolism.com/en/opinion/31387_documenting_documenta_14_athens (accessed 16 November 2018).
- 40 Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, 'The Ambivalence of Anti-Austerity Indignation in Greece: Resistance, Hegemony, and Complicity', *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2014): 490–2.
- 41 John Kelsey and Fulvia Carnevale, 'Art of the Possible', *Artforum* 45, no. 7 (2007): 256–68.
- 42 Diedre Tedmason and Dinesh Wadiwel, 'Neoptolemus: The Governmentality of New Race/Pleasure Wars?', *Culture and Organization* 16, no. 1 (2010): 10.
- 43 Ibid., 7.
- 44 Daniel T. Fisher, 'An Urban Frontier: Respatializing Government in Remote Northern Australia', *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2015): 139–40.
- 45 Tedmason and Wadiwel, 'Neoptolemus', 11–12.
- 46 The most obvious reflection of this is the anxiety felt across Australia that the NTER's focus on children could lead to another Stolen Generation and thus a return to periods in which Aboriginal children were forcibly taken en masse from their families and communities. Although deployment of the Australian Defence Force military police ceased in 2008, a marked increase in police power and presence has continued. Furthermore, the new laws and agreements attached to the NTER facilitated the replacement of Aboriginal local councils and Traditional-Owner governance systems.
- 47 The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* called for constitutional recognition and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples (via a constitutionally enshrined representative Indigenous body to parliament) and a truth and reconciliation royal commission.

- 48 Rowland Atkinson, Elizabeth Taylor and Maggie Walter, 'Burying Indigeneity: The Spatial Construction of Reality and Aboriginal Australia', *Social & Legal Studies* 19, no. 3 (2010): 311–30.
- 49 Djon Mundine, 'White Face, Black Mask (Apologies to Franz Fanon)', *Artlink* 25, no. 3 (2005): 17–22.
- 50 Aisha Farley and Agnes Portalewska, 'Reclaiming Aboriginality: Richard Bell', *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, December 2011: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/reclaiming-aborigeneity-richard-bell> (accessed 18 November 2018).
- 51 Richard Bell, 'BELL'S THEOREM', *Kooriweb*, November 2002: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html> (accessed 18 November 2018).
- 52 On this, see Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 152–62.
- 53 James Ferguson, 'Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the "New World Society"', *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2002): 551–69.
- 54 Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Cvorovic, *Transitional Aesthetics*.
- 55 Critchley, *On Humour*.
- 56 Kelsey and Carnevale, 'Art of the Possible'.
- 57 Southwick et al., 'Resilience definitions'.
- 58 Critchley, *On Humour*.