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Commemorating the SIEV X

Julie Stephens

The SIEV X memorial in Canberra's Weston Park raises crucial questions about the politics of memory. It also raises issues about how the cultural history of asylum in Australia at the beginning of the millennium will be recorded. Unique in Australia, the 353 hand-painted poles each commemorate one of the victims of the sinking of the refugee boat that has come to be known as the SIEV X. These hand-painted poles combine as a way of memorialising that is radically inclusive, pluralistic and democratic and, as I will argue, that refuses to allow a passive, disinterested viewing experience. As attested by the debates in *The Canberra Times* in October last year, and the references to the SIEV X in *Quadrant*, this uncommon memorial challenges sanctioned, nationalist versions of Australia's recent past.

Before examining some of these debates, the background to the sinking of the SIEV X needs to be recounted. For those who have not yet visited the memorial, I will also attempt to describe its physical and emotional expressive content. On 19 October 2001 a small, overcrowded, unseaworthy boat of asylum seekers sank in international waters inside the Australian aerial border protection zone. Of the approximately 421 passengers aboard, 353 people drowned. The delay in rescuing the survivors, despite Australian Operation Relex maritime surveillance in the area, allegations by survivors that two large ships went by and did nothing to rescue them, the final rescue by an Indonesian fishing boat twenty hours later, and the contradictory evidence given by the Howard

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government in the ensuing investigations have been the subject of a Senate Inquiry, a play, a song, numerous media articles, books and blogs.

The memorial to those who drowned on that day strategically avoids any reference to these controversies or accusations of blame for the failure to rescue survivors in time. The simple plaque on the site at Weston Park declares: 'Our message in making this memorial is that Australia is not a country defined by fear and greed. Love is stronger than fear. Kindness is stronger than greed'. However, the plaque also says that the memorial is designed to 'remember the 146 children, 142 mothers and 65 fathers who died on the refugee boat SIEV X at the height of the Federal election campaign in October 2001' (my emphasis). The memorial simultaneously encourages and suspends a directly political reading. On the one hand it entreats us to 'feel the hope and promise that young Australians cared so much to create this beautiful memorial' and, on the other, 'to share the grief of those fathers and husbands detained here in Australia' who were unable to help their loved ones survive. The intertwining of mourning and hope, of individual remembering and collective sorrow is what makes the SIEV X memorial so unsettling and so successful as a form of memorial activism.

It would be difficult to imagine a more appropriate site for this memorial. It is in the nation's capital in Yarralumla beside the water of Lake Burley Griffin on a gentle slope, with hills in the background and water birds in the foreground. A group of kangaroos graze on the adjacent land. Each hand-painted pole is exquisitely executed and many depict familiar aspects of Australia: small farms, magpies, koalas, wattles and gum trees, dolphins and sea-life. Particularly moving is one pole where children's toys and a small soccer ball have been inserted into the timber, almost like a gift for the drowned children. On another pole, commemorating the death of 'Unknown Boy', the students of Northwest High School, Northmead NSW, have painted the Sydney Opera House and harbour and inscribed the words, 'I am here for you now'. The memorial pole marking the death of Daya Sobie, aged fourteen, and created by the students of Our Lady Queen of Peace School, SA, includes the following words, described as a Middle Eastern Proverb:

How do we know when it is dawn,
when we have enough light to
recognise,
in the face of the stranger,
that of our sister.

Given the collective and inclusive nature of the project as a nationwide student and community art collaboration, it is remarkable that each tribute is so striking, imaginative and heartfelt.

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Together the poles follow the sweep and incline of the landscape beside the lake. The emotional force of the memorial has something to do with its human scale. The size of the poles (large for adults and small for children and babies) and the fact that so many of the dead are still unnamed (despite the memorial group calling on Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty in August 2007 to release a list of names) give concrete expression to the number '353'. Like the X in the acronym SIEV X, referring to the naval description of the vessel as Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel X, the injustice of namelessness is reinforced again and again as you wander through the countless memorial poles marking Unknown Baby, Unknown Mother, Unknown Girl. Here the activist intent of the memorial is clear. Not just recording a past event, the memorial is futureoriented, looking toward (and indeed campaigning for) a time when the names of the dead can be spoken and duly recorded. Nothing short of lining up the bodies along the lake could rival the affective power of the vision of each painted pole being like a person standing. And the line of the dead stretches far, far along the lakeshore. Brilliantly, and without the fanfare of statues and flags, stone and marble, the small-scale un-monumental design of the SIEV X memorial signals a large-scale loss of monumental proportions.

The conception, design and the execution of the memorial poles reflect a democratic inclusiveness in stark contrast to the official monuments for which Canberra is noted. The hundreds of groups designing and painting the poles included kindergartens, neighbourhood houses, Catholic Schools, Uniting Church and Anglican schools, primary and secondary state schools, refugee resource centres, Islamic schools, community groups, support groups and fathers who lost whole families in the tragedy.

The fact that the memorial incorporates the outline of the exact dimension of the boat gives further physical expression to what otherwise could be experienced as a remote and abstract tragedy. This aspect of the memorial was the idea of fourteen-year-old Brisbane schoolboy Mitchell Donaldson. The design calls you to stand in the outline of the boat and be reminded physically of how small the craft was, how cramped and intolerable the conditions must have been given the number of people aboard, and how criminal it was that so many people died.

Passive viewing from afar is not an option at this memorial. Another pluralistic aspect of this particular way of remembering is that there is no starting point or finishing point for visitors. You move around from pole to pole in any order, becoming part of the memorial as you experience it. The content of many of the poles is richly symbolic and onlookers are left to make their own sense of the messages, drawings and quotations. In this respect, there is a feeling that, as you wander through the memorial poles (at times reminiscent of totems), you are implicated in the events

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being commemorated. While to a certain extent the non-directive nature of the memorial allows different interpretations to emerge, the overwhelming combined impression from the painted messages is one of welcome. The students of Notre Dame College in Shepparton, Victoria, commemorating the death of Unknown Boy, write of 'a community in which strangers are welcomed, differences celebrated and all people are valued'. The memorial thus strives for a very different kind of national imaginary.

According to Christopher Capozzola, the process of memory formation in social contexts has two interrelated elements: the commemorative and the monumental. In Western culture, the model of the commemorative is the gravestone, seeking to testify, to record and to document the loss of a person. 'Its enactment is primarily but never fully private and individual.' The monument, by contrast, seeks to interpret loss and put it to future political uses (the National War Memorial would be a good example). The function of the monument is selfconsciously public. In an excellent analysis of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, Capozzola determines that the kind of memorialising where the 'commemorative and political functions of monuments are densely intertwined' is unique to the Quilt. Yet the SIEV X memorial also links the commemorative and the political in its performance of public memory. In fact it would be difficult to argue that the nature of commemoration (naming, testifying and recording) can be separated from the political if it involves any kind of public display. For this reason, memory wars surface when any new monument is unveiled.

The aim of the SIEV X memorial project's participants, with Steve Biddulph playing a co-ordinating role, is to ensure that 'the memorial is one day a permanent feature of the national capital, and its message part of the national conscience'. Not surprisingly there are those, particularly in the ACT, who condemn both the memorial and its location. In October 2007 in The Canberra Times, the Howard government Territories Minister Jim Lloyd described the memorial as 'protest art', criticising the way it trivialised existing memorials commemorating those who gave their lives for our country. Others responded positively to Lloyd's condemnation in the letters pages of the newspaper. Tom Ruut applauded Jim Lloyd's call for the demolition of the memorial and described it as a haphazard collection of poles that posed a 'hazard to joggers'. Warren Feakes wrote that he was offended by the memorial because it shoved unwarranted political statements upon him in a public recreational space. He raged: 'A Stanhope-run, bleeding heart capital territory is the only place such a ridiculous erection would be tolerated'. Feakes wanted the supporters of the memorial to 'swipe their credit cards and pay the rent for the space'. These responses tap into a perception generated by Keith Windshuttle, and reproduced in Quadrant in January 2007, that the story of the sinking of the SIEV X is the kind of atrocity story that has 'been critical to the success of the propaganda

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campaign that has infected the writing of history for the past thirty years'. Windshuttle accuses the 'tertiaryeducated, middle-class Left' of promoting interest in the fate of SIEV X and of becoming 'morally unhinged' by their efforts to undermine the Howard government.

Defenders of the memorial also surfaced in the public debate. Many charged Jim Lloyd with trivialising the value of life and the preventable deaths of 353 asylum seekers. David Perking described how members of his family had served in two world wars. He had wept at only three memorials in his life. The first time was at the Belgium war cemetery where his uncle fell in 1917, then at Dachau, and the third time at 'the SIEV X memorial down by the lake'.

The passion of the debate only underscores the success of this memorial. Complex political stakes and meanings are bound up with what a culture remembers and forgets. Theorists of cultural memory suggest that the content, sources and experiences that are recalled, forgotten or suppressed are always intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony.

In one sense Windshuttle and Howard government Minister Jim Lloyd and his supporters are right: the SIEV X memorial is political. It is a form of protest against cultural forgetting. Uncomfortable though it may make certain politicians and bureaucrats, it stands to remind us of what we have been and what we could become. The fate of the memorial remains uncertain. If it is threatened with demolition by the National Capital Authority or the Rudd government, I would urge people to chain themselves to a pole to ensure that the memory of this tragedy survives.

I would like to claim the pole commemorating the drowning of an 'Unknown Boy', which says:

You could have been our neighbour,
Our friend.
You are whole.
You are much loved,
And your story inspires us to
Strive for a world where all
Children are free.

Julie Stephens teaches at Victoria University.

See www.sievxmemorial.com/thememorial.html for more information.

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