

--- FEATURE REVIEW ---

SECESSIONISM, SUBMERGENCE AND SITE-RESPONSIVE ART

The Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater at the 1st Fremantle Biennale

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ABSTRACT: Assertions of territorial and, particularly, micronational secession have often been highly performative and/or rhetorical. In this regard, they closely parallel aspects of conceptual, performance and installation art practice. It is unsurprising then that a number of prominent micronations have been formed by artists in response to local issues and/or as components of broader artistic projects. The Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater, created by Perth artist Jessee Lee Johns for the inaugural Fremantle Biennale in 2017, is a prime example of site-responsive art's ability to provide illuminating representations of key issues in local discourse. The installation merits sustained consideration in this journal due to its intersection with recent debates concerning micronationality in the form of its wry engagement with aspects of Western Australian secessionist politics. Its other significant aspect is its address to issues of sea level rise, encroachment and submergence – a phenomenon whose impacts are likely to over-ride the viability of many low-lying territories let alone any secessionist pretensions individuals or communities inhabiting them may have.

KEYWORDS: Secession, Micronationalism, Site-Responsive Art, Submergence, Western Australia, New Bayswater, Rottneest Island

Introduction

Secessionism has become an increasingly prominent aspect of international politics in the mid-late 2010s. The United Kingdom's historic vote to withdraw from the European Union in 2016 is perhaps the most notable example. Separatist movements in regions such as Scotland, Catalonia and Kurdistan have also risen in popularity in recent years, promoting and attempting separation from the nations that include them as components. Similar impulses have also occurred at lower levels of territorial administration in a range of locations¹ Micronationalism – understood as the enterprise of attempting to extract relatively miniscule parcels of territory from nation states to suit the needs, inclinations and/or fantasies of small groups of individuals - is a highly particularly subset of

¹ Such as the recent referendums in the Italian regions of Lombardi and Veneto that overwhelmingly supported greater autonomy. On an even greater micro-level, there is considerable local support for Canvey Island, in southern England, seceding from its administering mainland council that has gained traction from the UK's recent 'Brexit' from the European Union (see Hayward, 2018).

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secessionism. As previous articles in *Shima* have established, one manifestation of the latter has involved a series of attempts to create semblances of nations on islands and offshore platforms, using their clearly defined boundaries as demarcations of and rationales for their imagined secessions. A second, more recent tendency has involved the creation of micronations as entities that only exist within extended social media spaces – most prominently that of Microwiki (see Hayward and Khamis, 2015). In this project, actual spaces are characterised as belonging to figurative micronations that have no point of connection with (let alone effect on) them (ibid). It should be noted that the identification and promotion of highly local socio-political entities as micronations is often (implicitly or explicitly) absurd – being as much as a fictive/artistic practice as it is a political one. It is no accident in this regard that a variety of artists have been involved in either the formation of micronations, such as Lars Vilks’s Ladonia (in Sweden)² or Edwin Lipburger’s Republic of Kugelmugel (in Austria)³ or else have evoked them as part of a broader artistic practice.⁴

Micronationalism’s highly specific address to (often miniscule) areas of territory – such as, most ludicrously, tiny islets in a pond, in the case of The Grand Duchy of the Lagoan Isles (in the UK)⁵ – is a rhetorical practice applied to a highly specific locale. In this regard, it complements and resembles a broader tendency in contemporary cultural practice, that of site specific/responsive art. This involves artists using existing locations, structures, historical associations and/or their imagined futures as the material and/or inspiration for works that draw on these aspects and reconfiguring them in new ways (see McIver [ed] 2004). In the case of Jessee Lee Johns’s ‘Embassy of The Commonwealth of New Bayswater’, produced for Fremantle’s inaugural Arts Biennale in 2017, the work was also informed by state and regional factors concerning secession and micronationality.

I. Context

Western Australia (WA), which is the largest state in Australia by land area (covering 2,530,000 square kilometres) and the 5th largest by population (2,367,000) has manifested separatist tendencies at both macro and micro levels. At state level, there has been a smouldering undercurrent of secessionism for over a century, stoked by perceptions that the resource-rich state has been variously estranged from and/or unfairly treated by a national government based in faraway Canberra (see Constitutional Centre of Western Australia, 2015). The most recent recurrence of this was prompted by Western Australian perceptions that their state has been subsidising other states through the (national) goods and services tax, which returns less to WA via various schemes than it collects. This perception acquired momentum in the mid-2010s and prompted the WA Liberal Party to pass a motion in September 2017 calling for the establishment of a committee to evaluate whether WA could be viable as a “financially independent state” (Laschon, 2017: online). As documented by de Castro and Kober (2018 – elsewhere in this issue), WA is also home to the longest-established micronation in Australia, the Principality of Hutt River (PHR). This short feature review complements de Castro and Kober’s study of PHR by examining an intersection of satirical, absurdist and/or figurative discourses that have arisen around

² See Ladonia website (nd).

³ See Valjak (2016: online).

⁴ Such as the KLF’s performances of the mythical isle of Mu on the Scottish isle of Mull in 1991 – see Fitzgerald and Hayward (2016: 59-64) for discussion.

⁵ See the Duchy’s official website at: <http://lagoan-isles.moonfruit.com/>

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Perth and Fremantle's relationship to nearby Rottnest Island and the imagination and performance of the New Bayswater Embassy in October-November 2017.

Rottnest Island (henceforth Rottnest) is located 18 kilometres due west of Fremantle, a major port and historical heritage site located 14 kilometres south west of Perth, the capital and major population centre of WA (Figure 1). Rottnest is a low-lying island with sandy soils that covers an area of 19 square kilometres. Separated from the coastal mainland sometime between 10,000 and 6,500 years ago, when low lying coastal land was inundated by rising sea levels following the end of the last Ice Age, the island has retained many species of flora and fauna that are now rare or extinct on the mainland, the most notable of which is the quokka, a cat-sized marsupial.⁶ These aspects resulted in the island's classification as a Class A state nature reserve in 1917, a status it has held since then. Rottnest is home to a permanent population of around 110, most residents being employed in its management or in its tourism facilities, which are overseen by the Rottnest Island Authority (RIA). Currently, Rottnest receives close to half a million tourists per annum, who arrive on the island principally via ferries departing from Perth, Fremantle and Hilary's Boat Harbour (Figure 1) and with light plane and helicopter services also operating from the coast. As with sand-based islands in general,⁷ Rottnest exists as a dynamic rather than immutable entity and the RIA is monitoring erosion of the Narrow Neck, a sandy isthmus that connects the island's main area to its western promontory. Given existing erosion, and the lack of tenable mitigation, the RIA acknowledges that the isthmus is likely to be breached in the near future if sea-levels and/or storm surges increase, transforming the promontory into a new small island.⁸

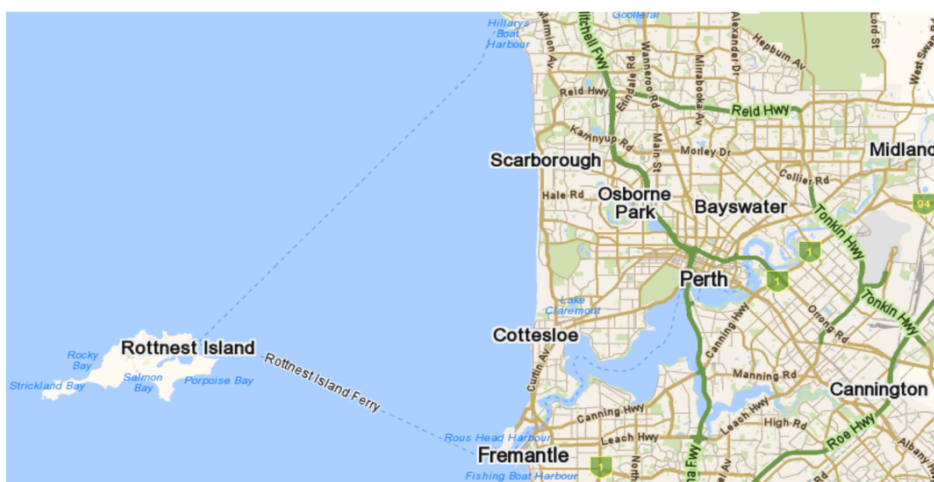


Figure 1 – Rottnest Island, Fremantle, adjacent urban areas and ferry routes

⁶ A satirical item on the online service *Buzzfeed* in 2015 called for a petition to replace WA's existing faunal emblem - the black swan - with the quokka (on account of the latter's "cuteness"), provided an alternative flag design and listed a number of factors in support of the proposal (Crerar, 2015).

⁷ One of the most marked examples being Sable Island, in Nova Scotia, whose shifting location has made it a major hazard for shipping (see Dalrymple and Hoogendoorn, 1997 for discussion).

⁸ Indeed, this information is regularly conveyed by island tour guides.

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Increasing concern over the likely impact of proposed developments in the 1970s prompted the WA Government to establish the RIA in 1987 as a statutory body with responsibility for managing the island and for regulating tourism and commercial development. While state opinion has been divided as to whether the island should be protected or opened-up to tourist access for much of the 20th and early 21st centuries (see O’Meira, 2016 for detailed discussion), there have been increasingly vocal complaints that local and/or low income visitors are being priced out of Rottnest in favour of inter-state and international visitors. This sentiment has been voiced by prominent members of the Rottnest Society, a voluntary conservation group whose members principally reside off island. In an interview about visitation costs,⁹ Secretary/treasurer Trish Bevan contended that “the West Australian public is very angry about the fact that ordinary families can’t get across” and that Rottnest Island was fast becoming “an island for the wealthy” (Merrillees, 2015: online).

Triggered by a revival of interest on state secession from Australian, the prospect of a different type of independence was raised in 2016 as an acerbic satire of the RIA’s supposed elitism. An item published on *Rotunda Media* (a volunteer run, independent news/magazine website based in Perth) opened with a characterisation that was presented as if factual:

The 114 people who live on Rottnest island have just declared that they will separate from the main state of Western Australia, if a referendum is passed (Henderson, 2016: online)

The article then continued, more vituperously:

And now it’s Rottnest’s turn to get in on the action – the conditions are sound for a mini Brexit: Rottnest island’s shadowy past, its fading relevance to the rest of the state, and the elitist asshole locals to match who are all going to live on very expensive crabs and peacocks or something. (ibid)

While the story was entirely invented, it was subsequently echoed in a humorously futuristic letter-to-the-editor published in the *Western Australia* newspaper that was purportedly written from a newly independent WA in 2022. The letter described how a secession movement on Rottnest, prompted by its residents’ perceptions of “an unfair distribution of revenue” within WA had recently been quashed on the grounds of its unworkability (Clyne, 2017: online). The item used Rottnest as allusive proxy for WA in a manner that clearly opposed and satirised secession more generally. The two media texts form part of a swirling current of perceptions concerning WA’s status within Australia and Rottnest’s relationship to Perth and the remainder of WA that continues to produce eddies in various forms.

Like many other isolated locations, Rottnest has also been claimed as a micronation within the essentially figurative realm of MicroWiki – an online repository of micronations imagined, described and promulgated by individuals involved in fantasy politics and inter-micronational relations (see Hayward and Khamis, 2015: 78-80). In Rottnest’s case, this takes the form of its inclusion within a micronation identified as being formed in 2015 by

⁹ All day visitors arriving on Rottnest are required to pay an admission fee. As of 2017 this was Australian \$18 per adult (with various reduced cost options for those staying on the island for extended durations). Ferry fares currently cost up to \$81 return per adult.

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Todd Leon, an Australian born and resident in Adelaide. Entitled 'The Kingdom of Falcar and Rottnest', the latter territory is included by virtue of Falcar, apparently located somewhere in South Australia, claiming the distant island as "an ancestral and ceremonial territory". This is, of course, an arcane gambit that has no connection with the actual administration or status of Rottnest itself. Unusually, in the open fantasy-scape of Microwiki, Rottnest's inclusion within Leon's virtual micronation derives from an actual personal connection, namely Leon's (claimed) descent from John Benedict Lomas who resided on the island in the 1870s after serving time in Fremantle gaol. The curious privileges Lomas enjoyed on the island led to his island home being nicknamed "Buckingham Palace" (Weaver, 2009: online) and to Leon subsequently perceiving Lomas as a de facto ruler of the island during his residence there and claiming rights to the territory based on descent.

II. The Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater

The Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater (henceforth referred to as the Embassy) intersected with the set of relations, perceptions and fictions mapped above in various ways. The artwork was completed for Fremantle's first Arts Biennale, staged in October-November 2017. Adopting the theme and designation 'High Tide 17,' the Biennale was publicised as "hosting the best in site responsive art" in various sites around the city's West End. As the event's website specified, it addressed Fremantle's nature as a port city and the "ephemeral site-specific works" commissioned for it were designed to respond the "transience and transitional flow" of the location (ibid). One aspect of the latter that the Embassy particularly engaged with was awareness and concern about the impact of global warming on sea levels and the likelihood of local inundation if even modest projections of sea level rise eventuated. This aspect was formally acknowledged by the City of Fremantle in their 2012 'Climate Change Adaptation Plan'. In addition to committing the city to low carbon production policies and other "corporate actions" (ibid: 11), the plan postulated a likely increase in sea level between 18-59cm by 2100 (ibid: 6), based on Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) data, and featured a map showing "how the shoreline would move if the sea level rose with no change to topography" – without consideration of "accretion and erosion, which is likely to have a large impact on eventual shorelines" (ibid) (extracted as Figure 2). The modelling the city's plan referred to has led to predictions of its West End area becoming "the Venice of the South" by 2100 (Foster, 2016: online). Dramatising this scenario by projecting inundation patterns that exceed the maximum IPCC 2010 projection by around 40% - ie with levels rising by 1 metre – a map presented in the report (Figure 2) showed substantial submergence of wharfs and promontories along the city's coast and an inundation of the streetscape of West End (the area immediately south of the Swan River's entry point to the sea).

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Figure 2 – Map of the impact of projected rise in sea level of one metre on Fremantle by 2100, existing sea levels in light blue, projected encroachments onto land in turquoise (City of Fremantle, 2012: 6¹⁰).

The Embassy was conceived and constructed by Perth artist Jesse Lee Johns, who has established a reputation in WA for utilising abandoned urban spaces as temporary galleries or installations. His work on these has been undertaken as manifestations of his Contemporary Institute of Modern Art (CIOMA), described on the High Tide 17 website as “WA’s most intangible art institution”. The most significant material manifestation of CIOMA to date occurred on a patch of disused industrial land in Rockingham (an urban location south of Fremantle). Johns assembled a ‘pop-up’ gallery there from found materials that operated for several months until it was first squatted and then scavenged for materials by unknown individuals. Johns then salvaged what he could and reconstructed it in a small space in the inner-city Perth suburb of Bayswater.

Johns’s Biennale work was advertised as “the embassy for a fictional island nation located off the coast of Australia.” This island nation, referred to as “the Commonwealth of New Bayswater” (alluding to both the water of Fremantle Bay and the aforementioned Perth suburb) was specified as ultra-exclusive - a “country of one” with “no boats or planes servicing the island, so access will have to be negotiated” (festival placard). As befitting a conceptual installation that was site-responsive in both local and regional terms, the installation did not simply imitate a conventional embassy premises, with a conventional office space accessible from the street but rather utilised distinct aspects of the urban space of Fremantle’s West End to create an embassy whose form was mimetic of the (imaginary) island micronation. Located in the basement of Princess Chambers on Market Street, Johns’s installation was positioned within and utilised a largely hidden aspect of the

¹⁰ Derived from www.ozcoasts.gov.au/climate/Map_images/Perth/mapLevel2_North.jsp (nd)

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area. Located on coastal land reclaimed in the mid 1800s, the basements of Fremantle's Victorian buildings have become increasingly prone to flooding. At present, most buildings in West End with basements are either flooded with water of variable depth, dependent on tide cycles, or else drained by pumps. The Princess Chambers building is an example of the former. Entering the embassy via descending stairs to a large, open basement, visitors were met by a water-covered floor space, with a small built island at the opposite end of the room. Access to the island, upon which the Embassy was located, was aided by both the provision of rubber boots that visitors could don to wade across, or by a small dingy, moored at a quay projecting from the island (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – The Embassy's dingy, jetty and office (with visitors – image central left)
(author's photo, 2017)

The Embassy was open for the duration of the Biennale and was staffed by volunteers who were on hand to assist visitors fill in visa or passport applications that were later assessed by Johns (Figure 5). The island's miniscule elevation above the level of the basement's floodwater mimicked both the nature of West End's elevation above sea level and the situation of many low-lying island nations (such as Tuvalu) at a time of rising sea levels. The doubling of having an island nation's embassy on an island (in an inner-city basement) blurred the nature of the Embassy as the premises *representing* an island and rather suggested the micro-island site *as* the micro-nation that was otherwise referred to as ambiguously elsewhere. This was further complicated by Biennale documentation also identifying the Commonwealth of New Bayswater as being "a series of spaces throughout

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WA”.¹¹ Johns has clarified the latter by explaining that the referent island is an actual location in South West WA whose location was deliberately not identified and that installations such as the Fremantle Embassy form temporary annexes to the core territorial entity (pc 16th November 2017).



Figure 4 – Embassy office in operation (visa applications on table visible through the open door) (author’s photo, 2017)

The Embassy offices were minimal and the only trappings of state comprised a woven flag showing a white seabird with open wings on a blue circle on a white background.¹² Visitors to the Embassy were allowed to either explore the installation space and/or enter the office to formally apply for either a visa to visit New Bayswater or citizenship of it. Those applying for passports were required to fill in a form, provide a passport photo and then attend a follow-up meeting with the ambassador (Johns himself – Figure 5) where they were interviewed about their backgrounds and interests in becoming citizens and then subjected to a quiz to assess their knowledge of New Bayswater culture. The spurious nature of the latter (which included questions about imaginary New Bayswater sporting champions and historical personages) was a wry satire on right wing Australian politicians’ desires to include questions about sporting icons and World War One characters as part of citizenship evaluations for migrants.¹³ Referencing earlier satirical paradigms of Australian identity – such as the Fosters’ lager guzzling citizens of the 1970s’ Barry Mackenzie films¹⁴ – interviewees were also invited to consume a cold can of Castlemaine XXXX Beer during their interview. Successful applicants were later contacted and provided with a handmade passport and were added to a database of citizens.

¹¹ See: http://www.hightidefremantle.com/line-up/commonwealth_of_new_bayswater/ - accessed 8th November 2017.

¹² Which the flag’s designer, Carla Adams has explained in terms of seabirds being as “beacons of hope... hovering in stormy skies” – (pc 17th November 2017).

¹³ See Coorey (2008) for discussion.

¹⁴ *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972) and *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (Bruce Beresford, 1974).



Figure 5 – Ambassador (and artist) Jesse Lee Johns at the Embassy (wearing official uniform and regalia) (author’s photo 2017)

Conclusion

While Johns’s Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater was assembled and performed as an absurd manifestation of micronationality, its resonance with WA’s own secessionist impulses, those of the Province of Hutt River and the circulation of erroneous/fictitious texts concerning Rottneest Island’s secessionism and/or micronationality gave it particular relevance and currency, placing it in a liminal zone between opportunistic realpolitik and pure fantasy of the type engaged in by MicroWiki participants. The materiality of the embassy and its installation in an environment where inundation was apparent and active also provided a preview of the potential impact of rising sea levels in Fremantle and their ability to reconfigure urban spaces as a series of built islets within shallow tidal waters. The Embassy thereby provided far more than a whimsical distraction for festival-goers. Its performance added to artists’ contributions to the theatre of contemporary micronationality and underlined the value of site-responsive art in illuminating and commenting on local socio-political and environmental issues. Evoking the range of issues tackled in the special theme issue of *Shima* on ‘Submergence’ (v10 n2, October 2016),¹⁵ Johns has contended that:

The various secessions that have been talked about are problematic in terms of our ability to deal with climate change. Whatever vague optimism I tried to imbue my new country with, was absolutely undermined by the rising water in the basement. It highlights the doomed nature of these secessions. At the end of the day, these secessions may make a rhetorical point, but are practically useless, and not in any way equipped to deal with the complex problems the world faces. (pc November 20th 2017)

¹⁵ See Hayward and Dawson (2017) for an introduction to these.

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Even given the contentious and disputed nature of predictions of sea-level rise, Johns's identification of the intersection of actual physical conditions and secessionists' conceits serves to undercut the latter and provide an inventive perspective on various performances of statehood. In the context of Fremantle's West End, the flooded basement that housed and inspired Johns's installation shows the permeability of urban environments built on porous soils close to waterways even before the inundation scenarios projected by the City of Fremantle begin to occur. The Embassy of the Commonwealth of New Brighton thereby both represented a hidden present, lurking below West End's street levels, and presaged a future when storm surges and rising sea levels might turn the city's streetscapes to waterways. In the latter scenario, the fragmentation and reconfiguration of urban spaces is likely to be a more pressing issue than the initiation of micro-level enterprises that aspire to autonomy.

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