

Half Dozen presents...

## **YEAR OF THE DOG: Chinatown Public Art Project**

Curated by Jasper Knight and David Teh  
at 4A Gallery, Hay St, Sydney  
6 – 21 January, 2006

### **Shoufay Derz**

with Divij Darbar, Peter Majarian, Xotchitl Quintanar and Matthew Venables

#### **Break-up, 2006; digital video installation**

For most of us, going overseas actually means traversing the skies; but still today, many less fortunate people venture, literally, across the seas, in search of safety, peace and opportunity. But there is nothing reckless about these actions – the risks they and their families face are clear enough, but they are deemed acceptable risks, so great is the peril they leave behind, so urgent their need for relief.

In the Tampa incident and ‘Children Overboard’ affair, the Australian public bore witness – if only just – to two such desperate attempts for asylum. Instead of interpreting them as cries for help, our government chose to present them as brazen assaults on our national sovereignty. In the mirror of the media, the Australian public was subjected to the sad spectacle of a nation fleeing the world it inhabits – legislating itself out of existence – turning outlying islands into extraterritorial non-space where human rights are heaped in the too-hard basket. Our government’s role in the ‘Children Overboard’ affair stands as its grossest act of rhetorical indecency and moral recklessness. For many of us, this cowardice has been neither forgiven nor forgotten.

The boat is therefore a powerful symbol for contemporary Australia – a bridge between cultures, but a precarious bridge. The boat is more than a life raft, more than just a way of moving people and their belongings. Like all transport, it is also an information technology. From the first colonisation of our continent tens of thousands of years ago – which began its transformation into a culturally diverse land – boats have brought new ways of thinking, speaking and living, different technologies of being. The vessel is also a channel, a political vector.

For Shoufay Derz, the boat is an ambivalent metaphor, symbolising on one hand the feeling of transit, of being between places (for the boat is not a place) – and on the other, the impossibility of communication between two cultures. The artist herself is an Australian of German and Taiwanese heritage, and the imagery for this installation is drawn from several places: Tsing Tao in

eastern China, coastal New South Wales and Tasmania. While these locations may be integrated seamlessly as landscape (or seascape), the mediation introduces its own disconnections, some impossible differences.

In Derz's Break-up, an imperfect, imagined dialogue is recomposed from multiple video sources. Like speech itself, 'new media' also describes a set of languages (code), and the gaps between them can be just as profound as those between different cultures. These slippages necessitate and inform the editing. At times, the two channels converge and, briefly, comprehension seems possible. But not for long. Is it possible ever to be adequately understood? Or does understanding consist precisely in this experience of misunderstanding?

In The Infinite Conversation, Maurice Blanchot noted the necessity of this failure: "To speak to someone is to accept not introducing him into the system of things or of beings to be known; it is to recognise him as unknown and to receive him as foreign without obliging him to break with his difference."

In our climate of repressed inter-cultural tension, Break-up explores the limits, possibilities and impossibilities of conversation. In a boat at sea, two figures must converse; but as day becomes night, they appear to inhabit different worlds, different times. Just as their conversation is full of holes, so too is the boat - it is far from sea-worthy; it is, perhaps like all communication, destined to fail.

## **Shoufay Derz**

(with Divij Darbar, Peter Majarian, Xotchitl Quintanar and Matthew Venables)

### **Break-up, 2006**

Digital video installation; salt, timber boat\*

\* This 14-foot boat, of "carvel" timber construction, was originally a recreational vessel. It is over 100 years old, and was hauled from a riverbed in the Royal National Park, where it had been decomposing for decades.

Half Dozen is a non-profit, artist-run initiative dedicated to commissioning, promoting and exhibiting the work of emerging visual artists. For more info, please visit: [www.halfdozen.org](http://www.halfdozen.org)

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