

Speaking Truth  
to Power

Maura Reilly

Richard Bell of the Kooma, Kamilaroi, Jiman, Goreng Goreng peoples is a deeply political artist with a single agenda. Since picking up a paintbrush in 1997, making souvenirs for tourists, Bell's consistent goal has been to open dialogue about the rights and sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples, who since 1788 have fought against the settler colonialists who continue to occupy unceded Aboriginal land. His message is direct, bold and provocative. And, like all political artists, he 'speaks truth to power', most pointedly in his protest placard-like, text paintings. He speaks of land reparations for Aboriginal people and to the need for the Australian government to 'pay the rent', to 'give it all back' and to acknowledge that his peoples 'were here first'. As Bell explains, 'there must be acknowledgement of our prior ownership ... and it must be accompanied by some monetary payments, financial offsets or cash reimbursements.'<sup>1</sup> In Bell's painting *I Am Not Sorry* (2008), he speaks to the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd about his 'non-apology' offered in 2007 that failed to address issues associated with dispossession and colonisation, stating, 'as powerful and seemingly generous as it seemed, the statement lacked the requisite compensation package'. He speaks to the violence against blacks at the hands of white policemen, nationally as well as globally, highlighting, for instance, the killing of Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island in 2004. He has challenged the continued 'stealing' of Aboriginal children by the state, insisting the egregious actions have not ceased, with record numbers of Aboriginal children continually removed by the government. He speaks to privatised prisons and the ridiculously high imprisonment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, where, he argues, 'the Indigenous, black and brown peoples are incarcerated at rates upwards of five times that of non-Indigenous people'. To the art world, Bell speaks to the 1%, the chardonnay socialites and elites who control the sector at large and to the white paternalism that has taken over the Aboriginal arts industry, correctly stating in his *Bell's Theorem* (2002) that Aboriginal art is 'a white thing'. He speaks to the mistreatment and imprisonment of people seeking asylum in Australia. More recently, he speaks to the crisis of late capitalism, the rampant greed and redistribution of wealth that maintains broad economic and racial inequities. In underscoring these current concerns, Bell's work challenges the politics of domination that would otherwise render him nameless and voiceless.

American theorist bell hooks has argued in favour of speaking truth to power, defining it as a courageous 'act of defiant speech'. She explains:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side; a gesture of defiance. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject — the liberated voice.<sup>2</sup>

While she acknowledges that *talking back* can be threatening

to those who are not oppressed, she argues that it is important that colonised peoples speak, as a kind of 'coming to voice which is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle'.<sup>3</sup> Liberating one's voice is critical in the context of linguistic colonialism. As Bell himself explains, 'The fact that I have to use the language of the coloniser is a statement in itself. That I don't have the stories from the six tribes that I descended from is appalling.'<sup>4</sup> It is because his people's languages have been oppressed that speech and words are so important to him.

It is important to state that Bell is not 'calling out' injustices, as in shaming people or naming names, which is so often the case in the context of today's toxic call-out culture. Rather, he is 'calling in' — a tactic promoted by progressive politicians like New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,<sup>5</sup> defined as 'the act of checking your peers and getting them to change problematic behavior by explaining their misstep'.<sup>6</sup> He is not calling-in about a singular incident. Instead, his entire practice relates to a longer history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being subjected to the brutality of a racist state, to being historically and continuously excluded from the promise of sovereignty, land and reparations, and to being exploited by a system that consistently plunders and takes from Indigenous communities. As Australian curator Leigh Robb explains, Bell's work 'gives voice to the collective rage' experienced by all Indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup> But I would argue that it is not only collective, but righteous — with 'righteous rage' being a term used by African American scholar Leah Wright Rigueur to designate a rage that is moral, honourable, and just. In other words, Bell should not be pigeon-holed as an angry black man. To label him as such is to dismiss his honest desire to dismantle systemic racism. Bell simply wants to have a conversation, to dialogue, and to debate, because he knows that there are no easy answers. His aim is clear: 'It is my job as an artist to test people's resolve and that's what I do — I provoke thought and discussion.'<sup>9</sup>

Bell's work is more prescient now than ever before and the discussions he provokes are not only urgent but current. We are witnessing an international racial reckoning, inspired in part by the murder of George Floyd in the US at the hands of a white police officer. The Black Lives Matter movement, founded in 2013, has arisen again in protest against centuries of violence, and has become a global phenomenon. Recognising the significance of Bell's practice, and the way it speaks to this specific moment, London's Tate Modern has invited the artist to install his iconic work *Embassy* (2013) in the Turbine Hall in 2022, a space previously occupied by 'art stars' like Kara Walker, Louise Bourgeois and Superflex.

*Embassy* is a pop-up, mobile exhibition that Bell has presented in cities around the world. It is inspired by the original Aboriginal Tent Embassy, a sit in demonstration — now a permanent protest site — that was first mounted in 1972 by four Aboriginal activists on the grounds of Australia's Parliament House in opposition to the then conservative Federal Government's rejection of Aboriginal land rights. Bell believes firmly that little progress has occurred since then

and there is a pressing need for an embassy for Aboriginal Australians. *Embassy* consists of a military style tent, large enough to accommodate an audience, around which Bell places protest placards based on those used in the original embassy, repainted by the artist with phrases like: 'White invaders, you are living on stolen land', 'If you can't let me live Aboriginal, why preach democracy', as well as another that speaks to the land rights of the Larrakia people in Darwin, who he says 'wuz robbed'.

The public programming within *Embassy* is extensive and, for each iteration, Bell presents his controversial film trilogy *Imagining Victory* (2008-13) – a series that envisions a world in which First Peoples are truly equal, and where 'victory' includes land reparations and financial compensation. Bell collaborates on the programming with activists, artists, curators, scholars, politicians, and members of the community to organise and facilitate public events in and around the tent that are designed to encourage solidarity amongst people of colour – and to educate white participants.

For these carefully curated events, Bell and his team have invited African American artists like Emory Douglas (Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party) and Adam Pendleton to discuss activism, New York representatives from the Black Lives Matter movement to discuss police violence and protest, local Aboriginal Elders to lead Black history tours and weaving sessions, Canadian First Nations artists like Rebecca Belmore, Mohawk artist Alan Michelson and Mohawk curator and writer Lee-Ann Martin, to discuss the importance of international Indigenous solidarity, as well as members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), which was formed in 1968 to address systemic issues of poverty and police brutality against Native Americans. For other iterations of *Embassy*, he has invited ruangrupa, an art collective from Jakarta, Palestinian artist and curator Jack Persekian, as well as members of the Bedouin community, a people who have historically roamed with livestock in the regions west of the Jordan river. Australian artists Gordon Hookey, Tony Albert, Vernon Ah Kee, and Stuart Ringholt (the latter hosted *Anger Workshops* where participants learned simple techniques for expressing stress and anger in 'kinder ways') have participated, as have Australian filmmakers like Darlene Johnson and Alessandro Cavadini. Other activists, like the Aboriginal historian and academic Gary Foley, have been frequent guests. He has also hosted events like hip-hop dance and music sessions, protest placard-making classes and mural painting workshops.

Importantly, *Embassy* always involves community outreach. In Amsterdam, Bell partnered with the University of Colour, a student bloc dedicated to 'decolonising the University' that emerged from the occupation of the Maagdenhuis building at the University of Amsterdam in 2015. In Sydney, he worked with students from the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) Dance College, an organisation established in 1975 to train Indigenous Australians in dance. In Venice, he worked with the Poveglia per Tutti, an association whose aim is to reclaim the Venetian island Poveglia in order to establish

it as a community space, rather than another tourist resort. In Cairns, he worked with Murrandoo Yanner and Jeremy Gaia as representatives from the Sovereign Yidindji Government, an Indigenous micronation that renounced legal ties with Australia in 2014. Collaborations like these are an integral part of each iteration.

When placed into the context of the global art world, Bell's *Embassy* becomes all the more potent, aligning him with the most important artists working today, many of whom are associated with socially engaged art, a form of practice that is collaborative, participatory and conversational. At its core is the artists' desire to engage audiences in the process of production. Socially engaged art – which spans disciplines, ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts – most often deals with political and ethical issues with the goal of raising awareness and encouraging debate around current (often difficult) issues. It is based on the belief in the agency and responsibility of art and artists to affect social change.

Claire Bishop has theorised extensively on the subject, describing this type of art as a response to neo-liberal capitalism, stating that in order to 're-humanise a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production', socially engaged artists value a group dynamic, a social situation, and a raised consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Bishop argues that the most effective socially engaged art has a strong authorial voice and should be confrontational, disruptive, individualistic or acrimonious, raising questions rather than attempting to provide answers. Instead, Bell's non-confrontational *Embassy* gives agency to others, as he prefers to co-labour, to share power with his community and collaborators. For Bell, it is the discussions that are the work of art; the tent is simply a safe space for those ideas. As such, according to Grant Kester, another theorist of this area of practice, a work like *Embassy* would be deemed 'dialogue-based public art', a specific type of socially engaged art practice and a term he uses as an homage to the theories of Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin who argued that the work of art can be viewed 'as a kind of conversation; a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view'.<sup>11</sup>

There are many artists working today whose practices are informed or framed by dialogue-based art, including Suzanne Lacy's *Youth, Cops and Videotape* (1995), Arahmaiani's *Tibetan Plateau Project* (2010-ongoing), Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* (2011-ongoing), and Simone Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic* (2014), among others. Each is participatory, community-based, relational, and collaborative; each embodies the concept of 'open exchange'; and each, like Bell's *Embassy*, is fiercely political.

When he installs *Embassy* in the Turbine Hall in 2022, Bell will have an opportunity to situate Aboriginal politics in the context of global race relations. He plans to invite Michael Anderson, the one surviving member of the original Aboriginal Tent Embassy; he plans to speak with the British activist-writer-rapper, Akala, about his book *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (2018). He will engage





with John Akomfrah, a British artist of Ghanaian descent, about his commitment to radicalism, as well as with the Greek economist and left-wing politician, Yannis Varoufakis, whose new book, *Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present* (2020) offers a radical vision of democratic socialism. Also participating will be Sylvia McAdam of the Canadian Cree Nation, who is a founding member of Idle No More, a grassroots protest movement comprised of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, as well as several members of the Sámi Parliament, which was established in 1964 to address Indigenous matters in Norway. In London, he also plans to host political banner-making workshops for children, as well as others that teach young people how to write persuasive letters to local members of Parliament. These are just some of the many events scheduled when Bell pitches his tent at Tate Modern, with 'Ambassador Bell' in the role of chief diplomat, spokesperson, and mediator of disputes for First Peoples worldwide. He will create a forum for free speech within the most impermanent of structures, a tent. And he will present *Embassy* in London, the former seat of colonial power where ships from the Thames that invaded Aboriginal land set sail over 250 years ago; the place from which directives were given and countless lives destroyed. He will go there to speak truth to power, to flip the tables of agency so that a future can begin in which suppressed voices are heard.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Bell, interview with the author, October 2020. All quotes in the essay, unless otherwise noted, come from this interview.
2. bell hooks, 'Talking Back', *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, South End Press Boston, 2015, p.9.
3. bell hooks, 'When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution: Coming to Voice', *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, op cit, p.18.
4. Richard Bell quoted in Michael Eather, *Richard Bell*, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane, 2002, reprinted in *Richard Bell: Positivity*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2006, p.77.
5. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, @AOC, Twitter, 5 March 2019, accessed 6/03/2019.
6. Ashley Austrew, 'Is There A Difference Between 'Calling In' And 'Calling Out'?', *dictionary.com*, [dictionary.com/e/calling-in-vs-calling-out/](https://dictionary.com/e/calling-in-vs-calling-out/), accessed 15/11/2020.
7. Leigh Robb, 'Introduction', *Richard Bell: Embassy*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, 2014, p.6.
8. Leah Wright Rigueur quoted in *America's Racial Reckoning: Black Lives and Black Futures in Historical, Political and Legal Context*, video conference transcript, Brandeis University, Boston, 22 June 2020, pp.6-7, [brandeis.edu/now/2020/june/video-transcripts/transcript-americas-racial-reckoning.html](https://brandeis.edu/now/2020/june/video-transcripts/transcript-americas-racial-reckoning.html), accessed 15/11/2020
9. Richard Bell quoted in *BELL Invites*, exhibition pamphlet, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2016, np.
10. Claire Bishop, 'Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?', *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2001*, Creative Time Books, New York, 2012, p.35.
11. Grant Kester, 'Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art', *Theory in Contemporary Art*, Blackwell, 2005, p.156. Kester also explains how, for Bakhtin, 'art's role is to shock us out of this perceptual complacency, to force us to see the world anew'. Ibid.

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Left to right: Richard Bell, Name Name, Name Name and Keith Munro, *Embassy*, 2013, installation view, MCA Forecourt, Sydney, 2018

*BELL Invites*, 2016, installation view, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam

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*Embassy*, 2013, installation view, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, 2014

*Umbrella Embassy*, 2013, installation view, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2013