

## Four

# Xenophobia

Museums, refugees and fear of the other

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Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.

But do not hurry the journey at all  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey  
Without her you would not have set out  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.<sup>1</sup>

In these evocative lines from the 1911 poem, *Ithaka*, by the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, which were used to ground the extraordinary exhibition *Odyssey* at the National Museum of Archaeology in Athens, we have a poetic expression of cross cultural exchange enriching what it is to live a good life. While the idea of homeland, of a stable place to which one belongs, keeps us anchored and focused, for many it is movement, change and contact with others that makes us feel alive. Ithaka is arrived at after a lifetime of journeying, 'full of adventure, full of discovery.'<sup>2</sup> The metaphor of the journey in this exhibition serves not only to immerse the presentation of antiquities in the ancient Greek world of god's and heroes, trade and war, but to support the idea that practices of contact and exchange between different cultures sustain creativity and life.

The exhibition, which opened in October 2016, came at a time when Greece, and Europe more generally, was facing an unprecedented influx of refugees fleeing conflict and poverty in the Middle East and North Africa. Many crossed the very same Mediterranean sea that is so evocatively conjured within the space of the exhibition itself, with its watery blue light, night sky and the sounds of the waves gently lapping the shore or the side of a boat.

If the *Odyssey* exhibition could be read as an embodiment of the idea of cosmopolitanism, as a valuing of cross cultural encounters through which we can come to understand what it is to be human, this chapter is concerned with understanding how museums are revisiting this idea as an ethical field premised on the notion that we come to know ourselves through knowing others.<sup>3</sup> These developments will be explored by paying particular attention to the ways museums are

responding to the contemporary refugee crisis and its attendant discourse of fear of the 'other'. My geographical focus will be Australia, which has seen a marked increase in the arrival of asylum seekers by boat, in perilous journeys which – just as in the Mediterranean – have seen many deaths. As in Europe, successive Australian governments have sought to 'stop the boats'. By doing so they have responded to, and helped shape, a discourse of fear of the stranger, and particularly the Muslim.<sup>4</sup> This discourse is the antithesis of the story of the Odyssey. Instead of positively valuing encounters across difference, it promotes the primal importance of the homeland as a place of stasis, its citizens bounded by commonality and, ideally, untouched by the worlds of others. This sentiment was embodied in an election speech by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, in 2001, soon after the *Tampa* incident: 'we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'.<sup>5</sup> This chapter then, explores some of the ways museum exhibition practices are engaging with the contemporary global movements of refugees and, in so doing, are encouraging people to consider difference in an informed and positive manner.

In particular, I want to look at two aspects of these practices: one is concerned with questions of representation of the empirical reality of the global movement of refugees; the other with how particular dispositions towards 'others' are being shaped. Of particular help in understanding the first of these practices is Ulrich Beck's work on cosmopolitised societies and the ways in which they produce both a normative idea of cosmopolitanism as well as a reactionary affirmation of 'methodological nationalism'. In discussing the second practice, I want to anchor the ways in which relations between self and other are played out in exhibitions that attempt to engage citizens across difference using mimetic forms of communication. I explore these practices referencing two exhibitions at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia. The first is a temporary exhibition, *They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention*,<sup>6</sup> which was developed using testimony given by a number of asylum seekers to Australia who had arrived during a period in which every asylum seeker who arrived without official papers underwent a mandatory detention period while they were processed. Some still remain on Manus Island, awaiting their relocation to a country other than Australia or the determination of their refugee status. The second is a permanent exhibition called *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours*, which opened in 2011 in response to growing racism in Australia, targeted particularly against Muslim migrants and refugees. These exhibitions will also help me tease out a third aspect of this chapter: the ways in which museums are developing a 'pedagogy of feeling' to reshape relations between self and others.<sup>7</sup>

### **Metamorphosis, mimesis and sticky affect**

In *The Metamorphosis of the World*, Ulrich Beck claimed the world has become a cosmopolitised space – a space in which global others are in 'our space' and we in theirs, even, if, for much of the time, we remain unaware of this. For Beck, this contemporary reality is a side effect of modernisation, whose impacts are such that they cannot be understood using the conceptual toolkit of the contemporary social sciences. Instead of concepts such as change, transformation or revolution, Beck argues that we need to come to grips with the fact that the world is actually going through a metamorphosis. From impacts arising out of climate change, the financial crisis, the September 11 terrorist attacks, the rise of ISIS and the subsequent mass movement of refugees, 'we are always confronted with the same pattern' Beck argues. 'What was ruled out before-hand as inconceivable is taking place – as a global event, mostly

observable in every living room in the world because it is transmitted by the mass media'.<sup>8</sup> The scale of this metamorphosis is such that it represents an ontological shift. In such a world, Beck says, we can no longer afford to maintain what he calls 'methodological nationalism' for it is simply not the case that nations can control everything that happens within their borders. Economically, politically, culturally and socially our everyday lives unfold in ways that might be blind to us but which are utterly dependent on relations across differences, many of them on unequal planes. Understanding that fact is, according to Beck, one of the most urgent tasks of the social sciences, for without such an understanding we cannot grasp the nature of the challenges we currently face – whether that concerns climate change or indeed the global movements of people in response to wars, lack of economic opportunity, famine, and natural disasters.

While Beck's arguments point to the importance of recognising seismic shifts in the ways relations between self and others are produced, he also points to the significance of recognising the importance of cosmopolitanism as a philosophy rather than as an empirical reality. As a normative idea, he states, cosmopolitanism and its attendant human rights discourse, a discourse that asserts that everyone has a right to strive for equality, is itself a response to the pressures that have emerged out of the development of a cosmopolitised world which has led to third world peoples wanting the same rights and opportunities as first world ones. At the same time, however, he is also careful to recognise that this very same metamorphosis is also responsible for negative reactions to it – namely a return to narrow ideas of identity, simplified narratives of homogeneous nations based on single cultural identities and a desire to keep the world out, to erect barriers against foreign bodies, and thus to deny that everyone has a right to equality.

This distinction between the empirical existence of a cosmopolitised world as the marker of our global contemporary society and the rise of a human rights-based cosmopolitan discourse which attempts to counter narrower, more xenophobic discourses, is very useful in helping us analyse how museums are responding to events like the movement of refugees across the globe. In Australia, at least, museums that deal with the history of migration are increasingly attempting to do two things. The first is to use a human rights discourse, mainly through the use of testimony, to encourage the development of a cosmopolitan ethic as a counter to the xenophobic racism that has developed in response to the growing number of asylum seekers. Such exhibitions offer an excellent illustration of Beck's argument concerning the rise of human rights discourses in response to the growing cosmopolitisation of the world. Their argument is basically that all of humanity has a right to equality and thus access to resources to improve their lives. This includes the right to seek asylum in another country. The second exhibition strategy attempts to foster a more cosmopolitan ethic by demonstrating that our society – and indeed that we ourselves – are already cosmopolitan; that there are no pure or stable identities. It challenges our assumptions about the identity of others, embodying a cosmopolitan journey of encounter that replays the values embedded in the story of the *Odyssey*. This is the strategy used in *Identity: Yours, Mine Ours*. As we shall see, both strategies use affective forms of interpretation, but do so to different effects.

To demonstrate the importance of affect in both of these strategies of interpretation, I want to focus on the use of mimetic forms of communication to embody affect in both exhibitions. In an

essay on affect, Anna Gibbs describes mimesis as a form of communication practice that embodies relations between people, rather than the communication of information.<sup>9</sup> For Gibbs, this involves ‘corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary... At their most primitive, these involve the visceral level of affect contagion, the “synchrony of facial expressions, vocalisations, postures and movements with those of another person”, producing a tendency for those involved “to converge emotionally”’.<sup>10</sup> There are a range of affects such as, for example, joy, anger, pain, disdain, and pleasure that are communicated through facial expressions (grimaces, smiles) and in the tonal quality of the human voice (loud, quiet, soft, harsh, fast, slow, rising, diminishing) which spread contagion like, across bodies. As the surface traces of deeply felt bodily sensations, these affects help to build emotional landscapes that build as well as break social bonds.<sup>11</sup> For example, if I smile with joy at seeing someone, it is highly likely that they will smile back, acknowledging a link between us. That response also intensifies the feelings of joy that the original smile gave me. Smiling back thus provides an intensification of that affect. It is something that happens automatically, a visceral response from one body to the other. The same goes for negative affects whose effect is to exclude people from a community. Thus, if I throw someone a disdainful look they are likely to look the other way and be hurt. Rather than inclusion, we will have created a space of disconnection, of exclusion from each other. The same with the voice – I can make my voice welcome someone into my space or exclude them simply by using tonality and volume. I can also use my body to create a space of welcome or its opposite – pushing people away. I can open my arms and gesture for people to come towards me or I can turn away from them or stand in defiance for example. Ultimately, the affects generated by my facial expressions, the posture of my body and the quality of my voice contribute to building a sense of belonging to or being excluded from, a community.

I am interested in how exhibitions can use these forms of mimetic communication to build a shared sense of community in the context of the fears that surround the global refugee situation. My hypothesis is that museums are using mimetic forms of communication to create what Beck described as a ‘civic space of action’<sup>12</sup> that promotes embodied learning and practices which support normative ideas of cosmopolitan values such as, for example, those of empathy. However, as Beck argues, to be successful against ‘methodological nationalism’, such spaces need to promote reflexivity and reflection.<sup>13</sup> This is because, according to Beck, it is not enough to recognise and value difference. The future of our world is also dependent on our response to the empirical fact that our cosmopolitised world is, at this point, built on unequal relations. These have to be addressed if we are to avoid social, not to mention climatic, disintegration. Exhibitions that aim to create a more cosmopolitan citizenry, then, need to promote a level of critical analysis that might produce in the case of museum visitors, a metamorphosis in how they understand relations between self and others. This means that we need to ask two questions around the use of mimetic communication to promote cosmopolitan values. The first is simply an empirical question – how is mimetic communication used to communicate a human rights discourse aimed at building a normative cosmopolitan ethic? The second question concerns whether or not this form of communication can do more than simply reflect this cosmopolitan ethic by enabling a more reflective space of encounter that might actually contribute to the building of a more cosmopolitan cosmopolitised world. Can exhibitions that aim to shape more cosmopolitan outlooks build a space for self-reflection that challenges and perhaps reforms established ways of thinking that lead to xenophobic

responses to the global movement of refugees? Can they reach an audience beyond those who are already converts to cosmopolitan values? To answer my questions, I will engage in an analysis of how my two case studies use mimetic forms of communication paying particular attention to both their modes of address and the larger narrative structure these modes operate within in order to get at whether or not they build a space for self reflection. In doing so, I am interested in exploring whether or not mimetic forms of communication can enable an exhibition to become a 'sticky object' in the experiences of visitors. A sticky object is one which, as Sarah Ahmed puts it, accrues layers of meaning which leave a residue on those that come into contact with them.<sup>14</sup> This residue is what she describes as affect. For her, affect 'is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects' (Ahmed 2010: 29). Can mimetic forms of communication be structured so as to leave behind an affective residue that promotes reflective thought?

### **Witnessing asylum**

*They Cannot Take the Sky* was developed by Behind the Wire – a not for profit organisation that aims to document the stories and experiences of asylum seekers to Australia – in collaboration with the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia. The exhibition uses video oral histories to explain the experiences of people who have 'sought, or are seeking, asylum and refuge in Australia'.<sup>15</sup> The exhibition is part of a public advocacy campaign on the part of Behind the Wire to call attention to the lack of a human rights in Australia's approach to asylum seekers. The group is composed of volunteers whose backgrounds include law, journalism, writing and photography. They record and disseminate the testimony of former and current asylum seekers regarding their experiences of the Australian government's system using their website, podcasts, a book and this exhibition.<sup>16</sup>

An important aspect of Behind the Wire's work arises from the context in which it is undertaken. Their central aim is to shed light onto darkness – both metaphorically and literally. This is because the Australian government has made it illegal for anyone to have contact with asylum seekers; there is a prohibition against their voices being heard in public. This attempt to isolate asylum seekers has included their removal to offshore detention centres, away from the public eye. Returning them to the light, where they can literally be seen for who they are, is therefore a key strategy in the long process of coming to terms with what has happened and what this means for how we understand the nature of Australian society as well as, hopefully, changing the future of these people and these policies.

The Australian government's policy of processing asylum seekers who arrive by boat offshore, which denies them refuge in Australia itself, is the latest in a long and troubled national history of managing refugees and dealing with the other.<sup>17</sup> Despite becoming a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees in 1954 and thus signalling a willingness to become a place of refuge for asylum seekers, the Australian government made provision for the discretionary detention of unauthorised arrivals in detention centres on mainland Australia in its 1958 *Migration Act*. 'Unauthorised arrivals' are people who have overstayed their visas, breached their visa conditions or sought entry into Australia without identity papers or visas. In 1992, this discretionary ability became mandatory. As the number of asylum seekers began to rise, particularly those arriving by boat from Indonesia, it was argued that facilities on mainland Australia could no longer cope with the number of arrivals. From 2001 to 2007 the

government instituted what was called the Pacific Solution in which asylum seekers were processed on offshore detention centres. From 2008 to mid 2012 this policy was discontinued. In August 2012, however, amidst the return of growing numbers of asylum seekers, many of whom drowned at sea, the Gillard government reopened offshore processing facilities on Nauru and Manus Islands in the Pacific. Since July 2013, all new arrivals have been processed at Manus Island detention facilities with the added measure that none of them will ever be able to resettle in Australia itself. Effectively, this policy has stopped the arrival of new asylum seekers but those who have been sent to Manus Island have spent years in limbo while they await the results of their application for refugee status and then the offer of a place in a country other than Australia. The situation has given rise to a persistent and loud advocacy for human rights and calls for the government to follow its own commitment to the Convention on Refugees.<sup>18</sup>

The exhibition is one example of the way the language of human rights has been used to conduct this campaign against xenophobic discourses. In the videos, mimetic communication is as important as the actual content of the testimonies themselves, in terms of having their claimed human rights recognised. The faces and voices of individuals – rather than groups – is central to a performance that seeks to humanise its subject. As such it is the very antithesis of the migration statistic. Visitors can trace the emotions of these people – their fear, hope, despair, sadness, joy – in the tone of voice and facial expression. This adds a powerful affective layer to the engagement that is not as accessible in a book. The effect is precisely as Gibb's explains it: their emotions spread, contagion like, to us as witnesses to their testimony.

The exhibition experience actually began in a long introductory corridor that contained a photographs of each asylum seeker who spoke in the exhibition. Shot in the Australian landscape, in their homes or in detention centres, the photographs were taken by a Behind the Wire volunteer. Some of the asylum seekers looked straight at the camera and thus at the visitor – their eyes and facial expressions alternatively confident and joyous or sad and pensive. Some had their eyes cast down. In the case of others we saw only their back – frightened of the consequences but nevertheless wanting to speak out – they did not want to take the risk of being identified. One central narrative seemed to emerge from them: bravery. The next narrative was that of generosity. At the end of the corridor, before the pods that contained the video testimonies, we were welcomed into the exhibition space by a video with a number of smiling and waving asylum seekers. These were the ones who had gained the necessary visas to live in the community. Now they were inviting us into their homes to hear their stories. The emotional tone was warm, with the effect that I smiled back, acknowledging their humanity and entered. The situation was strange – they are the ones whom we have treated as strangers yet they are the ones that are here seeking to make us comfortable. A third theme was now emerging: that of their emotional resilience and humanity.

The stories that followed were harrowing but they also offered hope. The first testifier I witnessed was Hani Abdile, a refugee from Somalia. Hani found her voice through poetry and it is as a poet that I first encountered her in this exhibition. The poem alludes to but does not describe, her experiences at sea, a sea which gave her freedom but which also provided her with one of the most terrifying experiences of her life. Before she speaks we encounter her with eyes closed taking in a large slow breath – we wait with bated breath, aware of the

tenseness in her body which travels imperceptibly to our own as we too prepare ourselves. The poem comes forth the moment she opens her eyes and looks straight at us with the incredible energy of a rapper, the rhythmic energy of the poem willing her to keep going. The excitement of coming close to shore comes through in the speed and tone of her voice, while silence between stanzas communicate the experience of pain. Looking straight to camera, the sea, she tells us, is 'so kind for a short time/But not for long journeys'.<sup>19</sup> In that moment something passes imperceptibly behind her eyes – and we know instantly that the journey was long and harrowing.

The experience of trauma is also communicated mimetically through the voice and facial gestures of Aran Mylvaganau, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee who describes the afternoon his primary school and village were bombed, resulting in the death of his brother. Aran too, closes his eyes as his dark memories flood back, moistening his lips to combat his nerves, clearly making an enormous effort to hold it together as he shares his story. It is impossible not to reach out emotionally towards him.

The next two pods vary the pace a little, with stories about first encounters with Australian government personnel in reception centres where they are given food and clothing, and later, darker stories from their time in detention centres. These narratives are told in a more matter of fact style, a style that belies the darkness of their experiences and emphasises their resilience. The focus is on their dehumanisation at the hands of government agents – a focus that is then in dialogue with the humanising strategy embodied in the structure of giving testimony itself. As Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn have argued in relation to the giving of testimony by Holocaust survivors, testimonies are at once an attempt to document and give evidence of experiences in a context where other forms of documentation do not exist. They are form of memorialising those who did not make it through the experience and an effort, on the part of the testifier, to reach out to find their humanity again, having lost it in the Holocaust itself.<sup>20</sup> As the asylum seekers look at us straight in the eye, as we listen to their voices calmly describing their experiences, we are forced to take in the ways in which their humanity was taken away from them – the way in which, for example, their names are taken away and they are referred to only by a number. Detention centres, one asylum seeker tells us, are 'a factory for making mental illness'.<sup>21</sup> And while experiences of despair, self-harm and eating strikes are described, what also emerges is their fight to keep their identity whole, to not forget who they are – by writing in the case of Hani and Behrouz, or by simply looking up to the sky, which, as Behrouz said, 'they cannot take away from us'. As witnesses, we are held in their thrall.

The power of the exhibition, however, does not rest simply in the rendering of their experiences through these uses of affective forms of communication. It also has to do with the narrative structure of the exhibition itself, which is different from that of the book on which it is based.<sup>22</sup> The book follows the biography of each individual. We read each story one by one. In the exhibition, however, we follow a series of themes, each of which is addressed by the asylum seekers in ways that build a cumulative picture not only of a range of experiences but of the system itself. These themes – the journey by boat to Australia, the memories of the events that led them to become asylum seekers, immediate experiences in reception centres, the process of dehumanisation in detention centres, mental stress and illness in response to

those experiences, reflections of life in detention centres and the afterlife of these experiences – are all aimed at one thing: a representation of a brutal, dehumanising system and the utter failure of Australian governments to recognise not only the human rights of asylum seekers but their own responsibilities as signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of Refugees. The point is important because it means that visitors are asked not simply to become witnesses to the experiences of the asylum seekers and to have empathy for them, but to become witnesses to the brutality of the mandatory offshore detention system Australia has developed. The gaze is on ourselves as much as on ‘the other’. In effect, the asylum seekers are speaking about us. The result is a communication loop that connects us to one another. The task of visitors is not simply to offer empathy, to pay the courtesy of listening. It is also to think about our own role in these events, our own complicity in what is happening. The exhibition effectively offers an opportunity for us, as Australians, to witness a wrong doing perpetrated in our name and to add our voices to the chorus of critique. As one of the asylum seekers, Behrouz Boochani, who is still in the Manus Island put it, looking straight at us: ‘But the whole of Australia made this trouble. And I think the history will make a judgement of Australia in the future’. He follows this, with eyes shut, his face taut: ‘And the next generation in Australia, one day they will think about Manus and Nauru and they will blame them, but it’s not enough at that time’.<sup>23</sup>

There is a further twist in the narrative structure of this exhibition which is provided by the involvement of Behind the Wire, an activist group. Their involvement means that visitors witness Australian citizens openly criticising their government. Taken as a whole, the exhibition is thus a testimony to the existence of a critical movement, of a cosmopolitan ethic within at least part of Australia’s citizenry as well as the strength of its civic institutions, in this case a state museum, to stage the giving of such a testimony. These aspects – the activists and the civic space – are critical aspects of the performance. This double frame comes through in the introductory label:

The reference committee welcomes you to this space, where you will hear first-hand from men and women who have sought asylum in Australia and were – and – are – detained by the Australian Government under its mandatory detention policy. Here, you can listen to the voices that are so often absent from public discourse.<sup>24</sup>

Quite clearly, the activities of the Australian government are under scrutiny and the visitor is directly addressed as someone who is aware that there is a debate and who is invited to think about it from the perspective of both the asylum seekers and our responsibilities as a nation that is a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees.

This means that while the exhibition appears at first sight to have the hallmarks of what I have elsewhere called a ‘pedagogy of listening’<sup>25</sup> – the representation and enactment of a plurality of voices, often from the margins and against dominant interests but in ways that leave relations between dominant groups and ‘others’ untouched – it actually begins to stage an encounter in which the ground of inquiry is ‘us’ as much as ‘them’. In doing so, it begins to reach to a form of curatorial strategy that I call a ‘pedagogy of feeling’. This is a pedagogy which uses the experience of encounters across difference to produce a space for critical, self-inquiry aimed at generating a space of transformation or perhaps even, to follow Beck, metamorphosis.

Is there evidence that this exhibition actually achieves that?

An answer is to be found in the form of post-it notes on the exhibition message boards. They ask:

What have you experienced here today? What have you discovered that you didn't know before? What would you tell your friends and family about these stories? We invite you to share your reflections on what you have seen and heard today.<sup>26</sup>

On the day I visited, these boards were full of the visitors' own reflections. These indicated that many of the visitors were already sympathetic to the cause, enacting their own belief in human rights and the rightfulness and legitimacy of asylum seekers' claims for refuge, indicating at the same time their intense discomfort with the Australian government's position. The following give a flavour of what was said on these notes:

Close the offshore camps and start working to uphold human rights in this country. We are so much better than this.

It is disgraceful and inhumane to keep people locked away in detention centres. Process them and give them the freedom and life they deserve.

Australia's immigration detention policy is shameful. As an Australian I am ashamed. In the years to come, I am sure that a future government will issue an official apology for the way we have treated asylum seekers – much like the apologies issued to Aboriginal Australians and migrant children detailed in this museum's other galleries.

A few promised to continue the work of testifying by saying they would share the stories, indicating in so doing, that their understanding of the situation had gained in detail and that they understood their role as witnesses included not only listening but repeating the stories: 'As a person who discovers new worlds and shares them throughout my life, I promise to share these stories everywhere I go.'

A smaller but nonetheless important number of people indicated that they had not only learnt something new but that they had changed their views as a result:

I feel moved in a way I cannot describe. It overwhelms me that there are still people living like this. It is so unjust and inhumane. More people should know about this. I wasn't expecting to see this today and for some reason I have, and it has changed my stance from which I have been living and meaning life. What I find difficult no longer feels hard. Thank you for this.

The last statement, I would argue, indicates the role of affect in effecting this change. While they can't explain it, they felt moved, developed empathy and saw the situation with new

eyes. In effect, these statements indicate that this exhibition did leave a 'sticky' residue that enabled a more reflective and critical civic space to emerge.

### **Negotiating other identities**

*Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* is quite a different exhibition but it, too, seeks to develop an encounter across difference that builds a greater awareness of self – in this case of the ways in which we stereotype others and, in so doing, exclude them from feeling that they can belong. Like the previous exhibition, *Identity* is concerned with creating a critical and reflective space in which cross-cultural encounters can occur through embodied experiences that can lead to new emotions and thoughts. It does not do this, however, through testimony or even by focusing on refugees or migrants. Nor does it focus on difficult histories, even though its aim is to counter the racism that has accompanied the migration crisis. Instead, it focuses on the issue of belonging – how we feel we are included or not and how our relations with others shape that experience. Its special trick is to stage this encounter by continually throwing a mirror onto the self rather than onto others, and doing this at both an individual and collective level. Once again, the key to this encounter are mimetic forms of communication that leave a 'sticky' residue.

The exhibition opens with a video art installation called the *Welcome Wall* by Lynette Walworth. At the end of a long narrow corridor, visitors find themselves being welcomed or, alternatively, pushed away, even shunned by individuals and groups of people who express themselves through body gestures. These are of a kind already discussed, expressing a range of emotions and dispositions from happiness to anger, trust to fear, and love to hate. All visitors will feel these emotions thrust upon them as they become the objects of gaze. The curators wanted to use this experience to communicate the following points:

Our identities are multiple, diverse and changeable.  
Searching for my identity is a journey in self-discovery.  
We all judge others according to physical and cultural assumptions.  
Honesty, empathy and accurate information will help us to understand both ourselves and others.<sup>27</sup>

The aims are carried out by creating a space for the enactment of stereotyping practices which are then turned against us, questioning our assumptions, and thus effectively working across the space of difference. The gestures of welcome or pushing away are enacted by groups of people with clear markers showing collective forms of identity. Some are dressed in football team colours, others as punk or goths. Some are marked as belonging to particular ethnicities by their physical characteristics or dress. Some appear not to be marked at all – meaning they appear to be Anglo-Celtic Australians. These markers invite stereotyping on the part of visitors. Depending both on who we are as the visitor, and what our assumptions about those in the screen are, visitors might be surprised to be at the receiving end of being pushed away by people they judge to be like them, or by people they assumed to be relatively disempowered. The surprise is that the experience makes it look like those on the screen are responding to us, making similar judgments and thus forcing a double take. What we assume to be a display about them becomes a mirror onto us. It becomes clear that people's identities change according to whom they are interacting with, that we all make judgements based on

surface appearances and that such judgements produce fear and alienation as well as a sense of belonging. The piece thus works intuitively rather than didactically, requiring us to explore our own internal feelings and work at making our assumptions explicit rather than making them explicit for us.

This two way mirror, I would argue, is what two high school students who took part in a small audience study project I was involved with were working through:<sup>28</sup>

Student 1: It unsettled me that I could make those judgements and see them as different people. Like the difference between the people – people have bad days, people have good days. Like it happens. They change, but it unsettled me that I could make the two different stereotypes about the same people.

Student 2: I like it too because ... when they were really cold and unwelcoming, it seemed like people were discriminating against them and stereotyping them, and I was like a third person watching their reaction, while not hurting them, if you know what I mean. So I felt sympathy for them, but then I kind of felt like they were being mean to me by having that cold, unwelcoming kind of reaction, and they were kind of really judgemental, and I felt like I could have been like discriminated against as well, but it was really nice when they were welcoming. And as Rose said, it was really interesting how the same people, but based on their actions, you can stereotype them differently.

These statements show that when they first start talking about their experience with the video, the students discussed the video in terms of the 'other' – the people in the video. Student 2, however, began to bring it around to him/herself – how they were making judgements about them but also how they felt they themselves were being judged and made the object of discrimination. They were surprised and it was that surprise, that affective response, that made them think.

The entire exhibition is structured to encourage this kind of self-reflexivity, where opportunities to learn about others, turn out to be opportunities to learn about our own assumptions and values and then question them. A key example is a touch table in which it is possible to ask pre-determined questions of various people such as what they like, what food they eat, what their language is, and so on. The value of the interactive is the way it challenges stereotyping on the basis of skin colour, shape of eyes, dress and so on. Even those whom we might identify as 'like us' can surprise us. The result is indeed to appreciate this interactive's aims:

Every person has a unique identity consisting of a combination of characteristics which results in both commonalities and differences with others.

Who we think we are might be different from who others think we are. Making judgements and assumptions about people based on what they look like can be inaccurate, unjust and prejudicial.<sup>29</sup>

Importantly, the answers to the questions are given through video. Once again, we interact with people who talk to us directly, who smile and look at us and in so doing are present as rounded human beings, with particular life experiences, likes and dislikes. A 'Chinese-looking' woman turns out to have been born in South Africa, speaks Afrikaans and English but not Mandarin. Her parents don't speak it either. They communicate in English. The favourite food of a man with a Lebanese background is a chiko roll (an Australian fast food). An 'Anglo-looking' blue-eyed middle-aged man turns out to be Jewish but does not follow kosher rules. The lesson being taught here looks rather bald and unsophisticated when written like this but the exhibit itself is subtle and sophisticated, and our attitude changes not simply because they don't simply fit the stereotype but because they increasingly become visible as individuals like ourselves.

That then sets the ground for an analysis of how we treat 'them' – the 'other'. The key display here is again a video installation, this time of an everyday racist experience on a Melbourne tram. A young man of African background (Ibrahim) is sitting with a spare seat beside him. In front of him is a 'white' Australian woman in vivid conversation with a friend who is of 'Asian' background. Behind the 'white' woman is her son. An Anglo looking male (Rob) enters the tram, notices the empty seat but does not take it. Instead he leers at the young man, using his body and a can of coke that he crushes, audibly filling the space in a menacing way. Glances are exchanged between the two women which indicate they clearly disapprove of what is going on. Nothing is said however. When the overbearing male tells the young man to keep his voice down when he takes a phone call on his mobile and starts talking in an African language, the 'White Australian' woman moves and takes the seat next to him gesturing to her son to take her old seat. The bully steps out of the tram at the next stop, loudly crushing his now empty can of coke as he goes. Visitors can then go into the minds of each of the adult participants, exploring the thoughts of perpetrator, victim and bystanders.

In this interactive, the drama is mostly carried by mimetic forms of communication between the characters on the tram. No words are exchanged; only glances and movements of bodies. Everyone however displays their emotional inner state – from hurt to dismay to an overt desire to intimidate. At the same time, the exchange of those very same glances is what draws the visitor into the scene. We too are bystanders in the tram. We respond affectively to what is going on in the screen because the setting is familiar to us and we can imagine ourselves in a similar situation.

This last point is reflected in what one of our two students in the research project mentioned above, said and felt about this display:

I felt terrible. Like I really felt the side of the victim watching that, and so I felt really bad, and I felt maybe like guilty for doing the same thing, like maybe I do that. So it made me think about my actions in relation to like what was happening.

In articulating this further, she explained that at first, she interpreted Rob not taking the seat next to Ibrahim as

well at first I thought of all the people on my bus, 'cause I catch the bus every day, and how they just ...I don't know why, they just don't sit down in spare seats. I think it's because they don't want to sit next to...I don't think it's the person, but I think it's just like they don't want to...they want to sit by themselves or with their friends, not someone they don't know...When I first started catching the bus, I was like those people, and I didn't want to sit next to other people because they were strangers and I didn't know them, not because they were a different race or something. But then I just started to learn that ...I don't know...it doesn't really matter, yeah, it's a seat, it's a person, like there's nothing wrong with sitting next to whoever. So it kind of made me think back to that, and how people on my bus still do that.

As this young woman realised, sitting next to a total stranger on the bus, may be a small thing but it is a measure of one's ability to not fear another, to not treat them as not like you. It is also one way we can help them feel they belong.

## Conclusion

In both exhibitions, the moment of metamorphosis is the moment when we realise that the exhibition is actually about us rather than them. This realisation is enabled when the interpretation strategies enable a connection between the experience of others with our own cultural practices, our own history, our own political processes. To return to Beck, what is enabled here is both the development of a cosmopolitan ethic and a recognition of cosmopolitics and its impact on the daily life of actual people. Mimetic communication and testimony by themselves are not enough to achieve this. This recognition only becomes 'sticky' if it leaves a trace in us. That only happens if that trace can be revealed as being part of us. The student's comments above, together with some of the comments from visitors to *They Cannot Take the Sky*, suggest that little things matter, that we are capable of understanding and changing our practices and that museums can help in giving people agency to do so and a way of thinking about how to go about it. It suggests that we can overcome the fear of living side by side with strangers and learn to welcome them if, first of all, we learn to see ourselves anew – in effect to seek in museums not an affirmation of who we think we are but help with exploring who we actually are, how we relate to others and why.

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<sup>1</sup> C. P. Cavafy, 'Ithaca' in John Mavrogordato (trans.) *Poems by C. P. Cavafy*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978, first edition in 1951), Exhibition text *Odyssey*, National Museum of Archaeology, Athens, (viewed May 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Lisette Josephides, 'Introduction: We the cosmopolitans: framing the debate' in Lisette Josephides and Alexandra Hall (eds), *We the Cosmopolitans: Moral and Existential Conditions of Being Human* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Nethery and Stephanie J. Silverman (eds), *Immigration Detention: The Migration of a Policy and its Human Impact* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> John Howard, 2001 election speech, <http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2001-john-howard> (accessed June 30 2017). For information on the Tampa incident [http://www.nma.gov.au/online\\_features/defining\\_moments/featured/tampa\\_affair](http://www.nma.gov.au/online_features/defining_moments/featured/tampa_affair) (accessed 30 June 2017).

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- <sup>6</sup> The exhibition ran from March 17 to July 2, 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> See Andrea Witcomb, 'Toward a pedagogy of feeling: Understanding how museums create a space for cross-cultural encounters', in Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (eds) *Museum Theory, vol.1 of Sharon MacDonald and Helen Rees-Leahy (eds), The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 321-44 and Andrea Witcomb, 'Curating relations between us and them: The changing role of migration museums in Australia' in Conal McCarthy and Philipp Schorch, *Curatopia: Museums and the Future of Curatorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018 in press).
- <sup>8</sup> Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), xii.
- <sup>9</sup> Anna Gibbs, 'After affect: sympathy, synchrony, and mimetic communication', in Melissa Gregg and G.J. Seigworth, (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 186-205.
- <sup>10</sup> Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994, 5 in Gibbs, 'After Affect', 186.
- <sup>11</sup> Gibbs, 'After affect', 191.
- <sup>12</sup> Beck, *Metamorphosis*, 11
- <sup>13</sup> Beck, *Metamorphosis*, 64
- <sup>14</sup> Sarah Ahmed, 'Happy objects', in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, 29-51.
- <sup>15</sup> Website, Immigration Museum <https://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/whats-on/stories-from-detention/> (accessed 30 June 2017).
- <sup>16</sup> See [behindthewire.org.au](http://behindthewire.org.au) for more details.
- <sup>17</sup> For a history of the Australian government's approach to refugees, Klaus Neumann, *Across the Seas: Australia's Response to Refugees, A History* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2015). For a history of current policies, Robyn Sampson, 'Mandatory, non-reviewable, indefinite: immigration detention in Australia', in Amy Nethery and Stephanie J. Silverman (eds), *Immigration Detention*.
- <sup>18</sup> For discussions of these grassroots movements in Australia, Lucy I. Fiske *Human Rights, Refugee Protest and Immigration Detention* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- <sup>19</sup> Exhibition video testimony, *They cannot take the sky: Stories from detention*, Immigration Museum, Melbourne (viewed June 2017).
- <sup>20</sup> Dori Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn, 'Holocaust Testimony', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 5(4) (1990): 447-462.
- <sup>21</sup> Exhibition text, *They cannot take the sky*.
- <sup>22</sup> See Michael Green and André Dao (eds), *They cannot take the sky: Stories from detention* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2017).
- <sup>23</sup> Exhibition video testimony, *They cannot take the sky*.
- <sup>24</sup> Exhibition text, *They cannot take the sky*.
- <sup>25</sup> See Andrea Witcomb 'Curating relations between us and them'.
- <sup>26</sup> Exhibition text, *They cannot take the sky* (accessed June 2017).
- <sup>27</sup> Immigration Museum, Digital Design Pro Forma, Introduction Corridor/Exit Experience, IM Identity exhibition 2011 hanging files, Multimedia section.
- <sup>28</sup> See Dianne Mulcahey and Andrea Witcomb, 'Affective practices of learning at the museum: Children's critical encounters with the past' in Laurajane Smith and Margaret Wetherall (eds.), *Emotion, Affective Practices and the Past in the Present*, (London: Routledge, 2018 in press)
- <sup>29</sup> Immigration Museum, Digital Design Pro Forma, First Impressions, IM Identity exhibition 2011 hanging files, Multimedia section.