

# SAM Education Resource

Proposition for banner march and **black cube** hot air balloon

July 12 to September 9 2012



Prepared by

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This collection of notes and references is a compilation of material gathered over the duration of the exhibition - *Proposition for banner march and black cube hot air balloon* by Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson at Shepparton Art Museum July 12 to September 9 2012.

It is intended to provide a starting point for discussion of the ideas presented around collaborative or participatory art forms and an understanding of current art practice by two of Australia's leading contemporary artists.

It includes:

1. The exhibition proposal for banner march and black cube hot air balloon to SAM
2. Exhibition list of works
3. An overview of the project
4. Notes on a presentation by Acting Director, Ryan Johnston on early modernism and notes from our artist presentation by Nicholson and Ishak, July 2012
5. The opening address for the exhibition by Professor Nicos Papastergiadis, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne
6. A reference list of digital resources.

There is also an SAM exhibition catalogue available which includes an artist interview, essays and artist biographies.

## 1. Exhibition proposal for banner march and black cube hot air balloon

by **Raafat Ishak** and **Tom Nicholson**

The exhibition will comprise several elements, aimed at presenting the project as a proposition, rather than a documented actual event. We believe this will best introduce the project to potential interest groups while presenting the culmination of our research and collaborations over the past eight years. Having said that, we both regard the work we produce towards that goal as art works in their own right, rather than explanatory or pitch oriented objects.

1. A set of photocopied A2 source material from our project archive (and A4 originals as a box set, 'negatives' for future use). The A2 photocopies will be installed over the entire wall length of the Roy O'Brien Gallery and extend into the north wall facing the Central Gallery. These will include copies of drawings, doodles, notations, correspondence, found images and other source materials. The photocopies will number 100 to 120 and will cover all practical and conceptual aspects of the project.
2. 15 sandwich boards as 'spine' to the project, linking the two main spaces. Four sandwich boards have already been created and used previously in the West Brunswick Sculpture Triennial. The images on both sides are documentation images of a banner march and black hot air balloon performance at Arden Street Oval in Melbourne in 2007.
3. A pairing of : a large leaning black box (240 x 240 x 120cm) and a small video work, documenting a moment directly before the beginning of a banner march in Sydney in 2005 in hand-processed black and white super 8 film transferred to digital video.
4. We also envisage a small collection of objects and pictures to introduce Ishak and Nicholson's individual practices as well as their collaborations. The space will include a number of past works from both artists as well as various objects of their collaboration. A table and chairs will be provided and a number of publications and catalogues introduced into the space. A specially produced and framed set of small photographs will also be included. These photographs could number between 5 and 8 and will be printed from a collection of photographs taken during the Arden Street performance in 2007.
5. We are currently investigating the possibility of using the staircase and landing space for a separate installation, including banners and a black cube.
6. Opening and closing events. We envisage that the opening event will be a re-launch of the gallery and therefore think that it should be organized as the gallery sees fit. We would like to participate in at least one artists' talk, meetings and discussions during the exhibition. The main function or event should take place at the closing of the exhibition, involving a number of invited guests whom we and the gallery think are relevant in the realisation of the actual project. This should be an informal food event where we are able to circulate and meet all interested parties and discuss the project and its potential realization. There are several ways to envisage this event, and if feasible and practical, it could be that we stage several of these food events. The first one would be to set up chairs directly in front of every poster, facing the room. This would reflect a particular set up common in funeral events in the middle east, where guests sit along the sides of the room or tent, with a religious leader sitting alone at one end. This singular figure would be represented by the black square. In these funerary events, it is common for the host to circulate amongst the guests and conversing on a one to one basis. We would perform this, as the hosts of the event. Such a configuration would involve about 100 guests, one per poster. Another physical configuration would involve the setting up of two chairs, again, matching two posters, and separated from the next pair by a gap of two posters. This would reiterate the basic dual structure of the event, and once again, would involve us as hosts, circulating and conversing to pairs. A third possible configuration would involve a long table and a conventional sit down dinner, reflecting the configuration of the sandwich boards.

## Acquisition

1. A set of approx 100 A4 boxed photocopies, a single black painting and a number of sandwich boards. This would be conceived a single environment or installation, the most ambitious form we have given the project to date, and one which includes a kind of encyclopedic archive of its gestation. While it has evolved in relation to the current configuration of the Shepparton Art Gallery spaces, it would be donated with instructions for at least two different ways to install the work, which could vary according to changes in the Gallery over time.  
And/or
2. A set of 5 framed photographs, approximately 30 x 40cm.

## 2. Exhibition list of works

Raafat Ishak (b.1967) and Tom Nicholson (b.1973)  
Live and work in Melbourne

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (Banner)* 2004/2012  
Digitally printed synthetic canvas, with linen loops, 308 x 269 cm

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (Paste up)*  
2003–2012  
100 A2 photocopied sheets, pasted directly on wall, printed from a box set of A3 Inkjet prints on archival paper, each photocopied sheet 59.6 x 42 cm

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (Vinyl text)* 2012  
Vinyl text, two sentences translated into the 13 most commonly spoken languages in Shepparton written phonetically, 7 x 3000 cm

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (Untitled)*  
2004–2012  
Oil on chipboard. 30 x 21 cm

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (Video before a march)* 2005–2012  
Hand processed black and white super 8 film transferred to sd digital video, silent, 1min 2 seconds  
Camera: Louise Curham

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (Apparition of a miserable acquaintance)*  
2007–2012  
Acrylic on MDF and wheels, 240 x 240 x 120 cm

*Proposition for a banner march and a black cube hot air balloon (A frames)* 2012  
20 sandwich boards, each consisting of 2 Type C photographs mounted on di-bond and MDF, hinges  
82 x 60 x 40 cm (last dimension variable)  
Photograph: Christian Capurro

Courtesy of the artists and their respective galleries.

Raafat Ishak is represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

Tom Nicholson is represented by Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne & Sydney.

### 3. PROPOSITION FOR A BANNER MARCH AND BLACK CUBE HOT AIR BALLOON

RAAFAT ISHAK AND TOM NICHOLSON



Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson began exploring shared aspects of their work early in 2003. *Proposition for a banner march and black cube hot air balloon* is a planned future event which evolved out of these exchanges. It involves a group of 15 banners and a black cube hot air balloon. The banners are large scale images of faces (about 3mx 3m), produced by Nicholson. The black cube hot air balloon is to be manufactured according to Ishak's specifications. The banners are marched through the streets, trying to follow the course of the hot air balloon in the sky above. The hot air balloon floats in the sky, trying to follow the course of the banners in the streets below.

*Proposition for a banner march and black cube hot air balloon* has emerged out of an interest in propaganda shared by Ishak and Nicholson. For both artists, the highly declarative nature of propaganda forms are combined with a kind of secrecy or muteness of meaning, rather than the immediate or transparent messages which normally characterise propaganda forms.

Ishak's black cube hot air balloon has emerged through his painting practice, conceived as a kind of anti-sun, a resting place for the eye in the brightness of the sky. Its form alludes to the utopian abstract paintings of Kazimir Malevich, whose black square painting from 1915 has come to be deeply connected to the dream of both the Russian Revolution and 20<sup>th</sup> century Avant-Garde.

Nicholson's banners of faces draw on a variety of propaganda sources, ranging from contemporary advertising to Soviet socialist realism. Drawn using a coarse pixel system and ultimately printed digitally on synthetic

fabric, they suggest an incomplete archive of propaganda faces, either relics of another time lost or props awaiting use for a future occasion.

*Proposition for a banner march and black cube hot air balloon* draws on a variety of propaganda traditions: Soviet orchestrated celebrations which very often involved synchronised activities on the streets and in the air, religious festivals in which air-borne forms and carrying images through the streets are both common tropes, and contemporary advertising in which large scale images and messages in the sky are both frequent forms.

The reciprocal following – by the balloon of the banners, and by the banners of the balloon – suggests a desire for meaning or certainty, and ultimately for the meeting of the balloon and the banners. But the action produces an endless roaming and searching, on the streets and in the sky.



*Proposition for a banner march and black cube hot air balloon* is collaborative project between Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson. Since its beginnings in 2003, the project comprised a series of discussions and interviews, photographic presentations, performances, events and installations. Its first presentation was at the National Gallery of Victoria as part of *Australian Art Now* in 2004. Photographic documentation was presented at Sutton Gallery Project Space in 2007 and a major sculptural installation included in the inaugural West Brunswick Sculpture Triennial in 2009. In 2012, the Shepparton Art Museum will hold a major exhibition of the project's archival material as well as newly commissioned sculptural and video works. Since 2003, Ishak and Nicholson have independently researched and presented aspects of *Proposition for a banner march and black cube hot air balloon* in their individual practices.

## 4. Opening Address, The Black Air

by Nikos Papastergiadis

The first thought that comes to mind when you are before this collaborative work by Raf Ishak and Tom Nicholson is that it appears so simple, but you then realize that it is actually quite difficult to find the right words and identify an apt starting point. As a way of starting I will then go all the way back to the beginning of the beginning of life as we know it.

A long time ago, much, much, much longer than the minor story about our descent from apes, there is a story about how a primal form of our ancestors crawled out of the water and returned to the element of air from which we came. (I assume that this life form that once lived in the water was itself a descendent from another life form that existed in a gaseous state.)

We arrived on the land and found our way, once again, to be in the air.

Since then we have dreamed of the air. Floating is the archetypal goal – the nirvana – of all dreams. Floating is what underpins existence. It is only natural that we want to be in the air. Flying is just the means – not the endpoint – of being in the air.

These abstract and preliminary remarks are drawn from biological speculations but they also speak from the aesthetic dimensions of Nicholson's and Ishak's work. Their aesthesis – the sensory awareness through which they interpret the world, and the sensory form through which they make their worldview sensible – is, in this collaboration, based on the interplay of the elements of air and ground, as well as the senses of sight and touch. They invite us to re-see the interaction of movements through the air and along the ground, as well as the feeling of travelling by foot and the mind's eye.

These are the fundamental activities that we tend to take for granted, but in our blasé attitude to the elements a whole sense of the world is almost lost.

Let me highlight the extent of this 'latent' world that already exists in us, but which we have kind of forgotten how to speak to, by drawing on one of the references that Ishak repeats in his visual practice. This is the Black Cube and for Ishak this form has a double birthplace – in one it is the focal point of a sacred site for Islam, and in the other it is the crucible for modernism. This image / form is now like an ever-present thing that is part of the making of everything that Ishak makes. This image / forms is like a constant in the syntax of his speech.

Normally if we think of a thing that has both a sacred – non-western and modern – western origin, we assume that it would be contradictory and far too hybrid to be real. We tend to believe that these are diametrically opposed historical trajectories and that there is nothing that could be compatible to the influences that arise from these different points of origin.

However, a brief quotation from the exemplary catalogue essay by Amelia Barikin reveals a more complex overlay, and perhaps a commonality that would shock adherent to both modernism and Islam. Barikin found a quotation from the Russian avant garde artist Malevich in which he evokes the mechanical inventions that enabled new levels of speed and flight – the means to enhance travel across the land and into the air – and he elevates these machines to the role of being a NEW context that would crack open an ANCIENT secret that had perdured in art but almost vanished from popular consciousness. Malevich says:

"The new life of iron and the machine, the roar of automobiles, the glitter of electric lights, the whirring of propellers, have awoken the *soul*, which was stifling in the catacombs of ancient reason and has emerged on the roads woven between *sky and earth*. If all artists could see the crossroads of these *celestial* paths; if they could comprehend these monstrous runways and the weavings of our bodies with the clouds in the sky, then they would not paint chrysanthemums." (My emphasis)

Now clearly Malevich could not have anticipated the radiant delight of the new gladioli that Barry Humphries has now gifted to Melbourne in celebration of the refit of Hamer Hall!!!! However, the REAL POINT is that this

founding figure of Modernism – who thought that the business of art was not to mimic nature but to compete with it – that is, the artist must create something new, and in this transformative act, the artist would not only awaken the reasoning mind but more importantly the soul. Once the artist is in this new state, then where would it lead him towards? Malevich suggests that it takes him no less than to the cross-roads of sky and earth.

This celestial pathway is a harmonic destiny. Modernism, in Malevich's word aimed for the exact same focal point and horizon of classical and Hellenistic philosophy. This recovery is astounding given that the project had been hi-jacked and diluted by Christian theology. For nearly two thousand years Western philosophers tried to reconcile cosmological thinking with religious dogma. Finally the Enlightenment philosophers had had enough. They called for a divorce. They distinguished their philosophy departments in the modern Universities from the theological schools and moved closer to the new scientific approaches in truth finding.

What Malevich's quotation reminds us of, and Ishak's and Nicholson's collaboration manifests, is that cosmology and truth seeking reason are not so easily divorced. While in the context of secular modernity, the philosopher's cut themselves free from the questions of the soul, and theologians were cut away from the role of authority in social governance – the artists continued their quest to grasp the spirit of the cosmos. The cosmos was now to be witnessed in universal forms such as the black cube. These forms were meant to make sense to everyone. It was also believed that they contained a world that was a potential space for the world as a whole.

Let me conclude by discussing the dual aspiration of this team. As I have already noted in my foreword they seek to record / document events as they have occurred, and to propose / initiate an alternative form that stretched into the form that things could become.

Last week I saw a group exhibition at MUMA called Liquid Archive in which Tom Nicholson participated by contributing a series of photographs of a burnt ruin of a library in Dili. He also presented a book that included a series of photographic reproductions of the title pages of books that were sent from Melbourne to Dili after the vandalism exacted by the Indonesian military and paramilitary forces on the soul of the East Timorese people. I had first noticed but not fully processed these images at an earlier installation in the Sydney Biennale. I was struck then by the swift presence of mind to fill a void. However, at the time I failed to ponder over the agency of this act.

While looking at the photographs and flicking through the book at MUMA I was once again touched by the gaping wounds – represented in the images of the burnt library, and the profound justice that is conveyed in gathering books and sending them to Dili. One of the books that was dispatched – and you can smell the dignity and the irony – is titled: "From Whom the Bell Tolls" by Ernst Hemingway. The title is a fragment from John Donne's poem, "No man is an Island."

On this occasion the fullness of this action became more palpable. But I still had no exact sense of the author of this initiative. Was Tom Nicholson 'the' instigator, a 'mere' collaborator, or 'just' an artistic recorder of the event? Was this a political, moral or an artistic gesture?

Tom Nicholson was at the opening and so at a discrete moment I asked him. In his typically modest and unassuming way he confirmed that it was his idea.

Immediately I realized that this was a very stupid question –not because I felt embarrassed about probing into something private, but rather, as I articulated the question my body instantly recognized that I had already known the answer. It was as obvious as the skin on *his* body. The way this 'idea' was handled in the space, the conviction with which it was addressed in the work, the sense of connection that it showed to the world – all this was typical of his whole aesthetic being. It was not a secondary or parasitic document. It was both a record and a proposition. It was proof of a violation and a declaration of resistance. This spirit can be found in one person – but just like the black cube – it is not personal – it is part of the common that we all make when we enter into something with the energy of our pathway.

This exhibition is a tribute to the air we are in and the world we make! And it is of course a pleasure to launch this phase, and like everyone else here I now await for the *lift off* when the people in a banner march follow a balloon following people in a banner march.

## 5. The art of participation and practice

by **Ryan Johnston**, Acting Director **Shepparton Art Museum**

Since 2001 there has been increasing levels of participation in art that involves the viewer in the creation of the art work. Thai, Argentinian born artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija known for his participatory installations, in works such as *Untitled, tomorrow is another day*, recreated a true to life replica of his apartment in a gallery space began his career by staging dining experiences in a art gallery context. Australian performance artists, Nat and Ali brought theatre into art making in *The Art Bar*. In the Palais deTokyo and other important art venues, the move for galleries and museums to open up to the wider public is not just about accessing collections but foregrounding citizenry and democracy.

Looking back, historically, gothic cathedrals were designed to heighten the participation, or social engagement of congregations, just as ancient Greek culture was celebrated through ritual or performative practices at designated sites. In more recent times, the European avant garde identified with the performative and perhaps transformative role of art in society. In France, dada was among one of many art movements that took a foothold at the turn of the 20th century, where the social transformation of society become linked through art with the lives of everyday people, not the elite.

As founder of the surrealism, Andre Breton championed individual creativity in stream of consciousness 'automatic writing' or in art games people played such as 'the exquisite corpse'. In Italy, the futurist agenda included a cooking manifesto, in 1930. Just one among many other manifestos. In Russia, constructivism was aligned with political and social change in art, architecture but also the active participation of the viewer of the art work. Art informed industry in the design of fashionable clothing, household crockery, workplaces and advertising. Art was a response to the over rationalisation of everyday life.

In the 1960's, pop art culture was sung and mediated in neo avant-garde events, such as Exploding Plastic Inevitable with musical performances by Nico, the Velvet Underground, films and dancing from regulars at Warhol's Factory. Claes Oldenburg, scrutinised consumer culture and commercial art industry in the street shopfront, *The Store*, 1961. These participatory events, mimicked social structures, were at best ironical and to a large degree sceptical of social change.

<http://maisd-dangleadall.blogspot.com.au/2010/02/rirkrit-tiravanija-and-parenthesis.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94-0QouAiEE>

<http://www.artslant.com/par/venues/show/2480-palais-de-tokyo?tab=EXHIBITS>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploding\\_Plastic\\_Inevitable](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploding_Plastic_Inevitable)

<http://plazalondon.wordpress.com/2011/01/19/claes-oldenburgs-store-1961/>

**Raafat Ishak**

### **Presentation notes on art practice** (from a floortalk)

Studio painting practice is mostly concerned with proposing a future event, especially the impossible, as a way of setting up a dialogue between artist and viewers.

1. He works towards a show and the work is conceptually aimed. *Mt West Mt East - Dubai*, examines different types of representation in eastern and western art. He references books, art, media.
2. Artspace exhibition, examines relationship of art and notions of belonging and responded to current issues.
3. Research into cubism. *Ascent, descent and congratulations #3*, references Marcel Duchamp's, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, no. 2, 1912. See *Cubism & Australian Art*, Heide Museum of Modern Art 2009, p. 245.
4. Asia Pacific Biennale - 20 paintings, influenced by cubist palette and John Brack
5. Museum of Contemporary Art, Avenues of Honour.
6. Response to application for immigration, includes 168 flags of countries who rejected his application, phonetic arabic script.
7. Staircase, temporary exhibition
8. Refugees being sent back! Boat people, as theme emerging since 2003
9. Mutiny 1 to 5?
10. Mixed media, postcards, drawing on wall - juxtaposition of materials and approaches to art making.
11. Flags - St Kilda/ Egypt
12. References of black square. 1. Russian avante garde, black as nothingness, spatial void, transcendence. 2. Black cube of Mecca, a common symbol in Cairo where he was a young boy. Symbolic meanings - hopeful, restful, reflective.
13. A previous manifestation of the *Proposition of the banner march and black cube hot air balloon* was at Ocular Lab, an artist space in West Brunswick and Melbourne University, 2002

## Tom Nicholson

### Presentation notes on art practice (from a floortalk)

His art practice is grounded in drawing and on the nature on how you make an image.

Drawing and painting have been historically tied, but the former is historically more exploratory. i.e. 'it describes something which is yet to be.' As human beings, we are capable of imagining things. His art practice looks at what is art and how can it be used to transform the world.

1. East Timor project. Artist book made up of title pages of literary titles, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway, John Donne sonnets that concern themselves with the notion that the fate of others, including individuals involves others, of one's self.
2. VCA Melbourne 1996/97. Photograph of marchers holding banners of Lenin and Stalin, Victoria Market, 1930's. Why do people carry images of people in the street? what happens when you march but there's no text of purpose evident? Meaning would come from the actions, gestures of the collective body. Marches reference propaganda. Also looked at traditions of marches, Searched archives such as the People's History Museum in Manchester.
3. For Tom the process of collecting images is a way of digesting, selecting and making sense of the visual overload i.e. the prosaic mediation of images.

4. The collective body of a march is ordered fashion is unifying, as 'one', or as 'strength'.
5. The video taken on super 8 film of a banner march through a cemetery, in Sydney's shoreline suburb of Waverley, people marching became inside the art work. Film was shot looking down onto the scene from a high vantage point which took in a wide shot the marchers through the cemetery.
6. Marching shows the experience of belonging, kinship or a relationship but not necessarily linked causally to a demonstration.
7. Ocular Lab, artist space venue showing film and banners. Considers notion of 'collective dreaming' as a form of collective memory. See's tension between idealism and reality.
8. HJ Johnstone's, *Evening Shadows..*, most copied or reproduced painting in South Australian art history.
9. His re - working of it is a black and white negative drawing.
10. It was then turned into a poster advertising the walk off at Cummeragunja, NSW, aboriginal mission north of Echuca in the 1930's. This was the first ever mass strike of aboriginal people in Australia.
11. The poster is always something that is aimed towards the future. It enables reflection on a political moment, or reflects on the creation of a streetscape by residents.

## 6. Reference List

ABC Open, 3 minute time lapse recording of exhibition installation, produced by Benj Binks, July 2012  
<http://open.abc.net.au/posts/wake-up-walk-the-dog-drop-the-kids-at-school-28wn3pw/in/tags/art>

ABC, Art Nation, Raafat Ishak at The Potter, Melbourne Uni  
<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s2949587.htm>

Raafat Ishak, interview with Tom Nicholson <http://www.artterritories.net/>

Raaf is represented by Sutton Gallery in Melbourne. Plenty of images of past works here:  
<http://www.suttongallery.com.au/artists/artistprofile.php?id=2>

Tom is represented by Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne  
<http://www.annaschwartzgallery.com/works/biography?artist=67&c=m/>

A recent interview with Australian Art Collector magazine:  
<http://www.artcollector.net.au/ArtistinterviewRaafatIshak>  
Ian Potter Museum of Art exhibition in 2010

[http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/assets/files/Exhs2010/raafat\\_ishak\\_recipes\\_catalogue.pdf](http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/assets/files/Exhs2010/raafat_ishak_recipes_catalogue.pdf)  
Tom Nicholson's website, <http://www.tomn.net/home.htm>

Art programs by Tom Nicholson. See forms for a public address and Drawings and Correspondence  
- <http://www.surplus.com/>

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