

Homo sacer: life unawed
La Trobe Art Institute, 14.02–07.05.23

ARTISTS: Martha Atienza, Jonathan Baldock, Kait James, Helen Johnson,
Nick Modrzewski, Jack Ky Tan and the Victorian Bar

GUEST CURATORS: Nick Modrzewski and Jack Ky Tan

**A conversation between Nick Modrzewski
and Jack Ky Tan**

JKT: Okay, so we need to talk about this show. Should we think about an introductory wall text?

NM: Yep. So, let's start by explaining the idea of homo sacer, which translates as 'sacred man'. It's a legal concept from ancient Rome, which proposed that a person who has been removed from society and the laws that govern it could be killed without consequence.

JKT: But, confusingly, to the ancient Romans, the idea of 'sacer' didn't simply mean 'sacred' as we understand it today. It did refer to the sacrosanct, but it also designated things that were cursed or rotten. So, a person who was homo sacer *could not* be sacrificed to the gods, because the person was impure, yet the person *could* be murdered by members of the community.

NM: Right. And this is why we talk about homo sacer as being outside both divine and human law. He/she/they are an outcast, subaltern or pariah.

JKT: Yes, and the artworks we have brought together in this exhibition – sculpture, painting, video and installation – offer an idea of the law as a quality that is embedded and inherent in bodies, material and space. And they give us an idea of what happens when the law is withdrawn, meaning that bodies must operate outside the sphere of the legitimate.

NM: We should probably mention that as artists with legal backgrounds, we've noticed that law is like a fabric or fluid, a 'shadow world' that underpins society. Like if society was a body or machine, law would be the DNA or the code that dictates how that body or machine is to be performed or activated.

JKT: And it would be a kind of messy fabric or code, made up of visceral bundles of contradictions that regulate our perceptions of inside–outside, validity–invalidity and belonging–rejection. So, ultimately, I think this exhibition explores a range of entanglements, between law and the body, art and politics, the individual and the institution, humans and the more-than-human. And, of course, we're interested in what happens when we untangle these relationships and see the affect of the law's withdrawal.

NM: Did you mean *effect* when you said *affect*?

JKT: No, no, I mean *affect*. Affect as I understand it is about the feelings and sensory information you get about something. It is the knowledge you gain from experiencing things in a direct, lived and personal way. Effect is also about an object's impact. But it is more as something observed from the outside. Law has both affect and effect. But this show, via the artworks and artists' practices, focuses on exploring law's affect, in particular the serious affect of law's withdrawal.

Jonathan Baldock

NM: So let's take Jonathan Baldock's work, for example, in terms of affect and effect. I think Jonathan's work offers very visceral affective information about the line between inside and outside, and particularly the inside–outside of bodies. When I think of Jonathan's practice, my mind just gets flooded with these undulating body parts that flow in and out of objects and bulge out of surfaces. He really blurs the line between object and body, with giant thumbs spurting out of domestic scenery and performers cloaking themselves in his sculptural costumes.

JKT: Yes, but at the same time, these material excesses and protuberances are held in and made palatable with a clean graphic quality, the flatness of colour and precisely sewn/cut lines. And, as you know, lawyers absolutely love making clear lines between what is in and out, what is allowed and not allowed, what belongs and what doesn't.

NM: And not just lawyers. From a very young age we play with toys that teach us to match colours, or to put the right shapes in the right holes or boxes, or to pick teams. It's like Jonathan takes great joy in playing with these boundaries and slipping or sliding over them, back and forth. It's maybe for this reason that in this work, *My biggest fear is that someone will crawl into it* (2017), he invites us to literally enter the sculpture, to lie on the bed, surrounded by these sewn images of floating body parts – a giant ear, a mouth, an eye.

JKT: He is literally inviting us into his fear?! Or perhaps inviting us into a confrontation with our own bodies and what we think of our bodies through a framework of childlike play. He seems to be saying that this sense, these rules even, of insideness and outsideness pervade our bodies and lives, from womb to tomb. And that there's a kind of violence in this delineation of inside and outside. So instead of subscribing to inside/outside, he lets our bodies sort of float, like the sewn body parts, in this in-between state as we lie in the bed.

NM: Speaking of violence – I guess there is always a violence in the abject body, a horror in dismembered body parts or bodies turned inside out. But the playfulness in Jonathan's work and his pastel colour palette seduce us into a more complex relationship and understanding of this horror.

JKT: It makes me think of that film *Un chien andalou* by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí – you know, the one with the ants crawling out of a dismembered

hand, and the eye being slit with a razor blade – except if *Un chien andalou* was done as a cute anime! I think the best kinds of works are the ones that hold their deep seriousness lightly.

NM: Agreed. This bed implies that our relationship to our bodies, our insides, each other's insides, is intimate and perhaps one that we return to cyclically every night. The work asks us to become part of it in a private space, and to enter Jonathan's family's private space, as we hear the audio of his mother narrating her memoir. Yet, we, she and Jonathan are all on display in public at the same time. It's like we're all engaged in this theatrical ritual together.

JKT: This is one of the things that Jonathan does best, in my opinion, which is to turn the inside outside, and the outside inside, and to hold both together as concurrent truths. I mean, by the time you finish absorbing his work, you might wonder what is inside and what is outside about the bed, the room and your own body.

NM: There's something very Schrödinger about it.

JKT: There is! Okay, okay, DON'T start me on Schrödinger because this gets me into the field of quantum physics, and how the work of the philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad shows us that these clear lines that we love so much, that we think are everywhere in the world – the edge of a table or leaf, the surface of a wall or tree trunk, or cling wrap even! – is only true at a macro-Newtonian level. But under a microscope at quantum level, lines are fuzzy and diffracted, and materials as phenomena exist in one state or another depending on who and what is at play in an 'intra-action' that creates that reality.¹

NM: And so these soft lines in Jonathan's work and the inversions of inside and outside explain this idea?

JKT: Not explain, exactly, but, like Barad, his work enables us to reconsider the status quo and to redefine or to queer what is the baseline or the norm in an understanding of body, frame and space. His work has also helped us both understand that law not only does the abject work of delineating what is inside and outside, but it too has an inside–outside which it constantly struggles with and has to reinvent.

1. K Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2006.

Kait James

NM: Kait's work appropriates novelty tea towels and brings them into her work – bright clashing colours, slogans and characters rendered in a slapstick or cartoony manner. She both uses and knowingly subverts a kitsch aesthetic.

JKT: It's worth thinking for a moment about what it means to call something kitsch. I think the basic idea is that it's lowbrow and absent of any ambiguity – what you see is what you get. Kitsch seeks universal approval, a kind of G-rated, immediately recognisable message conveyed in a harmless, lukewarm tone. We tend to know it when we see it – it's those Live Laugh Love wall texts you can hang on your wall, cute koala bears, cherubs etc.

NM: In fact, the Czech writer Milan Kundera [in his 1984 novel, *The unbearable lightness of being*] calls kitsch 'the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence'.

JKT: So there's an analogy here with homo sacer. By removing anything subversive, painful or ambiguous, kitsch works only within the realm of what is acceptable.

NM: I think that's right. Which means the kitsch aesthetic itself operates as a regulator, or judge, if you like, of what of anything or any community can be visible and therefore can have standing within social reality. It operates particularly as a form of obfuscation of the real situation or reality behind what you see in the particular object.

JKT: Yes, like how golliwogs are kitsch because they make light and acceptable the Black slave body in social life, when in reality these bodies were and are subject to painful and abject conditions, which is excluded from the object itself.

NM: But Kait's work seems then to do the opposite of kitsch. The images and texts feel ironic and all you are seeing is a flatness and an obfuscation of the realities of First Nations people?

JKT: Well, the bodies of First Nations people were treated and still continue to be treated as homo sacer by settler law in Australia. Kait's appropriation and editing of the tea towels disturb their simple kitsch messaging by superimposing a critique.

NM: That's right. Take Kait's work, *Unjustified & ancient* (2022), for example. It's not

entirely clear what is original and what has been added by Kait, but it doesn't really matter. As an Australian with both Anglo and Indigenous heritage, Kait embodies multiple identities, both settler and First Nations, mainstream and homo sacer, 'producer of kitsch material' and artist.

JKT: This idea of 'outsider' vs 'mainstream' artist is interesting to me, because certain aesthetics do belong to hallowed traditions and others are relegated to the outskirts of visual history. And as times and tastes change, once respected or sacred visual histories are sometimes re-evaluated and shunned. Again, things are moving *in* and *out*.

NM: I think this might be to do with how different regimes of legitimisation operate in different art scenes. There's the primary and secondary art market, where the ability to sell is of course a significant legitimising regime, but there is another 'non-profit' regime at play like art schools, universities with galleries (like this one), art criticism and journalism and public museums.

JKT: And don't forget yet another very important regime: the arts community itself that's made up of practising artists, curators, producers, writers. Through constructing our own networks, how we talk about work, what we think is good work, and who we think is one of us, we create lines of legitimacy too.

NM: Very much so, like what we are doing right now as artist-curators. As artists curating a show, we are allowed not to observe the strict professional codes of curators. We are free, for example, to include ourselves in this show, to be very subjective in our opinions about the artists we are curating and, in fact, to write exhibition wall texts and curatorial essays as dialogue like this. This way of producing exhibitions is another negotiation of what is legitimately curatorial.

JKT: We are totally crossing a lot of lines in a show about crossing lines! But hang on, we've talked a lot about kitsch and being insider–outsider, but we mustn't forget the big main image at the centre of Kait's work: a calendar and the theme of time. Although tea towels often feature calendars, the Gregorian calendar of course is only one way of marking time (I'm thinking here of other traditions – Chinese, Islamic, Indigenous to name a few), yet it tends to present itself as absolute.

NM: Yes, I think it is unavoidable when looking at this work to think that there is a juxtaposition here with other cosmologies of time, in particular the sense and science

of Indigenous Australian peoples' time. I think for Kait the calendar is like this kitschifying sticker that's stamped all over her work, which is also saying that this Gregorian colonial time is flat and can hide more complex Indigenous understandings of time.

JKT: So these original tea towels could just be hanging in the kitchen next to the kettle when you're making a cup of tea and reminding you of the prevalence of colonial 'calendar time' and how it is just one or a surface understanding of time.

NM: That's right, a formulation of time that ignores, excludes or overrides thousands of years of history and culture experienced by First Nations peoples.

Helen Johnson

JKT: So Helen Johnson's painting, *Leapyear ladies pop* (2022), is visually chaotic. It's like layers and patterns and drawings and brush-marks all gyrating on top of one another. It doesn't let your eyes or mind immediately settle and recognise what is being represented.

NM: It looks a bit to me like a map, with its bureaucratic green oceanic lines and grey masses floating on top. But it's like someone trying to draw a map of a landscape that's constantly moving. So you need to let your eyes settle, and focus, and look closer at the painting, and when your eyes start to focus, you see that there are large figures depicted in a cartoon style. Then you look closer again, and you see these large figures are interrupted by smaller figures that break up the bodies of the large figures. And when you look even closer again, you see that the smaller bodies seem engaged in a type of ritual. In fact, the women in the cartoons are proposing to the men, an image that Helen has transposed from a cartoon originally published in the Police Gazette, dated 1876.

JKT: I had to Google what a Police Gazette is.

NM: Same. So, the function of a 'normal' gazette is to inform the general public about the actions and decisions of the government. I'm reminded of how sometimes legislation will say something along the lines of: the authorised person will publish notice of this or that decision in the gazette. And it pops up all the time across a wide range of areas of law/life. For instance, when a corporation is deregistered (i.e. when it 'dies'), the Australian Securities and Investments Commission publishes a notice in the

gazette, alerting people. Or when a new piece of legislation comes into operation, a proclamation will be published in the gazette. And so the Police Gazette was slightly different, in that it wasn't published widely for the general public. Rather, it was specifically distributed to the police officers and government officials, and it listed details of wanted criminals, court warrants, escaped convicts, discharged prisoners and other miscellaneous bits and pieces.

JKT: Very homo sacer!

NM: That's right. It's like a homo sacer newsletter ... and maybe it would be if there were also names of anyone who had been declared no longer human.

JKT: So these images in Helen's painting of women proposing to men, they first appear in the Police Gazette, and it seems that in their original publication they appeared with a kind of sexist undertone, like, how absurd that women would propose to men.

NM: I think so. I believe the original cartoon was meant to show a parallel universe of the leap year when social rituals are inverted. So it's this imagined, upside-down world. I find it really interesting, though, this idea of a rational structure like a 'normal' calendar year providing a catalyst for any social habit (or the inversion of a habit). Again, we're in a realm where a human-made structure (i.e. the Gregorian calendar) *excludes* this 'homo sacer notion' of the female body taking the lead and proposing the institution of marriage to a male.

JKT: I am thinking now about Martha Atienza's video work in this exhibition that depicts carnivalesque scenes from an animistic and religious festival in the Philippines. It's like this imagined leap year operates a bit like the idea of the carnival, which is historically a festive public celebration where rules and laws are temporarily suspended. Bakhtin, a literary scholar, writes extensively about this.² Hierarchies are turned upside down, social roles are reversed, and the streets are flooded with exaggerated costumes. The carnival period was a time for the potential renegotiation of the social contract – a boundless place where established norms could be re-examined with fresh eyes. So *Leapyear ladies pop* invents a time when thinking the unthinkable is possible, that of inverting gender roles.

2. M Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, ed & trans C Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 1984.

NM: I think the formal qualities of the painting itself also speak to the ideas contained within the Police Gazette drawing – this idea of things constantly interrupting one another, of undercutting and subverting one another time and time again, foreground interrupting background, background squeezing through foreground – everything is overlapping itself. It's like a consistently interrupted cartography of social engagements.

JKT: That's how this work fits into Helen's wider practice, which, among other things, often depicts colonial era bodies enacting legal or symbolic rituals. The law and the body are sometimes tangled together in complex compositions, with the law manifesting either in visible symbols or as an invisible, omnipotent force.

NM: This idea of entanglement is really important for her work, because it seems to me that her paintings overcome the hardness of society and law, of these Victorian era official bodies, with the softness of her painted depictions. The law is all about being as explicit as possible, about defining things as comprehensively as language will allow, plugging all the holes, so to speak. But Helen's work is pointing to the space in-between, the implicit aspects of law, the assumptions it makes, the values embedded within it.

JKT: For me, her work makes visible the actual dynamism of law as a kind of space-time and gravitational field that flows between people and things. It is as if I have put on magic glasses and I can suddenly see this shadow world of law, power and relations. This invisible flow, this quantum fuzziness, is the materiality and sociality that make empathetic bureaucracy and equality possible: it is what really enables a leap (year) of faith?!

Martha Atienza

JKT: When I think about these videos, I am reminded of a line from the play *King Lear*: 'As flies to wonton boys are we to the Gods; They kill us for their sport'. But unlike Shakespeare's take on the world, there is an ambivalence here about who is playing who, and what is at play.

NM: Yes, does the world perform us, or do we perform the world? Who is the puppet and who the puppeteer here?

JKT: We aren't quite sure, because the processions in *Anito 1 2011–2015 Our islands* (2011–15) depict scenes that people experience in daily life: a typhoon survivor undergoing emergency surgery,

travellers or migrants hauling their luggage, girls in beauty contests. In this video work, Martha has captured parts of her community's animistic Christianised festival of *Ati-Atihan* ('to be like Aetas', an indigenous group predating the Austronesian migrations some 30,000 years ago). It isn't clear whether the people feel controlled by their condition or if these performances are an expression of their agency.

NM: In *Anito 2 The Drug Wars* (2017) there are also people playing armed soldiers who are patrolling, and even a captured drug lord under guard.

JKT: I think that might be referring to former president Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs!

NM: Yes, and the reality being depicted is made surreal too firstly by the soundtrack, but additionally by the community themselves turning their own society into the carnivalesque.

JKT: And as we know, the carnival offers a suspension of the normal rules of life and respectability. Very macho men can wear makeup and dress as women, people can jest and tug at one another's panties, one can occupy ordinary public space in an extraordinary way. But, through all this revelry and humour, life, death, survivability and power are being processed here. However, I am not really sure whether they are being processed as celebration or mockery.

NM: Isn't carnival both?

JKT: Yes, you're right. The carnival provides a time of reprieve from any fixed moral positions in life where many things can be role-played.

NM: It is as if there is a suspension of social law.

JKT: And an instatement of theatrical law?!

NM: Sure, meaning that in carnival the rules of creativity take precedence. Norms can be played with, poked at and viewed from a different angle, and so a jurisgenesis of normality can happen.

JKT: But why jurisgenesis and not just role-play?

NM: I think if you watch the videos, what is at stake for these communities is more than just a need for fun and releasing a pressure valve. There are serious social and political scenes being humourously interrogated here. And the critique or mockery that is being played out through costume and parade is that of the effect and affect of the political and legal systems impacting

fishing communities. Implicit in this is a call for legal creativity and change, hence 'jurisgenesis'.

JKT: You're right. Much of Martha's work interrogates the economic conditions of cargo ship sailors and the environmental plight of the fisherfolk from the Bantayan Island communities in the Philippines, and asks what can change. In fact, Martha's practice also includes running an education and advocacy organisation called GOODland that tries to find policy and mutual aid solutions to environmental and economic problems faced by the Bantayan communities.

NM: But there is also something existential being addressed in Martha's work. In *Our islands* we see a similar procession happening underwater, with some of the same characters reappearing underwater, implying that the lives of these communities are deeply bound up in the sea. Perhaps even suggesting that they, and maybe all of us, are both creatures of land and of sea.

JKT: And also that they are subject to the laws of both the land and the sea.

NM: Martha's larger body of work also alludes to the idea that individuals, communities and nations are entangled with the sea; that trade, transport, travelling, migrating, fishing, harvesting from, on and in the sea create an interconnectivity between human and environment. That there is no clear line between land and sea, or within the history of social or political art practice, or between art and life.

JKT: To me, it is arbitrary where we draw the line between humans and the environment, between land law and the law of the sea, between human law and natural law. Martha's work helps me to understand that things like law and art, art and politics, humans and the sea, are much more intertwined than we like to imagine.

Jack Ky Tan

JKT: I remember setting myself the challenge of trying to draw the soundscape of law and litigation when I was undertaking my residency at the State Courts and Family Justice Courts in Singapore. But working with the Community Justice Centre, a charity that supports litigants in hardship and litigants-in-person, I ended up also drawing the soundscape or emotion-scape of the courts.

NM: But how did you draw sound or emotion?!

JKT: I worked in a synesthetic and ekphrastic way by listening to what was happening in front of

me in court, and then sketching the images that appeared in my head. I did all this with a box of colour pencils and pastels, and sketched at the back of the public benches. This allowed me to get around the verbal, rational and logical content of litigation, and to access the emotive, existential and affective meanings that also circulate in the law.

NM: It is interesting that the verbal or speech gets in the way of affective meanings.

JKT: Yes it does! Or, more precisely, it is that speech, as we use it in court, is imbalanced towards logic and rhetoric. And in that, vocality gets lost or subsumed.³

NM: I see. Speech is a vehicle for reasoning and persuasion whereas voice offers other kinds of knowing?

JKT: Right. The voice gives us access to other kinds of information like timbre, tone, pitch, the condition of the speaker's body ... how tired or chirpy they are, their state of mind, and even clues into their social history. Of course, I appreciated the importance of legal reasoning in the cases I attended, but as an artist I was also interested in the way lawyers, judges and witnesses reconciled the very human content of cases with the format of advocacy and legal procedures.

NM: I really get that. There is a line drawn between reason and emotion in the practice of law. A lot of this is for practical reasons because none of us could do our jobs and serve our clients properly if we were ruled by emotion. Justice has to be objective.

JKT: But at the same time, for the law to continue to be relevant and useful to society, it has to make space for compassion, empathy, emotional intelligence and for the condition of being human.

NM: And it does through victims being able to provide impact statements, the jury system itself, which enshrines 'common sense' at the heart of court justice, and young people being able to give evidence in judges' chambers rather than open court.

3. Philosopher Adriana Cavarero writes: 'The voice indeed does not mask, but rather unmasks the speech that masks it. Speech can play tricks. The voice, whatever it says, communicates the uniqueness of the one who emits it, and can be recognized by those to whom one speaks.' A Cavarero, *For more than one voice: toward a philosophy of vocal expression*, trans PA Kottman, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2005, p. 24.

JKT: Yes, and I think I made this work to remind the legal community that humanness and empathy have always already been part of legal culture. This is why after listening to and drawing their emotive landscape, I turned the drawings into graphic scores.

NM: Wait. So these banners are musical scores?!

JKT: Oh sorry, didn't I say that already? I 'composed' these scores from the pictorial notes I had made in court according to various themes that arose during my court attendances. Then I got a graphic designer to digitise and print my scores on banners. The first iteration of this work was as the opening number in a court charity concert, where my drawings were performed as choral pieces back to the court community. They got the opportunity to listen to their own ethical soundscape for the first time.

Nick Modrzewski

NM: While I was making this painting, I was thinking about crowds – throngs of people, objects, animals and hybrids of all three. Where does one body start and another body end? Individual subjectivity can almost merge in a crowd.

JKT: The law struggles to cope with merged subjectivities because it needs to find a specific legal subject in order to attribute responsibility. You can't sue a horde of people in a court of law, you need to pluck out individuals. If we think of a corporation – it requires singularity before it can come before the law, it is a legal person separate from its members. The notion of a collective or merged or fluid crowd identity is outside the law. It's homo sacer.

NM: That's right. Take the 6 January storming of the Capitol in America, for instance. You have the many individual people who make up the crowd, who may have committed specific crimes. But who is responsible for the *collective* intention of the group and can those intentions be attributed to its specific members?

JKT: So, in the painting, it looks like a crowd of individuals is dispersed over four separate panels. And the various heads and bodies are kind of chopped up, they are fragmented and entangled, they kind of glitch and gyrate across the painting, so that each individual figure comes to constitute a whole, like an amorphous crowd-being. It also makes me think of a film strip.

NM: Well, actually, the way I made this painting was I painted all these singular bodies and forms across four panels. Then I actually took the panels apart and reshuffled them, changing their order. So I literally broke

apart the singular bodies and dispersed them. It did feel a bit like editing a film, splicing these different scenes together. This created a whole host of new relationships between the forms, and created a new logic in the painting that I hadn't originally intended. You can see these linear vertical lines that break up the composition where the separate panels meet, which literally divide up the bodies in the painting.

JKT: It creates this weird feeling of repetition, like the painting is on a loop. And it's a bit nightmarish, I think, a bit like these figures emerge from the shadows so their forms are partly distinguishable, maybe it's a dog-human hybrid thing, a bird form or maybe a weapon or a cluster of bodies merged together.

NM: That's right. I wanted the characters in the painting to occupy a shadowy, ambiguous space like when you wake up in the middle of the night and the objects in your bedroom can appear monstrous – in the low light they can feel like people standing around your bed. So I'm painting this mucky, fluid scene where bodies are almost conjured out of a nebulous muck of abstraction and it's hard to tell the individual from the whole. Things are swampish, murky and almost uncategoryisable.

JKT: It seems to be a place of possibility, where an arm might not actually be an arm but a gnarled tree. And because nothing is comprehensively defined, your forms resist categorisation. It makes me think of how the law strives to define things but it is actually filled with grey areas, which is what keeps lawyers employed; they argue about how to construe the greyness. When I was working as a lawyer, I remember one job where the senior lawyer asked me to research the definition of a child. I had to research all these different legislative enactments and at the end I went back to the lawyer, and I said: 'Look, the definition of a child changes across these four statutes. There is no single definition.' So this idea that the law is black and white is just not the case. Definitions are slippery in the law; categories fail, bodies slip through the cracks.

Victorian Bar

JKT: Nick, why don't you explain what the Victorian Bar is?

NM: It's Victoria's association of barristers, who are basically lawyers that specialise in going to court. It's been around for 182 years, since 1841. To be a barrister is different from being a solicitor. Barristers and solicitors are both lawyers, but there is a

distinction in the profession. Solicitors deal more with the client, whereas barristers are court specialists. Barristers (and judges) are the ones who wear wigs, although that practice is rare in Victoria these days. Barristers are also different from solicitors in that they operate alone; they are all independent practitioners running their own businesses. They are all bound by a set of ethical rules. There are over 2,200 barristers currently practising in Victoria.

JKT: And then the Victorian Bar is this association, this collection, of all the barristers?

NM: That's right.

JKT: So it's like a non-human legal entity?

NM: Yes. It is an incorporated association, so it has a separate legal personality to its members. It has a constitution, and it can enter contracts in its own name.

JKT: So the Victorian Bar is our only non-human person/artist in the show.

NM: Yes.

JKT: And the Victorian Bar's collection of objects — they are objects belonging to this non-human entity?

NM: Yes. And to go back to our original discussion about the Victorian Bar and why it's in the show, I think we were interested in how the Victorian Bar thinks about and expresses its own history through its collection of legal artefacts. Most of these items, I should add, were gifts to the Bar. Victorian barristers do a lot of volunteer work in Papua New Guinea and Polynesia, for instance, training new legal professionals.

JKT: And in deciding which objects form part of the collection, it implicitly decides what is in and what is out — a line is drawn between objects that encapsulate some aspect of the Bar's identity, thus joining the collection, and those objects that are irrelevant and can be excluded. This is closely linked to the concept of homo sacer and the ways in which people, objects and histories can be inside or outside legal institutions.

NM: And, as curators, when we first approached artists for this exhibition, the artists would send us a spreadsheet of available artworks. We then discussed each individual work and how it might fall within the curatorial rationale for the show. We have treated the Victorian Bar's collection in much the same way, looking through a catalogue

and selecting objects. The varied objects in the collection represent the many intersecting and interconnected histories of the Victorian Bar and the people who pass through it. Sometimes, the Bar has a record of the history of the item. Other times, its origins are unknown. There are donations from judges, gifts from other courts around the world, newspaper cutouts from a hundred years ago, and gifts from Islanders in thanks for the Bar's pro bono work. They tell a piecemeal story of the Bar's comings and goings, recording contributions made to it by members and beneficiaries of legal services.