

Signs of Sorrow is a visual dialogue across two continents about living with the legacy of primary injustice. The exhibition consists of two wall texts facing each other. Vernon Ah Kee (Brisbane), one of Australia's most celebrated contemporary artists and a founding member of the Aboriginal Art Collective ProppaNow, is represented by this bold-faced text:

everyday
iachievesomething
becauseiwas
borninthisskin
everyday
iconcedesomething
becauseiwas
borninthisskin

Across the hall, Lee Henderson writes with red bingo daubers on a school blackboard the following lines, repeatedly, until his body or medium gives out:

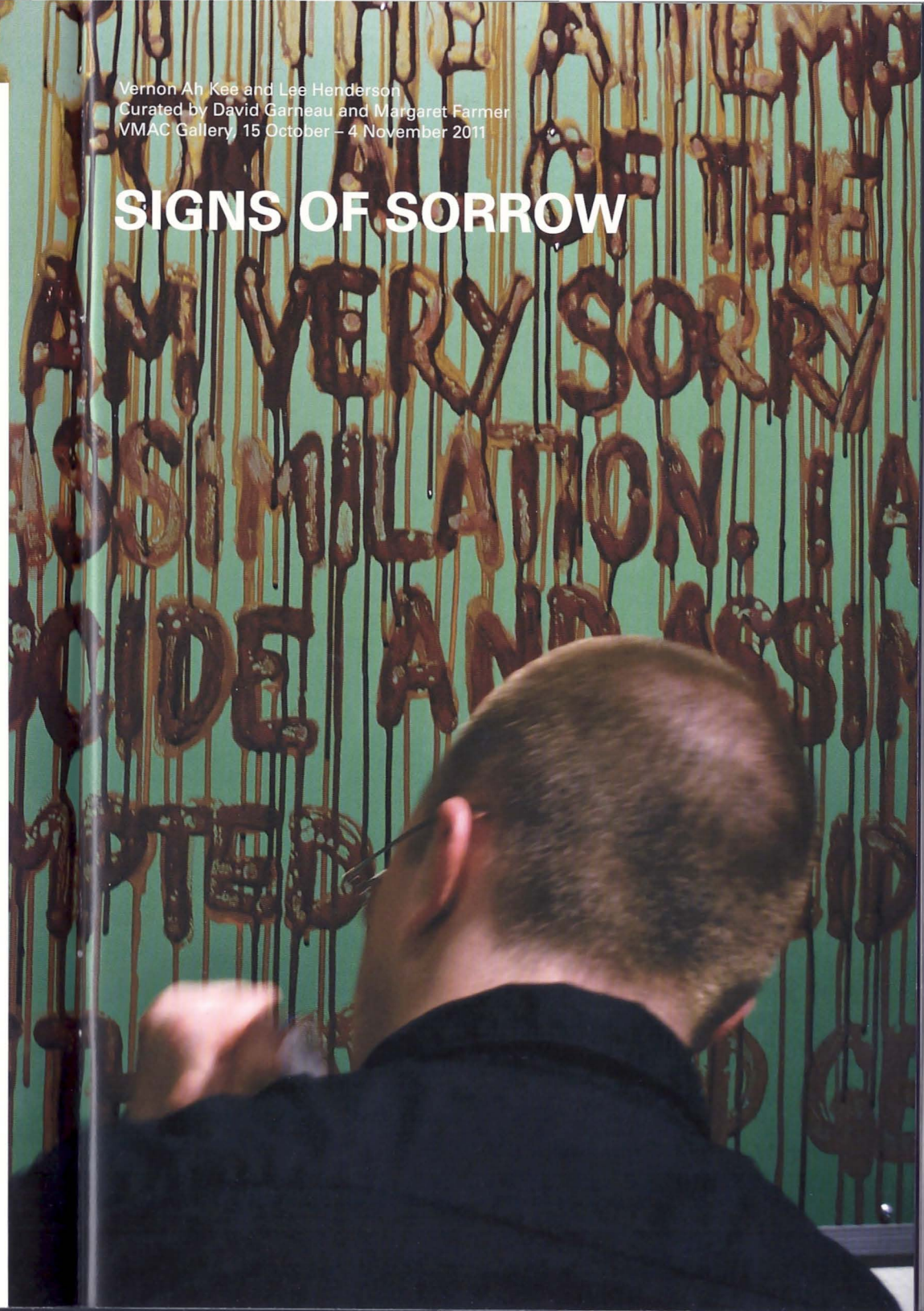
*I am very sorry for all the attempted genocide
and assimilation.*

While Ah Kee's words can be taken as a truism of the human condition and Henderson's penitent prose is global, the exhibition is haunted by the specificity of recent government apologies to the Indigenous peoples of Canada and Australia. This association is further reinforced by the fact that the exhibition is hosted by the Aboriginal Visual Culture Program at OCAD University in partnership with the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective. In addition, Ah Kee being a blackfella – an Australian Aboriginal (Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimithirr peoples – and Lee, with his blond hair and blue-eyes being most likely non-Indigenous, further specifies and racializes the meanings of *Signs of Sorrow*.

Few exhibitions gather Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists together to examine their shared and unshared histories. And for good reason. There is too much to say, to show, and every attempt is inadequate. Aboriginal artists have not solidified their presence and discourse within the dominate art institutions enough to insure they will not be "set-up" by such a dialogue, and few non-Aboriginal artists are willing to be associated with a challenge as-of-yet thought not to be theirs. This pairing is the thinnest possible weak effort. Instead of a comprehensive battlefield, we have two brief texts by very thoughtful artists. The beauty of both works is their lean ambiguity, an openness that encourages a dialogue based on common humanity but filled with the ringing sound of the yet to be said.

Vernon Ah Kee and Lee Henderson
Curated by David Garneau and Margaret Farmer
VMAC Gallery, 15 October – 4 November 2011

SIGNS OF SORROW



Ah Kee's words take up space. They are a black presence covering a white wall. They are thin, temporary skins daring you to ignore or remove them. Physically, they are in-your-face; conceptually, they are poetic, multivalent and generous in their ability to unsettle. Ah Kee's ongoing project is the assertion that he and his are human. This is not an established fact in the minds of many, the artist explains, in a country that prior to the 1967 reformation of the constitution did not recognize the existence of its First Peoples. His work demands that Indigenous being be recognized. Part of that recognition is non-Indigenous folks having some idea of what it feels like to be in skin like his in a dominantly white society.

The voice in Ah Kee's text may not issue from a specifically coloured body. Perhaps he is suggesting that every skin comes with advantages and limits; that the brute fact of being to flesh born is the fundamental existential challenge. But, if read racially, in the first statement skin is the progenitor of his achievements; in the second it is an obstacle to full being. His words evoke an ontology of oppression based on skin tone, but also the sense that resistance creates being. Can either side of his symmetrical equation stand alone?

Alternatively, because the skin colour is not described it could be read as "white." In which case, the first part of the poem alludes to the unearned privileges afforded light-toned people, and the second part argues that this accidental advantage requires its own concessions. Racism distorts the perception of everyone.

It is difficult to know if Lee Henderson's *Line* is sincere, insincere or otherwise. Is he a student made to "do lines" as punishment for his transgressions? Does he feel his sentencing is unjust? Is this a voluntary action, a personal penance? Is his litany a form of prayer? Perhaps his physical recitation is a form of rote learning and unlearning performed until he believes it. His statement is so broad as to suggest sarcasm. While he may indeed be "sorry for all the attempted genocide and assimilation" is he sorry only that it happened or is he acknowledging an inheritance? Does he feel only empathy or also responsibility? What's the point of this public exercise?

Many Aboriginal artists have argued that at a basic level, as an entry point, their work is about having their histories and persistent existence recognized by the dominant society. Through his actions, Henderson acknowledges that the thin edge of that message's wedge has penetrated him. It takes repetition to replace previous, erroneous messages. Re-learning is labour.

As curators, Margaret Farmer (Australian/New Zealander of British ancestry) and David Garneau (Metis), are moved by Henderson's initial gesture and the complexity of Ah Kee's simplicity. Both manage to evoke colonial inheritances without being reduced to dichotomies of victim and oppressor. They also focus on process over resolution. We hope to see a future with more such pairings and complexities. Meaningful change cannot occur without an exploration of the conditions that make change desirable. As Ah Kee's words suggest, we share a common humanity, denied only by an equally common impulse in the opposite direction.

Curators

David Garneau (Regina, Saskatchewan)

Margaret Farmer (Sydney, Australia)

BIOGRAPHIES

Born in North Queensland (Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimithirr peoples), **Vernon Ah Kee** currently lives in Brisbane where he is a founding member of the Aboriginal Art Collective ProppaNow. Ah Kee is an internationally exhibiting artist (including the Sydney and Venice Biennales) best known for his text works, video installations and large-scale portraits. His work weaves sincerity and irony into the documentation of recent history. The assertion of Aboriginal presence, humanity and dignity is a primary theme.

Having studied art in Canada and Berlin, **Lee Henderson** furthers his time- and lens-based artistic practice while teaching Media Art, Computer Science, and Photography at the postsecondary level (currently at OCAD University). He continues to show in Canada and abroad, recent and upcoming exhibitions and screenings include Zero Film Festival Los Angeles, The Rooms, The Dunlop Art Gallery, and Trinity Square Video. Through installation, video, performance and photography Henderson negotiates persistence of collective histories and the brevity of individual lives.

Margaret Farmer is a curator at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, University of New South Wales (UNSW) College of Fine Arts and lecturer in UNSW School of Art History and Theory. Past curatorial projects include the co-founding in 2006 of *SafARI*, the ongoing fringe exhibition to the Biennale of Sydney, with Lisa Corsi; and the exhibition *Terra Alterius: Land of Another*, which toured from 2004-2006. Farmer has extensive publishing experience, including as Associate Publisher of The Federation Press (2000-2005), and has been Managing Editor of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Consultant Editor to *Art & Australia* and Managing Editor of *Art & Australia's* recent book project *Current: Contemporary Art From Australia and New Zealand* (2008), for which she was also a writer.

David Garneau is Associate Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. His practice includes painting, drawing, curation and critical writing. Solo exhibitions include *Cowboys and Indians (and Métis?)*, *Métis/Sage* and *Road Kill*. His work often engages issues of nature, history, masculinity and Aboriginal identity. His paintings are collected by Canadian Museum of Civilization; The Canadian Parliament; Indian and Inuit Art Centre; the Glenbow Museum; the Mackenzie Art Gallery; Mendel Art Gallery; Saskatchewan Arts Board; Alberta Foundation for the Arts; NONAM, Zurich; and are in many other public and private collections. Garneau has curated several large group exhibitions including *The End of the World (as we know it)*; *Picture Windows: New Abstraction*; *Transcendent Squares*; *Contested Histories*; *Making it Like a Man!*, *Graphic Visions*, *TEXTiles*; two-person exhibitions: *Sophisticated Folk* (ManWoman and Michel Boutin) *Reveal/Conceal* (Eric Cameron and Chris Gardiner); and solo shows: Diana Thorneycroft, Tim Moore. Garneau has written numerous catalogue essays and reviews and was a co-founder and co-editor of *Artichoke* and *Cameo* magazines. He is currently working on curatorial and writing projects featuring contemporary Aboriginal art exchanges between Canada and Australia.

