

Cluster Essays on World Youth Cultures

Performing Youth: A Tactical Arts Response

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THE END OF the twentieth century has brought about significant shifts in the ways that young people are represented and valued in social, cultural, and political spheres. While on the one hand, youth as a discursive category is equated with newness and innovation (a dominant postwar depiction in Western societies), on the other, “youth is often associated with the dangers of the future, when fear of the unknown is coupled with a culturally pessimistic diagnosis of degeneration in which the morals and norms of youth become sure signs of the sins and transgressions of modernity” (Fornäs 1).

While many may argue that this has commonly been the case — that throughout recent history youth cultures have invariably been perceived as transgressional or deviant subcultures — the life experiences of many people presently under thirty are being profoundly affected by vast technological and economic change. As Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel note, with the “restructuring of the labour market . . . points of reference which previously helped smooth processes of social reproduction have become obscure” (1), such that a “Boomer” faith in predetermined paths of development toward a better or at least secure future is being questioned. In Australia, as in other late-capitalist societies, these factors have led to a contemporary state of social and cultural anxiety about youth: one of the main paradoxes being that while the concept of youth is increasingly deified through global consumerist ideologies, on a local level young people routinely are being blamed for a myriad of social

and cultural ills ranging from rising street crime to falling theatre subscriptions.

How then are young people in local communities negotiating these changing conditions, representations, and images? And with respect to differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, locale, and ability, how are young people accessing and creating their own cultural self-narratives in this era of ambiguity (as Henry A. Giroux might prompt us to ask)? In raising these questions, this paper does not aim to be a comprehensive investigation into youth cultural activity in Australia, nor does it intend to homogenize or speak for the interests of young people. Rather, it examines a recent community-based performance by a group of young men that reflects some of the incongruities and difficulties of youth self-representation in this time of change; and its mode of inquiry is informed by these core conditions of contemporary youth-specific experience.

Zen Che: A Tactical Arts Response is a ten-minute video ostensibly created by a group of young people as an act of self-narration. It is the result of an arts project that was nationally significant for its aesthetic approach to community-based performance, involving professional facilitation, editing, and production processes to create a broadcast-quality art video. In doing so, it attempted to be more than a roughly edited, handheld, "slice of life" documentary, common to community projects. By utilizing features of the local environment and the young participants' "grounded aesthetic" (Willis 14) of martial arts, *Zen Che* forged an intergenerational dialogue between a group of young men from a working-class area and a local war veteran on issues of conflict and fear. The final video profiles the young men's active involvement in the making of the piece and, as an act of self-representation, it can be read as their own contemporary artistic engagement with discourses of generation in the late 1990s.

The young participants' bodily display and commodification of fearlessness in the video both activate and disturb certain dominant ideas of gender, history, and nation. Through their performance the young participants unquestioningly identify with conservative transgenerational and national tropes of fighter/defender masculinity. While this might signal safety in

this period of instability (as well as in the more personal sense of age and gender-related social insecurity), ironically, it is the older war veteran who challenges most effectively the contemporary dominant adult discourse on "Generation X" youth.¹ Similarly, while the video appears to challenge right-wing aspects of Australia's nationalist mythologies by conveying images of the young participants engaging in Asian martial arts alongside historical images of a threatened Japanese wartime invasion, questions and representations of race and ethnicity as they intersect with "youth" are left untouched. In some ways, these aspects confuse the project's representational objectives and cloud its political intent. But, as this paper suggests, these incongruities also appropriately reflect the shifting social and cultural milieu. Hence, the project is discussed here as a response by a specific group of young people to the ambiguities surrounding the value and positioning of "youth." It particularly focusses on the video performance as a process of cultural re-inscription and self-identification with national gendered myth, and considers the appropriateness of video as a mode of community-based representation and performance for the young men involved.

Zen Che: A Tactical Arts Response began as a community arts project in 1997. It was coordinated by Street Arts, a professional arts company now called Arterial in Brisbane, Australia. Formerly a community theatre, the company creates and promotes "public art in the public interest" by devising original works in collaboration with communities. For *Zen Che*, professional video and installation artists, Craig Walsh and Randall Wood, and the Street Arts coordinator, Therese Nolan Brown, collaborated with a local youth centre to facilitate the project in Ningi, a small working class suburb near Caboolture, forty kilometres north of the capital of Queensland. Street Arts had earlier worked in the nearby area of Deception Bay, conducting a series of art workshops with young people that culminated in a short, inexpensively produced video, shot and edited by the young participants themselves. This initial work in the area could be viewed as facilitatory community development, offering the under-resourced young people of the region the tools

for cultural self expression. In documentary style, the video followed the participants and their friends over a Friday night, presenting self-constructed images of themselves hanging out at a skate bowl, talking about the lack of things to do, drinking, and interacting with police. "Depression Bay" and "Conception Bay" were terms used by the interviewees on the video to refer to the boredom they felt and the high youth pregnancy rates in the area.

Nine participants were involved in the following, more professionally produced art video, *Zen Che*; although seven — all young men aged between sixteen and eighteen years — were the main agents of the cultural project. Notably, the other two participants were young women who do not significantly appear in the video and who, in the video's credits, are referred to only by their first names, indicating that the ownership of the project remained predominantly with the young men.

The *Zen Che* project was as much about advocating for greater youth-specific recreational and welfare services in the region, as it was about making art. In this context, the project was avowedly political and aimed to be a high-quality visual representation of youth by young people, for a target audience of the regional community, local government, and other state social service providers. This motivation was evident in the overt issue-based framing of the performance text of the video. Directly after an opening martial arts chant and title sequence, two of the participants remark to the camera:

Well, there's not really that much to do in Ningi: walk the streets . . . come down here basically, do martial arts and play a game of pool . . . something like that. . . . We want to do something . . . everybody thinks we just want to sit around and do nothing . . . like, drink beer and watch TV [laugh]. (Ningi Connection)

In sombre documentary style, the young men are seated inside the sparsely resourced shed of the Ningi Youth Centre and a suitably staid soundtrack underscores their comments.

This mood is immediately countered, however, with a playful change in music and a cut to a daylit outdoors shot of the young men on the back of a four-wheel-drive travelling the sandy tracks of nearby Bribie Island. Any interpretation of these

young men as passive Generation X slackers, or victims of the obvious lack of regional facilities, is quickly dispelled by images of adventure and outdoor recreation. These men are “doing it for themselves”: challenging the dominant generationalist stereotype of bored, troublesome youth and replacing it with a no-less dominant (and no more self-reflexive) representation of carefree, risk-taking male adolescence; complete with particularly Australian associations of sun, surf, sand, and a large truck. The relationship of these men to their physical environment is one of domination. Sweeping views of unspoilt nature are intercut with fat tire marks on sand and shots of the young participants obviously enjoying themselves and their sense of control over the surrounding landscape. When the ruin of a concrete naval bunker on the beach comes into view, its image is harshly pixilated, emphasizing the structure’s incongruity with the otherwise natural physical environment. The following performance narrative focusses on this fifty-year-old bunker, one of a string of many that line the beach in this region, now inscribed with graffiti art as tags of youth-specific ownership.

The notion of the local that opens the video is expanded, as the bunker becomes a central motif for the performance and acts as a catalyst to examine wider themes of fear, war, and conflict. Through recorded interviews with a sixty-four-year-old veteran of the Korean war, Alex Clode, the performance utilizes the bunker as an historical referent, offering a suitable focus for a cross-generational dialogue about the thematic issues at hand. The former significance of the bunkers for national defence is discussed through a text of questions and answers acted out by the participants. The request, “tell us about the history of the Bribie bunkers,” is made three times by different performers before leading to increasingly performative interrogations on “what is war?” and “what is fear?”

The bodily display that accompanies this narrative of inquiry is initially marked by many of the conventional signifiers of white Australian masculinity. The young men display their carefree, risk-taking bodies on the back of the four-wheel-drive; they present their strong, defiant bodies side by side, arms crossed in solidarity; and they engage in *larrikin*² playfulness, with images

of themselves “horsing around” with their mates. But in a shift that both reinforces the national larrikin myth and contravenes it, this “Australianness” is put into relief with the young men’s performance of Asian martial arts movements. Ironically, this display is performed on the beach; not in the sunlit, pleasure-filled day, but at night when this national icon takes on more subversive and dangerous undertones.

Within a highly codified kinesthetic, the young black-costumed men perform in and around the bunker, with footage of World War II planes projected on the concrete structure’s stolid walls. Notably, these martial movements are performed in a training formation, not as one-on-one combat, but as a display of self-discipline and strength that are valorized attributes of that other Australian icon, the soldier digger. Curiously, Australia’s infamous doctrine of the “yellow peril” is simultaneously invoked in a voice-over by Clode that confuses the signification of the martial choreography. The threat of Japanese invasion and, on a broader level, Asian immigration, has been white Australia’s “great national fear” at various times during the nineteenth and twentieth century; a fear that continues to fuel the rhetoric of contemporary right-wing political parties such as One Nation. While Clode’s voice-over remains firmly centred on the historical at this point, the discussion of the threatened invasion of Australia is reinforced by film clips of military planes, yet contradicted by young men performing ritualized gestures on the sand below.

Given the popularity of various forms of Asian martial arts in Australia alongside the anti-immigration aspects of margins of Australian politics, the intertextuality of the performance — featuring the training regime by the young Caucasian men next to the defunct bunker representing the desire to repel Asian invasion — is either a clever irony that fails to be fully realized in the video or could, more simply, be a transnational identification with the masculine tropes of another culture. Either way, the metonymic relationship between the historical referent of the bunker with national myths vis-a-vis Australian-Asian relations is destabilized. Furthermore, a close-up image of Clode projected on the bunker wall reinforces this agitation of conventional historical nationalism, by relating his experience as a

soldier involved in Britain's nuclear testing on Christmas Island in the 1950s. Here, Clode describes his greatest experience of fear as being not in warfare with Asian forces, but in the hands of a supposed ally, the "mother country" Britain.

Simultaneously, aspects of national mythology are being both upheld (the brave larrikin Australian digger as fighter/defender is celebrated) and critiqued (right wing and xenophobic aspects of nationalism that cast Asia as a threat and enemy are challenged). At the centre is the sinister night beach setting, playing a significant if subliminal role — a fair playing field, a war zone, a national icon, a last frontier, a last defence. Drawing on Josette Féral's concept of space in performance, the beach in *Zen Che* "no longer surrounds and encloses the performance, but like the body, becomes part of the performance to such an extent that it cannot be distinguished from it" (292). In each manifestation, this multivalent signifier of the sandy beach performs with the martial body in what could be perceived as either a celebration or abrasion of nationalism in its display of masculine strength, defence, and fearlessness.

A commodification of fearlessness as male and youth-specific continues to be pervasive throughout the video; although more as a desirous re-inscribing of conventional masculinity than an interrogation of such. Away from the beach, the young participants shoot their own vox pops about the history of the bunkers and the meaning of fear in their own lives, firstly in front of a poster advertising the movie *Independence Day* and later utilizing the signifying codes of an interrogative documentary. Strong lighting contrasts and close-up images are featured to underline the seriousness of their "authentic" responses. They consider fear to be "an emotion" and "a heightened sense of self-preservation," while another participant asserts he has no fear. Unsurprisingly, the young men's responses to their own questioning about fear resonate more with the background poster images and the wording of their various brand-name T-shirts, than with Clode's description of risk in warfare. Following on from the beach performance, this commodified and male-identified idealization of risk indicates a complex politics of association between the video's theme of war and fear, and its

more implicit representation of national myth and transgenerational and transnational masculinity.

One participant asks of another, "What do you think the old codgers think about us?" The answer, "Not a lot actually. I don't think they think a lot of us at all," echoing the earlier remarks about generationalist portrayals of young people as just wanting "to sit around and do nothing." The participants' re-imagining of themselves as active outdoor types and self-disciplined martial artists challenges these common perceptions, and the young participants reflect on, and appear to be resisting, dominant representations of young people in mainstream adult discourse. Therefore, they proudly display the "no-fear" motif of their commercial surfwear as an ideology. But no fear of what? These representations unquestioningly invest in a performance of youth masculinity based on prescriptive and traditional conventions. By inscribing the young male body with martial movements signifying power, discipline, and defence, a particular self-narrative is implied: that these young men see themselves as comparatively as fearless and capable of (self-)defence as previous generations of young men but with the difference that for men like Clode, war provided the site for proving their mettle and their capacity for responsible social action. Although the young participants express their belief that war is unjustified and undesired, they also voice their respect for "the diggers" who defended the country in war to keep it free: mentors in demonstrating strength against fear. While today that fear is manifest in very different ways (for example, in extreme sports, competitive martial art, and the advertising slogans of clothing manufacturers), the close associations between fear, war, and masculinity remain firmly intact.

More disconcerting, however, is that these markers of interpellation, repeated throughout the video, imply a correlation between fearless masculinity and a supposedly empowering politics of youth representation. Later in the video, one young participant half-jokingly states, "if we don't defend it [the country] our way of life's gone. No more sitting around drinking beer and watching TV." Echoing the earlier playful comment about the dominant representation of young people as slackers, this

line partly expresses the participants' recognition of the need for participating in social action, but also implicitly functions as a conservative re-inscription of a generationalist view. The comment, in performance, floats outside of any social, economic, or political context and as such offers a revealing insight into the normative behaviours and values of many young white men living in outer suburban Australia. Ironically, the greatest challenge to generationalist discourse in the video comes not from the young participants, but from the war veteran, Clode. He claims that young people today would not know the kind of fear he had experienced as a soldier and he hopes that they would never have to do so in the future. While the dominant representation of young people in the mainstream media is as a threat to senior citizens, Clode offers a refreshingly non-generationalist perspective, considering young people to be "the mainstays of Australia" and urging the young interviewers that "you people must have the say now." Clode expresses the belief that young people, "if they're treated right and given a fair deal," will do right by the environment and by future generations. His phrase, if "given a fair deal," is especially important in view of the project's political motivation to garner more social support services for young people in the region, and at least gestures toward some understanding of the contemporary social conditions that young people face.

On face value, *Zen Che* is a strong act of self-representation and self-narrative by these young men. As Shane Rowlands states in her review,

By extrapolating their keen interest in martial arts training to broader considerations of fear, conflict, and (self-)defence, the young men sought to address issues of particular relevance to them, that is, the presumed threat posed by youth to older people in the community and the consequent resentment by youth for being "written off." ("Media to Move the Margins")

But the manner in which the young participants choose to work with these ideas in performance glosses over a number of representational complexities. While undoubtedly a significant achievement in terms of its use of video in community-based performance, the success of *Zen Che* in challenging dominant

generationalist portrayals of youth and youth culture cannot be as enthusiastically lauded. For while the young participants at times consciously play with the dominant discursive attributes of Australian maleness (such as mateship, fearlessness, "larrikin" behaviour, and risk-taking), the video serves to reinforce these traits, to the point of idealizing them as youthful. Little space is available, within this process of desirous image-making, for critical distance, irony, or self- or community-reflexivity, such that *Zen Che* becomes ultimately a performative act of desire, which, in attempting to counteract generationalist representations, simply substitutes an equally limiting discourse in its place.

In *Zen Che*, there is a desire to "reclaim" and repeat certain stereotypes. As Elin Diamond notes, the prefix "re" in cultural performance "acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition — and the desire to repeat — within the performative present" (2). The "pre-existing discursive field" for *Zen Che* is that of a conservative hetero-normative masculinity of which the fighter/defender is archetypal. Within the "performative present" of the video (and of the making of the video), the young participants and their artist-collaborators repeat this image, embodying it visually, discursively, and subliminally. The performance does little to open space for an interrogation of discourses of gender or youth. Instead, it prefers to respond to generationalism with an assurance that while generational performativity might change over time, normative gender performance does not.

True to its name, the *Zen Che* video does attempt to be a "tactical arts response" to the mainstream media construction of youth that often incites community moral panic. And, as an act of self-representation, *Zen Che* needs to be considered in the context of this community-based aim. The performance was of great value, socially, culturally, and aesthetically to those who made it (a community in process) and those who will see it (particularly regional and age-based community service providers). As such, it was a legitimate attempt on the part of the participants to perform their culturally ideal representations of themselves. It must be noted, however; that its political efficacy is limited by its

seeming failure to, in Diamond's words, "assert the possibility of materializing something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines other as yet unsuspected modes of being" (2) — for young people or for men in general. The closest the performance gets to this is the repeated close-up images of the participants' faces which do offer a hint of the kind of "unstable improvisations within . . . deep cultural performance . . . [exposing] the fissures, ruptures, and revisions that have settled into continuous reenactment" (Diamond 2). These close-ups are not sharp or clear, but are overlaid with the images of other participants' faces, such that attention is drawn to the instability of the portraits conveyed. These images are a recurring and sometimes prominent feature of the performance, like the military bunker, leading one to question the significance of their blurred quality and repetition. While still unquestionably the participants themselves, facial markers of individuality are unclear. What is behind these faces? How does this stylistic approach reinforce or question the historiography of the piece? Are the young men's supposedly fixed ideas about themselves being disrupted here? And is this the young men's aesthetic response to their sense of "youth self" or predominantly the co-artists' mediation of such?

The overall production and editing values indicate that the professional artists played a prominent role in guiding, mediating, and aestheticizing the participants' cultural performance. Regardless of whose final choice it may have been to construct and include these images, their unfixed and recurring quality indicate that all is not as it seems. These images gesture towards an unsettling contradiction in this performance of cultural performativity: the "I" of the representation in *Zen Che* may not be the wholly, closed, and stable "I" that the young men assert elsewhere in their professionally glossy reproduction. Perhaps, then, these images invite a reading which privileges a more non-mimetic, unbounded quality to the representation and repetition. While, on the whole, the video testifies to the young men's identification with masculine fearlessness and self-discipline, this aesthetic play of images disrupts, for a few brief moments, the erstwhile fixity of their portrayal.

It is in the use of video as a communicative tool — a site where images can be transformed “into useful arbiters of change and education” (Burnett 283) — whereby *Zen Che* works well as a community-based medium for young people, particularly for this group of young men. In *Zen Che*, the aim throughout the project was to produce a video product that would be viewed as a performance in its own right. Cameras and editing technology fully mediated the live performance aspects of the project, such as the beach event in which the young participants’ bodily display was controlled, mediatized, and contextualized in certain ways. Shy of performance in the theatrical sense, the participants engaged in a multi-mediated, nonmatrixed performance in which they were able to control their self-narration, representation and, partly, their distribution. Denied direct access to decision-making processes in governmental and community-service provision, the young participants were able to both distance themselves from, and represent themselves in, public space. They were able to negotiate their individualized risk of speaking up and standing out, and each therefore could take up a subject position without necessarily performing the subject. This was achieved through an innovative collaborative performance with professional artists in a mode suited to the participants’ experience, interests, and tastes. As such, the use of video functioned well as a “youthful cultural strategy”, described by Vered Amit-Talai as activity by young people that emerges from and is addressed to “the exigencies of the situations in which they are implicated and the constraints which age restrictions impose on the range and nature of that involvement” (231).

The way that the Street Arts utilized video as the main mode of performance was well suited to the involvement of young people wary of associations of theatricality. This was particularly evident in the first public screening of *Zen Che* at the Ningi Youth Centre whereby the participants chose not to make a live speech to the assembled audience. Through the screening of the video, however, they were still clearly representing themselves. In doing so, they were presenting a performance in which “the performer does not embody a fictional character but

'merely carries out certain actions' that nevertheless can have a referential or representational signification" (Kirby qtd in Auslander 2011). Other critiques of the use of video by young people have similarly highlighted the value of such processes, especially in non-arts projects in which video has invited, "through the serious process of play, of exploration and representation, . . . the self . . . [to be] constituted" (Bloustien 130).

Yet prominent as always is the ethical concern of who speaks for whom. As images of a community's region, way of life, or contemporary concerns are committed to video footage, how might they be framed and by whom? Editing is still a professional skill that has a strong impact on the way that images make meaning: particularly in how representations in performance are delivered, compared, and received. While young people in contemporary Western societies may be regarded as the most media savvy of generations, this skill is not necessarily accessible to all. For instance, in this case it was unlikely that — post-project — the local youth centre could afford to purchase, maintain, or provide ongoing training in the use of the costly video equipment. Another questionable effect is that video can contribute to a further commodification of communities through infinitely reproducible and replayable self-narratives. Community images can thus be wrongly perceived as fixed or mimetic, with little acknowledgment given to their temporal and aesthetic aspects (aspects that are foregrounded in the impermanence of live performance). This may become the case with *Zen Che* as it continues to circulate as a self-narrative of an assumed community of young people in the Caboolture and Ningi region. The more it is replayed for the purposes of advocacy, the more these images may become cemented as the normative representation of young people in the region, and the normative production standard for community-based art projects that are rarely as generously funded or as professionally produced.

Josette Féral states that "performance does not aim at a meaning, but rather *makes* meaning insofar as it works right in those extremely blurred junctures out of which the subject eventually

emerges" (292). *Zen Che*, while being a conscious act of performance that *makes* meaning, also strove to construct *a* meaning in the context of its representational, political and community-based aims. Its subject of youth was indicated from the start — both in the projects' contextual aims and implied spectator body. What emerged in its final performance, however, was a very differently constituted subject. While *Zen Che* aimed to be a conscious political act of locating youth, its performative elements and fissures effectively dislocated its collective subject of youth. The questions raised by the video, particularly those arising from the tension between a desired mimetic representation of masculinity and a destabilizing non-mimetic performance, are important ones that reflect those of the wider cultural and social field. How is youth constituted in the realm of the late- or post-industrial? When the "youth self" is constituted, with what or whom is it identified? With the collapse of generational rites of passage through (amongst other things) recent changes in the constitution of the labour market, perhaps this cultural performance demonstrates how young men are looking askance at history. Tentatively, some aspects of an historical nationalism — particularly those engaged with the concept of the youthful male digger — are celebrated, but with a decidedly contemporary transnational inflection. In this project, it was significant that gender rather than generation became a more significant locus of identification and cultural meaning-making, although this leaves contentious the place of ethnicity and difference in this play of self-constructed images.

Zen Che cannot be framed as a representative example of all youth-specific responses to the contemporary conditions of life in the late 1990s. However, its ambiguities, contradictions, and desire to repeat and reclaim cultural stereotypes can be seen as indicative of the uncertainties that characterize young people's responses to mainstream adult discourse and its perceptions of youth as problematic and dangerous. While far from providing a "pessimistic diagnosis of degeneration" (Fornäs 1), *Zen Che* is nonetheless conservative in its outlook. It regenerates rather than resists certain norms, and is a local and specific response to an era of instability and change.

NOTES

- 1 "Generation X" is a regulatory category, prevalent in most Western societies, which demarcates the cultural interests, styles and behaviours of people born in the late 1960s and 1970s. Douglas Rushkoff describes the common media construction of this category of young people as "unmotivated . . . apathetic . . . at best, a market segment and, at worst, the downfall of the Western world" (3-4). While no longer as frequently in use, the term was popular in the mid to late 1990s, and is appropriate to the time when the *Zen Che* video was made (1997).
- 2 "Larrikin: Originating in the late nineteenth century, a larrikin was a delinquent or hooligan, often a member of a "push" or street gang, and sometimes of a criminal bent. The term retains something of its antisocial meaning but has taken on the qualities of independence and anti-authority of the true Australian and is frequently used as a term of admiration." (Rattigan, qtd. in Holland and O'Sullivan 79).

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