



Source: Martin Chulov, 'Olmert, Abbas in harmony on talks', *The Australian online*, 22/11/07.

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The American artist sits in the desert. Not on the ground, exactly. He's inside a rectangular two-storey structure, formerly occupied by the US Army, but now it's home. For the last couple of years, he's been reconstructing the military landscape, hiring Mexican workers, legal of course, to make and lay adobe bricks, returning the Texan no man's land into something austere and civilian not only for his family but for art and thus for posterity. The desire to build a rural Utopia goes back a long way in America, but none has pursued the idea with such single-minded aesthetic rigour as our man, J.

Today is not a good day, however. He has just hurled a magazine out the window. It's picked up by the desert wind; the cover cracks apart and pages fly off in all directions. All the following week, fragments of cheap newsprint, prematurely browned, turn up in the desert plants or nestle among the rows of concrete boxes. J is deeply suspicious of stories, as he said: 'the Don Quixote of our time would be against all stories and words. We're brought up on stories: children's stories, literature, movies, trite expectations, if this, then that.' He didn't include in his list art writing, though he's done a fair bit himself. What he is profoundly opposed to is any sort of generalisation or grand interpretation.

What had made him flip that day was an essay written by two aliens in an inconspicuous looking magazine called *The Dingo* that opened by asking whether it was possible to talk to him. The aliens then proceeded to personally interrogate his use of language across ten pages, to show how it controlled the public image of his art objects. They wrote:

*I remember looking at your work and feeling that my 'looking' was almost 'programmed'; I remember walking around your series of boxes and thinking my reactions were in some way 'choreographed'.*

He thought 'the best thing that could happen would be equal international art elsewhere.' They tackled him for his untroubled use of institutional culture, so that it could seem natural that every corner of the 'free world', even that fair city of churches, Adelaide, had to have a work of J's.

That was when he threw it out the window. Here he was an anarchist with a lifetime of political activism, a card-carrying member of Citizens for Local Democracy, who wrote for the War Resisters League and subscribed to their 'plan without a master' being called an imperialist! He, who had defended the rights of citizens to form resident action committees to fracture central government, like running an *arrondissement* during the Commune, though it was in fact Soho in the early 70s.

That afternoon he rang New York and tried to get a straight answer from K, the only artist he knew first hand on the editorial staff of *The Dingo*. He demanded the truth. 'Everyone knows it's your magazine, so if that was in it, it had to be your doing.' K had in fact become one of a factional schism of two within the Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong *Dingo* gang, and believed in a delusional fantasy that the essay was an elaborate plot directed at him. He replied: 'Those aliens are on the other side and they just wanted to attack me, but they couldn't do it directly. So just like Chinese politics, where if you want to attack Zhou Enlai, you have to attack Confucius, they attacked you to attack me.' K then unleashed a coke-fuelled invective against the aliens, attacking like one of his pet piranhas, accusing one of being a company man the other of being his camp follower. J had heard enough of New York megalomania and hung up.

Almost fifteen years later, a young scholar, a truth seeker, travelled to the desert to interview the master. He arrived in the hot and dusty town by bus on Highway 67. He had plenty of time to mull over the essay and to rehearse his questions—after all J made him wait for two days before being ushered in to do the interview, yet what had really surprised the scholar, sitting there in that great concrete living space was how angry J was about the aliens, when he mentioned *The Dingo*. He said they stalked him, turned him into an object lesson in late imperialism. He kept muttering into his beard. 'Was it Oedipal? Or were they just shit crazy rabid dogs?'

I heard all this on another continent when the aliens returned. As they unpacked their bags they wondered out aloud about what really happens when you send an exhibition from New York to another country...Is there any way for it not to be an imposition? Long ago when they had begun their pilgrimage they had deep respect for J, he was, for them 'an almost sacrosanct figure, a powerful reference point for so much during the sixties', yet as they had probed the net of language that he had thrown around his work they had grown outraged.

Last month I met the now internationally famous scholar who is riding the sixties revival. He wanted to prod both sides of the equation. He asked me why the aliens had attacked. I mentioned the critical reception of American culture in the shadow of Vietnam. He said 'but the war was over by then.' It's true the gunfire had stopped, the B52s were all back in San Diego. But he could not see that the aliens were dealing with their own past. Who can see that now? No one apparently. It's just written off as another case of Dingoism.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ann Stephen.*