

Vivian Zihert
**Editorial: Trade
Markings**

01/03

In opening the book *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (2015), Aileen Moreton-Robinson leads with an epigraph: “The problem with white people is they think and believe that they own everything.”¹ In terms of a critique of the seven-centuries-long rollout and contestation of European dispossessive power, this citation is the alpha and the omega. It is incredibly hard to add anything that isn’t captured within its succinct analysis. Nevertheless, this special issue of *e-flux journal* goes to work amid the breadth of this statement – seeking greater insight into its truth and the counter-tactics therein through aesthetic study in particular.

The essays, dialogues, illustrations, and poetry in this issue are compiled in the context of Frontier Imaginaries, an art and research foundation established in Brisbane (Australia) and incorporated in Amsterdam (the Netherlands). It is specifically in this movement between the spatio/temporal compression of the settler colony on the one hand, and the predatory juridical mappings of merchant colonialism on the other, that the foundational relations of property – the endless toggle of propriety and expropriation – arise as a common denominator.

In practice, Frontier Imaginaries is a project that has found points of grounding in Brisbane, Jerusalem, New York, and Eindhoven, and it is in these oblique incidents that aesthetic study comes to the fore. The frontier, after all, offers a viewpoint that turns the European modern text on its side – revealing intricate and elided theaters of consequence that evade categorical reason.

In this work it is crucial to establish that the frontier is not a “border.” That is to say, it is not a contractual seam between two legal entities that share mutual recognition. The frontier is rather the threshold at which such a contractual space can no longer exert its jurisdiction.

The easiest way to dramatize that threshold is through territorial metaphors hailing an outer limit to a locus of power, e.g., the image of a “wild west” beyond the grasp of metropolitan law, or the “final frontier” of outer space and/or tech innovation. The limits of such contractual space are convoluted, however; they roll together and exist multifariously. Contractual failure can occur through incommensurabilites in the terms of agreement itself, for example.

The primal scene of the European modern agreement is neatly summarized in Hugo Grotius’s *Mare Liberum* (1609) as “trade supported by force of arms.” Here the potential “freedom” of any such trade is radically qualified by the violence inherent within “force of arms.” The greater title of the treatise that *Mare Liberum* is culled from – *De Iure Praedae*

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 [Vivian Zihert](#)
Editorial: Trade Markings

Commentarius (Commentary on the Law of Predation/Booty) – also calls out the need for a renewed vocabulary of standardized larceny, and cuts to the quick of Denise Ferreira da Silva’s notion of the European modern “Spirit of Possession,” a riff on Hegel.²

As an advisor to the fifth edition of *Frontier Imaginaries*, Ferreira da Silva suggested the title “Trade Markings,” which also gives its name to this special issue of *e-flux journal*. Trade Markings signals the internally incommensurable demands of proprietary modernity under “Natural Law”: on the one hand the claim to trade marking as *legitimate opacity*, and on the other hand the enforceable *transparency* of frictionless exchange. This is the *vremden handel* or strange business of the Spirit of Possession.

This journal issue includes a large portion of artists’s writing, starting with a return to Richard Bell’s barnstorming 2003 declaration “Bell’s Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It’s a White Thing.” A reflection on the boom in markets for Australian Aboriginal art since the 1980s, “Bell’s Theorem” attacked the fundamental categories of colonial cultural value, resetting the terms of art history in Australia and more broadly. In a similarly rebellious spirit, Yazan Khalili’s *I, The Artwork* turns the tradition of conceptual art towards the context of occupation with a “Deed of Ownership and Condition of Existence” that codifies BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) conditions into the very being of the artwork. In dialogue with lawyer and critic David Kim, Khalili discusses the implications of *I, The Artwork* with regards to fundamental categories of profit, ownership, obligation, and aesthetic effect.

Artists Rachel O’Reilly, Ho Rui An, and Wendelien van Oldenborgh consider genealogies of proprietization in Australian, Singaporean, and Dutch turns. Demonstrating the aesthetic crises at the heart of environmental and colonial urgencies, O’Reilly takes the 1800s British-Australian legal innovation of Torrens Title as a case in point of the compositional violence of the property form. Ho examines the subjective governance encoded in financialized statehood. His take addresses the speed-scape of the road, and its accidental cinemas of the dashcam. Whereas movement is the principle of Ho’s study, van Oldenborgh focuses on distance, in an examination of a real-estate property in Amsterdam and its multiple lives as financial asset, office workplace, architectural heritage, and shelter to asylum seekers. Also moving through an analysis of filmmaking, van Oldenborgh pursues the “colonial modern here-ness” and value structures of the modern city through the cinema of Alain Resnais, Glauber Rocha, and Pedro Costa.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s “white possessive” casts a long shadow across this journal issue. Her essay included here, “Bodies that Matter on the Beach,” reads the racialized body politics of Australian beach culture against the warrior stance of artist Vernon Ah Kee. Elizabeth A. Povinelli likewise contributes a meditation on the proposal of a frontier point of analysis with a searching critique of critiques, “Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habitats.” Angela Mitropoulos also reads the frontier through her essay “Art of Life, Art of War: Movement, Un/Common Forms, and Infrastructure.” Here Mitropoulos takes modern dance as a locus to examine ideals of movement inherent to proprietized relations, captured against the backdrop of emergent European fascism.

The issue closes with a fragment of poetry by artist and founder of R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance and Empowerment, Demian DinéYazhi’. Pressing his words forward against the reader, DinéYazhi’ undercuts the dispossessive plane of the American imaginary with a text untethered from the possessive comma, and indeed from typographic punctuation altogether.

x

02/03

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 Vivian Zihert
Editorial: Trade Markings

1

The source of the remark is cited as "Dennis Benjamin Moreton, personal communications, April 10 2015." Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xi.

2

Ferreira da Silva, "Difference Without Separability," in *São Paulo Art Biennial, "Incerteza viva" (Living Uncertainty)* (2016).

03/03

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 [Vivian Zihert](#)
Editorial: Trade Markings