

# SODA JERK

formed 2002, Sydney  
live and work in New York, United States



Soda Jerk is a two-person art collective who work at the intersection of documentary and speculative fiction. They are fundamentally interested in the politics of images: how they circulate, whom they benefit, and how they can be undone.

Part political satire, eco-horror and road movie, their 2018 film *TERROR NULLIUS* is a political revenge fable that offers an unwriting of Australian national mythologies. Binding together a documentary impulse with the bent plotlines of Australian film texts, Soda Jerk's revisionist history opens a wilful narrative space where cinema fictions and historical facts permeate each other in new ways.

**Artspace: How did your collaborative practice as Soda Jerk begin and who are your key influences?**

Soda Jerk: Our early practice is indebted to the scenes we were part of in Sydney in the early 2000s. The freak-positivity of our queer community and the System Corrupt noisecore scene, the experimental audio sampling of Frigid, and the pervasive culture of illegal warehouse parties and squatting initiatives like Sydney Broadway Squats. Within all these communities there was an embrace of civil disobedience, as well as the strategic utility of seizing privatised resources and politically appropriating them. And this is really how we first came to video sampling – we understood it as part of a broader resistance to cultural privatisation.

Perhaps we're guilty of romanticising that period, but it does seem like a very different moment in time, before contemporary art became the dancing monkey of the culture Industry. Which is not to say that there isn't resistance now, it just has different contours, and we feel that much of what is most acute and emergent takes place online. But the question of how culture can be intercepted or militarised still acts as an attractor to the kinds of artists we're drawn to. Like our good mates Adam and Zack Khalil, our mentor Craig Baldwin, and the badass politics of The Invisible Committee and Accomplices Not Allies.

**AS: Has political commentary always been an integral part of your practice and what is the utility of satire in conveying and critiquing political ideas?**

SJ: When we turned to satire in 2016 it was because we had this feeling that the form itself was in crisis. Trump had just won the election, and every day in the news it felt more and more as though reality itself was spinning out into a bombastic shitshow of hyperbole and clickbait. Faced with these government-sanctioned contortions of fact and logic, we began to wonder whether satire

could continue to function as an effective counter-cultural strategy.

So it felt compelling to inhabit satire at the exact moment that the bottom fell out of it. Part of the swerving tonality of *TERROR NULLIUS* was an attempt to conjoin a satirical impulse with other sensibilities including earnestness, shame and melancholy. As a form of political critique satire will always lack nuance, that's not its strength; but as a cultural strategy that is stark and positional it offers a formidable means of building solidarity and humiliating the enemy.

**AS: Tell us about the conception of TERROR NULLIUS and its development, was there a particular character or landscape that started the process and informed how it evolved?**

SJ: We'd been developing the idea of an Australian political revenge film since 2006 when we made a short work called *Picnic at Wolf Creek*. And by 2016 we were feeling a growing sense of urgency to respond to the sinister conservatism in Australian politics – the deepening crisis of asylum seekers, the devastating legacy of colonial history, the erosion of minority rights, and a political circus more than happy to propagate hate when it polls well.

We consider *TERROR NULLIUS* to be a kind of rogue documentary, and our earliest treatments for the film were maps of historical vectors that we used as touchstones for shaping the narrative. Things like Gough Whitlam's dismissal, the Tampa crisis, the rise of Pauline Hanson, Mel Gibson's rant tape, the same-sex postal vote, and the Mabo decision. Once these were established we began drawing connections between these events and resonant moments within Australian cinema. Then it all gets thrashed out in the edit. There's an incredible amount of waste built into the way that we work – rampant variations of the same narrative and endless scenes that never make the cut. For *TERROR NULLIUS* these included a kung fu fight with Pauline Hanson, an outback pub wedding for Muriel and Rhonda, and a mining blockade where Gina Rinehart gets turned into a cane toad.

Sometimes when you feel powerless to effect change it can be a powerful thing to see it. So this was really the idea with *TERROR NULLIUS*, to create a vigilante fable of social justice that radically inverts the dominant relations of power, privilege and oppression. It might be a small win in the scheme of things, but sometimes you just need to be able to enjoy a misogynist getting devoured by a crocodile, or see a bicentennial celebration ravaged by flesh-eating sheep.

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# TERROR NULLIUS

A POLITICAL REVENGE FABLE BY SODA\_JERK

★★★★ “dazzling, kinetic, mishmashed beast of an Australian film” The Guardian

Commissioned by ACMI (Australian Centre for the Moving Image)

"Soda Jerk remix cinema history to create  
the best movies that never existed" - i-D



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**AS: Given *TERROR NULLIUS* is so deeply rooted in Australian history, culture and cinema, did you approach it differently to other works that have a more international focus? Were you conscious of appealing to both Australian and non-Australian audiences?**

SJ: We definitely didn't try to cushion any of the Australian cultural specificity for an international audience. What interests us about sampling is precisely the question of how films operate as encrypted documents that carry traces of the ideations and traumas of their particular context. So specificity is really where the heart of this project lies. Having said that, cultural encoding is not always going to cut along national lines. For sure Australians will be more likely to recognise Tony Abbott, but identifying the Babadook as a queer icon will probably depend more on your sexual orientation and how deep you live in the internet.

**AS: *TERROR NULLIUS* was awarded the \$100,000 Ian Potter Moving Image Commission in 2016. Yet on the eve of its premiere, one of the co-commissioners, the Ian Potter Cultural Trust, withdrew their promotional support, describing it as 'a very controversial piece of art'. How do you reflect on what happened and what are the broader ideological implications of creating, commissioning and exhibiting politically charged artworks?**

SJ: The whole thing feels like a bit of a riddle. While it seems surprising that such a staunchly conservative organisation would have funded a project like *TERROR NULLIUS* to begin with, this also fits with the politics of art that we're witnessing right now. In these WTF times, institutions are increasingly enlisting political artists to appear responsive to the moment and play well on social media. They are more than happy to share in the reputation capital of these choices, but ultimately what they want is work that is dangerous in name only, without any kind of real risk. And if an artist doesn't toe this line, the institution inevitably starts to worry about the potential fallout involved with the broader reception of the work, particularly among stakeholders.

Of course, there are sincerely well-intentioned institutions and deadset humans fronting them. We know lots of those. But even with best intentions, the corporate restructuring of the art world has resulted in the proliferation of unwholesome handshakes with unethical money. The implications of this for political art are incredibly complex and we don't claim to have the answers. All we can offer is our

concrete belief that artists must stay with the trouble and remain uncompromising in the work they want to make. Because unless we inhabit political art as a place of real risk and even potential error, it'll be indistinguishable from the political virtue signalling of corporate brands.

**AS: *TERROR NULLIUS* is an extension of previous influences and content in your practice. How do you see the work influencing your future endeavours? What's next for Soda Jerk?**

SJ: We've always tried to be responsive to the kinds of questions that are emerging for us at any time, whether personally or politically. And in the years since *TERROR NULLIUS* things have only continued to feel increasingly upside down, urgent and on the wrong side of history. Right now we're working on *Hello Dankness*, an attempt to bear witness to the period from the last US election cycle to the present day. So the current pandemic moment has obviously become integral to that, which feels harrowing but necessary.

We consider *Hello Dankness* to be the second instalment in a trilogy of political fables that began with *TERROR NULLIUS*. It's a kind of doomer grand opera of filter bubbles, fascism, 4chan, freedom of speech, Gamergate, Pizzagate, disaster capitalism, contagions, melting ice caps, ICE, the rise of the alt-right, the splintering of the left, and the collapse of the internet into politics and everything.

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Soda Jerk's works have been exhibited throughout Australia and worldwide, including at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney; Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne; Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart; City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand; Barbican Centre, London, England; Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool, England; The Whitworth, Manchester, England; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany; Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund, Germany; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, United States; National Gallery of Art and National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, United States; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, United States; Pioneer Works and Anthology Film Archives, New York, United States; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada; Onassis Cultural Centre, Athens, Greece; Video Bureau, Guangzhou, China and Videotage, Hong Kong.



*This essay is excerpted from the Just Not Australian exhibition catalogue. Just Not Australian was curated by Artspace and developed in partnership with Sydney Festival and Museums & Galleries of NSW. The exhibition is touring nationally with Museums & Galleries of NSW.*