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# Difficult Conversations



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# Mediating via Materiality: Continuing Critical Conversations around Child Sexual Abuse in Australia

Megan Deas, Kerry McCallum and Kerry Martin

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## Introduction

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) was a ground-breaking national inquiry held in Australia between 2013–2017. The RCIRCSA amplified the voices of victims and survivors and changed the discourse around one of society's most devastating, long-silenced crimes; the failure of institutions to protect children in their care. Systemic abuse was uncovered in educational, religious, sporting and state-run institutions, most prominently within the Catholic Church. Evidence emerged through the Royal Commission's 57 widely publicised public hearings, 8000 private testimonies, its seven-volume final report and the 2018 National Apology to the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in institutions. The revelations made global media headlines and forced the communities in which these institutions operated to reckon with the legacies of abuse (McCallum and Waller, 2021). They spawned the community movements and artistic responses that are the subject of this chapter.

Our essay is based on a panel discussion at the *difficult conversations* symposium held in Canberra in March 2022. The panel brought together academics, community organisations and artists who are variously researching and responding to the Royal Commission. Here we draw on the words and images of panel members to explore two creative responses to the Commission's findings in which material objects have facilitated difficult conversations

about its revelations. Maureen Hatcher is the founder and Karen Monument is Chair of LOUD Fence, a community-driven movement based in the city of Ballarat that uses colourful ribbons tied to fences of institutions implicated by the Commission to acknowledge the trauma of victims and survivors. Megan Deas manages the Australian Research Council-funded *Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission* project (2019–2023), which analyses the role of media, journalism and social media activism in reporting on and responding to the RCIRCSA. She is researching the role of visual activism in responses to the Child Abuse Royal Commission. Textile artist Kerry Martin uses a reparative aesthetic to encourage audiences to confront the testimony of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church by disrupting church authority and fostering ongoing conversations around painful events.

## 'No more silence': Community, creativity and conversation at the Ballarat LOUD Fences

On May 21st, 2015, bright colourful ribbons were tied to the front fence of the former St Alipius Boys' School site in Victoria Street, Ballarat. The ribbons were placed there by a group of Ballarat locals who were responding to the revelations from the RCIRCSA regarding allegations of historical abuse that had occurred at this Catholic institution. The organisers invited the local community to tie brightly coloured ribbons on to the fence as a show of support for those who suffered as a result of child sexual abuse there and at other



**Figure 1.** Close-up of ribbons tied to a church fence in Ballarat, Victoria. Image: LOUD Fence (2020).

local institutions (LOUD Fence, 2022).

LOUD Fence founder Maureen Hatcher described the process and rationale for choosing an array of coloured ribbons to break the silence around child sexual abuse in Ballarat:

We had the discussion about what color ribbons we should have because of course, there's ribbons for every cause these days and everybody was coming up with different colors for particular reasons and emotions. And in the end, we decided on an assortment of colors, any color, it didn't matter. And I called that particular fence 'LOUD Fence', and loud because there'd been too much silence (Difficult Conversations, 2022; see Figures 1 and 2)

In the weeks after the first ribbons were tied to the fence at St Alipius school, the Ballarat community heeded the LOUD Fence organiser's call, with ribbons tied to fences of other institutions. Hatcher told us that:

...what happened was any fence that had ribbons tied to it, as a show of support, became a LOUD Fence. So it was really a grassroots movement. And it took off, and I think just because it's such a simple thing to do, but it meant so much to so many people (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

Scholars have analysed the work of LOUD Fence from the disciplinary perspectives of cultural heritage (Wilson & Golding, 2018; Hodges, 2019), criminology (MacDonald, 2021) and social justice (McPhillips, 2021). Wilson & Golding highlight the 'performative and dialogic facets' of the LOUD Fence campaign's activism, seeing the ribbons themselves as texts that disrupt the pre-existing cultural – and often, Catholic – heritage of the institutions targeted (2018, pp. 863–864). Kerry Martin, whose creative response to the RCIRCSA we will discuss later in this essay, draws on Dormor's (2020) work to argue that in addition to the inherent materiality of textiles, they also possess a language – they can be metaphors and metonyms, texts with political messaging, or they can translate abstract concepts into tangible form.

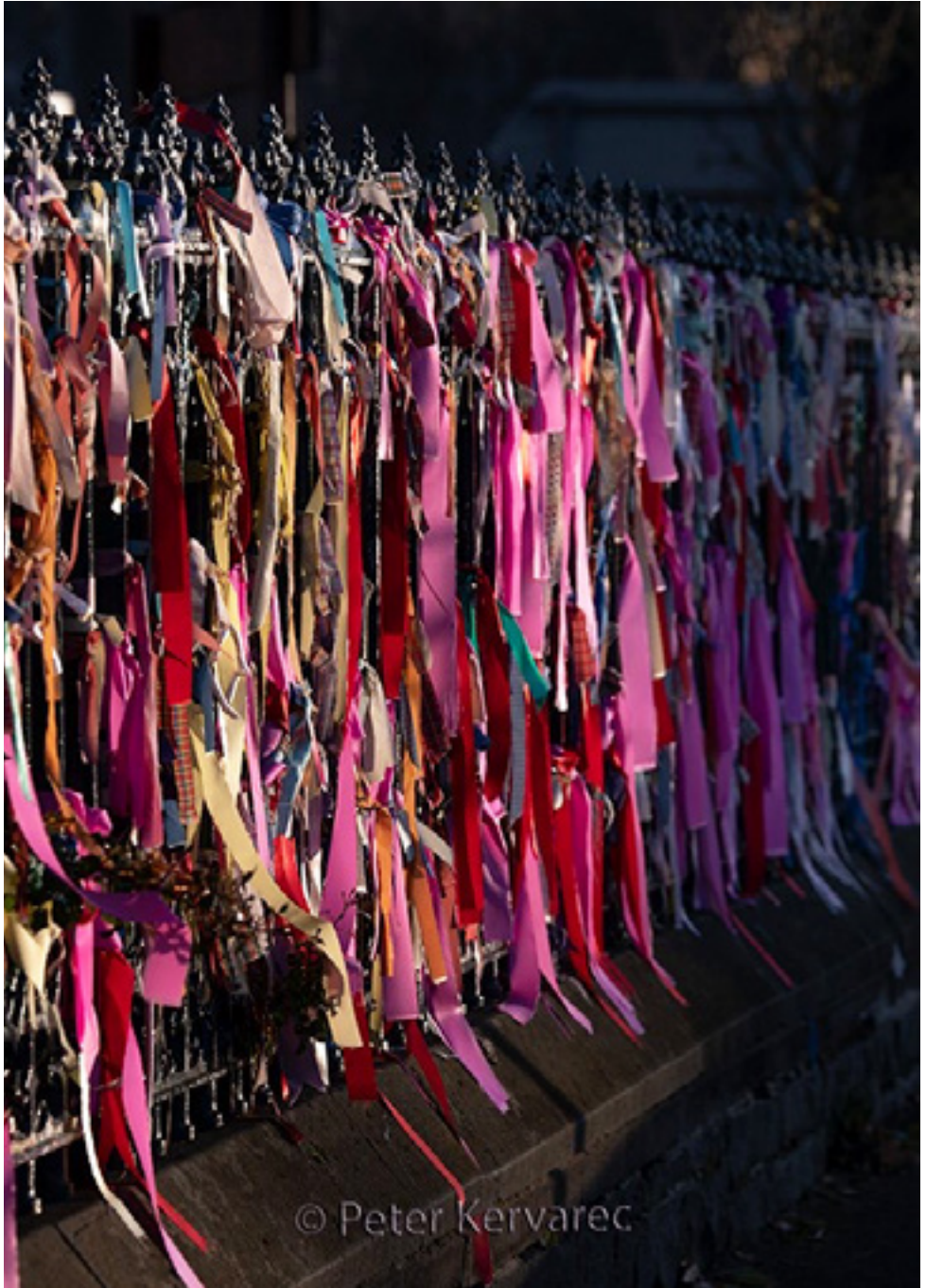
This chapter builds on the discussion of the unspoken dialogue between the community of Ballarat, the institutions themselves and their victims and survivors, to argue that the ribbons are also a powerful metaphor for voice due to their potential as a creative and communal project.

Megan Deas articulated the materiality of the LOUD Fence ribbons:

The ribbons themselves, before they are tied on the fence, are neutral material objects, but they allow us to make our own meanings. They carry with them, kind of a reminiscence of childhood. Not only do we have this widespread understanding of ribbons as a commemoration, or memorial remembrance, but they also spark memories of childhood. And I think that in that way, even without saying a single word, they are loud because they can confront some powerful emotional reaction in the viewer (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

This emotional reaction is a key aspect of the ribbons' effectiveness as what Hendricks, Ercan and Boswell describe as non-verbal 'aesthetic-affective forms of communication' (2020, p. 65), where such types of public, community-driven awareness-raising projects use imagery and even material objects to create connections across disparate publics. The ribbons can therefore be regarded as a form of what Wendy Kozol terms visual advocacy (2014, p. 7). They bear witness, not to the unspeakable acts of abuse disclosed by victims and survivors during the public and private hearings held by the RCIRCSA, but to the community's efforts to stand in solidarity with those affected.

In discussing the visibility of the multicoloured ribbons juxtaposed against the more sombre and solid buildings, Deas went on to speak of how the ribbons got traction and became a widely understood symbol of the places where institutional child sexual abuse occurred, saying: 'Obviously it was covered in the press. And I think part of the reason is because of the inherently photographable nature of the ribbons on the fences' (Difficult Conversations, 2022; see Figure 2).



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Figure 2. Ribbons tied to a metal fence in Ballarat, Victoria. Image: P. Kervarec (2020).

While the material objects themselves may function as a silent mediator between the victims and these institutions, the power of the broader campaign is its role in bringing individuals together at the sites: simply the act of volunteers tying ribbons to a fence can pique the interest of passers-by, and opens up an opportunity for them to ask questions about the ribbons. This engagement can spark a difficult conversation about what occurred in these places, and how the community might acknowledge and support victims and survivors in their midst. Karen Monument articulated the community reckoning that took place around the fences:

But the LOUD Fences themselves are where some amazing conversations and some really difficult conversations start to take place. It's also about different times when we're at the fences and not everyone agrees with us. Not everybody supports what we're doing with LOUD Fence. Some people are quite aggressive in the way that they come to the fence, and the way that they want to take on people that are there at the time (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

Monument, who is now the Chair of LOUD Fence Inc, reflected on how the fences became sites for a divided community to hold, at times, painful conversations in the wake of the Royal Commission that had seen Ballarat positioned as the 'epicentre' of child sexual abuse in Australia (Marr, 2013).

...that's the important part of LOUD Fence. It is about being able to have that really difficult conversation. It's about being able to have, you know, have that chat with the person who's saying 'get this down. This is terrible. This is not what we want to see. We need this out of our psyche; we need it out of our community. It's all over and done with now, it's time to move on'. And it allows us to sit or stand and have that conversation to say it's not over. It's not over for so many, and there's such a long way to go with a lot of people's healing. There's an enormous amount of trauma that sits around these sites across Ballarat

and wherever our LOUD Fences are (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

Hatcher agreed that LOUD Fences could elicit pain while confronting the most powerful of institutions:

Not everybody likes us and what we do, and I think there are certainly people within our community and with communities worldwide that say it is sort of soiling their brand and they're finding it really difficult to separate their faith from their religion. And we understand that those people find it incredibly difficult when they're confronted with ribbons on the church fences, etcetera. But we have actually been trying to work with those communities (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

Over the past seven years Hatcher and Monument have helped build LOUD Fence from an awareness-raising movement into an incorporated advocacy and survivor support service. Hatcher explained some of the reparative activities spawned by the LOUD Fence movement to aid community recovery:

We've had a project called Continuous Voices, which was funded by the City of Ballarat, and they brought in artists and had them complete trauma informed training, and survivors were able to choose a number of workshops that they could attend. Works of art came out of that, whether it be writing, photography, sculpture, etc, and they were displayed. That worked incredibly well because what we've realized in these seven years is that the connection is probably the key to all of this and having survivors connect has been probably the main thing that seems to work (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

This new entity, named LOUD Space, provides another physical site at which survivors can meet and connect, which is not as emotionally charged as the institutional sites where LOUD Fences have sprung up. It enables a different kind of conversation to emerge: one that does not centre on the trauma of those affected by



Figure 3. Kerry Martin, Guilty #1. Image: K. Martin (2022).

the institutional abuse. Nor does it foreground the perpetrators of this trauma, and the often-sensationalised media reports of their past sins.

## **‘Guilty’: The reparative aesthetic and the possibility of textiles as objects of social activism**

Textile artist Kerry Martin’s doctoral research responds to the testimony of hundreds of victims and survivors subjected to child sexual abuse in Australia, focusing on the Catholic Church. Her project explores three key concepts: the reparative aesthetic – an approach to art that confronts shameful social histories while rejecting the common anti-aesthetic style of most socio-political art; the deployment and effectiveness of using beauty as a legitimate aesthetic strategy; and the ethical concerns and responsibilities of the artist-as-witness.

Martin explained the reparative aesthetic as ‘an approach to art-making that allows us to confront what Susan Best (2016) terms shameful social histories, without stirring up defensive attitudes towards inherently disturbing topics’. Best’s aim is to ‘show that

the representation of shameful issues in art can transform the affective tenor of the subject matter...and facilitate attention to the wrongful actions and disturbing events...[F]or this to happen, however, the audience needs to be engaged rather than shamed’ (Best, 2016, p. 9). Viewer engagement promotes learning and ongoing conversations, and in the context of art-based commentary, a different format for stories to continue to be told (see Figure 3).

Drawing on Dormer (2020) Martin argues that textiles have the capacity to hold people’s attention. Objects made using textiles can be two-dimensional or multi-dimensional, textured, intricate and complex, or plain and simple. There is scope for introducing detail, removing elements and incorporating a range of different materials. Most importantly, we ‘know’ the materiality of textile work, and even if the story it is telling is unfamiliar, many of its physical qualities are not. We get it. Relating her work to the LOUD Fence project she observed:

We know about cloth from the moment we’re born till the time we die. So even in a gallery setting where you can’t touch, ... when you’re looking at a textile object, you know what it feels like. You know how it





Figure 4. Kerry Martin, *Wear the Weight of Their Stories* (detail). Image: K. Martin (2022).

might move, you know what the weight of a garment or making of garments might feel on your body. So that's how I'm using textile. And I love the connection with the ribbons as well (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

Martin's approach to her creative output is a direct response to victim and survivor testimony. She has been inspired by the courage of those who have testified in public or private, through the Royal Commission processes, journalistic documentaries and non-fiction works. For example, The ABC three-part documentary *Revelation* (2020), an exposé of priest perpetrators, contained particularly relevant and compelling survivor testimony that guided the artistic response. These exceedingly raw and powerful public releases of shame and guilt led her to ask how she might represent the Church taking on the shame – shifting it from victims and survivors and placing it where it rightfully belongs. In subverting ecclesiastical clothing, she is attempting to indicate the weight of stories that the Church needs to wear and is, in effect, reimagining the archive to create a counter-narrative from the official position (see Figure 4).

Martin reflects that textiles can be familiar, playful, universal. She says: 'the reparative aesthetic is about subtlety, and a gentle and a more hopeful approach than the normal kind of brutal political art' (Difficult Conversations, 2022; see Figure 5). But she is also reflexive about the ethical considerations of creating work such as this. Whose stories is the work telling? How can she tell these stories by amplifying the voices of victims and survivors, without reinterpreting them? By using written testimony and journalistic accounts of abuse as primary data sources, Martin is mindful that she is interrogating other people's stories.

This raises the question of an artist's moral and ethical 'right' to make work about a subject where they have no lived experience and from which they are removed, due to what Best (2016) calls the secondary witness position (i.e. someone who wasn't there or involved). By reimagining and not retelling, by

shifting shame, Martin has attempted to ensure, that in Lindroos & Möller's words, she does not make work that results in the '... dispossession of survivors' intimate stories and memories' (Lindroos and Möller, 2017, p. 44). Her artworks invite the viewer, rather than confront or challenge them, to contemplate the lived experience of an unseen other.



Figure 5. Kerry Martin, Suffer. Image: K. Martin (2022).

## 'A little bit magic': Materiality and the metaphor of voice

In this essay we have reflected on how the material aspect of the two approaches is so effective in sparking this difficult but necessary conversation. Considering both LOUD Fence and Kerry Martin's art, we find that materiality renders the difficult conversation tangible, making it both personal and public. Figure 6 is a powerful example of the how the ribbons have become a symbolic *and* tangible focus for the difficult conversation taking place in Ballarat. Deas asks: 'Is the ribbon or artwork a cloak, a magic shield? In what ways does it challenge or undermine Church authority?' Hatcher's response captures the essence of the question:

I always say once they're tied to a fence they take on quite different meaning. They're, I don't want to say magical, but to me they really become a little bit magic, in that they become a survivor's voice. That's what they're representing. So to see them, you know, *en masse*, means that there's lots of survivors that just need support and need the institutions to step up, really. And I think that that's where LOUD Fence is a reminder to them that more needs to be done (Difficult Conversations, 2022).

Yet despite their vibrancy, textiles are inherently fragile: Camhi notes that textiles are 'notoriously difficult to conserve' (2018). The LOUD Fence ribbons in particular are evidence of this, with Figure 7 illustrating how the ribbons, after being tied to fences, have been worn by the weather, by the sun, and by time. When this inevitable deterioration occurs, some of these weather-worn ribbons are removed from the sites with 'great reverence and care', as the text in Figure 7 indicates, and placed in dedicated spaces such as art installations or archive storage. Yet in other instances, even five years after the handing-down of the RCIRCSA's final report, recently-tied ribbons are still being cut off fences under the cover of darkness by those who do not

want to acknowledge the harm-caused to individuals and the broader community that the RCIRCSA uncovered. The community activity of removing and replacing the ribbons is representative of the town's ongoing struggle for recovery, and the ribbons remain a metaphor for both the strength and fragility of victims and survivors.

## Wearing the weight of shame: Subverting authority and empowering survivors

Both projects use material objects to subvert institutional authority and empower victims and survivors by giving them a voice. Wilson and Golding note the 'significant power disparities' between the institutions targeted by the LOUD Fence campaign and their victims (2018, p. 863). The work of Martin and LOUD Fence is therefore inherently political; they are grass roots artistic responses, intended to spark conversations that foreground the voices and experiences of those who have suffered at the hands of such powerful institutions. Child sexual abuse is often difficult to think about: it is too abhorrent, it happens behind closed doors, its taboo nature means that it is often not spoken about when it does happen due to the shame that victims and survivors are made to feel. These textiles, the ribbons and the ecclesiastical vestments, are a tangible representation of this most difficult subject and powerful symbols of disruption. Monument said:

It is about restoring people's sense of self. So it is very much about what we can restore and bring back and I don't want to say repair because that's not the right word. I think restoration is a far greater word. It's a stronger word. It's about healing. It's about people getting to a place where they can sit in both the comfort and the discomfort of what happens in this space around us (Difficult Conversations, 2022).



Figure 6. Handwritten text on a ribbon tied to a fence in Ballarat, Victoria. Image: M. Hatcher (2019).



Figure 7. Ribbons removed from the front fence of St Joseph's Church Warrnambool, Victoria. Image: LOUD Fence Instagram (2022).

Similarly, the reparative aesthetic does not aim to repair what has occurred, or to make whole again. Best argues this is an impossible ask. Instead, acknowledging the futility of repair she says ‘...it incorporates the damaged’ into its outcomes (Best, 2016, p. 81). Difficult conversations are necessary to enable victims and survivors to restore their sense of self, to enable their communities to demonstrate support, to confront viewers with these uncomfortable truths and to shift public discourse. The ‘magic’ of the textiles, and the creative use of textiles in these two instances, is that they highlight how art and community can facilitate this necessary work.

## Conclusion

In our difficult conversation we explored two ongoing projects that capture the power of materiality in bringing community together to confront painful histories of institutional child sexual abuse. Both LOUD Fence and Kerry Martin identify that the fragility of the material object is at the same time its source of strength. The beauty of the material object, whether it be a simple colourful ribbon or a complex artwork, confronts the violent crime of child sexual abuse and subverts the ugliness of past silence and denial by powerful institutions.

The LOUD Fence ribbons are a powerful metaphor for voice due to their potential as both a creative and communal project. They are both symbolic of the community’s reckoning with its past, and a tangible site for ongoing conversations about recovery from trauma and community restoration. The ribbons and Martin’s artworks do not shy away from conflict but are performative. They amplify and draw attention to the issue through their creativity. In doing so they invite the viewer to bear witness to the burden of the victims and survivors and share the responsibility of collective restoration.

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