

Challenging Dialogue: Current Relationships Between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Art and Artists

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Abstract:

This paper will examine the tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art and the response of contemporary artists to this tension. By considering the history of this relationship, and informed by interviews with contemporary artists and curators, this paper will speculate on the present cultural and political challenges to be met. From its position as a contemporary art form developed outside the realm of the Western art world, to its confrontation of Australian history and race relations, Indigenous contemporary art has long been an area of unease in art discourse. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists experience this unease, which stems from disparate world-views, the complexities of colonial cultures and the history of Western Modernism and market forces.

Recent publications and discourse represent a significant shift in attitudes towards the value of Indigenous contemporary art in the Australian art world. The need for artists to be critically considering or engaging with Indigenous art is presenting a challenging dialogue for contemporary Australian artists.

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This paper is primarily focused on the tension between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and the response to these challenges by contemporary artists. By considering the history of these tensions, this paper will speculate on the present cultural and political challenges. This paper is part of an ongoing investigation informed by interviews with contemporary artists and curators. The interviews conducted thus far will form the basis of this paper.

In examining the current relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and artists in Australia, this research must consider a wider frame of cultural intersections, within the emergence of contemporary discourse. Today 'contemporary art' refers to a discourse, an ideology—one that defies the geographical boundaries and teleological limits of Western modernism.¹ Contemporary art derives its conceptual and expansive power from this de-centredness. This condition of the contemporary is discussed by Terry Smith as the definition of diversity, creating a new environment for a more encompassing definition of visual art and the interaction of artists from different cultures.²

In this paper, the phrase 'Aboriginal contemporary art'³ refers to the art made by Aboriginal artists, which is not homogenous but vast, complex and often contradictory. This basis of inclusion, rather than exclusion, is a feature of global contemporary art.⁴

In his writings on colonial culture, anthropologist Nicholas Thomas rejects simplistic notions that suppose that art today is defined by transnational interactions. Whilst globalisation has been of profound significance, Thomas argues, "cultures and cultural relations in particular regions and nations continue to be deeply shaped by more local factors."⁵ Thomas is referring to the unequal and volatile relations created by colonial cultures—outlining a distinctive interaction in which both the colonizer and colonized have a voice that together creates new cross-cultural territories. It is this understanding of colonial cultures that underlies this research.

In addressing the interplay between indigenous culture and colonial art in settler countries,⁶ Thomas establishes an important framework for considering the tensions between indigenous and colonial cultures. The intimate connection between the foundations of settler societies and the dispossession of indigenous peoples forever underlies the shape of the nation.

For Thomas, art is significant in approaching these cultures through its radical ability to define and redefine social relations and meanings. However, as settler-colonial societies are built on contradictions, the art produced in these societies will often be incongruent. This has certainly been the case for Australian art. Since establishing a strong presence in the Australian art world in the 1980s, Aboriginal art has

consistently demonstrated “the potential to make us nervous.”⁷ Tension is experienced by both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists, stemming from a difference of underlying world-views, and the history of Western modernism and market forces. The historical tensions of representation and politics will now be addressed, followed by the current challenges faced by contemporary artists.

The seminal ethical debate in the Australian art world has been regarding the misrepresentation of Aboriginal art and the impossibility of an Aboriginal art criticism. The politics of representation were initially challenged by Brisbane-based ProppaNOW artist Richard Bell in his famous aphorism, “Aboriginal Art - It’s a White Thing” in 2002.⁸

Terry Smith highlighted the constraints of art discourse in representing Aboriginal art in 1993. He asked, “Can art writing match the challenges coming from the art itself?”⁹ Smith argued that it is only the contemporary practitioners, purged by feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and postcolonial theory that can pursue real dialogue.

Valuable communication can occur if both parties recognise that, while cultural incommensurability is the bottom line, it does not erase the positive potentials of difference.¹⁰

In his 1998 article, *The Impossible Painter*, art historian Rex Butler uses the brief and noteworthy career of Emily Kame Kngwarreye to argue the impossibility of an Aboriginal art criticism. During her eight-year career, Kngwarreye’s paintings were compared with American Minimalism, Pointillism and Abstract Expressionism, as well as artists Monet, Matisse and Pollock.¹¹ All of these comparisons limit Kngwarreye’s work to Eurocentric readings, neglecting the tribal, ceremonial and spiritual aspects of her work. Butler notes, however, the unease with which he employs even the term ‘spiritual’, which “strikes us as colonizing, as seeing the work from an exclusively Western perspective.”¹²

This is in fact the case for all critical language used in art discourse, terms such as: expressiveness, innovation, originality, authenticity, formal success or failure. The language possessed by the Western art world is not appropriate for discussing work made on such different ground. For Butler, the impossibility lies in attempting to speak about something that exists completely outside our frameworks and understanding.

Australian arts writer Nicholas Rothwell expresses a continued dissatisfaction with Aboriginal art criticism in his 2004 article, *Crossing the Divide*. The issue remains that if you judge an artwork by Western aesthetic standards you continue the trope of colonialism.¹³ Echoing Smith’s earlier sentiments, Rothwell calls for an engaged response to Aboriginal painting, one that involves dialogue and exchange between the artists and the audience.

Misrepresentation is extensive in the institutional categorisation of Australian art.¹⁴ Artist and art critic Ian Burn acknowledges that our thinking about these questions of

representation is restricted by the conventional institutional categories of 'Australian' and 'Australian Aboriginal' which do not allow for the complex interaction of cultures in Australia. This issue calls to mind an anecdote shared by leading Bandjalung curator, Djon Mundine, senior figure in the Australian art world, in a recent interview.¹⁵ Djon spoke of an anthropologist friend who spent a day with Emily Kngwarreye. Emily spoke to her for hours, however, due to the language barrier, the anthropologist could not understand anything that was said. Djon surmised "and most probably that's a metaphor for the art world's struggle to verbalise its appreciation of Emily's work."¹⁶ This is in fact a pertinent analogy for the challenges faced in discussing and relating to Aboriginal contemporary art.

Aboriginal artists are classified further within the terms 'traditional' or 'remote' and 'urban.' Aboriginal art cannot be confined to "fixed representations of diversity within the terms 'traditional and 'urban'."¹⁷ These terms, although contested, persist as convenient categories within Australian art discourse.¹⁸ In his review of *unDisclosed: the 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*, Nicholas Rothwell defines remote and urban artists as follows. Artists from 'remote' community backgrounds almost all create work in state-funded art centres, with their work guided to market by art coordinators, who are almost invariably non-Indigenous.¹⁹ Rothwell defines urban Aboriginal artists as:

The artists who live and work in regional or city contexts are more strongly engaged with the professional culture system of contemporary Australia: they show in galleries, execute commissioned pieces and tend to offer up a politically coloured picture of their position in the world.²⁰

The depiction of Dreaming, land and ceremonial functions renders Aboriginal art a highly political act in and of itself, and one that has been a most successful political strategy. Art has been an integral part of the Aboriginal political movement for land rights and self-determination since the Yirrkala bark petition in 1963, and in the Native Title paintings made following the Mabo decision in 1992. The establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 by the Whitlam Labor Government gave Aboriginal artists the political and social tools and funding to significantly support, grow and market all facets of Aboriginal art.

It is important to acknowledge that while the success of Aboriginal art in the Australian art world may appear a sudden development, it is in fact the result of sustained and intense social and political activism by Aboriginal artists. "From an Aboriginal perspective it is the climax of a continuing advance and dissemination of ideas and practices that had been ongoing since first contact."²¹ This was never more evident than during time spent in the remote Aboriginal community of Warmun in January 2012.

Warmun is part of Gija country in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was settled only 30-40 years ago as a community of peoples displaced from their own specific countries by the pastoral industry. The distinctive movement of the East

Kimberley region rose to international prominence through the work of Rover Thomas, who was selected to represent Australia in the Venice Biennale of 1991. Inspired by the vision of Rover Thomas—converging planar and profile views of the Kimberley landscape—the resulting paintings are grounded in social, cultural and political histories while prompting connections outside their own context entirely. This concept of land encompasses multiple perspectives across the space of memory and time, built on the foundations of Ngarrangarni (the Gija word for Dreaming).

In an interview, Rusty Peters, senior Gija artist, spoke of his time working on the cattle stations and being displaced from his land after equal wages laws were introduced. The Art Gallery of NSW purchased Peter's work, *Waterbrain*, in 2002. In *Waterbrain*, Rusty departs from representations of Ngarragarni and explores the universal cycle of life and learning. From left to right, the canvas presents a chronology of birth, growth and learning from conception to adulthood. There is a universality to Rusty's work: "Black people got their own law, white people got their own law. But we together, white and black, see we're friends. We got two laws but one big spirit."²² It is this cultural worldview that creates such powerful socially, politically and artistically loaded paintings. Existing outside Western art history, the works of remote artists raise a wider question about the space and time of contemporary art.

Current discourse indicates that we are seeing a change in the desire for an engaged response to Aboriginal painting and the inter-relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and artists. The following texts highlight the current tensions within the Australian art world and the need for contemporary artists to be critically considering or engaging with Aboriginal art.

Nicholas Rothwell identifies the current tensions facing Aboriginal artists in his review of *unDisclosed*, an exhibition in Canberra in 2012. Five years after the first *Triennial*, Rothwell writes:

Much has changed: the global financial crisis has stripped away the boom-time froth from the Aboriginal art market; the Northern Territory Emergency Response has cast fresh light on the social tensions and economic abjection of the remote community world where the roots of the art tradition lie: a vast regulatory net has been cast over the indigenous art business. The breadth of the Aboriginal culture scene has widened even as its certainties have shrunk. The Triennial, then, has a new landscape to survey: a new politics and economics as well.²³

Carly Lane, a Kalkadoon woman from northwest Queensland and curator of *UnDisclosed*, identifies the new landscape as a consequence of remote and urban Aboriginal artists combining forces. Despite facing different challenges and contexts, *unDisclosed* draws remote and urban artists together in a way that challenges the historical need to separate and categorise them. Aboriginal artists are acknowledged for their varied cultures, identities and techniques; however, they share many goals,

from cultural protection to the constant drive to gain control over the art world's approaches to Aboriginal art.²⁴

UnDisclosed is significant in its re-imagining ways of drawing disparate voices together, beyond the typical classifications of 'urban', 'remote' and 'traditional'. All artists are charged with the same responsibility of shifting the wider Australian population's perception of history and present relations. Lane's catalogue essay leaves us to consider the potential for these artists to help overturn the current position of Aboriginal people from that of being the undisclosed in and of Australian society.²⁵

In NSW, Aboriginal artists face a particular struggle for recognition. In his essay, *Premier State: First State, First People*, Djon Mundine speaks of this struggle:

Aboriginal people are often called the first people and so NSW Aboriginal people are the first of the first; the first to suffer the catastrophe of full European encounter; first to be confronted and attacked; first to be forgotten. We remain the first in population size (around 30% of the national indigenous population) but in a time of wide acclaim for artistic expression, remain almost invisible regarding quality, respect and influence from our voices.²⁶

NSW Aboriginal artists continue to struggle with visibility and representation. This was reiterated in an interview with Koori artist, Adam Hill, earlier this year:

Why is NSW Aboriginal art this week still, after being in the 8th year of the NSW Aboriginal Art Prize—which is an amazing exhibition every year—why is there still no interest from international curators... and part of that is to do with internal politics.

Adam Hill has experienced significant racism from both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous communities in the reception of his work, by having the authenticity of his Aboriginality questioned. This is reflected in his highly political works, which question the lack of progress in race relations in Australia. Adam acknowledged that politics will always exist, "it seems to me that everyone has run off with their own little highlight... and become a curator for a select group."²⁷ Adam lamented that, while ProppaNOW in Brisbane has established international acclaim, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in Sydney is still operating on a volunteer basis and receiving few review articles and little funding. Artist and curator, Brenda Croft, noted the absence of any critical discussion of both of these cooperatives in her review of art historian Ian McLean's anthology, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, further emphasising their lack of voice in art criticism. Adam describes it as being "consistently ill-favoured" due to "a lack of interest in promoting Urban Aboriginal art in NSW."²⁸

In 2011, Bandjalung artist, Bronwyn Bancroft, wrote of the continued Governmental neglect in supporting Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative, an organisation that

advocates for the rights of NSW Aboriginal people.²⁹ The lack of visibility for NSW artists, reinforced by the creation of artist celebrities – limiting opportunities for lesser-known artists – continues to limit dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists. In an interview this year, Bronwyn expressed the need for collaborative relationships in creating dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and artists. This collaboration needs to occur on all levels, between artists, curators and writers to achieve a deeper level of understanding and creation.

When envisaging the future of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous relationships, Bronwyn criticised the categorisation of Australian art and its neglect of their complex interrelationships. The two cultures of Australia are historically entwined and cannot be separated. In this sense, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art in Australia should be represented under the same banner of ‘Australian art.’ This sentiment was expressed by Brisbane-based ProppaNOW artist, Vernon Ah Kee, in a recent panel discussion titled ‘What is Aboriginal Art?’ held at the Sydney Opera House as part of NAIDOC Week 2012.

The publication of Ian McLean’s *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* in 2011 has marked a significant shift in attitudes towards the value of Aboriginal contemporary art in the Australian art world, opening up a space for a more equitable dialogue between artists. Whilst in her review of McLean’s anthology, Brenda Croft notes some “glaring omissions”, she acknowledges its success in charting the discourse of the journey of the Aboriginal art industry over six decades in a way that is provocative of further inquiry and dialogue. Croft concludes hopefully, “Perhaps this is simply volume #1 in an endless series on the issue and the next editor may be indigenous...”³⁰

McLean’s publication clearly affirms that Aboriginal art and imagery have pervaded our visual experience for the past 30 years. Many non-Indigenous artists have been directly or indirectly responding to this influence in their work, however it has only recently been acknowledged in art world discourse.

Museum of Contemporary Art curator Glenn Barkley’s essay “Zoom: The Shape-Shifting Painting of Helen Eager,” published in *Art & Australia* immediately prior to the opening of the MCA, presented a curatorial approach that sought to create ongoing dialogue between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous works in the collection.³¹ Barkley places the new wall work of Helen Eager in the context of contemporary expressions of abstraction. His hang of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists in this context is aimed at questioning what a contemporary expression of abstraction might mean and how it is manifested in the work of Australian artists.

Where comparisons were once made on a purely aesthetic level, parallels are now being drawn between conceptual and practice-based relationships between artists. Barkley writes of tonal relationships that recall Aboriginal art in Eager’s work, however focuses further on the influence of Aboriginal art on the art making practice. Barkley suggests the most obvious influence is in the spontaneity and informality of Aboriginal painting and the intuitive sense of form and composition.

Barkley goes on to say, "...any abstract painter working in Australia today has to work out an approach to art making that must at least consider Aboriginal art and a way of working with or through it."³² This necessary engagement has changed the way we think about art, proposing a challenging dialogue for contemporary Australian artists. This indicates a shift in consciousness in Australian contemporary art, as artists now consider intersections in their work in a new way.

At this point in the research, this paper will conclude with the following observations. Tensions, having historically surfaced through issues of aesthetics, ethics, politics and appropriation, now lie in the intersections between Aboriginal contemporary art and Western art world concerns. Aboriginal artists today continue to face an art world that remains under the control of the dominant culture, denying their voices by continuing to relate to Aboriginal art on Western terms. The present challenge faced by artists is a new consideration of their relationships to one another and the Australian art world. Interaction between the two cultures, until now, has been predominantly a material process. While opinions around these complex interactions are varied and often contradictory, there is a common call for an intellectual interaction, a considered response from artists. I conclude with a question posed by Djon Mundine that we must continue to revisit, "Where does the communication begin?"³³

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1. Ian McLean, "How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art," in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Brisbane, Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011).
 2. Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (New York: Pearson Education, 2011).
 3. Terry Smith has included Aboriginal art as an exemplary contemporary art in his theorisation of the contemporary, its decentred spatiality and postmodern temporality. See Terry Smith's books: *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (New York: Pearson Education, 2011).
 4. Ian McLean, "Aboriginal Art and the Artworld," in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Brisbane, Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011), 14.
 5. Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 8.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Nicholas Baume, "The Interpretation of Dreamings: The Australian Aboriginal Acrylic Movement", *Art & Text*, no. 33, Winter (1989): 120.
 8. Richard Bell, "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing," in *Volume 1: MCA Collection* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012).
 9. Terry Smith, "Second Person/First Peoples: Writing About Postcolonial Art," *Art Monthly Australia* 64 (1993): 11.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Rex Butler, "The Impossible Painter," *Australian Art Collector* 2, (1998): 42-45.
 12. Ibid.

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13. Nicholas Rothwell, "Crossing the Divide," *The Australian*, 3 April 2004.
 14. Ian Burn, "The Australian National Gallery: Populism or a New Cultural Federalism?," *Art Network* 8, Summer (1983): 39-43.
 - 15 Interview conducted on the 13th August 2012, Sydney. A version of this comment can also be found in Mundine's article "Travelling from Utopia," *Art Monthly Australia* 250, June (2012): 39-42.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn, "Blak Artists, Cultural Activists," *Australian Perspectives* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993).
 18. Lin Onus, "On the Location of Aboriginal Art, Its Promotion and Reception: Some Current Issues," *Agenda* 1, no. 2 (1988): 29-30.
 19. Nicholas Rothwell, "Surveying the Landscape at the 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial," *The Australian*, May 5, 2012.
 20. Ibid.
 21. McLean, "Aboriginal Art and the Artworld," 30.
 22. Gija artist, Rusty Peters, in conversation with the author, Warmun, Western Australia, January 28, 2012.
 23. Rothwell, "Surveying the Landscape at the 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial."
 24. Ibid.
 25. Carly Lane, "First, Sight; Then, Acknowledge: Building Indigenous Visibility through the Undisclosed," *undisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2012).
 26. Djon Mundine, "Premier State: First State, First People," in *A Personal History of Aboriginal Art in the Premier State* (Campbelltown: Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2008).
 27. Ibid.
 28. Koori artist, Adam Hill, in conversation with the author, Sydney, April 11, 2012.
 29. Bronwyn Bancroft, "Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative," (www.boomalli.com.au, 2011).
 30. Brenda Croft, "How *did* Aborigines Invent the Idea of Contemporary Art?," *Artlink Indigenous: Indignation* 32, no. 2 (2012): 113.
 31. Glenn Barkley, "Zoom: The Shape-Shifting Painting of Helen Eager," *Art and Australia* 49, no. 3 (2012): 406-408.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Bandjalung curator, Djon Mundine, in conversation with the author, Sydney, August 13, 2012.