

Historical ironies: the Australian Aboriginal art revolution*

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Margaret Preston, an Australian painter, has been credited as the first non-anthropologist to begin to explore Australian Aboriginal art *as* an art. Preston saw in Aboriginal painting the well-spring for an 'indigenous art of Australia'. The seeking of a national identity, and specifically a connection with place, is common to many if not most societies, reflecting a Herderian idea of art, language and culture shaped by land, and a connection between people and place. But if this is common to most societies, it is perhaps most keenly felt in colonial settler states. For Preston, if there were to be a truly national art, it would be through inspiration from Aboriginal art and its relation to land; all it needed was the 'all seeing eye of the Western Artist to adapt it to the 20th century'.¹ What she did not expect was that this 'indigenous art of Australia' would be produced by Aboriginal people.

Over two decades ago, art historian Nicholas Thomas wrote that the Anglo-Australian dominance of high art had given way before the 'astonishing emergence of modern Aboriginal art'.² These paintings, which emerged from Papunya Tula in the 1970s, have been variously described as 'Australia's only artistic revolution', 'the most significant corpus of art made in Australia during the twentieth century, 'perhaps the greatest significant cultural achievement of Australia's post-white settlement history'.³ Moreover, as Ian McLean points out in his forthcoming anthology of Aboriginal art, 'No Australian art movement has produced so much work by so many artists for so long, and in the process established a whole new market along with a string of specialist galleries, indeed a brand new industry, as well as created new departments in state art galleries and new courses in academia'. While Anglo-Australian art 'remained an art of landscape and the outback and national myths',⁴ Aboriginal art 'has changed the ways in which both Australian and contemporary art are conceptualised. In short, the Papunya Tula art revolution has also detonated an artworld revolution.'⁵

Perhaps McLean puts that a little too strongly. It is true that, in Australia, artworld attitudes towards Aboriginal art (all Aboriginal art, not just that from Papunya Tula) have entirely changed. McLean describes this revolution as a

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¹ Cited in Anita Angel, 'Perceptions of Aboriginal Art – Whither Anthropology?', *Journal of Northern Territory History*, 10, 1999, 33.

² Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1987, 8.

³ Ian McLean, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World', in Ian McLean (ed.) *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, Sydney: Power Publications with the Institute of Modern Art, forthcoming 2010, 17. This anthology has been an extraordinary valuable resource in preparing this essay, and his introductory essay provides an excellent overview of critical historical approaches.

⁴ Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1987, 8-9.

⁵ McLean, 'How Aboriginal art conquered the art world'.

fundamental change in how Aboriginal art is conceptualised within Australia as involving one simple idea: 'Aboriginal art is contemporary art'. Yet it is not as clear that this revolution has taken root in other parts of the world. The reason for this is that contemporary Aboriginal art is a fundamental challenge to the artworld.

In this paper I intend to explore just how revolutionary this idea is. Not only does the Aboriginal arts movement challenge the legitimacy of Australia's sovereignty through its legal claim to and spiritual connection with the land, but it challenges broader historical and art historical myths – the inevitability of the demise of Aboriginal cultures, and artistic myths about the 'universality' of art. Artistic claims to the 'right to appropriate', if this is what is required for expression of their artistic vision, show themselves to be elements of cultural hegemony. Accordingly, it may be some little time before this revolution becomes popularly accepted. It may never be popular, even if it does become widely accepted.

Disjunctions in artworld discourses

At the opening of the Quai Branly Museum, President Chirac, the driving force behind its creation, explained that 'there is no hierarchy among the arts just as there is no hierarchy among peoples'.⁶ Such an attitude might be considered fundamental to recognising the value of other cultures. As Charles Taylor suggests, cross-cultural recognition and respect involves, at least in part, recognizing the artistic achievements of other civilizations.⁷ Historically, such an attitude has been politically important. According to the socio-evolutionary theory that was popular at in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, peoples living in cultures at an earlier evolutionary stage, such as hunters and gatherers, were close to nature and did not produce art.⁸ In 1837, when Sir George Grey had come across the Wadjina rock paintings in the Kimberly ranges in Australia, he felt they could not possibly have been painted by Aboriginal people: 'It is scarcely probable that they could have been painted by self-taught savages', he wrote.⁹ When, in 1913, the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer saw an Aboriginal man painting on bark, his immediate comparison was with 'civilized' artists:

Today I found a native who, apparently had nothing better to do than to sit quietly in the camp, evidently enjoying himself, drawing a fish on a sheet of stringybark...[He used] a primitive but quite effective paint brush, made out of a short stick...he held it like a civilized artist...he did line work, often very

⁶ Alan Riding, 'Imperialist? Moi? Not the Musée du Quai Branly', *The New York Times*, 22 June 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/22/arts/design/22quai.html>. Accessed 28 December 2009. This section of the paper was first presented at a Symposium on the Musée du Quai Branly, Department of Anthropology, University of Siena, Italy, 19 June 2007.

⁷ Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

⁸ Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon, 1998, 13.

⁹ George Grey cited in Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 20.

fine and regular, with much the same freedom and precision as a Japanese or Chinese artist doing his more beautiful wash-work with his brush.¹⁰

The fact that Aboriginal people painted was considered evidence that they were 'cultured' and not 'savages'. As such, the recognition of a people's art as art is itself politically significant, for it raises the creators of the art on the ladder of civilization. This new appreciation of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture developed alongside new theories of aesthetics. In the early twentieth century there was a growing aesthetic appreciation of 'primitive art'. Clive Bell, for instance, felt that, 'As a rule primitive art is good...In primitive art you will find no accurate representation; you will find only significant form'.¹¹ For Bell, the highly representative art from the Renaissance onward was a distraction from the true value of art. What was so impressive about primitive art, all primitive art, was the absence of representation, and absence of technical swagger: 'Formal significance loses itself in preoccupation with exact representation and ostentatious cunning'.¹² But perhaps one of the most attractive features of this theory is its validation of our experience of beauty, and, accompanying this validation, recognition that this appreciation of beauty occurs regardless of whether we have knowledge about the objects we are appreciating, and whether this knowledge is anthropological, or historical. According to Bell, 'To appreciate a work of art we need bring nothing with us from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life'.¹³ Formalism became one of the twentieth century's most significant theories of art. (It was some time, however, before indigenous art was to be shown in art galleries rather than ethnographic museums.¹⁴)

Yet, the Quai Branly Museum has been severely criticized. The debate surrounding the establishment of the Quai Branly has focussed on two central issues. One was whether the museum 'patronises the cultures it wishes to invest with lustre', a problem Jeremy Harding thought may have been ameliorated if the exhibition was not presented in 'significant dimness', which, in combination with the plant motif printed on the windows, may be considered 'dangerously close to a fantasy of pre-contact worlds adrift in benign and fertile obscurity'.¹⁵ The second issue focused on the distinction between primitive arts and fine arts, 'whether a Tuareg tent cushion, for instance, is an extremely pretty household object, a ceremonial device or a work of art'.¹⁶ In the *New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman explained, 'the familiar aesthetics-versus-ethnology question came up: Will religious,

¹⁰ Baldwin Spencer cited in Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 13.

¹¹ Clive Bell, *Art*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1931, 22.

¹² Bell, *Art*, 23.

¹³ Bell, *Art*, 26.

¹⁴ For an overview of the history of Aboriginal art's acceptance in Australian galleries see McLean, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World'.

¹⁵ Jeremy Harding, 'At Quai Branly', *London Review of Books*, 29:1, 4 January 2007.

¹⁶ Harding, 'At Quai Branly'.

ceremonial and practical objects, never intended as art in the modern, Western sense, be showcased like baubles, with no context?'¹⁷ But, Kimmelman decided, in the end, the aesthetics versus ethnography debate, understood as a question about the nature of the objects, misses the point. He thought the real issue involved questions about who should control the meaning of objects. This issue over the control of meanings has arisen in postcolonial countries such as Canada, the United States and Australia, and manifests itself in conflicts over what may be shown or displayed in art galleries and museums. For instance, the Iroquois have asked for the removal of masks from the National Museum of Canada on the grounds that the masks are not only sacred, but dangerous objects that should be viewed only at the time of curing rituals.¹⁸ However, Kimmelman accepted the presentation of such objects aesthetically, as the category of aesthetics, he thinks, is as meaningful as 'religion' or 'cultural patrimony' – although he thought the Quai Branly failed to show the works to their greatest aesthetic advantage. This, he thought, would be to show them in the same way that paintings in the Louvre were presented.¹⁹

Zimmelman is wrong to dismiss the debate over the ethnography of indigenous art as merely a debate over the control of meanings. The formalist idea that we can go into a gallery and 'appreciate' the works of other cultures is less obvious than it seems. The judgment of taste, many people have argued, is culturally conditioned. Without information, we have only our initial resources, the resources of our personal taste and cultural background, with which to judge. Charles Taylor has argued that the validity of a claim to significant cultural value must be demonstrated from within the standards of the culture.

To approach a raga with the presumptions of value implicit in the well-tempered clavier would be forever to miss the point. What has to happen is what Gadamer has called a 'fusion of horizons'... The 'fusion of horizons' operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these concepts.²⁰

We arrive at an 'understanding of what constitutes worth that we couldn't possibly have had at the beginning. We have reached the judgment partly through transforming our standards'.²¹ This assumes, of course, that the objects being appreciated *are* arts, and it is not inconsistent with there being 'primitive arts', but

¹⁷ Michael Kimmelman, 'A Heart of Darkness in the City of Light', *New York Times*, 2 July 2006.

¹⁸ Ruth B. Phillips, 'Disappearing Acts: Exposure, Enclosure, and Iroquois Masks', in M.S. Phillips and G. Schochet (eds) *Questions of Tradition*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 74.

¹⁹ For a further discussion of these issues see Elizabeth Burns Coleman 'Madonna and Piano Accordion: Disrupting the Order of the World', in Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias (eds.) *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, Canberra: ANU Epress, 2008, 37-53; see in comparison A.W. Eaton and Ivan Gaskell, 'Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Art Museums?' in J.O. Young and C.G. Brunk (eds) *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 235-267.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, 'The politics of recognition' in Amy Gutman (ed.) *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, 1994, 67.

²¹ Taylor, 'The politics of recognition'.

would be true regardless of whether the arts in question were fine arts. Here we are presented with an entirely different model of what aesthetic appreciation involves. Information about the art form is central to appreciating something, and to recognising its value. On this account of appreciation, Zimmelman's disjunction between aesthetics and ethnography does not make a lot of sense, as we need certain kinds of ethnographic information in order to appreciate an art form.

Within Australia, the criticisms of the Quai Branly had a slightly different flavour. Similarly to the criticisms made elsewhere, it was asserted that the museum patronises other cultures. But a second criticism was made: the Quai Branly Museum failed to represent Aboriginal painting adequately because the paintings are not 'primitive art', but 'contemporary art'. Bernice Murphy, co-founder of the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art and the current National Director of Museums Australia and Chair of the Ethics Committee of the International Council of Museums, declared the Quai Branly to be a 'regressive museology'. According to Murphy, we must understand Aboriginal art as emerging within a contemporary political environment, 'It can't be decontextualised into a glorious otherness'.²² In a similar vein, journalist and critic Angela Bennie decried the fact that the new Quai Branly Museum makes a distinction between indigenous arts and other arts, insisting that this makes an illicit distinction between primitive (or tribal) art and fine art. She states that such a separation demands a response to the question, 'Is there something quintessentially different about...the art housed in the great galleries of Paris such as the Louvre, the Pompidou Centre and the Musée d'Orsay? And if so, what might that be?'²³ She suggests that contemporary art is art that is produced now, and Aboriginal art is contemporary art, and 'that is all there is to it'.²⁴ Bennie is wrong to suggest that there should be no distinction made between the arts in the Louvre and the arts in the Musée du Quai Branly. The fact that Aboriginal arts are contemporary arts, and should not be categorised as belonging to some mythical past, does not make the works equivalent.

It is not surprising that Australian curators and critics are wary of the implicit hierarchy in a model of arts which contrasts fine arts with primitive arts, (or high arts or 'sophisticated, international arts' with 'simple, local' arts). This is unsurprising because of the political context of colonial settlement, and the suspicions of racism lurking in such judgments about cultural hierarchies. It may surprise that Bennie seems to rely on a notion of the universality of aesthetic appreciation similar to Bell's. Ann Stephen, for instance, has criticised Margaret Preston's writing about Aboriginal art, and the use of Aboriginal design in her pictures as similarly assuming 'that she was able to transcend cultural differences; and that her values were not in direct opposition to and complicitly involved in the

²² Jeremy Eccles, *Australian Art Market Report*, 23, Autumn 2007, 32-34.

http://www.archiplanet.org/wiki/Mus%C3%A9_du_Quai_Branly,_Paris,_France. Accessed 28 December 2009.

²³ Angela Bennie, 'Modern Master', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24-25 September 2005, 34-35.

²⁴ Bennie, 'Modern Master', 34.

destruction of aboriginal culture'.²⁵ Yet, it is widely acknowledged that such universalism, and modernist movements such as pointillism and minimalism, allowed Australians 'to see' and to appreciate Aboriginal abstractions in a new light (raising the disturbing question of 'why wasn't this seen before?').²⁶

The great surprise concerns the assumptions implicit in the claim, 'Aboriginal art is contemporary art', as it raises the question of how could a person living in remote Australia have a strong understanding of, and therefore produce, 'contemporary art'? In his discussion of Rover Thomas's paintings (though this could be extended to almost any remote indigenous painter) Nicholas Thomas suggested:

Thomas's paintings are of the present, but they do not constitute 'contemporary art' as it is usually understood; they are in no sense engaged in a critique of modernism, or the cross referring dialogues and mutual influences of late abstraction and postmodernism. The *avant garde* has always been defined by radicalism – various aesthetic, conceptual or political – yet this radicalism has very rarely questioned a progressive notion of time and of cultural history...[T]hat progressive idea...has always been linear.²⁷

In contrast to 'contemporary' art's individualism and connection to or against a western art historical past, the anthropologist Peter Sutton argues that the 'aesthetic locus' of 'classical' Aboriginal art is ceremony. Sutton suggests that Aboriginal art has a predominantly 'social aesthetic, not one of alienation or social rebellion or of largely private experience'.²⁸ Sutton's research highlights differences in the morphology of representational form, as well as the relationship between composition and meaning. He argues that even the most abstract Aboriginal works are 'readable' because of the visual logic they employ, the rationality of which he thinks is embedded in their religion. Art writer Susan McCulloch points out, 'Western notions of aesthetics are rarely those motivating the creation of Aboriginal art. Nor does the *raison d'être* of much Western art – the artist's desire to communicate thoughts or emotions, to present the world through his or her eyes, or to comment in a highly individual way on imaginary or real life – generally apply to Aboriginal art. Rather, Aboriginal people, no matter where they are, paint what is in their heads, in their histories, as a continuation of their spiritual link with their country'.²⁹ Some commentators have attributed the popularity of Aboriginal painting to this spiritual meaning and connection with the land, in contrast to the

²⁵ Ann Stephen, 'Margaret Preston's Second Coming', *Art Network*, 2, 1980, 14-5, cited in Thomas, *Possessions*, 141.

²⁶ See for instance, Ian McLean's explanation of the popularity, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World', 41-5.

²⁷ Thomas, *Possessions*, 217.

²⁸ Peter Sutton, cited in Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, 5.

²⁹ Susan McCulloch, *Contemporary Aboriginal Art: A Guide to the Rebirth of an Ancient Culture*, Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001, 23.

emptiness of abstract expressionist and minimalist painting. Bennie's assertion that Aboriginal art is therefore contemporary art is striking, as it shows that certain questions, in particular questions about the 'authenticity' of contemporary Aboriginal art are no longer issues in Australia. This challenges one of the central tenants of this progressive, linear view of history.

The disappearing question: what happened to 'authenticity'?

Historians are often concerned with questions of authenticity. These are generally questions about provenance: whether a work was produced by the person we believe to have produced something, and the style or history of production. There is a different conception of authenticity that may come into play in debates about indigenous arts. This is the conception of authenticity as 'culturally authentic'. We might say that to be 'culturally authentic' an artefact must be produced according to traditional methods, and used as it was pre-contact with colonisers.

Problems with 'primitivism'

While it is a reasonable question to ask whether an artefact was produced for local consumption, and this feature may be valued by collectors, debates over the authenticity of primitive arts may degenerate into assumptions about 'unchanging' cultures, treating every adaptation or innovation as a form of 'degeneracy' or fraud. This is how innovations in Aboriginal sculpture have been treated in the past, for instance, when Lake Eyre 'sculptures' of carved animals and toas were 'discovered' in 1906, many commentators felt they could only be the some kind of hoax. Such questions of origin and authenticity arise in part because ethnographers collecting 'authentic primitive art' felt it unnecessary to record the details of artists, 'believing that Aboriginal art was an unchanging, homogenous product'.³⁰

This idea of authentic Aboriginal art as primitive art from the past also overlooks or diminishes styles of Aboriginal arts and distinctive artists. We see in many Aboriginal paintings a concern for narrative, and representations of hunting trips or historical events. Andrew Sayers's history into Aboriginal drawings of the nineteenth century is interesting in that it identifies three Aboriginal artists – Barak, Tommy McRae and Mickey of Ulladulla – all of whom were born in the 1820s, prior to colonisation within their region, who 'are set aside from other makers of Aboriginal art in the nineteenth century because they produced comparatively large and varied bodies of work' that may be understood as 'sustained, expressive and personal statements'.³¹

The audience for the nineteenth century figurative drawings on paper was the western audience, as there was a demand for such works as 'curios', but not all figurative drawing can be put down to Western influence or demand. Sayers suggests that a figurative, naturalistic Aboriginal art form existed at the time of

³⁰ Peter Sutton, Philip Jones and Steven Hemming 'Survival, Regeneration, and Impact' in Sutton (ed.) *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood: Viking, 1989, 196.

³¹ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 4.

invasion based on the evidence of surviving bark paintings, as well as the evidence of the first settlers. The earliest mention of such figurative drawing is from 1833, by an employee of the Van Diemen's Land Company. The company had earlier sent an expedition of two carts, each with six oxen, into Tasmania. In a bark hut, the employee had seen depicted a 'rough drawing of the whole scene. The wheels of the carts, the bullocks drawing them and the drivers with their whips over their shoulders, were all distinctly depicted'.³² The second sighting of an Aboriginal drawing, from 1843, was also of humans and drays. While Aboriginal artists may have produced drawings on paper for their Western audience, these sightings provide evidence that figurative drawing was also produced for a domestic audience. As Sayers comments, 'This narrative style, which appears to be almost totally naturalistic and figurative in content and to be concerned with recording historical events, lies outside the two primary expressions of and functions of traditional art: maintenance of social identity and continuity of tribal customs and laws.'³³ Sayers concludes that representational drawing was an established Aboriginal tradition at the time of settlement, and was not specifically influenced by white artists, although the artists were no doubt stimulated by the accommodation required to meet a western audience.

Such drawings, however, have been received as inauthentic Aboriginal art. The catalogue of the 1929 exhibition *Primitive Art* included an image by McRae, with the caption describing him (falsely) as a mission Aboriginal, and his work as 'showing European influence'.³⁴ Sayers suggests that McRae's works, and indeed all these figurative artists, lacked the requisite 'stone age' quality expected of Aboriginal artists. This observation is true also of the catalogues of other exhibitions in the twentieth century. The catalogue for *Art of Australia*, which toured North America in 1941, contained several drawings by McRae, though McRae's name is not mentioned, and the caption reads 'White man's materials were here used. While clearly primitive, they show a fairly advanced conception of design and action'. The *Primitive Art Exhibition* (National Museum of Victoria, 1943) catalogue displays McRae's work as 'examples of Australian graphic art after aboriginals had made contact with the whites'.³⁵ In short, anything that did not look like preconceived notions of 'primitive art' must somehow be untraditional. Part of the reason for this belief may concern buyer expectation. Djon Mundine, a curator, has observed that collectors' value stereotypical representations of 'genuine' Aboriginal art.³⁶ In this case, the problem is that traditional Aboriginal art does not fit with collectors' preconceptions of Aboriginal 'primitive art'.

Similarly, one may question whether 'Aboriginal contemporary art', with its implication that Aboriginal art is a variety of fine art, is culturally authentic.

³² Cited in Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 105.

³³ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 107.

³⁴ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 85.

³⁵ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 86.

³⁶ Djon Mundine, 'Finding the Body: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award', *Art and Australia*, 34:3, 1997, 321, cited in Angel, 'Perceptions of Aboriginal Art', 36.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, theorists debated whether the application of the term 'art' to the products of indigenous cultures misrepresents the products of indigenous societies. Fine art, it was argued, is not a cross-cultural category, but a culturally specific practice,³⁷ and, some argued, the success of 'Aboriginal art' should be seen as a form of exploitation.³⁸ The distinction between the term 'fine art' as a modern institution arising in the nineteenth century, and a pre-modern, broader use of the term 'art' that incorporates religious arts and crafts, 'settled' the dispute. It enabled a degree of agreement: indigenous arts may be considered arts, even if they are not understood within the cultures that produced them as fine arts. Moreover, if we make a distinction between fine art and aesthetic sensibility and activity, it is possible to agree that indigenous people display an aesthetic attention to products and process, and so to discuss aesthetics cross-culturally. But, the suggestion that some Aboriginal arts should be considered fine art opens a new series of problems. If it is agreed that contemporary Aboriginal paintings and sculptures are fine art, then it may also be thought that they are not culturally authentic.

Aboriginal art as postmodern art

The anthropologist Fred Myers has written,

My engagement over the past several years with understanding a history of acrylic painting has led me fully into the messy thicket of 'traditionalism'. From the beginning, the ambiguous status of Papunya Tula's acrylic painting – as art or artefact, as tourist souvenir or fine art, as ethnographic object or else painterly achievement – has pressed itself on every analyst. Produced largely for non-local and non-Aboriginal buyers, are the paintings an authentic expression? Of what? Of traditional culture? Traditional painters? Or are they 'a product of non-Aboriginal culture'? ... [T]he problem of authenticity pressed itself on the producers themselves, so much so that they insisted to me in 1979, 'These are not just pretty pictures. We don't just make these up. They come from the Dreaming'.³⁹

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46, Special Issue on Analytic Aesthetics, 1987, 201-210; Alfred Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992; Joanna Overing, *Aesthetics is a Cross Cultural Category: Against the Motion* (1) in T. Ingold (ed.) *Key Debates in Anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1996; Marcus Banks et. al., 'Aesthetics Is a Cross-Cultural Category', in Tim Ingold (ed.) *Key Debates in Anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1996; Larry Shiner, 'Western and Non-Western Concepts of Art: Universality and Authenticity', in Stephen Davies and Ananta Ch. Sukla (eds) *Art and Essence*, Westport: Praeger, 2002.

³⁸ Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, 'Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success?', *Art in America*, 77:7, 1989, reprinted in Rex Butler (ed.) *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Critical Writings on Australian Art in the '80s and '90s*, Institute of Modern Art and Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1996; Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) TV, 'Dot for Dollar', *7.30 Report*, 23 March 1998.

³⁹ Fred Myers, 'Unsettled Business: Acrylic Painting, Tradition, and Indigenous Being, 2001, excerpt in McLean (ed.) *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, p. 146.

For some indigenous people, the 'authenticity' of paintings concerns the truth of the designs they paint, these designs are representations of the Dreaming. In contrast, the postmodern artist Imants Tillers thought Central Desert artists were painting 'pretty pictures' once the dotting infill became predominant after the Papunya Tula painters removed secret sacred designs from their images. The postmodern turn denied the possibility of authenticity of contemporary Aboriginal cultures, emphasising that the ubiquitous condition of the postmodern condition. No matter how remote the indigenous community, there had been a loss of the original condition; Aboriginal art could only parody itself. Rex Bulter, an art historian and critic, pointed out the significance of the influence of Aboriginal painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Under Kngwarreye's influence, artists broke away from laborious dotting styles and encrypted iconography. Butler wondered if it would lead to the end of 'Aboriginal art' in terms of any identifiable style, as opposed to the end of art produced by Aboriginal people.⁴⁰

Gabriella Pizzi, a well-known Melbourne gallery owner, simply dismissed questions about authenticity with the suggestion that to question the authenticity of central desert dot paintings was to miss their visual and spiritual power; 'its authority was its authenticity'.⁴¹ This view owes a lot to the anthropologist Eric Michaels, who wrote, '[T]raditionalism and authenticity are now completely false judgements to assign to Aboriginal painting practices'.⁴² '[T]hese works are to be judged first and foremost in terms of the social practices that produce and circulate them – practices that promote authority, not authenticity'.⁴³ I have argued elsewhere that Michaels was wrong to assume that authority and authenticity are not related concepts on the basis that many things are authentic only if they are produced with requisite authority, such as insignia.⁴⁴ But by the mid eighties, according to McLean, the postmodernism of Aboriginal art was 'given' and the price of this was its claim to authenticity. Its 'newly won "contemporaneity"...was defined against its previous anthropological framing', leading to Aboriginal art being defined by an aesthetic, rather than ceremonial, function.⁴⁵

By the 1990s, postmodernism was being challenged by postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory challenges the ground of the distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. As Marcia Langton, an Aboriginal academic, bluntly suggests, before colonisation, there were no Aboriginal people.⁴⁶ The people we

⁴⁰ McLean, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World', 54.

⁴¹ Angel, op. cit., p. 37. Angel attributes this view to Pizzi. It is unclear whether Angel is suggesting its 'authority' is visual/artistic authority, or the authority to paint.

⁴² Eric Michaels, 'Bad Aboriginal Art', 1988, in McLean (ed.) *How Aboriginies Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 144.

⁴³ Michaels, 'Bad Aboriginal Art', in McLean (ed.) *How Aboriginies Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 144.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Christiane Keller, 'What is Authentic Aboriginal Art Now? The Creation of Tradition', in Vrasidas Karalis (ed.), *International Association of Aesthetics Yearbook*, 10, 2006, <http://www2.eur.nl/fw/hyper/IAA/Yearbook/index.htm>. Accessed 30 December 2009.

⁴⁵ McLean, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World', 53.

⁴⁶ Original source: Marcia Langton, 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation', in Michelle Grossman (ed.) *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne:

currently identify as Aboriginal identified themselves according to nation and language, such as Yolgnu or Pitjantjatjara. But Aboriginal identity is not merely opposed to non-Aboriginal (white) Australian identity, it is contrasted against 'urban' Aboriginal people, or 'non-traditional' Aboriginal people. Within this context, the claim to have 'tradition', that is, to 'possess culture', is highly political. It is more than a description; it is also a claim of survival in the contemporary world, resistance in the face of colonisation, and a connection with the past. It is this concept of 'tradition' that divides Aboriginal people into the urban and remote Aboriginal people, a distinction that is between those who have been dispossessed and those who still have a connection to land.⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, many indigenous people resist this kind of classification of Aboriginal people into 'authentic' Aboriginal people and urban, fringe 'ersatz' Aboriginal people – not the least because this definition of authenticity dispossess the majority of Aboriginal people from this identity. Similarly, a broader conception of Aboriginal identity has emerged in the context of contemporary arts.

Howard Morphy describes this expansion of the category of Aboriginal art as a dual process of inclusion: the inclusion of regional traditions into the category and,

its subsequent expansion to include work by [postmodern] artists such as Gordon Bennett, or Tracey Mophatt or Trevor Nickolls that would otherwise be classified as contemporary world art...The global significance of 'Aboriginal art' as it is presently constituted is that it includes in an ethnically-defined category works that would equally fit into a dominant unmarked category.⁴⁸

The need for a concept of authenticity and tradition

Nicholas Thomas has suggested that this ethnic definition of Aboriginal art 'despite its association with cultural radicalism, could be seen to echo the now discredited thinking behind assimilationist policies'.⁴⁹ Thomas thinks this is because the definition maintains the hierarchy of values in this position expresses, 'The critic who is supposedly sympathetic to postcolonial indigenous art declares his or her politically progressive stance, and gestures toward an interest in cultural difference, but in fact only acknowledges the work that is most consistent with the space and time of the art world, and so is close to his or her own aesthetic and theoretical values.'⁵⁰ This criticism might be considered a pragmatic problem with the distinction, rather than a theoretical one, as there is no reason for this stance to be taken just because an inclusive definition is taken by the definition.

Melbourne University Press, 2003, 118. Discussed in Sarah Maddison, *Black Politics: Inside the Complexity of Aboriginal Political Culture*, Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009, 103.

⁴⁷ Maddison, *Black Politics*, 105.

⁴⁸ Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 419-420.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Possessions*, 220.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *Possessions*, 220.

A more serious problem with this kind of 'ethnic classification' of Aboriginal art is that it fails to capture what many believe to be important differences between the arts practiced in remote and urban communities. In *Dreamings*, Peter Sutton, Philip Jones and Stephen Hemming point out that,

In postmodern circles an ironic mode may even be almost obligatory if an artist's work is to be accepted, yet an Aboriginal artist may proceed without the detachment of a mode of irony and certainly in most cases does so without cynicism. This is especially true of the more tradition-oriented artists. Urban artists like Trevor Nickolls, on the other hand, may employ irony and bitter humour in their work. But the difference between these two kinds of artistic approaches is not merely one of sincerity versus irony...The underlying difference is one of detached comment (recent urban art) versus symbolic narrative (traditional art).⁵¹

Sutton, Jones and Hemming argue that the meaning of 'Aboriginal art has a distinctly different structure to that of urban Aboriginal art; that 'Meaning is not made exterior to its representation, and the message is not distinct from the myth or image itself'.⁵² In traditional art the artist does not say things like, 'In this painting I am trying to show the relation between power centered on the gerontocracy and what has happened to young people in my society'.⁵³ (If no such 'artistic message' is to be interpreted from the work, however, there may well be, a message expressed *through* the traditional art, such as 'this is my land', a point I will come back to later.) A second major difference is that 'most of the urban and rural art produced by Aboriginal people...is not claimed to be sacred art. The art of the Dreamings is based on what Sutton calls a 'classical tradition' in that it plays a role in setting a standard or benchmark, and such forms are conservatively maintained and subject to gradual change.⁵⁴

Against such distinctions, Thomas argues that 'The simultaneity of work manifestly grounded in tradition and in cultural spaces beyond settler imaginings, and the work highly engaged with international art practices, illustrates the extent to which an indigenous population can remain grounded in tradition and in ancestral practices while being fully engaged with modernity at the same time.'⁵⁵ While Nicholas acknowledges there is a difference in the levels of dispossession between remote and rural Aboriginals, 'What is critical', he thinks, 'is that indigenous people can neither be categorically related to the past, to a colourful prehistory that supplies something unthreatening and culturally distinctive to a nation; nor can the autonomous distinctiveness of their cultures, which plainly have lives beyond as well as before the colonial impact, be denied.'⁵⁶ Like Michaels,

⁵¹ Peter Sutton, Philip Jones and Steven Hemming, 'Survival, Regeneration, and Impact', 203.

⁵² Sutton, Jones and Hemming, 'Survival, Regeneration, and Impact', 204.

⁵³ Sutton, Jones and Hemming, 'Survival, Regeneration, and Impact', 204.

⁵⁴ Sutton, 'Reading "Aboriginal art"', *Australian Cultural History*, 11, 1992, 28-32, cited in McLean (ed.) *How Aboriginies Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, 104.

⁵⁵ Thomas, *Possessions*, 223.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Possessions*, 223.

Thomas thinks that we should not talk about the authenticity of people, because it fails to recognise the reality of colonisation, and the reality of indigenous people's difference, but asserts there simply is no conflict between 'tradition' and 'change'. The importance of this criticism is its rejection of a significant assumption of colonialism: the assumption that indigenous cultures are destroyed or lose distinctiveness as they come into contact with western values.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the rejection of the term 'authenticity', like the rejection of the term 'tradition', is the result of an inadequate conceptualisation of these terms. It makes no sense to discuss Aboriginal traditions, if all 'tradition' means is 'what Aboriginal people do'. Given that tradition is dynamic (and there is no controversy around this), we need to accept that a tradition is different from cultural change. A change may break with tradition, or adapt the tradition for new circumstances. This distinction between different relationships that an action may have to tradition is necessary for understanding much of art history, let alone Aboriginal art history. But in particular, a robust but dynamic concept of tradition is necessary to make sense of the idea of 'Aboriginal fine art', and how the adjective 'Aboriginal' modifies the term 'art' in such a way that it may be considered culturally distinctive at all.⁵⁷

These issues concerning authenticity and tradition are also central to appreciating the work. As Malcolm Budd has argued in his *Values of Art, Pictures Poetry and Music*, the value of 'a work of art' is different from the value of art in general. And, as I mentioned in the introduction, there is something intuitively 'wrong' with appreciating a work in terms of standards that are completely alien to it. Budd thinks that our aesthetic experience of a work needs to be informed by 'an understanding of the aesthetically relevant facts about the work's history'. Understanding the meaning of a work – its interpretation – 'involves understanding the conception of the work under which the artist created it, the style in which it is executed, the works of art to which it alludes, and the view of life out of which it arose'.⁵⁸

Aboriginal art histories

As Anita Angel writes, most of 'the history of the Aboriginal art' is largely a history of anthropological inquiry rather than 'art historical inquiry'. It was, and largely remains, the discipline of anthropology that shapes its public reception, and art historians, at least in the 1980s with the emergence of dot paintings from the central desert, were 'somewhat overwhelmed by the weight of anthropological data it appeared essential to read in order to properly "understand" the work, sat back and enjoyed the paintings, and in the interim, most unhelpfully for the public, wrote

⁵⁷ Coleman and Keller, 'What is "Traditional" Aboriginal Art Now?'; see also Elizabeth Burns Coleman, 'Aboriginal Painting, Identity and Authenticity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59:4, 2001, 385-402, for a discussion of authenticity in relation to Aboriginal art.

⁵⁸ Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, 11.

very little.⁵⁹ Charles Taylor's challenge to appreciate this art on its own terms remains.

Morphy promotes an Aboriginal-centric art history, that is, a history that explains how indigenous art comes to be the way it is, rather than what place it has in a Eurocentric art history (and in which, it seems, it is considered little more than footnote⁶⁰). In *Becoming Art*, Morphy explores the history of Yolgnu art, and muses on what an *Aboriginal* art history would look like. This history, Morphy argues, is possible only, 'if it is acknowledged that some objects are in some sense art objects in the context of the societies that produced them; and that requires the development of a conception of art which is capable of encompassing the diversity of cultures concerned. Without this, 'they are part of the history of Western art as objects incorporated into Western art'.⁶¹ But equally, he thinks it important for an art history to grapple with the ideas about art that are common to the members of those societies. An Aboriginal art history, for instance, will grapple with Aboriginal discourses about art production, particularly where there is overlap with western art history.

Morphy begins this project by outlining what he takes the field of discourse of art history to be: this is the formal relations between paintings in space and time, the attribution of works to individuals or groups, as well as more specific areas of individual creativity and artistic influence. A Yolgnu theory of representation, Morphy suggests, involves a view in which the forms of the present are 'a reproduction of forms of the past'.⁶² Yolgnu artists often deny their own creativity, either in the creation of these forms or in their interpretation of them. Yolgnu art history, 'like all art histories, is in part an ideology intimately connected to value creation processes. The value underlying Yolgnu conception of agency in paintings prioritises group rights over individual authorship, emphasises the relation between paintings, social groups and ancestral beings, and emphasises continuity over change even to the point of denying change'.⁶³ In contrast, a Kuninjku painting, infill style has 'a central role to play in differentiating between schools of artists' and clan membership plays a 'reduced role in structuring the system'.⁶⁴ Kuninjku artists 'relate their paintings to earlier generations of paintings preserved on rock surfaces. In some cases they are able to identify the individual hand of artists of the previous generation... They emphasise change and originality both within their own corpus and as a basis for differentiating between paintings on the basis of micro-stylistic features, and adopt different styles from their relatives as a means of asserting personal identity'.⁶⁵ This ideal for the development of an Aboriginal art history

⁵⁹ Angel, 'Modern Master', 38.

⁶⁰ See Ian McLean's discussion of the place of Aboriginal Art in the context of *Art Since 1900*, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World', 65.

⁶¹ Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross Cultural Categories*, Sydney: UNSW Press, p. 143).

⁶² Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 148.

⁶³ Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 157.

⁶⁴ Morphy; *Becoming Art*, 159.

⁶⁵ Morphy; *Becoming Art*, 164.

would allow us to become aware of the kind of value structures appropriate to the evaluation of many indigenous arts, and so to begin a process of acculturation.

Sayers's history of nineteenth century Aboriginal art, in comparison, is far more straightforward. His resources are records of the artists, and their drawings. As such, it is focussed on individuals, their drawings, and their life circumstance. For Sayers, 'Questions about the artist's intentions cannot be isolated from a consideration of the audience for their work. When we ask "Why was this drawing...made?" we must also ask "For whom?" And from these questions flows another: "What was the artist affirming, both in terms of subject matter and through the very process of making art?"'⁶⁶ It is from the body of works – the oeuvre of the artist – that Sayers draws conclusions about what was important to each individual. It is very much a history of 'the artist and his (her) work'.

This model of art history is based on a highly westernised model of individualistic art production, and one would expect this model to be inadequate to the exploration of another culture. Yet, it highlights something distinctive not only of the artists he discusses, but of what might be considered the Aboriginal art movement. The strong impression one has reading Sayers's history is that he understands nineteenth century Aboriginal drawings to be communicative, an exchange between peoples as equals. This is evident from his introduction, the first page of which shows a portrait of 'Johnny' (1855) by Eugene von Guérard, and the second image, by Johnny himself (probably the man known as Johnny Dawson), which is a drawing of Eugene von Guérard drawing (1855). For Sayers, 'Guérard and Johnny are linked by the unique status which the word "artist" implied'.⁶⁷ A similar encounter is recorded much later (1901-2) about an Aboriginal informant, Erlikilyika, accompanying the explorers F.J. Gillen and Baldwin Spencer through central Australia. Erlikilyika was invited by Gillen to fill in some pages that he had missed in his drawing book with 'examples of his artistic skill'.⁶⁸ Erlikilyika filled the pages with depictions of hunting scenes, animals and ceremonies. Erlikilyika also provided botanical drawings for the explorers. In another sketchbook, Erlikilyika's twenty-four drawings are all of native trees, and each tree is named in Aranda and in English. The style of these botanical drawings have a compositional coherence often found among bark paintings.⁶⁹

This theme of communication is frequently found among commentators on Aboriginal art. McLean observes, 'Aboriginal artists acted as if aesthetic communication between the two cultures was viable'. As he points out, some Aboriginal people,

established relations with sympathetic intermediaries for this purpose – for example Albert Namatjira with Rex Batterbee, Manggalili Yolgnu artist Narritjin Maymuru with Wilbur Chaseling; Kuninjku artist Yirawala with

⁶⁶ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 5.

⁶⁷ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 3.

⁶⁸ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 78.

⁶⁹ Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 79.

Sandra Holmes...not to mention the many relationships struck up with arts advisors and anthropologists in the previous 30 years. These relationships were important to Aboriginal artists, and often occurred at their instigation, because communication with the settler world invariably required a trusted mediator. In this sense the artworld revolution is the culmination of a conscious convergence initiated decades earlier by Aboriginal artists...with sympathetic 'whitefellas', rather than an act of cultural imperialism on the part of the art world.⁷⁰

According to Morphy, the theme running throughout the recorded history of Yolgnu art is that Yolgnu create a dialogic relationship with outsiders who enter their country, specifically centred on the idea of 'two-way education'. Morphy reports that Yolgnu do not separate art from political action. They not only send their paintings into the world as a means of educating their audience about their connection to land and indigenous rights, but they self consciously attend their openings in order to command the arena for their message to be heard. For instance, the 2006 Sydney Biennale was the context for Djambawa Marawili to point out that his works were 'not just pretty pictures'. The ceremony chosen for the launch of the Biennale was connected to Mungurru, the currents that flow into the mouth of Mud Crab Bay and to *Bäru*, the crocodile ancestor, in order to 'emphasise Yolgnu concerns about their rights to the intertidal zone. Djambawa was conscious that the warehouse in which his works were exhibited jutted out into Sydney harbour, and he could not help making a passing reference to the fate of the people who had once occupied the harbour's shore.'⁷¹

The anthropologist Franca Tamisari suggests that Aboriginal people have always used art to negotiate their place in Australian society. Their art production is often understood by them as a form of 'diplomacy', and as such, should be understood as 'a tactic of survival'.⁷² This is born out in artists' statements concerning why they paint. For instance, Jack Britten is reported to have claimed that 'the only way our culture will survive is through our dancing, our stories and our painting'.⁷³ Similarly, Churchill Cann states that the reason for painting is, 'To have our young ones carry on in our culture and the love of our country'. As the website that sells works for these artists, and other artists from north-western Australia states, 'the reasons to paint are closely associated with carrying on Tradition, the Culture, the Dreaming Stories as to why a certain landmark appears as it does, Law for the youngsters, the love of their land. They express all this with their painting, their style, and the story that always is given with their artwork.'⁷⁴

⁷⁰ McLean, 'How Aborigines Conquered the Art World', 19.

⁷¹ Morphy, *Becoming Art*, p. 79.

⁷² Francesca Tamisari, 'Against Domestication: The Art of Encounter' in Foley (ed.), *The Art of Politics The Politics of Art: The Place of Indigenous Contemporary Art*, 2006, 66.

⁷³ Aboriginal Art-History from the Artists Perspective', <http://www.aboriginalartshop.com/aboriginal-art-history-from-the-artists-perspective.html>. Accessed 25 December 2009.

⁷⁴ Aboriginal Art-History from the Artists Perspective', <http://www.aboriginalartshop.com/aboriginal-art-history-from-the-artists-perspective.html>. Accessed 25 December 2009.

And, as McLean writes, there is 'a palpable sense of difference', in Aboriginal art, 'most evident in the political urgency that surrounds its reception. This burden of representation – be it the devotion to the Dreaming, the trauma of recent history, or the symbolic weight of unfinished business and aspirations for reconciliation – is unique to Aboriginal art.'⁷⁵ In this instance, Sayers's art-historical approach of the artist and his work is particularly helpful in deciphering how this political urgency of Aboriginal art is perceived.

As I mentioned earlier, classical Aboriginal art is often based on sacred designs. Sutton suggests that there is no artistic message that is detachable from its symbolic narrative. But we can make finer distinctions about the meanings of art works than this suggests. While works of Aboriginal art do not make 'artistic statements', they do contain messages. The message *in* a work of art is inferred from the work, and is identical with the implied author's (artist's) intention. An artistic statement that expresses an individual's perspective on the world, however, is distinct from a message expressed *through* an artwork. A message *through* a work of art concerns the values that the work upholds.⁷⁶ As is commonly known, and frequently stated, a person requires authority to produce paintings from the Dreaming. 'Under Aboriginal law, an artist is permitted to portray only those images to which, though birthright, he or she is entitled. Within this confine, the styles of work vary widely.'⁷⁷ The images to which they are entitled concern the creation of their country. Painting these stories and land is not only a religious expression, but a restatement of title to the land. This deeply religious art is, in an Australian settler context, a constant reminder, and assertion, of the fact of ownership. This message is not inappropriately 'imposed' upon the work. As Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson have pointed out, while in pre-contact Australia there was no arts market, the designs were 'currency in a competitive political economy'.⁷⁸ Sutton and Anderson argue that the political meaning may be distinguished from, but is interlinked with, the spiritual meanings of the paintings and sculptures.⁷⁹

Taylor and Morphy are right to emphasise the need to evaluate art forms by their own standards. Yet, there is a lot that a 'traditional' art history with its focus on individuals may accomplish. It may make us far more sensitive to the agency of the individual artist, and to how they relate to the culture and norms around them. It also, in this instance, asks its audience to listen to a message expressed through the work that affirms Aboriginal values. This affirmation is, as Sutton and Anderson have suggested, identical with its symbolic narrative – the spiritual connection with land – and involves a message asserting the rights connecting artistic design and the land to people.

⁷⁵ McLean, 'How Aborigines Conquered the Art World', 19-20.

⁷⁶ David Novitz, 'Messages "in" and Messages "through" Art', in Stephen Davies (ed.) *Art and its Messages: Meaning, Morality and Society*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, 84-87.

⁷⁷ Susan McCulloch, *Contemporary Aboriginal Art*, Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001, 23.

⁷⁸ Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson, 'Introduction', in Peter Sutton ed. *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood: Viking, 1989, 4.

⁷⁹ Sutton and Anderson, 'Introduction', 22.

What makes Aboriginal art contemporary art?

It seems I have yet to answer the principal question with which I began, and to consider the justification for considering Aboriginal art 'contemporary art'. To begin with, it seems necessary to define what I mean here by Aboriginal art. I mean, as implied by the stereotypes, the art produced in remote communities, and in particular, what Sutton would describe as 'classical' Aboriginal art. There is nothing about the concept of 'contemporary' that requires art to relate itself to modernism or postmodernism. I consider the work 'contemporary' not in the sense of an art that positions itself against or in relation to modernism, but in the temporal sense of 'new'. While there is plenty of evidence for Aboriginal people having 'art' prior to contact, the art and its function were generally different. I maintain that contemporary Aboriginal art defines itself in relation to this past, but that the art practice is undergoing rapid changes in terms of media and expression. Significantly, these artistic expressions have not been known before; entire new genres have been created in what may be described as an artistic renaissance.

I am not convinced that claiming this work is 'contemporary' implies that all contemporary Aboriginal art is a fine art, in the sense of being produced 'for the sake of art' by an artist with a strong sense of their own creativity. My reticence here arises simply from the consistent refrain by artists that they produce art to educate white people, and to show their connection with land, as well as the numerous anthropologists who warn against assuming that Aboriginal artists have this self conception. Yet, there is no reason to think that Aboriginal fine art, where it exists, is inauthentic. All 'Aboriginal arts', to the extent that they maintain Aboriginal law and are produced with authority, are authentic, and the maintenance of law creates a coherent tradition of Aboriginal art. In some respects, the postmodernist position, though flawed in its belief that there could be no grounds for authenticity, was right to insist that central desert arts were as much a postmodern object, a hybrid object, as their own art forms, and that its authenticity was its authority.

An Aboriginal artwork is an intercultural object – not merely in the sense that they are objects that mean one thing in one culture and yet are used differently in another, but also in the sense that they 'belong' in both cultures. Indeed, one might describe such paintings as creole paintings.⁸⁰ They belong in both cultures not only as art, but as a communicative, and highly political, act.

⁸⁰ In contrast, see L. Turgeon's 'The tale of the kettle. Odyssey of an intercultural object', *Ethnohistory*, 1997, 44:1, 1-29. The abstract states that: 'This article seeks to explain why the European-made kettle became invested with cultural identity for Quebecers after having made a detour among Amerindian groups. The uses to which the object was put in the culture of origin are reviewed; its transcultural pathway is retraced; and, finally, its new functions in the culture of reception are identified.' But one may just as easily describe such objects as cross-cultural, as they do not actually presuppose that different cultures 'engaged'. 'Culture shock', however, is an intercultural term, and a creole language may be described as an intercultural 'object'.

Aboriginal art is a political act

Aboriginal art must be understood as a political statement about the continuation of indigenous cultures and traditions. They are presentations of land, used with intent to educate its audience about indigenous rights and culture, as well as a means of maintaining and reinterpreting these rights and culture in contemporary society. It is this message through the work that gives it its critical edge and sense of political urgency.

It is worth exploring the surprise about the emergence of Aboriginal art and its success in further detail. It is a challenge not only to white Australians' sense of entitlement or privilege (if they have one), but to what has been a dominant thesis held not only by Australians but throughout the west – this is a thesis about the inevitable demise of indigenous cultures everywhere; their inability to cope in the face of, or to adapt to, western hegemonic forces. This challenge makes Aboriginal art intrinsically political. It is true that this political message is not necessarily 'aesthetically' significant, if by 'aesthetic' we mean a focus on sensitive form. But it is important in understanding it historically as an artistic movement, and in understanding how it challenges meta-historical ideas.

Let me identify what I mean 'intrinsically' political. There is an obvious sense in which some contemporary Aboriginal art is explicitly political. This is in its figurative and narrative forms which deal with the invasion and displacement of indigenous people, but also in works like the 1988 memorial at the National Gallery of Australia, where 200 hollow log coffins 'commemorate' Australia's bicentenary. But not all political art is so explicitly didactic. For example, Dadaism was political, as was Surrealism and Futurism. All these movements were guided by a political manifesto, although the works themselves were not necessarily explicitly political. Much contemporary Aboriginal art is political in a different way again. Firstly, it is political because it is an assertion of rights in land, and secondly it is political because it is an assertion of the strength of Aboriginal cultures and societies.

But this politicisation of art has also led many Anglo-Australians to recognise Aboriginal arts in a way that is not evident in the UK, European or even North American societies. According to McLean, 'the Western artworld [outside Australia] has never countenanced Aboriginal art as contemporary art. Modernity is blamed for the destruction of Aboriginal culture rather than the inspiration for a new modern Aboriginality'.⁸¹

As Thomas notes, colonisation in the antipodes has 'not led to the establishment of enduring settler dominance and secure settler identities. Indigenous presences have not been wished away, nor comfortably accommodated in unthreatening terms'. Settler dominance has been 'reinforced and unmade again and again. The legitimacy of indigenous political claims and the power and validity of indigenous cultures are perhaps now more widely acknowledged than ever before...'⁸² One of the means that this continuing Aboriginal presence is reinforced is through art.

⁸¹ McLean, 'How Aboriginal Art Conquered the Art World', 21.

⁸² Thomas, *Possessions*, 259-60.

This difference between Australian perspectives and those coming from Europe, the UK and North America can be illustrated in an example. In 1985, the postmodern artist Imants Tillers caused a national debate after his painting *The Nine Shots* appropriated images from paintings by Michael Nelson Jagamara, as well as other examples of white Australian and international art. The debate focussed on the difference between appropriating from international art and from Aboriginal creative expressions that symbolise local Aboriginal landholding and represent Aboriginal mythology. Ian McLean pointed out, 'Tillers' appropriations 'were designed to supersede their Aboriginality, transforming them into a postmodernism'.⁸³ Such appropriation may be considered a failure to recognise indigenous rights (both in Aboriginal law, and as well as copyright) and is seen as akin to assimilationist policies that sought the destruction of indigenous cultures.⁸⁴

A stark reminder of the difference between a post-colonial, settler perspective and the perspective of the European can be seen in the abstract of a lecture that was given by David Elliott earlier this year. Elliot is a curator and museum director. His positions have included director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the founding Director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, and the first Director of Istanbul Modern. He is currently the Director of the Sydney Biennale. A web site containing the abstract for his lecture explained his view that it is 'natural' for artists to take what they like from other cultures. Indeed, his argument proceeds,

Using genetic theory and a consideration of pre- and ancient history, [this lecture] examines how influence works through art and related forms of cultural interchange. It is only relatively recently that this 'natural' state of affairs has been disrupted by ideas of nationhood, which stressed the separateness and hierarchy of cultures... Now, as before, it is the normal and desirable state of one culture to beg, steal and borrow from other cultures.'⁸⁵

There are numerous problems with this argument. The reasoning moves from a descriptive term, such as 'influence' to a moral term, such as 'steal', which is not implied by the descriptive term. An analogous argument would be that, because people have always died, it is acceptable to murder them. A second problem with the argument is that it is a form of the naturalistic fallacy more commonly espoused by the Roman Catholic Church in defence of its prohibitions on contraception (and various kinds of sexual relations). This involves the idea that because something is 'natural', it is also good or desirable. Finally, one may question Elliott's notion of

⁸³ Thomas, *Possessions*, 273.

⁸⁴ See Elizabeth Burns Coleman, *Aboriginal Art, Identity and Appropriation*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005; Elizabeth Burns Coleman, 'The Disneyland of cultural rights to intellectual property: anthropological and philosophical perspectives', in Christoph Beat Graber and Mira Burri-Nenova (eds), *Intellectual Property and Traditional Cultural Expression in a Digital Environment*, Cheltenham UK: Edward Elgar, 2008.

⁸⁵ David Elliot, public lecture, University of Sydney, 26 March 2009, The Biennale http://www.bos2008.com/plugins/newsfeed.cgi?rm=content&plugin_data_id=26100, Accessed 24 December 2009.

western fine art and artistic practices as 'natural' – rather than the historically recent invention that many theorists have suggested.⁸⁶ This idea of the natural artistic practice, in fact, is not unlike Margaret Preston's idea of an 'all seeing Western eye' that reproduces all that lies before it in the name of artistic creativity. But antipodean critics have been paying attention to the messages in Aboriginal art, and cannot accept any or all artistic appropriation as 'natural'. It appears that that the southern horizon has changed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me restate what had seemed so distinct about the antipodean view of the Musée du Quai Branley. This was that the Australian Aboriginal art there did not belong in a gallery of 'primitive art' on the basis that they should be categorised as contemporary art. This is because Aboriginal art, as currently recognised, is an intercultural object, and because it addresses a contemporary audience. It is 'contemporary' in relation to its basis in Aboriginal tradition. But there are broader implications to be drawn from this conclusion. First, the historical narrative that western culture will inevitably overcome and destroy 'though contamination' indigenous cultures is false. Second, the debates about the authenticity of contemporary indigenous arts may be inapplicable in other contexts as well. As others have noted, very little 'primitive art' is produced according to the methods and the purposes indigenous people may have had prior to colonisation.⁸⁷ But, at least in some societies, instead of 'contaminated' and 'inauthentic' 'primitive arts', we have continuing traditions of indigenous fine arts, indeed a renaissance of indigenous art forms in terms of its breadth of media, vitality, and creativity. These works may be counted as authentic both in terms of the western fine arts tradition, and also in terms of the maintenance of indigenous law. Third, the grand narratives about the universalisability of fine art and artists' 'right' to take what they want from other cultures is itself a force of hegemony and cultural imperialism. Such behaviour seeks to supersede indigenous culture, in the process re-enacting the appropriation of land and denial of indigenous law with the appropriation of culture. As such, contemporary Aboriginal painting shakes the foundations of much art history and criticism. But there is a dislocation, perhaps, in the art histories being told by historians and curators in colonial settler societies, who hear this political message loudly and clearly, and those of the countries of colonising origin, who maintain the myth of the inevitability of the destruction of indigenous culture.

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⁸⁶ See, for example, Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, Chicago: London, 2001.

⁸⁷ Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive art and Other Tales of Progress*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 7.

co-editor of *Negotiating the Sacred I: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*, Canberra: ANU E-press, 2006, *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, Canberra: ANU E-press, 2008, and *Medicine, Religion and the Body*, Leiden: Brill, 2009.

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