

# The hang and art history

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When the Royal Academy showed the exhibition *Australia* late in 2013, promotional and critical discourse revolved around two ideas that lay at the heart of the enterprise. One was that artists' responses to the landscape, coming to know its colours, forms, textures and moods, underpins most Australian art – a concept familiar to those who may know of Bryan Robertson's *Recent Australian painting* at Whitechapel in mid 1961 or the *Australian Painting* exhibition at the Tate in January 1963 and in any case requested by the Royal Academy for 2013.<sup>1</sup> A second, less familiar, idea is the way in which Australians have come to understand the land, not as a motif for naturalistic, expressionistic or abstract landscapes, but as places that harbour stories and cultural attributes not always evident to the Western eye yet sensed by the mind. In August 1957 anthropologist, photographer and curator Charles Mountford had shown his collection of Aboriginal art at the ICA, London.<sup>2</sup> A few months later in Perth, Western Australia, Ronald and Catherine Berndt curated *The art of Arnhem Land* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia where they noted in passing that Magani, an Eastern Arnhem Land artist, was accepted that year as a member of the New South Wales Contemporary Art Society – a detail that reinforced their central argument that 'Aboriginal art is contemporary, and *not* primitive'.<sup>3</sup> Despite the coupling of Aboriginal art with contemporaneity in 1957, the idea took time to catch on. Today both Australian artists and the wider public have become accustomed to integrated exhibitions and museum hangs that give pride of place to Aboriginal art. Within Australia there is no questioning of the authenticity of Aboriginal art that is conceptually and materially innovative, and it is certainly not regarded as 'tourist tat' dependent on 'stale rejiggings of a half remembered heritage', simply because the materials are more 'whitefella' than traditional.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Bryan Robertson], *Recent Australian Painting*, London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1961; *Australian Painting: colonial impressionist contemporary*, with commentaries by Clive Turnbull, Elizabeth Young, Daniel Thomas. Adelaide: Griffin Press, 1962 (although the exhibition was not shown in the Tate until January 1963). Ron Radford (then Director of the National Gallery of Australia), in conversation with Joanna Mendelsohn and Cathy Speck, May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> C.P. Mountford, *Bark paintings: Aboriginal art of Australia*. Preface by Herbert Read. London: ICA, August 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The art of Arnhem Land: an exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art. Arnhem Land paintings on bark and carved human figures*. Arranged by the Anthropology Section of the University of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 24 December 1957- 31 January 1958, 8 and 5 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Respectively, Waldemar Januszczak, 'A desert of new ideas', *The Sunday Times*, 22 September 2013, 8-9, and Brian Sewell, 'Lost continent: A vast survey is wasted on "cultural

My paper stems from a nationally-funded research project being conducted by a team of academics and art museum personnel on key curated Australian art exhibitions over the last 50 years, with the aim of investigating the impact of government, corporate and philanthropic funding on exhibitions, the changing nature of curatorship, and new models of writing art histories in Australia. Its objective is to enable art curators, art historians and the wider public to better understand the nature and impact of curatorial interventions.<sup>5</sup> One line of inquiry is the incremental recognition of Aboriginal art, and the promotion of it as quintessentially Australian.

While there is now a substantial history on the reception of Aboriginal art within the art museum,<sup>6</sup> there has been little analysis on the implications for art history. This paper looks carefully at cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional curatorial strategies behind Tony Tuckson's *Australian Aboriginal art* (1960-61).<sup>7</sup> It introduces the exhibition, examines concepts of style informing both the hang and the critical discourse, looks at why the cross-disciplinary dialogues soon unravelled, and considers the legacy of the exhibition within Australian curatorship and art history.

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cringe" that only goes to show what the "whitefella" did to Australia and its art exhibition of the week', *London Evening Standard*, 19 September 2013, 46-7.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Art Exhibitions 1960-2009: a generation of cultural transformation, is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project, headed by A/Prof. Joanna Mendelsohn with Adjunct A/Prof. Catherine De Lorenzo (both University of New South Wales), Professor Catherine Speck (U. Adelaide) and A/Prof. Alison Inglis (U. Melbourne), Steven Miller (AGNSW), Lisa Slade (Art Gallery of South Australia), Simon Elliot (National Gallery of Australia), Bernice Murphy (Museums Australia) and Isobel Crombie at the National Gallery of Victoria.

<sup>6</sup> Some accounts of pioneering exhibitions include: Philip Jones, 'Perceptions of Aboriginal art: a history', in Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia*, New York: Viking, in association with The Asia Society Galleries, 1988, 143-179; Wally Caruana, 'Black art on white walls? Institutional responses to Indigenous Australian art', in *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, eds Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000, 454-461; Howard Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery', *Humanities Research*, 8:1., 2001, 37-50, essentially reproduced as 'Placing Indigenous art in the gallery', in *Becoming art: exploring cross-cultural categories*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008; Susan Lowish, 'Writing/Righting a history of Australian Aboriginal art', *Humanities Research*, 15, 2, 2009, 133-151; Ben Thomas, 'Daryl Lindsay and the appreciation of indigenous art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne in the 1940's: "No mere collection of interesting curiosities"', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4, June 2011, 32pp; Ian McLean, 'How Aboriginal art conquered the art world', in *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art*, ed. Ian McLean, Sydney: Power Publications with the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane), 2011, 26ff; Caroline Jordan, 'Cultural exchange in the midst of chaos: Theodore Sizer's 'Art of Australia 1788-1941'', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 13, 2013, 24-51.

<sup>7</sup> See [Tony Tuckson], *Australian Aboriginal art: bark paintings, carved figures, sacred and secular objects. An exhibition arranged by the state art Galleries of Australia, 1960-61*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1961. Because so many exhibitions at this time carried the name *Australian Aboriginal Art*, it is often clearer to refer to the exhibition as Tuckson's, even though Tuckson's name is barely mentioned in the catalogue and he often prioritised the role of the author of the catalogue essay, anthropologist Fred McCarthy.

## The curated exhibition Australian Aboriginal Art

Tony Tuckson, Deputy Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales [AGNSW], curated *Australian Aboriginal art* on behalf of the state directors of art museums. He attracted the admiration of anthropologists, art curators and specialists around the country. His aim, simply summarised in a letter to Ronald Berndt four months before the exhibition opened in Sydney, was 'to show the changes in style over the years and also to represent different subject matter, which...to the general public will make the exhibition more interesting'.<sup>8</sup> He knew what he wanted and what he didn't. He wanted real objects, in this case painted barks, carved wooden figures and other objects.<sup>9</sup> He was not interested in emulating earlier museum exhibitions that showcased a wider repertoire of media - rock paintings, rock engravings and carved trees - via photographic records and various forms of replicas.<sup>10</sup> When borrowing from collections around the country Tuckson took pertinent advice from experts on the meanings of images, display protocols pertaining to photos and film of the deceased, and sacred-secret objects.<sup>11</sup> As art curator Daniel Thomas later noted: 'It's easier for art museums: we don't collect human remains or sacred-secret objects. We only collect objects made by Aborigines for sale or exchange'.<sup>12</sup> Not all Aboriginal art made for the market was valued by curators. For example, Melbourne-based Leonhard Adam, a German Jewish refugee with expertise in art history, ethnography and law, expressed relief that Tuckson had selected 'real Australian Aboriginal art', by which he meant not only the absence of replicas but also the decision to exclude what Adam referred to as the 'unfortunate "Hermannsburg School of Watercolourists", Namatjira and his tribesmen', because it appeared too Western.<sup>13</sup> Like the Berndts' 1949 and 1957 exhibitions,<sup>14</sup> and

<sup>8</sup> Art Gallery of New South Wales [AGNSW] archives: EF614.

<sup>9</sup> The three exceptions to wood -an incised sacred stone Tjurunga, an incised pearl shell phallocrypt and a skull from Millingimbi - were all painted.

<sup>10</sup> Many two- and three-dimensional replicas (photographs of cave paintings and engraved trees, replicas of rock carvings) were included in Charles Barrett and A.S. Kenyon's, *Australian Aboriginal art: issued in connexion [sic] with the exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art*, Melbourne: National Museum, 1929.

<sup>11</sup> Dr Ride from West Australian Museum would not allow 'sacred boards' to be shown in Perth, and suggested Tuckson borrow others from the South Australian Museum and the Australian Museum (Sydney) as they 'had no such reservations'. Tuckson agreed that the Wandjina works would be removed from display when the exhibition was in Perth, and no films were shown.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Thomas, 'Australian Aboriginal people and art museums', at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Museums, 20 June 1989. Transcript of talk in Queensland Art Gallery archives: *Balance* exhibition file, #1990.01.

<sup>13</sup> AGNSW archives: EF614. McLean (*How Aborigines invented*: 25) has noted Namatjira was by then considered a 'weak copyist of second-rate art' within Australian anthropology and art worlds, a judgement also condoned by Claude Levi-Strauss in Paris.

<sup>14</sup> [Ronald and Catherine Berndt], *Arnhem Land art (Northern Territory of Australia)*. Exhibition by The Australian National Research Council and the Department of Anthropology, Sydney University. David Jones' Art Gallery, 17 to 29 October, 1949; Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The art of Arnhem Land: an exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art. Arnhem Land paintings on bark and carved human figures*. Arranged by the Anthropology Section of

Mountford's *Aboriginal bark painting* in Adelaide Festival of Arts 1960,<sup>15</sup> Tuckson prioritized Arnhem Land art but with an eye to the distinctive regional attributes from numerous sites. The geographical diversity reflects Tuckson's curiosity about art from a range of sites—and the fact that he was not constrained to limit material to one where he'd conducted fieldwork (as tends to happen with shows curated by anthropologists).

Tuckson's enthusiasm stemmed from several experiences. One was that he had never forgotten the beauty of art from north-east and western Arnhem Land exhibited eleven years earlier at David Jones Art Gallery in 1949.<sup>16</sup> Curated by the Berndts, the exhibition, although shown at a commercial gallery, was not for sale: it was a novel way of publishing some results of fieldwork that had been supported by the Australian National Research Council – effectively the same body supporting this research. Additionally, in August 1956 at the annual national Art Gallery Directors' Conference, bark paintings, collected during the 1948 Australian American Expedition to Arnhem Land, were distributed to the state art museums. These gifts changed curators' understanding of Australian art. Finally, in 1958 Tuckson seized the opportunity to visit parts of Arnhem Land with the informed collector and orthopaedic specialist Dr Stuart Scougall.<sup>17</sup> There he met with the artists, recorded them painting, listened to the stories underpinning their art and, through Scougall's generosity, acquired *pukamani* (mortuary) poles and bark paintings for the Gallery's collection.

Tuckson's national touring exhibition opened in Sydney August 1960 and closed in Hobart June 1961, before being scaled down for the VI Biennale in Sao Paulo, Brazil. It was not the first exhibition of Aboriginal art in an art museum in Australia<sup>18</sup> but its curatorial strategies and cross-disciplinary theoretical framings have elicited considerable comment. Although all the art in Tuckson's exhibition was from northern Australia,<sup>19</sup> the works on display were sourced from art, science and university collections around the country. Part of the curatorial strategy was to

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the University of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum. Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1957.

<sup>15</sup> Charles P. Mountford, 'The art of Arnhem Land' and 'Aboriginal bark painting', in *Adelaide Festival of Arts March 12-26, 1960 souvenir programme*, Adelaide: Adelaide Festival of Arts Executive Committee, 1960.

<sup>16</sup> [Berndt], *Arnhem Land art*.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Scougall's best known publication on Aboriginal art is *Australian Aboriginal bark painting: a brief study*, Australia: [s.n.], 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Some exhibitions include: [F.D. McCarthy], *Australian Aboriginal culture*, [exhibition 1949-53 prepared by Australian National Committee for UNESCO], Sydney: A.H. Pettifer, Government Printer [195\_] - this exhibition toured widely in Australia before going to the US and Canada; Laurence Thomas, (under the direction of the Plastic Arts Committee, Commonwealth of Australia Jubilee). *Jubilee exhibition of Australian art: Aboriginal art, early colonial art, the art of the middle period, contemporary art*. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1951 (the exhibition opened at the National Art Gallery of New South Wales on 28 June 1951, and toured nationally); the Berndt exhibition listed above, 1957; Charles P Mountford, as in note 15.

<sup>19</sup> OenPELLI, Goulburn Island, Liverpool River, Milingimbi, Yirrkala, Groote Eylandt, Beswick Creek, Port Keats, Melville Island, all in the Northern Territory and Torres Straits, and Walcott Inlet in the Kimberley District of Western Australia.

acknowledge a nascent national interest in Aboriginal art as evidenced by collecting patterns.<sup>20</sup> Having chosen art from many areas, Tuckson arranged the hang so that viewers would compare works by different artists within the one, and across several, communities. He was also responsible for an informative catalogue that set a new national standard in professional documentation of the works, including the effort to name the artists, provide provenance, offer a brief explanation of the key motifs or story provided by Aborigines to anthropological and ethnological experts, and reproduce all works not elsewhere reproduced. Indeed Karel Kupka, artist and ethnologist who had also conducted research in Arnhem Land and collected material for ethnographic collections in Paris and Basel, commended Tuckson's precision and care that made his catalogue a 'model for all catalogues of this genre'.<sup>21</sup>

In the months leading up to the opening, Tuckson was constantly checking facts with anthropologists, who in turn praised the result. In a letter to Berndt, Professor Elkin, who opened the exhibition and lectured on Aboriginal Culture to the Art Gallery Society,<sup>22</sup> described it as 'very good', and Berndt himself, after having seen the exhibition in Perth in February 1961, wrote to Tuckson congratulating him on the collection, the arrangement and the organisation.<sup>23</sup>

It was also admired by art critics, curators and, professional art historians – few though they were at that time in Australia. Tuckson himself noted that the exhibition was 'particularly well received by the art community here in Sydney'.<sup>24</sup> As yet I've not encountered any responses from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, nor from Aborigines who may have seen it during the national tour.<sup>25</sup> Building on the shifts in consciousness about Aboriginal art as art in the 1950s, the Tuckson exhibition appeared to consolidate a moment when the art and ethnographic experts around the country agreed that good research, thoughtful display and a highly professional catalogue had shifted the thinking about Aboriginal art within the public at large.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the exhibition that comes closest to Tuckson's in terms of its national scope was Pettifer's *Australian Aboriginal culture*, which toured Australian towns 1949-53 before being sent to the US and Canada 1955-56, and returning to a second Australian tour 1957-8. Unlike Tuckson's, this exhibition was presented as a crowded display of Aboriginal artefacts.

<sup>21</sup> Karel Kupka, 'Les écorces peintes d'Australie du Musée et Institut d'éthnographie de Genève', *Bulletin annuel du Musée et Institut d'éthnographie de Genève*, 9, 1966, 24 (De Lorenzo's translation). Terence Maloon (*Tony Tuckson, themes and variations*, Bulleen: Heide Park and Art Gallery, 1989, 10-11) described Tuckson's prose as 'deadly dry and pedantically over-referenced'.

<sup>22</sup> Elkin archives, Private correspondence, 1956-1979, items 5/2/23 (1961), in Fisher Library, University of Sydney.

<sup>23</sup> AGNSW archives: EF614.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> In 2010 Hetti Perkins, former curator of Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of NSW, argued that the seminal Tuckson collection both reinforces a 'continuing link with our country and the rights and responsibilities we have to it' and has provoked new creative art within a younger generation of artists on Melville Island. See *Art + Soul: a journey into the world of Aboriginal art*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2010: 230 and 210 respectively.

<sup>26</sup> Nearly all 5,000 copies were sold.

From today's perspective all these efforts, including a substantial catalogue essay by anthropologist Fred McCarthy,<sup>27</sup> suggest a strong ethnographic sensibility informed by collaboration between the curator and academe. Harder to detect is the disciplinary shift towards art history. However, documentation from Tuckson's correspondence files as well as notes for lectures delivered during and shortly after the exhibition shows the curator's aim was to position the works within national and global art histories. For example, in an undated lecture on 'Facets of Modern Art' Tuckson talked mainly of French art, yet also alluded to the Berndts' 1949 exhibition because the sheer 'variety of subject, symbols, and forms' made him realise the importance of:

understanding their forms as symbols for something deeper in meaning and ... nearly always in primitive art the simple shape is beautifully placed and adjusted to its neighbour within the larger area making a satisfying whole.<sup>28</sup>

The linking of Aboriginal art to the modernist project was not a new idea, but the embedding of it within mainstream Australian art history was. In a 1963 talk on '...Australian Art 1885-1963', Tuckson not only emphasised that meaning is generated through materials and skill into a work of art where 'Form and content are one', but that a distinctive feature of Aboriginal art is that the artist's 'spiritual life...looks inwards rather [than] outwards. In consequence... space in the representational sense is nearly non-existent'.<sup>29</sup> These attempts to position Aboriginal art within national and global art histories reflect intent, but also new insights gained from the exhibition itself.

Tuckson wanted to show the viewing public 'the changes in style over the years', a goal that opens directly into an expanded disciplinary field where common ground existed between the anthropological and art worlds.

## **Style – understandings and applications**

In the 1950s discourses on style showed that attention to surface and materiality, to morphology and gesture, could go beyond the identification of familiar art historical categories – the Picturesque, Impressionism – by providing tools for cross-

<sup>27</sup> Frederick D. McCarthy was Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, Sydney.

<sup>28</sup> Tuckson archives, AGNSW, MS1995.8, Box 20, 6.1 (4). Artist Margaret Preston had articulated similar insights in an article in *Art and Australia* 3:26 December 1928. It should be noted that anthropologists such as Elkin, McCarthy, Mountford and others were actively advocating the advantages of mining Aboriginal art as a source for modernist design. In Europe there was also interest in Aboriginal art. For example, Max Ernst and Roland Penrose collected Aboriginal art, and André Breton wrote the forward to Karel Kupka's, *Un art à l'état brut: peintures et sculptures des Aborigènes d'Australie*, Lausanne: Editions Clairefontaine, 1962, translated as *Dawn of Art; painting and sculpture of Australian Aborigines*, with a foreword by A.P. Elkin and a preface by André Breton, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, c.1965.

<sup>29</sup> His talk, called 'Influences of the environment and overseas trends on Australian Art 1885-1963', is in the Tuckson archives, AGNSW, MS1995.8, Box 20, 6.2 (1).

disciplinary analysis of visual material culture. Today it is not easy to discuss 'style' with enthusiasm, given that it has long since lost its status as a critical term for art history: its former popularity as a tool for relatively judgement-free art analysis has not survived theoretical transitions of the discipline towards cultural and visual studies. But there is no doubt that drawing attention to the aesthetic dimensions of Aboriginal art was enabled by attending to style, helped in large measure by Meyer Schapiro's seminal essay published in 1953.

First published in *Anthropology today: an encyclopaedic inventory*, Schapiro's 'Style' was one of dozens of papers in the edited volume, most of which were authored by anthropologists, palaeontologists, and archaeologists.<sup>30</sup> Then Professor of Fine Arts and Archaeology at Columbia University (New York), Schapiro addressed modes of visual analysis variously employed by this diverse range of specialisms within the applied and social sciences; he was able to interweave disciplinary threads under the concept of style. Perhaps because he was an art historian who had published in social science, both anthropological and art museum professionals in Australia attributed authority to his paper. Schapiro was something of an intellectual polymath whose reading and thinking across the arts and sciences is a mark of his oeuvre.<sup>31</sup> This is not the place to fully elucidate his methodology, variously praised for its complexity, incisiveness, idiosyncrasy, erudition and insight: numerous studies have closely examined the development and refinement of his thinking.<sup>32</sup> But it is worthwhile briefly identifying some of Schapiro's methodologies that helped articulate a transition of the object from the artist's own working context to a comparatively decontextualized art exhibition or publication where the associated essays required attention to aesthetic attributes.

Schapiro offered general definitions of style as well as those specifically grounded in art historical traditions by scholars such as Riegl and Wölfflin. In order to circumvent the limitations of cyclical and evolutionary models of style, he drew on Franz Boas to recommend the observing of 'motor habits in the handling of tools' (81), because the choice and handling of materials impacts on the chosen symbols and plays a key role in communication. By seeking to understand how a work was made, he was able to examine its specific characteristics and sought to demonstrate links between materials and techniques as well as the society from which it came. In his schema there were individual and cultural dimensions to style: a closely-

<sup>30</sup> Meyer Schapiro, 'Style', in *Anthropology today: an encyclopaedic inventory*, ed. A.L. Kroeber, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 287-312. The essay was reprinted and slightly enlarged in his *Theory and philosophy of art: style, artist, and society. Selected papers*, NY: George Braziller, 1994, 51-101. Alas the 1994 version did not include the reference list that helped substantiate the 1953 paper. All page references in brackets in this text come from the 1994 printing.

<sup>31</sup> See the range of essays in Schapiro's theory and philosophy of art. See also Terry Smith, 'Meyer Schapiro on style in art and science: notes from a theory and methods of art history graduate seminar lecture course', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 7, 2012, [61pp.], <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/smith.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the numerous essays in special issues on Meyer Schapiro in *Oxford Art Journal* 17: 1, 1994, and *Social Research*, 45: 1, Spring 1978. Michael Ann Holly (in 'Schapiro's Style', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55: 1, 1977, 7) refers to Schapiro's creative inconsistency as an art historian.

observed reading of a work could be tested through comparison within an expanded repertoire. Seen individually or collectively, 'form elements or motifs, form relationships, and qualities' (54) can generate 'inner correspondences' (51) which function as 'a kind of syntax' (55), enabling both 'internal order and expressiveness' (57-8). At the same time, he cautioned against taking things at face value because in any one work or group of works there can be clearly-observable heterogeneity (65), or what Schapiro was later to call 'discoordination' where, as Kuspit has argued, a grouping with corresponding sets of elements might in fact *negate* apparent correspondence or, conversely, where apparent contradiction might be experienced as *implied* coordination.<sup>33</sup>

In Schapiro's hands, style was less a tool for easy classification than intellectual investigation. Michael Ann Holly notes that his aim was 'not to authenticate, but to interrogate, and to be interrogated by' art, to the extent that his own style of writing developed as 'mirror images of the style of the works of art he is talking about'.<sup>34</sup> Schapiro's complex method has been positioned within a political framework inspired by Marxism. For example, Gerardo Mosquero links Schapiro's valuing of 'multiplicity, complexity, interrelationships [to] the dynamism of those factors that constituted the social'.<sup>35</sup> Equally, it was his theoretical framework, David Craven notes, that 'illuminates why Schapiro has always placed considerable emphasis on ... formal analysis ... and ... technical procedures of making art, that is, on the various ways that cultural forms are produced by means of human labour and on the formative role these artworks will exercise.'<sup>36</sup> Attention to the making of art served the anthropologist in the field as much as it did the artist-curator.

Just as Schapiro spurned doctrinaire Marxism that linked abstraction to capitalism, so too his essay on style questioned prevailing orthodoxies that saw so-called primitive art shift from abstraction ('geometrical' art), to more naturalistic representation. Instead he argued that abstraction can co-exist with naturalistic representation (75), and both can encompass aesthetic qualities. As it happens, some Aboriginal bark paintings include recognisable creatures and objects as well as much abstract patterning. A method that allowed the researcher, curator and viewer to pay attention to 'the constant form' (51) across representational and abstract elements, and that was grounded in a theory of the social as fundamental to art, was welcome indeed. Mindful of these ideas, we can now examine how they informed the hang of the Tuckson exhibition and the discourse that accompanied it.

Tuckson believed that a hang that encouraged comparative viewing of similar subject matter within and between communities would make the exhibition 'more interesting' for the viewing public. Visual documentation of the exhibition hang is poor,<sup>37</sup> but there exist contemporary critiques that confirm the realisation of

<sup>33</sup> Donald B. Kuspit, 'Dialectical reasoning in Meyer Schapiro', *Social Research*, 45: 1, Spring 1978, 104.

<sup>34</sup> Holly, 'Schapiro's Style', 9.

<sup>35</sup> Gerardo Mosquera, 'Meyer Schapiro, Marxist aesthetics, and abstract art'. *Oxford Art Journal*, 17: 1, 1994, 77. See also David Craven, 'Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch, and the emergence of critical theory', *Oxford Art Journal*. 17: 1, 1994, 42-54.

<sup>36</sup> Craven, 43.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to the illustrated catalogue, Tuckson commissioned slide sets of individual works which the Gallery attempted to sell to museums, universities, and art schools. The

his aims. 'For the first time', wrote Alan McCulloch, 'an exhibition laid due emphasis on the identities of individual [A]boriginal artists; this made it possible to trace the variations and differences in style within the traditional tribal style'.<sup>38</sup> After listing numerous artists he continued: 'The stylistic differences of these individual artists were subtle and were revealed only after careful study and comparison; the tribal differences of style and concept were easier, though not easy'.<sup>39</sup> He also noted:

In the Oenpelli paintings there was a concentration of decoration inside the various figures which were often isolated, as against the Yirrkala figures which were treated as silhouettes surrounded usually by white lines to separate them from backgrounds richly decorated with diamond patterns and hatchings... In all the work the limited means employed by the painters...produced a natural and elegant study.<sup>40</sup>

The comparative viewing strategy worked. Another critic observed:

Each of the quite abstract patterns of design has some meaning which is known to the artist and members of his clan, and for these the finely documented catalogue is most useful... there is tremendous aesthetic satisfaction to be gained from the excellence of these bark paintings. For here there is no mere symmetry but the continual wonder of the unexpected imposed on works of such balance of changing patterns and textures that only the most gifted and perceptive artists could be responsible for their conception.<sup>41</sup>

Tuckson must have felt vindicated in his aim 'to show the changes in style over the years' because the critics, at least, were inspired to pay close attention to the comparative formal attributes and encouraged their readers to think about the meaning of it all. However, whilst this strategy resonates with Schapiro's ideas, the Tuckson archives suggest that he only came to know of Schapiro's essay second hand, firstly through the writings of Berndt, and secondly, a little later, through Douglas Fraser and Ralph Linton, both colleagues of Schapiro.<sup>42</sup>

Direct indebtedness to Schapiro's ideas is more evident amongst the anthropologists. In their catalogue essay for the 1957 exhibition *The art of Arnhem Land*, the Berndts made two clear arguments. One was that Aboriginal art, or at least

AGNSW archives on the exhibition (EF614) show that interest in these slide packs was modest, although a number of American institutions bought them. Only one installation image exists in the Gallery archives.

<sup>38</sup> Alan McCulloch, 'The Aboriginal art exhibition,' *Meanjin*, 20: 2, July 1961, 192.

<sup>39</sup> McCulloch, 'Aboriginal art exhibition', 192.

<sup>40</sup> McCulloch, 'Aboriginal art exhibition', 192-3.

<sup>41</sup> Our Art Critic (Wallace Thornton), 'Aboriginal art exhibit at Sydney gallery', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1960.

<sup>42</sup> Tuckson (see AGNSW archives, MS1995.8, Box 20) took copious notes from R.M. Berndt's 'Some methodological considerations in the study of Australian Aboriginal Art', *Oceania*, Sept. 1958, 26-43. AGNSW MS1995. Box 22 8.3 included copious notes taken from Ralph Linton, a mid-century American anthropologist who had written on art in the South Seas.

the bark paintings and carved human figures from Arnhem Land, are 'contemporary *not* primitive' [their emphasis].<sup>43</sup> The other was that 'social relevance' is integral to the meaning of art for Aborigines.<sup>44</sup> These arguments were apposite, given that city audiences in the late 1950s may well have regarded popular Western-influenced art from missions in Central and SW Australia – often landscapes, sometimes with Aboriginal hunting scenes - as being more contemporary. But of such work they said: 'we cannot call this Aboriginal art'.<sup>45</sup> In drawing attention to stylistic differences across the known field of Aboriginal art in the later 1950s, the Berndts inferred that Arnhem Land art was more authentic because the artists primarily made objects for their own people rather than for Western consumers: 'Art is an integral part of culture: it has meaning, and it has something to say'.<sup>46</sup> The following year Ronald Berndt published a major article where he re-emphasised the fundamental utilitarian premise of Arnhem Land art but developed his argument in ways that resonated with art curators and historians.<sup>47</sup> Berndt made use of Schapiro's 'Style', and was able to complement his exegesis on symbols with social relevance, by comparing similarities within a group, acknowledging the possibility of art as a vehicle for expression, and accounting for both 'naturalistic and stylized' elements as being 'always an abstraction from reality'.<sup>48</sup> Tuckson, who took extensive notes from this article, recognised that such an argument could be used to highlight the correlation of form and content to contemporary art audiences.<sup>49</sup>

### Cross-disciplinary tensions

The courtesies and collegiality that prevailed between Tuckson and Berndt before and during the exhibition did not extend to the 1964 publication that retrospectively honoured Tuckson's exhibition. *Australian Aboriginal art* was edited by Berndt and its pages lay bare the divisions that flared between them.<sup>50</sup> Relegated to the end of

<sup>43</sup> Berndt and Berndt, 'Art of Arnhem Land', 5.

<sup>44</sup> Berndt and Berndt, 'Art of Arnhem Land', 4.

<sup>45</sup> The Berndts specifically referred to art by Albert Namatjira and others at the Hermannsburg School of art in Central Australia, and the children at the Jiggalong school in Carrolup, Western Australia. Namatjira was a feted artist in the Australian commercial art scene of the 1950s. For a short biography see Vincent Megaw and Ruth Megaw, 'Namatjira, Albert (ELEA) (1902-1959)' in *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, 655-656. For a recent critique of the reception of Albert Namatjira within Australian art museums see Joanna Mendelsohn 'When the wind changed: Albert Namatjira at the Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, 1984', paper, AAANZ Annual Conference December 2013. For the story of the Jiggalong school see Mary Durack Miller in association with Florence Rutter, *Child artists of the Australian bush*, Sydney: Australian Publishing Company in association with George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, London, 1952, and John E. Stanton, 'Bush landscapes of the south-west of Western Australia: The child art of Carrolup', in *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, 259-263.

<sup>46</sup> Berndt and Berndt, 'Art of Arnhem Land', 8.

<sup>47</sup> R.M. Berndt, 'Some methodological considerations in the study of Australian Aboriginal Art', *Oceania*, September 1958, 29ff.

<sup>48</sup> Berndt, 'Some methodological considerations', 32-34.

<sup>49</sup> Tuckson, AGNSW archives, MS1995.8

<sup>50</sup> Berndt, Ronald M. (ed), *Australian Aboriginal art*, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964.

the book after interpretations of Aboriginal art by various anthropologists, Tuckson's essay presented his exhibition within an historical framework of exhibitions, art criticisms and histories on Aboriginal art. As is evident in the exhibition archives, for Tuckson it was important to understand how and why the art was made. He also argued that when viewing Aboriginal art within an art rather than ethnological museum, one can observe both different styles and a 'unifying spirit' and that 'to fully appreciate any work or art we must use the same sense of intuition as the artist'.<sup>51</sup> When he stated, provocatively, that it was 'possible...to appreciate visual art without any knowledge of the specific meaning and original purpose', he not only contradicted his own formerly-held position that valued knowing the production context, but waved a red rag to Berndt's social-relevance-at-all-costs bull. And charge he did!

Berndt retaliated by heavily editing Tuckson's manuscript (sometimes for the better!)<sup>52</sup> and publishing a scathing *ad hominum* attack on Tuckson in an Epilogue.<sup>53</sup> Referring to Tuckson as an 'art critic', Berndt insists on 'a fundamental cleavage between an anthropologist who writes about Aboriginal art, and an art historian, art critic or artist [no mention here of an art curator] ...between the social scientist who relies on a systematic approach to his subject, applying the rules of consistency and logical arrangement of facts, and an approach which draws most heavily on intuition'.<sup>54</sup> He elaborates:

An anthropologist is interested in the living art, and in the artists themselves...in the significance of the subject matter they produce, its meaning to them and to others; ... An artist...is interested mainly in design and form, and in interpreting these within his own particular universe of discourse. ... An art historian asks the question, where does this fit into the schema of the historical development of world art?... In classifying [art of the non-literate world] as primitive, the art historian and others have followed the approach of the unilinear evolutionist.<sup>55</sup>

The bile thickens as he parodies Tuckson's position:

His contention is based on the universality of all art, irrespective of

<sup>51</sup> J.A. (Tony) Tuckson, [Aboriginal Art and the Western World], original MS, AGNSW 1995.8, Box 22/8.3, 27pp. The published version in Berndt's *Australian Aboriginal art*, 60-68, was heavily edited by Berndt.

<sup>52</sup> Original manuscript in Tuckson archives, AGNSW: MS1995.8, Box 22. Morphy, 'Placing Indigenous art', 210 [note 11], correctly identifies a 'somewhat interventionist editorial style'. See also Richard McMillan, 'The drawings of Tony Tuckson: the establishment of a comprehensive inventory; problems of dating considered in regard to this and new biographical material', M. Art Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, 1997, 91-100.

<sup>53</sup> Ronald M. Berndt, 'Epilogue', *Australian Aboriginal art*, 69-74.

<sup>54</sup> Berndt, 'Epilogue', 69. In what appears to be a spoof of the Berndts' position, archaeologist John Clegg wrote a mock review of 'The Art of the Mugwumps', in his *Notes Towards Mathesis art*, Balmain: Clegg Calendars, 1979, Ch.1.

<sup>55</sup> Berndt, 'Epilogue', 69-70.

provenance. It is important to know exactly what this means. ... We can take an Arnhem Land bark painting. ... we [note the insincere first person plural to mask the third person singular, he] like its lines, its curves, its colouring, its boldness, its sense of balance, and so forth. ... There is no question of exploring its background. We do not ask, What is it for, and what does it mean to the people for whom it was produced? Instead, we simply interpret it in our own terms.<sup>56</sup>

In his 1964 essay Tuckson may have reversed his previous position on the importance of contextual knowledge, but so too did Berndt because it would seem that his initial enthusiasm for Schapiro's visual methodology, one that combined careful visual analysis with rich iconological, historical and social analyses, was recalled only as descriptive formalism. From Berndt's account one would never imagine there was room in the mid-twentieth century discipline of art history for minds as diverse as Schapiro, Erwin Panofsky, Frederick Antal or Ernst Gombrich and the distinctive methodological challenges they embraced. Instead the discipline is dismissed as fostering vapid formalism, laced with vague concepts of intuition and emotion, so that any thoughtful hermeneutics is seen as implausible make-believe. Undoubtedly Tuckson's essay has many weaknesses, but Berndt's riposte suggests that in his mind art history and theory lack scholarly credentials, because they operate outside social science methodologies. Had Berndt like Tuckson consulted the recently-published (1959) *Encyclopaedia of World Art [EWA]*, he would have seen that the methodologies of art history were indeed substantiated by evidence and argument.<sup>57</sup> In trying to show something of the art and culture of all known societies across time and place, the *EWA*, far from validating clichés about art history privileging form and expression over content, sought evidence-based entries, albeit using historical, morphological, iconographical and contextual analyses rather than the participant observation methods of the anthropological fieldworkers. Parenthetically, it should be noted that the *EWA* entries on both 'Australia' and 'Australian Culture' were essentially written by German anthropologist Helmut Petri from the University of Cologne, using an approach that manifestly conforms to the *EWA* house style.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Berndt, 'Epilogue', 72-73. Berndt returned for a final word nine years later, coincidentally the year Tuckson died, when he reiterated the importance of 'meaning and ideas rather than visual impact' in Aboriginal art, and summarized key exhibitions but omitted all reference to Tuckson as the curator the 1960 exhibition: see R.M. Berndt and E.S. Phillips (eds), *The Australian Aboriginal heritage: an introduction through the arts*, Sydney: Australian Society for Education Through the Arts in association with Ure Smith, 1973, 39.

<sup>57</sup> *Encyclopaedia of World Art [EWA]*, vols 1-17, New York: McGraw Hill, 1959. Joseph Burke, AP Elkin & AP Trendall were the only three Australian scholars on the *EWA*'s International Council of Scholars (ICS). Of these, only Burke authored an entry (Hogarth).

<sup>58</sup> See *EWA*, vol. 2, columns 119-139. Petri's *EWA* entry included a sub-section on Australian "Art of European Origin" co-authored by Luigia Cecchini (Rome) and Dan Sproud (New York City). It should be noted that these entries challenge a claim made by Jim Berryman ('Exhibiting Western Desert Aboriginal painting in Australia's public galleries: an institutional analysis, 1981-2002', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 7, 2012, 8, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/berryman.pdf>) that Wally Caruana's

## Curatorial and art historiographical legacies

So, what were the curatorial and art historical legacies of the Tuckson exhibition? With few exceptions, before 1957 most exhibitions of Aboriginal art were held in science museums or commercial galleries.<sup>59</sup> After 1960 art museums continued to occasionally host exhibitions of Australian art. In Sydney, very shortly before he died, Tuckson curated *Aboriginal and Melanesian art* (1973) at the AGNSW, and in Perth Frank Norton, Director of the Western Australian Art Gallery, curated *Aboriginal Art: The Western Australian Art Gallery collection*, (1969) and again *Aboriginal art* (c1975), neither of which maintained the standard set by Tuckson in 1960 with artists' names, working methods and provenances. There was little momentum for change until the 1970s following the radical restructuring of the Australia Council under the chairmanship of H.C. "Nugget" Coombs when serious money was directed to the arts, including Aboriginal arts. Between 1960 and the early 70s the whole socio-cultural landscape began to change in Australia: on 28 August 1963 Yolgnu elders from Yirrkala in Eastern Arnhem Land presented the Bark Petition to the Australian House of Representatives in Canberra affirming, through painting, their ancient and on-going responsibility to the land that sustains them; on 27 May 1967 Australians voted to remove discrimination against Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders; and on 26 January 1972 the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established outside Parliament House, Canberra to highlight the need for self-determination and land rights. The first really significant change in curatorial thinking came in 1979 when Nick Waterlow curated 'European Dialogue', the 3rd Biennale of Sydney.<sup>60</sup> Malangi, Bunguwuy and Milpurrurr, bark painters from Ramangining in Arnhem Land, were included as a part of the texture of contemporary art. In 1957 the Berndts had argued for Aboriginal art as being

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*Aboriginal Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993) was the first account of Aboriginal art admitted to the world of art history.

<sup>59</sup> For example, two significant early exhibitions of Aboriginal art in museums were Charles Barrett and A.S. Kenyon's *Australian Aboriginal Art* (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, 1929) and Leonard Adam's *Primitive art exhibition* (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, 1943). Key exhibitions in commercial art galleries include Fred McCarthy's *Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art and its application* (organized by the Australian Museum at David Jones Art Gallery, Sydney, 1941) and Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt's *Arnhem Land Art* (1949), although the former included much Aboriginal-inspired European-Australian art and the latter was a public exposition of recent fieldwork. Two travelling exhibitions of Australian art that included Aboriginal art in the mix were *Art of Australia 1788-1941: an exhibition of Australian art held in the United States of America and the dominion of Canada* (curated by Theodore Sizer, catalogue compiled and edited by Sydney Ure Smith. New York: Published for Carnegie Corp. by the Museum of Modern Art, 1941) and the locally-touring *Jubilee exhibition of Australian art: Aboriginal art, early colonial art, the art of the middle period, contemporary art* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1951). The author and Catherine Speck contextualised three exhibitions of Aboriginal art in art museums in How Three Key Mid-Twentieth Century Aboriginal Art Exhibitions Tell a New Story, Museums Australia Conference, May 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Other Australian artists included Rosalie Gascoigne, Bea Maddock, Mike Parr and Imants Tillers, and European artists included Christian Boltanski, Victor Burgin, Nikolaus Lang, Anne and Patrick Poirier, and Krystof Wodiszko.

inherently contemporary: the '79 Biennale was the first major exhibition to demonstrate the fact. Throughout the 1980s and then pre-eminently from 1988 (Australia's bicentennial year), Aboriginal art, whether as discreet or mixed with settler art, came to dominate major exhibitions. In virtually all the state and national galleries, Aboriginal art takes pride of place and has become for Australians, as for the world, the art that is quintessentially Australian.<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to overlook the links between the art museum and the art market, but it is also true that this change in collection and exhibition practices reflects a new shift in consciousness within wider Australian culture. By learning to understand Aboriginal art and the different conceptions of the land embedded within it, Australians, according to Marcia Langton, come to feel they 'belong to this place rather than another'.<sup>62</sup> So the curatorial legacy has been strong.

To what extent has this shift in consciousness, so evident in the art museums, and indeed in individual art works themselves, been generative of new Australian art history? Here the answer is more complex. The earliest response to the Tuckson exhibition in the art historical literature appears to be that by poet and art critic Gary Catalano who in 1977 argued that, in addition to symbolic conventions and social contexts, artists understand that techniques and materials 'are equally important factors. Through attending to both, an outsider may work his way into the mind of the tribal artist'.<sup>63</sup> In 1988 educationalist Colin Symes and sociologist Bob Lingard, co-examining the ethnographic and aesthetic in Australian art, attributed the 'dilatatory' response of mid twentieth century art museums towards Aboriginal art as reflecting the lack of art historical scholarship in the field.<sup>64</sup>

Then as today, anthropologists<sup>65</sup> and sociologists<sup>66</sup> continue to play a prominent role in art historical literature, despite the indigenisation of the curatorium and increasing expertise of art historians, Indigenous and otherwise. In 2001 and then again in 2008 anthropologist Howard Morphy essentially defended Berndt's criticisms of Tuckson as a necessary upholding of scholarly standards, and

<sup>61</sup> There are now numerous accounts of this shift in consciousness. See especially Ian McLean, 'How Aboriginal art conquered the art world'.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in McLean, *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art*, 63.

<sup>63</sup> Gary Catalano, 'Changing response to Aboriginal art', *Meanjin Quarterly*, 36: 4, 1977, 572-81, and *An intimate Australia: the landscape and recent Australian art*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Colin Symes and Bob Lingard, 'From the ethnographic to the aesthetic: an examination of the relationship between Aboriginal and European culture in Australian art, 1788-1988, in Paul Foss, ed., *Island in the stream: myths of place in Australian culture*, Leichhardt (NSW): Pluto Press, 1988, 199.

<sup>65</sup> The most active anthropological scholar curator is Howard Morphy. See in particular his *Aboriginal art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1998; *Becoming Art*; and 'Coming to Terms with Aboriginal Art in the 1960s', in *The Cambridge companion to Australian art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011: 153-167.

<sup>66</sup> Vivien Johnson has been the most prolific sociologist writing on Aboriginal art. For example, see her *Aboriginal artists of the Western Desert: a biographical dictionary*, Roseville East: Craftsman House, 1994; *Papunya painting: out of the desert*, Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008; and *Once upon a time in Papunya*, Sydney: New South, 2010.

dismissed scholars sympathetic to Tuckson.<sup>67</sup> In his judgement, 'Western art history creates pigeonholes' and cannot cope with complexities. Furthermore, art history: 'must be reinvented to reflect the diversity of world arts' and seek to 'understand difference as well as similarity' because, in a nutshell, an 'anthropologically informed art history is needed'.<sup>68</sup> A few years later, in issue 4 of the *Journal of Art Historiography* on Australian art histories, Morphy reaffirmed his position that anthropological ways of 'knowing about' are superior to art historical attempts at 'appreciating' Aboriginal art, albeit that they function as 'two sides of the same coin'.<sup>69</sup> Far from being presented as complementary disciplines, as Morphy asserts, the 'fundamental cleavage' identified by Berndt in 1964 appears to prevail.

The most recent of the grand narratives on Australian art, Sasha Grishin's *Australian Art: A History* (2013), combines a conventional model of looking at the art through selected artists' lives within a framework that is cross-culturally 'dialectic' in intent.<sup>70</sup> He wishes to co-examine Indigenous and non-Indigenous art without resorting to 'apartheid' models where anthropologists focus only on 'remote' Aboriginal art, or 'assimilationist' ones where Aboriginal art is grafted onto a settler story. To argue his case he includes a chapter that promises an overview of key art historical writings acknowledging/embracing Aboriginal art,<sup>71</sup> although many key authors are missing, including the now-substantial literature by Aboriginal art curators and historians.<sup>72</sup> Grishin does acknowledge Andrew Sayers' important

<sup>67</sup> Morphy, 2001/2008, took issue with Richard McMillan, 'The drawings of Tony Tuckson' (above), and Terence Maloon, *Tony Tuckson, themes and variations*, Bulleen [Vic.]: Heide Park and Art Gallery, 1989, and 'Tuckson and Tradition', in *Painting forever: Tony Tuckson*, curated by Tim Fisher, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2000.

<sup>68</sup> Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery', 48.

<sup>69</sup> Howard Morphy, 'Moving the body painting into the gallery — knowing about and appreciating works of Aboriginal art', *Journal of Art Historiography* (4), 2011, 20pp, [http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/moving-the-body-images-formatted\\_01dec1.pdf](http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/moving-the-body-images-formatted_01dec1.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> Sasha Grishin, *Australian art: a history*. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2013. Rejecting what he calls an 'apartheid' model of art history (proffered by anthropologists focusing only on 'remote' Aboriginal artists), and 'assimilation' art history (where Aboriginal art is grafted onto a white discourse, or visa versa), Grishin sees 'cultural production in Australia [as] characterised by a constant and continuing dialectic' (x). Strangely, there appears to have been no Aboriginal person on Grishin's advisory "'council of twenty elders" in the discipline' (ix), if the 18 acknowledged (xi) people reflects this council.

<sup>71</sup> Grishin, *Australian Art*, chapter 1.

<sup>72</sup> Missing from the art historiography is: Bernard Smith and Terry Smith, *Australian painting 1788-1990*. 3rd ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991, ch. 15; Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian art: the twentieth century - modernism and Aboriginality*, vol. 2 of 2, St Leonards (NSW): Craftsman House, 2002; Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: identity politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, and *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art*. Selected Aboriginal authors include: Donna Leslie, *Aboriginal art: creativity and assimilation*, Melbourne: Macmillan Publishing, 2008; Hetti Perkins, *Art + soul*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2010; [Fiona Foley and Djon Mundine], *Tyerabarrbowaryaou II : I shall never become a white man*, 5th Havana Biennial, Havana, Cuba, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994; [Djon Mundine], *Bungaree: the first Australian*, Mosman (NSW): Mosman Art Gallery, 2012; Brenda L. Croft, ed., *Michael*

*Australian Art* (2001), arguing that his examination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art is in terms of 'separate parallel entities', a comment that downplays Sayer's more subtle and robust achievements.<sup>73</sup> Beyond the grand narratives of Australian art history there are many independent and academic art historians engaged with Indigenous issues. The now substantial literature in catalogue essays and scholarly papers shows the cultural shift within the discipline in Australia towards a desire to understand the implications of the local context on thinking about art -- although what is still sorely needed, according to Aboriginal experts, is far more robust criticism and analysis of the art and the exhibitions.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly it is not enough for art historians to play catch-up with anthropologists and art curators by grafting new material onto old models. If Sayers has been the most thoughtful art historian to date it is because of his pervasive questioning of Indigenous art and culture within his larger historical enterprise. Sayers' art history is not limited to a collection of facts but articulates questions about what it all might mean. His approach is reminiscent of historian Inga Clendinnen's argument that to 'embrace uncertainty and ambiguity is the historian's special duty'.<sup>75</sup> Although Tuckson lacked the scholarly credentials of Sayers his 1964 argument, such as it is, was also an attempt by the artist-curator to move beyond known back stories in order to explore other ways of knowing based on encounters with the people and their works.

## Conclusion

I have here considered what was once a novel exhibition program, born out of a lively exchange of ideas between an art curator, Indigenous artists and anthropologists, and have charted the legacy of this process within the art museum and the academy. Two key trends have emerged. One is that, initially by osmosis, the museum sector forged a new way of acknowledging and presenting Aboriginal art such that while the old didactic hang has given way to an aesthetic one, this has

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Riley: *sights unseen*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006, and *Culture warriors: Australian Indigenous art triennial*, rev. ed., Parkes (ACT): National Gallery of Australia, 2009); Margo Neale, *Emily Kame Ngwarreye: Alhalkere: paintings from Utopia* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery ; South Yarra (Vic): Macmillan, 1998; and Martin Thomas and Margo Neale (eds), *Exploring the legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land expedition*, Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Sayers, *Australian art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. The quote from Grishin, *Australian Art*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> See special Indigenous issues of *Artlink* with a broad spectrum of dominantly, but not solely, Indigenous writers: 'Blak on Blak', *Artlink*, 30: 1, June 2010; 'Artlink Indigenous: beauty and terror', *Artlink*, 31: 2, June 2011; 'Artlink Indigenous: indignation', *Artlink*, 32: 2, June 2012; 'Artlink Indigenous: re-visions', *Artlink*: 33: 2, June 2013. See also minutes from the National Indigenous Curators Forum 2013, [http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/190492/NATIONAL-INDIGENOUS-CURATORS-FORUM-2013.pdf](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/190492/NATIONAL-INDIGENOUS-CURATORS-FORUM-2013.pdf), downloaded 20 April 2014. Roger Benjamin notes the 'fear of offending the Koori community' in 'The brush with words: Criticism and Aboriginal art', in *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, 469.

<sup>75</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 'The history question: who owns the past?', *Quarterly Essay*, 23, 2006, 67

not come at a cost to the communication of cultural, critical and aesthetic drivers. The other is that writings positioning Aboriginal art and exhibitions within historical frameworks are remarkably inclusive of experts, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, and affiliated with science and art museums, art history and the social sciences, and independent scholars. This poly-vocal trend is driven as much by collaboration as respect for difference. Within art history there has been a paradigm shift.

Complex and nuanced exhibitions inform the public as much as they do the art experts. Research into the impact of key exhibitions on Australia's art history is identifying previously-unrecognised trends in the discourse.

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