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# Visible art, invisible artists?

The incorporation of Aboriginal objects  
and knowledge in Australian museums

*Ilana Seltzer Goldstein*

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## Abstract

The creative power and the economic valorization of Indigenous Australian arts tend to surprise outsiders who come into contact with it. Since the 1970s Australia has seen the development of a system connecting artist cooperatives, support policies and commercial galleries. This article focuses on one particular aspect of this system: the gradual incorporation of Aboriginal objects and knowledge by the country's museums. Based on the available bibliography and my own fieldwork in 2010, I present some concrete examples and discuss the paradox of the omnipresence of Aboriginal art in Australian public space. After all this is a country that as late as the nineteenth century allowed any Aborigine close to a white residence to be shot, and which until the 1970s removed Indigenous children from their families for them to be raised by nuns or adopted by white people. Even today the same public enchanted by the indigenous paintings held in the art galleries of Sydney or Melbourne has little actual contact with people of Indigenous descent.

**Keywords:** Australian Aboriginal art; Indigenous art; anthropology and museums; 'artification.'

## Resumo

A pujança criativa e a valorização econômica da arte indígena australiana surpreendem os estrangeiros que dela se aproximam. Desde os anos 1970, vem se constituindo, na Austrália, um sistema que compreende cooperativas de artistas, políticas de fomento e galerias comerciais. O foco do presente artigo recai sobre um aspecto particular desse sistema: a gradual incorporação de objetos e conhecimentos aborígenes pelos museus. Com base na bibliografia existente e em pesquisa de campo realizada em 2010, apresentarei exemplos concretos e discutirei o paradoxo da onipresença da arte aborígene no espaço

público australiano. Afinal, trata-se de um país que, no século XIX, permitia atirar em qualquer aborígine próximo a uma residência de brancos e que, até os anos 1970, removia crianças indígenas, para que fossem criadas por freiras ou adotadas por brancos. Até hoje, o mesmo público que se deleita com pinturas indígenas em museus de Sydney ou Melbourne tem pouco contato com pessoas de ascendência indígena.

**Palavras-chave:** Arte aborígine australiana; arte indígena; antropologia e museus; ‘artificação.’

# Visible art, invisible artists?

The incorporation of Aboriginal objects and knowledge in Australian museums<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: from artefacts to artworks

Activities more or less similar to what we call artistic practices were traditionally omnipresent among Indigenous peoples living in the continent today known as Australia. These activities were associated with an intense ritual life: dance, body painting, rock painting, earth drawings and music. However the adaptation and recreation of some of these practices for the appreciation and consumption of white people are historically and socially situated processes. The construction of the contemporary Indigenous art system in Australia is the outcome of diverse agencies over the course of the twentieth century. And although it engenders a series of unresolved tensions, it has attained institutional and commercial levels unimaginable to many readers from other countries.

It may be useful to provide some quick examples. A painting by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, from the Anmatyerre language group, who live in the Australian desert, reached the final selling price of 2.4 million Australian dollars at an auction held by Sotheby's in July 2007. The work was purchased by one of the country's most important fine art institutions, the National Gallery of Australia. Made in 1977, the large canvas painting condenses various mythic fragments called Dreamings in the Aboriginal English. Between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, also from the Anmatyerre people, known for her large brush strokes and her refined sense of colour, were shown next to paintings by Mondrian, Miró and Kandinsky in the exhibition 'On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century,' at MoMa in New York.

The anthropologist James Clifford (1998: 224) developed a model that allows objects from traditional societies to be positioned in four 'zones,' based on the utilitarian or aesthetic purpose attributed to them, and on the degree

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an enhanced version of a paper presented at the 28<sup>th</sup> Brazilian Anthropology Meeting, held between the 2nd and 5th of July 2012 in São Paulo, Brazil.

of proximity to their original context of production. The 'zone' of 'authentic artworks' includes items valued by artists, curators and collectors; the 'zone' of 'authentic artefacts' comprises examples collected by researchers, held in historical and ethnographic museums; the 'zone' of the 'inauthentic artworks' includes falsifications; and finally the 'zone' of 'inauthentic artefacts' comprehends tourist souvenirs and mass-produced objects for everyday use. Clifford argues that an object can shift from one 'zone' to another, changing its value and status, which increase as it moves from 'cultural artefact' to 'artistic object' and from 'inauthentic' to 'authentic.'

The sociologist Roberta Shapiro (2007: 137) proposes a similar approach with her concept of 'artification,' referring to the potentially infinite transformation of objects and practices previously considered non-artistic into art. The producer starts to be called an artist, fabrication becomes creation and observers are turned into audience. This is not just a discursive strategy: these reclassifications lead to the emergence of exhibition spaces, new forms of legitimization, new artistic forms and the broadening of the criteria used for acquiring works for collections.

Such processes can be very clearly observed in the case of Australian Indigenous arts. A change of 'zone' occurs, for example, when the same traditional iconography that populates desert traditional paintings is used to decorate sandals and keyrings in souvenir shops, or waste bins and cash machines in Australian big cities. Or when paintings made with natural pigments on tree bark, collected as 'authentic artefacts' by Baldwin Spencer in his field work in Arnhem Land, between 1911 and 1920, are exhibited in fine art museums. The process of 'artification' is also revealed when we realize that the same works by Indigenous Australian painters rejected in the 1990s by the Cologne Art Fair, whose organizers refused to accept that an Aborigine could use acrylic paint and brushes, are today present in this kind of event without any problem.<sup>2</sup>

Departing from the reflection on changes in the meanings of objects, associated with their circulation in new spaces and networks, the first part of

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2 At the Cologne Art Fair in 1994 the participation of the gallery owner Gabrielle Pizzi was vetoed with the following argument: "you do not exhibit authentic Aboriginal art" (McDONALD 1994: n.p.). At this time, 'authentic primitive' art was supposed to be created only in order to meet the artist's own spiritual needs without any relation to the surrounding society.

this text describes the history of how objects produced by Aboriginal<sup>3</sup> peoples in Australia have been received by the white population, as well as the mediations that have enabled the circulation of Indigenous arts in the country. The second part, based on my own field work experience,<sup>4</sup> explores the ways in which the artistic production of Aboriginal peoples makes its presence felt in white Australia today.

## **1 The legitimization and institutionalization of Indigenous arts in Australia**

From the start of colonization<sup>5</sup> until the First World War, ethnographic collectionism reigned in Australia: weapons, adornments and other utensils collected by travellers were used to represent the material culture of the Indigenous peoples in ethnographic collections and anthropological books. Among the items collected at the end of the nineteenth century are the first records of eucalyptus bark paintings.

From 1920 to 1940, traditional Aboriginal iconography was incorporated by the Australian modernist movement, somewhat similarly to what happened in Brazil. White Australian artists and designers, led by Margaret Preston, were inspired by the Aboriginal visual repertoire to forge an Australian national identity, incorporating the native iconography into their

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3 In Australia, the term *Indigenous* is used to encompass all the traditional peoples living both on the continent and on the Torres Strait Islands. The term *Aborigine*, in turn, refers specifically to those groups inhabiting the continent. Despite the huge linguistic variety, the Aborigines of the continent share a mythic complex called the Dreaming, as well as various similarities in their kinship systems. The Torres Strait groups, on the other hand, located in the far northeast of the country, are culturally closer to the peoples of Melanesia. I adopt this terminology in my own work.

4 I stayed in Australia between January and April 2010, funded by a scholarship from CNPq, as a visiting student at the Australian National University, under the kind supervision of Howard Morphy. The trip formed part of the research culminating in my doctoral thesis, presented at UNICAMP (Goldstein 2012).

5 The European colonization of Australia is relatively recent. On 29th April 1770, Captain Cook of the British Royal Navy anchored at the location where Sydney lies today. Systematic colonization would begin after the independence of the North American colonies in 1783. The British wanted to make clear that the newfound southern land already had an owner. But above all it needed a solution to its large prison population: in 1787 the British Parliament approved the deportation of 200 convicts to Australia. Many other waves followed. From 1851 onwards the colony experienced a burst of economic growth with the discovery of gold, which supplemented sheep breeding, introduced in 1797. The Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901, uniting six independent states and a territory under a single Constitution. On the history of Australia, consult among others Teo & White 2003, Dennon et al. 2000, Davison, Hirst & Macintyre 2001.

objects, prints and paintings – without, though, being interested in their traditional meanings (Edwards & Peel 2005).

The 1950s saw the first inclusion of an Aborigine painter in the Euro-American art system: Albert Namatjira successfully sold his watercolours depicting the desert landscape. He was also the first Indigenous person to obtain Australian citizenship, after becoming famous. While Namatjira's work provoked criticisms because of its use of a technique and a style popular among whites, he only painted trees and mountains symbolically important to his family and his clan. The so-called Hermansburg School started by Namatjira perpetuates his style even today (French et al. 2008).

In 1958 the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney acquired and displayed a collection of sculpted funeral hollow logs made in Arnhem Land in the tropical north. The fact generated controversy in the press, for it was the first time that an Australian art museum included Indigenous works in its collection.

At the beginning of the 1970s the foundation of Papunya Tula Indigenous cooperative led to the emergence of a new artistic movement in the desert. This took place one year after the white art teacher Geoff Bardon had encouraged his Indigenous pupils and their relatives to use acrylic paint on paper and canvas to reproduce designs traditionally applied on the earth and the body (Myers 2002, Johnson 2006). At first the cooperative was ignored and it encountered considerable resistance, taking around ten years to establish itself on the art market. Later, however, the success of Papunya Tula led to the proliferation of Indigenous arts and crafts cooperatives and to the multiplication of regional substyles over the ensuing decades.

Still in the 1970s, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam of the Australian Labour Party launched a campaign supporting the 'self-determination' of Indigenous peoples – instead of their "assimilation", which was the former official ideology. In 1973 the Aboriginal Arts Board was created by the government. Composed also of Indigenous representatives, this entity regularly bought works for public collections over a twenty-year period, some of them presented to embassies and museums around the world, others included in national and international exhibitions. The objective was to open up the market for this kind of production, while educating the gaze of the public, curators and collectors.

The 1980s were marked by the inauguration of new wings exhibiting Indigenous art in Australia's leading public museums. Little by little they began to dedicate some rooms to permanent exhibitions or temporary shows of Indigenous art and set up specific departments and curators for this type of production. The influx of Aboriginal painting into commercial galleries in the big cities during the 1980s was another watershed. Gabriele Pizzi opened the first gallery of this kind in 1982 and sealed a contract to represent the Papunya Tula cooperative in Melbourne. In 1987 she also began to sell the work of artists from the Yuendumu community. In 1991 Pizzi organized shows of Aboriginal artists in various countries like the Soviet Union, Italy, India, Spain and South Korea. She revealed names that are nowadays famous, like John Marwurndjul and Emily Kngwarreye. Other commercial galleries subsequently opened: Alcaston, also in Melbourne, and Hoggart in Sydney, for example.

An event in New York in 1988 was the first landmark in the international diffusion of Australian Aboriginal art: the show 'Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia' united 103 sculptures and paintings. Enthused by the show, the entrepreneur John Kluge began a private collection that over the course of the 1990s became one of the most important in the world and today belongs to the University of Virginia (Peterson et al. 2008).

In the 1990s and 2000s Aboriginal curators and 'urban' artists appeared on the scene. Artists and curators of Indigenous origin, raised in the cities, fluent in English, aware of their rights and often educated at universities, started to produce works and critical discourses with a political tone, influenced by the post-colonial debate. In the mid-1990s Sotheby's held an exclusive auction of Australian Aboriginal art. At the same moment the first legal disputes emerged in which gift and textile companies were accused of using images produced by Aboriginal artists without permission and without due remuneration (Janke 2003).

It was also at the end of the twentieth century that Aboriginal art established itself internationally. In Europe the exhibition 'Aratjara' was inaugurated in Germany and later taken to England and Denmark between 1993 and 1994. In 2001 and 2002 a show of bark paintings, 'The Native Born,' organized by the Aboriginal curator Djon Mundine, toured throughout the world, including Brazil. In 2006, the Musée du Quai Branly was inaugurated in Paris with permanent interventions by eight Aboriginal artists from Australia





Figure 1. Poster and folder for Emily Kngwarreye's show in Japan. Publicity photo.

included in its edifice. The commission responsible for curating this project also included two professionals of Aboriginal descent, Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft (Australia Council for the Arts 2006). In 2008 an individual show by Emily Kngwarreye, organized by Margo Neale, an Aboriginal curator, attracted large crowds in Osaka and Tokyo.

Today there are more than 100 cooperatives of Indigenous artists spread across Australia, and a similar number of commercial galleries in the state capitals and tourist cities. The indigenous segment corresponds to 15% of the total art market sales in Australia, moving 300 million Australian dollars per year (Altman 2005). The number of Indigenous artists who define themselves as such in Australia is estimated to exceed 7000. There are also dozens of distinct regional and individual styles (Mundine 2005, Healy 2005, Myers 2002, Könning 2002, Mclean 1988 and Morphy 2008).

### 1.1 The diverse agents involved and the mediations required

Among the main social actors helping to maintain what is called the Indigenous Arts Industry in Australia we find the arts centres, cooperatives

directed by representatives from Aboriginal communities and often run by outside staff hired by them. In addition to promoting local artistic production, the arts centres which I visited,<sup>6</sup> as well as those on which ethnographic accounts exist, not only store and publicize artworks produced by community members, but they also perform the role of health centres, schools and political venues where meetings are held, demands are formulated and trips organized. Sometimes, it is true, the coordinator of an arts centre – normally white – may interfere too much in what the artists produce, making recommendations based on what pleases the market and ignoring local cultural questions. But in principle the Aboriginal directorate can dismiss the coordinator if the associated artists are unhappy.

Two regional associations were set up to represent, advise and train indigenous artists and arts centres. The Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists was founded in 1987. Based in Darwin, ANKAAA's members include 5000 individual artists. Its statute defines its objectives as strengthening indigenous cultures, supporting the development of the art production chain, fomenting new talent, and training young professionals to work in the sector. Meanwhile the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres, Desert, was founded in 1990 to provide assistance to arts centres in the Central Desert. Based in Alice Springs, it supports initiatives that certify the origin of artworks, pass on most revenue to the Aboriginal population, support the sector's professionalization and promote ethics in commercial relations. The strategies of both organizations, which receive direct public support, range from the organization of art fairs to the provision of management training

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6 I have been to the Warlukurlangu Arts Centre, in the Yuendumu settlement, in the arid region of the Central Desert, where artists use colourful acrylic paint on canvas, and the paintings usually function like a sort of aerial map of the region, highlighting sacred places, as well as the deeds of the ancestors in those places. I also visited Buku Larrngay Mulka, in the Yirrkala settlement, in the tropical region of Arnhem Land, where artists make bark paintings, wooden sculptures, paper prints and pieces woven from fibre. At Yirrkala, besides its spiritual dimension, artistic production sometimes assumes an eminently political role. At Yuendumu, the predominant ethnic group is Warlpiri, while Yirrkala is traditionally Yolngu land. My stay at both art centres was short due to visa problems, but before, during and after the trip I was lucky to have valuable and generous interlocutors, some of whom I take this opportunity to thank publicly: Howard Morphy, Adrian Newstead, Alison French, Beverly Knight, Bryan Hooper, Cath Bowdler, Cecília Alfonso, Chrischona Schmidt, Christina Davidson, Christine Godden, Diana James, Franchesca Cubillo, Gnarnayarrahe Waitairie, Helen Hansen, Hetti Perkins, John Altman, John Carty, Laura Fischer, Margo Neale, Merryn Gates, Otto Jungarrayi Sims, Philippe Peltier, Robyn McKenzie, Wally Caruana, Will Stubbs and Wukun Wanambi.

courses, including the organization of a national network and the creation of communication channels.

Neither can the role of anthropologists be ignored. They have participated and still participate actively in the process of consolidating the recognition of Aboriginal art as fine art, working as curators, writing essays for catalogues, producing documentaries and biographies of individual artists, and publishing critiques in the press – the case, for example, of Christine Nicholls, Fred Myers, John Altman, Howard Morphy and Marcia Langton (Fisher, 2012).

Moreover Indigenous art has become an arena in which forms of individual and collective emancipation can be experienced and political positions expressed. Eloquent examples include the bark petition typed and then elaborately painted by Yolngu leaders in 1963 in protest against the installation of a mining company in the northeast of Arnhem Land (Morphy 2008); the baticks made by the women of Utopia between 1976 and 1978 to prove that their community was economically viable and capable of surviving autonomously when they received the right to land (which came in 1979); or the irony of the urban artist Richard Bell, who won the Telstra Award, Australia's most important prize for Indigenous art, with a painting sarcastically entitled 'Aboriginal art is a white thing' (2003).



Figure 2. 'Scientia e Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem) or Aboriginal art is a white thing.' Richard Bell, 2003. Acrylic on canvas. Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

Although Richard Bell's theorem is exaggerated – since contemporary Aboriginal art is *also* a white thing but not *only* a white thing – the artist raises a genuinely paradoxical issue. The works of Aboriginal artists are bought, studied and displayed by whites, while motifs from the traditional iconography decorate tourist souvenirs and even the airplanes of the national airline, Qantas. Yet the indigenous communities continue to face serious housing and health problems: their average life expectancy, for example, is 17 years less than that of the white population, and black people are practically unseen in the streets of Sydney and Melbourne. In the next section I shall look to how the presence of people of Indigenous descent in the Australian public sphere is inversely proportional to the importance of Indigenous artworks in Australian collections and museums.

## **2 Indigenous works and values in the Australian exhibition circuit**

As mentioned in the previous section, the process of Australian museological institutions acquiring works by Aboriginal artists was slow, becoming visible only at the beginning of the 1990s. The collector and curator Wally Caruana recalls that in 1984 so little was known about Aboriginal communities and their artistic productions that a Sydney newspaper published a lengthy report on “a painter called Oenpelli” – when, in fact, this is the name of an entire community in Arnhem Land.<sup>7</sup> Also in the 1980s, the National Gallery of Australia refused to purchase Aboriginal acrylic paintings made in the Western Desert, alleging that it “already possesses an example of that kind of technique” (Johnson 2006: 39).

Today the main Australian museums have a department of Indigenous affairs. In the art museums and science museums alike, the Aboriginal viewpoint is now usually taken into consideration in different ways. In Melbourne, for example, the entire ground floor of the Ian Potter Centre, an annex of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery of Victoria, is dedicated to the Indigenous peoples of continental Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. Diverse media, languages and artistic regions are represented in both traditional and unusual formats. There are video projections with statements from Indigenous artists about their creative process and the

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7 Interview with Wally Caruana conducted by the author on 08/03/2010, in Canberra.

meaning of the works. The labels contain detailed information, including the artist's name and ethnic group, the region where he/she lives, date of birth and the date the work was acquired.

At the Melbourne Museum, which specializes in history and science, Aboriginal societies are considered as producers of knowledge. Displayed on the wall of one of the lobbies are two gigantic tapestries, called Federation Tapestries, designed and embroidered collectively by whites and Aborigines. Next to them a video is shown explaining how the tapestries were made, a kind of "book of images with relevant passages of the nation's history." Inside the museum the Bunjilaka space is exclusively dedicated to the Aboriginal societies of Victoria state, with exhibitions selected through public competitions aimed at Indigenous artists. Bunjilaka's opening was preceded by six years of discussion with Aboriginal representatives from the region and marked by a smoking ceremony, traditionally important in events such as births and funerals.

In the 'Forest Gallery' of the same Melbourne Museum a text explains: "Aboriginal peoples and scientists both describe the role of water in modelling our landscape." Next to the graphics on the water evaporation cycle from the physical viewpoint, there is a video with an elder from the Wurundjeri ethnic group telling how the Yarra river was created by ancestors. In the section on the seasons of the year, both the Euro-American and the Aboriginal divisions are explained – the latter comprising between five and seven seasons, linked to floods, dry spells and the presence of particular plant and animal species.

The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, for its part, inaugurated a new wing in 2010 to hold its collection of Australian Indigenous art, announced as the largest in the world. There are 11 galleries with natural lighting – similar to the light in which the paintings are made – where 600 works are on permanent display. In contrast to the rest of the museum, entry to the Indigenous art wing is free. According to Franchesca Cubillo, former curator of the National Gallery of Australia, visits have increased by 20% since the opening of the new wing (personal communication 2011). Interestingly when I visited the National Gallery, Aboriginal paintings were also on display in the abstract minimalism room. This was the case of John Marwurndjul [c. 1952], of the Kuninjku ethnic group, displayed next to Ian Fairweather [1891-1974], a white Australian. Figures 3a and 3b, shown on page 12, are not exactly the same ones I saw in the museum, but they give an idea of the type of dialogue intended.





Figure 3a. John Murwurdjul.  
'Mardayin – theme 1,' 1997. Natural  
pigment on tree bark. Annandale  
Galleries.



Figure 3b. Ian Fairweather. 'Monastery,' 1961. Acrylic paint and gouache on card and wood.  
National Gallery of Australia collection.

The National Gallery of Australia also hosts an Indigenous Art Triennial, the first version of which presented the work of 30 artists from all Australian states, encompassing a variety of languages and media, such as acrylic on canvas, natural ochre on bark, textile works, sculpture, basketry, multimedia works, photography, printing and installations. The theme chosen by the curator Brenda Croft, herself of Aboriginal origin, was 'Culture Warriors.' The show, exhibited between October 2007 and February 2008, was accompanied by the publication of a catalogue with critical texts. The works displayed were acquired by the museum.

The National Gallery of Australia is a signatory and promoter of a set of guidelines for public collections of Indigenous art, the *Indigenous Australian Charter of Principles for Publicly Funded Collecting Institutions* (2009), which among other precepts establishes the following:

1. When undertaking any dealing with an Indigenous artist or his or her representative or community, a publicly funded collecting institution has regard to relevant domestic and international laws, studies existing codes of ethics, and consults the parties involved at all stages.
2. Public collections respect not only the moral and intellectual property rights established by law, but also the specific cultural rights, in order to determine and implement the appropriate treatment of any culturally sensitive information, including the citation of a deceased person's name. This applies to exhibitions, promotional material, websites, catalogues and so on.
3. When acquiring or commissioning a work of art from an Indigenous artist or collective, the terms of the contract must be clearly explained and recorded in the way that contracted party wishes. These records must contain the sum paid and form of payment, the purpose, the type of work acquired or commissioned, etc.
4. The institutions commit to avoid becoming involved in anti-ethical initiatives or those harmful to Indigenous individuals and communities, such as the divulgence of inappropriate information and representations.
5. Public collections should only acquire Indigenous artworks when the origin has been verified and after certifying that the rights of the artists have been and are being respected.<sup>8</sup>

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8 The complete charter is available at: <http://nga.gov.au/ATSIART>. Consulted on 13/05/2011. Two other



Figure 4. Smoking ceremony in the opening of the exhibition 'Marnti Waranjanga: we are travelling,' at the Museum of Australian Democracy, in Canberra. Photo: Ilana Goldstein, 2010.

In addition, smoking ceremonies (Fig. 4) were held at the exhibition openings which I attended at various institutions.<sup>9</sup> Green leaves chosen by the host group – responsible for the local Dreamings – are burnt, the smoke covers those present to purify and strengthen their bodies, also clearing the negative energies from the place. At the end the reasons for the smoking may be mentioned, and then the ceremony is usually closed with songs and percussion (produced by beating boomerangs and clapsticks).

At the Sydney Biennale, it was only in the 1980s that the presence of Indigenous artists began to increase. At the penultimate version of the event, there were works by 'remote' Aboriginal artists, i.e. who live in communities far from the major cities, as well as by 'urban' artists of Indigenous descent raised in big cities.

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documents contain guidelines for museums in Australia: 'Taking the time: Museums and galleries, cultural protocols and communities. A resource guide,' and 'Previous possessions, new obligations.'

9 Smoking is common to various ethnic groups in Australia. The smoke is produced by burning plants native to the region. At funerals the deceased person's siblings are responsible for the smoking. On other occasions the elders lead it. Smoking is also a way of welcoming visitors. This became recently recurrent at civil and commemorative events in Australia (Pascoe 2009).





Figure 5. 'Jumping Castle War Memorial.' Brook Andrews, 2010. Installation for the 17th Sydney Biennial. Publicity photo.

Figure 5, above, shows an installation by an artist living in Melbourne, who is also a university professor and editor. Produced especially for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennale, it involved an inflatable castle, an allusion to the aristocratic European monuments, decorated though with designs from the Wiradjuri – the artist's ethnic group.

One provocative detail was that only adults over the age of 16 could play on this kind of trampoline, suggesting that responsibility and a fully-formed spirit were needed to face the challenge. The inflatable walls were encrusted with replicas of Aborigine heads, often decapitated by the English colonizers and sent back to Britain as trophies.

There are also specific awards in Australia for Indigenous arts, which help legitimize Aboriginal artefacts as *art* and end up dictating trends and influencing the work of new artists. For the past 27 years the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin has held the most important event of the kind, the 'Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards' (NATSIAA). Sponsored by a telecommunications company, the Telstra award serves as a stage for new artists and may launch individual careers. Around one hundred works are pre-selected. The award categories are: painting, tree bark painting, work on paper and three-dimensional work. The winners receive \$30,000 each. The Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth also promotes a 'Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards,' worth \$45,000. In the

state of Queensland the 'National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) Northern Rivers Region Aboriginal Art Awards' takes place and in Victoria the 'Victorian Indigenous Art Awards.'

Meanwhile the Araluen Cultural Precinct, in Alice Springs, hosts a large event each September called 'Desert Mob'. It comprises an exhibition of artists affiliated to Indigenous art centres, accompanied by a catalogue. Each art centre chooses ten works to send to the exhibition and, at the end, the Araluen Cultural Precinct acquires some of them for its collection. An open-air art fair and a symposium of artists and art centre representatives, with simultaneous translation, are organized in parallel. Since 1990 the 'Desert Mob' functions as an opportunity for the face-to-face interaction between Aboriginal artists, researchers, curators, commercial gallery owners and private collectors.

Canberra's National Museum of Australia, for its part, recently supported an interesting initiative combining artistic production, oral history and job generation. The 'Canning Stock Route Project' reconstructed memories around an old and remote Australian road and, at the same time, generated professional training opportunities for Aboriginal photographers, filmmakers, curators and administrative assistants, culminating in an exhibition. The Canning Stock Route was constructed between 1908 and 1910 in the north of Australia to enable cattle to be transported across desertic regions. Using forced Aboriginal labour, water sources were identified and wells built along a 1850 kilometre stretch of road, cutting across the territories of nine ethnic groups. The road ended up being seldom used because the wells that had been built on sacred water sources were later destroyed by the Aborigines of the region and cattle hands were killed during the first crossings. The government rebuilt some wells in the 1930s and carried out maintenance on the road during Second World War in case an evacuation from the north was required. Today the Canning Stock Route is only used by adventure expeditions with 4WD vehicles. But for groups who lived in the area, the construction had tragic consequences – including slave labour, forced change of homeland and violent police reprisals.

In order to recuperate these experiences, even today absent from official history, a non-government entity from Perth called FORM organized, in 2007, trips from representatives of the nine ethnic groups affected by the construction of the Canning Stock Route to areas close to the road, encouraging them to tell the stories that they know and to paint them. Aboriginal consultants



Figure 6. Curators preparing the exhibition for the 'Canning Stock Route Project.'  
Photo by Ross Swanborough, 2008.

and translators were hired to help with logistical, geographic and cultural issues. Aboriginal apprentices in photography and video documented the entire process under the supervision of experienced professionals. Well-known Aboriginal artists were invited to run workshops with the painting apprentices who took part in the project. Nine art centres and an anthropologist were also involved (Webster 2009). Together with the National Museum of Australia, the sponsors were the Aboriginal Lands Trust of the Federal Government, an aluminium and bauxite company, and the Western Australia State Lottery. The museum bought the 100 pictures produced during the project and produced an exhibition, which later travelled from Canberra to Beijing.

In the photo above (Figure 6), the line marked in the centre of the warehouse is a way for the curators, while organizing the exhibition, to represent the road and thereby situate where each painting was made (Webster 2009).

Some other facts deserve mention. In the city of Alice Springs, the capital of the desert, I have found around 40 commercial galleries selling Aboriginal paintings from the most quick-made to the most impressive and sophisticated ones. The New Parliament in Canberra is located in front of a mosaic designed by Michael Jagamara Nelson, a member of the Walpiri people from the Central Desert. According to the artist, the colourful mosaic, structured in concentric circles, indicates that it is a site for important meetings. Inside the Parliament building Aboriginal paintings hang on the walls, too. During the celebrations for the opening of the Sydney Olympics in 2000, the *Leitmotiv*

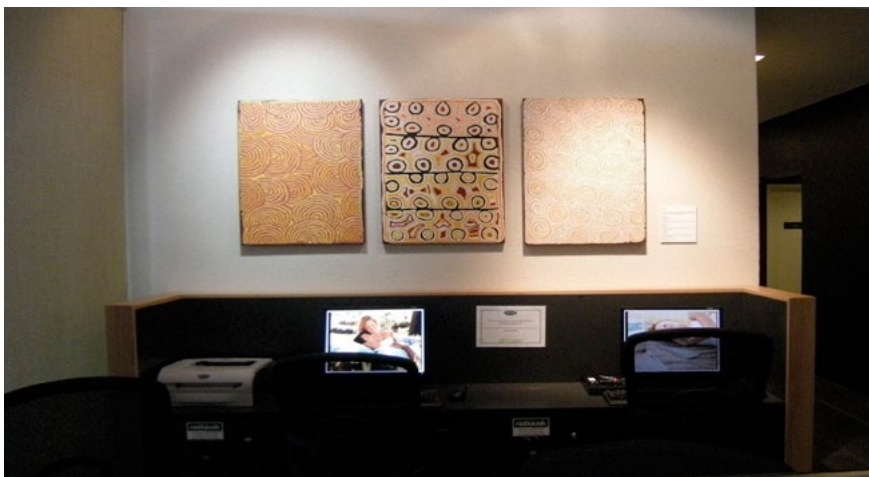


Figure 7. Vibe Hotel, Darwin. Photo by Ilana Goldstein, 2010.

was Aboriginal dance and songs. The benches along the famous Bondi Beach, in Sydney, are decorated with traditional Indigenous motifs. Finally, Vibe, one of Darwin's most chic hotels, located on the seafront, has Aboriginal paintings on its walls, as it can be seen in the image above (Figure 7).

All the forms depicted above through which Aboriginal arts and cultures are inserted in the exhibition circuit, in public spaces and in the market in Australia help to construct the national imaginary and reflect – even if upside-down – the nature of the relations between the national society and its Others (Robins cited in Peterson 2008).

According to Ivan Karp (1991), two strategies are typically used to represent other societies and their respective artistic productions: exoticization, which emphasizes differences; and assimilation, which approximates the Other of the spectator through idealization. The first strategy (exoticization) tends to deny rational calculation to nonliterate societies, while the second (romanticized assimilation) usually projects virtues valued by ourselves onto these societies, such as ecological awareness.

The museological approaches observable in Australia do not fit well into either of these poles. Instead they seem to combine logics and elements of diverse societies, at least at a symbolic and discursive level. In fact this is a tendency shared by other post-colonial museums in search of reflexivity, aware that the ways of displaying objects are not neutral and that the museological discourse must be multivocal, without ignoring the political questions involving the collections (Duarte 1998).

This new theoretical and ideological approach of those responsible for museums and exhibitions inspires the adoption of innovations, among which the expansion in the commissions responsible for organizing exhibitions. They tend to be formed by multidisciplinary teams that include not only different professionals from the museum, along with the conservation staff and anthropologists, but also in some cases members of the ethnic groups to whom the displayed objects belong (Duarte 1998: 21).

In fact there exist between 20 and 40 Indigenous curators working in Australia today at public institutions or as independent consultants. According to Hetti Perkins, former curator of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, the only comparable situations are in Africa and the United States. At first the Indigenous curators in Australia were voluntary, but now they have succeeded in getting equal pay and have earned respect from their colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

Margo Neale, curator of the Aboriginal Department of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, told me that Australia's Indigenous curators can come from different backgrounds, having begun their careers either in art centres in remote communities, which is the case of Djon Mundine; in commercial galleries, like Hetti Perkins; giving art classes in schools, like herself; or in ethnographic museums, as occurred with Franchesca Cubillo.

Franchesca Cubillo, a former curator of Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, narrated to me her family and personal trajectory, which I shall summarize here since it strikes me as emblematic. Her grandmother, who lived in the Borrooloola community in the Northern Territory, was taken to a mixed shelter for children where she studied up to basic primary school level. She learnt how to clean and cook and was then sent to a white family. She married and had a daughter, Franchesca's mother, who lived most of her life in Darwin, studied up to advanced primary school level, became an auxiliary nurse in a hospital and, at the age of 40, gained a degree with support from a university program for Aborigines. Franchesca, in the third generation, studied anthropology in Adelaide. She began her career as a volunteer at the South Australian Museum where she discovered her vocation. She moved to Canberra to work at the National Museum where she was responsible for repatriation requests. In Darwin she became the senior curator of the city's

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10 Information obtained in individual interviews with three Aboriginal curators: Franchesca Cubillo (Canberra, 08/03/2010), Margo Neale (Canberra, 15/03/2010) and Hetti Perkins (Sydney, 26/03/2010).

main art museum. Later she received an invitation to assume the post at the *National Gallery of Australia*, in 2009, where I have met her. In 2012 the last news I had was that she had left her position in order to undertake her doctorate.

Francesca Cubillo explains her double position as curator and Aborigine as follows: “An Indigenous curator always considers an artwork within its cultural context. I see Aboriginal art within Aboriginal culture. I try to convince museums to make acquisitions on the basis of the meaning of the pieces” (Cubillo, personal communication, 2010). Margo Neale, for her part, told me that the space for them is increasing because, today, “the Australian museological institutions must have Aboriginal curators. It is the protocol, it is also politically correct” (Neale, personal communication, 2010).

## Conclusion

The valorization of the Indigenous artistic production in Australia reveals an attempt at ‘Reconciliation’ – the official term used by the federal government – between white Australia and Aboriginal Australia. Contemporary Australian Indigenous art seems to be a channel of negotiation between colonizers and colonized. However, it is worth remembering that from the start of English occupation until the mid-twentieth century, Indigenous children, especially the ‘half cast’ (considered more capable of assimilation), were forcibly removed from their families. It was believed that they would have more chances for development in reformatories or when adopted by white families. Australian colonial laws like the 1816 Martial Law in New South Wales, allowed white men to shoot if they saw Aborigines carrying bows and arrows or too close to their houses. In addition, the ‘Citizenship certificates’ for Indigenous peoples that came out in the 1940s were given only to those who promised to abandon traditional life completely and to keep a distance from other Aborigines (Cameron 2000).

If the visibility and the support for Indigenous arts in Australia enable the intercultural dialogue and, above all, make national society more aware than before of the cultural wealth and the rights of Indigenous populations, they cannot erase tragic events of the past or even solve some of the problems of the present. One of these is the abusive consumption of toxic substances, especially alcohol and petrol, which leads to complications like diabetes, high blood pressure and neurological damage. This situation – tragically similar



to that of other national post-colonial contexts – arises from the ‘social suffering’ generated by the lack of meaning in everyday activities and the sensation of permanent outside control (Schmidt 2005). A large part of Indigenous lives became regulated by laws and mechanisms imposed by the whites. And although Social Welfare funds allow the purchase of food, medicines, blankets and so on, they end up worsening the vacuum left by the steady abandonment of traditional activities as hunting and ceremonial life. Chrischona Schmidt (2005) uses the term *boredom* to describe the state of mind that leads Aborigines to intensify the consumption of drugs. In these altered states, they may become violent and engage in acts of vandalism, which trigger more control measures from the government, generating a vicious circle.

As a specialist in human rights of Indigenous descent aptly summarized, “whites can see Aboriginal art, however they are incapable of seeing Aboriginal peoples. They like Aboriginal painting, but do not want to protect the artists (...). We are at risk of being seen as something merely symbolic” (Berendt cited in Carvalho 2012: n.p.).

‘Samson and Delilah’ (Thornton 2009), an Australian film that won awards at the Cannes and Dublin film festivals, shows precisely how the day-to-day life of Aborigines can be difficult. The film’s protagonists are Warlpiri and Arrernte young people without previous experience in acting, but they perform surprisingly well. In the storyline, Delilah and her grandmother live together in a remote community of Central Australia, in a relation of affection and respect. A white trader appears occasionally, bringing canvases and paints. He takes away the ready paintings and hands over a tiny percentage to the elderly artist. When the grandmother dies, the girl decides to flee from the desert to the city with her boyfriend Samson. The young couple end up living under a viaduct, close to a stream, in Alice Springs. Delilah tries to sell street drawings for the two of them to survive but fails. She starts to steal. Samson begins to sniff petrol the whole time. The health of both deteriorates. They hardly exchange a word, communicating by gestures and looks. The film is at once beautiful and sad, like the reality that inspires it.

It is true that the creativity of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples, along with their capacity to give fresh meanings to traditional objects and practices, signalize that to some extent a two-way relation exists between Indigenous artists and the national society. It is also true that the visibility of the artistic creations of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples attracts sympathy from a section

of the white population to the Indigenous cause, and stimulates Indigenous communities to invest time and energy in a culturally significant and economically profitable activity.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind that the nation that now implements initiatives aimed at the cultural valorization of Aborigines also works to make their lives meaningless.<sup>11</sup> Neither can it be forgotten that whites' economic interests move the Indigenous art market and influence the public policies concerning this artistic production.

In sum, the forms, designs, colours and even fragments of the worldview of Indigenous peoples find themselves dispersed throughout the museums, the art market and shops of Australia. But this phenomenon amounts above all to the aesthetic appreciation of objects and to the museological presentation of cultural fragments. Flesh-and-blood Aborigines are still seldom visible or influential in Australian society. It remains to see whether their incorporation in the art system and in the exhibition circuit will be a first step to enabling new forms of participation and exchange, or whether it will function merely as a balm.

Translated by David Rogers

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11 In 2007, for example, the implantation of a policy called the Northern Territory Emergency Response caused revolt among anthropologists and activists. Based on rumours of mistreatment of children in communities in the north of Australia, this policy established interventionist measures, such as: increasing the police contingent in the region, restricting alcoholic drink, directing the funds for social programs to purchasing goods that the government deems to be priorities, lessening the autonomy of the recipients, and rescinding the need for permission to enter Indigenous land.



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