Post Colonial Indigenous Art and Criticism in Australia, or, How Australian Aboriginal art is Redefining the Gallery

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Australian indigenous art, that is to say art produced by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, has enjoyed an immense increase in national and international interest over the past fifteen or so years. What is responsible for this phenomenon? Has indigenous art changed? Has critical reception changed? And what are the consequences of this? The phenomenon itself, I will argue, is a complex of both processes. The art has changed and so has its reception. The consequences are many. Not the least of these are the economic and cultural consequences of 'critical' success for Aboriginal artists themselves. But here I want to address primarily the consequences *for* criticism.

Art criticism in the West has long been predicated on notions of 'quality'. The critic's pose has been to judge with their expert eye whether an artist or a form of art is worth admitting into the canon of Western culture. What do we do when we come up against works which either defy these notions or find them irrelevant? And what do we do when they claim to be equal or even superior to that canon despite apparent technical and conceptual naiveté?

The first recognition of Aboriginal art was entirely anthropological. As Judith Ryan (1990) notes:

> Before the 1950s the major collectors were anthropologists researching Aboriginal mythology, ritual and kinship systems who were primarily interested in the relationship of art to ceremony and what it revealed about Aboriginal culture. (p.14)

Even when Negro and Pacific Island arts became recognised for their formal qualities and exerted an influence on Modernism, Australian Aboriginal art defied being categorised aesthetically. Some of this was perhaps due to a

reciprocal reaction of the Aboriginal artists to anthropological interest. As Philip Jones (1988) observes:

> There is little doubt that Aborigines responded creatively to the intense interest in their culture displayed by field-workers and collectors. The motives of these individuals, furthermore, may have been varied, but the result was often the same: an efflorescence of artifact production which sometimes even inspired new forms of Aboriginal art. (pp. 153-155)

This may have been a classic case of both 'colonialist influence' and of research altering its object of study (Heisenberg, 1962) for as Philip Jones adds,

> As a rule, though, the collectors had fixed ideas about what they wanted to obtain... There is no doubt that particularly in the nineteenth century, this bias reflected Western preferences as well as patterns of production by Aborigines for the Western market. (p.155)

What the anthropologically inclined collectors wanted from the Aborigines was 'a proportionally greater numbers of utilitarian artifacts (weapons and tools) than ornaments or decorative pieces' (Jones 1988, p.155). This was evidently out of the nineteenth century collectors' desire to affirm a Darwinian notion of human evolution (Jones 1988, pp.157-159) within which Aborigines were considered to occupy a crucial position. The Aborigines obligingly complied by staging a mini-'arms race' not for use, but for a European market. The value placed on Aboriginal creativity thus became dependent on an 'authenticity' which amounted to a correspondence with a particular regime of truth (Foucault, 1982) manufactured almost entirely by a colonial hegemony.

A not dissimilar critical error occurs at the next stage of Aboriginal cultural recognition. Aboriginal Bark Painting became the first artifact to be collected for more or less aesthetic reasons although none-the-less predicated

on an authenticity which, ironically, again precipitated *inauthenticity*. Judith Ryan (1990) reports that the earliest 'bark paintings' were removed from bark shelters. Their lean-to rooves were originally decorated with *sgrafitto* 'doodling' when they became blackened from the campfire. These featured predominantly secular and mundane images such as X-ray representations of animals they used for food. One could imagine an Aborigine whiling away an afternoon scratching the fishbone outlines of the remains of their dinner. But under the influence of European critical selection, these had to become representations of something more profound. The earliest known collected bark was not spontaneously produced, but *commissioned* in 1912 by Baldwin Spencer, appointed to the official government post of 'Protector of Aborigines'. Spencer 'commissioned large bark paintings' from Oenpelli mission in Kakadu, famous for its cave art, to be 'similar in scale and *style* to the rock paintings'. This was equivalent to asking a pastrycook to reproduce Chartres cathedral, but it imbued this secular art, in European eyes, with a necessary aura. The preparation of these for sale and the enhancement of their technique became a classical result of commodification. Despite the transformation, if not complete invention, of bark painting to the form we know it today in response to Western presence, the value of bark paintings was calculated in terms of their perceived 'authenticity'.

The production of bark painting was apparently restricted initially through missionary objection to pagan and sexually explicit images; but from the 1930s to the 1960s, Ryan observes, 'mission superintendents regularly supplied bark paintings to collectors in the capital cities'. 'The production of large quantities of bark paintings for sale—as art not artefact—stems particularly from the 1960s, as part of an evolving dialogue between Aboriginal and white Australians' adds Ryan.

A similar charge has been made about 'Toas'—waymarkers featuring little figures, feathers, and other decorations said to convey information about a camping site for the benefit of subsequent visitors literate in their code. It seems these too were a 'recent' invention. Wally Caruana (1993), curator of Aboriginal art at the national Gallery of Australia writes that:

> the first recorded example of innovation in desert art intended for sale appeared in 1903...More than four hundred *toas* were made between 1903 and 1905 in response of the wish of the missionary, Pastor Johann Reuther, to build a collection of Aboriginal artefacts to raise funds for the mission. The *toa* collection was acquired by the South Australian museum in 1907, but it appears that their production ceased when Pastor Reuther left the mission in 1906...The popular belief that Aboriginal culture was static encouraged the view that *toas* were a traditional form of sculpture.(p.101)

The recognition of Albert Namatjira, who learnt 'Western' watercolour technique from white artist Rex Batterbee, posed an entirely different critical problem. Here was someone who seemed to blatantly discard their own 'authenticity' in order to paint like a white man. While achieving an unprecedented recognition, Namatjira and his 'school' (consisting mainly of his relatives) which sprang around him, became tinged with an element of kitsch—associated more with biscuit tin labels than with State Gallery collections.

Recent revisionist assessments, once again intent on recuperating authenticity, vindicate him in this, claiming that he nevertheless expressed a quintessential Aboriginal relation to the landscape. Europeans' projections of their own desires have shaped almost every critical encounter with Aboriginal art from then on. Karel Kupka (1965) claimed to see a natural 'expressionism' in tribal art. And the Papunya Tula dot paintings have predominantly been seen in terms of 'colourfield plus pointillism' (McNeill, 1992) by American reviewers. Eighty-seven year old Emily Kame Kngawarrye began her artistic career by translating Dreamtime stories into batique prints. Recently, after showing her work in fashionable contemporary galleries, she has adopted a minimalist/tachiste idiom.

The root of the problem is in the assumption that the artwork is self-contained. If we, however, see the work as part of a *process* which consists

of a cycle—of production, circulation, mediation, exchange, consumption, and cultural *re*production—we can quickly perceive the incommensurable differences that make a simple critical relation based on authenticity with a pure 'traditional' art impossible.

European intervention necessarily commandeers a portion of the work's circulation, mediation, and consumption and forces a relation of exchange quite unlike that experienced within the Aboriginal community. The Oenpelli barks, for example, were able to be 'commissioned' because this mission had instituted an economy based on tobacco as currency—in preparation for accustomising Aborigines to a monetary exchange system whose complete lack of dependence on use value would naturally have been beyond their comprehension and more importantly against their cultural principles.

But this one-sided exchange may not be an eternal *fait accompli*. What is particularly exciting at the present historical juncture is that a reciprocity of cultural exchange is being felt at the museum end. Just as European economy changed Aboriginal art, perhaps Aboriginal art can change the cultural economy of European Australia—at least at the points of critical mediation, circulation, and consumption merely through indigenous people's participation and transferrence of some of their customs to our own, gallery, ritual. White people's hopes that an exchange to their advantage could be effected on the level of image production were overly optimistic. Attempts at adopting Aboriginal imagery have had mixed results: white Australian artists such as Margaret Preston addressed Aboriginal culture and opened some doors for its white reception but did not substantially change the relations of cultural exchange. Recently, non-indigenous artist such as Imants Tillers and Tim Johnson have in different ways appropriated Aboriginal imagery—the former by warrant of postmodernist arrogance and the latter through a level of negotiated permission. Although their actions, good or ill, give rise to some controversy, the point I want to make is that they are insignificant in relation to the real revolution that is taking place around them. Imagery is but a tiny tip of the iceberg of the 'process' or 'cycle' of art, that I referred to earlier,

which characterises and defines the colonisers' culture's difference from the colonised culture. What is a far more important change in these terms is the start of active Aboriginal intervention in *our* system.

Plainly, any 'system' is greater than its components. So to create a single art work or even a body of work, in either deference to or defiance of indigenous culture, is an anomaly rather than a cultural change. However, the phenomenon of *urban* indigenous art appears to be accomplishing something entirely different. What it is doing is changing the very criteria for inclusion in the emerging canon, of at least Australian art; changing the form of critical relation to the work that the mediators of that canon (the critics) have to adopt; and, in some ways, altering the mode of reception and consumption of the work.

The success of the 1981 International Papunya Tula exhibition was followed by shows such as *Koori Art '84* at Artspace, Sydney in 1984, *Two Worlds Collide* in 1985, and *A Koori Perspective* in 1989, also at Artspace. The 1984 exhibition prompted the formation of Boomali Aboriginal artists' cooperative in Sydney in 1985. These initiatives finally resulted in even State galleries hosting exhibitions primarily concerned with 'urban' rather than remote indigenous art: *Recent Aboriginal Painting* at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1988, *Urban Aboriginal Art* 1988 at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia and Flash Pictures at the Australian National Gallery in 1992. The most radical of these was *Balance*, held at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1990. The mode of production of these images breaks with Western expectations firstly by not emerging out of an art school training, professional studio production, and career strategy. Many of these works are made on a kitchen table during a social occasion with the participation and advice of friends, relatives, and children. The conditions of consumption and exchange at the immediate level are also unlike those which predominate in Western art. Pictures are exchanged out of friendship, given away, printed on T-shirts. Unlike the valorised, so called 'traditional', works, the preconditions of their production do not include export; they are primarily made to circulate

within the Aboriginal community and consequently do not seek to meet the critical standards of the West.

Neither is there any tradition of mediation, i.e. criticism in the western sense, within Aboriginal society. Direct criticism is considered 'shameful', although judgement of the correctness or appropriateness of images is traditionally deferred to elders. One general cultural trait remains despite specific cultural loss: a huge value placed on 'protocol'. However, urban aboriginal artists do not have clear guidelines in regard to what images are appropriate to them, as do their remote region counterparts. As many have lost their cultural roots they have no way of knowing what images they 'own'. Nonetheless, a general community attitude paramount in determining an artist's 'success' in this is often tied to a notion of 'copyright' rather than originality. Despite, in many cases, having lost clear guidelines as to what they can 'copy', urban Aboriginal artists attempt to use the judgement of 'right to copy' particular designs as an aesthetic criterion. Thus the 'failure' to observe protocol by becoming an issue serves as a means to restore tradition and to recover lost knowledge.

In some ways, the 'anthropological' stance towards indigenous art has been replaced by a 'sociological' one. Many urban indigenous artists expressed the tastes of their community: stylistic features generally associated with amateur and commercialised images—cliché silhouettes against a red sunset, sentimentalised subjects, decorative repetition which are the staple of an 'ordinary' public became signifiers of social cohesion. But, like the anthropological stance, this quickly became absorbed into mainstream aesthetic values. What had been naive kitsch became valued as uninhibited and socially and historically more important than the jaded cynical recycling of European skills by non-indigenous Australian artists that is now at least openly acknowledged by postmodernism. When one of these indigenous community-supported shows opens, the whole ritual of gallery openings is transformed: beer cans replace champagne flutes, indigenous country and western bands replace string quartets, and whole extended families, including children and the very elderly, come dressed in various degrees of casualness or formality.

Whereas western gallery goers attend in order to *be* observed as much as to observe the exhibit, for indigenous people the exercise is more fundamental. It is still a social ritual but always to do with cultural solidarity rather than with personal aggrandisement. Whereas people of European extraction play out their conflicts and differences privately and try to conceal them on social occasions, indigenous people save disputes expressly for a public occasion when the whole community can judge and intercede if necessary. This once again facilitates the 'recovery', or, perhaps more correctly, reinvention of tradition.

But the cycle of production of urban Australian indigenous art also has to contend with a western economy that underwrites its brave new experiment in cultural recovery. These relatively idyllic relations of production and consumption are rapidly becoming integrated into the commercial market. And there is considerable hope vested in the success of this phenomenon. But, while the Australian market and museum culture adapt to this phenomenon in a reciprocal way, it is perhaps too much to expect a World culture to do the same.

As urban Aboriginal art becomes popular overseas, will it be able to resist becoming alienated from its origins?

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(Eather, Hall, 1990).