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Making in translation: the intercultural broker in indigenous Australian art

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MAKING IN TRANSLATION
The intercultural broker in indigenous Australian art

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Prof. Ian McLean

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Declaration by author

I, Quentin Sprague, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD), from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Quentin Sprague

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To

my family

and

Leah
MAKING IN TRANSLATION

The intercultural broker in indigenous Australian art

Quentin Sprague
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This thesis examines the role of intercultural brokerage in the production and mediation of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. It aims to illuminate something of the broader movement by way of third party brokers – in most cases non-Aboriginal – who have acted between the art world on the one hand, and on the other the local contexts within which remotely-based Aboriginal artists work. These figures are varied, but include curators and – more prominently – art coordinators (a key position within remote community Aboriginal art centres).

In the literature on indigenous contemporary art in Australia, sustained examination of such intermediaries remains largely absent, regardless of the often-central role they have played. This thesis intends to undertake initial steps towards addressing this oversight through a review of a number of critical and historical precedents and through three sustained contemporary case studies that draw upon interviews with key brokers.

In doing so, it asks a central question: How might we model, and thus articulate, the role of third party brokerage within the broader network of authorial agencies that surround indigenous contemporary art in Australia?
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Inside it all was fug and cockatoo-shit, dried sweat and blowflies and the stink of hides. Outside, the landscape could be apocalyptic, vast; it was like standing on the edge of one world and looking into another.¹

– Robert Hughes

I need my mediators to express myself and they’d never express themselves without me: you’re always working in a group, even when you seem to be on your own.²

– Gilles Deleuze

INTRODUCTION

0.01 Methods

In late 2004 the definitive survey of Kuninjku bark painting, that highly detailed style associated with the Kuninjku language group from Western Arnhem Land, opened at The Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney. Titled Crossing Country: the Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art, the exhibition was curated by Hetti Perkins, then AGNSW’s Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, and was widely welcomed as a significant moment in the historical and regional conception of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. A carefully arrayed hang firmly grounded key contemporary practices upon a rich base of regional history. It is commonplace to hear of distinct ‘movements’ in Aboriginal art, but only rarely have one’s borders been so compellingly articulated.

In hindsight, Crossing Country stands together with a handful of other exhibitions from the same period – roughly two decades after the institutional representation of this art found a secure foothold in the Australian art world – as emblematic of a quality particular to indigenous contemporary art. This has little to do with the often unique-seeming aesthetics of such work, nor with the specific background of the artists. Rather, it comes down to the way in which such exhibitions articulate the interdisciplinary, and often deeply intercultural, contexts in which they form. As a case in point, Crossing Country drew seemingly equally from art historical and anthropological discourses. In a sense it played both ways, defining a narrative that on the one hand established the importance of individual artists (their ‘genius’, in a modernist sense), and on the other argued that their work be seen within a set of very specific collective cultural contexts.
To look at Kuninjku bark painting, the exhibition emphasised, was to learn something about the Kuninjku worldview, even as figures such as John Mawurndjul emerged alongside the country’s cutting-edge contemporary artists as individual practitioners of the highest order. As Perkins put it, Kuninjku art embodied a “contemporary cultural nomadism (…) underscored by an indelible schema of ancestral enterprise and influence.” The exhibition’s catalogue – which still stands as a major publication in the field of indigenous contemporary art in Australia – was far from unusual in the methodological reach of its contributors. Alongside Perkins’ curatorial essay, it presented the work of two anthropologists, a linguist, an art coordinator, and six interview-based essays by participating artists. Implicitly, one sensed it was in this fashion – deeply composite – in which an accurate conception of this art might be reached.

By this time such an approach had long been proven effective: understanding indigenous contemporary art, it would seem, demanded the coming together of previously distinct disciplines, and to some extent always had. Although from the 1980s onward it had ‘become’ contemporary art, the anthropological readings that first attempted to capture it have remained central to its attendant discourses. Even a casual review of the material generated by the regular institutional exhibition of indigenous contemporary art makes this clear. Papunya Tula: genesis and genius, another definitive Perkins-led project that opened at AGNSW four years

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1 Evidence of this lies, for example, in Mawurndjul being awarded the National Gallery of Victoria’s Clemenger Contemporary art award a year earlier, in 2003, a now defunct triennial prize focused on established contemporary artists. He was the first Aboriginal artist to win.


3 The anthropologists were Jon Altman and Luke Taylor, the linguist Murray Garde, the art coordinator Apolline Kohen and the artists Lofty Bardayal Nadjemerrek AO, Ivan Namirrki, Mary Marabamba, John Mawurndjul, Mick Kubarkku and Melba Gunjarrwanga.

4 Here I am paraphrasing Howard Morphy’s apt phrase. See, H Morphy, Becoming Art, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2008.
Introduction

earlier, took a similarly interdisciplinary approach as *Crossing Country*; the accompanying catalogue included the work of anthropologists, social historians, art coordinators, and curators. So too other significant surveys, whether focused on individual artists or specific regions. As another example among many, the monograph published to coincide with the Gija artist Paddy Bedford’s eponymous 2006 exhibition at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art features writing by a curator, an art historian, an anthropologist, a linguist and an art coordinator.

At times it can seem as if the multiple tensions between such disciplinary categories defines the very nature of the indigenous contemporary art movement. As the above examples suggest, one would be mistaken to see such interplay solely in oppositional terms, but that’s not to say that people don’t take this perspective. As a case in point, in 2010 Ron Radford, then-director of The National Gallery of Australia, opened a newly extended NGA that placed greatly increased emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. He took the opportunity to disavow its entangled disciplinary character, underscoring that the institution’s approach was art historical rather than anthropological. Implicit, of course, was the suggestion it couldn’t be both.

Radford may have been simply picking up on a broader debate or have assumed he was addressing a crowd of art world converts, but given his surrounds his words rang somewhat hollowly: although the NGA’s new ATSIA galleries emphasise the

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(The contributors were as follows: Paul Sweeny, Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink, Vivien Johnson, Geoffrey Bardon, R.G (Dick) Kimber, John Kean, Daphne Williams (With Hetti Perkins), Fred R Myers, Paul Carter and Marcia Langton)

(The contributors were as follows: Tony Oliver, Russell Storer, Michiel Dolk, Marcia Langton and Frances Kofod)

7 M Hinkson, ‘For love and money’, *Arena Magazine*, Melbourne, No. 109, Dec 2010, pp 17 – 21, p 17
aesthetic achievements of the movement by way of eschewing (for the most part) didactic text panels and narrative interpretation, they nonetheless remain tightly bound to a set of geographic and ethnographic principles underpinned by anthropology’s structuring vision. To walk through the collection galleries is to trace a carefully ordered spatial ‘map’ of Australia, each hang aligned to a specific language or cultural group. There are few, if any, of the radical juxtapositions or geographic pluralities one might associate with an art history grappling with the broader implications of our distinctive period.

What is most striking in Radford’s opening remarks then, is the seeming intent to separate discourses that have long been interwoven as part of the broader discursive field upon which indigenous contemporary art has taken shape. It’s a position that betrays the sense of mistrust – pervasive in much of the art world – that anthropology shackles the art of Aboriginal Australia to its ethnographic past and in doing so limits its ability to circulate as contemporary practice. What such a perspective misses, of course, is not only that one of the defining features of contemporary art and its attendant discourses lies in the breaking down of the kinds of categories that had defined modernism before it, but that it is exactly this process that grants the art of our times its particular character. Seen in this light, we might begin to understand that its ability to unfold in the emergent spaces between categories is exactly where indigenous contemporary art gains not only much of its power, but its distinctive contemporaneity.

Soon after the NGA’s new ATSIA galleries opened, the entangled, overlapping nature of this field was granted a far more apt representation: in 2011, the art historian Ian McLean published a comprehensive anthology of critical writings that traced Aboriginal art’s emergence from ethnographic curio to contemporary art. As the anthology shows, this was not necessarily a clean de-coupling from one definitive categorisation to another: indeed, the collection’s
deliberately provocative title – *How Aboriginies invented the idea of contemporary art* – found a persuasive answer in the interdisciplinary (and intercultural) spread of the selected writing. Leafing through its pages, one finds tangible evidence that indigenous contemporary art – as both discursive term and art form – traces a diverse relational field peopled by many players, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Alongside prominent anthropologists and art historians are Aboriginal activists, artists (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), curators, journalists, philosophers, and many others: an at times dizzying array clamoring to categorise, explain, defend, and disprove, sometimes all at once.

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I begin here to make a simple point: any work that purports to capture something of indigenous contemporary art’s unique qualities must negotiate an insistently interdisciplinary environment. Exhibitions have often provided one site in which sometimes-divergent ideologies intersect and cross-pollinate; in the pages of accompanying catalogues, and in publications like McLean’s, we see another tangible expression.

This thesis is similarly interdisciplinary in approach. But although it at times leans heavily on the work of anthropologists and art historians (as all works on indigenous contemporary art at one level must), it also aims to achieve something different. By taking the intersection between previously divergent fields as its subject, it emphasises the relational quality of indigenous contemporary art: the way it has taken shape between different participant parties and its theorisation unfolded at the intersection between different methodologies.

My research questions and methodology are in part a response to the specific qualities, demands and contradictions of this multivalent field. I do not claim (or, for that matter, aim) to survey the extent of these different discourses as they converge on the field of indigenous
contemporary art; rather the prism through which I conduct my analysis of such convergence is that of the intercultural. By this I mean that indigenous contemporary art is treated here as a deeply intercultural phenomenon. To this end, a discourse of brokerage between cultures - and an attendant focus on individual brokers as key agents of this exchange - forms my overarching frame. This provides means to position the 'contemporaneity' of indigenous contemporary art - that is, the way it reflects something essential about a shared contemporary condition - against a deeper, and in most cases more localised, background. In this, my ultimate hypothesis directs attention towards this art’s specific intercultural localities, both in a contemporary and historic context.

My research questions thus coalesce around a concern with how the interactive space of intercultural exchange might best be articulated, not only against current art historical discourse, but against the historical contexts that have shaped the intercultural production of material culture in specific places. How might the role of the broker of indigenous contemporary art be illuminated in a manner that productively complicates our understanding of individual agency? What are the ethical aspects of intercultural mediation, and how should these impact the meanings carried by key practices? What should we make of the pronounced art world tendency to downplay the role of intercultural mediation in the production and dissemination of indigenous contemporary art in Australia? And, how might a discourse of brokerage between cultures illuminate this art’s contemporaneity in light of specific historical precedent?

Ultimately I argue that focusing upon such questions establishes a means to picture key practices against more collective conceptions of creative authorship, and thus gain a greater understanding of their function as contemporary art. I aim to show that any theorisation of indigenous contemporary art must therefore first establish a nuanced understanding of the role played by intercultural brokerage.
Introduction

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To this end, my hypothesis is in two parts.

First, creating a deeper understanding of the role of the cultural broker – in this case the art coordinator and/or the curator – in the production of meanings for indigenous contemporary art will provide a greater sense of its collective – and at times collaborative – character, and thus a more detailed representation of its underlying intercultural agency. Second, a particular methodology is needed in order to amplify the intercultural voice of the art coordinator, the figure who in differing guises recurs throughout this thesis. In the second section – chapters three through six, as well as my conclusion – I have developed a central part of this methodology by way of spoken interviews with key subjects.

In this way, my research methodology can also be characterised in interdisciplinary terms. It draws not only upon a standard art historical methodology (the analysis of art works and exhibitions combined with the review of critical literature and exhibition catalogues), but elements of oral history and what might best be characterised as narrative journalism. The latter combine to establish a subjective ground upon which to construct central aspects of my argument. In turn, this highlights a significant departure point: in attempting to address the methodological challenge posed by my field of enquiry, the conventional objectivity of the art historian’s voice ultimately retreats behind measured representation of the experiences, interpretations and recollections of significant others.

Needless to say, this approach is distinct from a sole reliance on written or visual sources, moving instead towards an accounting of the social field in which indigenous contemporary art is made manifest. In this respect my methodology borrows from that of the anthropologist. Research for this thesis was conducted as much in the field as in the museum and library; shaped as much by participant informers as by scholars.
The resulting interviews inflect core aspects of this work and, as such, demand we must first acknowledge a key aspect of their methodological character: the particularly subjective processes of interpretation that attend them. As Alessandro Portelli has noted, speech is marked by qualities that the written word can only approximate: tone, pauses, velocity, and emphasis all evoke meaning, often as much — and at times, far more — than the meaning of the words themselves. Interpretation is deeply contingent upon such qualities: combined, they “reveal the narrator’s emotions, their participation in the story, and the way the story affected them”. The attendant questions for the interviewer are clear, if not easily answered: how does one represent such aspects that are usually repressed in written texts, (especially, one might argue, academic texts designed to maintain objectivity)? Which quotes are central to the subject’s narrative? How to negotiate the subjective quality of memory? In responding to such questions the interviewer’s own voice is implicit in a multitude of decisions.

Oral sources also lend a useful subjectivity in another sense. As Portelli emphasises, they “tell us not just what people did, but what they thought they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.” This quality also represents an important methodological tool in relation to this thesis: indeed, how each subject chose to elaborate upon their experiences has in large part shaped some of its very structure. This has in turn provided something of its core argument: indigenous contemporary art is formed upon the subjective ground mapped between individuals, and best apprehended, at least in part, through a kind of collective accounting of experience.

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9 ibid, p. 65.
10 ibid, p. 67.
This simultaneously points to a conception of the interview as a dialogue in which both the subject and interviewer become implicated in the construction of meaning. That is, the content of interviews is deeply contingent upon the interviewer, not only in terms of the questions they ask, but (perhaps more so) the personal relationships they establish with their subject and the experiences they themselves bring with them.\footnote{ibid, p. 70.} In the second section of this thesis this interchange becomes prominent. Interviews were adapted to each subject; in some cases the personal relationship was more pronounced, in others less so: different approaches and lines of questioning developed accordingly, most often in an organic or informal manner. In keeping with my overall focus, we might even go as far as establishing the interviewer or researcher not only (following Portelli) as “a partner in dialogue”,\footnote{ibid, p. 72.} but as a broker of information: the interview thus emerges as a process in which their own ideologies and ideals find tangible form.

In this light my own experiences as a participant-observer in the indigenous contemporary art world – not only as a researcher and writer, but as an art coordinator and curator – also provide a key aspect of my methodology. Between 2007 and 2010 I lived and worked in ‘remote’ Australia: initially on the Tiwi Islands, where I was based in the Melville Island community of Milikapiti for two years and worked as an art coordinator for Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association, and then for a year in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia, where I performed a similar role for Jirrawun Arts. Following my return to Canberra and Melbourne I have initiated a number of curatorial projects concerned with the categorisation and circulation of indigenous contemporary art in the art world.
These each involved working closely with artists and their representatives in a range of different regions.13

If the ways in which these experiences have guided my approach here are varied, and at times hard to fully articulate, one thing is clear: in all roles – either embedded within Aboriginal communities for significant periods as an art coordinator, or by way of short-stay research as a curator or writer – I have experienced first-hand the social relations that define the broader world of indigenous contemporary art. Put simply, I have fulfilled a number of the intercultural brokerage roles that ultimately provide this thesis its subject: I have, for instance, worked closely alongside artists in remote studios; negotiated with collectors and art dealers; managed the career trajectories of particular artists; collaborated with institutional and independent curators; and written and edited curatorial, academic and journalistic texts.

An obvious cumulative expression of these experiences lies in an ability to relate to others who have occupied similar positions and who, either directly or indirectly, provide this work its subject. In relation to the interviews, my intimate understanding of various intermediary practice has enabled me to not only pursue certain lines of questioning, but to empathise with the unique pressures that often shape the experiences of those who work within the very particular social space that scaffolds the production and circulation of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. My work with artists also frames these interactions: as an art coordinator (particularly in regards to the Tiwi artist Timothy Cook and the Gija artist Rammey Ramsey), I at times keenly felt the

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13 In the conclusion to this thesis I draw directly upon my role as curator of The world is not a foreign land, an exhibition project featuring works by Timothy Cook, Djambawa Marawili, Ngarra, Rusty Peters, Freda Warlapinni, and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, as well as bark paintings collected in the Tiwi Islands in 1954 by Charles Mountford. The exhibition, which opened at The Ian Potter Museum of Art at The University of Melbourne in March 2014, developed over a two-year period and included research travel to a number of remote communities.
Introdu

permeable border between impartial coordination and collaborative exchange (a border that this thesis draws attention to in a number of ways). My sensitivity to this area created much of the basis for my focus here.

Artists have also informed this thesis in a far more indirect manner. Alongside Cook and Ramsey, many others displayed great generosity and patience with me as an often ill-informed interloper in their worlds, be it as an art coordinator, a curator, or a researcher. Particular bodies of work have been equally important: those of Paddy Bedford and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, along with the drawings of the late Andayin artist Ngarra, are of specific note and underpin significant portions of this work. Each showed me creative ways of thinking between previously demarcated worlds, and in doing so directed my attention to the critical oversight that often renders invisible the intercultural character that defines much indigenous contemporary art in this country.

Indeed, the intercultural relations such practices embed at their very core provide this thesis with its two key critical frames: indigenous contemporary art as a relational field, and intercultural brokerage as an inter-subjective practice that unfolds in a collaborative space between participant parties.

0.02 What is indigenous contemporary art?

As should already be clear, the term ‘indigenous contemporary art’ recurs throughout this thesis. In a broad sense I use it to refer to the key critical shift in the reception of Aboriginal art practices in the 1970s and 1980s; a period in which this art gained increased visibility in the wider contemporary art world.

For many, this was set in motion in the early 1970s in a tiny central Australian settlement called Papunya that had been established in the late 1950s to house displaced tribal groups from the surrounding area. The founding artists of what soon became known as Western Desert painting were among its first residents: drawn from across the Pintupi, Anmatyere,
Arrente, Luritja and Walpiri people, each were in possession of their own dialects and intersecting, co-dependent systems of belief. Among them were figures now synonymous with the broader movement: Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Mick Namerari Tjapaltjarri, and Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula. Forming something of a hub around which this group of senior men gathered was a young, idealistic schoolteacher called Geoffrey Bardon, who had been drawn to the community in February 1971 by his desire to work more closely with “tribal Aboriginals.”

Bardon was central to the complex negotiations and agencies that carried the early days of the painting movement: as art and craft teacher at the Papunya Special School, he encouraged the children under his tutelage to forego Western iconography in their drawings; soon afterwards the senior men took notice and following a sequence of well-known events – including the painting of a series of public murals at the school – he helped them establish both a physical space and an administrative framework within which to paint. By mid-1972 – just eighteen months after Bardon had first arrived in the community – the Papunya Tula Association was officially established. Bardon departed not long afterwards, but he has since become an integral part of the movement’s narrative: indeed, no matter how one frames its myth-like beginnings, Bardon is unavoidable; much of the existing literature on the development of Western Desert painting is thus shadowed at one level by his experiences.

Yet as central as the narrative of Western Desert art is, there remain many important precedents to these developments. Indeed, tracing the origin of indigenous contemporary art to Papunya alone foregoes a far more layered understanding of how the practice of art between cultures developed at Australia’s

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colonial interface. Not only can a compelling lineage be traced directly to figures such as Albert Namatjira, the Arrente watercolourist from Hermannsburg who rose to national fame in the 1950s, or Yirawala, the Kuninjku bark painter from Western Arnhem land who gained similar recognition in the 1960s and 1970s, it also goes far deeper, revealing a richly intercultural vein that binds together even the earliest interactions between Aboriginal and settler Australian cultures. The contemporaneity of indigenous contemporary art can thus be understood as constituted in many inter-related localities, each bound to specific historic contexts.

Yet in conceiving the historical formation of what we now term indigenous contemporary art, events at Papunya nonetheless remain key. Part of this comes down to visibility: who was watching, and when. The broader art world was just then beginning to undergo a series of transitions which over the following decade would usher in contemporary art as the dominant art world discourse: the “discovery” of Western Desert painting, as Ian McLean has written, “occurred during the endgame of modernism, when all was lost and there was no going back.”15 As modernism’s previously stark boundaries (in this case between Western and non-Western art) were unthreading, buffeted by the simultaneous emergence of postcolonial theory and globalisation more generally, a new, intercultural space for its reception was opened. Western Desert painting – marked not only by the insistent Aboriginality of its striking designs, but by a pronounced material (and cultural) hybridity – filled it in compelling fashion. From this point, the art world reception of Aboriginal art, incipient for much of the twentieth century, gained pronounced traction: by the mid-1980s it was increasingly seen among the most cutting-edge practices in the country.

15 I McLean, ‘How Aboriginies invented the idea of contemporary art’, in I McLean (edited and introduced by), How Aboriginies invented the idea of contemporary art, Institute of Modern Art/Power Publications, Brisbane, 2011 pp 333–342, p 333
With this turn came a wider awareness of the range of localised contexts within which this art took shape. Ex-mission communities – such as Yirrkala in southeast Arnhem Land, or Hermannsburg in central Australia – where the production of art and artefacts had long bolstered local economies, were steadily drawn to the centre of what soon took the discernible of shape of a movement. In step, government funded art centres opened across much of Australia’s remote desert centre and top end: a new, and largely unique, market economy slowly found form.

Since this foothold was established, indigenous contemporary art has proven to be one of Australia’s most enduring and unique contributions to the global currents of contemporary art. Subject to numerous institutional surveys and significant scholarly publications, it has undoubtedly shaped the country’s artistic (and national) consciousness at a fundamental level. Evidence of it is everywhere. Often it is embedded at the very foundations of the country’s institutional imagining, a fact perhaps most evident in the large mosaic that greets visitors at the entrance of Australia’s ‘new’ parliament house, which draws its design from Michael Nelson Jagamara’s 1985 painting, Possum and Wallaby Dreaming. For more than three decades the work of the movement’s most celebrated artists has been among the country’s most visible: names such as Rover Thomas, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, John Mawurndjul, and Paddy Bedford have been prominent in the broader Australian art world. Their work, among that of many other Aboriginal artists from many distinct cultural and geographic localities, has graced the walls of key museums both here and abroad, and, between the mid 1990s

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and first decade of the 2000s in particular, contributed to a robust commercial market. Although still at least partially represented within separate discourses and institutional structures (evident in dedicated collecting departments within state galleries, and largely separate representation in commercial galleries), the inclusion of indigenous contemporary art in survey exhibitions of contemporary Australian art, and by extension under the broader discursive rubric of contemporary art, is now commonplace. An long-emergent – if tenuous – international currency as contemporary art is also clear: recently evidenced, for example, in the inclusion of Papunya Tula artists Warlimpirruga Tjapaltjarri and Doreen Reid Nakamarra in Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany in 2012, a high watermark on the global contemporary art calendar.\(^{18}\) Put simply, indigenous contemporary art has been increasingly exhibited, theorised, and marketed as contemporary art.

This naming reflects the shift touched on above. Initially defined in the art world by its peripheral reception as ethnography, and thus ascribed outsider status against modernism’s then-dominant insider narrative, Aboriginal art – freshly rebranded as indigenous contemporary art – is now aligned with the evolving discourses of the art world. In this, it has tracked the broader critical turn that has come to define contemporary art as a distinct period style. For Terry Smith – among contemporary art’s most prominent theorists – this turn highlights the interactive edges and overlaps between previously distinct worlds: a series of constant-seeming recalibrations that form nothing less than recent history’s defining narrative.\(^{19}\) Smith has developed this argument across a number of different publications, including

\(^{18}\) It’s worth noting that Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the Artistic Director of Documenta 13, was also the Artistic Director of the 16th Biennale of Sydney in 2008, in which she also included Nakamarra (among other indigenous artists).

What is contemporary art? (2009) and Contemporary art: world currents (2011). In using the term throughout this thesis I also draw on his essay, published in Critical enquiry, 'Contemporary art and contemporaneity' (2006). Far from simply serving as a referent for art made now, the ‘contemporary’ in contemporary art might best be understood as characterised not only by the coming together of multiple differences and the demands of their simultaneous translation, but the constant mistranslations that increasingly define our time on a global scale. It’s here where Smith argues we might best perceive contemporary art’s overarching contextual frame: “in the constant experience of radical disjunctures of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them” (his use of italics).

As evidenced in this description, contemporary art seeks to describe, rather than resolve, the difficulties of translation: it should therefore not be mistaken as a wholly unifying or resolved category in and of itself. It’s for this reason that the term is ultimately useful here. Indeed, the inherent tensions it strives to articulate also speaks to something of the discursive realignments and contestations that have occurred in indigenous art since its initial interactions with the broader contemporary art world began to take shape. It is ultimately this quality that demands indigenous contemporary art be classified as such. By this I mean that the contested field upon which it has manifested (and indeed continues to do so) ultimately imparts a key

20 ibid.
23 ibid, p. 703.
feature of its contemporaneity. Used here, it follows that 'contemporary art' is not a homogenising signifier that assimilates indigenous art into a global art movement, and in doing so diminishes its specific sovereignty. Rather, it is best understood as a network of relational agencies: overlapping, interlocking and conflicting all at once.

This perspective simultaneously helps us to understand the importance of the broker, a figure who, in moving between such differences, plays a fundamental role in articulating them. It’s at this interactive edge between various agents that this thesis ultimately takes shape.

0.03 Why brokerage?

My field of enquiry is defined broadly by the role of the broker, and in particular by an examination of this role in relation to the development and art world reception of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. In a general sense this focus aims to illuminate what is arguably indigenous contemporary art’s most radical proposition: the interleaving between cultural domains that forms such a compelling, and often difficult, part of its character. Although this directs attention to the role of third parties – often non-Aboriginal – it also demands we picture the role of Aboriginal artists as brokers within the networks of exchange that support the production and dissemination of their art. My focus in these pages thus implicates Aboriginal participants as active intercultural players, even as my emphasis ultimately foregrounds others.

Throughout, I use the term ‘broker’ in the fashion theorised by Jeremy Boissevain, for whom brokerage highlights a network of social interdependencies.24 This provides a particularly useful frame for picturing indigenous contemporary art’s relational character: although Boissevain draws attention to the vested interest of individual brokers,

he simultaneously argues that they are in turn caught up as part of a wider group whose ideologies and interests intersect, each impacting upon the other. From this perspective we can understand brokers within a far broader context in which they play bridging roles between parties: embedded outsiders whose precise power draws from an ability to bring into play external contacts and influence. In this, Boissevain’s broker finds a corollary in another, earlier conception of those we might best term ‘contingent outsiders’: Georg Simmel’s notion of ‘the stranger’. For Simmel, the stranger’s social power is essentially that of the broker: their relation to the group they act within is (as he notes) “fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it.”

Defined partially by an ability to depart, this quality in turn lends an objectivity not available to others. Indeed, along with their role in mediating new ideas, material forms and practices in local contexts, this can be understood to constitute a particularly influential kind of participation, even a freedom to act in ways others cannot. Yet although of a different tenor to the rest of the group, it is ultimately their interdependency that defines the stranger’s (or broker’s) action: their power, that is, remains contingent upon their social incorporation, even as it draws from elsewhere.

In similar fashion, non-local interlopers – whether characterised as ‘strangers’ or ‘brokers’ – can be understood to have had a significant history within Aboriginal Australia. Here they are often drawn into the kinship relations that underpin existing social patterns. This is a deeply


26 ibid, p 145 - 155.

27 Simmel puts it as follows, “[despite] being inorganically appended to it, the stranger is still an organic member of the group.” ibid, p 149.
Introduction

intercultural process that foregoes essentialist readings of culture as comprised of intransigent, unchanging ethnic identity formations. In doing so it demands a more layered understanding, not only of the function and role of brokers, but of how Aboriginal people actively create and exploit their contemporary intercultural environs.

In this light, the anthropologist Cameo Dalley has recently pointed out that “(w)ith the acknowledgement of Aboriginal sociality as thoroughly intercultural come questions about the propensity or desire to incorporate those who do not self-identify as Aboriginal, but for various reasons seek inclusion or are sought to be included in Aboriginal people’s lives.” Following Anthony Redmond, Dalley highlights the local transition such figures undergo as from “relative strangers” to “strange relatives.” As Redmond has shown in relation to the Ngarinyin people of the Northern Kimberley region of Western Australia, such transition – marked by strategically deployed patterns of co-dependency – results in strikingly entangled relations that bond Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people into contingent alliances. In keeping with the conceptions touched on above, the relative distance of the broker – maintained even as they draw close – remains central to their intercultural function. Redmond points out, for instance, that the external origin of certain ideas or practices – “the very fact of their transmission from afar” – have long been held in high regard in traditional Aboriginal worlds, a perspective that explains something of

29 C Dalley, p. 40.
the value brokers bring to intercultural relations.\textsuperscript{31} Their distance might even be seen to strengthen, rather than undermine, locally-bound subjectivities: indeed, rather than dispersing difference by way of new ideas or practices, the intercultural function of the broker can be understood to, in a sense, double-down the local; that is, to play a decisive role in “forging and sustaining a local sense of identity” in light of the changes of which their very presence is often emblematic.\textsuperscript{32}

That such conceptions echo in Geoffrey Bardon’s founding role at Papunya – and thus underwrite any accurate conception of indigenous contemporary art – should be obvious. When in 2004, for example, the art historian Roger Benjamin acknowledged that “(t)he need to recognise the agency of the Indigenous men at Papunya as weighed against the intervention of Bardon (...) remains a political as well as historical question today,”\textsuperscript{33} he acknowledged the importance of Bardon in the transactions that produced the earliest paintings of the movement. Although others have made similar observations (Nikos Papastergiadis, for instance, has recently referred to Bardon as “a stranger who acted as a kind of unwitting guide” for the founding artists),\textsuperscript{34} the question remains of what we should make of subsequent figures who have played similar roles in the production of indigenous contemporary art. In a postcolonial context marked by an emphasis on Aboriginal autonomy in both political and cultural domains, this is particularly vexed. How might we establish a means to negotiate the implications of these often ‘invisible’ presences in a fashion that simultaneously layers our understanding of Aboriginal agency?

\textsuperscript{31} A Redmond, p. 235.
\textsuperscript{32} ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} N Papastergiadis, Cosmopolitanism and Culture, Polity Press, United Kingdom, 2012, p. 151.
Even though under examined, the potential significance of brokers within the history of the broader indigenous contemporary art movement has not gone wholly unnoticed. Indeed, the broker’s presence – whether as apparently impartial mediator, or as active collaborator – remains unavoidable. Nicolas Rothwell, the writer and journalist whose position as Northern Correspondent for *The Australian* newspaper has drawn him close to the world of Aboriginal art and the figures who constitute its social field, recently argued, for example, that a focus on the role of brokers (in particular art coordinators) will be necessarily central to any comprehensive future overview of the movement. This thesis is not that overview, but such prompts provide an important departure point. Although they largely focus attention on very specific fields of cultural production, a number of key sources nonetheless enable a closer understanding of brokerage in this context. In his comprehensive critical history of the Western Desert painting movement, the anthropologist Fred Myers has provided an overview of early art coordinators, outlining how the individual character of each impacted on the movement’s discursive framing. Likewise, Howard Morphy’s detailed studies of Yolngu art as an intercultural phenomenon are threaded with third party participants who have helped mediate Yolngu art into the art world. Morphy’s focus, however, ultimately foregrounds the local, ceremonial and ancestral contexts for art production and the role these play in its broader circulation, even as he establishes the depth of its intercultural function. More broadly, Jon Altman has examined

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remote Aboriginal community art centres as “intercultural brokerage institutions,” as well as provided detailed overview of the specific development of markets for Kuninjku painting from Western Arnhem Land (essentially a network of brokerage). A perspective more deeply embedded in the discourses of the art world (and extending into a much broader international context) can be found in Ian McLean’s edited collection of essays Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous contemporary art.

Vivien Johnson’s history of the development of the Western Desert Painting movement, Once upon a time in Papunya, provides similarly productive ground. Johnson, who is the movement’s foremost historian, deepens our understanding of its beginnings by embedding her narrative within an historical and social field that pre-dates Bardon’s arrival: the broker can thus be further conceived as contingent upon existing histories, her or his role shaped inextricably by local conditions. The ethnographer and theorist Eric Michaels similarly complicates easy understandings of the agency underlying remote painting production, in his case in the Warlpiri community of Yuendemu (just north of Papunya) in the 1980s. In his essay ‘Bad Aboriginal Art’ Michaels considers how notions of authenticity and tradition are disrupted by the contemporary relational contexts surrounding the production of paintings for external markets. It’s this quality, he writes, that ultimately grants Warlpiri painting much of its “social legitimacy,” an argument that is easily applied elsewhere. "To

41 V Johnson, Once upon a time in Papunya, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2010.
make any other claims,” Michaels continues, “is to cheat this work of its position in the modernist tradition as well as to misappropriate it and misunderstand its context.”

Although focus on this area remains uncommon, others have turned attention more directly towards individual brokers: Phillip Batty, for example, has examined the art coordinator Rodney Gooch’s impact on the Utopia painting movement (and especially on that movement’s late figurehead, Emily Kame Kngwarreye); Martin Edmond has comprehensively historicised the mid-twentieth century creative dialogue between Albert Namatjira and Rex Battarbee; and Paul Carter has provided critical analysis of Bardon’s early role at Papunya. Carter’s work in particular provides this thesis with one important critical touchstone: what he refers to as Western Desert art’s “transactional environment”. This idea extends through many of the following pages – both explicitly and implicitly – and provides one basis for my argument that the patterns of brokerage that carry indigenous contemporary art between producers, intermediaries and the art world, have provided a key character of the broader movement.

It also pays to remember that such interactions often unfold in fraught cultural contexts. In a wider sense, an examination of the challenges that intercultural brokers within remote Aboriginal communities often experience is provided by Kim Mahood’s keenly observed essay, ‘Kartiyas are

43 ibid, p. 447.
like Toyotas: White workers on Australia’s cultural frontier’.\textsuperscript{48} Although her focus largely falls beyond the borders of the Aboriginal art world, Mahood nonetheless provides a near-perfect overview of the potential difficulties that face interlopers negotiating social and cultural environments in which their accepted norms are easily disrupted. She paints such sites not as traditionally inflected cultural idylls, but as isolated communities marked by “the crossed purposes of indigenous and non-indigenous expectations”.\textsuperscript{49} It’s here, she writes, where “perspectives tilt, passions flare, petty irritations assume the proportions of murderous hatreds.”\textsuperscript{50} Although she draws from a long personal association with communities in the Western Desert, Mahood nonetheless makes clear a broader ramification: non-indigenous interlopers in such environments are often far from home, no matter how embedded they become within local worlds.

* In an international context the broker has also emerged as a central intermediary in the production of intercultural art forms. Writing from a north American perspective, Ruth B Philips has examined those she terms ‘stranger artists’: key players in the development of new forms of indigenous art at the turn of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{51} Their presence highlights a pattern that, she notes, “has manifested itself many times in colonial and neo-colonial societies around the world.”\textsuperscript{52} In this, we can understand that transcultural material forms and the intercultural exchanges that carry them

\textsuperscript{49} ibid, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{50} ibid, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{52} ibid, p. 48.
have often provided an important means for their producers to contest and renegotiate essentialist categories.\(^{53}\)

From this perspective, such patterns of brokerage track key twentieth century changes to the initial framework that guided the exchange of material culture in colonial contexts. The passing of ethnography’s dominance as the main mediating mode between cultures created a space in which newly hybrid practices could take shape. In step, calculated responses to colonisation’s new intercultural paradigm developed: art forms that were themselves a response to contact, no matter how they re-played or reconfigured prior forms.\(^{54}\) In this light, Peter Wollen turns attention towards figures he terms ‘animateurs’: third-party interlopers who at transformative historical moments encouraged new ways for artists working in colonial or postcolonial contexts to creatively engage with external markets.\(^{55}\) Tellingly, Bardon’s participation in events at Papunya is one example Wollen employs. Indeed, Bardon’s role can easily be seen as a local manifestation of such histories. He is well apprehended by both Philips and Wollen’s terms: as the inaugural art coordinator at Papunya, Bardon was both ‘stranger artist’ and ‘animateur’. To differing extents, so too are many of the intermediary figures who recur in the pages that follow.

The interaction between local contexts of artistic production and the broader art world (and commercial market) also prompts ethical questions that resonate throughout this thesis. In this space the broker is often a suspect character, and thus open to critique. In an Australian context this fuelled much of the tension that greeted indigenous contemporary art’s development as a significant art world


\(^{55}\) ibid, pp. 190-211.
presence. Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, for example, presented an early criticism of the Aboriginal art industry and its attendant commercial and non-commercial market that remains cogent today.\(^56\) Although Willis and Fry don’t focus upon brokers specifically, they nonetheless implicate a variety of third parties, highlighting brokerage as a network of co-dependencies that extends throughout the Aboriginal art world, and in a postcolonial context often traces enduring inequities and dissonance between Aboriginal and settler-European worlds. Whose ideals and objectives brokers ultimately serve becomes here a key question.

For the artist Richard Bell, the answer is clear. He has made another influential critique of third party mediation in his deliberately provocative essay-cum-manifesto, ‘Bell’s Theorem’, and is unequivocal on the matter of who benefits in Australia from the production of art between cultures. The “key players” in the Aboriginal art industry, he argued, “are mostly White people whose areas of expertise are Anthropology and Western Art” (his use of capitals).\(^57\) The critique that follows is essentially one in which the role of the non-Aboriginal broker of Aboriginal art – whether curator, art coordinator, or anthropologist – is drawn into question. Bell’s well-known painting Scientia e metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem), 2003, featured a far more succinct variation on the same theme: the work – a bold text painting that appropriates generalised elements of Western abstraction – reads, “Aboriginal art – it’s a white thing”.

My thesis echoes Jon Altman’s response to Bells’ provocation, which could be summed up as “Aboriginal art: it’s an intercultural thing”.\(^58\)

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58 J Altman, Brokering Aboriginal Art, p. 4.
Finally, these understandings of brokerage have strong parallels with the contemporary art curator. One argument I put forward in the first section of this thesis is that the art coordinator – arguably the most influential third party broker of indigenous contemporary art – is a ‘curator-like’ figure, especially when considered in terms of contemporary curating as a collaborative, inter-subjective practice – a development that occurred in the international art world at the same time (the 1980s) that the remote Aboriginal art industry in Australia began to take a discernable institutional shape (see Chapter 3).

Since the late 1960s the curator has been a significant agent – at times even provocateur – in the production of meanings and subjectivities within the art world, and thus a key figure in any attempt to analyse contemporary art (just as, one might argue, the art critic was a key figure in the formation of modernism). In examining the curatorial role in more detail I turn to a number of key texts that establish social, historical and theoretical frames of reference. Terry Smith’s recent book Thinking Contemporary Curating develops a theory of current curatorial practice in relation to contemporary art discourse.\(^59\) Paul O’Neill, the English curator, artist and theorist, has also written widely on curating: his edited collection Curating subjects,\(^60\) and his historical overview The culture of curating and the curating of cultures,\(^61\) both form key references. In addition, Hans Ulrich Obrist’s A Brief History of Curating provides another, albeit more subjective, overview of the developments underpinning the rise of the curator in the contemporary art world.\(^62\)

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59 T Smith, Thinking Contemporary Curating, Independent curators international, New York, 2013.
The literature on curatorial practice in direct relation to indigenous contemporary art in Australia is best located within exhibition catalogues. This resource has been used here as a means to trace the curatorial reception of indigenous art, as well as provide reference texts for individual curatorial approaches.

0.04 Chapter outline

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first, comprising chapters one to three, provides a critical and historical grounding for its central questions; the second, comprising chapters four to six, presents three contemporary case studies which take the various implications of intercultural brokerage as their subject.

In chapter one I examine two related frames for the interpretation of indigenous contemporary art in Australia: the intercultural on the one hand, and the political on the other. Beginning with an examination of the historic interactions between Bennelong and Captain Arthur Phillip at Sydney Cove in the first years of settlement, I establish a basis for the subsequent critical elaboration of indigenous contemporary art as an expression of intercultural exchange, and thus an intercultural phenomenon. In contrast, I then turn towards an overview of the late twentieth century Aboriginal political movement in Australia, and its influence upon the reception of indigenous contemporary art from the 1980s onwards. Ultimately the political developments I explore, although essential to any accurate conception of this creative phenomenon, can be seen as having limited detailed discussion of its intercultural aspect, and thus impacted upon wider understandings of the role of brokers.

In chapter two I begin to model the role of the broker in more detail, drawing comparison with the conception of the contemporary curator. I do this by way of a detailed examination of two projects undertaken by the Bundjalong curator Djon Mundine: The Aboriginal Memorial (1987-1988), and Djirrididi (kingfisher) (2008). In this way I establish a
number of further critical frames that thread through this thesis: the broker as social entrepreneur; the curator as collaborator in art’s social relations; and the relational, socially driven aspect of key works.

In chapter three I turn towards a detailed analysis of the art coordinator: a ‘curator-like’ figure, I argue, who plays an essential brokerage role between remotely based Aboriginal artists and the broader art world. Beginning with an overview of the contemporary formation of this role, I then elaborate something of its historical basis, embedding it within intercultural relations that pattern colonial Australia and which have resulted in the invention of new material forms and subjectivities. By examining three historical narratives in further detail I ultimately argue for a local conception of the exchanges that have been essential in the production of much indigenous contemporary art.

Chapter four – the first of the three case studies – establishes an intercultural discussion around the practice of the contemporary Yolngu artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu. By looking at Yunupingu’s wider practice in terms of translation between Aboriginal (Yolngu) and settler Australian worlds, I argue that her work provides an effective means to re-evaluate indigenous contemporary art’s defining discourse: a prompt that has largely been missed in the reception of her work to date. Ongoing exchanges between Yunupingu and art coordinators at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in North Eastern Arnhem Land, particularly long-term coordinator Will Stubbs, provide an important framework within this chapter.

In chapter five I explore the experiences of Tony Oliver, an influential art coordinator who worked particularly closely with the late Gija artist Paddy Bedford. Unfolding in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia, Oliver’s narrative forms the basis to examine his robustly collaborative approach to art coordination and to consider the broader implications of his role. In doing so I build upon my argument from the previous chapter, further establishing a means by which to
reappraise the defining discourse of indigenous contemporary art like Bedford’s against a more collective understanding of authorship and the individual relationships that are often of central importance within remote art contexts.

Chapter six examines the practice of another remotely based artist, the late Sally Gabori. Whereas the subjects of the previous two chapters provide opportunity to emphasise exchanges between individuals, and the local basis upon which these occurred, this chapter provides means to more closely analyse the role of the market as a site of intercultural agency.

In conclusion I return to the origins of this thesis by critically examining my own role as a broker in the production of meanings for indigenous contemporary art. I do this primarily through my role as a curator in relation to a series of drawings by the late Kimberley artist Ngarra, and my selection of these for exhibition in Melbourne in 2014. In this way I reiterate the subjective frames that have driven both my methodology and ultimate argument, and which together have generated key questions about the efficacy of indigenous contemporary art in Australia.
PART ONE: A THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BASIS
CHAPTER 01

The intercultural and the political:
Aboriginal art at the interstices between worlds

1.1 The house at Bennelong Point

If you look across Sydney harbour today it is almost impossible to conceive that Bennelong Point, site of Jørn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House, was once a small tidal island frequented by the Cadigal people. The city has long grown over this tiny area of land, to the point where it no longer resembles an island at all. What one sees now is a bricked thoroughfare subject to a constant stream of sightseers and tourists drawn to one of Australia’s most iconic urban landscapes: the sweep of Utzon’s white sails back-grounded by the curvature of Sydney harbor bridge and pressed on all sides by some of the most expensive waterfront real estate in the world. In this, Bennelong Point might best now be seen as an enduring symbol of Australia’s global modernity; a kind of visual shorthand, recognisable the world over, for the country’s aspirational vision of nationhood.

Yet it’s equally true that another history disturbs the ideals embodied in this iconic site, just as it does the harbour’s wider shoreline. It was here, in 1788, that the Cadigal, along with the other clans of the area, found themselves caught at the leading edge of an invasion as over 1000 Britons began to carve out a convict colony. Among the Wangal, the close allies and neighbouring clan of the Cadigal, was Bennelong, an astute figure whom history now generally understands as a diplomat in all but name. The most prominent among the small number of native Australians who established close ties with the invaders in the first decade of settlement, it is his story that has endured, and his name that Bennelong Point now bears. Indeed, the first building that the British erected on the site was a small brick cottage that Bennelong requested, and which was built
The intercultural and the political

at the behest of the colony’s first Governor, Captain Arthur Phillip: a charged gesture of the boundedness and reciprocity that traced the outline of their brief friendship.

*Among the first Aboriginal people on record to infiltrate the settler world on somewhat mutually beneficial terms, Bennelong occupies an unsettled position in the country’s founding narrative; hope and tragedy animate his story in near equal measure.

He was taken by force from his clan, along with his close Cadigal companion, Colebee, in November 1789. The kidnapping was ordered by Governor Phillip, who had resorted to these desperate measures after feeling he had exhausted other avenues by which to establish relations with the native population. Although undoubtedly a terrifying introduction, Phillip’s ultimate motivation was a kind of misguided diplomacy: he hoped to introduce his captives to the positive aspects of the settler world, and thus gain further traction with the surrounding clans. Benevolent or not, the strategy had already proven to have tragic consequences. Another man, Arabanoo, had been taken in the same manner, and although he had initially responded well to his treatment, he had died of smallpox after only a few months.¹

For his part, Colebee – perhaps cognisant of Arabanoo’s fate – made off as soon as the opportunity presented itself; still sporting an ankle iron he returned to his people. Bennelong, by contrast, seems to have adjusted with great alacrity to his new surrounds. In the eyes of his abductors he was a notably amicable and sharp subject. As Kate

Fullagar has noted, he made surprisingly quick inroads into the settlement’s nascent society:

His leg irons came off in the New Year but he chose to remain with Phillip; he loved the food and the wine and the fine clothes; and he was said by many to relish in revelry – he was intelligent, good humored and “scrupulous” in his observance of etiquette.\(^2\)

Inga Clendinnen also outlines Bennelong’s capacity to absorb the culture of his interlopers and, in a sense, enthusiastically play it back to them:

For all of his stay with the British he remained exuberantly experimental, ready to tackle whatever these peculiar strangers had to offer.\(^3\)

In part, this meant ready adoption of foreign cultural mores: as Clendinnen continues, Bennelong readily “recognised the British use of different cloths and colours to mark status and happily accepted the distinction lent to his person by formal styles.”\(^4\) This kind of calculated social mimicry aimed, one can assume, to elevate the regard in which he was held by his captors: it ingratiated him into their symbolic systems of power, and in doing so granted him space within which to realise his own ideals.

Bennelong’s kidnapping undoubtedly marked an inauspicious start to intercultural relations: as such, it might have seemed a foregone conclusion that even in light of his marked level of mobility in the settler world, the balance of power would fall against him. Yet this was not necessarily the case, at least not at first. Even in the early days of his confinement “it was far more frequently Bennelong who dictated terms and gained information.”\(^5\) It seems he was soon able to leverage his position to his own

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\(^2\) K Fullagar, p. 177.
\(^3\) I Clendinnen, p. 106.
\(^4\) ibid.
\(^5\) K Fullagar, p. 177.
benefit: his knowledge of the settler world was accompanied by a rise in his status with his own people. In addition, he readily understood Phillip’s standing within the colony and sought to draw him into local patterns of social organisation, thus granting this strange new relationship a more familiar shape. Following his tradition, he took to calling Phillip ‘father’, embedding at the heart of their friendship an Aboriginal notion of social reciprocity.

Indeed, Bennelong’s relationship with the settlers, and with Phillip in particular, was such that when he too slipped away a number of months later, leaving behind the ‘fine’ English clothes he had worn to such great effect, the English were genuinely surprised by the turn of events. As Fullagar puts it, “the wobbly power relations between Phillip and his captive seemed to topple in on themselves with a single stroke.”

Bennelong would return to the colony three months later, following the spearing of Phillip at Manly Cove in September 1789, an event now largely understood as a symbolic act that Bennelong likely orchestrated. He enjoyed a successful re-entry: having proven he could come and go as he pleased he had enacted his own agency within these new colonial relations of power. This time he found himself a free subject navigating the rapidly changing world that was unfolding around him. To an extent it was a transition that seems to have suited Phillip’s project perfectly: the historical record reveals that he and Bennelong drew unusually close, at least when measured against the broader settler and Aboriginal relations of the day. They dined

ibid.

I Clendinnen, p. 106.

K Fullagar, p. 177.

Clendinnen is among those to perceive complex intercultural motivations behind the spearing at Manly Cove. She suggests it was a form of tribal payback for the abduction of Bennelong and Colebee (among other injustices) that once executed laid the groundwork for Bennelong to return to the colony with a clean slate between him and the settlers. See, I Clendinnen, pp. 110 –132. Fullagar makes the same observation in less detail, following historian Keith Smith (see, K Fullagar, p. 178.)
together often at Government house and although Bennelong continued to constantly engage in the social politics of his own world, and in doing so disrupted Phillip’s ideals for the relationship, the unavoidable conclusion remains that there was a genuine regard between the two.

It was at this moment of conciliation that Phillip ordered Bennelong be built a small brick cottage on the tiny spit of land that jutted into Port Jackson. Erected on a site of Bennelong’s choosing, it formed an important symbol for both of them. If in Phillip’s mind it bound Bennelong and his friends to a new alliance with the settlers, Bennelong’s intentions were also clear, part of a wider attempt to claim something of the settler world as his own:

[He] was pursuing a rapidly evolving political project of his own: to establish himself as the crucial hinge-man between the white men and the local tribes, and indeed as the only man capable of eliciting proper compensation for past wrongs (…)

In this light, the cottage can be seen as a charged emblem of the intercultural mid-zone that Bennelong was largely responsible for opening. But if this was indeed the case, it’s also true that he only got so far with what was, at least when measured against the colonial ideologies of the day, an impossible task. If his is an early success story of the interactions between cultures at the colonial interface, the telling of it is also tinged by tragedy. In 1792 Phillip’s posting came to an end and he returned to London. As is well known Bennelong accompanied him, along with a young man called Yammerawanne. After a three-year stay, during which Yammerawanne died, Bennelong returned to Sydney Cove in the company of the colony’s new Governor, John Hunter. In most versions of Bennelong’s story his

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10 I Clendinnen, p. 138.
11 ibid, p. 119.
1.1 Samuel John Neale, 'Benelong: a Native of New Holland', 1804, engraving, printed by Whitehall: T Edgerton, collection of The State Library of Victoria, Melbourne
return is emblematic of his decline, both socially and physically. His manners, from a British perspective at least, went downhill; his clothes, once so carefully observed, became tattered and worn. The broad promise flagged by his early friendship with Phillip soon faded in favour of a far harsher, and at one level far more familiar, colonial narrative. As Fullagar notes, “within five years he rarely engaged with the colonists at all.”¹²

Yet in Samuel John Neele’s 1804 engraving of him, made well after his return to the colony, Bennelong still presents as the transcultural gentleman par excellence. Pictured in profile, he stares intently out of the left side of the frame. His hair – unkempt, but not wild – forms a dark scaffold of curls, while the lapels of an English overcoat lie raffishly open at his chest, adding a touch of urbane style. Gone is the unnamed native dancing threateningly at the edges of the picture frame, beyond the secure borders of settlement. In his place, perhaps for the first time, we get a sense of an individual acting within history rather than falling to its inexorable spread. That Bennelong’s story still imparts such promise is perhaps evidence of his greatest achievement. It’s hard not to sense that here is a man explicitly aware that to be understood by the dominant culture, he had to appropriate something of its symbolic power and in doing so prove he could understand and value the other’s logic.

Naturally, one must assume that Bennelong not only hoped his gesture would be reciprocated, but that intercultural relations might proceed on the very basis of such exchange. But although we see the beginnings of this in the evenings he shared at Phillip’s table, the weight of their contract ultimately seems to have fallen upon Bennelong’s shoulders. The settlers, after all, had brute force at their disposal; it was Bennelong and his people who were expected to change,

¹² K Fullagar, p. 185.
not their British interlopers: they were there to establish empire’s outpost, not to forge a new cultural paradigm. In his exchanges with Phillip, it was Bennelong who seems to have ultimately found himself marooned upon a largely unknown cultural landscape. His small cottage might have become a site of intercultural revelry, but against the broader backdrop of colonial dispossession this could only achieve so much.

The tragedy of misunderstanding that befalls many accounts of Bennelong’s story is illustrated perfectly in the account of David Collins, the colony’s Judge Advocate, which he wrote in the late 1790s. Collins was shocked to observe that regardless of Bennelong’s entry into the settler world – particularly what Collins sees as the opportunity he had to live happily within the grounds of the Governor’s relatively palatial house, where he could wander “unmolested” by his own people – he still “preferred the rude and dangerous society of his own countrymen.”13 Collins’ perception of this turn of events as a kind of stubborn refusal of all Bennelong had been offered would endure. When Bennelong died of natural causes in 1813, his obituary in the Sydney Gazette claimed that his visit to Great Britain had “produced no change whatever in his manners and inclinations, which were naturally barbarous and ferocious.”14

This perceived intractability of character – often presented as evidence of an innate ‘savageness’ – is what, in the eyes of empire at least, inflected Bennelong’s narrative from here on in.15 It rendered what he had offered through his relationship with Phillip – nothing less than a platform of mutual exchange between Aboriginal and settler

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13 ibid.
14 ibid, p. 186.
15 ibid.
Australian worlds – that much more easier for the colonists to refuse.

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In his day, a space in which Bennelong might draw equally from each culture surrounding him, shuttling between the two, was largely unimaginable. Yet this is precisely how Bennelong’s narrative, and his interactions with his British interlopers, and Phillip in particular, might best be understood. Extending across unfamiliar terrain, their exchanges highlight a moment in which two cultures previously defined by their difference begin to unthread, one into the other. A friendship between two individuals, and the relatively transparent process of mutual political brokerage this enabled, provided a medium for this exchange to occur.

Here we see tangible evidence of what the linguist Mary Louise Pratt called a ‘contact zone’.16 Although she uses the term interchangeably with ‘the frontier’, she notes that the conception of a ‘frontier’, contingent as it is upon a faraway ‘centre’, has certain discursive limits: it draws its power from Europe and thus minimises the transformative power of the other. By contrast, a ‘contact zone’ denotes a more horizontal field of exchange, one in which both parties become implicated in a complex social and cultural space that predicates the creation of new cultural identities.17 For Pratt, the term sketches a far more nuanced, and therefore accurate, understanding of the interactions that play out at the cultural interface: as she notes, it “invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point in which their trajectories now intersect.”18

17 ibid.
18 ibid.
This provides a particularly useful means to visualise not only the earliest interactions that trace Australia’s settlement, but subsequent exchanges between Aboriginal and settler Australian cultures throughout history. The anthropologist Peter Sutton, for example, also notes the power that exchange enacts upon parties, drawing particular attention to the transformative relations that take shape between individuals. Focusing on his own discipline, Sutton explores historically significant relationships between anthropologists and their Aboriginal informants. He suggests that the intimate space created between such figures – far removed, as they are, from the grandly symbolic (and, one might argue, thus largely abstract) gestures of the nation state – is precisely where meaningful reconciliation between cultures might begin.19

These intimate, personal exchanges gesture toward something simultaneously more tangible and more fragile. Contingent upon specific parties, the loss or withdrawal of either side of the exchange often predicates a fatal disruption to its very architecture. We see a particularly dramatic illustration of this within the British failure to fulfill the intercultural potential flagged in Bennelong and Phillip’s relationship. When Bennelong returned to Sydney in 1795 with John Hunter, Phillip’s absence as friend and advocate ultimately spelt the end of their codependent project. There were, of course, no official appointments waiting for Bennelong on his return; nor means provided for his successes as a cultural go-between to be further ratified in the settler world. While Hunter, an experienced naval captain, desired relations with the native Australians to remain easy – even if simply to achieve the objectives of empire without costly conflict – he evidently lacked his predecessor’s insight that suspending the prevailing

Making in translation

colonial order might benefit Aboriginal and settler cultures alike.

Yet it is exactly this willingness to bend to the transformative potential of cultural exchange that draws forth new ways of acting and being in a changing world. This calls for a certain divestment of previously intransigent conceptions of identity. As Sutton puts it:

(L)earning to see the world through the eyes of others ideally means not just looking through a different lens, but stepping through it as far as feasible. (…) Proper attitudes, listening, being nice and cultural relativism are not enough. One has to change.20

In Pratt’s terms the notion of change is also key: her conception of the contact zone in which intercultural relations are forged urges us to think beyond the limit of cultural boundaries, emphasising instead “how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to their other.”21 At one level, this speaks of the vagaries of exchange as they play out in the contact zone; whatever the broader framing ideologies, colonial or otherwise, it might be impossible to avoid the ramifications of this disruptive, ragged landscape. Here change shapes a newly intercultural future, even as individuals might imagine they are deepening the grooves between existing differences. Regardless of an often-unequal basis of power (in colonial or frontier contexts this can be conceived in terms of a dominant versus a subjugated party), it is here where relations proceed “not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices.”22

Herein we can observe not only the creation of new kinds of social and cultural practice, but also the invention of new material forms and subjectivities. It pays to remember

20 ibid, p. 163.
21 ML Pratt, p. 8.
22 ibid.
that, in the same fashion in which we can accept that
Phillip’s conception of the colonial project was
inextricably shaped by his exchanges with Bennelong, the
dominant culture has been similarly challenged by subsequent
exchanges; events that often unfold between individual
parties, and, as they do, create new means of thinking
between previously demarcated worlds.

1.2 Art in the contact zone / an intercultural dimension

Pratt’s notion of the contact zone was an example of the
cosmopolitan turn that underpins postcolonial theory, which
understands modernity not as emanating from Western centres
but as the result of channels between first and third world
contexts. For Homi K Bhabha, the narratives of diaspora and
dispossession that have resulted from the historical
ruptures of colonisation and exile make possible a unique
double register: what he refers to as the “double vision” of
the immigrant or exile who finds him or herself drawing on
two cultural contexts to make sense of the space that lies
between.

For Bhabha, the boundary lines between cultures define a
site of “presencing”. Here meanings and subjectivities might
be re-made and rewritten in productive interchange, an “in-
between” space that can in turn be understood as the
psychological manifestation of the contact zone. The
disruptive presence of the colonial other is thus understood
as providing means to transcend previously binding
configurations of identity. Indeed, as Bhabha puts it: “The
borderline work of culture demands an encounter with
‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and
present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act
of cultural translation” (my use of italics). For the
anthropologist James Clifford, this site of cultural
interchange holds similar promise: as Christian Kravagna has

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24 ibid, p. 10.
noted, Clifford has “countered anthropology’s fixation on a static and place-bound conception of culture with a paradigm of ‘routes’, advocating for a particular emphasis on ‘travelling cultures’.”  

In the art world, which is ultimately the terrain across which this thesis extends, such sites of cultural interchange have proven particularly productive. Indeed, contemporary art – now generally accepted as the name of a new globalism in art that has superseded the Western orientated modern period before it – finds itself uniquely adapted to the complex, interstitial space (mainly colonial in character) that theorists such as Pratt, Bhabha and Clifford have analysed.

My focus on contemporary art, and in particular the kind of material practices borne of the contemporary contact zone, intends to cast light upon a specific area of this interchange: the legacy of Australia’s colonial interface – a site that emphasises the modes of thinking between cultures that (as I will argue) contemporary art finds itself uniquely placed to engage. Here creative practice has long provided parties from both indigenous and Western backgrounds means to both negotiate and contest existing differences. As it does, new configurations of identity, and new forms of creative practice, become possible.

In this we see something central to the creative act. Indeed, as Nikos Papastergiadis – a leading theorist of the cosmopolitan turn in art and culture – has written, creative practice in this context has a specific function. As he puts it:

Art begins in curiosity, the sensuous attraction towards difference and connection, and proceeds through a relational mode of thinking that serves simultaneously as an instrument

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for suspending the existing order of things and as a platform for imagining alternatives.\(^2^6\)

My focus here, in a broad sense, ultimately falls upon the mediation of indigenous contemporary art in Australia: a subject, one might argue, that has little to do with the broader cosmopolitan turn to which Papastergiadis is drawing attention. At one level, this is true. As many of the following pages reiterate, it is the specific qualities of this art, rather than its conscious alignment with global developments, that ultimately grants it a unique frame. A key part of this difference is accounted for by the distinctive social structures of its dissemination; another by the specific cultural and geographic localities of its production. However, by focusing on the central notion of mediation I ultimately argue for similarly unstable and revelatory notions of creative authorship and agency to those touched on above. Indeed, if the contact zone that continues to carry the production of this art has long established new formations of identity at the cultural interstices, picturing it in robustly relational or inter-subjective terms is largely unavoidable.

Foregoing the modernist inflected notions of individual genius that have often traced the passage of indigenous art into the Western art world, I thus intend in these pages to sketch a more nuanced conception of how indigenous contemporary art has been conceived not only between cultures but between individuals; that is, how specific meanings and understandings have been drawn out through the social and cultural exchanges that punctuate its circulation from sites of production to sites of display and dissemination. This is, I ultimately argue, best conceived in terms of a social configuration, which in turn can be highlighted in a number of different ways. Once again, notions of sovereignty or locality become key: indeed, in focusing on how we might see this art in contemporary terms we must understand how it reiterates its

\(^2^6\) N Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and culture*, p. 9.
local character, even as its broader circulation provides much of its function.

For one, the specific geography that indigenous contemporary art covers might be best conceived as far more local that the general term ‘indigenous’ signifies.\(^\text{27}\) By this I mean that in becoming contemporary art, *indigenous* contemporary art (much like the wider interactions between Aboriginal and settler-Australian worlds) can be understood to maintain a certain localised sovereignty even as its intersections with the broader world of contemporary art become more pronounced. As touched on in my introduction, it is arguably this mobilisation of differences, or locality, within the wider art world that aligns it with aspects of the current theorisation of contemporary art that seek to establish its critical topography within an increasingly dispersed global perspective, distinct from what the Nigerian curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor refers to as modernism’s “Westernism” before it.\(^\text{28}\)

Terry Smith advocated for a similar perspective in 2001, when he noted that Aboriginal people “originate their own structures of same and other, produce their own relations of distinction and difference, and then choose whether to act ‘in-between’ cultures.”\(^\text{29}\) It follows that their art - perhaps unsurprisingly given the histories of displacement and deterritorialised encounters within which it has formed - remains resonant with an inherent intercultural tension. The

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\(^{27}\) See for example, I McLean, ‘Names’, in I McLean (ed), *Double Desire*, pp. 16-29.


Enwezor defines Westernism as ‘the sphere of global totality that manifests itself through the political, social, economic, cultural, juridical and spiritual integration achieved via institutions devised and maintained solely to perpetuate the influence of European and North-American modes of being.’ (p. 46.)

identities artists manifest in their work remain strikingly specific, representing, for many, a refusal to be defined solely within the discursive structures of the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, the mantra of place that indigenous contemporary art articulates through notions of ‘country’ and custodial ownership, which has in turn served to emphasise specific geographic ties and at times even helped repatriate those in exile,\textsuperscript{31} also acts to distance (or, as Smith puts it “to defend and secure incommensurability”\textsuperscript{32}) as though the criticality of difference depends on its active performance.

As with broader understandings of contemporary art this is a quality that divests the hegemonic structures of Western modernism by insisting on the primacy of specific contexts and meanings, even as – or precisely because – they manifest within increasingly diversified contexts of cultural production. For the editors of the E-Flux Journal, this ability to make apparent “the vitality and immanence of many histories in constant, simultaneous translation” is “perhaps contemporary art’s most redeeming trait.”\textsuperscript{33} Here we also see evidence of what Smith notes as a key feature of contemporaneity (and a key aspect of its cosmopolitan underpinnings): the traffic between cultures, a site in which previously incommensurable differences are brought into

\textsuperscript{30} Fred Myers has noted in relation to Aboriginal acrylic paintings that ‘the identities that many acrylic painters produce on their canvasses are not uprooted or deterritorialised: this is their very claim’. See, F R Myers, ‘Representing Culture: The production of discourse(s) for Aboriginal acrylic painting’, Cultural Anthropology, vol. 6, no. 1, 1991, pp. 26–62, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{31} For example, return to ‘homelands’ was a key feature of the painting movement at Papunya, which was originally established in the late 1960s as a government administered settlement for displaced peoples from the Western Desert. Initial painting sales provided much needed economic support to visit surrounding areas and also provided a political fulcrum to quicken their return. The initial wave of this return was cemented by the establishment of a school at Yayayi near Papunya in 1974. By 1976, five years after the advent of Western Desert painting, 40 percent of Papunya’s initial population were living at newly established outstations. See P Carter, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams: Mobilising the Papunya Tula Painting Movement, 1972–1972’, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{32} T Smith, ‘Public art between cultures’, p. 641.

alignment, where they don’t necessarily reconcile but where each “becomes implicated in the other.”\textsuperscript{34}

It is from this perspective that we might perceive that the intercultural currents that define much of the prevailing theorisation of contemporary art on a worldly scale refract and echo within local transactions. In this, they find particular resonance in indigenous contemporary art’s interactive edge. Indeed, the ‘transactional’ dynamic that Paul Carter has analysed between Geoffrey Bardon and the founding artists at Papunya, has to varying degrees underwritten the development of similar art-making traditions across Australia. They too display similarly intercultural processes of negotiation based upon the complex call and response of what I ultimately characterise here as collaborative exchange.

Yet this isn’t to say that the resulting art is generally received in this manner. Indeed, as I’ve already noted, indigenous contemporary art’s intercultural character often remains largely invisible within surrounding discourse. Carter, for example, points out that relative to the vast amount of material produced on Western Desert art since Bardon’s time at Papunya, “little attention has been given to the transactional environment” in which its metamorphosis from “traditional painting forms” to contemporary art occurred.\textsuperscript{35} He suggests that Bardon’s famous diffidence in his own writings – that is, his downplaying of his own role – is far from the only reason for this critical blindspot.\textsuperscript{36} Rather, it “stems from a concern amongst both indigenous and non-indigenous writers and scholars not to deflect attention away from (…)\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} T Smith, ‘Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity’, p. 705.
\textsuperscript{36} ibid, pp. 103-104.
the extraordinary act of cultural self-reaffirmation represented by the painting movement." 37

Although Carter is referring to Western Desert painting specifically, he frames this oversight in terms easily applied to indigenous contemporary art more broadly: "to suggest the hybrid character of the movement’s beginnings," he writes, "is thus easily construed as an attack on the artist’s cultural autonomy and political agency" 38 - even, we might imagine, a re-colonisation which doubles the historical act of dispossession.

1.4 A political dimension

The pronounced tendency to retreat from a cosmopolitan or intercultural understanding of indigenous contemporary art points to the fact that regardless of the baseline of cultural hybridity that has directly enabled this creative manifestation to unfold between Aboriginal and settler-Australian worlds (and which ties it convincingly to global developments), the dominant field of art world discourse has clustered around political rather than intercultural readings. At times it seems as if each can only foreclose the other. Indeed, the ‘concern’ that Carter points to above has a much broader historical dimension: it can be traced to the enduring effect of the Aboriginal political struggles that gathered momentum within Australia throughout the twentieth century, and which were themselves contingent upon a global context patterned with anti-colonial movements that were by the 1980s bleeding into the international art world.

In Australia this had a specific and far-reaching effect. As notions of Aboriginality began to be re-circulated and re-negotiated, particularly following the success of the 1967 Referendum, the political dimension of indigenous art provided an increasingly relevant frame for its interpretation. In this

37 ibid.
38 ibid.
period, the “mythic, yet much recited frontier tropes”\textsuperscript{39} previously integral to settler Australia’s historical self-signification were progressively challenged by the emergence of Aboriginal self-determination on the political and cultural stage.

Curators Wally Caruana and Djon Mundine are among those who have noted this intersection. They retrospectively observed in 1994 that many indigenous artists, especially those based in and around urban areas, “were at the forefront of the indigenous political movement of the period – social justice and the land rights push were integral to the struggle to have their identity acknowledged.”\textsuperscript{40} Yolngu activist Galarrwuy Yunupingu’s often quoted assessment goes one step further: for him indigenous art practice has long been “central to the expression of the conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people since [1788] – and in recent times, in many ways, has paralleled our political struggles to maintain our culture and our rights to our land.”\textsuperscript{41}

From this perspective, it is of little surprise that in the 1970s the emergence and reception of Aboriginal art became contingent upon radical developments within the broader Aboriginal political movement, a cause which itself found oxygen in the “re-assertion of ethnic identities all over the world.”\textsuperscript{42} When the Whitlam Government ushered in the era of self-determination it fell almost perfectly in step; not only did it underscore the end of the era of enforced assimilation, it also signaled a broader shift: an increased level of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{40} W Caruana and D Mundine, ‘From Charcoal Lane’, in Urban Focus: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists from the urban areas of Australia, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1994, unpaginated.
\end{footnotesize}
expenditure on Aboriginal affairs that echoed the new multicultural polices that at this time found favour in Australia and other Western countries. Against this backdrop the pressing issue of Aboriginal land rights found renewed prominence; key services were established “which were to be managed by local communities”\textsuperscript{43} and funding was made available for the outstation movement, enabling many in remote Aboriginal Australia to establish small settlements directly on their traditional lands. Such developments – which essentially aimed to address historic disadvantage – ultimately saw key figures begin to move from the insurgency of the Aboriginal protest movement to the new responsibilities of an Aboriginal bureaucracy charged with the management and implementation of new policies, programs and expenditure.\textsuperscript{44}

This is not to say that such visibility was solely contingent upon a newfound clarity in government policy. Far from it: Aboriginal activists had been agitating for such change for decades, at least since the emergence of Black Nationalism in urban politics in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{45} The Gurindji land claim in particular, headed by the Gurindji activist Vincent Lingari at Wave Hill in 1967, pushed land rights and the social struggles of Aboriginal people to the political forefront, and helped to set the stage for other high profile legal challenges. Key among these was the Gove Land Rights case, Milirrpum and Others \textit{v} Nabalco Pty Ltd, which was brought to the courts a year after events at Wave Hill by Yolngu traditional owners from the ex-mission community of Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land, and followed the pledge of traditional land ownership set out in the Aboriginal Bark Petition of 1963.\textsuperscript{46} Although the presiding judge eventually ruled against the claimants in 1971, he made a key admission:

\textsuperscript{44} ibid, p 276 – 277.
\textsuperscript{46} H Morphy, \textit{Aboriginal Art}, p. 66-67.
the people of Yirrkala lived within (as he put it at the time) “a subtle and elaborate system highly adapted to the country in which people led their lives.”\textsuperscript{47}

The effect of these quietly spoken words was seismic. As the historian Henry Reynolds has written, “Perhaps for the first time since European settlement, an Australian court had taken Aboriginal society seriously.”\textsuperscript{48} Just over two decades later, the ruling provided a legal basis for the success of the Mabo Land Rights case in 1992, \textit{Mabo v Queensland (no 2)}. It was this development that finally provided an official acknowledgement of the existence of native title, and in doing so overthrew Australia’s great colonial myth – that of Terra Nullius.

Although successful, these events formed only a slow moving backdrop to a more urgent political forment, far more militant and direct in its political aspirations. A new generation of indigenous activists emerged in the late 1960s and 70s. While built on the legacy of Black Nationalism that had guided earlier generations, it was further fueled by the ideology of the American Black Power movement – especially that of the Black Panthers. Clear evidence of this came in 1969, when the Victorian Aboriginies Advancement League (VAAL) brought the Caribbean Black Power activist Roosevelt Brown to Australia, during which time he delivered a lecture in Melbourne.\textsuperscript{49} Three years later, in December 1971, the short-lived Australian Black Panther Party was established. Although the organisation’s real influence, as Kathy Lothian has argued, extended beyond activism and into the establishment of Aboriginal-run community organisations such as legal aid and

\textsuperscript{47} H Reynolds, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{48} ibid.
medical services, it further aligned the Aboriginal cause with international developments. In this light, globally influential texts such as Frantz Fanon’s ‘The Wretched of the Earth’, ‘Black Power’ by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton and the speeches and writings of American civil rights leader Malcolm X provided important ideological ballasts for the assertion of new formations of Aboriginality. Popular significations of Aboriginality began to encompass the political demands that had long-driven Aboriginal activism.

The ultimate outcomes of these intersections were many and for the most part lie outside the scope of this thesis. Importantly, however, this emergent awareness prompted a key shift in the institutional makeup of a number of Aboriginal organisations. Although still engaged within the broad protest movement, Australians of settler-European descent began to step aside in order to make way for Aboriginal people to articulate their own vision beyond the assimilation era. For example, following Brown’s visit to Australia the VAAL issued a statement that “described the proper role of whites within the organisation as standing back while Aboriginal decision makers did their jobs.” In some cases this split existing organisations, fuelling new groups such as the National Tribal Council, which held Aboriginality as a prerequisite for membership.

Conscious alignment with global political struggles also had a more free-ranging local impact. The ideologies of Black Power, marked by the construction of positive black identities on the political and cultural stages, signaled a more militant identity politics that veered radically from the largely

50 ibid.
52 ibid, p. 20.
53 ibid.
intercultural spirit of pre-1967 activism. In this, a strident reimagining of Aboriginal agency in the public domain continued to take shape, even as the militancy of actions like the Aboriginal Black Panthers retreated. As the Whitlam Government’s policies encouraged a shift towards working within government structures, an activist legacy nonetheless remained. Michael Mansell’s proposal for an Aboriginal nation in 1992, and the calls for a treaty with indigenous Australians by Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Kevin Gilbert can be seen in similar light: events that not only signaled the crumbling of the colonial edifice, but ultimately the local manifestation of a global readjustment of colonial power relations.

For many, the symbolic and ideological centre of this legacy remains the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. This purposefully makeshift encampment – established on the grounds of Australia’s Parliament House on the 27th of January 1972 – provided an early locus for high profile activists including Michael Anderson, Bobbi Sykes and Gary Foley. Emblematic of the struggle for land rights – the broadest and initially most pressing issue to unite a pan-Aboriginal voice in Australia – this action provided a brilliantly creative riposte to the McMahon Liberal Government’s declaration on Australia Day, 1972, that such rights would not be granted to Aboriginal people outside of ‘special leases’. To this day the Embassy retains its charged symbolism, signifying not just the displacement shared by an Aboriginal population treated as foreigners in their own lands, but the twin demands of Aboriginal autonomy and sovereignty that crystallised around its establishment. Lodged in the national consciousness, it has become a thorn in the side of respective governments seeking to promote a collective vision of nationhood.

It was against this backdrop that a flag designed by Harold Thomas was in 1971 first claimed as the Aboriginal

flag. At first unofficial, in 1995 the Keating Labor government faced down coalition opposition and proclaimed it a national flag. To this day the Aboriginal flag and the old colonial flag of White Australia fly together on official occasions: a tacit acknowledgement that the country can only be accurately signified as a nation forged between two traditions.

1.5 Lighting up

The political developments described here undoubtedly presented Aboriginal people with effective new opportunities for cultural advocacy in the public domain. In the art world this meant not only challenging prevailing distinctions but gaining control of associated discourse, a task taken to with enthusiasm by a new generation of politically engaged artists and curators.

In the 1970s and 1980s it was the exclusion of urban-based Aboriginal artists from the emerging narrative of indigenous contemporary art (and, indeed, contemporary art more broadly) that drew their focus. Initially it was the pioneering work of writers including Faith Bandler, Jack Davis and Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), along with artists such as the ceramicist Thancoupie and the painters Trevor Nickolls and Lin Onus that emphasised the political efficacy of creative practice. For them it provided means to critique the historic dispossession and prevailing marginalisation of Aboriginal people. It was this strategy – emblematic of the broader political climate of the times – that became synonymous with the urban Aboriginal art movement. Curators Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn summarised the consolidation of this tendency in 1993 (my italics):

55 ‘To light up’, along with ‘to strike back’ and ‘to make a mark’ are three translations for the word ‘Boomalli’ in the Bundjalong, Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri languages respectively. See J Jones, ‘Boomalli: to make a mark, to strike, to light up’, in Boomalli – 20 years on, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007, (unpaginated).
It is the neo/post colonial context in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists create their work that has led many artists to believe that [they] are not artists only – they are cultural activists. This implies that making art is as much a political statement, if less overtly so, as the dramatic demonstrations and protest movements of recent times. (...) The function of art as an agent for social change is embodied in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. 56

Informed to some extent by broader critical developments in the international art world, many of these artists and curators drew on more combative art practices, such as the political, activist and performance art of the 1970s. Yet although enabled by this newfound contingency, as the above quote suggests the history of activism had already embedded the notion of creative dissent within the Aboriginal political movement.

This too bled into the art world. For example, Bob Maza, an Aboriginal activist from Queensland, had attended a Black Power conference in the US in late 1970 and returned deeply impressed by the Harlem Black Theatre, which he recognised as a powerful social and political medium. 57 Two years later Maza established the National Black Theatre in Redfern, a lower socio-economic inner-city Sydney suburb with a largely Aboriginal demographic, a move which inaugurated in Australia the concept of a “protest theatre” whose members, such as Gerry Bostock, were involved in “multiple spheres of activism.” 58 This same embeddedness would be reflected in the practices of a core group of urban-based Aboriginal artists who rose to prominence in the mid-to-late 1980s. Like the National Black Theatre, they too created a significant pooling of shared cultural and political objectives, and, by contrasting popular “exotic or reified notions of

58 ibid, p. 25.
Aboriginality”59 with their own contemporary realities, provided further means to critically counter the existing representation of Aboriginality in Australia.

Boomalli, an influential Sydney art collective founded in 1987, quickly established itself at the centre of these developments. Like the National Black Theatre, it too found a natural base in Redfern, where from unassuming premises it provided a critically supportive ground for now well-known figures. They included Tracy Moffatt, Brenda L Croft, Michael Riley, and Hetti Perkins, daughter of the high-profile activist Charlie Perkins.60 Alongside their wider peer-group they would become integral in reframing contemporary perceptions of indigenous art and Aboriginality on both the Australian and International stage.

Boomalli’s founding group had met at art school or through exhibiting together in a number of seminal exhibitions of urban Aboriginal art.61 In addition, the collective was also contingent on the emerging Aboriginalisation of key positions, as figures from the Aboriginal political movement began to be drawn into self-management, advocacy and bureaucratic structures: a direct outcome of the wider currents of self determination that had begun in the 1970s. This shift had a direct impact in the art sector; for example, in 1984 the Aboriginal Arts Board (essentially an Aboriginal advisory committee and funding arm set up under the auspices of The Australia Council for the Arts in 1973) appointed veteran Aboriginal activist Gary Foley – a founding member of the Australian Black Panther Party – as its first indigenous

60 Boomalli was founded in 1987 by Brenda L Croft, Bronwyn Bancroft, Euphemia Bostock, Fiona Foley, Fernanda Matins, Arone Raymind Meeks, Avrill Quaill, Jeffrey Samuels, Michael Riley and Tracy Moffatt.
61 These included Koorie art ’84, at Artspace, Sydney (1984); Urban Koories at the Willoughby Art Centre, Sydney (1986); and Inside Black Australia (1988) and More Black than white, (1987), at Tin Sheds Gallery at The University of Sydney; see J Jones, (unpaginated).
director. Foley played a significant role in supporting Boomalli’s funding and establishment and continued to provide (sometimes controversial) advocacy for urban Aboriginal art throughout his tenure.

That the group’s early focus was unapologetically political should not be surprising. Its founding directly responded to the marginalisation that urban-based Aboriginal artists had experienced within the euro-centric confines of the Australian art world and the dissatisfaction that came from seeing their work excluded from “‘mainstream’ contemporary art exhibitions.” The initial relegation of their art to a kind of ‘inauthentic’ version of Aboriginality in comparison to work originating in ‘remote’ Aboriginal communities was thus met as a challenge to engage debates of authenticity head on, and led to their collective push against what Hetti Perkins would go on to characterise as “reductive and binary models of remote and urban dwellers.”

This found early expression in 1989, when the collective staged the exhibition Continuity: ANCAA/Desart/Boomalli across two venues – Boomalli and The Performance Space – in Sydney. It made the link between urban and ‘remote’ Aboriginal practice explicit: the work of Boomalli’s member artists was presented alongside their counterparts from communities associated with the newly formed peak representative bodies for Aboriginal community art centres; the Association of Northern Central Australian Aboriginal Artists (now the Association of Northern Kimberley Australian Aboriginal

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Artists) and its central desert equivalent, Desart. But, perhaps more revealingly, the collective also turned overseas. In 1995, while under the directorship of Perkins and Brenda L Croft, Boomalli worked with the black British curator, writer and artist Eddie Chambers on the first international exhibition focusing on urban Aboriginal art. *True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists raise the flag*, was presented at Boomalli; Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Western Australia; and The Institute of New International Visual Art (INIVA), London.

In many ways Chambers’ conception of black art in the UK mirrored Boomalli’s own politically inflected focus. It was, he told the postcolonial theorist, artist and editor Rasheed Araeen in 1988:

(…)Art produced by black people largely and specifically for the black audience, and which, in terms of its content, addresses the black experience. (…)The function of black art (…) was to confront the white establishment for its racism, as much as to address the black community in its struggle for human equality.

However, there were also differences between Boomalli’s engagement with black identity politics and that of the British black art scene. If Boomalli was keen to assert the Aboriginality of urban artists, Chambers and Araeen were more interested in asserting the modernism, rather than ethnicity, of their art. Drawing on the African, Caribbean and Asian diaspora and the intersecting histories of slavery, imperialism, colonialism and racism, black art in the UK is best understood as an intercultural migrant discourse and, as such, differed from the discourse of indigeneity that framed Aboriginal art in Australia. Black British artists and critics sought ways to integrate their practices into the dominant discourses of Western art, while at the same time disabusing it of its Westernism; an approach ultimately at odds with Boomalli’s aims to develop a distinct Aboriginal identity.

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discourse.

Even so, Boomalli’s success in articulating an Aboriginal voice – not only through art, but particularly through associated curatorial practices – was nonetheless decisive in creating opportunities for Aboriginal people to actively participate in the establishment of art world discourses for indigenous contemporary art. Since the 1990s, for example, both Perkins and Croft have undertaken high-profile careers as curators. Each has held key positions in Australia’s state art galleries – Perkins at The Art Gallery of New South Wales, and Croft at The National Gallery of Australia – and in different ways has brought an activist sensibility focused on Indigenous agency into the mainstream of the Australian art world.

At the risk of glossing over a complex history – and with it, a detailed analysis of each curator’s distinctive approach – it’s important to note that the politics of this shift remain contentious. Although with the exception of The National Gallery of Victoria curators of Aboriginal Australian descent continue to hold key positions within public collecting institutions, at the time of writing neither Perkins nor Croft were among them. The reasons for this, of course, are surely personal as much as they are political, but it nonetheless remains a telling fact.

Most notable was Perkins’ resignation as Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2011. She had worked at the gallery for 13 years, and had been responsible for a number of significant projects, among them Papunya Tula: genesis and genius, (2000), and Crossing Country: the Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land, (2004). ‘You can only get to a certain point within a mainstream institution, and I have reached that point at the Art Gallery of New South Wales’, she told The Australian newspaper at the time.67

67 A Wilson, ‘Hetti Perkins quits NSW state gallery position and calls for national indigenous art space’, The Australian, September 20, 2011,
If this implied distinction between those parties inside and outside the ‘mainstream’ is revealing, Perkins’ solution to the problem was even more so: ‘(...) I think that we (indigenous people) need our own place, our own cultural institution’.  

It’s hard not to sense that Perkins’ frustration stems from a belief that Aboriginal art has ultimately been sidelined, rather than foregrounded, by its move into the institutional domain of the Western art world. It’s a position that suggests, for her at least, that the promise of this move has never lain in the integration of one art history into another, as if Australia’s founding rift can be smoothed by contemporary art’s cosmopolitan promise. Rather, agitating for visibility has been about reclaiming lost ground: controlling the narrative rather than ceding it all over again.

Opposition is, of course, predicated on a divide; the discourse of contemporary art, by contrast, emphasises entanglement and exchange. As such, Perkins’ demand for a national indigenous-only museum suggests that in Australia a core question remains unanswered: whose ideals do such entanglement ultimately serve?

1.6 At the interstices

Although Boomalli arguably presented the most vocal and visible front, the organisation was not alone in drawing Aboriginal art into broader politicised contexts in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, in concert with the collective’s formation in 1987, another began to coalesce in Brisbane, similarly


68 ibid

Making in translation

sparked by a desire for Aboriginal self-determination within the Australian art world. Later to be called the Campfire Group, they initially drew together to stage the 1990 exhibition Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences, at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG).\(^{70}\)

As with Boomalli, the development of Balance and the Campfire Group was “contingent on and informed by the political situation”, and guided by resounding calls for “sovereignty, justice and land rights” and the broader shifts in artistic and cultural practice that this predicated.\(^{71}\) There was, however, an important difference between the collectives: alongside the prominent Aboriginal artists and activists that played central roles in The Campfire Group (these included brothers Richard and Marshall Bell and Laurie Neilson), non-indigenous Australians – either acting as artists or cultural producers – also held key positions.

Indeed, Balance was produced by a rolling indigenous and non-indigenous curatorium that included the well-known Aboriginal artists Lin Onus and Trevor Nickolls, but ‘complied’ overall by Michael Eather and Marlene Hall; a formation that spoke directly to the collective’s broader intercultural concerns. In the words of indigenous curator Margo Neale, the project was “a head-on challenge to the plumped up politically correct view that black artists lived in an essentialist vacuum and must be protected from the contaminating influence of non-indigenous art.”\(^{72}\) To this end the curators provided equal space (and billing) to ‘urban’ Aboriginal art, ‘remote’ Aboriginal art, and non-indigenous contemporary art that addressed indigenous issues or experience. They also included openly collaborative works by

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\(^{70}\) Balance was initially intended to take place during Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations in 1988.


The intercultural and the political

indigenous and non-indigenous artists. The intent, while still deeply political, was also intercultural: a gesture, as Neale points out, aimed at highlighting and championing “shared influences between black and white artists from across Australia.” 73

For members of Boomalli this focus fuelled long held anxieties concerning identity, cultural politics and agency. Even if it promised a new, integrated conception of contemporary art practice in Australia, it simultaneously threatened the division that ultimately formed the basis of their own approach. Balance, billed as a nation wide survey, was left with a core absence when artists associated with the Sydney collective refused to participate. It was a decision put down to an abiding caution regarding the “exploitation or misrepresentation” of indigenous practices, 74 but which nonetheless flagged not only the dominant presence of post-colonial identity politics, but the contested ground upon which indigenous art was taking shape.

Yet regardless of this rift, the political and the intercultural need not be understood as mutually exclusive – and thus oppositional – frames for the interpretation of indigenous contemporary art. By this time the other key development was the loose formation of the remote Aboriginal art industry, which had expanded exponentially over the previous decade. 75 If initiatives like Boomalli had grown from a political climate of dissent and resistance, the remote community arts infrastructure was devised from its very beginning as an intercultural enterprise. The communities themselves, for example, were often founded in pronounced intercultural environments. Here colonial power relations still loomed large, as did the primacy of traditional

73 ibid.
75 I will return to these developments in greater detail in chapter three of this thesis.
Aboriginal law and collective practice. Further, key artists of the movement had often directly forged intercultural relations on the frontier, either as workers on cattle stations, or in the space between the syncretic ideals of the missionaries and their own people’s ideals of social reciprocity. Such experiences underpinned the way indigenous artists expected the newly established art centres to run. In addition, key workers in the remote arts infrastructure (besides the artists themselves) were most often white. Called upon to negotiate a complex set of social and cultural networks, these figures often established strikingly intimate relations with the artists and communities they worked with, and, consciously or otherwise, often had decisive impact on the kind of work they created.

This was not a set of realities that chimed convincingly with the oppositional rhetoric that had so successfully carried the Aboriginal political movement, nor the art world approach to Aboriginal art it had been instrumental in establishing. At one level this can be cast as a political boundary that although key in defining the discourse of urban Aboriginal art within the art world, had limited understandings of the intercultural features of Aboriginal experience in remote Australia. Not only has this boundary been reinscribed by the many institutional survey exhibitions of Aboriginal art that overlook its intercultural features, it has been reinforced by the modernist inflected notion of the individual genius of the artist. This frame of interpretation has carried much indigenous art from ‘remote’ communities into the art world, drawing what are initially practices emanating from largely collective origins into the rhetoric of genius and individual iconoclasm that defines modernism generally and late-modernism in particular.

The reasons for this are at one level obvious, but as I’ve already touched upon, the potential offered by the emergence of postcolonial theory predicates a more complex reading of how the interaction of Australia’s Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal cultural domains might be articulated. Art historian Ian Mclean is not alone in noting, for example, that the “profound critique” represented by this emergence has resulted in a “rethinking of the borders which previously separated the coloniser and the colonised.”\textsuperscript{76} In the context of ‘remote’ Aboriginal art, founded within community art centres and similarly intercultural spaces, such a perspective helps confuse the tightly held distinctions that so often shape its reception. Here notions of convergence, rather than divergence become key: in step, the promise of this art emerges as intercultural, even as its political frame as an oppositional practice grounded in essentialist notions of identity and difference remains clear.

It is from this site that we can see that simplifying the exchanges at the heart of indigenous contemporary art – especially that emanating from ‘remote’ Australia – in the name of agency, downplays a more revelatory aspect: the way in which artists have actively engaged intercultural exchange to develop new means of acting in the contact zone of colonial history. Not only is a key attribute of the contemporaneity of their art in this way lost, the deeply intercultural histories of specific localities are in the process overlooked or, at the very least, underplayed.

In the complex spaces of this art’s production, it follows that authenticity should only be conceived in terms of how these social structures are reflected, and how adequate (or otherwise) the existing representative frameworks of the contemporary art world are in terms of illuminating the intercultural imperative at their centre. We might even go as far as this: what these exchanges propose within Australia’s postcolonial reality – a reality still defined by stark cultural division – is exactly where this art’s provocation is to be felt most keenly.

\textsuperscript{76} I McLean, ‘White Aborigines’, p. 132.
CHAPTER 02

The curator as intercultural broker:
The Aboriginal Memorial and Djirrididi (Kingfisher)

[T]his Memorial is for all the dead Aboriginal people all over Australia. In some parts of Australia people have lost their song. In this Memorial we sing for all those people too.¹

- Djardie Ashley

Within a year of the arrival of the first settler fleet in Sydney, Aboriginal deaths from introduced diseases spread along traditional trade routes well inland, decimating societies along the way. And right up to the early decades of the twentieth century, massacres of Aboriginal people occurred throughout the land. Death came swiftly and was so widespread that in many cases there was no-one to bury the dead.

(...)

The idea of so many people for whom proper burial rites had not been performed led me to think of the painted hollow log coffins made by artists today. In the Dupun ceremony the bones of the deceased are placed in the hollow log coffin, which then embodies the soul. The idea for The Aboriginal Memorial was born: a memorial consisting of 200 hollow log coffins, one for each year of European occupation. The installation would be like a forest (...) a war memorial for all those Aboriginal people who died defending their country.²

- Djon Mundine

2.1 Introducing The Aboriginal Memorial

What is The Aboriginal Memorial, and how should we understand it?

Taken at face value, the first part of this question is relatively straightforward. The Aboriginal Memorial, we might begin, is one of the most celebrated and readily recognised examples of indigenous contemporary art in Australia, a kind


² F Cubillo and W Caruana (eds), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art: collection highlights, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2010, pp 20-23, p. 22.
of masterwork in which we find embedded something of the shared aspirations – political or otherwise – that have traced the broader movement to which it belongs. If more detail is needed, we might describe its formal properties: how it is constituted, and how it looks. The work, which was created in the Central Arnhem Land community of Ramingining between 1987 and 1988, consists of multiple, interrelated parts. Generally attributed to forty-three artists drawn from the region’s many clan groups, it is best understood as the product of many hands: collective in the true sense of the word, it is a cooperative effort of authorship made possible only by the group in which it took form.3

This collectivity is also evident in another of its key characteristics: The Memorial consists of 200 separate Dupun, the hollow log coffins which were once the domain of the region’s elaborate funerary ceremonies and which, since the 1980s, have been made increasingly for the fine art market. Within the whole, loose groupings of these striking organic forms – the majority painted with ochre in intricate designs – are clearly discernible: the work of a single artist clustered together, or that of a cohesive clan group in which a similar approach dominates.

For this reason, The Memorial traces a series of differences – some subtle, some more pronounced. The work of the Wulaki/Balmbi people, for example, is marked by figurative representation: the viewer makes out planar depictions of ancestral beings and bush foods against carefully plotted geometric backgrounds. Elsewhere, a finely crosshatched

3 The artists behind The Aboriginal Memorial were Djardie Ashley, Joe Patrick Birriwanga, David Blanasi, Roy Burrnyyla, Mick Daypurrrun 2, Tony Dhanyula, Paddy Dhatangu, John Dharrikayu 1, Jimmy Djelminy, Tony Djikululu, Dorothy Djukul, Tom Djumburpur, Robyn Djujginginy, Charlie Djujritjinji, Elisabeth Djuttara, Billy Black Durrgumba, Gela Nga-Mirraltja Fordham, Toby Gabalga, Daisy Ganilya 2, Philip Gudthaykudthay, Neville Gulagulyal, Don Gundinga, George Jangawanga, David Malangi Daymiringu, Jimmy Mamalunhawuy, Terry Mangapai, Agnes Marrawurr, Andrew Marrgululu, Clara Matjandatjp (Wubukwubuk), John Mawurndjul AM, Dick Smith Mewirri, George Milpurrurruru, Peter Minggululu, Jack Mirritji 2, Jimmy Moduk, Neville Nanyjawuy, Victor Pamkal, Roy Riwa, Frances Rrikili, William Watiri, Jimmy Wululu, Wurraki 2, Yambal Durrurringa.
cluster announces the hand of a young John Mawurndjul, the Kuninjku bark painter who in the early 2000s established an international reputation, while a group by the artists of the Malarra/Wolkpuy-Murrungun people stands together at one end: totemic representations of the morning star, the upper protrusions of each Dupun cut to resemble the jaws of swordfish and barracuda.

Other Dupun, by contrast, are marked not by elaborate detail, but by something approaching formal restraint: undulating bands of red, yellow and white entirely unbroken by fields of patterning or iconographic imagery. This is the work of Tony Dhanyula and Mick Daypurryun of the Liya-gawumirr-Manyarrngu people, their subject the tidal interplay of salt and fresh waters at the juncture of the Hutchinson Strait and the Glyde River.

To walk through The Memorial is to thus understand that each cluster of Dupun maps the ancestral significance of a very specific site. The cumulative effect is one of overwhelming presence: the ‘forest’ of Dupun, each of which consists of the trunk of a tree, is activated by an insistent and far-reaching human ecology. If we are to take a broader reading from this work, it is this: in depicting place, Aboriginal art also depicts a people.

The second part of the above question – how we should understand The Memorial – demands another, albeit interrelated, reading. That it embeds certain political aspirations is at one level clear. Indeed, once some understanding of its genesis is reached, the work oscillates fluidly between aesthetic and political readings, as though each were wrapped within the other. In this, it embodies another essential character of the broader movement. Initially created for the 7th Biennale of Sydney: From the Southern Cross, a view of world art c.1940-88, The Memorial’s pointed commentary on the unsettled history of Australia’s

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The curator as intercultural broker

colonisation (see quotes above) is among the most incisive of its kind. If it is indeed one of Australia’s most significant works of art (as has often been claimed), it is surely for this reason: its immersive and striking visuality carries with it an insistent political undertone.

James Mollison, the founding Director of The National Gallery of Australia (NGA), was among those to first recognise The Memorial’s broad significance. Encouraged by Wally Caruana, the NGA’s first curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, he was by its unveiling already a key supporter: under his directorship the NGA had essentially commissioned the work, in large part bankrolled its production for the Biennale, and promised it an important place in the collection immediately afterwards.

True to his word, Mollison eventually oversaw its installation in a prominent thoroughfare, where it could be experienced in direct relation to two of the national collection’s most iconic works: Jackson Pollock’s Blue poles, (1952), and Constantin Brancusi’s Birds in space, (1931–36), both of which Mollison had been similarly instrumental in collecting.

More recently the gallery went one step further, embedding The Memorial within the very architecture of its new multi-million dollar wing, which opened to the public in 2010. Situated immediately adjacent to the ground floor entry, the work now presses towards a wall of glass, reaching out into the landscaped native gardens beyond as if the Dupun are

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5 See, for example: F Cubillo and W Caruana, p. 23.
6 ibid, p. 23.
7 This appears to be in keeping with art coordinator Djon Mundine’s own vision for the work. In a 2005 interview with art historian Rex Butler he stated: ‘Personally, I don’t think the Gallery plays up enough the significance of what they’ve got. It (The Memorial) should be in a dedicated space all by itself. It should be much more distinguished from what surrounds it.’ See, R Butler, ‘Interview with Djon Mundine’, in R Butler (ed), Radical Revisionism: An anthology of writings on Australian Art, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2005, pp. 88–92, p. 90.
collectively reaching back toward their natural origins. Here it finds itself (as the anthropologist Melinda Hinkson has put it), “quite appropriately, at the foundations of the institution,” a summation that can be read in two ways. Not only can such prominent institutional recognition of a work dealing with Aboriginal dispossession be read as a charged admission of past wrongs, its position at the new entrance can’t help but ballast the collection beyond. This proximity to other art continues to activate The Memorial’s interpretation, and vice versa. A stone’s throw away is a major work, similarly immersive in its scope, by the American sculptor James Turrell, ‘Within without’, (2010), while the galleries directly above house the NGA’s collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art for which The Memorial can’t help but read as a kind of conceptual and material touchstone.

But such embeddedness is also misleading. As Hinkson goes on to note, The Memorial’s complexities – either as cultural document or explicit postcolonial critique – are strangely muted in its new home: even as its aesthetic achievements are heightened, its symbolic power is offset by the fact that its core concerns – although acknowledged in an accompanying wall text – remain largely unarticulated.

This was, of course, not always the case. It’s worth noting that contemporary readings of The Memorial can’t help but draw upon its initial iteration at the 1988 Biennale, which was curated by Nick Waterlow and opened in Australia’s Bicentennial year. Sited at the end of Pier 2/3, a cavernous enclosed industrial space that juts into Sydney Harbour, it found form not far from where European settlers had first made landfall 200 years prior. Buoyed by the broad current of

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8 M Hinkson, ‘For love and money’, p. 17.
9 ibid, p. 18.
10 Lendon N, ‘Relational Agency: Rethinking The Aboriginal Memorial’, *EMAJ*, issue 9,
Aboriginal dissent that ran counter to the country’s generally enthusiastic Bicentennial celebrations, in this context The Memorial’s political intent was thrown into sharp relief. In the words of Djon Mundine, the Bundjalong curator who was Ramingining’s community art coordinator during the work’s genesis, the two hundred Dupun represented nothing less that “200 years of white contact and black agony.”\(^\text{11}\) It was a statement as direct as any protest banner.

As with its later iteration at the NGA, here The Memorial was also framed by the institutional context of its display. To see it at the Biennale, audiences had to first negotiate passage through a selection of global contemporary art: works by, among others, Rebecca Horn, Hermann Nitsch and Arnulf Rainer.\(^\text{12}\) These were significant artists, and rarely seen in Australia, but for many they simply formed a precursor to the main event. Mundine put it most succinctly in an overview that was published in Art Monthly to coincide with The Memorial’s unveiling: for him, it was ‘the single most important statement in the entire exhibition.’\(^\text{13}\)

There are a number of reasons – beyond, of course, Mundine’s own involvement in the work – why this assessment may have rung true. The pressing political context that surrounded its unveiling is the most obvious, and is broadly what Mundine was referring to, but another emerged more quietly. In institutional surrounds of The Biennale, The Memorial seemed to turn the cutting edge qualities of the contemporary art that surrounded it back towards its own local ends. By this I mean that although it immediately recalled the


\(^{12}\) N Lendon, ‘Relational agency’, p. 4.

installation-based practices that remain so central to the contemporary art world, it was an insistence on a specific locality that ultimately articulated its core concerns. This was only emphasised by its immersive quality: by requiring audiences to walk through it, rather than view it from a remove, it symbolically drew them closer to the site of its initial inception. Picking their way between the clusters of Dupun, they were afforded a shifting sequence of views: the highly elaborate details of each component counterpointing that of the broader whole.

If in its recent architecturally contingent home at the NGA The Memorial’s politics are somewhat diminished, this immersive quality nonetheless remains central to its potential power. As each Dupun – essentially a single work brought into the service of a collective whole – merge together they articulate a carefully planned cartographic layout: a rough approximation of the Glyde River and the position of various clans in relation to this geographic feature that cuts through their ancestral territories.

As touched on above, to walk through The Aboriginal Memorial is to trace a landscape – historical, mythological and actual – that few white Australians will ever visit, let alone fully comprehend. Even seen at a remove from its political content, in this the work manages a complex and affective articulation of Aboriginal boundedness to place. Here, its political edge might even return: such boundedness, of course, remains a charged proposition in a country largely peopled by those from elsewhere.

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In this chapter, I want to layer these readings with another: The Memorial’s enduring impact, I argue, although clearly attributable to the work of the forty-three artists directly involved in its production, and to the history of its display and interpretation, is also due to the vision of Mundine: the work’s 44th participant, and its so called ‘conceptual producer’. Indeed, Mundine not only played a
central role in securing the work its place in the canon of Australian art, he was also a key player in its very genesis. Conceiving his role deepens an understanding of The Memorial’s importance: in addition to its obvious political intent (which, of course, aligns squarely with the political readings of Aboriginal practice that had by The Memorial’s unveiling come to dominate the world of Aboriginal art), it is perhaps Australia’s pre-eminent (and most visible) example of the kind of collective intercultural practice discussed in chapter one: a creative manifestation of the complex entanglements that characterise Australia’s contact zone.

It follows that Mundine’s role in The Memorial can be understood to have come down to more than the impartial guidance that the term ‘conceptual producer’ infers. As the intermediary essential to the work’s final, collective form, he may best be conceived as equal part author, artist and animateur (to use Peter Wollen’s term).14 As a hinge-point between worlds, he harnessed elements of both to create a perfectly timed piece of protest art, which although directed towards broad ends nonetheless stayed true to its deeply local origins.

As I will discuss, in the process Mundine imprinted his own ideals onto The Memorial’s discursive surface: its meanings, and, more importantly, its efficacy as a political act, in large part came down to his understanding of the codependent contexts for its production, display and dissemination. So, although the term ‘conceptual producer’ describes something of the terrain on which The Memorial found form - suggesting, as it does, that Mundine’s role possessed a unique cast - it is at once both too literal and too vague. This is not to suggest that Mundine wasn’t responsible for sketching something of the work’s conceptual outline (he was), but rather that the term falls short of fully illuminating the

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transactional exchanges that underwrote its ultimate realisation.\footnote{It’s worth noting here that Mundine also seemed unsure of exactly how to frame his role. In a short article on the Aboriginal art world for Third Text, published in 1989, he detailed the intent behind The Memorial. Only in the final paragraph did he reveal that he had ‘coordinated’ the work through his position as ‘arts & crafts adviser’. See, D Mundine, ‘Aboriginal Art in Australia Today’, Third Text, vol. 3, no. 6, 1989, pp. 33-42, p. 42.}

In this, Mundine is best understood as the work’s curator, but to do so we need to align our understanding of curatorial practice with recent notions of the contemporary curator and the distinctively collaborative features this premises. That is, the curator as author, creative participant and/or artist, rather than as an arm’s length keeper of a particular collection, an institutional administrator, coordinator, or thematic producer. It’s this space in which curatorial practice takes shape as a networked process of cultural brokerage. For if Mundine can be cast as an exemplar of the curator-as-artist, he is also The Memorial’s key creative broker: the figure responsible for negotiating a complex network of shifting authorial agencies, interdependencies and subjectivities.

In relation to the mediation of Aboriginal art in Australia, it’s here where the broker emerges as an integral player in the production of new art forms at Australia’s cultural interstices. In doing so it provides a key thread within the body of this thesis: beyond Mundine, of course, the term ‘broker’ can be applied to the majority of intermediaries I analyse, both broadly and in more detail, in the chapters that follow.

\subsection*{2.2 The Broker and the Curator}

In his work of social anthropology from 1974, Friends of friends: networks, manipulators & coalitions, Jeremy Boissevain considers the role and social space of the broker in detail. He shows that the broker is contingent upon the broader social field they act within: they are individuals engaged in specific exchanges who are driven by an inter-
The curator as intercultural broker

pattern of self-interest and broader societal pressures. This places them within a dense network of cause and effect peopled by a series of individuals whose ideologies and intentions overlap.

As he notes: "social pressure is exerted on individuals, but this is not the pressure of an impersonal society or group. It is the pressure from other individuals caught up in a pattern of interdependencies." 16

It is exactly this quality that prompts Soren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, writing on curatorial practice, to refer to the broker as a "suspect character", a figure, that is, who occupies an "opaque position in the social space." 17 Usually cast as an intermediary whose motives are not always clear, it can be difficult to ascertain where and how the broker’s self-interest intersects with broader, more altruistic motives and vice versa. This is because, as Boissevain suggests, the contingency of brokers upon wider social configurations renders it easy for their motivations to be subsumed by, or confused with, the power of the network they act within.

Urging us to understand brokers as part of “networks of choice-making persons”, 18 he argues that “(n)either independent individuals nor the particular configurations which they form can be considered separately from each other. The interrelation between the two is dynamic and forms a process with an inherent momentum and development of its own.” 19

If in the more prosaic sense of the marketplace this momentum is fuelled by a trade in goods and services, 20 within the broader social space (which constitutes a more slippery notion) it is characterised by something far more intangible.

Following Boissevain, a broker can be understood as someone

18 J Boissevain, p. 9.
19 ibid.
who trades first and foremost in “strategic contacts”, working to bridge “gaps in communication between persons, groups, structures, and even cultures.” In doing so, they act as a kind of social entrepreneur, a “professional manipulator of people and information who brings about communication for profit”; a process that in turn hinges upon the shifting relations that are formed by the transactional process of exchange within which brokers strategically position themselves. As Boissevain continues:

Social relations are not static but dynamic. They form a shifting pattern of power relations between persons and groups trying to gain freedom from social and physical constraints in order to pursue their goals. To do this they must obtain power. Hence the transactional element present in social relations.

In the art world there are many figures who can be identified as brokers in one way or another. These range from artists themselves, to art dealers, museum directors and wealthy patrons, all of whom, to varying extents, trade in specific social relations, contacts and influence. Indeed, even the term ‘art world’, coined by Arthur C Danto as a means to describe and name the ideological field that designates art as art, can be understood to refer to the networked processes of brokerage that carry an artwork, art practice or exhibition into the world.

Since the late 1960s, however, one figure in particular has emerged as the art world broker par excellence: the curator. Indeed, many of the characteristics that Boissevain assigns to brokers generally find specific correlation in this increasingly prominent field. Andreasen and Larsen, for example, propose the terms ‘mediator’ and ‘intermediary’ to describe the curator’s role, before settling on ‘middleman’: a

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21 J Boissevain, p. 148.
22 ibid, p. 154.
23 ibid, p. 26-27.
phrasing that echoes Boissevain’s conception of the broker. These terms that all suggest that a curator, by acting in a space of translation between parties, can be most clearly understood as a central player in the transmission of art, or, as Dave Beech has put it, as a “collaborator in art’s social relations.” Once again, a broker by any other name.

This conception of curatorial practice has a distinctly historical dimension, and has come under closer scrutiny as broad understandings of the role have shifted from a professional with specialist knowledge who is essentially “a keeper of a particular collection”, to a figure who enters into a “reciprocal and collaborative relationship with artists.” As Paul O’Neill has observed, this shift brought about a conflation of traditionally distinct art world roles, leading to an implicit acknowledgement of what he terms the “influential mediating component within an exhibition’s formation, production and dissemination.”

Although this can be traced to much broader developments in the international art world in the first half of the twentieth century, mid-century curators such as Harald Szeemann – who famously curated the sprawling exhibition ‘Live in your head: when attitudes become form’ at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969, and Documenta 5 in 1972 – played a key role. Szeemann characterised the curatorial function in terms that explicitly pushed it beyond the institutionally bound definitions of the day: by defining himself as “a maker of exhibitions”, he underscored the creative aspect of curatorial practice and, in particular, the way in which the curator’s role might echo that of the artist. Yet even with figures like Szeemann establishing the creative aspect of curatorial

27 ibid, p. 56.
29 HU Obrist, p. 80.
practice in more robust terms, it was not until the late 1980s that the notion of the curator as creative participant, or collaborator, became more widely recognised. This was prompted largely through the increased prevalence of the thematic group exhibition, which can be understood to form something of a medium for the contemporary curator.\(^\text{30}\) Since then, the curated exhibition has become the primary field of discourse in which contemporary art is made manifest. As Reesa Greenberg et al. have put it:

Exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is construed, maintained, and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions – especially exhibitions of contemporary art – establish and administer the cultural meanings of art.\(^\text{31}\)

Within this discursive format are held a number of further critical frames that assist us in more clearly picturing curating as a form of creative cultural brokerage.

The first is that of ‘transnational’ or ‘transcultural’ curating, a practice that O’Neill defines as a “method of ‘gathering’ divergent cultures.”\(^\text{32}\) This is a designation that gained momentum in the wake of Jean-Hubert Martin’s Magiciens de la Terre, (1989),\(^\text{33}\) and resulted, as curator Jessica Morgan has recently put it, in the “incorporation of a global realm of artistic production.”\(^\text{34}\)

The second aspect returns us to the notion of the curator as creative participant, or the ‘curator-as-artist’. As

\(^{30}\) P O’Neill, The culture of curating and the curating of cultures, p. 32.


\(^{32}\) P O’Neill, The culture of curating and the curating of cultures, p. 56.


O’Neill has written, this moved to the fore with Jan Hoet’s Documenta 9 in 1992, four years after Mundine’s participation in The Aboriginal Memorial pointed to similar authorial territory. Hoet was in large part simply completing a shift that by this time seemed unavoidable, but his exhibition was notable in that he used it to explicitly place the curator in the key authorial role in relation to exhibition making, proposing “the exhibition as a text, the curator as an author, and art as selected components within an overall structure (…)”.  

Here the exhibition becomes the curator’s medium, rather than the artist’s; through particular selection and placement, the curator creates the didactic or poetic space that the viewer experiences. Each shifting view is contained within the exhibition’s overarching discursive frame, the curator-as-author (or artist) ever present in the careful counter-arrangements of individual objects and practices.

For Terry Smith, interrogating this aspect of curatorial practice has become unavoidable. He too has argued that in recent decades it has often been curators who have “staged the debate” in relation to contemporary practice. For Smith the curatorial work of three figures in particular – Kirk Varnedoe, Okwui Enwezor and Nicolas Bourriaud – has been responsible for defining and championing what he sees as the three main tendencies that “surge through the bewildering, beguiling variety of contemporary art.”

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35 P O’Neil, The culture of curating and the curating of cultures, p. 97.
36 T Smith, Thinking Contemporary Curating, pp. 31-37. See also, T Smith, What is Contemporary Art?, pp. 259-264.
37 Smith defines these tendencies that Varnedoe, Enwezor and Bourriaud have highlighted, or argued for, as, respectively, ‘a continuity of modernist values within contemporary art, the arrival of a worldwide postcolonial constellation and the small-scale yet portentous emergence of relational aesthetics’. See: T Smith, Thinking Contemporary Curating, p. 31-32.
This prominence, Smith argues, leads to a certain responsibility: "If (...) the curator is a creative producer of exhibitions, it is a deception to remain absent."  

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Although the discussion around the curator-as-artist has expanded exponentially from its origins in the Euro-American art worlds of the 20th Century and now has a trans-global dimension, it has largely overlooked the role that curators have played in the mediation of Aboriginal art in Australia.

The reason for such oversight is at one level clear: even in the age of globalisation the enduring legacies of the Euro-American art worlds, while no longer hegemonic, still dominate art-world discourse; Australia remains a somewhat peripheral concern, even as the art world aggressively seeks new territories. Although, as touched on in the previous chapter, the rise of Aboriginal art in Australia has occurred in lockstep with similar post-colonial developments in other parts of the world, it remains uncomfortably bound to this country’s histories and, in particular, to the recursive fallout of colonisation.  

Yet the curatorial turn discussed here, as reflected within an Australian context, has nonetheless provided a key connective medium between indigenous contemporary art and the broader world of contemporary art. Given the thematic group exhibition’s primacy as an emergent curatorial mode from the late 1970s, it is unsurprising that this model of exhibition-making provided the first and most significant means of engagement between these increasingly entangled worlds.

Although these borders had already been proven, to some extent, permeable, it was following developments at Papunya  

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38 ibid, p. 46.


40 An example of this previous intersection lies in the exhibition Art of Australia 1788-1941, held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 2 -
that this intersection truly gained momentum. The first group exhibition of contemporary art to feature Aboriginal painting in this period was *Landscape & Image: a selection of Australian art of the 1970s*, curated by Bernice Murphy for the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1978. Murphy included bark paintings by David Djuta and acrylic paintings by Billy Stockman alongside a selection of their well-known non-Aboriginal contemporaries. A second instance followed soon after with *The 3rd Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue*, which was held in 1979 and curated by Nick Waterlow, then an ambitious young curator helming his first major exhibition. Partly due to lobbying from the arts community for a more expansive scope for his iteration of the Biennale, Waterlow looked further afield than his predecessors: he included bark paintings by David Malangi, Johnny Bungawuy, and George Milpurruru.41

By 1981 a pattern had emerged which endures today: Murphy included major acrylic works by the leading Papunya Tula artists Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Tim Tjapaltjarri and Charlie Tjanggati in the inaugural *Australian Perspecta* at The Art Gallery of New South Wales, once again alongside a selection of the country’s leading contemporary practitioners; a year later William Wright, artistic director of *the 4th Biennale of Sydney: Vision in disbelief*, followed suit, albeit in a more arresting fashion. He commissioned a group of Walpiri artists from Lajamanu to work in-situ on a large-scale sand painting at the same venue. Although a retrospective comment by Wright that for other artists in the Biennale “the experience of exhibiting alongside tribally integrated artists of such deep and extensive cultural memory was profound” spoke.

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to some degree of an enduring modernist fascination with the Other, his acknowledgement of this work’s “sheer mesmeric presence” within the broader scope of the Biennale further prefigured the fact that it would be in these contexts that indigenous contemporary art would intersect most convincingly with broader global currents of art making.42

From the mid-eighties, and especially the 90s, this shift was consolidated by another: curators like Murphy and Waterlow began to move aside as curators of Aboriginal descent moved to the fore, both inside and outside of gallery institutions. As discussed in the second section of chapter one, at one level this effectively tied into the broader Aboriginal political cause. An earlier generation of Aboriginal writers, poets and artists had, after all, long believed that political activism could be effectively advanced in the ideological field of the nation’s high culture; indeed they believed it was imperative if significant political and social changes were to occur. Curating, particularly from the late 1980s onwards, played a fundamental role in extending these concerns. Indeed, for a core group of first generation Aboriginal curators – including Brenda L Croft, Mundine, Margo Neal and Hetti Perkins – this emergent field held its own promise. All can be understood to have inflected the meanings of indigenous contemporary art and, through their exhibition-making, have argued for (and sometimes against) its dynamic interplay with broader forms of contemporary practice.

From this perspective this loose group of Aboriginal curators can, following Dave Beech, easily be positioned as “collaborators within art’s social relations”. One can even argue that negotiating the resulting tensions between artists, institutional producers and audiences – and, more so, the broader tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia – has been a major determinate of the trajectory of

their careers. Yet although each have realised significant projects at this interface, and to varying extents have established recognisable curatorial 'voices' from within Australia’s state art galleries, it is Mundine – whose curatorial practice has primarily unfolded independently – who has engaged the intermediary practice of curation in the most robust fashion: he remains the figure who has explored to the fullest extent the collaborative potential of the curatorial medium.

2.3 Making The Memorial

Some time ago an elder artist in Ramingining brought me several videotapes belonging to his dead son (…) The son and the artist were and are very close to me. The tapes were battered and dust-ridden. I hesitated to run them through my machine but our relationship and my curiosity made me play them. His son had been a member of the Northern Land Council Executive and, in the course of his work contracts, had been given some more ‘political’ videotapes as background briefing for himself and the community. One of these was a copy of a John Pilger documentary called 'The Secret Country’.43 – Djon Mundine, 1988

Mundine’s career tracks a long view of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. Not only was he an early remote Aboriginal Arts Advisor (a role he began only three years after Geoffrey Bardon’s departure from Papunya) he was also the first (and remains among the few) Aboriginal people to officially have held such a role. From 1975-1995 he worked at three Aboriginal art centres in Arnhem Land – Millingimbi Art & Culture, Maningrida Arts & Culture and the nearby Bula’bula Arts, in Ramingining. His longest tenure (from 1983-1995) was at Ramingining, the small community in central Arnhem Land,


(According to a near identical account published in 2010, the elder artist referred to here was Paddy Dhatangu. See F Cubillo and W Caruana (eds) 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art’, p. 21.
around 400km East of Darwin, in which The Aboriginal Memorial took form.\textsuperscript{44}

This was a significant period to be involved in the representation of indigenous practice from the perspective of a community art centre: the increasing momentum of the Western Desert Painting movement had precipitated indigenous art’s shift into the centre of the contemporary art world. Mundine actively played into this context: his conscious positioning of indigenous art (initially that of the regions of Arnhem Land in which he was working) in relation to the broader contemporary art world would become a feature of much of his subsequent curatorial work. But perhaps most importantly, this strategy provided Mundine and his artist collaborators with a means to test and question dominant art world hierarchies, capitalising on the intersection of diverse contemporary practices (and on the simultaneous divestment of Aboriginal art’s prior ethnographic designation) to actively re-frame and re-engage its art world reception.

The Memorial remains the most visible example of this kind of intersection. Even today, almost three decades on from its first iteration, Mundine’s intimate participation in its genesis is striking.

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The well-known ‘meaning’ behind The Memorial – that the work’s 200 Dupun collectively signify 200 years of Australia’s settlement – was not always set in stone. Indeed, as recently explored by Nigel Lendon, it was first conceived in less symbolic/metaphoric terms than those by which it has subsequently become known. In this, it was David Malangi, a senior artist from Ramingining, rather than Mundine, who initially played the key role.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} These biographical details are taken from Djon Mundine’s artist biography in D Elliott (ed.), The 17\textsuperscript{th} Biennale of Sydney: The beauty of distance: songs of survival in a precarious age, the Biennale of Sydney in association with Thames & Hudson Australia, Sydney, 2010, p. 300.

\textsuperscript{45} N Lendon, ‘Relational agency’, pp. 8–9.
In 1986 Malangi travelled under the auspices of Bula’bula Arts to Queensland, where he had been commissioned to work on a public artwork on the Gold Coast. During his visit he and Mundine met local Kombumirri people, who at the time were responsible for human remains that had been unearthed by a building project and were being held in trust within The University of Queensland’s Anthropology Department. The Kombumirri’s plans for a re-internment ceremony struck a chord with Malangi, and on his return to Arnhem Land he discussed with Mundine the possibility of creating 200 Dupun for the group to utilise in the burial that was being planned in Brisbane for the following year.46

Ultimately Malangi’s vision wouldn’t be realised, but the idea of a vast collective work that aimed to express a pan-Aboriginal affinity had been set in motion. The possibility of another, broader statement emerged, this time far more ambitious in its conceptual scope.

As is better known, this development occurred in Ramingining, where Mundine had recently viewed John Pilger’s 1985 documentary, ‘The Secret Country’.47 In his film, Pilger compares the prevalence of Australian memorials to servicemen lost in wars on foreign soil to the absence of similar memorials to Aboriginal casualties of colonial violence. The concept resonated; Mundine, supported by Malangi and other senior advisors including Paddy Dhatangu, unfolded Malangi’s initial proposal into another. When the opportunity arose to develop a major work for the 1988 Biennale, the conceptual form of The Memorial was, for Mundine and his collaborators at least, already tangible.

As Lendon highlights, the realisation of this large-scale work was socially, politically and conceptually ambitious: in his words, “a remarkable logistical and entrepreneurial

46 ibid.
exercise." Even the more pragmatic questions of its genesis presented seemingly insurmountable challenges: how to produce, transport and install 200 Dupun? How to rally the support of the many artists from across the many different clan groups who would be needed for its production?

The complex authorial realities attending the work’s ultimate realisation transcend straightforward readings of collaborative process: indeed, these would render it too simplistically. For Lendon, The Memorial is an exemplar of what he terms "collective agency"; a concept that, he writes, refers to "the circumstances and processes of production that involve multiple participants (not just artists) whose roles in the creative process entail complex sets of hierarchies and inputs." Although Mundine was a central player in these "circumstances and processes of production", in keeping with the dense network of social relations around him he had far from ultimate control over the work. He had, for example, initially expected only eight senior men to participate, but as the project gained momentum this soon changed. "The community’s great interest", Mundine wrote in 2010, "meant that many more wanted to contribute and, in the end, the Memorial included the work of 43 artists."

As the project grew, so too did the need for strategic alliances that would ensure its success: following the commission from the Biennale, Mundine negotiated transport funding from the Australia Council’s Aboriginal Arts Board, and then, as costs ballooned, approached James Mollison at the NGA, who almost immediately promised additional funding.

In step with these very real logistical challenges, the project also required Mundine to balance his own political ideals with the more pragmatic concerns that attended his role.

49 Ibid, p. 3.
50 F Cubillo and W Caruana, p. 23.
51 To trace this process in more detail see, D Mundine, ‘Forest of Dreams, forest of hope’, p 207-210. See also, N Lendon, Relational Agency, p. 12.
as Arts Adviser to the Ramingining community. Although many Aboriginal organisations were openly boycotting Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations, under which the Biennale of Sydney unavoidably, if imperfectly, fell, Mundine’s role as community Arts Advisor compelled him to take a more creative approach. Bula’bula Arts was, after all, set up to ensure commercial returns to the artists: any decision to boycott, he realised, might impact negatively on the organisation’s hard won market.52

"The bind", Mundine wrote at the time, "was to present Aboriginal culture without celebrating – to make a true statement."53

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It remains easy to frame the gesture that resulted as one of reconciliation, especially as The Memorial continues to be lionised as perhaps the key work in Australia’s national collection (or at the very least the most visible Aboriginal art work).54 Indeed, at times Mundine himself has done exactly this, stating in 2010, for example, that the work now functions as “a symbol for an egalitarian future, in the heart of the nation.”55 Yet, perhaps more revealingly, he has also readily recalled his concerted attempts to position The Memorial in relation to a national network of Aboriginal activism, a context within which he wanted to ensure its visibility. In the lead up to its unveiling, for example, he made a brochure that detailed the project and sent this out to (as he recalls) "every Aboriginal group I could find."56

The intent here was clear: Mundine wanted to determine the work’s audience, and thus make explicit the group its ideas were addressing. "(The Memorial) was really for Aboriginal

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53 ibid.
54 For example, it is the work given over to the most thorough interpretative framing on the NGA’s website
55 F Cubillo and W Caruana, p. 23.
56 R Butler, p. 90.
people,” he explained to the art historian Rex Butler in 2005. “It was in fact not for white people. Generally white people see it as a reconciliation statement. An absolution. I don’t necessarily see it that way.”

In this, the context offered by the Bicentennial was retooled as a distinctive opportunity; an event that had a collective political dimension that not only mirrored the collective authorial dimension that had activated The Memorial itself, but presented the means for Mundine to establish strategic alliances. Here, the broader political moment was everything. As Mundine continued:

(…) I think that what makes great art is the historical context (…) the pieces that people remember and write about come about at crucial times. They capture a zeitgeist. They put down what everyone else is thinking (…) People were talking about displaying things like Aboriginal art in a critical mass. But what made it all come together was the fact that it was 1988, the Bicentennial year.

Accurately picturing The Memorial’s achievement allows us to return to Boissevain’s conception of the broker and the effect of the network within which their role finds shape. However we refer to Mundine’s participation in its genesis, his own investment in its form and function is more than clear. But this is, of course, far from the sole motivating factor. Highlighting a network of interdependencies, The Memorial’s formative structure extends between the intentions of Mundine, those of the artists, and the lines of intercultural connectivity the work itself enacts upon the wider world. Its various installations, including and following its initial iteration in 1988, have presented an artwork that is uniquely in flux: the gestalt recognition of its singularity as a work exists in tension with the multiple voices it contains within; not only those of the individual

57 ibid, p. 88.
58 ibid, p. 90.
artists, but of its producers and the institutional contexts of its display.

It follows that although Mundine’s seemingly contradictory statements about the work’s intent may or may not be intentional, they are in themselves revealing. In a sense it proves his contingency upon the wider social configurations within which The Memorial took shape. The ways in which its readings are pulled between a number of apparently irreconcilable contexts – shifting as they do between the aesthetic and the political, between ideals of reconciliation and political agitation – can thus be understood as evidence of its participatory, intercultural scope.

We should not be surprised then, that as a creative action The Memorial displays more than a conscious response to the potential offered by a contemporary art context like the Biennale of Sydney and an attendant understanding of the expectations that audiences carry for contemporary art as a site for social commentary and debate. Undoubtedly this has played an integral part in its reach and affect, but it is the work’s function as a connective intercultural mode that has led to its enduring status. Even as it was installed among a selection of then-cutting edge global contemporary art, it remained true to its local origins in both material and form (and, to some extent, ceremonial function). In this, it established a medium of currency between a highly localised space of production, and much broader contexts: not only that of contemporary art, but the pan-Aboriginal movement that was agitating for social and political change as The Memorial took shape.

2.4 A kingfisher in the contemporary art museum

Since The Memorial was first realised, Mundine has continued to blur authorial divisions between curator, collaborator, artist and activist. To varying degrees this is evident across the gamut of his practice: when he has engaged the medium of the thematic group exhibition, for example, his curatorial voice is often prominent.
One sees early evidence of this in *Tyerabarrbowaryaou: I shall never become a white man*, which was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney in 1992, before a revised version of the exhibition travelled to *The 5th Havana Biennale: Art, Society, Reflexion* in 1994.\(^{59}\) Named for a statement ascribed to the famed Eora resistance fighter, Pemulwuy, the exhibition, co-curated with the artist and founding member of the Boomalli collective Fiona Foley, marked the MCA’s first significant project of its kind. For this reason alone it can be seen as key in an institutional history of indigenous contemporary art in Australia.

By the measure set by *The Memorial*, however, *Tyerabarrbowaryaou* presents as a far more conventional exhibition. Although framed by a similar, politically inflected discourse (Mundine, for example, began his catalogue essay with a famous slogan of the Aboriginal political movement, ‘White Australia has a black history’), *The Memorial’s* collective, participatory scope was absent. In its place, Mundine and Foley gathered a group of fifty-nine works by artists including Ian Abdulla, Gordon Bennett and Paddy Wainburranga. Together, they aimed to challenge the Western bias of colonial history, telling a “shadow-story” of dispossession, invasion, massacre and child removal.\(^{60}\)

Although this approach can’t help but echo the political motivations of *The Memorial*, under the scope of this chapter Mundine’s ongoing significance lies elsewhere: it’s in his role in commissioning individual works that function as disruptive presences within broader exhibitions where the impact of his practice ultimately endures. This is particularly clear in a work realised two decades after *The Memorial* was first unveiled: *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)*, (2008),

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\(^{59}\) *Tyerabarrbowaryaou* was originally conceived for *The 4th Havana Biennale: The challenge to colonialism*, in 1991 This was decision that followed from discussions Mundine and Foley had with Brenda L Croft at Boomalli following Croft’s recent international travel. See, D Mundine and F Foley, ‘Acknowledgements’, in B Murphy (ed.) *Tyerabarrbowaryaou: I shall never become a white man*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1992, p.2.

\(^{60}\) D Mundine, ‘If my ancestors could see me now’, in B Murphy (ed.), p. 7.
The curator as intercultural broker

a site-specific wall painting commissioned by Mundine and created by Richard Birrinbirrin and David Dhalwarrpuy for the exhibition They are meditating: bark paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection, which Mundine curated at the MCA in 2008 (fig. 2.2).

*Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* followed on from a number of significant site-specific works Mundine had included in exhibitions he curated, or co-curated at the MCA following Tyerabarrbowaryaou. In 1996 Jimmy Wululu created a large sand sculpture on the museum’s front lawn for Mundine’s *The native born: objects and representations from Ramingining;*61 Wululu’s work was in turn directly referenced by the artist Matjuwi four years later during another, closely related project Mundine curated with Linda Michael, *Yolngu science: objects and representations from Ramingining.*62 This latter exhibition also included a direct precursor to *Djirrididi (Kingfisher),* a wall painting created by Micky Dorrong that utilised the same clan design.

*Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* followed the blueprint set by this earlier work. It translated onto a large scale the reductive clan design associated with the kingfisher: alternating bands of red, white, yellow and black. These were applied directly to the gallery wall, a strategy that lent the work an overwhelmingly modernist tone even as its title simultaneously evoked persuasively non-Western readings.63

As with *The Memorial,* *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* illuminates curatorial practice as an act of creative brokerage, displaying a similar intent to re-frame, question and

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63 In this *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* cogently recalls Terry Smith’s observation that *The Memorial* “shares something of the accumulated social power of a non-indigenous category, but then quietly insists on a fundamental difference.”63 See, T Smith, ‘Public art between cultures’, p. 651.
Making in translation

challenge art world categories, specifically in relation to notions of contemporary art as a Eurocentric category. Yet *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* is a far quieter work. Not only is it less ambitious in its authorial scope, and ephemeral rather than permanent, its political edge is by contrast muted. Indeed, by allowing some of The Memorial’s political urgency to retreat, *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* makes clear that beneath the political concerns that can at times obscure the intersubjective heart of a work like The Memorial, there resides other more nuanced questions (each of which echo throughout this thesis): when and how does indigenous contemporary practice become contemporary art, and by whose authority? What occurs within each of these categories when it does?

In this, the work allows us to understand more closely a shifting field of authorial agencies that extend from a localised field of production on the one hand, to an institutional one on the other: Mundine’s practice as a curator, as an addendum of sorts to the practice of the artists he works with, can once again be readily seen as a connective medium that extends between these spaces. But not only does *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* further highlight the intermediate space of third party brokerage, it also allows us to further consider another key detail: the role of institutional agency in determining the discursive field within which such a work takes shape.

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Although wall paintings have a long tradition in Western art, they have played a particularly important role in the performative and immersive aspirations of contemporary art since the conceptual turn of the 1960s.

Key practitioners of the form include artists such as Sol le Witt and Bridget Riley, or the post-minimalist Daniel Buren. In more recent decades, site-specific wall paintings have become a recognisable hallmark of the expanded field of painting through the international practices of artists such
as Julie Mehtru and Richard Wright since the late 1990s (among many others) and in Australia (also from the late 1990s onwards), by figures including Kerri Polliness, Rose Nolan, Robert Owen and Helen Johnson.

These artists are, of course, as varied in their concerns as their work is different, but I draw them together here to make a simple point: wall painting possesses an undeniable currency in the broader contemporary art world. The reasons for this are many, but key among them is the fact that the practice moves the act of painting from the artist’s studio into a direct relationship with the context of its presentation, effectively compounding distinctions between sites of production and exhibition. In doing so it troubles static readings of painting’s ‘objectness’; that is, by eliminating the edge of the canvas and drawing the architecture of the surrounding space to the fore, readings of the artwork as a discrete object are transcended. For this reason wall painting – both as a physical action in space and as a presence in relation to other works – draws painting into dialogue with more performative and installation based practices. In doing so it positions the medium in robust dialogue with the dynamic, temporal presences of other, more recent forms of contemporary practice.

Within the broader exhibition – They are meditating: bark paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection – Djirrididi (Kingfisher) acted in exactly this way. Not only was it highly visible – greeting visitors at the entrance, where it literally bordered the view to the gallery beyond – but its effect, like The Memorial before it, was immersive: audiences had to first pass through it to access the rest of the exhibition.

It follows that the work can be understood to actively frame indigenous practice in a certain manner. For one, it consisted of a traditional clan design that appropriated a recognisably contemporary form, which in turn chimed with the expanded field of contemporary painting. Secondly, it took
shape within a context – that of the contemporary museum – where this recognition was to great degree ensured: audiences at the MCA, one can safely assume, are generally familiar with the provisional, temporal qualities of contemporary art practice and its immersive presentation within arts institutions.

Beyond this lay the contrast *Djirrididi* (*Kingfisher*) established between its own form, and that of the exhibition that extended beyond: over 200 bark paintings drawn from a collection created between the 1960s and the early 1980s by the Californian businessman and graphic designer Jerome Gould (fig. 2.3). It was against established understandings of the agency of a collection such as this, which *Djirrididi* (*Kingfisher*) positioned itself. In doing so a broader intent was signaled: if the finite borders of a ‘collection’ are usually defined by the collector and his/her travels, and are thus historically bound, a work like *Djirrididi* (*Kingfisher*) proves such borders permeable. By breathing new air into such interpretive constraints, it sets the objects into motion once again. This in turn is shadowed by another overarching context: Aboriginal art’s own discursive shift from the endgame of ethnographic discourse to contemporary art’s emphasis on innovation and hybridity; essentially a narrative that pivots on notions of vitality and change.

In step with this divestment, perceptions of the contemporaneity of the Aboriginal voice behind the production of the barks can be restructured against a new institutional context. Put simply, it is an action that not only confronts distinctions between ethnography and contemporary art, but stages this distinction in tangible fashion.

Fred Myers, writing on the 1988 survey exhibition of Aboriginal art, ‘Dreamings’, which toured the United States, highlights the importance of institutional framing in the presentation of exhibitions. To critically examine the sites of exhibition, he argues, “is to ask how they are produced,
inflected and invoked in concrete institutional settings.”

Employing Pierre Bourdieu’s term, he points out that “[t]hese ‘fields of creative production’ have distinctive histories, purposes and structures of their own.”

In considering the effect and intentions of Mundine’s curatorial approach as a layered form of creative brokerage, it serves to reflect upon the MCA’s broader program at the time as a means to position Djirrididi (Kingfisher) in similar light: that is, within a specific “field of creative production”. What audiences are accustomed to seeing at the museum, and what they experience simultaneously in crossover programming, ultimately (and perhaps unavoidably) informs their perception of an exhibition like They are meditating: bark paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection. Indeed, one of the benefits of the MCA is that its distinction as a ‘contemporary’ museum (as opposed to a museum focused upon the communication of discrete historical periods and distinct cultural contexts) frees its programming from the departmentalised approach that unavoidably characterises the majority of other state galleries in Australia. It follows that the exhibition of indigenous art at the MCA, simply by way of inclusion under the museum’s broader discursive framework, is thus always more integrated within its wider program. Unsurprisingly, this displays a commitment to Australian and international contemporary art – outwards looking, it is aimed at challenging distinctions between regions in a fashion that aligns the museum’s approach with contemporary art’s globalised frame.

As a brief example: running at the MCA from mid-February to early August, 2008, They are meditating coincided with survey exhibitions of contemporary Scottish painter Callum Innes (From Memory); American sculptor Tim Hawkinson (Mapping the Marvelous); the multi-disciplinary Australian artist Fiona Hall (Force Field); an exhibition of recent Australian video

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64 FR Myers, Painting Culture, pp. 235-236.
Making in translation

art curated by Russell Storer (Video logic); a touring collection from the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (Southern Exposure); and a selection from The 16th Biennale of Sydney: Revolutions: Forms that turn, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.65

This broader context forms something of the institutional agency by which meanings circulate and are created throughout the social structures of the art world. It also goes someway towards illustrating the expanded global field of contemporary art in real and tangible terms. But more than this, it makes clear the shift in the nature of the contemporary museum that Djirrididi (Kingfisher) can be understood to capitalise on. As Terry Smith has noted (following Boris Groys), this is a transformation from “collection to site of exhibition.” That is, “from a place where history is held in stasis (…) to one in which everything – including the collections rooms – has the status of an event in the process of becoming.”66 This is a process that traverses the specific intentions of individual artists, curators or exhibitions and in doing so provides links, contrasts and connections between sometimes radically different material and cultural themes.

I will return to this idea in relation to the practice of the Yolngu artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu in chapter four, but for now my point is simply that audiences aware of broader programs at a museum like the MCA ideally come away with not just an informed understanding of specific exhibitions and practices, but with an implicit sense of the place of these within much wider currents. These areas of commonality form contemporary art’s “transnational milieu”, where, as Nicolas Thomas has written, the notion of “shared understandings of value and exchange” creates a kind of baseline which situates divergent practices within a coherent, albeit endlessly


66 T Smith, Thinking Contemporary Curating, p. 69.
The curator as intercultural broker

malleable, global frame.\textsuperscript{67} This is not to say that translation between radically different worlds is always achievable, or for that matter even an identified ideal. Rather, it suggests that the museum’s institutional frame creates a space within which such differences might interact in new and surprising fashion.

*Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* is productively read through this prism: as a conscious decision to engage the potential of institutional agency implicitly offered by a venue like the MCA to reframe established understandings of localised contexts of art and meaning production (in this case Arnhem Land). In turn, this provides a means to question art world distinctions, not only between art and ethnography, but also between contemporary art and *indigenous* contemporary art. Where do these trajectories intersect and two histories become one?

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The deftness with which *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* negotiates possible answers to this question echoes, at one level, the achievement of *The Aboriginal Memorial*. This is, of course, not simply due to Mundine’s informed reading of the exhibition context. This is part of each work’s success, but as with the Dupun that constitute *The Memorial*, the design chosen for *Djirrididi (Kingfisher)* is already in possession of an inherent elasticity between contexts, cultural domains, and material grounds. This too, provides a key to its efficacy.

Applied to bark paintings, similar alternating bands of colour circulate within the cross cultural, secular networks of the art market: as body painting they form integral components to continuing sacred ceremony; and as designs on Dupun they traverse both these worlds, produced for funerary rites and (now much more regularly) for the art market. To add another material ground – that of the gallery wall – can thus

be read less as a dramatic intervention (or innovation) and more as recognition that such designs are fundamentally activated by their ability to traverse contexts and in doing so, achieve varied ends. Such inherent malleability may indeed be something of their core function.

This quality also ties Djirrididi (Kingfisher) into broader frameworks of interpretation: the ability to circulate between contexts and distinctions in this fashion is an unapologetically contemporary one, and is arguably where the contemporaneity of much indigenous practice might be most securely apprehended. It’s here where the work comes into its own, how it transforms the possible reading of the works that occupy the gallery beyond. If this juxtaposition is unexpected, it is nonetheless compelling: no longer can the barks be understood simply as ethnographic curiosities possessed by a white collector; they are instead reanimated as nodes within a continuing art history, one that although shaped in part by its interactions with other art histories, nonetheless maintains a clear sense of sovereignty.

As with Mundine’s role in The Aboriginal Memorial, Djirrididi (Kingfisher) provides evidence of authorial collectivity: his intent intersects with that of the artists, each party engaging the discursive potentials of the museum which in turn enacts its own effect upon the work.

From this perspective we can begin to understand that as an act of cultural brokerage, Mundine’s approach to curatorial practice may indeed function as an important strategy for the artists with whom he works – by utilising his nuanced understanding of the exhibition context, the two cases discussed in detail here display how their work is thus enabled to perform a charged act of divestment. In this way

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68 Although Djirrididi (Kingfisher) has not been recreated at the MCA, the barks from the Arnott’s collection have continued to be displayed at the museum in relation to wall paintings. On separate occasions two works from the MCA permanent collection – Sunrise #3, (2005) by Robert Owen and Loop: a model of how the world works, (2008) by Brook Andrew – have counterpointed the barks.
previously dominant categories are transcended and in the process new modes of interpretation, although not always explicitly acknowledged, become tangible.

A central part of this is the participatory approach to authorship that each work engenders, which in turn directs our attention towards the importance of third-party mediation. So although it remains important to sustain our understanding of the artist’s role in securing these modes of creative intercultural practice, it is the broker’s role that simultaneously emerges within this space as a key contingency. In this chapter I have explored this contingency in relation to brokerage and contemporary notions of the curator-as-artist, and in doing so have positioned Mundine at the interstices of these practices. I have treated this here, at one level, as the view from the art world, focusing largely upon questions of institutional mediation. In the next chapters I turn towards far more local contexts, aiming to establish a more nuanced understanding of the role intercultural brokerage plays in the production of meanings for indigenous contemporary art.
CAPTIONS:
2.1 Ramingining artists
The Aboriginal memorial, 1987-88
Natural earth pigments on wood, dimensions variable
Installation view, The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2011

2.2 Richard Birrinbirrin and David Dhalwarrpuy
Djirrididi (Kingfisher), 2008
Site specific wall painting, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, dimensions variable
Photo: Jenni Carter

2.3 Installation view
They are meditating: bark paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s collection
Photo: Jenni Carter
CHAPTER 03

Creative intimacies:
The Art Coordinator as broker

3.1 The Art Coordinator as broker

Although he may not have recognised it at the time, when Geoffrey Bardon steered his Kombi van into the tiny Western Desert community of Papunya late one night in February, 1971, he was stepping into a role that would become central in the development and circulation of Aboriginal art practices in the contemporary art world.

Bardon, who had been engaged as a community schoolteacher, was initially driven by the belief that a new visual language might emerge at the interstices of Aboriginal and Western graphic traditions. He first thought that this might manifest in the openly collaborative medium of super-eight animation — an abiding interest of his — but history quickly conspired to cast things differently.¹ The senior men who would become the founding figures of the Western Desert painting movement had their own ideas: if they responded to the idealistic young schoolteacher’s aspirations, it was undoubtedly because they recognised an opportunity to realise something of their own.

As already detailed, the formation of Western Desert art that followed between 1971 and late 1972 is now cemented as one of the historic cornerstones of the indigenous contemporary art movement. It’s generally accepted that the initially diminutive paintings that emerged in these early years were made possible by a shared desire: not only to breach Papunya’s then-prevailing administrative and social conventions, but to broker a medium of exchange that might enable such a breach to occur. Put simply, if developments were guided by the creative vision of each party (Bardon on

the one hand and each of the artists, also a collective, on the other), so too were they contingent upon the ground of exchange that was negotiated between them. Bouyed by a complex intercultural tracery, the earliest works of the movement – often rawly provisional in character – can be seen to have ruptured the prevailing colonial order of the day. In their radical translation of Aboriginal visual codes, they turned the subjugation and estrangement felt so keenly by their authors towards collective purpose.

As this narrative suggests, conceiving indigenous contemporary art in terms of a contemporary ‘contact zone’ – that is, as a practice that highlights passages of interchange between previously distinct worlds – thus demands we picture a unique terrain. The art world and its institutions, which not only provides this art its ultimate destination but also the social infrastructure that supports the curatorial practices discussed in the previous chapter, forms only part of this. So although it is a given that indigenous contemporary art exists in the social space of the broader art world, it remains important to acknowledge the significant institutional and social differences that support its production and dissemination. Like the art world more generally, this network – which includes government-funded art centres and similar organisations – is peopled by various intermediary figures. As such, it calls upon us to picture a variety of different forms of cultural brokerage.

In the previous chapter I examined two key works – The Aboriginal Memorial and Djirrididi (Kingfisher) – in which Djon Mundine’s robust approach to the brokerage of indigenous contemporary art served to illuminate the intersecting boundaries between curator and artist, insider and outsider, creative participant and thematic producer. As I argued, the collaborative features of these complexly intersubjective works enable us to picture curatorial practice as a medium of interchange: the curator, acting within a network of shifting authorial agencies, readily emerges as intercultural broker.
This has undoubtedly provided a productive site for the mediation of Aboriginal art in Australia, and thus its interpretation, but if Mundine’s narrative threads into this chapter it is for a different reason: through his tenure as an art coordinator in the remote regions of Arnhem Land, rather than his affiliation with the institutions of the art world as a curator. It was, after all, in this context that his initial exposure to the complex authorial realities of the Aboriginal art world occurred. As the foundational moments of Western Desert art also show, it is arguably this position that provides the kind of creative intimacy necessary to enact the more collaborative aspects of indigenous contemporary art that ultimately form the subject of this thesis.

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In the years that followed Bardon’s relatively short but productively intense tenure at Papunya, art coordinators became the key employees of the government funded collectives known as art centres that soon extended throughout northern and central Australia. Indeed, even while broad curatorial interest in Aboriginal art was still nascent, art coordinators were already entering into intermediary positions within communities: early emissaries of an art world in which the demand for Aboriginal art would soon grow exponentially.

Officially, these positions first gained traction post-1973. This was when, sparked in part by the emergence of Western Desert painting, the Australia Council inaugurated the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB), a federal arm that initially provided direct funding for the development of art centre infrastructure within remote communities, including salaries for key staff. Perhaps because a need for official ‘crafts advisors’ in Aboriginal communities had been proposed as early as 1968, the AAB’s initiative spread surprisingly fast: by 1981 a total of fourteen full-time and three part-time art

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2 The art coordinator is also known interchangeably by a number of other titles including, most commonly, arts manager or arts advisor. For consistency’s sake I use the term art coordinator.
coordinators were being funded across northern Australia. It was through these points of interchange that the majority of remotely-based Aboriginal artists began to access the broader art world.

Yet regardless of the prominence of art coordinators in these developments, their role, like the role of the broker in more general terms, has always occupied an uncertain space in the discourse. As with the curator, they are traditionally positioned just beyond the spread of the art world’s stage light, simultaneously always there and never there. In contrast to the curator, however, the adjustment that has shifted the discourse surrounding that role – allowing us in turn to more clearly picture the collaborative features of curatorial practice – has not yet affected the way in which the role of the art coordinator is understood, nor articulated. This doesn’t mean that such figures are less central players in Aboriginal art’s social relations. Far from it: as Djon Mundine’s career arc from art coordinator to robustly collaborative curator suggests, art coordinators are often granted strikingly intimate access to the creative practice of Aboriginal artists within remote communities; not only are they more visible to Aboriginal people as direct actors within community networks, it is usual for them (as with many non-Aboriginal interlopers within such spaces) to be drawn into local kinship relations and be required to act accordingly.

For many, this intimacy, although sometimes double-edged, cuts to the heart of the role. As Fred Myers has noted, regardless of the well-documented difficulties of art coordination, “(t)he pleasures and pangs of this work, what makes it interesting and challenging, are less the experience of romantic encounter with artistic ‘Others’ than the personal relations, the incongruities of local knowledge, and the

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1 FR Myers, *Painting Culture*, p. 150.
emotional dichotomies of living within a field of highly charged cultural difference.”

So although art coordination undoubtedly shares an overlapping social space with curatorial practice, examining something of its contemporary and historical foundations provides here a means to extend my ultimate theme more directly into specific relations between Aboriginal artists and their art world mediators. Yet although I sustain this focus (with varied inflection) in the chapters that follow, it nonetheless remains important to understand the art coordinator as a ‘curator-like’ figure. Doing so draws attention to both similarities and differences from what might be recognised as curating in a more general, institutional sense. It also shows that in contrast to the increased prominence of the curator in the latter part of the twentieth century (in the broadest sense), following the lineage of the art coordinator directs us towards vastly different historical territory: the loose formation of the role readily reaches beyond the borders of the Western art world, the administrative imperatives of organisations like the AAB, or the demands of the commercial and non-commercial market for Aboriginal art. These of course form the role’s recent scaffolding (which I will now briefly explore), but it is also deeply contingent upon historical exchanges between Aboriginal and settler Australian worlds and the figures who have acted within them. In this, it provides a particularly useful means to model the brokerage of indigenous contemporary art as a practice whose precedent lies in the contact zone of colonial history.

3.2 Pragmatism and collaboration

Myers, writing on the advent of Western Desert painting and the subsequent spread of the Aboriginal arts industry in Australia, was amongst the first to identify and analyse the intermediary role of art coordination as one of cultural

\[\text{ibid, p. 164.}\]
Creative intimacies

brokerage. As he makes clear, it is a role not only bordered by intimacy, but by dissonance and conflict.\(^5\) He argues it formed an integral building block for the entire Aboriginal arts and crafts industry: “perhaps the pivotal role in the brokerage, or mediation, of Aboriginal cultural products to the marketplace and the wider public.”\(^6\)

Jon Altman, another anthropologist with extensive long-term relations with Aboriginal communities, has also examined the broader structures within which art coordination takes shape. In a similar sense to Myers, he refers to art centres as “intercultural brokerage institutions” and highlights their function within much wider social and institutional configurations,\(^7\) a conception that finds a clear echo in the social space within which Jeremy Boissevain locates the broker. Altman notes that the entry of indigenous contemporary art into the broader art world:

requires careful and considered mediation over vast geographic and cultural distance. This mediation can take a diversity of forms – it can be undertaken formally by commercial dealers and agents or by individual artists, or informally through a diversity of social and commercial relations between artist and buyers, some more acceptable than others.\(^8\)

Drawing on his own experiences in Arnhem Land, Djon Mundine has also provided a useful overview in an article that appeared in the international journal of postcolonial art, Third Text, in 1989. Acknowledging that the employment of what he refers to as ‘arts and crafts advisers’ was a critical initiative on the behalf of the AAB, he offers a relatively straightforward definition – part mediator, part protector – as follows: “to foster Aboriginal art and guide it to the outside world – the marketplace – and to make sure people

\(^5\) ibid, pp. 147-183.
\(^6\) ibid, p. 147.
\(^7\) J Altman, ‘Brokering Aboriginal Art: a critical perspective on marketing, institutions and the state’, p. 3.
\(^8\) ibid, p. 4.
were not being ‘ripped off’ by external interests as they had in the past.”9

For Mundine, art coordinators perform what he described as “a very important linking role between the outside world and traditional communities, and in the chain of contacts that influence how and where Aboriginal art is dispersed.”10 This in turn requires a regionally diverse, and malleable, skill set which may include, as Altman has pointed out, “expertise in marketing and an understanding of commerce and the fine arts market.” But even in a pragmatic sense there is far more to it. As Altman continues, art coordinators:

(B)uy, sell, document, conserve and transport art; they accompany artists to exhibitions, host visitors, deal with intellectual property issues, administer grants, run projects, look after a small business, manage other staff, supply artists with materials, and support the governing boards who employ them (...). They are people who can communicate cross culturally and who can cope with the distinctive pressures and stresses associated with remote community living. As a general rule arts advisers have to be resourceful, energetic and resilient.11

Philip Batty, an anthropologist who began his career as a schoolteacher in Papunya in the late 1970s, touches more directly on the role’s collaborative and ethical dimensions (both of which are recurrent themes in the following chapters). He writes that the tasks of the art coordinator are “multifarious and difficult”:

They have to soothe angry artists convinced that they have been ripped off, go cap-in-hand to governments each year for more funding, work out what will sell and encourage their artists to paint accordingly, stretch and undercoat innumerable canvases, watch for ‘carpetbaggers’ circling their artists, write submissions for endless government enquiries into Aboriginal art, deal with vehicle breakdowns miles from nowhere and butter

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10 ibid, p. 40.
up rich buyers at glittering exhibition openings. Finally, they must do all this work knowing that their best artists will probably spend their money on drink or dodgy cars.\textsuperscript{12}

Together, these definitions map something of the collective features of art coordination and, as such, assist us in conceiving the intermediary aspect of the role. Yet they also impart the sense of something elusive at their centre. Indeed, it can seem at times as if the specific contours of individual exchanges, and the role they play in generating the new forms of creativity that characterise indigenous contemporary art, can only be overlooked in an attempt to draw many varied actors under one overarching frame. Although Myers, for example, details how the personalities of different art coordinators at Papunya each impacted differently on the formation of Western Desert Art, he avoids considering if and when such practice might become a kind of creativity in and of itself.\textsuperscript{13}

The question of where we might draw this line, and how, reiterates a central theme of this thesis: How might we reach a deeper understanding of the embedded positions such third-party figures often hold within the social relations that govern the production of Aboriginal art? How invested in this process might their own interests become?

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To begin to conceive this aspect – which I ultimately characterise as collaborative – more clearly, we can look again at Bardon’s initial exchanges with the founding artists of Western Desert Art. This is because, beyond his own significant contribution, Bardon’s role in the development of the painting movement at Papunya has been well established in attendant critical literature. For Paul Carter – the theorist who has come closest to picturing the complex pattern of intercultural call and response that carried the movement’s


\textsuperscript{13} FR Myers, \textit{Painting Culture}, pp. 147-183.
inception – as Bardon was drawn more closely into the social relations around him, he shifted from catalyst to participant in the creative act. As Carter puts it, a space opened where a “different kind of cultural transaction might occur.”

Indeed, Carter’s notion of Western Desert painting’s ‘transactional environment’ – touched on in chapter one – once again becomes key. In prompting the radical local reimagining detailed above, it allowed the imposed frame of Western modernity to be re-fashioned in the modulated light of localised perspectives. In similar fashion, Nikos Papastergiadis has examined events at Papunya as a way to tie developments there to a broader understanding of cultural translation and its relationship to currents of global cosmopolitanism. In defining worldly interactions, this intermeshing of cultural differences not only creates newly hybrid forms of cultural identity, it can also be understood to form the common ground that different cultures now negotiate.

As I have already discussed, it is this interaction that provides the means to think creatively between previously demarcated worlds. Following Carter, Papastergiadis casts Bardon as “a stranger who served as a kind of unwitting guide” in a newly charged space of exchange. Although ‘unwitting’ may indeed underplay Bardon’s role (he was, after all, famously self-effacing when it came to detailing his influence), Papastergiadis makes clear that what he terms “the productive force of the encounter with difference” provided both parties with the impetus for new forms of creative practice.

The critical frames that Carter and Papastergiadis draw from the emergence of Western Desert painting point towards a

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16 ibid. p. 151.
17 ibid.
conception of indigenous contemporary art that is both guided and shaped by the kind of collectively driven intercultural exchanges highlighted in the previous chapter. But whereas my focus there lay largely on institutional mediation (and Djon Mundine’s function as an intermediary/emissary who engaged collaborative process within that framework) Carter and Papastergiadis assist us in illuminating another perspective. By directing focus towards Western Desert painting’s local context, a more intimate social terrain takes shape. As each suggests, the movement undoubtedly coalesced around Bardon’s arrival, but although he thus emerges as a key player in its early moments, this should not be mistaken as a means to downplay the creative agency of the artists themselves. Instead, it points towards a more nuanced understanding of the achievement of their work between cultures.

3.3 Before Bardon

Although Bardon has been the subject of wide analysis, focus on equivalent figures has been, at best, sporadic. As noted in my introduction, the writer and journalist Nicolas Rothwell is among the few to draw attention to this oversight. He argues that the “interweaving of the indigenous painting movement with the influence of mainstream art advisers” is so significant “that it is almost a perversion of the record to underplay the hybrid aspect of the tradition.”

His own definition of art coordination, although reminiscent of those already detailed here, pivots more directly on the contrast between visibility and invisibility:

The coordinator is at once slave and master, employee and arbiter, providing guidance about a strange and all controlling market to painters and sculptors whose way of seeing is distinctive, and must be highlighted and brought with an appealing frame.

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18 N Rothwell, ‘Bridge between worlds’, p. 6.
19 ibid.
For Rothwell, the resulting significance of the role is unavoidable: “It is safe to say,” he continues, “that without the coordinators there would be no broad-scale community-based art movement (...).”

He sees in this a much broader prompt:

(A)s histories of the past decades are written, co-ordinators will be viewed increasingly as crucial presences: catalysts, serving as channels of inspiration and communication between remote art centres and the far-off, waiting world.

Given their strangely opaque position, the question of what we should make of these strangers who act between worlds remains prominent. How should we picture the complex terrain that extends from the more pragmatic descriptions of art coordination touched on above, to the much harder to visualise exchanges that mark intercultural collaboration?

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One clear place to begin is by looking towards historic exchanges that have been borne of similar intercultural circumstance. In this way we can begin to picture a local basis for the contemporary transactions that have led to the rise of indigenous contemporary art; a means, that is, to understand something of how a similar space has been historically utilised by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players. For although Bardon is most often cast as the inaugural art coordinator – and thus ‘broker’ – of indigenous contemporary art, this is something of a convenient oversimplification. His story is only part of a much broader and more varied history that follows the spread of the colonial frontier throughout Australia. It’s not surprising then, that the role of the art coordinator might conform to the contours of other roles founded within this contested interstitial zone, betraying a pattern of creative

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20 ibid.
21 ibid.
Creative intimacies

Intercultural brokerage set in motion by the earliest encounters between Aboriginal and settler cultures.

Take, for example, the work of the 19th century Aboriginal artists William Barak (1824 – 1903) and Tommy McRae (c.1835-1901). Both developed their stylised drawings between existing indigenous and Western pictorial tradition, and in doing so utilised introduced media and Western intermediaries to establish hybrid art forms that in turn helped broker the new paradigm emerging before them.

For Barak, a key figure at the government administered Aboriginal settlement of Coranderrk, 60km from Melbourne, creative practice was part of a much broader program of intercultural diplomacy that included the production of artefacts and the practice of traditional song and storytelling. Against this backdrop, his drawings – which almost exclusively took as their subject a retrospective view of pre-contact cultural practice – presented a vision of cultural continuity at a time of radical change.\(^{22}\) They also provided Barak with an effective intercultural currency, in both a practical and symbolic sense. As Andrew Sayers has pointed out, drawing formed part of "the tourist market component of Coranderrk’s economy";\(^{23}\) beyond this, it provided Barak a means to secure productive intercultural relations: he often gifted his work to those who assisted he and his people, who in turn became essential agents in setting it into wider circulation. For example, when Barak died, Anne Fraser Bon – a Scottish settler and close advocate for Coranderrk’s people – donated the drawings he had given her to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria and the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, thus helping cement his posthumous reputation as an artist. Bon took her advocacy role particularly seriously: not only did she author a series of newspaper articles about Barak in the

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\(^{23}\) ibid, p. 22.
1930s, she was also instrumental in erecting a marble statue of the artist in the main street of Healesville in 1934.24

Tommy McRae’s sketchbooks similarly provided him with a tangible medium of intercultural currency. Yet in contrast to Barak, McRae, who lived in Victoria’s upper Murray district during the same period of colonisation, turned his finely tuned eye towards the world around him. His detailed pictures of Aboriginal, English and Chinese subjects provide one of the era’s most effective portraits of contemporary life. Like Barak, he too made use of European intermediaries: his “occasional patron” Roderick Kilborne and the artist Theresa Walker were among those who helped turn his small observational drawings into a currency in the colonial world.25

Anthropology’s rise as a discipline in the 20th century also unavoidably led to a series of robust engagements around the production of material culture. Often these resulted in new forms, carried in large part by the interactive features of their inception. For example, Donald Thomson’s expeditions through North Eastern Arnhem Land in the 1930s — not only as an anthropologist but also, following a murder at Caledon Bay, as a kind of intercultural diplomat — resulted in a significant group of commissioned bark paintings by figures including Maama Munuggurr and Mundukul Marawili.26 These featured designs that before Thomson’s engagement with their authors had only been displayed as body painting within the far more ephemeral frame of ceremony. In addition to Ronald and Catherine Berndt’s work within the same area (they commissioned a series of wax crayon drawings in 1947)27 and the local Methodist mission’s craft initiatives in Yirrkala, these

24 ibid, p. 25.
provide one intercultural basis for contemporary art practice in the region.

The approach of these intermediaries and the artists they worked with was far from extraordinary. Indeed, employing material culture as a form of cross-cultural pedagogy in this way was not an unusual strategy for the day. Another example lies in Mervyn Megitt’s mid-century engagements in Warlpiri country in the central desert, the results of which include a series of crayon drawings produced at the settlement of Hooker Creek (now Lajamanu).28 Another for whom the practice served varied methodological ends was self-taught anthropologist Charles P Mountford. He and Norman Tindale commissioned crayon drawings during expeditions to the central desert in the 1930s and early 1940s;29 later Mountford commissioned bark paintings during expeditions he led to Arnhem Land in 1948,30 and the Tiwi Islands in 1954.31 In each of these cases resulting material provided an important interpretive basis for subsequent scholarly studies.

As with many similar engagements, such exchanges also provide obvious precedent for the later development of localised art histories. Furthermore, in each similar figures recur: in coalescing around mission settlements and, later, government administered Aboriginal communities, they feature not only Aboriginal artists and cultural producers, but anthropologists and missionaries, linguists and art gallery representatives. Viewed collectively this social field illuminates a contact zone peopled by many players, both

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30 Ibid.
31 For Mountford’s own detailed account of this expedition see, C Mountford, The Tiwi: their art, myth and ceremony, Phoenix house London, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1958
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. In this, we might begin to understand that the role of the art coordinator sketched above is heir to those figures (like the missionary and anthropologist) whose broader field of action intersected with the production of new forms of material culture.

The following analysis turns to three distinct examples of such pre-art centre brokerage in more detail. Although at one level interchangeable with any of those narratives touched on above, the following have been chosen for a clear reason. Not only do they provide a possible historical basis for the contemporary exchanges detailed elsewhere in this thesis, they also illuminate the difficulties of translation that often attend such developments.

The first two – unfolding around works now known as the Killalpaninna Toas and The Elcho Island Memorial respectively – highlight the contested receptions often met by the newly hybrid material outcomes of such exchanges. In different fashion they each prompt a key question: how should we conceive the authorship of such works in light of the shifting discourses and subjectivities that have surrounded them?

The third example – the well-known story of the watercolourists Albert Namatjira and Rex Battarbee – takes this question a step closer towards contemporary engagements, providing an opportunity to explore how an intimate friendship sparked a local creative economy. In the process the broker takes on the explicit form of the art coordinator: in step we see an early instance in which creative visions intersected in the contact zone of colonial history.

### 3.4 An uncertain identity

Between 1888 and 1906 Pastor Johann Reuther, a German, was the Lutheran missionary at Killalpaninna, a remote mission at Cooper Creek, east of Lake Eyre. As with a number of the missionaries of the day his evangelical calling found a counterpoint in his amateur interest in ethnography, a passion
that he pursued throughout his posting. He established a number of reliable ‘informants’ in the region, men who would gather each evening in Reuther’s small mission house and provide him with a glimpse into their cultural and spiritual world.\(^{32}\)

Reuther, who entertained grand plans for his ethnographic work, diligently kept copious notes. He also built a significant collection of artefacts that by his departure had expanded to some 1,300 objects. Following his unsuccessful attempts to sell this collection to a museum in Germany, he turned his attention to the South Australian Museum in Adelaide which, as a recently founded institution seeking a collection cornerstone, jumped at the opportunity: they paid £400 for a collection that the historian and curator Philip Jones has recently argued formed a “catalogue raisonné of Central Australian Aboriginal material culture.”\(^{33}\)

Part of the initial draw card for the museum was a series of unique objects: 385 ‘way-markers’ carefully crafted from wood, gypsum and ochre, which Reuther referred to as ‘Toas’. He had carefully recorded their purpose and iconographic significance: they were, he explained, objects that were left by groups departing campsites. Dug into the sand, the positioning and pictographic representations communicated by each Toa’s varied form illuminated the traveller’s ultimate destination, thus providing a navigational tool for anyone seeking to follow.

Yet regardless of Reuther’s detailed justification of their significance, it soon emerged that these intriguing objects possessed no precedent: there were no records of Toas ever being made either before Reuther arrived in the region


\(^{33}\) ibid, p. 251.
or, for that matter, following his departure. Claims were ultimately made that the museum had been the victim of a calculated hoax. The Toas, for the time deeply unresolved objects, were left to linger in museum storage for much of the twentieth century.

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The obvious brokerage of the Toas – calculated or otherwise – is what created this problem. At one level, this was relatively straightforward: from an ethnographic perspective Reuther’s central role in their commission threatened their authenticity. It was only later, once indigenous contemporary art had established an emergent presence on the art world map, that a revision of this narrative became possible. By then the Toas could be re-framed in the fresh light cast by the new discourses of cultural hybridity that marked postcolonial studies in particular, and contemporary art more generally.

In this we can understand the importance of timing in the reception of such material. As Ian McLean has observed, the Toas were initially “marketed as tribal primitivism and not as modernist fine art”, a designation that swiftly ensured their dismissal once their unique story came to light. Until their revision in the 1980s, the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ readings that had so disrupted their reception had occurred simply along discursive lines, little more than a sign of the prevailing orthodoxies of the time rather than of any inherent failing on the part of the objects themselves, or those who had crafted them.

Their significance, as Philip Jones points out, can thus be understood as bound to their very form: for him, they are

best conceived as “objects whose uncertain ethnographic identity evokes the fluidity of a frontier in which Aboriginal and European interests not only clashed, but also merged and overlapped.”37 For McLean, the same quality positions the Toas within a revised history of Australian modernism. Referring to the emergence of Western Desert Painting, he argues that they “herald the Desert acrylic paintings that caught the imagination of the art world some 70 to 80 years later.”38

From this perspective the evident brokerage of the Toas becomes a means to understand the interaction between cultures at the colonial interface. Understood as icons of exchange, they reveal not only their own inherent character, but also the textures of the broader social dynamic that drove new configurations of modernity on the colonial frontier. Yet even though the status the Toas now occupy in the history of Australian art – as symbols of culture collision rather than inauthentic hoax – is relatively secure, there remains only a limited understanding of Reuther’s motivations, or, for that matter, the motivations of those who produced them. Jones suggests that the Pastor, driven to unearth the hitherto undiscovered, was simply caught up in the ethnographic fervor of the day. Undoubtedly it was his desire for the collection he had spent long hours amassing to stand out from others like it, but beyond this it is difficult to fully read or comprehend the complex motives that underlie the Toas invention. Putting their creation down to Reuther’s bare ambition alone seems not only to fundamentally undervalue their uniqueness, but also to ignore the central role their Aboriginal producers played in shaping their form and meaning. One must assume that they too saw the opportunity latent in the new social field that was unfolding around them, that they sensed in Reuther’s sustained interest a means to engage the vagaries of intercultural exchange to their own ends.

37 P Jones, Ochre and rust, p. 245.
It follows that however we figure these authorial uncertainties, what the Toas now show us remains important: somewhere between Reuther’s interests and the artist’s intent to signify something of the depth and complexity of their culture within a new context, a space opened in which an entirely new potential was realised.

3.5 A mediated visual discourse

If we can establish that the inherent hybridity of the Toas, expressed in their very formation, illuminates a new way of thinking through the historic interactions between Aboriginal and settler-Australian cultures, it is a model that can be readily applied elsewhere.

Another prominent example lies in Galiwinku, the mission settlement on Elcho Island, a tiny landmass off the East Coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. In 1957 this community became the site of a striking creative intervention-cum-artwork known as the Elcho Island Memorial.

The memorial consisted of what was, for the day at least, a radically new form: a carefully composed constellation of carved and painted sculptural objects arrayed across a concrete base and interspersed with areas of sand. Key materials used in its construction - including paint, boards and milled planks - had been salvaged from the mission; others retained wholly traditional origins. English and Yolngu texts, either painted on boards or etched into wet concrete, illuminated the work in a fashion not dissimilar from bible passages: evidence of the religious syncretism that carried through the memorial as a whole. Although it recalled the ceremonial grounds of the Yolngu, the memorial, replete with a prominent pulpit and crucifix rising amongst the carved representations of ancestral beings, also clearly adhered to the formal conventions of a church altar.

Conceived and led by three Yolngu elders - Batanga (d.1960), Willi Walalipa (d.1983) and David Burrumarra (d.1994) - the creation of the memorial was underscored by a
serious intent. Previously restricted outside the clearly
demarcated borders of ceremony, the carved and painted
sculptural forms – known by the Yolngu as *rangga* – had never
before been presented in a public context. Their disclosure
was driven by an internal desire to mediate the currents of
intercultural change that had been sweeping the Arnhem Land
peninsula in recent decades. Yet beyond this fact – evident in
the clear parallels the action drew between Aboriginal and
European worlds – it was initially unclear exactly what was at
stake. As with the Toas, the Elcho Island memorial has enjoyed
a chequered reception: as the outcome of a unique
intercultural mediation it has found itself imperfectly bound
by ethnographic and art historical readings.

Husband and wife anthropologists Ronald and Catherine
Berndt provided what is generally seen as the definitive
account of its production and interpretation in the form of
Ronald Berndt’s 1962 publication (based upon an earlier paper)
*An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land.*\(^{39}\) Berndt’s title goes
some way towards illuminating his understanding of the
memorial’s syncretic intent. In the Yolngu world, he argues,
the memorial intended to enact “major alterations both in the
organization of social activity and in the framework of the
society as such.”\(^{40}\) He frames this as an ‘adjustment’, or
bringing together, of “traditional Aboriginal and introduced
ways, in order to achieve the maximum benefit for the
latter.”\(^{41}\) Although Berndt foregrounds the memorial’s
distinctive religious considerations, noting for example that
it aimed to define a ‘continuum’ between Aboriginal and
European beliefs, he also emphasises its broader aims in
social, economic and political terms.\(^{42}\) For him it was a
calculated gesture that reflected a certain density of cross-

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\(^{40}\) ibid, p. 17.

\(^{41}\) ibid, p. 39.

\(^{42}\) ibid, pp. 14-15.
cultural influence between traditional Aboriginal domains and the missions. But considered today, its production can also be understood to have sketched a more complex social field.

The chief broker who emerges from Berndt’s account is David Burrumarra, a figure whose fluency in both Aboriginal and European worlds greatly informed the memorial’s creation. Indeed, Burrumarra’s understanding of the intercultural potential of the moment provides a revealing lens by which to approach the memorial as a whole and gain some understanding of the syncretic mode through which its authors chose to transmit their ideas. Burrumarra clearly had an existing sense of this terrain: as well as being familiar to Berndt, he had already enjoyed a ‘close association’ with the Reverend Wilbur Chaseling, the first missionary at nearby Yirrkala in North Eastern Arnhem Land, as well as with subsequent missionaries on Elcho Island. As a result he had been schooled, had “learnt to read and write to a limited degree, delivered sermons in Church, and at times served as a right-hand man to various missionaries.”43 As Berndt continues:

In consequence [Burrumarra] became openly identified with the mission. Although this involved increasing commitment, he was torn between the mission and the traditional Aboriginal sphere, especially in regard to ceremonial and religious life.44

This was not an easy position to hold. Situated between cultural domains competing for primacy over Yolngu life, Burrumarra often found himself reproached by both parties, “each accusing him of wavering in his allegiance.”45 It follows that the memorial can be seen as a gesture of rapprochement between these competing forces, each of which were intent on shaping the future of Burrumarra’s people.46 In similar

43 ibid, p. 33.
44 ibid.
45 ibid.
46 See, for example, H Morphy, Becoming Art, pp. 62-63. Morphy notes, ‘(The Elcho Island Memorial) was aimed at the internal restructuring of Yolngu society and constituted an attempt to create regional unity, almost to create a more open society, by publicly exhibiting objects that were
fce, the other Yolngu figures involved in the memorial’s production also possessed to varying degrees a similarly intercultural experience of the local world, including significant links to, and authority within, Yolngu spiritual life. As with Burrumarra it was precisely their position between cultures that enabled their action.

Due largely to Berndt’s text the creation of the memorial is less opaque than the Toas, but it too exists upon contested ground. Nigel Lendon has recently reviewed its production and interpretation, drawing upon Berndt’s work (along with subsequent material) to position The Elcho Island Memorial in similar terms to those he has established for The Aboriginal Memorial. Acknowledging Burrumarra’s central role, Lendon seeks a more unstable – and thus revelatory – understanding of the Memorial’s authorship. He establishes not only a more collective picture of it as a work of art, but an understanding that Berndt himself should be credited in a “participatory role as interlocutor.” In doing so, Berndt can be seen as a central part of the social constellation that provided an armature for the memorial to extend beyond its local context. As Lendon puts it: “Berndt’s particular anthropological aesthetic ideology framed all further considerations of the specific nature of the Memorial as a work of art by those who have contributed to the literature.”

Following this reading, it is precisely the memorial’s collective character that grants it a resonance, a fact that contrasts, to a certain extent, with Berndt’s own

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47 RM Berndt, p. 35.
49 ibid, p. 104.
50 ibid, p. 95.
Making in translation

interpretation. It also provides a much broader implication (as Lendon continues):

The cumulative impact of the installation of the Memorial, the consequences of its disclosure, and the subsequent political motives of its instigators, remained intensely provocative and became the aspect most discussed in the literature it generated. What Berndt could not have anticipated was that, half a century later, the complexity of the Memorial’s innovative form (...) seems remarkably predictive of other instances of Aboriginal art that have emerged out of similar circumstances of intercultural exchange.\(^{51}\)

As I have already explored in relation to Djon Mundine’s role in The Aboriginal Memorial, the network of brokerage here is far broader than a set of actions that play out between two parties. Indeed, in keeping with his own reading of that later work, Lendon characterises the Elcho Island Memorial as a “mediated mode of visual discourse” (his italics) that acts:

between the authors and their kinfolk (men, women and children), between the authors and their non-Christian kin, and between the authors and the missionaries, European outsiders and occasional anthropologists who were a part of its audience.\(^{52}\)

In this we can understand something of the social fabric that carries the production and dissemination of a work like the memorial. As with the Toas, which emerged fifty years earlier and half a continent away, what this striking constellation of objects now illuminates is the complex character of the contact zone; a site which has been engaged by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parties to not only produce new creative forms, but to mediate these forms into broader domains.

\(^{51}\) ibid, p. 95. Note: the examples Lendon notes are ‘the Yirrkala Church Panels (1962-3), the Bark Petitions (1963), the Papunya school murals (1971) and the lesser known Yuendemu men’s murals (1971).’

\(^{52}\) ibid, p. 113.
3.6 An Aboriginal artist is something to be

If the Toas and the Elcho Island Memorial layer our understanding of creative brokerage on Australia’s frontier, another far better known example illuminates a specific instance where the broker explicitly takes on the form of the art coordinator: the two-way mentorship between the watercolourists Albert Namatjira and Rex Battarbee.\(^{53}\)

Much has been written on their relationship and the work that resulted. It is well known, for example, that the two first met in 1934 when Battarbee arrived with his friend and fellow painter John Gardner at Namatjira’s home of Hermannsburg, a tiny but thriving Lutheran Mission west of Alice Springs.\(^ {54}\) So too that Namatjira was intrigued by the work the two artists undertook during their visit. Like David Burrumarra, he was clearly well placed to recognise the potential offered by the practice of art between cultures; a traditional Arrernte man raised at Hermannsburg, Namatjira was already known locally as a mission evangelist, camel-man and souvenir maker: in short, he had long been called upon to negotiate the cultural fissures of the rapidly changing social landscape around him.

It was no doubt for this reason that the paintings Battarbee and Gardner displayed in Hermannsburg’s tiny schoolhouse before their departure resonated. Namatjira asked if he too could paint; when Battarbee returned to Hermannsburg in 1936, this time travelling alone, he invited Namatjira to accompany him on a painting trip to Palm Valley, west of the mission. Another trip soon followed, and a pattern was set: it was in this way that Battarbee began the informal lessons in technique and style that would form the basis of Namatjira’s

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\(^{53}\) The most comprehensive account of this relationship can be found in Martin Edmond, *Battarbee and Namatjira*. See M Edmond.

\(^{54}\) Battarbee and Gardner had undertaken a number of wide-ranging painting trips together in the years leading up to their 1934 visit, and had already been to Hermannsburg once, two years earlier.
practice.\textsuperscript{55} All this, of course, is part of their established story. But how should we place it in a broader context? Where, exactly, do the outlying borders of their narrative lie?

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Although Namatjira and Battarbee’s initial encounter and subsequent exchanges may seem surprising given the remote location in which they occurred, as with the examples already discussed theirs is easily located within a much broader history.

Not only had the Lutherans and their Arrernte subjects long-established cultural interchange as the mission’s basis, they had already inaugurated a small craft business: an art centre in all but name intended to capitalise on the region’s nascent tourist market.\textsuperscript{56} Further, Battarbee and Gardner were not the first artists drawn to the region; the painters Jessie Traill and Violet Teague, for example, had also visited Hermannsburg for a period, and Teague and her sister Mary had organised on the mission’s behalf a fundraising exhibition in Melbourne in 1934.\textsuperscript{57}

Namatjira’s meeting with Battarbee can thus be understood as far more than a chance occurrence. As Martin Edmond has shown, it was the “culmination of events and encounters (…) that go back at least to 1932 and probably some years earlier.”\textsuperscript{58} More broadly, it can be understood as an unavoidable expression of the various forms of desert modernism (including the Killalpaninna Toas) that had flowed on from the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line between 1869 and 1872, and the opening of previously untraversed territories that had resulted.\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} M Edmond, p. 138.
\item \textsuperscript{56} I McLean, ‘Aboriginal Modernism in Central Australia’, p. 89.
\item \textsuperscript{57} M Edmond, pp. 117-121.
\item \textsuperscript{58} ibid, p. 127.
\item \textsuperscript{59} I McLean, ‘Aboriginal Modernism in Central Australia’, p. 83.
\end{itemize}
Subsequent events can be firmly located within this localised context of exchange. Namatjira, who took to the difficult watercolour medium with a now-famous alacrity, seemed to effortlessly appropriate a Western pictorial tradition to represent the luminous nuances of the country he had known since birth. Battarbee, deeply impressed, soon organised a sequence of exhibitions in the southern capitals that catapulted his student’s profile beyond his own. Indeed, although the reception of Namatjira’s art was unavoidably traced by a modernist fascination for the other, his achievement was immense: for a brief time he became the most recognisable artist in the country.

Over the next decade, as Namatjira shifted from student prodigy to art star, their work together became central to Battarbee’s life. After living at Hermannsburg for extended periods, in 1947 he built himself a home and studio in Alice Springs. By this time Namatjira was already enjoying the proceeds of his success: he had purchased a number of vehicles from the sale of his work and had built his own home a few kilometres from Hermannsburg.60 For him painting had become a full time job, a development that signaled the importance that the remote art industry would achieve in coming decades.

Founded upon the mutual artistic regard and friendship the two established during their painting trips, the initially informal exchanges that drew Battarbee and Namatjira together quickly solidified into clearly defined roles. Each brokered the other into his world: if Battarbee opened for his friend the door to the Western system of ‘high’ art – characterised by gallery exhibitions, monographic publications, and critical and commercial success – Namatjira immediately responded in kind. In taking Battarbee to key sites in Arrernte country, he set in motion a practice often observed in remote communities to this day: art coordinators are commonly initiated into

60 M Edmond, p. 204.
their roles by way of visits to the traditional countries of those they work with.

Yet even though each can be understood to have written the other into history, Battarbee was, of course, Namatjira’s art broker. Not only did he provide his Arrernte friend the necessary training to establish his artistic career, he was also caught up as an integral player within the vagaries of the new art-based economy that flourished around Namatjira’s success. This was a role traced by the pragmatism contained in any art coordinator’s job description: Battarbee quickly became responsible for pricing and cataloguing Namatjira’s works; he ordered high-grade art materials to be delivered to the mission, and he balanced Namatjira’s income with the outgoing expenses associated with professional practice. In a pattern that draws together the entire movement, Namatjira’s success galvanized his countrymen to become artists in their own right. Others who soon followed in his footsteps included Wenten Rubuntja and Otto Pareroultja, as well as Namatjira’s sons Enos, Oscar, Ewald, Maurice and Keith. With minor individual variations, each appropriated the same style of landscape painting, aiming to secure a piece of the newfound market for Arrernte watercolours.

When the Second World War led to an influx of military personnel in Alice Springs (at one time swelling the population by as many as 8,000) Battarbee worked with the mission to manage the subsequent increase in the supply and demand of paintings. He sat on the two local committees that were initially established for this purpose – the Namatjira Arts Committee and the Pareroultja Artist’s Committee – and eventually accepted the Chairmanship of the overriding Aranda Arts Council (originally the Arts Advisory Council).61

Here, as part of a group comprised of local artists and mission staff, Battarbee’s responsibilities took on a more official note. A system of value was created against which

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61 ibid, pp. 184-86.
artworks were priced accordingly; income and outgoings were tabled; agreements were brokered that intended to address the sustainability of the new arts economy. In a development that presaged the carpetbaggers who in the 1990s began to shadow the desert Aboriginal painting industry, Battarbee even met threats from local ‘blackmarketeers’ intent on cutting in on artists like Namatjira for their own profit.

As Edmond points out, these developments represented a clear ‘bureaucratisation’ of artistic process. What he doesn’t spell out is obvious to anyone with even a passing interest in the Aboriginal art industry that followed on from these early days. The ‘bureaucratisation’ at Hermannsburg, which occurred in a less intensive and fraught fashion on other missions, provides a clear precursor to the network of government funded art centres that over the following decades would spread across central and northern Australia, creating similar bureaucratic structures for the production and dissemination of Aboriginal art. (Indeed we only have to return to the general descriptions of art coordination touched on earlier in this chapter to see evidence of this).

There is, however, also an additional, and interconnected, reason why Namatjira and Battarbee’s narrative is relevant here. Although the commercial crafts initiative had already been established at Hermannsburg by the time Namatjira began to paint (not to mention similar initiatives in other mission communities) Namatjira’s clear star power is what now makes his story so compelling. In keeping with Battarbee’s modernist ideals, it was never a question that artists with whom he worked would not be named, and, as such, become known for their individual inflections on local style. It can also be argued that this too is what Namatjira recognised in the first exhibition that Battarbee and Gardner held at Hermannsburg’s

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62 ibid.
63 ibid, pp. 223-225; p. 237.
64 ibid, p. 187.
Making in translation

schoolhouse: the sense that each artist’s respective vision might be what pushed the value of their work well beyond that already established for artefacts. As the movement grew, this is what also draws it close to the post-Papunya efflorescence that spread throughout remote Aboriginal Australia: suddenly it was far more important for a certain kind of forward thinking collector to have a ‘Namatjira’ or a ‘Pareroultja’ on the wall, than it was to simply possess an unnamed ethnographic or craft object of Aboriginal provenance.

Battarbee, it seems, played into this. As with many who followed him into similar roles, he knew the market well; what he didn’t know he learnt quickly. The emphasis on individualism rather than collectivity was, of course, part of this. At times this focus placed him in difficult territory: for example, as an artist himself he came to regret the extent of his influence on Namatjira, feeling that “he may have over-determined the kind of painter Albert would become.” Ultimately this led him to adapt his approach accordingly.

“When it came to teaching other artists”, Edmond writes, “rather than facilitating imitation in his own manner, [Battarbee] made a conscious effort to help them develop what he considered to be their own individual style.”

In this we glimpse something of the intimate role Battarbee forged for himself; the point where his practice as an intermediary extended beyond the pragmatic concerns attending marketing and production and into creative exchange and artistic guidance. This returns us to the very point where he and Namatjira began their intertwined creative project, the two of them camping and painting in Namatjira’s country, each in their own fashion guiding the other. It’s this that can be seen as emblematic of the more intimate features that have come to define many subsequent interactions between Aboriginal artists and their art world brokers. Here facilitation begins

65 ibid, p. 149.
66 ibid, p. 187.
to unthread into something far more complex: it takes on the features of collaborative exchange.

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By his death in 1959, Namatjira’s legacy was unparalleled. Not only had he met acclaim in the white art world, he had helped define the very structure of the remote Aboriginal art industry. His story had resonated widely, but perhaps most important was its local impact.

A striking example of this occurred in the months before he died, when he lived briefly at the newly established settlement of Papunya. 67 Although he had already crossed paths with a number of those who would found the Western Desert painting movement there in 1971, it’s hard not to imagine that this brief moment, during which he realised his final works, provided the aperture through which one history passed directly into another. 68 Even though the Papunya painters would jettison Namatjira’s appropriated pictorialism – turning instead towards newly-hybrid Aboriginal iconography – he nonetheless echoes clearly in their achievement.

As Vivien Johnson has put it, for Papunya artists like Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, who shared Namatjira’s Arrernte heritage, it was Namatjira’s “brilliant, trailblazing career (that) made an Aboriginal artist something to be.” 69 For Ian Burn and Ann Stephen his achievement is similarly remarkable, lying in the appropriation of a “space of cultural practice for himself – and for subsequent Aboriginal artists – which allowed

67 By this time Namatjira had been derailed by a combination of his fame and an overly paternalistic state. After a tumultuous period that attracted nationwide coverage and debate he was eventually sentenced for supplying liquor to a relative. The court ordered him to serve his term in Papunya. (see M Edmond, pp. 301-315.)

68 There were also earlier instances where Namitjira intersected with the artists of the Western Desert painting movement. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri recounted a story from the early 1950s in which Namatjira had approached him at Glen Helen Station and encouraged him to learn the art of watercolor painting, to no avail; see, V Johnson, Once upon a time in Papunya, pp. 24-25; see also M Edmond, p. 300.

69 V Johnson, Once upon a time in Papunya, p. 26.
transgressions of cultural, racial and historical boundaries.” Namatjira’s relationship with Battarbee was a central part of this. Indeed, if, as Burn and Stephen also note, “we can represent Namatjira only by writing between histories, between meanings, between private and public experiences,” their shared history is exactly what might enable this series of rapprochements to coalesce into something tangible.

As Namatjira’s art coordinator in all but name, Battarbee also momentarily bridged these two distinct yet inter-related moments of desert creativity. His role in the broader Aboriginal art movement possesses a tantalising epilogue. Bardon visited Battarbee’s home in Alice Springs in 1972, hoping that this legendary figure whose story so closely mirrored his own might agree to become the first agent for Western Desert painting. Battarbee, it transpired, was out of town.

3.7 A historical contingency

The narratives above sketch a brief and incomplete history. At one level I have included them to make a simple point: not only that processes of creative brokerage have always played out between Aboriginal and settler Australian cultures, but that these processes manifest within the new kinds of material objects borne of such exchange. Further, the discourses that attend the reception of such objects are more often than not deeply unsettled, or at the very least left unresolved, by their status (usually unfamiliar or undervalued at the time) as intercultural forms.

But more than this, these narratives draw to the surface a greater understanding of the role performed by individuals in

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70 I Burn and A Stephen, ‘Namatjira’s white mask: A partial interpretation’. In J Hardy, JVS Megaw and M R Megaw (eds), The heritage of Namatjira, William Heinmann Australia, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 249-283, p. 278.
71 ibid. p. 277.
72 V Johnson, Once upon a time in Papunya, pp 44-45. See also, M Edmond, p. 324.
such exchanges, and the broader social contingencies that shape them. In doing so they disrupt more generalised conceptions of the art coordinator-as-cultural broker; that the role, carried into being by a fast-moving arts bureaucracy, is simply one of service provision undertaken in culturally demanding contexts. This of course forms part of the terrain, and for many art coordinators defines where their role begins and ends, but as I have already detailed there is in key instances far more to it. This is especially true where a level of interpersonal intimacy becomes embedded in the very forms that result of such exchanges. From this perspective we can gain a sense that relationships between individuals - bordered by sometimes-haphazard circumstance, and driven in turn by the vagaries of any social exchange - cuts close to the intercultural centre of indigenous contemporary art.

As the above narratives also make clear, the Toas and The Elcho Island Memorial, as with Albert Namatjira’s creative exchanges with his friend and mentor Rex Battarbee, simultaneously highlight the contingency of these intercultural forms upon broad social groupings. These include alongside artists a variety of third party intermediaries who can also be characterised as brokers, each in possession of their own embedded ideologies and ideals.

In this we find a precursory social model for the role of the art coordinator. Not only can similar exchanges be observed at the heart of the other narratives I have already touched upon - such as those which led to the formation of Western Desert art, or which have at times underwritten Djon Mundine’s collaborative approach to curatorial practice - they also provide a productive frame for the discrete case studies that follow in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

As opposed to the examples detailed here - each of which occurred beyond the art world’s frame, or at least just before the discourse of contemporary art caught up with indigenous contemporary art as a distinctive practice - the examples that follow sit firmly within a post-Papunya history. As such they
can be understood to possess a certain fluency – whether in terms of contemporary art generally, indigenous contemporary art specifically, or of the commercial and non-commercial markets which now buttress the production and circulation of Aboriginal art practices. Occurring much more firmly within the frame of the art world, they are thus bound by certain discourses and narratives of their own, each in turn shaped by their local formations.
3.1

3.2
CAPTIONS:

3.1 Tommy McRae, Kwat Kwat people, (c.1835-1901)
*Untitled (spearing fish)*, late 19th century, ink on paper, 23.5 x 30 cm
Collection: Koori Heritage Trust, Melbourne

3.2 Makers unknown, Toas, mixed media

3.3 View of The Elcho Island Memorial, 1957

3.4 Albert Namatjira and Rex Batterbee at Finke River, c.1938
Photo: Gwen Trullo
PART TWO: CASE STUDIES
CHAPTER 04

Beautiful things:
Reading intercultural exchange in the recent work of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu

4.1 White Lines

When in 2008 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney began representing the Yolgu artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu it came for many as a surprise. The gallery, which occupies a small converted warehouse in inner-city Paddington, first opened its doors in 1982 and has since become synonymous with what might best be characterised as a kind of high-end contemporary practice. Not only have the Australian artists it represents often featured in prestigious national and international exhibitions of contemporary art (including, on a regular basis, the Venice Biennale), but its program often presents well-known international names: among them Tracy Emin, Isaac Julien and Jim Lambie.¹

Yet although the gallery has worked closely with artists of Aboriginal descent over a long period, it has (unlike many commercial art dealers in operation over the same period) never actively focused on artists from ‘remote’ Aboriginal Australia. Indeed, its history in this regard is slim enough to be relatively unknown to all but a handful of insiders. Between 1989 and 1993 Roslyn Oxley9 held five exhibitions from the Arnhem Land communities of Ramingining and Maningrida.² Although three were solo exhibitions, none of the artists

² This was during Djon Mundine’s tenure as an art coordinator in the region, a followed soon after the successful presentation of The Aboriginal Memorial at The Biennale of Sydney in 1988 (see Chapter 2). Mundine is credited as curating a group exhibition form Ramingining in 1991.
shown went on to establish longer-term representative relationships.³

For Yunupingu, who in 2008 was in her early 60s and experiencing the first moments of what would soon become a significant art career, the association presented a clear opportunity: placed in relation to a carefully selected stable of leading Australian and international artists, her work sat, for the first time, squarely within contemporary art’s broader frame. For an artist who seemed to flag a calculated break with the often stark-seeming doctrines of Yolngu practice, and thus play directly into contemporary art’s emphasis on constant, irrevocable change, it appeared a perfect setting.

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Yunupingu’s first exhibition with the gallery came not long after her representation was announced. Titled Once upon a time, it showcased a series of bark paintings alongside a group of small, compulsive-seeming carvings arranged en-masse on a low plinth. To varying degrees the work was all recognisably figurative, but only in the vaguest of senses: if there was a subject it was minor, even slightly abject; there appeared none of the grandly overarching ancestral narrative that activates the work of her Yolngu contemporaries. Her second exhibition, In Sydney Again, (2010), both compounded this sense of disconnect and reached further still. Roughly half the works followed the loose blueprint she’d already set out: naïve renderings of personal history, combined with non-narrative figuration that included flashes of the natural world in the form of tree branches, or bush foods roughly rendered on loosely crosshatched backgrounds. There was a painting of Sydney Harbour Bridge and a planar depiction of the hotel Yunupingu had stayed at during her first visit to Sydney, both of which drew upon her initial impressions of the city’s unfamiliar urban terrain (fig. 4.1).

The other half of the exhibition, by contrast, was marked by a clear divestment of recognisable elements. All obvious figuration had been stripped away, seemingly subsumed by Yunupingu’s rough mark-making and crosshatched patterns. It appeared as if the backgrounds that cradled the figurative elements in much of the surrounding work had won out, and in doing so had edged identifiable imagery from the picture plane. In its place viewers were presented with haptic fields of luminous pigment: formless-seeming visions that presented the eye little or no purchase (fig. 4.2).

These paintings, which appeared to be abstractions in some kind of fundamental way, provided far more than a simple counterpoint to the work Yunupingu was then known for. They also pushed firmly against the reception of much indigenous contemporary art in Australia. If in general terms this usually turns upon the representation of specific places and associated ancestral meanings, in these paintings Yunupingu was directing our attention elsewhere entirely.

The titles chosen for this body of work – which were starkly self-reflexive and thus unavoidably modernist in tone – couldn’t help but compound this feeling. A group of five paintings that featured pink geometric shapes woven into white backgrounds were titled Pink and white painting #1-#5; a further seven works, entirely devoid of colour, were titled in keeping with this apparently modernist referent: White painting #1-#7.

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In this chapter I engage these paintings as a departure point from which to establish Yunupingu’s recent practice within a robustly intercultural framework. This is best done, I argue, by way of examining a series of interactions that include intermediary parties and institutional networks – a set of interrelated contexts that collectively illuminate the pattern of brokerage that has carried her recent work into the broader institutional domain of contemporary art. Obviously, this focus intersects with the central theme of this thesis,
echoing the narratives of brokerage and intercultural exchange I have already established. In relation to Yunupingu’s work, however, I want to introduce an approach proposed by the anthropologist Alfred Gell. He suggested that art objects be viewed as the “equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents”, drawing our attention to art as a “system of action” that is constituted within specific relational contexts. This prompts us to move beyond notions that an artwork is simply a vessel that mediates communication from artist to viewer and thus divests meaning in one revelatory moment. By contrast, it provides not only a means to trace the circulation of Yunupingu’s art within the network of relations that support it, but to embrace this circulation as part of its very content. Indeed, if the display of Yunupingu’s practice within galleries like Roslyn Oxley9 inextricably shape its reception, so too do the exchanges that play out between the individuals party to its initial brokerage. Far from being a recent phenomenon, I will also show that this is a pattern underwritten by an historical context that has long rendered Yolngu art in similarly intercultural terms.

While such focus provides a revealing way to trace the circulation of art objects in a general sense, it provides a particularly useful means to extend my focus on the brokerage of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. As already discussed, the reason for this is relatively simple: realised at the charged interface between cultures, indigenous contemporary art is constituted within a particularly compelling social environment, and is thus aptly conceived in such terms. As I will continue to underscore in this chapter, work like Yunupingu’s unavoidably draws attention to the unsettled intercultural ground upon which it manifests: this is where we can begin to understand how its various values find competing form. It follows that my emphasis here is not

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5 ibid, p. 6.
upon indigenous practice as a material embodiment of custodial ownership and traditional systems of belief. This kind of discourse has, of course, framed the reception of many acclaimed individual Aboriginal artists from varied localities across northern and central Australia, yet although such frames of interpretation remain important, in relation to Yunupingu focusing on these alone limits the achievement of her recent work in light of the intercultural exchanges that have underwritten it. By drawing attention to these exchanges I aim to display that it is certain ‘actions’ between cultures, rather than the intent to transcribe and communicate specific information relating to Yolngu culture, that have recently sparked her creativity. This in turn has led not only to a series of ‘innovations’ within her practice, but to the ability for her work to speak within multiple contexts and, in doing so, to multiple histories.

In this sense, Yunupingu’s ‘apparently’ abstract works – and the white paintings in particular – provide a provocative illustration. For what are they if not compelling intercultural forms of the highest order; paintings that not only exist between the various contexts that shape their production and dissemination, but between the various categorisations that only partially capture them?

In this, they are emblematic not only of Yunupingu’s valuable status as an innovator within established notions of Yolngu art, but within indigenous art more broadly. In a profile on Yunupingu from 2012, Nicolas Rothwell put forward a similar perspective. But not only did he single the white paintings out for special mention, he also highlighted their ability to conjure meaning in the spaces between Western and Yolngu tradition, a quality that remains central to their lure:

These works of hers, painted in pure, dazzling pipe-clay, the fine lines stroked on to the dark ground, create a rhythm, a wave-like effect (...) they call up many things: tidal flows, the dance of flames, bright sunlight diffusing in a cloud-filled sky. (...) They stretch bark painting to its limit: they call up
modern minimalists in the most insistent fashion: they seem like vague cousins to works by Cy Twombly or Robert Ryman, rendered in a Yolngu hand.\(^6\)

The term ‘vague cousins’ is particularly apt, but what should we make of the faint charge of recognition it describes? How is it that Yunupingu’s paintings, created in a locality apparently far removed from such histories, nonetheless evoke them?

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As Rothwell points out, white paintings hold a prominent place in the history of Western abstraction. It follows that they are, of course, a far from neutral form: any current iteration unavoidably recalls its precedent. As a loose category within the modernist canon, such works can be seen as particularly characteristic of the final stages of the modernist project, which in turn is best understood as marked by the careful elimination of non-essential conventions.\(^7\)

For this reason white paintings are now historically laden, not just with the meaning ascribed to them when they first appeared, but with the retrospective weight of their own canonical place in the Western narrative of modernism generally and modernist abstraction specifically. It’s a position that at one level represents an historical end-point. Yves-Allan Bois, for example, once memorably referred to Robert Ryman – arguably the most famous practitioner of white paintings-as-subject-unto themselves – as “perhaps the last modern painter” in that Ryman’s work “is the last to be able to graciously maintain its direction by means of modernist discourse.”\(^8\)

By the time that Bois’ essay was published, in 1981, the modernist project had faltered and diversified to such an


\(^8\) ibid, p. 103.
extent that he was able, without controversy, to not only pin-
point Ryman as representing the end of his particular lineage,
but to characterise him as “standing guard at (modernism’s)
tomb.” Yet it’s also true that regardless of the shift away
from the empirical nature of modernist discourse evident from
the 1970s onwards, modernism remains with us; even if its
reigning ideologies are no longer absolute, it continues to
radiate its historical presence, which in turn unavoidably
inflects the reception of certain contemporary artworks or
practices. Terry Smith refers to this tendency as ‘re-
modernism’. He uses the term to describe a kind of modernism
that isn’t modernism in the pure, empirical sense sought by
artists like Ryman: it is, by contrast, quotational, self-
aware of its own inability to embody past ideals; marked, in
Smith’s words, by a “renovating, recursive character”. In
repeating, it changes, rebuilding as it goes.

What, then, to make of Yunupingu’s apparent entry into the
genre? Although modernity took hold in Arnhem Land in the
first decades of last century, the history of modernist
painting – which found its late expression in New York during
Yunupingu’s youth – cannot be seen to have impacted
contemporary painters in the region. There are, after all, no
art schools there, at least not in the Western sense, nor are
there lending libraries full of art history books and
monographic studies. Yolngu art is a practice founded in
relation to the specific concerns of ancestral belief (I’ll
touch on this in more detail later in this chapter); marked
not by modernism’s enduring fall-out, but by a strident re-
purposing of local identities in light of what might well be
classified as the region’s intercultural turn. Yet still
Yunupingu’s paintings resonate in the terms Rothwell
identifies: as ‘vague cousins’ they point towards some shared
genetic inheritance, a recognition that allows them to reach
further than they otherwise might.

9 ibid.
Indeed, when the white paintings were first exhibited in Sydney in 2010, it was tempting to forego the caution that usually attends the circulation of Aboriginal images as contemporary art, and suggest that Yunupingu had arrived at her own position in relation to modernist precedent. On the one hand these works – which seemed to be about nothing other than their own materiality – effortlessly aligned with a version of what Ad Reinhardt, another high-profile New York proponent of reductive painting, once described as an art “preoccupied with its own process and means (...) unentangled, styleless, universal painting”, and on the other presented as an embodiment of Smith’s notion of modernism’s ability to reconfigure and change. This should not be mistaken as attributing Yunupingu a kind of false intentionality. Rather it displays that as works like hers circulate as contemporary art they unavoidably apprehend something of that category’s power. This builds upon the broader pattern traced by the reception of Aboriginal art in Australia: indeed, recognition of paintings like Yunupingu’s as contemporary art – as a specific category within the more general category of ‘fine art’ – represents the next logical step in a trajectory set into motion by the earliest paintings from Papunya some forty years earlier. As touched on, for Yunupingu this move has required the entry of her work into certain institutional frameworks. Roslyn Oxley9 – focused on contemporary art rather than Aboriginal art – is emblematic here, but so too are other institutional contexts such as biennales and contemporary survey exhibitions. With this comes an attendant sitting alongside other works/artists already established under

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12 Fred Myers is among those to consider this perspective in detail. He wrote in 2004 that the category shift that Aboriginal artworks have undergone in Australia since the 1980s from ethnographic artifact to fine art necessitated ‘their recognition by the art gallery rather than the natural history museum, their appreciation on the basis of aesthetics rather than of context, and their study perhaps by the methods of art history rather than anthropology.’ See, FR Myers, ‘Ontologies of the image and economies of exchange’, American Ethnologist, vol. 31, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-16, p. 7.
contemporary art’s overarching frame. Ideally this illuminates contingent relationships between sometimes-contradictory indexes of cultural meaning, drawing disparate forms into a system of equivalences that still allow for the articulation of difference.

As I explored in chapter two, this is a potentially charged and effective site for the circulation of Aboriginal images as art, a quality that Yunupingu’s practice – and her ‘white paintings’ in particular – can’t help but seem to bear out: in the white cube surroundings of Roslyn Oxley9, these works appeared in almost transcendent fashion to speak to the broadest possible material and social field, quite literally divesting their obvious ‘Aboriginality’ by apparently emptying all content from a discipline – that of Yolngu art – usually bound by strict cultural tenets.

This sense of divestment, which at one level completes a shift hinted at in much indigenous contemporary art yet never fully embraced, seemed also to cut to the centre of her project as an artist. At the time, the white paintings comprised her most recent work; they built upon what had come before, illustrating what appeared to be a trajectory in which extraneous detail had been systematically removed.

But if this provides a compelling narrative, one could be forgiven for seeing it as too perfect. A series of obvious seeming questions demands we unwind the series of assumptions the white paintings urge us to make. For one, what is at stake in these works from a local perspective? And, perhaps more bluntly, how might they be read in a fashion that foregrounds their local condition even as they circulate ever more broadly?

4.2 Materiality and meaning

To view Yunupingu’s white paintings from their point of origin rather than their point of reception is to complicate the reading touched on above. Originally titled Mayilimirriw, a
Yolngu Matha\textsuperscript{13} word that translates as ‘meaningless’, from this perspective the works state a series specific material facts, each of which counter any perception these works might be either (in Reinhardt’s terms) ‘styleless’ or ‘universal’.\textsuperscript{14}

Take as an example their undulating grounds and skewed edges; the way they kick away from the wall, refusing to remain flat. This tells us they are sheets of bark that once enclosed the growing trunk of a tree. In similar fashion, the loosely interwoven networks of cross-hatching that cover their surfaces also embed them in place, foregrounding the white ochre pigment – known in Yolngu Matha as ‘Gapan’ – dug from the locality in which Yunupingu lives and works. Extending in sections anchored by the artist’s body, each of these white ochre lines radiates outwards across the bark and then stops at a point defined by a set of shifting distances – from body to hand, and from brush to painted surface.

Far from an exact geometry, these strokes nonetheless map each painting’s temporality; gathered together in each work they define a series of staggered, concentrated moments, each terminated when Yunupingu perhaps shifted position or rotated the bark. This is a process that repeats, first one-way and then another, until the entirety of the primed surface disappears beneath a loosely sketched net.

Although their resonance with modernist abstraction is unavoidable, such specific materiality simultaneously places these paintings within another, far more local art historical

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Yolngu Matha is a broad term for the group of languages and associated dialects spoken by Yolngu people.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Changing these titles, for example from ‘Mayilimirriw’ to ‘White painting #6’, was a matter of convenience more than anything else. The sequential number allowed specific works in the series to be identified by Yunupingu’s art centre and gallery representatives, while the more descriptive title allowed a distinction to be made between ‘kinds’ of paintings contained within the ‘Mayilimirriw’ series. In this essay I have chosen to use Mayilimirriw to refer not only to the ‘White paintings’, but to paintings such as ‘Pink and White’ (2011) and ‘Some Circles’ (2011); works that may also have been titled ‘Mayilimirriw’ if this initial convention hadn’t changed. These works, along with others named solely for their formal features, are also ‘meaningless’ in the sense that the Yolngu Matha word conveys. (Interview with Will Stubbs, Yirrkala, 11/09/12).
\end{itemize}
lineage – that of Yolngu art, a category that, as the anthropologist Howard Morphy has detailed, traces its intercultural emergence in Eastern Arnhem Land to the earliest transactions between Europeans and Yolngu in the 1930s.\(^{15}\) Even before this, creative practice in the region formed part of an active network of ceremonial action: as Morphy puts it, an “important component of [a] system of restricted knowledge, and at a more metaphysical level (...) [a] major means of recreating ancestral events, ensuring continuity with the ancestral past, and communicating with the spiritual world.”\(^{16}\)

This interpretive frame shows that even as Yolngu art merges with and is partly prompted by Western categorisation, contemporary extensions of the tradition continue to replicate this ‘internal’ cultural intent. That is, although carefully engineered towards intercultural objectives, Yolngu art remains in general terms bound to the ideal of cultural maintenance. If we follow Morphy’s reasoning we can begin to understand it in terms loosely commensurate with its ongoing ceremonial and ancestral significance within Yolngu culture. This remains true even as its interactions with broader contexts prompt significant categorical change. As Morphy establishes, this is the specific local meaning Yolngu art communicates as it circulates in the broader world and in doing so becomes ‘fine art’, or, as is now the case, ‘contemporary art’.

It follows that a certain expectation is thus attached to Yolngu contemporary art by its non-Yolngu audience: that of cultural explication. Indeed, as Morphy has noted, not only is Yolngu art appreciated for its strong aesthetic qualities, ‘it is seen today by many in the world outside as a way of learning about Yolngu society, a means of appreciating their knowledge of the environment, as an access to a more spiritual


\(^{16}\) ibid, p. 13.
perspective on the relations between people and the land.’¹⁷ That is, regardless of its often-significant aesthetic qualities, Yolngu art is understood to communicate specific information and to function as such. It follows that the value of individual artworks and practices can readily be understood to possess a one-to-one relationship to explicit content.

At this point we should not be surprised that a clear understanding of Yunupingu’s Mayilimiriw works seems to break apart; that they begin to flicker before our very eyes, even as we try to see them more clearly. In part, this is because even though their materiality remains recognisably Yolngu, their stated ‘meaninglessness’ contrasts any expectation that they will explicitly divulge specific information relating to the ancestral conditions of Yolngu culture, or even more secular knowledge of the environment. In her Mayilimiriw paintings – as with many of the narrative paintings that came before them, or her more recent drawings and collaborative multi-media work – we are provided relatively few, if any, keys to unlock their internal cultural significance.

This fact becomes clearest when we realise that the woven networks of her paintings are not coded with the embedded clan designs, known as Min’tji, that trace the complex compositions of the work of other contemporary artists of the region, such as Djambawa Marawilli and Gunybi Ganambarr. Within the context of Yolngu art this patterning of Min’tji exercises a literal function: it embeds latent meaning within the very designs it depicts and, in turn, shapes the information each painting is intended to impart.¹⁸ In this way Yolngu practice is bound to an enduring world of ceremonial action and ancestral narrative regardless of individual inflection (fig. 4.3).

So, if the dynamic interplay of Min’tji imbues the paintings of other Yolngu artists with something of the force of ancestral narrative, and thus renders them ‘meaningful’, in

¹⁷ H Morphy, Becoming Art, p. 82.
¹⁸ ibid, pp. 100-101.
Yunupingu’s work it is the absence of Min’tji – and thus the absence of associated ‘meaning’ – that is striking. So although all Yolngu art (as with indigenous contemporary art more broadly) can be understood in intercultural terms, my contention here is that the specific qualities of Yunupingu’s practice – particularly this turn from ancestral content – grants her work a unique emphasis. As I will argue, this relative absence creates a void that can’t help but amplify the intercultural relations that surround it.

4.3 ‘Just paint’

In September 2012 I made the first of two visits to Yirrkala, the North East Arnhem Land community where Yunupingu lives and works. As well as having seen Yunupingu’s Mayilimirriw paintings, and being intrigued, I had also by this time recently encountered her work Light Painting in the 18th Biennale of Sydney, (2012), where it had been installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in proximity to works by the contemporary Nigerian-based Ghanaian artist El Anatsui and the South African, Nicolas Hlobo, among others.

If the Mayilimirriw works had suggested a provocative interleaving with Western precedent, Light Painting, which essentially took the form of a multimedia digital animation, seemed to complicate this entanglement further still. In particular, by entering such a loaded institutional context as the Biennale and in doing so almost completely divesting the materiality of the work that had preceded it, I couldn’t help but wonder about the brokerage that had enabled this shift. To this end I had come to Yirrkala not only to meet Yunupingu, but to interview Will Stubbs, the art coordinator at The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, one of the oldest and most successful Aboriginal art centres in Australia.19

19 At one level I mean this in simple economic terms. Jon Altman, for example, has compiled figures on the economic stability of a range of remote art centres that attest to The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre’s success in this area. See, J Altman, ‘The escalating challenges of doing indigenous culture business in Australia’, opening address to Research Exchange 2013: Remote Indigenous Enterprises in Arts and Tourism, The Australian National
Stubbs, whose two-decade tenure at the centre has earned him a reputation as a strategic and ethical advocate for contemporary Yolngu practice, originally worked as a criminal lawyer in Sydney and Darwin. He has been a resident of Yirrkala since his marriage to Dhalulu Ganambarr (Nyapanyapa Yunupingu’s niece) in 1995; their daughter, Siena Mayutu, was born in 2002. Fluent in Yolngu Matha and well established within the local social fabric, Stubbs has found himself in a unique position to critically engage with both the internal and external context framing the production of Yolngu art. He is intensely engaged with the subject: indeed, his ongoing series of short essays, usually published in exhibition catalogues, have done much to illuminate something of Yolngu art’s complexities for a broad audience.

All this, however, should not suggest that Stubbs is an ‘insider’. Rather, in the discussions we undertook during my visit in 2012 it became clear that it is his position as an embedded ‘outsider’ – best characterised as a kind of participant observer within the network that produces and disseminates Yolngu art – that has guided much of his thinking. This is an important distinction to make: although Stubbs is far closer to the Yolngu world than the vast majority of other non-Yolngu Australians, when we spoke he often expressed his ongoing confusion with the complexities of translation that shape his role.

More than happy to talk at length on his experiences, he is nonetheless self-effacing when it comes to the subject of his expertise on Yolngu culture. ‘What I’ve been saying a lot recently is that you don’t understand a lot about Yolngu culture by being immersed in the way that I am,’ he told me at one point. ‘What you understand a lot about is your own culture, and the fact that you’ve got one.’

University, 31 October – 1 November 2013, unpublished, p. 9.

20 The other key figure who worked closely with Yolngu art and artists over this time is Andrew Blake, coordinator of Buku Larrnggay-Mulka centre from 1991-2001, and also from 2005-2008.
The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre – which includes gallery spaces, a printmaking workshop and a digital media lab replete with screening room – also houses a significant museum of early artworks and cultural artefacts from the region. Its crowning jewel is the Yirrkala Church Panels, arguably one of the most intriguing and enduring intercultural gestures in Australia’s history. Painted by a group of sixteen artists on two large sheets of Masonite, the almost impossibly detailed work refers to the interwoven clan ‘estates’ of the region’s two moiety groups, Dhuwa and Yirritja. It was first installed in the community’s Methodist church in 1963, where it functioned as a kind of collective visual title deed to Yolngu country, and thus tempered the mission’s ideological power.\(^{21}\)

It was in the darkened, heavily air-conditioned space off the main gallery that houses the panels where Stubbs and I first sat, and began to discuss not only Nyapanyapa Yunupingu’s life story and recent work, but his own experiences as a broker of contemporary Yolngu art. Around us, the panels provided a fitting counterpoint: not only did they underscore the intercultural underpinnings of the region’s art practice, but their dense, reverently textual depictions of the Yolngu world provided near-perfect contrast to Yunupingu’s apparently ‘meaningless’ paintings.

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Yunupingu was born around 1945. She grew up, Stubbs explained, observing her late father Munggurrawuy Yunupingu painting for ceremony and for the then-nascent Aboriginal art market that threaded through the mission at Yirrkala. Munggurrawuy urged his daughter to commence her own practice once he had passed away, and, in the late 1990s, she followed his prompt, joining her late sister Barrupu and late classificatory sister Gulumbu at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre.

\(^{21}\) H Morphy, *Becoming Art*, p. 66.
Over the first decade of her practice Yunupingu seemingly remained content for others to take Yolngu art to the centre of the art world through increasingly ambitious variations on local art making tradition. During this time she focused her energies in the art centre’s printmaking studio, which opened in 1996. There she worked on a series of screen-prints, usually brightly coloured, that established her idiosyncratic and initially figurative visual style.22

Before she joined Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in 2008, Yunupingu had held only one solo exhibition. A group of the diminutive bark paintings and carved sculptures that she had begun making in the early 2000s had been shown at an art and craft shop-cum-project space in Darwin called ‘Nomad Art’ in 2007. These were similar in content to the work she had shown in Sydney a year later: their oddly indistinct figuration suggested narrative, but any subject ultimately seemed less important than the rough mark-making that had brought them into being.

Stubbs was quick to confirm that the evident narrative concerns in these works were minor. The paintings were of, as he put it, ‘indeterminate things’, nothing more.23

‘You couldn’t tell what they were’, he told me. ‘It (the subject) could have been a turtle, a gecko, a crocodile. It was completely unimportant what she was painting. If you asked

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22 At an individual level the kinds of exchanges I explore here between Yunupingu and Stubbs may have emerged as a key factor in her practice as early as her first forays into printmaking. Printmaking is, of course, marked by the presence of various participants in the creative process, including master printmakers whose knowledge of process and material is engaged as a means to developeditioned works.

23 In the context of Yolngu art these kinds of paintings are not entirely without precedent. Howard Morphy has pointed out that one of the earliest collections of bark paintings, collected by Rev. Wilbur Chaseling in Yirrkala in the 1930s, were figurative and did not include clan designs. When Morphy began his fieldwork in 1973 he met Nyapanyapa Yunupingu’s father, Munggurrawuy Yunupingu, who had been among the artists commissioned by Chaseling. Munggurrawuy, Morphy notes, described these figurative, non-sacred paintings as ‘anhow’ paintings, a designation that points to the fact they “were not valued by Yolngu as highly as the sacred art.” See, H Morphy, Becoming art, pp. 48–50.
her she would smile and say, "I don’t know – what do you think it is?".\(^2^4\)

In this, Stubbs was careful to point to Yunupingu’s distinctive character as a means to understand something of the unique qualities of her work. Although from a family of well-recognised luminaries, she is, he explained, very much a peripheral figure within the complex hierarchies of Yolngu society.\(^2^5\) Others have made a similar observation: Nicolas Rothwell, for example, pointed out in his 2012 profile that Yunupingu is ‘slight, frail, deaf from her early youth and widowed and childless, (…) very much a subsidiary figure in the elaborate social networks of the Yolngu clan-group world.’\(^2^6\)

During my first visit, which extended over five days, I too came to sense something of this. Yunupingu was a constant presence in the art centre’s shaded internal courtyard: the first artist to arrive in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. In a region in which the vast majority of artists work at their homes in Yirrkala, or at far-flung outstations, this in itself was notable. As each day unfolded she seemed for the most part engrossed in the task at hand no matter what was going on around her; when one work was finished – which would take a number of days if it was relatively large – she would immediately go into the centre to quietly request another blank bark or pre-prepared Larrakitj from staff.\(^2^7\)

\(^{2^4}\) Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Will Stubbs are taken from a series of interviews I conducted with him in Yirrkala, 11-12 September 2012.

\(^{2^5}\) Andrew Blake, the co-ordinator at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre who had originally employed Stubbs in 1995 and was consulting at the centre during my visit in 2012, further described Yunupingu to me as follows: ‘Nyapanyapa hasn’t changed too much at all other than the fact that she paints every day,’ he told me, referring to her recent recognition as an artist. ‘Before, she was out on the rocks every day, seeking out little fish to put in her tin can and take back to her camp with all of her dogs.’ Andrew Blake, conversation with the author, Yirrkala, 11 September 2012.

\(^{2^6}\) N Rothwell, ‘Smoke and Flame’, p. 6.

\(^{2^7}\) Larrakitj are the region’s standing hollow-log sculptures, directly based upon those once used exclusively for funerary rites.
I found Yunupingu not so much unwilling to talk about her work, as warmly bemused by my interest. Her sister Barrupu was clearly used to speaking for her; Yunupingu, it seemed, welcomed the interjections, if only because the shift in attention allowed her to continue painting. Her relative deafness and limited English, although surely contributing factors in her ability to cut out the surrounding world to a degree, were clearly only part of this almost preternatural focus.

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Yunupingu first came to the attention of a wider audience in August 2008, when she won a category prize at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA), in Darwin. Her work – *Incident at Mutpi, 1975*, (2008) – consisted of a bark painting presented alongside a video, a first in the trajectory of Yolngu art (fig. 4.4). In a clear shift away from her prior work, Yunupingu’s subject was far from indeterminate: in planar fashion her painting recounted the time when she had been charged and gored by a water buffalo while collecting wild apples with her family. Due to her partial deafness, she hadn’t heard the animal coming and had been injured badly enough to require an airlift to Darwin hospital.

By the time Yunupingu returned to this incident as an artist, Stubbs was thirteen years into his role at the centre and well experienced at calibrating the shifting ground between the local social space and the distant art world. In 2007 he had taken long-service leave while Andrew Blake, the coordinator who had originally employed Stubbs in 1995, returned in his absence. The small bark paintings and carvings Yunupingu had been making on and off for some time caught Blake’s eye, and he collected a group together in the art centre.

Arriving back, Stubbs was immediately struck by this small collection. Before this moment, he told me, he hadn’t thought
about Yunupingu’s work in great detail: the art centre’s only prior in-depth engagement with her, beyond purchasing the small bark paintings and carvings she would bring in from time to time, had been almost solely confined to the printmaking studio. Now, staff began to see her in a different light: the avenues by which she might access the external art market began to widen. Tasked on his return with preparing the art centre’s NATSIAA submissions, Stubbs decided for the first time to include Yunupingu, and, in keeping with the opportunity, encouraged her to make a larger, more ambitious work.

Perhaps initially confounded by this shift in scale, Yunupingu turned the question of what to paint back on him:

‘So I gave her a bark – it wasn’t a huge bark – and she asked me what she should paint’, Stubbs recalled.

Although taken off guard by the request, he thought of what he knew about Yunupingu’s life, searching for a possible subject. He settled on one of the few stories he knew about her personally – the incident with the buffalo – and suggested this.

It was only later that the uniqueness of the exchange became apparent: ‘When I really asked myself, “why is this weird?” (I realised) it was because no one had ever asked me that before, “What do I paint?” And I’d never told them to paint anything about their lives. Most of the incidents in (Yolngu) people’s lives are happening in the spiritual world anyway so they are going to involve spiritual painting. And most non-spiritual painters aren’t going to get your attention long enough to ask you what to do anyway.’

Yunupingu proved to be different. Stubbs observed her new painting unfold in the art centre’s quiet internal courtyard: ‘I came back and she’d painted a tree, a buffalo, maybe another tree (…) Just a row of figurative elements.’

He recognised that her approach to this new work was, at one level, in keeping with the small carvings and prints she’d
already been making, but he also saw that it was establishing new ground. The clear narrative stitched the figurative elements together in a new way, creating a frame that allowed the painting to communicate a story in a fashion that her earlier work hadn’t.

The question for Stubbs – which in turn became key in the work’s ultimate configuration – was whether or not this narrative would be apparent to others:

‘I could see the story was compelling, but I didn’t have faith that viewers would be able to read the narrative (the way she intended).’

At this time the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre had recently opened The Mulka Project, an innovative digital media production lab focused on the twin objectives of archiving repatriated footage from the region and producing new multimedia representations of current Yolngu culture.28 Realising that The Mulka Project could help elucidate the meaning behind Yunupingu’s new work, Stubbs asked if the Mulka team, then managed by Randin Graves, could produce a short video of Yunupingu telling the story. His idea was to submit this to the NATSIAA selection panel along with the bark: a practical means to articulate its embedded narrative and thus emphasise the work’s unique qualities.

The resulting video featured Yunupingu speaking in subtitled Yolngu Matha, with her two sisters – Barrupu and Djakanng – interjecting from off-screen with their own version of events. The NATSIAA selection panel responded positively: not only did they accept Yunupingu’s submission; they suggested that the video be shown alongside the painting in the new ‘3D’ category, which she won. Together with Stubbs, Yunupingu travelled to Darwin for the award ceremony. It was the first time she had been to the northern capital since being airlifted following the Buffalo’s attack.

It was soon after her return to Arnhem Land that Yunupingu began to produce her first body of work for Roslyn Oxley 9. The same question – what to paint? – presented itself. This time Stubbs encouraged her to focus on stories about her father, Munggurrawuy.

‘I would just say (to Yunupingu) “paint a story about your father”’, he told me. ‘It’s not so much to record the story, it’s more because if I didn’t (suggest that idea) she would have gone back to painting nyiblets (Stubbs’ phrase for the indeterminate figurative paintings).’

I wondered if the dialogue established between Yunupingu and Stubbs in the resulting series of work was thus best conceived as a means to help sustain Yunupingu’s newfound status as an artist following her NATSIAA success.

‘It’s a way to make the marks more interesting, rather than give her an interesting story,’ Stubbs said.

‘If you set her a challenge it won’t be a problem for her’, he continued: ‘At the end of the day I might have recorded the title (of the story) or I might not have. It often didn’t matter because it was just to give her some form, to make it more difficult to make the marks. Having a story made nicer marks rather than making something historically significant (…).’

It sounded to me like a strategy to free Yunupingu up in the studio, a means to prompt her creativity, even to guide it, albeit in haphazard fashion.

Stubbs agreed, loosely, but was careful to explain that his role as an art coordinator was rarely that simple. Nor could he guarantee an outcome with any real certainty:

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29 Yunupingu’s roughly painted figurative barks and small carvings had caught Roslyn Oxley’s eye during a brief visit to Yirrkala in 2007.

30 An example of the work that resulted includes ‘Munggurrawuy saved by dolphins’, (2008), natural earth pigments on bark, 156cm x 41cm.
The rule here in doing this is that if you do try and get the artist to paint what you want, it will backfire on you. And it’s good that it’s this way, that it’s not just an ethical no-no, it’s a practical no-no as well. (…) If you do start trying to get involved you will be punished. It’s what makes any one of us coordinators very ethical at doing our jobs, because any time you are unethical you get a big slap in the face. Because (if) you try and cross the cultural barrier to try and explain something, which was visually in your mind, to someone who doesn’t think like you, it won’t work. But you can say a word, a topic.

As an example he mentioned that earlier on the morning of our discussion he’d suggested Yunupingu paint a white painting, but he wasn’t sure if she’d followed this prompt through to its logical conclusion or not: ‘I haven’t looked recently to see whether or not she’s actually forgotten,’ he said.

When I asked how Yunupingu originally made the shift from the narrative works to the white paintings, and other apparently abstract works, Stubbs told me that it was a slow transition; a divestment of imagery, piece by piece. Given the intimacy of working relations at the art centre, Stubbs observed this development closely, and had arrived at his own summation of the process.

‘What do you paint when you don’t paint the buffalo?’ he asked me rhetorically. ‘You paint the trees and then you come down and you just paint the leaves. So then you are coming down closer to abstraction almost by accident.’

‘Various things will come up’, he continued. ‘And you know what? (…) in the end it doesn’t matter what you paint. Just paint.’

4.4 Finding beautiful things

Although art coordinators often occupy a central position in the circulation of indigenous contemporary art – largely through ongoing dialogue at an art centre level and by way of their position between the local context of artistic
production and the broader art world - Stubbs is among the few who have openly engaged the collaborative potential implicit in such roles. Indeed, his approach provides a compelling example of the exchanges detailed in the previous chapter: evidence, for example, of how Paul Carter’s conception of the “transactional environment”\(^{31}\) that guided the early development of Western Desert painting continues to resonate within contemporary interactions. In terms of Alfred Gell’s prompt to consider the relational context of an artwork, this in turn provides means to picture not only the enabling structures that quicken the circulation of art like Yunupingu’s as contemporary art, but also a critical way of understanding the challenge it might pose to enduring modernist ideals of individual genius.

In a similar fashion to Geoffrey Bardon’s self-effacing drive to establish means of communication between the artists at Papunya and the outside world, Stubbs conceives his role in deceptively simple terms. Speaking of he and his fellow coordinators purpose at The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre he told me that ‘we find beautiful things and we show them to people’.

Yet Stubbs’ recent exchanges with Yunupingu promote a more robust conception than this relatively passive summation suggests. If, as Carter argues, Bardon’s ability to collaborate with the founding artists of Western Desert painting was quickened by a shared desire to move beyond then clearly demarcated cultural borders, Stubbs’ approach has been similarly enabled by a shift beyond the generally perceived limits of his own culture. This in turn helps us better understand how artist and intermediary are drawn together within the same charged cultural interface, and how in the process the creativity of each might align.

For Stubbs, this outcome relates directly to his long-term residence in Yirrkala. As he understands better than most, 

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this is a site marked by a series of dissonances – productive and otherwise – between Western and Yolngu cultures. As he put it during my visit:

Two different sets of ideas [Yolngu and Western] around all the important things in life spark a whole separate set of ideas. It’s the conflicts, contradictions and compatibilities of these two different views of the world which illuminate your own (…) And those insights are what stimulate thinking.

Picturing this as a form of creativity that impacts work such as Yunupingu’s in positive fashion is not a stretch of the imagination, nor is it necessarily challenging within a deeper intercultural conception of Yolngu history. Indeed, in a local context there is a clear lineage of third party figures whose engagements with Yolngu culture have provided an effective hinge point for intercultural negotiation. Stubbs is quick to recognise the power dynamic inherent in these relationships and, although careful not to equate himself with figures he sees as more significant, sketches a local social context for his own role as follows:

I am (…) expected to apply all of my intelligence (…) to achieve maximum thrust and impact for Yolngu genius to reach the rest of the world. And in doing that I am part of a long line of white people (…) who have come from the outside and basically been turned around and used to protect Yolngu from the dominant culture. Donald Thompson, Nugget Coombs, Fred Gray, Reverend Shepardson, Edgar Wells – people (…) who were basically suborned by Yolngu society and became champions for it because they recognised the beauty and strength and power of Yolngu culture and realised it needed a helping hand. And they accepted their role as subservient to the imperatives of Yolngu power and leadership.

As part of a much broader political and social history of Yolngu engagement with settler Australia, this lineage of exchange has had a specific impact on the production of Yolngu art. For example, the mission at Yirrkala – initially under the guidance of Rev. Wilbur Chaseling – began commissioning and collecting artifacts and material culture as early as the
1930s, ensuring that the intercultural production of art became implicated in its particular “value creation processes” from its earliest manifestations.\(^{32}\) Along with the work of anthropologists such as Donald Thomson (both through collection and cultural advocacy) this helped initiate the first local iteration of the Arnhem Land region’s particular form of modernism: the practice of bark painting that had already begun in other areas of Arnhem Land in response to anthropologist Baldwin Spencer’s earlier visits.\(^{33}\) In Yirrkala this history traces much of the 20\(^{th}\) century, and includes visits by Ronald and Catherine Berndt in 1946 and 1947, and Charles Mountford (as leader of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land) in 1956. As collectors and advocates of Yolngu culture each of these figures had a significant impact on the creation of an external market for Yolngu art, and the local economy this supported.\(^{34}\)

As Nancy Williams has shown, the mission institutionalised these kinds of exchanges. In an essay from 1976, she draws on fieldwork undertaken between 1969 and 1970 to provide an early view of art making in the community.\(^{35}\) In its initial phase, she notes, the local art economy was relatively minor, contingent upon the mission’s provision of a small amount of available cash and exchange items; primarily clothing, food and tobacco.\(^{36}\)

The establishment of exchange value for art objects in cross-cultural settings required, unsurprisingly, a number of early non-Yolngu intermediaries to play prominent roles. Douglas Tuffin, for example, began buying arts and crafts for the mission at Yirrkala in the mid-1950s, and had a clear

\(^{32}\) H Morphy, *Becoming Art*, p. 32.

\(^{33}\) Spencer carried out fieldwork in Arnhem Land in 1912, during which time he collected 170 commissioned bark paintings.

\(^{34}\) H Morphy, *Becoming Art*, p. 51.


\(^{36}\) ibid, p. 268.
impact on the form and content of Yolngu art. As Williams points out, he was responsible for introducing “innovations both in form and techniques that he judged would make the art more saleable and fetch higher prices.”

By the mid-1960s, local supply began to outstrip nascent demand. This prompted Keith Theile, then buyer for the mission, to limit the production of bark paintings. In addition, Theile identified those artists whose reception by the market was already proven and restricted purchases to their work alone: only when he was successful in growing demand in the southern states were these restrictions lifted.

As these interactions make clear, art practice in the region developed within a robust intercultural framework. But this is not to suggest that the specific features and form of Yolngu art were simply economically driven, or that the exchange only flowed in one direction. Howard Morphy, for example, does much to illuminate the complex motivations and agencies that circulated around the early production of art in the region around Yirrkala. He underscores many motivating factors, encompassing the economic, pedagogical and political. Yolngu art, he argues, conformed to internal function even as it adapted and responded to external demand: “Art was used as a means of knowledge transmission within Yolngu society and it also worked well with a larger audience.”

37 ibid, p. 274.
38 ibid, p. 275.
39 This, of course, works both ways: Williams also notes that ‘(i)nnovations unacceptable to white buyers have been overtly discouraged by staff buyers.’ See ibid, p. 279.
40 H Morphy, Becoming art, p. 61.
Williams also notes the pedagogical function of bark painting in the community: ‘Men frequently said that they kept completed bark paintings several days before selling them so they could show them to their sons who were growing up and explain to them the stories and the meanings symbolised in the paintings.’ N Williams, p. 280.
41 H Morphy, Becoming art, p. 61.
It follows that new developments to such tradition can be seen to manifest within a lineage in which exchange is already understood to underlie the development of local art practices, and thus accepted as a key part of its function by contemporary practitioners. In this light Yolngu art is easily conceived as a medium that pivots between domains that not only contrast, but which bleed one into the other: to pretend this isn’t the case downplays a central part of its character.

Indeed, looking at the broader trajectory of Yolngu practice through this lens reveals a sequence of significant projects driven by a desire to negotiate between Yolngu and settler-Australian worlds. This readily shifts beyond the establishment and maintenance of a productive local economy and into more politically driven territory. Even a casual lineage of Yolngu art would prominently include those creative actions that have been underwritten by political intent: the 1963 Bark Petition and Yirrkala Church Panels among key early examples, and, more recently, the travelling exhibition and publication 'Saltwater: Yirrkala bark paintings of sea country’, (1998-2001), and the Wukidi ceremony and associated Larrakitj installation at the Northern Territory Supreme Court, (2003).

Against this dense intercultural backdrop, it follows that although it was unusual in 2008 when Yunupingu turned to Stubbs to explicitly ask what to paint, it was also an entirely fitting development within a local history where Yolngu have long vested a certain authority in non-Yolngu collaborators to manage the successful circulation of their cultural forms beyond their own borders. Within a local

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42 ibid, p. 63-67.
(Note: the exhibition originated at The National Maritime Museum, Sydney, and toured nationally between 1998 and 2001)
44 See A Collins and T Murray (directors), Dhakiyarr vs the King, 2005, 52:00mins.
institutional framework – initially provided under the auspices of the mission, and in more recent decades by the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre – these exchanges have found a logical and open expression.

4.5 Relative readings

Although their intersection with Western forms of abstraction might appear particularly provocative, Yunupingu’s *Mayilimirriw* paintings – a term used here to encompass the ‘white paintings’ as well as other apparently ‘abstract’ works – stage their intercultural dimension in a more nuanced fashion than her earlier figurative works described above. As already touched upon, following casual assessment their apparent ‘abstraction’ might be understood simply as a continuation of a broader development in Yolngu art that saw a shift from figurative iconography towards an increased focus on densely patterned fields of *Min’tji*.

This development, which gained momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the work of artists including Djambawa Marawilli and Wanyubi Marika, has been referred to as ‘Buwuyak’, a Yolngu Matha word that translates loosely as ‘invisibility’. This can be defined as a “visual faintness or transparency”, whereby figurative elements of a painted design merge, sometimes completely, into ‘background’ designs.45 For Western eyes this can’t help but appear a shift towards abstraction, but it isn’t; ‘Buwuyak’ is perhaps best understood as a carefully calibrated move by which Yolngu artists aimed to consolidate the visual intensity and embedded meaning of their recent art.46 This can be seen as part of a broader set of artistic techniques and processes which together act to encode latent meaning in Yolngu visual


designs, and in doing so impart something of the complexities of the ancestral world.47

‘Mayilimiriw’, by contrast, is not an established concept or doctrine. By this I mean that no other Yolngu artist explicitly engages in ‘Mayilimiriw’ paintings, or if they do, do so only as an addendum to more explicitly textural works. At one level, this word once again reflects the ongoing dialogue between Yunupingu and Stubbs who, along with Yunupingu’s late sister Barrupu, observed this development while Yunupingu painted on the verandah at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka centre. ‘Mayilimiriw’ was initially chosen collectively as a means to at once convey the reflexive quality of Yunupingu’s mark making and the break to internal tradition that her approach premised.

But the ‘meaninglessness’ inferred by this title is, of course, relative. From a Yolngu perspective it might even be interpreted as something close to an insult. At the very least, for other Yolngu artists it can be taken to denote a certain insignificance; an unreadability that within a worldview grounded by the readily articulated contingency of the individual to the collective would be understandably confounding.48 So, although it is tempting from the position of Western art historiography to interpret these paintings as a considered reaction against internal doctrine – embracing meaninglessness in the face of the spiritual weight of the sacred, for example – it is important to emphasise that in their reception within the Yolngu world this has not been the case. Indeed, as Stubbs pointed out during our interviews, this aspect of Yunupingu’s work has, if anything, been met locally with bemusement rather than measured debate. For in such a world, rich in ever-present ancestral narrative, and traversed by complex social and cultural networks within which

47 For a detailed overview of the visuality of Yolngu art see, ‘Visuality and representation in Yolngu art’ in H Morphy Becoming Art, pp. 87-110.
48 At one level the designation may also reflect Yunupingu’s unique standing within her community.
the authority to reproduce sacred clan designs is synonymous with a reiteration of a collective ‘self’, why would an artist choose to paint nothing?

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The tension inherent in this local reception contrasts that of the broader art world. Here similar trajectories to Yunupingu’s post-2008 rise have long become familiar: elderly Aboriginal artists have often established late careers based on artworks that, at face value at least, take local art tradition in seemingly new directions yet remain grounded by established frames of reference.49

In reviewing Yunupingu’s work, and especially the divestment of readily recognisable imagery apparent in the Mayilimirirw paintings, it is thus at one level understandable that many have overlooked its intercultural aspect - or, for that matter, its provocative disavowal of ancestral meaning - and turned instead towards established interpretive precedent. From this perspective her work, however ‘abstract’ to western eyes, has largely been read in terms of ‘country’; evocations of place that reiterate one of the defining features of indigenous contemporary art - the articulation of identity as it is grounded by social, geographic and spiritual networks.

This is evident across the relatively small body of literature Yunupingu’s work has generated. Franchesca Cubillo, the senior curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at The National Gallery of Australia, has written of them from a topographical perspective as ‘landscapes’, their surfaces evocative of the ocean’s competing currents, or the

49 A recent example of this can be found in Kaiadilt artist Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori, a ‘late-bloomer’ (in the words of curator Bruce McLean), whose art world reception similarly turned upon an axis between the apparent abstraction of her paintings and their embedded references to specific places in Gabori’s traditional country. See for example, B McLean, ‘Sally Gabori’s mindmapped landscapes’, Art & Australia, Vol. 49, no. 3, Autumn, 2012, pp. 478-485. (Note: Gabori is the subject of Chapter 6 of this thesis)
ebb and flow of white sea-foam.\textsuperscript{50} As already mentioned, Nicolas Rothwell similarly perceives embedded reference to the natural visual phenomena of Eastern Arnhem Land ("tidal flows, the dance of flames, bright sunlight diffusing in a cloud-filled sky").\textsuperscript{51} Gerald McMaster, co-Artistic Director of the 2012 Biennale of Sydney, is perhaps the most adamant. For him, their meaninglessness in relation to Yunupingu’s Aboriginality is nothing less than impossible. He observes that although her work “frequently appears abstract (…) she is a traditional ceremonial woman, with so much cultural knowledge and experience that it is highly unlikely that her paintings would be without reference.”\textsuperscript{52} In this light Yunupingu’s work can only be seen as an insight into her Yolngu worldview in which, according to McMaster, “every animate and inanimate thing has a place in the complex grid of their understanding.”\textsuperscript{53} (My italics)

At one level this recourse to notions of country and traditional knowledge reflects the fall-out of an important shift in the art world’s reception of indigenous art in the 1990s. This was due largely to the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the first Aboriginal artist to seemingly divest the obvious visual signifiers of her cultural identity in favour of loose, expressionistic canvasses that immediately chimed with the work of Euro-American modernism’s greats.\textsuperscript{54} Afforded two museum retrospectives, the second of which toured to Japan, the critical reception of Kngwarreye’s work turned upon the same axis as my own initial engagements with

\textsuperscript{51} N Rothwell, ’Smoke and Flame’, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{52} G McMaster, ’Ntotemuk: commonalities among great differences’, in C de Zegher and G McMaster (eds), All our relations: the 18th Biennale of Sydney, Biennale of Sydney, 2012, pp. 307-331, p. 315.
\textsuperscript{53} ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} I say ‘seemingly’ because one can easily argue that Kngwarreye’s identity remained deeply embedded in the mark making and forms of her paintings. For the art world however, their iconography was radically different to existing perceptions of Aboriginal painting, which up until then were largely based on the roundels and dotting of Western Desert Painting and bark painting styles from Arnhem Land.
Yunupingu’s *Mayilimiriw* paintings: how to reconcile their apparent modernism with their local condition, or, put another way, their Aboriginality? Such questions quickly became central to Kngwarreye’s career: at one level her meteoric rise can be seen in light of how closely her work echoed the formal tropes of modernism, replaying for a Western audience its own already-canonised moments, all the while simultaneously insisting on its difference.

The art world was quick to react to what art historian Roger Benjamin categorised as “a case study in cultural misunderstanding.”\(^55\) Asserting that conceptualising Kngwarreye’s work within the frame of Euro-American Modernism “shed very little light on the specific beliefs and mental conditions under which the artist produced the paintings”, he instead called for a criticism “more attuned to Aboriginal cultural values.”\(^56\) Thus, although Kngwarreye’s large-scale painterly revisionings of Alhalkere, her clan country, appear abstract to Western eyes, viewers are constantly reminded that they unequivocally refer back to embedded representations of country.\(^57\) Appreciating Kngwarreye’s paintings with recourse to their cultural intent – that is, the intent of the artist, assumed or otherwise – becomes an act of constantly ‘winding back’ one’s initial interpretation: moving from their initial ‘abstraction’ to their embedded ‘figuration’, as though each forecloses the other.

But if Yunupingu’s work enters a space occupied by Kngwarreye’s, it does so only to challenge such readings. If we are to understand the titles of her *Mayilimiriw* paintings literally, what we see is what we get; no rendition of ‘country’, however abstracted, underwrites their painted surfaces. They instead hinge upon the autonomy of her mark

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\(^56\) ibid.

\(^57\) As an example see, M Neal, ‘Two worlds: one vision’, in ibid, pp. 23-32.
making, by which I mean their ability to articulate meaning by way of *divesting* figurative reference rather than embedding it.

As a long-term art coordinator familiar with the sites of interchange that link remote art practice to the broader art world, Stubbs was well placed to frame this as a provocation, and to emphasise it rather than downplay it. Indeed, he volunteered during our interviews that it would have been possible to elicit a ‘story’ from Yunupingu for even the most reductive of these works, and thus play them into established frames of reference. However, fascinated by the emergence of relative ‘truths’ at the cultural interface – and guided by what he understands as an ‘ethical’ responsibility – he readily admitted that attempting to communicate that these paintings meant ‘nothing’, at least from a Yolngu perspective, provided a far more engaging possibility.

‘(Y)ou need to remember that Nyapanyapa is disrespected here [in a Yolngu context], because it’s ‘Mayilimiriw’’, he explained. ‘So it would be the worst of all possible outcomes if [her work] was disrespected here because it was meaninglessness and wrongly celebrated elsewhere because it was meaningful.’

Although the *Mayilimiriw* paintings may, in a phenomenological sense, embody an understanding of what it is to be ‘in place’ – that is, to see and feel a specific locality58 – Stubbs’s perspective demands we consider a more openly ideological intent. This is prompted by Yunupingu’s divergence with local tradition, the communication of which is subsequently carried by Stubbs’ close understanding of the reception of indigenous contemporary art in Australia, or put another way, his role in the translation of these works from one cultural context to another.

58 See for example, P Gibson, ‘Nyapanyapa’, *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 251, July 2012, pp. 5-7.
It is this latter intent that helps us further understand the relational aspect of Yunupingu’s practice, and how exchange between parties has come to underwrite the information her recent work conveys as it circulates in the art world.

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Once again, Geoffrey Bardon’s early experiences at Papunya come to mind. As Paul Carter has argued, a key part of Bardon’s creativity lay in his obsessive and inventive cataloguing of the earliest paintings, now known as the ‘Papunya boards’.59 The names by which these formative works of Western Desert art are now known, he reminds us, are at one level drawn from Bardon’s discussions and negotiations with the artists; that is, by way of his direct participation in each work’s genesis.60 Hence their titles preference for cultural exegesis at least partly reflects Bardon’s interpretation of the collective intent behind the fledgling painting movement.

This prompts us to remember that many of the conventions surrounding the circulation of Aboriginal images in the form of art – including titles – remain Western in origin. At the point of production – ‘in the studio’, so to speak – they still require mediation by figures acting, at least at one level, as art world emissaries. As I have already argued throughout this thesis, in this space between parties such conventions are readily complicated by the vagaries of translation.

In this, Yunupingu’s Mayilimirriw paintings take on a slightly different cast. Whether they are titled Mayilimirriw, numbered with a descriptor like White painting, or indeed left untitled (as has also been the case), they communicate a similar, albeit inverse, intent to that which Bardon

60 ibid.
identified in the early paintings from Papunya. By inferring a move in the opposite direction – that is, away from the explication of cultural meaning – her works rub against the grain of an art world geared towards the readability of ‘remote’ Aboriginal art. Although this prompt has to date been largely underplayed in the critical reception of these works, it nonetheless remains key to their understanding. Indeed, seen against a backdrop of established conventions – both in relation to Yolngu art specifically and Aboriginal art more broadly – their titles alone prompt a meaningful elaboration of their intercultural origins.

4.6 Painting with light

If the ‘meaningless’ white grounds of Yunupingu’s Mayilimirrwiw paintings flagged this challenge in no uncertain terms, Light Painting (2010-2012) reached further still.

A digitally projected, constantly changing overlay of Yunupingu’s drawings on acetate, the work was prompted initially by a seemingly prosaic material challenge: the seasonal availability of bark (fig. 4.6). In the dry season in Arnhem Land the pliability of bark reduces, becoming much more difficult to strip from the trees around Yirrkala and its outstations. Although the art centre stockpiles pre-prepared barks, invariably by late dry season this supply diminishes to the point of running out. In 2011, faced with the lack of readily available materials, art centre staff gave Yunupingu acetate and a paint pen – leftovers from a failed animation project – and she began an (ongoing) series of white drawings on the clear surfaces, revisiting both the non-sacred figuration and the non-figurative fields of mark making she had been producing on bark. These piled up in Yunupingu’s working space each day and it was while archiving a group one afternoon that Stubbs overlaid the acetate sheets, held them to the light, and looked through them.

The overlaid drawings created, in his words, ‘a filigree of chaos and complexity and beauty.’
‘I went around showing my colleagues, excited,’ he told me.

They began to discuss a new work that layered Yunupingu’s acetate drawings, essentially an attempt to build outwards from the moment in which Stubbs had looked through the initial overlay. The problem, however, was immediate: whose hand would define the order of the overlaid acetates if not Yunupingu’s own?

Stubbs described this challenge to me as follows:

When [Yunupingu] makes a pile of [the acetates] – up to six or ten in a day – and she finishes them and puts them aside: that’s her hand. She’s put them in that order. Even if she never intended people to look through the drawings together, it’s still her hand (…) But by this stage I’d been putting them into the drawer for a few days (…) and it was impossible to go back through them and return to their original order. They weren’t accessioned or paid for, they were just collected up and she got paid a little bit and that was all. (…) Even if you were to go back and say, “These were the first six” and show them as a pile and “these were the second six”, it seemed there was no ethical way to do that because the order had been lost.

In conversation with his co-workers, Stubbs realised that such a work would demand an entirely new approach. What they needed, he thought, was a computer program that would select digital versions of the drawings at random, setting them into an ‘infinite’ loop. This way, ‘no human hand other than [Yunupingu’s] would have touched them.’

The name of a young programmer in Melbourne, Joseph Brady, who would eventually go on to manage The Mulka Project, was put forward and Stubbs contacted him from Yirrkala. He provided a long brief with detailed instructions:

There were a whole lot of conditions about what it needed to be: basically a static artwork, but one that changed every time you looked at it. It needed to be random; it needed to be infinite. Joseph (…) delivered immediately within a week: the *Light Painting* as specified.
By the time it was exhibited Light Painting had ultimately been realised by a group of participants. They not only included Yunupingu, who had made the original drawings entirely unaware of what they would become, but Stubbs, Brady, fellow art coordinator Andrew Blake, Mulka Project director Araluen Maymuru, and another programmer and Mulka Project manager, Rob Lane.

As the realisation of Light Painting progressed, the collective arrived at a clear idea of how it should look. Although essentially a moving image work, Stubbs explained to me, for instance, that he didn’t want it to appear like a piece of video art. This was a discipline he had come across, and thought little of, during his participation as an intermediary for Yolngu artists and their practice in numerous large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art. For him it became clear that Light Painting should occupy the space of a painting, rather than require the durational commitment that video work usually demands of the viewer: it was this that would tie it back to its local condition.

The result is largely unique within the canon of indigenous contemporary art in Australia. It was presented at the 2012 Biennale of Sydney as a rectangle of Perspex (acrylic) floating a few centimeters in front of an aperture in the wall that allowed the digital overlay of drawings to be rear-projected. As intended, it occupied the same physical space as a bark painting, yet it simultaneously premised a categorical shift beyond such tradition: its smoothly industrial surface, for example, provided stark contrast to the natural surface of bark that activates the Mayilimirirr paintings, not to mention the countless other bark paintings produced in the region throughout the history of Yolngu art.

On this surface Yunupingu’s loose, expressive line drawings fade one into the next, creating near-infinite compositions between each digital overlay. This transition remains slow enough to be almost imperceptible, while each configuration that pulls slowly into focus is as close to
unique as possible. At one level this seemingly random aspect — realised by way of a programming algorithm that selects each overlay from a scanned database of one hundred and ten original drawings — can’t help but appear as part of an attempt on behalf of the work’s collaborative team to reconcile the difficult authorial questions raised by its genesis.

But this is, of course, the work’s most radical aspect. The process underlying Light painting is one of translation, by way of collaborative intervention, from one material and cultural domain to another. To obscure this fact seems to push against its function. Indeed translation might be its central subject. As the very motif that draws the viewer close, it articulates a core challenge: quickened by the creative participation of third parties, concrete notions of the artist-as-author once again can’t help but be troubled by the formation of the resulting work.

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At one level the 2012 Biennale of Sydney provided a productive context in which to elaborate this underlying collectivity, even if it was ultimately underplayed in accompanying didactic texts. As their co-authored essay in the accompanying catalogue explained, the Biennale’s Artistic Directors aimed to eschew traditional approaches to the artist-as-individual. They instead advocated for a “connective model” that focused on “inclusionary practices of generative thinking, such as collaboration, conversation and compassion.”

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61 At the MCA, the wall text for Light Painting presented the work in conventional terms. Yunupingu was foregrounded as the artist, with a ‘project team’ — which included Stubbs, Araluen Maymuru, Rob Lane and Joseph Brady — listed in much smaller font below. This came after the title of the work, the list of materials used in its production, and the artist/gallery courtesy line. The agency behind the work also remained entirely opaque in the descriptive text that followed. This focused on the formal features of the work, before shifting into a short text authored by Stubbs that described the ‘tense’ within which Yunupingu, and Yolngu artists more broadly, work within.

Beyond this, in much the same way that Yunupingu’s white paintings might unavoidably call forth the reductive moments of late-modernism, inclusion in the Biennale displayed that the form of *Light Painting* chimes with the broader material and social field of global contemporary art, echoing any number of contemporary practices that engage new media and participatory modes of authorship to re-inscribe more traditional forms. One only had to look around the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Biennale venue where *Light Painting* was exhibited, to see evidence of this. Close by hung the work of El Anatsui, a recent international phenomenon who utilises teams of assistants to reimagine traditional Ghanaian weaving practices, while an adjacent wall displayed a screen-based collaboration by Australian twin sisters Gabriella and Silvano Mangano. Although deeply contingent on its local formation, these relationships – evident in *Light painting*, but also in much of Yunupingu’s recent work – also further illuminate a contingency on the circulation of indigenous practices within the wider field of contemporary art. Yet it’s also true that they create a productive contrast.

In *Light Painting* Yunupingu’s own agency shifts towards a collective action that is far more dispersed than either of these examples. The work of the Mangano sisters, for instance, exists at the interstices between two parties, each of whom subsume individual authorship in favour of their collaboration. Indeed, one might argue that the interplay between each of their roles, and the attendant notions of identity that are re-shaped by this interface, forms the conceptual hinge for their work. This is clearly articulated: not only in the work itself, but in didactic writing, such as wall texts or catalogue notes, produced to accompany it. Similarly, the social formation of Anatsui’s practice ultimately emphasises his own agency in the creative process, regardless of the collaborative relationships he utilises. In line with many other contemporary artists, he acts as a kind of creative director, even as his process highlights, even elevates, the role of third parties.
Light Painting, by contrast, suggests an authorial configuration that the art world is yet to fully recognise, let alone articulate. Tracing its production urges us to see its various participants in stridently non-hierarchical terms: as a whole, the resulting work emerges as a kind of collective homage to Yunupingu’s creativity in which the collective, rather than Yunupingu herself, is foregrounded.

4.7 Conclusion

Visiting Yirrkala requires a flight from Darwin to Nhulunbuy, a small mining community on North East Arnhem Land’s Gove Peninsula. It takes just over an hour, during which the plane tracks a flat expanse of tropical savannah and escarpment country almost entirely unbroken by road. On approach the plane banks into its descent and the open-cut bauxite mine and aluminium refinery operated by Rio Tinto/Alcan spreads out beneath the window: a man-made geometry of red sands, tailing dams and industrial infrastructure coated with dust.

When the Australian government first granted the mining lease (to Nabalco) in the early 1960s, Yolngu people, led by elders including Yunupingu’s father, Munggurrawuy, fought them in the courts. Subsequent events are well-known: the Yolngu attempt to halt the mining lease on their lands failed twice, but ultimately, in 1976, led to the establishment of The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. This came too

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63 By this I mean to point out that the collective aspect of Light Painting, as with Yunupingu’s broader practice, has remained unresolved. Audiences seeing the work for the first time would have little idea of the multiple agencies underlying its production. The National Gallery of Victoria, for example, which collected ‘Light Painting’ in 2013, follows the MCA in identifying it very much as a work by Yunupingu. Its recent display as part of a gallery of bark painting and related practices served to emphasise Yunupingu’s innovative approach to art making rather than articulate the collective practice that ‘Light Painting’ engaged.

64 I owe this conclusion, in part, to Nigel Lendon, who during a discussion about ‘Light Painting’ in 2012, referred to it as ‘a work in the third person’; that is, a work about Yunupingu’s practice rather than an example of Yunupingu’s practice (conversation with the author, November, 2012).
late to stop the mine, which by that time had already established a secure foothold.65

Now Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala lie 20 minutes apart by road, if that. Although each community is defined along largely racial lines, each is nonetheless dependent upon the other: like the mine it services, Nhulunbuy extends across Yolngu land, while Yirrkala and its people have long grown accustomed to the royalties that eventually followed on from the mine’s development. It’s a relationship traced by tensions, but it is one that has over half a century become part and parcel of local life.

Yet this too is changing: the mine is now in its declining phase as international markets contract.66 In early 2014 the refinery operation was closed, prompting Nhulunbuy’s population to dramatically decrease, while changes to royalties have already sparked bitter legal battles between the three most prominent Yolngu clan groups.67 As this intertwined history begins to unthread it’s impossible to descend towards the airport and not wonder about the difficulties to come.

Thinking through the dissonances evident in Nyapanyapa Yunupingu’s practice, it’s hard not to recall the sight of the mine unfurling beneath the plane window on my first visit to Yirrkala in 2012. It provides a particularly blunt symbol of the tensions that play out in this cultural space on both a macro and micro level; within the interaction between entire

65 H Morphy, Becoming art, p. 66.
cultures as well as between individuals and the exchanges they enact between themselves.

That Yunupingu’s work might embody something of this should not be surprising: after all, such features thread through the history of Yolngu art, as much as they do the wider Aboriginal art world. But even as it folds into this history Yunupingu’s work seems to simultaneously direct us elsewhere. At times I feel it points to a future iteration of Yolngu art, one even more thoroughly intercultural in its features and collaborative in its intent. But then again, it may simply be evidence of a chance confluence of relationships; a social network that drew together at the right moment to create a vacuum in which Yunupingu’s practice found new shape: Gell’s notion of a ‘system of action’ in tangible form. Perhaps it is this, rather than some defining fact of contemporary Yolngu practice more broadly, that cuts to the heart of her work.

Whichever perspective one takes, there remain different ways to establish the relative meanings behind Yunupingu’s recent practice. For many commentators the most rewarding will undoubtedly continue to follow recourse to country and what that multi-faceted notion might represent for Yunupingu both as an artist and as a Yolngu person. Yet tracing a trajectory from the narrative-based aspects of her bark painting, through to the Mayilimi riw paintings and her use of digital media, tells a different story: not only does it demand a more complicated understanding of the network of relations that continues to underwrite her practice, it urges us to see this as central to her work’s very being. For what is it that Yunupingu shows us if not communication itself: a kind of residue of exchange set in aesthetic form?

In this way a number of key features pull slowly into focus, all of which support a more rigorously intercultural reading of Yunupingu’s achievements. Firstly, her work exists in a context provided, increasingly, by the contemporary art world. This shift has been accompanied by an attendant
increase in the art centre’s participation in the genesis of her practice, which has in turn provided Yunupingu new avenues for innovation and change. Although much of her recent work supports this reading, it is *Light Painting* that provides a particularly cogent example. Here the question of how we might reconcile the realities of collective authorship within an artworld/market context that remains focused on individual genius and associated notions of value becomes unavoidable.

Of course, this is only a problem if we see the reconciliation of these dissonances as an ultimate ideal. To paraphrase Stubbs it may indeed be the ‘conflicts, contradictions and compatibilities’ thrown forth by the interactions between cultures that in themselves carry the power to illuminate new ways of thinking about the world. To try and soften this effect through reason risks simultaneously dulling it. One can also argue that this too is what Yunupingu’s work shows us, which in turn further illuminates something fundamental about communication: the risk of not being understood at all; of meaning dispersing like quicksilver in the space between differences.

*In closing it’s worth looking once more at the white *Mayilimiriw* paintings; those loosely painted nets of *Gapan* that initially drew me to Yunupingu’s work. Surely it is the ability of these works to simultaneously recall Western and non-Western categories that draws us in, and in doing so, keeps us looking?

Here we can understand that works such as these show us what it is to act between worlds, to exist in contexts that shift and change. It is this that enables them to speak to the reductive moments of late modernism, even as they prompt us to reconfigure our established understandings of other conventions, such as Yolngu art or, for that matter, contemporary art more broadly. As an audience, we too are implicated in the social transactions that extend as a network both to and from their point of production. This is
what results in such an insistent double register; they
invoke two worlds, rather than one, binding each into the
other with revelatory effect. If this seems an uneasy
alliance, it is. In this, such paintings convincingly stage
the social networks that not only carry them into being, but
which form the contemporary world in which we live.
Making in translation

4.1

4.2
Beautiful things
I was praying.
Beautiful things

CAPTIONS:

*natural earth pigments on bark, 40 x 79 cm*

*natural earth pigments on bark, 65cm x 80cm*


*video still*

4.5 Nyapanyapa Yunupingu and Will Stubbs, *Yirrkala, September, 2012*

4.6 Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, *Light Painting*, (2010-2012)
*paint-pen on 110 acetates, animated and digitally projected, dimensions variable*
*(This digital composite pictures a series of the different, digitally produced overlays)*
CHAPTER 05
Pushing the line:
Jirrawun, Paddy Bedford and Tony Oliver

Creativity always comes from beneath, it always finds an unexpected and indirect path forward and it always makes use of what it can scavenge by night.¹

5.1 Arrivals

Kununurra, the East Kimberley region’s largest town, seems at first glance to be a kind of oasis. Appearing quite suddenly from the dry wilderness that surrounds it, it’s bordered by the greenery of the Ord River irrigation scheme, and is sustained by a steady stream of tourism and the economic boon offered by the Rio Tinto-owned Argyle diamond mine, which lies just over 100km to the south.

When I first arrived there in 2009 the town had an undeniable look of prosperity. The local real estate window pointed to a then-booming property market, which had in recent years skewed towards city prices. On weekends Lake Kununurra was overrun by the whine of new speedboats pulling water-skiers in aimless-seeming arcs behind them, while in the centre of town shiny new four-wheel drives constantly patrolled the grid-like maze of streets. There was, and still is, an upmarket resort for visitors and a country club for well-to-do locals; for those wanting to part with a few thousand dollars there’s even a diamond outlet.

Yet although in the heat of the day Kununurra’s slow rhythms can seem innocuous – even quaint – even a casual inspection reveals a rift common to many of the regional centres that are scattered throughout northern Australia. Its population of around six thousand, split almost evenly between

Aboriginal² and non-Aboriginal inhabitants, is defined by two largely divergent realities. Evidence of this is clear if you climb one of the towering rock outcrops that mark the town’s northern and eastern perimeters and look down upon the neat street plan and surrounding reserves. A loose network of walking tracks is clearly visible. They connect not only the town’s centre and the largest Aboriginal settlement at its edge, but also various ‘drinking camps’ that occupy makeshift space in the long grass, where they often spread beneath the hulking forms of large Boab trees.

This overlaid network intersects with the local white population, yet remains largely separate: like the indigenous communities at its edges, and the near segregation of the town’s two supermarkets, each appear to exist simultaneously, playing out their own racially defined rhythms. It’s a social landscape where casual racism is endemic and the lives of Aboriginal people remain marked by the ingrained cycles of violence, alcoholism and ill-health that characterise Australia’s colonial fallout.³

In Kununurra - like in so many similar places - the evident prosperity has not been theirs.

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² Kununurra’s Aboriginal population consists largely of Gija, Miriuwung and Gajerrong people; the language groups whose country lies closest to the town. Kununurra itself spreads out across Miriuwung country.  
³ The indigenous academic Marcia Langton discusses a similar response to the Kimberley’s confronting social context, drawing in part upon her experience as a young researcher in the region in 1980.

Langton’s essay is notable in that she directs attention to the underlying social context of East Kimberley painting, a rare approach in the Aboriginal art world that likely comes down to her engagements in the region as an anthropologist. She notes the difficulty of balancing a celebration of art with the harder realities of contemporary life in the region as follows:

“It is challenging to write about the grinding poverty, violence and racist exclusion in which so many Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley live and at the same time to communicate the beauty and grandeur of their lives. Australians are accustomed to media depictions that on page one of the newspaper heartlessly recount the latest violent death of an Aboriginal person, and on page ten lyrically describe the artwork of a ‘revered’ elder.” See, M Langton, ‘Goowoomji’s world’, in L Michael (ed.), pp. 51-61, p. 51.

For further overview of the harder realities of contemporary life in the Kimberley see also, N Rothwell, ‘Living hard and dying young in the Kimberley’, The Weekend Australian Enquirer, April 30, 2011, p. 5.
When Tony Oliver, an ex-Melbourne gallerist and artist, arrived in Kununurra in early 1998 he consciously stepped across this divide. In a sense he had to: he had been invited to visit by Freddie Timms, a Gija artist and ex-stockman then in his fifties who Oliver had met in Melbourne. Oliver stayed for close to a decade. By the time he left, emotionally and physically spent, in late 2007, one of the most unique painting collectives in the history of the indigenous contemporary art movement had unfolded.

Although often controversial - partly due to the fact that Oliver's true influence on the group was never clear - Jirrawun, as the collective was called, drew almost unprecedented art world acclaim. Under Oliver's management the associated artists quickly rose to prominence, carried by a buoyant Aboriginal art market that was then fast approaching its peak. Soon their work graced the walls of some of the most respected private galleries in the country: almost as quickly it entered key institutional collections and was included in important museum exhibitions. By the early 2000s, barely two years after the majority of the collective's artists had commenced painting, Jirrawun exhibitions were regularly selling out.

A rotating cast of non-Aboriginal collaborators and advisors gathered around the collective's charismatic central cast. Gallerists reduced their sales commission to work with them. Urban business leaders, political lobbyists, academics and high profile lawyers joined the board of directors. Various initiatives that extended Jirrawun's focus beyond painting rose and fell: in 2002 there was a stage production

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4 Nicolas Rothwell, who has written widely on the development of Jirrawun, has covered this meeting between Timms and Oliver in Melbourne a number of times. See, for example, N Rothwell, 'Jirrawun: beyond the boab', in N Rothwell, Another Country, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2007, pp. 222-228. Recently he has taken a more creative approach with this material: See, N Rothwell, Bellomor, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2013, pp. 119-170. In Bellomor, Rothwell plays into the more romantic aspects of Jirrawun's formation: he refers to Oliver's meeting with Timms, and Jirrawun's foundation, as "a tale that was circulating across the north long before I came to know its protagonists." See N Rothwell, Bellomor, p. 119.
based upon Gija dance that played at arts festivals in Melbourne and Perth;\(^5\) for a brief period Jirrawun employed a mobile nurse to visit the artists and their families in their communities; and there was momentarily Jirrawun Editions – which produced one run of beautiful etchings – and Jirrawun Film, which never made it past the barest contours of a dream. Although the majority of the collective’s work was undertaken in a variety of rented properties and remote settlements, in 2007 a long-held plan was realised: a purpose-designed studio was built on the outskirts of Wyndham, a long-declined port town 100km northwest of Kununurra. Throughout, the group irresolutely refused the lure of government funding, pursuing instead a strategically commercial approach to dealing their paintings, which from time to time was bolstered by support brokered from the private sector. This included Rio Tinto, whose Argyle Diamonds enterprise was on Gija land.

The artists themselves, drawn from the generation who’d come of age on the region’s pastoral frontier, were paragons of individuality and hard-won gravitas. Alongside Freddie Timms, the youngest, there was Peggy Patrick, Paddy Bedford, Phyllis Thomas, Rammey Ramsey, Rusty Peters and Goody Barrett. In the early days they were joined by Timmy Timms, who passed away in 2002, and Hector Jandany, who opted to join the community art centre at Warmun not long after Jirrawun was founded, but who maintained an irregular advisory role with the collective until his death in 2006. Each inflected the project in certain ways. Freddie Timms, for example, might well be characterised as the hard-drinking

\(^5\) *Fire, Fire Burning Bright (Marnem, Marnem, Dililib Benuwarrenji)*, written and directed by Peggy Patrick and Andrish Saint-Claire, premiered at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, The Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory (September, 2000), and subsequently toured to the Perth International Arts Festival (January, 2002) and the Melbourne International Arts Festival (October, 2002). It was based upon a Gija Joonba (narrative dance performance) that recounted the massacre of a group of Gija and Worla people in the East Kimberley in the early decades of the 20th century. For an overview, see M Dolk, ‘Are we strangers in this place?’, in L Michael (ed.), pp. 17-49, p. 29.
entrepreneur who returned from his city forays with new ideas. Rusty Peters, taciturn and brooding, inhabited the role of the deep thinker who turned his ideas over in his mind for weeks at a time before picking up a brush. For her part, Peggy Patrick – grandmother to many – was a master intercultural mediator and a ready spokeswoman for the group: equal parts earth mother and raconteur.  

Although a deeply felt anger and mistrust still guided much of their interaction with the settler-Australian world, Oliver’s intent to live beyond the segregated realities of local life proved his commitment to the artist’s worldview. As I will explore in this chapter, the level of intimacy he achieved played directly into the collective’s broader achievements. He worked closely with them in the studio, not only advising on their paintings, but applying all he knew of the white art world to carry them to acclaim. In turn, they brought him close to the centre of the Gija world; the qualities he came to elaborate in their works – whether graceful minimalism or the darker narratives of colonial history – were all framed by what he found there. Indeed, if Jirrawun briefly brokered itself some space beyond the exploitative textures of the Aboriginal art world, it was driven, in its key moments at least, by a genuine creative accord. To conceive the project in accurate terms we need to understand that it reflected Gija patterns of thinking and doing just as, through Oliver, it drew much needed oxygen from the broader art world.

Yet although the dense intercultural relations of the project as a whole bore the mark of collaborative vision, it was with Bedford – a quietly imposing elder with a wicked sense of humor who was also known by his Gija nickname, Goowoomji – that Oliver brokered his most embedded relationship. For the art world Bedford became the star. By the time of his death in 2007 his paintings had long rendered

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Note: I met (and to varying extents worked with) each of these artists between 2009-2010.
him, in his own estimation at least, a ‘millionaire’. Beyond a small body of work the old man made during a visit to Derby in 2005, and the first roughly painted boards that initially drew he and Oliver together, Oliver had been with him for every painting he had ever made.

Unavoidably, Bedford’s work traces the arc of their relationship. At first tentative, the dialogue between the two builds throughout the old man’s oeuvre; as with the broader pattern of Jirrawun’s rise and fall, towards the end it’s near impossible – and perhaps entirely counterproductive – to try and separate their roles. Although the art world remains largely blind to the exchanges that played out between them, it’s hard to avoid an obvious conclusion: the decade that Bedford and Oliver spent working alongside one another represents one of the great intercultural collaborations in Australian art history. It follows that in conceiving the collaborative aspect of indigenous contemporary art more clearly, their narrative must be central.

5.2 Town life

When Oliver arrived in Kununurra he found himself with little choice but to follow Timms’ lead; he purchased a swag at the local camping store and, for a heady first week, lodged in the local Gija drinking camp, which occupied space in a then-vacant reserve next to the drive in cinema.

If for Oliver Kununurra provided stark contrast to inner city Melbourne, life in the drinking camp was stranger still. There he witnessed an oddly confounding reality. The dysfunction of camp life played out in predictable ways – excessive drinking, fighting and yelling all seemed to be the norm – yet, as he recalled during a series of interviews I undertook with him between 2012 and 2013, an undeniable cultural undercurrent was also present.

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He was surprised to find that men and women, loosened by alcohol and physically ravaged by their time in town, still took the opportunity to sing and dance their traditional culture. It was here that Oliver first met Timmy Timms, the late ‘Boss’ of the Gija community of Juwurlinji (Bow River), and a highly respected senior lawman throughout the greater Kimberley. Oliver recalls that Timms would arrive from time to time to direct proceedings, handing out clap-sticks to mark the insistent underlying rhythm that carried the repeated incantations of Gija song. For Oliver, being there disturbed the veil between two worlds; as brief as it was, it provided him a proximity that set the tone for his life in the Kimberley.

Soon he had a more permanent home. A connection from Melbourne directed him to a rental property on Pindan Avenue, a street of fibro houses set a few blocks from the edge of the Mirima National Park that abuts the township’s eastern perimeter. At the time, a young social worker and occasional freelance journalist from Melbourne called Simon Georgeff was living there: Oliver moved in and the house was soon overflowing with the itinerant and evolving population that had frequented the drinking camp. Within a matter of weeks it was a well-known Gija party destination where marathon drinking sessions would sometimes extend late into the night.

Hector Jandany, the flamboyant Gija intellectual and artist, was another figure among the milieu Oliver became familiar with during this period. Indeed, although Oliver acknowledges that Freddie Timms’s invitation had formed the initial impetus for his move, he emphasises that it was Jandany who did the most to induct him into local ways of thinking and acting. In his early days in Kununurra he often found himself, along with any young Gija men who were willing to pay attention, listening as the old man held forth each evening on

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8 Unless otherwise noted, narrative details regarding Oliver’s experiences in the Kimberley, along with any quotes, are taken from a series of interviews undertaken between late 2012 and late 2013.
the verandah at Pindan Avenue, the sun sinking below the surrounding hills. Morality loomed large in these tales drawn from the Ngarranggarni, epics populated with the dreamtime figures who lived on in a concurrent temporal space, and whose watchful presence was signaled by the radiating power of the Kimberley landscape.

A gifted storyteller, Jandany was careful to pierce any misconceptions Oliver might have had of an idyllic, pre-pastoral existence prior to the European occupation of Gija country. He would highlight the dark undercurrent of traditional life as often as he would celebrate its creative and cultural peaks. One evening, for instance, Oliver recalls Jandany recounting the horror of punitive inter-tribal raiding parties in which men would paint themselves in white Kaolin clay, and execute surprise night time attacks on sleeping family groups, killing and raping indiscriminately.

Although Oliver’s purpose was yet to be found, Jandany’s approach was clear: he was schooling Oliver in Gija thought, not only urging a far more complicated understanding of what guided and defined Gija life, but providing him with a sounding board from which to reflect his own conflicted feelings about this new and endlessly foreign place.

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Oliver had already worked with Freeddie Timms during visits his Gija friend had made to Melbourne and Wollongong (where Oliver had been based immediately prior to his move to the Kimberley), and at the house on Pindan Avenue they began to replicate the informal studio process they’d already established. In part, this was bound to the daily cycles of town life. Simon Georgeff, who was in his early twenties when he lived there, recalls Timms pushing the deadline for his first exhibition at William Mora Gallery in Melbourne, not long

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9 Linguist Frances Kofod defines the Ngarranggarni as a ‘time in the distant past when the land, plants and animals took their present form and the rules for living were laid down, sometimes referred to as the dreamtime.’ See, F Kofod, ‘Gija Glossary’, in L Michael (ed.), p. 136-139, p. 136.
after Timms and Oliver moved in. The ex-stockman would wake before dawn and set his canvasses down on the ground in the front yard, a can of beer open by his side. By midday, the sun’s heat blasting, he would drop everything and wander off to spend the rest of the day drinking with an evolving cast of family and hangers-on, only to turn around and do it all again the next day.¹⁰

As Georgeff recently pointed out to me, this period, although often unruly, was underwritten by a quiet intensity. Once a group of interested artists had gathered at the property the party scene was held at arm’s length. Much time was given over to looking at art books and talking about the white art world. ‘Tony was a great educator about how the art world worked for those guys’, Georgeff recalled. ‘Alot of that was very mystifying.’

Country and Western music, Aboriginal anthems like ‘From little things, big things grow’ and Archie Roach’s album ‘Charcoal Lane’ provided something of a soundtrack for the early paintings that would emerge there. ‘[Tony] had this real confidence and joy about their momentum’, Georgeff told me, referring to the artists. ‘[He believed that] they were seriously great painters and that he would put them on the world stage. (…) There was a feeling we were on the good path.’

Against this backdrop Timms had been introducing Oliver to senior figures in the Gija community and together with Jandany they began discussing a new kind of painting project, one not bound to the government-funded infrastructure that generally supports Aboriginal art centres across Northern Australia. Timms’s early engagements with the art world had highlighted for him what needed to be done. He had established his art practice in the wake of key figures of the East Kimberley art movement, such as Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji, and had often been frustrated by the pitfalls of the local system of artistic representation. Like many of his contemporaries he found

¹⁰ I interviewed Simon Georgeff a number of times in 2014.
himself pulled between competing demands, sometimes painting through the local community art centre, Waringarri Arts, and at other times entering into more immediate - but often far riskier - partnership with private dealers eager for a piece of the booming Aboriginal art market. This largely unregulated shadow-world parallels the government funded arts centre infrastructure, connecting remotely-based artists like Timms to a network of dealer galleries spread throughout Australia’s metropolitan centres. Put simply, he had often been ripped off by unscrupulous dealers eager for a quick profit.

In an article that Georgeff published in The Sunday Age in 1998 Timms, ever pragmatic in money matters, clearly recognised the shift Oliver had made possible: “It doesn’t matter where you go - Fitzroy Crossing, Derby, Broome - all those Aboriginal artists, they don’t get much money (...) They think $500 is big money. They don’t know how much their painting is worth. But I found out.”\(^{11}\)

Through Oliver he brokered consignment deals with a number of key mainstream galleries. Prominent among them was Watters Gallery in Sydney, which at the time was one of the most respected blue-chip enterprises in the Sydney art world. The 60/40 split offered by this arrangement brought Timms in step with his non-Aboriginal contemporaries for the first time. It was a canny move: for his second exhibition at Watters he received a cheque for $60,000.\(^{12}\)

In the midst of his first flush of success Timms began to spread the word more widely. The administrative and social borders of the yet-to-be-named collective were taking shape: it was far more intimate than the government-funded community art centre model, but perhaps more importantly the stakes were higher. Timms, one assumes, was seeking to extend its effect when he took Oliver to Warmun, the main Gija community situated some 250 km southwest of Kununurra.

\(^{12}\) ibid.
Although it sits among some of the most visually striking country in Australia – all deep red ranges and sweeping plains – Warmun itself is a bleak place. Its establishment in the early 1970s followed the introduction of equal wages for the Aboriginal workers whose cheap labour had fuelled the region’s pastoral industry. The unintended consequence was a forced exodus of Aboriginal families from the cattle stations, a development that left them displaced in their own land.

The site of Warmun was chosen for a number of reasons: not only did it intersect an important kangaroo Dreaming, there was already a ration depot and small post office there. Tin-clad housing and a small school were soon added; the Sisters of Saint Joseph moved in and a government-backed community was formed, its economy dependent largely on monthly welfare payments. Unavoidably, the community retained something of its unsettled origins and quickly fell into the vicious cycles that have long driven many remote Aboriginal settlements into cataclysmic decline.

Timms’s plan was simple: he wanted to introduce Oliver to Chocolate Thomas, an affable figure who had expressed an interest in painting. The two met, but it was Paddy Bedford – at the time staying with Thomas in Warmun – who ultimately caught Oliver’s attention. At Thomas’s request, the culturally senior Bedford had shown him a few ‘stories’ to paint by sketching out rough approximations in ochre on sheets of discarded board. Although Thomas’s own paintings held little appeal for Oliver, what happened during his visit (here recounted by Marcia Langton) has entered the historical narrative as the formative moment of Bedford’s career:

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A number of discarded works on cardboard and laminex lay as rubbish on the floor in the dark room. Tony Oliver enquired whose masterpieces these were and Chocolate informed him they were by an old man named Paddy Bedford, “Goowoomji,” who was standing outside. Oliver met Goowoomji a few moments later and asked him if he could look after his paintings that lay as rubbish inside (...) So began Goowoomji’s painting journey (...).14

In Langton’s telling (drawn from Oliver’s own account) it is ultimately Oliver’s agency, his naming of discarded paintings as ‘masterpieces,’ that propels Bedford from dispossessed outsider to artist of the highest order. As an emissary of the Western art world he elevates Bedford’s paintings into a new interpretive domain, yet it is equally true that Oliver’s arrival and interest in Bedford’s work presented the old man with an opportunity he no doubt recognised.

It’s hard to imagine, for one, that Bedford was unaware of the potential value of his paintings within a Western market. Asides from Timms’s recent experiences, the East Kimberley region had been the site of a significant painting movement since the mid 1980s, by which time artists like Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji were establishing successful art practices. By the end of the decade Thomas in particular had become an artworld star, a run of high-profile exhibitions had been crowned in 1990 by his representation of Australia at the 44th Venice Biennale. His success had sparked both an art movement at Warmun and the shadow world of Aboriginal art speculators that troubled its edges.15

The initial transaction between Bedford and Oliver can thus be nuanced as follows: Bedford, aware of the potential economic

14 M Langton, ‘Goowoomji’s world’, p. 56.

and cultural exchange value of painting, recognises the opportunity presented by Oliver’s arrival and, like the first artists at Papunya did with Geoffrey Bardon, draws Oliver towards his own objectives.\footnote{In a similar light, Vivien Johnson has made a concerted effort to picture the beginnings of the Western Desert art movement from within the artists’ own histories, that is before Bardon’s arrival. She notes one charismatic and enterprising artist in particular, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, who had already made inroads into the white artworld. It is now undeniable that the founding figures of Western Desert art had already recognized the exchange value of material culture: their experiences of modernity had long proven the potential of “art” as a currency of negotiation between cultures. Bardon’s arrival presented a means to further crystallise this potential. As I suggest above, it is against a similar backdrop that Oliver's own arrival in the Kimberley, and his meeting with Bedford in particular, might best be contextualised. See, V Johnson, Once upon a time in Papunya, pp. 11-43.}

For his part, Oliver’s initial gift to Bedford was as simple as enthusiasm. He encouraged the old man to continue painting. But he also did more than this: as he’d done for Timms he made it clear that he could help Bedford navigate the pitfalls of the marketplace. One assumes it was as good an offer as any: within a week of their meeting, Bedford had joined Oliver at Pindan Avenue.

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Fittingly, it was Hector Jandany who gave the collective its two main conceptual ballasts. The first was the name ‘Jirrawun’, a Gija word that, simply translated, means ‘all in one, at the one place’:\footnote{F Kofod, ‘Gija Glossary’, p. 137.} an evocation of an ethos of sharing between parties. The second inflected the project at a deeper level. By introducing Oliver to the widespread Aboriginal notion of ‘two-way’, Jandany ultimately provided Jirrawun, and by default Oliver, with an ideological Raison d’être. For the Gija, ‘two-way’ had its roots in the hybrid curriculum pioneered by the Warmun School, where Jandany had been closely involved since its establishment in the 1970s, including as chairman.\footnote{B Collins, V Mills, H Smale, ‘Kimberley nuns recall the excitement of reshaping Aboriginal education’, ABC Kimberely, Feb 4 2014, available, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/02/04/3937665.htm>, accessed, 5 February 2016.} By the late 1990s, however, it had
broader resonance. Seen as an expression of indigenous ways of conceptualising intercultural relations in local contexts fraught with the historical trauma of settlement, it perfectly encapsulated the collective’s nascent vision.

For Oliver this concept would eventually take on the features of a doctrine – in it he found a perfect echo of the cultural doubling that he had been negotiating since his arrival. Encouraged, he began to envisage a role for himself that grappled directly with the challenges of simultaneous translation: not only between the contrasting domains that defined the Gija worldview, but between Aboriginal and settler-Australia.

5.3 Hard stories

Even though the early paintings suggested something significant might be possible, the destructive cast of life in Kununurra made progress increasingly difficult. Seeking the relative quiet of the bush, the artists took Oliver to Rugun (Crocodile Hole), a tiny outstation settlement between Kununurra and Warmun that is sited alongside a permanent waterhole. Once there, Oliver felt himself drawn into the quieter patterns of bush life: distanced from the blinding presence of alcohol that had hampered their time in town, the ideal that had been discussed in Kununurra began to take a more tangible form. Painting materials were sent from Melbourne and a space was established to begin work in earnest.

The feeling at Rugun was different to Kununurra, but if it was meditative and open it was also intense. As with the other tiny communities of the region, the immensity of the surrounding landscape is impossible to ignore: it presses down upon the scattering of rundown tin-clad houses with what at times feels like an impossibly oppressive weight. In the dry season the surrounding bush crackles with barely withheld electricity, seemingly poised to burst into flames at any moment. The horizon at this time is often apocalyptically stained by slow moving grass-fires.
When the wet season comes the world changes once again: driven by a relentless pattern of heavy rain the surrounding network of creeks that feed the waterhole regularly breach their banks. Spear grass rockets to head height, while access roads, at the mercy of the ebb and flow of floodwater, are often rendered impassable.

Rugun’s population is sporadic at best. When I visited a number of times in 2009 there were often as few as two people living there permanently, with others coming and going between various other settlements. Power is dependent on a diesel generator for which fuel is an hour’s drive away. Housing, basic today, was even more so in the late 1990s; little more than two-room, tin-sided huts with slab concrete floors and treacherously outdated plumbing (fig 5.1). During the time Oliver spent living there, cooking was mostly done outdoors on open fires. Staples like flour, tea, powdered milk and sugar were interspersed with fish from the waterhole, bush turkey and occasionally roughly butchered bullock meat from one of the handful of nearby Aboriginal-owned stations.

Adrift so far from his previous life in Melbourne, Oliver recalls Rugun in dual terms: it was, he told me, ‘the most wondrous thing and (...) the most frightening thing all at once’.

A number of photographs from the time, taken during the dry season, show Oliver holding paintings up for documentation. Kitted out as a cowboy, he squints into the sun, a scatter of precarious tin houses holding onto the dust behind him. In others the artists rest under shade in the heat of the day. Jandany smiles broadly over a work in progress, brush poised in hand. Behind him Bedford reclines in a chair, his leg cocked and hat pulled low as he lights a hand rolled cigarette (fig 5.2 & 3). In another the renowned Sydney art collectors Colin and Elizabeth Laverty, the first to visit the Jirrawun group at Rugun, sit crumpled by the heat in camping chairs. Although clearly enervated, they appear eminently pleased with the canvasses propped around them.
With a mixture of direct sales to visitors like the Laverty’s and a handful of initial exhibitions at galleries in Perth, Darwin and Melbourne, the money began to trickle in. Marked by low overheads, the project was soon self-sustaining.

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Peter Adsett, a well-regarded painter who was then coordinator of the painting program at The Northern Territory University (NTU) (now Charles Darwin University) visited Oliver and the artists at Rugun in August of 1998. Adsett was travelling at the invitation of his then-gallerist William Mora, an old friend of Oliver’s through whom he’d already established a representative relationship for the Jirrawun artists.

‘William wanted me to go out there and meet a guy he knew’, Adsett told me when I interviewed him in 2014.

By this time Oliver and the artists had been at Rugun for close to six months and had been painting solidly. Adsett and Mora slept in swags in a vacant house adjacent to the painting area: a small tin shed with an open concrete slab at the front on which the artists would gather each morning to work. Oliver showed his visitors through the collection that was stacked in the shed, much of which comprised of Bedford’s austere paintings. For Adsett it was already clear that the relationship between the two was the key to the entire project.

‘I can remember him saying that Paddy would be another Rover’, Adsett recalls (referring to Rover Thomas, the progenitor of the East Kimberley painting movement), still taken by the unshakable certainty of Oliver’s statement.

But even at this early stage, the pitfalls of cultural translation were emerging: ‘(I)t was very clear to me that the way that some paintings were being read by Tony (they) were being aestheticized by a Western aesthetic, even then’, Adsett explained to me. ‘He was picturing things in the work which were Western ideas but were not Aboriginal ideas at all.’
Adsett already understood something of these challenges: when he visited Rugun he had recently spent time as an artist in Pitjantjatjara country in the Western Desert and knew well the charismatic pull that remote places and people could enact. In these charged zones of contact, cultural certainties could easily become confused; mistakes could be made. But for Oliver, one senses this was exactly the point. If his experiences in Kununurra had been coloured by a sense of foreignness, life at Rugun compounded this quality ten-fold. Where others might have turned away, Oliver opened himself to the experience. At an almost inchoate level, the paintings had already begun to reflect this.

‘He was captured, absolutely,’ Adsett told me when I asked him if he felt Oliver was seduced by the charged nature of Rugun’s social environment. Nonetheless, Adsett recognised the potential of the embedded working model that was emerging. He readily lent what support he could.

‘I said to Tony and William out there that they needed proper facilities to develop this practice’, Adsett said. ‘It’s not going to happen in a small tin shed.’

In the New Year, at Adsett’s initiative the group began an 18-month residency at the painting workshop at NTU, shuttling back and forth between the remote Kimberley and Darwin, where they stayed with the Gija linguist Frances Kofod, a close friend of the artists. They would work in Darwin for a period of time and then they’d leave.

‘That was important,’ Adsett recalls, ‘they weren’t at the NTU (…) every week of every month. They would come and do a session and then go back to country.’

In Darwin, Oliver began dealing paintings to collectors in Melbourne and Sydney over the phone from Adsett’s office, which doubled as a storage space for new works. The artists spread throughout NTU’s painting and ceramic workshops with Oliver circulating amongst them. Fascinated, Adsett observed as the symbiotic dynamic between Oliver and Bedford continued to
evolve. ‘They were like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers’, Adsett said, only half-jokingly. ‘Tony had a knowledge of Western art and understood what line does and shape does and what colour does and what figure and ground is. (...) There was a kinship there really, in painting, there was a really strong personal relationship; they had respect for each other.’

Although the working environment established at NTU was generally open, the robust exchanges between Bedford and Oliver soon created a problem. Adsett recalls a white visitor who knew the artists from the Kimberley dropping by one day to find Oliver painting the background of one of Bedford’s works. A complaint was made; Oliver, incensed, responded immediately: he relocated the artists to a new studio at Kofod’s house in suburban Rapid Creek.

Adsett came and went as the project continued to develop in private: he watched as the collaborative aspect of Jirrawun stepped up a notch. The initial result was Blood on the Spinifex, one of the most significant exhibitions the group would realise.

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Shadowed in part by Adsett’s own ‘painted dialogue’ with Rusty Peters, Oliver conceived Blood on the Spinifex as a platform from which to expand Jirrawun’s collaborative potential. But whereas Adsett and Peters’ work – a collection of call and response paintings that Peters collectively titled Two Laws … One Big Spirit – was shaped by careful questions about the formal legitimacy and function of painting within

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19 In 1999 Adsett, who was back and forth between painting residencies in the US and South East Asia at the time, began a project with Rusty Peters. William Mora, who had exhibited Peters with his Melbourne gallery, originally suggested the two work together when they first met at Rugun. Peters and Adsett eventually produced what Adsett is careful to call a ‘dialogue’ rather than a ‘collaboration’. Each painter made a work at a set size in a reduced palette of black, white and red and the other responded to it. Peters titled the resulting body of work Two Laws… One Big Spirit, and it was first shown in its entirety at Darwin’s 24hr Art in August, 2000. Although Adsett always believed that Jirrawun might involve non-Aboriginal artists as part of an evolving intercultural dialogue the Two Laws… project ultimately fell outside of the group’s core vision.
cross-cultural conversations, Blood on the Spinifex was driven by the urgency of historical testimonial. Titled in reference to Blood on the Wattle, Bruce Elder’s acclaimed 1988 history of violence on Australia’s southeastern frontier, Oliver was encouraging the artists to revisit the most traumatic aspects of their region’s history: the violent conflict that had defined their people’s relations with the pastoralists who spearheaded the Kimberley’s settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although the paintings for Blood on the Spinifex were ultimately created in Darwin, the project’s conceptual home remained Rugun, where the remoteness and intimacy had combined to create an atmosphere of trust. Under the stars each night a shadow history of the region slowly emerged through the medium of Gija oral history. Gathered around communal campfires the senior artists, including Bedford, Timms and Peggy Patrick, recounted instances in which the brutal patterns of the frontier had manifested in violent encounter. Timmy Timms, the respected community leader Oliver had first met in his short stay at the Gija drinking camp in Kununurra, would often be the first to begin. He characterised what followed as ‘hard stories’. The others would listen gravely and then add their own accounts of the massacres and frontier violence that had been perpetrated in the region well into the twentieth century.

Once Oliver had encouraged the artists to exhibit paintings dealing explicitly with these narratives, and Frances Kofod had painstakingly transcribed the accompanying stories, the far-

20 For further discussion of this project see: K Mahood, ‘Two Laws, one Big Spirit’, Art Monthly Australia, November 2000, online only, (no longer archived).


22 A detailed account of this history (particularly in relation to the West Kimberley) is detailed in MA Jebb, Blood Sweat and Welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2002.

right revisionist historian Keith Windshuttle would openly question the veracity of their version of events. Initially, however, Oliver recalls that it was a simple and ideologically free exchange: the Gija spoke and he listened.

For him the stories immediately recalled a group of celebrated massacre paintings by Rover Thomas, among them Ruby Plains Massacre #1, (1990), in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. But Thomas’s recounting of these stories was far from straightforward: indeed, for many of the Jirrawun artists it was controversial due to his Wangkajunga/Kukatja descent in the Great Sandy Desert, far to the south of Gija country. In this, Oliver sensed an opportunity. Together, he thought, they might expand upon a project that Thomas’ celebrated works had flagged: they could present another take on the region’s frontier history.

‘I thought it would be interesting to see if they would paint stories from their own country about first contact and what happened,’ Oliver told me.

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Painted over eighteen months, Blood on the Spinifex opened at The Ian Potter Museum of Art at The University of Melbourne on December 14 2002, and ran into the following year. Key works were rendered in epic scale. The largest painting in the exhibition – Blackfella Creek, (2002), by Freddie Timms – extended across nine meters of pristine gallery wall; a

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25 The Jirrawun group also presented Fire Fire Burning Bright in the same year, the stage production that touched upon similar material. See footnote 5 above.
mournful flow of graceful lines and elipses, predominately black and grey highlighted by a shimmer of white dots.

Like the other works on display, Blackfella Creek recounted one of the ‘hard stories’ that had initially emerged at Rugun. In this case it was the narrative of an Aboriginal ‘outlaw’ called Major who stood accused of the murder of three white men at a site depicted in Timms’ painting as a seemingly innocuous circle of dots. Major was eventually shot by police in 1908, along with two other Aboriginal men, near the border between Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Timms’ grandmother had been with him when he was killed and years later had recounted the tale to her young grandson.26

But if Major was that rare figure who briefly cut back against the colonial tide and thus became a hero to his people, others inhabited a far more tragic place in local history. Timmy Timms’ work Mistake Creek Massacre, (2002), for example, depicted the site of the ambush and massacre of much of his mother’s family, an event that the historical record suggests occurred in 1915.27 As in many of the other works, the details laid out in this painting are bleak: a handful of survivors, a haunted landscape and a legacy of silence.

Yet although the stories were ‘hard’, audiences found themselves transfixed. Beyond the legacy of colonial violence, Blood on the Spinifex communicated a key feature of the Gija worldview, one rendered all the more powerful by the collective voice behind it. For the artists the fraught history of European settlement occupied a concurrent space to the psycho-mythological concept of the Gija Ngarranggarni (or Dreaming). In her accompanying catalogue essay on the recursive nature of historical trauma in the East Kimberley, Marcia Langton neatly encapsulated this quality as “the landscape behind the

27 ibid, p. 33.
landscape.”28 This embedded presence was perfectly illustrated by one of Bedford’s paintings for the exhibition, *Emu Dreaming and Bedford Downs Massacre*, (2002), a work that depicted the dual narratives that define a site at what is known by Europeans as Mount King. Equal parts geographic map, historical testimonial, and ancestral document, *Emu Dreaming and Bedford Downs Massacre* hinges on its ability to simultaneously stage what might otherwise be seen as distinct realities; to picture actual, mythological and historical spaces as a series of contingencies. For Bedford, as with other Gija (and many Aboriginal people) of his generation, the current moment remains cradled within the historical vastness of the surrounding landscape; the events that had played out there, both tangible and intangible, are etched in its very form. This is a quality that, in 2006, Michiel Dolk identified in terms of a “palimpsest”, a surface overwritten not only with “successive strata of memory” and ancestral origin, but by “events and imprints of the gardiya (settler-European) world.”29

This perspective provided striking contrast to European notions of history’s temporal progression. The fact that the prompt was recognised flagged the exhibition’s ultimate success: writing in *The Age* the art critic Robert Nelson called *Blood on the Spinifex* “a defining moment in public understanding of Aboriginal ideas.”30

### 5.4 A new modernism

Oliver’s work with the Jirrawun artists, and the revelations it was making possible, remained underwritten by his social position within their community. Marcia Langton – a strident supporter of the project in its early days who sat on Jirrawun’s Board of Directors for two separate periods – had

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realised this during a visit to the Kimberley two years earlier.

By then the Jirrawun group had largely left Rugun for the nearby and similarly remote community of Juwurlinji on Bow River Station (also known as Bow River Community). Langton’s visit followed soon after the economic collapse of Warmun’s community council had resulted in the withdrawal of basic services to a number of outstation settlements, an event that was having a clear impact on the lives of their inhabitants:

(Th)e people living there (at Juwurlinji) and in other small communities were starving (...). Tony Oliver was living in a swag like everyone else, his health suffering from the diet and pool of disease; the impact of such deprivation shows no regard for ‘race’.  

Like Geoffrey Bardon’s intent to breach the racially defined divide within Papunya a quarter of a century earlier, Oliver’s approach continued to make clear to his Gija collaborators that he was willing to enact an identity that contrasted starkly with the normative colonial experience. He readily recognises that this provided the framework for his acceptance and built the trust that allowed his role to develop in a more participatory direction.

‘It happened over a long period of time’, he told me. ‘A big part of it was kind of about checking me out, getting to know me. The fact that I lived with them, in exactly the same way, was really important. I wasn’t the white guy from the government, or the one who lives in the house and comes.’

His commitment to projects like Blood on the Spinifex formed an obvious expression of this, and in part could be defined as cultural advocacy, but there was also another side to Oliver’s vision. Although his early experiences in the Kimberley quickly sparked his anger and sense of injustice at the contemporary reality for Gija people, he was equally guided by an enduring commitment to modernist painting. As an art

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31 M Langton, Goowoomji’s world, p. 56.
dealer in the 1980s in Melbourne he had run Reconnaissance Gallery on Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. There he had organised exhibitions by canonical American artists including Philip Guston, Roy Lichenstein and Harvey Quaytman, as well as Australians including Imants Tillers and Paul Boston. He had, at the time, also made a number of pilgrimages to New York, the epicenter of late-modernism. While there he met dealers and artists, and spent a life changing few hours with Andy Warhol at The Factory (fig. 5.4). Later, he would show Warhol’s prints in Melbourne. In addition, Oliver had an art school education. Although he had never exhibited, over the course of his career he had interspersed his time as an art dealer with extended periods in which he focused on his own modernist-inflected paintings (indeed, he was doing this in Wollongong when he first met Timms during a visit to Melbourne). If nothing else, this had granted him the kind of intimate understanding of studio practice that often eludes even the most successful art coordinators.

In this light, the fact that Oliver looked towards Aboriginal Australia when he did should come as no surprise. Part of this was personal, but there was also a much broader context in play. By the late 1990s indigenous painting in Australia had firmly established within the vacuum left by the retraction, over the previous two decades, of the modernist-inflected painting that had once dominated much of the art world. The large minimal fields and painterly surfaces that marked East Kimberley painting were especially evocative of the reductive moments of late-modernism; a fact that rendered them a near-perfect visual substitute, even as they were establishing the parameters of an entirely new discourse. This was not just recognised by the Euro-centric art world either. Rover Thomas was among the Gija painters to remark upon such resonances early on: in an often recounted story, Thomas had in 1990 encountered the work of the American painter Mark Rothko during a visit to the National Gallery of Australia and immediately recognised a kindred spirit. He turned to the curator Wally Caruana, who was at the time working on Thomas’
first survey for the gallery, and humorously asked, ‘Who’s that bugger who paints like me?’

If this visual resonance had previously been a perfect example of a kind of superficial cultural relativism, Oliver’s guidance began to lend it more tangible form. For him, the potential interleaving between cultural domains that it suggested quickly became unavoidable. The concept of ‘two-way’, which had endured as Jirrawun’s conceptual bedrock, provided any justification he needed for this vision. Everywhere he looked he saw the chrysalis of a new modernism unbounded by the Western version to which he had subscribed throughout his own life in art: not only was it present in the stark works by the Jirrawun artists and the rough body painting that was a feature of Gija dance performances, he also sensed it in the weight of recent Gija history and the epic nature of their landscape-bound systems of belief.

Indeed, if the European diaspora and the trauma of the war had underwritten much of the epic and existential presence of the American modernism that Oliver embraced, for the Gija it was the tragic experiences that their people had endured beyond the colonial frontier, and which found such compelling form in Blood on the Spinifex. Put simply, an East Kimberley painting, no matter how attractive, had never been just a pretty picture. Oliver and the artists were not only aware of this, they worked to emphasise it: the quality became central to their work.

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Although a number of the artists who worked with Oliver enjoyed successful careers, Paddy Bedford became the one to conquer the contemporary art world in the most enduring manner. This was not only due to his stellar reception within the commercial art market, but because he also unequivocally succeeded in crossing the divide that still largely separates

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Aboriginal art and Western art in this country. The most compelling evidence of this came eight years after his meeting with Oliver, when his brief career culminated in a celebrated 2006 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney (fig. 5.5).

Curated by the MCA’s Russell Storer, the exhibition perfectly illustrated the fashion in which Aboriginal paintings like Bedford’s have come to reinforce a number of what are accepted as contemporary art’s defining traits. For one, their clear echoes of Western abstraction allow them to speak in modernist terms conterminously with their otherwise insistent ‘Aboriginality’. By this I mean that along with the traditional, political and historical narratives that have established a frame for Bedford’s work, his practice as a painter can also be read as his subject, and that this quality opens a space for the circulation of his paintings as contemporary art. As explored in the previous chapter, this kind of ‘doubling’ has been a defining feature in the reception of many other indigenous painters in Australia – Rover Thomas’s trajectory comes to mind as an obvious example, as does that, once again, of the late Anmatyere painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye – but if the discourses surrounding Bedford’s predecessors more often than not reinscribed established interpretations, by engaging Oliver’s guidance Bedford went one step further.

Indeed, even while utilising painting to assert his specific Aboriginal identity, Bedford seemingly articulated his practice in terms that played into its apparent modernism. A late-career quote included in his retrospective catalogue had him stating (to Oliver) that, after painting all his Mother’s and Father’s Country he was now ‘just painting’. This statement, radical when taken within the established interpretive context for Aboriginal art, can of course be construed in a number of ways, especially if we take into

account the challenges of cross-cultural communication. But, however one looks at it, ‘just painting’, and the focus on materiality as content that it implies, provides an unavoidable provocation to an art world inflected by modernism’s historical dominance.

Yet even though the discourses of contemporary art might have become attuned to Bedford’s practice in this manner, in keeping with a recurrent theme in this thesis the details and implications of its specific mode of production between cultures remained largely overlooked. Bedford’s exchanges with Oliver are, at best, opaque. In a similar fashion to Geoffrey Bardon’s presence in the literature on Western Desert painting, Oliver recurs throughout the literature on Bedford, yet the general art world understanding of his role remains as ‘facilitator’ rather than ‘collaborator’: an intermediary party whose presence neither disrupts or alters perceptions of Bedford’s singular artistic achievement, nor understandings of his specific subjectivity.

For Bedford, however, (and this is true for the entire Jirrawun collective) it’s hard to imagine that he wasn’t fully aware that Oliver’s participation in the creation of his work represented an effective strategy for his success; that he sensed in their intimate working relationship a means to engage the art world in ways that served both individual and collective purpose. Freddie Timms, it seems, knew this from the very beginning; it formed part of the knowledge that he imparted to his elders when he first encouraged them to join Oliver and himself at Pindan Avenue in Kununurra. Oliver’s presence, from this perspective, quickly becomes hard to ignore. As already discussed, the Jirrawun artists drew him to the centre of their lives, an act he reciprocated by way of his insider knowledge of the art world. Together they brokered not only a new kind of painting project and an attendant economy,

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34 In this light we might ask whether of not Bedford was referring to a conscious shift within his paintings, or simply reflecting Oliver’s own modernist-inspired rhetoric.
but the kind of knowledge-based exchange that already characterises Aboriginal cultures such as the Gija.\textsuperscript{35}

For Oliver this process carried with it a distinct sense of responsibility. He was quickly given a skin name – Joongoora – and thus placed within certain relationships with his Gija friends. For much of their time together this meant that he called Bedford ‘Father’ and Bedford called him ‘son’. When in his final years Bedford’s health and mobility began to decline this reversed: in an expression of the younger man’s responsibility towards him, he called Oliver ‘Dad’.

Oliver’s role in the studio can easily be cast as part of this pattern of reciprocity. Soon after he arrived in the Kimberley his impact became clear: large canvases, evocative expanses of wet-on-wet paint and highly poised reductive compositions began to dominate the work Jirrawun became associated with. This was a highly conscious creative strategy that bonded the existing local aesthetics of Gija painting to the love of late New York modernism that still traced the boundaries of his own artistic vision. But it was also more than this. If Bardon can be seen as a ‘collaborator’ in the emergence of Western Desert art through his active encouragement of the surrounding creative milieu (a process that ultimately became a form of creative participation in and of itself), Oliver took this notion through its next logical steps. He entered into a robust poetic exchange in the studio that compounded imagined distinctions between his own creative practice and those of the artists he worked with. In this he enacted the more overt order of collaboration that Bardon – as well as more recent third party figures like Will Stubbs in Yirrkala – had gone to great pains to avoid.

The resulting intimacy is nothing if not striking. Oliver was actively involved in the production of the old man’s entire

\textsuperscript{35} In the Kimberley region this process finds a particular resonance in the traditional Wurnan exchange economy. See, for example, A Redmond and F Skyring.
oeuvre; present, often one-on-one, for the over 700 paintings on canvas and paper that Bedford created between his ‘discovery’ in 1998 and his death in 2007.\(^{36}\)

In contrast to the other Jirrawun artists, who with the exception of Timms sometimes went months without setting foot in the studio, Bedford’s practice was for the most part a daily ritual. In a routine that mirrored his earlier life as a stockman, he and Oliver woke with the sun. They usually painted in the cool hours of the morning, before resting in the heat of the day. Their working proximity – essentially a process that brought the creativity of each into sustained alignment – set a pattern that readily reached beyond the studio. After painting Bedford and Oliver often ate and socialised together. They made pilgrimages, at times by helicopter, to key sites in Bedford’s traditional country. When bodies of work were completed they travelled to gallery openings in metropolitan centres, each often dressed in dapper new suits tailored for the occasion. That Oliver advised Bedford closely was simply part of this broader relationship. He finessed the scale and colour of the old man’s paintings, encouraging his painted ‘accidents’ to become a conscious part of his artistic lexicon. By introducing Bedford to the medium of gouache on paper he provided a means for Bedford to experiment with composition and colour on a small scale (fig. 5.6). Eventually, Oliver would even go as far as assisting Bedford with the painterly backgrounds and infill on large canvases. As Bedford’s work progressed this aspect became more and more pronounced: increasingly these backgrounds can be read as a significant part of each work; moody washes of pigment that align Bedford’s paintings with those of Philip Guston, one of Oliver’s favourite post-war American painters.

\(^{36}\) As already mentioned, Bedford also created an unknown number of paintings during a visit to the Kimberley town of Derby, during which he was commissioned by an independent Aboriginal art dealer to make a series of work. In terms of size, material and technique these works stand apart from Bedford’s other work. Due to the unknown ethical aspect of the arrangement surrounding these works they are generally treated as ‘outside’ Bedford’s oeuvre. When I refer to Bedford’s oeuvre, I refer to the works reproduced in his MCA catalogue. See, L Michael (ed.), pp 143-183.
whose exhibition of drawings in the early 1980s was perhaps the greatest coup for his gallery in Melbourne.

As part of the broader Jirrawun project, this process would for Oliver form a kind of ‘meta-practice’; it engaged the full gamut of his own creativity. Given his own artistic enthusiasms, it’s unsurprising that he came to conceive of this vast, increasingly ambitious collaborative project in terms inherited from the New York art world: for him the shared studio became a kind of post-Warholian ‘factory’, a socially-driven enterprise in which various creative visions intersected beneath his own guiding hand.

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If at one level Bedford’s MCA retrospective was fundamentally (and, of course, unavoidably) activated by this relationship, its more intimate details remained largely hidden. Oliver was everywhere and nowhere all at once, a ghost-like presence sensed in each of the exhibition’s galleries, increasingly evident as the chronology of work mapped by default the growing proximity of their working relationship.

Regardless of this – or perhaps because of it – the retrospective was well received, its run extended by popular demand. The Sydney Morning Herald’s chief art critic, John Macdonald – famously hard to please – noted in a glowing review that “(i)f one had to choose a single indigenous artist to represent the state of Aboriginal art, it would be hard to go past Paddy Bedford.” Yet Macdonald, even though writing a world away from Jirrawun’s base in the Kimberley, sensed there was more to the exhibition than met the eye. Oliver, he went on to suggest, although undeniably dedicated to the Gija cause, “bears a closer resemblance to Svengali than he does to Daisy Bates.”

38 Ibid.
This comparison goes someway towards illustrating the difficulty the Western art world has in conceiving a role like Oliver’s accurately. Svengali – the archetypal manipulator – acts only in his own interest; Oliver, by contrast, is quick to point out that if Jirrawun was a ‘manipulation’, it was one that cut both ways. In this light the most interesting element of the retrospective may have been a photograph that was included in the accompanying catalogue (fig. 5.7).

Reproduced alongside a short preface by Oliver, it shows him seated beside Bedford at a temporary studio in the Darwin suburb of Coconut Grove. It was taken in 1999, just after the residency at Northern Territory University had been relocated to Frances Kofod’s house at Rapid Creek, and a year after the two first met.

Each are dressed in similar fashion: cowboy hats, jeans and Western-style shirts. This is the uniform of the northern Aboriginal stockman; a point of sartorial pride for the men of Bedford’s generation and one that Oliver adopted soon after his arrival in the Kimberley. For each, we might imagine it represents a complex strategy of social mimicry; that for Bedford it harks back to his time as a pastoral worker and the change and adaptation this signaled, while for Oliver it flags his far more recent commitment to Bedford’s world: his symbolic divestment of his prior urban identity.

Oliver leans in towards the much older man, resting his hand on his leg. The detritus of a recent painting session fills the studio in the background; the eyes of each gleam, there’s a sense of almost proprietorial closeness.

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Although this photograph explicitly displays the bond between Oliver and Bedford, his impact on the work of the other Jirrawun artists is also clear. In 2006, for example, Phyllis Thomas began a series of black and white, horizontally striped paintings. These were based on ‘Gemerre’, the traditional Gija scarification practice
that cuts across Thomas’s arms and torso (fig. 5.8). In a much starker exchange than that which characterised his work with Bedford, the series was conceived entirely by Oliver with Thomas in mind.

For inspiration, he looked towards the work of the celebrated Australian modernist Tony Tuckson, that of the Irish painter Sean Scully and a similarly stark series by Emily Kame Kngwarreye that had gained iconic status within the canon of Aboriginal art. He also drew on the Gija practice of body painting for ‘Joonba’ – narrative dance performances he had attended many times during his decade in the Kimberley. In the process the paintings became Thomas’s, both for the art world, for Oliver and for her as the artist.

Thomas’ own conception of this process was clear: when I spoke to her about these paintings in 2009 she told me that Oliver ‘gave’ them to her. For his part Oliver explained to me that he participated in the first painting of the series ‘completely’: in his words ‘a tick for a tick’. Part of this came down to technique: he wanted to show Thomas what would happen when a black background was painted over while still wet and some of the darkness was allowed to leach through. But his guidance also ran to more conceptual concerns: ‘I said to her, Look, you can make your reds run like blood, like initiation’, he recalls.

After the first painting, which for Oliver remains the strongest from the Gemerre series, he stepped back. His presence, however, was still integral: ‘I would always have to be with her’, he told me. ‘I’d put the black grounds down for her and they’d have to be hit (by the next layer of paint) at exactly the right time to get that charcoal effect.’

These exchanges fitted into an established pattern: Oliver had advised closely on Thomas’ paintings throughout her short career. The narrative works she had contributed to Blood on the Spinifex as well as to her 2002 solo exhibition The Escape, held at Raft Artspace in Darwin, for example, had all been carefully workshopped in the studio. The figurative elements in
Making in translation

these works – difficult for Thomas to execute yet integral to their narrative – had, with her tacit approval, also been painted by Oliver.\(^{39}\) But as successful as this process became in collective terms, it ultimately raised a unique challenge. Even if he had for the most part transfigured his own practice into the Jirrawun project, Oliver remained a painter himself.

‘I was giving away a lot of my own ideas about paintings I might have done later’, he explained to me when I first interviewed him in 2012. ‘(I was) inventing these techniques and getting to know the materials really well and then giving them away (...).’

At one level this speaks of an infinitely simple idea, one underscored by an aesthetic and conceptual generosity. Following this thread of thought, it would be easy to argue that Oliver acted as little more than a kind of art tutor; that he simply recognised the individual strengths of each artist’s work and encouraged them towards a closer understanding of the

\(^{39}\) A similar exchange had occurred in an acclaimed painting by Rusty Peters called Chinaman’s Garden Massacre, (2000), which was included in Blood on the spinifex and is now held in the collection of The Art Gallery of New South Wales (fig. 5.9). The work features figurative renderings of a small frontier-style hut and a number of trees. ‘I painted the house’, Oliver told me, ‘but he (Peters) painted the trees, which are done in a very Western style.’ Like Phyllis Thomas, Peters had his own conception of this exchange: Oliver recalls that Peters said to him, ‘you paint the house because that’s not our law. You’re a white man, you paint it’. Yet even this apparently clear-eyed instruction may have been clouded by the difficulties of cultural translation. Oliver noted to me that Peters might simply have not have trusted his own ability to model the requisite architectural space. Another prominent instance of Oliver’s vision lies in the painterly washes of Rammey Ramsey’s Warlawoon series, which Ramsey began in 2005 (fig. 5.10). These possess a clear resonance with Oliver’s enduring respect for the work of American painter Philip Guston, (1930–1980), whose drawings he had once shown in a commercial exhibition at his gallery Reconnaissance, in Melbourne in the early 1980s. This intersection is explicit in three works – Gum Hole, (2005), by Paddy Bedford; Head, (1975), by Philip Guston; and Warlawoon Country 3, (2004), by Ramsey – reproduced in Bedford’s MCA catalogue in illustration of Michiel Dolk’s essay. Dolk, however, avoids the specific implications these works suggest when seen together. He notes only that Guston was “much admired” by Oliver and adds in an endnote that “PB may have encountered a reproduction of this work by Guston in a catalogue owned by Tony Oliver. Generally, however, his indifference to European art and limited susceptibility to such influences is remarkable.”

In relation to Ramsey’s works Dolk notes Ramsey’s own conception that his style of painting related directly to the atmospheric conditions of his traditional country, specifically clouds of billowing dust. No mention is made of Oliver’s impact on these works.

See, M Dolk, pp. 22–23.
art world within which the value of their paintings would ultimately be established. Yet the simplicity of this conception belies the dense patterning of exchange through which such action is enabled. As with others who have found themselves within similar cultural spaces, Oliver’s actions were calibrated to a constantly changing set of local transactions. If this process were to succeed he needed to be an embedded actor within the artist’s worlds.

In addition, Oliver’s robust engagements (‘a tick for a tick’) occurred not before artists such as Phyllis Thomas reached acclaim, but exactly at the point they did. The paintings he worked on – not as an assistant, but as a kind of creative guide whose aesthetic fluency (in Western modernism specifically and painting more generally) quickened each work’s traction – immediately entered each artist’s oeuvre; indeed, they formed core content for some of Jirrawun’s most celebrated exhibitions.

If we understand Jirrawun not simply as a united collective, but as a social organism consisting of various individuals – each in possession of their own ideals, and, one assumes, their own understandings of creative agency – we might understand this practice in terms of a sliding scale. Oliver adapted his approach to each artist according not only to the friendship they shared, but to their individual character. Sometimes his guidance was minimal, in other cases far more pronounced. As already discussed, by the time Jirrawun hit its stride in the art world he had brokered a strikingly embedded role for himself: not only had the artists shared the highs and lows of his experiences in the Kimberley, together they had opened a far more collaborative space than that occupied by other key art coordinators. Here Oliver found himself able to act where others couldn’t (or perhaps wouldn’t).

The flip side of this concerns authorship, a question that at times has seemed to hang heavy over the whole Jirrawun project. Surely, the thinking goes, if we can establish the intimacy of Oliver’s role as discussed above, then the
paintings were at some fundamental level not only the artist’s alone, but his as well?

Once again this directs us towards difficult territory. Where do ideas come from, we might ask, and who owns them? If Oliver’s thinking was sparked by his charged experiences within the Gija world, were the specific contours of his thought really his, or was he simply mining their world to furnish his own, and vice versa? Would it defeat the collaborative spirit of the Jirrawun project to ask whose idea was what, or whose hand was responsible for which mark? Surely the power of collaboration lies in the blurring of these boundaries, in the fact that it renders what was distinct, indistinct, and in doing so forges something new?

* 'It was direct,' Oliver told me during one of our interviews.

He was referring to the feeling of being granted access to Gija culture; that it wasn’t mediated in the fashion one is so used to in relation to its Western counterpart. There was no media, art museums or books to filter his experience: if it were to be rendered tangible, it had to be lived. He characterised this quality as ‘primary access’.

The ever-present Kimberley landscape played a central role in this. Oliver began to think that at times he glimpsed it through Gija eyes; that he came to understand how, in the fashion emphasised by Blood on the spinifex, it provided a living backdrop upon which contemporary events merged with those from the far distant past.

'The landscape just spoke to you,' he said. 'That was the language, in the dry season or the wet or the storms. You just become so acutely aware of your environment, of nature. (...) Through that comes creativity - it’s feeding you all the time, every hour of the day you’re absorbing that.'

Within the traditional Gija world, the resulting creativity takes on a unique cast. It can, for example, easily be equated
with a social power that forgoes Western conceptions of individual thought or action. Indeed, such interchange between the collective and the individual underpins much creative practice in the region. The best-known example perhaps lies in Rover Thomas’s genesis as an artist, through which the very blueprint for Gija painting was set. Thomas ‘found’ the basis of his practice when his recently deceased classificatory mother visited him while he slept. Critically injured in a car crash, she had died en-route to Perth during a medical airlift. Thomas dreamt of the country her spirit had flown above and as he did was revealed a sequence of associated songs: he awoke with the outline of a new narrative dance cycle – known in this case as a Guirr Guirr – in his mind.

The performance of the Guirr Guirr ultimately included iconographic paintings that were held aloft by dancers to furnish the narrative: works that were initially produced by others – notably Paddy Jaminji – even as the Guirr Guirr remained fundamentally associated with Thomas’s discovery of it. In contrast to a modernist emphasis on individuality, understanding the genesis of such thinking, and the forms of creativity that result, may only be possible by way of its collective features.

From this perspective we might understand that although the question of why the paintings that drove artists like Bedford to acclaim were never marketed as ‘collaborations’ in the Western sense of the word is unavoidable, it points us in the wrong direction. After all, they took form within a cultural framework in which each artist’s understanding of collaboration – whether conceptual, physical or otherwise – may never have threatened their right to claim sole authorship of the resulting works.

In the example of Bedford – a manambarram (senior Gija law man) – one imagines this had little to do with studio process (which often provides the locus for Western conceptions of  

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40 W Christensen, pp. 32-33.
collaborative process) and everything to do with ancestral responsibility. He only ever painted sites in his mother and father’s country, places intrinsically linked to his very identity. This line, clearly marked within Gija law, he never crossed. In this way, Bedford ‘owned’ the pictures he painted with Oliver in fundamental fashion.

It follows that although Oliver’s embeddedness in this process creates a rupture within the established interpretive frame of indigenous contemporary art like Bedford’s, the issue that his presence raises is not necessarily, or at least not wholly, that which the art world might anticipate. Its problematic terrain is not formed by whether or not Oliver’s hand authored key works from Bedford’s oeuvre, or even whether or not his assistance should be retrospectively credited as the practices he collaborated on continue to circulate in the art world. Approaching his exchanges with Bedford and his fellow artists from this perspective comes dangerously close to dismissing them in terms of ‘scandal’. As other episodes in the world of Aboriginal art have proven, this simply provides a means to ignore the challenge that the collaborative aspect of practices like Bedford’s enact.\(^{41}\)

If we are to avoid this route and instead seek to open a new discursive space, we need to examine the prevailing categories that the art world continues to hold close, in particular the limiting notions of authenticity often brought to bear upon senior Aboriginal artists like Bedford. These limits highlight a prevalent inability to visualise a space for indigenous contemporary art beyond that framed by modernist-inflected notions of authorship and its attendant assumption (Western in formation) of individual genius.

By ordering the reception of practices like Bedford’s, such modes ignore the most radical characteristic of his art; namely that in collaboration with Oliver this elderly Gija man drew on

\(^{41}\) See for example: FR Myers, ‘Representing culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings’, pp. 26–62.
his life experience, his seniority within his own culture, and
his existing experience of cultural exchange to actively
authorise a new process of creative dialogue. This unfolded in
a social space mapped between cultural domains, and in doing so
created means and processes that would benefit each. Put
simply, as with events at Papunya it allowed a new kind of art
to take shape. Its features – collectively imagined into being –
were cast by a highly localised set of demands even as,
through Oliver, a pattern of logic was appropriated from the
broader art world.

For his part Oliver downplays the question of authorship,
especially when it begins to extend into difficulties of
attribution. ‘It was always relaxed,’ he told me once,
referring to the atmosphere he and the artists cultivated in
the studio. ‘I was comfortable. The only thing that made me
uncomfortable was the way in which whites perceived it.’

Indeed, he argues that his time in the Kimberley was always
driven by what he terms a ‘true feeling’. During our interviews
he emphasised that everything that occurred was not only
authorised by the artists he was working with, it was also
deeply reciprocal in nature. His work with Bedford developed
the way it did simply because within the boundaries of their
relationship it felt right. Labouring alongside one another in
the heat of the Kimberley, bent to the same task, brought each
into intensely focused creative alignment; closer than few
other experiences would have.

Once again, this was at one level strikingly simple.
Bedford, Oliver recalls,

(…) genuinely loved painting. And it was just something that in
the end we shared; we met, we understood each other very well.
It became like a dance or something. Choreographed. It was just
something otherworldly.

5.5 Endings

Deeply contingent upon Oliver’s clearly identified position
within the densely woven Gija social fabric, Jirrawun
eventually proved to be unsustainable. Its exhibition projects hinged upon an increasingly interdependent form of creativity, yet space to unpack the true implications of this process was never opened. In the absence of any deeper understanding, the ideological (and commercial) value of individual authorship took precedent.

This blind spot was combined with the ever-present spectre of emotional burnout on Oliver’s part. His modus operandi had always been to live at the centre of the lives of those he collaborated with; each new step in their collective vision hinged upon a charged and often traumatic social space.

It was far from an easy reality to be a part of. By the end of his time in the Kimberley young Gija men and women he’d known since childhood were, one by one, beginning to fall victim to the region’s vicious social patterns. Largely illiterate, they were entering what for most would be a short adulthood marred by alcohol abuse, violence and ill health. In addition, the older generation that had drawn him close were now passing, and with them much of the binding knowledge that grants the Gija such intellectual and cultural poise, and provides them some resilience against the day to day tragedies of contemporary life.

For Oliver, an unavoidable reality began to take shape: the painting movement Jirrawun had sparked and the independent economy it had briefly enabled could make little difference. He began to question his own motivations – whose dream was it that had played out over his years in the Kimberley? If he left, what would remain?

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These questions were thrown into stark relief by the work he undertook with Vondean, Tennielle, Remika and Ramona Nocketta, a group of teenaged sisters whom Oliver had known since they were children at Rugun. Dubbed The Jirrawun Girls, the project developed over a charged couple of weeks at a block...
of land Oliver had purchased outside the town of Wyndham, 100km north west of Kununurra.

The block, which had a rundown house and a large machinery shed on it, later became the site of Jirrawun’s short-lived purpose built studio, but before these plans came to fruition Oliver presided over a series of painting workshops there. In 2006 these were focused towards an ambitious curatorial project – ‘Women’s Business’, an exhibition of the Jirrawun women for Sherman Galleries in Sydney.

Oliver had always been taken by the graffiti with which the sisters, as part of the small army of wayward Aboriginal youth that roamed Kununurra’s streets at night, decorated the town. Marked by a unique Kriol lexicon, the unadorned lists of names and insults possessed an undeniable aesthetic appeal that chimed immediately with Oliver’s vision: ‘I saw Jean-Michel Basquait in it,’ he once told me, in reference to the enfant terrible of New York’s 1980s art boom.

In establishing an aesthetic framework within which to translate the girls’ loose graffiti, Oliver employed the technique he had honed with the senior artists. He looked not only towards Basquait, but to one of the great antipodean modernists: New Zealand’s Colin McCahon, whose late-period paintings embedded text and landscape to austere effect. Oliver encouraged the girls to experiment with their text in new ways, providing the backgrounds and finessing each composition. They scrawled large phrases over flat expanses of colour; elsewhere they wrote lists of names that combined alliterative and visual effect:


Backgrounds coupled the expressive wet-on-wet blending of paint that Oliver had developed with Bedford and the graphic renderings of barramundi scales borrowed from paintings he had developed with the senior Jirrawun artist Goody Barrett.
Yet the blindspot around collective authorship that had marked the public reception of much of Jirrawun’s wider work endured regardless of the robust exchanges that underwrote this process. Oliver himself played into it. The essay he prepared for *Women’s Business* focused on the vacuum of the sisters’ social lives rather than the transactional process of creativity they had forged together in the studio:

Their graffiti is tame in comparison to their lives (...) The content of their paintings covers the walls of Kimberley towns and communities. It is the only language that is screaming at the great Australian indifference and to all sides of politics (...) 42

Referring to the Western audience for Aboriginal art, he continued: “We want the artist’s ‘dreaming stories’ – a European fetish obsessed with the exotic and the spiritual – but not their humanity and their day-to-day reality as contemporary people.” 43

Regardless of how heartfelt this sentiment was for Oliver, nor how accurate, he also understood the art market. The value of individual authorship – or in the case of the Jirrawun Girls, a collective Aboriginal agency unfettered by non-Aboriginal assistance – was, of course, financial as well as ideological.

Their works, although controversial in their tacit rejection of traditional modes of Gija painting, sold out. The largest, ‘Kununurra Midnight Prowl,’ (2006), a horizontal black and white composition dominated by the phrase ‘BIG SLUT’, was sold to a private collector for $25,000 (fig. 5.11). When the renowned German curator René Block saw it during a visit to Sydney he immediately included it in the sprawling 2006 Belgrade Salon exhibition, ‘Art, Life and Confusion’. 44

43 ibid.
Building beyond the sisters’ sudden success, however, was where the project foundered. Oliver was always idealistic when it came to Jirrawun’s capacity to enact change in the lives of the artists. For him the opportunity for The Jirrawun Girls was clear: he wanted them to establish international careers. This would, in turn, provide a means to transcend their local realities.

‘For most people it would have been easy to orchestrate,’ he told me. ‘Get on a plane and go to New York, have a show (...) It would have been easy. You will be huge. For the rest of your life you can paint and you can make this good income and you can escape this bullshit you’re living in. They can’t do that.’

‘What was possible and what (could have been) possible – the gap was just amazing’, he said.

‘It just comes back this schism – [The East Kimberley] is not a normal place. It’s not even Harlem, New York. It makes Jean-Michel Basquait look like the bourgeois middle class kid that he was. But these girls were actually the real deal, they really were.’

The questions that had been haunting him returned:

‘So you start thinking, What am I doing this for? Because all the opportunities are happening, and people are interested but it’s (at) this end that you can’t do it. It’s the social conditions where I’m living and where they’re living that’s the problem. They can’t conceive anything other, they’re sort of conditioned into this destruction (...)’

As an art collective The Jirrawun Girls drew together only momentarily; the paintings realised during the weeks they worked with Oliver in the machinery shed at Wyndham comprised their entire oeuvre.

The full details of the Belgrade salon exhibition are as follows: 47th October Art Salon: Art, Life and Confusion, Belgrade, Serbia, Curated by Rene Block and Barbara Heinrich, September 29 – November 5, 2006.
Nicolas Rothwell, who through his friendship with Oliver came to know the girls well, recently summed up the project’s legacy in carefully measured terms: “The sisters went their separate ways; one of them died. The bleak tone of their graffiti had been predictive.”

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In 2007 – a year after Women’s Business opened – Jirrawun’s instability could no longer be ignored. Following a brief illness, Bedford passed away. Without their star artist the collective’s fragile intercultural scaffolding began to crumble.

By his death Bedford was a painter of iconic stature whose instantly recognisable work had been collected around the world. The funeral service was held at Juwurlinji and gathered together many of the dignitaries and collectors who’d supported Jirrawun over the years alongside Bedford’s family from throughout the greater Kimberley area. Sir William Dean, an early supporter of Jirrawun who had opened Blood on the Spinifex five years earlier, delivered the eulogy.

In front of the small crowd who’d come to pay their respects, many of them flying the length of the country to be there, Oliver arranged his own memorial: an uncannily precise approximation of one of Bedford’s Cockatoo Dreamings he’d painted on a large sheet of calico. It depicted the same story as the rough works on board that had originally brought he and Bedford together all those years ago at Chocolate Thomas’s house in Warmun.

In hindsight, it’s difficult not to see this act as a veiled public admission of the collaborative process that had carried Bedford’s work to acclaim, yet had remained unspoken. Far more than simple homage, Oliver had painted it following Bedford’s death, channeling his grief into one last creative outpouring. Although few made the connection, the inference was

\[\text{45 N Rothwell, ‘The Writing’s on the Wall’, p. 9.}\]
clear: Oliver had not only lost his friend, he had lost the
daily practice they had shared so closely. Free to make his own
paintings once more, he found himself unable to make a mark
that felt truly his.

Oliver’s feelings following Bedford’s death were mixed;
sadness was unbearably tinged with relief. Often driven to
despair, he had by then attempted to leave the Kimberley a
number of times and in recent years had holidayed in Vietnam
where he’d begun to build another life. It was always his
relationship with Bedford that had drawn him back; they both
knew the old man’s painting career was contingent on his
presence, their collaboration too deeply encoded for either of
them to continue their interwoven creative project alone.

‘I couldn’t leave him’, Oliver told me recently, as if he
was still grappling with the idea years after Bedford’s
passing. ‘We were chained together, climbing the mountain. I
had to see it out’.

In late 2007, after toying with the idea of remaining at
Jirrawun’s helm, Oliver left for good, relocating to Vietnam to
be with his new wife and infant son. It wasn’t a smooth
transition: in his first years there the darker experiences
he’d had in the Kimberley would constantly return to him. He
found himself plagued by nightmares.

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Once held up as a shining jewel in Australia’s Aboriginal
art world, Jirrawun folded a short two years later. I was
there, brought on board for twelve months in 2009 to try and
turn around an organisation that, despite Oliver’s attempts to
plan an exit strategy, had been left in free-fall. Most of the
artists had already lost faith and the largely non-indigenous
board of directors – originally set up simply to provide
governance support – were overcome by indecision and
infighting.

Since Oliver’s departure Jirrawun had slid irretrievably
deep into debt. An interim manager – drawn by the board of
directors from the mining industry – had negotiated a $30,000 a month consulting contract, and stayed for two years. Collectors who’d been carefully cultivated by Oliver had turned their backs: for many Bedford’s death and Oliver’s departure had largely defused the magic. Crippled by staggeringly high overheads the small financial reserve the organisation had rapidly amassed had dissipated even faster.

Like many others, I hoped that Jirrawun’s struggles might seed renewal. However, as with most of the art world I too had little idea of how robust Oliver’s creative engagements had become, and by extension how contingent the organisation had been upon his presence. Those that did know kept quiet, perhaps uncertain of how this unique narrative would be cast in the harsh light of public opinion.

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Since then most of the remaining artists have continued to paint, hoping still to claim a portion of the rapidly contracting Aboriginal art market. Most have transitioned to working with Warmun’s community art centre, Warmun Art, and a number – including Rammey Ramsey and Rusty Peters – have gone on to hold solo exhibitions. Yet the tangible sense remains that if Jirrawun flagged a new form of indigenous painting, the moment has passed.

Bedford’s work remains highly regarded; he is now often mentioned in the same breath as two of Australia’s most recognisable Aboriginal painters: Rover Thomas and Emily Kame Kngwarreye. In late 2013 a vast interpretation of his work ‘Medicine Pocket’, (2005), was painted on the fuselage of a new QANTAS 737-800 jet.46 His estate, containing over one hundred and fifty works at the time of his death, has been carefully

managed by the executors of his will.\footnote{K Strickland, Affaires of the Art, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2013, pp. 90-93.} A single-artist sale drawn from this collection was held in Sydney by Bonham’s Auctions in late 2011. It netted close to one and a half million dollars from twenty-six lots.\footnote{Bonhams Auctions, Selected works from the estate of Paddy Bedford, 21 November 2011, <http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20102/>}, viewed 22 November 2014. Proceeds pass equally between Bedford’s family members, an education trust for Gija students set up at his behest, and, until recently, Jirrawun, reduced to nothing more than a legal entity.\footnote{K Strickland, p. 91.} Oliver’s role in Bedford’s striking work remains rarely mentioned and if it is, little understood.

5.6 Displaced modernists

What should be clear by now is that although Oliver’s experiences took shape independently, he nonetheless finds an echo in others who have acted in similar roles, both in an historical and contemporary context. Although one might readily argue he reached further that either, Oliver was, at one level, Battarbee and Bardon rolled into one.

Yet what I want to do here is shift focus outwards. For although the history of indigenous contemporary art in Australia is patterned with figures who, like Oliver, have embedded themselves within specific social spaces and localities, his approach – and in particular his modernist-inflected aesthetic ideology – calls to mind broader conceptions of the importance of ‘outsiders’ in the rise of indigenous modernisms elsewhere.

Writing on the development of Native North American modernism in the early to mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Ruth B Phillips points to its dialogic nature, tracing what she refers to as “a pattern of encounter and cross-appropriation.”\footnote{RB Phillips, ‘The turn of the primitive’, p. 47.} She observes that third party figures acting between indigenous artists and
Western art worlds have often been key in countering colonially inscribed tropes of disappearance that were (and in some cases still are) premised on an invisibility of cultural forms and practices. In an historical sense she casts these intermediaries as displaced modernists; “stranger-artists” wandering beyond the borders of their own worlds who possess an affinity with the dispossession of those they encounter.

Similar encounters in Australian contexts that have borne new forms of creativity in this country’s contemporary contact zone can thus be seen in light of a series of international precedents. Phillips uses the example of European modernists driven by the cataclysmic upheavals wrought by early 20th century conflict, who found themselves lodged in the colonised world where their artistic vision gained newly intercultural foothold. “In all these encounters”, she argues, “we find the same triangulated pattern, which brings into dynamic association the de-territorialised Western artist, the colonized and dispossessed native artist, and the modernist European ideology of artistic primitivism.”

Although in a post-1970s Australian art world the rhetoric of artistic primitivism has widely been replaced in favour of the multivalent narratives of contemporary art, the resonance here is clear. Between the vision of the art world (which remains inflected by modernism’s historical dominance); that of the dispossessed artists; and that of their intermediary/interloper (in this case Oliver), we can trace a complex social network that bifurcates cause and effect between these participant parties.

Where art markets are involved, driven by the commodity-status of objects and the complexities of authenticity and contingent value than so often result, things are further

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51 ibid p. 48.
52 ibid p. 47.
53 ibid p. 48.
54 ibid.
complicated. In this context Peter Wollen’s notion of the ‘animateur’ is once again apt. He notes that the key transition in frontier art production like that of the Kimberley is its shift – often mediated by outsiders – from small-scale trade items to recognizable ‘fine’ art.55

“Often”, he writes, “this shift can (...) be traced back to the efforts of a single animateur, who may be Western, often an artist who encouraged more ambitious production, both in scale and in quality control.”56

In this context the fact that a productive reading of Bedford’s work can be made through the prism of his decade-long interactions with Oliver should come as no surprise. Each finds form through the other, a means to act where otherwise they couldn’t. Phillips observes that in settler societies this exchange results in “specific and complexly intertextual forms” for the following reason: “the valences of displacement and indigeneity are doubled. Both the stranger artist and the indigenous artist are deterritorialised (...) the stranger as immigrant or exile and the native through colonial histories of displacement” (italics in original).57

Although Oliver, like Bardon before him, wasn’t an immigrant or exile in the way that Phillips uses the term, his experiences are characterised by a similar, albeit self-imposed, kind of exile. He consciously set himself adrift beyond the familiar borders of the settler-Australian world and in doing so became an actor within a charged intercultural zone. According to Phillips it is exactly this kind of shared displacement – a feeling that forces each party to relocate their identities in new ways – that prompts new forms of creativity at the cultural interface.

In the East Kimberley, as elsewhere in Australia, this common ground rests upon the traumatic foundational structure

56 ibid, p. 196.
57 RB Philips, ‘The turn of the primitive’, p. 49.
of regional history. The events that sparked a local painting movement in this ‘remote’ corner of Australia’s north west occurred within long-established geographies of exchange formed by local currents of colonial incursion and the multi-faceted cross-cultural encounters that came as a result.

Indeed, the region’s contemporary art practice highlights a specific intercultural juncture when considered against the pastoral industry that led its colonial invasion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Henry Skerritt has observed, the seismic inter-generational ruptures created by this historical event quickly formed “an interzone that required creative forms of social performance (...) to make the realities of the new order psychically cogent” — a kind of rift that opened a space for the creation of new cultural identities and, ultimately, enabled the invention of Gija painting. Although premised upon subjugation, the colonial experience created a space for cosmopolitan exchange: quite literally the frontier recast as the contact zone.

The Gija men and women who would, in the 1980s and 1990s, become the region’s celebrated first-generation painters were embedded at this interface long before art-making for external contexts became a going concern. Indeed, their familiarity with the intercultural realities of the colonial frontier undoubtedly provided them means to engage the production of art-as-exchange as a way to maintain their cultural visibility and, to varying extents, enact some form of economic freedom in light of the growing reality of welfare dependence. Like others of his generation, Bedford came of age within this unsettled intercultural environment, and was long familiar with its often-brutal patterns. As many commentators on his practice are quick to point out, this fact was an embedded part of his very identity. Not only had he been born and raised on Bedford Downs

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Pushing the line

Station (where he later worked as a stockman), but he bore the name of its violent proprietor, a domineering Irish settler called Paddy Quilty who had named the newborn Bedford a short handful of years after perpetrating a massacre of Gija people at Bedford Downs. In a stark illustration of the complex dynamics of his historic environment, Bedford would later recall his namesake in strikingly generous terms. As he had only “done it once”, Quilty was “only a little bit bad.”

From this kind of historical perspective we can assume that intermediary figures like Oliver are sited by the artists they work with in relation to their own life experience on the colonial frontier. It’s not hard to imagine that here, as with other sites such as Yirrkala in Eastern Arnhem Land, these cultural interlopers are placed within an historical continuum of others who have occupied similar intercultural positions at different stages of the colonial project. Indeed, as touched upon in chapter three, the historical intermediary might be as varied as an anthropologist, a missionary-turned-ethnographer, or a traveling artist. In the case of the pastoral history of the Kimberley this takes on its own localised features: the white ‘boss’ of an Aboriginal stock-camp or (further up the chain) the colonial proprietor of a cattle station. Whatever the intrinsic ideological differences that separate these figures, all bear a common characteristic; they are drawn together with Aboriginal people at the interface of cultural encounter. Here they find themselves part of a constant process of cultural translation as each party strives to relocate their identities in the face of world-altering difference.

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59 This narrative is recounted in most published sources relating to Bedford’s art and life, among them, M Dolk, p. 27-28; M Langton, Goowoomji’s world, p. 53; F Kofod, ‘Artist’s accounts’, pp. 19-25.

60 M Dolk, p. 18.

61 In this context it is little surprise that the exploitative textures of the Aboriginal art world should sometimes bear an uncanny relationship to the days of colonial subjugation. In its pastoral hey day stock camps in the region were lauded over by white ‘Bosses’, intermediaries acting between the Aboriginal world and the station owners, who in turn were engaged with far-away markets.
This is not to suggest, of course, that the colonisation of the Kimberley was anything but an often-violent and traumatic rupture to an existing world. Rather, I mean to make clear that the new realities that this process of subjugation and cataclysmic change brought forth were by necessity given local form by way of existing social practice.

Traditional notions of exchange, for example, surely played an essential role. As Anthony Redmond writes in relation to the northern Kimberley, the fact that Aboriginal people elicited “acts of social relatedness and reciprocity from people outside of the local kin network, especially from those who wield considerable political/economic power in the pastoral regime” was (and, one must assume, still is) underpinned by an existing social order. He employs the example of traditional ‘owners’ or ‘managers’ of particular tracts country or ceremony who engage the agency of others as a means to extend their own; an elaborate and interdependent process that in the Kimberley ultimately bound the pastoralists to local social networks whether they realised it or not.

Seen through the lens of the traditional practice of Wurnan – a pan-Kimberley system of reciprocity and trade that far pre-dated the region’s pastoral annexation – such processes are further articulated by pre-existing cultural practice. So too, we might argue, are the creative exchanges detailed in this chapter. Indeed, as already emphasised, accurately conceiving Bedford and Oliver’s narrative demands we consider a particularly Gija worldview. As ‘stranger artist’ or ‘animateur’, Oliver undoubtedly arrived with a certain vision, but it was his Gija collaborators who were responsible for giving it local form. In this, we can understand that if Oliver drew Bedford and the Jirrawun collective into the social structure of the broader art world, he did so from a position

62 A Redmond, p. 236.
63 ibid, pp. 235-236.
64 See, A Redmond and F Skyring.
of contingency: he was part of a system – both historic and traditional – that had long traded in social influence and power as a means to incorporate ideas and practices from afar.

5.8 Conclusion

In Oliver’s last years in the Kimberley he lived in the existing house at the Wyndham block. The previous owner had established a large garden, which by Oliver’s time was long overgrown, and had decorated it with machinery parts from the decommissioned meat-works that had until the 1980s sustained the town’s industry. These strange cast iron shapes broke through the remnant undergrowth at unexpected intervals: unsettling metal points and curlicues once used to skin and de-bone carcasses, now rusted and draped in vines.

A creek-bed, usually dry, ran circuitously by the back porch, beyond which rose a striking, spinifex covered incline. Inside, Oliver painted one room deep red and another black. The wall by the entranceway was given over to a rambling collage that plotted a constellation of his creative touchstones. There was an austere black and white image of Bedford counterpointed by one of Jazz great Dizzy Gillespie, both in sunglasses, suits and fedoras. Alongside were reproductions of works by Guston, Bedford, and McCahon, as well as a yellowing cover torn from a 1970s edition of ‘Capricornia’ by Xavier Herbert that featured a Russell Drysdale painting of an Aboriginal stockman.

Jirrawun’s studio was finally realised a few hundred meters from the back door: a strikingly beautiful folly of white industrial PVC stretched taught over an organic steel skeleton. There were plans drawn up for a kind of Gija cultural precinct that included a sculpture park and a helipad. By this time Oliver was planning to turn the organisation’s energies towards international art markets and, perhaps to this end, had himself professionally photographed in front of the new building dressed in the approximate guise of a New York art

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dealer. It all seemed an 'all-or-nothing' gamble, but if it was, it didn’t pay off: although the final paintings each artist realised under Jirrawun’s banner were made in the new studio’s chapel-like interior, it would never be completed. Bedford, his health in decline by its opening, only visited twice before his death.

* In the series of interviews I undertook with Oliver it became clear, in these examples and others, that notions of identity played a key part in his overall project in the Kimberley. The identities of the artists as well as his own were malleable: materials to be reworked and reconfigured in the discursive spaces offered by the art world.

I began to understand that Oliver’s unsettled, compulsive nature drove this. He once told me, for example, that towards the end of his life in the Kimberley he reached something of a revelation. He phrased it like this: 'I can’t be an Aboriginal person (…) I don’t want to be an Aboriginal person’. It was as if by divesting himself of his previous life and embedding in the Gija world he had thought at times he could alter his very being.

Yet as much as he may have sought some kind of oblivion in the charged space beyond the frontier, it’s also true that he remained transfixed by the art world’s spotlight. From his earliest moments in the Kimberley he was searching for a reentry: telephoning his art world contacts and urging them to visit; showing them with relish the dark realities of the Kimberley when they did. Planning ever more ambitious projects and seeking new avenues of influence took up much of his time. In this way he left the art world only to return. When he did it was as the Aboriginal art broker par excellence: a contested mid-point between the artist and the high-stakes gallery dealer he had once desired to be.

This aspect he often played in symbolic fashion, seeking a corollary to his own experiences in the popular imaginary. In
doing so he carved out his own particular sense of mythology, which in turn became an implicit part of the Jirrawun story.

For the opening of Jirrawun’s group exhibition Beyond the frontier at Sherman Galleries in 2004, for example, he wore a three-piece suit he’d had tailored in Melbourne, replete with deep black trench-coat. He had worked hard on the project, had in a sense stage-managed its production, and wanted to emphasise its theatrical aspect.

‘I took in a photo (to the tailor) from the Wyatt Earp movie, of the Earp brothers wearing these long black coats and these vests and lace ties and black hats. And I said, “just copy that suit for me”’, he told me.

‘I was like the white law man – that was my idea: to be the white law man with the shotgun’.

Stage-managed photo shoots provided another means for Oliver to manipulate intercultural identities beyond the borders of the artist’s canvasses. One particularly striking example was meticulously based upon Hans Namuth’s iconic 1950 photograph of Jackson Pollock, in which the proto modernist-as-hero sits on the running board of his battered car. In Oliver’s version, taken by the photographer Peter Eve, Bedford is framed by the open door of his own beloved Toyota Landcruiser utility. A cigarette hangs loosely in his lips, the expression on his face as severe and inscrutable as Pollock’s was before him. Whether it was recognised or not, for the art world it chimed perfectly (fig. 5.12 & 5.13).

Yet as carefully orchestrated as this interleaving of worlds was, it was ultimately left implicit, unspoken to all but a handful of insiders. For them it would sometimes appear as a joke played at the art world’s expense. Some were in on it, and some weren’t.

From this perspective Jirrawun, as a project in and of itself, takes on the form of a complex sleight of hand: if Oliver did play a kind of frontier Svengali it was in a much
broader sense than simply guiding the artists towards a rehashed version of the American modernism he loved. In canny fashion he exploited the best and worst excesses of the Western market for Aboriginal art. He fed the desire for otherness back to white audiences, playing into familiar colonial tropes even as he and the artists tried to subvert them.

At times this appeared as little more than an elevated sales pitch. 'Tony had a velvet tongue’, Dallas Gold, a gallerist who worked with the Jirrawun artists, told me recently. 'Once he was up there [in the Kimberley], he could sell anything.'

But he was, of course, far more than a salesman. As part of a calculated project of intercultural engagement Oliver was the artist’s greatest asset, the secret weapon in what arsenal they had left after generations of dispossession. As their hinge-man he granted them previously unimaginable traction between worlds. This was about power - theirs and his - much more than it was about money.

Nicolas Rothwell, who wrote to me as I began an early draft of this chapter, urged me to focus on the human element of Oliver’s narrative: for him, as for a number of other commentators close to the Jirrawun project, it is Oliver’s character that explains his success as broker to the Jirrawun artists in general and to Bedford in particular.

'(Tony) knew the world he was in, and loved it, and shared a language with it,’ Rothwell wrote. 'The interesting thing (...) for me is that he was in the most damage-laden blood and guts part of the frontier and he was a blood and guts kind of person (...)’

Oliver, Rothwell went on to note, was at times both loved and hated by the artists he worked with, another fact that pointed to the intimacy of the relations they forged. From this

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66 Dallas Gold, personal communication with the author, July 2014.
67 Nicolas Rothwell, personal communication with the author, 30th August, 2013.
perspective it’s tempting to conclude that Oliver’s departure and the subsequent failure of the ambitious project that he created with his Gija collaborators simply reflects the drama and tragedy of the frontier: that complex zone of contact where certain differences irresolutely refuse to divest their hold on individual identity even as others unfold and are reworked.

There is, of course, truth to this. To spend time in the Kimberley is to realise that it remains a deeply colonial place; its landscapes are shot through with the recent trauma of its invasion, the subjugation of its people and the nightmarish cycles of disempowerment that have followed. It often seems as if contemporary relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can’t help but bend to these enduring realities, regardless of either party’s attempts to transcend them.

To focus on the specific details of authorship in this light might seem to miss the point. Yet the fact remains that the paintings that mark this unique moment in Australian art demand critical review. They record a very specific set of social relationships, but the difficult truth they show is not that they are, in the truest sense, products of the intercultural mid-ground. If anything, this is their revelation: it proves that creativity will cut its own path regardless of the ideological barriers that so often surround engagements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia.

What is unsettling is how these paintings have been received – the stubborn blindness that has foreclosed a nuanced understanding of what made them possible. It’s almost as if, by overplaying the indigenous agency involved, the art world is making a desperate bid to counter the enduring guilt of colonisation. It’s uncertain how this might be overcome, but one day we will surely look back on the grand paintings of Jirrawun and wonder how such a significant collaborative episode in Australia’s art history was missed.
Pushing the line
Pushing the line

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5.11

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CAPTIONS:

5.1 Rugun (Crocodile Hole), East Kimberley, c. 1998

5.2 Hector Jandany (foreground), Paddy Bedford (background) Rugun (Crocodile Hole), East Kimberley, c. 1998

5.3 Tony Oliver with an early painting by Phyllis Thomas Rugun (Crocodile Hole), East Kimberley, c. 1998

5.4 Andy Warhol and Tony Oliver, The Factory, New York, 1984
Photo: Peter Leis

5.5 Installation view
Paddy Bedford, curated by Russell Storer
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2006

5.6 Paddy Bedford, Untitled, 2003
Gouache on crescent board, 50 x 76 cm
Private collection

5.7 Paddy Bedford and Tony Oliver
'Jirrawun Studio’, Coconut Grove, Darwin, 1999
Photo: Frances Kofod

5.8 Phyllis Thomas, Gemmere, 2006
Pigment with acrylic binder on linen
Two panels, 120 x 180 cm (overall)
Collection: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

5.9 Rusty Peters, Chinaman’s Garden Massacre, 2000
Pigment with acrylic binder on linen, 150 x 180 cm
Collection: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

5.10 Rammey Ramsey, Warlawoon Country, 2005
Pigment with acrylic binder on linen, 150 x 180 cm
Private collection

5.11 Ramona, Remika, Tennielle and Vondean Nocketta
Kununurra midnight prowl, 2006
Ochres with acrylic binder on linen
10 panels, each 120 x 120 cm
Private collection

5.12 Paddy Bedford, Kununurra, 2005
Photo: Peter Eve

5.13 Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock, 1950
CHAPTER 06

Searching for Sally Gabori:
The making of a Kaiadilt painter

6.1 The market as a social configuration

The only time I met the late Kaiadilt artist Sally Gabori, in late 2014, I was struck by her age. She was old, but although she was 91 at the time, I don’t necessarily mean that in terms of years. It was more the fact that her age combined with the strident sense of otherness that has framed the paintings she became famous for almost a decade before our meeting and transported this tiny, bright-eyed woman beyond what mere numbers could convey.

Part of this came down to her Kaiadilt name, Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda. It had always sounded exotic to my ears, but it was for the Kaiadilt of her generation a name of pure pragmatism. It located her immediately. It said, ‘this is the place I was born and this is my totem, the dolphin’.¹ For those drawn to her art this name was also meaningful throughout her career, albeit in slightly different fashion. It underscored that this old lady was, first and foremost, Aboriginal, and although its specific Kaiadilt meaning remained opaque to many, it made one thing clear: Gabori’s big, bright, discordant and expressive abstract paintings were not in fact big, bright, discordant and expressive abstract paintings at all, or at least not wholly. They were, and remain, pictures of country and that country, re-lived by the artist each time she handled a paintbrush, was for her deeply felt.

¹ This definition can be found in various published sources on Gabori and her work. See, for example, N Evans, ‘Muthaa miburlda ngad: the life of Sally Gabori’, in Sally’s Story (ex cat), Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2005, p. 15.
If you take a slightly jaundiced view, it was this, rather than the success of her work as paintings in and of themselves, which was largely used to create their value, monetary or otherwise. In part, this explains why, over the course of her career, Gabori’s Western name began to be downplayed. At first it was Sally Gabori, then Sally Gabori (Mirdidingkingathni Juwarnda); finally, Mirdidingkingathni Juwarnda (Sally Gabori).

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However we name her, one thing is clear: by any measure this old Kaiadilt woman experienced a stellar rise to art world success. In this chapter I argue that her career arc – from unknown to art star in a matter of months – was emblematic of the late phase of the market for Aboriginal art that expanded exponentially in the late 1990s and continued unabated for most of the first decade of the millennium.

When she began painting in 2005, Gabori (which is how I’ll refer to her) was already a long-term resident in her community’s old person’s home. This didn’t stop her, nor did it discourage collectors. Her work almost immediately secured a strong commercial foothold, playing almost perfectly, one might argue, into an established disposition within the market for the big, bright and colourful.

Within months of picking up a brush on her adopted home of Mornington Island – the largest of a scatter known as the Wellesley Islands in Queensland’s Southern Gulf of Carpentaria – she had held her first solo exhibition; within five years she was widely recognised as one of Australia’s most collectable artists.3

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2 Sally’s Story, Gabori’s first exhibition, opened at Woolloongabba Gallery, Brisbane, in December 2005.
When Gabori largely ceased painting in 2012 due to declining health, her star only continued to rise. In late 2014 Patrick McCaughey, the art historian and ex-director of the National Gallery of Victoria, singled her out as an heir apparent to the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, while at the time of writing a vast, digitally printed commission was poised to be unveiled at Brisbane’s newly redeveloped international airport terminal. When in 2016 Gabori’s career retrospective opens at The Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane it will likely do much to complete her entry into the Western art establishment, and in doing so not only fulfill something of McCaughey’s claim, but justify the many high-profile supporters her work has garnered.

All up, it’s not a bad achievement for someone who spoke next to no English and hadn’t experienced sustained contact with Europeans until her people were brought to Mornington Island’s Presbyterian mission in 1948. Yet although Gabori’s late-blooming career tells a compelling story in and of itself, it also raises harder questions about Aboriginal art in Australia. For one, how do we frame the kind of rise that she enjoyed in her final decade? Should we see it, as many commentators do, as something unexplainable, or is it simply evidence of the inner workings of an art market that by the time Gabori began painting was nothing if not well-oiled?

In the following pages I wish to make clear that each of these questions provide productive means to understand Gabori’s achievements as an artist, a perspective that in turn directs us towards an expanded version of the interwoven networks of brokerage detailed in the previous two chapters. Indeed, although the singular otherness of both Gabori and her work continues to be emphasised, I will show here that her career was closely guided by a variety of third-party stakeholders. Although often downplayed, this context provides an illuminating framework within which to place her work, just

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as a similar approach might deepen an intercultural understanding of the practices of Paddy Bedford or Nyapanyapa Yunupingu. In relation to Gabori, however, my focus is far more diffuse: employees of the art centre where she painted, commercial gallery dealers, a linguist, and figures best described as community arts development workers are all touched upon, many of whom themselves share varying degrees of proximity to government funding agencies. When I refer to ‘the market’, then, I intend to implicate something of this broader social field: a collective that although constituted of separate, independently acting entities betrays a momentum beyond the complete control of any one individual.\footnote{I am here once again following Jeremy Boissevain’s conception of the broker.}

Tracing this loose group of figures provides one means to explore Gabori’s sudden rise and subsequent success. Yet, in lieu of anything resembling access to Gabori’s own understandings and motivations – due not only to her passing, but also to significant cross-cultural difficulties, including, most prominently, language – there remains a mystery at the core of her career: who was she, and what was painting to her?

The existing literature on Gabori’s work, clustered for the most part around commissioned essays, goes directly to these questions, as if they can be answered by way of her cultural heritage or personal history.\footnote{See for example, D Mundine, ‘The Road to Bentinck Island: Sally Gabori’, in Baker, Candida (ed.), \textit{Gabori: The Corrigan Collection of Paintings by Sally Gabori}, Macmillan Art Publishing, Sydney, 2014.} For the most part, such questions remain here largely unanswered. Although I draw on the history of the Kaiadilt people, I do so in an attempt to explore Gabori’s work as a confluence of historical, social and art world forces, each of which reflect back to us an understanding of the market for Aboriginal art as it played out in what is best characterised as its ‘late phase’.
In extending outwards from the focus of my previous two chapters, I aim in this way to address Gabori’s work in terms of broader questions about the Aboriginal art industry in Australia, rather than solely as a means to re-evaluate or re-frame one particular artist’s work in light of intercultural exchange. Visualising something of Gabori’s achievement against this context comes at a critical moment: since 2009, when the effects of the Global Financial Crisis began to be keenly felt in this corner of the art world, an industry once worth as much as $100 million a year has struggled to regain ascendency. As I will discuss, the reasons for this are complex, but they are generational as well as economic. Since its earliest days, the Aboriginal art market has seemed almost preternaturally attuned to the work of artists whose lives, like Gabori’s, were forged beyond the colonial frontier. Unsurprisingly, it can seem at times as if the movement’s demise is written in its very blueprint.

With narratives like Gabori’s increasingly less likely to repeat, the most obvious question is becoming unavoidable: when the dust of the Aboriginal art boom finally settles, who will be left holding the prize?

6.2 ‘A despised minority’

The Kaiadilt’s ancestral territories, which extend across the southern reaches of the Wellesley Islands, lie to the southeast of Mornington Island; just far enough for the group to have maintained a historical distance from the Lardil and Yankaal people of the North.

This changed with a disastrous confluence of environmental and social factors in the early 1940s. Bentinck Island – the flat, seemingly featureless speck of land that the Kaiadilt called home – succumbed to an extended drought. Starving families were left suffering from dysentery, malnutrition and chronic chest disease, while rapidly diminishing resources

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7 See for example: N Rothwell, ‘Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi’s demise echoes the fate of Aboriginal Art’, The Australian, November 21, p. 15.
sparked vicious inter-tribal conflict. According to an account that the remote-area psychologist John Cawte published in 1972, the situation became dire enough that it was nothing during this period for a Kaiadilt man returning at night from fishing the reef to be killed for his catch.\textsuperscript{8}

For Rev. J B McCarthy, Mornington’s Presbyterian missionary, the Kaiadilt were already ideal candidates for salvation. He’d been attempting, and failing, to draw them in to the mission for a number of years: assisted by Gully Peters, an energetic Lardil man from Mornington already inculcated to the mission’s ways, McCarthy had been making regular visits by boat to what he characterised in his journal as the Kaiadilt’s “dark island”.\textsuperscript{9} The final push appears to have come in the form of a freak spring tide that inundated low-lying land throughout the Gulf and Torres Strait, rendering freshwater on Bentinck undrinkable. Faced with certain disaster, the remaining Kaiadilt finally boarded the mission launch and were taken across the strait to Mornington. There were just over 60 persons in total: Sally Gabori, then aged in her late 20s and yet to given her western name, was among them.

A photograph taken at this time shows Gully Peters waist deep in the ocean, ushering a group of Kaiadilt towards the camera (presumably positioned onboard the launch).\textsuperscript{10} Against Peters’s impressive physique, the Kaiadilt cut a sorry picture: physically wracked by hunger they appear as refugees fleeing crisis. In their own unique way this is exactly what they were.

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\textsuperscript{9} D McKnight, From hunting to drinking: the devastating effects of alcohol on an Aboriginal community, Routledge London/New York, 2002, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{10} ibid, p. 39.
On Mornington the group were met among their northern neighbors as outsiders with a fierce reputation. Widely regarded by the rest of the community as ‘wild’, they claimed what space they could at the bottom of what must have been a strange new social order: initially denied access to Lardil fishing grounds, and generally shunned, the Kaiadilt quickly became a “despised minority”. In response, they carved out their own satellite encampment; a handful of ruptured tin humpies that faced towards the ancestral territories that now lay irrevocably distant beyond a short but treacherous stretch of water.

When Cawte published his now-controversial mental health study of the community following a series of short-stay assessments, he titled it Cruel, Poor and Brutal Nations, after Dutch explorer Jan Carstens’ assessment of a group, likely to have been Kaiadilt, that he came across when he passed through the Wellesley Islands in 1623. Although a minority, the Kaiadilt feature prominently in Cawte’s text; he goes as far as to characterise them as the “sickest” among the community’s tribal groups. “It is the little Kaiadilt nation”, he wrote, “that exemplifies the extremes of rapid exposure to western influence, ecological hazards, social disintegration, and mental disorder.” No matter how we read Cawte’s dramatic assessment, one thing is clear: the carefully woven fabric of the Kaiadilt world, linked so closely to the fragile tidal ecology of Bentinck Island, had been severed. The fallout was almost immediate: for a period no Kaiadilt child born on Mornington would survive; when they did, not one would go on to learn the intricate tongue of their forebears.

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11 ibid, p. 44.
13 D McKnight, p. 44.
14 J Cawte, p. 9.
15 ibid, p. 67.
16 N Evans, A grammar of Kayardild, pp. 41-42.
Even a partial return to country wouldn’t come until the mid 1980s, when a community boat was purchased and the crossing to Bentinck became possible once again.\textsuperscript{17}

Although there is truth to the bleak picture that Cawte’s study paints of the Kaiadilt, others are careful to convey a more nuanced picture. Nicolas Evans, a linguistics professor at The Australian National University who is among the three or four remaining speakers of the Kaiadilt language, is one. He first arrived on Mornington as a graduate student in 1982 and has worked with the group ever since. While acknowledging that there were “tremendous psychological strains” associated with the Kaiadilt’s exile from country, he points out in an orthology of their language that he published in 1995 that their fortunes slowly began to turn. “By the time of my first visit”, Evans writes, “a disproportionate number of teacher aides, high school students and school prizewinners were Bentinck Islanders.”\textsuperscript{18}

‘They were marginalised and ridiculed,’ Evans told me in late 2014, when I visited him in Canberra to discuss Gabori’s career. ‘I think they felt the severing from country very profoundly (but) my first impression when I got there was just of this incredible liveliness. Totally ribald, outrageous humour. Incredible emotional directness.’\textsuperscript{19}

On early visits, when there were still 30 or 40 speakers of Kaiadilt living on Mornington, Evans would hear the language all around him. Regardless of their difficult position within the community – they remained, for example, by far the poorest – the group welcomed him with open arms. ‘I’ve always been so grateful that my first engagement with an Aboriginal community was with Kaiadilt’, he said. ‘(...) Some

\textsuperscript{17} ibid, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{19} Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Nicolas Evans are taken from an interview conducted on the 1\textsuperscript{st} of September 2014.
communities can take years and years to get into, but there you were just in.’

Evans, who has remained close to the Kaiadilt community, and has observed Gabori's rise first hand, is as confounded as anyone by her late-blooming career. In his early days on Mornington hers was a quiet presence around the edges of the Kaiadilt enclave. By then she was living with her husband Pat in a house in the wider community: "(She was) devoted to her large family, with flashes of mischief," he recalled in an obituary for Gabori he published in The Australian.\(^\text{20}\) Evans’s adoption by another family initially placed he and Gabori in an avoidance relationship; they were not supposed to talk with each other, and didn’t. It was only as the core group of Kaiadilt speakers shrank dramatically in the 1990s that they drew closer. By then, Evans was working with the Kaiadilt on native title claims for their home territories: ‘'Whitefella’ rules crept in and we were able to converse.’\(^\text{21}\)

Life on Mornington had by this time long spiraled out of control. After winding down, the mission had withdrawn for good in 1978. Administrative control of the community was ceded to a shire council; part of a network set up by Queensland’s Bjelke-Petersen state government to help secure mining interests across the state’s remote regions, particularly Aurukun on Cape York Peninsula which boasted valuable bauxite reserves.\(^\text{22}\) Decision-making, at least nominally in local hands under the mission (the mission had, for instance, supported a local council drawn from across the community) was now almost entirely outsourced to a revolving cast of non-Aboriginal bureaucrats.\(^\text{23}\) Further compounding this

\(^{20}\) N Evans, ‘Artist Sally Gabori had a language of her own’, The Australian, March 24, 2015, p. 15.

\(^{21}\) ibid.

\(^{22}\) D McKnight, p. 93.

\(^{23}\) ibid, pp. 93-94.
shift was the fact that the generation raised in the mission’s dormitories had been effectively cut off from traditional practices, and had inherited little in their place. The British anthropologist David McKnight sees this, along with the mission’s practice of sending young community members to work on the mainland for extended periods, as a significant cause of the community’s later social tensions.  

McKnight, who undertook fieldwork on Mornington during which he lived there with his wife and young children for a number of years from 1966, remains the most compelling documentarian of this period. His initial experience was of a community in which the influence of elders remained prominent and daily life maintained a certain quiet rhythm. When he returned in 1977 it was to a devastating change; the opening of a ‘wet’ canteen the year before had eroded the Island's fragile post-mission order. For many, drinking became a way of life. Murder and suicide — previously almost unheard of — quickly reached epidemic proportions.

Driven by what he clearly saw as the end of an era, McKnight pulled few punches: “The canteen has become the centre of people’s lives”, he wrote in From Hunting to Drinking, his 2002 study of the ruinous effects of alcohol abuse in the community. “There is precious little of interest in everyday life except to drink, fight, kill oneself or someone else, and go to prison.” Over two months in 2000, five young men took their own lives. Three years later an alcohol management program that was being rolled out in nineteen similar QLD communities was met with stubborn resistance. Police reinforcements were sent from Cairns to

24 McKnight notes: ‘the political and social edifice began to crumble with the establishment of the mission, raising children in dormitories, and in later years sending men (and eventually women) to work on the mainland.’ See, D McKnight, p 214; see also p. 49 where McKnight notes that Aboriginal children ‘were further institutionalized by being enclosed in the dormitories’; see also, p. 2: ‘Parents found it difficult to reconcile what they had experienced and learned in their dormitories with what was expected of them in the village camp.’
25 ibid, pp. 88-89.
26 ibid, p. 212.
help quell the resulting unrest. A critical mass of community support finally forced the canteen’s closure five years later but a thriving black market – buoyed in recent times by locally produced moonshine – quickly took its place.

‘By the mid ‘80s it was horrendous’, Nicolas Evans recalled when we spoke in Canberra. He characterises Gabori, along with a wider group of older women, as ‘the classic women in the family (…) holding it together.’ Against the Island’s social backdrop it almost goes without saying that no one expected her to become a nationally renowned artist.

‘I think it’s a giant mystery, almost a religious mystery, what happened with Sally,’ Evans put it as our conversation drew to a close. ‘If you were to ask me on my deathbed: What are the three or four things in your life that totally baffled you and bowled you over? that would be one of them. (…)’

‘How is it that someone is just not who you thought they were, that they’ve got these incredible talents?’

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28 The anthropologist Cameo Dalley has mapped the contemporary social terrain of Mornington community (now known as Gununa), and negotiates this difficult territory with particular care. McKnight’s perspective, she notes, while valuable, is guided in part by notions of a ‘shattered Eden’: the community he had grown to love during the first years of his fieldwork was changed irreparably by the opening of the canteen, a development he felt keenly given his professional and personal stake in the community’s prior formation. Nonetheless, Dalley also points out that McKnight “poses challenging questions about the impacts of cultural change, which he typified as ‘loss’, on Aboriginal identities.” See, C Dalley, ‘Social relations and layered identities in a remote Aboriginal town, Mornington Island, southern Gulf of Carpentaria, Australia’ PhD thesis, The University of Queensland, 2012, p. 8-9.

Dalley’s own focus on the canteen, and the layered identities enacted in relation to it, ultimately supports McKnight’s position that drinking has become a significant part of life on the Island. Daley offers a detailed account of the canteen’s final year of operation, establishing the fashion in which patterns of drinking reconstitute other social groupings, both familial and ancestral. See, C Dalley, ‘Social relations and layered identities (…)’, pp. 144-183.
6.3 Consultants, coordinators, commercial dealers

My own meeting with Gabori took place in Gununa on a Tuesday morning in August 2014. I had flown in from Cairns the afternoon before, stopping briefly in the sun-blasted town of Normanton before skipping across the strait and descending towards the Island’s mangrove fringed beaches. The dry season winds that once brought Maccassan traders to the northern reaches of the Gulf blew through the dusty streets and whistled under the eaves of the small unit I booked at the edge of the community.

At the art centre, a low-slung, brick-red bunker backing onto the airstrip, I was introduced to three of Gabori’s daughters – Elsie, Dorothy and Helena – and together we piled into the art centre mini-van and drove through the surrounding network of flat, gridded streets. We stopped to collect Gabori’s youngest son Maxwell, and then another daughter, Amanda, who had her own young grandson LeBron in tow. Gabori, they told me, had outlived four of her eleven children and is the matriarch of an extended family that includes, at last estimate, twenty-six great-grandchildren.

When we arrived at the old person’s home, Gabori joined us at a table in the sun and sat quietly as the impromptu reunion flowed around her. Aside from the tall cyclone wire fence and an imposing automated gate our surrounds seemed relatively idyllic. A few ancient looking figures sat listlessly in the shade, while beside us a sprinkler lazily coaxed the parched grass to turn green.

From time to time Gabori leaned over to Elsie and spoke a quiet phrase or two in Kaiadilt. Her lack of English made conversation even with her closest family difficult: although generously mediated by her daughters my own attempts met with little traction. Perhaps sensing the difficulties, Elsie stepped in.

‘We are very thankful for what Mum has done for us’, she told me, holding onto Gabori’s shoulder. The only suggestion
that the tiny, almost impossibly frail woman folded into a chair next to me was one of Australia’s most celebrated artists was a smear of turquoise paint that stained her dark dress.

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When Gabori began painting it seemed as if the remote art boom might bypass Queensland altogether. The majority of the movement’s stars, past and present, hailed from the Northern Territory and Western Australia, but beyond the success of a group of young women from Lockhart River, Queensland was notably absent from what had become a celebrated narrative of cultural and economic revival. The Beattie government took steps to address this in 2004, initiating the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA). Its remit was clear: create a new market.

Brett Evans, a long term Mornington Island resident who had inherited management of the community’s ailing art centre three years earlier, recognised the opportunity. Since arriving in 1984, Evans, who is married into a local Lardil family (and is no relation to Nicolas Evans), had shuttled between various positions on the island, including stints as a teacher and an outstation coordinator. By 2005 the indigenous art market was, in his reckoning, ‘like a golden goose’: well aware of the successes at Lockhart River, he realised that if Mornington Island’s art centre were to survive, the artefacts that local artists had been making for tourist outlets in places like The Rocks in Sydney had to give way to fine art.29

‘I started talking to these guys and saying, ‘Look, you’ve got to get into the painting, that’s where the money is’’, he told me matter-of-factly during my visit.

With funding from QIAMEA Evans contracted Simon Turner, an enthusiastic arts worker who was then running a small commercial space in Brisbane called Woolloongabba Gallery, to

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29 I interviewed Brett Evans in Gununa on the 5th of August 2014.
deliver a series of painting workshops on the island. Turner came with a certain pedigree: as a young art college graduate in the late 1990s he’d accepted a position to set up and manage art centres in Utopia, a 5,000 square km area north east of Alice Springs that had over the previous decade formed the epicentre of one of the most significant chapters in the Aboriginal art movement. Although a handful of senior women were associated with the region, including Minnie Pwerle and Kathleen Petyarre, it was Emily Kame Kngwarreye – the grand dame of desert painting – whose work achieved then-unprecedented acclaim.

On the ground Kngwarreye’s success created an unregulated market frenzy; private dealers, carpetbaggers and random speculators were soon using anything from piles of cash, used Toyotas and second-hand clothes to secure the artist’s work. When Turner arrived in 1999, three years after Kngwarreye’s death, the wave had broken. In his assessment the movement had been ‘gutted’.

‘The demand had just destroyed it’, he told me in 2014 on the phone from Brisbane. ‘They [the artists] were simply trying to keep up.’

But there was more to Turner’s experience than the picture he saw of a market in free-fall. His guide on the ground was the Utopia art coordinator Rodney Gooch, a famously entrepreneurial figure who had enjoyed a close working relationship with the senior artists of the region from the very beginning. In light of Turner’s later role in Gabori’s success, Gooch provides an apt comparison: he enacted a significant impact on the Utopia painting movement, and is widely recognised as a key influence on Kngwarreye’s career. Philip Batty, an anthropologist who initially employed Gooch during his tenure at The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in the 1980s, goes as far as referring to Gooch’s

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30 The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association ran a shop in Alice Springs where Gooch worked before becoming an independent operator. Works by the Utopia artists were initially sold through this outlet.
influence as ‘the Gooch effect’: his methods of “unabashed intervention”, Batty argues, “not only facilitated the development of one of the most successful Aboriginal art concerns in Australia, but the rise of Emily Kngwarreye.”

From Gooch, who passed away in 2002, Turner learnt that the ‘art’ of art coordination combined market savvy with an ability to see things from the artist’s perspective. It underscored his existing experiences in the Aboriginal art world. Before accepting his position in Utopia he had been a member of Brisbane’s ‘Campfire Group’, the intercultural collective that took shape around the 1990 exhibition ‘Balance’ at The Queensland Art Gallery, and in 1997 had undertaken a number of “short experimental workshops” with the senior Papunya painter and fellow Campfire Group member, Michael Jagamarra Nelson. This was prompted in part by a collector of Nelson’s work who had issued a challenge in the wake of a 1997 exhibition of Nelson’s at the Fireworks Gallery in Brisbane. As Turner recalled in an article by Vivien Johnson, the collector put it to him like this: “I don’t care if [Nelson] throws the paint brush at the canvas like a spear, so long as he doesn’t do dots.”

In response, Turner loaded up with painting supplies and drove from Brisbane to Papunya, where he stayed with Nelson over three months. As Johnson described it, he encouraged Nelson “to break out of classical strictures in his painting by increasing the scale of the design elements.” The resulting works, collectively titled ‘New Expressions’, were

34 ibid.
big, bold and messily executed: in short, a radical departure from Nelson’s prior practice.\textsuperscript{35}

‘All of that stuff informed my practice’, Turner told me, ‘so when I went to Mornington I brought it with me’. The sequence of four workshops that he held at Mornington Island Art in 2005 initially focused on a group of Lardil men, inheritors of the local figurative painting tradition that was initiated by figures including brothers Dick and Lindsay Roughsey in the 1960s. Turner followed his established blueprint: he encouraged the men to think more strategically about the market, showing them how to turn body designs into ‘abstract’ paintings.

By the end of the first week they had a handful of works Turner deemed ‘exhibition quality’, but he still had the success of the Utopia women on his mind. As he told me, ‘(I was) looking for the old women immediately, but I was doing it quietly because I knew the men had to come first’.

During the second workshop Evans introduced him to Gabori at Mornington’s old person’s home and the next day she was at the centre, working. Everyone was struck by how assured her early paintings were.

‘I just thought, this woman is going to be massive’, Turner recalls. Within six months she was being hailed as a genius.

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Gabori’s first painting was a small canvas comprised of a number of scrawled marks and roundels in acrylic and crayon. When I visited Mornington Island Art, it was propped on a shelf behind Brett Evans’ desk. Executed in primary colours, its roughness and immediacy recalls drawing more than painting, but although the work has a certain naive charm it’s hard to judge whether this quality comes down to intention or

\textsuperscript{35} For a detailed reading of this body of work see: S Butler, ‘Michael Jagamara Nelson’s New Expressions’, Eyeline, no. 41, summer, 1992, pp. 36–41.
happenstance; whether or not, that is, Gabori’s unfamiliarity with the medium is what grants the work its particular aesthetic lure.

Evans recalled for me the moment Gabori made it. She had begun by working on paper until staff realised there might be promise in what she was doing: ‘We just basically raced over and grabbed the paper (...) and put a canvas in front of her’, he told me.

As Gabori developed her practice, it was the loose, expressive quality of this early work that ultimately set her apart. To her advisers it suggested that bigger, for her at least, would be better. In a direct echo of Kngwarreye’s celebrated large-scale works, such as Anwerlarr angenenty (Big Yam Dreaming) (1995), which is held in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Gabori’s canvasses grew exponentially. Her inaugural exhibition at Woolloongabba Gallery in December 2005 featured the first of the epic paintings – which eventually grew to eight meters in length – that quickly became something of a signature.

Gabori, in turn, was enlivened by her newfound status. Among the small group of female Kaiadilt artists that immediately sprang up around her, which included her nieces Netta Loogatha and Paula Paul, her position was soon clear: she was, as one commentator put it to me, ‘the Queen Bee’ of the Island’s newfound art economy.

With Gabori’s star on the rise, Brett Evans began to court the lucrative southern market more directly. In late 2005 he sent an email to Melbourne’s Alcaston Gallery with images of Gabori’s early canvasses attached. Another high-profile Aboriginal art dealer had already passed up the opportunity to represent the Mornington artists, but Beverly Knight, Alcaston Gallery’s director, recognised something in the rough, brightly coloured works.

‘I like artists who have a totally different view of the world’, Knight told to me when I interviewed her in 2014.
'They were very raw, the first group of paintings, but I could see there was huge potential.'

Knight, an assertive ex-restauranteur whose enthusiasm for Aboriginal art spilled over into a business in the late 1980s, is something of a major player in a small pool. Like Turner, whom she collaborated with when he worked in Utopia, she too is an advocate of being closely involved in the studio. At times she has worked directly alongside artists who she has represented commercially through Alcaston Gallery, either hosting them in Melbourne or renting space in regional centres like Alice Springs in which she could undertake her own ‘workshops’, free from the demands and distractions of community art centres. Peggy Napangardi Jones, for example, a late Warumungu artist from the Northern Territory associated with Julalikari Arts and Crafts in Tennant Creek, worked with Knight in both Alice Springs and Melbourne.

Knight explained to me that this was a valuable process in that it allowed the space and time to both develop big paintings and to ensure that not only good materials were used, but that they were used correctly. Beyond that, she has often fulfilled a more intimate role with artists: ‘Rubbing their back(s) and cleaning their brushes’, was the example she volunteered.

‘It’s hard work’, she told me, ‘but it was a one on one approach to really good artists. And I got the best work. I got great work.’

On Mornington, where Knight visited the art centre on a number of occasions, Knight readily takes credit for steering Gabori towards better materials and closely advising staff employed after Turner’s contract was completed. When I asked her what, if any, input she had beyond this, she was more circumspect: ‘We were trying to get it to, you know, that level,’ she explained.

36 Quotes and associated details are taken from an interview with Beverly Knight undertaken in Melbourne on the 22nd of August 2014.
At the market’s peak, Alcaston gallery had been responsible for some of the biggest stars of the movement. From the late 1990s onwards, luminaries such as the late desert painter Eubena Nampitjin, with whom Knight enjoyed a long association, had seen their prices driven rapidly upwards by a bullish primary and secondary market. By 2008, their works were commanding, in the case of Nampitjin at least, as much as $75,000 in their primary dealer exhibitions and occasionally more in the auction houses.

This end of the market was, in part at least, crippled by the trickle-on effect of the GFC, but there was also more to the downturn that followed: the Indigenous Art Code of Conduct and the well-intentioned but largely failed resale royalty scheme – initiated in mid-2010 – were both compounding factors. Perhaps most harmful were restrictive changes to the rules of self-managed superannuation funds in Australia. With art suddenly no longer a viable investment, investors began to turn elsewhere. Collections were consolidated and sold off, commercial galleries began to close their doors, and auction results plummeted; put simply, the party was over.\(^37\)

By 2009, with the market already beginning to falter, Gabori was yet to achieve the acclaim of her better-known contemporaries. Although her work had been widely collected, it was then largely clustered around the $5-10,000 mark: still accessible for collectors who had retracted from the market’s higher end. In addition, her foundation story – especially her first-contact status – was as near to perfect as anyone could imagine. As if on cue the art world swooned.

Between late 2009 and early 2012 some two hundred and eighty of Gabori’s paintings were shown in upwards of twenty-two solo and group exhibitions in commercial settings. Fifteen of these were held by Alcaston Gallery, which by this time had

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\(^37\) See for example, N Rothwell, ‘Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi’s demise echoes the fate of Aboriginal Art’. 284
negotiated near exclusive representation. Her prices rose quickly. This period peaked between May and June, 2011, when the gallery presented two major solo exhibitions – one each in Sydney and Melbourne – in quick succession, handling over half a million dollars worth of work. It seemed that, however briefly, acrylic paint and canvas had been quite literally transmuted into gold. 38

Although driven by Alcaston Gallery’s well-known commercial acumen, this saturation would not have been possible without what many described to me as Gabori’s enormous work ethic. Before her recent decline she would often complete six or seven large works in a day: a volume that created its own challenges.

‘Our biggest concern at the time was making it look like we weren’t a sweatshop’, Brett Evans told me.

‘She just loved painting’, he continued, ‘but the good thing with (Sally) was one day she’d paint five absolute crackers and the next day she would paint five we would throw away kind of thing. With the amount of work she was producing you always had a really good choice.’

Knight agrees that careful editing has been key to Gabori’s success: ‘Sally managed crackers straight away,’ she told me, ‘but I can remember a year or so in we’d go through hundreds of paintings to select a show.’

Unsurprisingly, this approach left far more work than the market could absorb. With space at the art centre at a premium a shipping container was soon required to store the overflow. These were perhaps best seen not so much as ‘rejects’ – the failed works that any painter might edit out – but as ‘outtakes’: excess volume carefully edited to create a more contained and market-ready picture of Gabori’s artistic


NOTE: the website has since been redesigned. Previously exhibitions were archived in full, with prices and sales details included. During this same period Gabori’s works were also shown at Raft Artspace, Darwin, Tim Melville Gallery, Auckland, and Red Dot Gallery, Singapore.
vision. Works that didn’t make the cut were incinerated at the local rubbish tip. In a practice not unusual in the world of Aboriginal art, this process, closely managed by a cast of third parties, largely occurred unbeknownst to Gabori herself.

During my visit I was struck by the ragged energy of the Mornington community: the loose groups of children stalking Gununa’s streets with ready smiles, the communal gatherings outside the well-stocked local store. There is a large school, a clinic, and various service providers on the island, but there is also a darker edge that belies first impressions; put lightly, the community is still gripped by well-documented internal struggles.

As with many remote centres, the Island’s economy is heavily dependent on welfare and CDEP, which was integrated into the Remote Jobs and Communities Program in 2013. In 2007-08 rates of diabetes were ten times that of the rest of Australia; assault-related presentations at the local clinic were thirty-eight times higher. Four months before I visited, a group of suspects in a high-profile sexual abuse case – aged

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39 ‘On 1 July 2013, the RJCP integrated CDEP and began delivering significant reforms to employment, participation and community development services in remote Australia to help more people get into jobs and participate in their communities. The RJCP replaces and builds on the strengths of Job Services Australia, Disability Employment Services, and the CDEP Scheme. It provides more streamlined and flexible employment and participation in 60 remote regions across Australia.’ See, Department of human services, ‘Community development employment projects’, <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/community-development-employment-projects> accessed 02 April 2015 (no longer archived); See also, Department of education, employment and workplace relations, ‘Remote jobs and community program – establishment’, <http://www.budget.gov.au/2012-13/content/bp2/html/bp2_expense-08.htm>, accessed 11 March 2016.


41 ibid.
between 14 and 16 – had been flown to Mount Isa for questioning.\textsuperscript{42}

Against this backdrop stories like Gabori’s are easily cast as a beacon of hope; a flash of good news to transcend the bleak cycle of reporting that often drags Aboriginal communities into the national consciousness. There is truth to this, but it also risks oversimplification.

In the broader art world the healthy ambition of youth drives generational renewal; in Aboriginal art, by contrast, where old-age is often aligned with outmoded notions of cultural authenticity – and thus market value – the newest star is usually the oldest. Although younger artists are readily motivated by the immediate success of those like Gabori, their own success can be much harder to secure, and if it does come, far more moderate. Indeed, from a local perspective the vagaries of taste that guide the remote art economy can seem confounding. ‘I’ve been waiting a long time’, Elsie Gabori told me pragmatically when I asked her during my visit if she had been selling her own paintings; ‘it’s not like mum’s paintings: every time she paints, they go away’.

The resulting imbalance can have difficult consequences, especially when it comes to money. Like elsewhere in remote Aboriginal Australia, Mornington’s population is rising exponentially; in 2011, for example, 39% of residents were under 14,\textsuperscript{43} compared to just over 19% nationally.\textsuperscript{44} Where once elders like Gabori would have been supported by large extended


\textsuperscript{43} The 2011 National Census recorded the following for Mornington: ‘39.0% were children aged 0 to 14 years and 4.6% were people aged 65 years and over.’ See, http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/IELC30400203?opendocument&navpos=220, accessed 02 April 2015.

\textsuperscript{44} The 2011 National Census recorded the following for Australia: ‘Children aged 0 – 14 years made up 19.3% of the population and people aged 65 years and over made up 14.0% of the population.’ See, http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/0?opendocument&navpos=220, accessed 02 April 2015.
families, for the stars of the painting movement the opposite is now usually true.

In the first twelve months that Gabori began painting Brett Evans estimates that the art centre’s income jumped from $12,000 to $300,000. ‘It was like a drug to people,’ he told me, referring to the market that quickly flared up. ‘At the start you think it’s a bit crazy and you’ve got a license to print money.’ By 2010 painting sales had climbed to close to $900,000 a year.\(^45\)

Gabori’s portion of this windfall quickly created immense pressure within the community. Recognising that the art centre, which takes half of the 60% of the sale price that the gallery returns to the artist, was not only responsible for the creation of this income but also dependent on it, Evans struggled to make it work.

Following a series of meetings with Gabori’s family, he helped devise a system of monthly payments to six nominated bank accounts. When there was a big lump sum, large purchases such as cars or boats were negotiated on a case-by-case basis. The pressure, however, remained intense; jealousies and recriminations flew. Following a third party intervention (it was suggested to me that this was made by a health professional concerned about Gabori’s welfare in the face of local demand) the Public Trustee was brought in to manage Gabori’s money from afar. Not only did this arrangement make it far more difficult for her family to access the income from her practice, it also immediately raised the spectre of a significant unpaid tax bill. In lieu of an adequate paper trail, Evans found himself roving the community photographing wrecked vehicles, trying to show the Trustee where much of the money had gone. At the time of my visit, it seemed likely, with the tax issue as-yet-unresolved, that the money that had

quickly accrued in Gabori’s account following the shift to the Trustee would be gone just as fast.

When Nicolas Evans began visiting Bentinck Island in the 1980s it had provided the Kaiadilt with a quiet alternative to Mornington. He recalls that in the late 90s there were often as many as thirty people there for the dry season, a mixture of Kaiadilt elders joined intermittently by CDEP workers and young mothers seeking assistance with their babies.

‘I think that there were things people wanted to do,’ Evans told me in 2014. ‘The Bentinck ladies were saying they would like to have a clinic there for example. You know? Setting out the things that they would really need to get an outstation going: a school, a kindergarten. (...) One can imagine a world where the money from the painting could partly be put into supporting that. That’s not the world that came to pass.’

6.4 Unequal exchanges

When I caught up with Knight in Melbourne’s Fitzroy it was the week after the 2014 Melbourne Art Fair, the bi-annual event that draws together commercial galleries from Australia and beyond for four days of highly charged commerce under the Royal Exhibition Building’s grand dome. Alcaston’s stall had featured Gabori’s work heavily. ‘We were run off our feet’, Knight tells me, allowing her face a flash of exhaustion.

We settled in a room off the first floor landing of the three-storey terrace that houses both the gallery and an apartment Knight shares with her husband Anthony. The walls around us bloomed with paintings from their private collection: an ‘Emily’ here, two ‘Rovers’ there. A work by Ginger Riley, an acclaimed artist whose estate Knight represents, hung opposite a meticulous painting by the late Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, a progenitor of the entire movement whose epic 1977 work Warlugulong set a record for
Searching for Sally Gabori

Aboriginal art when it was auctioned in 2007 for $2.4 million.\(^{46}\)

Knight, who’d recently taken delivery of close to two hundred and fifty of Gabori’s late works – the contents of the shipping container – is quick to point out that Gabori is an obvious successor to these figures. At an economic level, at least, it seems she is on the right track: ‘What Sally earned was an incredible amount of money’, Knight said. Yet she also readily admits to the obvious flaws in the system of exchange that generates such income; given her long involvement in the industry it’s no surprise to her that the proceeds of Gabori’s paintings seem to have made little difference on the ground. When pressed, she suggested that there has always been space in the Aboriginal art industry for dedicated money managers; people to work closely with artists and their families to help them achieve more sustainable outcomes. The AFL, with which Knight has worked in a number of capacities, has long offered this kind of support for recruits from the bush who are plucked from obscurity to experience the sudden flush of fame and fortune.

Why a similar initiative hasn’t been established in any meaningful way for figures like Gabori, however, is far from clear. Even in a field crowded by many stakeholders, addressing the disparities that mark the industry is a challenge that has rarely been met. For her part, Knight maintains that as far as the gallery goes responsibility only extends so far. Either way, she argues it’s too late to iron out the deficiencies in the system: ‘Indigenous art isn’t going to earn the same money it did,’ she told me unequivocally. ‘It’s over.’

There’s a complexity to this assessment, of course, but it’s hard not to see it as emblematic of the market’s harshest tendencies. During our discussion we touched upon younger

\(^{46}\) G Coslovich, ‘$2.4m for Possum painting that once fetched $1200’, The Age, July 25 2007, p. 3.
artists, including a Cairns-based relative of Gabori’s whose work shows promise, but it’s clear that with only a few notable exceptions, the elders of the movement ultimately remain the most prominent; not only does their work display the much-romanticised (and easily marketed) worldview that initially drew Knight to Gabori, it’s also where the highest value resides. In this light Knight’s comment takes on a different cast: get in now because paintings like these won’t be around forever.

It might bear all the hallmarks of an endgame, but from a commercial perspective it’s the perfect pitch.

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For some, the narrative of Gabori’s brief career is compelling in its simplicity. As the former curator John McPhee recently put it, her paintings embody no less than “all of the sorrow experienced at having been exiled from her homeland, and, when able to return, her delight in the land of her youth.”

This story, which was told in various guises throughout Gabori’s career, emerged in step with her earliest forays into the art world. Simon Turner, who wrote a catalogue essay for Gabori’s first exhibition at The Woolloongabba Gallery, put forward what is perhaps the first version: “Sally’s story is the beginning of a language and the start of a dialogue”, he wrote. “It’s a story of a senior Kaiadilt woman who picked up a paintbrush and created a vehicle, a medium to return home, on canvas and by plane.”

Yet although an arc in which the elderly artist engages her newfound creativity to hasten hers and her family’s return to country provides a compelling story, in Gabori’s case it is

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not strictly true.\textsuperscript{49} For his part, Nicolas Evans is careful to distance himself from claims that the financial proceeds from Gabori’s paintings were what enabled her to return to Bentinck Island.

‘They’d been going back since the early ‘90s regularly, and certainly since the outstation had been going there,’ he told me when we spoke in Canberra. He suggested diplomatically that accounts to the contrary had been ‘overstated’.

For him, Gabori’s achievements lie elsewhere, particularly in her success at transmuting spoken and visual methods of communication; essentially a process of translation in which her Kadiadilt worldview is rendered tangible for a non-Kadiadilt audience. “Much of the appeal of Gabori’s art”, he wrote in the obituary published in The Australian, “is that it places the viewer behind Kadiadilt eyes to see the world in another way.”\textsuperscript{50}

Yet this too raises difficult questions. Is it really possible, as Evans suggests, for those without a detailed understanding of the Kadiadilt world to ‘see’ in a fashion commensurate to how Gabori saw as a Kadiadilt woman born in the early decades of last century? Or is this simply a projection: further evidence of the trade in otherness that threads through the broader Aboriginal art world?

When Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry (a culture critic and design theorist respectively) mounted an early critique of the then-new Aboriginal art industry in Australia in the late 1980s, they noted a similar pitfall. Careful explication of ‘inner’ meaning, they argued, although often well intended,

\textsuperscript{49} It’s worth mentioning that since Gabori’s passing this narrative has remained central to the myth surrounding her practice. As one example, in an obituary published in The Sydney Morning Herald Jeremy Eccles claimed: ‘for Gabori, the greatest boon from her painting was being able to return to Bentinck Island and establish an outstation.’ My own research found nothing to back this up. See J Eccles, ‘Sally Gabori: artist whose boldness of colour and design was unique in Aboriginal art’, The Sydney Morning Herald, April 10 2015, p 28.

\textsuperscript{50} N Evans, ‘Artist Sally Gabori had a language of her own’.

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“may at best generate a generalized respect for the complexity of an unfamiliar cultural system, (and) at worst function as signs of an exotic modern primitive.”

They continued: “Either way, what is not faced directly is that that belief system and the way of acting in the world it represents has become increasingly inoperable with the ongoing process of colonisation (...)”

As I’ve made clear, Gabori’s painting career almost perfectly tracks the final stages of the Aboriginal art boom, responding to increasing market demand even as the living conditions within communities like Gununa continue to spiral. As such, it is possible to view her work in the relatively stark terms Willis and Fry put forward: not only emblematic of her deeply held knowledge of country, but representative of the late phase of an industry that has seen acrylic paintings like hers flood into the market from some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country. At that end, regardless of the sometimes-significant amounts of money generated by the painted economy, things have barely changed since the earliest days of the movement; if anything, they have worsened. From this perspective Aboriginal art remains deeply etched with colonial anxieties; tangible benefits seem at best fleeting, and at worst weighted in favour of city-based gallerists and collectors.

Such anxiety is, of course, far from new: as the above quote from Willis and Fry displays, it has attended the reception of Aboriginal art since its status in the Western art world began to gain momentum in the 1980s. That such questions remain prominent more than three decades later attest to the peripheral role of art in affecting actual change within the remote communities that have been the industry’s primary focus. Taking a more recent retrospective view of their critiques, Willis and Fry put it like this:

52 ibid.
The massive divide between the producers, their living conditions, the cultural economic meanings art-making had for them and the metropolitan art worlds in which the work was displayed, promoted, sold and reviewed – was, and still is, stark, and a classic example of unequal exchange. This fact alone is sufficient to counter claims about the political efficacy of art.\(^{53}\)

In this notion of “unequal exchange”, the anthropologist James Clifford might readily see a shadow of what he refers to as “the salvage paradigm”, albeit one complicated by the specific features of Australia’s Aboriginal art movement.\(^{54}\) Clifford locates this concept in the anthropology of the early twentieth century – the “salvage ethnography” practiced by foundational figures including Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski which functioned to retrieve what remained in the wake of the more destructive aspects of Western modernity’s arrival.\(^{55}\) The hinge here is the notion of constant passing: what is salvaged in this process is valuable precisely because of the unlikelihood of it ever repeating. As Clifford displays, it’s hard not to sense in this the same logic that so often drives collectors and other art world aficionados, which in turn results in ‘career’ trajectories like Gabori’s.

“We still regularly encounter,” Clifford wrote in 1989 (the same moment that Willis and Fry were publishing their critiques of the Aboriginal art industry in Australia),

the last traditional Indian beadworker or the last stone age people. The salvage paradigm, reflecting a desire to rescue something authentic out of destructive historical changes, is alive and well. It is found in ethnographic writing, in the

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\(^{54}\) J Clifford, ‘The Others: Beyond the Salvage Paradigm’, Third Text, volume 6, Spring 1989, pp. 73-77.

\(^{55}\) ibid, p.73.
connoisseurship and collections of the art world, in a range of familiar nostalgias.\textsuperscript{56}

At one level, a critique of the external forces that shaped Gabori’s career seems implicit here: the market which quickly gathered forces around her, extracting the ‘good’ paintings and destroying the ‘bad’ to protect its own interests, simply played out a well practiced art world version of the salvage paradigm. But this is only part of the picture. Clifford also points out that practices that rework local understandings of tradition within newly intercultural boundaries also make possible the transcendence of a system that relies for the most part on largely outmoded notions of ‘authenticity’. “(B)eautiful objects”, he notes, can be taken beyond their previously binding designation as ‘authentic’ or otherwise to be “located in ongoing, inventive traditions.”\textsuperscript{57}

Herein lies the notion of ‘innovation’ that similarly traces the art world reception of Aboriginal art: a key part of the broader narrative in which art’s efficacy in shifting stubborn colonial patterns is taken as a given. Gabori’s paintings, we should remember, don’t replay existing cultural forms; instead, they retool traditional ways of seeing within the material parameters of a Western practice (that is, painting). As such they are hybrid and intercultural, rather than ‘authentic’ in the fashion Clifford uses the term. But this too is incomplete in relation to Gabori’s work; it is readily thrown into question by the bind that traces the art world reception of practices like hers. The fact remains, after all, that the value of her work, and much like it, is most often associated with seniority and cultural knowledge, as if it is only in conjunction with these factors that its more ‘innovative’ qualities can be valued in the complex cross-cultural setting of the art world.

\textsuperscript{56} ibid, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{57} ibid, p. 76.
Here we begin to understand that Gabori’s paintings also perfectly embody the art world tendency to conflate misguided notions of a fast-disappearing ‘past’, one usually constituted mythically rather than historically, with a romantic account of the primacy of her pre-contact life experience. It is the latter that is taken to constitute her worldview, and by extension, the worldview experienced in her paintings. Put another way, Gabori’s paintings do not direct our attention towards the contemporary reality of Aboriginal Australia. They instead gesture just beyond it: before the missions, before the Kaiadilt’s estrangement, just before the world changed. Tantalisingly close yet, lest we forget, now gone.

This too is in keeping with Clifford’s conception of the salvage paradigm: “Authenticity in culture or art exists just prior to the present but not so distant or eroded as to make collection or salvage possible.”

Although Gabori came to the game late, her age nonetheless placed her among the first generation of Aboriginal artists that took the art world by storm. ‘Innovation’, for them, has too often been an ideal contingent on its effectiveness in restaging relatively static notions of Aboriginality within the discursive space of the Western art world. If this is, as many argue, a kind of victory of Aboriginal symbolism deployed at the heart of the nation state, it has clearly defined limits. Here the notion of authenticity that Clifford critiques is transferred from the material object to the artist themselves. This allows for innovation to become a sought after quality, even as it secures an understanding of an Aboriginality at constant risk of disappearing.

*A challenge to this critical and commercial status quo can’t simply be staged by assessing the relative ‘value’ of Gabori’s paintings. Indeed, whether or not they are ‘good’ or

58 ibid, p. 74.
'bad' – and there are convincing arguments to both ends – proves nothing. Nor does an account of Gabori’s art world achievements: that her work is held in every key public collection in Australia for example, or has been included in important international exhibitions. Nor should we focus solely on the vast abstractions embodied by her life experience and the difficult history of her people, as if these eclipse the similarly difficult contemporary circumstances that surrounded the production of her work or the labyrinthine social networks that have shaped her practice.

Rather, such a challenge is achieved by what Willis and Fry presciently framed in 1989 as a reversal of the order of things. The boom in Aboriginal painting, they argued, demanded to be understood “as a symptom of contemporary conditions rather than the expression of an erroneously romanticized 40,000-year-old culture.” In this they were not referring to the multivalent narratives of contemporary art, in which all signifiers of difference might be adequately housed, but to the contemporary social conditions in which this art is made.

In many remote communities, similar social conditions endure today. As Willis and Fry noted more recently, the Aboriginal art world remains “characterised by extreme inequality between welfare-dependent Aboriginal communities and the metropolitan art market.” When they first presented their critique this was a system in which the chain of exchange ultimately favoured non-Aboriginal stakeholders; where at the community end independent modes of income generation beyond art remained almost entirely non-existent. 25 years later, in which the Aboriginal art market reached un-

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59 This explains why I haven’t assessed her actual paintings in this chapter.
62 ibid.
dreamt of heights, Gabori’s narrative suggests that little has changed. As the dust settles on the peak market, gains and losses remain near impossible to separate. It’s hard not to think that the fact these are not clearer illuminates something of the industry’s darker heart.

Perhaps all that is clear is this: only once we can assess these works in terms of how well they communicate the multilayered social and political contexts of their production, can we begin to understand their ‘real’ function. They are artifacts of exchange and that exchange, occurring across cultural borders that remain starkly drawn, has the power to illuminate uncomfortable truths about colonialism’s enduring legacies.63 In the meantime we are left with little choice but to endlessly negotiate the space between.

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Gabori’s seemingly incessant production of paintings in the final decade of her life was explained to me, repeatedly, as evidence of the joy she wrought from the process. ‘She loved painting’, was a common refrain in the interviews I conducted; many also expressed awe for the energy with which she undertook her work. This was affirmed not only by her gallery dealers and by current employees of Mornington Island Art, but by those who had less at stake in Gabori’s narrative; those, that is, whose position in the value-chain of her practice was either peripheral or no longer a going concern.

Two young employees who worked at the art centre during the peak of Gabori’s practice countered their recollection of the more challenging aspects of their experience – in particular their role in taking Gabori’s work to the local rubbish tip for incineration – with positive memories of their time spent alongside the older Kaiadilt women in the communal studio.64 Both recalled, for example, Gabori and her sisters

63 I expand upon this idea in my conclusion.
64 Both these employees asked to remain anonymous. I corresponded with each by phone and email in September 2014.
dropping their brushes and hastening outside to welcome the wet season’s gathering clouds with Kaiadilt dances.

This aspect of Gabori’s practice should not be underplayed. As it is for many remotely based artists, painting, in part at least, was for her a social activity, and valued as such. If anything, the business of making art might best be understood as providing some respite within a community that for the old women see-sawed between grinding hours of boredom spent at the old person’s home, and the pressure to provide that was regularly placed on them by family members. For those who took to painting, the art centre ruptured this cycle. Staff collected them each day from the old person’s home, prepared their lunch and dropped them off again in the afternoon. In a practice not uncommon at art centres across northern Australia, materials were not only provided for them, but prepared; canvases were primed black or white and colours either mixed on their behalf, or provided straight from the tube.

At one level, Gabori’s paintings were closely guided by the dictates of the distant market. Brett Evans explained, for instance, that when a gallerist expressed interest in black and white paintings, these were the only colours provided in the studio: ‘I’d go in there,’ he told me, ‘and put black and white on her table (…) She used to hate it, but she used to do the most beautiful black and white paintings you’d ever seen. For a woman who loved colour’.

At another level, however, her creativity astounded the many people who worked with her, regardless of such seemingly intrusive methods. The studio was a collegiate and controlled atmosphere: a place to be among friends, where family demand could easily be palmed off in favour of the task at hand.

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I owe this perspective to Cameo Daley, who observed life at the art centre as part of her broader research into the Mornington Island community. We corresponded by phone, email and in person on a number of occasions throughout 2014. This perspective also aligns with some of my own experiences as an art coordinator.
But there must also have been more than this. For Gabori her paintings must have provided some meaningful access point to her country: a means to not only revisit in her mind’s eye the places in which her early identity had been forged, but to be celebrated for the deeply held knowledge she retained of them. Whether or not it follows that her paintings, as objects, retain a trace of this process that can be perceived, let alone understood, by non-Kaiadilt eyes remains contentious, but it does go some way towards illuminating the more elusive aspects of her art. In particular, it’s this that might provide some traction for interpretation beyond their conflicted status as cross-cultural art commodities.

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This became clearer for me just before I left Mornington Island. I arranged to meet with a local non-indigenous woman who had worked for Mornington Island Art during Gabori’s rise to acclaim. Earlier in the day she had recounted a story concerning Gabori’s response to seeing a group of her paintings at the National Gallery of Australia’s second indigenous Art Triennale in 2012; she had been accompanying Gabori at the time and had filmed the event. That evening she came to the unit where I was staying and we watched the footage on my laptop.

By way of conclusion I offer a short account of the moment in which this footage was taken. What it represents, exactly, is unclear, but I’d suggest its potential to illuminate something about Gabori and what painting meant to her lies less in its interpretation than in its persuasive poetry. In it we find a tangible representation of how her late-blooming career as an artist was traced by the history that she had lived; not only how this informed her work, but how she herself understood it. It also reminds us that for many Aboriginal artists the line between the act of painting and the mnemonic presence of the country they depict is permeable. Although often commented upon, this aspect of Aboriginal art
remains the hardest to put into words; when it is captured it is usually done so through far more ephemeral means.

The footage provides a near-perfect example. It shows Gabori seated in a wheelchair in a large gallery space, positioned at the rear of a crowd gathered to hear another artist talk. The surrounding walls are dominated by a sequence of her own large works: discordant swathes of colour depicting the coral shoals and tidal eddies of Bentinck.

With no fanfare she rises wordlessly and begins to dance in front of one of her paintings. Although her act seems entirely spontaneous, its effect is almost immediate: the crowd turns to record the spectacle and Gabori is caught in a flurry of camera flashes, her tiny figure outlined against the gallery’s white walls.

By then she was already frail: within the next year she would near completely cease painting even as her market reception gathered momentum, and exhibition after exhibition of her work was held. In the moment, however, none of this seemed to matter. She simply continued to shakily stamp her feet as her handclaps echoed in the cavernous space around her.
CAPTIONS:

6.1 Sally Gabori (Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda), Dibirdibi country, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 197.8 x 303.7 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

6.2 Sally Gabori, c.2008
CONCLUSION

Dissonant objects:
Aboriginal art and the global contemporary

In the aftermath of modernity, art has only one option: to be contemporary.¹

1.

In the first days of October 2013 I flew into Cairns, hired a car at the airport and drove inland. Just north, the highway turns dramatically from the cane fields that trace the edge of the ocean and ascends the steep rain-forested flanks of the McAlister Range. Everything becomes a pattern of shade and darkness, until the tree line drops away and the flat expanse of the Atherton Tablelands extends before you. It’s almost shocking how fast the Far North Queensland of the glossy brochure retreats: there’s the turn-off to Kuranda – a once-isolated hippy enclave where cable cars now offer scenic views from above the forest canopy – and then beyond that nothing but a series of glum looking fibro houses holding onto their acreages. Suddenly everything seems far less picturesque; the towns get smaller as you go.

I was headed towards the home of Kevin Shaw, a field anthropologist who had spent much of his career working in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. Throughout the 1990s and for much of the first decade of the millennium, Shaw was responsible for administering the Kimberley Aboriginal Heritage Act across this iconic landscape. It was a task that had kept him in constant motion, shuttling between the far-flung communities where he mediated the development of protection plans for the many sites of cultural significance that lie scattered across the region. In this, he became the key broker between traditional owners and the government: a

¹ T Smith, What is contemporary art?, p. 1.
deeply pragmatic role that drew him into the local Aboriginal world.

The closest friend he had made during this time, and the reason for my visit, was Ngarrangarri, a magisterial elder who had in the decade before his death in 2008 briefly become known to the art world by his shortened moniker, Ngarra. To say the two were close is something of an understatement. Ngarra had painted for the most part at Shaw’s house in Derby – the rough township on the edge of the West Kimberley that Shaw had then called home – but in the overarching schema of their relationship this formed only a small part. When the old man had died, or so I’d heard, the responsibility to bury him in accordance with his cultural beliefs had fallen to Shaw. It was a grim and deeply private task, and one that Shaw took as an honour.

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As an artist, Ngarra was never widely known. He’d enjoyed some success, but had not reached the same heights as many of his first contact contemporaries from Aboriginal Australia. The story was that this is exactly how he wanted it: he was known within his own community by another name, Barney Yu, and even as he began to sell his paintings in exhibitions in Perth and Melbourne, he kept his identity as an artist private from his countrymen and women. ‘Who’s that artist, Ngarra?’ they’d purportedly wonder from time to time. If asked himself, he would plead ignorance. Affiliated to no art centre, Ngarra was a free agent, his distinctive work very much his own.²

Over the past year I had been researching an exhibition that I was curating for a university art museum in Melbourne and had become intrigued by a series of small drawings in coloured texta that Ngarra had made in 1998, or thereabouts. I kept hearing about these works, and the potential of what they could be had begun to gnaw at me. Even before I saw images of

them, let alone the works themselves, they sounded like exactly what the exhibition needed: in their small-scale, casually distinct materiality, I imagined they might effectively push against the object-commodity status of much contemporary Aboriginal art. In this, I was picturing them as a kind of disruptive presence within the broader exhibition - loosely conceived around three distinct regions - in which I hoped questions about the curatorial framing of Aboriginal art could be drawn into focus. As my research had developed, one question in particular kept rising to the surface: how should we conceive Aboriginal art in terms of the broader currents of contemporary art? Perhaps more to the point, on what basis has this art become contemporary? What role had curating, as an intermediary practice, played? In Ngarra’s drawings I sensed a key means by which these questions might be staged, if not answered.

I can’t now recall how I got into contact with Shaw, but when I did we struck up a correspondence. In his initial reticence it was clear he had little time for the art world, but as we exchanged emails he loosened up, as if some unspoken, but necessary, bona fides had been established. A large group of Ngarra’s drawings had ended up in a European collection and had never been shown publicly, he told me, but he still had some in his possession. It turned out ‘some’ was a relative term: as it transpired he had perhaps twenty sketchbooks that Ngarra had kept late in his life, once his failing health had forced him into the old person’s home in Derby. In addition, there were reams of earlier drawings on loose-leaf pages from the late 1990s - part of the series I had repeatedly heard about. Eventually, after much backwards and forwards over email and Skype, Shaw began to send me images. They were pretty much exactly what I’d hoped they might be; perhaps even more.

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Ngarra, I soon learnt, had reached out to Shaw in the late 1990s when he realised that there might be something to be
gained from participating in the newfound market for Aboriginal art that had been sweeping the Kimberley in recent years. Although Shaw had little interest in art, or the sometimes-shady business that went with it, he readily recognised the spirit of reciprocity that guided Ngarra’s request. After all, by that time the two had spent years traveling the remote Kimberley together: Shaw had often relied heavily on the social contract they shared to negotiate the region’s complex cultural landscape. This, Shaw knew, was always a two-way street. At Ngarra’s request he became a different type of go-between. He arranged a gallery in Perth to show Ngarra’s works and provided him with art materials and a quiet space to work at his house. There, Ngarra developed his distinctive artistic sensibility: an individuality that betrays not only his independence as an artist, but his very specific cultural inheritance.

Born in the bush towards the end of the colonial settlement of his traditional lands, Ngarra was Andayin, a tiny language group responsible for a tract of country that extends through the central Kimberley. By the time of his birth in the 1930s, the cattle stations had already annexed much of this area and, in pattern that has since defined the very contours of Kimberley life and history, most of his people had been co-opted into indentured labour. Although he moved onto Glenroy station at an early age Ngarra soon withdrew to the bush once more, joining those of his family who were still attempting to follow their own way of life. Known disparagingly in Kimberley Kriol as ‘Myalls’, they had by choice eschewed the lure of the stations in favour of a peripatetic life maintained at the outer reaches of European settlement. As the competing worlds of the frontier clashed, the threat of violent encounter with the pastoralists loomed ever more likely. Punitive parties from the stations would often attempt to track them down, ostensibly as ‘punishment’ for the spearing of station cattle. In this entangled space of colonial encounter tactical evasion became for Ngarra and his people a way of life.
This experience drew Ngarra close to his maternal grandparents Muelbyne and Larlgarlyne, both of whom provided key formative influences. Even when he eventually rejoined others at Glenroy station, where he quickly became a renowned stockman, he continued to spend time with his grandfather throughout his early life. From Muelbyne Ngarra learnt much of the law and ancestral knowledge that provided him with some ballast against the cataclysmic changes to come. In turn, as his grandparents grew older Ngarra’s links to the settler world — in particular his ability to liberate station supplies on their behalf — became increasingly essential to their survival. All this, of course, was an expression of changes then sweeping the broader region. Here Ngarra became a master-mediator. He was well established as a cultural go-between long before Shaw arrived in the Kimberley and took on something of the same role.

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Sitting at Shaw’s kitchen table in his recently completed, light-filled house, we began to spread the archive of Ngarra’s drawings in front of us. Their varied subjects tallied with his life’s history, and provided obvious departure points for conversation. Shaw knew each of them intimately, and as we went he paused to explain key works. One, executed in 1998, was a posthumous portrait of Muelbyne drawn nearly half a century after his death. After a period of no contact, Ngarra had found his grandfather’s decaying remains in the bush, and the memory had unsurprisingly remained vivid. He made the drawing following a dream: rendered in blue texta-colour, Muelbyne’s lidless eyes stare upwards above a skeletal grin. Cogniscent of the required Andayin law, it was Ngarra who had interred the old man’s body in his traditional country, a practice that became increasingly rare as mission influence spread across the greater Kimberley.

Populated by figures that Shaw darkly characterised during our discussions as ‘villains’, the frontier of Ngarra’s experience was a lawless place. Although the archive consisted
largely of pictures that could be loosely grouped under the catch-all term ‘country’ (which in Ngarra’s case includes finely tuned observations of the Kimberley’s flora and fauna) in a number of drawings he unsentimentally touched upon harder subjects. One, carefully drawn in pencil on a torn scrap of paper, depicted a cowboy aiming his rifle downwards from his saddle and shooting a spear-carrying Aboriginal man, his arms flung outwards and his body painted for ceremony. As this drawing made explicit, the fading edges of the frontier had shaped Ngarra’s life: whether or not these had been stories passed to him by his grandfather, or events he had witnessed himself, these were the experiences that he returned to once he began his practice as an artist.  

Against the underlying intensity evident in many of the drawings, playing the curator was emerging as a difficult task. I was listening as Shaw recounted the various narratives that each displayed, but I was simultaneously trying to see them grouped together in the gallery space: attempting, that is, to visualise how they might look in the exhibition’s final iteration. I was already picturing them laid out in the wood and perspex vitrines the museum would eventually build for them, which I had decided, long before I saw them for the first time, was what they needed. I wanted them to look a certain way, to not be reduced to images framed and hung on the gallery wall, but to be seen instead as small-scale propositions: artefacts of visual thinking in the fashion of all good studio-based drawing. For this reason, it seemed important to present them in a way an artist fluent in the aesthetic mores of the contemporary art world might: I knew

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3 In this, it’s worth pointing out that Ngarra’s body of drawings – particularly the more obviously figurative examples – become nearly indistinguishable from those by the handful of acclaimed 19th century Aboriginal artists – including, for example, Tommy McRae (c.1835-1901) and William Barak (1825 – 1903) – whose small observational sketches of Australia’s southeastern frontier provide a glimpse of a similar, albeit much earlier, period of colonial contact. Like Ngarra’s drawings, theirs also record the interactive edges of the new world emerging around them. Beyond the fact that they had been made a century or so later, Ngarra’s drawings perform a strikingly similar function: depicting the frontier through the eyes of someone who had lived it.
this would be the frame within which the museum’s audience would look, and I wanted these works to fulfill their expectations, and then to quietly subvert them.

In this, I was brokering the material between its local context (the studio, or in this case a deeply personal private collection in which the drawings were almost indistinguishable from the relationship between Ngarra and Shaw) and an intended, but as-yet-imagined, audience. My own ideals for contemporary art, and for what indigenous contemporary art could or should be in relation to this discourse, were to be reflected in the articulation of the objects and how they interacted in the space of their display. Part of this lay in choosing the right works; another part, just as important, in treating them in a certain way. I wanted also to keep them open; to not limit them to the readings of ‘country’ and ancestral narrative that so often define Aboriginal art. What else, I wondered, might they tell us?

On a handful of the drawings Shaw had carefully written a title at the edge, in Andayin, using pencil: an anthropologist’s annotation. Ngarra had told him their names and he had diligently recorded them. He hadn’t done more than that, but Shaw explained that he knew Ngarra’s subjects intimately enough to be able to recall associated stories simply by way of the title alone. He told me a number, but to be honest I wasn’t interested in articulating the works in this way. I wanted to avoid the reduction of Ngarra’s work solely to his life experiences, or his cultural inheritance: the white cube of the contemporary art gallery was not, after all, the didactic space of the ethnographic museum.

For Shaw, my position must have been clear: at one point he asked if the names he had written in the corners were in fact a problem, assuming, I suspect, that they might disrupt the new-found status I wanted to bring to them. But I liked the drawings as they were. His annotations formed part of an index of imperfections that included ink smudges and water stains. It all added a patina of wear, not only placing them
immediately in the lived space of the studio, but within time. That they were more than a decade old, and appeared as such, promised to productively complicate their relationship to the term ‘contemporary art’ and how it might be articulated in the exhibition. Shaw’s hand was part of this: evidence of each drawing’s brokerage, it spoke of the network of social relationships that had carried Ngarra’s drawings into the world. It rendered them at once more tangible and more distant. Contemporary art, here at least, could be emphasised as an entangled term: one that traced a period of history within Australia and, as it did, retained an unavoidable historical contingency.

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Most of the drawings I began to choose for the exhibition could be loosely described as planar landscapes. They were images that were harder to pin down than the figurative drawings, which struck me, for the most part, as far too personal to show widely. In addition, the planarity of these drawings played into the kind of analytical abstraction for which I myself had a long-held predisposition: playful, yet carefully observed. Many were animated by brightly coloured starbursts of dotting and fields patterning. There were hills and trees, but identifiable imagery readily dissolved into fields of pure visual invention: discordant harmonies and strange juxtapositions of deep and shallow space, rendered in high-keyed texta-color (fig. 7.2 & 7.3). They were undeniably pictures of country, but they seemed to simultaneously expand upon the term. In Ngarra’s drawings, I felt one could readily understand, almost implicitly, that ‘country’ could provide an armature for something far less distinct: picture-making. It was exactly the point I was hoping to make.

If I was yet to fully understand what these small gem-like pictures had been before my arrival, when they lay carefully stacked in a weatherproof case in Shaw’s work shed, I felt that one thing was clear: I knew I had to make them look contemporary. I felt there was promise in that; that the shift
it would represent might, in a quiet way, breathe air into the discourse surrounding Aboriginal art, at least within the exhibition itself. But I also knew that I too had things at stake here in a more personal sense. I’d been contracted to curate this exhibition, and had been successful in securing competitive government funding to do so. It was an all-too-rare opportunity to make a statement of intent: not only about the art, but about my own aspirations as a curator.

If in this I found myself implicated in the particular flow of meaning construction that carried these works between worlds, I knew I shouldn’t be surprised: as a broker my role was never going to be impartial.

2.

There’s a number of ways we might argue that works like Ngarra’s have an intrinsic quality that sites them as contemporary art, and that the articulation of this is what I was performing as a curator.

Their intercultural condition – that is, the fact that they are essentially icons of exchange as well as being statements of cultural autonomy – provides perhaps the most obvious and persuasive means. It’s a convincing perspective, but it’s worth pointing out that what we might recognize as the contemporaneity of such works – the way, that is, that they chime not only with broader understandings of contemporary art, but with what we might see as a shared contemporary condition – is not simply a quality that we have recently uncovered, as if it were always there waiting for the discourse to catch up. The passage that imprints their meaning – their very brokerage, so to speak – continues far beyond the relationship that carried their inception. Naming them ‘contemporary art’, and trying to articulate this in a certain fashion, which is where I myself was becoming implicated in the process of mediation, is part of this. In making a set of decisions about how something is seen and where – both of which are key elements of discursive framing that serve to
direct attendant discourse – the status of artworks like Ngarra’s as ‘contemporary’, or not, can shift and change.

Once they would have been classed, in an ethnographic sense, as ‘transitional’ works: pieces whose ethnographic authenticity was compromised by their self-reflexive status as cross-cultural objects. We could also see them as a distinctive form of indigenous modernism: a calculated response to the arrival of Western modernity in the Kimberley, and, as such, a re-imagining of an imposed ideology to local ends. As contemporary art they might be all this at once, but it’s not, of course, a given that they are. What part of the art world do they circulate in, we might ask? Where in the museum should we display such works, and what conventions should we follow when we do?

In this instance these decisions lay largely with me. I had been making them, both implicitly and explicitly, from the project’s earliest conception, even as I put forward a proposal to the museum in which I argued that these questions would form something of the exhibition’s critical scaffold. My colleagues there would have input (indeed, they already had done), as would each of the living artists who were included alongside Ngarra, but as the exhibition’s curator I had an overarching responsibility: I’d be explaining its intricacies, arguing for the connections I was making between different artists and distinctly local traditions of art-making. Usually the artist would be far more central in this process, but Ngarra was deceased. In addition, Shaw’s lack of interest in the conventions of the urban art world bordered on deep mistrust, and Ngarra’s gallery representative was a good example of the kind of neo-ethnographic commercial spaces that make up much of the Aboriginal art world in Australia: they might use the phrase ‘contemporary art’, but few understand the broader implications of the term. By being the broker in this equation I had the authority, in a sense, to articulate their contemporaneity.
In the catalogue’s introduction this is what I wrote about the broader concerns of the exhibition (by then titled *The world is not a foreign land*):

In recent years much has been made of a significant revision in the broader art world: ‘contemporary art’, a term that had predominately been used as a signifier for the art of the moment, has emerged as a distinct period style, one that reflects something intrinsic about the contemporary condition. Far from simply being art made now, contemporary art has taken shape as a practice that reflects a certain way of being and acting in the contemporary world. What this discursive adjustment has meant for indigenous contemporary art in Australia remains largely unexplored. Undoubtedly it provides space to further redress ethnographically bound notions of ‘tradition’ and the Eurocentric histories and categorisations these rest upon. Yet, perhaps more importantly, it also calls upon curators and audiences to think through the logic of division – whether cultural, regional, or otherwise – that continues to broadly define this art’s reception and display. Even though at one level ‘The world is not a foreign land’ operates on the difference between contemporary art and indigenous contemporary art, it does so in the knowledge that this in itself is a flawed distinction. If this art does contain a defining sense of the ‘foreign’ (as in, if the Aboriginal communities and outstations in which it is made lie an insurmountable distance from the populace urban centres where it is ultimately shown), it is a foreignness of a similar register that threads through the broader discourses of contemporary art, binding together previously distinct worlds.⁴

There is, of course, a certain truth to this, but revisiting it now I can’t help but wonder if this narrative is far too easy. As I’ve touched on, Ngarra’s work can be displayed under various interpretive frames, among which contemporary art is just one. But there is also another aspect that seems important here: anything can be placed under the malleable frame of ‘the contemporary’ should we so desire it.

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Whereas the discourse of modernism hinged upon a clearly defined ‘us’ and ‘them’, upon the mapping of centres of power and their peripheries, contemporary art’s defining trope lies in its voracious all-inclusiveness. As Ian McLean wrote in the catalogue essay I commissioned for the exhibition:

The contemporary is not something you defeat or join; it is the fiction of our times; the new universal. It already has you in its belly. The contemporary, fully globalised, has no centre and hence no periphery; no other and hence no aboriginal.\(^5\)

The question then, perhaps lies less in the veracity of the claims we make for Aboriginal art as contemporary art. It is rather more about whose ideals such claims betray, and how this ‘new universal’, even if it implicates us all, can in relation to the mediation of Aboriginal art appear to do little but re-tread colonialism’s enduring logic. Here the risk remains that this discursive shift achieves little more than a kind of recolonisation: the frame of a dominant culture extended over that of a subordinate; evidence of what the Aboriginal curator Brenda L Croft once referred to as “the ever-changing dictates of European/Firstworld art theory”, albeit dressed in new clothes.\(^6\)

The questions this raises keep coming: For one, should we conceive indigenous contemporary art as a separate current within the broader flow of contemporary art? This is certainly implicit in the usual institutional display and collection of Aboriginal art, and the rhetoric that surrounds it, but might such distinctions simultaneously risk adding another chapter in modernism’s exclusionary narrative, relegating, as they do, Aboriginal art to a contemporaneity of a different order? Yet, if we forego this difference, is some essential part of its being not in the process lost?

\(^{5}\) I McLean, ‘What’s contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?’ in ibid, pp. 49-54, p. 49.

In this, the question of whether or not Aboriginal art is contemporary art takes on what I argue here is an ethical quality. It is a consideration that cuts to the centre of the interactions between black and white Australia: not only to the conflict, expressed in Croft’s statement, over who possesses the authority to speak, but the question of how this art is conceived in relation to the enduring fallout of colonisation.

It follows that the question is not necessarily, or at least not immediately, the discursive one it is usually treated as – a question, that is, that demands we re-imagine existing art historical categories. This remains part of the challenge Aboriginal art supposes on the broader art world, but before this, the promise its resolution might hold lies elsewhere. How, we might ask, does the term ‘contemporary art’ assist indigenous contemporary art to convey a sense not just of its particular cultural vantage point in new contexts – that is, to affirm cultural difference within ever widening borders – but to impart a sense of its contemporaneity?

Put more simply: Can naming this art ‘contemporary’ more accurately communicate the dissonant and multi-layered social field within which it manifests?

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In the art world the question of what it is to be contemporary, along with its obvious follow-on, ‘what is contemporary art?’ became increasingly prominent as modernism’s hold on art world discourse inexorably loosened: as the old centres of power diversified and the volume of art practices increased exponentially, so too did the need to reimagine how the art of our times might be conceived.

As touched on in the introduction to this thesis, Terry Smith claims the transition from the modern to the contemporary – and more broadly the overarching transition from modernity to contemporaneity – as recent history’s defining narrative. “In the visual arts”, he writes, “the big story, now so blindingly obvious, is the shift - nascent...
during the 1950s, contested during the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s – from modern to contemporary art.” 7 In short, the contemporary speaks of a shared condition: part and parcel of what it is to live now – to be in our time – the very concept aims to address the connective tissue that binds together previously distinct worlds. “Contemporaneity”, Smith continues, “is the most evident attribute of the current world picture, encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multeity of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being (his italics).” 8

This ever-present quality is why McLean refers to the contemporary as the “new universal”, or why we might understand it as an all-encompassing signifier that binds us in its diversity, something like (as the editors of e-flux Journal have put it) “an invisible barrier that seals us together precisely by its very invisibility.” 9 But regardless of the malleability of such definitions we shouldn’t mistake ‘the contemporary’ as a non-hierarchical notion. Although much of its theorisation imparts a loose sense of boundless egalitarianism, this is, in fact, not necessarily true. For some ‘the contemporary’ remains little more than a “watery signifier”: hard to pin down with any coherence, slippery in a fashion that hints at a veiled ideology under the non-specific empiricism of an endlessly malleable ‘now’. 10 Here, the question of how it might adhere to the enduring patterns of historical precedent, no matter how and where it subverts them, becomes prominent.

If, as I suggested in the catalogue introduction quoted above, the interaction between indigenous contemporary art and broader notions of contemporary art remains critically

7 T Smith, What is Contemporary Art?, p. 5.
8 ibid.
10 ibid, p. 7.
fraught, it is for this reason, rather than more straightforward considerations of display and interpretation. Indeed, in Australia's specific postcolonial context - a social and political space in which the fallout of colonisation remains explicitly written in the enduring reality of Aboriginal dispossession - the much vaunted 'promise' of the contemporary presents as particularly vexed.

The kind of contingency this betrays - between the current moment and its colonial antecedent - should not be surprising. At one level the phenomenon of indigenous contemporary art is part of one of three major currents that can be discerned within contemporaneity’s broader flow: the postcolonial turn. As Smith puts it: “Following decolonization within what were the second, third and fourth worlds (...) there has emerged a plethora of art shaped by local, national, anti-colonial, independent, antiglobalization values (those of diversity, identity, and critique).”\(^{11}\) Although indigenous contemporary art from Australia possesses significant structural differences (both social and institutional) to much work that characterises the postcolonial turn at an international level, it remains productive, as I suggested in my first chapter, to see it in this light: as a significant manifestation of difference within an increasingly global context, one intended, as it were, to push against the colonial ideologies that had preceded it. But as useful as this is, it simultaneously risks glossing a more difficult narrative in favor of one of triumph against history’s odds. After all, in many respects Aboriginal Australians remain a people colonised by the Australian nation state. If this is a fact emphasised in the tensions that continue to trouble interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, it also hangs heavy over the structural networks of the Aboriginal art world. In particular, it can't help but be reiterated in the distributive channels through which 'remote' Aboriginal art is

\(^{11}\) T Smith, 'What is Contemporary Art?', p. 7.
disseminated: usually through government-funded community art centres and white-run city galleries.

If the difficulties of this translation are what threads through all the narratives contained in this thesis, linking the diverse cultural and geographic regions that are by default mapped, I have perhaps left the most obvious example until last: the career of the most acclaimed artist of the entire movement, Emily Kame Kngwarreye. My provocation here—that the term ‘contemporary art’ is only useful if it illuminates, rather than veils, the more difficult aspects of cultural translation that attend the production and dissemination of indigenous contemporary art— is well illustrated by the tensions apparent in the critical and commercial reception of her work.

This is not simply due to the wide acclaim Kngwarreye and her art enjoyed, but rather to the foundational place she holds in a broader sense. Indeed, her story of sudden success and subsequent demand (touched on in the previous chapter) can be seen as something of an ur-text for the rise of the Aboriginal artist-as-art star that became an increasingly prominent function of the market from the mid 1990s onwards. Other Aboriginal artists had of course become widely known in the broader art world by the time Kngwarreye came to attention, but she, along with Rover Thomas, was the first whose work not only signaled a move away from the recognisably ‘traditional’ iconographies of the desert and Arnhem Land, but which entered into lockstep with an increasingly voracious market. With higher stakes came more pronounced exploitation: Kngwarreye attracted the broadest possible range of art world speculators, ethical and non-ethical alike. This has rarely been an accepted part of her ‘official’ narrative (forming instead a kind of shadow-narrative), but it should, nonetheless, be seen as central to any full understanding of her career: the brokerage of her art by a variety of third parties, often in dedicated competition, shaped its form, materiality and function between worlds.
It follows that any real accounting of Kngwarreye’s achievements necessarily draws upon this aspect of her work as a means to not only contextualise her relatively vast production of paintings over her relatively short career, but to site this production in a local sense: that is, within Kngwarreye’s lived experience of intercultural exchange rather than externally to it. In similar fashion to many Aboriginal artists of her generation this immediately makes clear a correlation between Kngwarreye’s experience of the white-run art industry (in which she was often paid directly for her labour, including in ‘local’ currencies such as used vehicles or second hand clothes), and the earlier pastoral industry, also white-run, in which she provided indentured labor and was paid in rations.

As I explored in relation to Paddy Bedford’s work in the Kimberley, such prior patterns of intercultural exchange, no matter how difficult, remain written within contemporary transactions. Kngwarreye, along with other artists from the Utopia movement, often painted at Delmore Downs, the station owned by Donald and Janet Holt that spread across a vast area of their traditional country. Delmore Downs neighboured the Aboriginal-run Utopia station, on which Kngwarreye lived, and for many years had functioned as a kind of ration depot-cum-remote area store for her people. In this we see that the process of decolonisation one might read in the production and dissemination of her art was not one of sudden decoupling, but one in which certain contingencies and entanglements endured: in shaping the contemporary interface her practice was borne from, they also enabled it.

As with other interactions detailed in this thesis, in Kngwarreye’s case this was far from straightforward: the power dynamic between parties remained deeply interwoven. The Holts, who alongside the art coordinator Rodney Gooch were among the most significant third parties involved directly in the production of Kngwarreye’s work, have each provided revealing accounts of their relationship with Kngwarreye and her family. Although the cynic might point to vested interest (their
involvement was always at one level commercial in nature), theirs was a relationship nonetheless bound by a long and intimate association: Donald Holt’s family had lived in the region since his grandparents had settled there in the 1920s; their absorption into local kinship networks had even rendered his mother Kngwarreye’s classificatory ‘sister’. Donald Holt’s participation in the local arts economy began well before indigenous art had established a viable art world presence: he began collecting artefacts from his Utopia neighbours in the late 1960s, continuing a practice that his grandfather had begun before him. Kngwarreye’s association with Delmore Downs, which began in 1934, remained in her later life clearly guided by the valences of this shared history.

Janet Holt, who came to the station after meeting her future husband in Alice Springs, where she had worked with the fledgling Papunya Tula Association, put it like this: “The nature of Emily’s relationship with Donald was fundamental to her long-standing association with Delmore Downs.” Her own account of working with Kngwarreye similarly displays a striking co-dependence: each party, one can easily infer, were not only caught up by the exhilarating sense of creativity that attended Kngwarreye’s rise to success, but by the new social networks this opened.

Although he avoids detailing specific relationships, Ian McLean looks to such history to establish Kngwarreye’s work as a form of Aboriginal modernism: an art, that is, which embeds

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13 ibid, p. 144.
15 ibid, pp. 148-158.
local experiences of modernity within newly “hybrid practices”.16

“As extraordinary as Emily’s aesthetic achievements are”, he writes, “from the perspective of an Aboriginal modernism they are not an enigma but in keeping with well-established precedents and patterns of post-contact art.”17 It is for this reason, he argues, that Kngwarreye’s is a contemporary art that is Aboriginal and modern all at once.

Smith, in his own writing on Kngwarreye, introduces the notion of a “bridgework between cultures” to similarly understand the patterns of exchange her work both encouraged and grew from.18 While acknowledging that such interactions remain fraught, he goes as far to suggest that such practices, adapted as they are to the traffic between cultures, carry with them reconciliatory promise:

The entire contemporary Aboriginal art movement is part of the bridgework between cultures which are primarily intent on pursuing distinct, hopefully parallel rather than incompatible, ends.19

It is tempting to read in Smith’s perspective that although indigenous contemporary art like Kngwarreye’s remains traced by challenging circumstances of translation, it nonetheless succeeds as a meaningful mode of intercultural dialogue. That is, it manages to build something like a symbolic form of intercultural reconciliation, even as its production occurs within seemingly irreconcilable frameworks of cultural exchange.

17 ibid, p. 28.
19 ibid, p. 41.
This seems broadly true, but as I’ve argued throughout this thesis it remains important to complicate such thinking: to not, in a sense, rush towards its conclusion. The idea that indigenous contemporary art manifests reconciliation as an as-yet-unachieved but incipient ideal suggests that the fraught interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures in Australia are close to some kind of resolution. The many exhibitions of Aboriginal art in this country could be readily presented as evidence of this: an example, perhaps, of the art world leading the political world towards a new, more settled future. Of similar note would be the celebration of Ngwarreye’s painting, and much like it, as a dynamic form of contemporary art, equal to, and in many cases surpassing, that of her non-Aboriginal contemporaries.

Yet Ngwarreye’s work (and here she can stand in for Aboriginal art more broadly) is a success not despite the difficulties that surrounded its production and dissemination, but because of them. From its earliest manifestations, the specific contours of the Aboriginal art industry were unavoidably transposed upon local historical armatures within which many of its senior 'stars' had already been called upon to retool the imposed frame of Western modernity to local ends. In this, indigenous contemporary art can be understood as a contemporary practice embedded within local history rather than uncoupled from it. The success of such paintings as Ngwarreye’s then, lies less in the fact that they might express a newfound compact between Aboriginal and settler worlds, and more in their power to manifest something of the dissonance that continues to trouble the interactive edges of these domains. This is not out of step with Smith’s own conclusions in relation to Ngwarreye’s practice. “This trafficking between the cultures”, he writes, “is not a matter of simple, two-way swaps of equally weighted chunks of clearly understood material. Like all exchanges of gifts it activates
a multiplicity of misunderstandings, acts of faith, wistful thinking, suspicion and mistrust."\(^{20}\) (my italics)

In these qualities, I would suggest, we see something of the true effect of much indigenous contemporary art. Indeed, it is exactly this pattern of misregistration, and the dissonance that resultus, that naming this art ‘contemporary’ should throw into relief. It follows that this position, in which the more challenging aspects of indigenous contemporary art are accommodated, should not be mistaken as effectively excluding it from broader understandings of contemporary art: from what Smith refers to as ‘the global contemporary’. Arguably it does the opposite: by siting it more deeply in the context of its production it renders it more present; more of its time; more emblematic of a contemporary reality that enfolds not only Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal world views in a constantly becoming ‘now’, but which implicates this moment within history. Here the signifier of ‘the contemporary’ is not one that disengages Aboriginal art from the colonially inscribed ideologies (of salvage; of authenticity; of native ‘genius’) that continue to underwrite its production and dissemination and in doing so uncomfortably tie it to earlier discourses of modernism before it. In keeping with the actual promise that contemporary art, as a discourse, might offer, what this provides is (or at least ideally), a means to see more clearly the difficult social relations that border such practices: to not only interrogate them, but to gain some insight into how they implicate all of us.

3.

I began this conclusion with an account of how my own practice as a curator manifested as a form of intercultural brokerage in relation to a series of drawings by the late West Kimberley artist, Ngarra. Although the questions this prompted remained largely unresolved within the exhibition itself, the drawings were nonetheless well received: for many, they were a

\(^{20}\) ibid, p. 40.
standout, due largely to their distinctive material and formal qualities.

Yet my feeling that something had been lost in translation remained. They were effective and engaging works – encouraging the audience, as I’d originally hoped, to think beyond more established, market-ready, approaches to Aboriginal art – but the patterns of exchange that had carried them (not only through my own engagements, but through Ngarra’s relationship with Kevin Shaw) remained for the most part invisible. Beyond that lay the social context from which the works were borne: the West Kimberley, as with much of Aboriginal Australia, remains gripped by the legacies its colonisation set in motion half a generation before Ngarra’s birth. Indeed, as in many similar localities around Australia the broader region’s much celebrated art history, weighed in favor of a fast-disappearing generation of senior lawmen and women, has done little to brighten its contemporary reality. How can this be articulated at the same time as work like Ngarra’s is celebrated for its aesthetic and cultural achievements?

If this disquieting sense had taken on a more personal cast through my role as a curator, it had nonetheless made clear a broader ramification: the majority, if not all, exhibitions of indigenous contemporary art in Australia risk faltering somewhere upon similar ground. At times it seems as if they can’t help but impart a sense that the hermetically sealed spaces of the art museum offer only a carefully contained version of reality, one that remains partly veiled by well-intentioned, but nonetheless misguided, ideologies.\(^\text{21}\) If anything rings true in this context it’s that exhibitions that effectively communicate the intercultural core of this art remain rare: those that address, in a real sense, the difficult social conditions it often originates within are

\(^{21}\) As an obvious case in point, Paddy Bedford’s acclaimed 2006 retrospective at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney was presented as a comprehensive survey of the artist’s eight year career; his working relationship with Tony Oliver, detailed in chapter five of this thesis, remained unexplored.
almost entirely non-existent. How to even go about correcting this remains unclear.

In this, the questions remain: if, as I’ve established above, the dissonances of translation form the most pressing aspect of this art’s manifestation as contemporary art, how might such dissonances be staged? What of the complex social networks that trouble, but nonetheless enable, indigenous contemporary art’s production and dissemination?

It’s clear that such questions, if they are to be answered, demand new approaches to both critical theorisation and exhibition-making. Less obvious is exactly how this might be achieved, or by whom: although many recognise the impasse, few seem confident in anything but the most propositional of answers. The anthropologist John Carty, for example, writing on Western Desert art in terms readily transposed upon Indigenous contemporary art more generally, points to a “critical stasis” that will only be overcome by combining anthropology’s embedded approach with art history’s formal analysis.\textsuperscript{22} Ian McLean, Carty notes, has argued in similar fashion that art historians, challenged to provide a better accounting of Aboriginal art, “must rewrite their stories, and in the process rethink their methodologies”.\textsuperscript{23}

Similar arguments are often made for curatorial practice: that it too needs to adapt to new ends. Stephen Gilchrist, for instance, has recently argued that curators of indigenous art in particular “need to devise installations and exhibitions that interrogate dominant interpretive binaries.”\textsuperscript{24} He suggests that curatorial practice, constituted as it is socially, is perhaps uniquely attuned to these needs: its “generative value”, he writes, “is that it is intentionally

\textsuperscript{23} ibid, p. 60. (Carty is quoting I McLean, ‘How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art’, p. 22.)
multidisciplinary; it does not and should not align to any one single framework.”  

The artist and art historian Adam Gezcy takes a less measured perspective on the promise of curatorial practice as an agent of change. For him, the exhibition of Aboriginal art in the Western art world strips it of social context: the much vaunted spiritual dimension of what he terms ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art trumps the more pressing social circumstances of its producers (this, of course, echoes Anne Willis and Tony Fry’s earlier sentiments).  

From this perspective, arguing for different modes of engagement, or different approaches to curatorial or art historical practice is, for Gezcy at least, ‘naïve’: the art system, he writes, “aspire[s] to find operations that suggest alternatives and voice dissent only to absorb them into the very advantage of the system that these operations negate.”  

Although one can counter Gilchrist by arguing that curatorial practice, more often than not still contingent upon slow-moving institutional support, is less adaptable than the tools available to the art historian, or challenge Gezcy’s position by pointing out that the visibility of Aboriginal art has at times helped achieve longed-for political wins for indigenous Australians, it is perhaps more productive to draw attention to such positions as evidence of the contested ground upon which new approaches must manifest. As Carty and Gilchrist both suggest, albeit in different ways, it is likely that the malleable space between methodologies will open new lines of interdisciplinary research. Here, a newly hybrid approach to art history might find productive counterpoint in

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25 ibid, p 58.
27 ibid, p. 46.
28 I am thinking here of the usage of Aboriginal art in native title claims: see, for example, Yirrkala paintings of sea country or the Ngurrara canvas from the Great Sandy Desert.
Making in translation

a more speculative approach to exhibition-making, each establishing means to question the other.

Such intersections would be necessarily fluid: they would need to seek broader contexts within which to display indigenous contemporary art; to acknowledge, at the same time as honouring its underlying cultural intent, the intercultural basis that enables this work; and to approach its social relations – the way, that is, that its meanings have been established in the intercultural space between participant parties – as central to its being.

Here, much of the remotely based indigenous practice discussed in this thesis (including, of course, work like Ngarra’s, or Kngwarreye’s, but also that by Paddy Bedford, Nyapanyapa Yunupingu or Sally Gabori) might not only be better conceived against local histories of intercultural exchange, but its interactions with the broader currents of contemporary art may also be more securely apprehended, and thus more rigorously assessed. It is also an approach that would allow a more critical view of the movement as a whole. It would provide a means not only to challenge overly simplified claims that Aboriginal art is an art of cultural revival against the odds, but to see more clearly how stubborn colonial patterns endure in its very logic: not only in the way it circulates in Western art worlds, but in the very fashion in which it is made. This would return us to what I framed above as the ‘ethical’ dimension of the Aboriginal-art-as-contemporary-art discussion. It would provide one answer within a more integrated, layered approach to representing the possible significations that such cultural material may make possible. Asking questions rather than seeking definitive answers might create more robust means to assess this art’s historical function.

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If working curatorially with Ngarra’s archive of drawings had left questions about the mediation of indigenous contemporary art somewhat opaque, it had emphasised that his
relationship with Shaw was not only central to his drawings, but to his work as an artist more broadly. As a form of research, curatorial practice had rendered this fact tangible: through Ngarra’s work I had come to know Shaw to some degree, and in the process had understood something of his own personal investment in Ngarra’s work. The drawings – as with Ngarra’s broader practice – had become icons of their shared friendship, as much as they were pictures of country or tradable art world commodities.

If, as I discussed above in relation to Kngwarreye’s work, it remains overly optimistic to suggest that the circulation of work like Ngarra’s in the Western art world functions as a form of intercultural reconciliation, the relationship that had grown between the two men was clear evidence of what Peter Sutton frames as “the kind of reconciliation that matters most.” In this he is referring to intimate pairings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals throughout Australia’s colonial history whose interactions lead to negotiated bodies of intercultural knowledge. That is, relationships in which the valences of shared friendship, kinship and experience combine with intersecting ideals and objectives.

One readily imagines that for Ngarra these exchanges were particularly pressing. When he died in 2008 he left a vacuum at the heart of Kimberley life. His recognition as an artist by the Western art world had little, if anything, to do with this sense of loss, at least not from his local perspective. What was at stake there was his senior status as a Lawman and the lack of another figure to truly take his place. Responsibility to ‘speak’ for Ngarra’s traditional area of country was transferred to his close friend and contemporary,

Mick Jawalji (now also deceased), who was raised by the Andayin side of his family, but who identified as Gija.\textsuperscript{30} During my visit to Shaw he recounted that Ngarra’s final years were marked by an increasing anxiety about who would carry the law in his absence. As I had heard before we met, this did indeed run to the more personal consideration of who would bury him. In Ngarra’s assessment none of his relatives possessed the requisite knowledge, and a Catholic burial was for him a terrifying prospect. This was the reason he reached out to Shaw in the months before his death and explained, in fine detail, exactly what needed to occur.

For Shaw to achieve this he had to again mediate between worlds; this time in the most pragmatic sense. Following Ngarra’s death he lobbied the state authorities to allow for an exemption to the laws that would usually render traditional burial practices illegal. He did this, and was then able to lay his friend to rest in accordance with his wishes, interring him at the same site in which Ngarra had interred his grandfather Muelbyne all those decades earlier. It would seem that for Shaw a cycle was then completed: not long afterwards he left the West Kimberley for his new home above Cairns.

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What do such relationships signify against the broader patterns of colonial dispossession that continue to define in Australia relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds? How do they push against the enduring anxieties that so tightly bind these interactions? If they are, as Sutton suggests, evidence of the kind of reconciliation that matters, how do we measure their import? Do they, as I asked in relation to Nyapanyapa Yunupingu’s practice in Yirrkala, show us a glimpse of some future iteration of intercultural relations in this country, or are they simply exceptional

\textsuperscript{30} Q Sprague, ‘Outside history: Mick Jawalji and Ngarra’, \textit{Art Monthly Australia}, no. 244, October 2011, pp. 80-81.
cases contingent upon very specific parties and their willingness to bend to the demands of exchange?

This thesis is threaded with such relationships and thus with similar lines of questioning. Both are manifest in the artworks I have discussed: intercultural narratives are what bind all the examples—historical and otherwise—upon which I have touched; at times briefly, at other times in far more depth. The very structure of my enquiry—in particular the way in which I focus largely upon brokers, rather than on artists themselves—is a key part of the very argument I have put forward.

From this, we might make a broader statement: indigenous contemporary art in this country, its very form and function, speaks of an intercultural phenomenon. This is its story. It is why we can make claims to its contemporaneity, why its relevance as an art form now is undeniable. If its unique cast reveals the imprint of two cultures held in constant becoming, we should not be surprised that it betrays the ideals, hopes and ideologies of each. I’ve also attempted to argue that this is an exchange that remains unsettled: that regardless of its broad recognition as a success story in the conversation between Aboriginal and settler-Australia, as a dialogue between cultures indigenous contemporary art remains a particularly difficult one.

From a broader perspective this should come as little surprise: cultural differences are always a challenge to negotiate—any sense that this art establishes ground for a commensurable exchange is held in check by the incommensurability of the worldviews it exists between. In this way indigenous contemporary art can be understood to embody a number of the risks that Arjun Appadurai has identified as implicit in dialogue—intercultural or otherwise.31 For him it is a process guided not only by the

possibilities of both communication and mis-communication, but by the resolute internal differences of each party. These unavoidably shape the external interface between them, even as they seek the elusive goal of mutual understanding. Indigenous contemporary art is here revealed as a very particular mode of creativity, one that has emerged at the interstices between cultures – a space driven by the often-unpredictable dynamics of exchange and by conflicting regimes of value defined by cultures that remain largely out of step. We might perceive this as a site where differences continue to be collaboratively performed in ways commensurate to those at Papunya in the early 1970s (or, for that matter, earlier exchanges that characterised Australia’s contact zone) – acted out between Aboriginal and Western worlds in a complex interplay of revelation and concealment.

Although the inherent challenges of this process are why, for Appadurai, dialogue between cultures is by definition fraught, as he notes the structure of the contemporary world still calls upon us to seek common frameworks of exchange.\textsuperscript{32} As I have established in this thesis, in Australia the dialogue between Aboriginal and settler-Australian worlds is a key part of this. Mapping the exchanges underlying key practices has allowed me to argue that the meaning of this art resides beyond established interpretive frames. One place to look is within the shifting relationships that mediate its passage into the world. As such, we might see a deeper prompt within the indigenous contemporary art movement as a whole, one that urges us to consider the possibilities of dialogue, however fraught, that lie at the charged interface that marks contemporary Australia. Indeed, the terrain of this dialogue forms the landscape in which we act: as the various exchanges and practices detailed in this thesis insist, it’s here where we might begin to conceive new ways of thinking creatively between worlds.

\textsuperscript{32} ibid, p. 27.
It follows that what non-Aboriginal audiences see in Aboriginal art is not just the complexities of another’s worldview laid out before them. Instead, what might emerge is a tangible sense of what it is to be actively implicated – not only in the fraught circulation of Aboriginal images as contemporary art, but within a world of social relations that extends between and around all of us.

This is a perspective that avoids essentialising Aboriginality in a vaguely understood pre-contact past: it shows instead that identity is something that is constantly negotiated upon a shifting field; that players and spectators alike actively construct the game. As an interpretive frame, it assists us in understanding the ways in which differences are actively constructed, rather than held in a kind of impermeable stasis. It also points to a key feature of contemporaneity, and in doing so allows us to picture how, exactly, we might site indigenous contemporary art as part of the currents of the global contemporary.
Making in translation
Dissonant objects

7.2

7.3
Making in translation

7.4
CAPTIONS:

7.1 Ngarra, *Untitled*, date unknown
Fibre tipped pens on paper
35 x 42.5 cm

7.2 Ngarra, *Untitled*, 1998
Fibre tipped pens on paper
29.7 x 42 cm

7.3 Ngarra, *Untitled*, 1998
Fibre tipped pens on paper
29.7 x 42 cm

7.4 Ngarra
Photo: Kevin Shaw

7.5 Emily Kame Kngwarreye painting at Delmore Downs, late 1990s


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