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# The art of others: Nolde, Preston & views of Indigenous Art

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# The art of others:

## Nolde, Preston & views of Indigenous art

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The emergence of Australian Aboriginal art in post-colonial Australia reflects a history of cultural separation between European and Aboriginal art. Up to late 20th Century—Aboriginal culture was 'invisible' within the wider 'nation-building' identity. The definition, role and status of Aboriginal art has changed dramatically in Australia over the past thirty years, but in Europe no similar shift into a post-colonial ideology is evident.

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While Aboriginal art in Australia is exhibited in public contemporary art galleries, in Germany the same work is read and exhibited almost exclusively in terms of ethnographic discourse. The striking differences between these representations of Aboriginal culture raises questions about the role of art in nation-building, the influence of academic discourse on public understandings of a 'culture' and the role of public exhibition spaces in facilitating or suppressing inter-cultural dialogue. This paper explores the role of art in the construction of identities by considering how images from indigenous cultures have been used in non-Aboriginal art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century through the works of Emil Nolde and Margaret Preston. Both artists were crucial in contesting the ethnographic positioning of Non-Western art from a modernist perspective.

By considering these artists this paper looks at the perception of art production outside the Western art canon through the development of Aboriginal art as a keystone in Australian 'nation-building.' By contrast, in Germany, art institutional space appears to serve the architecture of national identity through exclusion of the Other, whereas Australia's identity absorbs the formerly perceived Other, the Indigenous. This paper compares aspects of the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous art in the German and the Australian situation.

## Nolde and the 'primitive'

'What is art?' Almost a hundred years ago, Emil Nolde, German expressionist painter (1867-1959) contemplated this key question. Many of the answers to this question, before and since, have been located within a socio-historical frame. Nolde for one, stepped outside the given art historical constraints of Imperial Germany, which had principally concerned itself with art as educational means to 'nationalisation' and historicism.<sup>1</sup> He rejected this position, asking: 'Why is Indian, Chinese and Javanese still classified under ethnology or anthropology? And why is the art of Primitive Peoples not considered art at all?'<sup>2</sup>



Emil Nolde (reproduction of photo with the kind permission of Dr. Andreas Fluck, Stiftung Seebuell Ada & Emil Nolde, Neukirchen, Germany)

His statement is radical for its time, considering that the Cologne Art Fair excluded Aboriginal artist John Mawurndjul in the mid 1990s on grounds of being 'folkloristic'.<sup>3</sup> The fact that most of the Aboriginal art shown in Germany is not shown on the 'hallowed walls' of the art institutional arena but in other public, commercial or ethnographic space<sup>4</sup>, reflects the incapacity within the Western art world to negotiate space for this little-understood art. Nolde's question has retained its relevance to this day.<sup>5</sup>

European art history predominantly excludes art from beyond the Bosphorus, maintaining an occidental/oriental dichotomy, as described by Edward Said.<sup>6</sup> Occasionally it engages analytically with art from the continents, but only in relation to works that the Western mind can easily interpret: where form and expression are seen as congruent, in familiar media that either originated in, or had been appropriated by, Western culture.<sup>7</sup> In relation to Aboriginal art, a rift is created by Eurocentric exhibition criteria, which compartmentalise Aboriginal works into 'contemporary' and 'traditional.'



John Mawurndjul with one of his paintings of the Ngalyod Mumeka, 1988. Photograph: Luke Taylor. Reproduced with kind permission of Dr. Luke Taylor & the Artist.

In Nolde's enquiry, two notions underline the overall sub-conscious attitude of the fin de siècle, Eurocentric environment of his day: the first is a readily accepted idea

of an ascending order of societies within a progressive, global civilisation, based on social-Darwinism. This theory places a homogenous, abstracted 'European' culture at the apex of a global order.

Nolde's second notion embraces the concept of the Other, which refers to the way peoples outside European civilisation are construed as the flip-side of European identity, not only different (i.e. what a European is not), but also a necessary construct in the definition of what a European *is*. His efforts to raise awareness of art outside the Western art canon, and to view all art (regardless of provenance), as equal, seems radical in view of conventional interpretations of art at the time. In reappraising their art, however, he speaks of 'primitive peoples' and seems to unquestioningly accept their social subordination.

A hierarchical system of categorisation characterises art definition that allocates the urban, the regional, the sacred, the popular, the high and the low arts within the ranks of Western art history. Art history is focused on the Christian art of Europe<sup>8</sup>: the placing of 'primitive art', the Other, therefore must occur beyond these hierarchies. 'Primitive' denotes a rudimentary and inferior form of artistic expression, though despite numerous attempts to define it over the years, the connotations of the term vary greatly.<sup>9</sup> Cultures seem to be ranked in descending order, determined by their geographical remoteness, with Aboriginal artists long believed to be practitioners of Neolithic art.<sup>10</sup>

The aim of this paper is not to discuss the connotations of the 'primitive' at length, but to sketch the influence of non-European art on two important 20th Century artists: Emil Nolde and Margaret Preston.

Emil Nolde's (1867-1959) investigation of the 'primitive' came from the perspective of German Expressionism during the years of his membership of Die Brücke from 1906-08.<sup>11</sup> This 'avant-garde group', originally harbouring artists such as Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff, Heckel and Bleyl, together with the group of der Blauer Reiter 'represented the Expressionist movement in German art.'<sup>12</sup> Both groups sought new means of expression, artistic style and voice by examining indigenous art. Their interest in 'alternative traditions and cultures', according to Rhodes, 'often went hand in hand with the artists' Messianic desire to deliver a new beginning to a Europe they perceived as old and spent.'<sup>13</sup> Nolde's use of the term 'primitive' carries, yet, another nuance: while German expressionists saw themselves as the 'primitives of a new art',<sup>14</sup> his question as to why art of 'primitive' peoples is not regarded as art is, in fact, self-serving, and implies a romantic identification with the Other.

During that period, Nolde's paintings were highly influenced by sculptures from the West-African Yoruba. The Neue Sezession, an expressionist group he later joined in Berlin, saw itself as a 'link with, and catalyst for, the art of the future.'<sup>15</sup> However, like all art from indigenous people around the world, African art was not commonly regarded as art at all at the time of Nolde's interest. It was not until German-born anthropologist Franz Boas' seminal publication in 1927 on Primitive art that the Eurocentric focus on the so-called high art of the 'civilised' world began to shift towards an emphasis on the emotional and associative motivation as a commonality underlying all creative engagement. Introducing the concept of cultural relativism, Boas equated artistic expression of the 'primitive people' with that of his own world, Western society, pointing out that 'the mental processes of man are the same everywhere.'<sup>16</sup>

Emil Nolde's engagement with cultures outside Europe was distant and romanticised, very much in the tradition of early 19th Century German scholarship arm-chair orientalism.<sup>17</sup> His study of 'primitive art' began with the displays in the Berliner Völkerkunde Museum before the first World War, where he found his inspiration for a new art. With the intention of writing a book 'on the artistic expressions of primitive peoples', he proclaims in his autobiography<sup>18</sup> the immediacy of expression in form and emotion found in 'native art', and its appeal to the contemporary artist.<sup>19</sup>

This theoretical engagement with the arts from around the world was followed by a more direct involvement during a medical expedition, sponsored by colonial authorities, to the South Pacific in 1913-14. The experience left him, according to Colin Rhodes, with a fear of loss of the 'precious primary spiritual values' of the natives (Urmenschen) 'who live in their nature, are one with it and a part of the entire universe.'<sup>20</sup> Nolde concluded that 'we live in an evil era in which the white man brings the whole earth into servitude,'<sup>21</sup> an idealisation confirmed by Rhodes, who interprets Nolde's images 'of these peoples and their land as a way of holding on to "a bit of primordial being".'<sup>22</sup>

By appropriating African art in search for a new artistic identity, Nolde's art work offended National-socialist doctrine, inadvertently alienated himself from the nation during the third Reich, despite his own nationalistic and conservative inclination. The Nazis declared his art as 'Entartete Kunst'—'degenerated art'. During the era of 'Aryan superiority' in Germany, the slightest notion of acknowledgment of the 'lower races' came under attack.<sup>23</sup> His paintings were confiscated and removed from the public eye. Nonetheless, after the war his contribution to German expressionism gained him decorations of the highest order. One can argue that Nolde's appropriation of the Other contributed not only

to German expressionism, also to post-war German identity as it tried to distance itself from Nazism. Nevertheless, the budding interest in 'primitive art' as art by artists or anthropologists such as Emil Nolde, Franz Boas and Julius E. Lips, never quite recovered its momentum, after this set back during the Third Reich.

But do Nolde's questions still hold the same urgency today?

## Denial of art histories and ethnological truth

Almost a hundred years on, as compatriot of Nolde living in Australia as well as being educated in both art history and ethnology, I would like to pose the question slightly different: 'Why is a great deal of Aboriginal art not considered art at all?'<sup>24</sup>

In the search for answers, one needs to examine the discourses of art history and ethnology and how they have emerged as institutionalised forms of knowledge. In Germany, the bifurcation of the disciplines of art history and ethnology dates from their inception as academic units in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and their intrinsic dichotomous positions concerning art of their respective cultures that form the object of study which carries into the present.

Although ethnology<sup>25</sup> is no longer the colonial discipline it was at its inception, two independent studies of the display of Aboriginal culture in the current Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde by Emily Purser and Janice Lally, indicate the *Weltanschauung* of a by-gone era persisting.<sup>26</sup> Not that the ethnographic Museum is the only avenue for disseminating Aboriginal cultural material; as Lally demonstrates, other venues (such as the House of World Cultures) promote contemporary Aboriginal art exhibitions and music performances in Germany.<sup>27</sup> The question is how an institution with a claim on scientific knowledge directs its audience and—potentially overshadows the inter-cultural dialogue attempted in other public spaces.

Ethnological studies emerged from the Enlightenment, and initially rested on the evolutionist idea of a linear process of cultural development. Early proponents of the discipline, such as J.J. Bachofen, J.G. Frazer, H.S.J. Maine, L.H. Morgan, H. Spencer and E.B. Tylor offered an alternative to creationism proposed by theological dogma.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of accepting a God-given, unchangeable world order, early evolutionists proclaimed the 'savages' and the 'primitives' to be the representatives of early human development, and justified not only scientific research, but invasion of the Other through missionaries, colonial endeavour, and world trade.<sup>29</sup> The discipline of anthropology has perhaps similarly helped to promote readings of

non-European art in terms of Otherness, as Thomas McEvelley suggests. During the modernist period, he asserts, Western anthropologists generally 'tended to represent the rest of the world through Western conventions', where 'Western culture... was to be the universal Self: non-Western culture was to be entirely Other.'<sup>30</sup>

Has anthropology therefore created the Otherness in 'primitive art'? Howard Morphy, on the other hand, insists there is 'no historical basis' for such a notion—on the contrary, he emphasises the key role anthropologists played in the inclusion of Aboriginal art 'within the same generic category as other people's art', especially in Australia, but also in other parts of the world.<sup>31</sup>

While this seems to be true in the Australian context, the situation in Berlin tells a different story. According to Lally and Purser, the notion of the 'primitive' lingers on in some contemporary museum displays, despite the fact that social-Darwinist notions became marginal in ethnology after World War I, and obsolete after Nazism.<sup>32</sup>

As Lally observed, displays of Aboriginal art as in the Berlin ethnographic museum authoritatively propagate the notion of 'timelessness' and 'incommensurability', while the more 'populist approach of the House of World cultures' (a centre for intercultural exchange) is easily dismissed by academics as of 'poor scientific standards', which would have needed 'a more scholarly ethnographic approach.'<sup>33</sup>

If conventional ethnographic display in museums is handled from a Eurocentric point of view, and art institutions don't aspire to communication between distinctly different cultures, how, as Lally justly inquires, do these powerful sites of representation inform their audience? What kind of dialogue can be procured?

German ethnological institutes and museums house a vast amount of non-European art, and one might imagine that German audiences are therefore quite familiar with various forms of indigenous art and design, and issues represented in contemporary works of Australian Aboriginal art. The reception of such work, however, is determined by the terminology: the exclusion of indigenous work from mainstream art history is based on face value, on its 'traditional' appearance.<sup>34</sup> Such art is seen as 'folkloristic' and bound by social and religious order. Therefore, representation of Aboriginal art in Germany is widely handled by the ethnologist who functions as 'decoder' or interpreter of the other culture. In contrast to their Australian colleagues, German ethnologists seem to find the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Art' incompatible.<sup>35</sup>



The notion of categorising material culture, including artefacts, as subjects of science in the study of mankind as 'ethnographica' rather than art, is rather persistent within one of Germany's leading Ethnological Museums as Janice Lally's exploration of the representation in Berlin highlights. It represents, with few exceptions, the German situation in regards to Aboriginal art.

Contrasting the colonial outset of German ethnographers of late 19th Century/early 20th Century, Australian anthropology has from its inception in the 1920s, focused on Australian Aboriginal culture. Generally, it has been only in relatively recent times that a small number of anthropologists has begun to concentrate on the study of art, as Jeremy MacClancy criticises.<sup>36</sup> In Australia, conversely, the focus on Aboriginal art has always been a crucial part of the work of anthropologists and continues to play a major role to date. Herein, it distinguishes itself from German ethnology, which widely excises art interpretation informed by Western ideas of aesthetics. Problematic to anthropologists in general appears to be the use of the term *art* itself, which derives from a Western concept and is non-existent in most of the societies they are studying.<sup>37</sup> Although motivation for anthropological studies may have differed from that of their European colleagues, early attitudes towards Aboriginal cultures as a paradigm of the 'primitive' were consistent with evolutionist thought. Therefore, attempts to make Aboriginal cultures known through the exhibition of material culture were tainted by the conviction of extinction.<sup>38</sup>

The reception of Aboriginal art in Australia changed with the innovative approach of interpretation. While in the late 19th Century, the very first exhibition of works by Aboriginal artists, William Barak and Tommy McRae was seen as mere curiosity, it was through the joint efforts of anthropologists<sup>39</sup> such as Elkin and McCarthy and artists such as Margaret Preston that Aboriginal art entered the public sphere.

Preston, like Nolde, shared the conviction that 'primitive man' was doomed by progress, and in the hope of preserving the artistic expression of a dying race, this Australian group organised, in the 1940s, the first (David Jones) exhibition to hang non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal art side by side.<sup>40</sup> Argued from a Western art historical philosophy that 'fine art is a symbol of high culture' Charles Mountford, Frederick McCarthy and Davidson, and A.P. Elkin and Donald Thompson in the 30s, Munn in the 50s, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt in the 60s. Therefore these anthropologists represented the art of Aboriginal peoples as access point to acknowledge 'the equal status of Aboriginal and European society.'<sup>41</sup>

## Margaret Preston and the new Australianness

Margaret Preston (1875-1963), while accompanying anthropologist friends on field trips in the first quarter of the 20th Century, saw the decorative potential of Aboriginal art as the foundation for a national art. Preston was associated with the *Jindyworobak* movement, which emphasised an Australian identity.<sup>42</sup>

In her article on Aboriginal designs, she suggests concrete ways of design-appropriation for daily-objects such as the Central-Desert design of a shield for a cushion or tablemat. Preston's suggestions raised general public awareness of Aboriginal art, though she showed no interest in reciprocity.<sup>43</sup> The interest in 'primitive art' was a starting point for a renewal, and a resource from which to select and cultivate a new style. As she states, she therefore felt 'no loss of dignity in studying and applying [herself] to the art of the [Aboriginals] of Australia.'<sup>44</sup>

Reflecting the colonial mind, Preston viewed Aboriginal art as there to be exploited to the advantage of artists and the Australian nation, to stand up to their European colleagues:

Would France be now at the head of all nations in art if her artists and craftsmen had not given her fresh stimulus from time to time by benefiting from the art of her native colonies, and not only her own colonies, but by borrowing freely from the colonies of other countries?...if you go to the museum and study the art of the [Aboriginal] you are not demeaning yourself or being kind to them...apply them in a manner that will make us an individual land in art, as Spanish art is always Spanish, as Italian art is always Italian...it is only from the art of such people [Australian Aboriginals] in any land that a national art can spring. Later come the individual or individuals who with conscious knowledge (education) use these symbols that are their heritage, and thus a great national art is founded.<sup>45</sup>

According to Jones, Preston's influence was also visible in the David Jones exhibition of 1941: more than 250 items were grouped into *Aboriginal art works*, *Western artefacts* influenced by Aboriginal design, and *Western art works* depicting Aboriginal themes.<sup>46</sup>

The survey exhibition of 1943, entitled 'Primitive Art', was organised by anthropologist Leonhard Adam<sup>47</sup> for the National Museum of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, was the first full-scale exhibition of Indigenous art around the world on Australian soil. It opened with works from New Guinea, Africa, Melanesia, Polynesia, the Americas, Asia and western Iran

and Australia.<sup>48</sup> The director of the National Gallery of Victoria at the time, Daryl Lindsay, commented on the uniqueness of Aboriginal art expression: 'very lightly [are] the bark drawings of our own Australian natives, who seem to possess a certain delicacy of line all of their own.'<sup>49</sup>

According to both Jones and Adam, the 'aesthetics and religious or social context' of Aboriginal art contributed to further recognition, and in his introduction to the 1943 exhibition catalogue, Adam attributes the 'burgeoning Western interest in primitive art' to a developing 'recognition of its aesthetics qualities and to the increasing interpretative role played by the two "scientific" professions of anthropology and psychology.'<sup>50</sup>

In the 1960s, anthropologists Roland Berndt and his wife Catherine Berndt investigated Aboriginal Art and contributed much to the understanding of its complexity. Anthropologists since the 70s, Peter Sutton, Howard Morphy and Jennifer Isaacs in particular, developed the cultural relationship between non-Aboriginal Australians and Aboriginal Australians through their seminal work involving exhibitions, publications and directly working with Aboriginal communities. Since the 1980s Aboriginal artists and art administrators such as Djon Mundine, Hetti Perkins, and Margo Neale became strong voices in negotiating trans-cultural space.

Exhibitions of Aboriginal art in Australian art space can be chronicled into several stages. From the late 1880s to the end of the 1950s, Aboriginal art was viewed as curiosity, and subsequently placed in an anthropological context. Pioneering since the 1950s, was the accreditation of authorship in anthropological texts, through which artworks lose their 'anonymity' and artists are being acknowledged.<sup>51</sup> Getting Aboriginal art out of its invisibility imposed by settler-politics and evolutionist theory,<sup>52</sup> Tony Tuckson, then deputy director at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, organised 'Australian Aboriginal Art', an exhibition that visited State galleries nationwide (1960-61) and marked the shift from ethnographic museum to art gallery.

Despite the epoch-making effect of anthropological approach and artistic integration, it is remarkable that for the following decade then no significant exhibitions ensued, despite the fact that systematic collecting had propelled since the 1950s. This is a significant gap of almost a decade, of Aboriginal Art, apparently, being put on the backburner. This could perhaps be explained by the political and social re-structuring of Australian Society. From the 1970s to the 1980s, Aboriginal artists were included in regular, major art events such as the Sydney Biennale and *Perspecta*. The economic situation of Aboriginal people was

generally improving, and they were gaining increasing influence as to what was to be exhibited and where. This period also marks the 'emergence' of urban artists and female Aboriginal artists. Since the late 1980s, solo, regional and survey exhibitions show increasing involvement of Aboriginal people in curatorial and academic positions, and the promotion of Aboriginal art internationally.

Exhibition practice in relation to Aboriginal art is highly sensitive to overall political and social developments in Australia: heightened interest in Aboriginal people is reflected in the frequency of exhibitions over the last twenty to thirty years or so, from less than one per year in the 1960s to more than 20 exhibitions each year by the end of the 1980s. Aboriginal curatorship negotiated increasing 'floor space' within Australian culture, markedly by the efforts of Djon Mundine, Hetti Perkins, Brenda Croft, Margo Neale, Daphne Wallace, Michael Aird, Franchesca Cubillo-Alberts, Laurie Nielson, Michael Eather, Fiona Foley, Kerry Giles, Garry Lee, Doreen Mellor, Banduk Marika, David Prosser, Joyce Watson and Avril Quail. Notable is also the shift in gender; while early anthropological and artistic representation of Aboriginal art was dominated by males (art advisory practice predominantly encouraged male artists),<sup>53</sup> Aboriginal art and its curatorship is now more often than not in the hands of Indigenous women.<sup>54</sup>

Can pluralism, underlying such developments in artistic and cultural dialogue as expressed above, be secured under the current academic climate in Germany?

## Comparing the German/ Australian situation in regards to Aboriginal art

The art of the Other - Yoruba art in the case of Nolde and Australian Aboriginal art in Preston's—was appropriated in the quest to define and project the self and the 'national'. Neither, within the parameters of these colonial subjects, ever really examined the art of the Other on its own terms, for its own merits and intrinsic properties. Discussion of Aboriginal art has, of course, very different motives and social purposes in Australian and German contexts, which are also subject to immediacies of geographies and politics.

Preston's efforts to draw attention to Aboriginal art needs to be understood in relation to a common belief at the time that Aboriginal culture would soon become 'absorbed' into the dominant Western social order. A race against time<sup>55</sup> to collect was occurring, both in Australia and in Germany, but the German interest<sup>56</sup> also involved, according to Lally, 'obtaining evidence for constructing the science of ethnography'.<sup>57</sup> Great Britain and the United States had their great collections, but Europe's ethnographic museums and institutes also procured a major

share in colonial trade and pillage. Through various exploratory and missionary endeavours, the connection between Aboriginal Australia and Germany is profound; missionaries of the late 19th and early 20th Century provided institutes with a firm base for cultural displays in most major German cities. Nolde would have seen some of the current exhibits in the Berlin Völkerkunde Museum.

Social and political events propelling the Aboriginal movement over the past three decades have created a greater potential in Australia for respecting Indigenous people within and dissolving the notion of the Other<sup>58</sup> than ever before. In contemporary Australia, 'the worlds of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous inevitably overlap,' as Ian North states, 'even in the remotest parts of Australia.'<sup>59</sup>

The nation-building aspect of representing Aboriginal art still appears to play



Margaret Preston, *Aboriginal design of Fish and Lizard*, 1941. With kind permission from The National Art Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT). © Margaret Preston, Licenced by VISCOPY Australia, 2005.

a significant part in both Australia and Germany. As Australia struggled for an identity<sup>60</sup> independent of Britain, both as former colony and as a new nation, it could not avoid analysing the significant cultural output of parts of the country's population.<sup>61</sup> With regard to Australian identity, Aboriginal art continues to be 'absorbed' in multifarious ways; the situation in Germany seems to be one of juxtaposition and projection.

At the time of Nolde's enquiry, Germany was also a relatively recent united nation, and continued the colonial subjects of Self and Other even after it had been suspended from all colonial powers in 1919.<sup>62</sup> It is a context within which

the dissemination of stereotypes inside many of the ethnological museums was rife.<sup>63</sup> Pertaining to Australian Aboriginal culture<sup>64</sup>, as Lally discovered, 'a power relationship exists which has been established by the exercise of the traditional scientific knowledge of the Museum scientists in their ordering and classifying of Aboriginal culture.' This, she continues, 'is translated into the image of the culture that is portrayed in the display'. Aboriginal culture, construed as the primitive Other 'through the means of the Western scientific system', plays an important role in the construction of the image of civilisation and German national culture.<sup>65</sup>

In the face of global cross-cultural fertilisation, the continuation of a binary art system which once had been put in place to endorse colonial aspects of superiority and racism, as well as attempts to nation-building, seems a striking anachronism.<sup>66</sup> Upholding such a system implies not only a static, unchangeable traditional art on the one side, but also a neo-colonialist notion of appropriation and exploitation on the other, a failure to acknowledge the continuous change affecting not only Western, but all cultures.

Emily Purser's critical analysis of text and display of Aboriginal culture in the Berlin Ethnographic Museum, describes an unrevised, 19th Century notion of social Darwinism in the museum's exhibition that ignores contemporary Aboriginal culture:

The image it [the museum] gives of Australian cultures contrasts with the rest of the Pacific exhibition, and contains some serious contradictions. It is stated in the texts available to the visitor that the exhibition is a "documentation of the past," of a culture which no longer exists—and yet includes contemporary art works in traditional style and material.<sup>67</sup>

Contrary to the scientific 'truth' such an institution lays claim to propagate<sup>68</sup>, the display offers no alternative to prejudice sentiments based on face value rather than a careful analysis of 19th Century-ethnographic-data, by conveying Aboriginal culture as a homogenous, singular culture.<sup>69</sup> The danger in such a 'monologue' lies within the position of assumed authority of the institution, as Purser identifies, relates to the authority of the institution, and the illusion that such a mode of presentation creates 'that a museum simply and objectively "reflects" the "real" state of peoples and cultures it exhibits.'<sup>70</sup>

The Museum<sup>71</sup> has a major educational purpose in Germany since the 19th Century and by constructing the 'exotic' (and inferior) Other within a linear history of humanity, ethnographic museums enable the German public to define itself by looking at various non-European and 'primitive' artefacts and to make cultural

comparisons.<sup>72</sup> The construction of national identity, as Anna Triandafyllidou explores, is 'also determined through difference', and these modes of displaying/viewing once served also colonial ideologies of exploitation and annexation.<sup>73</sup> Further, the 'nation-building' character of the Museum in general provided the reputation of 'national intellectual achievements' as well as 'high standards of cultural development.'<sup>74</sup> As Bernhard Lüthi sums up the German situation, 'the principles of ethnographic classification, which correspond to a normative value system in day-to-day interaction with non-European culture, are in many ways still alive today.'<sup>75</sup>

In terms of dialogue, there is always danger of misinterpretation or losing meaning in cross-cultural exposition between exhibited culture and audience. Yet, the practice of exhibiting another culture than ones own quickly falls into the trap set by a singular, selective perspective and is, as Emily Purser describes, bound to become 'monologic and self-interested.'<sup>76</sup> The academic study of art in Germany needs to be approached anew, in line with the general post-modern re-figuration of art histories. The division between art history and ethnology<sup>77</sup> and the way the objects of study are interpreted, needs critical review.

Indicative for post-modern re-figuration of art histories, is a new approach of the bifurcation into two disciplines, art history and ethnology. In Germany, since their inception as academic units, both disciplines with their intrinsic dichotomous positioning continue to endorse a segregational, stratified view of art.

As the history of Australian exhibition demonstrates, the collaboration of art historians, anthropologists and artists has not only brought Aboriginal art into Western public art spaces, but has also made its public showing increasingly commonplace in Australia. In the first century of European Invasion, the very notion of an existing pre-colonial culture was detrimental to the colonial ideology, and early settler mentality sought to obscure existing artistic expression.<sup>78</sup> Later, when the Commonwealth of Australia came into being, Australian identity needed to be defined through its cultural proponents, such as artists, historians, anthropologists and art administrators/curators, of Indigenous and non-Indigenous background —still evident in more recent events like the Olympic games in Sydney.<sup>79</sup>

Aboriginal cultural expression has gone from being anthropologically framed to historicised as art in Australia, but can it now be received as such in the European/German context? The Australian example indicates that the reception of non-European art can be changed (and can perhaps only be changed) through a collaboration between ethnologists and Indigenous art negotiators.

Illustrating the situation in Europe, the Olympic Games of Athens 2004 marked a significant moment in the history of arts of Australia. The exhibition 'Our Place: Indigenous Australia now' in the Benaki Museum in Athens, was Australia's contribution to the Cultural Olympiad of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. The chosen artists Lin Onus, Jimmy Pike, Bede Tungatalum, Thancoupie, and Emily Kame Kngwarreye to name but a few acted as cultural Ambassadors of a special kind: in Greece, for the first time, Indigenous art from Australia was put on display in an institutional context.

Here, emerging as a 'new star' on the ancient horizon of what is perceived as the cradle of Western art history, Aboriginal art has begun to negotiate space in public places in Greece. The Aboriginal curators, Fabri Blacklock, Gary Foley, Steve Miller, Caine Muir, Keith Munroe, James Wilson-Miller, challenged the audience by showing non-stereotyped or 'traditional' art, but art often carrying strong political messages.<sup>80</sup>

In Australia, Aboriginal artists are progressively in the position to define their art and its boundaries themselves. Their art is not 'assimilated' or 'colonised', but an expression of evolving intercultural processes. Anthropologists, artists, art administrators and art historians, of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent, are gradually changing the cultural and socio-political landscape within Australia, working to create public recognition of Indigenous art and hence working towards a perception that recognises Indigenous culture as equal—not as the (inferior) Other.

Australian exhibition history demonstrates that informed dialogue takes place as gradual process of creating knowledge. An examination of the exhibition history of Aboriginal art in Australia shows how trans-cultural representation can perhaps be interpreted for a European context and current art-historical parameters be re-appraised. Perhaps, if Nolde was to contemplate the exclusion of 'primitive art' from the Western art canon today (rather than during a visit to the local ethnological Museum) he would do so on a Lufthansa-flight to the smallest continent.

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#### REFERENCES



<sup>1</sup> As Lenman et al. state, the 'art in Imperial Germany was not simply an ornamental luxury, but had major symbolic and didactic functions: both as part of the cultural 'identity kit' indispensable to a new nation and as a medium to communicate historical facts, myths and political values.' Lenman, R., Osborne, J. and Sagarra, E., 1995. Visual culture: the institutional framework. *In German Cultural Studies—An Introduction*. Burns, R. (Ed.), Oxford University Press, New York 30-37.

<sup>2</sup> Nolde, E. (member of the Brücke 1867-1956) Jahre der Kämpfe 1912-14, Berlin *Quoted in* Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (Eds.), 2003. *Art in Theory 1900-2000—An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Blackwell Publishing Co. Malden, Oxford, Carlton South and Berlin, 97.

<sup>3</sup> As Mundine reports, authenticity and identity of Aboriginal art were points of dispute in the controversial refusal of the submissions by Melbourne's Gabrielle Pizzi's Gallery in the Cologne Art Fair in 1993/4; Mundine, D., 1997. Aboriginal art abroad—responses to touring exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Asia *Art & Australia* 68-73; According to Lally, the pendulum positions of the organisers of this art fair, swinging from refusal to acceptance and back over the years on one side, and issued invitation to exhibit Aboriginal art at the Düsseldorf Art Fair in 1999 on the other, indicate "immense discrepancies and misunderstandings between perceptions of Australian Aborigines and an appreciation of their culture that is projected from the Australian point of view, and that which is perceived in Germany"; Lally, J., 2002. *The Australian Aboriginal Collection in the Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin and the Making of cultural Identity*. PhD thesis, University of Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Elisabeth Bähr and Bernhard Lüthi in 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Smee quotes Caruana stating that 'the acceptance of contemporary visual indigenous art practice is far from common in Europe art institutions... Aboriginal art is often regarded either as ethnographic curiosity or as an expression of mystic qualities associated with "new-age" thinking.' Caruana, W., *Quoted in* Smee, S., 2002. The fortunes of Aboriginal art outside Australia: ethnographica or art? *The Art Newspaper*, International edition [online] <<http://www.eniar.org/news/ethnographica.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Said, E., 2003. *Orientalism*, Vintage (first published 1978) Books/Random House, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Wedge's use of canvas and acrylic paints for example suggests a greater acceptance of his work as 'contemporary' than the bark-paintings by his contemporary John Marwurndjul in the Cologne art Fair in the mid nineties.

<sup>8</sup> Dilly, H., 1985. Einleitung Dilly, *In Kunstgeschichte—Eine Einführung*, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, H., Kemp, W., Sauerländer, W. and Warnke, M. (Eds.), Berlin 7-16.

<sup>9</sup> See Price, S., 1989. *Primitive Art in Civilised Places*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London where the notion of Primitive is comprehensively discussed.

<sup>10</sup> Lally, J., 2002. The Australian Aboriginal Collection in the Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin and the Making of cultural Identity. PhD thesis, University of Melbourne.

<sup>11</sup> Nolde, E., 2003. On primitive art. *In Art in Theory 1900-2000—An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, C., and Wood, P. (Eds.). Blackwell Publishing Co., new edition: Malden, Oxford, Carlton South and Berlin 96-97.

<sup>12</sup> Kirchner, E.L., 2003. Programme of the Brücke. *In Art in Theory 1900-2000—An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (Eds.). Blackwell Publishing Co., new edition: Malden, Oxford, Carlton South and Berlin 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Rhodes, C., 1994. Primitivism and Modern Art, Thames and Hudson, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* 21.

<sup>15</sup> Greenhalgh, M. and Duro, P. (Eds.), 1992. *Essential Art History*, Bloomsbury, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Boas, F., 1955. *Primitive Art*, Dover Publications. Boas continued use of the term 'primitive' for the indigenous is however inconsistent with his counter-Eurocentric position and implies his partial acceptance of the projection of the Other, even if not in the Darwinian sense.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said demonstrates that two of the most significant works on the Orient, Goethe's *Westöstlicher Diwan* and Friedrich Schlegel's *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Inder* were conceived far away from the actual locale, but on a Rhine journey and the libraries in Paris; Said, E., 2003. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, Random House, New York 19.

<sup>18</sup> Nolde, E., 1934. *Jahre der Kämpfe [Years of Struggle] 1912-14*, Rembrandt, Berlin.

<sup>19</sup> Declaring at the same time that 'our predecessors' ideals are not ours; Nolde, E., 2003. On primitive art. *In Art in Theory 1900-2000—An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (Eds.). Blackwell Publishing Co., new edition: Malden, Oxford, Carlton South and Berlin 97. Declaring at the same time that 'our predecessors' ideals are not ours'.

<sup>20</sup> Rhodes, C., 140.

<sup>21</sup> [online] <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/N/nolde.html>>.

<sup>22</sup> Nolde, *quoted in* Colin Rhodes, 140.

<sup>23</sup> As many artists and scientists experienced the sword of censorship under the Nazi-regime, ethnologist Julius Lips ultimately had to go into exile to escape persecution and to get his ethnographic material, a collection of 'art works of white people by non-white artists', published in New York in 1937. Lips, J.E., 1966. *The Savage Hits Back*, University Books, New Hyde Park, New York.

<sup>24</sup> There is a growing movement outside the institutional walls however, with a growing awareness of Aboriginal art in public art space, in particular commercial galleries (personal communication with German gallerist Elisabeth Bähr).

<sup>25</sup> In English-speaking countries the discipline is widely known as *cultural anthropology* or, as in the case of Australia as *anthropology*. *Ethnologie* or

Völkerkunde are the more commonly used terms in German-speaking countries.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Purser published several essays on the display of Aboriginal culture in the Berlin-Dahlem Museum since the mid-nineties; In her essay 'Moving images, making meanings' *In* Marcus, J. (Ed.), 2000. *Picturing the 'Primitif'- Images of Race in Daily Life*, LhR Press, Canada Bay 31-42; the case study of the museum as 'representer' of another culture points out the institutional power and the danger of misrepresentation, annulling any kind of 'dialogue' in the process. See also Lally 2002. 147-148.

<sup>27</sup> 'The House of World Cultures is a major government-supported venue for presenting foreign cultural material in Berlin' which also promotes Australian Aboriginal performances and contemporary art exhibitions according to Lally 17.

<sup>28</sup> Gingrich, A., 1988. *Evolution* *In* Neues Wörterbuch der Völkerkunde, Hirschberg, W. (Ed.), Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin 38-140 and Stagl, J., 1988. *Evolutionismus in Neues Wörterbuch der Völkerkunde*, Hirschberg, W. (Ed.), Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin 138-140.

<sup>29</sup> Stagl, 141.

<sup>30</sup> McEvilley, T., 1992. *Art and Otherness*, Documentext, McPeherson, Kingston, New York.

<sup>31</sup> Morphy, H., 2001. Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery. *Humanities Research* 7, 37-45.

<sup>32</sup> Stagl, J., 1988. *Sozialdarwinismus* *In* Neues Wörterbuch der Völkerkunde, Hirschberg, W. (Ed.), Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin 443-444.

<sup>33</sup> Lally, J., 221-22 she also explains: 'In ethnographic terms, only Aboriginal objects classified as "traditional", such as painted barks, might be accorded the classification "art", that is the art of that culture, not art in Western terms.' 134.

<sup>34</sup> This is especially the case for works from the settler period until the second half of the 20th Century, but is still experienced by contemporary artists as the Cologne Art Fair showed in the mid nineties.

<sup>35</sup> Notable exceptions are ethnologists such as Rudi Kraussmann and Ulli Beier with their publications and advocacy on Aboriginal art exhibitions in the eighties in Germany.

<sup>36</sup> MacClancy, J., 1997. *Anthropology, art and contest* *In* *Contesting Art, Art Politics, and Identity in the Modern World*, MacClancy, J. (Ed.), Berg Publishers, Oxford 1-26.

<sup>37</sup> See Sutton, P. (Ed.), 1989. *Dreamings—The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking Ringwood, Vic., New York; Morphy 2001; and MacClancy, 1-26 [online] <<http://www.ssl.brookes.ac.uk-anthro>>.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, P., 1989. *Perceptions of Aboriginal art: a history* *In* *Dreamings- The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Sutton, P. (Ed.), Viking Ringwood, Vic., New York, 173.

<sup>39</sup> Sutton, P., 1989 *Responding to Aboriginal art* *In* *Dreamings—The Art of*

Aboriginal Australia, Sutton, P. (Ed.) Viking Ringwood, Vic., New York 35-36.

<sup>40</sup> Mclean, I., 1998, *Aboriginalism: White Aborigines and Australian nationalism*, *Australian Humanities Review*, May, 3 [online] <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-May-1998/mclean.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> Morphy gives two reasons as to why anthropologists and other proponents wanted Aboriginal art recognised as such: for one it was to counter evolutionary thought: 'fine art as a symbol of high culture, and the production of art was thus a sign of the equal status of Aboriginal and European society,' and secondly, the hope, the viewing and appreciation of the works as art would lead to respect 'for the culture that produced it.' Murphy, H., 2001. *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon Press Ltd London, New York 29.

<sup>42</sup> North, I., McQueen, H. and Seivl, I., 1980. *The Art of Margaret Preston*, Art Gallery Board of South Australia in association with The Australian Gallery Directors' Council 10.

<sup>43</sup> Which reflected the disrespectful treatment of Indigenous people as consequence of inequality in social and cultural status.

<sup>44</sup> Preston, M., 1925. *The indigenous art of Australia*. *Art in Australia* March.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Jones, P., 1989. *Perceptions of Aboriginal art: a history In Dreamings - The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Sutton, P. (Ed.), Viking Ringwood, Vic., New York 170.

<sup>47</sup> Lane, A., 1940. *Primitive Art*, Penguin Books Middlesex/ New York.

<sup>48</sup> Philip Jones p. 170 and Gordon Bull p. 583, from the latter, 18 exhibits were put on display, among which were pen-drawings, bark paintings, a copy of a rock painting, a painted Queensland shield and a carved Victorian shield, beeswax sculptures and ceremonial boards.

<sup>49</sup> Lindsay, D., quoted in Thompson, 281.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, 170.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Morphy, H., 2001. *Aboriginal Art*. Press Ltd London, New York first published 1998.

<sup>53</sup> See Watson, C., 2003. *Piercing the Ground*. Fremantle Art Centre Press, Fremantle.

<sup>54</sup> Neale, M., 1999, 20.

<sup>55</sup> A notion that was endorsed by Australia's assimilation policy as well as ideologically inclined ethnography of the early 20th Century.

<sup>56</sup> As Lally demonstrated from the perspective of the Berlin Völkerkunde Museum.

<sup>57</sup> See Lally, 98-99.

<sup>58</sup> See also MacLucas, J., 1984. *Aboriginal Art and Culture within European Visual Concepts and Western Society*, B.A. dissertation in Visual Art Theory, University of South Australia 53.

<sup>59</sup> North, E., 2002. Star Aboriginality, *Hawke Institute Working Paper Series*, University of South Australia, Magill, South Australia 1-21.

<sup>60</sup> McLean, I., 1998 gives a critical account in 'Post colonial: return to sender' *Australian Humanities Review*, December Issue, saying that 'Australia's desire to know itself through Aboriginal culture' is the 'fulfillment of colonialism.' [online] <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-december-1998/mclean2.html>>.

<sup>61</sup> Preston, M., 1925.

<sup>62</sup> Wildenthal, L., 2003. Notes on a history of "imperial turns" in modern Germany *In After the imperial turn: thinking with and through the nation*, Burton, A. (Ed.), Duke University Press, Durham and London 144-157.

<sup>63</sup> Lally finds that 'the construct [in the museum] of a "primitive" other' as presented as the "truth" of Aboriginal culture. 'The image of Aborigines as arrested at the lower end of an evolutionary scale by virtue of the Museum display of their very simple artifacts...provides a counterpoint against which admiration of the "civilized" German nation can be promoted. With its attributes of learning and high culture, this can then be celebrated in the other museums of Berlin.' (Lally, 2002, 219).

<sup>64</sup> Here, the use of Aboriginal culture as collective noun does not denote a homogenous culture deriving from a single origin.

<sup>65</sup> Lally 2002, 219.

<sup>66</sup> Lally reports the 'ethnographic museums initially expanded as collections were established in association with the prestige of nation-building or the power of the patrons who supported them.' *Ibid* 48.

<sup>67</sup> Purser, E., 2000. Moving images, making meanings *In Picturing the 'Primitif'-Images of Race in daily Life*, Marcus, J. (Ed.), LHR Press, Canada Bay 31-42.

<sup>68</sup> Lally writes: 'Application of taxonomic categories assisted in the organisation of museum collections and the associated displays. By virtue of the authority of the institution, it was possible for these locally determined categories to be presented as the "truth". The visual evidence encouraged viewers to accept the connection as presented...By virtue of the selection of objects for collection, labeling and display, they accrued an importance and a sense of authenticity related status of the museum.' 48.

<sup>69</sup> Purser, 32.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid* 33.

<sup>71</sup> The term 'Museum' also applies to art institutions in Germany and implies a scientific justification of all items displayed.

<sup>72</sup> See Lally 2002; as well as Carol Magee, who in the Afro-American context of the Seattle Art Museum, asserts the 'museums, as significant educational institutions, partake in acts of socialisation...museums thus, both explicitly and implicitly, contribute to the heterogenous and homogenous formulations of and instruction

in national cultural identities' (Magee, 500).

<sup>73</sup> Triandafyllidou, A., 2004. National identity and the "other," *quoted in* Carol Magee, "400 men of African descent"—negotiating racialised identities at the Seattle Art Museum, *Third Text* 500.

<sup>74</sup> Lally, J., 2002. 48, 53.

<sup>75</sup> Lüthi, B., 2001. Terra Incognita? Europe, Art History and the Art of Aboriginal Australia *In* Das verborgene im Sichtbaren/ The unseen in Scene- Zeitgenössische Malerei der ersten Australier/ Contemporary Art of the First Australians, Bähr, E. (Ed.), Aboriginal Art Verlag Speyer 81-100.

<sup>76</sup> Purser, E., 2000. Telling Stories: Text Analysis in a Museum *In* Discourse and Community—Doing Functional Linguistics, Ventola, E. (Ed.), Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen 170.

<sup>77</sup> Ethnology in Germany is part of the Faculty of Social Science and Philosophy and predominantly researches non-industrial societies (Anglo-American: Cultural Anthropology/ Australia: Anthropology).

<sup>78</sup> Morphy, H., 2001. Aboriginal Art, Phaidon Press Ltd.

<sup>79</sup> The promotional as well as the cultural framework of this international mega-event was drawing vastly on Aboriginal culture and its image outside Australia, while neglecting copyright issues in regards to paintings used for promotional and commercial purposes etc. at the same time.

<sup>80</sup> See Miller, S., (Ed.), 2004. Our Place: Indigenous Australia Now, Exhibition catalogue (Australia's contribution to the Cultural Olympiad of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games , Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney.