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Abstract

I insert myself, here, in between these two texts by Butcher Joe: Stephen Muecke, his friend? Perhaps. In a field of ambiguous relationships of both work ('research') and pleasure, always at several removes from any possibility of a 'true' or 'real' contact.

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I insert myself, here, in between these two texts by Butcher Joe: Stephen Muecke, his friend? Perhaps. In a field of ambiguous relationships of both work ('research') and pleasure, always at several removes from any possibility of a 'true' or 'real' contact.

I sign myself here in Sydney, in your absence, a signature which accumulates as style, a specific sort of trace like your own, coming at the end of a life of being written by 'others', all stylistically gesturing their appropriation of a social project which for the moment bears your name, Butcher Joe, but extends beyond all possible ambits of that name. Butcher Joe *and* his paintings. Butcher Joe *and* Aboriginal art. Butcher Joe *and* Aboriginal music. Butcher Joe *and* traditional Nyigina knowledges, etc.

In how many ways are we removed from each other's concerns, he and I? In age, in language/culture, coloniser/colonised, metropolitan and rural, rigid and nomadological.¹ And then I was always working with Paddy Ore, which made Butcher Joe into a kind of marginal character in the story that Paddy and I were telling each other.²

And perhaps one needs to distinguish between art and science, as if Butcher Joe were always already 'artist', somehow in excess of all disciplinary constructions of knowledges, a fluid, empty, ab-original incoherence of drifting 'facts' waiting to be stratified. But we know this will miss the mark, because of science's discursive regularities, which carry with them their own points of disappearance. Most significantly, of course, in the unsaid of *origins* which became part of the Aboriginal name at a time when the notion of origin stood at the heart of Western epistemologies, as in Darwin, whose ship, the *Beagle*, finally sank in a bay near the mission of the same name where Butcher Joe first learnt to paint.

Let us conceive of artistic production as a kind of machine, something comprised of different parts which fit together and move in sequence. For instance, there is no artist without a market – they are symbiotic – and the

romantic idea which says that the artist comes first, that he or she is in fact 'aboriginal' is no doubt part of the sales pitch which helps move the paintings.

Let us now oppose the 'Western' art machine with the 'Broome' one. What regularities and discontinuities characterise the two, make them incompatible, or, on the contrary, compatible to the extent that Butcher Joe's art can be said to 'emerge', begin to exist? Frame, key, title, signature, museum, archive, discourse, market ... these are some of the 'Western' ones, to which one may add various other categories which limit and define the artistic project.³

To these one may oppose, from the 'Broome machine', the categories of trade route, discourse, series, agent ... and there may be others.

The major differences extend along these lines: the 'work of art' is not individuated in Butcher Joe's country, it is not framed, authenticated by a signature, nor does it form part of an oeuvre. It is not destined to accumulate in a museum or archive so as to build up towards a life's work (paradoxically, that is what is now being done with Butcher Joe's work to make it more compatible with the 'Western' machine). The painting is contingent upon an event, or a specific scene in the countryside, or a narrative. It is always connected with discourse, with the discourse of the dreaming (*bugarrigarra*) or history.

It emerges as part of the traditional demand for two-way 'flow' of artifacts, in that sense the painting or pearl-shell carving forms part of a series of artifacts which might have been made by anyone – they bear the signature of the country of origin at least as much as the signature of the crafter. That is why Butcher Joe always makes a 'book' of paintings. His work doesn't finish until he has completed a Spirex drawing book with his watercolours, and his first step is to get someone to write on the corner of each page a series of numbers, from 1 to 10 or whatever. This is how he always begins teaching someone the Nyigina language also; you have to put down the numbers 1 to 6 on the page, then he declines Nyigina verbs according to a ritual which no doubt emerged through many years of working with linguists.

The *series* is a nomadological feature, like that of travelling through the country, one place after another, and a chain of stories, 'and then ... and then ... and then'. This is *not* a hierarchically constructed narrative of plots and sub-plots, major and subordinate clauses, dominant discourses or logical

structures which have a strong *metaphorical* tendency (for which it is appropriate to find interpretative 'keys', as in Western symbolism, for instance). The series is *metonymic*, each painting is a new departure, and it corresponds to a particular place – one cannot be subsumed by the other, each one is a site of renewal and decay, as in the desire to paint and to live, live, that is, according to nomadic techniques.

There are two texts, the watercolour of the woman and the crocodile, and the written text, originally in pencil on two sides of a roughly ruled page of drawing paper, now quite yellowed with age, though it probably doesn't date back much before 1977. That is when Butcher Joe painted the picture. The story was written sometime before, by his granddaughter, to whom he dictated in the camp at Beagle Bay.

The analysis to follow will attempt an approach to an Aboriginal aesthetic, rapidly shifting its gaze between the picture and the written text, avoiding where ever possible the available categories of the dominant 'Western' aesthetic, hoping that certain hints coming from conversations with Butcher Joe and Paddy Row will inform the analysis.

TRUE

The woman who travelled to Langgee has a name, but I will not give it here, she is a dead woman, but from this century, not the last. The citing of the date in the written text is an intrusion from white historiography; it is a realist detail, it puts the story in its historical context. The phrase is anthropological, referring as it does to 'aboriginals' (from the outside).

It is a 'true story', generically distinct from the *bugarrigarra* (dreaming) stories; it is about something that happened within living memory, not something that always already was.

The watercolour is realist also, not abstract in a traditional iconographic manner. It too could be read as anthropologically empirical because Butcher Joe always draws 'scenes from real life' as they were before colonisation. Only native animals, clothing and decorations as they were, specific landforms which are the memory of a place old age prohibits him from visiting any more.

HYPOPTICS

Seeing, in this aesthetic, is glancing, it is not gazing full on so as to possess a scene, take it away and store it. It is an aesthetic of the glimpse where things half seen can be imagined as something *other*, beyond and magical:

Sometimes we see a woman pass but, when you look again you might say: 'Oh I've only seen a grass'. But it is the woman Worawora, she still lives today.⁴

Stories of the third eye and the *ngadjayi* (spirits) confirm this.⁵ Perceptions come in flashes, in disruptions of the steady gaze. Since the country is variably peopled by spirits, ghosts and natural things transformed, there is always the danger that this mystical world will break through into perception, especially if you walk in certain 'danger places'. Gaps can appear in the veil of ordinary looking. 'Clever' men, like Butcher Joe, can look through these gaps and see a 'long way'. He has drawn pictures of *rai* and *balangan*, so he is not too disturbed when they make themselves visible to him. It is not the intensity of his gaze which produces them: if he is at peace with a place they will come. The harder you look the less likely you are to see. You dream, and something good will come to you, like your boyfriend, but when you look again...

EROTICS

There is a widespread myth in the North that crocodiles will never harm a woman, 'only keep her for sweetheart business'. There is no denying the phallic forearm of the crocodile. And in the story, at the point of rupture between pages, before you 'turn over', you are told about the woman's desire, a narrative device anticipating an erotic outcome.

The story is structured in two parts, the trip in to Langgee following a traditional Nyigina track, the sore head, no doubt caused by a dispute in camp which has driven her away (the boyfriend?), the arrival, sleep, the sexual subconscious.

Water is already heavily thematised, and it will be the sexual medium: 'dived deep into the water'. The alligator turns into the boyfriend, and when she can look *properly* (rather than figuratively, seeing him as more than an instrumental phallic effect) it is too late. The irony of 'he was a good man'

sits uneasily with the 'raw meat', this is why she has to get away, complete the journey back to her people at Yedda, which achieves closure for the text, she will have a story to tell when she gets home.

EXCHANGE

Contact with Butcher Joe could always produce a market, a point of exchange on a trade route. Being on the spot meant that you were in the line of exchange which would frustrate those in Perth who wanted him to retain his work for them alone. 'Things must go two ways', says Paddy Row about Aboriginal-White relations, and he is reinscribing a traditional trade rule. Once it was only the artifact that was traded, but now the agents trade on Butcher Joe's name. His name, the singularity of his style, these are rarities, and rarity is value in the contemporary production of Aboriginal culture as an archival accumulation, not a lived disposable economy for those producing the artifacts.

The story and the painting go together, they displace each other in a certain direction, and the one cannot move without the other. The story glosses the painting as a supplement of pleasure which can be reiterated by the owner, in a faraway place, who can cite Butcher Joe's name and his exotic location. Butcher Joe was tapped into a market and the trade scattered and amplified, beyond his control.

DRIFTING OUT

Butcher Joe has caught the tide and is moving out, to islands where tastes, perceptions, science and calculation are the ripples his work has become. Texts are formed, paintings will be remembered and reproduced, not all the songs will be forgotten. Sentiment will not always get in the way of understanding that an Aboriginal aesthetic is a material way of life, not something to be preserved. It is something that is being produced differently in different sites. Art to 'go' in shops and airports. Art to stay in museums. Even Butcher Joe's art does not have a true point of origin, since its creativity was its dialogue with Western realism. The conditions for an Aboriginal aesthetic are the conditions for living with the possibility of expansion and transformation, always moving slightly beyond recognition, allowing critics

and traders the occasional glimpse of a secret which is both profound and as candidly open as the country in which we walk. We walk until we reach a tidal creek, lying down to sleep, happy to drift out, not caring who comes...

NOTES

1. See 'Strategic Nomadology: Introduction' in Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984 which borrows from 'Traité de Nomadologie: La Machine de Guerre' in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nille Plateaux*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1980.
2. *Reading the Country* (op.cit.) and Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu*, Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983.
3. Jacques Derrida, *La Verité Peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978.
4. *Gularabulu*, (op.cit.) p. vii.
5. *Reading the Country*, (op.cit.) p. 236 n. 36, p. 138.