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Abstract

There is nothing mysterious about what indigenous artists want. They want the same thing as most people: a fair slice of the pie. How to get it, is a much more difficult question to answer. To even find a seat at the table, indigenous art has to first be accepted as contemporary art. This has been its defining struggle in the modern era. The problem, at least until recently, was that the Western tradition of modernism circumscribed the terms of contemporary art. This meant that indigenous artists had first to prove their modernity, a Catch-22 game that they could never win without disavowing their indigeneity.

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Surviving ‘The Contemporary’: What indigenous artists want, and how to get it

IAN McLEAN

*Works of art do not lie; what they say is literally true. Their reality however lies in the fact that they answer to questions brought before them from outside. The tension in art therefore has meaning only in relation to the tension outside.*¹

Theodore Adorno

There is nothing mysterious about what indigenous artists want. They want the same thing as most people: a fair slice of the pie. How to get it, is a much more difficult question to answer. To even find a seat at the table, indigenous art has to first be accepted as contemporary art. This has been its defining struggle in the modern era. The problem, at least until recently, was that the Western tradition of modernism circumscribed the terms of contemporary art. This meant that indigenous artists had first to prove their modernity, a Catch-22 game that they could never win without disavowing their indigeneity.

Being a contemporary artist is never a matter of just being here in the present moment, but of how one’s being is here. Take the example of Richard Bell. In a former life he was in the indigenous tourist art game, making and selling clichéd dot and rarrk designs that signified a clichéd idea of indigenous identity. In the 1990s Bell saw and seized a new opportunity to move sideways into the contemporary art game. Now he can make dot paintings for any occasion. Fast forward to now: *The Dinner Party* (2013), the final film in his trilogy *Imagining Victory* (2008-13). With its whacky crass references to Judy Chicago’s magnum opus, *The Dinner Party* is a very contemporary queering of the contemporary artworld. In an early scene a successful indigenous artist (played by Bell) is talking about his ‘dot’ painting to a dinner gathering in a collector’s house. The ‘dot’ painting is the latest addition to the collector’s collection of B-grade ‘erotic’ art, which covers every wall and corner of his house. Much like Borat (whom Boris Groys says is a figure of the radical artist and activist²), the indigenous artist’s self-deprecating naivety dissembles the sophisticated arty assumptions of the collector and his guests, leaving them (and us) incredulous. The biggest joke, the dot painting – its title *I am an ass man* writ large across the canvas – is clearly the most contemporary B-grade art in the room.

Are you an activist or an artist, the collector asked the artist, as if these are different ways of being. Not long ago they were; but since the ascendancy of relational art in the 1990s, the being of activism has been a good way of becoming a contemporary artist. It certainly worked for Bell.

The possibilities of how an indigenous artist might *be here* have changed enormously since Bell was born sixty years ago, when modernism was the horizon of contemporary thought. In the emerging post-Western era, non-Western traditions are increasingly shaping the sense of what contemporary art is. This has not been at the expense of, or in opposition to, Western art, but conducted as a conversation between contemporaneous traditions across the world no matter how incommensurable they might appear. To make contemporary art now requires artists to engage with the simultaneous presentness of contemporaneous worlds.



In Australia this new game plan produced considerable local success for indigenous artists. While the success is only regional, when today contemporary art is assuredly global – i.e. it situates itself reflexively within a transnational space³ – it is evidence that the nature of contemporary art (what is in and what is out) is being reconfigured in ways that give indigenous artists a fighting chance to be contemporary.

These new possibilities for being an indigenous artist suddenly appeared in the late 1980s. A truism of art criticism today is that a seismic shift occurred around then, as if a threshold was crossed and art began to speak a different language across the world. As this new master narrative came into play in Australia, a shadow lifted off indigenous art and it was seen in the bright lights of the contemporary.

What did it feel like in the Western artworld when this new sun first cut across the horizon? The then young French curator and critic, Nicolas Bourriaud, was the first to clearly intuit the deeper ramifications of this defining moment for contemporary art practice. What turned his head were the new sorts of relations that were suddenly opening in contemporary art. His coining of the term “relational art” in 1995 aptly describes his sense of what was happening then. Aesthetic judgment and “its assertion of a private symbolic space”, and the teleology of the new and its “preconceived idea of historical evolution” were, he believed, no longer the criteria of contemporary art practice. Rather, relational art unfolds in “the realm of human interactions” and “social context”.⁴

**black
cunt**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a series of groundbreaking exhibitions put art hitherto excluded from contemporary art discourse—especially indigenous, Black and other non-Western art—into relation with it. Finally, indigenous artists tasted what they had long wanted: to be included as agents of the contemporary. These exhibitions, such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), and the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* (New York) also favoured postconceptual installations that were socially engaged in both their content and participatory format—a type of practice that Bourriard associated with relational art.

The best known and most globally orientated of these groundbreaking exhibitions, *Magiciens de la Terre*, had a high indigenous and non-Western content and particularly inspired Bourriard. While widely condemned as an act of neocolonialism by many Western critics and even some of the Western artists participating in it, Bourriard was one of the few at the time to recognise its groundbreaking nature. He was particularly struck by the exhibition's challenge to accepted categories of art and criticism: "For the first time in a long while, a curator has forced us to rethink art in time and space, re-examine our values and our understanding of the word 'art'".⁵ If, said Bourriard, "it is an exhibition whose 'directions for use' are still to be found", he saw in it an outline of things to come.

Bourriard was most intrigued by the exhibition's intercultural openings: "One couldn't help noticing a number of tentative dialogues that were cut short, especially at La Villette: between Merz and Nera Jambruk (Papua) or between Richard Long and the Australian Aborigines."⁶ Amongst the "discoveries" he listed "the installation of Yong Ping Huang... and Bodys Kingelez, a postmodern from Zaire". Huang's installation included mounds of pulp made from newsprint and books "run through a washing machine", including two pulped books ceremoniously placed in a wooden box, titled *The history of Chinese art and the History of Western art put into a washing machine for two minutes*.⁷ Bourriard would become increasingly interested in such "planetary negotiations" and "discussions between agents from different cultures", and art that "can only be polyglot".⁸ However, despite his interest in the expanded ground of contemporary art, he never developed an interest in the relational agency of indigenous art. This was the first lesson of contemporary art. Indigenous artists cannot rely on either an epochal change that seemingly brings them into the fold, or perceptive Western critics to get them what they want. They have to go out and get it themselves.

NARRATING THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF THE CONTEMPORARY:

There is no point having a seat at the table if you can't speak the language, narrate the narrative, or dance the dance. As critics have been telling us for some time, there is a new way of doing things and it's called "the contemporary". The contemporary rules. It is the grand narrative of our time by force of its sheer presence in artworld discourse. This means that the term "contemporary art" is no longer just a descriptive term that signifies the totality of works being produced today, but as Terry Smith was the first to argue, a fundamentally new condition.⁹ In the latest book attempting to get hold of the meaning of "the contemporary" in contemporary art, the English philosopher Peter Osborne argues that the contemporary has become a critical term, and more than this, a mindset, ideal or what he calls a "fiction". This fiction is the ideology of our time.

Osborne's underlying point is that the concept of the 'contemporary' has acquired the 'historical-ontological' significance that the 'modern' had for most of the twentieth century, thus usurping its former paradigmatic function. The notion of contemporaneity is shaping our sense of being in the twenty-first century, just as the concept of the modern did in the twentieth century. It is not just a new fashion or yet another avant-garde "ism", but a whole new set of rules that, according to Osborne, have profound consequences for the ways in which we experience the world. This is because they fundamentally alter our *a priori* intuitions of space and time. What are these rules?

Modern temporality, says Osborne, is "inherently self-surpassing", eternally transient and futurist, whereas contemporary temporality is eternally present, meaning that, as in Aboriginal Dreaming, there is a "fictive co-presentness of a multiplicity of times". Osborne aptly calls it a "disjunctive unity", which, he says, "considerably complicates the question of periodisation", imposing "a constantly shifting periodising dynamic". "When the present begins... has very different answers depending upon where [and I would add *what*] you are thinking from, geopolitically".¹⁰ This disjunctive unity of contemporary temporality is also a characteristic of its spatiality. What was formerly incommensurable in the modern—the old and new, Western and non-Western, centre and periphery (and one could add other oppositions such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual)—enter new productive relations in the contemporary as we slip more easily between these categories.

Thus to be contemporary is to inhabit a temporality and spatiality that is foreign to that of the modern. Modern epistemology fashions difference in a series of oppositions—the new and the old, the West and the rest—which it resolves dialectically and in such a way that modernisation is always associated with Westernisation. On the other hand, the 'disjunctive' logic of the contemporary sets in play relational systems that are dialogical rather than binary or dialectical. Osborne aptly called it a "de-bordering".¹¹ Difference has not been annulled but its borders have been opened, so that we can now travel, like Bell did in *The Dinner Party*, as if through a wormhole to other worlds, and do it without leaving our own. In this apparently quantum state of contemporaneity, we can simultaneously be in not just multiple places, but also multiple time zones. Today even the long dead, even those condemned as living fossils of the Stone Age, can be contemporary.

However, this new, very ecumenical condition of the contemporary does not guarantee everyone, let alone indigenous artists, a seat at the table. While Smith is sympathetic to indigenous art, like most critics of contemporary art Osborne isn't. He only admits them on very strict terms. While he recognises the inherent intercultural transnational space of contemporary art, he interprets it in Western-centric terms. Using Charles Merewether's 2006 *Biennale of Sydney: Zones of Contact* as his example, Osborne claims, with some justification, that "the more successful an artist, the less likely they are to live and work in their country of origin, or indeed in any single place", and that their movement is "overwhelmingly 'inwards', from the periphery to Europe... and New York". While he thus acknowledges a striking feature of contemporary art—the role of non-Western artists in its formation—he describes a space in which the old provincialism model of Western hegemony prevails, even if in a more (neo-) liberal guise. Indigenous artists will recognise in Osborne's analysis a familiar scene—one reminiscent of the dinner conversation in Bell's *The Dinner Party*:

[I]t is precisely displaced postcolonial subjects who can most successfully represent themselves as "native". The native itself, on the other hand, (in so far as the term retains a meaningful referent in such an interconnected world) can acquire its status as 'informant' only by being represented as such, by others, within international cultural spaces.¹²

This is the entirety of what Osborne has to say about the contemporary indigenous artist. If this doesn't seem of much use to indigenous artists, it does map a discourse that they need to contest. Otherwise, indigenous art will be just as effectively excluded from the contemporary as it was from the modern.

In the current state of play there is no guarantee that indigenous artists will get what they want. Indigenous contemporary art might, like so many phenomenally popular art movements of the past, be a passing fad with no future. In privileging intercultural relations, the contemporary is a platform for the global trajectories of the most local traditions. However, this platform is a contested space that indigenous artists need to seize in order to get what they want.

THE CONTESTED CONTEMPORARY:

If the contemporary provides openings to non-Western artists, including indigenous ones, the latter have had only limited success within its regime. This is not the case with Asian, African and South American artists, who enjoy an increasing presence in European and American contemporary art museums. For example, in 2002 the Tate began establishing special committees to collect art outside Europe and the USA. Beginning with Latin America, it has since turned its attention to the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe, and Africa. Elvira Dyangani Ose, appointed to the position of Curator International Art at Tate Modern to lead its interest in African art, said: "It is important for African art to be part of a major international narrative... we need to tell the whole story of modernity."¹³ However, indigenous art has only come into view for the Tate tangentially through its interest in African contemporary art. Tate Modern has shown no curiosity in indigenous contemporary art more generally, which in London remains the province of the British Museum. Given the new internationalism, why has indigenous art, especially Australian indigenous art, which enjoys a reasonably high profile, had difficulty being accepted as contemporary art?

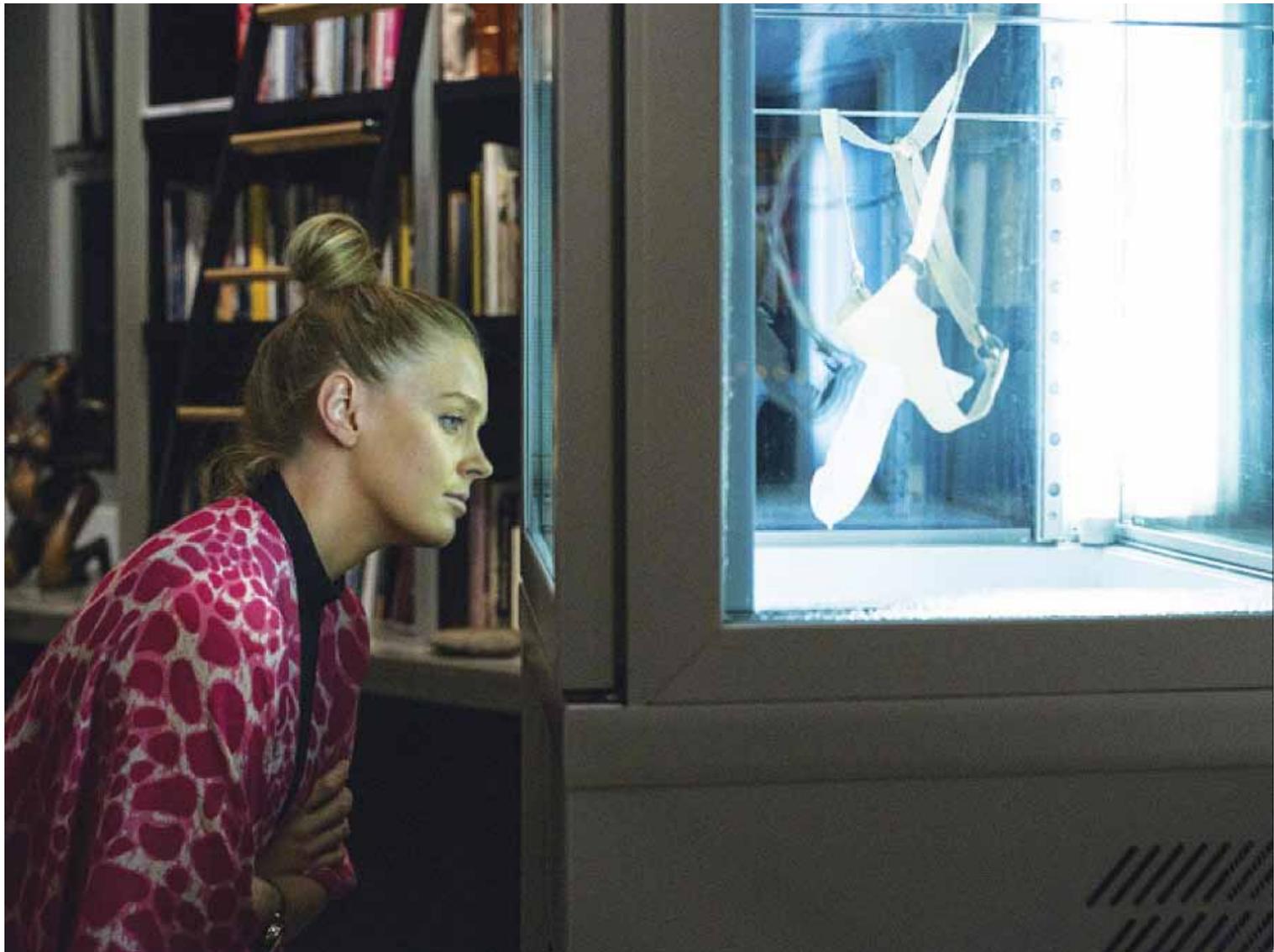
One obvious reason is the relatively unique indigenous experiences of decolonisation and its specific forms of postcolonial modernities. Osborne cites the importance of post-war anti-colonial struggles in the emerging geopolitical space of globalisation that is a defining feature of "the contemporary". However, while indigenous artists did participate in the anti-colonial struggles of the post-war period, unlike other colonised groups they never achieved independence through the accepted political institutions of modernity associated with the nation-State. They effectively remain a colonised people burdened by struggles for land, power and identity—struggles that seem, in Osborne's terms, more modern than contemporary. How does one fight for land in an age of de-territorialisation, for the right to be a nation in a post-national world, and the

right for an autonomous identity at a time when identity politics has been discredited by the new regime of the contemporary? Condemned to being primitives in a modern world, now they seem condemned to being moderns in a contemporary world. Indeed, the artworld success of indigenous art in Australia would appear to rest more on the tropes of the modern than the contemporary. How did this happen to an art movement that for a brief moment in the 1980s fascinated artists, critics and curators searching for a way out of the endgames of modernism, and which in many ways presaged the relational art of the 1990s in its collectivist production, political content and installation format?

Postconceptual paradigms were first applied to Aboriginal art when three collaborative Papunya Tula paintings were included in the inaugural *Australian Perspectives 1981: A Biennial Survey of Contemporary Australian Art* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.¹⁴ The Papunya Tula art collective formed in 1972 as an expression of rising indigenous activism across the country (i.e. as part of the global anti-colonial struggle). Early art criticism of Papunya Tula art focused on its political engagement and conceptualism rather than its formalist credentials. This focus in the reception of indigenous Australian art continued throughout the 1980s, most evident in the acclaim given to the *Aboriginal Memorial* (1988), which honoured Aborigines killed during the first two hundred years of colonisation.

First exhibited at the 1988 *Biennale of Sydney*, *The Aboriginal Memorial* met all the criteria of relational and contemporary art more generally: social-political content, disjunctive temporality, the re-fashioning of local traditions to global contexts (in this case the history of colonisation in Australia), installation format, collectivist and intercultural production and postconceptual form. Interestingly, Smith published an extensive analysis of *The Aboriginal Memorial* in 2001, at the very moment that he first began arguing for the emerging ontological significance of the term "contemporary".¹⁵





If the Australian artworld reception of indigenous art generally operated in a postconceptual field during the 1980s (Osborne thesis is that contemporary art is by definition postconceptual), as it gained the attention of the wider world during the late 1980s, more easily digestible signifiers of modernism (individual genius, abstract art, sublime aura) came into play. This was exemplified by the curatorial discovery in the early 1990s of individual stars such as Emily Kngwarreye and Rover Thomas. Their work met all the criteria of late modernism: large abstract painting by a very singular genius, the aura of its vibrant formalism becoming the object of private contemplation and existential awe. Ironically, in the new order of the contemporary, the very aesthetic magnificence of these abstract paintings had lost currency.

The curatorial turn to outmoded paradigms of modernism in the exhibition of indigenous art occurred at the very moment that relational art—which defined itself against the aesthetic nuance and individualism of modernism—began to capture the imagination of contemporary art curators. Thus while Australian indigenous art became a market and institutional success in the 1990s, curators of the burgeoning global art biennale phenomenon largely ignored it (except in Australia). To them it seemed more like an earlier modernism than contemporary art. This also masked the extent of continuing relational or postconceptual practices in indigenous art, thereby missing important aspects of indigenous contemporary art production and meaning.

The assimilation of indigenous art into the conventional—i.e. modernist museological paradigms that still largely reign in Australia’s art museums—occurred under the watch of newly appointed indigenous art curators. However, there was a payoff. Indigenous artists gained an inside run in the Australian artworld. Given that they comprise only two percent of the population, and judging by their market share, artworld discourse, media attention, appointment of indigenous curators, galleries devoted to indigenous art at State art galleries, special art prizes and funding opportunities, it could be concluded that in Australia at least they had gained a bigger slice than any other group, and by a long shot. The large exhibition of Australian art due to open at London’s Royal Academy in September 2013 will even begin with a special room devoted to indigenous art, “because”, said Ron Radford, Director of the NGA and closely involved in organising the exhibition—“it was here first”. “When they [the British audience] come in first”, he said, “they’ll see Aboriginal art, and that will shock them”.¹⁶ Shock them, I presume, because outside of Australia indigenous art has largely failed to penetrate the contemporary art world. My sense is that Radford’s curatorial strategy, while well meaning, will simply confirm existing prejudices.



Excess in the local does not compensate for lack in the global. Indeed, here it would seem a symptom of this larger lack. Indigenous art's inside run in the Australian artworld is on the condition that it is indigenous art, as if in Australia it has a privileged place in a discourse of multiculturalism rather than contemporary art. It is only allowed to speak to the latter in the guise of indigeneity. This would appear to be the case at the upcoming Royal Academy exhibition. Judging by media reports, after the room of Aboriginal art "the show will be laid out as a chronological journey through the different art movements in Australia over the past two centuries", through to "leading twentieth-century century artists like Arthur Boyd, Rosalie Gascoigne and Fred Williams, and end in the twenty-first century with international recognised artists such as Bill Henson and Shaun Gladwell".¹⁷ If that sounds familiar, so will this—the newspaper report that I have just quoted from mentions the names of seven non-Aboriginal artists to be included in the exhibition, but not one Aboriginal artist.

The shock here is not so much the familiar chronology of Western art or the equally familiar separation of indigenous and Western art and the anonymity of the indigenous artist, but what this exhibition (as reported in *The Canberra Times*) of a national art signifies in the current discourse of the contemporary. It creates two impressions: that in Australia the old formulas of nationalism, identity politics and modernism reign, and that the triumph of Aboriginal art in Australia is to be understood within these terms. No wonder that curators of contemporary art outside of Australia continue to ignore it.

IS THERE AN INDIGENOUS FUTURE IN CONTEMPORARY ART?:

The modern and the contemporary share at least one thing: each dismisses the notion of indigeneity. However, each does it for different reasons and to very different purposes. Indigeneity is not in the lexicon of those remote artists working in the frame of Dreaming who initiated the so-called Aboriginal contemporary art movement. Rather, indigeneity is a concept of identity derived from concepts of race, ethnicity and nationhood developed in the modern European era. Here indigeneity took the form of the 'primitive', the anti-modern and the anti-Western. Thus within the negative dialectics of modernism it provided a platform from which to articulate a resistant politics and poetics. Hence it would be wrong to say that indigeneity is not an indigenous concept just because it is an ideology of the modern; rather indigenous activists made it an important sign of indigenous modernity. However, if indigeneity had a use in modernism's negative dialectics as a site of resistance, in "the contemporary" its place, like that of the local in general, is much more ambivalent.

In the regime of "the contemporary", indigeneity meets the same fate of all identity formations: the borders in which the modern had circumscribed and delimited them collapse. Hence, while the disjunctive temporality (and spatiality) of Dreaming and its postconceptual-like poetics should be enough to give those indigenous artists who still think according to it precepts a voice in the discourse of the contemporary, this is prohibited by the reception of their art within the frame of indigeneity.

Artists, curators and critics who largely articulate the discourse and reception of indigenous art are responsible for giving life to the concept of indigeneity. However, since about 1990 a large number of artists normally excluded from the contemporary artworld by the ethnic politics of multiculturalism, such as 'post-black' artists like Glen Ligon and Kara Walker in the United States of America,¹⁸ and post-Aboriginal artists like Gordon Bennett in Australia, have been deconstructing such essentialist formulations of identity—be they white, black or whatever. This did not erase ideas of indigeneity or ethnicity but it did transform them into a postconceptual discourse. In this way the burden of indigeneity acquired a contemporaneous intercultural edge. Many urban-based indigenous artists have followed suit and as a result been moderately successful in the contemporary art world, though the most successful, Tracey Moffatt, simply stepped outside the box—disavowing (or erasing) the concept of indigeneity altogether. It was a good career move but one that acquiesces to rather than contests the Western worldview that is still virulent in the

Pages 166-67 and 170-71: Richard Bell, *The Dinner Party* (digital video stills), 2013
Page 168: Vernon Ah Kee, *stop that Black Cunt (after Andrew Johns 2010)*, 2011
Opposite: Vernon Ah Kee, #15 from the *Hallmarks of the Hungry* series, 2012
Photos courtesy the artists and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

discourse of contemporary art. As Bell has argued, being indigenous is not a prerequisite to making indigenous art.¹⁹ Nor are indigenous artists required to make indigenous art. Likewise being Australian is not a prerequisite to making Australian art, and nor are Australians required to make it. Who aspires to make Australian art these days? Such identity categories are no longer fixed boundaries that can't be crossed, but temporary meeting places in which to build conversations, make relations or, as Bell does, make trouble. As Bell demonstrates in his art, indigeneity, like any idea, can only be contemporary through how it is made to be *here, now*, in the crossroads of contemporaneous traditions. What it means will not be found in the essentialisms of former times, but in the moment as its meaning is remade at every crossing, with every iteration. When indigenous artists realise this, they might, like Bell, start getting what they want.

Notes

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann eds, Robert Hullot-Kentor trans., London: The Athlone Press, 1997: 8

² Boris Groys, 'Boris Groys in Conversation with John-Paul Stonard', *Immediations: The research journal of the Courtauld Institute of Art*, 1/4, 2007, 3-19: 14

³ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London: Verso, 2013: 163

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les presses du réel, 2001: 11-14

⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Magiciens De La Terre', *Flash Art* 148, 1989: 119-121, 120

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*: 120-21

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Altermodern Manifesto', London: Tate 2009; see <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm>

⁹ Smith first sketched his argument in 2001: *What is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come*, Sydney: Artspace Visual Art Centre 2001. For his most complete account see *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011

¹⁰ Osborne, *op cit.*: 24-25

¹¹ *ibid.*: 28

¹² *ibid.*: 164

¹³ Quoted in Charlotte Higgins, 'Tate Opens the Door to Africa', *The Guardian*, 2 November, 2011; see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2012/nov/01/tate-africa-contemporary-art>

¹⁴ Bernice Murphy, *Australian Perspectives 1981*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981

¹⁵ Terry Smith, 'Public Art between Cultures: The Aboriginal Memorial, Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia', *Critical Inquiry* 27/4, Summer, 2001

¹⁶ Quoted in Sally Pryor, 'London Calling for the Width and Breadth of Australian Art Treasures', *Canberra Times*, 28 June, 2013; see <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/london-calling-for-the-width-and-breadth-of-australian-art-treasures-20130627-2p0aj.html#ixzz2XSkykyZJ>

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Thelma Golden, *Freestyle*, New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001

¹⁹ Richard Bell, 'Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art It's a White Thing', in Robert Leonard (ed.), *Richard Bell: Positivity*, Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2007: 27-32