This belongs to me, the one dollar note: the eternal returns of appropriation

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Abstract
The dictionary meanings of appropriate and misappropriate are the same: to take something for one's own use without the owner's permission. Appropriate also has an additional dictionary meaning: to use something for a purpose that it wasn't originally intended for. Poetic appropriation is quite different. It does often use images without the owner's permission and often for an unexpected purpose, but its practice descends from hermeneutics (from Hermes, the ancient Greek messenger of the gods): the ancient art of interpreting the world's speech. Its methods derive from theories of mimesis and simulation that can be traced well beyond Plato to shamanistic practices of form shifting—of becoming animal through the use of dance, painting and masks that mimic the animal in question. To dismiss poetic appropriation as theft is to miss its purpose.

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White students often wonder why First Nations and Métis artists are applauded when they appropriate and distort Western culture, while White artists, if they just dream of quoting Aboriginal images and styles, are pilloried.

David Garneau

The dictionary meanings of appropriate and misappropriate are the same: to take something for one’s own use without the owner’s permission. Appropriate also has an additional dictionary meaning: to use something for a purpose that it wasn’t originally intended for. Poetic appropriation is quite different. It does often use images without the owner’s permission and often for an unexpected purpose, but its practice descends from hermeneutics (from Hermes, the ancient Greek messenger of the gods): the ancient art of interpreting the world’s speech. Its methods derive from theories of mimesis and simulation that can be traced well beyond Plato to shamanistic practices of form-shifting—of becoming animal through the use of dance, painting and masks that mimic the animal in question. To dismiss poetic appropriation as theft is to miss its purpose.

Today appropriation is so ubiquitous in contemporary art that it is not easily dismissed. Its critics have retreated behind laws about private property. The only movement to repress the central function of poetic appropriation in art was modernism, most obviously in the avant-garde quest for originality. These days, however, appropriation is applauded for its originality, criticality and ethics. It has a certain noblesse. In Claire Bishop’s words contemporary “artists should renounce authorial presence in favour of allowing participants to speak through him or her”. Why has this occurred?

The turn away from modernism opened the door for the return of poetic appropriation and the post-Western globalised world order cemented its place in contemporary art practice. As Western hegemony diminishes contemporary artists have had to become more open to cultural differences and multiple subjectivities. We have all had to understand ourselves differently. Appropriation is the way our brains do this—the “cross-cultural dynamics of a Creole aesthetic of migration and translation” have made us “all appropriationists now”.

Poetic appropriation aims to, in Jacques Rancière’s suggestive phrase, redistribute the sensible, or fulfill the hermeneutic function of making visible what had been invisible or unclear. Things and images are appropriated not to reiterate their presence but to show what does not appear to be there, either because it is ambiguous, hidden, invisible or deliberately excluded in the very structure of the image. Examples range from Marcel Duchamp’s discovery of a fountain in a urinal to Michael Nelson Jagamara’s mappings of ancestors in the lie of the land.

Unlike the proverbial carpetbagger, the poetic appropriationist does not aim to possess the image but be possessed by it—Plato’s criteria for a good poet. The exemplary appropriationist is Paul Ricoeur’s discerning reader who abandons herself to the “space of meaning” (i.e. the heterogeneous play of signifiers): “it is always a question of entering into an alien work, of divesting oneself of the earlier ‘me’ in order to receive, as in play, the self conferred by the work itself”. If in appropriating the text the discerning reader makes “one’s own what is alien”, it “ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold... it implies instead a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic ego”. The appropriationist is the one that is appropriated. Like the shaman, she cedes her subject position and
Opposite: Yirawala, Maralatj ancestors, creator of northern tribes, c. 1976
Photo courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Above: Lucas Grogan, You've Been Out All Night Babe, 2010
Photo courtesy the artist, Galleynsmith, Melbourne, Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide and Jan Marvin Art, Brisbane
autonomy to that of another thing. Thus appropriation isn’t just something that imperialists do to the colonised or the ruling class to the proletariat, and when it is this, the theft, as Marx predicted, eventually rebounds. Now, as Matis appropriation artist David Garneau quipped: “White artists occasionally rip-off indigenous art, and... indigenous artists continuously rip-off Western culture.”

Appropriation artists have had difficulty convincing modern lawmakers about the public good of their poetic project. The poetic use of images has become subject to the rules of capital through copyright laws. The law respects the poet’s right to appropriate if he/she has the money and the copyright owner consents. Copyright (the right to copy) agencies have made it easy for appropriation artists—just fill in a few boxes and supply your credit card details. It can all be done with the click of a mouse. What could be fairer in our technocratic world?

Nevertheless, someone such as Imants Tillers, Australia’s most acclaimed appropriation artist, who over many years has appropriated an enormous range of texts and images, courts bankruptcy. While the costs are much higher if he appropriates an image of Mickey Mouse or Bugs Bunny than say a painting by Eugene von Guérard (out of copyright) or a contemporary artist who practises the aesthetics of appropriation (who might likely waive the fee), he never can be sure. In the early 1980s the Australian proselytiser of appropriation art, Tillers’ friend Paul Taylor, sued a publication calling itself Art & Texta that satirised his journal Art & Text for appropriating its copyrighted name.

However, appropriation artists and the law seem to have arrived at a workable understanding and issues around poetic appropriation are now largely framed in ethical rather than narrow legal terms. Bishop observed that ethics has become the benchmark of critical judgments in contemporary art and aesthetic judgment has fallen by the wayside. Nowhere is this more evident than in non-indigenous appropriations of indigenous art. This is partly due to the legacy of colonialism, and partly because another law is involved. It is not just capitalism that demands a fee.

The primal scene of poetic appropriation by the Australian nation-State is the 1966 one-dollar note. Desiring an Aboriginal theme for the new decimal currency, the Reserve Bank distributed photographs of bark paintings to the competing designers. Gordon Andrews’ “innovative” winning designs—as Djon Mundine called them in 2004—incorporated appropriated imagery from a bark painting featuring the history of the ancestral hunter Gurrmiringu, as well as rock art depictions of Mimi figures and other motifs. Andrews’ composite mixture of such different sources—from different places, times and artists—is typical of appropriation art.

Shortly after the release of the one dollar note, the governor of the Reserve Bank, H. C. Coombs, received a letter from the Millingimbi Mission asking for compensation for one of its artists, David Malangi, whose painting of Gurrmiringu’s history Andrews had selected. Coombs had assumed that the paintings were “the work of some traditional Aboriginal artist long dead”, so he must have been surprised to discover that Malangi was twenty years his junior. He was probably also surprised when he was advised that Malangi did have rights under Australian law. Coombs wisely did not test this advice in court. Having just embarked on a life-long mission for indigenous justice, he was not looking for contrary opinions. He had what he needed. After consulting Malangi, he authorised compensation and personally presented him with a medal—a poetic act that according to Mundine had two important consequences: “it fixed the idea of the Aboriginal painter as an individually recognised art practitioner” and a precedent was set for indigenous artists to receive copyright. This is a classic case of appropriation ceding authority to the appropriated. The ramifications went well beyond indigenous rights to copyright protection. Its most important consequence was the redistribution of the sensible: “to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals.” Here we see the nexus between aesthetics and politics. The indigenous as a category of people had effectively become citizens of the Australian nation-State, which its citizens affirmed in the referendum that year. What then was heard that previously sounded like babble? Primarily it was Aboriginal art. It gained visibility in the politics and law of the state that it previously did not have. It became the face and voice of indigenous Australians and eventually the brand of a nation. Further, in consulting and compensating Malangi, Coombs did more than honour Australian law.

He also acknowledged indigenous law, or at least this is how Malangi saw it. As with Australian law, the issue was not the act of appropriation per se but its appropriateness. Malangi did not want the dollar note destroyed—to the contrary its appropriation excited him—but to retrospectively secure its appropriateness, to legitimise it. His reasons had more to do with cosmology than his bank balance. As the primary custodian of the ancestral history of Gurrmiringu, in Aboriginal law Malangi was held responsible for the design on the dollar note and its public circulation. More than 680 million notes were eventually printed, so it was no idle responsibility. Malangi did not think that his copyright payment of $1000 was sufficient, but he and his Manharrngu brethren were very proud of the medal. He was deeply ashamed when, many years later in Canberra, he lost it. A replica was made which Malangi believed just as effectively authorised his story, that is Gurrmiringu’s history. In its re-authorisation could the replica be more valuable than the original medal?

Gurrmiringu’s history had 680 million iterations through the dollar note. No wonder Malangi became known as “Dollar Dave” and Gurrmiringu’s history was referred to as “the dollar note story”. It is the ancestral history of the dollar note; the dollar note was in the Dreaming. The one-dollar note, Malangi believed, was his, namely Gurrmiringu’s. Andrews’ initial appropriation had returned much more than Coombs could have imagined. From that point the anti-colonial war was won even if many battles were yet to be fought. It made Coombs and Malangi lifelong friends. Between them they had performed an inspired poetic act worthy of mention in Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. However, it was probably only Malangi who understood the full poetic power of appropriation from his knowledge of Aboriginal ceremony, which is a form of controlled ancestral simulation by which Ancestors reveal themselves. This makes indigenous art a dangerous activity that can only be made and performed by the appropriate people with the right knowledge and kin relations to the ancestral history being revealed. There is, then, an ethical core to traditional Aboriginal art—a right way and a wrong way.

Further, replication is fundamental to how the cosmos is structured. All things, animate and inanimate, are simulations of Ancestral spirits, and the inter-relations of things mirror Ancestral relations. Simulation is also how the world procreates. Life is not simply created once but must be continually re-created, so that “if people stopped doing their ceremonies and interpret their dreams, there would be no more Law, Dreamings, that is, no more people.” The simulations of Ancestral histories are necessary acts of procreation. This is also now a law of contemporary art as well as biology: “The only thing that will be retained is what can be remade.” Appropriation is the law of eternal return. The primal scene of poetic appropriation by the Australian artworld occurred in 1985 when Tillers painted The Nine Shots. Since then non-indigenous appropriation of indigenous art has become particularly dangerous ground. The reasons are political, not poetic. The failure of political justice has created unresolved ethical dilemma in regard to indigenous art, which have been amplified by the central role that ethics now plays in critical judgments of contemporary art. Thus while Tillers’ mistake was similar to what Andrews had made twenty years earlier, there was a very different outcome.

When Tillers appropriated Jagamara’s Possum Dreaming (1984), he didn’t simply infringe Australian copyright law, like Andrews he created an unauthorised and so inappropriate presencing of Ancestral histories. Jagamara, as the authorised custodian, was ultimately responsible—meaning that like Malangi before him, he was obliged to make it right. Otherwise, who knows what might return? Whether the latter collaborations between Jagamara and Tillers—the most recent being joint appropriations of The Nine Shots—re-balanced the cosmos is still out with the jury. Collaboration is a form of mutual cross-appropriation. This is why collective and collaborative art practices are a standard
strategy in the post-appropriation art of relational aesthetics that dominate
today’s art biennales. Relational aesthetics is primarily about the relational
agency of the various players in the aesthetic experience. Collective and
collaborative practices are also ubiquitous in appropriation-rich indigenous
cultures—and also mainly concern the relational agency of the various
players—and thus a canny way for Jagamara to assert his agency and right
the imbalance inadvertently made by Tillers’ mistake. It also explains why
there are increasing collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous
artists. However, practice and theory rarely meet in the anxious politics of
the contemporary. In Australia the promises of poetic appropriation and
collaboration have yet to be fulfilled.

Last year the Melbourne dealer Beverley Knight, who has long
dealt in indigenous art, pulled an exhibition by the white artist Cameron
Hayes. Her reasons were not the art’s lack of poetry but complaints she
received from Tiwi artists about its content. In a word, Hayes was censored.
Objectives were made about appropriated clan designs on kitschy felt
sculptures in the form of funeral poles. Also at issue was a painting of a
football ground because it was depicted littered with beer cans. The Tiwi
were upset with the art’s satire of their life and values. The kitsch of the
felt funeral poles mocked Tiwi ancestral histories, just as the beer cans
denigrated Tiwi morality, now given a sinister twist by the Intervention.

Lucas Grogan is in even more trouble. If Hayes drew the rancour of
Tiwi artists, Grogan seems to draw fire from an urban demography.
According to his Melbourne dealer Marita Smith, it mainly comes from
“a small group of urban-based Aboriginal activist practitioners”. One
is Ryan Presley. A graduate of Griffith University, his series Blood Money
—simulations of Australian banknotes that included appropriated indigenous
designs—won him the 2010 graduate art prize and secured
him an exhibition at Brisbane’s Jan Manton Gallery. Two years later, when
Grogan joined the Jan Manton stable, Presley quit in protest. Presley
had joined the gallery when Tillers and Jonathan Kimberley—both non-
indigenous artists who collaborate with indigenous ones—were in its stable.
Their work obviously passed the test. Grogan’s did not.

Objections to Grogan’s work date back to the beginning of the
Intervention in 2007, when he was still an art student and relatively naïve
about the artworld. He had several successful exhibitions at this time in
Newcastle (where he is from) and Sydney. The works that drew most
attention were striking black and white ink drawings on card cut to the
shape of bark paintings and closely emulating their distinctive sensibility.
Bark painting’s graphic lucidity had clearly seduced Grogan. Compared to
Hayes, Grogan’s art displays much more empathy for Arnhem Land art,
and his sometime wry social commentary is playful, not mocking. His gay
punk subjectivity is also very much in evidence—as in his preference for
elongated male Mimi-like figures with elongated penises. In one work two
such figures masturbate together. In another, two similar figures are joined
in one body, and give birth to cascading beer bottles. If he were indigenous,
Grogan might be considered the Kent Monkman of Australian art.

In Canada “Monkman’s cheeky interventions… [are] eagerly
collected by the rich and by important institutions”, but in Australia
Grogan is an artist under siege. Curiously, the most complex and interesting
reaction was not from the local community but from the aforementioned
Garneau, then part of the Canadian Aboriginal curatorial delegation
to the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. Garneau discovered Grogan’s work at
the Biennale SaRAI Fringe festival and was immediately interested. As
he explained in a letter to Art Monthly, its Aboriginal style and “salient
content: alcohol and sex… echoes similar strategies that are happening and
that I want to encourage in our contemporary, Canadian Aboriginal art
community”. Garneau was intent on buying a work but “my jaw dropped
to the floor when I was told that the artist… is not Aboriginal but a white
guy ‘appropriating’ the Arnhem Land rrarrk style”. Garneau “talked at
length” with Grogan and found him “a sincere young man”, but could not
believe that such blatant cultural theft was occurring in Australia, especially
in a prestigious venue. His shock stemmed in part from his Canadian
experience: “Few non-aboriginal artists in Canada would engage in such
(mis)appropriation.” Garneau was particularly vexed that “there was
no critical context explaining this rather dodgy aesthetic/political move”. Should all artworks come with ethnic identifiers, as Aboriginal artists
generally do, to avoid such embarrassment to the unsuspecting buyer?
Garneau’s complaint wasn’t against Grogan (he thinks artists have a licence
to be contrary) or his work in particular (he liked the work), but against
the apparent social tolerance of aesthetic misccegenation in Australia when
it is instigated from the white side. He wanted to know “if the uncritical
appropriation of Aboriginal art is a trend in Australian art and curation?”

The answer is yes. Critical or uncritical, Grogan is only one of many
non-indigenous artists directly engaging with indigenous art in Australia
even though it remains a fraught zone. This is not the place to discuss
the reason why such engagement is taboo in Canada but only risqué in
Australia, though it might explain why Garneau’s letter in Art Monthly
received, he told me, “an avalanche of negative response (I don’t remember
a single positive reaction) and no public support from Aboriginal folks in
Australia”.

Nevertheless, Australians (indigenous and non-indigenous) have
not been reticent in criticising Grogan. These criticisms are in a slightly
different register to Garneau’s, but they stem from a similar moral outrage
at colonial injustice. One of the co-curators of the Fringe Festival, Margaret
Farmer, resigned over Grogan’s inclusion, and after being selected as
a finalist in the Off the Wall emerging artists’ exhibition at this year’s
Sydney Art Fair, Grogan was deselected because “senior curators in the
indigenous community… had ethical concerns and issues”. Jenny Fraser
spelt out the problem. It wasn’t cross-cultural engagement: “There are
many positive examples of Aboriginal artists collaborating with others.”
Nor was copyright the main focus: “it wasn’t just that Grogan was ripping
off designs in order to make money”. The main issue was “the context that
he presented them in… gross portrayals… with Aboriginal people engaging
in oral sex, boozing and vomiting”. Similarly, TextaQueen, who makes
graphic comic-book-like imagery about cultural identity and gender not
dissimilar to Grogan’s and who describes herself as “a non-indigenous
person of colour”, objected to Grogan’s depiction of “black figures often
in misogynistic scenes involving alcohol and sex”. Mundine objected
to Grogan’s depictions of Mimi-like figures drinking from beer cans and
vomiting. Mimis might be famous for their promiscuous party-going but
according to Mundine, Grogan uses such themes “in a demeaning way to
Aboriginal people, (suggesting) that they’re all drunks and they sit around
and get pissed… You wouldn’t take the bleeding heart of Jesus image and
stick it on toilet paper”.

However, as Mundine well knows, contemporary artists have not
been adverse to making blasphemous works about Jesus, and extremely
inappropriate indeed transgressive behavior is a frequent subject of art
and myth of all cultures. Grogan clearly likes rather than disdains bark
painting—he is not a satirist—and one can interpret his subject matter as
attempts to put the art to contemporary use. Garneau read the paintings
this way, and bark painters have also depicted such contemporary blights
as petrol sniffing. Yet Mundine’s complaint resonates because of the
Intervention (which amongst other things repealed anti-racism laws) that
frame it. There is nothing like war to sharpen one’s anxieties.

In this troubled atmosphere Grogan’s art opens old wounds. Accusations
of moral laxity were just flack. It goes to deeper ethical questions about subject positions and relational agency. TextaQueen doesn’t
think that “it’s his story to be telling. It really personally affects me as a
person of colour”, she was quoted as saying. She is opposed to non-
indigenous artists initiating dialogue with indigenous artists: it “is a role
for an indigenous artist to undertake”. This is very similar to Garneau’s
position:

Some Aboriginal artists appropriate Western art styles
to deconstruct colonialism… they clearly have the right
and duty to ‘talk back’ in the ‘master’s voice’ as well
as their own. The reverse, however, is not equitable.
To steal the voice of the oppressed under the weak claims
of appreciating the style, because it is Australian and that
he is doing it ironically, exceeds credibility and propriety.
For him indigenous appropriation of either Western or indigenous art is “sanctioned taking”, whereas he dubs white appropriations of indigenous art “misappropriation”, because it is “the acquisition of property without either the rightful owner’s permission or a public sanction”. If only Grogan was indigenous, as both Garneau and Textaqueen initially thought he was. Then he might be hailed as a new Gordon Hookey or Harry Wedge, though in my opinion Grogan’s work is closer to the decorative magic realism of Trevor Nickolls. To dismiss Grogan’s work as unethical is too summary and quick an execution. Truth and justice are hermeneutic not moral domains. We should not miss the opportunity to examine what Bishop called, in her critique of the ethical, the aesthetic regime’s ability “to think contradiction” and “the darker more painful complicated considerations of our predicament”. In making our judgments we should first ask if Grogan’s readings of indigenous art are insightful?

“To understand”, wrote Ricoeur in his essay on appropriation, “is not to project oneself into the text; it is to receive an enlarged self”. Is this the case with, for example, Grogan’s history of beer bottles (referred to above)? The image references Yirawala’s history of Maralatj, the ancestral mother who gave birth to the Kuninjku clans and assigned them classificatory relationships. In apparently focusing (unlike Yirawala) on the two husbands that Ngalyod gave Maralatj, does the drawing reinterpret this history of human creation in the light of contemporary gender relations in Arnhem Land, or does it merely project Grogan’s tribal punk sensibility into this history and so, in Ricoeur’s terms, fail to understand his self differently? If the latter, the drawing is what Garneau designates “tribute appropriation” or “Wanabesein”. An example Garneau gives is the popular tribal tattoo, “symptomatic of disillusionment with one’s own culture, rather than marking an authentic relationship with another”. Though, he says with some irony, it might be symptomatic of the “desire for a post national body... cosmopolitan bodies released from origins. Free floating signifiers. Collage people.”

If, however, Grogan’s work is a hermeneutics he cannot escape censure, as Tillers discovered when he painted The Nine Shots. The histories of Maralatj cannot be freely reinterpreted by anyone. This is the prerogative of the custodian. If Tillers made a similar mistake, he did not retreat from his practice and he welcomed the chance to collaborate with Jagamara. From what I can gather, Grogan has gone to ground, backed into a corner, more worried about what not to do than where he can go. He needs his own Jagamara. This might prove difficult. His letters to Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Arts in Yirrkala were unanswered. Grogan tells the anecdote of the (unnamed) Yolngu artist who dismissed his drawings as “rubbish paintings”; i.e. paintings about nothing and without ancestral significance, akin to “Wanabesein” and not to be taken seriously.

At present, indigenous artists can freely appropriate the work of non-indigenous artists but, like time, it is not reversible. However, indigenous artists also cannot freely appropriate indigenous art and non-indigenous artists can appropriate non-indigenous art: an equality of sorts but nevertheless an unequal relation between the two traditions. Does it signal an incommensurable difference (i.e. “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality”) and thus the impossibility of cross-cultural dialogue and hence postcolonial politics, or a double bind, a “positive contradiction” that Rancière believes orders all regimes of the sensible? Or is it simpler: an example of positive discrimination, or maybe the rising power of indigenous law in Australian art? Or do we have to wait for political justice before artists can play with each other on equal terms? If Rancière is right, politics is something that occurs under the jurisdiction of the sensible; and it is art that distributes the sensible. Artists don’t wait for political justice, but act to rebalance the world. Maybe we need more nostalgia for the aesthetic regime to believe, as Rancière does, that poetry can dissolve the hierarchies of discourse.

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