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The Complicity of Cultural Production: The Contingencies of Performance in Globalizing
Museum Practices

Abstract:

This essay is concerned with an often-ignored component of museum practice: the symposium – understood as an important site of cultural production within a changing exhibitionary complex. At a time when the intercultural movement of objects and people, and their representation in museum practices, has accelerated, I try to illuminate what happens at the level of performance in these movements. Through analysis of the case of a symposium accompanying the exhibition of Aboriginal Australian art in New York in 1988, at the Asia Society, I explore the ironies and complications in the process of producing meaning for unfamiliar objects to a new audience.

Author's Bio:

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This essay is concerned with an often-ignored component of museum practice: the symposium. Symposia deserve to be considered as part of what I want to call – combining Bennett’s (1995) groundbreaking articulation of the “exhibitionary complex” and Bourdieu’s (1993) theorizing of “the field of cultural production” (Bourdieu 1993), “the exhibitionary field of cultural production.” These activities of education are also performances and offer an epistemologically interesting location for the study of institutionally complex meaning-production. I bring a particular perspective to bear on contemporary museum practices, drawing on my experience with indigenous Australian art as it has come to circulate internationally and through a variety of museum and gallery sites.

With all due respect to the concept of the “exhibitionary complex” (Bennett 1995), which identified a hegemonic regime of display, over the past twenty years, the struggle of indigenous people to represent themselves in all domains has productively entered the field of museum practices. They have sought to claim the space of cultural display for themselves and to displace the devastatingly appropriative regime of the earlier history of museums. Museums are evolving institutions, and at the risk of sounding like an optimist, by calling attention to exhibition as a field of cultural production, as something processual, I call attention to the capacities of minoritized subjects to gain a purchase in the world of representation. This purchase is also not total and complete. Exhibitions are themselves points of cultural process and do not statically represent what is “out there.” More likely they cunningly recontextualize forms and practices, producing something new. It is in this uncertain form that I wish to regard the museum as a site of cultural production in a globalizing cultural economy. That these processes are not straightforward and that they take place in ironic fashion is the point of my story.

The concept of the exhibitionary field has a specific logic for investing value in objects, distinct from that of the “commodity” process. Exhibitions, of course, are venues for defining the relationships among people and things, while Bourdieu’s conception of a “field of cultural production” provides a useful a framework for recognizing the dynamic part that participants play in defining the value of objects --understanding the movement or transmission of cultural forms as a form of social action. This seemed especially important for a consideration of the impact of museum exhibitions; curators themselves hardly imagine that a single exhibition would transform the situation of those represented, but they do imagine that a single exhibition might be part of a process of resignifying or reconceptualizing its object. By offering a more complex approach to the intentions of participants, to the identities of the parties, and also to the distinctiveness of the moment of communication, a focus on cultural production moves beyond the frameworks that were built largely on critique of the representation of indigenous cultural forms as little more than “appropriation.”

In failing to address any aspect of the agency of production, through which representations are actually made, these critiques betray a Saussurian heritage in a theory of signification that can hardly imagine change (see Sahlins 1981). Nicholas Thomas (1991) has argued that the conceptual frameworks of “domination” and “appropriation” hardly seem to exhaust the import of exchange over time; instead, he suggests we view cultural exchange in terms of “recontextualization” (for examples, see also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 1995). With the expectation that these matters look different if we step outside of what has been largely a textual criticism of representation, I want to consider the museum process of recontextualization as an broader activity of cultural or discursive production in which the representation of culture is significant. In this way, it is possible to recognize in exhibitions more than the simple

instantiation of pre-existing discourses. As participants can tell us, exhibitions are real-life organizations of resources, imagination, and power--in short, social practices. In approaching these activities of circulation as cultural production, I believe, one finds the possibility of understanding exhibitions as instructive, transformative, educational – as interventions on/in culture and not simply repetitions.

In the aftermath of the critiques in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *Exhibiting Cultures* (Karp and Lavine 1992), and in response to criticisms of the authenticity of intercultural exchange under conditions of severe inequality, my approach to respecting the agency of indigenous participants has been to focus on their work of producing culture. Conceived as “cultural producers” rather than culture bearers, anthropology’s subjects could be understood not just as objects of Western regard but as making their culture and themselves visible (see Dussart 1997, Morphy 1983, Ginsburg 1993, Mahon 2000). And, there are many different kinds of “natives” in this exhibitionary complex, including those of us who participate as scholars but who surely must be recognized – reflexively – as situated culture bearers ourselves (Clifford 1988, Fabian 1983, Ginsburg 1999). One should, therefore, approach the exhibition --the production of representations -- as the complex social process it is.

When culture-making is understood as a signifying practice (a materiality), it warrants a theoretical shift from an emphasis on “representation” to one on “cultural production” and a methodological attention to social actors in different sites, relations and fields of production (see Turner 1974), as well as their collaborations and complicities. Analysis can draw on “what the natives know,” but it is not identical with that. A focus on the political economy and the social relationships of producing culture, rather than the critical analysis of representations allows not only for recognition of the possibility of agency (within limits) on the part of the various

participants but also engages the rather complex intersections and reorganizations of interest that are inevitably involved in any production of culture.

My interest was originally engaged by the critical responses to the popular exhibition of examples of Australian Aboriginal visual culture at the Asia Society Galleries in New York (6 October – 31 December 1988).¹ “Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia” drew the largest attendance (27,000 visitors) of any exhibit ever held at the Asia Society. On display were 103 objects, mainly of five types and from four different “cultural areas” in Australia: wood sculptures from Cape York Peninsula, bark paintings from Arnhem Land, acrylic paintings and shields from Central Australia, and small carved pieces known as loas or message sticks from the Lake Eyre region. The exhibition—combined with a magnificent catalogue (Sutton 1988) and symposia that included Aboriginal artists, films, a lecture, and a sandpainting performance by two Papunya Tula painters (see Myers 1994)—was widely reviewed in New York, before traveling to Chicago, Los Angeles, and then back to Melbourne and Adelaide.

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What are these?

As Ian McLean has written, this exhibition was a transformative moment in the history of Aboriginal art:

By the late 1980s, Aboriginal art had achieved an unprecedented popularity and exposure in commercial and state public galleries, culminating in the Dreamings exhibition which opened in 1988. Significantly, Dreamings was not organised by art curators, critics, theorists or historians, but by the anthropology division of the South Australia Museum which, under Peter Sutton, effortlessly presented Aboriginal art as a continuity of traditional and contemporary practices that engaged with Aboriginal relations to land in religious, colonial and postcolonial

contexts. The impact of the Dreamings exhibition was profound. Before 1988 Aboriginal art had barely penetrated New York; by 1989 it was clear to most commentators that “the acrylic movement has revolutionised the way we see Aboriginal art,” both in Australia and overseas. [McLean 1998:129]

I concur wholeheartedly with this evaluation (see Myers 1991), which refers principally to the recognition of bark painting from Northern Australia (see Morphy 1992) and acrylic paintings on canvas (Myers 2002) from Central Australia. Surely, this “event” must be considered a significant moment of intercultural communication and exchange.

This particular exhibition, further, must be understood as part of a broader category of similar events. Museum exhibitions now constitute sites of cultural production that are of relevance to indigenous people whose lives are not bound to single locations, part of the broader structure that Appadurai and Breckenridge (1988) call “the global cultural ecumene.” Terence Turner has argued that indigenous people occupy a specific place in this ecumene, what he describes (1993, n.d.) as the “contemporary global conjuncture” in which the expansion of capitalism and consumerism has intensified the value of “culture” and indigenous identities (which were once supposed to disappear) (see Turner 1993:427). Presumably it is on this basis in general that the curation of these cultures has been able to proceed. While there is no time to consider it here, there is also a specific political economy involving Australia, its tourist industry, its changed geopolitical situation, and the connections among elites that underlies the particular formation of the Asia Society exhibition (see Myers 2002).

Outlines of Turner’s scenario--or something like it--are recognizable in the Australian case. While undertaken in the expectation of payment and not for their own consumption, indigenous paintings on bark or with acrylics on canvas were almost entirely defined at the point

of their making by their own goals and meanings. The entry of the paintings into the international art market coincides with significant changes in the whole structure and process of the definition of meaningful local identities in a national/international world order. But their value nonetheless continues to rely on their presumed authenticity, their capacity to represent Aboriginal self-production.

Aboriginal Image-Making

Painting on bark in Arnhem Land or with acrylics on canvas in Central Australia involves the transfer of indigenous religious imagery into a somewhat new form for sale. Although intended for intercultural exchange, the painted objects are still anchored in indigenous systems of image-making that draw upon the institutions, practices, and relationships to country typically subsumed in The Dreaming (the invisible ancestral realm or state in which the visible world acquired its shape and being) (see Stanner 1956). The paintings are held to be iconic and indexical images that represent events of this realm. The social practices of indigenous image-making reflect its embeddedness in these story-song-design complexes of ritual, stories also manifest in the medium of the land and owned by specific groups of people who hold the right to reveal them to others.

We know that many indigenous artists in Central and Northern Australia have agreed to – and even initiated – the circulation of some forms of their religious imagery into commodified spaces of exchange. At the same time, they seem to insist that their paintings retain some of their indigenous meaning and value. Indeed, such designs comprised the famous Yolngu bark petition presented to the Australian Parliament in 1963 and were part of other ritual diplomatic exchanges

such as the performances described in this volume by Morphy. The movement of Aboriginal Australian painting illustrates a transformation of what are essentially Aboriginal inalienable possessions (Weiner 1982) in the form of sacred designs as they circulate into commodities and then into fine art--supposedly emptied of ethnicity--as curators elevate their value in Western terms into a museum's inalienable possessions (see Myers 2001). Despite this, Aboriginal regimes of value have been surprisingly resilient (see Johnson 1987). While Aboriginal makers of these images can imagine conditions under which legitimate holders of these designs can circulate them, they object to their use by those without the authority to do so. Images painted by recently deceased artists have been removed from display, in recognition of indigenous custom. It is possible, then, to partially translate Aboriginal social practices of image circulation into Western terms of intellectual property, of ownership and copyright -- an issue to which I shall return.

Unlike Western concepts of cultural copyright (see Coombe 1997, Sax 1999, Strathern 1999), it is not fundamentally human creativity which is considered to be objectified in the form of painting, but identity. Design (or the right to make and circulate, or show, designs related to specific stories) are a focus of regulation under what I call the "revelatory regime of value," to distinguish it from other systems of value. In this revelatory regime, designs and stories can be given or exchanged, both with the expectation of some return gift and also in the understanding that this exchange produces some transfer of or bestowal of identity between giver and receiver -- an identity objectified in the sharing of rights to ritual, stories, or land. In such a regime of value, it might be said that no one can use your image; that it is an inalienable possession (Weiner 1992) that cannot be fully removed from its "owner." The concern in such a regime is to limit dispersal, to control the potential or actual manifestations of "The Dreaming" to those entitled to

them. These objectifications of ancestral subjectivity are identified with persons and groups who are their custodians, but not their creators. The focus of such a revelatory regime is to control not only the rights to reproduce images as well but also the rights to see them.

Objectification in this form of painting, the materiality of this knowledge, has distinctive consequences. For one thing, Aboriginal myth and ritual knowledge have material qualities beyond the narrative structure; they have extension in space, insofar as the stories are linked to specific places, an important material component of formulating a social identity among those with rights to the stories.² Stories and the ceremonies reenacting them, along with the associated paraphernalia and designs, can also be owned and exchanged; rights to speak and transmit them can become the objects of social and political organization. What might we imagine to occur when these images and practices, and the concern for dispersal, are transported to another venue of objectification – a symposium in New York at the Asia Society?

My concern is to understand a particularly unstable moment in this process of recontextualization, as – I believe – the concept of cultural production recommends. To ask what actually happens when such objects circulate into an international art movement, how they are made meaningful at the sites of exhibition, is to ask how meanings and values are produced, inflected, and invoked in concrete institutional settings. What are the particular mediations through which phenomena like “Aboriginal art” are produced and made meaningful as these enter into arenas with particular audiences, technologies, and presumptions?

Thus, I propose a close up look at the processes of circulation and exhibition as necessary to do justice to the work of cultural exchange. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to explore the significance of global cultural relocations within performances within a single institution by focusing on the symposium held at the Asia Society Gallery as part of the

“Dreamings” exhibition. Such symposia, which frequently accompany exhibitions in museums, have been ignored as significant intercultural phenomena despite their growing significance to the way knowledge is produced for new audiences encountering exhibitions of unfamiliar and indigenous “art.” Through such events, exhibitions constitute a site of political dialogue that recombines distinctive identities within a social space. I am concerned with the implications of a fundamental dislocation between audiences, speakers, and other participants in these new global spheres of cultural translation.³

The Complicity of Cultural Production

Let us look, then, at “globalization” through this particular case and the mediations through which phenomena like “Aboriginal art” are produced and made meaningful as they enter into different cultural arenas with particular audiences, technologies, and presumptions.

We must begin with the Asia Society. The Asia Society produces programs and publications on the arts and cultures of Asia, presenting some eight special exhibitions each year; previous exhibitions had included “The Real, the Fake, the Masterpiece,” “The Chinese Scholar’s Studio,” and “Akbar’s India.” It has a staff organized for such activity--design consultants, catalog editors, fundraisers, performance coordinators, and so on--and relies, moreover, on a network of designers and consultants who work in other cultural institutions in New York, suggesting that the exhibition techniques and ideologies of this institution draw on those more widely shared in other exhibitionary venues--from the China Institute and Japan House to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As one might expect, this history and institutional context provided a framework for the presentation of Aboriginal paintings, a framework that is neither that of an art museum or gallery nor that of a museum of natural history--the two exhibitionary complexes most commonly considered by scholars.⁴ Indeed, this particular history should make the Asia Society's production of an exhibition quite distinct from the more or less concurrent exhibition of Aboriginal painting at Brisbane's more festival-like Expo 88 (see Bennett 1995, West 1988).

That situating of Aboriginal art at the Asia Society deserves a short explanation. The connection is not obvious, but owes something to Australia's effort to reposition itself in the 1980s as regionally part of a greater Asian political economic sphere. This transformation was well under way by the late 1970s, as ties with England were severed after World War II, and new relations were forged in alliance as America's "junior partner." The shift to this new positioning outside the ambit of its colonial British heritage by cultural allegiance on the part of Australia's new elite to a kind of "modernist internationalism" itself began to falter with the economic downturn of the mid-1970s and Australia's detachment from the "American century" and turn to Asia. The Dreamings exhibition was initiated, in fact, in discussions between Australia's consul general in New York and the Asia Society and no doubt owed considerably to the desire to project an Australian tourist identity for Americans.⁵

While the Asia Society could very well use the discursive formulations of "art" developed and deployed in dedicated museums of art, it has a somewhat more pointedly educational slant--dedicated to promoting "understanding of Asia and its growing importance to the United States and to world relations." This slant shapes a policy of education, an approach inaugurated through the patronage of the wealthy Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, 3rd--who, one presumes, hoped to spread their enthusiasm for Asian culture more widely. Nonprofit and

nonpartisan as it may be, the Asia Society is not a public institution in the same fashion as many museums considered in the literature. A somewhat hybrid cultural institution, the Asia Society is nonetheless organized within the parameters made possible by other histories and institutions of display and exhibition and their presumption of audience, visibility, and knowledge.

Exhibitions are a distinctive technology of presentation. As Ward has pointed out, exhibitions face the problem of representing a totality or entity greater than themselves (Ward 1996: 458), and different types of exhibition address the problem in distinctive ways. They signify their object accordingly. For example, art exhibitions since the 19th century have tended to be in format either the monographic or retrospective show or the “art-movement” show. Scholars have pointed out that museums of history and memory (Bann 1984) or universal expositions (Mitchell 1989) have and had distinctive formats as well, and they have recognized that their capacities to represent a larger totality have relied on events besides the exhibition narrowly conceived.

Comment: Date?

There has been, also, a trajectory in the development of the institutions of exhibition as they have become increasingly public (rather than private) and legitimated through their attendance: they have become involved in producing “events. These include not only “exhibitions,” which are different from permanent installations, but also a range of other educational activities and public programs. Typically, such activities are “educational”--drawing on the 19th century concern with “uplift” and the socialization of citizens (see Bennett 1995). The more general effort to make museums “eventful,” as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett phrased it (personal communication, 18 September 1999), should be recognized as part of their emerging structure, a movement that is making museums something more like public fora than temples of civilization as they enter into spaces of the bourgeois public sphere in which controversial

interpretive exhibitions might be held and symposia might bring interlocutors face to face. They are, that is, shaped by the broader social context--democratization, popularization, "Disneyfication"--and its changes. It should not be forgotten that "eventfulness" is suited to the problem of bringing people to the museum, to "reaching out" and justifying their existence in one kind of measurement of effect. Events such as lectures, performances, openings, symposia, and tours punctuate the "slow event" of the exhibition with fast events.

In the "Dreamings" exhibition, the Asia Society had proposed not just to exhibit "art," but to communicate about a relatively unknown culture through its art. It promised to introduce to the public both the "amazingly complex and rich culture of Aboriginal Australians, and the strength of this surviving and adapting culture as manifest in the vibrant artistic productions of the last 100 years" (NEH Implementation Proposal 1987). The timeliness of the exhibition, the curators argued, lay in the recent recognition of the paintings and sculptures in contrast to earlier--more negative--reactions to Aboriginal art. In formulating the "value" of Aboriginal painting in this way, not only in the planning document's discourse but also in subsequent realizations, the exhibition repeatedly tapped into particular connections between art and spirituality in the process of transferring the Australian context to that of the Asia Society. The theme was especially marked in the punctuating events that were held at the Asia Society itself. They followed the grooves of an American preoccupation with non-Western or alternative spirituality and wisdom.

This was to be, as the NEH Implementation Proposal outlined, "a unique international exhibition" that would "reveal the creativity and depth of an extraordinary artistic heritage" (NEH Proposal 1987, my emphasis). Furthermore, it was

to demonstrate that traditionally-minded Aboriginals have been able to preserve and invigorate a tradition that stretches back over twenty thousand years. This exhibition will also indicate the depth of cultural and spiritual meaning that lies behind many of the designs in these paintings. Such works of art are extremely important to their makers and Aboriginal appreciators because they contain complex and subtle expressions of fundamental ideas of the nature of the world and the sources of life. (ibid.)

To represent the “difference” (or differentness) of Aboriginal culture provided a challenge to the “Dreamings” exhibition, which also planned to explore commonalities in the notion of artistry within this difference. The curators understood that there were obstacles to the recognition of Aboriginal art works as of cultural value: (1) the unintelligibility of Aboriginal worldviews, symbolic systems, and visual conventions to Westerners, and (2) the unwillingness of most non-Aborigines to work to overcome this problem (see Sutton 1988: 34).

One attempt to address these problems in the exhibitionary complex itself was the two-day symposium that presented five Aboriginal artists, one art adviser, and four anthropological experts on Aboriginal art and culture. The symposium was one of two events in which Aboriginal participants represented their own art and culture. That it was an event that largely depended on speaking should not prevent us from recognizing its performative qualities as well. Such events are useful in order to provide some distance--a degree of estrangement--from an exhibitionary context that has become seemingly transparent to many educated Westerners. Without this estrangement, the cultural complexity of recontextualization--of “education” or “communication”--may be obscured. If this was a transparency shared by many of the

participants, it was not familiar to all. Certainly, “exhibition to the public” has not been a meaningful framework to most Aboriginal people.

My argument in this essay is double. First, it is important to consider how the symposium offered an alternative interpretive practice for the exhibition, and second, how it revealed a dramatic change in the practice of anthropology and translation that is also part of changing museological practice. The case exemplifies some of the complexities of even these best-intended efforts at indigenous control over cultural translation. With the co-presence of anthropologists and Aboriginal painters on the stage, the symposium represented a moment in which the conceits of a “bounded culture” to be translated were set forth just as they began to fall apart. This unraveling coincided with a complex collapse and performance of the usual tropes defining the regulative ideals for justifiable relationships--“rapport”--with our subjects.

I was myself in this event, participating, performing the role of an anthropologist. But I was beginning to see the event itself as an instance of an increasingly important cultural formation and not just a re-enactment of “being there.” The disjunctions and anxieties of the event were characteristic of a situation that George Marcus has articulated in his observations on the “complicity” of fieldwork. “In any particular location,” he has written,

certain practices, anxieties, and ambivalences are present as specific responses to the intimate functioning of nonlocal agencies and causes--and for which there are no common-sense understandings. The basic condition that defines the altered *mise-en-scène* for which complicity rather than rapport is a more appropriate figure is an awareness of existential doubleness on the part of both anthropologist and subject; this derives from having a sense of being here where major transformations are under way that are tied to

things happening simultaneously elsewhere, but not having a certainty or authoritative representation of what those connections are. (Marcus 1998: 118)

Indeed, “the sense of the object of study being ‘here and there’ has,” as Marcus (1998: 117) put it, “begun to wreak productive havoc on the ‘being there’ of classic ethnographic authority.”

The symposium was planned mainly at the insistence of Peter Sutton and Chris Anderson, the anthropologists/curators from the South Australian Museum (SAM), who pressured the Asia Society for artists to be present. It seems to have had a lower priority for the Asia Society, but SAM’s legitimacy with Aboriginal representatives would have been compromised without this participation. Nonetheless, the participation was itself “hybrid,” articulating Western notions of representation with presumptions of Aboriginal ones that may not have been those of remote community people. Ironically, according to Françoise Dussart (personal communication, 22 September 1999), these particular Aboriginal participants did not especially want to come, but were persuaded to do so by the curators. Thus, their presence was itself a concession to the occasion, and simply inviting them may have sufficiently acknowledged their rights as authorities.

Sutton’s catalog (1988) had given focus both to the style and artistry/content of Aboriginal visual culture and also to the intrinsically political dimension of Aboriginal art and--with some reflexivity--to the (related) historical development of interest in it. The symposium, however, was advertised on flyers in terms that some of the participants found to be a little more ethereal, as “Dreamings--An Exploration of Aboriginal Art and Culture.” The flyer explained that “Aboriginal art, called both the newest and oldest art form in the world, links contemporary media with tens of thousands of years of religious and intellectual experience.” The audience

was invited to “[e]xplore the complexity of this unique artistic tradition through two days of special discussions and films at The Asia Society. Symposium participants include Aboriginal artists and scholars from America, Europe and Australia.”

The cost of attendance for members was \$35/day, \$45/ two days, while non-members paid slightly more. The anthropologists found the disappearance of the usual gritty sociopolitical context of Aboriginal art problematic, and they were particularly uncomfortable with the Asia Society’s program emphasis on a cleaned-up “spirituality.”

During the first day of the symposium, 22 October 1988, entitled “The Continuum of Art and Culture,” the panel discussed two topics: “The Land, Symbols and Spirituality in Aboriginal Art” and “Art and the Social Order: Who May Paint What.” Two films involving Arnhem Land barkpainting were also scheduled, Ian Dunlop’s *One Man’s Response* and *Narritjin at Djarrakpi*, both of which seek to establish the political context of Aboriginal visual culture at the time and are embedded less in the spirituality of Aboriginal cultural traditions than in the relations between blacks and whites in Australia and the attempt of the bark painter Narritjin Maymuru to assimilate these relations within terms meaningful to an Aboriginal culture (see Morphy, this volume).

On the second day of the symposium, “Understanding and Appreciating Aboriginal Art,” the panel members were to discuss “Form and Feeling: Responding to Aboriginal Art” and “Aboriginal Art, Markets and Collectors.” Two more films accompanied the discussion -- Curtis Levy’s *Sons of Namatjira* and Mike Edol’s *When the Snake Bites the Sun*.

Symposium

For most of the 27,000 visitors to the Asia Society, the visual exhibition, framed by text panels and video interpretation, stood alone as a representation. The committed viewer might have turned to the catalog for an important elaboration and contextualization of themes that could only be hinted at in the show. For a few hundred others, however, the visual display was further mediated through the symposium. We might regard this event in the semiotic terms of the philosopher, C. S. Peirce, as an “Interpretant.” Peirce (1985) argued that all signs are comprehended only through other signs -- their Interpretants-- in an endless chain of semiosis. However apprehended by planners and participants, the symposium activity provided another means to achieve some sort of referentiality in representation, to reach the object--the Other – through extended linguistic activity. The panelists were Westerners who had “been there,” at the scene of the art production, anthropological guides who could speak with the producers (and who were certified as “experts”), as well as some of the Aboriginal people who currently make the objects. I spoke as the anthropologist-New Yorker, a local who had been there.

Inevitably, such a task of interpretation tends to consist of mediating between Aboriginal cultural categories or signs--what these objects mean for them--and those of the audience. Many anthropologists have been caught in the web of appealing to the dominant culture’s categories to legitimate local practices--to argue that they qualify as what is socially valued as “art”--rather than analyzing the relationships involved in the activity of mediation (see Myers 1988). That is, this practice of interpretation is itself caught up in the structures of cultural hegemony. Cultural translation of this kind is, to be sure, somewhat self-conscious, undertaken with a degree of ironic distance. It openly declares a complicity with power (Who needs to be translated to whom?) and threatens, therefore, to expose an anthropologist’s uncomfortable identifications.

Anthropologists have typically been trained to be sensitive to the ethnocentric imposition of their own culture's judgments and categories onto the practices of others. But how does one avoid it?

Such longstanding problems took on renewed significance in the exhibition context of 1988, a context within which--after the "Primitivism" controversies (Clifford 1988, Foster 1985, Rubin 1984)--the "representation of the Other" had become a politicized, defining issue. Consultation, representation, permission, presence were some of the numerous strategies invoked to address the problem of museum mediation. They were not magical antidotes to the power of representation, however. After all, Aboriginal and other Native peoples have themselves long been objects of exhibition, and the shadow of these earlier practices seems inevitably to trail subsequent revisions. What actually happens when museums try to invite indigenous people to represent themselves? Can the indigenous people become the subjects of enunciation, collaborators in interpretation?

There were five Aboriginal artists at the symposium, four from remote, "traditional" communities and one urban bilingual woman. Two acrylic painters, Dolly Granites Nampitjinpa and June Walker Napanangka, came from the Warlpiri community at Yuendumu; two bark painters, Jimmy Wululu and David Malangi, came from Ramangining in Arnhem Land; and one contemporary "urban" Aboriginal artist, Kerry Giles, came from Adelaide. Giles's participation as an urban indigenous person partially responded to the exhibition's focus on what Peter Sutton later called "the classical tradition" of Aboriginal art, an exclusion of urban art that replicated a problematic historical divide between "urban" and "traditional" communities. The participating anthropologists were Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson, from the South Australian Museum, Françoise Dussart, who had done primary research with the women at Yuendumu and had collaborated in parts of the exhibition, and myself -- invited as an acknowledgement of my

academic presence in New York and my published work on Central Australia. The art adviser was Djon Mundine, an urban Aboriginal from Southeastern Australia who had been working as art adviser at Ramangining for several years.

The presence of five Aboriginal artists at the symposium represented an important statement about the right of painters to represent their work and the political context of this work. The curators and participants were well aware of the recent concern --raised in cultural criticism as well as by Aboriginal critics--about “speaking for the Other,” about appropriating their products and dominating them by Western discourse. Equally important, and not unrelated, in speaking for themselves, the Aboriginal people enacted some Aboriginal principles of presentation, whereby only those with legitimate rights to designs and stories may discuss them.

While many in the audience appreciated this significance of Aboriginal participation, for others their presence no doubt had a less esoteric—and more “exotic”--value. To see, and meet, the actual Aboriginal painters was certainly the real thing in another way, as signs asserting the genuine presence of “the Other” in the paintings: a spectacle, not a dialogue or a conversation. If, inescapably, by appearing before an American audience, the Aboriginal people and their understandings of their own work could become objects, indexes of their culture, what these representatives said and did could also challenge the viewer.

Interpreting Aboriginal Paintings

Thus it was that at noon, on 22 October 1988, ten of us sat at a table on the Asia Society stage, five “artists,” an art adviser, and four anthropologists. The traditional Aboriginal painters did not look like any black people the American audience might have seen in the US, and thus

their unfamiliarity had to dominate efforts at making them intelligible. The two women from Central Australia were striking in their dress--running shoes and high athletic socks visible beneath the symposium table, Dolly's knitted watch cap and rugby shirt, and June's orange tunic were a jolting accompaniment to the dark skin of their broad faces shining under the lights. The men from the Top End found a certain dignified formality in the use of suit jackets. Malangi's scarf was dramatically thrown over his right shoulder, making him resemble nothing more strongly than a World War I aviator.⁶

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Where's this?

We anthropologists were also dressed for the role: Peter Sutton in a (borrowed) pinstriped suit and tie, hair parted down the middle in a way I thought indexed the artistic nature of the event. The indigenous art adviser (and later curator) Djon Mundine wore a striped shirt with a white collar and tie, overwhelmed by his abundant dreadlocks. Dussart, her short blond hair pulled back into a small ponytail, wore a black sweater and a single strand of pearls, along with blue jeans and boots. Anderson wore a sport jacket and tie, with his own blond hair done in a little ponytail that echoed Dussart's. Less formally--perhaps marking a status I felt to be less official than that of my colleagues--I wore a black sweater over a white shirt. Whatever identities these signified, clothing was part of the staging of a performance, a presentation in a sloping auditorium with a lighted stage, microphones, slide projectors, and a videographer recording it all. This kind of cultural event is called a "symposium." It puts experts on a stage in front of an audience, assigns them roles in the performance, and it occupies a specified time frame. A weekend performance imagines an audience of the curious, most often members of the Asia Society, who might be free from working at this time and able to acquire further education to accompany the exhibition.

The staging was evident. By plan, the symposium began with an introduction to the event by Andrew Pekarik, the Asia Society's curator, who then left the stage. But the panel itself began directly – and perhaps somewhat shockingly -- with a brief statement by Dolly Granites Nampitjinpa, who spoke in Warlpiri. To avoid speaking “for her” and framing her as someone who could not represent herself, no background or interpretive framework was offered beforehand. This was a confounding moment: her speaking was unintelligible except as an expression of friendly Otherness. Except for the few who might have understood Warlpiri, Dolly's words were available only in the translation of the anthropologist Françoise Dussart. When she finished, Dolly leaned with a slight smile toward Françoise, who was sitting close beside her, raised her eyebrow, and paused.

Françoise spoke into the microphone they shared: “Dolly says that she holds the Dreaming from her father.”

More words from Dolly, and the translation: “She holds the Dreaming from her father's father, and she holds many Dreamings in her country.”

Another pause, and again the translation: “She also holds the Dreaming from her mother. She holds the Dreaming from her father's father and from her father's mother.”

With that, Dolly indicated she was finished. Only later did the audience learn from other speakers that Dolly was suggesting the source of her paintings and the rights through which she reproduces them.

When Dolly completed her speech, Françoise turned to Peter, who indicated to his right for Djon Mundine. Mundine turned to David Malangi and whispered to him; there seemed to be no direct eye contact, making David remote from the audience--echoing the distance of Dolly's reserve. A double image of one of Malangi's paintings was projected on the screen behind them,

one image of the painting and a second of a drawing outlining the iconography. David and Jimmy Wululu turned around in their seats and began to look at the image, pointing and whispering. This seemed a further hitch in the genre of presentation, but the painters' distance, or holding back, was real, rooted in Aboriginal protocols appropriate for those on the stage. The women, for example, were embarrassed to speak in front of the men--strangers whom they didn't know,⁷ afraid of offending them by appearing to speak on their behalf or violating their own rules; they therefore restricted their comments to the most narrow frame of reference [Françoise Dussart, personal communication, 22 September 1999]. Had the symposium happened after the painters had established what their kinship relations were, rather than so shortly after their arrival, perhaps this event would have worked better. But other protocols also guided the performance. As "owners," the painters had the right to speak publicly about their works, but as strangers in New York, they were also "shy" and hesitant – appropriately respectful. And also, as owners, one does not necessarily wish to make one's knowledge—that which distinguishes one – freely or equally available.

The two men gathered in the image, and finally David turned back toward Djon and the microphone. With a slight smile, but surely recognizing the length of the pause, he began. A thin man distinguished by his silvery white hair and mustache, Malangi spoke briefly into the microphone in his own language.⁸ When he stopped, Jimmy Wululu began to translate:

Uncle David said, that painting over there is his father's, his father's father... That bone up there, that [is] his sacred site country. And that fish been going into that waterhole, and two--what you call them?--clapping sticks...

David spoke further, and Jimmy translated:

And Uncle David said, that fresh water that is called Djamara; that two ladies was walking through there, you know, two Djangkaos--and, uh, they got a walking stick down there, too...

Again Malangi spoke, and Jimmy repeated in English:

and that fish over there--you can see, catfish--we used to call him Djikara. That Djikara been going into that waterhole there. That's Uncle David's country. And show [it shows] that--what you call, snail?--we used to call Tukarayi--maybe you call snail? Something like that...

That's true story. Not Uncle David's story..., but through, from (you know) ceremony. And his father and his grandfather, and his grandfather's father, and so on, you know. That's true story. Truly!

Malangi's final words were brief. Jimmy translated: "That's all. Thanks."

To the anthropologists on stage, these statements were examples of a discourse of explanation with which we were familiar, drawn--as Geertz (1976) once said--from a universe of signs in which they were meaningful. It is a particular routine common to presenting paintings to outsiders but also similar to the discursive routine through which Aboriginal people communicate to each other. This discourse drew on widespread traditional Aboriginal ideas, and for us these statements would have needed no further explication. The Aboriginal painters had

told the audience what they thought should be said. From their point of view, no doubt, the act of presenting themselves to the audience had performed their identities, their courage, and confidence. The senior painters spoke of what they knew, in their own languages. They made little attempt at deeper contact with the audience, at trying to imagine what intervention would help them understand, as if it were enough to speak the words. They knew they spoke with authority, but it was not quite the same as “being there”--at Yuendumu or Ramangining.

Acting as moderator, Peter Sutton clearly perceived that more interpretation was needed for the audience. So it became Djon Mundine’s turn to speak, art advisers being another kind of intermediary for painters, particularly given his own Aboriginal identity. However necessary, this direction threatened to displace the authority away from the Aboriginal spokesman. Aware of the senior man’s presence and authority over the story, Mundine spoke in a manner that suggested a degree of reluctance. Having now to stand in for the Aboriginal artist he represented, Mundine explained:

Just for those people who didn’t quite grasp the English we use, ... what both speakers have done is to try to explain the painting in terms of their Dreaming, or their religious creation beliefs, and how it relates back to their land and to their families, and how their families and their ancestors, and their families going back ad infinitum, belong to the landscape and how they are given that land by these creative beings and how they came to own that land and the ceremonies and practices that ensure the continuity of the landscape and the environment.

It is important to note that Mundine claims no authority for his own voice, but implicitly claims to be translating. Nonetheless, his words begin the process by which explication takes place, by which an audience applies categories, has them provisionally checked, and learns. They are directed to recognize the verbal sign “Dreaming” as an “Interpretant” (Peirce 1985), a sign applied to the previous signs--sacred sites, country, fish, ceremony--just as these signs informed the “signification” of the word “Dreaming.”

Peter Sutton, speaking next in the symposium, sought to explain the significance of choices made in the translation of Aboriginal culture. Offering a metacommentary on the concept of Dreamings, he also drew attention to what, over a longer period of time and conversation, listeners would have recognized as context-- meaningful repetitions and themes:

One of the first titles that we rejected for this exhibition was “Totemic Landscapes.” We thought that sounded obscure and a bit academic, so it was replaced later by “Dreamings.” “Dreamings” is even more obscure, perhaps, to people from other parts of the world than Australia, partly because the word isn’t used that way in English, but also because the concept itself is very complex. It really can only be understood by gradually building up more and more fragments of the sort that we’ve just been listening to. Gradually, you get a deeper and fuller sense of what is being spoken about...

Sutton thus tried to show how anthropological representations might relate to the phenomena engaged in our experience, to people’s ways of talking and expressing their realities (see Geertz

1976). The symposium was thus almost like having fieldwork performed and interpreted on stage.

Politics

A major concern of the exhibition curators had been to ensure that the paintings are understood as part of the social and historical context of Australia as a country, that they not be separated off from their real-life circumstances. Chris Anderson, therefore, spoke of the devastation of settlement, conflict, disease, and way of life--devastation within which the survival of cultural traditions was significant as an assertion of continued Aboriginal presence. The paintings in the exhibition, he pointed out, were expressions and assertions of the same process that saw the government-produced mixed settlements giving way to more homogeneous outstation communities. So, he said,

Despite enormous pressures exerted on it, Aboriginal culture has retained its uniqueness and much of its strength. It is a way of life that has many continuities with its precolonial past. At the same time, much of its nature stems from Aboriginal responses to the European presence and to forces external to Aborigines and their society...

I think that's probably, in my own view, the best way to look at the art that has been produced over the last century in Australia.

I organized my own "speech" in the context established by those preceding me (and have analyzed the videotape of it). I was introduced as the New Yorker who had spent many years in

Aboriginal Australia. In the presence of Aboriginal people from different areas than those I knew well,⁹ and just returned from several months in Australia, I was very self-conscious about seeming to speak “about” them. The understood call of the audience for interpretation and explanation provided me with an identity (i.e., “expert”) that competed with the identity I might have as a part of an Aboriginal community (i.e., not to speak for others). This was a problem. I found a resolution in the way that the Pintupi community had defined my presence, as one who should “help” Aboriginal people. I made myself an extension of their authority. Unlike Dussart or Mundine, I was not accompanied by any particular and close Aboriginal acquaintance. The representational strategy of my speaking was to defer my authority by talking about what I learned from people at Yayayi, what they insisted I understand-- implying, thereby, what they wanted me to bring back. This involved summarizing what the stories represent, what their value is, what their context might be as people had explained them to me in order for me to represent them. Rather than speaking on behalf of “Aboriginal authorities,” in relying on my personal experience I enacted a mediating position, speaking to what I was told, how I had learned it, sharing my experience with the audience as their representative but also a Pintupi extension.

My comments were oriented to the essentially “political” issues that I understood to define the context of painting, insisting however that these did not represent a break with a distinctively different indigenous past. The overall thrust was to overcome the Western distinctions I sensed to be operating in the way “painting” was understood--between religion and politics. The political aspirations encoded in the paintings tended, I thought, to be neglected or ignored in American settings. That the paintings articulated, in part, the relations of Aborigines to the larger society--and indeed their aspirations for self-determination--offered a meaningful

continuity with the past in which ritual production and ritual knowledge articulated the relationships between persons and groups.

I built on Anderson's depiction of the paintings as "assertions," arguing for the complexity and authenticity of the assertions represented by the paintings and the deeply social meaning of country:

So, there's a message in these paintings that comes out about the recognition of who the painters are and what their rights are. And they continue to be bewildered, in a way, that those who see these paintings do not recognize all that is encoded in the right to paint them. Now, ... one shouldn't think out of this that Europeans are unique in not being able to recognize the deeply encoded messages of other cultures. There's nothing special to us about that, but nonetheless there's a kind of poignant message in all this: that we buy and sell their art and we like it, and at the same time, the political aspirations that are often encoded in it are neglected as well.

There are other features of this, and in terms of the translation I just want to give one other point. The Pintupi, when I worked with them, were not living in their own country, which placed them at a disadvantage with other Aboriginal people. They didn't have the confidence that comes from being in a place to which you have unequivocal rights. In 1981 they did move out to their own country. I've been back to visit them several times since then. All the places that they had been painting about in their stories, they now can visit. They can take children out to see them, and they are just part of the regular course of people's lives. But before that, that tradition was passed on and sustained through this somewhat more secularized tradition of painting.

In the course of developing commercial paintings for sale, the people of Central Australia and Arnhem Land have had to make decisions about what they could show to outsiders, as opposed to what they would show to people within their society. In the early period of acrylic painting, they painted a lot of designs which wouldn't ordinarily have been shown to women and children of their own society. They didn't really ever think that these things would get back to their own society. Subsequently, if you look at the catalog, you'll see that there has been a change over time. When I first started working out there, the men used to do these paintings and put them in my camp, apart from the women and children, and then they would be sold. Subsequently, as they've come to know us better and they've come to understand their relationship to the larger world and the possibilities of it, they have made decisions as to what designs can be shown. Women have to make the same decisions. And so we are seeing in Aboriginal art also a recognition of their relationship to us and of the relationship between our society and their society as they offer us that part of their vision that they think can be fitted into their own expectations and not do harm to their own society.

When we returned after the film screening for the next session of the symposium, June Walker spoke--briefly, as her predecessors did, but in English for herself--about how one acquires the rights to paint and what these rights consist of. These remarks were expanded by Chris Anderson and Djon Mundine to a more general discussion of the problems of compensation and of copyright. Mundine spoke as an art advisor, remarking the growing tourist interest in Aboriginal art and culture and the "growing rip-off of Aboriginal artists":

It's a real crime that's being committed. ... Aboriginals in Australia have been deprived of many things. They've been deprived of their land, for one thing. In many cases, all they have left is their language, culture, and identity. Many white people in Australia think there is nothing wrong with people taking that last thing that Aboriginals have-- their culture and their identity--away from them, by reproducing their designs without acknowledging the artist, without making appropriate payment, and quite often in what are quite inappropriate circumstances. What I've found is that Aboriginal artists are not opposed to using their images or their art to sell to tourists, it's just that they would like to have some control over their own art and get some return for that art.

Finally, the audience heard from Kerry Giles, the South Australian artist, commenting on what Peter Sutton introduced as "the issue of who may paint what in an area where the older Law no longer obtains." Kerry represented what has come to be known as "Koori art," or urban Aboriginal art, marking its difference from the painting that emanates from less interrupted cultural tradition. Her lighter-skinned appearance and overall presentation would challenge purist notions of an "authentic" Aboriginal, but because of her cultural familiarity she also could bring the discussion down to the ground. Kerry began by saying she could only go on her own experience. She is, she said, careful not to offend other Aboriginal people in Australia, but "the art that I do is Aboriginal in the sense that it is searching for grass roots and identity." Her approach was to talk about a painting she did last week, discussing it in far greater detail than did the other artists.

Aftermaths

These, then, were the topics set forth by the speakers at that first day of the symposium, the one on which our agenda was created in the doing. We had not known what to expect. The audience questions were varied and more numerous than I had expected: How are “guardians” (kurtungurlu)--a term Françoise had introduced to discuss the limits on individual painterly activity--assigned to a person? Why do you have to attain a level of seniority to have the right to paint? What is the relationship between dreams and painting? How do Aboriginal people respond to their art; what makes it good, strong, or important? Why do dots predominate so much? What does it mean for the art to be “dangerous”? What are the differences between men’s paintings and women’s paintings?

June Walker was the only traditional painter to answer one of these questions. She had the best English of this group and was persuaded to respond to the question of how they told stories 100 years ago--before they painted in this way. Shyly and with a smile indicating her discomfort in speaking authoritatively with her seniors present, June told about learning from her parents, from ceremony. Her answer was very brief and partial, compared to what anthropological observers have written about iconographic practices in her own community of Yuendumu (Munn 1973). Françoise reminded her of the drawings in the sand that Nancy Munn had described for Yuendumu women, supposedly the originary site of the iconography. June acknowledged and reasserted this information, growing more confident as she proceeded, saying not so much things that hadn’t been heard before but reiterating what she heard others say and giving it her voice.

Personal: Keeping-While-Giving Knowledge

The sense of the object of study being “here and there” has begun to wreak productive havoc on the “being there” of classic ethnographic authority. (Marcus 1998:117)

In her volume Inalienable Possessions, Annette Weiner (1992) developed a paradigm of exchange in which she pointed out how much of exchange or “gifting” is concerned equally to keep control over those possessions that constitute one’s identity even while seeming to give them away. In representing the Aboriginal painters at the symposium, anthropologists were producing themselves in the moment of giving. Our activities undoubtedly contributed to the interpretation of Aboriginal painting, but it seems equally true that as “experts” we could not ignore our activity as part of a field of cultural production or the identities that would be available for us in speaking. We had to perform respect for the Aboriginal speakers as the true or first owners of this knowledge, but we had to enact this respect in ways other than those expressed in what had become clichés of a colonial anthropology – the recourse to claims about initiation into the communities, special ties of kinship or “rapport.”

We were, nonetheless, professionally committed to some possibility of “representing” Aboriginal culture. This theoretical debate actually is an important context in which the exhibition of Aboriginal art has been framed. One side of the debate was articulated by two Australian critics, Fry and Willis (1989), who have stated (in Peter Sutton’s rendition) that “ethnographic and art-critical discourse harnesses Aboriginal art to the dominant culture’s notions of art” (Sutton 1992: 30), and that “Aboriginal art thus becomes a commodity in the trade of ‘othernesses’ in which anthropologists and curators are the profiting merchants” (ibid.). This view, Sutton notes, would threaten to silence all anthropological commentary:

Their [Fry and Willis's] solution to all this, in part at least, is to remove people such as myself from even speaking about the subject and to let Aboriginal voices present their own culture in their own way and on their own terms, making use, for example, of the new culture of television (a 'late-modern cultural space'), thus empowering Aborigines in the process of producing not only culture but its representation to others. (ibid.)

The evidence of the symposium, however, was that Aborigines might not always be able to represent their culture adequately for a non-Aboriginal audience.

What, then, was being performed at the Asia Society symposium? It was, in some ways, a kind of fieldwork here, in public, about fieldwork there. I began to see that what was happening at the symposium itself was not just an evanescent moment of translation, something apart from the real work of ethnography "there." It was an example of an increasingly important site in the circulation of Aboriginal culture, a location that cannot be simply dismissed as inauthentic or irrelevant to the continued life of Aboriginal people. The Asia Society symposium was on its way to becoming a "there"--a significant site of intercultural practice.

At the symposium, the Aboriginal participants performed their authority and rights, in speaking for themselves, and they acknowledged the context in expecting their intermediaries to carry the interpretation to the audience. There was no sign of a dissatisfaction with being represented, even as the anthropologists performed (1) their own tangible discomfort with representing those equally present with them, and also (2) their difference from the audience they addressed--an audience apparently consumed with a need for a "spiritual Other," if the questions were any indication. Much as the anthropologists suspected this "spiritualization" as yet another

falling back into the primitivist stereotypes so much under critical attention elsewhere,¹⁰ as hosts they could hardly draw out what they (we) understood as a fuller picture of Aboriginal difference from the Western spiritual ideal.

The performance of Aboriginal authority deserves a short discussion here as an enactment of the fundamental paradox of “giving-while-keeping” (Weiner 1992), of controlling the dispersal of sacred knowledge, a paradox at the heart of formulations of indigenous cultural property which have become important in museums and elsewhere. Aboriginal artists recognize a resemblance of their understandings to practices of intellectual property, of ownership and copyright (see Marika 1995), yet their performance of their rights and authority over cultural property is distinguished by something other than exclusive possession, something that might be understood as the potential to create identity. “Ownership,” in this sense, as Marilyn Strathern has written, “gathers things momentarily to a point by locating them in the owner, halting endless dissemination, effecting an identity” (1999: 177). Rosemary Coombe (1997) has brilliantly summarized the way in which indigenous relationships to cultural forms may challenge the legalisms of ordinary property law:

For Native peoples in Canada, culture is not a fixed and frozen entity that can be objectified in reified forms that express its identity, but an ongoing living process that cannot be severed from the ecological relationships in which it lives and grows. By dividing ideas and expressions, oral traditions and written forms, intangible works and cultural objects, the law rips asunder what many First Nations people view as integrally related--freezing into categories what Native peoples find flowing in relationships. For those sympathetic to their ends to attempt to reduce these claims to assertions of intellectual property rights is simultaneously to neglect significant dimensions of Native

aspiration and impose colonial juridical categories on postcolonial struggles in a fashion that reenacts the cultural violence of colonization. (Coombe 1997:92; my emphasis)

The promiscuity of knowledge to form new connections makes it a site for varying kinds of control. For Aboriginal Australians like the painters at the symposium, knowledge has the form of an object, something that can be “given,” “held,” “revealed,” or “withheld.” Its possession can differentiate those with authority and those without; it is also subject to dispersal and loss. While the symposium participants want the audience to understand, or perhaps to acknowledge, they also wish to restrict the information they give – quite in accordance with indigenous practice in which different levels of knowledge are preserved in consonance with the deployment of knowledge’s potential for distribution as an objectification of shared identity. In so doing, they retain for their knowledge a series of properties and values that are not reduced by the market and which recognize the interests of those beyond the artist or the performer. Defying the definition of cultural property within the framework of “possessive individualism” (Handler 1991), this represents a limitation of any attempt to conceive of the objects, knowledge or their performances within the regime that has been developed for property in general. They want to give something, but to perform at all is to expose oneself to the risk of revealing inappropriately that which is held by a larger group than oneself. In this sense, the exchange is a particular formulation of intellectual or cultural property that must be distinguished from a simple commoditization.

In this crosscutting field of specific relationships as well as pre-existing discourses, something known as “Aboriginal art” comes to be imagined and produced. I was not only in it; I was also studying this very new formation in which my acts of representation were a part.

The Danger of Circulation and the Politics of Knowledge

The specter of authenticity seemed inescapable--or perhaps its reappearance made it seem an inexhaustible presence. The entire "Dreaming" event took place in the shadow of the increasingly frequent criticisms of anthropological representation and authority. What anthropologist could not share the radical critics' suspicion of our culture's rather complacent consumption of the apparently exotic, or their sense of regret at the loss of local people's self-definition? Was anthropology enacting such a complacent consumption, even while intervening against a projected "spirituality"? What anxieties might have been betrayed in these public performances, at the intersections of culture on the stage of a museum, despite the confidence of our immediate possession of knowledge?

The positions given voice in these questions are recognizably part of Western culture's tradition. Sometimes, indeed, this critical opposition--embodied, for example, in the work of the Frankfurt School--has itself been attacked as elitist and too heavily freighted with romantic nostalgia. Is the hesitation performed about the traffic in Aboriginal culture grounded only in a romantic remorse at the passing of distinctive traditions, in imperial nostalgia (see Rosaldo 1989)? Are these suspicions, in part, our arguments, often going on outside the concern and interest of the Aboriginal people themselves--who want their paintings exhibited? Are ethnocentric appropriations of Aboriginal art something to worry about? One needs also to recognize the value of Aboriginal work being displayed on the "world stage," acquiring the cultural capital of an elite museum in New York. This gain in cultural capital cannot be denied as part of a benefit that we can help to develop.

In the “community” constituted by the art scene and the soft politics of the 1980s, knowledge had a different material significance for most: it could become little more than a badge of distinction, a value excised from the social world in which it originally existed and exchanged like a commodity in conversations of self-production. I wanted connoisseurs to know that they did not know much, that something eluded their grasp and thereby challenged their modes of being. Perhaps more than this, or more precisely, I was disturbed by what these representations of Aboriginal cultures--like any construction, really--excluded, all the dimensions of Aboriginal life that do not fit their frame.

There are concrete reasons, grounded in the political relations between Aborigines and whites, for being suspicious of the way knowledge circulates about Aborigines. In what I now see echoes Sutton’s concerns about the different ontologies, the reality gaps, “between Aboriginal ‘art’ and the culture that buys and collects it” (Sutton 1992: 31), I would like the art world to be subject to Aboriginal conventions of representing and respecting others, to have the standards of the community of study prevail over those of the representer. In this sense, the emergence of Aboriginal curators – Hetti Perkins at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Brenda Croft and the National Museum of Australia and others -- is an important and positive trend.

Something like these standards have for some time been the conditions of most contemporary ethnography in Australia (see Myers 1986b). To respect these conditions has not been a simple task, but anthropologists have attempted to mediate between their responsibility to the conventions of the local communities in which they study--communities that may seek to apply their standards to all representations, giving no exempt status to “science”--and the interests and values of the scholarly world for whom, largely, they write. These problems are

necessarily the stuff of recontextualization in an exhibition, but the transformation of context is not all one-directional. Increasingly, respect for and accountability to Aboriginal protocols have entered into the exhibitionary practices of the Australian art world: the names of deceased artists are not mentioned, communities are consulted about exhibitions, painters are invited to visit exhibitions to represent themselves, and copyright recognition has been extended to indigenous designs. While there was nothing simple about the settling of such terms in relation to exhibition, the changing relations of power between the knower and the known can, at least, make the relationship explicit and negotiable.

The expressions of ambivalence about the art world and its criticisms are all evidence of the emerging new forms and values of the reorganization of intercultural space. They are also evidence of what might be called a “struggle” over the meaning of the exhibition, suggesting that this exhibition and exhibitions generally came to have a meaning (were placed in a context and a context produced) through a social process. Thus, for example, John Von Sturmer (1989) criticized the show as the South Australian Museum’s effort to turn itself into a “treasure house” rather than a storehouse, buying into a masterpiece framework of art--and ignoring the grit of Aboriginal life, while Sutton (n.d.:2) replied that SAM was interested in both representativity and the exceptional.

In what complicities, therefore, were we embedded in our mediation? And what do these particular complicities signal about what Marcus called “the changing mise-en-scène” of fieldwork? The participants embrace the Asia Society, only to distance themselves from its assumed project of making knowledge available. They (we) criticize the category of “art” while insisting on its value to communicate about Aboriginal painting and sculpture. How were we to maintain the rapport with Aboriginal participants established by living in their communities in

new fields of power, definition and performance? Sutton, as we saw, ultimately opted for the primacy of his relationship to his Aboriginal “mentors” who, he wrote, “have made it clear they see my responsibility to explain the high value of their culture and the defensibility of their political position to my other mob, my tribe of origin” (Sutton 1992:33).

Despite this recognition of our multiple identities, it does seem in retrospect as if the anthropologists found it hardest to acknowledge their relationship to the immediate community--the audience of the symposium. To be one of “them,” seekers after some truth about the Other, was deferred by a range of strategies of affiliating with the Aboriginal speakers without claiming to share their identity. In this circumstance, particularly, we could not claim a special identity, either as ethnic or as professional, or--for myself and Dussart--even as national. After all, returned from an intense four-month field trip in Australia, I knew too much to be part of the audience and felt too much the estrangement of that long-delayed return trip to identify myself easily with Aboriginals.

The exhibitionary context cannot replicate what it represents. It necessarily recontextualizes what it shows, producing something new. However, what the symposium produced as “Aboriginal art” was not identical with what the exhibition or the catalog imagined. What the event format accomplished instead was a rearrangement of the relations of Aboriginal and white persons as specialists on culture and art, to show them both as participants in the emerging artworld of Aboriginal art.

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Notes

¹ I have discussed other dimensions of this exhibition extensively elsewhere (Myers 1991, 1994, 2002).

² See Myers 1986a.

³ Constraints of time and length preclude discussion of how audiences in fact responded to this kind of production. Whether “audience” is researchable is a question I want to open even if I cannot resolve it. We can begin to understand what the issues might be.

⁴ Underlying the movement of Aboriginal painting into the category “fine art” are concrete examples of the practices and institutions that shape the process of classification (for others, see Beidelman 1997, George 1999). The movement of Aboriginal paintings into the zone of fine art necessitates the recognition of the art gallery rather than the natural history museum, aesthetics rather than context, and perhaps art history rather than anthropology.

⁵ For a consideration of the relationships among elites that underlay the development of this exhibition, see Myers 2002.

⁶ This was something quite different from anything Malinowski had conceived when he trumpeted the birth of traditional ethnography in the famous words of his introduction to Argonauts of the Pacific. “Imagine,” he wrote, “yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight...” (Malinowski 1922:4). We were there to explain, to be

ethnographers. We had, once upon a time, been set down somewhere surrounded by our gear, but the native villagers did not remain behind, isolated, when the dinghy sailed. The Asia Society stage was not simply a locus of representing that other place we had all once been; it was itself an exemplar of many new sites for the ethnography of Aboriginal social life in which intercultural activities are themselves significant.

⁷ The men and women were from different regions of Australia and had only just met. They spoke different languages as well, although they could communicate with each other in English to some extent.

⁸ Malangi was a famous artist, whose painting was used by Australia in its \$1 note. Because of problems or miscommunication in the agreement for this usage, and certainly the neglect of his rights, there was eventually litigation that resulted in compensation and recognition of his copyright ownership of the image.

⁹ My own research has been mainly with Pintupi-speaking Western Desert people over the years -- 1973-75, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1988.

¹⁰ The principal critique of such primitivist stereotypes is that the "Other" is not regarded as he/she actually is, but rendered intelligible only through the interests of the Western viewer. Among the effects of this framework, as Johannes Fabian (1983) has argued, is the removal of indigenous people from having a history connected to us, removal of them from the actual political relationship in which we and they coexist.