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Disturbances in the field: Exhibiting Aboriginal art in the US



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Abstract

This article considers the role of varied agents in the circulation of Papunya art across the relations between the Australian and the international art fields. My analysis follows an exhibition that took place at New York University's Grey Gallery in 2009, tracing in particular the international circulation of the highly valued 'early Papunya boards'. By focusing on the unsettled nature of Aboriginal art's circulation and the problem of producing its value socially in a world that is not consolidated, I consider Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production' as still becoming. Finally, my argument should caution against assuming that 'antipodean fields' might be addressed as autonomous from international agents, circuits of distribution and so on. It also questions Bourdieu's tendency to treat national art fields as independent.

Keywords: Aboriginal acrylic painting, Bourdieu, fields of cultural production

This article discusses the 2009 exhibition of Aboriginal art, Papunya Tula acrylic painting, in the U.S. I have been following the exhibitions of this work since 1988. By focusing on the ethnography of the 2009 exhibition, I consider how the 'frictions' (Tsing, 2004) generated by bringing together the different cultural formations constituting Aboriginal art might be in conversation with Bourdieu's understanding of fields of cultural production in ways that result in provocative and salutary disturbances.

To a working anthropologist of my generation, Bourdieu has certain crude genealogical resemblances to the key figures of the French anthropological tradition – Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Like Durkheim and Mauss's (1967 [1902]) work on 'primitive classification,' or Lévi-Strauss's (1962) *Totemism*, Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*

argues that differences among objects reflect differences among social groups, and that social categories (knowledge, classification) emanate from such differences, which, in turn, are crucial to the formations of personhood. Bourdieu's addition was to recognize that the organization of difference might be stratified in a way that served a hegemonic function. His interest in fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996) was in historicizing the very development of their autonomy. Viewed abstractly, the organization of a field of cultural production depends on the development of such autonomy to secure a totalizing organization of difference within it.

It is not surprising that one might find some limitations in resituating elsewhere a framework developed to explain the field of literary production in 19th-century France. Bourdieu's concern with a particular *national* field of cultural production did not really interrogate the significance of France's historical tradition of centralization and elaborated forms of stratification, nor did it – importantly for my concerns – require Bourdieu to account for the introduction of radical cultural alterity into the system. Surely, the most significant insight I have borrowed from Bourdieu is that the 'boundary-making' of art discourse – distinctions between art and non-art put forward by theorists such as Clement Greenberg (1961 [1939]) or Theodor Adorno (1983), for example – are defensive strategies, not neutral facts but forms of cultural production, hegemonic exercises of power through knowledge. This has enormous significance for thinking about boundaries in the movement of Aboriginal art into western art worlds. But these movements are often messier, more chaotic, less resolved than the position-taking that take place within more coherent fields.

Exhibitions are necessarily only partial instantiations of a field of cultural production, movements in its reproduction, transformation, or failure. They are events, articulating actors' perceptions of objective structures and instantiating their dispositions in strategic or tactical action. The indeterminacy of such events, I argue, requires a focus on 'culture-making' as a way of thinking about exhibitionary activities that bridge new domains, as has happened with the display of Aboriginal art in the US.

Bourdieu is less instructive about what I call 'the traffic in culture' that shapes the circulation of work such as Aboriginal acrylic paintings. This is a circulation in which different regimes of value come into unprecedented contact, creating what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2004) has discussed as 'friction'. Grounded as I am in the level of intercultural events available to ethnographic scrutiny, I am more impressed by the frictions set in motion between disjunctive and sometimes incommensurable regimes of value than I am by the effects of what Bourdieu discusses as 'misrecognition'. That said, let me pursue an ethnographically grounded conversation with Bourdieu's ghost.

I am taking up the case of the 2009 American exhibition of 50 'early' Papunya acrylic paintings, painted mostly in the 1970s. The show was

entitled 'Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya'. Applying introduced acrylic paints to the two-dimensional and permanent surfaces of masonite and other available materials, senior Aboriginal men from the several different language groups living at the government settlement of Papunya (160 miles west of Alice Springs) transposed their inherited knowledge of ritual, place, and body designs onto these surfaces, thus transforming these into objects for both recognition and exchange. Roger Benjamin, an Australian art historian hired by the American collectors, John and Barbara Wilkerson, who had purchased these paintings at secondary auction in the late 1990s, curated the exhibition.

'Icons' opened at John Wilkerson's alma mater, Cornell University in upstate New York, at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, then travelled to UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History, and ended at NYU's Grey Art Gallery in the heart of Greenwich Village. I will focus on some features of this exhibition as it developed in these different locales in order to discuss the structure and effects of Aboriginal art's placement in the US. In the interest of full disclosure: I am a participant in this history; indeed, I have the longest history – since 1973 – with Papunya Tula painters of any of the participants in 'Icons'. Additionally, I was a crucial link to the exhibition at NYU, where I am a professor of anthropology and worked to get the show to our university gallery.

The time and space of art worlds, the differences among objects

Given the much publicized success of Aboriginal art in Australia, many Australians wonder about its reception and standing abroad – especially in the US and Europe. Such concerns about 'value' are endemic to the field of art production generally. For example, the anthropologist Stuart Plattner (1996) showed how buyers of contemporary art in St. Louis constantly looked beyond the local, to New York, for 'guarantee' or 'legitimation' of a value that would reassure them in their own judgments. Such value, as many writers on art have noted, is typically indicated by a resumé of an artist's exhibitions and inclusion of their work in collections elsewhere – especially by institutions and persons with a prior reputation for their taste or knowledge; here we recognize a role for cultural and social capital in the functioning of any contemporary artistic field of production.

By contrast, such a network of circulation, purchase, and exhibition, constitutes – in the case of Aboriginal art – a very uneven or perhaps disorganized field of cultural production. Thus, my discussion forms around differences between the Australian or national field of Aboriginal art and the international one as sites for producing value.

Let me point out, first, the larger, national political fields within which this art is embedded. Within Australia, the production and reception of

Aboriginal art is articulated through the structure of ‘settler primitivism’ (see Thomas, 1999), with the co-presence of ‘native’ and ‘settler’ informing that relationship. In contrast, although the U.S. is also a settler nation, Aboriginal art arrives in the U.S. typically within a framework of a more general ‘primitivism’ – a formation delineating the cultural difference such work represents as modernity’s ‘Other’ – that is, without any moral or political sense of the co-implication between viewer and producer, for the most part.¹ In this form of primitivism, Aboriginal art tends to be defined in relation to ‘modern art’ in an ideological formation thoroughly discussed in the 1980s.

In fact, the Wilkersons narrated their own discovery of the paintings in almost ‘explorer’ terms, as something they found when visiting their son, then an exchange student in Sydney. Apparently innocent of any sense of the settler politics of Indigeneity, on going to the Northern Territory Museum, after reading their son’s paper on Aboriginal art, they ‘were gob-smacked’, to quote John Wilkerson, by the beauty of the paintings. They determined to make them the object of their connoisseurship.

There are more specific key differences between Australia and the U.S. that I might sketch by reference to my use of Bourdieu in a few of my prior writings on Indigenous acrylic painting in Australia. These are focused on the Papunya Tula Artists cooperative – the originary location of the Indigenous acrylic painting movement. I have argued, for example, that the *success* or *uptake* of Indigenous art in Australia owed a good deal to the distinctive *tastes* of the ‘Whitlamite’ professional-managerial class of the 1970s and 1980s (see Myers, 2001, 2002). These Australians were international in taste but nationalistic in their postcolonial movement away from Britain and the U.S. They were tertiary-educated people whose tastes were formed in international (formalist) modernism but who wanted to identify with forms of this international taste (think Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles*) connected to their own national belonging and to use it to resituate their alienation from a non-European landscape. There are, of course, particular frictions here – or disjunctions as I have called them elsewhere (see Myers, 1991). Most Aboriginal art intrinsically asserts not only the *presence* of Indigenous people, but also puts forth a claim that the land of the nation is *theirs*.

In another article, I distinguished between two formations of collector *habitus* in Aboriginal art, a nationalist Bohemian one and a modernist nationalist, each crucial in developing particularly Australian values for Aboriginal acrylic painting (Myers, 2006a). Such analyses suggest some of the shape of a national field of Aboriginal art production in Australia and how a particular set of values came to be identified with at least *some* Aboriginal art. My analysis weaves emerging tourist identity and national distinctiveness around a changing international economy and political system. Drawing on the volume of this interest and value, the combination in

Australia of State galleries along with a developed system of private dealers, critics, and collectors has allowed for a somewhat coherently developed ‘art world’, if not a fully autonomous field of cultural production.

The Australian subjectivities I indicate do not exhaust the range of those who buy Aboriginal art, even in Australia. It is well known that a huge portion of the market is made up of tourists, who purchase at the lower end of the market. They value the work they purchase by virtue of its connection to a place visited. This is shared by many Australian and overseas visitors, both of whom are often indifferent to deeper attachments of Aboriginality.

While these heterogeneous interests support the overall value perceived in ‘Aboriginal art’, there also remains an interest in high-quality Indigenous art by a small number of overseas collectors and, although less so, by museums. The desire of these collectors differs from that of tourists as well as from that of the Whitlamite professional-managerial class for whom it indexed their ‘home’, or possibly a negotiation with an insistent moral claim of prior occupation. However, the combination of the overseas collectors with the Australian Whitlamite class has the force of a dominant class fraction – an emergent taste class – with respect to more touristic forms.

Differentiating objects

Such movements of culture, while still organized around classification and stratification, as in Bourdieu’s work in *Distinction* (1984), seem to require further analysis if we think about how they enter into spatially and culturally extended fields of cultural production. They may not map simply onto ‘taste classes’. Indeed, to imagine mapping, we might need to distinguish classes – differences – in the field of objects.

Pascoe’s (1981) four-cell matrix from three decades ago, in defining types of artifacts, bears a strong resemblance to the matrix Clifford (1988) identified in 1988 as representing the taxonomy of the western art-culture system. ‘Authenticity’ is a component of the fine arts model of value that is not represented in Pascoe’s taxonomy, but is better represented in James Clifford’s fuller diagram of the western art-culture system. Clifford’s four-cell matrix identifies authenticity/inauthenticity as one axis of the art-culture system, with genuine art and culture at the authenticity end (vs. fakes, inventions, tourist art, and commodities) and masterpiece/artifact as the other axis, with originality, singularity, and connoisseurship opposed to tradition, collectivity, and folklore. The schema presented, it should be noted, corresponds to a differentiation of art museums (galleries) vs. natural history or cultural museums, on the one hand, and both differentiated from the commercial market – which is neither real art nor genuine culture.

From classification to practice

As Bourdieu well understood, objects do not (just) *have* a meaning. They acquire meaning in a range of practical activities. Exhibition – a form of

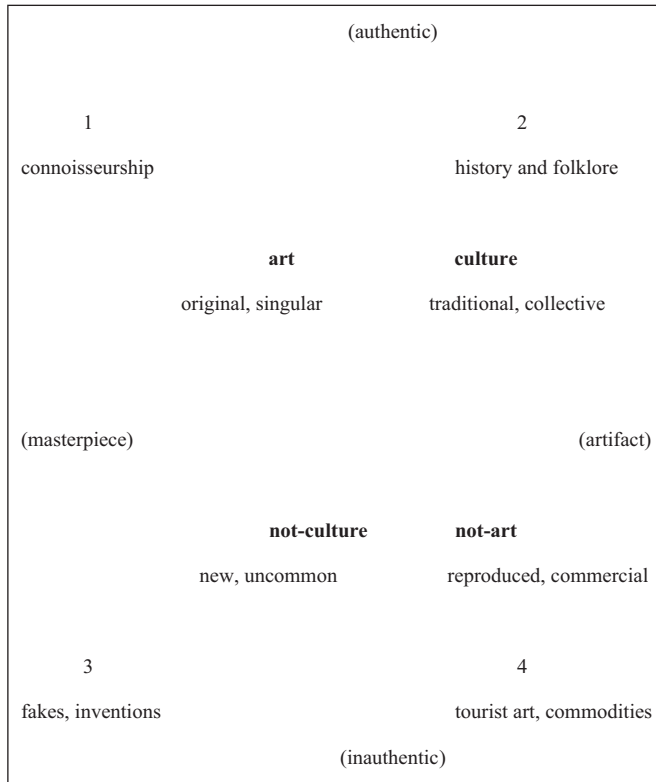


Figure 1: The art-culture system (after Clifford, 1988: 224)

social action based in a system of practice – plays a key role in the classification of objects, creating the space for the ‘singular, masterpiece’ that James Clifford has identified as the location in the class of objects schematized in the western modern art-culture system. The placement of acrylic paintings into this category in Australia has been accomplished through a variety of exhibitions, prizes, and critical writing, of which many non-Australians are ignorant. Without space to develop this, I will simply assert the necessity of exhibitions in developing the ‘taste’ and ‘discrimination’ necessary for ‘fine art’ to exist as objects suitable for ‘aesthetic contemplation’.

The exhibition of Aboriginal art *overseas* is an even more complex phenomenon, drawing on many different interests, exhibitionary institutions, and sorts of social actors. For a start, how is it that exhibitions come to *be* in places like the US? Exhibition does not respond simply to an already existing consumer demand within a fully formed field of cultural production; audiences and markets are built, and the geographical/national specificity of Aboriginal art has been central to that art’s support.

In the 1980s, for example, government support for overseas exhibition was motivated by the goal of increasing tourism (making Australia a distinctive, interesting destination), of increasing economic income (industry), but also in establishing some sort of *national distinction* as a country identified with recognizable and geographically specific forms of cultural value. The two major late 20th-century exhibitions that I have analyzed previously are exemplary: ‘Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia’ in the US in 1988 (the Australia bicentennial year; see Sutton, 1988) and ‘La Peinture des aborigènes d’Australie’ in France in 1993 (see Dussart, 1993), which was supported – in part – by funds put into Franco-Australian relations to celebrate France’s bicentennial. Crucially, these exhibitions sought to present the work as ‘art’ through a variety of legitimating curatorial procedures, and not as mere objects of cultural curiosity.

These exhibitions met with varying responses, but the recognition that accrued from ‘Dreamings’, in the U.S. and indeed any success overseas (such as the famous ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ in Paris, 1989) has been very significant in establishing legitimacy for arguments *within* Australia for the value of Aboriginal art as well as in developing the taste and sensibilities of wealthy collectors.

A frame of the exhibition: a new kind of beauty is born

The Australian correspondent Nicolas Rothwell’s review of the show’s catalog serves as a useful guide to one narrative of the ‘work’ of the ‘Icons’ exhibition. Rothwell (an influential critic of Aboriginal art and widely read commentator on Northern Territory affairs) followed the exhibition’s framework in pointing out that this was an unusual collection, a ‘treasure trove’ of 50 boards and canvases, ‘unified not just by date and place of creation but by tone and theme.’ That the *early* period was the focus shaped the representation of the exhibition in terms of beginnings and origins. Rothwell honored the intention of the Wilkersons as patrons: ‘Like many great collectors, they felt the need to probe the works they owned: to learn from them and share them.’

For Rothwell, the ‘Icons’ exhibition promised to be a successful – even landmark – event, with ‘paradigm-changing potential’. The paradigm he hoped to see emerge was a familiar one, enunciated in the particular way he praised Roger Benjamin’s curatorial essay in the catalog: ‘The effect of this bravura piece of criticism is to liberate the viewer from the perspective of anthropology and to encourage a new mode of looking at Papunya work.’ Rothwell thus congratulated Benjamin for fulfilling his brief ‘to treat the paintings as art’, as the next hoped-for stage: the recognition of these paintings properly as ‘art’. Indeed, Benjamin cast the exhibition in this light with the opening words of his essay: ‘Beauty has many forms, but it is not every

day that a new kind of beauty is born to the world. Such is the achievement of the painters from Papunya' (Benjamin, 2009: 21).

It is not my goal here to argue *what* the painting movement has been, but rather to discuss the exhibition as articulating an emerging field of cultural production. The 'Icons' exhibition, which Rothwell recognized as 'the most targeted exhibition of its kind to have been displayed overseas', would face an audience for whom 'appreciation of Aboriginal traditions remains in a fledgling state'. But New York could be a catalyst for a shift in the appreciation of this work, Rothwell suggested, on a par with the paradigmatic modernist exhibition – the retrospective of Picasso in New York, in 1939.

The structure of the field, partly: 'You can take the art out of the bush, but you can't take the bush out of the art!'

If the distinctive aim of 'Icons' was to present Wilkerson's collection of early paintings as extraordinary fine art, what does the artistic field require? If making the acrylic paintings fine art is the goal, must other dimensions of the work be suppressed or disregarded as irrelevant to the artistic qualities? In the U.S., then, should or would the cultural content and political intentions of the paintings be accorded recognition?

In discussing my position in relation to the 'Icons' exhibition, I can clarify some issues about this artistic field – ideas perhaps best summed up in a mantra I have coined: 'You can take the art out of the bush, but you can't take the bush out of the art!' I began my association with the Pintupi painters of Papunya Tula Artists cooperative in 1973, when I was an anthropology PhD student living in the outstation community of Yayayi, a hinterland of Papunya. In those early years, I helped the Aboriginal-owned cooperative by providing documentation of the paintings for their circulation into sale and collections, not only helping the manager of the cooperative given my language skills in Pintupi (one of several languages spoken at Papunya) but also serving the local wish that I help Yarnangu (Aboriginal people) let consumers know that these paintings were valuable, 'from the Dreaming', 'not made up by people'. The Pintupi and other Papunya Tula painters understand the designs and stories to originate in the activities of ancestors who made the world the way it is.

I have had, since then, a continuing concern to help the Papunya Tula Artists obtain for their paintings recognition of their intentions and of the value they understand to be in them – which I call their 'revelatory value' – in reference to their location within an Indigenous regime of value in which initiatory revelation and exchange are central. The desires of the original group of Papunya Tula painters were for their work to gain this cultural recognition, a recognition they feel they deserved based on the sacred – i.e. revelatory – value of the works. In depicting their ancestral stories, their

Dreamings, in the paintings, the artists show – and share knowledge of – the power of their Dreamings, the land these Beings made, and their own cultural identities.

In some important respects, the Papunya Tula painters are intrinsically part of the artistic field of cultural production. The very condition of their acrylic painting *is* a market. It is the market that has made it possible for individuals to paint works in such volume, and that underlies their expressions of virtuosity. It is the existence of this market that makes available canvases and acrylics, media that are – crucially – acceptable to the highest category of art: painting. This combination of market and medium allows Papunya painting to be perceived within a framework of comparability with other ‘art’ as well as making it mobile and commodifiable. On the other hand, the painters – and certainly those collected by the Wilkersons – did not understand themselves as most highly regarded non-Aboriginal artists do. Their painting has its foundation in a cultural discipline and accompanying regime of value that is distinct and not reducible to market disposition; it does not represent conscious dialogue with or challenge to other art movements, as Bourdieu (1996: 232–6) has sketched such relationships. Thus, they represent a kind of radical difference. This orthogonal relationship of being ‘outside’ – or Other – is what lends support to tendencies to place them in the ‘Primitive’ (vs. Modern) category, especially in the U.S. or France, lacking the immediate settler context.

Unlike Bourdieu’s delineation of habitus and field in a two-way relationship, with agents incorporating into their habitus the proper know-how to allow them to constitute the field, Indigenous artists – certainly those of Papunya Tula – have only in minimal ways incorporated know-how about the art world from the consumers. While at a subordinate level acknowledging or incorporating the sense of ‘finish’ required by the market, the Papunya painters have continued to give precedence to their own sense of what is present in their work – an encompassing relationship of contradictory values that another French anthropological luminary and scion of Mauss – Louis Dumont (1966, 1982) – called ‘hierarchy’. The priority they continue to give to their own inspiration (forged in relationship to particular significant places, shaped by ancestral beings and reinforced by repeated trips to visit and ritually enliven this presence) supports a constitutive friction – between the indexical connection of the paintings to sacred places and knowledge on the one hand, and their status as fine art commodities on the other – to which I have tried to lend support through my own research and writing.

In this regard, it is interesting to return briefly to Clifford’s (1988: 224) diagram of the ‘art-culture system’, with its implication that if ‘traditional’ culture items (high Aboriginal cultural value) become original and singular, they can move into the area of the art-culture system marked off as ‘art’. They can become masterpieces, rather than artifacts, and enter into the

economy of the art museum and the art market, rather than the ethnographic museum or – if they become too commercial and reproduced and therefore of ‘low’ Aboriginal cultural value, they become tourist art. This is a schema for regulating the relationships between Aboriginal cultural value and western art value. As ‘masterpieces’ rather than ‘artifacts’, objects can be subject to aesthetic contemplation, distinguishable by those of good taste.

The classification of fine art indicated in Clifford’s diagram – based on connoisseurship, market, and art museum – recognizes a difference in human creativity and execution that has little significance in the ‘*revelatory regime of value*’ in which Aboriginal art production originates. To be art in western categorical frames, an object cannot be ‘collective’ but should be expressive of a more sublime characteristic that subordinates other properties to individual creativity. Yet, these objects also index and put forward a complex, land-based Indigenous personhood into national space and into a cosmopolitan art market.

In Australia, by virtue of frequent exhibition and museum collection, acrylic paintings have traversed this territory and are seen in the light of ‘creativity’. But the power of the revelatory qualities, of local protocols, is not fully or simply extinguished in being subordinated to the aesthetic. While they have submitted some of their properties to reorganization in acquiring value in the domain of fine art, the paintings have nonetheless retained the other sorts of cultural power that underlie this not-quite-settled classification. This is a friction.

If the Indigenous world of values stands in some kind of juxtaposition to those of the art world, its mediation is equally fraught. The distance of these painters from the market, culturally and spatially, has given great importance to a range of intermediaries in this relationship: of writers as well as the gamut of field officers, art collective managers, and dealers. There is a significant divide between those intermediaries who reside in close proximity to the bush and local communities and those from more cosmopolitan centers – between the bush and the urban. This divide, at times, also constitutes the friction between the anthropologist/ethnographer and the art collector/art historian/ art critic – a friction stronger in the case of Australia than it is overseas. Note how close the articulation of this divide is to Rothwell’s habitus, his disposition against the ‘ethnographic’ in favor of the ‘artistic’. Intimate knowledge of the painters and their practice comes, if you will, from the bush and close proximity to the values there, but other forms of cultural power emanate from the city. The struggles between these groups of intermediaries are palpable: visiting curators who are uncomfortable in the bush, who do not know how to change a tire, who cannot understand the clear expression of Aboriginal English, and so on. Conversely, what I call ‘bush capital’ – the knowledge and experience of Aboriginality acquired by those working within Indigenous communities – is a form of social capital that is important in this field.

The structure of the discursive field

There are very practical dimensions – or indications – of the categorical structures of the art-culture system I have described. ‘Anthropology’ is often constructed discursively within the field of ‘Aboriginal art’ as a lesser version of appreciation (if not utterly as a colonial activity, despite our long-standing efforts to decolonize the discipline).² We anthropologists have social capital in our relations to people in the bush, but not so much cultural capital in the palaces of art or in the spaces of art criticism. It has been common for analysts or critics to identify the emergence of Aboriginal art as a ‘fine art’ with the removal of these objects from the domain of ‘ethnography’ and their repositioning as ‘art’, as illustrated by Rothwell’s review. This Kantian removal is not simply a matter of venue – art gallery vs. ethnographic museum – it is also presumed that the sort of knowledge that anthropologists have about these objects is mostly irrelevant to their standing as art objects. Stripping objects of utility and regarding them simply as objects for aesthetic contemplation is a founding doctrine of modernist art.

Such antagonism to the ethnographic is a convenient ideological move in a world in which it became significant to claim control over these objects, and in which art comprises an autonomous domain. Through such exclusions, or rules, art comprises a field of cultural production distinct from ‘anthropology’ which has ‘culture’ as its domain, while the defining principle of ‘art’ is ‘aesthetic discrimination.’ As much recent history shows, however, the art world is not monolithic in terms of its principles. Although it has long dominated and is now a sort of commonsense default, Formalist modernism – which was articulated to distinguish ‘art’ from other sorts of objects – is not the only art game in town. Much as I admired what Rothwell lauded as Roger Benjamin’s attention to Papunya painting as ‘a new form of beauty’, my perspective on this exhibition – from the bush, as it were – and on exhibitionary practice, therefore, was not so much to fit the paintings into an existing field of western cultural production, but to intervene in that field of cultural production, or at least the placement of objects within them.

I am not unsympathetic to understanding this art world as having its own dynamics and placement in a larger field of cultural production. However, it also seems to me that, with extensive exhibition and writing about it (forms of acquiring cultural capital), some Aboriginal art, and especially work like Papunya Tula’s, might be seen as ‘contemporary art’ in the sense that Australian art historian Terry Smith (2011) has recently outlined: a contemporary creation of cultural value. In Australia, where knowledge of Papunya Tula’s ‘local art history’ is established (through years of exhibition and publication), we can perhaps talk of an ‘Aboriginal art field of cultural production’, as Caroline Hoban (2002) did a few years ago in articulating a subdominant and somewhat autonomous lesser sphere of ‘Aboriginal art’ separate from the cosmopolitan and international sphere of

contemporary art. But I think it may have more radical, challenging capacities than she saw then. Outside of Australia, lacking that knowledge of a regional or national art, when work like this circulates in occasional exhibitions or Biennales, the framework of ‘contemporary’ art or ‘contemporaneity’ may be another option.³

‘Icons of the Desert’

The ‘Icons’ exhibition embodied the intentions and activities of many people. These were paintings that John and Barbara Wilkerson had purchased, almost entirely on the secondary market at auction from Sotheby’s in the late 1990s. They decided to have an exhibition, as Rothwell writes, to learn more and share the paintings. Later, John Wilkerson described his path as ‘a journey of understanding’. The Wilkersons, as I understood them initially, were not interested in the more recent paintings. Perhaps this bespeaks John’s prior interest in folk art (as President of the Museum of American Folk Art), in work deemed unmediated by formal conventions and training, less responsive to consumers and the market. I believe the fundamental attraction to the particular beauty they saw was a sense of the paintings as primitive, basic, urgent. These paintings came, they said, ‘not from the hand, but from the soul’ – direct expressions, unfettered by formal training.

Wilkerson is a well-to-do, self-made businessman, specifically a man of what used to be called ‘modest (and rural) origins’ who grew up in a small Nevada town, went to a regional university in the American West before getting a PhD in managerial economics and market research at the elite Ivy League Cornell University, and made his fortune ultimately as a venture capitalist involved with the healthcare industry. He has, obviously, what Bourdieu called ‘economic capital,’ as well as a long-term commitment to the arts. His relationship to Cornell and to its art museum, the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, is fundamental to the mounting of the exhibition. The Johnson Museum undertook the basic development of the exhibition, the catalog, and its first installation, even though it had neither prior interest in Aboriginal art nor in-house expertise. Wilkerson’s personal relationship was crucial to their willingness to take it on, as was his substantial commitment of funding for an exhibition of very high quality.

Such commitments testify to the Wilkersons’ wish to be seen as thoughtful collectors, serious enough to have a collecting philosophy that they are able to objectify. At the opening of the Cornell installation, John spoke of the three legs of this philosophy: involving the ‘eye’ (connoisseurship), the ‘heart’ or ‘soul’ (how the hand expresses), and the ‘mind’ (‘spirituality’). To carry out their vision, the Wilkersons employed the Sydney art historian Roger Benjamin as guest curator of the show. Benjamin’s reputation as an award-winning art historian – of Matisse and French Orientalist art – was a significant source of legitimation and symbolic capital for an exhibition

that aimed to present the paintings as ‘fine art’ rather than as ethnographic or simply cultural examples.

Benjamin developed a rationale for the exhibition of early boards, from one cooperative, of a particular period – what Rothwell (2009) called a ‘targeted exhibition’. In convincing other high-status institutions to participate, Benjamin’s curatorial experience and scholarly reputation were crucial. He brought high-quality images of the paintings, a list of paintings and plans for a show. Indeed, the framework set forth by Benjamin’s curatorial essay, as Rothwell (2009) noted, explicitly focuses on what critics call the ‘formal’ qualities of the paintings and, to a lesser extent, on the historical setting of the paintings. In curating the exhibition, he put his own reputation on the line as a scholar entering a new area and as an art historian whose judgments might be deemed ill-founded.

Exhibitions are serendipitous as much as strategic transformations of cultural capital. Cornell as a venue was secured by Wilkerson’s connection, but in New York he needed other contacts. Benjamin’s visit to NYC was facilitated by my introduction to the director of NYU’s Grey Art Gallery, Lynn Gumpert. Benjamin’s ability – his cultural capital as an art historian and experienced curator – to communicate with other professionals like Gumpert gave her confidence in the quality of the planning and the work. Still, given the unfamiliarity of Aboriginal art and culture in New York, key factors in the Grey Gallery’s agreement were (1) my own presence as an NYU faculty member, my own past publications on Indigenous art and particularly of Papunya Tula art; (2) my wife and colleague Faye Ginsburg’s work on Australian Indigenous media; and (3) the potential therefore to develop a meaningful and broader program connected to the educational mission of the university (which the Provost increasingly emphasized as crucial to support). Our networks in the city could also bring in new and distinctive audiences to the gallery.

Our intersection with the Wilkerson project was intentionally and somewhat delicately maintained, to some extent, as collaboration. We were neither in his employment nor under his direction in planning the direction of our framing of the exhibition, but we were unquestionably representatives of a ‘dominated class fraction’ (see Bourdieu, 1984), striving to make our own values prevail.

For the Grey Gallery, the ultimate social goal of the exhibition was to receive positive recognition (cultural capital), that is, reviews in major art media, and this requires not only judgment but also sufficient support to produce an exhibition that can attract visitors: support for outreach with high-quality publications, and even public relations consultants who might get the attention of reviewers. The goal of the gallery, then, is not merely to gain these reviews, to amass cultural capital. Rather, as a small non-profit institution, this gallery needs reputation to attract further and continuing

support, and, indeed, to keep the university involved in supporting exhibitions of interest beyond that of the commercial gallery world.

The Grey Gallery was a promising venue. Although small, it has held a variety of well-received exhibitions in recent years, ranging from a landmark exhibition of Latin American art to an exhibition of photographs from the 1970s downtown art scene to one of African cloth, all of which received positive reviews in the *New York Times*. This is the space into which early Papunya paintings – ‘Aboriginal art’ – entered.

Wilkerson’s expectation was to have the exhibition heard about, seen, or otherwise registered by many people. His disposition, in this regard, was not entirely commensurate with that of an art gallery. They sought prestigious reviews; and while he was pleased with the Grey’s reputation as a gallery of ‘quality’, he wanted 20 million ‘impressions’, referring to any kind of quantifiable contact one might have with the exhibition, from number of visitors to website hits. Further, the Wilkersons were inclined to ‘brand’ the exhibition and its team of participants. When we arrived at Ithaca, at the hotel, we were given ‘Icons of the Desert’ fleece vests, messenger bags, notepads, and some other items with various ways of connecting to the exhibition.

The catalog

One crucial medium of value production is a catalog. An exhibition of Aboriginal art in the US cannot expect potential viewers to have prior knowledge of Aboriginal art, of what it is, of how it has been seen before. It must, in a way, create its own legitimation and framework, and be somewhat more self-authenticating than an exhibition of the same materials in Australia, where people might be expected to have seen several previous exhibitions or have read about Indigenous work. Indeed, why would anyone in the US know how rare and exquisite – how sought after – the so-called ‘early Papunya boards’ are? Over the nearly 40 years since Papunya Tula was formed and during which exhibitions of Aboriginal art have intensified, one can discern a steady trajectory in the production of ‘catalogs’ to accompany exhibitions.

The Wilkersons heavily subsidized the production of a high-quality catalog for the exhibition, a collaboration between Roger Benjamin and Andrew Weislogel, the Johnson Museum’s associate curator assigned to the project. Published by Cornell University Press, the catalog (Benjamin, 2009) had original essays commissioned from known scholars of Papunya Tula – Vivien Johnson, myself, and Dick Kimber – an overarching essay from Benjamin himself historicizing the focus of the exhibition (the early Papunya boards) in a way to make its importance available to new audiences, and a preface from the Indigenous Australian curator Hetti Perkins. As importantly, Weislogel saw to the development of a rigorous and scholarly consideration of the sometimes irregular and conflicting documentation

for each painting. The hardback catalog, with beautiful full-page reproductions of all the paintings in the show, is a lovely object, and was sold at a very reasonable price, allowing for its possible use in university curricula. Nonetheless, the catalog is not the show, and the tactics of the different venues imagined various engagements.

On the bus: symposium and Ithaca

The different venues concretized the exhibition differently. Cornell University is a rural campus, nearly five hours upstate from New York City, at the edge of the Finger Lakes, Six Nations country. As an Ivy League institution it has great cultural standing. The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art is perched on one of Ithaca's hills, above the valley, and looks out over the countryside. Designed by I.M. Pei, it is unmistakably a fine art gallery, a modernist palace of form.

The exhibition was installed on the bottom floor, without any exterior lights, on a single floor with a number of dividers. Mostly but not exclusively, the paintings were hung on white surfaces but with extensive documentation. They were also hung in some historically significant groupings, in coordination with the analysis in Benjamin's essay in the catalog, according to the earliest paintings by the so-called 'School of Kaapa' (the small group of Anmatyerre artists surrounding Kaapa Tjampitjinpa) and also others that research had indicated were painted at the same time, together with the artists gathered in Papunya's 'Great Painting Room'. This art historical grouping was indicated by the inclusion of several photographs of the painters working by Michael Jensen (in 1972) that had been unearthed by research for the catalog. The installation was fundamentally 'historical', perceiving connections among the paintings through historical associations. The inclusion of the on-site construction by three Pintupi artists – contemporary descendants of the represented painters and artists in their own right – of a 'traditional' groundpainting in the gallery, referenced the historical origins of acrylic painting.

The opening, New York, and national value

The strategy at the Grey Gallery intentionally departed from the installation and program in Ithaca, motivated (1) by the desire to connect specifically to the New York art world identified with the Greenwich Village locale of NYU, and (2) to challenge the 'primitivism' that is still so present in the art world. First, the exhibition was installed largely on an aesthetic basis, roughly historically. One artist's work was installed together to show how he worked repeatedly on the same theme. Wall labels were reduced from those in Ithaca, and the historical photographs were omitted. The arrangement of the installation invited visitors to stand in front of each painting one by one. A video interview with Bobby West Tjupurrula, one of the

Pintupi men who visited Ithaca earlier that year, was included near the entrance to introduce the exhibition in an Indigenous voice. Off behind a partial enclosure, we showed film footage from the 1970s that included me with some of the painters in the show to give a sense of the living presence, practice and circumstances of acrylic painting in the early days and its connection to NYU now.

Finally, in recognition of Indigenous protocols, we put nine 'restricted' paintings in a separate room downstairs, with a label cautioning visitors, especially Indigenous women and children, who – according to cultural protocol – should not see these works. When two Pintupi women painters came to the gallery for the opening, they were clearly relieved to know that what they were not allowed to see was clearly marked as restricted.

The program in New York was also longer, stretched throughout the semester, with funding from the Wilkersons as well as NYU. To build interest, related events were programmed at other institutions in the city with which we had worked in the past – in particular, the Museum of Modern Art and the National Museum of the American Indian.

Because the collection was largely of paintings from a few years in the 1970s, a principal exhibition concern was to avoid viewers seeing the art movement, and the creativity of Aboriginal cultural expression, as something that ended then. Thus we specifically wanted to present other forms of contemporary Indigenous cultural expression, emphasizing film but also Indigenous curatorial activity. While imperfect as interpretive activities, because one cannot ensure repeated attendance at events over a period of time, these activities were intended to reach an influential audience. We targeted journalists and scholars for the smaller events, especially the private invitation screening of Warwick Thornton's multiple award-winning feature film, *Samson and Delilah*, organized at MoMA (slated for its New York premiere at MoMA six months later). The screening at the National Museum of the American Indian of Beck Cole's documentary from the *First Australians* series, about the Aboriginal Civil Rights Movement drew an audience of perhaps 500, providing people with some background on Aboriginal politics and the vibrancy of Indigenous filmmaking – especially through the presence of filmmakers Thornton and Beck Cole. The New York effort aimed to destabilize the single regime of value by showing a broad range of Indigenous lives and creative forms.

Other events included the opening of the more or less simultaneous commercial exhibition of Papunya Tula ('We are here sharing our Dreaming'), with two Pintupi women painters (Doreen Reid Nakamarra and Yukultji Napangarti), and three of the staff of Papunya Tula Artists, at another NYU gallery space just down the street. They sold almost all the paintings they brought.

With help from some highly placed Australians living in New York, we invited the Consul-General to speak at the opening and to host a dinner for

the visiting Australians. In his address, the Consul-General placed the paintings, and Indigenous art, within the framework of Australian national patrimony and as a contemporary form of valued cultural production. Additionally, with a highly placed Australian diplomat coming to the Grey Art Gallery, we persuaded the Provost of NYU to welcome him and the public, bringing the Grey Gallery to the Provost's attention for its capacity to generate outside recognition.

For me, and for the Indigenous attendees, it was essential that some representative of Indigeneity in New York should welcome and embrace this exhibition. Sonia Smallacombe, an Indigenous Australian who works for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, graciously agreed to do so, pointing out in her comments some of the difficulties Indigenous people faced.

Over 600 people came to the opening, creating an aura of excitement, legitimating the potential and value of the paintings. It was a moment for registering value, when one visitor after another expressed his or her astonishment at the power of the paintings. New York artists who had come to see the show stood transfixed in front of the paintings. It was powerful fine art, it was significant, it was Australian and not Australian; an expression of something Australia had come to value in partially reversing its racist past. The show itself was celebratory of the art, but carried in its installation various indications that this work had arisen in resistance to the assimilationist intentions of government policies at the time, as a resurgence of Indigenous creativity seeking cultural recognition.

'Restricting' the formalist narrative

It is easy to see the imagined trajectory of the exhibition's recontextualization of the early paintings – as beautiful fine art, 'the birth of a new form of beauty', as Benjamin quite eloquently wrote. However, objects have their own histories and are not so easily stripped of their traces. In mid-course, while the catalog was still in preparation, we learned that a number of the paintings in the collection were regarded as problematic for public exhibition because of their overt revelation of secret ritual matters (see Johnson, 2010; Myers, 2009, 2012). While some of these paintings had previously been exhibited and cleared for exhibition at that time, some Papunya Tula painters had changed their views. This came to light accidentally, in the course of a different consultation that Vivien Johnson was conducting in Central Australia.

Because of our relationship to the painters and the cooperative, and the ethical commitments flowing from that, neither Johnson nor I felt we could continue to participate in the exhibition without resolving the issue. I doubt Bourdieu could have imagined such a circumstance in France, but in the context of settler society modernity, it is a real one. Faced with our withdrawal from the project, or convinced of the sincerity of our concern as evidenced by this, the Wilkersons agreed to pay for a serious consultation

with the descendants of the painters to determine what could be exhibited and how we might proceed.

As it turned out, nine of the paintings were considered 'restricted', acceptable to show in the U.S. but not in Australia. Two of the venues showed the paintings in unrestricted areas, but at the Grey Art Gallery, the director agreed to put the restricted paintings in a separate area with a caution sign for visitors. This was the only venue over which I had any influence. Of additional concern was the circulation of these images back into the community, where inappropriate Aboriginal viewers might see them. My own social and cultural capital was on the line. While the Wilkersons were not prepared to withdraw them completely from exhibition, the compromise was to withdraw them from the catalog proper and to have them available as an insert for the American edition only. Insofar as the agency and authority of Indigenous subjects and their cultural value were at the very heart of the early Papunya Tula movement, to subordinate these historical origins and political substance to curatorial or collector authority would be to ignore a fundamental character of the painting as a revelation of Indigenous survival and determination.

Friction: a collector's journey of understanding

What did involvement with Aboriginal art produce for Wilkerson? I do not think he hoped to make money from his investment. While highly valued, the price of even the best of Aboriginal art is modest compared to many other forms of prestige-bearing work. On the other hand, his standing in the art world as a collector of significance is what Bourdieu called cultural capital. Purchasing and exhibiting the work has made him a valued client of Sotheby's, who held a dinner in his honor to which some of his business friends and associates were invited. It has given him access to other significant collectors of Aboriginal art, invitations to the Australian Consul-General's dinner for Aboriginal artists, and connections to Australian dignitaries. But there is also something distinctive about his genuine passion for this art, his desire to share it and to be perceived as someone who discovered it and brought it together before others.

At the opening of the exhibition, in Cornell, one could sense the tension between recognition of the collector and funder of the exhibition – who spoke first in the honored spot – and the Aboriginal artists who represented the legacy of the painting he collected. Who is to be honored, in this situation? Whose achievement is it? Wilkerson is a gracious man, no egotist, and projects a modest and comfortable bearing, speaking of his love for the art and for sharing it. But, he was recognized at that event for his judgment and generosity.

The conversion of economic to symbolic and social capital was not all that happened to the Wilkersons. From the beginning, it was clear that the

Wilkersons – who initially chose to be anonymous as collectors – were very uncomfortable if not averse to ‘politics’ and especially to Indigenous politics. For them, these paintings were beautiful and their collection of them had nothing to do with the politics of Indigeneity or recognition in Australia. I doubt they knew any Indigenous people and they showed not too much interest in their contemporary lives. This concerned me and had a good deal to do with my keeping some distance from the project. I believe their anxiety or indifference to Indigenous presence had to do with fears of possible repatriation of their paintings and actual conflict over particular paintings that were prevented from overseas export by the Papunya Reference Group (a group who decide, under Australian Heritage Legislation, what works should remain Australian heritage). At the beginning of the planning for the exhibition, they had been reluctant to have their ownership of the paintings made public, identifying only a foundation as the holders of the works. At this point, they saw themselves as owning these paintings as valuable commodities, beautiful objects purchased at auction and not part of any engagement with their makers.

This view was challenged when they were asked to accept some restrictions on what could be shown. There was a direct confrontation between Indigenous protocol, community authority, and ownership rights. If it required the Wilkersons’ acceptance of these limitations to have an exhibition go forward, it was also an opportunity for them to learn more about what these objects meant to living people, and to develop an ethical model for private collectors, many of whom ignore such protocols since they are under different legal obligations from public institutions, especially outside Australia where heritage laws and Indigenous title are not relevant.

This was really the Wilkersons’ ‘journey of understanding.’ After their extended time with the visiting Pintupi men who executed the groundpainting in Ithaca and celebrated with them in New York City, direct descendants of the original painters, and with their exposure to the brilliant cultural work of Indigenous filmmakers Warwick Thornton and Beck Cole, John Wilkerson was imagining how he might ‘give back’ to the Aboriginal community in some sort of philanthropic way. He came to distinguish his own collecting practice as respectful of other dimensions, along with the beauty of the paintings. Turning away from his initial judgment that the original painters were all dead and the movement and its inspiration were over, and recognizing the impressive and ongoing creativity of Indigenous artists, the Wilkersons purchased several contemporary paintings to donate to Cornell.

Conclusion: the vicissitudes of bush capital

The enactment of competing and contradictory regimes of value I have described are a central focus for theoretical consideration. There is considerable friction in these gatherings over authority, control of knowledge,

precedence in scholarship, possessiveness of the painters, of moral authority and ownership, and so on. Surely one of the more interesting tensions of such cultural fields is the tension between the ‘bush’ and the ‘gallery’. By ‘bush capital’, I refer to deep knowledge that comes from living together in close proximity to the demanding situations in which the paintings are made, with the complex social relations of reciprocity and debt, as well as knowledge of the ‘revelatory regimes’ that are central to the paintings’ cosmological significance. This is in contrast to the rather spruced up, comfortable locations of the gallery, urban refinement, clean clothes and showers, and rather abstract and idealized language used in these settings.

What can we take from this case of disturbances in the field of cultural production provided by the presence of Indigenous Australian painting in centers of western art? In short, Bourdieu’s emphasis on a singular hierarchy of cultural difference – an analysis fundamentally based on dynamics internal to French society – presents some difficulties in understanding the complexities that emerge when incommensurable regimes of value – Aboriginal cultural values and those of the fine art world – come together. The kinds of cross-cultural ‘frictions’ that I have laid out in this article require some expansion of Bourdieu’s model, to give more analytic reach for the kinds of serious disturbances in the dominant cultural field that the radical alterity of Aboriginal art produces.

So, the movement of Indigenous acrylic painting into the space of full western aesthetic appreciation produces a series of disturbances. While it needed to be moved beyond its location in ‘the bush’, a significant part of its value also lies in its radical difference, a condition that continues in the presentation of the paintings because of the value they objectify for those who make them. I argue that it is not simply a matter of putting this work in the canon, but of recognizing it as having conceptual as well as formal qualities that teach one to look at art differently.

This can be a lengthy process. Primitivism still has its grip, especially when reviewers hold to the axioms of Greenberg’s Formalism – that one only needs to respond to the work on the wall. But even a sloppy review in the *Wall Street Journal* brings viewers, recognition, and ‘impressions’.

Imagine that you could travel back in time to meet a Stone Age hunter-gatherer, that you could hand him a paintbrush and ask him to paint something on a board or canvas – not warpaint on his body or daubings on a cave, but a proper picture, one that gave us a glimpse of his inner landscape and his aesthetic universe. This is precisely what happened at Papunya in 1972 near the remote outpost of Alice Springs in the heart of the Australian outback. The products of that early encounter gave rise to the internationally celebrated phenomenon of Aboriginal art, an *ecole* of sorts, that we all recognize today ... (Kaylan, 2009)

I had spent three hours discussing the exhibition with Kaylan, apparently to no avail. He was neither an appreciator of the ‘conceptual art’ qualities of the work nor receptive to the long-standing critique of ‘primitivism’. Sometimes hierarchy is hard to shake.

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Notes

- 1 The extensive critical discussion of the exhibition “‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth Century Art’ (Rubin, 1984) forms the basis of this view. See Clifford (1984), Foster (1985) and others, and my own reflection on ‘primitivism’ (Myers, 2006b).
- 2 I would like to clarify these discussions in relation to the current state of anthropology. It is no longer the discipline that essentializes its subject; my own relationship to acrylic painting draws on the approach that French filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch called ‘*anthropologie partagée*’, a collaborative practice of knowledge production that – in retrospect – has some family resemblance to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) call for decolonizing methodology.
- 3 I have argued (repeatedly but probably to no avail) from one of these other positions, as I take them – that what is most challenging about these objects as ‘art’ may be the (cultural) understandings of them held by their producers (Myers, 2009, 2011, 2012).

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