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American Ethnologist, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Nov., 1994), 679-699.

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culture-making: performing Aboriginality at the Asia Society Gallery

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Life is translation and we are all lost in it.
—Clifford Geertz [1983:44]

My article is a belated reflection on some events in New York City in late 1988, when two Aboriginal men from Papunya, a community 160 miles west of Alice Springs, spent two weekend afternoons constructing a “sandpainting” for an audience at the Asia Society Galleries. This construction was related to an exhibition, “Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia,” then on display at the Asia Society.

I am interested in this event not only because I know the artists from previous fieldwork at Papunya, but because the sandpainting and the exhibition itself represent a recognizable type of *intercultural transaction*. The performance of Australian Aboriginal cultural practice in a multicultural location is similar to others—increasingly taking place in venues ranging from art galleries and museums to rock clubs, such as the Wetlands in New York—that are important contexts for the contemporary negotiation and circulation of indigenous peoples’ identities (see also Myers 1991). For both indigenous performers and their audience-participants, this kind of “culture making”—in which neither the rules of production nor reception are established—is fraught with difficulties. Generally, such “spectacles” of cultural difference are scrutinized very critically by anthropologists and other cultural analysts¹ on questions both of authenticity and of inequalities in the representation of difference. This makes them, in my view, all the more worthy of sustained attention.

The way in which the performance is “stitched-together” discursively and practically is illustrative of a significant set of contemporary quandaries that, once buried in the handbooks of anthropological method and epistemologies, now occupy center stage in cultural study and the politics of difference. These quandaries—about ethnocentric projections, about the position of the observer-participant, about advocacy—are no longer external to the phenomenon. Translation is the ethnographic object. In the examination of concrete events, such as those of making a painting, representation—anthropological and otherwise—becomes tangible as a

This article presents and analyzes the construction and performance of Australian Aboriginal cultural practice, a sandpainting, at a major art exhibition at the Asia Society in New York. Drawing on an ethnography for which anthropological knowledge is part of the event itself, I examine the multiple constructions of Aboriginal identity in the performance. Such intercultural performances represent an important form of cultural production and constitute salient contexts for the contemporary negotiation and circulation of indigenous peoples’ identities. The focus of the analysis is on the unsettled and pragmatic quality of the performance as a form of social action, emphasizing the goals and trajectories of the differing participants and the specificities of context and discourses involved. [Australian Aborigines, performance, intercultural, identity]

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form of social action. Further, I also want to suggest that the uncertainties, the unsettled understandings, are central to comprehending the variable production of cultural identity in different contexts—what I am calling (after Richard Fox [1985] and Sherry Ortner [1989]) “culture-making” or, more specifically, “becoming Aboriginal.”

The objects displayed in the exhibition were mainly of four types and from four different “cultural areas” in Australia: sculptures (from Cape York), bark paintings (from Arnhem Land), acrylic paintings (Central Australia), and what are known as *toas* or message sticks (from the Lake Eyre region). Bark and acrylic paintings are produced as commodities primarily for commercial sale to outsiders (see Bardon 1979; Kimber 1977; Megaw 1982; Morphy 1983, 1992; Myers 1989; Williams 1976), but both artistic traditions draw largely on designs and stories embedded in Aboriginal traditional religious life. Bark paintings, as a particular mode of visual production, date from the beginning of the 20th century, although the forms are directly continuous with mortuary decorations, body paintings, and the like. Acrylic painting dates from 1971 (see Bardon 1979), but the images are similarly derived from indigenous traditions of ritual form.

The two-day “performance” by the two Aboriginal painters from Papunya Tula Arts cooperative (Billy Stockman and Michael Nelson) was conducted on the Asia Society stage on the weekend of November 4–5. This event was meant both to show something of the “origin”—the cultural original and ritual context—from which acrylic paintings had developed and also to fill a cultural slot in the Asia Society’s paradigm of programming. The performance—full of ironies and fabrications—functioned as one more in a set of representations of “Aboriginal culture” and as a signifier of an emerging construct of “Aboriginality.” In this case, the performance by genuine Aboriginal people authenticated the *presence* of the “Other” in the paintings for the Asia Society. If for some the chance to see the actual Aboriginal painters was certainly the *real thing*, as tokens asserting the genuine *presence* of “the Other” in the paintings, for others their presence raised prominent questions.

The exhibition itself was one of a number of Australian cultural presentations held during 1988 to mark Australia’s bicentennial year. One might view this event, therefore, as an example of those presentations of indigenous art that arrive from the old settler colonies from time to time. Similar sorts of cultural displays were once a part of Native American life, in Wild West shows (see Blackstone [1985]) as well as in the display of “art.” I would also suggest that the Aboriginal Australian cultural forms emerging in contemporary intercultural practice should not be segregated from the indigenous forms produced in other conditions: they may be *new* demonstrations of spirituality and authenticity—that is, redefinitions and rediscoveries of identity worked out in the face of challenging interrogations from an “other.” They are, however, no less sincere or genuine as cultural expression in this response to history.

In this light, it seems to me that most analyses of cultural performance do not address these events as forms of social action. Indeed, the current dominant discourse about such performances emerging from the discussion by many analysts revolves around a view that indigenous people (natives) should represent *themselves*. This position, once the oppositional critique of previous representational frames, tends to dismiss intercultural productions of identity. Those justly outraged and overwhelmed by guilt at the terrible things that have been done to Aboriginal people,² for example, still represent them too often as merely victims or passive recipients of the actions of others. Thus, the predominantly Euro-Australian art critics in Sydney and New York have frequently dismissed Aboriginal acrylic painting as an inauthentic commodification of their culture.³ For the art world, this is a judgment that reduces Aboriginal painting to insignificance (see Price 1989). In the end, I would argue, this erases from our sight the ways in which Aboriginal people use painting to define and gain value from the circumstances that confront them: a double erasure. One must be cautious about romantically finding resistance and cultural freedom where none exists (see Abu-Lughod 1990); it may be that a structure of

domination, such as that established by the white Australian conquest, will ultimately determine the outcome of individual initiatives. It does not follow, however, that one should accept such an *outcome* as representing the actions of the participants themselves. To do so, I believe, can be grievously misleading.

In contrast to the extremes of romantic resistance and devastating domination, other recent work in cultural studies and anthropology has recognized the intersecting interests involved in the production and reception of such events. In addition to pursuing such an approach here, I want to argue that the significance of such events in the life courses and projects of participants goes well beyond the moment of their performance. An ethnographic perspective can draw attention to the neglected temporal dimension of such cultural events by considering the historical trajectories that bring the various players together.

positions

I do not offer myself as the hero of this story. Indeed, I emphasize that I am *in* it, part of it. But I think it does matter that I *am* in it, not least because anthropological representations like my own (see, for example, Myers 1986) enter heavily into many discourses concerning Aborigines. This is strikingly so in the representation of “meanings” for Aboriginal art. My own involvement in the event was minor and largely informal, as I shall detail below, instructive mainly about the changing “location” of anthropology in the 1980s. By 1988, the overt language and action of politics so prominent in the 1960s and 1970s had shifted with the worldwide swing to the right. However physically remote the people in Aboriginal communities may be, the relationship between them and the dominant society is mediated by Euro-Australian terms of “Aboriginal self-determination,” citizenship, and welfare dependence in a liberal state. In Australia, as elsewhere, indigenous people are struggling to find a voice and to define the terms of their situation in ways that will strengthen their own sense of autonomy, their own local traditions and histories. Many recognize that, to some extent, they will have to work with the terms of the dominant society if they are to gain any cultural or economic advantage. Others find it simply inexplicable that the white society fails or is unable to recognize *their* terms. The comments and participation of Aboriginal painters in the exhibition show precisely the extent to which the people I know are willing or able to recognize such terms. One must understand that the terms of discourse are neither invariant nor do they issue from a single arena. They are, as numerous theorists of identity have argued, multiple and shifting (Bhabha 1986; Butler 1990; Ginsburg and Tsing 1991; Hall 1990; Spivak 1987). Thus, it is interesting that, in recent years, Aboriginal people increasingly are indexed by their “artistic” production, products that stand for their identity. This should hardly be a surprise. In many respects, it is the art world that has constructed the new scene, the arena in which the “Other”—the non-Western, non-white, non-male—is both being constructed and its use contested. Notably, even when the “Other” is invited to represent himself/herself/themselves in the 1980s, most frequently it is the “artist” who is invited to speak—be it Trinh T. Minh-Ha, David Hwang, or Michael Nelson Tjakamarra. Around them, and sometimes through them, deep debates over the adequacy and legitimacy of representations of culture have been taking place.

identity

Two issues seem to be central to the performances and circulation of collective identities by Australian Aboriginal people. One, as I have already suggested, is the significance of cultural performances in Western settings, not just for the communication of aspects of a collective Aboriginal identity, but as perhaps a central context of its very production and transformation.

The other issue is the very existence and production of an *Aboriginal* identity, as opposed to the less categorical and more temporary local identities that Aboriginal people had typically produced (or objectified [see Myers 1988]) for themselves in social action in the past. To put it boldly, there were no *Aborigines* until the Europeans came. There were, instead, “people from *Walawala*,” or “Warlpiri people,” or “people of Madarrpa clan.”

The us/them opposition is obviously a critical question, since in traditional life this sort of permanent, essential alterity is impossible—even if “the Other” (a self-other contrast) is a necessary condition of one’s own definition.⁴ There can be no doubt that the category “Aboriginal” is, in the first instance, externally imposed—as settlers of European descent used the category to denote the original inhabitants of the continent who had no framework (or need) to grasp themselves as an identity (a difference) in opposition to some other sort of people.⁵ They were quite able to do so, of course—as they typically extended the indigenous category of “human person” (for example, *wati*, “man,” or *yarnangu*, “person,” for Pintupi; *yapa*, “person,” for Warlpiri; *yolngu*, “person,” in Northeast Arnhem Land) that had differentiated “real people” from other sorts of persons (or subjects) to contrast with “whitefellas” (see Keffe 1992; Myers 1993). To some, the very category “Aboriginal,” therefore, reeks of its colonialist origins as the form of the indigenous people’s domination and exclusion. Embraced by the descendants of the first inhabitants, however, it has the potential of laying claim to a temporal priority that has moral power in claiming rights to land (as the concept of “First Nations” has in North America). Despite the existence of a category of collective identity, there was little action basis for its performance or realization. Identity was more typically, for want of a better word, “segmentary” or relative, local. Most performances of identity by traditionally oriented Aboriginal people are “totemic” (see Myers 1993), differentiating people at one level but linking them at another.

In contemporary life, there are undoubtedly numerous contexts in which collective identities are critical dimensions of social action, but it should require some consideration that a central arena for the performance and critical discussion—that is, the objectification—of cultural identity has been in “the arts,” so to speak (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992; Lippard 1990). Following a long history in which first objects representing their activities and beliefs, and then films, were circulated in museums and exhibitions, Aboriginal people have been participating increasingly as embodied representatives of their culture and identity in such endeavors, displaying their culture in external contexts in the form of “performance.” (These are, too, *male* bodies. One might well ask what difference it would make if the performances were embodied by women, as they could easily have been. Would the “readings” have emphasized an essentialist “female” identification with the earth?)

Stuart Hall’s much-quoted statement, “nothing exists outside of representation” (Hall 1990), is entirely to the point. These performances are always mediated, always enter into a ground prepared by existing genres—genres of pedagogical “instruction,” avant-garde “shocks of the new,” “nostalgia for the loss of spiritual wholeness,” and so on. Moreover, if the performers, somewhat cosmopolitan visitors to a range of cultural festivals and performances, bring a sense of audience and intention, the audience participants bring at least two preexisting, sometimes overlapping, cultural frames for this sort of performance of cultural difference. One, more political and instructional, frame is the performance of ethnicity, where cultural difference indexes collective and (potential) political identity. This frame probably derives from the 19th-century folkloristic interests in national minorities, but it is now a significant discursive framework for the presentation of Third and Fourth World people (see Graburn 1976, Paine 1981). The other frame, well-established at a setting such as the Asia Society (where a typical presentation would concern Tibetan, Chinese, or Japanese art and performance) is the frame of coming in contact with a cultural form that is assumed to possess something of an “aura”

(Benjamin 1968), of sacred tradition or aesthetic originality, as expressed in the following piece of publicity circulated by the Asia Society:

the extraordinary vitality of Aboriginal art. It is the oldest continuous art tradition in the world, and is flourishing with new energy and creativity in contemporary media. The works in the exhibition represent the "Dreamings," the spiritual foundation of Aboriginal life.

The origin of the exhibition and the sandpainting event lies in the collaboration of the South Australian Museum and the Asia Society. In addition to the exhibition itself, the Gallery offered video displays, films, a two-day symposium with anthropologists and Aboriginal artists, and the sandpainting (under the auspices of the "Performance" segment of the Asia Society staff).⁶ These events were not only intended to help place the art objects on display in a sociocultural and historical context.⁷ As "events," performances also provided the sort of action that brings additional publicity and attention to an exhibition. This certainly proved to be the case with the sandpainting: basing herself on interviews with the two painters, producer Joanne Simon did a segment on the exhibition for the nationally syndicated "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour" (1989).

The responsibility for arranging the sandpainting allegedly lay with the curators from South Australia (anthropologists Peter Sutton and Chris Anderson, also contributors to the catalog), who negotiated for over a year with men from the Papunya Tula Artists cooperative (currently about 90 men and a few women, mainly from the communities of Papunya, Kintore, Kiwirrkura, comprise this collective). However, it was the Asia Society people who *insisted* on this inclusion to help show something of the roots of the acrylic paintings in ritual life. The sandpainting event, billed as "Traditional Sandpainting by Aboriginal Artists," cost \$10 to attend and attracted a more-than-respectable 700 visitors on its two weekend afternoons. The rubric for the construction of a sandpainting was that such ground designs constitute *one* of the traditional bases for the contemporary production of acrylic designs on canvas. The embeddedness of designs in traditional religious life constitutes, for Aborigines and perhaps for whites, a major part of their value (Myers 1989). While the South Australian curators agreed to negotiate for a performance, the secret/sacred (that is, esoteric) nature of men's ritual and the conventions for its display (well-known to anthropologists) were a problem, because performance in a fully public context would be a violation of the ordinary, prevailing rules for the production of such symbolic forms.

the anthropologist at home

Perhaps I should explain my own participation in the events.⁸ I was consulted late in the plans for the exhibition itself, for advice on training docents. Because I was already going to Central Australia for more fieldwork with Pintupi people, I ended up helping to make a videotape representing the point of view of the artists from the community of Yuendumu (the cooperative known as Warlukurlangu Artists) that was shown for the exhibit (this is another story, however). I also agreed to take part as a speaker in the first symposium, drawing on my previous research with men who had done several of the paintings in the show. When the Papunya artists arrived, men I had known for several years, I visited with them and offered to make videotapes documenting the event and trip for them to take back to show in Papunya. So, I spent most of the days of their visit to New York either shooting video and talking with them or informally as a participant, providing anthropological knowledge to the audience. My ability to take on these roles was enhanced by Chris Anderson's interest; as the anthropologist who organized the sandpainting event from the South Australian Museum, Anderson was as interested as I in having a document of this unusual intercultural event.

ritual

Sandpaintings are typically constructed as part of ritual, including songs and reenactments of ancestral activities, in which all those present are essentially participants. Sandpaintings are neither independent entities nor are they performances for an audience of spectators. Indeed, sandpaintings are ritual constructions to which, like most forms of religious knowledge in Central Australia, access is restricted. Only initiated men would ordinarily be permitted to see these paintings. In that simple sense, the activity of constructing a sandpainting at the Asia Society was something new. And how to manage the painting in such a way as to adhere sufficiently to the conventions on such knowledge was an issue that had been discussed at meetings among the Aboriginal artists before they came to the United States.

The artists were faced with managing the painting in such a way as to adhere sufficiently to the conventions of such knowledge, that is, sufficiently enough to protect themselves from criticism from others with rights to designs and from possible spiritual dangers from misperformance. They were certainly cognizant of the dangers they faced from the jealousy of other men, although they had discussed their plans at length with other men at Papunya. And when Michael was interviewed by Joanne Simon from MacNeil-Lehrer, for example, a great success for the Asia Society, she asked him about the meaning of the dots in the acrylic paintings. He told her, politely but firmly, that he could not talk about that: "I can't tell you that name." Such knowledge was restricted.⁹

Each of the men did a painting for which he had rights as what is called "owner" in Aboriginal English, or *kirta* in Warlpiri, rights that can be conceived of, for simplicity's sake here (but see Meggitt 1962, Munn 1973, Maddock 1981, Myers 1986), as rights to designs and stories, including the right to perform them, obtained through a father who was also *kirta*. Such rights are differentiated from another, complementary, set of rights to the same objects, songs, and stories, which belong to those who are "managers" or *kurtungurlu*. Bill Stockman's painting was of the Budgerigar Dreaming, while Michael Nelson's was, typically, more ambitious: it included three different Dreamings to which he had rights (Possum, Kangaroo, Flying Ant). Such paintings would have been undertaken by several men under normal, ritual conditions. All of this was explained repeatedly to the audience, which, however, changed over the course of the afternoon and seemed little able to hear its local significance. Such issues of production would be of great theoretical interest to postmodern art concerns, but these entered little into the essentially modernist frame.

the painters and their purposes

Two Aboriginal men, Michael Nelson and Billy Stockman, were chosen and agreed to do the sandpaintings. An important criterion in their selection, which was partly made in conjunction with the advice of Daphne Williams (then art advisor to Papunya Tula Artists) and partly with the recommendation of a group meeting of the artists themselves, was that both men speak English relatively well. Nelson and Stockman's previous experiences of intercultural activity (they were used to representing or mediating their identities) meant they would be comfortable traveling to New York and communicating with people there. The Warlpiri painter Michael Nelson Tjakamarra is an intense, thoughtful, and complex person. The youngest son of a ritually very important father and grandfather, Michael was long overlooked in favor of his rather glamorous older brother. While he was the younger of the two men on this trip, Michael has achieved considerable reputation for his painting, especially for the design he did that was reproduced in a huge mosaic in front of Australia's recently completed Parliament House.¹⁰ One of Michael Nelson's paintings was in the exhibition and is reproduced on the cover of the catalog. But Michael took up painting only recently, and the older man, Billy Stockman,

Michael's classificatory brother-in-law, enjoyed a reputation as a painter from the earliest days of Papunya painting in 1972. Billy, distinguished by his silver hair and full-bearded "elder" appearance, has served as a member of the National Aboriginal Congress, visited the United States and France with earlier exhibitions of Aboriginal work, and traveled as one of the Aboriginal representatives to the Black Arts Festival in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1978. Other men *could* have come instead of these two, but they were likely choices, given the circumstances.

Why they wanted to come and what they wanted to communicate is more complex. First, there was the interest of a trip to a distant country and, secondly, the considerable prestige they expected to enjoy when they returned to Papunya. Other artists who have traveled, I can say, have tried to represent themselves back home as entitled to special treatment because of their experiences and connections abroad. (One man has repeatedly told me that no one can argue with him or threaten him, in Central Australia, because he has "too many relations" in England and America.) Such a value on relations from "far away" as a bulwark of one's own identity has roots in traditional Aboriginal life (Myers 1986). In fact, the trip itself and the interest whites showed in them would increase their importance at home (as more first among equals than others). Interestingly, at lunch one day after the sandpainting, the two men began to discuss the politics of their home community with me and expressed a sense that their own positions and control should be more significant than they currently were. Partly on these grounds, the videotape I was making was important to them: to show others. They complained that what *yarnangu* (Aboriginal people) do, such as when the Papunya women danced in Sydney, is not shown on the small television station at Papunya (as it is at nearby Yuendumu).

The explicit purpose of their coming and their construction of the sandpainting was to show Aboriginal culture to people of the world, so people would understand and respect their culture. However obvious this might seem, the communication was hardly straightforward. When two members of the MacNeil-Lehrer interview team arrived at the artists' hotel room to meet them, the interviewers attempted to create rapport and to begin communication by asking the men where they learned to speak English. At that point, it seemed to me, Billy Stockman actually told them most of what they would have wanted to know about the relationship between Aboriginal identity, painting, and the dominant society. They did not recognize this as part of his performance, unfortunately. Billy's response to their question was to say that he did not learn to speak English in school, but at stock camps. Before any of that, however, he had to learn ceremony, their own Law, from his father's Law, in the bush:

I didn't go to school . . . went to Aboriginal school, ceremony. Learned Aboriginal Law. Sort of Aboriginal high school, you know? Not white people's school. Learned ceremony, painting, there.

Only later, he stressed, did he learn white people's ways. Of course, this was not captured by any camera. Nor did it seem that the two interviewers saw how much they were being informed about the value or priority of "Aboriginal high school," of learning "our Law."¹¹ After their interview, Michael Nelson was highly critical of the way he was asked questions in the interview, finding them too abrupt, too sharp. This is, ironically, quite a common formulation Aboriginal people make of their difference from whites, especially in regard to the processes of recognizing persons, and of communicating and acquiring knowledge (see Keeffe 1992), processes that were fundamental, in fact, to the entire project of communication and respect for cultural difference envisaged by the exhibition. Michael had an idea in his head of what he wanted to say and felt tripped up by the questions which, he said, "made it hard." The questions did not allow him to explain his subject as he wished. Thus, he criticized the way these "big city people ask too many questions"; "they don't listen," he said, noting their difference from those of us (Françoise Dussart, John Kean, Chris Anderson, and I) who had considerable experience of Aboriginal communities.

The painters were clear about their intentions when they arrived in New York City (Françoise Dussart, telephone conversation, November 11). As Michael Nelson said when we had a lunch

break during the sandpainting, "I'm representing Aboriginal culture here," and he and Billy Stockman wanted this to go well. I believe that this act of representing has some of the significance for the men that the successful performance of ceremonies has in the local contexts. It certainly was an artistic challenge to Michael, who insisted on coming early to the Asia Society to check out the stage and conditions. Performing this in ways that worked with the news media was distressing, given the disparity between Michael's emerging cosmopolitan identity as an "artist" and their take on him as an exotic. Michael was a bit distressed about the day spent with the MacNeil-Lehrer interviewers, when they took the men to the Carnegie Delicatessen and to the Central Park Zoo, a nearby venue where they could film them "visiting New York" and "being Aboriginal" (Billy talked to the animals). Michael, a different sort of performer from Billy, wanted to talk about the "art" (John Kean, conversation, November 12). Michael expressed an expectation of being paid for appearing in a "film," a particular concern about control of images long an issue with Aboriginal people. At the same time, he *had* expected to see himself on television in New York and was initially somewhat disappointed by the apparent lack of interest. However, after discussion with some of us, he decided that the publicity for their work, that it would be seen "all over America, right around," would help sell paintings.

event

Preceded by a short lecture on the first day by anthropologist Chris Anderson (curator of anthropology, South Australian Museum) and comments by Beati Gordon (director of performances at the Asia Society), the "event" began on each day at about 1:00 p.m. and consisted principally of the two men sitting on a raised stage, each working at his own painting, applying acrylic paint and a "fluff" (*wamulu*) made from wild daisies to a sand surface. Wearing long trousers but with their torsos and faces covered with red ochre, the two men were mostly alone on stage, although the former art advisor to Papunya (John Kean) brought materials on and off for them.¹² On the first day, the men decorated themselves only in red ochre and headbands, but on the second day, they painted designs on themselves before coming on stage. Drawn from the repertoire of the *Tjartiwanpa* ceremony involving a snake (known as *Jaripiri*) associated with a place called Winparrku, the body designs had nothing to do with those on the ground,¹³ but they "stood for" a bigger idea, of context—the relation of song, dance, and myth to sandpainting—that is, for ceremony. Facing the seated audience of the large sloping auditorium, the painters were surrounded by tins and small containers for the acrylic paint they were using and bags of "fluff" made from plants they had brought from Central Australia. The stage had been covered with 3 tons of special reddish sand brought in from Long Island. A single break was held during each afternoon, during which the men went backstage for a rest.

Much of the emphasis in framing this event, from those at the Asia Society, focused on the dramatic dimension of the men "painting up" and on the (eventual) "disempowerment" of the paintings as the climax of the event. At two points, the men "performed" a dance, a modification of performances that men enact in contexts quite different from those involved with the paintings they were doing but which were chosen because they revealed no knowledge subject to restriction. For these performances, Michael Nelson turned his back on the audience¹⁴ and sang the words of a song from the *Tjartiwanpa* ceremony and provided percussion by clapping together two boomerangs, while Billy Stockman danced the conventional movements across the stage behind the paintings. On the first such occasion, Billy did only a single dance, but in subsequent appearances of this sort, he did four different dance sequences. The second day was built toward what was advertised as the "disempowerment" of the sacred images of the sandpaintings, which was performed by each man throwing sand on and disrupting the image of the other.

The disempowerment was a new twist, owing considerably (I believe) to the Asia Society's previous performances of Asian religious art. Nonetheless, the framework of such performances has become conventional in recent years for Central Australian people. Cultural improvisation is not new, even for the "bushiest" and least experienced of Aboriginal people. For example, ground paintings were similarly produced to accompany an exhibition in Sydney in the early 1980s, and painters from Papunya accompanied an arts group sponsored by Aboriginal Artists Australia that performed throughout the United States in 1981. Aboriginal women, likewise, have been performing their dances in arts festivals around Australia with considerable regularity and enthusiasm. These experiences, reported back by participants to their compatriots at home, provide the basis for a genre of "cultural performance" that is still partially unfixed.

Another dimension of the "event," as experienced, was the alternation of long periods of silence (with the audience simply watching the painters) with the presentation of background information by "specialists," especially by Chris Anderson and Françoise Dussart (but on occasion by me), and questions from the audience. Such questions were addressed, by request of the painters, to those "white people who know about Aboriginal traditions." Unintentionally, this created a rather bizarre concatenation of meditative, observational silences and pedagogical overlays on a distanced and (apparently) unattainable pair of performers. It led one visiting Australian artist (Christopher Hodge) to complain, in writing as well as in the lobby of the Asia Society, that the event was "like a diorama."¹⁵ Alluding to the lifelike scenes of figures behind glass in natural history museums, commonly held to embody a view of non-Western peoples as static and passive and as belonging to the natural environment as opposed to being human agents, Hodge's complaint suggests that the presence of Aboriginals in the sandpainting performance, ironically, violated the contemporary convention that the "Others" should *speak* for themselves. (This was, in fact, a convention rigorously observed in the symposium that had preceded this event by two weeks.) An artist himself, Hodge had recently visited Central Australia and had combined his sense of Aboriginal painters' co-presence (Fabian 1983) with the more general critical stance toward such representational practices.

Throughout the afternoon, as well, the audience changed to some degree, as people came and went. They were also free to walk up to the stage to see more closely. In these respects, it is unlikely that everybody saw the same event, if ever one could say that.

performance

The event described, however problematic from the point of view of Aboriginal practices, made perfectly good sense in its slot within the Asia Society, which has had all sorts of performers from different cultural traditions, ranging from Kathakali dancers to Chinese singers.

what's going on? Beati Gordon, the Asia Society's director of performances, introduced the event to the lecture audience by emphasizing "distance," "uniqueness," "difference," and "sacred ritual." Note how her own concern with authenticity is undermined by her unwittingly ironic emphasis on the newness of this event:

We have put together a very interesting demonstration of sandpainting by two Australian Aboriginals who have come here expressly just to do that for us. This has not been done ever in the United States. As a matter of fact, it has only been done twice in the world, once in Sydney and once in Paris, for lay audiences like ourselves. Because, as Dr. Anderson will explain to you later, this is a sacred ritual which the Aborigines do in secret, uh, places and the one you're going to be seeing is not going to be a completely secret one because apparently there are many layers of thought that go into these dreamings. [And Mr. Anderson being the expert on it, I will let him tell you exactly what it is. I just want to let you know how we will proceed.]

At this point, anthropologist Chris Anderson took up, attempting to explain the inexplicable: what would people be seeing (or not seeing). Notice how he gets caught up in contradiction with the prevailing frame of interpretation:

The performance today, I'd like to explain, is not really a performance as such in that it's not a dramatic event. . . . It's not a ceremony in that this work is normally done with many more Aboriginal people involved. It's very much a *social* event. It's a deeply *religious* event, and it's an important political event. In that sense, *this* is not a ceremony because there are too few people. It's a very strange context for them and so what they've done. . . . It took a long time of talking, perhaps a year or so of discussion. . . . It wasn't just a matter of negotiating with two individual people about the whole thing. There was a much larger social universe that had to be consulted before we could really get agreement on how it could be done [in other words, the painters are not fully individuated agents]. . . .

I just thought I'd mention that it *is* special and that they have modified the designs to some extent so that they can do them. . . . Normally men doing this is secret and only open to initiated men. . . .

They're only showing you the top part, the outside part. Other layers are too important, too powerful, too dangerous for settings like this. In fact, any setting outside the normal one in which the ceremony that the event is part of would be too dangerous. So they have modified it.

Anderson went on to tell the listeners that the painters had to make adjustments, which represented the flexibility, creativity, and ongoing continuity of an Aboriginal culture that was once conceived as static and doomed. For the men, he says, the performance is a denial of just this view. Their culture is alive; they are *here*. But how should one feel about this event? The conditions of performance do not interfere with *their* understandings of the sacred. As Anderson explained,

Because it's sacred doesn't mean we have to adopt this reverential attitude towards it. The men see this, and this is the reason they're doing it, *they want to present their culture and their world view to non-Aboriginal people and particularly to Americans*. So they are happy if you have questions and want to look." [emphasis added]

performing The Aboriginal men regarded this performance very seriously, and they were very proud of how they comported selves. They wanted approval and recognition, which required sustaining an illusion: Billy Stockman was finished with his painting by the end of the first day but had to keep painting over it during the second day; Michael Nelson was concerned that people not be so close as to see how the ground had cracked, but felt that he had been able to cover it sufficiently with paint to hide it.

Backstage at the Asia Society in the dressing room, with its mirrors and makeup lights, the chatter and conversation were markedly different from the silence on stage behind which the painters moved in their own space. Realizing how participants talk about ritual performance in ordinary contexts, I told them I was impressed that they were able to sing and dance alone, without "shame" or "embarrassment" (*kunta*). Michael said it was hard, with so many people. But "we [are] representing our country."

But there was also an air of performance that was quite different from that of ritual, not just because sandwiches and soft drinks were brought in as refreshment. As part of the Asia Society's publicity, a *New York Times* photographer arrived, and it was arranged for him to take pictures of the two men, painted up for their performance, with some small children. As the men knelt beside their boomerangs, several mothers brought their rather anxious four-year-olds up to meet the men (who are quite used to the presence of children generally and are comfortable with them). The children were anything but comfortable or pleased to encounter these smiling, ochre- and paint-covered faces, however much the boomerangs might have interested them. The photographs were taken, but the embarrassment was palpable. At this moment, pressured by the enticing potential for "publicity," the Aboriginal performers were only exotic sign vehicles, "commodities," of "something interesting" and "seen for the first time here."¹⁶

This objectification of their identity as "Other" contrasted powerfully with the way the Aboriginal men considered the relationships involved in putting on this performance. Elated by their success, the often-reserved Michael Nelson chose to address those of us whites who had

been with them in terms that identified us with them,¹⁷ emphasizing “connection,” referring to people in affectionate kin terms. Billy said how hard we had all worked (Chris, John Kean, Françoise, and I), including us in their entourage.

At times, the men’s conception of “performance” in this context and their concentration of effort had unforeseen effects. Quite significantly, the men had insisted they did not wish to answer questions while they were painting onstage; this would interfere with their concentration on their work. Moreover, they did not seem to want this kind of intrusion. They were, they said, very happy with our “help” in that respect, although in listening to what we said, they had suggested some elaborations of what they would like people to know. The results of this interpretive practice, however, were the alternating periods of questions and anthropological talk about what the audience could see on the stage (and the object of attention uncontacted by the audience) in the lights beyond their reach and the periods of hushed silence as people just watched.

The silence is very untypical of Aboriginal ritual events, especially in the preparatory stages, when forms of sociability such as chatting and card playing, as well as ceremonial singing, accompany the ground painting. Silence at the Asia Society added a sense of what is to us reverential, meditational concentration that is not at all obvious, if present, in the original ritual contexts. Many of the audience commented on this quality of the event, and Chris Anderson anticipated this in the comments I described before. Anderson may still have been forced to play into this by not owning up fully to this event as a sort of commodity, although he did say that men had left out parts, that they decided to show what was only a part of a larger event. Despite these “disclaimers,” so to speak, many in the audience did not seem to grasp how different the context really was. The two men often did seem behind glass, the “glass wall” effect of proscenium staging, although they were listening actively and occasionally laughing—thus was created the experience of the watcher I mentioned who complained that the event was like a “diorama at the museum of natural history,” with experts out front explaining and the men in the spotlight on the stage.

What was this, people wanted to know? Was it a ritual event? A commodity? There were many questions about whether “power” was being brought in, and so forth. What was going on? What was being performed? Much of the emphasis in framing the event and discussion from the audience, especially on the second day, centered on (1) the theme or drama of “disempowerment” of the paintings at the end, a theme that came from the Asia Society’s advertisement for the event and that I take to be from the comparative religion tradition that is significant at the Asia Society, or (2) on the men’s painting themselves with designs, although the body designs were not from the same Dreaming as the sandpaintings. Nobody said this to the audience, although Anderson did state that this performance was only “showing a glimpse.”

For the men, this fused genre was not a ritual, although it shared many features with that genre of performance. As if it were a ritual, before coming to New York, the men had made certain to obtain permission for the performance of this knowledge and design with others who had rights to it back at Papunya. And while it was not, therefore, exactly a ritual, the men saw it as a performance that, as with ritual, was expressive of their identity: their local identities as persons defined by their relationship to land-based ceremonial forms, their identities as mature (initiated) men with ceremonial knowledge, and their identity as “Aboriginal” (in contrast to whites).¹⁸ Some of the politically complex connections between these linked identities and the actual persons and histories who embodied them, however, were exposed during the event and prior to it.

In Adelaide, during the planning stage of the Asia Society exhibition, urban Aboriginal people were reportedly very angry with Peter Sutton, the curator from the South Australian Museum, because their work was not in the show. Michael Nelson apparently defended Sutton then. He believes that people are really interested in his work and the work of traditional people because

it derives from The Dreaming, the source of value from which most urban people have been separated. "They [whites] want to see [art] from the Center," he told me, in explaining his understanding of the situation. "Urban Aboriginal people *ngurrpaya nyinanyi* ('they are ignorant' [of Aboriginal Law])." Thus, he feels sorry for them.

There is a considerable political charge to such views. These differences have historically presented a significant obstacle to Aboriginal political mobilization, and the separation of "traditional" and "urban" Aboriginal people is viewed by many activists not only as the continuing product of a racist colonial history, but also as the current form of racial manipulation. In fact, such differences and gaps between different "sorts" of Aboriginal being may be denied by "urban" and "traditional" people alike in varying contexts in favor of assertions of similarity and identity. At one point during the sandpainting, for example, Lorraine Mafi-Williams, an urban Aboriginal woman and filmmaker who attended the event, spoke up from the audience and disagreed with the French anthropologist Françoise Dussart's description of how Aboriginal culture is learned by children. This disagreement, essentially a challenge to Dussart's ethnographic authority from one who sees herself as an Aboriginal (although not from the community being discussed), was viewed as a potential disruption of the performance by a differing political agenda. Michael said he had been worried when she got up to speak; he feared that she might upset things. This comment almost certainly derives from the criticism (discussed above) that he had received from some Aboriginal activists whose political purposes and cultural circumstances differ from his. Like many other traditionally oriented Aboriginal people, he believes that urban people have "lost" their law, or had it destroyed (he does not place the blame on them). But, as he told me, "We're lucky. We still have our Law, everything." So it is natural for people to be interested in them and their art.

The men were authentic, but conventions of "authenticity" were problematic throughout the event, as the men found when they considered foregoing the Asia Society's hard-sought 3 tons of Central Desert-looking sand trucked in from Long Island. Because the sand did not take water and produce a smooth surface the way Central Australian soil does, the men said they preferred to paint the designs on the masonite-board floor, which itself had a reddish tone. The Asia Society representative breathed deeply for a moment and said "This is supposed to be sandpainting; we advertised sandpainting." Faced with this, the men graciously gave in.

audience

The response to the sand construction was complex and varied among the audience and the performers. Cross-cultural communication is, in any case, complex and difficult. We cannot satisfy ourselves in accounting for this event by simple recourse to the Aboriginal point of view. We may know their intentions and goals, but in this sort of "improvisation," to use a word appropriate for such performances, no one quite knows what the categories are. Neither the artists nor the audience had a fixed and accepted framework within which to place this event. The anthropologists seemed uncomfortable, as well, with the departure from convention and from the "authentic" or, at least, uncomfortable that the audience might take the new for the "authentic" context.

The audience brought to this event a number of frames, including (1) that it was a ritual (was this going to bring power to New York?), and (2) that religious activity was intrinsically meditative, contemplative (the silence was wonderful). One woman asked, for example, "How should we think about the making of this construction here now? Does it include us? Is it something . . . is it just for Aboriginal people or is it for the good of everybody? And is it particularly done for us?"¹⁹ Another asked Chris Anderson,

I guess, that knowing that they are sharing something of their culture that is sacred, you did say they were not going below a certain point. . . . I understand that. But yet they are still sharing something that is sacred. Is it necessary for us in some way to give something back?

Others seemed more concerned with the nature of aesthetic production: "Are the images passed on from generation to generation in a static way or is there some sort of individual creation involved in each stage?"

For the Asia Society, the director of performances stressed the unusual uniqueness of this event (never seen in United States). Some viewers saw it as the contradictory event it was but enjoyed it anyway. A number of spectators were anthropologists, some were artists, but most were part of the "cultured" middle class who attend similar kinds of educational events in New York.²⁰ Not many of the people we encountered knew much about Aboriginal art. The Asia Society's typical events, Kathakali dancers, for example, are more clearly performance than this. What audience members took from their participation was varied, undoubtedly, but suggested a set of frameworks that belong comfortably within the categories of Western culture but which recognize the limitations of their knowledge.

Let me give as illustrations two more examples:

Audience: What I like about it also, is that you are dealing, I don't know if this is characteristic when it's really done in Australia, but there is this mixture of a casualness and a precise attention at the same time, so that you can come in and out. They seem to have a sort of relaxed attitude about it, so there is that sort of aspect to it. They are both very precise and concentrated but also sort of relaxed, get up, go around, and get things to drink. [interview by Elaine Charnov, November 5, 1988]

And finally:

Audience: I'd never seen it, of course none of us has ever seen anything like this, since this is the first time it's been done in the United States. I think the show is a major show, in this country. I don't know that much about the art myself, but aesthetically I find it very pleasing. I also like the idea of art, culture, art being part of the whole culture, the whole society. Too many Westerners tend to separate it into separate categories. We forget that, even for ourselves, art grew out of our religion, our history. It was part of our whole life, not one separate category. But it's wonderful to see these things and to learn about them. To get this one-world global picture. [interview by Elaine Charnov, November 5, 1988]

This was certainly not the last performance of "Aboriginal culture" in the United States, and the genre and its conventions are only now emerging. Subsequent events, such as the "Walkabout Tour" in 1991, which involved two other Papunya painters with two Euro-Australian poets, have attempted to evoke other, perhaps more avant-garde, relationships between cultural traditions. New Age contexts represent another arena for elaboration. This emerging genre, then, seems a good example of the necessity of differentiating the phases of "encoding" and "decoding" (Hall 1993) in the process of cultural production.

Much might be said about such events, but one should remember that, however troubled and imperfect they may be as incidents of representation, their effects outlast the moment. I think no one really knows what "happened" on the stage, whether spiritual energy and danger were invoked or negotiated, or whether Aboriginal relations to place were securely signified. It is not insignificant, I think, that a 7-year-old boy whose mother brought him to see the sandpainting was so captivated that he is now, four years later, planning to do a school project on an imaginary trip to a foreign country on Aborigines in Australia.

conclusion

My principal concern in this article has been to sustain the sense of the Aboriginal performance at the Asia Society as an *event*, a social engagement among participants with varied cultural and political backgrounds, trajectories, and purposes. First and foremost, I argue, it is particularly important to sustain this perspective if one is to grant any real value to the position(s) adopted by the Aboriginal performers in their improvisations. The view of these events simply

as moments in a longer history or structure of domination or subjugation, however accurate they might ultimately prove to be, ignores the play and possibilities of the event as a form of social action that is not necessarily reducible to a past or future social state.²¹ Not only is there much for us to learn about the experience of such intercultural transactions by such attention; there also seems to be little alternative. A “postcolonial” ethnography, one that does not articulate itself within the already existing relations of knowledge and power, must attend to these actors’ considerations over our own critical judgments.

Secondly, then, the ethnography of such unsettled events is important as an example of the increasingly common situation in which cultural “translation” is no longer confined either to anthropology or to the academy. As ongoing and passionate debates about cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity, about multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and the recognition of “difference” suggest, such translation constitutes a major dimension of social life itself. It goes on regularly, commonly, if imperfectly. The status of cultural production is inflected with a further consciousness: for Aborigines to make a painting now, in the new context, is also sometimes “representing one’s culture.” They do so, of course, not always in the times and places of their own making or choosing; instead, they—and I, as ethnographer—operate in a variety of local settings and mediate pragmatically and intellectually between cultural traditions. Aboriginal people do indeed produce their identities partly in relation to discourses emanating from the West, but these discourses are not monolithic, not invariant, and the social contexts in which practices of representation operate have varying effects and significance.

Both Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri hold complex views concerning the domination of Aboriginal Australians by the larger white settler society. Indeed, since the 1970s, Billy has frequently deployed the image of an Aboriginal struggle with whites for control over resources in local- and national-level disputes. Nor is Michael Nelson naive about the social and cultural inequalities in which his daily life takes place. These are as obvious to both men as have been the negative evaluations of Aboriginal life and culture, of their “nakedness” and “ignorance.” Yet in their performance at the Asia Society, they constructed themselves and enacted this cultural politics in a nonconfrontational fashion, drawing on an ongoing indigenous tradition of practice whose importance they continue to uphold *in its own right*, and not just as a counter to external judgments. In this subjectivity, demonstrating something they hold as self-evident, they resemble other Aboriginal people who have found Australian colonialism to be morally unintelligible (see Rose 1984; Rowse 1994). For Michael, at least until recently, there still seems to remain the possibility that white Australians will respond morally to the demonstration of Aboriginal ownership of land self-evidently embodied in ritual and painting (see Myers 1991:51–52), that they might recognize Aboriginal “Law.”

This form of Aboriginality represents a part of the identity performed at the Asia Society. In their agreement to perform a version of an indigenous ritual practice, one could say that the men accepted the position assigned to them as “primitives,” but in doing so, *they* set the terms: (1) they made the decision to come, both individually and as part of an Aboriginal collective; (2) they chose not to talk during the performance. Additionally, in the construction and evaluation of what counted as a “performance,” (3) they assumed the identity of performers and artists and thereby added a degree of discursive consciousness and intercultural awareness to the available conception of what indigenous persons are like.

The event itself is a fused genre; it is “demonstration” and “work display” fused with the aesthetics of “performance art.”²² Its commentary, didacticism, and documentary aspects liken it to demonstration and work display, but, as with performance art, we are invited to watch “real people” (not actors) in process in real time, unscripted, engaged in activities from their everyday lives and conducted in open view. To the degree that these process performances are framed as an aesthetic event and enjoyed in themselves (rather than as a vehicle for commu-

nicating something else), they are like performance art. This accounts in part for the responses, which ranged from “learning” (curiosity satisfied) to “aesthetic experience” (transport).

What relevance, then, do these events, taking place on another continent, have for Aboriginal people living in remote desert communities such as Kintore, Papunya, or Yuendumu? The relevances are several, direct and indirect, economic and cultural. The most concrete material effects of their performance, of course, were felt in the market, where convincing appearances establish value for Aboriginal art, one of the few available nondegrading economic possibilities they have. Events such as this performance make the exhibition newsworthy, and from that point of view increase non-Aboriginal people’s exposure to Aboriginal paintings and culture more generally. Perhaps more significantly in this case, the ability of the performers to enact the ritual foundation of contemporary acrylic painting provides an anchor of commercially valuable “authenticity” for this more hybrid work as a product of the indigenous imagination (see Price 1989). However, the significance of these material effects does not end there, because Aboriginal art producers clearly feel that such recognition enhances their cultural power. As with indigenous people elsewhere, Aboriginal people see themselves often to be taken more seriously overseas than at home. Thus, the constructions of Aboriginal culture that take place in foreign venues have significant consequences for processes of Aboriginal self-production. Ironically, many Aboriginal attempts to sustain the realm of local meanings and values—and a focus on the immediate and local, in contrast to obligations to some superarching social entity, is a longstanding concern of Aboriginal cultural life—may be occurring now in these newly developing forms of social practice that are in other ways transnational.

Of course, these social relations are not those in which still-dominant indigenous conceptions and practices of Aboriginal personhood were previously reproduced. And this is precisely what arouses the suspicions of critical theory that condense around debated notions of “authenticity,” “commodification,” “spectacle,” or “hybridity.” To be useful, critical readings of emerging forms of cultural production must overcome not only the continuing nostalgia for a cultural wholeness, but also the concomitant reification of the concept of “culture” as more of a structured given²³ than an imperfect fiction that is ambiguously mediated by multiple and shifting discursive moments.

The questions that ought to be asked about the politics of current forms of Aboriginal cultural production are whether and to what extent local (community-based) social orders are *defining* themselves—their meanings, values, and possible identities—autonomously in relation to external powers and processes; whether and how they are transformed in relation to new powers and discourses; and how or whether what had been local meanings are now being defined dialectically (or oppositionally) with respect to discourses available from the larger world. That is, our interest in such events as the Asia Society performance should be a closer examination of cultural mediation as a form of social action in uncertain discursive spaces, of unsettled understandings, in short, of “culture-making.” The concept of “culture-making,” as Ortner (1989) shows, allows a more direct focus on relationships between collective social experience and the performance of individual identity. This perspective can go beyond the common postmodern views on intercultural performances that limits the interpretation of such events to their ironic aspects and denies the distinctive agency of the culture-makers as well. Such a view suggests the difficulty that occurs when once-standard anthropological notions of “culture” and of the passive “culture-bearer” are imported into the processes of intercultural transaction.²⁴

In asking what such performances of “Aboriginality” accomplish, one faces the problem of conceptualizing a type of intercultural transaction that has raised suspicion on two fronts. Anthropologists have been disdainful of the apparent naivete and ethnocentrism of audiences, while avant-garde critical cultural theorists have concentrated on the representation (and display) of cultural “others” as an ideological function within the dominant (Western) system (for example, Clifford 1985; Foster 1985; Manning 1985; Torgovnick 1990; Trinh 1989).²⁵

Despite their power to discern inequality, such insights have not captured the more shifting and subtle constructions and disjunctions of actual communicative (or performative) practice. Thus, my recourse to the notion of such events as occasions of "culture-making" is an attempt to recuperate the ethnographic experience of this intercultural performance and my own engaged exposure to the perspectives of its participants. To ask where (or how) culture is being made brings us closer to the Aboriginal point of view and practice and the significance it gives to the interests of Western audiences.²⁶ The emphasis on how dominant cultures "produce" their others has, it seems to me, gone as far as it can with confident sermonizing on colonial processes; what is needed is a more ethnographic attention to the meaning of such transactions to participants,²⁷ to what these "others" make of us, however unequal the power relations through which such mediation takes place.

If culture-making is taking place, then one must take seriously the audience and its role, as the Aboriginal performers did. In contrast to stances that might render the Aboriginal participants too simply as passive victims of the subjectivity, or "gaze," of others, one needs a more complex approach to articulating the powers and processes through which discursive formations operate and are realized in people's lives. Far from being the condition of their subjection, the audience's gaze is crucial to the Aboriginal performers as an authentication of their experience. To ignore this exchange analytically is to exclude arbitrarily much of what is an Aboriginal self-defined humanity, as one who should be respected and heard, their own powers and understandings; this would be a double erasure.

Indeed, the circumstances of this performance suggest that many viewers simply indulged their curiosity without needing to form a coherent idea of what the Aboriginal men were or should have been doing.

It would not have been too difficult to turn this history of Aboriginal identities and gropings toward translation into "farce," so full of ironies and fabrications is it. In place of such treatments of exhibitions as texts outside the real activity of participants, I suggest one consider events like this as forms of communicative action, performance, in which participants attempt "to encompass what is alien to one's imagination" (Rowse 1991:2), performances in which neither the rules of production nor reception are established. It may be difficult for critical theory grounded in Western thought to grasp such "performance" and its theatricality without suspicions about its authenticity, as Denning (1993) recently argued. To foreground the disjunctions, humorous as they undoubtedly are, fails to recognize the sincerity and purpose of the Aboriginal participants to make something of themselves and their cultures known, to "objectify" themselves as not only as a type of people, but also as worthy of international attention and respect. It fails, as well, to capture what is the important quality of performance itself: *to connect* (V. Turner 1982). Such pragmatic and contextually specific mediations of cultural traditions are the stuff of cultural production from which we should draw our understanding of postcolonial realities.

notes

Acknowledgments. A shorter version of this article was prepared for participation in the symposium "Public Discourse and Collective Selves," at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings in San Francisco, December 2–6, 1992. I would like to thank Michael Nelson, Billy Stockman, Peter Sutton, Chris Anderson, Françoise Dussart, John Kean, and Andrew Pekarik, not just for their help and openness in allowing me to participate in the events at the Asia Society, but also for sharing their knowledge and experience. I thank Elaine Charnov for her assistance in interviewing audience members, and I am especially indebted to Françoise Dussart for the many discussions we have had about this event and similar scenes of Aboriginal performance. I have benefited enormously from comments from James Clifford, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Don Brenneis, and anonymous reviewers. Finally, I want to acknowledge Faye Ginsburg's many contributions to the conceptualization and the form of this article. The flaws are certainly my own.

1. See, for example, Fry and Willis's (1989) discussion of the "spectacular primitive" in reference to the Asia Society show and the exhibition in Paris, "Les Magiciens de la Terre."

2. See T. Turner (1992) for a similar argument.
 3. Arguments of this sort may be found in Fry and Willis (1989) and Taylor (1989), but there are many other examples.
 4. My conception of identity (see Myers 1993)—as a construction of similarity and difference produced in sets of contrasts—draws most immediately on Lévi-Strauss (1962, 1966) but also owes much to the tradition of social theory in the creation of a self *in relationship* to an “other” (Mead 1934; Sartre 1948; Taussig 1993).
 5. The Aboriginal political activist Paul Coe articulated a form of this in an on-camera interview in the documentary for Australian TV produced by Frances Peters (1992), *Tent Embassy*:

I was a young child growing up on a small Aboriginal reserve, a mission. I felt contented, I felt safe because whilst I was on the reserve-mission, I was just another person. It was only when I went into the white community that I became an Aboriginal. Whilst I was at my community, I was just treated as another human being.
 6. Funding for the exhibition was provided by several institutions: National Endowment for the Humanities, Friends of the Asia Society Galleries, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Starr Foundation, Westpac Banking Corporation. However, the final form of the exhibition inevitably was constrained by material limits and the enormous costs of insuring and transporting valuable objects.
 7. These intentions are recorded in the application materials describing the plans for the exhibition sent to NEH and also in the catalog edited by Peter Sutton (1988).
 8. I intend to undertake a more intensive discussion of the reflexive dimensions of my involvement in producing this knowledge and the event in the longer monograph of which this article is a part. I address some of the questions, however, in another article on the Asia Society show (Myers 1991).
 9. This discussion did not appear in the final version of the interview that was aired. I videotaped the discussions myself, however, as an ethnographic record.
 10. This was itself a significant political event. For this “collaboration” with white Australia, Michael Nelson not only received criticism from some urban Aboriginal activists, but also believed that he had been cursed by one. The basis of this controversy, which was widely reported in the Australian press, formulated current political differences in terms drawn from indigenous Aboriginal cultural practice. Essentially, Kevin Gilbert, a well-known urban Aboriginal activist, opposed legitimizing the Australian government by allowing them to deploy Aboriginal icons as part of their own nationhood. Initially, he was reported to have said that Michael Nelson’s design was a curse against the government, and when Michael vehemently denied this, Gilbert complained that Michael had violated Aboriginal Law by placing his design, one from a distant “country,” in what was the traditional country of people from the Canberra area.

More recently, the artist threatened to remove a piece of his painting from its place at Parliament House, protesting the Australian government’s alleged weakness in upholding Aboriginal rights in response to white backlash against the Supreme Court’s Mabo decision.
 11. How much this was on their minds is clear. Before the performance of the second day, when I spoke alone to Billy, I reported to him how people had been very happy. He explained to me that they were doing the sandpainting to show they have Law, that it is still there: “Aboriginal Law, like a river [runs forever]. Keeps going.” They want to teach it to the next generation and so on.
 12. Here, working as a technical aide, Kean has also written about Papunya painting, illustrating quite aptly what kind of relations are embedded in this art world.
 13. I am not entirely sure why the Tjartiwanpa designs were selected. However, they are considered viewable by women and noninitiates, and rights to them are shared by Michael Nelson and Billy Stockman. Therefore, they make an appropriate form for their joint display.
 14. I do not think this positioning had any particular significance, other than reflecting the painter’s shyness and need to make visual contact with Billy Stockman.
 15. An interview conducted with another viewer of the performance presents this concern more elaborately. In answer to the question, “How did you like the event?” he replied:

Well, I just had a funny feeling that I sometimes get going to the museum of natural history where you see aboriginal peoples from other parts of the world in glass cases. And I had the feeling of “Here we are sitting and talking about these people and asking questions, and they’re there and we’re talking over their heads in such a funny way, as though they were part of an exhibit of some sort, and they weren’t real human beings there.” And it made me a bit uncomfortable, feeling that they weren’t, you know, also participating and we knew that they understood.
- Interviewer: “Do you think it might have been different were they not on stage?”
- Yes, possibly it could be if they were on the floor and everyone were seated around them. I don’t think people would have this notion of treating them as though they weren’t there. They were almost as though they were behind a glass and separated from the audience. So that, if we were all seated on the floor around them, perhaps that wouldn’t have happened. And maybe they would have said something once in a while, too. That made me uncomfortable.
16. When the painters saw this scene on the videotape I made for them, they laughed. Michael thought the girl brought to meet him “wasn’t frightened,” but he joked at the point when they tried to show the children their boomerangs, “it won’t bite you.”
 17. In my case, this expression required a knowledge of the use of mythology to formulate shared identity. Michael expressed connection with me by talking of his country connections with Pintupi, who are my

closest associates in the Papunya area, through the Possum Dreaming and through his mother's mother's brother.

18. To some extent, too, the performance bore traces of indigenous ceremonial organization, with Michael and Billy, who are classificatory "brothers-in-law," defining themselves in the complementary roles of "owner" (*kirta*) and "manager" (*kurtungurlu*) to each other (see Maddock 1981, Meggitt 1962, Munn 1973, or Myers 1986 for more detailed discussion of these statuses).

19. As chance would have it, since I was present and filming, I ended up providing an answer to this question, which, to some extent, explains my current project. According to a transcription of the tape, what I said was this:

And I, in a way, I don't presume, I can't presume to know why. I think that in general when Aboriginal people do ceremonies that I have attended, they regard them as for the good of everybody. They don't regard them distinctively for that, they play a part in the world as a whole. I think that one meaning of what's happening here that we haven't really discussed but was discussed much more in the symposium [on October 22, 1988]: you have to remember that Aboriginal people in Australia have been facing dispossession from the land and real oppression for quite a long period of time. And they find it very surprising that European settlers don't recognize their relationship to the landscape, which in their own society is almost taken for granted. It's understood. And part of what we are seeing here is their relationship to these places. For them, they are inalienable relationships to the places where these stories took place and The Dreaming there. And so the claim of their role in that part of the world has important political significance now in the context in which land rights in Australia is threatened again. In this part of Australia, people have been very fortunate in that the federal government found it possible to grant land rights, but in many parts of Australia that is not true. So, there is, this is partly an expression of some real intercultural conflicts.

20. The Asia Society's own survey of visitors to the "Dreamings" indicate that the audience was relatively young, with half under 40 years of age and only 12 percent over 60. They were highly educated and literate: half had postgraduate degrees. Forty percent of the visitors had learned of the exhibition through the media, principally the *New York Times Magazine*, *Time Magazine*, and *New York Magazine*.

21. I am thinking of the example of Fry and Willis's (1989) criticism of spectacles of the "primitive" as forms of "ethnocide." However, this genre of judgment and criticism is fairly common in the aftermath of critical theory emanating from Foucault's work on classification, knowledge, and power (1971, 1980) and Said's related critique of Western knowledge of the "Other" as a technology of subordination (1978). It seems possible as well that the current focus on "history" in anthropology, while generally laudable and important, might similarly have the consequence of reducing the meaning of events to their historical consequence (see Asad 1987; Taussig 1987).

22. I am grateful to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for this formulation.

23. For a discussion of contemporary reifications of culture in the discussions of multiculturalism, see T. Turner 1993.

24. I am indebted to James Clifford's (1985, 1988a, 1988b) lucid discussions of these processes throughout his analyses of art and culture. However, the perspective offered here emphasizes the events of cultural production and the adequacy of different models for their conceptualization.

25. A good deal of this critical orientation about what is known as "cultural othering" derives from Foucault's (1971) *The Order of Things*, with its emphasis on the human sciences as a form of classification, and from Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, with its concern for representation of difference as a technique of power. One might argue that the monolithic approach to discourse of Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" (1971) is itself replaced in his later work by a more wily sense of power and knowledge, of multiple discursive formations (Foucault 1980) that may be more suitable to understanding the processes of a cultural production that is, if you will, intercultural.

26. Indeed, as David Halle (1993) recently argued in a study of "primitive" art in New York households, avant-garde cultural criticism has largely ignored "the role of the audience, which appears to be a more or less passive recipient in their view," either following the aesthetic judgments of artists and other experts or being "dominated by the ideologically motivated manipulations of museums and their directors" (1993:398). There are few studies that inquire how exotic objects acquire meanings in the complex processes of the everyday lives of the audience.

27. See, for example, the work of James Clifford that followed on the (1985) criticism of the Museum of Modern Art's "Primitivism" exhibition. The paper on Northwest Coast museums (Clifford 1991) and his attempt at an ethnography of the production of cultural identity in the Mashpee case (Clifford 1988c) both attempt to interrupt the reifications of culture that rely on an impermeable boundary between the "authentic" and its audience.

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submitted July 27, 1993

accepted September 10, 1993