Coolabah, No.11, 2013, ISSN 1988-5946, Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Art History in Remote Aboriginal Art Centres [1]

Darren Jorgensen

Abstract: The 2008 *Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art* in Melbourne suggested in its theme of 'Crossing Cultures' that art history must revise its nationalistic methodologies to construct more international histories of art. This essay addresses the legacy of different eras and methods of writing the art history of remote Aboriginal artists. It argues that colonialism has structured many of the ways in which this art history has been written, and that the globalisation of art history does little to rectify these structures. Instead, art history must turn to institutions that are less implicated in the legacy of colonialism to frame its work. Rather than turning to the museums and art galleries who have provided much of the material for the art histories of the twentieth century, this essay suggests that remote art centres offer dynamic opportunities for doing twenty-first century art history. Founded in an era of political self-determination for remote Aboriginal people, these centres aspire to create an opportunity for the expression of a cultural difference whose origins precede the invasion and colonisation of Australia. Art centres and their archives present an opportunity to work through the legacies of colonialism in the art history of remote Australian Aboriginal artists.

Art History in Remote Aboriginal Art Centres

The theme of the 2008 *Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art* (CIHA) in Melbourne, 'Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration, Convergence', was informed by postcolonial history and theory. Yet the structure of this conference, the first of its kind to be held in the Southern Hemisphere, closed on a distinctly colonial note. A final speech by the Director of the British Museum, Neil McGregor, proclaimed the role of his institution in helping global culture along. One of his examples was a Sudanese festival hosted by the Museum, aiming to bring people from all factions of the country together. McGregor's speech went on to declare his Museum's role in leading the world on such global matters.

The uncanny effect of McGregor's talk, 'Global Collections for Global Cities', was to reintroduce the colonial paradigms that the conference theme wanted to overcome. If

[1] This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness … geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au and http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/.

the legacies of colonialism are the unspoken traumas upon which 'Crossing Cultures' was written, the final drinks in the Ball Room at Government House in Victoria made these legacies all too visible once more. Between towering gilded walls, the Governor himself mingled with guests, dressed in a uniform handed down directly from the colonial era.

In its final afternoon, the cross-cultural focus of the conference gave way to the colonial ideology that it was supposed to overcome, the institutional ideology taking back what it had initially given in its gesture toward an equitable globalism. While colonialism is something of a catchall term that postcolonial history and theory has used to identify the power of nation-states in indigenous societies. The term is not an unproblematic one, as it tends to generalise the very different histories of indigenous peoples. Yet colonisation also remains a useful way of identifying the operation of power within the cities of the West. Aboriginal Australian art was a major theme of the conference, with the influential Australian anthropologist Howard Morphy a featured speaker. This paper suggests, through some of Morphy's scholarship in the area, that art history should not be tied to major institutions that collect and exhibit Aboriginal art. Instead its location can be re-placed in remote Australia, where the art is actually made.

A more radical place for art history?

The failure of this major European conference, CIHA, to shift out of the model of Eurocentric art history while in the Southern Hemisphere establishes the need for the discipline look at a more radical place to base its activity. The notion of 'Crossing Cultures' makes MacGregor's mistake in replacing one universal for another, as it substitutes globalism for British imperialism. It is to the difference of the art of remote Australian Aboriginal communities that we can turn in order to unpack this problematic return.

For the art history of these communities configures the contradiction between the institutional and the global. The former is wrapped up in a state power founded on colonial violence, while the latter's claims for an equitable world art history creates a space in which this power all too easily reasserts itself. Remote Aboriginal art offers a new set of problems for art historians by resituating this conflict, to re-place it in the communities where the art is made.

Arguments for disciplinary renewal are not particular to art history. Anthropology, inflected with the ideologies of Social Darwinism, its ideas implicated in the ethnocide of indigenous peoples, was forced to undergo a major, self-reflexive revisionism as it confronted the agency of its subjects. Indigenous people themselves forced this revision, and they have also forced art historians to afford a foundational place to a genre of art that has appeared in spite of them. Anthropology has dominated much of the discourse around remote Aboriginal artists, yet their work is responsible for cultural survival rather than for art practice and proliferation. For while anthropologists have largely been interested in the way that Aboriginal art represents country, in Dreaming stories and sites, or in the flora, fauna, geographic and seasonal detail of country, art history's basic premise is that knowledge lies within the visual object.

Art history attempts to tackle matters of form and style that are not necessarily tied to country, yet that remain the distinct property of Aboriginal artists. It is this figural distinction, its distinct and recognisable difference, that struck the eyes of international delegates to CIHA, and whose materiality forms a distinct subject for art history. As a new generation of painters emerges from remote Australia, the dynamic shifts in the visual identity of art from different remote communities will constitute a large body of material that art history is uniquely placed to think about.

These tendencies to enshrine the European patronage of art and culture can also be seen in the *Musée de Quai Branly*, an attempt by the French government to create a world art museum. The *Musée* is another example of the colonial drama replaying itself out, as the significant collection of Aboriginal Australian art on show here recreates the problem it wants to resolve. This is the problem of primitivism, In 2006, the then French President Jacques Chriac opened the Museum by declaring its difference from primitivisms of the past, but the museum itself only shows third and fourth world arts, returning to the historical distinction of colonised from coloniser. For what the third and fourth worlds have in common is an experience of being at the wrong end of colonialism, of being at the bottom of global power relations .The architecture of the new museum betrays the presumptions of its designers. For while across the river the Pompidu stands as a monument to post-industrialism and contemporary art, the architecture of the *Musée* wants to simulate the darkness and depth of a forest while its visitors peer at the works through dimly lit display cases (Ruiz-Gomez 2006). The interest of the *Musée* in exhibiting Aboriginal Australian art here thus carries with it the paradox of an equitable globalisation that reconstructs the colonial.

How to establish a more postcolonial art history?

Recently, Aboriginal Australian art has found its place within a trend to construct contemporary, global or world art histories. Terry Smith includes a chapter on Aboriginal Australian art in his *What is Contemporary Art?* (2009), while Elizabeth Grosz turns to Aboriginal desert painting as her final example of an art of the world (Grosz 2008). These art histories and theories represent the most recent phase of scholarship since the emergence of Papunya Tula Artists through the 1980s and 1990s as a force in the Australian artworld. This artists co-operative resituated the place of Aboriginal Australian art from an ethnographic context to one in which installations, paintings and sculptures by remote artists began to be exhibited in art galleries. Anthropologists and other people with local knowledge of different regions of art production have been the principal scholars on remote artists (French 2002; Johnson 1994; Johnson 1997; Morphy 1998; Morphy 2008; Taylor 1996). A second site for the production of knowledge about remote artists lies in the work of state sponsored galleries and their agents, and publications that accompany their exhibitions (Bowdler 2009; Perkins and Fink 2000; Perkins 2004; Perkins 2007 Ryan 1993; Ryan 2004; Ryan 2008).

There is, however, a third source for the production of scholarship on this art movement. These are remote art centres themselves, modelled on the success of Papunya Tula Artists. Many such centres, including Papunya Tula Artists, have such archives, particularly since around 2000 when digital repositories were introduced around the country have made archiving easier for overworked mangers. Many centres

use the Artist Management System (AMS), which documents work and sales, produces certificates of authenticity, tracks consignments and manages financial transactions. Originally developed at Warlayirti Artists in Balgo Hills in the late 1990s to run through Microsoft Access, this database incidentally constructs a consistent archiving system across different centres. Significantly, these archives are managed by the centres themselves, which are, in turn, managed by the artists.

Now is an opportune time for research on Aboriginal art that aims to have an international impact, while art history moves towards constructing methodologies for thinking about cross-cultural and world arts (Elkins 2006; Miller 2008; Summers 2003: 661-663). It is, then, to art centres and their archives that scholars might turn for another institutional basis from which to construct art histories of Aboriginal art. These institutions are not necessarily beyond being implicated in colonial regimes of power. The politics that surrounds them is that of Aboriginal self-determination, that includes such accomplishments as land rights, the establishment of outstations and a degree of economic independence. Yet self-determination is as much a product of government policy as it is Aboriginal political struggle. While outstations were established by Aboriginal people walking back into their country, to settle in camps on bores and waterholes, their development into settlements was only enabled with the economic support of a succession of governments. With the exception of Papunya Tula Artists, whose market success enabled its economic independence, art centres have been established with government funding. They also receive on-going funding, frequently for one staff member.

At present, these centres are under-resourced, as the documentation of artwork is often stored on a single hard drive, and the stories that accompany paintings are often recycled over and over again, dependent upon work that took place in the early years of the art centre. Due to limited staffing, and despite the ageing of some of the first generations of their artists, many art centres are unable to continue the process of researching the practices of their own artists. Art centre managers are kept busy undertaking general management, balancing the demands of the market with the personal needs of their artists, negotiating with funding bodies, and advocating for communities, artists and their families. There are strong arguments to be made for increasing the resource base, including the staffing, of these remote centres. In economic terms, these centres have facilitated much of the boom in the Aboriginal art industry, whose sales value has increased from an estimated $2.5 million in the period 1979-80 to $100 million in 2003 (Australian Government 2007; Altman 2005). Despite this increase, estimates as to the number of artists working in remote Australia have changed little. In 1980, this estimate was 5,000 artists, while in 1998 the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that there were 4,500 artists selling work through businesses and at auction (Australian Government 2007). A more recent estimate put the number of artists at 7,000 (Gough Henly 2005). Such figures suggest the significance of these individuals to the Aboriginal art industry as a whole, and some contours for doing art history in remote Australia.

Issues

Complaints about the lack of substantial analysis of Aboriginal art are not new. As long ago as 2004 the *Australian*'s Darwin correspondent Nicolas Rothwell complained about

it, writing that 'the absence of constructive criticism leaves these works of splendour to speak and fend for themselves in a strange world'. Anthropologist Howard Morphy (2007) also notes 'the moderate state of Aboriginal art journalism and the low level of writing about Aboriginal art in general.' The lack of scholarship in the area is so pronounced that much of the informed and sophisticated commentary in the area takes place in art magazines and newspaper reviews. Yet this is not been a problem particular to Aboriginal art. Other avant-garde movements, such as those from Paris and New York from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century, were not adequately historicised until decades after their most significant artworks were made. Only a process of revisionism brought their significance into being.

This shift to focus upon Aboriginal Australian art centres will not, however, capture the entirety of remote art production. The Aboriginal art economy also functions outside the art centre model. In regions such as the Sandover, for instance, that lies in and around the Utopia community north of Alice Springs, art centres have rarely operated with any effect. In the absence of such, numerous private dealers have facilitated art production and sale in this region (Green 2003). The Sandover is the region that hosted Australia's most successful remote artist. Emily Kame Kngwarreye makes a good test case for the art history of remote Australian Aboriginal artists, since despite her success, Kngwarreye's history of production has been overwhelmed and obscured by a complexity of economic, social, cultural and institutional relations. What drove the dynamic changes in style, the incredible pace of her change, which so captured the attention of art critics, collectors and curators? It has been all too easy to attribute the movement of her work to the enigmatic notion of the artist, to the romantic conception of an innate genius at work. A recent retrospective premiering in Japan and again shown in Canberra was called 'Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye', and Japanese critics were quick to buy into this notion of a woman from the desert spontaneously producing abstract art, as if from nowhere (Kazue 2008-9). The equivalent mythology in Western art history is that of Pablo Picasso, whose shifts from the 'blue period' to the 'rose period', from African influences to cubism, classicism and surrealism, has been cloaked in the myth of an intense personal vision. The difference between Kngwareye and Picasso for art history lies in the extent of documentation that is available to researchers. Subsequent, deconstructive interpretations of Picasso have been enabled only by immense attention given to each period of his work (Berger 1965). Equivalent attention to minute parts of Kngwarreye's career would prove difficult, because so much of her work was distributed through and among different agents, making it difficult to reconstruct its place in her *oeuvre.*

Even in the fragmented situation of Kngwarreye's working life, and the subsequent distribution of her work, art history remains possible. Jenny Green's familiarity with the Sandover and its economies enables her to estimate how the art economy works there. In a footnote accompanying an earlier version of her essay, 'Holding the Country: Art from Utopia and the Sandover', she estimates that in 2003 there were around seven major representatives of the Sandover artists. This implies that the actual economy of art distribution is to some degree estimable, and even that the work's content could well be documented, at least in large part, by these seven. Where information gaps exist, anecdotal evidence may be able to estimate the size of these gaps. Again, anthropology has taken the lead here, by turning to strategies for estimating extra-legal economies, to indices of flow and turbulence (Nordstrom 2007). Artist Marina Strocchi suggests researching the importation of Belgian linen into Australia, the media used by many art

centers and private operators (private conversation, 2011). The quantity and value of paintings by individual artists may also be tracked through the registration of vehicles; through the estimates of casual workers in Alice Springs who are employed to stretch canvases for visiting artists; or through people close to the artists themselves. It is the quality of such alternative methodologies that they are adaptable to opportunities and flexibly oriented toward information gaps.

These kinds of methodologies offer a fourth source of information for art historians attempting to construct the art histories of remote Australian Aboriginal artists. To write a comprehensive monograph on Kngwarreye may well require co-ordinating information from many different sources. Crucially, this spread of information makes up a different kind of art history to the kind of art historical work that has been undertaken thus far on remote Australian Aboriginal artists. These histories have largely focused on the cultural origins of the art without looking at its function and impact in the artworld, in the economy, or the place of the art centre in facilitating its development. Let the problematic situation of researching Kngwarreye, this most successful of remote artists, stand for the problems of researching remote artists working within the boom of the Aboriginal art industry, during the 1980s and 1990s. Researchers wanting to reconstruct the situation of many artists of this time, even those working consistently through art centres, will confront similar problems. Archives at these centres were rarely maintained in this period, with some very notable exceptions. Many centres in Arnhem Land have maintained long running records, as have Papunya Tula Artists, the Spinifex Arts Project, Walayirti Artists and Warlukurlangu Artists. The latter has gone so far as to archive their artist's records with the South Australian Museum. Such archives offer opportunities for future art historians to track the development of an atist's work.

Conclusions

The contradictions of the 2008 CIHA conference, as well as that of the *Musée de Quai Branly*, lie in their attempt to take stock of remote Aboriginal Australian art with deference to institutions structured by colonialism. For the CIHA conference, these institutions were the British Museum and Government House in Victoria. For the French Government, this deference is to the *Musée* that is structured by colonial legacies of discrimination. These contradictions animate the opportunities that historians of art have for changing the institutional basis for the art history of remote Aboriginal art. For while remote art centres are remote and their records difficult to access, they remain managed by the communities where they are located. Remote art centres, and even the communities that host them, are certainly a part of the legacies of colonialism. Yet their management by local Aboriginal people, and their role in situating a renaissance of classical knowledge in contemporary media, also ties them to a longer history of indigenous knowledge. These institutions are postcolonial in the sense that they create have created opportunities for self-determination for Aboriginal people.

A comprehensive postcolonial history of remote art, however, could not rely on these centres alone. For art centres have operated amidst a set of other historical conditions that have also been crucial for the rise of the Aboriginal art movement. These include the role of private dealers, who have also facilitated the development and success of

remote artists. Theirs is one part of a complex history that has taken place in remote places, far from the cities of the world. To begin to develop an Aboriginal art history, rather than one dependent on institutions that carry with them the legacies of colonialism, is to look to these remote communities, their art centres and their archives.

Bibliography

Altman, Jon. 2005 'Brokering Aboriginal Art: A Critical Perspective on Marketing, Institutions and the State', *Deakin University*, <www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/bowater/clmr/fellows/kennethmyerlecture2005.php > accessed 3 September 2007.

Australian Government. 2007 Senate report, 'Indigenous Art: Securing the Future', *Australian Government*, <www.aph.gov.au/Senate/Committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/indigenous_arts/report/report.pdf> accessed 10 April 2009.

Berger, John. 1965 *The Success and Failure of Picasso.* New York: Pantheon, 1980.

Biddle, Jennifer. 2007 *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience*, Sydney: UNSW Press.

Bowdler, Cath. 2009. *Colour Country: Art from Roper River.* Wagga Wagga: Wagga Wagga Art Gallery.

Elkins, James, et al. 2006 *Is Art History Global*, London: Routledge.

French, Alison. 2002. *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira, 1902-1959.* Canberra: National Gallery of Australia.

Green, Jenny. 2007 'Holding the Country—Art from Utopia and the Sandover' In Hetti Perkins (ed.) *One Sun One Moon*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales. 203-209.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 2008 *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Henly, Susan Gough. 2005 'Powerful Growth of Aboriginal Art: All about Earth and the people on it', *International Herald Tribune*, <www.iht.com/articles/2005/11/06/opinion/aborigine.php> accessed 15 October 2007.

Johnson, Vivien. 1994. *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri.* East Roseville, N.S.W.: Gordon and Breach Arts International.

Johnson, Vivien. 1997. *Michael Jagamara Nelson.* Sydney, Craftsman House.

Kazue, Nakamura 2008-9 'A Dialogue to Find Ourselves and Others: The Reception of Emily Kame Kngwarreye in Japan.' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 9: 23-27.

Miller, Partha et al. 2008 'Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery', *Art Bulletin*, 90(4): 531-574.

Morphy, Howard. 2007 'Creating value, adding value and maintaining value: the complexity of Aboriginal Art as an industry', *Desart,* <www.desart.com.au/documents/Morphy_CreatingValue.pdf> accessed 10 April 2009.

Morphy, Howard. 2008 *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories*, Sydney: UNSW Press.

Morphy, Howard. 1991 *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nordstrom, Carolyn 2007 *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money and Power in the Contemporary World*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
Perkins, Hetti and Hannah Fik. 2000 *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius.* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales in association with Papunya Tula Artists, 2000.
Perkins, Hetti. 2004 *Crossing Country: the Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art.* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Perkins, Hetti, ed. 2007 *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal Art in Australia* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Rothwell, Nicolas. 2004 'Crossing the divide', *The Australian*, 3 April: B18.
Ruiz-Gomez, Natasha. 2006 'The (Jean) Nouvel Other: Primitivism and the Musee du Quai Branly.' *Modern and Contemporary France* 14(4): 417-432.
Ryan, Judith, ed. 1993 *Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley* Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria.
Ryan, Judith. 2004 *Colour Power: Aboriginal Art post 1984: in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria* Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria.
Ryan, Judith. 2008 *Across the Desert: Aboriginal batik from Central Australia* Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria.
Smith, Terry. 2009 *What is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Summers, David. 2003 *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, London: Phaidon.
Taylor, Luke. 1996 *Seeing* the *Inside: Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Darren Jorgensen is an associate professor of art history and theory in the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts at the University of Western Australia. He is also an art critic for his local newspaper, the West Australian, and publishes essays on science fiction. He is currently working on an Australian Research Council funded project to co-ordinate and compare art centre records with a view to producing contemporary art history. (Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts, University of Western Australia, Australia. Email: darren.jorgensen@uwa.edu.au)