

Indigenous Australian art in intercultural contact zones

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Abstract: This article comments on Indigenous Australian art from an intercultural perspective. The painting *Bush Tomato Dreaming* (1998), by the Anmatyerre artist Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth serves as model case for my argument that art expresses existential social knowledge. In consequence, I will argue that social theory and art theory together provide tools for intercultural understanding and competence.

Keywords: Indigenous Australian art and social theory.

Introduction

Indigenous Australian artworks sell well on national and international art markets. Artists like Emily Kngwarreye, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Kathleen Petyarre are renowned representatives of what has become an exquisite art movement with international appreciation. Indigenous art is currently the strongest sector of Australia's art industry, with around 6,000 artists producing art and craft works with an estimated value of more than A\$300 million a year. (Senate Committee, 2007: 9-10) At a major Indigenous art auction held in Melbourne in 2000, Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's famous painting *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* was sold for a record price of A\$ 486,500. Three years before, it was auctioned for A\$ 206,000. What did Johnny W. Tjupurrula receive? – just A\$ 150 when he sold that painting in 1972. (The Courier Mail, 29 July 2000) The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (06 September 2005) reports that Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri received A\$ 100 for his painting *Emu Corroboree Man* in 1972. The very painting was re-sold for US\$ 411 000 in 2005. However, the above-mentioned artworks were produced within the framework of Indigenous cultural knowledge, and so they may also be evaluated as cultural texts and representations of Indigenous identity.

In this article, I will develop an intercultural perspective on classical Indigenous Australian art and I will raise a variety of questions in regard to representations of cultural knowledge. My concern here is an intercultural, interdisciplinary perspective on fine art. I will introduce the painting *Bush Tomato Dreaming* (1998), by the Anmatyerre artist Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth, and I will use this painting as a case study. The artist is a member of the community of Utopia (NT) and was introduced to traditional Anmatyerre knowledge by community elders who are aware of their responsibilities as carriers of cultural knowledge. (Personal communication with the artist). This means that the artwork relates to the Indigenous Australian concept of the Dreaming, however, as it was produced for so-called “western” viewers and/or “western” art market, it is also

open to non-Indigenous modes of interpretation and reception. So, I will focus on Indigenous art as complex representations of Indigeneity within intercultural contact zones. In this context, my proposition will be that Indigenous artworks represent a source of existential social knowledge (Harrington, 2004:3), and I will conclude that sociology of art helps to understand the degree to which art shapes and reflects society.

Indigenous Australian art

The art of Indigenous Australia is "one of the longest continuous traditions of art in the world [and is] dating back at least 50,000 years" (Caruana, 1993: 7). On the one hand, so-called 'traditional' "[a]rt is central to Aboriginal life [and] is inherently connected to the religious domain" (ibid), on the other hand, since the 1970s a significant variety of art works have been produced for the art market. The mental and artistic concepts of both domains could hardly be farther apart than they are: there are culturally determined, inherently religious regulations and prerogatives on the one side, and there is big business and 'western' concepts of art on the other side.

Before Europeans came to Australia, art was purely produced within "traditional cultural needs, and this has remained the case in varying degrees since"(Caruana, 1993: 10). In recent years, Indigenous artist have adopted new technologies and new materials, which has led to a variety of new art forms. Yet the most prestigious artworks on the Australian and international art markets are acrylic paintings, many of which come from famous artists of the Western desert region. These paintings feature icons, symbols and signs which come in a multitude of combinations and contexts and each of which may carry a variety of meanings (Caruana, 1993: 14). The spiritual concept of the Dreaming provides the framework by which these meanings may unfold on different levels. The term 'Dreaming' is in fact a trivialising English word which does not do justice to the complex concept as such. Franchesca Cubillo, Indigenous art curator of Yanuwa, Larrakia, Wardaman and Bardi descent, explains:

The Dreaming is the eternal moment of creation, when the spiritual Ancestors moved across the land, creating the landforms, the plants, animals, people and the languages. Rules and languages were also established by the Ancestors in this timeless moment and are maintained by Aboriginal people in the present. The land is looked after, animals respected, ceremonies performed and social obligations adhered to according to the precepts of these traditions. Aspects of the Dreaming are taught and reinforced from an early age. Everyone within the community is expected to know, in varying degrees, their place in the Dreaming, their country, kinship and ceremonial obligations. Designs are used to empower objects, people and places within the landscape. The artwork is painted on the bodies of the performers, on the ground on which the ceremony takes place and on ceremonial paraphernalia used during ritual. Songs are sung to establish communication with ancestors at particular locations and at specific times. (2000: 44)

This means that the Dreaming, also known as the Indigenous Law, determines social and religious behaviour and defines the relationship between people and land. The art expert Wally Caruana explains that "[t]he all-pervasive powers of the [A]ncestral [B]eings of the Dreamings are present in the land and in natural species, and also reside within individuals. They are activated by ceremony and art to nourish generation after generation of human descendants" (1993: 10). This means that the Dreaming defines a person's rights and responsibilities to land and it links people with their particular tracts of land and everything in it. When Indigenous artists re-create their Dreamings in their paintings, the Dreamings also regulate "the prerogatives of artists to use sacred designs and to depict religious subjects" (Caruana, 1993: 15). In consequence, "the use of designs belonging to others without the appropriate permission constitutes a major breach of Aboriginal law"(ibid). The artist owns her/his designs and has copyright over them, and in this way, artworks express and represent individual and group identities. To say it in Caruana's words,

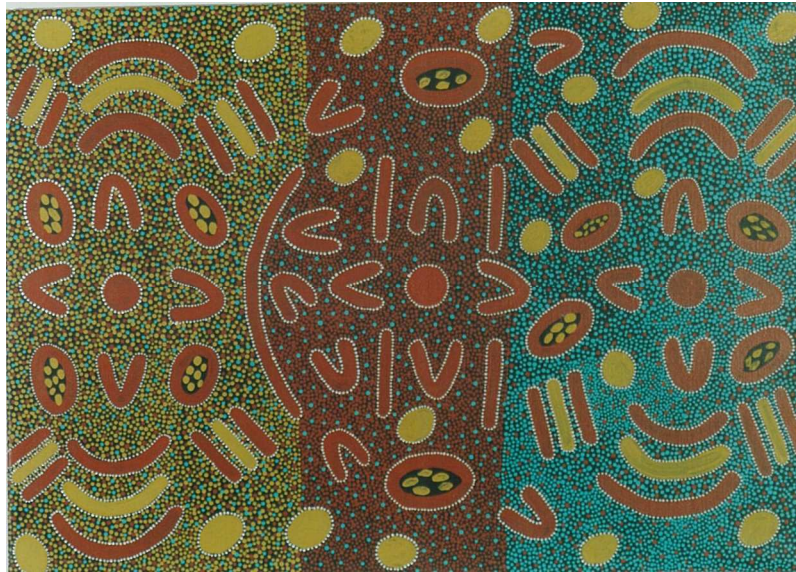
Art is an expression of knowledge, and hence a statement of authority. Through the use of ancestrally inherited design, artists assert their identity, and their rights and responsibilities. They also define the relationships between individuals and groups, and affirm their connections to the land and the Dreaming. (1993: 14-15)

Caruana adds that artists carry the Dreaming regulations, "with varying degrees of modification... into the making of art for the public domain" (1993: 15).

Art production for “western” art markets:

The contemporary so-called 'traditional' art movements go back to the early 1970s, when Geoffrey Bardon, a young art teacher at an outback school in Papunya, a government-established Indigenous township in the red centre of Australia, encouraged some elders to translate their designs into permanent, portable art. This was the beginning of Western Desert art, which sells so well today.

A representative of this art movement is the Anmatyerre artist Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth, whose painting *Bush Tomato Dreaming* (1998) may serve as model case for my argument.



Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth, Anmatyerre nation, Utopia (NT).
Bush Tomato Dreaming, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 0,80 cm x 0,56 cm; private collection. © Artist.

The painting represents a piece of land, (the artist's land, as it is confirmed by the Indigenous Law), seen from the bird's-eye view. The icons in the painting relate to narratives that draw upon ceremonial knowledge, defined by the Indigenous Law. The title of the painting provides a clue to the narratives in the artwork. Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth's Dreaming Ancestor is the Bush Tomato Ancestor, which means that the artist knows (and owns) the sections of the Indigenous Law that was established by her Dreaming Ancestor. This means that Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth owns the (copy)right to the set of laws that define the ownership and the responsibility in regard to her land and all phenomena on it. So, the painting is not only a piece of art, but also a representation of cultural identity that draws upon particular cultural regulations and rules that are defined by the Indigenous Law, which has been activated, remembered, practiced and confirmed in the ceremonies to date. An essential key to the understanding of classical Indigenous paintings are the narratives that the composition of the paintings imply. The artist owns both the copyright of the painting and the relevant narratives.

Bush Tomato Dreaming shows five sets of narratives, designed as five groups of women who are represented by u-shaped icons. The group in the centre of the painting consists of seven women, four of which face each other. A big windshield emphasises the importance of the central scene. Left and right of the central scene there are two other groups of four women each, facing each other. These two groups are protected by three smaller windshields at the top and bottom ends of the scene. Related to the main scene in the centre, there is one group of two women at the top and another group of two at the bottom of the painting. In addition, some bowl-shaped dishes, so-called *coolamons*, carrying bush tomatoes, are placed between the sitting women. The background of the painting shows the well-known "dot"-technique of Western Desert art. An interesting artistic feature is the choice of three different background colours that support and emphasise the three main groups of women in the painting.

For some so-called “western” critics, the artistic evaluation of this painting may include little appreciation, or even raise the point that Indigenous artworks are “primitive” and demonstrate a lack of ingenuity, as the sets of icons would repeat given scenes in given settings, without much artistic variety or creativity. By contrast, the artist has indeed produced an individual artwork out of infinite options of compositions, all of which relate individual artistic productions to a complex set of cultural knowledge. The artistic evaluation of the artwork can be diversified and extended to further levels of meaning, if one is able to decode the narratives of the artwork. However, knowledge of Indigenous Law is subject to rules that do not give unlimited, open access to cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, artists may provide some clues to the narratives of their artworks, without compromising the established rules. In our case, the artist confirmed that the narratives in *Bush Tomato Dreaming* relate to girls’ initiation ceremonies. The artwork shows women that paint themselves up for ceremonies, and women that sing and dance in the course of ceremonial performances that commemorate relevant sections of the Indigenous Law. The artist remembers and confirms her responsibilities for the land in relation to the creation of the land and the members of her community. The *coolamons* with bush tomatoes, integrated within the respective sets of sitting women, emphasises the Dreaming Ancestor’s creative powers that are re-activated in ceremonies. (Personal communication with the artist) For knowledgeable insiders, the narratives represent rules and regulations in full detail and at great length. Clearly, informed insiders have the ability to decode further layers of cultural meanings that remain hidden to the uninformed outsider.

So, on one level of meaning, the painting is an expression of cultural knowledge and Indigenous identity. On another level of meaning, the painting is a piece of art that generates a complex variety of aesthetic judgements. Simultaneously, this painting is a product of/for the art market with a completely different set of ©-laws and different concepts of intellectual property. Needless to say those Indigenous artworks relate to diverse mental concepts that may evoke a range of misconceptions and controversies.

Indigenous art and social theory

This article cannot adequately deal with the complex context of Indigenous art production and reception; on the contrary, I am well aware that I raise issues rather than offering solutions. However, in search of answers, I will draw attention to the interrelation of art production, art representation and art reception. In accordance with Austin Harrington I argue in favour of 'art AND social theory' as "equal partners in a joint-venture of cognition of the world" (Harrington, 2004:3). The problem lies in the interrelation of, or even interference from, different fields of action, such as art, culture, business, or politics, as Bourdieu argues. Modern society is determined by a web of interconnected areas that form fields of power and establish hierarchies. (Alexander, 2003: 285).

In the case of classical Indigenous Australian art, these fields of power not only have an impact on curatorial concepts of art exhibitions, or on sale strategies of art markets, they also transform the construction and conception of intercultural meaning. In consequence, I argue in favour of a well-balanced, joint perspective on Indigenous art,

which analyses artworks as a socially constructed category of cultural objects, yet also engages in questions of aesthetic content and artistic value. Theorists are called upon to examine art not as an isolated entity, but in its interaction with society (Alexander 2003: 292-294), as art represents "a source of existential social knowledge" (Harrington, 2004: 3). Therefore, social theory may provide a useful mental concept that takes the artistic value of artworks seriously, while also "recognizing political values of democracy of access to cultural production and cultural valuation" (Harrington, 2004: 5). Clearly, sociological analysis requires critical engagement with values, and theorists address questions, such as, Who are the spectators? Which factors have an impact on their judgement? Does their judgments speak for everyone? Are values in art universal? Do values in art hold for ever? (H., 2004: 38).

These questions may very well be applied to a critical evaluation of the above-mentioned painting *Bush Tomato Dreaming*. If we add the socio-political, postcolonial context to an artistic analysis of the painting, we will not only integrate intercultural issues but will also raise awareness for intercultural sensitivity and understanding. Drawing upon Harrington, I argue that social theory supports an interculturally appropriate approach to Indigenous Australian art, however, I am aware that social sciences can only adequately analyse artworks, if also questions of aesthetic content and intrinsic artistic value are addressed. Interculturally appropriate art theories are supposed to find a suitable balance between (value-distancing) sociological analysis, (value-affirming) aesthetic appraisal and (value-affirming) social and political philosophy and practice (Harrington, 2004: 210). In short, "Social theory should seek to foster an understanding of art in which art objects and practices are experienced as value-relevant sources of sensuous knowledge." (Harrington, 2004: 207)

Conclusion:

In this article, I've introduced Lucy Ngwarai Kunoth's painting *Bush Tomato Dreaming* as a model case of an intercultural, interdisciplinary analysis of Indigenous Australian art. In contrast to concepts of a detached aesthetic analysis of art I hold the view that aesthetic evaluations of Indigenous art cannot be made "neutrally" (Alexander, 2003: 294). According to contemporary understanding of art, aesthetics are socially constructed and historically contingent. Sociology of art helps to understand the degree to which art reflects society, and how art may shape society. I've argued in favour of interdisciplinary research methods that take into account the complexity of art production, art reception and representation. (Alexander, 2003: 307-308) I've argued that a balanced approach to art not only defines artworks as being autonomous in their normative principles, such an approach also takes into account that artworks serve a wider range of social purposes. In short, social theory and art theory together provide useful frameworks for intercultural competence.

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