Found in Translation

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Over the past thirty years, Australia has been an exciting place to be as far as art is concerned. Thirty years ago, Australian art museums and galleries, although positioned in the Asia-Pacific region, operated as though they were firmly in the Western art world. Certainly, Australian art discourse had moments of separating itself off and differentiating its art practice from the art worlds of Europe and America, but it did so in dialogue with them. At the beginning of the 1970s the only art gallery in Australia that contained significant collections of Aboriginal Australian art was the Art Gallery of New South Wales, whose major collections of Arnhem Land art had been acquired just a decade before; it was followed shortly afterwards by the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory. And although some institutions, such as the National Gallery of Victoria, had magnificent Asian collections, they lacked collections of contemporary Asian art. The explanation for this lies in the recent history of Australia as a European colony, and in the facts that fine art, or high art, as a segregated category was a development of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe, and that until recently the history of world art had been biased towards the European canon. The dominant paradigm is reflected strongly in a letter from Brett Whiteley to Lloyd Rees, written shortly before the latter’s death:

I know Lloyd that I will continue to be influenced by you until the day I too, come up to, giving in, and to giving over, and I know someone will pick up something of what I have done, and carry the mantle on into the 2000s, whatever shape and form that will take; so the profound thread, that leads its way back to Leonardo and back through the Millennium to Egypt, that wonderful line, the most precious club in the world, that occasionally gets new members and bids farewell to those whose innings of dreamings are done.  

The ‘innings of dreamings’ may add an Australian flavour, but fundamentally this reflects a Eurocentric view of art history, in this case connected directly to art practice. And until recently this was the dominant view. Indigenous art, if it entered art history at all, was placed in the category of primitive art. Indigenous art was part of world art history inasmuch as it influence[d] and connected with European art movements. After that influence was over, Indigenous art ceased to exist as fine art since it had become contaminated by the colonial encounter, it was no longer pure. The 1984 ‘Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art’ exhibition curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, in which Indigenous artworks were exhibited in relation to the European works that they influenced, is today seen to represent the apogee of that perspective. I think it is fair to say that the criticism generated by the exhibition also made it a turning point in attitudes to non-Western art. While in many respects the exhibition itself was a magnificent achievement in drawing attention to the influence of Indigenous art on Western art, as an exhibition it was really about Western art history more than, say, African or Oceanic art. It emphasised the neglect of Indigenous art in its own right by art historians and the absence of exhibitions of Indigenous art in art institutions. Aboriginal Australian art was absent from the exhibition and indeed had hardly a significant presence in the primitive art category. Aboriginal Australians as hunter-gatherers were not expected to produce art, and Australian society preferred to push its Indigenous population into the past. Contemporary Aboriginal art was almost a contradiction in terms.

In Australia today the situation is transformed, and globally there is a strong movement towards the exhibition of Indigenous art in its own right, although one should not exaggerate the changes that have occurred so far. In Australia, Aboriginal art now holds a prominent place in all national
and state collections, and artists from the Asia-Pacific region are routinely included in Australian biennials and triennials. Indeed, many young Australians must believe that the world was ever thus and have little knowledge of the 200 years of exclusion that preceded the present state of affairs.

The history of how this happened has only just begun to be researched, and the implications of the changes that have occurred still have to be thought through. Like most major changes, it is likely to have multiple causes and a much longer history than people realise. From the beginning of the twentieth century there were people—some artists, curators, missionaries and anthropologists—who argued for the recognition of Aboriginal art and its inclusion in the galleries. Certainly, in the second half of the twentieth century there was a movement towards a more global perspective on art history, one that was less connected to the history of European art. In Australia the Indigenous rights movement played an important role in making Indigenous Australian art more visible, partly because art was used as a form of political action and partly because the movement challenged the multiple ways in which Aboriginals had been excluded from Australian society. However, I would also argue that the ideology of high Modernism had broken down; European art had ceased to be dominated by a formalist paradigm.

The problem with Modernism was that it incorporated Indigenous art on the basis of form alone. Works of art were for aesthetic contemplation, and, in the case of Indigenous arts, there was no need to know anything about their meaning or significance in their context of production. And indeed, the history and contemporary significance of non-European art tended to be largely neglected. This perspective continues to be a significant one and strongly influences present discourse, even though it has its origins in relatively recent European history and in particular strongly influences the art market and some modes of art criticism.

There is of course nothing wrong with viewing artworks on the basis of their form alone. There is nothing wrong with applying qualitative criteria in exhibiting art. And, certainly, all arts have the right to be exhibited in the best possible contexts. However, viewing is only part of the process of appreciating and understanding art. Viewing art without any additional information about the works concerned can in itself create an unequal relationship between those works of art that are familiar to the audience and those that are unfamiliar. Art can benefit from translation as much as any other form of human communication. It is only by understanding the kind of object or form of expression that a work of art represents, in the context of the society of its production, that it can be understood in its own terms. And understanding art in its own terms is a prerequisite for cross-cultural comparison and for the development of a cross-cultural category of art.

As Marcia Langton has pointed out, in the case of artworks in a Western tradition viewed by Western audiences, those audiences do usually come with backgrounds of knowledge and experience that can be brought to bear on their viewing. And, of course, in exhibiting artworks today most major exhibitions will be accompanied by excellent interpretative material in the form of catalogues, web resources and often multimedia displays. Writing about art and art history is integral to the exhibition and marketing of Western art. There is no reason why precisely the same criteria should not apply to other arts.

In the context of Australia, the consequence of this perspective ought to be to re-centre art history on the Australian region. Increasingly, the interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists, and between these and artists from the Asia-Pacific, will require an art history centred on Australia and its surrounding region. And, while not negating the influence of European traditions on contemporary Australian art, it would be better if that influence were viewed from an Australian rather than from a European perspective. Regional perspectives enable the complexity of art histories and their interrelationships to emerge. However, it is important to allow fuzzy boundaries to develop around whatever new categorisations we introduce; we do not want to replace one hierarchical ordering of places with another, or to enforce a different set of exclusive and rigid categorisations! Hopefully, we are moving into a world that recognises and allows for difference while encompassing artists under the same broad umbrella. Now, Aboriginal art, Pacific art and different arts from Asia can all be included in the fine art category, which is no longer based on the history of European art and the European canon. Indigenous artists are not separated from global art movements and markets but encounter them from their own relatively autonomous trajectories.

Producing Indigenous art histories will require a considerable research effort. While major figures and movements in Western art have a long history of research, so that sessions or entire conferences can be devoted to the work of individual artists, research into non-Western art lags far behind. It is important not to neglect the contemporary context; however, it is equally important to rebuild the earlier history of non-European arts through
the resources that exist. In Australia, for example, it is important that Indigenous Australian art history should not be centred on the moment when Indigenous art became re-discovered by the contemporary Australian art world. That would simply be to repeat the history of the recognition of African art by Modernism. In addition to acknowledging the diversity of contemporary Indigenous art practice, there need to be detailed histories of Indigenous Australian arts that take those histories back in time and reveal the richness of the Indigenous heritage. Fortunately, a fairly extensive historical archive exists through the major collections in museums in Australia and around the world, in addition to the magnificent rock art which in many parts of Australia has the potential to add greatly to the historical depth. Those resources are increasingly being used by researchers and Indigenous communities to bring the rich history of Aboriginal art to wider audiences. Thus, as well as being able to appreciate Indigenous art on the basis of its expressive form, audiences will be able to contextualise it, learn about it and learn from it. As the Yolngu artist Djambawa Marawili summarised in his artist’s statement for the 2006 Sydney Biennale, ‘I don’t want to go to exhibitions and galleries and see people only looking at pretty pictures anymore, I want people to look at my paintings and recognise our law.’

NOTES

1 For a useful theoretical perspective on this issue, see Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether & Anne Stephen, The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay about Interpretation, Power Publications, Power Institute for Fine Arts, Sydney, 1988. Indeed, the authors argue strongly that in the period following World War II ‘it became easier for artists to accept Australian art as a series of footnotes to the history of European and American art’ (p. 105).

2 Beat Whitley, letter to Lloyd Rees, cited in Janet Mackey, Encounters with Australian Artists, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1988. While, as Mary Eagle has pointed out to me, there is an element of playful satire in his words, they nonetheless represent the extent to which the European-defined canon was a dominant theme in Australian art at the time.


4 For further development of the argument of this section, see Howard Murphy, Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories, Berg, Oxford, 2007.

5 Robin, p. 130, wrote of Modernist artists prior to the 1920s that ‘the meanings which concerned them were the ones that could be apprehended from the objects themselves, not from the function and significance of the objects in the cultural contexts of their production.’
