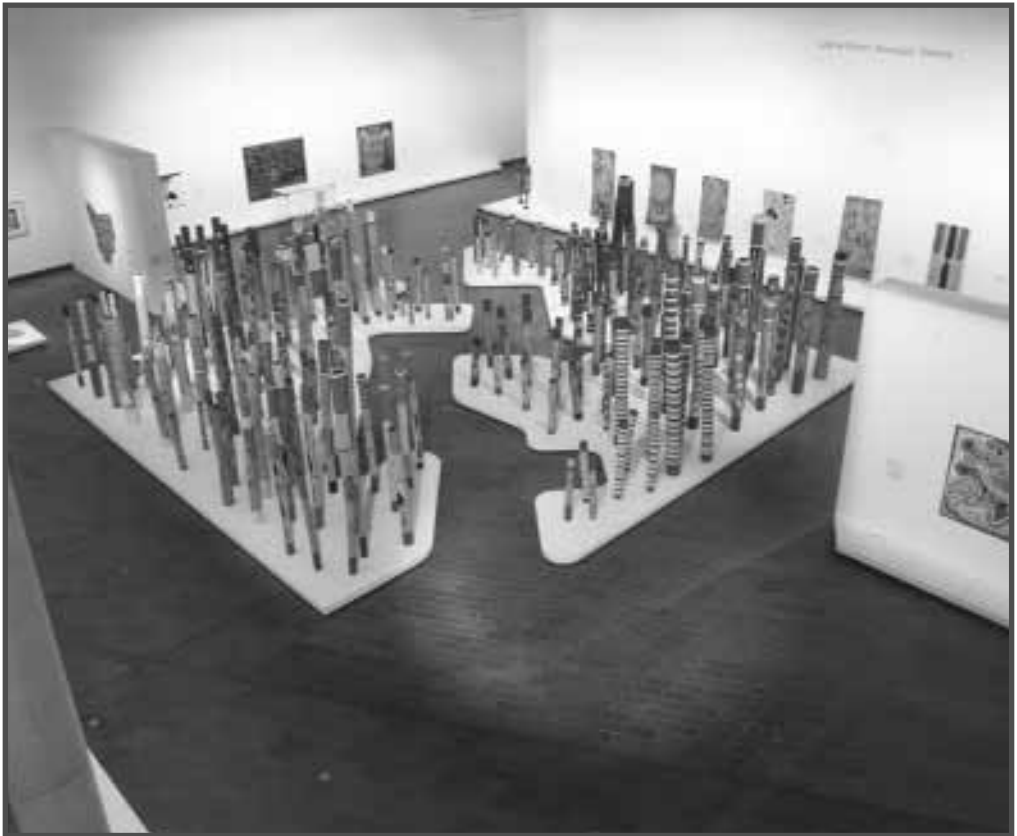


SEEING ABORIGINAL ART IN THE GALLERY

HOWARD MORPHY



Ramingining Artists, **The Aboriginal Memorial 1987-88**. Natural pigments on wood, heights from 40 cm to 327 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia. Reproduced by kind permission.

INTRODUCTION

One of the great embarrassments confronting the art world in the post-colonial context is the recent history of the exclusion of much of the world's 'artistic' production from the hallowed walls of the fine art galleries of the West (Sally Price's 'civilised places').¹ One might ask: how was it that it was excluded for so long and who is to blame

for keeping all this art out? However, rather than attributing blame, it is much more interesting to analyse the historical process of its inclusion. The excluded objects became different after they were included not because their very inclusion magically changed their status, but because the fact of their inclusion reflects changes in Western conceptions of what art is. The process of inclusion has involved three

significant factors: the critique of the concept of 'primitive art', an associated change in conceptions of what can be called 'art', and an increased understanding of art as a commodity. Those factors have operated in conjunction with global political and economic processes which in some contexts have empowered the agency of Indigenous artists. In this paper I will outline my theoretical argument and then apply it briefly to the Australian context, reflecting on the history of the inclusion of Aboriginal art in galleries of fine art and the significance of that change in the discourse over Aboriginal art.

The anthropology of art seems at times to have been squeezed between — and distorted by — two myths: the myth adhered to by the art market, and by some art curators, that somehow an anthropological approach to Indigenous art created its otherness and separated it from Western art works; and the anthropological myth that classifying works as 'art' imposed a Western categorisation upon them. These myths have a number of continuing echoes in practice: for example the emphasis in art galleries on displaying works as art, with the minimum of information lest it provide a distraction to the viewer, contrasting with the greater concern with information in ethnographic museums. This opposition has been reinforced at times by disciplinary battles over public spaces, by Indigenous and ethnic politics, and by the desire to be on the right side of the colonial/post-colonial divide. In part it has been maintained by the desire of the disciplines involved to emphasise their distinctiveness in order to maintain their separate identities and sources of funding. This motivation to maintain a structural division provides a clue to the ahistorical nature of the debate and the ever-present desire to lay blame for an unacceptable history on a rival: the art gallery can feel threatened by the ethnographic museum, the anthropologist by the art historian.

The myth concerning the role of the anthropologists in the creation of otherness of primitive art has no historical basis. Indeed in

the Australian case anthropologists have played a major role in the process of including Aboriginal art within the same generic category as other people's art, and there is evidence that anthropologists have played a similar role elsewhere. This is not to argue that all anthropologists were participants in the process. For much of the twentieth century anthropology neglected art. Non-Western art and material culture were associated with ethnographic museums and some museum curators were indeed unsympathetic to the categorisation of objects in their collections as art objects. I would argue, however, that their position was often motivated by a desire to increase the understanding of the significance to the producers of the objects in their collections. Many museum curators and anthropologists viewed the inclusion of non-European objects in the art category as a license for misinterpretation, through the imposition of universalistic aesthetic concepts and in the creation of difference at the level of meaning and significance.

'Primitive art' was viewed by modernist critics and connoisseurs as formally dynamic, expressive, challenging and incorporable within the Western canon; as to its meaning it explored the primeval depths of human spirituality and sexuality. It was this demeaning and ill-informed categorisation of objects as 'primitive art' that alienated anthropologists from the art connoisseurs and signified the gulf between their discourses.² It is ironic, yet inevitable, that for many years anthropologists and connoisseurs of Indigenous art found themselves on opposite sides of the art/artefact divide. The recent challenge mounted to the category of primitive art by anthropologists and art historians, such as Coote, Shelton, Errington, Philips, Marcus and Myers, Price and Vogel³ has allowed museum anthropologists to reincorporate the concept of art within their theoretical discourse and may foreshadow a bridging of the divide between the anthropological and art worlds.

Part of the process of incorporating art within the theoretical discourse of anthropol-

ogy is the development of definitions that are cross-cultural and that distance the concept from its Western historical baggage. An example of such a definition is one I produced myself: art objects are 'objects having semantic and/or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational or representational purposes'.⁴ I am not concerned at this stage to defend this particular definition. Any cross-cultural definition of art, just as in the case of a cross-cultural definition of religion, magic, gender or kinship, is part of a discourse that shifts the term in the direction of broad applicability while still maintaining connections to its previous place in academic discourse. The recent history of the world biases epistemology towards Western definitions, but the challenge of anthropology is in part to separate concepts from a particular past, as for example, in anthropological definitions of religion which have moved away from Christianity without excluding it. Cross-cultural definitions are as much concerned with time as with space: hence a cross-cultural conceptualisation of art must allow the analyst to encompass the fact that conceptions of art have changed in the last 400 years of Western art practice and history as much as they differ cross-culturally. As a consequence the sets of objects that get included under the rubric art change continually over time.

However in relegating Western based definitions of art to their place in a typology of possible definitions, it would clearly be naïve to neglect the impact that Western cultures — and their definitions — have had on global processes in recent centuries. The material culture of Indigenous societies has been changed as they have been incorporated within wider global processes. However those processes of articulation and transformation are highly complex — both the incorporated and the incorporators are changed thereby.⁵ Changing definitions of art are a microcosm of these larger processes. The increased understanding of the role of the commoditisation and trade of material culture, including art, has been a partner to the critique of the 'prim-

itive art' paradigm in bringing art back into anthropology. Graburn puts this succinctly when he writes:

We now realise that practically all the objects in our ethnographic collections were acquired in politically complex multicultural colonial situations. Furthermore we can state unequivocally that unless we include the socio-political context of production and exchange in our analyses we will have failed in our interpretation and understanding.⁶

To this I would only add a corollary: that material culture — however it enters the discourse of art — is an important source of evidence, for anthropologists, to better understand the social conditions and historical interactions of the time of their production.

ART OR ETHNOGRAPHY A FALSE OPPOSITION

Aboriginal art is included today in the collections of every major art gallery and art museum in Australia, and is one of the world's most visible art forms. Its inclusion within the category of fine art is no longer challenged in Australia, though elsewhere in the world this can still be the subject of controversy.⁷ It is easy to forget how recently this process of inclusion happened. Aboriginal art was barely recognised as a significant art form until the 1950s and it was not until the 1980s that it began to enter the collections of most Australian galleries, or gain widespread recognition as a significant dimension of Australian art.⁸ However it is also important not to overstate the lateness of its arrival on the world stage. In 1964 Ronald Berndt was able to write:

Australian Aboriginal art is becoming better known these days, or at least more widely known, than ever before. Once it was relegated to the ethnological section of a museum, and treated along with the artifacts and material culture of other non-literate peoples. Now it is not unusual to

find such things as Aboriginal bark paintings taking place alongside European and other examples of aesthetic expression. And because they rub shoulders with all forms of art, irrespective of cultural origin, the inference is that they are being evaluated in more general terms: that there is not only wider appreciation of Aboriginal endeavour in this respect, but that it is, almost imperceptibly, taking its place in the world of art. ... Fifteen years ago few of us would have envisaged this meteoric rise in popularity, within Australia and overseas.⁹

It is often said that Aboriginal art first entered an Australian gallery of fine art in 1959, with the acquisition by the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) of major works from the Tiwi artists of Melville and Bathurst Islands and the Yolngu artists of Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land. While this is an oversimplified account, nevertheless this gift remains a significant and perhaps, in hindsight, even transforming event. The works were acquired by Tony Tuckson, Deputy Director at the AGNSW in association with Stuart Scougall, an orthopaedic surgeon with a passion for Aboriginal art.¹⁰ One of the ways in which this event has been interpreted is as shattering the anthropological paradigm. For example the curator Terence Maloon puts this position clearly when he states of Tony Tuckson: 'In the role of Aboriginal art expert he had to take an opposing position to the anthropologists who to put it crudely, generally argued for the radical dissimilarity of all things traditionally Aboriginal to all things traditionally European'.¹¹ According to Maloon this enabled Tuckson to lay the foundation 'for the earliest public collection to be acquired for aesthetic rather than ethnographic reasons'.¹² Maloon here echoes Tuckson who wrote: 'Appreciation of Aboriginal art has widened immeasurably because the general public and the artist have been given a greater opportunity to see it as art, not as part of an ethnological collection.'¹³ However in

phrasing it 'crudely', arguing in effect that anthropologists have failed to recognise the cross-cultural nature of art, Maloon oversimplifies the issues involved.

It could indeed of course be argued that certain Western definitions of art themselves are inherently cross-cultural since they posit universals in human aesthetic appreciation. Clearly such a view lies behind Tuckson's position as summarised by Maloon.¹⁴ He argues that:

[Aboriginal] artists make their paintings with pleasure and imagination and intuition. They put their feeling into what they do. They exercise skill and ingenuity in their use of materials; they are considerate of the ways their works are organised and elaborated and are sensitive to the resulting aesthetic effect. Bark paintings and other Aboriginal artefacts are not ethnographic curiosities, but genuine works of art. Furthermore, when non-Aboriginal people respond to bark paintings as art, they are prone to recognise 'the underlying spirit of the imagery' (in Tuckson's revealing phrase).¹⁵

In countering Maloon's/Tuckson's¹⁶ thesis it is necessary to isolate two strands of argument that are only loosely interconnected. The first is an essentialist view that associates art with individual creativity, technical facility, and aesthetic sensibility. The second is masked by the phrase that bark paintings 'are not ethnographic curiosities'. I will address these issues by first stepping back in time to the debate between Tuckson and Ronald Berndt that is the initial reference point of Maloon's argument. The debate occurs in the pages of Berndt's edited book *Australian Aboriginal Art* which was published to accompany an exhibition of the same name curated by Tuckson. A 'reading between the lines' reveals that the book reflects a heated exchange between the two over how Aboriginal art should be exhibited, appreciated, and understood.¹⁷

Tuckson certainly believed that there is something universal about the character of art objects that makes it possible to evaluate them in isolation from their cultural and social background. He wrote: [there is] “an underlying unifying quality in art that resides in a visual sense of balance and proportion, but also an underlying spirit of their imagery ... [makes it possible] for us to appreciate visual art without any knowledge of its meaning and original purpose”,¹⁸ (emphasis in the original). In a weak sense there is nothing unremarkable about this position. It is undeniably the case that ‘Western art appreciators’ can make aesthetic judgments about works they know nothing about; the question remains who is included in the ‘us’, and are there differences in the bases of ‘our’ evaluations? Berndt writing in the same book acknowledged that Tuckson was at least partially right: that the appreciation of the aesthetics of Aboriginal art did attract the attention of the viewer: “however, we have attempted to go a little farther — to cross over the limits of our own cultural frontiers, and to see something of the broader significance of Aboriginal art”.¹⁹ But Berndt thought that Tuckson pushed the argument just a little too far:

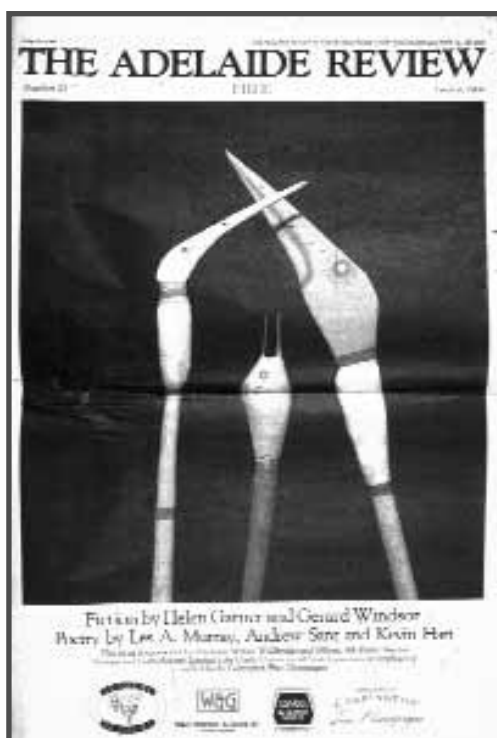
Tuckson’s contention is based on the universality of all art, irrespective of provenance. It is important for us to know here exactly what this means. The cultural background is not, here seriously taken into account; the function or use of the object or painting, even the identity of the artist, may be completely unknown. ... Its decorative qualities, its design, its treatment its overall appeal, are what matters; we like its lines its curves its sense of boldness, its balance and so forth. We are evaluating it in our own idiom, within a climate of our own aesthetic traditions.²⁰

While Berndt probably accurately assesses the core of Tuckson’s position, Tuckson²¹ acknowledged the importance of what he referred to as the ‘work of the ethnologist,

archaeologist, and anthropologist’ and in the examples that he analyses does indeed use ethnographic data.

In essence Berndt is arguing that although it is possible to appreciate works purely on the basis of form, this appreciation is only partial, and is biased towards the values of the viewing culture. Following from this I would argue that while people can thus obviously appreciate any work of art through the lens of their own culture’s aesthetics, just as they can appreciate the aesthetic properties of found objects, they must realise that this is precisely what they are doing. They must not be under the illusion that they are experiencing the work as a member of the producing culture would. The failure to provide the background knowledge necessary to interpret the object in relation to the producers culture can then be challenged both on moral grounds and on the grounds that it impoverishes the interpretation.

The counter-argument to this challenge is covered by Maloon’s statement that bark paintings ‘are not ethnographic curiosities’. While he provides no explanation of what he means, his underlying premise is that, as works of art, they should not be positioned solely or even primarily as sources of information about the way of life of another culture. From this perspective art is a celebration of common humanity, and too much context distracts the viewer. Indeed he suggests that the ‘spirituality’ that lies behind Aboriginal art is best revealed when it is viewed as art. This second suggestion poses the greatest challenge to an anthropological perspective on art, since it deems irrelevant the particular cultural meanings associated with objects. The anthropological perspective would not deny that the search for human universals and for categories that can be applied cross-culturally is perfectly compatible with a recognition of cultural difference. But the recognition of cultural difference requires that those categories be distanced from particular Western cultural assumptions. Maloon’s/Tuckson’s universals are in fact not universals at all but the expression of values of a particular (and indeed today



Cover photograph of *The Adelaide Review*, No. 23, 1986, illustrating the curator's intention to exhibit the toas as art.

unrepresentative) European art world. The debates that raged over Rubin's Primitivism exhibition generated similar debates in which it was argued that key assumptions of the ideology underlying European modernism alienated the art from the societies that produced it. Bernhard Lüthi, for example, wrote:

Rubin's love of modernism is based on the fact that it took Western art beyond the mere level of illustration. When Rubin notes that African, Oceanic or Indian artisans are not illustrating but conceptualising, he evidently feels he is praising them for their modernity. In doing so he altogether undercuts their reality system. By denying that tribal canons of representation actually represent anything, he is in effect denying that their view of the world is real.²²

Interestingly if we adopt a universalistic aesthetic perspective it is difficult to understand why the art world was so tardy in recognising the value of Aboriginal art — a value which appears to lie in its formal appearance unmediated by cultural knowledge. It seems unjust to attribute to anthropologists a significant role in the failure to recognise its universal attributes unless of course their attention to meaning was too much of a distraction. It was Australian artists and curators who so singularly failed to draw attention (to paraphrase Maloon) to the '[exercise of] skill and ingenuity in their use of materials; [or the fact that] they are considerate of the ways their works are organised and elaborated and are sensitive to the resulting aesthetic effect.' Indeed Margaret Preston,²³ one of the few Euro-Australian artists who showed an interest in Aboriginal art until the 1950s, wrote at times as if the simple asymmetric geometry that she found so vital is almost the accidental product of a simple mind and faulty technique! She later modified her view. By way of contrast praise that issued from the pen of the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer foreshadowed Tuckson's own (a fact that Tuckson clearly acknowledges):

Today I found a native who, apparently, had nothing better to do than to sit quietly in the camp evidently enjoying himself ... he held [his brush] like a civilised artist ... he did the line work, often very fine and regular, with much the same freedom and precision as a Japanese or Chinese artist doing his most beautiful wash-work with his brush.²⁴

However from Tuckson's point of view Spencer's involvement with Aboriginal art may have symbolised the very problem that he was trying to address. While Spencer was able to see the aesthetic dimension of Aboriginal art and responded to it in terms of universal characteristics of form, the paintings in his charge remained in the National Museum, and absent from the walls of the National

Gallery of Victoria. The paintings were part of a comprehensive ethnographic collection which included material culture objects in general, and thus the art was lost in the ethnography. It was not seen by others as art because of where it was housed and how it was exhibited.

The theory of a universal aesthetic is intertwined with a theory of viewing that opposes the art gallery to the museum. In this theory works of art should be allowed to speak for themselves. Thus they need their own space for contemplation, and though their meaning and impact will be affected by their relationship to adjacent works, and to the hang as a whole, it is desirable that the act of viewing should take place in space as uncluttered as possible by supplementary information. While the density of hangs varies, as does the amount of information provided, these broad principles apply in art galleries around the world. Museums, on the other hand, are often defined in opposition to art galleries as places where objects are contextualised by information, by accompanying interpretative materials, by dioramas, and by being seen in association with other objects. I think that it is desirable to distinguish the Western concept of 'seeing things' as art from the presumption of a universalistic aesthetic and indeed to separate 'seeing things' as isolated or decontextualised objects from 'seeing things' as art.

The real problem with Maloon's/Tuckson's position, apart from its circularity, is that Western viewers come to an art gallery already laden with information and experience that can be applied to already familiar works of European art. This information will have been acquired from seeing works in quite different contexts: not only the gallery walls, but also in publications and films, as reproductions, and so on. It is a conceit of a particularly narrow band of Western art theory and practice that the appreciation and production of art has nothing to do with knowledge of its particular art history. For Indigenous art to be seen on equal terms with Western art it requires more than the right to an isolated space. The view-

er must also have some access to its history and significance. Nigel Lendon has shown that, in viewing eastern Arnhem Land bark paintings, knowledge of the social and cultural background of the works enhances the viewer's appreciation of them:

The interpretation of these paintings may be compared to how the viewer might understand Western religious or political art, or the world of allegory. In that case we expect both the viewer and the artist to bring to the exchange a prior knowledge of the social and mythic space of the narrative, or at least a recognition of the wider reality to which the image refers.²⁵

Yet it is also undeniable that understanding the form of the paintings can provide deep insights into culture and cognition.

Seeing a work as art is also quite compatible with seeing it as something else, and viewing an object in isolation does not of itself make it into an art object. However placing objects in isolation, as in an art gallery, or in sets, as in ethnographic displays, has at times created the space for discourse over whether something is or is not an art object. And because art has been so inextricably interconnected with the market, the dialogue has been entangled both in an economic and in a cultural value-creation process. The South Australian Museum's exhibition in 1986 'Art and Land', provides an excellent example of the discourse over Aboriginal art as art. It also illustrates just how challenging Tuckson's action was, nearly twenty-five years earlier, when he installed Aboriginal art for the first time in the AGNSW. 'Art and Land' was an exhibition of toas from the Lake Eyre region of Central Australia. Toas were direction signs that marked where people had gone but they were also engaging and diverse minimalist sculptural forms. On this occasion anthropologist Peter Sutton and historian Philip Jones decided to exhibit the objects not as ethnography but as art, by the simple expedient of giving them their own space in a well lit

display with a minimum of accompanying information. The protagonist who took them to task was an art historian, Donald Brooke, who argued that the way they were displayed in itself was a form of appropriation, since it contradicted the intention of the producers.²⁶ Although adopting a different and, on the surface, opposite position from Tuckson, Brooke too appears to have been bound by the categories of his own culture. The acceptance of art works into the Western gallery context is not simply a belated recognition of their universal attributes. It can be a far more radical step that challenges the Western category itself and shifts the definition of art: exhibiting toas as art was part of that process. That is why the inclusion of non-European art continues to generate such opposition: it insists on a different kind of art history that threatens to disrupt pre-existing values. At the same time Jones and Sutton provided, through the accompanying book,²⁷ and in the debates that surrounded the exhibition, more contextual information on toas than had been available until then. As Luke Taylor pointed out in reviewing the debate the error is in the polarisation of views: in seeing works either as art or ethnography.

Our theory of art should not divorce the analysis of aesthetic forms from a consideration of social context; the form of the work is a crystallisation of those values. Rather we should investigate the cultural setting of the artist's aesthetic experience and how this relates to the form of the works and also address the ways such artistic forms engender aesthetic responses in members of other cultures who view the works.²⁸

A SHORT HISTORY OF INCLUSION

If Aboriginal art had its advocates, such as Baldwin Spencer and Margaret Preston, early on, how was it that it remained neglected by the Western art world for so long? There is no simple explanation. Much Aboriginal art was uncollectable either because it was secret or

because it existed in temporary form as body painting, sand sculpture, or ceremonial construction. While museum collections were crowded with Australian weapons, Aboriginal cultures seemed to have produced few figurative carvings or masks, the items that had gripped the imagination of sectors of the European art world. However this perception may have been reinforced by the evolutionist's eye. Aborigines as hunters and gatherers were seen to represent the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. Fine art, thought to be a characteristic of high civilisation, was not anticipated and hence remained unseen. It may also be the case that, in formal terms, much Aboriginal art fell outside the kinds of things included within the nineteenth century inventory of types of art. For example a toa comprising a hunk of pubic hair stuck into a ball of white clay on the top of a pointed stick was unlikely to have been acceptable as a work of art in Victorian-era Australia. Much Aboriginal art could however more easily find its place in the later slots created by conceptual art, minimalism, performance art and even abstract expressionism. While almost by definition 'primitive art' provided something of a challenge to existing categories, there were few Aboriginal artworks that did not pose a major challenge. Interestingly, in focusing on bark painting Maloon has chosen works that are most analogous to a fairly standard Western art form — that of pictorial representation.

While anthropologists may have been complicit in the nineteenth century in contributing to the image of hunter-gatherer society as representative of a pre-art, primitive level of social organisation, they were also at the forefront of the challenge to such a view. Indeed it was anthropologists in association with a few artists and curators who, before World War II, pushed for the recognition of Aboriginal art, and who, in the case of Leonard Adam and Ronald and Catherine Berndt were the first to attribute works to known individuals. And according to Maloon²⁹ it was at an exhibition organised by



A Toa. Parakalani: To the plain which reminded Kuruljuruna of his own, or his father's (Parakarlana) bald head. Kuruljuruna camped here with his men for some time. White knob=plain. Top=hair representing Parakarlana or Kuruljuruna. Diyari 215 mm. Collection: South Australian Museum.

the Berndts in David Jones art gallery in Sydney in 1949 that Tuckson first encountered Aboriginal art, and it was in a book edited by Ronald Berndt that Tuckson wrote his major article on the aesthetics of Aboriginal art. Moreover it was not for nearly another thirty years that other galleries joined the AGNSW in adding Aboriginal art to their collections.

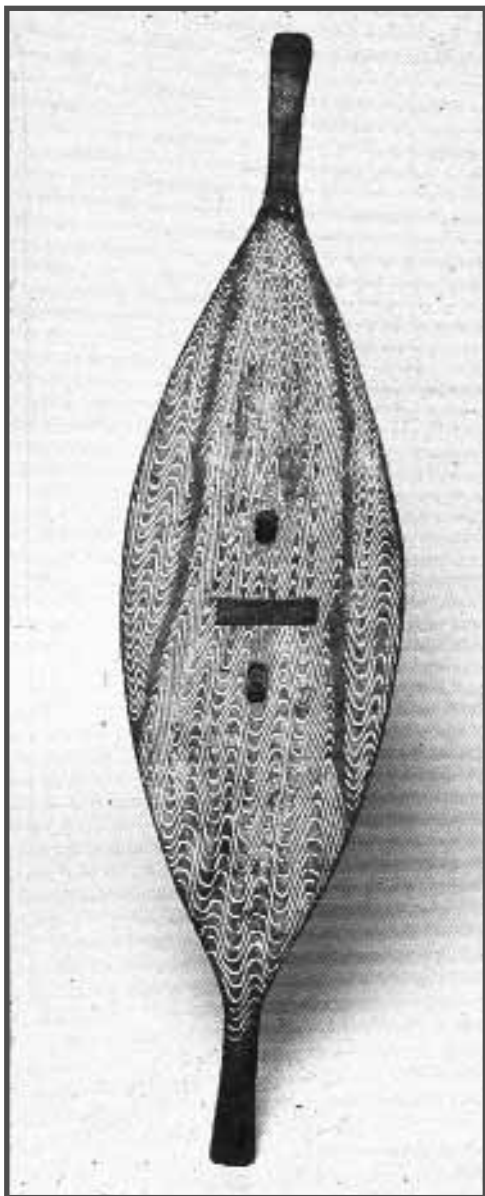
Just as it began to gain limited recognition in the 1950s Aboriginal art had to face another challenge, this time to its authenticity. This was felt to be threatened with contamination by contact and trade. While rejecting the categorisation of Aboriginal works as primitive, many anthropologists were allied with the primitive art market in assigning a primary

value to those works made before the influence of European colonisation. In particular there was a tendency to reject art produced for sale. As Ruth Philips writes of Native American art:

...the scholarly apparatus that inscribes the inauthenticity of commoditized wares [is] a central problem in the way that art history has addressed Native art. The authenticity paradigm marginalises not only the objects but the makers, making of them a ghostly presence in the modern world rather than acknowledging their vigorous interventions in it.³⁰

In the 1950s Australia was viewed as a country whose Indigenous inhabitants had been long colonised despite the fact that the frontier had only been extended to much of Arnhem Land and parts of central Australia in the decades either side of World War II. Almost from first contact bark paintings were viewed with suspicion by ethnographic museums and art galleries alike, and relatively few were collected by museums in Australia and overseas during the 1950s and 1960s.³¹ Collections made by Kupka and Scougal were notable exceptions. Indeed this attitude that authenticity is allied to isolation, that characterised the views of some anthropologists, gives a superficial weight to Maloon's arguments.

Perhaps because Aboriginal art had never been a major token in the 'primitive art' market there was less resistance to the inclusion of art made for sale in the fine art category when, eventually, the breakthrough came. The primitive art market needed to limit its products in order to keep the market price high; also its values rested on the difference between Europeans and the romanticised primitive other who was tamed and, in a sense, devalued through contact with civilisation. Between the 1940s and 1980s Aboriginal art moved from the non-art to the art category almost without passing through the stage of being considered as primitive art. Aboriginal art became art partly through the process of its



Shield from Murray River, Victoria. Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Photo: Malcom Osman.

commercialisation. Because so many forms of Aboriginal art are the temporary product of performance — body paintings, sand sculptures and ground drawings, string constructions and fragile headdresses — or sacred objects, in making works that could be sold Aboriginal craftspeople clearly produced artefacts whose form was influenced by inter-

action with the market. The designs on bark paintings were the same as those produced as body paintings, coffin lids, bark huts and containers or hollow log coffins — but in being painted on bark they were being produced for outside consumption. Similar considerations apply to the transfer of central Australian designs to acrylic paintings on canvas, though in this case no-one could imagine that they were a pre-European product. Anthropologists who worked on art such as Berndt and Mountford, in making foundational collections of art in ‘new media’, were often without realising it integral to these processes of incorporating Aboriginal cultural production within the new market economy. However in doing so they were only reflecting the agency of Aboriginal people themselves, who used art as a means of persuading outsiders of the value of their way of life as well as a means of earning a living in the post-colonial context.

Aboriginal art has also been fortunate in that at the time when interest in it was developing, the categorisation of Indigenous art as primitive art was under challenge. The 1970s and 1980s have seen a breakdown of categories within Western art in general as the hegemony of the Western canon has come increasingly under challenge, from non-Western and Indigenous arts. This challenge has led implicitly to a shift in the definition of what art is and in who defines what is art.

‘Contemporary Aboriginal art’ emerged as a category in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s.³² Initially it included paintings which challenged the ‘primitive art’ category because of the dynamic nature of the art and the contemporaneity of the artists. Previously the only slot allocated to such work was the devalued category of ‘tourist art’. The new category included art from all regions of Australia, with the proviso that the works were in continuity with Aboriginal traditions, and thus part of a trajectory that stretched backwards to the precolonial era. It included the art of Arnhem Land — an art whose genesis was independent of European traditions. The category came

into being partly because Aborigines asserted the contemporary relevance of their art in the Australian context. It was *their* contemporary art, it influenced white Australian art and in turn was influenced by the post-colonial context of its production. Aboriginal art, too, represented dynamic and diverse traditions, and for those who were prepared to see, it was an avowedly political art. The category also came to include the acrylic art of the Western and Central Desert.

The 'Aboriginal Australia' exhibition of 1981 which travelled to the State art galleries of Victoria, Western Australia, and Queensland was a major expression of this new and more inclusive category. In addition to bark paintings, Western Desert acrylic paintings and sculptures from Cape York Peninsula and Melville and Bathurst Islands, it included decorated artefacts from all over Australia. It also found a place for string bags and basketwork which challenged the accepted division between art and craft. Most innovatively, perhaps, it included watercolours by Namatjira, paintings by William Barak, and drawings by Tommy McRae.

The 'Dreamings' exhibition that toured the USA in 1988-89 before returning to its home gallery in Adelaide was in direct continuity with 'Aboriginal Australia', although its agenda, to show the works as contemporary Aboriginal art, was even more explicitly articulated. 'Dreamings' emphasised the commercial context of much of the art and drew attention, especially in the catalogue, to Indigenous perceptions of the art as opposed to Western aesthetics. It also included a far greater proportion of works from the Western Desert than did 'Aboriginal Australia', reflecting the degree to which that art was beginning to attract global interest. The exhibition of Western Desert acrylics and bark paintings from Arnhem Land together as equal members of the contemporary Aboriginal art category was potentially very challenging to the conceptualisation of the avant-garde. Western Desert paintings were a newly developed art form employing European materials, and they

apparently changed rapidly over time; these paintings thus became unproblematically avant-garde. Bark paintings, which used materials and techniques that were independent of European art, had been accepted into the old category of primitive art. Yet as art objects they and Western Desert acrylics occupied an almost identical position, and both were related directly to Indigenous iconographic traditions. Such Aboriginal art seemed to be simultaneously 'primitive' and 'avant-garde'. As Jean-Hubert Martin pointed out, "If [contemporary] Aboriginal artists do produce work of recognized value, then the categories reigning in our institutions are in dire need of revision."³³

The development of 'contemporary Aboriginal art' as a category rescued some Indigenous art from being marginalised or devalued but it sowed the seeds for a different kind of marginalisation. In the 1970s, when the art of the north and the centre was beginning to achieve recognition, the Aboriginal art of south-east Australia was still unrecognised. There the illusion that Aboriginal art belonged to a past that was separated from contemporary life was easy to maintain. It was simply a facet of the continuing invisibility of Aboriginal people from the south in the consciousness of most white Australians until the middle of the twentieth century. Aboriginal art had gone just as Aboriginal people were 'fading away'. The near-prehistoric art of the early to mid-nineteenth century gained some acceptance, but the art of the twentieth century and contemporary Koori art remained unrecognised, hidden as part of what W. E. H. Stanner called 'the great Australian silence'.

However, Aborigines in south-east Australia had continued to produce art and craftworks and a few, such as Ronald Bull, gained a limited reputation as artists. But they were in a difficult position, like Namatjira only more so. They found themselves positioned either as producers of tourist art, which was negatively viewed as a contaminated form of primitive art, or if their art was influenced by, or indistinguishable in formal terms from,

contemporary Western art then what they produced was taken as a sign of their assimilation. 'Aboriginal Australia' pushed at the boundaries of these categories by including works by William Barak and Tommy McRae. But more significantly the emergence of the category 'contemporary Aboriginal art' and the positioning of Arnhem Land bark paintings and Western Desert acrylics within it brought the contradictions of exclusion and Martin's 'need for revision' closer to home. This was implicitly recognised in the 'Dreamings' exhibition. Even so, while the catalogue included reference to the contemporary art of southeast Australia the exhibition itself did not.

In the 1970s and 1980s many Aboriginal people in south-east Australia began to develop as artists while simultaneously and confidently asserting their Aboriginality. Most were trained not in the remote bush or desert regions of central Australia but, like many of their white contemporaries, in the art worlds and art schools of urban Australia. What was their relationship to other Aboriginal artists? What was the relationship between Aboriginal art and other contemporary Australian art? The paradoxes multiplied when non-Aboriginal contemporary artists such as Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers borrowed Aboriginal motifs for their own work. Tim Johnson even participated with Aboriginal artists in the co-production of paintings. Was a piece of Western Desert art contemporary Australian art when Tim Johnson painted some of the dots? Was it 'Australian' as opposed to 'Aboriginal' even if it was formally indistinguishable from other Western Desert pieces? If it was classifiable as avant-garde could it no longer be Aboriginal art? And if it was avant-garde then weren't Aboriginal artists working in other avant-garde styles equally producers of Aboriginal art?

The apparent paradoxes arise because Western art history creates pigeonholes. It tends to allocate individual works to single art-historical spaces, failing to recognise the

fuzzy nature of the boundaries between stylistic categories and the multiplicity of influences on a particular artist's work. The solution forced by the nature of contemporary Aboriginal art was the recognition both of its plural nature and of the consequences of this plurality for Western art-historical theory.

CONCLUSION

The current moment provides a good opportunity for a rapprochement between art historical and anthropological approaches to art. The challenge to the old presuppositions of the Western art world, including the anthropological critique of the concept of primitive art, has created art worlds that are far more complex and heterogeneous than their predecessors, less subordinate to the developmental sequences of European-American art. Once non-Western arts were only thought to have a history at the moment of their discovery by the West. Such a view is no longer tenable. Art history must, as a result, be reinvented to reflect the diversity of world arts and make sense of the apparent chaos. This is not as radical a proposal as it may seem. Indeed contemporary art curation has long taken for granted the existence of knowledge of the history and significance of objects included in exhibitions, without which it is impossible to make sense of changes in the artistic record. Many of the variations in the Western canon can only be explained when related to the wider context of the objects' production: why the works of the artists of the voyages of discovery paid such attention to details of geology, environment and climate, what motivated the impressionists to develop a new paradigm, the role of colour theory in Seurat's pointillism, the cubist rejection of representational art, and so on. The anthropological endeavour of understanding difference as well as similarity is one that gives agency to the artists who made the works and allows their intentions and motivations to be reflected in the histories of their works that are produced. An anthropologically informed art history is needed to provide the historical, art historical, social and cultur-

al information, not only for those artistic traditions where background cannot be taken for granted but, it could be argued, for the Western art tradition as well.

HOWARD MORPHY

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Endnotes

- 1 Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- 2 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). The chapter titled 'Histories of the Tribal and the Modern' provides an interesting discussion of these issues though his eventual collapse of the opposition between museum anthropologists and primitive art aesthetes into an 'anthropological/aesthetic object system' oversimplifies the dynamics of the discourse and diverts attention away from the issues that divided them.
- 3 Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (eds), *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford Studies in the Anthropology of Cultural Forms (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Shelly Errington, 'What Became of the Authentic Primitive Art', in *Cultural Anthropology* 9(2) (1994), pp. 201-226; Ruth Philips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); George Marcus and Fred Myers (eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Susan Vogel (ed), *Art/Artifact* (New York: Centre for African Art, 1988).
- 4 Howard Morphy, 'The Anthropology of Art' in Tim Ingold (ed), *Companion Encyclopedia to Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 655.
- 5 For a relevant discussion see Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 6 Nelson Graburn, 'Epilogue: Ethnic and Tourist Arts Revisited', in Ruth Philips and Christopher Steiner (eds), *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 345.
- 7 In 1997 for example there was controversy over the exclusion of some categories of Aboriginal art from the art fair in Basel. David Throsby, 'But is it Art?', in *Art Monthly Australia* (Nov. 1997), p. 32, wrote to the chairman of the committee saying that letting in recognisably Indigenous artworks from Australia would open up the floodgates to primitive, tribal, and folk art from around the world. Interestingly Tracey Moffatt's work was exhibited with great success at the same fair. The following year an even more heated debate broke out over the exclusion of a number of Arnhem Land artists from the Cologne art fair, see John McDonald, 'Black Ban: All They Want is a Fair Go', in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 1998.
- 8 *Australian Perspecta* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981).
- 9 Ronald M. Berndt, 'Epilogue' in Ronald M. Berndt (ed), in *Australian Aboriginal Art* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964), p. 1.
- 10 Richard McMillan, 'The Drawings of Tony Tuckson', (unpublished M. Arts Theory Thesis, UNSW, 1997), documents the process of the acquisition of the collection and shows it as the result of a complex process of negotiation between the Gallery staff, in particular Tuckson and the director Hal Missingham, the Board of Trustees and the donor or sponsor Scougall himself. As Nigel Lendon pointed out to me the Indigenous works were still included under the rubric 'Primitive art' at the AGNSW until the 1980s.
- 11 Terrence Maloon, *Tuckson and Tradition, Painting Forever: Tony Tuckson* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2000), p. 14.
- 12 Maloon, *Tuckson and Tradition, Painting Forever*, p. 14.
- 13 Anthony Tuckson, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', in Ronald M. Berndt (ed), *Australian Aboriginal Art* (Sydney: Ure Smith 1964), p. 63.

- 14 It is precisely the particular form of such universals that explains why Bourdieu, in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), is so determined not to engage in aesthetic discourse when considering judgements of distinction, and why Gell, in Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: and Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), argues so passionately for an aesthetic relativism that eliminates the aesthetic altogether as a cross-cultural category.
- 15 Anthony Tuckson, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', p. 63; Terrence Maloon, *Tuckson and Tradition, Painting Forever: Tony Tuckson*, p. 14.
- 16 I use this formulation Maloon/Tuckson in places where it is difficult to know whether the views represented are ones shared by Maloon and Tuckson or are simply Maloon reporting his understanding of Tuckson's position. The confusion may be a sign of just how well Maloon represents Tuckson's arguments.
- 17 Indeed Richard McMillan's 1997 UNSW thesis *The Drawings of Tony Tuckson*, reveals a heated exchange between Tuckson and Ronald and Catherine Berndt over publication of Tuckson's chapter in the book. Reading further between the lines one can't help thinking that the somewhat interventionist editorial style adopted by the Berndts helped to polarise the debate and make the protagonists' views seem more opposed than in fact they were.
- 18 Anthony Tuckson, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', p. 63
- 19 Berndt, 'Epilogue', pp. 71-2.
- 20 Berndt, 'Epilogue', p. 71; my emphasis.
- 21 Tuckson, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', p. 68.
- 22 'The Marginalisation of (Contemporary) Non-European\Non-American Art (as reflected in the way we view it)', in Bernhard Lüthi (ed) *Aratjara: The Art of the First Australians*, (Dusseldorf: Kunstmuseum Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1993) p. 23; In writing a history of this particular period one is conscious of the fact that one is dealing with a coded language in which the use of words like conceptual is far removed from their ordinary language meaning and position the author in a particular way. Tuckson stresses that non-Western art is conceptual rather than representational, and clarifies his view with a quote from Golding, 'The Negro sculptor tends to depict what he knows about his subject rather than what he sees'. Without agreeing with the presuppositions about Negro art, this perspective should on the surface be compatible with an anthropological investigation. The difference may be that the anthropologist wishes to establish first what the artist knows about the subject of his painting by placing art within a context of cultural knowledge and establish the relationship between knowing and seeing, whereas a particular modernist world view sees that knowledge as being communicated directly through the art itself.
- 23 Margaret Preston, 'The Application of Aboriginal Design', in *Art and Australia*, 31 March 1930, pp. 44-58.
- 24 W. Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 2 volumes (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 793.
- 25 Nigel Lendon, 'Visual Evidence: Space, Place and Innovation in Bark Paintings of Central Arnhem Land', in *Colonising the Country*, special issue of *Australian Journal of Art*, 12, 1995, p. 60.
- 26 This exhibition provides a well documented contested arena for most of the issues discussed here. Luke Taylor's 'The Aesthetics of Toas: A Cross-Cultural Connundrum', in *Canberra Anthropology* 11(1), 1988, provides an excellent discussion of the main theoretical issues concerns and Peter Sutton, 'Unintended Consequences', in *The Interior*, 1 (2), 1991, pp. 24-29, provides an extended summary of the debate from his perspective.
- 27 Philip Jones and Peter Sutton, *Art and land: Aboriginal Sculptures from the Lake Eyre Region* (Adelaide: South Australian Museum, 1986).
- 28 Luke Taylor, 'The Aesthetics of Toas: A Cross-Cultural Connundrum', in *Canberra Anthropology* 11(1), 1988, p. 96.
- 29 Maloon, *Tuckson and Tradition, Painting Forever*, p. 14.
- 30 Ruth Philips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. x.
- 31 see Howard Morphy, 'Gaps in Collections and Spaces for Exhibition—Reflections on the Acceptance of Aboriginal Art in Europe and Australia', *Aboriginal Art in the Public Eye, Art Monthly Australia Supplement* (1992), pp. 10-12.
- 32 The analysis which follows is drawn from Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998).
- 33 Jean-Hubert Martin, 'A Delayed Communication', in Bernhard Lüthi (ed), *Aratjara: The Art of the First Australians* (Dusseldorf: Kunstmuseum Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1993), p. 33.