

ABROAD

Since the critical reaction to the 1984 exhibition *'Primitivism' in 20th century art* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, non-Western art has been an important ticket item in artworld discourse throughout the world. While there had previously been exhibitions that juxtaposed Western and tribal art, they had not elicited the same level of critique either locally or internationally. This artworld shift in the mid-to-late 1980s was preceded by considerable Third and Fourth World activism. During the 1970s the Aboriginal Arts Board sought to exhibit Aboriginal art overseas and create links with Indigenous artists and organisations from other countries. For example, the National Seminar on Aboriginal Arts, organised by the Board shortly after its creation in 1973, included invited Native American and African artists. This was part of an emerging global, postcolonial consciousness in which indigenous and colonised groups claimed, in an increasingly united fashion, the rights of cultural identity and expression (**Lüthi**). In 1982, at the World Cultural Conference in Mexico City, Third World representatives collectively demanded the recognition and equality of all cultures, including indigenous cultures of the so-called Fourth World.

An early test case of this postcolonial shift in the artworld was the French exhibition *The other continent: Australia, the dream and the real* (Paris, 1983) (**Smith, Pagé, Montgomery**). If familiar primitivist metaphors prevailed at this time, within a decade Aboriginal art was being discussed as contemporary art (**Weber, Jones, Kovalev, Myers, Morphy, Mundine**). There may have been considerable ambivalence in the critical reception of Aboriginal art overseas (**Jones, Myers, Morphy, Mundine**), but it did create an unprecedented opening for Aboriginal art on the contemporary world scene (**Lüthi**).

The main artworld concern in these new postcolonial developments was the Third and Fourth World diasporas in the Western centres, so the Aboriginal artists to most benefit in a critical sense were urban artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett. For example, while Moffatt's work was exhibited with great success at the 1997 *Art Basel*, the fair's organisers excluded 'Aboriginal art'—i.e. art from remote Australia—as did those of the Cologne art fair the next year on the grounds that it was ethnic and not contemporary art. While Aboriginal art from remote centres was often exhibited overseas, and attracted important collectors, it is yet to be really accepted as contemporary or postcolonial art (**Morphy, Mundine**)—though there are recent signs that this is changing (**Lüthi, Magnaguagno and Wilpert**). This section includes excerpts from overseas critics (**Pagé, Jones, Kovalev, Lüthi, Myers, Magnaguagno and Wilpert**), as well as travelling Australians (**Montgomery, Morphy, Mundine**). Generally, Aboriginal artists welcomed and sought out opportunities to engage the wider world through their art (**L. Bennett**).

Paris: The dream and the reality – 1983

Suzanne Pagé, curator, Paris

Why hold an Australian exhibition [*of contemporary art in Paris*] now? ...

Recently a boom in rock music and cinema has also caused great curiosity in France for this other continent, magnifying fantasies of adventure and romance centred around a heroic vision of Australia (a new version of the positive hero): a return to sources, the last frontier, the last place where adventure is still possible, the final refuge for a death-dealing civilisation haunted by the spectre of universal disaster ...

... For a French person landing with these expectations and this nostalgia, the first impression of excitement and optimism, bound up with a tremendous feeling of energy, the vastness and savage beauty of landscapes, the enormous untapped potential of a new nation (Federation dates from 1901), and further stimulated by stark contrasts—sunshine and the implacable harshness of a murderous climate; the coexistence of an aboriginal civilisation over 40,000 years old and the shortest history in the world (less than 200 years) ...

At the centre of this mass of contradictions ... Aboriginal society, divided as it is into many tribes, stands with serene permanence and timeless transcendence ...

However though most outsiders are fascinated by the intensity, the profound and complex nature of Aboriginal cultural life, these two radically different worlds are still ignorant of each other. So most of the artists exhibiting here will be meeting an Aboriginal tribe for the first time in Paris ...

... From an Australian point of view, this presentation involves the artifice of placing side by side two realities which are still foreign to the other. In fact this is the first time a museum outside of Australia presents this double participation, including Aborigines.

So, on the one hand there are the Aboriginal owners and managers from the Warlpiri tribe ... which has largely retained its cultural identity ... They and their representatives decided on the form their participation would take—ground painting—as the purest and most accurate expression of a religious and instructive art which excludes any idea of permanence, recognition and all the more so, of market value. Here they will be showing in the most peremptory way how art and life can be integrated, [*a*] nostalgia of our modern age ...

On the other hand, from Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, the most dynamic creative critical and commercial centres, twenty-two [*non-Aboriginal*] artists present their works ...

... There can be no mistake about the particular type of [*non-Aboriginal*] painting presented here, by hasty categorizing into the international neo-expressionist movement; it should be seen in the national perspective of the deep-rooted expressionism of the 1930s and 1940s. This was the source of a unique and forceful art where the Dreamworld is again present, in a monstrous or hallucinatory form ...

Suzanne Pagé, 'Introduction', in *The other continent: Australia, the dream and the real*, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 1983, pp. 10–15.

Paris: Our culture is as modern as today – 1983

Lance Bennett, art coordinator, Lajamanu (as authorised by the Warlpiri owners and managers of Tjundu)

We have brought this painting to Paris because we want to show that our traditional ceremony life, which has gone on since the beginning of time, is still living today. We, the Warlpiri tribe of the central Desert, want the outside world to know that our traditions have never collapsed.

We want to show the people of Paris that our culture is as modern as today.

Our ceremonies still have the power to control our young people. Our young men go into Alice Springs or to Darwin for a western-style education—but, when they return to Lajamanu, they are deeply pleased and satisfied to follow the dictates of tribal Law. They do not feel oppressed by our laws of living—they feel satisfied. They want to respect and obey the old people, and they do. In that way, they know what it is to say, with profound pride: 'We are Warlpiri'.

We do not do this ground painting in Paris to seek our praise, or honour. We only want the world to accept and respect our culture. We only want recognition that we have a culture, and that we remain strong, as Warlpiri people, in Australia. We do not want to be venerated as 'special'. We just want to be recognised as part of the human race, with our own traditions which we maintain, as we always have.

We Warlpiri present you here in Paris not with a 'showpiece'. We are not, and do not, ever, want to become professional painters.

Instead, we present you with a glimpse of the way we venerate the sacred Heroes who have given us our identity, so that Europeans can have some understanding of what we are, and how strongly we feel about being allowed to remain ourselves.

We will never put this kind of painting onto canvas, or onto artboard, or onto any 'permanent' medium. The permanence of these designs is in our minds. We do not need museums or books to remind us of our traditions. We are forever renewing and recreating those traditions in our ceremonies.

We came to Paris because Suzanne Pagé came all the way from Paris to the North of Australia, and personally approached our Aboriginal Cultural Foundation to see whether we leaders were prepared to make a ground painting in Paris, in order to show that our culture is still living ...

We old people had many discussions about whether we could leave this ground painting intact for a short period in Paris.

On the one hand, our Law says that as soon as the painting has been completed, it must be erased by the owners who have, themselves, been transformed into the Heroes for those few minutes.

On the other hand, if we had erased it thus, only a tiny handful of people in Paris could have witnessed our culture. Therefore, we old people decided on a special procedure in the case of this exhibition. We agreed among ourselves:

- That the ground painting will be done, in the Museum of Modern Art, to make the point that our culture is modern, even though it is 40,000 years old.
- The female staff of ARC conveyed to us, through Suzanne Pagé, that they would respect our Law by staying away from us while we were occupied with the sacred act of painting.
- That the painting can be left intact for the period of the exhibition, so as many Europeans as possible can visit the Museum and recognise the fact of our living culture.
- We trust the ARC Museum staff, at the end of the exhibition, to have that painting erased by men.

Lance Bennett (as authorised by the Warlpiri owners and managers of Tjundu), 'Aboriginal participation: "Ground painting" made by 12 members of the Warlpiri tribe', in *The other continent: Australia, the dream and the real*, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 1983, pp. 41–64.

Paris: Dreaming of the antipodes – 1984

Jill Montgomery, art critic, Perth

In Paris the year 1983 has already been christened the year of Australia ... The exhibition held in the ARC Gallery (at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris) could not have been organised at a more opportune moment ... However, the exploits of 'White Australia' pale into insignificance when one considers the impact, on the French press and public, of the discovery of Aboriginal Australia. In fact, one newspaper suggests, in a graphic image, that the co-habitation of contemporary Australian art and the Aboriginal Ground painting (in the context of the Museum of Modern Art) is as 'incongruous and exciting' as the construction of a 'motel-casino' in the vicinity of the sacred site of Ayers Rock in the Northern Territory. It is obvious that, without the aboriginal participation—the dance spectacle at the 'Bouffes du Nord', the ground painting by the Warlpiri tribe at the Museum of Modern Art, the aboriginal video programme and the acrylic paintings at the Australian Embassy—the Australian contribution to the Paris Autumn Festival would have been almost a 'non-event'. Probably, the exhibition of contemporary Australian art would have gone virtually unnoticed by the Parisian public, satiated with 'avant-garde' art, and secure in the knowledge of the centrality of Paris to 'mainstream' culture—even if the current has shifted slightly in the direction of New York.

The Aboriginal contribution gave the Australian exhibition a chronological, cultural and anthropological dimension which attracted a wider public than that which habitually frequents exhibitions of contemporary art. One can argue that aboriginal culture is just as much contemporary as it is ancient, but the aboriginal artefacts created a different awareness of the Australian continent, no longer viewed by the French just as an outpost of the British Empire or of a moribund Commonwealth ...

... [Fabien Gruhier, writing for *Le Nouvel Observateur*] goes on to describe the curious reversal, which has occurred in Australia, of the usual pattern of colonisation: whereas in most countries colonised by an advanced Western civilisation the inhabitants have been irresistibly attracted to a technologically superior culture and have been not

only converted to the Christian religion but also enslaved to a consumer society, the Aborigines have made a deliberate choice to revert to tribal customs and to return to their ancestral lands ... They abandoned the 'bidonvilles' (shanty-towns) where they had been herded after the war, and gradually resumed their ancestral territories and the struggle for the recognition of their legal rights over these lands, which they have gradually wrested from the Australian government. Gruhier emphasizes, justifiably, the rejection by the aborigines of the values of 20th century Western society, their refusal to invest in its materialism and their determined adherence to the spiritual tradition which they have evolved over a period of 40,000 years and lost in the last 200 ...

... Perhaps the most judicious and balanced appreciation ... appears in *Le Monde de la Musique*. The author, Jean Nattiez, expresses certain well-founded reservations about the 'legitimacy' of the spectacle at 'les Bouffes du Nord'. Firstly, he discusses the ethical or moral question raised by the transportation of this 'primitive' or tribal people to Paris. Should the aborigines be 'exhibited' for the entertainment of the Parisian intelligentsia? Secondly, what validity does this ethnic music retain when it is performed 'out of context'? He suggests that the presentation of aboriginal music and dance in the form of a 'spectacle' causes a profound alteration in their meaning, since this music was not intended for reception by a western concert audience nor to fulfill certain expectations of enjoyment ... the reactions of the Parisians, confronted with ethnic art, cannot but be different from those of the performers immersed in their own culture.

More than any of her colleagues, Marjorie Alessandri has attempted to reconcile, from an intellectual point of view, the contrasts apparent in contemporary Australia and reflected in the dichotomous nature of the exhibition in Paris ... In seeking to explain the sudden 'explosion' of Australia, she re-iterates the idea—which was one of the themes of the Sydney *Biennale* in 1979 and again in 1982—that Australia is becoming aware of her own identity ... an assertion of a cultural identity which rejects all forms of cultural imperialism exercised by America and also by Europe (the Old World) ... This explains the sudden cultural effervescence in Australia ... [and why] the aborigines pose (for the 'white' Australians) a number of urgent racial, social and political problems ... [and] also provide a source of wonder and fascination ... Artists and intellectuals who have succumbed to the fascination of the aboriginal culture have thus sought in its traditions a form of spirituality, which they lack, and an 'ecological' harmony with the land, which the aborigines have never lost. As she remarks with admirable perception, it is partially as a result of white, middle-class guilt that aborigines have suddenly become fashionable in Australia, rocketing to stardom as a result of the plagiarisms of their culture practised by Peter Weir (*The Last Wave*), rock groups like 'The Goannas', and fashion designers like Linda Jackson and Jenny Kee (who use 'earth' colours in their textiles). She concludes that the arrival of the aborigines in Paris must be 'read' or interpreted as the sign of this prehistoric people's determination to 'enter History' ...

... [I]n her introduction to the Australian exhibition, for which she acted as the

principal organiser, Suzanne Pagé ... describe[s] the appeal of Australia in terms of 'stark contrasts' ... 'Aboriginal society ... stands with serene permanence and timeless transcendence ... wanting only to live on the land where it belongs, according to the law of Dreamtime' ... 'White Australia' is superficial, secular ... materialistic, acquisitive; it is a usurper in this timeless land, racist to the point of apartheid ...

... The French, four centuries after Montaigne, still seem to rely upon such simplistic dichotomies, even if unconsciously, and the discovery of Australia which they have made in 1983 has led to an 'unqualified' infatuation with Aboriginal Australia. It perhaps explains why they have placed the emphasis on the ethnic aboriginal culture of Australia, forgetful of the fact that Australia has had to live with its 'conquest' for the last 200 years, and that its ideology has had to evolve beyond the stage of linguistic paradox ...

... So long as Australians continue to look to Europe and America for confirmation of their own identity, they will never exist as anything but a peripheral culture, forever condemned to be an 'exotic' and alien people ...

Jill Montgomery, 'Australia: The French discovery of 1983', *Art & Text*, 12-13, 1983-84, pp. 2-15.

New York: A new vision demands a new criticism – 1989

John Weber, art dealer, New York

Should this [Papunya] art be allowed, if only briefly, to be removed from the arena of art criticism so as to isolate its development as a purely visual style, it may be shown that Papunya Tula is a movement of consequence practiced by a group of artists who hold a common intent and yet who have developed an individual signature within their own oeuvres ...

The vitality and compositional complexity of these paintings is astonishing ... Even without specific contextual information, one is very aware of a sense of something, not power as much as an unknown on the periphery of our field of vision—strong stuff—infusing these paintings ...

As Australia has not as yet generated an art movement of international significance, nor have many, if any, contemporary artists achieved an international reputation, the art power structure is at a loss to deal professionally with the fast emerging aboriginal art scene. At the present time, only one commercial art gallery in Melbourne has a well thought out program of group and one-person shows of this work. Although a few corporations and private collectors have amassed significant holdings in the field, the collections are specialized and few cross-overs occur. Although international attention has been focused on Papunya Tula for a few years now, there exists locally an aura of Paul Hoganism Public Relations around its promotion. In certain entrepreneurs' eyes, this art is the hottest item since the California Gold Rush in 1849.

Whether Papunya Tula and the art from other aboriginal communities will survive this commercial onslaught is at this juncture a matter of conjecture. The art, it is hoped,

[Zones of engagement]

will sustain itself for it has great strength ...

Of maximal concern is the aesthetic ambience into which this art will be critically placed. An art dialogue sympathetic to the intent of this work is a necessary tool to engender a deeper understanding and appreciation of what the viewer sees and subsequently feels and thinks. This cognitive approach is possible but will necessitate a new set of critical art theory to elucidate this new art. A great deal of insightful material has been generated on contemporary aboriginal art by social anthropologists working in the field ... What is lacking thus far, is a disciplined critical approach for which we must turn to the contemporary art historian and art critic.

... A new vision demands a new system of critical thought.

Primitive Art is an incredibly derogative term which we Americans seem stuck with. The reference belies the sophistication and complexity of all Ethnography, a preferred term. At stake is the application and relevance of this terminology to a large group of indigenous people who are quite successfully interacting in the latter part of the Twentieth Century with other Australians ... These self-proclaimed artists are seriously pursuing their careers, are concerned with issues of artistic value, with the market place and are exhibiting in art galleries and museums of fine art worldwide. To categorize them any other way than as professional artists is a grave error.

John Weber, *Papunya Tula: Contemporary paintings from Australia's Western Desert*, John Weber Gallery, New York, 1989.

New York: Postmodernist primitivism – 1989

Ronald Jones, artist and critic, New York

In 1984 Thomas McEvilley blew the whistle on exhibitions of tribal art [*McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief', Artforum, November 1984*]. He reprimanded William Rubin, then director of the [*New York*] Museum of Modern Art's Department of Painting and Sculpture, for his "*Primitivism*" exhibition at MoMA ... charging him with wilfully scripting native artefacts into supporting roles with the epic '*MODERNISM*' ...

Four years later, the anxiety over the threatened exhaustion of Modernism that McEvilley discerned in Rubin's exhibition has gone beyond its crisis point. Post-Modernism has slipped into the saddle and firmly taken the reins ...

Thus 1988 arrives, with a seemingly new twist in the primitivism game. Wizedened up to our own ethnocentrism, we can accept, for example, the notion that Australian aboriginals dream their religion. But post-Modernist theory has seeped into our parched bones, so we're all pretty clear on the fact that if we don't dream our religion, we may have dreamed our own art. Consider, in this light, the Asia Society's [*Dreamings exhibition's*] characterisation of aboriginal dreamings versus traditional Western value systems:

In traditional Aboriginal thought, there is no central dichotomy of the spiritual and material, the sacred and secular, or the natural and supernatural ...

Another obstacle to the non-Aboriginal response to Aboriginal works can be described as a basic ontological gap, a difference of underlying world views. Traditional Aboriginal thought is not progressivist. Things will always be the same.

Replace Aboriginal thought, in these quotes, with post-Modernist assertions, and is it any wonder that we feel justified in conjoining our Age of Acrylic and the agelessness of aboriginal culture? ... Acrylic paint on canvas has become an instrument of modern ethnology, while at the same time it has effectively served as a fast-acting antidote, dissolving a sacred ritual the aboriginals had preserved for thousands of years, affirming Jean Baudrillard's observation that 'for ethnology to live its object must die.'

Furthermore, like a powerful narcotic, acrylic paint served to create the hallucination that even if the aboriginals do not exactly see themselves as we see them, or as we see ourselves, they clearly perform for us as though they do. And as the market for their acrylic paintings has grown ... the aboriginal art world has taken on an uncanny resemblance to our own ... In a gesture as swift as it is efficient, we have reduced their religion to commodity, their culture to a scale version of our own, and congratulated ourselves for having discovered the real thing.

But once again, the question remains: what is the real thing we are looking for? With more than a century's worth of clearly documented interest in 'primitive art' behind us, tribal art is now indexed as something distinctive to the '80s ... 'People are desperately looking for things that mean something', [*clothing designer Betsey*] Johnson said. 'I've been buying spiritual luxury items: Day of the Dead figures, Hindu masks, great oils and perfumes and Tibetan crafts' ... Perhaps we've come farther than we think. In short, if the Modernist approach sought out the 'primitive' to appropriate what was considered its unmediated vitality, the post-Modernist approach may send us precisely after the same kinds of work, but this time around, to appropriate the 'primitives' messages of mortality, its powers to reflect and confirm our own 'deadness'.

Thus the Asia Society [*Dreamings*] exhibition treated the aboriginal artists neither as tribal shamans nor as presagers of the avant-garde. Instead, these native artists served as the painters of the Barbizon school served the artists of Modernist Paris ... [*They*] represented to them the illusion that a simple honesty and mysterious spirit that tied everyone to mother earth had indeed been preserved—just somewhere else.

Now in our similar commitment to prove that there is no 'somewhere else', we turn again, paradoxically, to 'primitive art'. If only someone had warned the natives. For one of the first rules of lifesaving is to position yourself so that a thrashing victim can never gain the upper hand. But once we got the natives to swim out to meet what we have implicitly understood as our sinking ship, perhaps the rest was inevitable. In a manner indigenous to our culture, one we are currently practicing to perfection, we hold their culture under until it goes limp, and now balancing on it, hold our heads just above the water and smile into the camera.

Ronald Jones, 'Lifesaving in the acrylic age', *Artforum*, 27, 6, February 1989, pp. 114–15.



Jimija Jungarrayi Spencer *Wallaby Dreaming* 1986, acrylic on canvas, 236.4 x 119.8cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
© The artist. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2009.

Moscow: The universality of Aboriginal formalism – 1992
Andrei Kovalev, art critic, Moscow

It is possible to describe the Aboriginal artists not as post-modernists per se, but as post-modern protagonists. It is also possible that this art could only be created as a result of post-modernist intentions which permeate Western culture, although the complex issues of 'censorship' and 'self-censorship' which affect all these practices create a perplexing and piquant game of hidden and meaningless meanings. (Processes with which we inhabitants of the former 'evil empire', with our inborn apparatus of self-censorship, are all too familiar. Perhaps this is the reason why 'abstraction' was always a demon to be exorcized by a magician-art historian, who was bent on preserving the ritualistic purity of Soviet art. Perhaps like the magicians of the desert, they viewed abstraction in particular as a practice capable of disclosing hidden, sacred meanings.)

And yet, in spite of the post-modernist associations of the art of the Western Desert, this work will stand as an eternal panegyric to formalism and to Pure Modernism. The opinion of my Moscow colleagues, who have never read the works of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, was almost unanimous: contemporary artists have 'forgotten' how to paint real quality pictures, while Australian Aboriginals are doing it just splendidly. The formally brilliant execution of all the canvases shown in Moscow do not allow us to doubt this. Moreover, the exhibition offers a stunning proof for speculation that the organizational rules governing the space of the canvas do not depend on a particular culture but are exclusively determined by the basic physiological apparatus of the human mind.

The formalist virtues which Aboriginal artists possess in abundance are perceived, with particular acuteness, against the background of a narrative content which appears 'deserted' to the non-initiated—though it is for this reason that it promises some monumental revelations. A true Modernist is always prone to imagine him/herself as a Magician, rather than simply an artist.

Piet Mondrian locked the mysteries of theosophy in his innocent-seeming geometries, while Kazimir Malevich's black squares were supposed to contain the secrets of our future worlds. Looking over the heads of the cynical and ironic post-modernists, the Magicians who became Artists are stretching their hands out to the Artists who want to become Magicians. The true magicians will verify the truthfulness of the pretenders. Perhaps things are not what they seem to be, and all contemporary art is nothing more than the Freudian *traum* of some magician from a distant tribe, who gathers weeds in the desert or hunts for seals in the northern seas.

Andrei Kovalev, 'From red centre to red square: Aboriginal paintings from the Desert in Moscow', Anya von Bremzen (trans.), *Art and Australia*, 29, 4, 1992, pp. 435–37.

Düsseldorf: The postcolonial challenge – 1993
Bernhard Lüthi, artist and curator, Düsseldorf

The exclusion of contemporary Black Australian art from [European] museums of modern art is symptomatic of the way we organise exhibitions which dogmatically observe geographical restrictions and limitations of content we ourselves have defined, and consistently ignore topical developments outside 'tradition'. James Clifford has characterised this rejection as modernism's denial of the marginalized ...

It was not, however, only Europe that found it difficult to construct a cultural awareness of Black Australia. For the most part, Australia itself regards its own 'other' cultural heritage as largely alien. Even today, official Australia has no real idea of how to present its cultural heritage—the 'other' culture—in an appropriate and dignified manner beyond its own shores ...

[However] the 80s ... have become the starting point for a development which Achille Bonito Oliva, on announcing the 1993 Venice Biennale, called the 'shifting of the continents'. Only slowly does the concept of the 'New Internationalism' seem to be becoming accepted. It is the expression of a change in art history in the context of post-war migrations and the shifting of cultural borders, thus rendering a new assessment of 'Western' art history possible and heralding an exciting new development for the visual arts in the century to come ...

... What has hardly been considered at all, however ... is the revolt of a younger generation of non-European and non-American artists who live in a diaspora both in their home countries and here. They are now telling us an entirely new story about their cultural identities ...

The shift in favour of a geocultural emphasis in contemporary artistic production has gained momentum; it is a trend which seems unavoidable ... The dam of European ideology supporting its claim to sole legitimacy has begun to give way. Artists the world over will work to accelerate this process, as will those in the diaspora, who far from home have become European (and American) fellow citizens in our midst. By using and applying our strategies in art and the media, they will attempt to pursue their own aims ...

... Although the integration of immigrants is obviously still problematic in the countries of the former colonial powers, it does seem as though their societies are responding to the cultural demands of ethnic minorities more openly, and are more ready to tackle the risks involved than are the other countries of Europe. In European countries a younger generation of immigrants is increasingly moving into academic and cultural professions. In terms of demography Europe is becoming more like the USA. Fellow citizens from neighbouring countries on the margins of Europe, as well as those from culturally very different regions of the globe are achieving success in sports, the world of entertainment and increasing their presence in the media, as well as individually in politics and the economy—but successful 'coloured' visual artists? Who knows their names except in the cases of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Wifredo Lam? Who knows the

names of the numerous artists from Africa, Asia, Oceania, Australia, Southeast Asia and the largely unknown regions of Northeast Asia, Latin America, and Central America? In what group or individual exhibitions are they represented?

Bernhard Lüthi, 'The marginalisation of (contemporary) non-European/non-American art', in *Aratjara: Art of the first Australians*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 1993, pp. 15–31.

New York: Modernist judgements – 1994
Fred R. Myers, anthropologist, New York

Until recently, the most celebrated, well-received and best-attended show of Aboriginal art was the Asia Society exhibition, *Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia*, in late 1988 in New York ...

... [T]he exhibition intended to broach the contradictions and challenges posed by the changing circumstances of a 'commercial' art.

These 'intentions', however, awaited critical reception ... Among the first to appear was Peter Schjeldahl's, in the now defunct *7 Days* ... The review was an irritating but direct and honest response, following one obvious narrative course for reception: the work's 'authenticity' or freedom from Western influence.

... Schjeldahl is suspicious of Aboriginal art in a frame so accessible to the Western viewer. The disconcerting power of Aboriginal people to challenge his (but he also presumes 'our') view of reality is not sustained in the exhibition:

Don't go looking for that power of strangeness at the Asia Society. It's not there, except faintly in a few old carvings and paintings on bark. Instead, there is the violence of fences, unconsciously erected by people wanting only good things for aborigines. ... The violence lurks in the straight lines of stretched canvases that aborigines are painting with acrylics, using motifs proper to the ephemeral sand- and body-painting employed in their rituals. Promoted internationally, the paintings are seen as a means to build independent wealth and self-esteem for a people gravely lacking both.

This critic's view is that the exhibition is more demonstrative of the fullness of the colonial conquest, 'fencing' in Aboriginal culture as the White Australian settlers fenced in the land that had once been Aboriginal, rather than of Aboriginal persistence and survival.

This is an illuminating example of the ironic situation of much cross-cultural transaction that takes place in the 'nostalgic' mode. The very accessibility of the Aboriginal work becomes the basis of the critic's objection to it. What Schjeldahl finds to be lacking is something genuinely other and challenging to his (that is to say, the 'Western viewer's') reality. This work is not difficult enough, not challenging—terms one should recognize as emanating from the Western avant-garde's self-designated position ...

Generally, American critics seem deeply interested in the modernist question of whether such works [*Desert acrylic paintings*] 'challenge' Western visual conventions (a notion given particular value as consistent with goals of innovation, progress and freedom in Western art production). In *New York Magazine*, Kay Larson asks whether they are 'good' art, and answers positively. [*Roberta*] Smith and Schjeldahl find the

paintings to be weaker versions of 1970s Neo-Expressionist abstraction. Comparing the Aboriginal painting with 'outsider' art, and presenting it potentially as a challenge to art's conventional boundaries, Roberta Smith sees the work in the Aboriginal show as

for the most part quite weak ... (T)hey lack the power of the best Western abstract art with which, torn from their original context, they will inevitably be compared.

... 'This is not work that overwhelms you with its visual power or with its rage for power; it all seems familiar and manageable.' This sort of aesthetic distance is relatively uncommon in Euro-Australian reviews. While Euro-Australians seemed also concerned with the related critical question of whether the acrylic paintings challenged Western conventions of the artist as individual producer ... [they also sought] to measure out some positive value for Aboriginal cultural life in opposition to the West drained of art and spirituality in its pursuit of material paradise ...

The terms of positive Euro-Australian reviews reflect an attempt to find an aesthetic discourse in which to frame the embodied Aboriginal aspirations. Jennifer Isaacs' review of an exhibition at the Blaxland Gallery in Sydney, for example, maintained that the admixture of 'European' (i.e., non-Aboriginal) materials (acrylic, canvas, paint brushes) and venues for Western Desert visual culture is not a loss of authenticity or cultural subordination. It reads like an answer to Schjeldahl's review: the hybrid nature of acrylic painting, Isaacs writes, represents an explosion of creativity ...

The most noticeable feature of the Western writers about Aboriginal acrylics is their concern to define a moral stance, to place their interpretation in the context of what they think will *happen* to Aboriginal people, to justify their own situation in relation to the Aboriginals' presence.

... One should not be surprised that the texture of moral issues looks very different as the paintings and their producers circulate in new contexts. The Aboriginal in the Asia Society is not the Aboriginal over whom White Australian writers or moralizers are stricken by conscience ...

Instead, the struggle in the American and perhaps the larger international context is to place them within the more detached framework of art and art criticism, where—for example—the long-term, ongoing arguments about the autonomy of art and its separation from other domains are themselves signifying practices (stories) that define, essentially, what 'culture' is in the West.

Fred R. Myers, 'Beyond the intentional fallacy: Art criticism and the ethnography of Aboriginal acrylic painting', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 10, 1, 1994, pp. 10-43.

London: New primitivism – 1995

Howard Morphy, anthropologist, Canberra

The question that has to be answered and which the artist himself poses is why is Gordon Bennett, an art-school-trained, higher-educated contemporary Australian producing

self-consciously global art, categorised in the Hayward Gallery exhibition [Aratjara] as an Aboriginal artist? What is an Aboriginal artist and does s/he exist as a local or a global concept and what processes operate to position Gordon Bennett and the painter of the *White ibis* [a bark painting by an unknown Gaganju artist in 1912] as painters of Aboriginal art? What, in a global context, is the meaning of Aboriginal art?

These are questions clearly posed by the organisers to the audience ... [and] the inclusion of art that Westerners would see as coming from a fundamentally different tradition would be seen as a challenge to the more conservative critics.

The critic for the *Spectator*, Giles Auty, for example, wrote that *White ibis* is 'one of the loveliest and most moving works in the whole exhibition ... [and it] ... bears out my contention that work by Aboriginal artists has generally declined in quality in direct proportion one suspects, to the amount of interested input from non-Aboriginals'. In contrast Gordon Bennett is more 'political than perceptual ... like his counterparts hereabouts, Bennett is content to talk rather than paint a good picture' ...

There are critics who, like Giles Auty, argue that Gordon Bennett is not producing Aboriginal art at all but (an inferior) version of Western art, in contrast to the artist of the *White ibis*. On the other hand there are [Australian] critics such as John MacDonald ... who drew the opposite conclusion and found the whole distinction between Aboriginal and other art untenable ...

In Australia the changing position of Aboriginal art has resulted in its incorporation in discourse on Australian art in general. It tends now to be collected by the same institutions, exhibited within the same gallery structure, written about in the same journals as other Australian art ...

... [Overseas] the inclusion of indigenous art within the mainstream has not occurred in such a significant manner. Overseas, it is almost inevitable that the case to establish the authenticity of Aboriginal art in the contemporary world will have to be re-argued and there is always the danger of the art being repositioned in some lumpen category. A recent article in the *Guardian* by Waldemar Januszczak provides an example of both of these processes:

Just as you can walk into any supermarket these days and buy nibblets from every corner of the world, so you can walk into an art gallery and sample the cultural drupelets [sic] of a thousand far flung races. Most of this produce is fake rubbish. Certainly this is true of Aborigine art, a huge exhibition of which is on the way to the Hayward Gallery. Aborigines neither painted on canvas nor showed in Bond Street until a bunch of Aussie crocodile dealers realised that 20,000 years worth of sand pictures had already blown into the billabong; now vaguely Aboriginal artists with vaguely Aboriginal names like Peter Possum or Cliff Koala are Dreaming on—on canvas—all the way to the bank. The same process of cultural franchising has given us the Shona sculpture of Zimbabwe or the Inuit carving of the Canadian arctic. What all these fake international art forms have in common is a desire to give us white folks what we want—what we expect from an exotic culture.

Whereas white Australian art is likely to be included in the mainstream European

or American traditions because of its ancestry (though with limited spaces for named artists!), Aboriginal art is likely to be re-pigeonholed as 'ethnic' art ... I am afraid that the category of 'primitive art' is being born again in another guise.

Howard Morphy, 'Aboriginal art in a global context', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Worlds apart: Modernity through the prism of the local*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp. 211–39.

Europe and the United States: Global reach, local differences – 1998

Djon Mundine, Bundjalung curator, activist, writer, artist and former art coordinator at Ramingining, Sydney

During 1993–94 a large exhibition of Aboriginal art called *Aratjara* [the messenger]: *Art of the First Australians* toured to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, the Hayward Gallery in London, and the Louisiana Museum in Denmark ... Although other shows of this size had been seen in the United States, they had either not included important areas such as the work of living urban artists and artists of the south-east of the continent, or concentrated on historical work. And mostly these exhibitions had been shown in ethnographic museums. So, consciously or not, they perpetuated the out-of-date idea that Aboriginal art is merely exotica, if not 'primitive' art, rather than a living contemporary practice. As a project *Aratjara* was important in another way: it was controlled and directed by Aboriginal people. I was lucky to be chosen to travel with the show as touring curator.

In Europe the show was very successful in terms of attendances and press interest. Over 250,000 people saw it, and in Germany and the United Kingdom articles appeared in the papers practically every day. Danish papers and television also responded enthusiastically. More than 10,000 copies of the catalogue (printed in both German and English) were sold. In fact, the English-language version sold out in both Düsseldorf and London weeks before the show closed at those venues, and it is now impossible to obtain a copy. Considering the status of the fine art venues and the critical reaction, *Aratjara* has to have been one of the most acclaimed showings of art ever to have left Australian shores.

Responses in the European press followed several patterns. Most common were the exotic travelogues of the Australian landscape and its inhabitants, motivated by a romantic perception of Australia as clean and pure in comparison with Europe's ravaged social and political environment. A few critics took an obliquely referenced look at primitive art and a few others attempted the difficult task of describing to European viewers this new and infinitely complex form of painting and sculpture. Surprisingly, German critics took the important political message of the exhibition—the fight for social justice and Land Rights—to heart and ran a large number of articles on it ... In the United Kingdom the critics were more critical, almost defensive, partly because of Australia's colonial connections with England and partly because of the high population of 'other' artists from Africa, the Caribbean, India and Pakistan in England.

In Europe there is an overemphasis on the authentic, but when the Europeans apply authenticity as a criterion it is always to others, never to themselves. On passing London's Trafalgar Square I noticed the lion statues and asked a host curator when the last native lion was at large in the English countryside. He shamefacedly replied that as far as he knew there had never been lions in England; the nearest would have lived in Spain a long time ago. The lion, I was told, came from Richard the Lion Heart, a king of England who had three lions as his standard—a symbol of strength. He spent most of his life out of the country and, even more curiously, hardly spoke English at all. So this symbol of the English nation (like English tea, or coffee on the Continent) is in a way a fraud, an adoption of a foreign concept or fashion.

In Germany, where citizenship is still largely determined by blood line, there is a Pizza Hut in nearly every major town, including one in the Altstadt (old town) in Düsseldorf, near the Kunstsammlung where the show was displayed. There I was able to buy a curried chicken pizza, which is certainly not German—nor Italian—and shouldn't exist if we apply the criteria of cultural authenticity. Yet German visitors asked why, if I was a real Aboriginal, I was wearing European clothes and speaking English. How many of them were blue-eyed blonds with plaited pigtails, wearing black lederhosen and long white socks? This issue surfaced in another form at a dubious commercial exhibition of Aboriginal art in Belgium in 1996. When an art critic began excitedly talking to me about the terrible inauthentic art in the show, I thought that he was referring to some kind of forgery. In fact, he was talking about the acrylic paintings on canvas, which, to his western-art-history-trained eye, could not be authentic Aboriginal art.

Aratjara was hung as a visual art show, not a book. It was supposed to generate a visual-emotional response, to engage the senses and the imagination, and to counter the commonplace approach to art of this type (especially in Europe) with its overkill of didactic wall text. The labelling was minimal—artist, country, name of work, date and materials—just as would be the case with any other contemporary artist. Each piece was given a lot of space so that viewers could concentrate on its individual attributes. The idea was to draw attention to the works' strong formal characteristics and the intelligence of their construction, and to attempt to diminish the kind of bias that requires a certificate of authenticity before a work can be taken seriously.

But such an approach was greeted with dismay: how could viewers understand the work without extended labels and photographs (despite the generous catalogue, an acoustic-guide and several informative handouts)? In London such comments were especially common, although nobody seemed to be making the same demands of twenty or so pure white, untitled canvasses by Robert Ryman in a nearby commercial gallery. Visitors to the Western Desert room would ask what the circles joined by lines represented, even though they had used a similar conceptual map of circles joined by lines in planning their subway trip to the show ...

At *Art Cologne* in the last few years issues of contemporaneity, authenticity

and identity crystallised in a revealing way. In 1993 Melbourne's Gabrielle Pizzi was granted permission to exhibit at this fair. Later, however, its application was rejected on the ground that 'you do not exhibit an authentic Aboriginal art ... but contemporary art by artists following in this tradition'. The work was described as 'folk art'. This stereotypical view might have been acceptable a century ago, but today it is at best laughable, at worst racist. Gabrielle Pizzi, in reply, said, 'I sincerely hope *Art Cologne* is not on the way to becoming fossilised'. Happily, the organisers of *Art Cologne* have since readmitted the gallery, saying that they did not want to appear to be biased (racist). Interestingly, in 1996, when the fair organisers chose twenty 'up and coming' young representative artists, Tasmanian Aboriginal Julie Gough, from Gabrielle Pizzi's stand, was one of them.

... While the Americans in Chicago [*at the 1993 art fair*] couldn't help but be 'bowled over' by the visual power of the [*Central Desert acrylics*] work and so in some ways saw the work as a form of 'fine art', they still mentally filed it as 'indigenous art' and not stand-alone 'high art'. They certainly warmed to its religious-spiritual qualities and the exotic nature of the landscapes to which it referred—and to the artists they met. Apparently, though, anything over US\$4000 in value made people a little bit nervous—they wanted to be spiritually touched but really, was it a good investment? Not all benefits are immediate or visible.

Djon Mundine, 'Aboriginal art abroad: Responses to touring exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Asia', *Art and Australia*, 35, 1, 1998, pp. 68–73.

Basel: World art – 2005

Guido Magnaguagno and Clara B. Wilpert, museum directors, Basel

The present exhibition project [*Rarrk': John Mawurndjul: Journey through time in northern Australia, Basel, 2005*] provides a further link in a cultural-historical process which will surely lead to further fertile meetings. After a lengthy period of absence, and in the context of the irreversible process of globalisation, the culture and art of Indigenous peoples has found its way back into the art galleries and museums, thus creating the opportunity for a new public dialogue. It is similar to the process that world literature has experienced during the last decades. The curtain falls, the cultural heritage of humankind becomes visible to be joined by world art. The unfamiliar is no longer defined as the 'Other' and at long last we are becoming, as though taken for granted, part of the whole. Even art from the 'other end of the world' with a thousand-year-old tradition is becoming familiar to us and teaching us to see and appreciate with an open mind the cultural richness of this world and its different life patterns.

Guido Magnaguagno and Clara B. Wilpert, 'Foreword', in Christian Kaufmann (ed.), *Rarrk': John Mawurndjul: Journey through time in northern Australia*, Museum Tinguely, Basel, 2005, pp. 22–23.