

machine /



Visual Arts Bi-monthly / Issue 2.3 / Free

Interview with Imants Tillers / 1

Comprenez que je serai là pour toi
(Understand I Will Be There For You,
The Musée du Quai Branly) Christian Thompson / 6

Trading Places – why make Indigenous art
and where goes culture? Julie Gough / 7

Exhibition & Exhaustion: Lee Weng Choy, with
Jitish Kallat, Kim Machan and Roger McDonald / 10

Sweet Charity: Hiram To talks with Scott Redford / 13

The Other APT: An Exhibition
of Other Perspectives Kiley Gaffney / 15

Machine is an independent publication aimed at fostering a healthy environment of critique and discussion in the visual arts. It is focussed on but not limited to emerging and early career artists and writers. Submissions are sought from artists and writers from Queensland but interstate submissions are also welcome.

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Front cover / **Tony Albert** / *50perCENT* / 2006 / Detail / Photograph / Courtesy the artist

Inside Back cover / **Gary Lee** / *'Shaba'* #3 / 2006 / Digital print / Courtesy



Trading Places – why make Indigenous art and where goes culture?

Julie Gough

"It is not impractical to consider seriously changing the rules of the game when the game is clearly killing you"

M. Scott Peck¹

In *Smart state – crazy state* (Machine, issue 2.2) Djon Mundine described the Indigenous Australian art scene as a circus in an increasingly insane world.² Angry, lively, messy, clever; is the Indigenous art scene really made of egos: artists, curators, critics, galleries and investors? Sure. After all, this is *contemporary* art. Think in terms of pools or packs with each member feeding the others what they need to keep themselves independently afloat, and in doing so keeping these new clans testy and frenzied and compromised, symbiotically alive — but perhaps not fully living.

Significantly, these art clans comprise Indigenous and non Indigenous people, but this chequered feature is elusively shape shifting; a discomfort for many, where the professional impacts on the private, so that non Indigenous people, even relatives, are best not mentioned. The rules, secrets and factions we live with are 'deadly', and not in the Indigenous sense of the word, because there is history at stake. Real 24/7 history, not institutionalised western art history, brings many Indigenous people to make art, yet the latter history intrudes, preventing Aboriginal art being considered in its own context, nor adequately in any other, by institutions, exhibitions, academic art courses, globally. These difficulties and differences, between and also within cultures, surely need resolving from more than one site.

Indigenous artists and theorists find it prohibitively difficult, definitely risky, to write about colleagues, relatives, peers, employees, collectors, galleries, state institutions, each other. But, from many grounds: conversations, belligerence, self serving didacticism, desire to move the conversation further to transitional



Christian Thompson / *The Gates of Tambo* (Tracey Moffatt) / 2004 /
C-type print / Courtesy the artist

ground — all of the above — the patterns can change.

Mundine suggests that the discontent between two key art worlds in Australia lies with mainstream discourse not enabling Indigenous (or non Indigenous) artists to deviate from the linear opus of western art history. Suzi Gablik is also alert to the need for a fundamental shift by the west:

It's hard to conceive of art from the perspective of service, or as something that isn't commensurate only with itself. If you start rejecting the cultural ideals of economic success and competitive striving, or start challenging these ingrained perceptions of how we understand our place in the world, you threaten to break the barriers that keep us locked in denial.³

A little distance might bring us back to the art eventually. The spatial breather of globalisation has delivered what Terry Smith calls "antinomic exchange", resulting in recognition of art's undeniably different systems of mismatching, even conflicting, intellectual and artistic networks. This break away from one central western art cannon is alarming for

...the 'contemporary art' juggernaut (that) operates primarily in terms of frameworks — managerial, curatorial, corporate, historical, commercial, educational — imposed by art institutions, themselves a key part of a now pervasive, beguilingly distractive, but at bottom hollow cultural industry.⁴

Smith and Gablik, amid many other non Indigenous theorists, question the assumption that only the Other can discuss the problem of contemporary art frameworks. They also, as do most involved, realise that the situation is

a reflection of broader problems beyond the arts. Indigenous Australian art is but one small part of a global movement now rejecting formerly expected means of making, placing, reading and aligning. Not only a black and white thing, this is Iranian and Colombian, and African American and Indigenous Australian and for all people of construct afresh. This is messy and exciting — not only art but people's lives.

International Biennale and Triennale circuits provide for different ways that art can be positioned and comprehended but not all countries, audiences, contexts and certainly not many art critics can yet cope with the threat of Otherness reaching the helm of everyday contemporary art. Increasingly inscrutable for viewers without local knowledge and probably exacerbatingly frustrating for art critics locked into old school art paradigms, these ventures provoke by showing possibilities beyond essentialist Indigeneity. Alternatively, Biennales could be seen to blur difference into homogeneity by providing overwhelmingly exotic, travelling peep shows that risk losing locality, purpose, consequence — by exhibiting out of place, out of time.

In Australia, Indigeneity is still deigned as the unusual, the token, the start of an event, the welcome but not the middle and definitely not the end. Imagine a conference where those providing Indigenous Welcome to Country are quickly steered off the premises before the 'real' proceedings start. Not imaginary. One conference theme was colonialism.... Later, news travelled that the person providing the Welcome wanted to stay for the conference but couldn't afford the fees....Think about this.

Invariably, articles about the 2006 Biennale of Sydney carefully mentioned that two of the exhibiting Australian artists were Indigenous, while neglecting most of the other Australian artists' intrinsic identities; somehow everyone living local, except us, became more Australian because they are just 'Australian'. Other Indigenous artists from across the world were not labelled as Indigenous in the Biennale, despite many nations still being comprised largely of original (Indigenous) people who, not having almost been eradicated, weren't needing to be renamed by the invaders, nor 'given' this alien 'Indigenous/Aboriginal' label and framework of vanquished difference to live within.

Similarly, the *New McCulloch's Encyclopaedia of Australian Art* (2006) separates Indigenous and non Indigenous artists. The Indigenous artists provide the (welcome) section at front and are carefully differentiated from non Indigenous artists. Search for Tracey Moffatt, for example, in the non Indigenous section, and find: "SEE: Indigenous Artists". Why is this the case, and what are the arguments for and against this segregation? Does this publication prove that there are two types of art in Australia: Indigenous and non Indigenous and that they are incommensurable due to where they come from, or because of their often different destinations: galleries, collectors, curators?

Can the universal adoption of an International Art category more effectively enable different arts to come to

the fore, in frameworks relevant to people's own histories? Mundine offers an example:

These are artists who may not be orthodox in their religious practice, who lead western influenced lives and art practices, who may not live in Africa itself, but who refuse to be judged according to western art values and histories. The crucial element in their belief is that their art expression really comes from another history. They don't argue their position using western art history.⁵

Diversity confounds the critics and academics, so many Indigenous Australian artists essentialise their identities, rationales, and allegiances. This aids marketing and stifles creativity.

Indigenous Australia and non Indigenous Australia are trapped in invasion history. It is THE unresolved impasse. Arts is probably the only discourse where Indigenous people get a voice, a platform, stage or brush to reach the public, but western art academies cannot yet adequately negotiate work made from an alternate paradigm than their own. Khadija Carroll asks: "How might we redirect the anxieties about the terms of exchange across cultures that differ both materially and immaterially in their understanding of the world?"⁶

A way out of the stalemate between Indigenous and non Indigenous art (and by extension between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians) is not to see irreconcilable difference as a problem but as a working locus. We don't need to be reconciled or to understand each other to respect our positions.⁷ This argument is liberating. Carroll suggests that Homi Bhabha's model of a negotiation amid the incommensurable accords respect for difference beyond stymied attempts to understand, reconcile or change each other.⁸ An awkward compatibility that seems more resilient, less relinquishing, is offered by this renegotiation.

It is timely for art to co-operatively, actively, persistently resist previous models; to be energised and urgent across (all) our new world disarray.⁹ Where does this situate Aboriginal artists and the non Indigenous majority to manage these changes? Indigenous people's durable recall, incorporating resonant history, into practices sensitive to protocols, are the counter to the weightlessness of much contemporary art. But Indigenous artists, by simultaneously contributing to two worlds, working for ancestors, future, family and for western art realms are under untenable pressure.

Why do Aboriginal artists make Aboriginal art, and not just art? Growing Indigenous dependence on making 'Aboriginal art' to support often extended families, is in turn dangerously dependent on the irrational impulses of the western art investment market. Terry Smith speaks of the conundrum for artists framed as exotic or other by relating the predicament of African America artist Ayanah Moor:

Moor has recently taken an oath to reject further offers to show her work in exhibitions that are framed in terms of black American identity,

including those devoted to interrogating its conditions and questioning its limits. This puts the entire trajectory of her work to date at risk.¹⁰

How can this decision risk the work to date? The work is not made in a cultural vacuum, but is part of a trajectory; Moor's decision and its eventual outcomes are important in history, including art history. The art, exhibitions and reviews before and after Moor's reconstitution contribute to us better seeing and sizing the problem of dual discourses. Self-denial of identity reveals the desperate discontent of being the token black artist. Will good art, however exhibited, whoever created it, have universal relevance and engage beyond local restrictive borders, for example the work of Shirin Neshat, Tracey Moffatt, Doris Salcedo, or will the west eventually decry saturation point of art by Others?

Signalling this time of crisis are various reformations of identity. Whereas Moor relinquishes it, others adopt 'difference' to make their point. A decade ago Hal Foster warned artists that "self othering can flip into self absorption, in which the project of an 'ethnographic self fashioning' becomes the practice of a narcissistic self-refurbishing".¹¹ These extremisms reveal that those acting at the perimeter can still be embraced by the centre. Performative self-sacrificing denies independent recourse by requiring expected responses rather than formative action.

Artists who provide the material (art and dialogue) to better understand these problems may be sacrificing themselves to the cause (whose?). Immersion into the crisis with the art world takes work, decisions, positions over the border into western discourse. Might this Indigenous engagement then inadvertently sustain an art world and art criticism increasingly interested in absorbing the Other to better understand itself, and territorially expand its own parameters?

The art system has enabled us to "all be successful to a large degree whilst remaining individual and competing with each other in true free market capitalist fashion".¹² It is too late to turn off the life support, each keeps the Other. When support becomes expected by both sides, to sustain the whole we become decoration brokered between people selling the idea of Aboriginal art rather than the work itself. Amidst this sequestering much of the art becomes something other than art, perhaps something less than art should be. Is who buys who decides?

If indeed the work is a white thing as Richard Bell astutely attests, how are Indigenous artists implicated in continuing to support the system that in turn supports them? How can we really critique the structures we seem so keen to keep? Keeping up with the demands of the art world, to act Indigenous, to be spiritual, to be political, to be forgiving, to be the reminder for white Australia, to be a Confessional, to be articulate, to be part of a community, to be an invest-worthy individual artist, to collaborate, to be displaced and yet to know your Country intimately, are the series of constant exhausting contradictions we are supposed to adopt. This is our context before we have made (hopefully) good art.



Vicki West / Kelp Armour / 2003 / Bull kelp / Collection National Museum of Australia / Courtesy the artist / Photo: Dragi Markovic

Loving the skin I'm in ...

Many Indigenous artists manage to work across paradigms and across cultures, provoking, reminding, suggesting. Making art for family, community, continuity or for the western art market isn't really the problem for an artist in demand. The problem is the extra added pressure of talking the talk: balancing these demands, making these cultural transactions, coping with what those in power, the mainstream, unreliably desires. Joseph Beuys suggested that "in places like universities, where everyone talks too rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear". We may be this — but to what end?

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Footnotes

- 1 In Suzi Gablik. *The Reenchantment of Art*. Thames and Hudson, New York (2002 ed.) p.1.
- 2 Djon Mundine, 'Smart state – crazy state'. *Machine* 2.2 (2006) p.4.
- 3 Gablick, p.118.
- 4 Terry Smith. 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Enquiry*. no.32 (Summer 2006) p.695.
- 5 Mundine, *ibid.*, p.5.
- 6 Khadija D. Carroll. Personal communication, Nov. 2006, including Bhabha reference.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 See H. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, London (1994) p.310.
- 9 Smith, p.705.
- 10 Smith, p.691.
- 11 Hal Foster. *The return of the real: the avant garde at the end of the century*. October, MIT, Cambridge (1996) p.180.
- 12 Mundine, *ibid.*, p.6.