Art, Culture and Ambiguity in Wilcannia New South Wales

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The claim of most town whites that Aboriginal people of Wilcannia make art but have no culture and the claim by Aboriginal people of the town that their art work and art designs demonstrate their culture and cultural traditions opens up the powerful and productive dimensions of art and culture for closer scrutiny. In so doing, the ambivalence and ambiguity which saturates these categories is ethnographically revealed. How can the presence and production of art-works in Wilcannia and the white denial of culture be considered? Why indeed do these questions matter, in what ways do they matter, and to whom do they matter? How do the categories of traditional/remote, urban/settled and their avatars intersect with black and white notions of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture discursively and experientially?

In this paper, I demonstrate and articulate how the stereotypes of traditional/remote and urban/settled Aborigines resonate for Barkindji and non-Aboriginal people in and from Wilcannia, specifically as these relate to discourses of ‘art’ and ‘culture’. I seek to make explicit as well as problematise the ways in which lived culture bleeds into culture as a particular response; of how Barkindji people attune themselves to new demands in relation to local and wider public notions of culture and art and their associated terms. The problems that arise in the delineation of these categories are explored ethnographically, showing how any kind of discussion is inadequate to lived experience.

I was working one day with a Barkindji artist and Wilcannia man outside Thankakali [your people my people] Aboriginal centre, a Community Development Employment Programme facility in Broken Hill. The artist was making a four metre long canoe out of river red gum, the canoe having been commissioned by the Broken Hill regional art gallery as a public work. As he was scoping out the wood into a rough shape with a chainsaw, an older non-Aboriginal man came over to him and said, in a knowing tone, that this was not the traditional way Aborigines made canoes. The artist asked the older man if he had come to Thankakali that day in a pony and trap, a query which, when the man finally ‘got it’, was met with some degree of mirth. It did not, however, quite dispel the suspicion of the older man that something duplicitous or fraudulent was afoot in the use of a chainsaw to make a canoe in the name of being Aboriginal or Aboriginal art. However, these two examples are not equivalently reversible. The option is available to the white man to revert to pony and trap travel should he wish; however, the option of chainsaw use did not exist historically for Barkindji artists. Yet, this simplified way of viewing technology as a measure of Aboriginal cultural authenticity remains a primary value judgment in the public imaginary. The stage is set here for interpretative battles which lie at the heart of the slippery categories of Aboriginal culture and art.
Concepts such as art and culture have varied applications and ‘can never be divorced from their larger historical contexts’ (Crehan 2002: 39). Culture’s conceptual intersection, slippage and, on occasion, fusion with terms such as art, civilisation and race continue to play themselves out (Bauman 1973; Williams 1983; Mulvaney 1990; Myers 2002). In ordinary Australian discourse the term ‘culture’ (when it is used at all) often refers to ‘High Culture’, to the arts. The term ‘culture’ acquires a different loading and salience in the context of multiculturalism when reference is made to ‘ethnic cultures’ and ‘Indigenous cultures’. Here, multiculturalism is a ‘form of identity politics in which the concept of culture becomes merged with that of ethnic identity’ (Turner 1993: 411). The category of culture takes on a sharp edge in the Indigenous context because material interests are involved, including claims to government money and land. Thus, to say people have no culture is to question their entitlement and, beyond that, it is to question who they believe they are. As Myers notes, culture in its many guises has become ‘a major political and ideological force’ (2002: 234). While the audience reception of the categories of Aboriginal art and culture have changed across time in national discourse, and Aboriginal engagement in global art worlds is diverse, this paper grounds itself in the local, recognising that, at some levels, the local will inevitably refract wider public discussion.

Many Wilcannia Aborigines have taken on board a white view of themselves as lacking ‘real’ Aboriginal culture and mention this in a comparative context in relation to the ‘full bloods up North’. Yet, the artworks being made in Wilcannia are said by local Barkindji to be ‘our tradition’, ‘our culture’. Put differently, art is being made in the name of tradition by Barkindji people whose discourse (somewhat paradoxically) often bears considerable resemblance to the discourse of whites, which holds that they (Wilcannia Aborigines) have lost their culture (Gibson 2008, forthcoming). Yet, the similarity of the discourse is not enough to understand what is going on here. Whether the art they produce is traditional in the strict sense of the term is less important than whether it can be marked as ‘traditional’, a key trope of Indigenous discourse.

Wilcannia is a small country town in far western New South Wales (NSW) with a population of approximately 685 people of whom 64 per cent are Aboriginal (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002). Serviced by road only and lying just over 1000 kilometres west of Sydney and 200 kilometres east of Broken Hill, the town has a less than positive reputation in dominant society terms. Branded as a ‘public disorder hot spot’ by NSW police, much media reportage of the town is the subject of attentions that focus on the high incidence of alcohol abuse and related violence. Local residents of the predominately white towns on either side of Wilcannia advise travellers not to stop there but to drive straight through.

Until the 1960’s work was to be found in the pastoral industry with many Aboriginal people finding work as shearers, roustabouts, ringers and pressers (Beckett 2005). However, the decline of the pastoral industry in the region has seen almost absolute economic marginalisation for the Aboriginal inhabitants of the town together with an ever dwindling non-Aboriginal population. Most of the available jobs are in the service sector, such as police, teachers, nurses and at the local Central Darling Shire Council and these are held by a fairly transient non-Aboriginal workforce.

What does it mean to lose culture?

When I first asked some of the white townspeople of Wilcannia what they knew about the Aboriginal culture of the area, I was told that I was ‘lookin’ in the wrong place’, that ‘they’ve lost their culture’, ‘unless you call floggin’ the missus’ or ‘getting maggotty’ (very
drunk) a culture. At the local hospital a nurse said, ‘I’ve never heard a didgeridoo played in Wilcannia but I’ve treated three people hit with one’. Aboriginal culture in these articulations is differentiated from Aboriginality which is readily accorded by most whites although associated with kinds of behaviour which are abhorred or occasionally viewed with mirth. These stereotypical responses may strike one as passé in an anthropological sense but the effects and experiences of these appellations are important (Butler 1997). Whilst anthropological work and, to some extent, ideas have ‘moved on’ from writing about authenticity and Aboriginal culture, people on the ground continue to live with their resonances. Myers (2005: 5) asks, ‘what makes something or someone Aboriginal: what are the boundaries of Aboriginality?’ But this is not the question here. Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are recognised as Aboriginal and are accorded Aboriginality, but of a particular ‘type’. The more pertinent questions are: what causes someone to be seen as a particular type of Aborigine, what do people mean when they say that culture is lost, and what does this mean for people’s lives?

Wilcannia is an intercultural town in the sense that there is considerable interaction between Aborigines and non-Aborigines creating and referencing a sociality which requires the sharing of space and economic activities. Yet this interaction is neither equal nor harmonious (Merlan 1998, 2005: 167-169; Sullivan 2005). Ideas of blackness and whiteness sustain an ever-present highly visible dichotomy, which is invoked and called into action at the slightest hint of disagreement between local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (cf. Merlan 2005: 169-170; Gibson 2006). The work of negotiating or understanding difference or recognising sameness is, for the most part, neglected by both black and white in favour of the more ready practice of identifying an essentialist Other.

While much current anthropology favours the shared and relational inter aspects of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture(s) (Merlan 2005; Sullivan 2005) in preference to a divisive model of black and white difference, at the local level in Wilcannia, blackness and whiteness sit at the root and surface of daily interaction and organisation. This is partly attributable to, and consistent with, the modernist view of cultures as ‘hermetic entities with rights’ (Sullivan 2005: 183) and operates at heightened, if not unprecedented, levels as Aboriginal people respond, generating the requirement to demonstrate difference in political, economic and social arenas as a means to gaining greater and more specific recognition.

At the same time, and more widely, explicit public discourse and much private anthropological ‘talk’ continues its work of maintaining particular kinds of Aboriginal differences vis a vis the traditional/remote and urban/settled (Collmann 1988; Hamilton 1990; Myers 2002). This itself is not problematic but the idea that settled is lesser is. What is striking is the way in which most Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia maintain and articulate a repertoire of two ‘types’ of Aborigines, (traditional/remote and settled/urban), and how Aboriginal people locate themselves and are located within these categories. These are categories that extend their ideologies to objects now figured as Aboriginal art wherein traditional and urban are theoretical and textual shorthand for certain expectations and, indeed, requirements.

In many ways, Aboriginal people are compelled to have, to want and to need this ‘only ever obliquely glimpsed’ ‘thing’—traditional culture—in order to make good their claim of survival, persistence and connection to a past (Povinelli 2002: 38; Myers 2002). The notion of traditional culture promises economic, legislative and political recognition and rewards. In these terms, Aboriginal culture is regarded today as something that can be verbally and practically demonstrated; indeed, culture must be made demonstrable in various ways in order to be recognised and credited. This requirement is exacted in many fields, including cultural tourism, native title claims and art worlds (Merlan 1989, 2005,
Native title machinations in particular are charged with having intensified a ‘critically conscious awareness’, which compels Aboriginal people to reflect on dimensions ‘of their sociality [and] … to problematise their own notions and experiences of social realities in particular ways’ (Correy 2006: 338). This contributes to an increasing ideological separation between constitutions of blackness and whiteness and, importantly, mutual expectations.

Many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia—like the whites—also talk of the ‘full bloods’ up North, the ‘real tribal’s’ from the Centre. They have taken on board the insufficiency with which they are credited and articulate the notion of loss attributed to ‘settled’, ‘south eastern’ or ‘urban’ Aborigines. This sense of loss—quite apart from its often keenly felt actuality—has shaped much of the public discourse about Aborigines among anthropologists as well as historians, despite some academic assertions and intended goodwill to the contrary (Morris 1989; Beckett 1994; MacDonald 2000; Cowlishaw 2004; in the visual arts see Sutton and Anderson 1988; Johnson 1990; Kleinert 1994; Morphy 2001). This sense of loss has been overlaid on the Aboriginal visual arts arena in ways which continue to intimate a hierarchy of Aboriginality.

Aboriginal art and culture—a coming together

The emergence of the ‘acrylic art movement’ (which came out of Papunya in the Western Desert during the 1970s) added to an all but synonymous intertwining of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture. Government policies sought to provide a better understanding of Aboriginal Australia and respect for all aspects of Aboriginal cultural expression through the maintenance, support and promotion of Aboriginal arts and culture’ [my emphasis] (Altman et al. 1989: 111-112; see also Myers 2001: 173). Indeed Aborigines as a discursive category have become increasingly indexed by the products of art (Merlan 2001: 204; Rowse in Fourmile 1994: 74). ‘[B]oth within and outside of Australia, their ‘art’—usually along with their spiritual tie to the landscape—[has] come to be the representation of Aboriginal culture itself, of Aboriginal identity’ (Myers 2002: 10).

Ideas of Aboriginal art and culture have also figured in the creation of a particular nationalism that seeks to vicariously draw upon what is perceived to be Aboriginal people’s spiritual wholeness and deep connection to a sentient landscape. These are attributes which are variously considered to be lost to ‘Western art’ and ‘Western man’, or to ‘modernity’ (Myers 1991: 38; see also MacClancy 1997; Lattas 2000; Merlan 2001; Myers 2005). They are notably, however, attributes which many consider lost to those Aboriginal people classified as urban and those living in areas of Australia described as settled. This has particularly meaningful effects as well as an affective presence for those so named (Gibson 2008). It has effects for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia who are ambiguously located within the overarching tropes of traditional/remote or urban/settled and whose art is, for the most part, discussed and exhibited in art text and art world contexts under the categories of urban, Koori3 or contemporary. These are tags that many Wilcannia Aboriginal artists reject on the basis that these neither represent them as they perceive themselves to be nor as they desire to be, a point which I take up later.

In terms of arts funding and production, Wilcannia was not on the government arts funding treadmill until the late 1980s and then spasmodically until the early 1990s with little again until around 2006. There have, to date, been two short-lived and locally run art centres. One operated, according to best estimates, between 1987 and 1991 and another (with a broader focus encompassing the idea of a permaculture co-operative) from 1995 to 1997. More recently, in 2006, a dedicated ‘art space’ funded by the Far Western Regional
Arts Board opened in an old Uniting Church building. None of the centres have benefitted (or not, depending on one’s point of view) from the appointment of an arts co-ordinator. It is clear that the history of the production of art objects and artifacts in Wilcannia is an arena of discrepant black and white memory (cf. Gibson 2006). While there is certainly well documented evidence of art objects such as emu egg carving and the carving of wooden artefacts such as boomerangs, clubs, spears and stock whips from the 1950s and 1960s onwards around Western NSW (Kleinert 1994; Tacon et al. 2003), longer term townsfolk agree that the production of these objects as well as the more contemporary media of acrylic paintings on canvas and boards, and even more recent printmaking, (see Image 1), has seen a marked increase from the late 1980s, with even more substantive increases from 2002 onwards. This point of contestation regarding the production of visual ‘cultural objects’ meets, at certain points, that of the perceived differences regarding the presence, or absence, of culture. Nevertheless, for Aboriginal people in the Far West of NSW, making art, selling, talking about and exhibiting art have each become recognised vehicles for demonstrating, and seeking continuity of, practices and ‘traditions’. This, as we shall see, is something of a double bind and burden.


**Locating assumptions: timeless mystics, artistic luminaries or drunken black bastards**

Here I offer a story from my fieldwork, which serves to demonstrate some of the ‘on the ground’ effects and affective responses that relate to ideas and discourses of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture, their points of convergence and separation as these apply to both blackfellas and whitefellas.

Throughout 2002 and 2003 I spent time with several Barkindji men who work as Park Rangers for the National Parks and Wildlife Service at Mutawintji National Park.
Mutawintji is a place rich in Aboriginal history and Dreaming sites with galleries of stencils, rock paintings and engravings. Part of these men’s role requires them to take visitors from around Australia and overseas to particular sites in the park and explain the Aboriginal history, stories, myths and way of life of the area. During the tours the Rangers received celebratory tributes from the mostly white visitors: ‘I wish we had your culture’; ‘Where can we go to learn about your culture?’; ‘You have such a spiritual culture’. They sought knowledge on ‘culture’, ‘Aboriginal art’, spirituality, the didgeridoo, bush foods and the ‘Dreamtime’—all those objectifications with which we are familiar and which have come to signal Aboriginal culture in the public imaginary. The Rangers were variously unwilling and/or unable to answer all their questions, responding at the time with a mixture of silence, embarrassment and, later on, much laughter, recalling ‘how they [non-Aboriginal people] go on’ about Aborigines, in particular fixating on anything relating to broadly perceived notions of Aboriginal spirituality.

During a lunch break at Mutawintji I spoke with some of the non-Aboriginal people who had been on the guided tour. They were curious about Wilcannia, partly because of the advice they had received. The white tour operator with whom they were travelling told them when they made their overnight stop in Wilcannia that they were ‘not to go outside’. They said that this advice surprised them as the tour operator ‘is very Aborigine orientated’. When they asked him why, he told them that Wilcannia is ‘not very safe’, especially ‘on pay day’. Since the majority of the Aboriginal Rangers live in Wilcannia and many were born there and have lived there all their lives, these guides are in fact some of the people from Wilcannia the tour group would see and meet if they visited the town.

Rangers from Wilcannia belong to a community that is denied what is considered to be ‘traditional’ culture by both local and visiting whites in the town context. Yet, when located at Mutawintji, these Rangers reinforce the viewpoint that leads to their own exclusion. Their discourse as Aboriginal Rangers serves only to increase the authenticity of a traditional Aboriginality: ‘the full blood—bush black—the ‘real Aborigine, a good figure whose wisdom could be tapped by whites’ (Hamilton 1990: 22). One Mutawintji Ranger from Wilcannia told me that he wishes he was ‘real black’ (alluding to his skin colour, which is more dark brown). If he was ‘real black’, he would put on a lap lap and, then, when the tourists approach the ‘historic site’ he would jump out at them—speaking in lingo and shaking a spear—and then run off into the distance. Although said in a light-hearted way, there is an underlying recognition that, for him, it is impossible to do this. It speaks to and echoes a nostalgia for the traditional Aborigine, which, in some ways, runs parallel to the desire of white tourists for an authentic Aboriginal experience. These feelings—these expressions—demonstrate the profound discursive effects of dominant signifiers of Aboriginality applied by both black and white (Lattas 1990; Marcus and Myers 1995).

While Aboriginal discourse often appears to ‘fall in’ with white discourse, the reception of this discourse by white society differs in important ways. In the Wilcannia town context local whites discuss one Mutawintji Ranger who is a fairly prolific artist in terms of his ‘traditional style’ paintings. They also discuss his propensity for drunkenness which has often led to violent domestic situations and incarceration. Non-Aboriginal visitors travelling through Wilcannia who decide to stop at the local Motel (the main outlet for the sale of paintings) comment on, and are often surprised by, the very presence of the Mutawintji Ranger’s work and that of many other artists, as well as the content and style of the work. The image below is representative of the style of artwork at the Motel.
When pressed, tourists express not only stereotypical notions about Wilcannia Aborigines but also conventional ideas and sentiments about what properly constitutes Aboriginal art. There are no dot paintings, a matter causing some customer surprise as well as a degree of excitement that while this work is different it is still, according to perceived mores, recognisably Aboriginal in terms of content and style. That the work often comes together with information about what it means (a story) and some information about the artist also meets the popular view of what one should seek in and from Aboriginal art (Sutton 1988; Sayers 1994; Tacon, South and Hooper 2003). These are sentiments shared by tourists, many local whites and most government agency contract workers who come to work in the town. However, at the same time, the practice, content and style of this man’s art are expressed as being in tension with his perceived behavioural characteristics. If only he didn’t drink, didn’t hit his wife, he could be something, be someone, and be a great artist. His life as lived is seen to be in conflict with what he produces on canvas. Art is partly linked here to its conferral of value in terms of the human scale (Myers 1991: 34-35; Merlan 2001: 204): art is something of a marker or redeemer of ‘C’ulture and, importantly, a sign of traditional Aboriginal culture of a particular kind. This is an arena that invokes the complexity of ideas of ‘problem’ behaviour versus the absence of traditional culture. At times it is the bad behaviour not the absence of traditional culture that marks this man; yet at other times both are asserted simultaneously. The social circumstance of their expression invokes the difference. Art becomes a site where this complexity is experienced and expressed agonistically.

Making particular kinds of art as a marker of Aboriginal ‘C’ulture is also a consideration for many Barkindji artists. Certain content is signalled to be not traditional or ‘not what belong to us’ and therefore not legitimately Aboriginal (Gibson forthcoming). Indeed, in Wilcannia, in terms of art, doing and talking about what is seen to be traditional is something of a pedagogic imperative. One artist told me that he ‘started out drawin Mickey Mouse, cartoons an’ that an stuff’ until an older and respected Elder told him that he should ‘paint what belong to you, your own culture’. Despite Mickey Mouse and cartoons
being part of this mans life as lived, Barkindji ‘culture’, in terms of how this is imagined, at least artistically, and therefore of how this should be most validly represented is, at times, something seen to require instruction and direction. There are tensions in the exhortations by a leading Elder and artist that ‘you should paint what belong to you’, and the advice that this does not include Mickey Mouse. The will to produce art which meets the white desires and expectations for a traditional work is an emotional mixed bag. The frustrations are clear in one regionally acclaimed Aboriginal artist’s irritation that he ‘does not want to do f**ken borin’ snakes an’ goannas all the time’ and the annoyance that artistic freedom might render him no more than a poor facsimile of non-Indigenous culture. The ability of artists such as Tracey Moffatt and others to cast themselves as urban professionals—as individuals who refuse Aboriginal identity as having a bearing on their role as artist—is neither completely understood, easily available or sought by Barkindji artists. This is a complex arena that is constantly being worked out and worked on.

Art and the Dreaming

Art is produced by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and purchased by whites. For both black and white, there is a general acknowledgement that ‘Aboriginal art is culture’. Yet, the attribution of ‘culture’ to things as opposed to people is an important distinction which has much bearing on the Wilcannia case, as indeed do attributions of types of Aboriginal culture ascribed to Aborigines and their art works (Graburn 1976; Langton 1981; Myers 1991, 1994, 2002; Taylor 1996; Sutton 1998; Morphy 2001).

What exactly is it in artwork terms that differentiate Aborigines who live in the Top End or Centre of Australia from those in Wilcannia? In relation to artists and artworks it would seem that the Dreaming, the expression of the Dreaming, or the ability to manifest the Dreaming in ways acceptable to art world and dominant cultural views is key here. When the acrylic paintings of the Central and Western Desert began their rise in public popularity, the ideas of the Dreaming was trenchant in their marketing and valorisation. Exhibitions, texts, art advisors and art dealers in different ways all stressed the importance of the Dreaming and its links to the authentic and timeless nature of the artists and their work.

Fred Myers says of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra, a Pintupi man and artist from Central Australia, that he ‘believes that people are really interested in his work and the work of traditional people because it derives from the Dreaming, the source of value from which most urban people have been separated’ (Myers 1994: 690). Myers quotes Tjakamarra thus: ‘They [whites] want to see [art] from the Center … Urban Aboriginal people ngurrpaya nyinanyi (“they are ignorant” [of Aboriginal Law])’ (1994: 689-690). This assertion goes to the heart of what seems to differentiate Aboriginal art as a lived realm of practice and Aboriginal art produced with a certain degree of planned cognisance. Whilst one could argue that both are necessary in different ways for the peoples concerned, there can be no question that the social and cultural continuity of which Tjakamarra and others speak has, for Barkindji, been a process marked by rupture and discontinuity, as well as rebirth. This, in turn, is a difference that matters (in different ways) to, among others, anthropologists, art dealers, the wider public, Barkindji people and those from the Centre.

Nevertheless, Aboriginal Barkindji man and artist Phillip Bates, like many Barkindji artists in and from Wilcannia, says that the content of their art demonstrates that their Law and their ‘Dreamtime still alive’. For Aboriginal people in Wilcannia (as with others), interest in gaining further knowledge about ‘Dreaming tracks, the stories, and the rituals associated with them’ was revived with the land rights debates in the 1970s (Beckett 2000: 11). Whilst there is disagreement between black and white and between Aboriginal people
as to the extent of this loss, and therefore the extent of what constitutes a revival, it is clear
that explicit articulations and representations of ‘our Dreamtime’, ‘our culture’ and ‘our
traditions’ has increased.

‘Following up’ the Dreaming (Stanner 1979) is most readily practiced in Wilcannia
through artistic visual depiction, story and site visitation as compared to different
performative modes practiced in other parts of Australia where rights to reproduce certain
designs, events and stories is restricted to closely proscribed and prescribed kin (Munn
1973; Morphy 1991, 2000; Myers 1991: 32; Taylor 1996). Nevertheless, the Dreaming, for
Phillip, is no less intrinsic to articulating a sense of himself as Aboriginal. This could be
thought problematic to the extent that many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, having
internalised the dominant culture notion that they have lost their culture and their
Dreaming, are seeking in some primary way to articulate their hold of Aboriginality in
these terms. I asked Phillip what influenced him in relation to his work:

I’m sorta, I’ve been around, ya know. I seen lotta Myall people art work an’
that. An’ my Father’s art work. An’ I gotta lotta influence off him – my Father.
He told me lotta stories. An’ what he told me I tried to put in my pictures, you
know. An’ the way I see that is our Dreamtime still a live cos he telling me a
story an’ I’m painting his story, ya know? That’s, that’s my thing, ya know? To
keep our culture alive. That’s the way I see it. So there you are.
While the Dreaming’s presence is visually expressed, argued for and discussed by Barkindji in intercultural fora, for many there exists an expressed and palpable longing for the Dreaming—the Law—for tradition as a lived ontological realm. Although mirroring past and present white discourse in terms of authenticity and loss in certain ways (Povinelli 2002: 36-43), this remains, for some, an intensely lived experience.

The affective sense of loss of aspects of the Law was brought home to me one day at a friend’s (Henry’s) house in Wilcannia when his mate, John, came to visit. John had been drinking; he continued to drink quite heavily and became increasingly distressed. In what may have been linked to my presence as someone who often talked to Henry about aspects of culture, John kept asking Henry to ‘tell me some more tales bruh’. He kept saying that he was a Barkindji man and loved his country. He became more and more emotional, saying to Henry, ‘cut me bruh, cut me bruh’. My friend said: ‘We don’t do that anymore. That’s gone bruh’. He went on to say that they did not have the Law or the Lawmen who know how to do that and that the meanings of each nincka [cut] had been ‘lost’. John kept insisting that if my friend did not cut him he would cut himself; that he just felt like throwing himself against a tree or jumping into the river. He insisted ‘I want to learn bruh. I’m all ears’.

It is naive to suggest that making art, that painting, is an effective panacea to an affectively experienced and perceived loss of ‘the Law’ as a way of being. Nevertheless, for a people who are constantly denied Aboriginal culture of any ‘worth’ or ‘value’, who are often called upon to justify their culture and who (partly and arguably as a result) are self-consciously reflecting on culture, art objects stand as concrete visual evidence of ‘culture’. Moreover, the making of art is articulated as culture making through action.

There are, of course, many reasons why people make art works, ‘talk about’ art works and paint particular content other than to keep the Dreaming alive. Some of the reasons given for undertaking the practice of art making are: to express a personal connection with country and culture, to show that ‘we still have culture’, to make political statements, to educate whitefellas, to teach Aboriginal children, as a recreational pursuit (‘it’s somethin’ to do’), to make money; and as a form of concretising cultural continuity. Whether all agree on what Aboriginal art is or is not and the purpose of its production and content, Aboriginal art as cultural capital is recognised by most, if not all, Aboriginal people I work with. What I am keen for readers to consider is that Barkindji people are making meaningful claims through art and its making in ways which unsettle and contest local and wider ideas of what it is to be Aboriginal in ‘settled’ Australia.

Phillip intimates how art can also play an important role in redressing the portrayal of Wilcannia Aborigines as outcasts without culture. He says:

> We always get shit from the news about nothing good comes out of here, only bad, you know? But, wherever I go, I might have an exhibition, paintings, ya know and stuff. People will ask me, you know. Do you come from Wilcannia? An’ then I can say, yes I do. It’s not a bad place, it’s just what people make of it, you know? It’s good. That’s my, my way of I suppose of just sayin’, you know, I’m from there, I’m not a bad person.

In this way artwork is seen as something which can demonstrate ‘good’ or ‘worth’, a vicarious carrier of positive cultural images and signs. Phillip’s comments play on the role of art in ascribing positive identity to certain groups of Aboriginal people. As well as responding to the contemporary reputation that Wilcannia has gained through mainstream media, Phillip seems to be appealing to the ‘common humanity’ theme as this is attached to Western notions of art (Myers 1991: 34-35). Phillip’s statements suggest that in showing
his art work, and in tying himself to the work, he successfully reflects not only his own and his culture’s worth and presence but that of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia.

For a few artists like Phillip, making art has become a meaningful way of living and being. Phillip says he paints: ‘just about every day. Like, it’s not a job or anything, it’s art now. It’s just get part of life’. According to Phillip (and he is not alone in this thinking), culture is kept alive by the practice of painting and through the stories in the painting. Traditional culture, according to this view, is not located in the past; it continues to be re-learned and lives through Phillip’s father, through Phillip and through their art. I asked Phillip why he started painting. He replied:

I do lotta. Mainly for my kids, you know. An’ it’s for other little kids so they see that our culture—not dyin’, you know. It’s still alive. Cos it’s drummed into everyone’s head everyday that, ah, this mob losing their culture or whatever, you know? But me out here in the West, you know, our people learnin’ our culture again, you know? … So I say I paint for my kids an’ for the future kids, ya know? How they understand things a bit better. Yeah.

Phillip alludes here to culture being both continuous and re-learned: not only the practice of painting but the content of painting is important to his agenda. Asserting culture is an ongoing struggle for Wilcannia Aboriginal people. What Phillip paints, what he teaches and what the children learn are all connected to the past and to the future (Holland and Lave 2001: 28). Art and culture are inseparable here—the practice of art-making is a signifying practice and the works signify ‘culture’. Art makes culture, culture makes art, culture is art, and art is ‘culture’. Culture is kept alive and re-learned through, in Phillip’s case, painting daily. This practice is one of culture making (Myers 1994: 964).

The connection between art and culture is also expressed by Murray Butcher, an artist and Barkindji man. I asked Murray, ‘What do you hope for when you do a painting or carving, I mean, do you do it hoping that it’ll have a particular destination or do you care who buys it, does it matter?’ Murray responded to this particularly inarticulate question by saying, ‘Well, first an’ foremost why I do the paintin’ is to get some sort of contact with our culture—whether it just be animals what we eat or our relations with the land or sometime try an’ do a story. Try to, ah, put a message across about our dreamtime stories’. Putting a message across ‘about our dreamtime stories’ is directed at Barkindji and other Aboriginal people as well as Others. The painting of certain animals is both a source and a sign of ‘culture’. The painted kangaroo, emu and ‘porcupine’ become, in their visual objectification, materially concrete referents of culture. Painting the animals locals eat, hunting those animals, eating those animals and depicting their relationship to the land suggest much more than a pointing to culture; these practices embody the presence of culture. Thus the content of paintings both declares aspects of culture and also refers to unspoken aspects of culture. Indeed, since the 1970s, and progressively so, the practice of painting itself has become a recognisably Aboriginal cultural activity (Megaw 1990; Myers 1994, 2002, 2005).

According to Murray, contact with culture is made through ‘painting about’ relations with the land. Whereas the actual practice of hunting and fishing might be seen as contact with culture in action, stories which are ‘expressed’ in paint can also be understood in this way. Indeed, paintings often speak to and of culture in ways that can never be apparent to those who are outside of local culture.

One painting, which continues to be a work in progress, was begun about five years ago. It gets brought out and put away as the urge takes the artist. At one time the painting was being worked on while the artist and one of his friends were having an argument. The artist ‘king hit’ his mate and ‘downed’ him. When his mate came to he was bleeding from his mouth. He spat a spray of blood from his mouth onto the canvas and put his handprint
in it. This story was being relayed to me when I was in the artist’s house with his mate and several of the artist’s friends. I asked the artist’s mate why he spat on the painting. He said that he knew how much the artist’s paintings meant to him and, being unable to king hit him back (he was slightly built), he retaliated by taking it out on the painting.

Among those privy to the event this painting is known as ‘A’s painting after the injured man. Each time the painting is displayed, those who were present at the initial event remember, and talk about it; those who were not present enjoy the retelling. The artist expresses his sadness and regret at having hit his ‘little mate’ but there is often much laughter as the story is told and retold. The painting is a visual reminder and mnemonic for those in the know. It also serves as a cathartic release as tensions are reworked and resolved in the retelling and talking about the work (cf. MacDonald 1994).

Clearly this is not the discourse that might be invoked by those who are outside of this cultural group when they view the painting. Art, here, performs in ways which are central to cultural relations. Special stories, special moments and special people are linked to the creation of the works as well as to the works themselves. In this way art works as they are being created can also become biographical objects for future group memory and recall (cf Berlo 1999: 192). The artist in many ways takes on the role of the storyteller and becomes one with the audience. While the art may be widely consumed, the artist is claimed by the local community, creating with and receiving from it. Through art production, the production of myth and story is grounded in local and locally important ways.

Many of Murray’s paintings are about the stories he has heard over time from his relations, as well as the relations who have told the stories. There is a fluid and ever shifting dimension to the work and the works. Like culture, art moves on, but it must also look back. When Murray paints about growing up (the people, the places, the events and the stories), this remembering or looking back can be understood as creating a sense of cultural continuity as well as offering a way of moving forward. He can thus be seen to affirm his links to his culture as well as responding to those who might deny its presence. When Murray paints about what he remembers of the past and then tells it to the ‘kids’, he is also painting a future. This shared dialogue about the painting becomes shared culture. Moreover, as Murray paints his memories, both recent and distant, he can be seen to be expressing culture, his way, in visual form (cf. Berlo 1999). He is drawing on a network of thoughts and images linked to a network of people and places and, in so doing, he individualises his culture as he sees it and as he remembers it.

Contested identities

The purchase of art is often premised by whites on the consideration that they see or feel something of the Dreaming in the art, that the Dreaming is ‘somehow transparent’ in the paintings (Myers 2005: 24). Mainstream white Australia has taken on a ‘consuming and erotic passion’ for difference (Kahn 1995: 125) through the trope of the remote, traditional, real, authentic Aborigines: those who are accorded a particular culture, and who are granted (at least in the imagination) the possession of the kind of Dreaming that is seen to resonate ‘most closely with anthropological and popular portrayals of traditional Aboriginal society’ (Morton 2005: 196). In relation to art, it is precisely the perceived presence and recognition of this form of Aboriginal culture that is valued (Myers 2002).

Michael Nelson Tjakamarra similarly observes that whites want to see the art of ‘traditional’ people and paintings from ‘the Centre’ (in Myers 2002: 291). Myers observes that Tjakamarra is ‘contrasting this attention with the lack of interest in the work of urban Aboriginal art’ (2002: 291). According to Myers (1994: 690), Tjakamarra ‘feels sorry’ for these urban Aboriginal people.
Tjakamarra is not alone here and in some ways can be seen to be responding to a
particular parochialism, itself driven by art-world demands. Many others share similar
sentiments. This situation has partly been created through the extent of anthropological and
art-world interest in, and writing about, traditional (more recently ‘tradition oriented’) Aboriginal art and Aborigines from the more ‘remote’ parts of Australia. Yet, many of the
Aboriginal people Tjakamarra and others would feel sorry for, and who he and many art
world and anthropology workers often subsume under the category of urban or settled
Australia do not see themselves or their art in these terms.

While artists from the Centre, North and Top End are culturally affirmed by white discourse, Wilcannia people do not appear to have that option. Yet in some ways they are
asserting their right to be placed within this discursive framework. White discourse may
not favour them as having authentic Aboriginal art; nevertheless, they continue to produce
art. There is an agony and exhilaration where people are trying to find a place within the
notion that they have ‘nothing’. Making a claim to ‘something’ is, I suggest, important
terrain, which affects the circumstances of peoples’ lives.

I asked a prominent artist who I work with in Wilcannia what he thought of the
statement that urban Aboriginal people were ignorant of culture. He replied:

> I think in some ways, yes, some urban people ignorant of culture. Sydney, Adelaide—they urban. Wilcannia is a city, so is Broken Hill, but our food is outside [the city]. We won’t eat rabbits, bog eyes [shingleback lizards] in the street because of all the rubbish they eat. Come to Sydney—all those white ants, they got all the colours on but they know fuck-all about our culture.

This would suggest that what differentiates the urban, for this man, is in part his
community’s ability to leave the city and go hunting—to eat wild meat, to know how to
hunt and eat meat, and to hunt and eat meat that is not spoiled by city life. Food, people
and culture are all, in this statement, subject to spoiling by city life; there is a physical and
geographic as well as an ideological difference being claimed. Subsistence is intimately
connected to the land and to identity. Here, wild meat is not simply a source of food; its
ingestion is identity embodied. Urban Aborigines are portrayed by Wilcannia Aborigines
as separated from the real substance of Aboriginality. Particular social practices acquire
here the status of boundary markers.

While the measure of what constitutes urban/settled Aboriginality varies between black
and white and also between blackfellas, the discourse of cultural lack is always present in
some form. Urban Aboriginal folk are, according to this man, vectors of a symbolic culture
with no ‘real’ substance. Yet this stance is, in many respects, a discursive simplification of
his experiences. In many ways he is drawing on a dominant culture discourse, which does
not match the lived aspects of his life. He has many friends who describe themselves as ‘urban Aboriginal artists’ or ‘urban artists’ who are Aboriginal. It is clear that these
relationships are based on a sense of shared Aboriginality and shared experiences and he
refuses the idea that these individuals might be described as either ‘white ants’ or ‘uptown
blacks’. My point here has two dimensions: on the one hand I want to stress the contested
nature of the categories traditional/remote and urban/settled, especially as these are played
out in relation to art and culture are; on the other hand, we need to acknowledge the easy
recourse to wider public discourses which invoke and continually recreate these
dichotomies. Put differently, while stereotypical discourses of traditional/remote and urban/settled in relation to Aboriginal art and culture are available for use, and frequently
relied on, these categories may also be contested and unsettled, often by the same speaker.

The contrast between Aboriginal culture as a particular form of lived experience and the
apparent absence of these practices amongst urban Aborigines is vividly apparent in the
following assertion by the same artist: ‘It’s like me, I can go to the flashest restaurant, wearing the flashest suit an’ then come out an’ take it all off and sit down and’ throw some meat on the coals. They [city born Aboriginal artists] wouldn’t be able to do that’. In the image of throwing off his clothes and sitting down on the ground we meet one of the figures who populate the discursive category of the ‘real’ Aborigine whose Otherness ‘came to be affirmed and re-affirmed by the very continuation of their ritual practices, the custom of “walkabout” when they put off the trappings of European civilisation and “returned to the wild”’ (Hamilton 1990: 22, my emphasis). There is a shoring up of a boundary between urban and Other Aboriginal people, which finds its expression in ideological, performative and spatial terms. Although these categories are applied here partly to contest perceived attributes and characteristics, they are, importantly, quite heavily and imaginatively proscribed in black and white discourse vis-à-vis certain social practices and geographic localities.

Many of the Aboriginal people this artist refers to as urban (in particular those trained in the Western art canon) are described as ‘different to us, they talk different⎯they just different’. They ‘don’t talk about it [the art] like me’. This man claims his art practice is no different to ‘other talk’, in that his art is about his life, what he did, what he does, what he was taught, what he teaches, what others did, what others do, what was and is done together. Art, in this expression, conforms with the view of Fourmile (1994: 76) that art is not an ‘autonomous pursuit distinct from other aspects of life’.

At the same time, Aboriginal people in Wilcannia also allude to the difference between themselves and people from ‘the Centre’, the ‘North’ and the ‘Top End’, with one senior Wilcannia Barkindji artist and respected cultural man saying that he would like to go back to the Centre and spend some time with the old people, just sitting down with them and listening to ‘find out’ and ‘to learn’ from them. This man talks of the ‘Sydney-type’ Aboriginal people going to the Centre or the Top End, saying: ‘A lot of artists they just do it for where they wanna be with the old people. They use the old people to get what they want. They come back an’ use it as their own power’. This suggests that urban artists are perceived as having to go to the more perceptually ‘remote’, and by inference more culturally knowledgeable, people in order to gain some (unspecified) power; one that has possibilities of appropriation, one that is otherwise missing. There is an experiential and cognised ambivalence here manifesting through the discursive binaries of urban and remote. Terms such as urban/settled and remote/traditional are seen, on the one hand, by Aboriginals in Wilcannia to be somewhat meaningless and irrelevant; on the other hand there is recognition that these are powerful and productive categories as are their affects (see Collmann 1988).

**Contemporary art/contemporary Aborigines**

The categories and discourses of ‘urban Aborigines’ and ‘urban Aboriginal art’ often appear to effortlessly encompass all people and art that is not from geographically ‘remote’ places such as ‘the Top End’, ‘the Western Desert’, ‘the North’ or ‘the Centre’. Categories such as ‘urban’, ‘settled’ and ‘south-eastern’ are default categories, which in many ways exclude what are important differences to many of the people and artists being so named.

There is another category of art, that of ‘contemporary’, which began to be applied to Aboriginal art in the 1970s and 1980s and ‘included all 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 pre-colonial era’ (Morphy 2001: 46). This is quite a proviso and although, as Morphy (2001: 47) says, it ‘rescued some Indigenous art from being marginalised or devalued [it] sowed the seed for a different kind of
marginalisation’. Moreover, contemporary Aboriginal art did not imply contemporary life in its most readily inferred sense of belonging to the same time; on the contrary, it was in many ways contiguous with the ‘primitive’. Indeed those who lived in south-east or settled Australia were thought to be too contemporary in that they were perceived as too similar to contemporary whites to be acceptably contemporary within the avant-garde, primitive amalgamation the term actually referenced.

I asked a senior Barkindji artist from Wilcannia what he thought about the term ‘contemporary artist’. He bemoaned the title: ‘What am I, am I a contemporary blackfella or what? If we walk down the street with a lap-lap and spear we’d be jailed for indecent exposure and having a deadly weapon. We who people want us to be’. On another occasion, I was with the same artist at an exhibition in Broken Hill featuring his work. Reference was made in the introductory speech to the contemporary nature of the works. In response to this one of his Aboriginal friends said to him, ‘You not Aboriginal, you contemporary’. He replied: ‘Me, I don’t care … I can sit on the fence, sit both sides of the fence—doesn’t worry me. I’m black when they want me to be an’ white when they want me to be’. When I asked why this man and his friend were so opposed to the term contemporary, they responded that it meant they were not ‘traditional’, ‘not really black’, ‘not real natives’—not really Aboriginal. As James (1997: 62) notes: ‘the question of “authentic” Aboriginality persists … The stereotypes of “contemporary” and “traditional” Aboriginality, though different and opposed both operate against the interests of Aboriginal people’. Of course we need to recognise that those artists deemed traditional have benefitted from the cultural distinction attached to this category and that contemporary art has, at different times, advanced art world interest in the work of ‘traditional’ and urban artists alike. Here I want to draw attention to more localised assertions of these overarching categories in which Barkindji people are awkwardly located and the ways in which they respond.

Plural and ambiguous in its meaning, the application of the label contemporary, in an Aboriginal art sense, is one that many Aboriginal people reject, having fully cognised its nuanced and subtle shapes. That Aboriginal artists and others take on board and sometimes grapple with the traditional, urban, remote and contemporary categories gives some indication of the influence of these concepts and their discourses for Aboriginal self-authoring.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what is striking is the disjuncture between the sites of art production and art consumption as the paintings traverse distinctive disconnected worlds of meaning. While notions of a pristine Aboriginal culture tainted by degrees of contact are recognised to be artificial (Sutton and Anderson 1988: 5), this trope persists in explicit theoretical and expositional separations of Aboriginal cultures into more or less tradition-oriented categories (Sutton and Anderson 1988; Kleinert and Neale 2000; Morphy 2001). The Wilcannia case demonstrates some sense of the on the ground ambiguity and ambivalence related to the categories of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture.

This paper does not argue against differing levels or consequences of white contact. Nor does it deny the important differences of Aboriginal experiences and worldviews. But it does argue for better ways to articulate these differences in language that does not necessarily suggest degrees of Aboriginality. Some anthropologists, art-dealers, art aficionados and curators, among others, have begun to recognise that it may have been a little hasty to cast ‘urban’ and more ‘settled’ Aborigines as having lost their culture and their Dreaming. Urban may soon be the new Centre, the new North, the new Top End of
Some argue for a previously unrecognised continuity, or for a re-made and regenerated contact with tradition, while others place stress on adaptability, resilience and, in art terms, very commonly the oppositional and politically challenging nature of the work (Johnson 1987; Sutton 1988: 185-187, 1990; Sykes 1990; Kleinert and Neale 2000; Morphy 2001). Yet this is to narrow all aspects of art making for the people concerned. Although Aboriginal people themselves recognise that certain aspects of their culture are being regenerated, revitalised, returned or remembered, references to remnants of tradition (Sutton et al. 1988: 181) nevertheless continue to summon up comparative ideas of lesser and residual forms of Aboriginality. Whichever approach is taken, there remains a clear and indeed hierarchical separation between ‘remote’, ‘tribal’, tradition oriented and ‘urban’, ‘non-tribal’ or ‘settled’ Aboriginal art and Aboriginal people, with all the ambiguity and affective experience that this raises and invokes.

For Aboriginal people art has become a recognised vehicle for demonstrating continuity of practices and ‘traditions’. Questions of ‘tradition’ remain uppermost for Barkindji people and artists and speak to the socio-political importance and, at times, the institutional and legislative necessity for Aboriginal people to demonstrate continuity with ‘tradition’ (Povinelli 2002: 35-41) in ways which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike recognise⎯and value.

Artists in Wilcannia expressly state that the content and the form of their art work is ‘our tradition’, ‘our culture’. These assertions sit alongside a profound experiential sense of loss. It appears that unless Aboriginal artists can display either a timeless tradition or an urban ‘art of resistance’ that they remain ambiguously located in ambivalent and potentially damaging ways in their own and Other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal imaginaries.

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Notes

1. The traditional owners of Wilcannia are the Barkindji people and it is the art of those who identify as Barkindji to which this paper attends. The Barkindji speaking peoples were historically known as different groups, and ranged from Bourke in the north to Wentworth in the south: ‘all spoke what were basically dialects of the same language’ (Hercus 1993: 3). These river groups, including those from the Paroo and Warrego rivers, are now referred to collectively as Barkindji (Hercus 1993: 3). Whilst there are also Ngitgampaa people from around the Cobar area and Maliangapa from the corner country (around Tiboooburra) living in Wilcannia, the appellation Barkindji is used in the schools, by governments and non-government agencies as a general identifier of Wilcannia Aboriginal peoples.

2. The accuracy of this figure is subject to question by many in Wilcannia, including the Central Darling Shire Council. In terms of the town proper this figure is thought to be a shifting one of approximately 500 to 50 (personal communication, Bill O’Brien, General Manager CDSC 27 June 2007).
3. One Barkindji man responds (half jokingly) to people who refer to him as Koori with ‘don’t’ swear at me, I’m a Wiimpatya blackfella’ [meaning man (general term) but now widely used by Barkindji and other Aboriginal people in Wilcannia to distinguish Barkindji people and their networks; cf. Hercus 1993: 87]. One might also question how artists such as Bunduk Marika, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, Johnny Warangula Tjupurrulla and Wenten Rubuntja experience having their work exhibited and represented under the title of ‘Koori’ art as in the catalogue compiled by Tim and Vivien Johnson for the ‘Koori Art 84’ exhibition (Artspace: Sydney).

4. ‘Uptown Blacks’ and ‘show ponies’ are other terms this man uses to describe ‘white ants’. I should emphasise that he does not consider all ‘Sydney types’ in the same way. Indeed, he likes and admires many Sydney-based Aboriginal artists and counts many as friends. I draw on this response to demonstrate what ‘urban’ (particularly in a city art-world context) connotes for him.

5. This artist visited Alice Springs and Uluru in the 1990s. He said to me that the ‘old people’ told him he could go back there anytime he liked, as ‘I’ve got country there’.

References


Gibson, L. forthcoming. ‘We don’t do dots—ours is lines’: asserting a Barkindji style. Oceania.


