Making art and making culture in far western New South Wales

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Abstract: This contribution is based on my ethnographic fieldwork. It concerns the intertwining aspects of the two concepts of art and culture and shows how Aboriginal people in Wilcannia in far western New South Wales draw on these concepts to assert and create a distinctive cultural identity for themselves. Focusing largely on the work of one particular artist, I demonstrate the ways in which culture (as this is considered) is affectively experienced and articulated as something that one ‘comes into contact with’ through the practice of art-making. I discuss the social and cultural role that art-making, and art talk play in considering, mediating and resolving issues to do with cultural subjectivity, authority and identity. I propose that, in thinking about the content of the art and in making the art, past and present matters of interest, of difficulty and of pleasure are remembered, considered, resolved and mediated. Culture (as this is considered by Wilcannia Aboriginal persons) is also made anew; it comes about through the practice of art-making and in displaying and talking about the art work. Culture as an objectified, tangible entity is moreover writ large and made visible through art in ways that are valued by artists and other community members. The intersections between Aboriginal peoples, anthropologists, museum collections and published literature, and the network of relations between, are also shown to have interesting synergies that play themselves out in the production of art and culture.

This paper arose out of something Murray Butcher, a Barkindji man and artist from Wilcannia, said to me following a visit we made to the Australian Museum, Sydney, in 2004, having gone behind the scenes to see some Aboriginal artefacts from the Darling River. Murray said that he was ‘amazed’ at the carved and incised designs on some of the wooden shields and bundis (clubs). He said, ‘we still doin’ it…we still doin’ the same designs on our art work’. This was not Murray’s first visit to the Australian Museum. As a child he was taken with other Wilcannia children and he remembers (Murray Butcher, personal communication) seeing: ...the bundis and stuff, an’ the Darlin’ River area an’ all that there. An’ seein’ all of them designs on the clubs made me feel so proud and sad...An’ I remember sittin’ an’ askin’ Nan: what sorta art we do, ya know? An’ she said we do sort of stick art like little stick figures, an’ do tracks an’ stuff. We do lines an’ sometimes we do little spots an’ that y’know? Ahmm, we don’t do dots like out on, like them desert fullas do their paintins. So I try to stick to lines.

An example of some of the ‘lines’ to which Murray (now in his early thirties) refers flow behind the figurative forms in Figure 1; along with
a variety of geometric designs, they are a feature of the artefacts from western New South Wales, many of which are held in the Australian Museum collection (Figure 2).

Following our trip to the museum in Sydney and upon return to Wilcannia, I gave Murray copies of photographs taken at the museum: he said, ‘well them photographs what you gave me, we were lookin’ at some of them — see if I can incorporate those designs into this painting.’ 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, ‘Well, first an’ foremost why I do the paintin’ is to get some sort of contact with our culture’. Murray alludes to culture and contact with culture as something that one meets, that comes about through the practice of painting.

According to Murray, the museum visit spurred him on to ‘reproduce culture’ for the future. Culture in these articulated contexts is increasingly seen to be made present in material objects,
their designs and content (Fourmile 1994; Myers 2002; cf. Morphy 2001). Therefore, to know about culture is also to have some knowledge (often unspecified) about the use and designs of Barkindji cultural materials. At a more general level, culture is understood to be knowledge of and repetition of Barkindji language, myths and stories; some knowledge of sites and ability to talk about past ceremonies and practices (what ‘our people’ used to do, used to live like); and what Barkindji people should or should not do in terms of being ‘true’ to culture. It is to these more reflexive articulations, imaginings and representations that this paper attends. I discuss how some Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are drawing on the concepts of art and culture to perform, assert and create a distinctive identity. While this paper focuses on the work of one man, I also seek to provide something of a perspective of the way an individual operates within the wider ‘intercultural’ (Merlan 2005:67–170) social milieux.

**Situating the art scene**

Since the late 1980s there have been two locally run government-funded art centres in Wilcannia, the Kaathiri (boomerang) Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre, which ran (according to the best estimates in town) between 1987 and 1991, and the Parntu (cod) art centre, which ran from 1995 to 1997; neither employed a professional art co-ordinator or advisor. During my 16 months fieldwork over 2002 and 2003, art works were mostly created in private homes and to a lesser extent in correctional centres. These works were mostly paintings (including a few painted emu eggs). They also included some carved wooden boomerangs, clubs, clap-sticks and shields, and even fewer carved emu eggs. The majority of the works made are sold to travellers and (mostly contract) government agency service providers, either directly by the artists or through the local Wilcannia Motel (the motel owner provides art materials and purchases the works, which he sells for no profit or little profit, to, in his words, ‘further interest in art in Wilcannia’: Paul Brown, 28 June 2007, Wilcannia, personal communication).

Murray first began painting as an adolescent at about 12 years of age at a children’s hostel in Sydney, having watched some boys from western towns such as Bourke, Engonia and Walgett. While, as he says, he ‘was always interested in drawin’ an’ stuff’, it was following the trip to the hostel that he ‘really started getting interested in it’ [painting]. Since that time he has consistently, if periodically, made paintings and drawings, and carved boomerangs, shields, clubs and clap-sticks. There is a core group of about four artists who produce paintings more or less continually. Many more create works sporadically according to social variables, such as occasional art workshops, economic necessity and periods in correctional centres. I am aware of two families where artists span two and three generations, although, for the most part, one cannot talk of families of artists in any firm way; rather, most families have at least one member who paints or carves or who has at one time or another painted or carved. Most Aboriginal persons in Wilcannia do not refer in general to others in the community who undertake activities such as painting and carving as artists in terms of this as a primary identifier or role, despite the fact that for some art-making is a more or less daily activity. The term is applied mostly in art-related contexts; therefore, my use of the term artist as an identifier should be read with this in mind.

There are discrepant notions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals as to the content, form and production level of objects such as boomerangs, shields and carved emu eggs produced over time and which are now recast as art works. All agree, however, that, since the 1980s, Aborigines in Wilcannia are increasingly producing art works and drawing upon Aboriginal ‘art and culture’ discourses for their own purposes and ends. Painting on board and canvas and linocuts are recognised by all as a more recent phenomenon.

Since the emergence of the acrylic art movement, which came out of Papunya in the Western Desert during the 1970s, there has been a synonymous intertwining of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture. Myers considers that in the case of Aborigines, ‘both within and outside of Australia, their “art” — usually along with their spiritual tie to the landscape — came to be the representation of Aboriginal culture itself, of Aboriginal identity’ (Myers 2002:10). This intersection and fusion has particular resonance in
the context of Wilcannia — specifically, in view of the way in which Aboriginal peoples in this part of ‘settled’ Australia are said by local Whites and more mainstream society to have ‘lost their culture’ (Beckett 2005; Cowlishaw 2004; Morphy 2001; Merlan 2005) and given the assertions of Aboriginal artists in Wilcannia that their art both expresses and is their culture. These differing points of view bring the productive and discursive categories of both art and culture into question.

For the majority of the Whitefella population in Wilcannia, Aboriginal culture is something of a conundrum and a paradox. Whites implicitly recognise some notion of Aboriginal culture, of a kind, in the anthropological sense of a people’s way of life, but simultaneously assert their lack of culture — ‘they don’t have any culture’. Aboriginal culture here is differentiated from Aboriginality, which is accorded and is recognised, although correlated by Whites with behaviours that are interpreted as being problematic. Getting uncontrollably drunk, laziness, fighting, lack of self-control and a lack of parental responsibility: these are seen to be immediately recognisable aspects of being Aboriginal in Wilcannia. This is contrasted by Whites against ‘real Aboriginal culture’, namely, the ‘traditional’ ‘full blood’ living a hunter–gatherer lifestyle (cf. Merlan 2005). However, despite quite explicit discourse to the contrary, Black and White relations in Wilcannia are not clear cut and crisply divided; this is an ‘intercultural’ (cf. Merlan 2005) space riddled with ambiguity and ambivalence in terms of many short-term and longer-term ‘on the ground’ personal and social relationships. Nevertheless, racial tensions are a basic fact of life in Wilcannia and it is fair to say that clear ‘cultural’ binaries are immediately called into action in all spheres of life at the slightest hint of division or disagreement involving Black and White.

As the idea of culture has become increasingly reflexive and objectified, some would say by necessity (Correy 2004; Merlan 1989), many Aborigines in Wilcannia struggle to find and to feel they have this unquantifiable thing of real Aboriginal culture, which is seen to have been lost. They, too, talk of the ‘real tribal people’, the ‘full bloods’ ‘up north’, and reference them as somehow being more Aboriginal, measuring themselves against this in terms of absence and of loss, emotions that are palpable in culture talk. There is a level of yearning that the promise of ‘traditional culture’ is thought to fill (Gibson 2006). Povinelli’s (2002:57) assertion that ‘[n]on-Aboriginal Australians enjoy ancient traditions while suspecting the authenticity of the Aboriginal subject; [and] Aboriginal Australians enjoy their traditions while suspecting the authenticity of themselves’ resonates strongly in the Wilcannia context. Aborigines in Wilcannia say that they have culture, art and traditions, although their assertions often do not mesh with the ways these concepts are considered by Whites in Wilcannia, by art worlds and in discourses of the wider Australian public. Art has taken on a special role in this regard as a means of Aboriginal public expression and in terms that non-Aborigines understand and value (Myers 1994; Hamilton 1990; Dussart 1999; MacClancy 1997). As one artist in Wilcannia said to me, ‘Art and culture: the two main things, right? Because you get any visitor what come along…they interested in Aboriginal culture, they interested in art, right?’ (Badger Bates, Aboriginal artist from Wilcannia, 27 January 2003, personal communication).

While it is clear that artists recognise art potentiality as a means of cultural recognition (Gunew and Rizvi 1994; MacClancy 1997; Phillips and Steiner 1999), it would be incorrect to say that the only (or even the primary) driver of all artists in Wilcannia is a desire to prove an Aboriginal identity or the possession of Aboriginal culture to other Aboriginal persons, to others or to the self: indeed, there is much ambivalence here. Nevertheless, the extent to which artists say that art works show culture and demonstrate culture in some way references a desire to indicate some tangible expression of this thing called Aboriginal culture. I argue that making art is a tangible expression of a consciousness that reinvigorates explicit notions of culture and a clear experiential sense of identity in ways that satisfy and respond to felt needs.

I turn now to a main thrust of the discussion; to explore ideas regarding what art objects do within a network of relations and the motivations for their construction, as well as the ways in which art objects, as indexes of agency (in the
sense theorised by Gell 1998), operate to ‘motivate inferences, responses or interpretations’ (Thomas 2001:4). It is important to recognise that while the artists’ presence and the artists’ discourse about their work is significant, as will become clear, there is, for some, the belief that art works themselves have an agency of their own, as well as being subject to the agency of others. Gell’s (1998) notion of art objects as agents having the ability to do service as persons is pertinent here, particularly in relation to Frazer’s (1980) idea of ‘imitative’ or sympathetic magic, whereby ‘the mutual resemblance of the image and the original [are] a conduit for mutual influence or agency’ (Gell 1998:100).

**Experiencing cylcons: representing culture through art**

The painting Murray began following our museum visit and the circumstances of its making is cogent here for the multiple conduits of agency operating, as well as for the kinds of restrictions that Murray places upon himself. The following offers some further necessary contextualisation. Around the same time that Murray and I went to the museum, I gave Murray a paper written in 1942 by Lindsay Black (1942) on ‘Cylcons: The mystery stones of the Darling River valley’ (Figure 3).

These stones are thought by those in Wilcannia to be sacred stones that were used in rituals in times past. According to Flood (1996:192), they have a restricted geographical distribution in Australia, being found on sites virtually confined to western New South Wales. This distribution takes in what is now known as the town of Wilcannia. While there is some evidence of a wider, if much lesser and more scattered, distribution in the Northern Territory, central northern Australia and north Queensland, Black (1942:40) notes that the Barkindji ‘were the great exponents of the cylindro-conical stone culture’. Referred to as ‘ceremonial’ stones, Black (1942:2–3) pointed out that the use of these stones remains elusive, and apart from ‘phallic emblems’ and to some extent ‘snake producing fetishes’, other proposed uses have been largely discredited. New South Wales museums that house collections of these stones have placed them in restricted access. This restriction, according to the South Australian Museum and the Australian Museum (Sydney), has been accorded as a cautionary measure based on early literature (Etheridge 1916) that suggests their ritual ceremonial context, and upon request of Aboriginal advisers to the museums. My use of an image of a cylon will be clarified in due course.

Before Murray read Black’s literature on cylcons he was familiar with them. Indeed, he has

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Figure 3: Example of cylcons (from Lindsay Black 1942:26)
been in possession of several and claims to have experienced them, as I will discuss. Having read Black’s journal article, and following the museum visit, Murray started a painting depicting nine cylcons (Figure 4).

Murray decided that each of the cylcons depicted in the painting would represent one of the Barkindji dialects, and that the designs he was going to incorporate into the painting around the cylcons were those from the boomerangs and clubs (at the Australian Museum). He said, ‘I wanna show it to our kids, that this is one thing what’s unique to the Darling River region is our cylcons’. The cylcons are seen to be unique to the region and therefore, by extrapolation, so are the Barkindji.

Bearing in mind that Murray’s explicit reason for painting is to ‘get in contact’ with his culture, I am particularly interested in how painting does this. Moreover, unlike the designs on the boomerangs and clubs in the museum, which ‘amazed’ Murray because of their continuity (‘we still doin’ it’) and which he is happy to reproduce, the designs on the cylcons are seen to be particularly open to an abuse of power and misdirected use.

I asked Murray whether he would ever reproduce the designs on the incised cylcons. Murray said:

I don’t think I would because, I don’t know, really know, the true meanings of them. They could be things that they were women. I wouldn’t put them sorta things on, onto an artwork because, well, I’ve had an experience when I was younger...with a cousin and me an Uncle [X]. We was muckin’ around with it [a cylcon] an’ Nan was telling me to leave it alone: ‘you don’t’ know nuthin’ about it’, y’know? [Murray takes on Nan’s character] ‘Shouldn’t even be lookin’ at it, it’s nuthin’ to do with you’. An’ I was about fourteen or fifteen I was very stubborn, an’ ah it’s only a piece of old stone an’ that, y’know? It’s only old stone with little markins on, an she said, ‘Murray you don’t know what those markins mean. It’s got nuthin’ to do with you. You shouldn’t be touchin’ them or lookin’ at them’. An’ I went to bed that night an’ she said ‘you watch, you. Something gonna happen with you’...I went to bed that night an’, eh, I was havin’ trouble goin to sleep an’ I started hearin’ voices. An’ these voices, they was of old women singing. They was singin’ in language and I couldn’t get to sleep. Those voices come louder an’ louder and then it went on all night, until the sun came up and at the same time it just stopped.

Figure 4: Untitled (painting of the cylcons, work in progress) Murray Butcher© 2004. Acrylic on canvas, approximately 700 x 600 mm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist
Murray then ran out of the room, crying, ‘Nan, Nan, something funny happened with me, I'm not campin’ in there again’. Ever since, Murray claims he has been very reluctant to even ‘look at cylcons’. For Murray, what was a piece of old stone at 14 years of age overnight became a meaningful symbol and the locus of a productive power. Murray said, ‘I believe we can paint them [the cylcons] and this here. Respect it to keep that memory alive of what was part of our culture. They have a lot of meaning to me but I think, I won’t, well, suppose, abuse it or something.’

Abusing culture in this context is linked to ‘fully’ copying the cylcons in terms of both the designs and the shape; abuse is reproducing ‘meanings’ unknown, which are seen to be inherent in the designs. This reluctance to represent designs of which one does not know the meanings and to which one does not have rights can be understood in relation to the work of Dussart (1999), Morphy (1991), Dubinskas and Traweek (1984), Munn (1966, 1973, 1986) and Taylor (1996). These authors variously explore the affective and cognitive aspects of designs, cultural restrictions on reproducing designs in paintings and requisite fidelity for correct and proper representation. In particular, how ‘designs themselves possess or contain the power of the ancestral being’ (Morphy 1991:102) being ‘both visible forms and the essential invisible potency of the ancestors’ (Munn 1986:29). Indeed, Morphy’s (1991:103) statement regarding the dangers of ancestral power ‘to those who infringe on prohibitions surrounding sacred objects and other manifestations of the ancestral beings, especially to uninitiated men and women’ resonates with Murray’s reluctance to reproduce the cylcons in full.

I want to raise here Murray’s continued reluctance to look at or to handle the physical cylcons and his willingness to paint a partial or restricted copy in light of the approaches of Gell (1998) and Taussig (1993) to the mimetic faculty, in particular the idea of sensuous innervation through contact with an image. As with Taussig (1993:48), I am interested in ‘this notion of the copy, in magical practice affecting the original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented’.

The restrictions Murray places on himself are also interesting in relation to ideas of what constitutes a copy in magical practice. For Murray, it is only the copy in its exactitude, not a ‘poorly executed ideogram’ (Hirn 1900 [1972] in Taussig 1993:57) that would ‘fully’ abuse the power and invoke the power of the ancestors. Here a limited or partial copy ensures some degree of control. For Murray, looking at, touching and talking about the stones invoked the personhood of ‘old women’ in his room. The stones did not become people, but engagement with the object was seen to mediate the presence of those old women (cf. Morphy 1991; Munn 1973; Dussart 1999). This, and Murray’s refusal to copy the designs, suggests the belief in surrogacy to the degree that to make a full representation, even to talk disrespectfully of the stones, can invoke uncontrollable and unknown events. Taken together with Gell’s (1998) work that suggests that ‘persons or social agents are in certain contexts substituted by art-objects’, something of the art objects’ vicarious social agency and entanglement in a variety of interconnecting relationships is made clearer.

What Murray is more broadly enacting in painting the cylcons can be figured as a purposeful mimesis with purposeful restrictions. The slippage is at once both purposeful yet to some extent unaccountable, in the sense that what will become of the act of tracing the cylcons in an art work is unknown. It is clear that some Aboriginal people consider the mimetic faculty is powerful and can assume the power of the original. It is not the ‘otherness’ of the cylcons that is produced through mimesis, it is something of the sameness, but partial sameness. It is similitude as well as (by design) a restricted simulacrum. Mimesis is active: it does things, makes things. It is ‘a vital, bi-directional and sensuous modality of becoming-in-relation…’ (Deger 2004:133). In this case there is a becoming-in-relation to culture as lived through that which is understood to be in part lost, in part unknown and in part in the past. The stones become a painting that in its making and forethought produces and becomes ‘living culture’. Murray’s reluctance to look at or handle the physical cylcons and his reluctance to copy the designs are linked to his experience of ‘mucking’ with a power unknown, but importantly a recognised power that does things, that has effects and affects through the act of painting. In representing the images of the cylcons there is a danger that
properties of the cylcons will come to bear upon Murray through the practice and act of painting, as well as through a copying of the visual image.

Unlike the designs on the boomerangs and clubs, which have something of a continuous production, the cylcon designs are unknown and have not been practiced. The fact that Murray can safely look at images of the cylcons, complete with designs, in Black’s (1942) journal might seem something of a paradox, but one that can perhaps be understood in the following way. In the case of the journal representation, Murray is not responsible for producing these. However, when Murray paints and draws the cylcons, he is implicated in the act of making, as well as the act of reproducing properties of the stones. In placing his own restrictions, he invokes a limited sharing of the power of the cylcons by virtue of copying their shape in outline. It is at once a shadow of power as well as an actual power. The representation assumes power but not identical character and identical power. The copy draws on the power of the original in innovative and careful ways.

Murray claims that the night that he felt the power of the cylcons, ‘[it] gave me an insight into the ritual life of cylcons’. The ‘trace’ of the cylcons is all that he will permit himself, but that is enough to keep the cylcons ‘alive’. Also kept alive is the relationship to his ancestors, the ‘old people’ who have passed away, the ‘old women’ who were singing in his bedroom. In painting the outline of the cylcons, traces of ritual and traces of people past (including Murray’s Nan) are brought into present being. Culture as this is articulated and experienced is ‘kept alive’ and ‘made contact’ with. The cylcons become important for the ancestors and for the living through the practice of painting. In the physical practice of painting the cylcons, ritual is both remembered and practiced in new ways. In the practice of painting, Murray understands and observes that a sensuous production is possible. Indeed, for Taussig (1993:21), as far as the resurgence of the mimetic faculty is concerned, getting hold of something by means of its likeness involves crucially not only ‘a copying or imitation but a palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’. Just as culture is seen to flow from and between the old people and those living now, this flow must not be ‘cut off’ if culture is to live on. Art allows for this ‘flow of relation’ (Munn 1973:56). I’ve drawn heavily on Taussig because of his work on the sensuous and productive dimensions of mimesis. However, it seems to me that resonating between the lines here is something more than Taussig alludes to, namely the affective fluctuations between the trepidation and desire that both constrains and enlivens Murray’s work.

Conclusion

I argue that, for Murray and for some other artists, the practice of making the art, talking about the art and thinking through the art provides moments of contemplation, catharsis, mediation and resolve, as well as the requirement for caution in matters relating to identity and culture. 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 lived 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 life as lived, as well as stories and events he was/is told by his family, in the styles he learned from family, from museums and literature, and then tells it to the ‘kids’, he is also painting a future. A self-authoring can be envisaged as taking place through depiction (cf. Berlo 1999:192) and shared dialogue about the painting becomes shared culture.

I consider art-making to be a form of productive ritual. The making of art and culture are ‘signifying practices’ (Myers 2002:55; cf. Munn 1973; Sutton 1988; Dussart 1999; Taylor 1996). Art-making moments, the actual physical materiality and visual content of the art works, serve to consolidate and affirm notions of individual and group culture. Through art-making identity and culture are seen to be produced, reproduced, reconstructed and re-presented in an interactive process with and through both people and things. Art and culture and their importance become relational. That is, art and culture and how these categories are constructed and perceived are about relationships: relationships between people and relationships between people and things (Morphy 1991; Taylor 1996; Watson 2003; Myers 2002). In this way, art objects and their creation, together with

Despite the charge that art offers no real avenue to Aboriginal agency or power (Fry and Willis 1989), I argue that it demonstrably offers an avenue for Aboriginal artists to re-inscribe and re-make the communicative processes between Aboriginal persons, as well as between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The *redirected* nature of the content of the work of Murray (and others) suggests possibilities for self and group identification through a culture of art-making. In talking about art and culture and sharing this with others, art has the potentiality to bring things into being: it has productive dimensions on and in Wilcannia terms.

**NOTES**

1. The traditional owners of Wilcannia are the Barkindji peoples. 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). While there are many other groups, specifically Ngiyampaa people from around the Cobar area and a few Maliangapa from the Corner Country (around Tibooburra), living in Wilcannia, the appellation ‘Barkindji’ is used in the schools and by governments and non-government agencies as a general identifier of Wilcannia Aboriginal peoples.

2. Wilcannia is a country town approximately 1000 kilometres west of Sydney and 200 kilometres east of Broken Hill, New South Wales. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2001) gives the population of the Wilcannia locality as 685, with 64 percent being Indigenous. 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 50 to 500 (Bill O’Brien, General Manager, Central Darling Shire Council, 27 June, 2007, personal communication).

3. The artefacts date from the late 1800s. Some have explicit provenance from the Wilcannia region. These artefacts are mostly *nulla nullas* and *bundis* (clubs), boomerangs, spears and shields. Since the 1920s, when issues of purity and authenticity emerged, museums in the southeast no longer collect such culture materials.

4. Quotations from Murray Butcher are taken from a series of interviews and discussions between June 2002 and December 2004.

5. In these systems ‘the geometric element is predominant, with diamond patterns and curvilinear forms interspersed with oblongs, squares and oval features…the art of the southeast shares in common with the art of the centre the repeated outlining of the form of the central features’ (Morphy 2001:339).

6. During 2006 the West Darling Regional Arts Board funded a three-year artist-in-residence program for Wilcannia. This is being run out of the old Uniting Church building in Reid Street, which was turned into an ‘art space’ in June 2005. This was a vision of the Wilcannia arts group, a sub-committee of the West Darling Regional Arts Board, which comprises (mainly) the local motel owner, who is also a local government councillor, and a non-Aboriginal artist, Karen Donaldson.

7. Michael’s (1994) ironic Lassiter’s Reef may be invoked here, though, as we see, the title of artist is quite differently imagined in Wilcannia.

8. While Uncle Willie Don may paint, and Uncle Badger carves and makes things with steel, they are more readily known as someone’s poppa, son or cousin: they are family members who sometimes paint and sometimes fish and sometimes do lots of other things besides.

9. Nicholas Thomas (2001:4–5) succinctly and elegantly summarised these relations well: ‘Prototypes are the things that indices may represent or stand for, such as the person depicted in a portrait — though things may be “represented” non-mimetically and non-visually. Recipients are those whom indexes are taken to effect, or who may, in some cases, be effective themselves via the index. A view of a country estate commissioned by the landowner may be a vehicle of the recipient’s self-celebrating agency, more than that of the artist. Artists are those who are considered to be immediately causally responsible for the existence and characteristics of index, but as we have just noted, they may be vehicles of the agency of others, not the self-substantive, creative agents of Western commonsense ideas and art-world theory.’

10. The Australian Museum in Sydney has 390 cylcons, 90 percent of which hail from the Darling River area.

11. These stones now known by the abridged term of cylcons are variously cylindrical, cornute and conical-shaped. Some of these stones are incised with designs but a large proportion is plain.

12. Linguist Luise Hercus (1993) gave the nine dialects as Naaualko, Thangkaalk, Parrintyi, Marawara, Wilyakali (Pulali), Pantyikal, Paaruntu, Kurnu and Southern Paakantyi [Barkindji].
13. This idea of having something specific to Barkindji might be considered in light of the way in which ‘Land rights have demanded that both Aborigines and whites develop and articulate definitions of a unique Aboriginal identity’ (Jacobs 1988:31).


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