

15 Locality fails

IMANTS TILLERS

Albert Namatjira was born on 28 July 1902 (Marcel Duchamp's birthday) in Hermannsburg, Central Australia. He was a member of the Aranda Tribe of South Australia and worked as a stockman, camelman, and stationhand at the Mission Station, Hermannsburg. There, after seeing an exhibition by Rex Batterbee and John Gardner in 1934, he attempted, untaught, drawings and pokerwork figures of animals and birds on wood not in the traditional manner of Aboriginal representation but in the style of Rex Batterbee. In 1936 at Batterbee's next visit to Central Australia, Namatjira offered his services as camelboy in return for painting lessons. In imitating Batterbee's subjects, technique, and compositional preferences, Namatjira became the first Aboriginal artist to work in a characteristically non-Aboriginal manner and for this accomplishment achieved a modicum of fame recorded in the 1950 *Who's Who in Australia*.

In this volume, the most remarkable statement (even more remarkable than the Mission Superintendent's observation that Albert is 'happiest if sitting in sand or around a campfire, playing marbles like others of his tribe') is that his *recreation* is given as 'walk-about out bush'.¹ But while in 1950 'walk-about' were strictly 'recreational', in the 1970s they became 'avant-garde'. Yet, this was the case for British artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, rather than for Aboriginal artists.

Today, however, in Australia the obvious distinctions between Long's 'art' and Namatjira's 'hobby' are becoming blurred as more and more contemporary advantages are extracted from an association with 'aboriginality'. In fact the contemporary Australian art scene is now marked by two apparently convergent tendencies: the assimilation of 'traditional' Aboriginal cultural forms into 'contemporary' art and the emergence of 'aboriginality' (in defiance of the dictionary definition) as a ubiquitous quality which is no longer the exclusive domain of 'black' Aborigines.

The change in attitude to 'traditional' Aboriginal art is most forcefully demonstrated by the inclusion of Aboriginal paintings (not as anthropological curiosities but as contemporary works in

their own right) in the recent exhibitions such as the Biennales of Sydney, 1979 and 1982, and *Australian Perspectives*, 1981. This acceptance of Aboriginal art can in part be attributed to the promotional activities of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council and those of organizations such as the Papunya Tula Co. which markets 'traditional' Aboriginal paintings done in 'modern' media,² as well as the commercial success of private entrepreneurs in marketing ventures such as the 'Gallery of Dreams' at Hogarth Gallery.

However, the other more subtle and powerful reason for this acceptance is that certain contemporary forms in recent art seem to be convergent with Aboriginal art (and even 'life-style') to the extent that to a non-Aboriginal audience they have the atmosphere of 'aboriginality'. This atmosphere may be evoked through reference to aspects of a primitive life-style – to the look of its rituals, its artefacts, and the natural environment in which they are perceived to occur. Thus in *Australian Perspectives*, 1981, the works of artists who were presumably 'influenced by' or 'had an affinity with' Aboriginal art were installed in the same space as the acrylic paintings of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, and Charlie Tjapangatti. Ironically the 'aboriginality' of this art could be seen to represent a reciprocal (white) position to Namatjira's 'European' water-colours.³

Despite its irrefutable presence, the new sense of 'aboriginality' evades definition and even enunciation. It exists in the local work as a nuance, an inflection. For example, Bernice Murphy alludes to the incipient 'aboriginality' in certain works in the following almost opaque way:

The recent concern in art with the environment, archaeology and anthropology, and rehabilitation (through performance art) of the mythopoeic consciousness, personal symbols and a sense of generalised ritual is particularly important for the release and enrichment of new imaginative material into the bloodstream of Australian art.⁴

Robert Lindsay in the foreword to his exhibition *Relics and Rituals* (works by fifteen artists) at the National Gallery of Victoria is no more explicit. He suggests:

It is the power and simplicity of communication which is inherent in totemic objects, archetypal images and tribal rituals, that the artist hopes will cut through the habits of contemporary sophisticated forms of communication. It is the return to fundamentals, the simple realities of life that through magic and mystification may evoke archetypal responses and emotions.⁵

Moreover, this 'strategy of nuance' spans the entire range of contemporary art production in Australia, from formalist painting to 'radical' socially engaged work, and even spills into the related areas of fashion and design. Thus lyrical abstractionists (or more recently neo-expressionists) desiring the aura of 'aboriginality' shift their palettes (and titles) towards the 'desert' colours – the ochres, browns, and reds⁶ – but otherwise continue in their internationally derived styles as before. The socially engaged artist on the other hand accrues 'aboriginality' by association – by basing a performance, for example, on a pertinent Aboriginal issue (Land Rights) or by taking part in a collaborative photographic project with Aborigines. An 'Aboriginal' inflection can be found in the most naive or the most sophisticated work – it does not matter whether the reference is serious (supporting their culture) or ironic in tone (exposing our in-built prejudices).

The reluctance for a more explicit identification with the Aborigines, for an authentic 'cultural convergence',⁷ can in part be explained by the deep guilt underlying Australian culture. For the history of white settlement in Australia in relation to the Aborigines is a story of homicide, rape, the forcible abduction of children from their parents and the methodical dispossession of the lands upon which their well-being, self-respect, and survival have depended. 'Cultural convergence' is attractive as an *idea* because it offers a painless way to expiate our collective guilt for this history while simultaneously suggesting an easy solution to the more mundane but nevertheless pressing problem of finding a uniquely Australian content to our art in an international climate sympathetic to the notion of 'regional' art. The reality of 'cultural convergence' which necessitates that political and economic inequities be rectified first is a less satisfying prospect. Certainly 'aboriginality' is not a new idea – the Antipodeans in the 1950s and the Jindyworobak poets in the 1940s as well as others before them like Margaret Preston (who suggested it should form the basis of a 'modern' Australian art) were attracted to it – the difference today is that contemporary art forms and media particularly in the areas of informal sculpture and performance can approximate more closely the 'look' of traditional Aboriginal artefacts, rituals, and environments.

The 'concerned conscience' about the Aboriginal people which 'aboriginality' might reflect, however, does not often originate among the Australian-born. Interest in Aboriginal culture has and continues to come mostly from abroad.⁸ (They do not have to share our guilt.) Thus during the Sydney biennale *European Dialogue*, 1979, Australian artists were often dismayed by the interest in and knowledge of Aboriginal culture shown by visiting artists and critics and the almost aggressive

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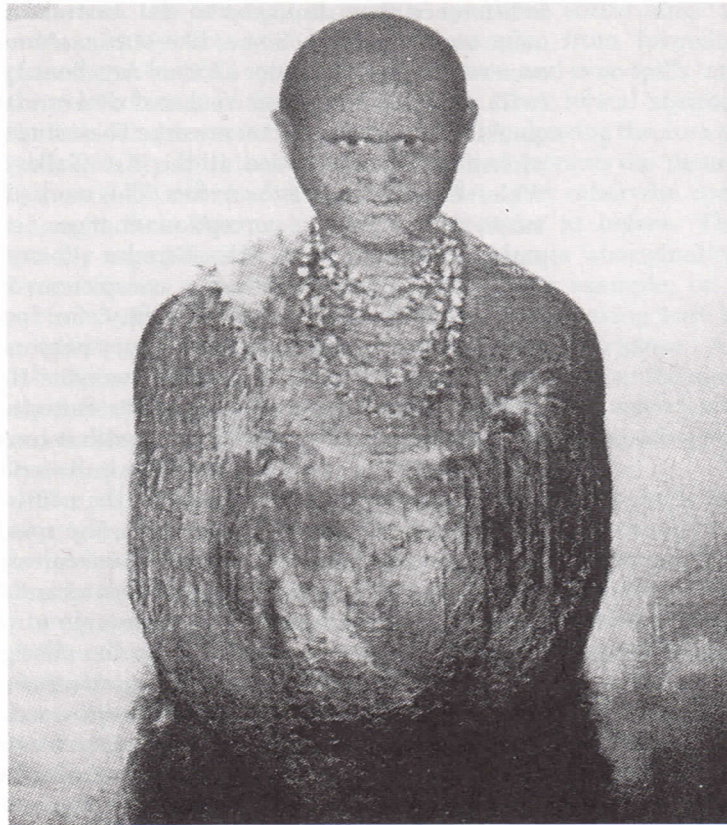
indifference they displayed to the Australian urban environment and its culture. Some, like Marina Abramovic and Ulay even returned later (under a Visual Arts Board grant) to seek out (with typically Germanic zeal and determination) the Aboriginal influence for their own work. Their stay culminated in an 'alchemical' performance at the Art Gallery of New South Wales: *Gold Found by the Artists*. This work (dealing with their 'survival experience, perception changes, energy and telepathy')⁹ together with the attitudes subsequently expressed about Aborigines,¹⁰ stands as a conspicuous model of a more 'serious', more earnest 'aboriginality' for local artists. Since 'advanced' art in the twentieth century habitually aspires to the condition of religion, it is little wonder that the spiritual resource of Aboriginal culture and its esoteric practices should now be recognized and association with it consciously sought.

Suzi Gablik, in an article for *Art in America*, 'Report from Australia', emphasized the links to the continent's Aboriginal past in certain contemporary work. She speaks of Australian artists being less embroiled in repressive cultural heritages than their American or European counterparts and thus able to look sympathetically to nature and even 'able to trace, in a clear, quiet way, some old paths back to the aboriginal presence'.¹¹ Such optimistic remarks (as exhortations to action) clearly reflect the change in critical attitudes towards 'regionalism', a word which now has ascendancy over the formerly popular and derogatory expression 'provincialism'. For today we believe that 'remarkable work is as likely to arise in Cracow, Turin, Düsseldorf, Vienna, Paris, London or Amsterdam as in New York'.¹² Why not Sydney or Melbourne as well? The old Jindyworobak notion of *environmental value* – the 'slow moulding of all people within a continent or region towards the human form which that continent demands'¹³ seems ready for a revival and 'aboriginality' is being offered again as an appropriate form.

This widespread though largely unstated hope (or even belief) in an 'indigenous' Australian art ignores the contemporary understanding of the nature of the physical world. Just as the discovery of the special theory of relativity and quantum mechanics revolutionized our view of the world in the first quarter of the twentieth century, so Bell's theorem will revolutionize our view in the last quarter. In 1975, Henry Stapp, in a work supported by the US Energy Research and Development Administration, wrote:

Bell's theorem is the most profound discovery of science.¹⁴

Bell's theorem shows that either the statistical predictions of quantum theory or the *principle of local causes* is false. It does not say which one is false only that both of them cannot be true.



15.1a Benjamin Duterrau, *Tasmanian Aboriginal* (c. 1834) (photograph Marianne Baillieu).

When the Clauser-Freedman experiment confirmed that the statistical predictions of quantum theory were correct it proved that the principle of local causes was false. The important thing about Bell's theorem which makes it relevant to the present discussion is that

it puts the dilemma posed by quantum phenomena clearly into the realm of macroscopic phenomena . . . it shows that our ordinary ideas about the world are somehow profoundly deficient even on a macroscopic level.¹⁵

And it does not matter how Bell's theorem is reformulated, it invariably projects the 'irrational' aspects of sub-atomic phenomena into the macroscopic domain. It says that not only do events in the realm of the very small behave in ways which are utterly different from our common-sense view of the world but that events in the world at large, the world of sports cars and

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15.1b Tibetans, from Heinrich Harrar (1955) *Seven Years in Tibet*, London: Reprint Society.

freeways (or the world of pristine white walls and spilt drinks) also behave in such ways. Since Bell's theorem *proves* that the principle of local causes fails it is of crucial relevance to the present discussion of a 'local' content in Australian art, 'regionalism' and 'aboriginality'.

The principle of local causes asserts that what happens in an area does not depend upon variables subject to the control of an experimenter in a distant 'space-like separated' area. The principle of local causes is common sense. The results of an experiment in a place distant and 'space-like separated' should not depend on what we decide to do right here. Thus 'local' art inevitably reflects 'local' conditions. 'Local' conditions might include the continuation of an Aboriginal presence in Australia but equally they might include the transference of art information and models from New York to Sydney. For New York and

Sydney are not 'space-like separated' at all: information is transmitted through identifiable channels (i.e. mechanical reproductions in aeroplanes) and thus arrives not mysteriously but by identifiable means. Could it be otherwise!

According to Bell's theorem it *is* otherwise. For the failure of the principle of local causes implies that there can be unexplained connectedness between events in different 'space-like separated' places and that this connectedness allows, for example, an experimenter (e.g. an artist) in one place to affect the state of a system in another remote (apparently unconnected) place. Or this can happen in reverse. Thus to take an almost preposterous example, Böcklin's painting *The Island of the Dead* completed in 1880 in Munich might be the direct (though slightly delayed) result of the successful extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines by the white settlers,¹⁶ despite the fact that Böcklin would have had no direct knowledge of this catastrophic event. (Like the mother who rose in alarm at the same instant that her daughter's distant automobile crashed into a tree.) Bell's theorem would imply that this is not merely an association nor a matter of 'pure chance':

the conversion of potentialities into actualities cannot proceed on the basis of locally available information. If one accepts the usual ideas about how information propagates through space and time, then Bell's Theorem shows that the macroscopic responses cannot be independent of far-away causes. This problem is neither resolved nor alleviated by saying that the response is determined by 'pure chance'. Bell's Theorem proves precisely that the determination of the macroscopic response must be 'nonchance', at least to the extent of allowing some sort of dependence of this response upon the far-away cause.¹⁷

While it is outside the scope of this chapter to pursue the implications of Bell's theorem on contemporary Australian art in any greater detail, it suffices to suggest that the conscious striving after the appearance of 'localness' could be an utterly futile and nonsensical activity except in that it might produce effects (unknown to us) in other, remote 'space-like separated' regions (say in the Carpathian Mountains or the Upper Urals).

The failure of the principle of local causes also invites speculation on the 'distant' origins of 'local' phenomena. How are we to interpret the fact that 'objects' no more convincing than the crude representations in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings occur with an unnatural frequency in the Australian suburban landscape? Does the mere resemblance of these dissociated, displaced 'objects' to those in de Chirico's pictures necessarily imply a causal connection?



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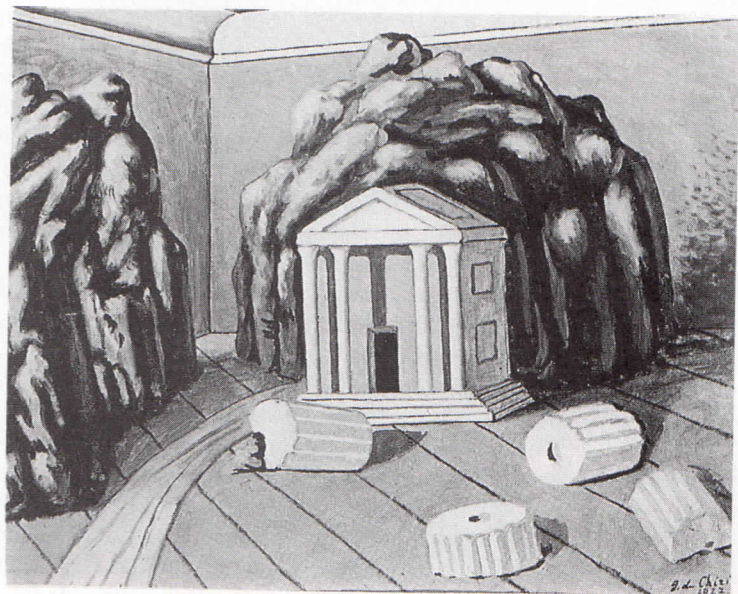
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15.2a Photograph reproduced in *European Dialogue: A Commentary*, Biennale of Sydney (1979), p. 27.



15.2b Giorgio de Chirico: *Temple in a Room* (1927).

In fact these 'objects' can be explained by more conventional and immediate causes. After all they are not so surprising in themselves considering the degree to which Australian experience is mediated by photography and photographic reproduction. For these 'objects' which seem to be the members of an entirely new *species of object* are derived (mutated) from photographs though they are not photographs in themselves. While often resembling houses (master-built project homes) at other times they can resemble the Greek temples of de Chirico's pictures. What is common to these 'objects' is that some essential property seems to be missing. Collaged together from prefabricated components (often neo-classical in their reference) chosen from printed brochures, their visual attributes can be best described as 'flatness', 'frontality', 'sharp focus', 'full colour', 'high resolution', etc. In real life they evoke strong feelings of *déjà-vu* and in the presence of other such 'objects' (e.g. in a street) they seem to partake of a game of 'quotation' and 'cross-reference'. Their most plausible attribute is that of being 'photogenic'. Also since they are entirely derived from photographic representations they have the same qualities of surface, of reproducibility, and they acknowledge the same formal devices of framing and cropping as do photographs themselves.¹⁸

A conventional and plausible explanation (pre Bell's theorem) of the resemblance between these 'objects' and the images in certain of de Chirico's pictures would point to the fact that 'simulation' (the quintessential quality of Australian life and culture and the means by which these 'objects' arise) is also an abiding interest of de Chirico – particularly in his later work. In these unfashionable works, the melancholy of *places* (of deserted Italian piazzas on autumn afternoons) yields to the melancholy of his own personal metaphysical situation. This is expressed in a twofold strategy of 'simulation': on the one hand 'precise variations' on his early 'metaphysical' works and on the other hand an almost inept imitation of 'traditional' painting and its subject-matter. ('Simulation' invariably allows the simultaneous embrace of apparently contradictory positions since the 'surface' is borrowed from 'elsewhere' and does not necessarily reflect real intentions or meanings.)

De Chirico said 'Pictor classicus sum'¹⁹ (I am a classical painter) and painted classical subjects in the classical manner. He even painted portraits of himself and his wife in seventeenth-century costume. These paintings reflect an almost pathological nostalgia – a 'quixotic' desire to defy the incontrovertible circumstances of his 'time' and 'place' – and there are in this echoes of the recent Australian experience (post 1788). But whereas de Chirico's later work in the intensity of its anguish bears comparison with the work of Francis Bacon or Hermann Nitsch,



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15.3 Giorgio de Chirico: *Self-Portrait in Costume* (1959), 60.25" x 38.5" (reproduced in *Art & Text*, 1982).

Australian 'simulation' (except for unintentional, largely architectural manifestations) is bound to a comfortable mediocrity by its own tentativeness. We do not yet have a *white* artist who can declare with conviction: 'I am Aboriginal.'

But while these connections and associations between de Chirico's interests and the Australian experience conform to the common-sense view of the world (of the pervasiveness of 'local' phenomena), how are we to interpret the presence of *this* fragment of 'Melbourne' (circa 1929) mapped into the second sentence of de Chirico's novel *Hebdomeros*:

And then began the tour of that strange building situated in a street that looked forbidding, although it was distinguished and not gloomy. As seen from the street the building was reminiscent of a German consulate in Melbourne. Its ground floor was entirely taken up with large stores. Although it was neither Sunday nor a holiday, the stores were closed, endowing this part of the street with an air of tedium and melancholy, a certain desolation, that particular atmosphere which pervades Anglo-Saxon towns on Sundays.²⁰

Luckily a world in which 'locality fails' is far more interesting than the one in which we are limited to our immediate circumstances and which we are suffered upon to reflect in our art.

NOTES

Reprinted from *Art & Text* 6, Melbourne, 1982, and published in this volume by kind permission of the editors.

- 1 J. A. Alexander (ed.) (1950) *Who's Who in Australia*, Sydney, p. 530.
- 2 The contemporary 'look' and practicality of these works in contrast to the sand-paintings from which they are derived makes them fit more easily into the contemporary context.
- 3 In the biennale of Sydney, *Visions of Disbelief* (1982), an Aboriginal sand-painting (not 'simulations' of sand-painting as in the previous biennale) was given an entire space to itself, thereby endowing this work with a pivotal significance.
- 4 Bernice Murphy (1981) *Australian Perspecta* (catalogue), p. 13.
- 5 Robert Lindsay (1981) *Survey 15: Relics & Rituals* (catalogue), National Gallery of Victoria.
- 6 This is in direct contrast to Aboriginal painters themselves whose choice of colours is limited by the local availability of certain pigments rather than by inherently 'Aboriginal' colour preferences. Thus prior to the 1977 exhibition of Papunya art works at Realities Gallery in Melbourne, the Aboriginal artists wished to add to the intended purchase of acrylics some blue, green, and possibly other colours for use in their work. However, they were talked out of this by a white artist's advice to stick to their 'traditional' range of pigments. (See Dismas M. Zika (1981) *Landscape, Some Interpretations* (catalogue), Tasmanian School of Art.) The idea of extending the colour range could be seen as could be seen as the same kind of cultural adaptation as, say, the substitution of readily available 'galiron' sheets for 'traditional' though scarce stringybark as a building material.

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- 7 Bernard Smith (1980) *The Spectre of Truganini*, Sydney: Boyer Lectures, ABC, pp. 44-52.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 9 Jennifer Phipps (1981) 'Marina Abramovic/Ulay', *Art & Text* 3: 45.
- 10 *ibid.*: 46-50.
- 11 Suzi Gablik (January 1981) 'Report from Australia', *Art in America*: 29.
- 12 Nick Waterlow (1979) *European Dialogue: A Commentary* (catalogue), Biennale of Sydney.
- 13 Les Murray (1977) 'The human-hair thread', *Meanjin*, Aboriginal issue, 36, 4:569.
- 14 Henry Stapp (1975) 'Bell's Theorem and world process', *Il Nuovo Cimento* 298: 191.
- 15 Henry Stapp (1971) 'S-Matrix interpretation of quantum theory', *Physical Review D*3: 1303ff.
- 16 Truganini, the last of the original Tasmanian Aboriginals, died in 1876.
- 17 Stapp, 'S-Matrix interpretation', *op. cit.*
- 18 See Paul Taylor's catalogue essay in (1982) *Eureka: Artists from Australia*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and Serpentine Gallery.
- 19 (1968) *De Chirico*, New York: Harry Abrams p. 13.
- 20 Giorgio de Chirico (1964) *Hebdomeros*, London: Peter Owen, p. 10.