

9 shots 5 stories:

Imants Tillers and Indigenous difference

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If one painting reset the agenda of late 20th century Australian art, it was Gordon Bennett's *The nine ricochets* (*Fall down black fella, jump up white fella*) (1990). It assertively occupied the dangerous critical space that had suddenly risen like a new volcanic island from the ocean of Australian artworld consciousness. There had been several eruptions during the previous decade but the one that did the most damage was Nick Waterlow's 1986 Biennale of Sydney. His desire for what Juan Davila called 'an Entente cordiale' between European and Indigenous art came horribly unstuck, as if he had inadvertently knocked the scab off a suppurative sore. It soured relationships between both sides. Davila's stinging review of the Biennale galvanized ill feeling. Accusing it of being 'aesthetic and politically regressive', he said that it spoke 'from inside the authority and prestige of a colonising tradition' because 'little change has occurred between "traditional" and "contemporary" times'. Waterlow's wager had hinged on an opposite intuition: that everything was on the point of change. He wanted the Biennale to initiate 'a new beginning' at 'our fin de siècle'.

The nine ricochets ricocheted across these issues. Like all great art its clarity of vision belied a deeper different dynamic: it was a moving target. On the one hand its success hinged on Waterlow's wager being a *fait accompli*: it was the payoff for his bold decision to make this the first Biennale of international contemporary art to include a significant number of Indigenous and Third World artworks. On the other hand, *The nine ricochets* owed much to Juan Davila's censure and its trenchant critique of the painting that was the hit of the Biennale and which epitomised Waterlow's aspiration: Imants Tillers's *The nine shots* (1985).

In the style of postmodernist appropriation, which leaves its sources in quotation, *The nine shots* had interleaved an obscure Aboriginal painting – *Five stories* (1984) by the then little-known Michael Nelson Tjakamarra – with an iconic European painting, Georg Baselitz's *Forward wind* (1966). Caught between European and Indigenous worldviews, it was an apt metaphor for the founding abyss of the postcolonial psyche. No wonder Bennett took aim. *The nine shots* was not just a metaphor, it seemingly exemplified the parallel rift between Waterlow's ambition 'for a moment of crucial alteration' and Davila's diagnosis of the Biennale's 'abstract recuperation of [colonial] history' and the failure to 'think the primitive as a disruptive potential'. Bouncing back and forth across this ideological divide, *The nine ricochets* adds a further twist to its dialectic, and in doing so, reminds us that this painting also began life as a ricochet, an echo of other paintings. Now, twenty-five years after Tillers fired his shots, it is timely to revisit this moment and trace its passage from beginning to end.



From beginning to end

The infinite is doubtless neither one, nor empty, nor innumerable. It is of a ternary essence. (Jacques Derrida, 1967)

Any understanding of *The nine shots* should begin with Tillers's devotion to painting reproductions of other artists' works. Such appropriation was the clarion call of our times but Tillers took it further than anyone else. From beginning to end it is his creed. For him *everything began with repetition*. As if mocking Plato, he is the self-proclaimed mimic man, master of the third-order copy. The reason for Tillers's devotion to the third order is ontological rather than ideological or aesthetic. Quite simply, the structure of repetition is ternary. An example is cellular replication. When the cell splits and redoubles, the double not only adds itself to the single, it divides it and supplements it. There is immediately a double origin plus its repetition, as if one plus one equals three. From this point the doubling begins to take on its own life. In this law of dissemination, be it in the form of cellular replication, sexual reproduction, colonialism or any discourse, three is the first and last figure, all the way to infinity. Spatially, this ternary structure resembles a room of mirrors in which nothing is ever present outside a system of repetition. In its endless ricochets there is no centre, no original, no absolute beginning, a kind of 'void which re-empties itself and marks itself with imprints'.



p13: Imants Tillers, *The nine shots*, 1985, acrylic and oilstick on 91 canvas boards; overall 330 x 266cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of the artist, 2008.

This page: 1/ Gordon Bennett, *The nine ricochets (Fall down black fella, jump up white fella)*, 1990, oil and acrylic on canvas and canvasboards, 220 x 182cm. Private collection, Brisbane Photograph by Phillip Andrews. © Courtesy the artist

2/ Imants Tillers, *Fatherland*, 2008, acrylic on gouache on 90 canvasboards.

All Imants Tillers images this article courtesy the Artist, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne.

Tillers's investigation of the copy was informed by his study of conceptual art, biological systems and mathematics, but most of all by his experiences as an Australian artist working at the cusp of globalisation and the digital age. In the analogue world of corresponding identities, as in the binary relation of provincialism that he and the Australian artworld knew so well, the copy appears as a confirmation of one's subservience and irrelevance, a sort of cliché that imperfectly reflects back the fixed authority and presence of the centre or original. Tillers's paintings, which in the mid-1980s appropriated many European and US artists, can be read in these terms – as his fellow appropriation artist Juan Davila did when he accused Tillers of behaving 'before the international world ... as if *colonized*', i.e. as if a provincial.

On the other hand, the copy can have a ternary rather than binary logic. In Homi Bhabha's post-structuralist notion of resistant colonial mimicry, the copy blandly reflects an empty and indeterminate image that is situated in a system of differences. Here 'mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask'. Instead of being a slightly tarnished if respectful reflection of an identifiable and fixed essence, this mimicry is more irony and camouflage, its third space a screen of ambivalence and uncertainty that, in the context of colonial power, disrupts the presumed authority of the centre, stealing its aura for itself.

If this potential for both subservience and subversion is always present in the copy, in the age of postmodernism the subversion was quite naked. With modernism's former authority on the nose, postmodernists unashamedly called their mimicry – as Tillers also did – 'appropriation'. What they appropriated, or turned to their own use, was the authority and aura of the original, i.e., of modernism. But for Tillers there was more to appropriation than either this postmodern or postcolonial power struggle. For him the analogue world of corresponding subjectivities, each with its

fixed individual local centre, was an illusion. Instead the cosmos was an interconnected maze of endless copies with no origin, no centre and bound by uncertain relations, something like the virtual worlds of the then dawning digital age or like some vast neural network: the world as a brain or nervous system that takes on its own ternary logic of dissemination, its own third space. With no authorising centre, the copy was neither an act of submission nor subversion, but the reality of communication, the way information is processed.

No better example of this is *The nine shots*. If its subject is the logic of the copy, the painting also has been subject to this same logic, repeatedly reflected in the texts of contemporary art like a recurring subliminal message; nine shots, three cubed and ricocheting to infinity. Even Tillers got caught in its ricochets, shooting himself in the foot. He was partly to blame as he chose its image above all others to represent him in these very auspicious times.

At this point in his career Tillers was Australia's most successful contemporary artist. He seemed to herald a new type of post-national artist and was gaining international recognition for the originality of his appropriation art, then at the forefront of avant-garde practice and theory. He was feeling part of the centre, not just an echo on the other side of the planet. Tillers finished *The nine shots* in his Sydney studio at the beginning of the 1985 Australian spring, just in time to send it to the Bess Cutler Gallery (New York) for his second solo exhibition in the northern autumn. It was a great moment in Tillers's career, an exhibition triumvirate. One: he was selected to represent his nation at the forthcoming Venice Biennale; two: he was selected for the sixth Sydney Biennale; and three: *The nine shots* was chosen to feature in an important book, film and exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Art – Sandy Nairne's *State of the art* (1987). Sensing that *The nine shots* would be a definitive painting at this defining moment in his career, Tillers chose to reproduce it on the title page of his important sixty-page Venice Biennale catalogue. The proportions of the catalogue were made to echo those of the

painting, allowing it to be reproduced at a larger scale than the other reproductions at the back of the catalogue, thus lending it added significance. And, as if putting all his money on one horse, Tillers also submitted it for reproduction in the Sydney Biennale catalogue. These decisions gave *The nine shots* maximum exposure at this high point of his career.

Despite this investment, Tillers was not in a position to actually exhibit the painting in either Biennale. It was not shown in Australia until the bicentenary year of 1988, at the S. H. Ervin Gallery (Sydney) in the little noticed exhibition, *A changing relationship – Aboriginal themes in Australian art 1938-1988*. This was its third showing, following exhibitions in New York and London. In lieu of *The nine shots*, Tillers sent to the Sydney Biennale *Lost, lost, lost* (1985). However, in a demonstration of the power of the double – in this case a reproduction in the catalogue – the 1986 Biennale is remembered for the scandal of *The nine shots*. Its simultaneous juxtaposition with *Five stories* in the catalogue provoked the scandal, as if this intervention of Tjakamarra's original was an act of Indigenous defiance against Tillers's copy.

The juxtaposition was an accident of the Roman alphabet. Neither Tillers nor Tjakamarra knew that the other was exhibiting. Indeed, up to this point Tjakamarra was ignorant of Tillers's painting and its appropriation of his design. Tillers could only blame the Fates who by their intervention revealed the truth of his painting. Tillers, the son of European immigrants, had made a copy of a design without permission from its Indigenous owner, as if reiterating the 200-year history of European appropriation of Aboriginal power. At the Biennale this metaphor took on a stark reality. As if tapping an undercurrent of moral outrage over Indigenous dispossession, Tillers was made a scapegoat for the artworld's and the nation's bad conscience. This is why a copy, a reproduction in a catalogue, attracted more attention than any actual artwork at the Biennale. *The nine shots* instantly acquired a mythical dimension. Perhaps even more remarkable is the way in which Tjakamarra got pulled into its orbit, as if it was also his destiny. In copying Tjakamarra's design, Tillers had unwittingly initiated a pact with it.

The story of this relationship first took shape as a poetic narrative of titles. The title of Tjakamarra's painting at the Biennale, *Possum dreaming*, emphasised its Aboriginality and thus the ontological rift between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art, thus playing to the scandal's accusations. However, following fresh interviews with Tjakamarra, in 1988 *Possum dreaming* was re-titled *Five dreamings*. Vivien Johnson further modified the title to *Five stories*. Unlike the original name, this new name has a poetic frisson with the name of Tillers's painting – Nine shots five stories. This new name and so identity of Tjakamarra's painting echoed or reverberated with its copy. The poetics of this reverberation now ricochets in our collective memory of this story of two paintings brought together at the Biennale. *Possum dreaming*, like *Lost, lost, lost*, has been lost to history. In the artworld's retrospective memory, *The nine shots* and *Five stories* went head to head at the 1986 Sydney Biennale. And so they did, poetically locked together in their difference.

The question at the Biennale and since is *what was the nature and politics of this difference?* At first it seemed obvious. *The nine shots* was lambasted for its appropriation

of a Western Desert design. The design lurked like a ghostly apparition in the clefts and shadows of a crucified man who dominated the picture. This image of the crucified man was readily identifiable to the artworld as a highly fashionable German new-expressionist painting, but this drew virtually no comment. To brazenly pinch an image of authority might be laudable even larrikin, but to mimic the remnants of a colonised culture unambiguously – arrogantly – asserts the power of the copy over the original. No wonder critics saw in it a blatant act of colonialism. The painting rapidly became seminal to a much bigger story over which Tillers had no control.

At the end of the 1980s, Gordon Bennett, a little known recent graduate from art school, won a major prize and established his career with his own appropriation of *The nine shots: The nine ricochets (Fall down black fella, jump up white fella)*. As the scandal's denouement, its timeliness and cathartic affect was so powerful that Terry Smith could not resist having it reproduced, as a sort of critical supplement, on the final page of the new 1991 edition of Bernard Smith's influential history *Australian painting* and also, as if doubling this effect, on the back cover. *The nine ricochets* was a brutal exorcism of not just *The nine shots* but of the whole 555 pages of the history of Australian art that preceded its reproduction in Smith's history. This is why *The nine ricochets* immediately became emblematic of the postcolonial turn that, in many ways, the scandalous reception of *The nine shots* had precipitated. *The nine ricochets* announced a new era. Tillers's time, recently so auspicious, suddenly seemed over.

The nine ricochets was a classical Oedipal ambush; by which I mean it spun its victim into the myth of history and cheekily claimed its legacy. If urban Aboriginal artists were amongst the most virulent critics of *The nine shots*, Bennett and, more recently, Richard Bell and a new generation of Indigenous artists, have emerged as Tillers's principal descendants: appropriation artists who openly purloin his aesthetic methodology and artworks. Bennett's (and Bell's) ambivalent relationship to Tillers is testimony to the deep impact of *The nine shots*. It had become the brand image of not just Tillers's oeuvre but also of a revolutionary moment in Australian art. *The nine ricochets*, itself a repetition, propelled *The nine shots* into a new orbit of eternal return, like a comet in the firmament. If *The nine ricochets* is the most important painting of late 20th century Australian art, what does this make *The nine shots*? What is its story?

The story

Thus painting is being used as a sublime venture to reconquer the whiteman's imaginary landscape, to endorse the 'art of white aborigines'. But nothing has changed, for it is still only looting from the dream it censors. (Juan Davila, 1987)

The nine shots is a grand history painting in the mold of Gericault's *Raft of Medusa* (1818-19): it summons up the passions and contradictions of an age in transition. The real scandal of *The nine shots* was not the poor protocol of its conception but the clarity of its thesis, which was a brilliant mirror to the incongruities and ambiguities of the times. Tillers's thesis put Indigenous art at the vanguard of the contemporary, a complete reversal of its fate in the story of European civilization. Such reversals do not occur in a

vacuum or without a considerable pre-history. Nevertheless, the realignment is always felt as a sudden shock. This gives it a mythical quality, which in this case is further enhanced by the archetypal themes at play. Davila's verdict that *The nine shots* 'contributes to the national "story"' was right. However the contribution was that of an assassin. *The nine shots* blew a whole in its plot.

In this story, the foundational story of the modern age, the citizen hero vanquishes the Indigenous monster in order to initiate the nation state. From its origins in the colonial era, the nation state successfully quarantined Indigenous difference as an inassimilable and inimitable other, an anti-nation, as if it was everything the citizen had to repress in order for the nation to realise itself. And realise itself it did. Today the nation state is stronger and more totalising than ever. There are close to 200 tightly wedged nation states with no land or people leftover between their meticulously mapped and heavily patrolled borders. The world is everywhere the citizen's domain, and overseen by a federation of nation states: the United Nations. Yet, like some dark secret, there is an excess of some 350 million Indigenous people scattered across every inhabited continent. Without a flag and so without a seat at the General Assembly, their difference is as absolute as ever.

Because the Indigenous is defined by its negative relationship to the citizen, it is not surprising that there still is no formally agreed definition of the term. The best that the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations could do was to quote Article 1 of the ILO (International Labour Organisation) Convention No. 169, which says that 'Indigenous' refers to 'tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community'. In short, the Indigenous is a remainder. In Derridean terms, it is the trace of the difference that founds the nation state. Thus the Indigenous, being both inside and outside the nation, is a limit that blurs its definition. This is the source of its power in the era of the nation state: it is the repressed other ever ready to return.

The postcolonial return of the Indigenous is not due to the weight of their number – though it must count for something – but the turbulence of globalisation. It exposes the Indigenous as a counter-position; a perspective that Tillers explicitly takes in *The nine shots*. From here the citizen could better think the limits of its own cosmology, and the Indigenous could stake a claim on the contemporary. This new relationship is articulated in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007, which formally recognised Indigenous difference rather than quarantined it as other. It mainly concerns the proper relations between the citizen (or nation state) and the Indigenous 'leftovers', including the rights of Indigenous peoples to either claim (Article 6) or disclaim (Article 8) nationality.

The Declaration formalised a global realignment that had been emergent since the mid-20th century. The international artworld first seriously felt its effect in the critical whirlwind created by the large exhibition at New York's MoMA (Museum of Modern Art), *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, in 1984. The curators had reproduced a transparent Eurocentric hierarchy, blissfully unaware of how easily it could be inverted to expose either the colonialism of its agenda or, in a more absurdist and subversive vein, the provincialism of European modernism as a copy of Indigenous originals.

The nine shots was a direct response to MoMA's *Primitivism* exhibition, which Tillers had seen in New York while preparing for his first one-person exhibition there. Reading *The nine shots* through Bhabha's thesis on colonial mimicry – also published in 1984, in the US art journal *October* – we can argue that the ghostly apparition of the Indigenous design reframes the famous German new-expressionist painting about national identity into a system of difference. Tillers rearticulates the resounding presence of the original German painting 'in terms of its otherness, that which it disavows'. Painted in the wake of the *Primitivism* exhibition, *The nine shots*' juxtaposition of a European avant-garde artwork with an Indigenous design was blatant and ironic mimicry. Few, however, saw the irony: thus the scandal.

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This is the first part of an essay which began life in a conference paper at the 2nd Imagined Australia conference, Bari, Italy, in June 2009, and the Daphne Mayo lecture, University of Queensland, September 2009. The second part (comprising the final three stories: 'The scandal', 'The truth', and 'The lesson') will appear in next month's issue, along with a related bibliography.

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Imants Tillers's latest solo exhibition, *A Poem of the Land*, is showing until 1 April at RoslynOxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

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