



Theme Park: A Rollercoaster Ride

MARIANNE RIPHAGEN

WHILE IN THE NETHERLANDS to attend the opening of the annual sculptural festival *The Hague Sculpture*, in the Dutch spring of 2007, Australian artist Brook Andrew received an invitation to visit the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art (AAMU). The AAMU opened its doors in 2001 as the only museum in Europe exclusively dedicated to showing Indigenous Australian art. It is located in the centre of the historic town of Utrecht, in a spacious, three-storey building formerly occupied by a bank. From its inception, this museum has introduced visitors to a wide variety of art forms, including bark paintings from Arnhem Land, batiks produced in Utopia, desert paintings from the Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, photomedia by practitioners living and working in cities, and the world famous Yuendumu Doors. Up until 2006, the AAMU solely displayed art created by Aboriginal Australians. However, since Georges Petitjean took up the position as curator, the museum and its objectives have undergone significant changes.

First, the board and Petitjean have decided that the AAMU needs to emerge from the margins of the Dutch art world, where it is relegated to the realm of ethnographic institutions. The AAMU now seeks to establish itself as a museum of contemporary art. Second, the focus has shifted to positioning Indigenous Australian art as an essential part of international art histories and global conversations on art-making. To its audiences, the AAMU conveys the message that Aboriginal art both articulates culturally specific philosophies and beliefs, and exerts efficacy in dialogue with European art traditions. From 2006 onwards, the museum has staged exhibitions in which exchanges between Indigenous Australian and European practitioners take centre stage. Such shows contribute to current Dutch debates about so-called non-Western art, and about the exclusion of non-Western art forms from institutions.

Against the background of these processes of change, Brook Andrew was invited to stage a solo exhibition of his work. Initially, the artist declined this offer. Critical of the museum's theme-bound origins – reflected by its name and collection policy – Andrew opposed restrictions potentially presented by such ethnic categorisation. However, when the curator subsequently offered him the artistic freedom to take over the entire museum, the artist conceded.

Theme Park, the resulting exhibition, constituted an

overwhelming spectacle, occupying the entire building as a multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. On the one hand, *Theme Park* set out to present the museum itself, as an exhibition object, to visitors.¹ Challenging the history and identity of the AAMU, the exhibition intended to provoke questions about the representation of Aboriginal art in an Aboriginal art museum. On the other hand, Andrew's show consisted of multiple themes which converged around an investigation into the representation of non-Western societies and peoples as 'exotic'.

As an amusement park, *Theme Park* dazzled visitors with giant inflatable clowns, a neon sign, freaks, mirrors, a mirror-ball, an out-of-control photocopier, vivid colours and captivating music. It even included a painted caravan (*The Colony: Caravan* 2007), set up in the museum's courtyard, from which a fortune teller could appear at any minute. Andrew presented audiences with a combination of his own work: cultural objects including Australian clubs and boomerangs from the collections of the Musée des Confluences (Lyon, France) and the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren, Belgium); records and kitsch objects from the artist's private collection; 17th century Dutch maritime prints from the Rotterdam Maritime Museum; works by renowned European artists; and archival material. Viewers entered a theatre in which Western practices, of turning colonised peoples and their cultures into exotic objects of spectacle, were visualised in their absurdity and gruesomeness. *Theme Park* referenced the circuses in which Australian Aborigines as well as many others performed as life exhibits to Europeans curious about the 'savages' inhabiting their empires.² In this circus we encountered colonial fantasies of Rousseauian primitives, tales of conquest and imperialism, and the fetishising of Aboriginal lives and cultural objects.

Walking through *Theme Park*, I discerned four interrelated themes. First, this exhibition advanced the dissolution of white/black binaries, and subverted straightforward definitions of Aboriginal art. Visitors were playfully lured into the museum by two enormous vinyl clowns (*Clown I*, *Clown II*, 2008). One of the clowns lay helplessly on his back, looking up to the ceiling. Positioned in the middle of a walkway, the other clown towered over curious viewers who strolled around and underneath its colossal body. These sculptures were accompanied by a neon sign with the text 'theme park', a Philips radiogram and three mannequins wearing screenprinted cotton costumes (*The Colony: Lord Burgher King, the Messenger and the Executioner*, 2007). Both the garments and the clowns were adorned with black-and-white diamond-shaped Wiradjuri patterns. These



PAGE 28: *The Island V*, 2008, from *The Island* series, mixed media on Belgian linen, 250 x 300 x 5cm;
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Colony 2007*, performance by Lord Burger King, the Messenger & the Executioner, The Hague Historic Museum, The Hague Sculpture, 2007, The Netherlands;
Ngajuu Ngaay Nginduugirr (I see you) 1998, diptych: neon & transparency face mounted on acrylic; 56 x 200cm (image), 350 x 50cm (neon); *Theme Park*, 2008, installation views, AAMU, Utrecht, with *Lost*, 2008, BOTTOM, and *Clown I*, 2008; *H142: First female aboriginal seen and captured. Camp XL*, 2007, *Yarruudang II (dream)*, mixed media, 170 x 110 x 5cm. All artworks by Brook Andrew. Images courtesy Brook Andrew and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

hypnotic designs, described by the artist as his mantra,³ repeatedly appear in his artworks.⁴

To a Dutch audience mostly familiar with Aboriginal dot and bark paintings, this installation challenged set expectations and beliefs about the form and content of Indigenous Australian art. Seeing the clowns, the costumes and the bright neon, while listening to songs by Australian country singer Slim Dusty, I felt at once bewildered and in awe. The eclectic combination of Wiradjuri cultural forms, music and modern technologies attests to a cosmopolitanism commonly found in contemporary art. Andrew's installation confounded categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art, thereby superseding the facile labeling of what is and is not Aboriginal.

Theme Park's second 'theme' concerned colonial history and memory, particularly evinced through Andrew's series *Gun Metal Grey* (2007) and *The Island* (2008). Five works from *The Island* series were displayed in a high-ceilinged atrium on the first floor, strikingly lit by natural light. Their sizes (250 x 300 x 5cm), combined with the height at which they were displayed, gave these recent works an arresting power. *The Island I, III, IV, V and VI* re-present images from the encyclopedia *Australia in 142 Photographic Images*, created over 1860-61 by the German scientist and explorer Wilhelm von Blandowski. This album, sourced by Andrew in the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, consists of photographs of colonial drawings.⁵ Informed by romantic and fantastic European imaginings of Australian peoples, flora and fauna, many of these drawings embody bizarre and grotesque interpretations of the 'newly discovered' land.



Screenprinted onto Belgian linen with the use of Italian foil, Blandowski's photographs now come across as history paintings. The materiality of Andrew's extraordinary renditions necessitates continuous repositioning from the viewer, otherwise the images remain difficult to discern. This seems a poetic metaphor for the way in which history reveals itself to be incomplete, often dependent for its narrative on those holding the power of interpretation. One of the most arresting 'historical' depictions, in the red *Island V*, shows a kangaroo being attacked by a pack of dogs. While the dogs resemble English hunting dogs, the kangaroo looks like a deer. In the right corner of the work, we see a tiny Aboriginal figure ostensibly chasing the dogs. This scene convincingly demonstrates how colonial expectations coloured the 'reality' documented by 19th century European scientists in Australia. Memories of observed landscapes, animals, Aboriginal persons and cultural practices have been re-worked into drawings that reflect prevailing preconceptions. The incongruous images of *The Island* affirm that global colonial conquest may be characterised by the statement: we see what we expect to see.

The ways in which we regard and image 'the other' is the third discernible theme in *Theme Park*. This was particularly apparent in an exhibition space on the first floor, aptly entitled the 'Faces' room. Kitsch objects, such as a thermometer embellished with a depiction of an Aboriginal man and several plates decorated with Aboriginal faces, adorned the brightly painted yellow walls. A collage of assorted picture postcards (*Postcard Collage I*, 2008) contained images of a Greek sculpture, the cover of a 1935 *Life* magazine, the former Australian Governor General Lord Hopetown, and several illustrations of Aborigines. Mirrors, of different sizes and forms, hung throughout the space. Furthermore, *Mask* (1925), *Mask I* (1930) and *Mask 3* (1925), freaky portraits by the Belgian modernist painter Felix de Boeck, menacingly looked down on visitors.

De Boeck's 'freaks', the mirrors, the yellow walls and the multitude of kitsch objects underscored our presence in

an amusement park. Aboriginal Australians, as exemplified by the deplorable artifacts, photographs and postcards, have been made the objects of 'our' entertainment. Building on previously created artworks, like *Sexy and Dangerous* (1996), Andrew's installation disclosed past and present regimes of representation in the public realm. Outside the Faces room, references to the Dutch history of colonisation, exemplified by books and etchings about the United East India Company, encouraged visitors to draw parallels between Dutch and Australian perceptions of colonised peoples. Back inside, the mirrors reminded me of Andrew's works *I Split Your Gaze* (1997) and *Ngajuu Ngaay Nginduugirr* (1998). These photomedia works also demystify and cause reflection about the mostly unidirectional 'white' gaze. Observing my own appearance in the mirrors, I felt a reversal occur. Rather than being the spectator, I became the object of spectacle.

Finally, the fourth topic in *Theme Park* comprised an artistic intervention in, and critique of, the exhibition of Indigenous cultural objects by museums. In the past, Andrew has re-contextualized Aboriginal objects in shows such as *Menthen Queue Here* (1999) at the former Djamu Gallery (Australia Museum, Sydney). *Theme Park* continued his practice of intervening in non-Indigenous ways of exhibiting and engaging with Aboriginal sculptures, shields and bark paintings. Andrew's work with these objects brings out their beauty as well as their contemporary significance. The installation *Lost* (2008) formed my favorite piece in *Theme Park*. *Lost* consisted of a painted, wooden platform upon which seventeen carved Tiwi sculptures were placed. These figures, from the former Lance Bennett collection, were positioned in a circle to face a miniature circus big top. Taken out of storage, and transposed from an ethnographic into a contemporary art context, these beautiful sculptures were sung back to life by Australian music legend Jimmy Little. Little's songs, emanating from the centre of the installation, seemed to entertain the figures. No longer objects of study, they formed a moving presence in the

room. In my imagination, coloured by Hollywood movie *Night at the Museum* (2006), the sculptures were dancing to Little's music after opening hours.

Although *Theme Park*'s multiple themes provide depth and complexity to the age-old spectacle of representing 'the other', I contend that they simultaneously impede the efficacy of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Many Dutch visitors, largely unfamiliar with Andrew's oeuvre and with topical Australian debates about colonial history and representation, would be overwhelmed by the eclectic (and often culturally specific) connotations. While the Netherlands has a long history of imperialism, in countries as far apart as Indonesia, Suriname, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba, its past as a colonial power is hardly part of present-day Dutch cultural memory. Colonial fantasies, the dehumanisation of colonised peoples and the enduring effects of colonisation do not receive much attention in the Dutch public domain. Evidently, this makes *Theme Park* a pertinent and thought-provoking exhibition for Dutch viewers but one, nevertheless, complicated by the breadth of topics broached and the large amount of objects on display.

An interesting point of debate is whether *Theme Park* indeed presented the AAMU as an exhibition object to audiences, as suggested by the introductory text to the show. Initially, I did not see how this exhibition specifically exposed the identity of the museum, or the particular ways in which the AAMU represents Aboriginal art. Of course, I recognise that individual installations contested stereotypical ideas about Indigenous Australian peoples, cultures and arts. Yet, I did not immediately perceive critical references to the museum's theme-bound origins. My position changed however when I overheard Dutch visitors discuss *Theme Park*. Ostensibly confused, they asked each other where the Aboriginal artworks had been relocated to. During their previous visit, as I came to understand, they observed colorful acrylic paintings from Central Desert communities.⁶ This example demonstrates how certain visitors associate the AAMU with specific forms of

Indigenous Australian art. *Theme Park* undermined conceptions of what a contemporary museum of Aboriginal art in Europe ought to be. By exhibiting the AAMU to viewers, it allowed people to leave with a different understanding of the institution's agenda and identity.

Theme Park thus took one on a rollercoaster ride through the unsettling and uncanny territories of imperialism, exoticism and primitivism. It enchanted, bewildered, angered, humored and saddened. Even though some Dutch visitors may have struggled to interpret its meanings, I am convinced that this exhibition left an emotional mark on all of its spectators.

Notes

1. Georges Petitjean, 'Smoke Signals. An Introduction to Brook Andrew's *Theme Park*', in *Theme Park*, exhibition catalogue, AAMU, Utrecht, 2008, pp. 7-12.
2. Coco Fusco, 'The Other History of Intercultural Performance', in *The Drama Review*, 38, 1, 1994, pp. 143-167.
3. As indicated in Anne Loxley's interview with Brook Andrew in 'New Work: Brook Andrew', *Art World, Australia/New Zealand*, issue 4, 2008, p. 176.
4. The Wiradjuri designs feature, for instance, in Brook Andrew's *Hope and Peace* (2005) series. They were also part of exhibitions like *YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE BLACK* (2006), held at the National Gallery of Victoria, and the 2008 Melbourne International Art Fair.
5. Nicholas Thomas, *The Island Catalogue*, 2007. <http://maa.cam.ac.uk/home/index.php?page=15&content=The+Island+Catalogue&parent=24>, website accessed 23 February 2009.
6. Personal communication with the author, 28 December 2008.

Brook Andrew's *Theme Park* was installed at the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Utrecht, Holland, from October 2008 to April 2009.

Marianne Riphagen is a Ph.D candidate at the Radboud University, the Netherlands. Her research, currently in its final stage, focuses on Indigenous Australian photomedia art.



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Image: Julie Brooke, *From Right to Left* (2007), Oil on spoons. CRICOS# 00120C SOA130807AM

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