

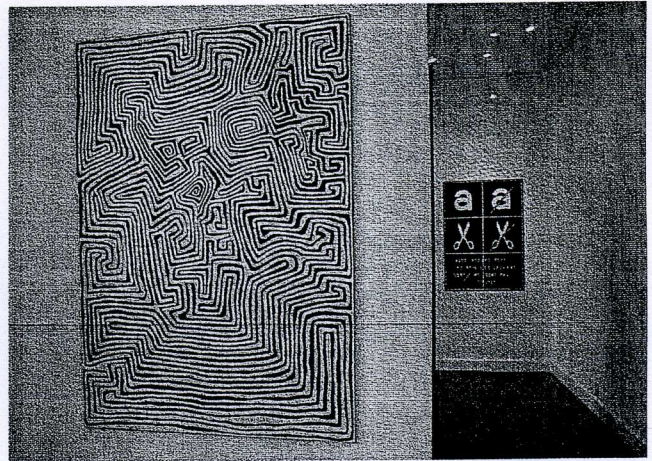
The AAMU in Utrecht – a new focus for a museum for contemporary Aboriginal art: a museum in the periphery

Australian Aboriginal art in Europe has often assumed an ambiguous position. From popular perceptions of "dot" paintings to ethnographic anonymous artefacts, relatively little serious exposure in a contemporary art context has been granted to this very diverse art. If it did, it went mostly accompanied with an aura of controversy. At the biennial Cologne Art Fair, for example, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi – at that time one of the most respected Australian galleries for contemporary Aboriginal art – was barred the entry in 1994. The "Bundesverband der Galerien", the organisers of the fair, argued that Aboriginal art, at least implicitly, could not be "art", as artistic expressions as understood by the Indigenous producers of art was perceived as closely linked to traditional patterns of beliefs and customs. In other words, it lacked the permeation of the European and North American art historical tradition, and the engagement with the Modern. This argument has been dealt with by, amongst other authors, the American anthropologist Fred Myers. For Myers Aboriginal art has "double provenance": outside the art system and within the art system. While many of the artworks from remote communities are produced by people with a strong connection to holistic belief systems, the artworks are clearly marketed and presented in a Western art world through the agency of art advisers, dealers, galleries and other art professionals.

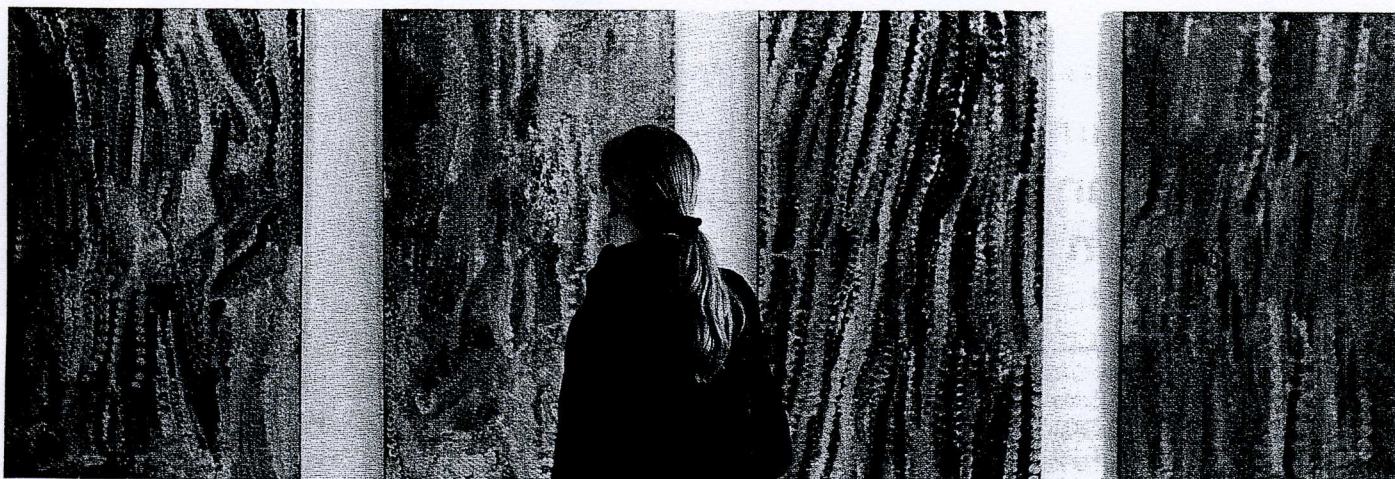


AAMU (Aboriginal Art Museum Utrecht), Museum for Contemporary Aboriginal Art, is the only museum in the world that is solely dedicated to Australian Aboriginal art.¹ AAMU, as a largely privately financed museum, opened its doors to the public in 2001. It is located in the centre of Utrecht, a city roughly in the middle of the Netherlands. The public areas are spread over three floors and accommodate large exhibition spaces, museum education, an auditorium, a small public library, a café and a museum shop. From 2001 to 2006, the museum has staged over a dozen exhibitions on a range of Aboriginal art practices, including women's art from the Utopia region in Central Australia ("Women's Business"), the Gabriella Pizzi Collection (also shown in Italy and at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne) and contemporary Australian Indigenous photography.

For its exhibitions, AAMU draws on Australian and European public and private collections. AAMU's own collection consists of about five hundred artworks. These range from bark paintings from Arnhem Land in tropical north Australia and acrylic paintings on Belgian linen from the desert regions of central Australia to prints, photography and video work by internationally renowned artist Tracey Moffatt.



"Opening Doors", for instance, an exhibition which focussed on the paintings from the small desert community of Yuendumu (central Australia) and coincided with the celebrations of 400 years of Dutch-Australian encounters in 2006 saw the collaboration with the South Australian Museum in Adelaide for important loans of twelve historic painted school doors. "Opening Doors" subsequently travelled to the Sprengel Museum Hannover that same year. This German museum hosted a number of Australian Indigenous art exhibitions since Ulrich Krempel became director fourteen years ago. Krempel was, next to Bernard Lüthi, responsible for the "Aratjara: art of the first Australians" exhibition held at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf) in 1993. "Aratjara", which subsequently travelled to the Hayward Gallery in London (1993) and the Louisiana Museum in Denmark (1994), is of crucial importance for the acquaintance and recognition of Australian Aboriginal art by European audiences.



In 2006 AAMU adopted a new policy which consists of presenting Aboriginal art explicitly in a wider contemporary art context. Previous exhibitions, typically, concentrated on familiarising and educating a Dutch audience on different directions and "schools" in Aboriginal art. While the basis for all exhibitions remains Aboriginal art, the art is no longer isolated. This new policy went along with changes to the house style and general presentation of the museum (e.g. logo, promotional publications). These shifts, however, are particularly spearheaded by AAMU's exhibitions program. The new exhibition program functions also as a strategy to attract and retain an audience (AAMU has on average 25,000 visitors a year) with differing interests in the art and entice specialist art press. A delicate balance sometimes has to be fostered in devising exhibitions in which the audience is informed on Aboriginal art, but also in which an understanding that allows for the translation of the culture of the art practitioners into the European world view is nurtured. As the curator of AAMU since September 2005, I have opted for exhibitions that present more openness as part of an outspoken approach to present Indigenous Australian art as contemporary art (art that was made in the here and now) in a contemporary art context.

AAMU indeed distinguishes itself from other museums in Europe that show Indigenous Australian art – such as the recently opened Musée du Quai Branly in Paris – in that it approaches this art within a contemporary art context. While museums such as the Musée du Quai Branly were originally founded as keeping places of non-Western artefacts and art, and thus present a further development of the former colonial and ethnographic museums, AAMU was erected from the outset as a museum that would show Indigenous Australian art as contemporary art. Much discussion has been held in recent years about a new kind of museum for the display of non-Western art.² In an era in which the world is constantly opening up, a time of globalisation and the ensuing encounters and confrontations between different cultures, it is no longer possible to ignore contemporary art from the non-Western world. Nevertheless, as a rule current practice in the exhibition of contemporary art is far removed from any confrontation between Western and non-Western art. Neither does it provide a broad platform for a genuine appreciation of art which does not immediately fit the Western paradigm. "Magiciens de la Terre", an exhibition held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris that displayed Western and non-Western art alongside each other on an equal basis as early as 1989, did not receive any significant follow-up. This attempt at an intercultural or cross-cultural exhibition in which non-Western art was presented in an explicitly contemporary context is still regarded as fraught with problems.

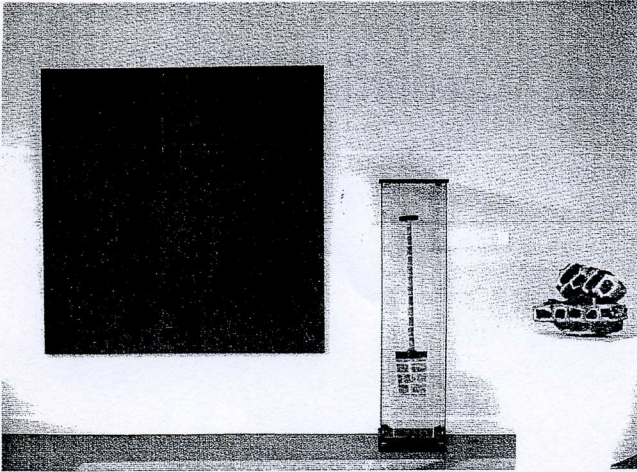
The discussion continues. The first (major) retrospective of an Aboriginal artist ("Rarrk"), John Mawurndjul, an Arnhem Land artist, was shown at the Tinguely Museum in Basel in 2005 and later restaged at the Sprengel Museum, in an explicitly contemporary context. A symposium, held simultaneously with the exhibition, provided a platform for art historians and anthropologists to exchange views on a cross-disciplinary level. A multi-disciplinary

approach to Indigenous Australian art, not only in its theorisation, but also in its exhibition, is needed in order to grasp the nature of the art, which is linked to a cultural specificity. An issue at stake in the description of Aboriginal art is that the art doesn't always have to borrow from pre-existing Western iconographies and cultural practices, but art historians and theoreticians do have to borrow from the vocabulary of Western art history to describe it. John Mawurndjul's work featured also in a London exhibition about the art of Arnhem Land ("Rarrk London", October 2007). Turner prize-winning artist and columnist Grayson Perry contended in a review written for *The Times* that collective and historical standards of the artworks on display in the show were not up to those of European connoisseurship. His views indeed reflect those of several European art professionals. The reality is that in Europe only a minority of art historians and even a smaller minority of curators are prepared to integrate Aboriginal art in their discourses or exhibitions.

Acceptance or rather non-acceptance of the established art hierarchy arguably rests partly on a basis of intellectual laziness to transcend simplistic labelling (e.g. "traditional" versus "contemporary"). Yet, it is vital that Indigenous art is seen and interpreted in a wider, international context. The winds of change can be felt. In Documenta XII (2007), for instance, the curators included successfully the work of several relatively unknown artists from Africa, Asia and South-America in the exhibition program (e.g. the provoking work by Chilean-Australian artist Juan Davilla). This referral for content to the periphery, which allows for a perilous freedom that may be difficult or considered too compromising in a more established domain of the art market and art world, is a tendency that can be observed in museums and exhibitions in other European countries.³ AAMU is to be situated within this periphery. It is in this periphery that possibilities open up that allow for broadening visions, experimentation and dialogue.

In the exhibition "Great Masters" held at AAMU in 2007, in which Aboriginal works of art from the Sammlung Essl in Vienna were included, a number of works by the Belgian modernist painter Felix De Boeck were shown as part of an exchange project. About thirty paintings from the AAMU collection were simultaneously shown at the Museum Felix De Boeck near Brussels. The underlying idea in bringing together Aboriginal art and European art in this show was in first instance to provide a foundation of equality for recognition of all the artists involved. While in this exhibition a cross-cultural exchange was less straightforward, less obvious, the exhibition "Two Laws... One Big Spirit" (April till October 2007) presented a direct collaboration between an Aboriginal artist from the Kimberley region, Rusty Peters, and a New Zealand artist of European heritage, Peter Adsett. "Two Laws... One Big Spirit" revolves around an intercultural dialogue in which the participants play equal roles. But "Two Laws" also demonstrates that such a dialogue is far from easy. Despite genuine attempts to meet each other intellectually, it is clear that each artist interprets the practice of painting within his own frame of reference. Within the dialogue there

is dissonance. What is of importance here is to give the dialogue the intellectual and physical space it needs. The exhibition "Brilliance", held from October 2007 till April 2008, explored aspects of aesthetics, more particularly the visual effect described as "shimmer" and "rarrk" as an externalisation of content in some artworks. It combined a large diversity of media and included bark paintings by John Mawurndjul, acrylic paintings by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, a video by Christian Thompson and sculptural work by Dutch artist Maria Roosen. Both Maria Roosen and Emily Kame Kngwarreye represented their respective countries at the Venice Biennale (in 1995 and 1997).



As a curator, the most challenging part is to make a large public, including art insiders, acquainted with work that is relevant in a global context by relatively unknown artists that are perceived to be local. Collaborations with other contemporary art initiatives seem to be a key to this attempt to change or adjust perceptions. Such exchanges offer in addition the rare possibility of providing new points of vantage for the work of well-known artists, of opening new perspectives. This is the case with the current exhibition "Nomads in Art" (until 5 October 2008). In this unusual encounter between Marcel Broodthaers and Aboriginal art, Broodthaers' work (including three-dimensional objects, 16mm projections and an audio work) is not shown beside objects or usually anonymous artefacts from the "traditional", religious perceptual domain of the Aborigines. On the contrary, Broodthaers's work is combined with the contemporary acrylic paintings produced by four Indigenous artists from the desert regions of central and west Australia (Kathleen Petyarre, Dorothy Napangardi, Lilly Kelly Napangardi and Jackie Giles). Attention has been given not to fall into the trap of imposing forced connections or comparisons onto the audience. It was simply decided that the work of the five artists should be shown together. The context of presentation – an exhibition in a museum – entails naturally the liberty and possibility to draw parallels and provides the opportunity to tentatively explore relationships between the various works. Yet, this cross-fertilisation has the potential of providing fresh perspectives from which to interpret and reinterpret the work of the Aboriginal artists and the work of Marcel Broodthaers. After all, no unambiguous meaning can be attributed to Broodthaers' oeuvre in which the artist and poet attempts to grasp the incomplete and unordered. Considering that the four Aboriginal artists try to deal with a very complex system which is handed down from generation to generation for the purpose of ordering things, of giving the world regularity, this certainly forms a fascinating encounter.

One of the aspects that recent exhibitions at AAMU make clear is that descriptions such as "Aboriginal" or "Indigenous" can be confusing at times. As the young Indigenous curators Keith Munro and Stephen Gilchrist suggest, labels can be very useful as providing background information, but can also be inadequate and anomalous.⁴ They risk pigeonholing artists and gate-keeping them from an international art context. Moreover, the diversity in art practices, backgrounds of the artists and cultural sites of

production of Australian Aboriginal art contradict the very idea of labelling. Nevertheless, the potential danger that a globalised art context presents in failing to capture or negating cultural specificity cannot be lost out of sight. This is the predicament of many non-Western artists. Cultural institutions play of course an important role in the way the artwork is displayed and in the ensuing perception of that artwork by a Western audience. AAMU, being located in Europe and having access to vast collections of international art, is in an excellent position to engage in dialogue and to attempt to challenge dominant perceptions of an artist's practice. One of the objectives of AAMU is precisely to contribute significantly to the discourses on the position of non-Western art in a Western art context. Through challenging exhibitions, informed catalogues and the hosting of guest lectures and round-table discussions, AAMU strives to participate in relevant debates surrounding Western and non-Western art.

In the upcoming exhibition "Brook Andrew: Theme-Park", the Australian artist Brook Andrew has been invited to produce an interactive exhibition. Andrew's interdisciplinary work generally comments on global and regional perceptions of race, politics, fame, capitalism and beauty. It can be rightly assumed that Brook Andrew strives not to be defined by his Indigeneity, even as his work presents a strong political engagement in Indigenous – non-Indigenous relationships. For AAMU, Brook Andrew is creating an intervention which will occupy the entire building. In a certain sense this exhibition will be almost the opposite of a conventional exhibition in a conventional museum; Andrew will turn the museum itself into an exhibition project, exposing its own records and objects mixed with kitsch and Andrew's own artwork. In this process driven installation, the artist will challenge what is an 'Aboriginal Art' museum, specifically in the European perception.

The author:

Georges Petitjean is a Belgian art historian who studied art history at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, and wrote his PhD on Western Desert art at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His field of interest is the transition of Indigenous Australian painting from its sites of origin in the deserts of west and central Australia to the wider art world. He has lived and worked in Australia for many years and since 1992 has closely followed the work of a number of artists in Central Australia and in the Kimberley. He was appointed curator at AAMU, Museum for Contemporary Art, in the Netherlands in 2005.

Notes

- 1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in Australian museum and art galleries is commonly one component of their collections.
- 2 On this discussion see Thomas Mc Evilly's seminal article on the strategies of exhibiting non-Western art in a Western art context in. Martin, Jean-Hubert (ed.): *Magiciens de la Terre*. Exhibition catalogue, Musée d'Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou. Paris, May-August 1989
- 3 I'm thinking here of some exhibitions at the Museum Dr. Guislain, which initially opened as a psychiatry museum, in Gent (Belgium). In their peripheral scope, these exhibitions in which "outsider" art is often combined with "high" art challenge the hierarchical, decision-making position of SMAK (Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent).
- 4 Keith Munro and Stephen Gilchrist in conversation with Margaret Farmer. In: Farmer, Margaret: *Points of convergence: Indigenous curators explore the question of contemporary within Aboriginal art*. In: *Art & Australia*, vol. 45, No. 4, winter 2008, p. 551-556