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On the reception of aboriginal art in German art space

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On the Reception of Aboriginal Art in German Art Space

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for
the award of the degree**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

**From
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

**By
Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, MA
Philipps University Marburg a. Lahn**

**FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS
2009**

CERTIFICATION

I, Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis

26 March 2009

ABSTRACT

German art history and ethnology have led to a binary reading of art that has inhibited the exhibition of Aboriginal art as contemporary art in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This thesis addresses the question of how Australian Aboriginal art is displayed in the institutional spaces of art galleries and museums in Germany.

I argue that there is an underlying current in Germany that divides the representation of art into European and “other”, particularly Aboriginal art. Within German culture, ethnological museums are ranked differently from art institutional spaces. The art museum or gallery is at the top of the hierarchy, enhancing the self-reflexive notion of culture, while the ethnological museum provides the context against which European, specifically German, identity and culture are pitched.

Aboriginal art that is contextualised as ethnographic and not as contemporary continues a Modernist perspective on cultural exchange, one that emphasises an essential difference between European and non-European art in a universal progress of humanity. This essentialising of culture in Germany does not reflect the globalised situation that evokes regional cultural inflections based on experiences and expressions of hybridity and fragmentation.

In order to understand how German art institutions and ethnographic museums stand for a Eurocentric art discourse, the thesis analyses the cultural parameters of nineteenth century Germany, the socio-political cataclysm of the Third Reich in the twentieth century, and the reversion to Modernism in its aftermath. In comparison, I outline the exhibition history and reception of Aboriginal art in Australia where the positioning of Indigenous and European traditions has shifted markedly into a postcolonial, postmodern situation since the 1980s.

My study investigates this categorisation into two entities through Western concepts of literacy and orality. Since the Enlightenment, the Western emphasis on alphabetic literacy as a system superior to oral transmission of knowledge has governed the way we make sense of the world around us. The written word underpins modes of exhibition display and reception, so that representation is read as text. As a consequence,

institutions and galleries, as part of visual culture, treat knowledge that is transmitted orally as inferior. This thesis explores strategies that allow the viewing of art outside the conventions of the written word.

I examine the modes of display and reception of Aboriginal art through fundamental ideas first put forward by Edward Said in Orientalism (1978), and also through Michel Foucault's The Order of Things (1970). My main focus, however, relates to Pierre Bourdieu's concepts surrounding Cultural Capital, Symbolic Capital and Symbolic Violence in his publications The Field of Cultural Production (ed. Randal Johnson 1993) and Language and Symbolic Power (trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson 1991) which allow an analysis of power relations in cultural exchange within the hierarchies of art institutions.

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In memoriam of Erika Heidecke (1912-2008),
my grandmother,
who passed away only months before this thesis was completed.

GLOSSARY

Aboriginal - The use of the terms Aboriginal or Aboriginal culture in the context of this research is problematic for various reasons: for one, Aboriginal derives from the colonial language used as a generic noun for the native population of mainland Australia and their insular inhabitants. Many contemporaries reject this and prefer the description Indigenous instead. Secondly, the use of the term Aboriginal or Aboriginal culture in its singular use is misleadingly implying a single, homogenous, monolingual society, which is not the case. The reasons why these terms have been retained (despite the danger of inviting criticism) in this research are twofold: the term is established in popular as well as academic language and have currency nationally and internationally - therefore practical considerations led me to continue with the use so far it is referring to events or research of the past; where it refers to contemporary issues, both Indigenous and Aboriginal are being used. Furthermore, the term Aboriginal functions on many occasions as signifier of what has been termed as “Aboriginality” in the 1980s, when it became a political expression and vehicle in the identity politics characterising Aboriginal activism from the 1960s onwards and in its capitalised form turned into a authoritative weapon in the battle against colonial structures.¹

Aboriginal art - comprises the Australian Aboriginal art used in ceremonial and secular contexts, including all traditional forms from sand and body painting, to bark paintings, dilly bags etc and everything that has been used for trade or exchange between groups or cultures in rural or urban settings.

Aboriginal culture - The term in its singular form is somewhat reduced and can be misleading since there has been always a cultural variety of Australia’s Aborigines, traditionally as well as today. Strictly, to speak of one Aboriginal culture is therefore incorrect. However, just as much as there is no one European culture, but an array of cultural distinctions, I will use both terms, as opposed to their plural form, because they both signify duality in cultural debate and represent dissimilar worldviews.

¹ See Ian McLean’s definition on “Aboriginality” in: Silvia Kleinert and Margo Neale The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Design, Oxford University Press, 2000

Anthropology - refers to the broader community of scientists, including English-speaking or otherwise (as opposed to ethnology – see annotation below).

Authenticity – The notion of authenticity is a social construct - that is the truthfulness of origins, attributions, commitments, sincerity, and intentions is defined by specific contexts; authenticity in ethnology for example refers to a quality of being genuine, unadulterated or any way corrupted from the original, while authenticity in art historical terms refers to authorship, provenance and originality. Elizabeth Burns Coleman established also clear notions of authenticity in Indigenous culture that refers to ownership, custodianship, spiritual and cultural responsibilities (2005). All three notions of authenticity can conflict when viewed within one specific context of representation such as the exhibition space.

Bildung = Kultur = Culture According to *Langenscheidts Taschenwörterbuch*, *Bildung* is: formation; education; culture ; knowledge; information; learning; refinement; good breeding) *Langenscheidts Taschenwörterbuch Englisch-Deutsch/Deutsch-Englisch* (1st 1884) (edition 81), Berlin and Munich, 1986.

Bildungsbürgertum – “Educated middle class”. The term describes a new social class formed in the eighteenth century that became the economically and culturally influential forefront of the German national-building. Education comprised humanistic goals like literature, music and science.

Culture/culture – here, the notion of culture draws on the following two distinctions: culture as a shared value system and system of knowledge, which has some affinity with the anthropological interpretation; and Culture (*Bildung*) in the German Romantic sense, as a universal aspiration and intellectual elitist construct.

Contemporary – The term indicates both a temporal and conceptual location. I use the term contemporary as in “here” and “now”, but also as active agent within the progress of modernity. Contemporary signifies opposition to “primitive”, “ethnic”, “neo-lithic”, “traditional”, “folk” art. In the Indigenous context, I refer to art that has been and is being produced since the time of the first cultural exchange between Indigenous and Europeans in Australia. In that sense I apply the term not so much as a temporal category, but as signifier of the parallel existence of Aboriginal art.

Ethnographic Museum – I refer here to Museums collections of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that are mainly colonial acquisitions.

Ethnological Museum – I apply the term to indicate conceptual change of representation since the 1980s with shifts towards hybrid cultural expressions taking into account the impact on colonialism or western imperialism in general.

Ethnology - is part of the social sciences and often as part of philosophy. The discipline is similarly concerned with issues explored in social anthropology (UK) and cultural anthropology (USA) (but not physical anthropology).

European art or Western art - refers in particular in the chapters on art history and ethnology to American, Canadian and Australian art and all art that have European art theory as its roots.

Folk art – According to Shearer West's (ed) The Bullfinch Guide to Art History, folk art is an expression of cultural identity by reflecting traditional art forms and aesthetics and is usually informally passed on to the next generation through apprenticeships. Folk art is handmade, utilitarian and decorative and - in its informal and traditional characteristics - stands in stark contrast to "fine art" (440). In art historical considerations, folk art ranks low in comparison to fine art.

German anthropology – physical anthropology

Indigenous/ indigenious – in small caps, indigenious refers to indigenous people from around the world; capitalised it refers to Aborigines in Australia.

Iwalewa Haus – Iwalewa (in Yoruba language - *Character is beauty*). The centre provides a place of contact between the German audience and "third world cultures" through art, writing, and music workshops, art exhibition and conferences.

Kulturstaat and Kulturnation - Translated: "culture state" and "culture nation" expand beyond a specific political unit (see Carr and Paul 335).

Non-European art - I use the expression "non-European" as signifier of art that has its roots in artistic traditions which were not conceived by the European idea of art and which under the Modernist coinage are often still related to as "primitive art".

Science = Knowledge= *Wissenschaft*: the term science in German is referred to all humanistic disciplines offered at university. The connotations here differ slightly from the English use. Ethnology is categorised as a social science. Art history is

considered as part of science of art (*Kunstwissenschaften*). Knowledge in German is, particularly in academia, linked to the scientific model of observation, evaluation and categorisation. There is no rigorous division between natural science (science) and other sciences such as art history or *studia humanitatis* (study of humanity) in general.

Postcolonialism – A cultural theory that delineates a polycentric, as opposed to a Eurocentric discourse, and positions towards re-writing colonial histories with emphases on experiences of diaspora, difference, hybridity, oral knowledge and translation.

Primitivism - Primitivism as a romantic art movement that reacted to the Enlightenment and its ideas. Primitivists opposed the idea of rational thinking versus emotional and sensory experience, by looking towards indigenous or so called “primitive art” for inspiration. German Expressionist used the notion of primitivism as a means for self renewal and to break away from tradition, academically and socially.

Tradition - encompasses the custom, knowledge, religious and social beliefs, and art that are transmitted from generation to generation and is associated with continuity and stability within a specific society over a long period. The term is often associated with oral cultures and in this context is used in its perceived opposition to modernity.

Völkerschau(en) – Peoples show(s): the exhibiting of groups of people for entertainment in world expositions towards the end of the nineteenth century. Later staged shows were often directed for the purpose of colonial spectacle, but were also used for ethnographic and anthropological research.

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