

# Contested Categories: Brook Andrew, Christian Thompson and the Framing of Contemporary Australian Art

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**T**HIS ESSAY ENGAGES, IN A SPECIFICALLY AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT, WITH A GLOBAL phenomenon whereby cultural producers previously categorised according to their non-Western ethnicities have begun to resist such naming practices. Such a phenomenon can be seen in statements made by curator Okwui Enwezor. He challenged the critical reception to the work of artists participating in *Snap Judgments*, a touring exhibition of contemporary photographers who, although of African background also seek other than purely ethnic or postcolonial readings of their work (in Bronwasser). Critique of ethnic categorisation has also been voiced by artists such as Bob Haozous in relation to Native American identity (in Wade and Strickland 16), Gonkar Gyatso in relation to Tibetan identity (Harris 706) and Rasheed Araeen in relation to the categorisation of art as Black British (58).

In an Australian context, recent decades have seen the emergence of city-based artists of Indigenous Australian origins who have challenged critical reception to their productions purely in terms of their categorisation as Aboriginal. In 1990, painter Trevor Nicholls stated:

My work is not purely Aboriginal art, it's a mixture. My work is cross-cultural and, as far as I'm concerned, by classifying it and saying it is Aboriginal art, by putting it in a box—well, that, to me, is racist. (107)

One of the best known exchanges about ethnic categorisation occurred in 1992 between Australian photographer and video-artist Tracey Moffatt and Clare Williamson, curator of the Institute of Modern Art exhibition *Who Do You Take Me For?* (Brisbane). Moffatt declined to participate in this group show of photo-based art by Australian and British artists whose work, according to the curator, concerned issues of marginalisation and identity politics (Williamson and Moffatt 6-8). In relation to the showing of her work in *Who Do You Take Me For?*, Moffatt wrote in a fax to Williamson:

I have never been a mere social issues type artist, in fact my work has never been BLACK. (If there is such a definition). I have made a point staying out of all black or 'other' shows. ... I want to be exhibited in Contemporary Art Spaces and not necessarily always bunched together with other artists who make careers out of 'finding themselves-looking for their identities'!! (Williamson and Moffatt 6)

Yet, despite such vocal opposition from Moffatt and other artists such as Gordon Bennett and Trevor Nicholls (see also Watson), and despite the awareness amongst non-Indigenous art professionals about the problem of categorisation (e.g., Bonyhady; Johnson, 'The unbounded biennale' 56; Portch; Watson), the characterisation of artists' works and artistic identities as Aboriginal has persisted.

Drawing on ethnographic research into Australia's visual art world, my analysis of ethnic categorisation in Australia investigates the cultural values and professional practices that define contemporary artistic production. My discussion focuses particularly on the career and work of Brook Andrew, one of Australia's leading contemporary artists and someone who has been particularly vocal about his rejection of ethnic categorisation. Since emerging onto the Australian art scene, Andrew initially embraced but later questioned his public profile as, variously, Indigenous artist, Aboriginal artist, Wiradjuri artist, Aboriginal photographic artist and urban-based Indigenous artist (see Coslovich, 'The culture'; Crombie 10; Hansen 9; C. Nicholls, 'Brook Andrew'). More recently, however, Andrew has opposed such categorisation of his identity (Andrew, pers. comm. 29 July 2006). Even so, while in interviews Andrew has expressed his preference for the ethnically and racially neutral label 'artist' (Andrew, 'Telling our own'; in Crawford, 'Black beauty'), he does not resist classification of aspects of his art and design as Wiradjuri. Andrew's complex response to ethnic categorisation has taken place in a contemporary context in which many artists identify with and see themselves through the lens of cosmopolitanism. As I argue here, his work can also be understood in terms of a process Erving Goffman has described as the 'performance of impressions'.

### **The presentation of self in everyday life**

Art critics, academics, curators, museum directors and art dealers all play an active part in how work is categorised. Their choices, disseminated not just through exhibitions but through art journals, newspapers, public lectures and advertising, have produced ethnic categorisation. Artists also have a role in the classification of their art. While they cannot exert complete control over how their art practices and works are characterised, artists can act to (consciously) influence reception. 'Impression management' (Goffman) is one way of thinking about the extent to which an artist like Andrew can influence reception to his work.

In his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman explores how individuals present themselves and their activities to others in social encounters. Goffman argues that, through their actions, people wittingly and unwittingly impress themselves on their 'audiences' (15). Creating an analogy with theatre, he suggests that all activity of a given person on a given occasion which serves to affect other participants can be loosely described as a performance. Artists like Brook Andrew express themselves not only through the form and content of their artworks and in interviews and artist talks. They also present themselves and their work through participation in exhibitions and, once established, choice of dealer gallery. Such choices are made in a cultural context in which the work of producers can, over time, be categorised according to a collective impression, which equals an artist's reputation (Bromley).

Goffman argues that the impression cultivated by an individual is very fragile (60) and draws attention to the need for people to build a reputation based on a homogenous performance. He states: 'The audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them' (141). Consequently, to prevent disruption of the performance, performers must guide and control the impression others come to form of them and their activities. Goffman uses the term impression management to explain such endeavours. He concedes that it is difficult for human beings to maintain expressive coherence, not in the least because our ideas about who we are and how we want to be seen by others develop over time (60).

The characterisation and contextualisation of artists' works and artistic identities as Aboriginal results in part from the performance in which city-based Indigenous Australians and Australian art professionals are mutually involved.

The importance of 'impression management' to Brook Andrew can be analysed in terms of four stages of his career.<sup>1</sup>

### *Making a first impression*

The first phase covers the years from the beginning of Andrew's practice until approximately 1997. When Andrew completed his Bachelor of Visual Arts at the University of Sydney in 1993, he arrived in an art world within which the category of contemporary Aboriginal art had only just emerged. Following the longstanding consignment of Indigenous artistic production to the realms of ethnography and, to a lesser extent, the category of primitive art, the 1950s finally saw Aboriginal art gain recognition within the established context of Australian fine art (Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art' 39-40). The acquisition of key works by artists from the Tiwi Islands and north-east Arnhem Land by the Art Gallery of New South Wales set the stage for the move of Aboriginal art from the non-art to the fine art category. Still, it would take until the 1980s before most Australian galleries started to collect works by Indigenous Australians. Initially deemed authentically Aboriginal were works perceived as free of European influence, such as bark paintings from Arnhem Land (Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art' 46-7). This cultural prejudice shifted in the 1980s when acrylic art of the Western and Central Desert began to be exhibited widely. This work was perceived as both continuous with Aboriginal iconographic traditions yet also as being shaped by contemporary forms, materials and politics.

This period can also be characterised by what some critics and commentators have argued was a widespread perception about the inauthenticity of city-based artists, that is those living in metropolitan locales and trained in urban art schools (Langton, 'Culture wars' 84). In defiance of these misperceptions, Aboriginal Australians living and working in urban locales collectively fought a politics of recognition (Taylor). It is significant that a new urban Aboriginal movement emerged that brought together art, culture, politics and identity (Croft, 'A very brief bit' 20). Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Cooperative was at the heart of this new movement. Established in Sydney in 1987, Boomalli played a crucial role in providing city-based practitioners with otherwise rare exhibition space and other opportunities that enabled them to present their work on their own terms. The cooperative created visibility for its members, including co-founder Tracey Moffatt, when the Australian art world was largely unreceptive to city-based Aboriginal work.

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<sup>1</sup> I distinguish trends that developed over long periods of time. Since their onset is seldom immediately obvious, it is difficult to define clear-cut start and end dates.

Brook Andrew joined Boomalli just after completing art school. In retrospect, he has explained how the cooperative presented one of few platforms for the display of his art in an otherwise unreceptive art world (pers. comm. 29 July 2006). R e a, fellow artist member of Boomalli during that period, and Brenda Croft, general manager of the cooperative during the first half of the 1990s, have corroborated this account (R e a, pers. comm. 11 Oct. 2007; Croft, pers. comm. 2 July 2013). Nevertheless, an analysis of exhibitions staged and art journals published at that time shows that, notwithstanding artists' felt experience of exclusion, the marginalisation of city-based artists had already undergone change. In Australia, their works were increasingly discussed and included in (prestigious) contemporary art displays, such as the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney (1992/93) (see Croft, 'Boomalli'; De Lorenzo; Johnson, 'Into the urbane').

During the first stage in his career, Brook Andrew predominantly exhibited his work in Aboriginal group exhibitions, many of which were curated by Boomalli. Through this cooperative, where the artist also worked as a curator for some time, Andrew took part in national and international shows. These exhibitions exclusively displayed art by Indigenous Australians and focused on experiences of marginalisation and exclusion as well as on themes like racial discrimination and colonisation. Artworks on display actively engaged with Indigenous political activism and past and present visual representations of Aboriginal peoples, identities and culture. At the outset, Andrew's works of art were first and foremost contextualised as Aboriginal.

#### *Becoming contemporary Australian*

In the year 1997, Brook Andrew left Boomalli to further develop his practice. By then, the driving forces behind the cooperative's achievements, general manager Brenda Croft and curator Hetti Perkins, had left to pursue other opportunities. New staff turned Boomalli from a thriving internationally oriented arts initiative back to a community based art space with a focus on local artists. R e a has reflected: 'Artists like Brook and I, we just fell through the cracks. We started to negotiate our own shows and residencies' (pers. comm. 11 Oct. 2007). This marked the beginning of a second period in Brook Andrew's career, a period during which he increasingly fostered an impression of his art and artistic identity as Aboriginal and contemporary Australian. On the one hand, Andrew entered and won Indigenous art awards, including the Kate Challis Raka Award (1998), and exhibited his work in Aboriginal group exhibitions, such as the national travelling show *Re-Take: Contemporary Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Photography* (1998-2000). On the other hand, the artist took part in several group exhibitions together with non-Indigenous artists and entered art awards open to all Australian artists, like the discontinued Citigroup Private Bank *Australian Photographic Portraiture Prize* (2003). He also started to take up

international residencies in countries as far apart as India and the United Kingdom. Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, a high profile commercial gallery that specialises in contemporary Indigenous Australian art, gave Andrew his first dealer exhibition in 2000. The artist then also joined Stills Gallery in Sydney and Greenaway Art Gallery in Adelaide, both of which include practitioners of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds. Through his activities, Andrew thus presented himself to his audience as a contemporary Aboriginal artist. That is, he can be widely understood as an artist who successfully operated in Australia's contemporary art realm with a recurring emphasis on shows and events dedicated to Indigenous Australians.

Looking back, Brook Andrew has explained how, as an emerging practitioner new to the Australian art world, he felt supported by the presence of artists and curators of Indigenous backgrounds at Boomalli (pers. comm. 29 July 2006). As Andrew has related, it was the first time that he met art practitioners who shared, to an extent, his experiences, viewpoints and background. Boomalli presented a place where the artist felt understood. During the early 1990s, when the constraints that compelled practitioners like Tracey Moffatt to start out within an urban Aboriginal art context were disappearing from the scene, the Aboriginal environment represented by Boomalli continued to hold considerable appeal. Artist *r e a* has described how she felt supported in the company of artists and art professionals of Indigenous origin (pers. comm. 11 Oct. 2007). During our interview, *r e a* further revealed how her involvement in this Aboriginal setting provided her with access to (information about) residencies, funding and exhibitions. The Aboriginal art context beyond Boomalli has similarly constituted a preferred starting point for artists who have emerged more recently. In the late 1990s, Christian Thompson, then a Queensland-based art student, sought out established Indigenous Australians like Fiona Foley and Brenda Croft to correspond with them about art (pers. comm. 24 Apr. 2006). Following his move to Melbourne in 1999, Thompson set off by primarily curating and exhibiting in Aboriginal group shows. Before relocating to Europe—the artist currently lives and works in the United Kingdom—he referred to Melbourne-based artists and art professionals of Aboriginal backgrounds as his 'family' (pers. comm. 16 May 2006).

It is thus not uncommon for city-based artists first to establish a strong foothold within a (supportive) Aboriginal art context before, as in the case of each of the aforementioned practitioners, becoming principally active as part of exhibitions, residencies, art prizes and other art events not exclusively dedicated to Indigenous Australians. Yet, while artists such as Thompson, *r e a* and Andrew have furthered their art practices, achieving renown in the wider Australian art world and beyond, first impressions remain resistant to change (Sjovall and Talk

279). Once a reputation as Aboriginal artist has been established, it is difficult to move away from the 'label' Aboriginal.

### *Questioning the public profile*

From 2004 onwards, Brook Andrew has explicitly rejected the categorisation of his art and artistic identity as Aboriginal. This turn to open disavowal of ethnic categorisation echoes the development of Tracey Moffatt's and Gordon Bennett's antagonism towards the Aboriginal 'label'. As artists mature and develop a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 25), they become increasingly familiar with the intricate relationship between being known as an Aboriginal artist and (mis)perceptions. Recognition as Aboriginal artist may bring viewers to anticipate artworks that inevitably and solely deal with Aboriginal people, history and 'culture' (also see Turney 428). On the international stage, preconceived ideas about the supposed primitivism and ethnographic status of art by Aboriginal Australians linger and proceed to affect the inclusion of such art within the contemporary art realm (Petitjean, 'The AAMU'). Both Moffatt (Williamson and Moffatt 6) and Andrew have shown awareness of the link between ethnic categorisation, misperceptions and career opportunities. In an interview with me, the latter expressed the concern that international curators who visit Australia to scout artists for biennales might choose to call in on renowned dealers such as Anna Schwartz Gallery and Tolarno Galleries while disregarding commercial galleries focused on Indigenous art, due to mistaken notions of what constitutes contemporary Australian art (pers. comm. 29 July 2006). Using Tracey Moffatt as an example, Andrew ruminated that artists of Indigenous backgrounds are compelled to think carefully about which dealer to show with.

Between the years 2004 and 2006, a period which I distinguish as the third stage in Andrew's career, the artist chiefly stated and elaborated on his position concerning ethnic categorisation. He used public forums such as newspapers, television, symposia and journal articles to articulate his viewpoints. In an interview for the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC), Andrew stated:

When I first started making art, people would label me as 'the gay black artist'. And I'd think, 'Uh-uh. This is a load of crap. I can't cope with all of these identities. I'm an artist'. Sure, you know, my Aboriginality has a lot to do with that, and also my sexuality has a lot to do with it, because I have a perception which is different to other people's lived experiences. But, at the end of the day, I'm part of a broader art spectrum, and I'm really interested in international art. And I'm really interested in different mediums. And I like being liked because I'm an artist, not because I ... have those other identities.

Following a conversation with Andrew, art critic Ashley Crawford wrote in *The Age*:

‘Being Aboriginal is my identity,’ he says. ‘What I don’t like about being labelled as an Aboriginal artist is that it boxes me into the ways in which people think I should create art and especially, always being placed within Aboriginal shows only. Like any stereotype, it has its disadvantages. I love who I am and my cultural being, but within the art world, I (and there are others, like Tracey Moffatt) want to be recognised as just an artist who works hard for their own work to be expressed and made without a particular type of mentality which surrounds our work and subjects. Sure, some subjects refer to our Aboriginality, but it doesn’t bind us.’ (‘Black beauty’)

The motivations put forth by Andrew to explain his opposition to ethnic categorisation have also been voiced by others. Artist r e a has observed:

What it does is it keeps me separate from the rest of the Australian art community and it also keeps me separate from the rest of the world. ... I know Brook and Christian [Thompson] and a number of people have galleries now. But I still haven’t felt like I have found the right space that is willing to take me on as an artist for who I am. And who understands the work and who is willing to push my work as: This is r e a, who makes these works. Yes, she is an Indigenous Australian but it is about the work. Not the person that is on show. (pers. comm. 11 Oct. 2007)

In 2006, when I first met Brook Andrew, the artist remarked that his explicit opposition to the framing of his work and artistic identity as Aboriginal had not put an end to ethnic categorisation (pers. comm. 29 July 2006). He attributed the persistence of this form of categorisation to his original involvement in the Aboriginal art context represented by Boomalli. Though research on the significance and unyielding nature of first impressions supports Andrew’s conclusion (e.g., Kelley; Sjøvall and Talk; Tetlock), the continuation of this contested practice cannot solely be attributed to Andrew’s presentation of himself at the *beginning* of his career.

#### *The ambiguous impression and its management*

During the third phase discerned here, Brook Andrew continued to participate in Indigenous group exhibitions and maintained his affiliation with Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi. Furthermore, several of the platforms used by Andrew to articulate his resistance to ethnic categorisation constituted forums for discussing Indigenous cultural production. For instance, the aforementioned ABC interview was presented as part of *Message Stick*, a weekly Indigenous program.



The artist also stated his position as part of the *Blakatak Program of Thought*, a series of symposia hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and devised by Andrew to critically debate and generate ideas about Aboriginal art.

Andrew's involvement in Australia's Indigenous art world continues to attest to his identification with multiple aspects of his heritage, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Wiradjuri and Scottish identities. Essentially, the artist rejects the reduction of his art to one dimension of his self. As Rasheed Araeen has argued:

The issue is not whether one relates to one's own culture or not (who decides what is one's own culture?), but whether one has the freedom to define oneself as an individual according to one's own choice and creative imagination (which should include one's right to opposition and dissent).  
(64)

This argument has not resonated with those art professionals who have suggested to me in interviews that Brook Andrew's continuing participation in Aboriginal art events is inconsistent with his resistance against ethnic categorisation. In May 2006, a staff member at a commercial gallery observed how the artist did not want to be classified as Indigenous. Yet, she continued, Andrew still 'allowed' curators to identify his ethnicity by putting the word Wiradjuri in brackets behind his name. During a meeting in April 2007, an experienced curator and art historian critiqued the artist's opposition to the framing of his art and artistic identity as Aboriginal in light of his persistent involvement in Aboriginal group exhibitions. It appeared to me that this curator, who was keen to include the artist in a show at the time, felt somewhat daunted by the prospect of interpreting and writing about Andrew's work as part of the planned exhibit.

In the period that Andrew began explicitly and publicly to reject ethnic categorisation, his presentation of self lacked the expressive coherence required for the audience involved in the performance to sustain the desired impression. As recognised by Goffman, the demand for expressive coherence articulated within professional art practices is nigh impossible to comply with (60). The notion of a homogenous performance also clashes with what is widely acknowledged in the anthropological discipline, namely that ethnic identities do not encompass a coherent essence of practices, ideas and symbols. Instead, identities are in flux, multiple and subject to modulation (Barth). Brook Andrew's response to art professionals who proceed to invoke his Aboriginality when describing or characterising his work and artistic identity is to develop a more strategic approach to the presentation of self. During the fourth stage, which commenced around 2006 and continues at the time of writing, the artist uses

different techniques of impression management to guide and control the impression received by his audience. While Andrew's impression management does not completely obliterate the ambiguity perceived by certain art professionals—the artist continues to be active within art exhibitions identifiable as Aboriginal<sup>2</sup>—his responses alter the prevailing context in which viewers encounter his art.

One way in which Andrew manages broader impressions of his artistic identity is through careful consideration of the extent to which he participates in Aboriginal group exhibitions. Wanting to forge a new language for the conceptualisation of his art, he largely avoids shows that emphasise the interrelation between art and Indigenous identity, or focus exclusively on Aboriginality, identity politics and political activism. For example, in 2007 he declined an invitation to participate in the exhibition *Power & Beauty Indigenous Art Now*, held at Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art (Andrew, pers. comm. 18 Oct. 2007). While not critical of Indigenous group exhibitions per se, Andrew like Moffatt refrains from participating in exhibitions that evoke what he describes as an outmoded and less interesting discourse around Indigenous Australian art (Andrew, pers. comm. 18 Oct. 2007).

Andrew also seeks to influence public reception of his work by editing written texts. From 2006 onwards, the artist has sought to influence newspaper reviews, essays in exhibition catalogues and wall texts. For instance, during a lunch with Ashley Crawford, Andrew challenged the critic—who had previously alluded to the artist's Aboriginality in a number of articles ('Black beauty', 'Collectable artists')—to review his retrospective exhibition *Eye to Eye* without referencing his Aboriginal background (Andrew, pers. comm. 18 Oct. 2007). In response, Crawford published a newspaper article which quoted Andrew in its portrayal of him as 'an interdisciplinary artist who is inspired by historical, local and contemporary culture, especially in the diverse constructions of power, difference and aesthetics' ('Sexy'). Crawford consulted with Andrew, enabling him to suggest revisions concerning the conceptualisation of his artworks before its publication (pers. comm. 9 Oct. 2007).

The coming into being of *Eye to Eye*, a touring show developed by the Monash University Museum of Art, provides another example. Curator Geraldine Barlow described to me how she originally intended to present Andrew to viewers by referring to his multiple backgrounds through use of the terms Wiradjuri, Scottish and Anglo-Celtic (pers. comm. 13 Feb. 2007). However, in the process of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Brook Andrew participated in the exhibition *Half Light: Portraits from Black Australia*, staged by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2008-9. In 2013, he mentored a group of artists of Indigenous backgrounds as part of The Native Institute Exhibition held at Blacktown Arts Centre.

developing the retrospective, the artist expressed his unease about such references to identity. Consequently, the curator decided not to allude to Andrew's heritage in the exhibition space. Brook Andrew, in turn, explained how he had long conversations with Geraldine Barlow (pers. comm. 13 Feb. 2007). During those conversations, he not only reiterated his viewpoints on the limitations of ethnic categorisation but also urged Barlow to delete references to ethnicity from her catalogue essay. In the end, the curator refrained from situating Andrew's oeuvre within a discourse on Aboriginality and cultural identity. She did however choose to reference the artist's 'Wiradjuri ancestors' (Barlow, 'Brook Andrew').

Third, and finally, Brook Andrew decided to change his association with commercial galleries. Leaving Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Stills Gallery and Greenaway Gallery, Andrew joined the stable of Melbourne's Tolarno Galleries. One reason for this move pertained to the perceived similarities between his practice and the oeuvre and ideas of those already represented by this art dealer (Andrew, pers. comm. 29 July 2006). In addition, for reasons alluded to earlier, the artist was ready to move away from the contemporary Aboriginal art context epitomised by Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi. Tolarno Galleries represents and provides access to symbolic capital in national and international art worlds. It constitutes one of Australia's top five commercial galleries for contemporary art (Crone) through which Andrew can foster an impression of himself as an interdisciplinary, conceptual artist. Jan Minchin, director of Tolarno Galleries, has stressed to me that her gallery presents the artist with a different context for his practice, outside of any pigeonholes (pers. comm. 2 Aug. 2008).

### **Aboriginal cosmopolitanism**

Until now, I have showed how the unyielding nature of the first impression and the impossibility of completely overcoming an ambiguous impression have contributed to the persistence of ethnic categorisation. Techniques of impression management used by Brook Andrew and by Tracey Moffatt before him have met with some success. For instance, in 2010, when the National Gallery of Australia opened its new showcase of contemporary art by Indigenous Australians, director Ron Radford described how Tracey Moffatt's work had been put on display outside of the Indigenous galleries, in line with the artist's preferred presentation of her practice (in Gill). Brook Andrew's strategic interventions in the (re)presentation of his art and artistic identity have, as exemplified above, encouraged certain curators and critics to modify their behaviour. Especially those who have had substantial personal contact with the artist effectively avoid ethnic categorisation today (e.g., Petitjean, 'Dissecting'). However, impression management has not resulted in the eradication of ethnic categorisation (Bowdler; Dolan; Moffatt in Smee).

Ethnic categorisation also continues because several art professionals struggle with artworks in which Aboriginal experiences, practices, philosophies, histories and symbolism are in conversation with or juxtaposed to non-Indigenous histories, lifestyles, identities and practices. Wrestling with the categories and language available to them, some critics, curators, dealers and museum directors focus on Aboriginal ethnicity at the cost of considering cosmopolitanism. Others invoke artists' Aboriginality only to construct an erroneous opposition between Indigenous and cosmopolitan elements in works of art. Before elaborating on the failure to adequately recognise and describe cosmopolitanism in art by city-based Indigenous Australians, I will analyse works by Brook Andrew and Christian Thompson that exemplify the skilful combining of Aboriginal particularity and a cosmopolitan disposition.

*Peace, The Man and Hope*

In 2005, Brook Andrew created the triptych *Peace, The Man and Hope*.<sup>3</sup> The centre screen-print of this collage consists of a digital photograph of Anthony Mundine, a renowned sportsman of Aboriginal origin, dressed in shorts. Known as 'the Man', Mundine is one of Australia's most celebrated and controversial athletes. The sportsman, whose shift from rugby league to professional boxing received much attention, has been outspoken about race relations. His statements have frequently caused public debate (Hurst and Phelps; Whyte). *Peace, The Man and Hope* portrays a person who has challenged entrenched racism in Australian society and persistently fought for justice for Indigenous people. In addition, the athlete symbolises perseverance. To several Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, Mundine is a role model and a hero (Langton, 'High excellent' 28). While we could understand Andrew's depiction of Anthony Mundine as evidence of a predominant concern with Aboriginal issues, there is also more at play. In Andrew's artwork, the sportsman functions as a sign for the spectacle produced around his body by the media. Mundine's shift to boxing, his conversion to Islam and his assertions about racism, women and the war on terror have made him a public persona. *Peace, The Man and Hope* is less concerned with Mundine's Aboriginality than with the politics of representation surrounding this celebrity. The work comments on the rhetoric espoused by the media, which veers between adoration and vilification.

Below Mundine's arms two cigarette packages convey the ideals of hope and peace. On a visit to Japan, Andrew came across these packages with the actual brand names 'Hope' and 'Peace'. Their use in this artwork communicates, as

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<sup>3</sup> The artwork can be viewed on the artist's website. It is listed under print media and belongs to the *Hope and Peace* series. See <<http://www.brookandrew.com/art.html>>.

Marcia Langton has observed, the irony of selling peace and hope via the ultimate American consumer good, namely cigarettes, to the post-Hiroshima Japanese ('High excellent' 28). The cigarette packages with their English trademarks attest to the globalisation of modern consumerism. Consumers around the world are enticed to satisfy human wants with destructive commodities that, sardonically, are promoted with words denoting optimism and faith. Seen in the context of the war on terror led by the United States, the combination of the colours of the peace flag portrayed on Mundine's arms with the trademarks hope and peace signify something different again. Langton has written in the catalogue accompanying the *Hope and Peace* series: 'This exhibition speaks back to the madness and contradictions of war with works of art bearing the double message of peace and hope' (Langton, 'High excellent' 26).

The texts NGAJUU NGAAY NGINDUUGIRR and NGINDUUGIRR NGAAY NGAJUU, positioned below Mundine's arms beneath the cigarette packages, respectively mean 'I see you' and 'you see me'. These Wiradjuri words comprise a recurring lexical theme in Andrew's practice (C. Nicholls, 'Transcending' 56). The artist's use of Wiradjuri language points us toward processes of inclusion and exclusion and to different speaking positions. The texts, excluding most viewers from comprehension, draw attention to the pivotal relation between understanding language and having access to knowledge. Previously, Andrew has explained his use of Wiradjuri language as follows: 'It's about denial—about who's in and who's out' (in Delahunt n.pag.).

When we shift our focus from the content to the visual language of Andrew's artwork, the striking diamond-shaped black and white designs come into view. These form the background against which Mundine, the cigarette packages and the Wiradjuri texts have been placed. They constitute Wiradjuri symbols, found on shields and carved trees, from the artist's mother's country. Andrew, who has used these mesmerising patterns on many occasions, refers to them as his mantra ('Brook Andrew' 176). The intricate geometric forms are reminiscent of Bridget Riley's early black and white paintings. Riley, a leading exponent of op art, is acclaimed for optically pulsating paintings. Similar to *Peace, The Man and Hope*, several of Riley's works generate a sense of movement and arrest viewers with remarkable optical effects (Follin).

Alternative aesthetic influences also reveal themselves in Andrew's work. It's ironic propaganda of peace and hope, via cigarette packaging, has been inspired by Russian constructivism, especially by the political posters produced by Gustav Klutis during the 1920s and 1930s (Langton, 'High excellent' 26). Constructivists' celebration of revolutionary mass culture and industrial development has shaped Andrew's ideas on the use of propaganda and mass consumption.

*Peace, The Man and Hope* also evokes pop art, particularly the legendary practice and figure of Andy Warhol. Similar to American artists Warhol and Rosenquist, Andrew displays a fascination for the iconography of advertising and mass media, the rhetoric of consumerism and everyday objects with an aura of mass production. *Peace, The Man and Hope*, in particular the image of Anthony Mundine, reminds me of Warhol's portraits of film stars and socialites. Aside from displaying the spectacular elements of contemporary mass culture, Andrew's work conjures up pop art through its material form. The large scale of *Peace, The Man and Hope*, as well as its colours, bears a resemblance to some of James Rosenquist's monumental artworks.

In *Peace, The Man and Hope* we thus encounter elements of Wiradjuri culture juxtaposed with recognisable material of contemporary Western societies. Brook Andrew has said about the *Hope & Peace* series, which includes the triptych discussed here:

Focusing on the intentions of the mass electronic and published media I aim to interrogate contemporary culture, teasing from populism to spew forth ironic takes on 'globalism'. Mixing and representing cultural identities from Australia, neighbouring countries of Asia and the 'Americas'. Our obsession/anxiety with artificial and popular constructs of identity, i.e. Australian Aboriginal and other cultures; celebrity, personality, war supremacy, revolution & spiritual fulfilment manifest through mass media/cultural activity. Lighting up our lives with popular, (mostly singular) illusions and extrusions of something that is not always 'us/me'. ('no title' 4)

*Peace, The Man and Hope* evinces a form of cosmopolitanism defined by Ulf Hannerz as 'first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences' (239). It is important to note that Andrew's approach to combining references to Aboriginal ethnicity with a cosmopolitan outlook is not exceptional amongst city-based artists of Indigenous origins. Christian Thompson's *Lost Together* (2009) series presents us with another example of the concurrence of cosmopolitanism and Aboriginality.

### *Lost Together*

In 2008, artist Christian Thompson moved to the Netherlands to commence a two-year course at DasArts, a school for the advanced studies of the performing arts. After twelve months in Amsterdam, he produced the photographic series *Lost Together*. Here, I focus on two images from this series, namely *Humpy Away from Home* and *Xanthorrhoea Australis—Donkere jongen uit Nederland 1*. In

*Humpy Away From Home* a figure with a blond beard (played by Thompson) is stretched out on a tartan blanket holding an axe in his arms. The tree, ferns and leaves surrounding this bearded figure suggest that he resides outdoors. A red shelter made from branches ostensibly offers protection.



*Figure 1: Christian Thompson, Humpy Away from Home (2009), from the series Lost Together. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne.*

*Xanthorrhoea Australis—Donkere jongen uit Nederland 1* is also set in a forest environment. It presents a somewhat barren scene marked by dead leaves, mostly leafless trees and tree stumps. A figure (likewise played by the artist) crouches down on the ground. He is dressed in white Reebok shoes, white tights, white torn off denim jeans and a white hoodie. The character's neck and torso are covered by a garment made out of fluorescent orange ruffled feathers. An

orange coloured wooden stick, of considerable length and with white feathers on top, seems to sprout from the dead leaves. It is clutched tightly by the figure.<sup>4</sup>

Dutch influences are readily apparent. The fluorescent orange is a symbol of Dutch nationalism. Orange officially stands for the Dutch royal family. Over time, it has become known as the colour of the nation. At the annual King's Day or during events that unite the Dutch populace, such as soccer matches, entire cities turn exuberantly orange. This Dutch fascination with orange, pointed out to me by Thompson during the European soccer championships in 2008, moved the artist. At the time of the championships, he collected several newspaper clippings containing photographs of Dutch soccer supporters singing, dancing and shouting whilst dressed in the national colour from head to toe. The artist dubbed their appearance and behaviour 'Dutch tribalism' (pers. comm. 20 June 2008). The sceneries in which Thompson's fantastical characters subsist are also unmistakably Dutch. The moodiness, darkness and melancholy captured by Thompson conjure up Dutch landscape paintings, particularly those by seventeenth-century artist Jacob van Ruisdael.

*Lost Together* depicts Christian Thompson's relationship to his non-Indigenous heritage and relatives. The artist explained to me shortly after making this series:

Here, I was looking a lot more into my mum's family history. That was just something I was doing because I live here [in the Netherlands]. It has become more significant to me here at the other side of the world. It is a large part of my cultural background or cultural heritage. (pers. comm. 26 May 2009)

In *Humpy Away From Home*, Thompson references his non-Aboriginal origin by dressing up with a beard to look like his non-Indigenous great-grandfather Isaac. Some of the titles of the other images in *Lost Together* even include this relative's name. Visiting Australia during a recess at DasArts, Thompson researched his mother's family history. The artist's investigation revealed that his non-Indigenous ancestors came to Australia from the United Kingdom and Germany both as settlers and convicts. The character in *Humpy Away From Home*, holding an axe to cultivate the land and seeking shelter in what appears to be an inhospitable, uncharted forest, calls to mind the predicament of many of such early Australian settlers. Visually, the work brings to mind Frederick McCubbin's colonial paintings such as *Down on his luck* (1889) and *The Pioneer* (1904).

*Lost Together* conjures up a sense of nostalgia, a traveller's longing for home. At the same time, the photographs touch on the process of creating a place for

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<sup>4</sup> The *Lost Together* photographs can be viewed on the artist's website. See <<http://www.christianthompson.net/>>.



oneself in an unfamiliar environment. The artist has reflected: 'For me, it was about imbuing a sense of Australia into the world' (pers. comm. 26 May 2009). This sense of Australia cannot be easily defined, but emerges from elements present in the works. In *Humpy Away From Home*, as indicated by the caption, the artist has used found objects to construct the kind of small, temporary dwelling commonly built by Indigenous Australians in the past. This impermanent shelter constitutes an Indigenous refuge in an alien space. In an image not analysed here, Australia is evoked through a kangaroo brooch worn by the fictional character. Finally, *Xanthorrhoea Australis* is the name of a unique Australian plant also known as the grass tree or black boy. The latter phrase refers to the purported similarity in appearance to a spear held by an Aboriginal youngster squatting behind bushes.

*Xanthorrhoea Australis—Donkere jongen uit Nederland 1*, which translates as 'dark boy from Holland', exemplifies the introduction of an Australian native species into the Dutch landscape. Thompson, firmly clutching the flowering grass tree spike, presents viewers with his own arrival and presence in the Netherlands as the 'dark youth'. It seems like the spike-cum-spear has been placed in the ground as a marker of Australian, or specifically Indigenous Australian, presence. The positioning of this spike-cum-spear in the Dutch forest could even symbolise an act of reverse colonialism, an inversion of the historic use of the Union Jack to mark the annexation of Aboriginal land.

Thompson has thus merged references to European ancestry, landscapes and painting traditions with symbols of Australianness and, specifically, Aboriginality. His *Lost Together* images expose the aesthetic and intellectual openness to different cultural influences and experiences cited by Hannerz as aspects of cosmopolitanism (239). What is more, the photographs evidence what John Tomlinson has described as the ability of the cosmopolitan to 'live—ethically, culturally—in both the global and the local at the same time' (194-5). Whilst physically present on the international stage, and absorbing the aesthetic of that stage, the artist has employed local Australian symbolism to create a visual narrative.

#### *Conceiving cosmopolitanism*

It is possible to find interpretations of *Peace, The Man and Hope* that address the collage's multifaceted character without resorting to ethnic categorisation. Avoiding descriptions of Andrew as an Aboriginal artist who makes Aboriginal art, Marcia Langton has discussed his work as a comment on 'the insinuation of excessive consumerism into the lives of alienated youth, despised racial groups and victims of globalisation' ('Ethical portraits' 58). Noting the juxtaposition of constructivist-inspired design, Asian cigarettes brands and Wiradjuri words,

Anthony Gardner has commented on ‘the Man’ and the multiple (not necessarily Indigenous) connotations associated with his image (79-81). Thus far I have not encountered a published contribution on *Lost Together* that does not frame the artist or his work as Aboriginal, although particular authors have highlighted the works’ references to colonial painting, Thompson’s European heritage, European football matches and Dutch national colours (e.g., Croft, ‘I see deadly people’; Inglis).

Significantly, the presence of cosmopolitan elements in artworks by Thompson and Andrew is frequently played down and emphasis is placed on so-called Aboriginal content (for a similar argument, see Gardner). Whilst mentioning Thompson’s encounter with Dutch culture, Connal Parsley’s interpretation of *Lost Together* concentrates on the thematic of Indigenous identity and representation which, according to the author, ‘offers a rubric through which to read Thompson’s work’ (35). Parsley interprets the *Lost Together* images as evidence of the artist’s talent for ‘brokering—and disabling—the markers and expectations of Indigenous identity in the present’. In a review of the *Hope & Peace* series, Penny Craswell touches on Andrew’s pop art aesthetic and the references to war. Yet, she stresses that despite the artist’s resistance to being categorised as Aboriginal, the screen-prints principally focus on ‘the politics of Aboriginal Australia within an international context’. In an interview with me, an Australian writer and art critic similarly demonstrated what Marcia Langton has called the denial of cosmopolitanism in art by Indigenous Australians (‘Ethical portraits’ 53). The critic remarked:

Artists can say all sorts of things about themselves, but unfortunately that is only one view of them. There are a whole lot of other things that come into it. ... They are known for the works that question identity and have the whole concept of Aboriginality; what it means and the historical sense, contemporary sense, the experiences of being Aboriginal, of growing up as a child. ... Probably most of Tracey Moffatt’s work deals with or is based on Aboriginality. (pers. comm. 7 Feb. 2007)

Some authors recognise the importance of cosmopolitanism in artworks by urban-based Aboriginal Australians, but fail to synthesise Aboriginal and cosmopolitan vocabularies. Instead, Aboriginality is evoked to underline the perceived disjunction between diverse references. Curator and art writer David Hansen has stated:

Andrew’s [work] is fundamentally an art of doubling. An absolute, essential and timeless identity—an Aboriginality of self-identification, proven descent and acceptance by community—provides the driving Jimmy Blacksmith disco base, over which a Jimmy Somerville falsetto sings about the bright

lights and the big cities. There is a black Brook and a biennale Brook.  
(Hansen 12)

Artist Tracey Moffatt identified the limited recognition of the multifarious influences in her work early on, when she remarked about critics and writers: 'They need to be aware that my background is not the only thing they need to talk about. ... They only go on about it because they don't know how to write about the work and they don't have to address it. They only have to talk about me' (in Portch 7).

There have been some attempts to create a different language for the conceptualisation of art by Indigenous Australians; a language that moves away from ethnic categorisation and embraces the cosmopolitanism fundamental to artists' works. Art historian Rex Butler has referred to Brook Andrew and Christian Thompson as post-Aboriginal photographers (pers. comm. 9 Dec. 2006). Originally coined by artist Imants Tillers, the term post-Aboriginal has been interpreted as signifying all Australian art produced after the transformation of Aboriginal art 'from a diverse, fragmented, marginalised practice to a highly visible, commercially and aesthetically successful juggernaut that deservedly dominates the mainstream' (Tillers in Loxley).

Based on Tillers' use of this term, every future Australian artwork could be described as post-Aboriginal (Morphy, 'Impossible to ignore' 93). But Butler has ascribed a different connotation to the phrase post-Aboriginal. Interested in questioning and testing the categories of Aboriginal art and Australian art, this scholar uses the term to try and capture the cosmopolitanism in art by Aboriginal Australians. Butler has argued that a new generation of Indigenous people currently produces artworks that speak across 'racial and social divides' and 'speak of wider cultural concerns' ('Aboriginal art' 27).

Butler's endeavour to transcend existing framing practices, and Tillers' use of the phrase post-Aboriginal, have not remained uncontested. After all, art practitioners like Thompson and Andrew identify as Indigenous Australians and draw—albeit not exclusively—on their Aboriginal heritage when making works of art. Even if the term post-Aboriginal has not been conceived to efface cultural difference, or to suggest artists' assimilation into a post-ethnic global ecumene, it conjures up the image of a universalistic culture (Morphy, 'Impossible to ignore' 86). If the tendency to dwell on an artwork's Aboriginal content is placed on one end of a continuum, the use of the phrase post-Aboriginal undoubtedly finds itself at the other end.

Until an artist's ethnicity is no longer thought to determine the meaning of his or her work, and until art professionals find a language suitable for conceptualising

the cosmopolitanism espoused by urban-based Aboriginal Australians, ethnic categorisation will persist.

### **An institutionalised division**

Today, all forms of contemporary Indigenous art are included in, and highly valued as part of, the category of Australian fine art (Morphy, *Aboriginal art* 417). Artworks by Indigenous Australians from around the country are discussed in art historical monographs about Australian art (Sayers), exhibited in the Australian art galleries of state and national institutions and analysed in art journals such as *Artlink*, *Art Monthly Australia* and *Art and Australia*. However, whilst the diverse forms of Aboriginal art have moved from the non-art into the art category, a division has developed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art and artists. Most Australian public institutions now have special departments for, and specialist curators of, Aboriginal art. Many also have dedicated spaces for the display of art by Indigenous Australians. Significantly, the present-day distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art has been fought for as part of an Aboriginal politics of recognition. Separate departments of Aboriginal art, according to some Indigenous art professionals, allow for specialisation and enable culturally appropriate consultation and collaboration with Indigenous communities and artists. The position of Indigenous art curator—by and large held by Aboriginal persons—ideally ensures self-determination and Indigenous control over the display, care and characterisation of Indigenous Australian arts and cultures (O’Ferrall and Croft 13).

In Australia, the different positioning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art within the overall category of Australian fine art appears in various guises. Australian art professionals commonly use the phrase Aboriginal art world to denote a realm that encompasses, amongst other things, unique funding opportunities, art prizes and venues or occasions for the sale of works of art. Despite the fact that the institutionalised distinction based on ethnicity is fairly flexible at the level of practice—artists of Indigenous descent and their works exist simultaneously within and outside of the so-called Aboriginal art world—it has an important effect on the ways in which art is being framed. What becomes evident here is the influence of structure, in this case the structure of the visual art world with its pre-existing categories, on art professionals’ behaviour and more particularly on their decision to rely on artists’ Aboriginality when interpreting, classifying and characterising works.

In 2006, Susan McCulloch and Emily McCulloch Childs produced a new edition of *McCulloch’s Encyclopedia of Australian Art*. This encyclopaedia constitutes an authoritative volume on Australian art and artists. During the process of production, both editors saw themselves confronted with the difficult issue of

where to list Indigenous artists—whether to include practitioners in the section on Australian artists or to separate them into their own category. Ultimately, they opted for the latter and contained all Indigenous Australians, including those who resist ethnic categorisation, such as Tracey Moffatt, Brook Andrew and Gordon Bennett, into a separate frame.

Stressing the function of the encyclopaedia as an information resource, Susan McCulloch has explained the choice of categorical frames as enhancing the volume's usability (pers. comm. 7 Feb. 2007). But she has also put forth a different reason for the construction of distinct categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian art. McCulloch has argued that the encyclopaedia merely replicates the existing division between Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal art in Australia's visual art realm. In the course of the production process, the editor explored the ways in which Australian state galleries, commercial galleries and commanding publications such as the *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (Kleinert and Neale), frame art by Indigenous Australians. Based on that research, McCulloch has legitimised the separate category of Aboriginal art in the encyclopaedia.

The establishment of separate artistic circuits for Indigenous or ethnic minorities—a practice all but exclusive to Australia (Delhaye)—has often been intended and understood as an empowering act. Even so, when it comes to the dilemma of ethnic categorisation, we see how an institutionalised distinction between artworks part of the fine art category can reinforce and sustain the unwarranted framing of city-based artists and their works as Aboriginal. As the above example demonstrates, Australian art professionals do orient themselves to existing practices of definition when contemplating the issue of how to classify and contextualise artworks by those of Indigenous descent. Consequently, they reproduce the divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art.

## **Conclusion**

Indigenous Australians and their artworks have long presented a challenge to accepted methods of classification employed by Australian art professionals such as critics, curators, art historians, gallerists and museum directors. Both the inclusion of Yolngu bark paintings in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1959 and the rise of Western Desert acrylic painting during the 1970s and 1980s evoked discussion about the nature and rightful positioning of Aboriginal art (Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art'). The opposition to established ways of framing art by Indigenous Australians discussed in this essay forms a new chapter in Aboriginal interventions into European practices of categorisation. From the early 1990s onwards, urban-based artists of Aboriginal origin have resisted the framing of their artistic identities and artworks as

Aboriginal. Their resistance mirrors the critique of what I have termed ethnic categorisation articulated by artists and curators of non-Western origins globally. Despite efforts undertaken by the three generations of city-based artists to get out of the 'black box', and general recognition of such efforts amongst Australian art professionals, ethnic categorisation persists today.

Considering the changes undergone by the Australian art world over the past sixty years, in particular the development of a dynamic category of Aboriginal art that has come to encompass a great variety of works, one might suggest that it will just be a matter of time before art professionals will fully engage with the cosmopolitan frame proposed by artists like Brook Andrew as an alternative to naming practices based on ethnicity. After all, it also took time for a discourse to develop around Western Desert acrylic painting. Indeed, the conceptual language chosen by art historians, critics and curators to interpret Western Desert art is still in flux (Carty). However, as this essay demonstrates, ethnic categorisation has multiple and complex roots and unless those are addressed and overcome in their entirety, urban-based artists will continue to be pigeonholed.

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