ABORIGINAL MODERNISM IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA
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...traditionalism and authenticity are now completely false judgments to assign to Aboriginal painting practices. This is borne out by contemporary ethnography and material history. The situation I worked in at Yuendumu demonstrated unequivocally that the Warlpiri painting I saw, even if it accepts the label ‘traditional’ as a marketing strategy, in fact arises out of conditions of historical struggle and expresses the contradictions of its production. This is really where its value and interest as ‘serious’ fine art lies; furthermore, it may also be the source of its social legitimacy. To make any other claims is to cheat this work of its position in the modernist tradition as well as to misappropriate it and misunderstand its context.

Eric Michaels, 1988

Remote Aboriginal painting earned a place in the contemporary global art world without any debts to modernism, as if it arrived fresh and new by some historical accident. The conventional art historical narrative traces the origins of the Desert art movement to the establishment of the Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd in 1972, at the very moment that modernism was supposedly disintegrating. While occasional claims for the modernism of Central Australian (or Western Desert) acrylic paintings were made when they caught the eye of the art world in the 1980s, they were more rhetorical than substantial. Based on superficial stylistic affinities with western modernism, they have since been discredited. Curators still sometimes juxtapose these two very different traditions, but for poetic effect rather than any didactic point.

Resistance to the idea of Aboriginal modernism derives from a respect for the unique difference and identity of Aboriginal culture, and a subsequent reluctance to relate its abstract designs (derived from traditional body and ground paintings) to the aestheticised abstraction of western modernism. If these days modernism is rarely understood simply in terms of style, it is still considered the cultural front of modernity’s assault on traditional European norms. While modernity also challenged traditional cultures in other parts of the globe, modernism remains the brand name of European (and more generally western) aesthetic engagements with modernity. It is presumed to be the natural inheritance of post-Renaissance European culture, but has also been understood as an alien invader that cripples and even destroys other traditions. Modernity is blamed for the destruction of Aboriginal culture, rather than the inspiration for a new Aboriginality.

Until recently, post-contact Aboriginal art was seen as the sad evidence of acculturation and assimilation – the very opposite of the triumphant originality of European modernism. Hal Foster, whose sense of contemporary and post-colonial art is staged by his local New York scene, exemplifies this approach. For him the Australian Desert artists are lost in some tangential third space over there, gone walkabout between the ‘archaism’ of traditional Aboriginal practices and the ‘assimilation’ of modernity.

While contemporary Aboriginal art has been written about in conventional modernist terms of subversion and outsider identity (rather than acculturation and assimilation), and even as a type of conceptual (or anti-modernist) art, an appreciation of its modernism has eluded contemporary critics. The art world consensus is that it is a contemporary rather than modernist
practice – as if the notion of the modern is not a framework that can be imposed on either the global practices of contemporary art or art that originates in non-western traditions. Indeed, because the Central Australian Aboriginal painting style is widely believed to have emerged suddenly and fully formed in the 1970s, it can hardly be said, like western contemporary art, to have a genealogy in modernism.

It might seem that the lack of a modernist genealogy should not be regretted. Since the 1970s contemporary art has disavowed modernism as irretrievably Eurocentric, masculinist, heterosexual and white. For a while ‘post-modernism’ was a popular term to describe this turn away from modernism, but ‘contemporary’ has prevailed. Indeed, the notion of the ‘contemporary’ has enabled a profound shift in the reception of not just Aboriginal art, but other art that, under the regime of modernism (and post-modernism), had been out of bounds.

However, I will argue that Aboriginal modernism is a productive idea. The contemporary, unlike the modern, remains an ephemeral concept – a type of pure event divorced from historical context or temporality, an ideology-free zone. If this weightlessness gives it some purchase in the fluid post-ideological field of globalism, it cannot illuminate the historicity of Aboriginal art. It thus fails to account for the profundity of post-contact Aboriginal art and the full scope of its achievements in the modern world. Because the idea of modernism is part and parcel of an established historical discourse on modernity, it is capable of tracking Aboriginal art in the long march of colonial modernity through Aboriginal country and, in doing so, narrates a story that begins not in the 1970s and ’80s, but much earlier with first contact. The notion of Aboriginal modernism thus has considerable rhetorical power: it re-positions contemporary Aboriginal art in its own colonial origins, and consequently challenges art history’s dominant Eurocentric discourse.

I doubt that Eric Michaels had all this in mind when, in the above quote, he decided to call Warlpiri painting ‘modernist’. He was an anthropologist not an art critic, and tended to apply the terms ‘modernism’, ‘post-modernism’ and ‘contemporary’ to Aboriginal art more or less interchangeably, depending on the particular point he was making. His social science background meant that, for him, the notion of modernity had been something like a universal constant since the Enlightenment, and that all cultural expressions since then were manifestations of modernity’s rationalisation of the world. His anthropological project in Yuendumu investigated the effects of television and video on Aboriginal culture. No wonder he saw the new paintings being made there as engagements with modernity and therefore modernist – a common-sense sociological approach that this essay also adopts.

Michaels recognised an agency in Aboriginal art that is discounted by the general assumption that modernity reduces the differences of traditional non-western cultures and subjects them to quite alien impulses. Even the post-colonial critic Nikos Papastergiadis, precisely because he is acutely sensitive to the Eurocentric bias of modernist criticism (‘the silencing that occurs by the very [modernist] rules of representation in the discourse of art’), asks: ‘can practices that were previously categorised as “Other” suddenly emerge within the parameters of modernity’s self-identity?’ This hesitation is further reiterated when he adds: ‘How will the
discourse of contemporary art, which is predominantly Eurocentric and presupposes a break with the past, address non-Euro-American art practices that display a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity? 

If art critics are fearful of assimilating remote Aboriginal art into Eurocentric conventions by the very methodologies they use (the methodologies of art history are, after all, classically modernist or Kantian), Aboriginal people have rarely hesitated to appropriate modern European technologies and discourses for their own ends. The fear that applying theories of the modern to remote Aboriginal art will assimilate its differences into Eurocentric concerns is paternalistic and ignores the ways in which Aborigines have, since the time of first contact, readily sought to translate, assimilate and use the cultural products of modernity. Aborigines have been as true to the Enlightenment project as many European modernists, ever willing to modernise whenever they saw advantageous alternatives to the limits of their own traditional practices.

The notion of Aboriginal modernism is consistent with the inherent ‘worlding’ and universal reach of modernism and modernity, and has become theoretically credible with the recent sociological and anthropological turn in art historiography. The latter has made modernism a much broader church. Instead of being narrowly focused on formal novelty and artistic autonomy, the innovative aesthetic expressions of modernism are now understood in terms of their engagements with the wider social sphere of modernity. Nevertheless, the formalism of post-contact Aboriginal art should not be ignored. In an uncanny fashion, such painting often looks like the classic aestheticised modernism that, for example, Clement Greenberg advocated. Is it possible, then, that as well as inhabiting colonial modernity, Aboriginal artists also participated in that (Hegelian) world-setting self-critical dialectical discourse that Greenberg and others identified with modernism?

**The Modernity of Dreaming**

For coloniser and colonised alike, the path to modernity and its liberty is theorised as a complete break with tradition (whatever its form). This is why migrant and diaspora discourses dominate critical thinking on contemporary art, and why the othering of the tribal and the indigenous is the most persistent of western beliefs. Somewhat ironically, modernity’s open space of cosmopolitanism has no room for Aboriginal ancestral worship and its ideology of place. The latter (it is presumed) cannot be simply modernised, because one of modernity’s principal effects is the disintegration of place – or the ‘disembodiment’ of Dreaming (the rich histories of ancestral sites and tracks that locate individual identity in particular places) from its particular sites and ecosystems. Modernity builds its edifices from ground zero; an accord between ancestor worship and cosmopolitanism is not negotiable. In rationalising time and space so that both are organised by a global, indeed universal, cartography and temporality, modernity tears the localism of pre-modern space and time from place: as Anthony Giddens argues, ‘locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them.’ 

This is why modernity was so catastrophic for Aboriginal societies: it was not just a matter of superior firepower, radical ecological changes or the devastating effects of exotic diseases, but entailed a process whereby:
the modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept away all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion. The changes occurring over the past three or four centuries—a tiny period of historical time—have been so dramatic and so comprehensive in their impact that we get only limited assistance from our knowledge of prior periods of transition in trying to interpret them.9

Modernity’s apocalyptic effects on all traditional societies, including Aboriginal ones, are undeniable. However, such argument easily slips into a binary logic that flattens the ambiguities of the colonial encounter and silences the historical adaptations of the colonised; thus colonising them all over again. This binary logic is a principal reason why western critics have had such difficulty in accepting the modernism of non-western and especially tribal art. In reality, the agents of tradition did what they always had: they adapted and adjusted to the new, even appropriated some of its ideas and practices. Admittedly the adjustment was often bumpy and at times contradictory, but the history of Aboriginal modernism is the story of such adaptation. While the Warlpiri might watch television, drive Fords and are successful contemporary artists, they nevertheless remain ancestor worshippers who, like their forbears, live in the Dreaming.

The theorisation of ancestor worship and cosmopolitanism within a binary politics of place and identity represses a shared history of displacement among Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers; each is entangled in a similar pain for home. The nation-state, which is the characteristic sociality of modernity, is the new collective memory for those whose local ancestors were dispersed by the great migrations of our times (both within and without the nation). Indigenous Australians have not escaped the cosmopolitanism of our times. About three-quarters live away from their ancestral homelands, most being first- or second-generation migrants, or more accurately internal refugees.

The great Aboriginal exodus to urban centres occurred after the 1967 referendum, which gave Aborigines citizenship and allowed them to move freely around the country. This journey from voiceless oblivion to post-colonial subjectivity has, in the last 15 years, paid significant cultural dividends. For example, Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt, the best known of such urban art practitioners, discount their Aboriginality and make art that follows, in an almost classic sense, the post-colonial paradigms of migration—of exiles, diasporas and strangers. Because these paradigms now frame much contemporary art practice around the world, such urban Indigenous art is readily incorporated into the established history of Australian and western modernism. However, these paradigms privilege a particular set of experiences that do not match those Aborigines who still walk with their ancestors, the Aborigines of so-called remote Australia.

The art of the other quarter of Aborigines who still live in remote communities, mainly in the centre and north of Australia, speaks of quite different experiences to their urban counterparts. This is not to say they have not experienced displacement. In Central Australia modernity first arrived in piecemeal fashion towards the end of the 19th century, and within 50 years had caught up with the rest of the desert-dwelling Aborigines. At first confined to a relatively narrow strip up the centre of Australia and the outer periphery of the desert, modernity’s vanguard (missionaries,
anthropologists, surveyors, prospectors, police and doggers) began having contact with Aborigines deep in the desert from the late 1920s. After World War II, the establishment of a military testing facility centred in Woomera, and the government’s adoption of assimilation policies, resulted in the remaining Aborigines being trucked hundreds of miles to new administrative centres and missions on the edge of the desert – such as Papunya, Yuendumu and Balgo. This occurred in the mid-1960s. The Desert art movement began shortly afterwards at these places and was instigated by those who led their people out of the desert.

The distinctive look of contemporary Central Australian Desert art is (in part) due to the continuing presence of the ancestors in Aboriginal lives; in short, the exile did not take root. There are three reasons why. First, Aboriginal song, dance and painting are mnemonic maps, allowing Aborigines to carry their sense of place in their minds, wherever they happen to be. Second, with the government’s apparent abandonment of assimilation for self-determination in the 1970s, many returned to their homelands in the outstation movement. Third, these desert people had for thousands of years made long journeys and interacted with different tribal groups hundreds of miles apart. The desert was a very cosmopolitan place before the arrival of modernity, so the enforced movement was not itself outside their lived experience and mythological tradition. The ancestors are great travellers.

These factors, however, do not mitigate the profound dislocation of modernity on Aboriginal lives: but the Central Australian story is one of adaptation not ethnocide. The mid-20th-century migration to the administrative centres was decisive for the art movement because its immediate sense of loss was countered by painting and singing to the ancestors as a way of imaginatively returning home. The sale of the paintings to buy Toyotas made the return real.

How then do we theorise this Aboriginal pain or longing for home in the shadow of globalisation?

Papastatgiadis recently observed that travel is not enough ‘to broaden the mind’ as he suggests that, ‘there must also be the shock and pain of difference’: the new cosmopolitans are not those travelling elites who by virtue of being ‘constantly on the move’ inhabit the ‘non-places of global culture’, but rather those ‘who must confront the turbulence [my emphasis] of globalisation without leaving their homes.’ The remote communities are not the affluent streets of green suburban estates or chic urban centres, but amongst the most violent and degraded places in the world. Here, modernity continues to wreak its havoc and yet the residents are not strangers in their land (thus the turbulence of modernity is all the more intensified). The ancestors are but a heartbeat away and it is their continuing presence that inspires the artists. This is even the case for those who do not live on outstations that are close to their Country (an Aboriginal term for places that are particular to their Dreaming) – as with many of the artists at Balgo (a former Catholic mission, now an administrative centre). Kim Mahood described the Balgo Art Centre as ‘a kind of portal to Country’.

[Eubena, grand matriarch and number one painter] sits in her customary position on the floor of the art centre, and paints for hours on end. ... All distractions including the busy kardinya who keep the whole enterprise running, have been excised from her consciousness. She has gone away into her country, re-inhabiting it brushmark by brushmark, like walking or breathing.”
The poignancy of this aesthetic homecoming – of this ‘future-orientated nostalgia’ (to coin another of Papastergiadis’ telling phrases) – is the desire to be with the ancestors, which is keenly felt by the old people, especially the painters – most of whom came of age in the desert (before the great round-up of the 1960s). However, the pull of the ancestors (or Dreaming) must be seen in the context of modernity. While much remote Aboriginal art is closely aligned with ritual revival, Dreaming survived modernity because its designs have been made into a modernism. Central Australian acrylic paintings are the direct result of modernity in the artists’ lives and exhibit many of the classic characteristics of modernism – such as heightened formalism, aesthetic innovation, freedom from the demands of religious function and successful participation in the art world.

The Australian art world recognised these developments about 20 years ago, with the art of Emily Kngwarreye confirming the modernism of Aboriginal art. Now the best known and most celebrated of the remote Aboriginal artists, Kngwarreye burst into the art world in the late 1980s. Over the next several years she worked rapidly through a series of large abstract formats that were hailed for their modernism and break from the iconography of Aboriginal art – a move that has since been followed by many Aboriginal artists (including urban ones). Yet many art critics questioned the modernism of her art, pointing out she was an elderly (she was born at about the same time as Jackson Pollock) illiterate woman who knew little or nothing about the western modernists to whom her art was often compared. Her paintings were so outside the normal expectations of Aboriginal art and yet so close to the aesthetic moves of western modernism that Rex Butler called her the ‘impossible painter’ – by which he meant that her art seems so familiar (to us western modernists) yet emerges ‘from so unlikely a source’.19

This ambiguous achievement of remote Aboriginal art is evident in the art world’s failure to integrate Aboriginal art into the history of modernism and Australian art20 – as is plainly evident in Australia’s major public art collections, where Aboriginal art is generally isolated from the gallery display of strong historical narratives of modernism and refused its own history.21 There is no permanent collection of Aboriginal art that presents an historical sense of its aesthetic development. (as there is for settler art). Curators do not even seem to know how to situate the Papunya School in the post-1970s story of contemporary settler Australian art even though it dominates the period. It is rare to find an Aboriginal exhibition that does not emphasise the traditional affiliations of the art, yet skirts its modernist genealogy. Despite some excellent research that has outlined this larger history, the occasional attempts by curators to articulate an Aboriginal modernism, while laudable, are generally superficial: usually the glib hanging of a Central Australian acrylic next to an abstract western modernist painting. Missed by both approaches (traditionalism and modernism) are the specific historical conditions of remote Aboriginal art. The former elides the social, political and aesthetic differences between traditional and contemporary practices; the latter presumes that modernism is simply a matter of style, and a style emanating from a few western centres.

The reasons for this impasse are not curatorial ineptitude but the binary logic of current art theory that regards the defining
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coordinates of contemporary Desert art—modernism and Dreaming, cosmopolitanism and ancestors—as mutually exclusive. There is excellent scholarship on Central Australian painting, but what is lacking is both an appropriate theory of modernism and a full historical account of Aboriginal modernism that locates it in the story of colonial modernity—which in Central Australia is now more than 100 years old.

Towards a Theory of Tribal Modernism

Modernity is a universal condition. It inaugurated a genuine world history, inexorably pulling all cultural traditions into its orbit (conceptually, politically and economically). Thus Anthony Giddens cautions that ‘modernity is not just one civilization among others’ and that the new post-colonial order, in which western economies are rapidly surrendering their former hegemony to non-western ones, is due to the triumph of modernity and not its decline.

Far from being a purely western or European construct, modernity is a mode of living that has taken root in many traditions, including ones often considered antithetical to it. Just as there were large urban centres, merchants, travel and even tourism before modernity, so too are there villages, kinship systems, and tribal, religious and other traditional loyalties after it. But they harbour a very different consciousness. We should not be fooled by the lifestyle of these elderly Aboriginal men and women in their outstations: their homage to Dreaming is staged by the modernity of their lives. They are not trapped between two oppositional worlds in some dysfunctional schizophrenic space, but have a coherent symbolic order that, while distinctly Aboriginal, is modernist. Their art and life demonstrate, in the words of Aboriginal activist, Noel Pearson, that ‘it is possible to choose to maintain an Aboriginal identity and be completely able to interact with modern society.’ Indeed, a telling symptom of modernity is the successful maintenance of just such a ‘layered identity’ (as Pearson calls it).

Modernity is also not something that can be pinned down to any one set of institutions or practices. In the 19th century it became a spirit that permeated everything and all places (to some degree). This notion of modernity as a zeitgeist has become the central organising concept in discussions of contemporary society and culture across the disciplines, and shows little sign of disappearing (despite the perceived anachronism of the term ‘modernism’). Whether they relate to industrial egg production or the production of a scholarly essay, the signs of modernity are ubiquitous and instantly recognised. Like the proverbial ether, modernity is the medium in which all things now mix and, as such, is the explanatory principle, mythology or symbolic order that shapes all social meaning. Thus if modernity has many phenotypes—from which Aboriginal modernity is one—there is one shared genotype or consciousness that organises its myriad forms. With modernity, each area of life gains an autonomy in which its own practice and knowledge system is its self-justification. This radical reflexivity is, in essence, formalist and self-critical, for its action (which is the action of the scientific method) renders all content uncertain, up for revision. What prevails is the form or structure of knowing, rather than its content.

If all modernisms are reflexive, highly formalised and self-critical, how did Aboriginal modernism emerge from practices steeped in tradition? First, we may say that it erupted
spontaneously in zones of contact between settlers and Aborigines, as if passed on by some virus or microbe. One example occurred at the end of 1801, when the English naval officer Matthew Flinders anchored in King George Sound (in Western Australia) for three weeks. Modernity made a brief appearance in the form of surveying, plant collecting and sketching, and the cosmopolitan spirit of friendly exchanges between strangers. As a finale to his visit, Flinders brought the uniformed marines ashore to stage a parade for a few Aborigines who had attached themselves to the party – no doubt they were Minung people who were owners and custodians of the site where Flinders had camped. The delighted Aborigines responded with their own performance that mimicked the marine’s formal drill.  

Mimicry might be a universal aesthetic strategy and Aborigines are renowned mimics, but the particular choreography of this performance had no precedent in Aboriginal tradition. Rather it had all the hallmarks of modernism. The abstract caricature of the Minung mimics followed a formalist or aestheticised sensibility already evident in the marine’s drill. Rhythm and a sense of form are the last resort in the face of unknown or untranslatable content. Here this nascent Aboriginal modernism was essentially a cosmopolitan aesthetic that sought a space of communication or universal language between strangers, and one in which existing content or meaning was necessarily ambivalent and open for negotiation.

What was this remarkable little episode about? Was it an attempt to incorporate the visit by Flinders into the Aboriginal stories of this place and hence into Aboriginal cosmology? Was it simply having fun? Or was it satire: having a laugh at the strangers? While we may never know the answer conclusively (it was perhaps all three), Daisy Bates reported a meeting (in King George Sound) in 1908 with Nebinyan, a Minung Elder who claimed to be the grandson of the man who led the dance with Flinders 100 years earlier. Nebinyan related that his grandfather’s spontaneous mimicry had become an important sacred Koornannup (home of the dead) ceremony. The dancers’ bodies were painted in red and white clay emulating the marine uniform and their choreography followed that of the ancestral beings who originally taught it to his grandfather – for Flinders and his crew were considered the spirits of ancestors returning briefly from the home of the dead across the sea.  

Thus the marine’s drill was absorbed into traditional life as a Koornannup ceremony from the Dreaming. Yet in 1801 it had also been an aesthetic and emotional response to and engagement with the rationalist endeavours of these strangers, and one that had the reflexive and formalist attributes of what later became known as modernism. This suggests, at some level, a universal taste or comprehension of form and rhythm that made up for the lack of a shared language between the two parties – and on this view such a sense of reasoned form would be innate in humans rather than a unique expression of Enlightenment rationalism or, as Europeans previously thought, something learned from studying classical Greek statues, which, in fact, is exactly the claim of Kant and his contemporary theory of universal taste that Greenberg later called modernism. The Enlightenment quest for the inner logic of things often led to the very places that reason had either discounted or foreclosed. It took artists straight to romanticism and then modernism: a search for the laws of art in its own purpose
and formal attributes. As early as 1772 Goethe suspected that the art of 'savages' retained an innate (animal) sense of form and formal integrity:

Even though this [savage] picturing is composed from the most arbitrary forms, it will harmonise in spite of the fact that the forms themselves are not in proportion, for one intuitive feeling created them into a characteristic whole. This characteristic art is the only art. 20

If Goethe is right, the vivid formalism of contemporary Aboriginal art owes as much to existing Aboriginal intuition as it does to the conditions of modernity and is perhaps why Aborigines were well placed to become modernists. In a similar vein, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner argued that the development of Aboriginal thought takes an 'aesthetic rather than an intellectual course', 21 and that this aesthetic sensibility - an attention to rhythm and form - is what alerts Aborigines to the force and action of Dreaming in the world. The post-creation world is not so much an allegory of fixed intellectual meanings (i.e. iconography) but an aesthetic field that must be interpreted through an intuitive feel for its symmetries and patterns. As Stanner suggested:

If the aborigines consciously appreciate any aspect of the geometric idiom, then it is probably the aesthetic aspect... [For example, a circle] may be intended to show a camp, a waterhole, a secret centre [...], a sacred totemic site, a yarn, a woman's breast or womb, or the moon. The range defines a category, and the ultimate denotation of the sign is presumably the ground or principle of the category. But its nature or definition cannot be elicited by direct [intellectual] inquiry. 22

He concluded: 'I have found no way of fixing specific social meaning on the spatial forms. They recur so frequently, however, that they seem a kind of "furniture of the mind".' 23 Thus, Stanner argued, 'The symbolical accompaniments of the ceremonies become loved, not for their recondite import, but for their own sake.' 24 This, he believed, gave the Aborigine 'the power to adapt the work of his imaginative mind to the unfolding of history.' 25 When the catastrophe of modernity struck, Aborigines were thus equipped with a sensibility, an aesthetic means, for meeting its challenge. The test, however, is to determine how well this Aboriginal aesthetic sensibility served them in adapting to modernity and to what extent these aesthetic adaptations are modernist (or participate in its aestheticised discourses).

Taking this brief account of cross-cultural encounter as a starting point for re-thinking Aboriginal modernism, we can see how the key terms of analysis call for a revision of the conventional art historical narrative. This narrative, repeated in nearly every text on the Desert art movement, begins with the seminal role of an art teacher from Sydney, Geoff Bardon. In 1971, he coaxed some of the leading men at Papunya to paint a mural and, after that, to paint on small boards. The narrative continues with Bardon helping the artists found the Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd (a cooperative that organised the production and sale of the art), and climaxes with the men painting larger works on canvas that eventually captured the attention of the art world. However, by giving Bardon such a
prominent role, as if Moses-like he led the artists out of the wilderness and founded a new era, the Papunya art movement is disconnected from both its Aboriginal history and the frontier modernity that shaped its unique form of modernism. As I will demonstrate, the history of modernity and modernism in Central Australia began well before Bardon arrived.

The post-contact history of Aboriginal art shows that whatever the downside of modernity upon Aboriginal lives, it also offered creative opportunities that many hungrily pursued when given half a chance. Aboriginal artists were particularly well placed to exploit the market for primitivism, which played a crucial role in the conception and development of European modernism. However, the authenticity of Aboriginal modernism - the truth of its endeavour - depended not on the artists' entry into the market but on the extent to which their work addressed the role of modernity in the lived experience of Aboriginal traditions. Aboriginal modernism is as much about Aboriginalising modernity as modernising Aboriginality, and the integrity of this project is evident in a history that begins from first contact (and not from Bardon arriving in 1971 or art world recognition in the 1980s). The contemporary Desert painting movement that began at Papunya over 30 years ago is just the post-colonial tip of the iceberg. At least two previous strata can be discerned underneath this recent development and these concern what I call colonial modernism and anti-colonial modernism.

Colonial Modernism: Turn of the 20th Century

Like most places, modernity first arrived in Australia on European ships and was then disseminated by camels, trucks, trains and electronic media. If in Central Australia it developed along the recognisable routes of genus modernus; it evolved in unique ways. The most distinctive feature about the Australian experience is that the steady march of colonisation never got much past the limits of mid-19th-century exploration. Despite further explorations, new technologies and the encroachment of missionaries, police, pastoralists, miners, tourists and art dealers in large areas of so-called remote Australia, Aborigines continue to outnumber settlers. This is not to say that modernity never penetrated the desert, but that it did not come all at once; it arrived in degrees until a threshold was crossed and it became a fixture of the place. Because its Aboriginal inhabitants were not immediately besieged, and because they wanted its technologies, they adapted; they became modernists in their own particular way.

While a few explorers had quickly passed through the Centre a few years earlier, the arrival of modernity can be quite precisely dated to the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line between 1869 and 1872, exactly 103 years before the Desert art revolution pioneered at Papunya. A range of frontier modernities gradually developed along the slender corridor of the Overland Telegraph Line, but the most important in the emergence of colonial modernism was the cross-cultural interaction among Aborigines with missionaries and anthropologists. The missions were intent on modernising Aborigines, while the anthropologists were keen to document the last primitives before they disappeared altogether. Nevertheless, anthropologists were a significant influence on the development of Aboriginal modernism. Their ability to introduce artefacts into the market fostered the neo-traditionalism that became a dominant characteristic of
Baldwin Spencer.
Arrernte women dancing
to the music made by the
men, Charlotte Waters,
6 April 1901
Aboriginal modernism in the latter half of the 20th century. Thus, this anthropological alliance with the ancestors was decisive in the development of Aboriginal modernism.

a. The anthropologists

Anthropologists began arriving in the Centre during the 1890s, some 20 years after the local Aborigines first came into contact with Kardiya (white men). By then the Aborigines had learnt that Kardiya preferred their artefacts decorated with coloured paint and other materials. ‘Make it flash’, they say. So began the first stylistic move towards an Aboriginal modernism, namely the aestheticisation of artefacts. This suited Aboriginal artists because such decorative formalisation was a traditional way of hiding inside knowledge: it simultaneously mimicked Aboriginal pedagogical art practice and European expectations of authentic primitive art.

The first important anthropologist in the area was Baldwin Spencer, who made expeditions in 1894, 1896 and 1901–2. He had such an insatiable appetite for Aboriginal artefacts (and biological specimens) that wherever he went he created a local arts industry. Spencer was after authentic Aboriginal art; he sought to document the savage life. However, he mainly stuck to established tracks, working from the small settlements around the telegraph stations – such as Alice Springs. Here, in 1894, he met his principal collaborator, the postmaster Frank Gillen. Alice Springs was also his main base in 1896. He returned five years later, when he also worked around other telegraph stations at Charlotte Waters and Barrow Creek. These were convenient places for the anthropological investigation of Aboriginal life. They were built in the middle of thriving Aboriginal communities previously untouched by European civilisation, and their novelty and modernity also attracted other Aborigines, all of whom conveniently camped nearby. For these reasons, such settlements were also the vanguard or frontier of a nascent Aboriginal modernity.

Spencer made a large and invaluable photographic record of these camps – mainly the everyday lives of their inhabitants and sometimes their ritual performances and art. By the time Spencer arrived in Alice Springs, the local Eastern Arrernte were seasoned negotiators with the Kardiya. Their leaders were his principal informants, collecting artefacts and arranging for Aboriginal performances on the edge of town for Spencer and Gillen to document. These were not actual ceremonies but entertainments performed for Spencer’s camera. Judging from the photographs, these performances had a ‘staged’ feel to them: stiffly posed noble savages re-enacting ceremonies for a foreign audience. Spencer thought he was documenting original Aboriginal dance and art, and indeed he was; but the originality was in a modernist rather than anthropological vein – it was neo-traditional rather than traditional. As Michael North observes of African American imitations of white minstrel performers being made at much the same time: ‘Black performers are original not because they possess originality as a quality but because they produce originality as a commodity.’ 27 Spencer’s interest encouraged a hybrid neo-traditionalism that became an important hallmark of Aboriginal modernism. Needless to say, it is also a hallmark of other modernisms across the globe.

Whatever their inevitability, modernity and modernism are never easy developments. There were considerable difficulties in the negotiation between tradition and neo-traditionalism. Gillen
notes in one letter to Spencer his problems in convincing a subject to be photographed naked. One publisher asked Spencer for new photographs because some of the Aborigines were clothed and a European was also in a scene. Nakedness was important to the anthropologists because it was a sign of the authentic rather than modern savage. Unfortunately for Spencer, it was a rule that Aborigines be clothed while in town; and many had become attached to their clothing as symbols of modernity. However, these difficulties were negligible compared to those faced by the Aborigines. The problem was the secret nature of their religion and much of its ceremony, which could only be divulged to initiates. Several Aboriginal informants were killed for revealing too much information to Kardiya. It came down to the subtle but important differences between insider knowledge restricted to indigenous groups, and outsider knowledge for public consumption. Their relationship is the familiar one of deferral or difference: the outside is an analogy of the inside to which it defers; its form mimics the look of the inside without revealing its inner secrets. In abbreviating the full 'inside story' by highlighting a few colourful episodes, 'outside designs' play an important role in Aboriginal pedagogy by progressively taking the initiative from the outside towards the inside. They allow inside knowledge to travel widely and safely; to flex its muscles without delivering its punch or revealing its secret content. Neo-traditionalism adapts this traditional pedagogical function of outside art to the new condition of modernity, to produce marketable artworks.

If this pedagogy is what the Aborigines also sold to Spencer, then a key motive of Papunya painting—namely educating the Kardiya—was being established from the point of first contact. From very early on, ritual designs had become a commodity to be traded as art. But where the conventional art historical narrative tends to see the loss of authenticity, from the Aboriginal perspective the Kardiya were simply paying for their education. This neo-traditional pedagogy was also the testing ground for a new type of art. Once painted on the skin of ceremonial bodies and earth, these outside designs have since been transferred to the more portable and saleable skin of canvas.

b. The missionaires

It should not be surprising that the transference from ritual to commodity first occurred in an overt sense on missions, because European missionaries were actually attempting to modernise Aborigines. The best known and most obviously modernist examples of cross-cultural artistic production in this context are the toas. Made from wood, they vary from 15 to 57 centimetres in length and feature a pointed end and a decorative shaft. They were made around 1904 on the Lutheran mission at Killalpaninha, shortly after ethnographers visiting the mission expressed interest in collecting artefacts, and when an artist, Harry Hillier, who had previous experience with tribal art, was teaching there.

Pastor Johann Reuther collected over 400 toas with the intention of selling them locally and overseas. Most were sold to the South Australian Museum in 1907. Reuther, a keen ethnographer, recorded the mythological significance of each toa but not the name of the artist. According to him, they were pegged in the ground at deserted camps to indicate the destination of the group. However, there is no evidence of such way-markers being made before 1904 or after 1906 when Reuther and
Killaipaninna toas, c.1904
Hillier left the mission. It has been speculated that they are decorative versions of markers sometimes used to denote local resources or the edge of ceremonial grounds.

The origin of the toads remains something of a mystery. The only satisfactory explanation is their deliberate modernism, as if adapted from traditional designs to satisfy the European market for primitive art. I suspect they are secular versions of Aboriginal secret sacred objects usually held in the hand, such as turingas and bullroarers. Powerful and dangerous, these objects are storehouses of tribal knowledge upon which ceremonial body and ground paintings are based and from which their legitimacy (copyright) derives. Europeans discovered them in the 1890s. Large numbers were looted, mainly by Lutheran missionaries who sold them to German museums. Hence it makes sense to consider the toads harmless but prettier (aesthetised) replicas of these secret sacred objects, intended to meet the expectations of a new market and at the same time to protect the original secrets of such sacred objects.10

For most of the century, toads were considered inauthentic hybrid artefacts. The museum, anthropologists said, was victim of a deliberate hoax. Only in the mid-1980s, when the art world and anthropologists finally accepted the authenticity of tribal hybrid artefacts and the notion of contemporary Aboriginal art, were toads recognised for what they were: namely a hybrid art form - what I call colonial modernism.

In resisting the onslaught of modernity by adapting it to their traditions, a new type of Aboriginal artist emerged: the Aboriginal modernist. This was an entirely Aboriginal invention; it mimicked Aboriginal tradition, not western modernism. After all, in their time the toads looked nothing like western modernism - it would take another decade, with Picasso's cubist sculptures, before such stylistic affinity might be glimpsed. Settler Australian modernists, still struggling with an impressionist aesthetic, had no intimation of the primitivism that was just beginning to stir a small section of the European vanguard. The toads were, in the spirit of modernism, ahead of their time: the most abstract modernist art being made anywhere in the world. They herald the Desert acrylic paintings that caught the imagination of the art world some 70 to 80 years later, except they were marketed as tribal primitivism and not as modernist fine art.

Anti-colonial Modernism: Mid-20th Century

The role of World War I in sparking anti-colonial sentiment across the globe has been widely acknowledged. Settler Australians, loyal subjects of Britain and empire before the war, discovered a newfound nationalism after it. There was a move amongst some settler Australian artists to develop a new national art that drew on Aboriginal motifs, in much the same way as Mexican artists at the time hoped for a new Hispanic modernism. Australian settler art went through a rapid process of Aboriginalisation that, paradoxically, established the modernity of Australian art and a sense of identity that still figures strongly in the Australian imagination. The source of inspiration of such settler Australian modernists was Arnhem Land bark painting rather than Central Australian art. For them the primitivism of these bark paintings confirmed the modernism of their own art. However, the best-known Aboriginal artist of the day, indeed the best-known Australian artist of the day,
was the Central Australian Arrernte man, Albert Namatjira, who eschewed primitivism for a very different brand of modernism. He was the first Aboriginal painter to compete and exhibit with contemporary settler painters as a modernist.

If the Overland Telegraph Line inaugurated colonial modernism, anti-colonial modernism in Central Australia was an unexpected outcome of the railway link to Alice Springs, completed in August 1929. It opened a new market for Aboriginal art by facilitating visiting tourists and dealers in the southern capitals. It also brought settler artists to the Centre. Many visited the Lutheran Hermannsburg mission, which was conveniently located nearby in the midst of a friendly Aboriginal community. This increased interaction with Aborigines by settler artists was the catalyst for a new type of cross-cultural Aboriginal art that, for some at least, embodied a new post-Aboriginal Australian modernism.

The Lutheran missionaries were the first permanent European settlers in Central Australia. Carl Strehlow arrived in the mid-1890s but, unlike Spencer, he stayed on as a permanent resident. He brought his children up as Arrernte Christians and was the first European to speak the Arrernte language fluently, translating the New Testament and other teaching material. This incorporation of Christian stories into the Arrernte language, and the Christian mission into Arrernte culture, combined with the isolation of the place and the dedication of the missionaries, created a viable modern Aboriginal community that countered the colonial Darwinian expectations of a doomed primitive race. When Spencer, a Darwinist, visited in 1923, he could not believe how many children there were – in stark contrast to the settlements he was used to. By the mid-20th century, Hermannsburg had become a model for a future assimilated Aboriginal society; and it was Albert Namatjira who put its achievements on the map. He, more than anyone else, destroyed the colonial Darwinian paradigm.

The Lutherans initially enforced a strict regime that did not tolerate Aboriginal customs among the faithful. Strehlow’s dedicated and inspired leadership converted a small core of Arrernte Christians who administered to their fellow heathens – most of whom came and went at will. Namatjira, born in 1902, was part of this Christian core; and while he knew his Dreaming and claimed its inheritance, his art was very different to the neo-traditionalism of colonial modernism.

Strehlow’s replacement, Pastor Albrecht, arrived in the late 1920s. He started a craft enterprise to make money. Within a few years, Hermannsburg had become the first Aboriginal art centre – with all the profits and problems that current art centres have. Namatjira was the leading craftsman and when artists from Melbourne began arriving he was naturally interested. Rex Battarbee’s visit in 1934 was the most significant. Battarbee was an Aboriginalist; he was seeking a new vision of Australia based on an Aboriginal feel for the place. A self-taught painter, his aspiration towards a type of post-impressionist modernism is generally dismissed by that damming Australian expression: ‘gum-tree painter’. Namatjira quickly surpassed him.

When Namatjira saw an exhibition of Battarbee’s paintings at Hermannsburg in 1934, and realised how much they sold for, he immediately decided to be a painter. Namatjira’s quick mastery of western realism baffled settler Australians. Battarbee gave him only minimal tuition in the difficult medium of watercolour and he was astounded at how quickly he progressed,
Albert Namatjira,
Central Mount Wedge, 1945
and how sure Namatjira's sense of colour and composition was, 'I have always believed', said Battarbee, 'that no ordinary white man could have done what Albert did in such a short time.' 27 Namatjira had frequent sell-out exhibitions in the capital cities and became Australia's first international celebrity artist. 'The story of the rise of Albert Namatjira', said Battarbee, 'is like fiction.' 28 In 1947, after thinking about it deeply, the American author Gordon B. Hempstead remained perplexed. I still have no answer to my question why this art movement started in Central Australia amongst the so-called lowest primitive race in the world ... there's nothing like this movement among any other aboriginal race in the world.' 29 This widespread incredulity arose because Namatjira's art proposed a direct relationship between Aboriginal and settler cultures that was, by the logic of the day, impossible. It was as if he deliberately chose not to paint in a neo-traditionalist style because he feared that its associations with primitivism were counter-productive. Just as his contemporary, the African American writer, Richard Wright, rejected what he called the 'minstrel technique' because it merely satisfied the chauvinistic tastes of white audiences,4 so Namatjira deliberately eschewed the primitivism of European modernism.

Namatjira produced the first Aboriginal art bought by Australia's state art galleries, and the first Aboriginal art that, to settler Australians, seemed European and modern. This was the point of the title of Battarbee's 1951 book: Modern Australian Aboriginal Art. But few could see past the unintended irony of the title: Namatjira could not be a modernist and make Aboriginal art - for this was a doubling that could not be focused by the Eurocentric paradigms of the day.

Battarbee believed that Namatjira's paintings 'may be nearer a real Australian art than anyone has ever been', 30 but few in the Australian art world did. Most considered him a weak copyist of second-rate art: a mimic of the mimics. Anthropologists concurred. Claude Levi-Strauss dismissed his paintings as 'the dull and studied water-colours one might expect of an old maid.' 31 The US anthropologist, Nelson Graburn, pronounced them 'assimilated fine arts' which he saw as 'characteristic of extreme cultural domination'. 32 Reviewing Battarbee's book, the Australian anthropologist Ronald Berndt complained that 'the title of the book is somewhat misleading...The products of the school are, when all is said and done, non-indigenous art of a local Aboriginal group. One asks, what of modern Aranda [Arrernte] traditional art?'. 33

Berndt's question was rhetorical but he had a point. Why was traditional Arrernte art not also modern Australian art? However, Berndt did not go there. He made it quite clear that Aboriginal art is strictly delimited by its traditional practices. This is why the very existence of Namatjira's art was, however you looked at it, anti-colonialist. Assimilated or not, it asserted the modernity of Aboriginal art. Namatjira remains a hero to contemporary Aborigines across the board. They saw not a fully assimilated artist, but one who painted his country and, most of all, the first Aborigine to conquer the white world and make a good living at the same time. Namatjira showed that art could be a successful anti-colonial strategy for Aborigines. Even the art world now recognises his achievement, and since the 1990s his work has been received with a post-colonial gloss. In 1992, Ian Burn and Ann Stephen wrote: 'Namatjira did not simply see with western eyes
but was mimicking that regime of vision as an access to particular knowledge. Turning the familiar complaint of settler modernists into a post-colonial critique, Burn and Stephen suggested that:

The political and cultural potential of mimicry is central to understanding Namatjira’s practice and suggests that his art can be reassessed in the context of counter-colonial strategies... According to Bhabha, the menace of mimicry lies in that double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. It is this double vision which allows Namatjira’s art its potency.

However, Namatjira was no ‘mimic man’. In Bhabha’s scheme, mimicry is the tactic of those forced to take their bearing against the dominant discourse of the coloniser: their mimicry, argues Bhabha, at once disrupts and affirms colonial discourse. For all his modernity, Namatjira never renounced his ancestral inheritance. Namatjira does not mimic western art; he completely masters its language and, through it, makes a claim for his Aboriginal inheritance, especially for the sacred sites of Arrente dreaming. His best paintings evoke a classical mysticism reminiscent of (that French neo-traditionalist) Cézanne: they depict a transcendent stillness through which Namatjira claims the modernity of Arrente spiritualism and thus the continuing presence of Dreaming. Settler artists may also have found a spiritual epiphany in the desert, but their wilderness lacks Namatjira’s quiet and assured sense of belonging.

Arguably, Namatjira’s art shared something with the neo-traditionalism that he eschewed: namely a classical Platonic mimesis in which inside knowledge is given an outside form. Rather than the ironic intertextuality of post-colonial mimicry, he disrupted the racist and Eurocentric assumptions of colonial discourse through Platonic or – in point of fact – Aboriginal mimesis. Only in this sense did he, as Burn and Stephen suggest, offer an elusive counter discourse, a model of inter-cultural exchange able to articulate a complexity of its own cultural reality.

The Hermannsburg School of painters that followed on from Namatjira took his style towards a more traditional Arrente sensibility, creating a hybrid magic realism that accentuated the reserved and classical mysticism of Namatjira’s art. This School flourishes today alongside the neo-traditionalism of the Papunya style of painting – Papunya and Hermannsburg being close neighbours. Some of the early Papunya painters knew Namatjira and had once painted in his style or a hybrid version of it. Indeed, the chief painter of the Papunya mural that inaugurated the movement, Kaapa Tjampijinta, was Arrente like Namatjira, and painted in a hybrid style – much to the annoyance of Bardon, who wanted him to renounce the western affiliations of his art for a purely ‘Aboriginal’ abstract style. Clifford Possum, also with Arrente connections, had spent time at Hermannsburg. Thus, there is some truth in Burn and Stephen’s conclusion that ‘Namatjira’s art stands as a precedent for the more recent Papunya and other Aboriginal art’ – even though the relationship is not linear, or at least not in a stylistic sense. Namatjira is not the post-impressionist forerunner of the abstract Papunya painters; rather the Papunya painters continued a neo-traditionalist strategy begun 100 years earlier (that Namatjira himself had
disavowed). Namatjira, however, showed them that the trick was to claim it as fine art, indeed modernism. The luck of the Papunya painters is that they launched their modernism at the very moment that western modernism began to look like Aboriginal neo-traditionalism. Only then did the art world 'see' the contemporaneity of Papunya painting. Since then it has been recognised as Australia's first international art movement: Papunya painting has become the global sign of Australian cosmopolitanism. Like African American jazz musicians, Papunya artists use western technologies to so thoroughly recreate western modernism that the latter now imitates it. Under these circumstances, who is the mimic and where is the original?
NOTES

4. Imants Tillers, 'Fear of Texture', Art & Text, 10, 1983, 8-10; and Baume, op. cit.
5. However, the 'contemporary' inevitably accumulates a greater (theoretical) density - as in Terry Smith's writings since 2001. See, for example, Terry Smith, 'World Picturing in Contemporary Art: The Iconographic Turn', Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art, 6, 2, 2005 and 7, 1, 2006, 34.
8. Ibid., 19.
9. Ibid., 1.
14. Terry Smith was the first art historian to include an account of Central Australian art within a general history of Australian art, in a chapter written to update Bernard Smith's classic, Australian Painting (Oxford University Press), published in 1919. However, while he and others have found ways of including Aboriginal art within contemporary Australian art, it is yet to be integrated into the larger history of Australian art.
15. Not only do the major State art collections not relate remote Aboriginal art to the historical narratives evident in the galleries of western art, they also hang it in non-temporal or non-historical fashion (usually by geographic site) so that a key character of modernism, namely its self-conscious historicity, is both unlocated and unexamined. Further, while the impact of modernity is often referred to in catalogue essays, exhibitions of remote Aboriginal art rarely make any attempt to develop connections with modernism (and then usually to disavow it) and tend to situate the work in either amorphous and undefined 'contemporary' or distinct Aboriginal contexts.
18. See Matthew Flinders (1814), A Voyage to Terra Australis undertaken for the purpose of completing the discovery of that vast country, and prosecuted in the years 1801, 1802, 1803 in His Majesty's Ship the Investigator, Volume I, facsimile edition, Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1966, 60-61.
19. Other similar instances have been reported. See Isobel M. White, The Birth and Death of a Ceremony, Aboriginal History, 4, 1, 1980, 33-41.
23. Ibid., 107.
30. This is not to say the toads are not 'true': the anthropologist Ronald Berndt saw no reason to doubt their authenticity in this respect (Ronald Berndt, 'Foreword', in Philip Jones and Peter Sutton, Art and Land, Adelaide: South Australian Museum, 1986, 7-9). For the most considered study of the toads, see Philip Jones, Dreaming and Rite, Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2007, 225-82.
31. Rex Battarbee, Modern Australian Aboriginal Art, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1951, 12.
32. Ibid., 10.
33. Ibid., 47.
34. See Nyth, op. cit., 176.
40. Ibid., 276-77.
41. Ibid., 279.
42. Ibid., 278.