Global Indigeneity and Australian Desert Painting: Eric Michaels, Marshall McLuhan, Paul Ricoeur and the End of Incommensurability

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"I think you can pick up a Yuendumu canvas directly from its site of production (these politically grotesque, post-colonial, depressed, third world desert camps and settlements) and drop it straight into any contemporary New York, Cologne or Paris gallery and, without any explanation, documentation or apology, it will "work" in these settings."

Eric Michaels¹

Defining Indigeneity

Today Indigeneity is often construed as an age-old identity, as if it is a primal Darwinian consciousness descended directly from our evolutionary origins in particular ecosystems. Historians, on the other hand, usually consider it an embattled identity tenuously holding out against the grain of history, displaced first by universal religions such as Christianity, consciously repressed by modern nationalist ideologies and finally erased by the global consciousness of post-modern economies. From either perspective recent talk of global Indigeneity must seem either a surrealist joke or the final assimilation of the Indigenous into the global.² However the meanings and uses of words are the product of changing desires; they are not set in stone. What seems incongruous one day makes perfect sense the next.

For example, our dictionaries don't yet have a term for Indigenous identity, despite current political imperatives for such a term. While "Aboriginality" has, for the previous thirty or more years, filled this need within an Australian

context, its meaning is too localised to be useful in the global politics of the postmodern scene. The closest words in today's dictionaries, "indigenoussness" (quality of being indigenous) and "autochthony" (condition of having sprung from the land), are too generalised in meaning, as is the obsolete word "indigenity", which also meant the quality of being indigenous. Neither word evokes the specific sense of belonging and responsibility essential to the psychology of identity. Other similar sounding words are even more inappropriate. "Indigency" is derived from indigent (poor, lacking), autoctony means suicide, and the obsolete word "indigenital" (of indigenous character) would only cause confusion in the heightened gender consciousness of the current critical climate. We need a new word, something like "Indigeneity".

The necessity of the term Indigeneity is a product of recent European ways of thinking. Joining ancient classical notions of geographical genealogy with modern psychological forms of identity, Indigeneity transforms the "indigene" (a person indigenous or native to a place) into someone with a consciousness or psyche that is grounded in a special place or locality. That an identity might be forged from one's natural environment is an Enlightenment idea that elevated parochial values into a "topophilia" or "domincentricity".³ Such thinking gathered pace in eighteenth-century Europe in opposition to the growing cosmopolitanism of the emerging middle class. Financed by the landed gentry and supported by a provincial clergy engaged in writing local natural histories, its pastoral and romantic sensibility resisted the national society of the metropolitan centre and its bourgeois supporters.⁴

While topophilia had its adherents amongst Australian colonists, the concept of Indigeneity did not catch on. The indigenes were indigent; they were perceived to lack an identity and specifically the rights to place. This is because modernist and colonialist ideologies locked them into a binary opposition with everything that the colonists claimed for themselves (including property rights). Once incongruous, the "global" and the "indigenous" became complicit but incommensurable terms, joined by a logic of alterity in which modernist ideologies defined themselves as universal, global and cultural in opposition to the primitive, the indigenous and the natural. Also at this time, the formerly rarely used term "global" came into more general use, and acquired a wider metaphoric sense that signified universal or total categories, and especially worldwide phenomena that, by definition, were contrary to anything indigenous. Then, quite suddenly in the closing decades of the twentieth century, the binary logic that had held the global and the indigenous in an agonistic tension for more than one hundred years dissipated. Indigeneity emerged as a valid identity and consciousness, and, like global consciousness, became one way of imagining

alternatives to the normative identity of modernity circumscribed by nationhood. Now the “global significance of Aboriginal art” is widely discussed without any sense of contradiction. What caused this latest shift?

Ideas precede their naming. The ideas of Indigeneity and global Indigeneity emerged at much the same time from a postcolonial mindset that first took hold in the mid-twentieth century amongst anti-colonial activists around the world. Then the many derivations of global first appeared: globalise, globalism, globally etc.. Everything and everyone was globalising, even the oppressed and dispossessed. Partly due to the global reach of media, increasing numbers of Aboriginal Australians felt part of a world-wide revolt that was then articulated in terms of the oppressed black people around the globe against a monolithic and hegemonic white power. At first the binary logic of modernist ideologies still haunted this anti-colonial politics of resistance, especially in the identity politics of the time. This is one reason why Aboriginality, not Indigeneity, was the term used to describe this new identity in the 1970s and 1980s.

Anti-colonial politics celebrated and emphasised the difference of cultural systems, and used this difference to carve out exclusive extra-national cultural niches from which to resist the hegemony of modernity, capitalism and late colonialism. Despite the global reach of such anti-colonial sentiments, Indigeneity (or Aboriginality as it was then called) became a legitimate identity forged primarily by the experience of colonial dispossession. One consequence was that land rights emerged as a central issue of Indigenous politics, and a convenient if paradoxical nexus was drawn between postcolonial demands for land rights and authentic (traditional) Indigenous attachments to particular sites. Thus many sympathetic anthropologists, while acknowledging the ancestral (i.e. temporal and genealogical) nature of Aboriginal cosmologies, also emphasised their sense of place. According to Tony Swain, Aboriginal cosmologies are not even ancestral, but purely placial and site-specific.⁵ Their habitat is their habitus.

One reason that a placial identity has been so readily ascribed to Indigenous cosmologies by anthropologists is their own familiarity with Enlightenment topophilia, especially its more romantic texts. However another reason is that anthropologists have spent many hours listening to Aboriginal voices. “Even the earliest [anthropological] commentators”, says Stephen Muecke, “saw the Dreaming as a logos of total or at least dominant significance” in all Aboriginal communities.⁶ Central to these Dreamings is the custodianship of stories about Country.⁷ Today it is not just anthropologists who hear these Aboriginal voices, but anyone who cares to listen. For example, recently in Darwin I heard the Balgo artist Susie Bootja-Bootja present an artist’s talk about her large abstract paintings. There was only one thing she wanted to say, and she said it repeatedly.

Pointing to the canvases, she said, "this is where I was born". I have no judgements to offer about the relationships between the topophilia of Western and Aboriginal discourses; but I aim to keep their juxtaposition in sight throughout this paper.

If Swain is correct, we could (and many would still want to) say that a topographical or even topological habitus is exemplary of an authentic Indigeneity. However, the habitus of many Indigenous people is not a particular habitat, but a multi-cultural, postmodern, post-national and often homogenous global culture in which so-called authentic relationships with place seem anachronistic. In a postmodern habitus the notion of global Indigeneity takes on a new significance, perhaps best exemplified by the re-positioning of Aboriginal art from an ethnographic context that could speak for land rights, to a contemporary aesthetic that belongs and functions in a global museum culture. Indeed, the term Indigenous (as opposed to Aboriginal) catches the global or at least universal edge of postmodern culture. This is not to say that Indigenous art is no longer produced within traditional parochial and ceremonial contexts, but that the economic impetus of its production and its critical reception is now largely framed by an official museum culture. Whatever Indigenous might mean, its art is rapidly being globalised. However; and this is an important qualification: the allure of Indigenous art, the motive of many of its artists, and the ideological force of the very term Indigenous, remains its topophilia. Unpacking the resulting paradox—and I see it as a paradox rather than a contradiction—of a global topophilia or Indigeneity is the task of this essay.

Theorising Global Indigeneity: Eric Michaels and Marshall McLuhan

The anthropologist Eric Michaels was amongst the first to propose and theorise a postmodern global Indigeneity in respect to Australian art. His maverick mind, combined with his first hand knowledge of the acrylic painting movement while working as an anthropologist with the Warlpiri people at Yuendumu during the early 1980s, makes him amongst the most authoritative and original commentators on contemporary Indigenous desert art and its global imperatives. Alert to shifting paradigms, he re-positioned the significance of Indigenous art in the light of McLuhan's "electronic age" and "global village", and the postmodernist theories they had engendered.

Michaels believed that contemporary Indigenous desert painters were not merely objects of postmodern desire, but creative partners in the global art market, matching "the postmodern methodologies of appropriation with their

own counter-appropriative strategies" in a "highly sophisticated exchange".⁸ The aesthetic and commercial success of acrylic desert painting in the modern museum world, far from the desert camps in which they were conceived and made, are not, he says, "proof of the corruptibility of the indigenous tradition", but of "its range and durability".⁹ However such ideas have proved difficult to sustain. Many remain sceptical that an art embedded in ritual, cult and authenticity can function unchanged in the universal aesthetic realm of the museum. Walter Benjamin's claim that the shift from the "cult value" to the "exhibition value" of an object results in a "qualitative transformation of its nature" is still a working assumption of much contemporary thought.¹⁰

Michaels countered this objection with varying success in two ways: an anti-essentialist argument aimed at classical ethnography, and a critique of the historicism of contemporary media theory.

1. Michaels' anti-essentialism

Arguing that "startling correspondences between some contemporary Aboriginal work and aspects of postmodern aesthetic theories" effectively invalidated the ethnographic paradigm of authenticity, Michaels proposed a very selective approach to the interpretation of acrylic desert painting.¹¹

Only if Western Desert painting—and perhaps all contemporary canvases labelled Aboriginal—are separated, wrenched, from their ethnographic context (e.g. nearly all available discourses claiming "tradition" and "unique authenticity") do I believe it can achieve the legitimacy it is due in the postmodern debate no less than the contemporary market.¹²

Michaels provided scant evidence for the postmodernism of contemporary Aboriginal work, but he believed that the modernity of Indigenous desert communities was enough to guarantee the modernism of their art.¹³ If his intuition is plausible, his reasoning fails to account for the continuing ceremonial context of the production of desert acrylic painting.

Setting in place a conceptual opposition between ethnographic and historical methodologies, Michaels considered essentialist claims of a timeless authentic relationship with Country by ethnographers to be incompatible with the historical reality of life on contemporary Indigenous communities. While he admitted that desert painters do "attempt" to "convey some authentic vision beyond the cultural and semiotic codes employed" in their paintings, he insists that their practice is also "artistic"—which I presume means their mode is aesthetic and modern.¹⁴ Elsewhere he is less equivocal. Rejecting what he calls

"the dangerous fantasy of authenticity", he argues that acrylic desert paintings "are to be judged first and foremost in terms of the social practices that produce and circulate them—practices that promote issues of authority not authenticity." In his words, he demands we think about Aboriginality in terms of its "historical (not pre-historical) construction".¹⁵

Michaels objects to the habit of relegating Indigenous cultural practices to a pre-historical nether land, yet at the same time he seems to adopt the very historicist tropes he protests. Pre-history is not an actual time or condition but a modern teleological concept that inflates an historical perspective into an historicist one. First coined in 1851, and widely accepted by the end of the century, the word "pre-history" added a fourth supplementary term to the Renaissance idea of history being divided into the three epochs of Ancient, Middle-Ages and Modern. Pre-history supposedly preceded the originary era of the ancient civilisations, and was widely considered to be a time without historical consciousness when classical Indigenous cultures predominated. Thus one nineteenth-century scholar proposed "antehistory" as an alternative name, and it is in this sense that Michaels seems to use "pre-history" in his accusations against ethnographic discourse.¹⁶ The choice between historical and pre-historical constructions is a false one; each is, as Michaels warned elsewhere, "semantically loaded with precisely the same ammunition".¹⁷

The point is not to excise ethnographic discourses of authenticity because they apparently operate in a pre-historical mode, but to show that these discourses are historical. Michaels, however, does the opposite; he argues that they are essentialist, as if this locks them (or any other discourses of authenticity) out of historical analysis. He thus loses sight of Aboriginal arts' seductive powers in the very market that he wants to situate them. It is, after all, the seduction of authenticity that lends Indigenous paintings their contemporary purchase. Further, an authentic relationship with Country is an essential (core) ingredient of the contemporary Warlpiri values that Michaels investigated. The "dangerous fantasy of authenticity" is exactly what is responsible for the production and circulation of acrylic desert painting. To "detach these paintings ... from the mystified discourses of primitivism and authenticity", as Michaels proposes, is to act as if primitivism and authenticity actually have an essence, and that this mystical essence can be easily and effectively put aside.^{18 19} However, like all discourses, they are historical formations, and it is on this ground that any critique of primitivism and authenticity should operate.

In choosing an historical over an ethnographic approach (as if the ethnographic is not already profoundly historicist) Michaels effectively forecloses on

the authenticity of Indigenous identity in the name of anti-essentialism. At the same time, his argument becomes circular and self-fulfilling: he is able to avoid the issue of authenticity because he has already removed it from view by relegating it to the pre-historical. Michaels may have been better to follow Baudrillard (whom he sometimes references), and argue that acrylic desert paintings are sites of seduction that threaten with sudden reversibility the logic of postmodern desire.²⁰ This, at least, might result in him questioning the historicism to which historical thought often succumbs.

2. Michaels' anti-historicism

Michaels' scepticism towards historicism pays more dividends than his anti-essentialism, and is the source of his most original contribution to the theorisation of global Indigeneity. The historical consciousness of nineteenth-century European thought mapped a progressive development at all levels of culture from so called "simple" "primitive" to "complex" "modern" societies. Michaels called it "the fallacy of unilineal evolution". "The point is", says Michaels, "that very few people believe what anthropology teaches: that indigenous, small scale traditional societies are not earlier (or degenerate) versions of our own. They are rather different solutions to historical circumstances and environmental particulars".²¹

Michaels claims that the logic of unilineal evolution pervades contemporary thinking and policy, especially media theory. Tracing it to nineteenth-century racist ideas, its historicist logic, he says, divides mankind between Indigenous ritual oral communities and modern rational literate ones, with each exhibiting incommensurable spatio-temporal thought patterns. Examples are easy to find; they pervade social and cultural theory. For example: Paul Ricoeur, citing Lévi-Strauss, claims that indigenous South Americans failed to assimilate Western technology because it was antithetical to "their fundamental conception of space and time".²² Anthony Giddens argued "modern institutions are in key respects discontinuous with the gamut of pre-modern cultures". "Fundamental to this discontinuity, he said, was "the separation of time and space". Whereas "in pre-modern settings ... time and space were connected through the situatedness of place", in the "global map" of modern times "there is no privileging of place because both time and space are "pulled away from place".²³ Baudrillard writes that the "linear, deferred time" of modern historical consciousness, is "so different from time in ritual societies where the end of everything is in its beginning and ceremony retraces the perfection of that original event."²⁴ Edward Casey concludes: "To have substituted the spatial infinity of the universe for the placial finitude of the cosmos is to have effected the fateful transition from ancient to

modern thinking in the West.”²⁵ The “fall” is fateful because it results in an irreversible expulsion from the grace of place to the reason of space.

On first reading, Michaels might seem confused, for he both accepts and rejects this historicist mode of thinking. Specifically, he accepts the structuralist logic it employs which draws analogies between technology and consciousness, but rejects its teleological conclusions. Michaels took his lead from Marshall McLuhan. Like Benjamin had before him, McLuhan emphasised that technology was not just a tool, but also the foundation of consciousness. New technologies create new galaxies of thought that are the engine of historical change, and like evolution, their effects are irreversible. McLuhan divided the history of human consciousness into two broad incommensurate domains, that of orality and literacy—which correspond more or less exactly to the divide of history and pre-history. He contrasted the shared parochial meanings and identities of localities that constitute the cosmologies of closed tribal societies, to a literate civilisation that eventually developed into the open postmodern multicultural societies of global capitalism.²⁶ An irreversible shift of consciousness is traced in which the literate habitus replaces the oral, like some major speciation event. Whenever the literate meets the oral in an undeveloped corner of the world, nature (i.e. natural selection), it was explained, took its course. McLuhan’s reasoning is hardly original. It is so ingrained in Western habits of thought that the difference he articulated has assumed a teleological significance commonly called the “fatal impact” theory.

If the shock of the modern in the primitive is calamitous, what catastrophe awaits when the global postmodern meets the Indigenous pre-historical? Michaels reported the predictable widespread alarm at the sudden invasion of television into the Indigenous desert camps during the early 1980s. “By the summer of 1985, the glow of the cathode ray tube had replaced the glow of the campfire in many remote Aboriginal settlements. ... People were predicting ‘culturecide’ ... The analogy to alcohol was quickly made, and the received wisdom was that the electronic damage was already done, the pristine culture ruined, and so forth.”²⁷ Michaels, however, described a very different outcome. Far from being drowned in the global soap of television and video, electronic media, he claimed, nurtured a dynamic local culture—what he cunningly called “the Aboriginal invention of television in Central Australia”.²⁸ Michaels discovered “what many other field-workers in nonliterate, Third World, and indigenous enclaves are recognising: that electronic media have proved remarkably attractive and accessible to such people where often print and literacy have not”.²⁹

Instead of a teleological eugenic Social Darwinism in which the literate survive because they are the fittest, Michaels proposed an ecological Darwinism that he believed the best contemporary anthropology was about: the story of

how particular communities adapt to a particular habitus. Michaels accepted the techno-determinism of media theory, but not its teleological conclusions. In this he follows McLuhan who, while observing the catastrophic consequences of literate technologies on oral societies, predicted that electronic technologies would have the opposite effect.

According to McLuhan, literacy broke so decisively with orality because it laid the ground for a type of consciousness in which “unified or pictorial space” is possible. By these terms McLuhan means a perspectival space, perfected in the fifteenth century, that offers a set point of view within a uniform continuous space.³⁰ Thus the technological developments of writing and perspective that characterise the age of literacy progressively instituted a way of knowing and organising the world that became increasingly visual, distant, individual and universal—what Heidegger called “the age of the world picture—the world conceived and grasped as a picture”.³¹

However this age of the world picture did not found global consciousness. McLuhan points out that the world cannot be pictured by perspective, because it can not be seen from a single point or by a single person (with only binocular vision at his or her disposal). Further, global consciousness cannot be wholly visual—which perspective pre-eminently is—because it requires a simultaneous perception. Only when cubism “drops the illusion of perspective in favour of instant sensory awareness of the whole” do we have a fully globalised consciousness.

Abstraction, says McLuhan, is the art style of the electronic age, and is only possible with the speed of electricity. “By seizing on instant total awareness”, abstract art “announces that *the medium is the message*”. Like the electric light, it is “pure information”.³² We live in an age of art without pictures. Modernist paintings are no longer pictures; no longer things causally surveyed from a fixed point of view, but energy fields that hold the viewer like some electro-magnetic force. The ordered spatiality of perspective is replaced by the hyper-acceleration of instantaneous circulation. Instead of surveying a picture from the quiet privacy of one’s own individual space, as if reading a book, post-cubist painting pulls the viewer into a collective field that is more like a social and interactive event than studied contemplation. Benjamin went further than McLuhan, arguing that painting itself “simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience”. The sorts of things McLuhan ascribed to cubism, Benjamin ascribed to film, seeing the medium of painting as incapable of convincingly representing the new age.

If Michaels’ enthusiasm for Indigenous television seems Benjaminesque, it stays well within the orbit of McLuhan’s thinking. Michaels believed “that there is

something essential to [Aboriginal] cultural maintenance with *not* writing, which is yet to be understood”, and proposed that Aboriginal communities had bypassed print literacy by moving “rapidly from ‘oral’ to electronic society”. However, in attempting to explain this, he did qualify his observation with the intention of pointing to “the limitations of our unexamined theories of unilineal media evolution”. While agreeing that “it is probably accurate to classify this culture as ‘oral’”, he pointed to the “rich graphic design” of the Warlpiri which, he argued, is a form of writing, even though today it gets “reviewed as art”. Nevertheless, in concluding that it was “a writing in the service of orality” Michaels confirms McLuhan’s model of media theory.³³

McLuhan and Benjamin believed that the electronic age was essentially a collective rather than individual experience. Whereas Benjamin saw this as a sign of its politicisation, McLuhan recognised it as more tribal than bourgeois. He thus coined the term “global village” (rather than global city), believing that the electronic age would “restore tribal patterns” of social behaviour. While a tribal society “collapses quickly” when it meets the linear hierarchical structures of literate societies, the reverse seems to happen when it meets the electronic age.³⁴ Tribal myth, he said, operates at the same speed and instantaneity as electricity; in traditional Aboriginal art the medium (the ochres from the land and the bodies of those who live there) is the message. In a strange way—though no stranger than cubism’s inspiration in African tribal art or Emily Kngwarreye being hailed as Australia’s greatest abstractionist—the electronic age returns to the non-linear space time continuity of tribal times, except on a global scale. At Yuendumu Michaels discovered just what McLuhan predicted.

Considering Ricoeur after Michaels

Despite the pervasiveness of tropes that define the modern against the primitive, and the historicist tenor of his argument, McLuhan believed that the global electronic age created a new consciousness, which, in many ways, was closer to an oral than a literate habitus. However he was not interested in the authenticity of Indigenous cultures or the fate of their traditional practices; rather he offered the opinion that tribal cultures will survive the transition into the electronic age because their consciousness is already adapted to its spatio-temporal organisation.

In the name of anti-essentialism, Michaels also avoids the question of authenticity and the survival of old traditions; rather he asserts the authenticity of a postmodern Indigeneity. If old traditions continue, for him they survive as relics of a bygone time. The emphasis for Michaels and McLuhan is the adaptation of cultures to the electronic age, not the reverse. They are futurists, not traditionalists. Their global Indigeneity assimilates the Indigenous into the global.

It is clear (to me at least) that traditional ceremonial commitments to place are not relics of a past (pre-historical) time, but remain central and essential to the production and reception of contemporary acrylic desert painting; and that this has inflated rather than curtailed its global presence. Do, then, Indigenous values already contain the potential to globalise and modernise, and even to enhance these processes? The only contemporary of McLuhan who addressed this (that I know of) is Paul Ricoeur—though to my knowledge Michaels was unaware of his writing, and in spirit remains close to McLuhan.

Much like McLuhan, Ricoeur appreciated the generative power of technology. The universal and “irreversible character of this [human] history depends in large measure upon the fact that we work as fragments of tools” that have “no fixed domain”.³⁵ They spread like a human-specific virus, sooner or later creating an “irreversible situation for everyone”. “Thus”, he concluded, “we are confronted with a *de facto* universality of mankind; as soon as an invention appears in some part of the world it will spread everywhere ... there is a single, world-wide technics”.³⁶

Ricoeur also saw in the triumph of modern technology, which he identified with rationality rather than electricity, the un-placement of space and time, and the dissolution of traditional indigenous cultural practices—though his interest was mainly traditional European practices. However, his prognosis was quite different from McLuhan’s. The rudimentary postmodern cultural forms Ricoeur saw emerging on the brink of this coming global epoch offered him little hope. They merely affirmed a homogenised and hegemonic globalization at the expense of the creative space of a living art. Art practice, which he believed sustained the “creative”, “ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind”, was under threat because it required an active dialogue with tradition and place. He was futilely calling on European intellectuals and artists to resist the sirens of the electronic age that so entranced McLuhan, and instead draw on the authenticity of their own Indigenous traditions.

Nothing is further from the solution to our problem than some vague and inconsistent syncretism. At bottom syncretisms are always residual phenomena; they do not involve anything creative; they are merely historical formations. Syncretisms must be opposed by communication, that is, a dramatic relation in which I affirm myself in my origins and give myself to another’s imagination in accordance with his different civilisation.³⁷

Ricoeur was not leading a retreat from globalism to localism, but advocating the local enrichment of an inevitable globalism. “The problem”, he said, “is not

to repeat the past, but rather to take root in it in order to ceaselessly invent".³⁸ In short, he longed for Indigenous practices that had a global reach. "No one can say", he wrote, "what will become of our civilisation when it has really met different civilisations by means other than the shock of conquest and domination". However, he prophesied, "human truth" will emerge from "civilisations confronting each other more and more with what is most living and creative in them ... at the level of an authentic dialogue".³⁹

In many respects McLuhan and not Ricoeur has been vindicated. The new pervasive hybrid media of the electronic age, including much postcolonial art, are syncretic and synthetic in form. They pulse rather than communicate; they are interactive rather than reflective; and they draw us into global vectors rather than local scenes. For Michaels, this also applied to acrylic desert painting. Yet if one contemporary art movement does seem to vindicate Ricoeur, it is acrylic desert painting. Ricoeur, however, would have been very surprised. His indigenism, if it can be called that, was largely Euro-centred. He believed that not every culture could "sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilisation".⁴⁰

I would say that only a faith which integrates a desacralisation of nature and brings the sacred back to man can take up the technical exploitation of nature. Likewise, only a faith which values time and change and puts man in the position of master before the world, history, and his own life, seems fit to survive and endure. Otherwise, its fidelity to the past will be nothing more than a simple folkloric ornamentation.⁴¹

In Ricoeur's reckoning, tribal cultures would have to sacrifice too many of their core beliefs in the wake of globalism. Their topophilic cosmology was too incommensurate with modernity. For this reason the coming world civilisation Ricoeur envisaged was a Euro-Asian one.

However, if the supposed incommensurability between tribal and modern cultures was by some miracle breached, as McLuhan suggested, and acrylic desert painting is a model of Ricoeur's vision of global Indigeneity, what sort of symbolic exchange occurs if it is be both authentically Indigenous and modern? And what does it tell us about Michaels' theories?

To many non-Aboriginal viewers, the modernity of acrylic desert painting is perhaps difficult to appreciate because the aura of authenticity is such an essential component of their interest in the work. On the other hand, we might expect Indigenous people and expert scholars like Michaels and McLuhan to have the opposite problem of appreciating the authenticity of the paintings. There is little of traditional ceremony to recognise here; only rectangular acrylic images

symmetrically arranged on white walls in a sanitised concrete box. There is no smell and song of place, no smoke and dust, no spirit, no Country. The paintings we see are only vestiges distilled from complex ceremonies about place and Country that seem superfluous in the abstract aesthetic timeless space of the gallery and modern apartment. No wonder these highly syncretic objects, painted entirely from readymade materials with no direct relation to Country sell well on the global market. Even the abstract patterns of their designs and the glow of their colours look digital. If he had lived to see them, McLuhan surely would have recognised their place in the electronic age.

The designs and colours of acrylic desert painting might pulse like other artefacts of the electronic age, however it would be presumptuous to assume that they were less authentically Indigenous for the communities they were made in. Indigenous cultures are able to accommodate the aestheticisation of ceremony. While non-Aboriginal viewers might consider these new aestheticised acrylic paintings mere shadows of their ceremonial origins, for many Aboriginal viewers they still harbour potentially dangerous designs.

What then is being communicated to non-Aboriginal viewers? While many admit the authenticity of acrylic desert painting, what is communicated remains elusive. Even Michaels, well versed in Warlpiri iconography, admits that he does not “understand” these paintings ... in terms of the meanings the painters put there.⁴² Indeed, the appeal of the work seems to be its refusal to communicate anything except the most superficial narrative that keeps from view the supposedly exotic secret and authenticity of its meanings. Whether non-Aboriginal viewers are drawn to the vague spirituality of Aboriginal art or to the aesthetic power of its abstractions, the allure of an authentic secret withheld from view remains central to the work's presence. All that is available is a providential promise (of reconciliation?) hovering over our consciousness like the Lacanian Real.

Take the acrylic desert painter, Emily Kngwarreye, an Anmatyerre elder from Utopia whose work, more than that of any other desert painter, came to exemplify Michaels' global Indigeneity. The fairytale story of her career as an artist has been given all the hallmarks of Providence.⁴³ She took up acrylic painting on canvas in her late 70s, in the same year that Michaels died. For the next six years until her death in 1996, she was a prolific producer of what everyone agrees was exceptionally innovative abstract art—producing, in this short time, an estimated three thousand (mainly large) paintings in an unparalleled diversity of styles. From the beginning she was immediately singled out as a powerful contemporary artist who was painting in a universal modernist style. Noel Sheridan, the director of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art that showed her work in 1990, wrote:

Those kinds of modernist, existentialist explorations that moved from a materialist base to abstraction in search of truer articulations are somehow confirmed by the powerful knowledge resources that Emily Kngwarreye and others in her community seem to effortlessly draw upon, across thousands of years allowing us to glimpse and see for ourselves what is radical in great art.⁴⁴

In one long sentence, Kant's universal aesthetic is effortlessly naturalised and rationalised. Here, an art supposedly firmly located within a continuous tradition that traces its origins back to cosmological practices nearly twice as old as the oldest art of Europe, proves its universality (and usefulness) by effortlessly leaping into modernist abstraction. Instead of confronting question of incommensurability, Sheridan ignores them. The past does not trouble the present. Rather, one is simply collapsed into the other. Terry Smith, at least, asked the obvious question that troubles such an easy collapse. How did an elderly woman living all her life in the terrible camps of the Australian desert, deeply immersed in traditional ceremonial practices of Country, with little knowledge and even less interest in Eurocentric modernist art, become "an outstanding abstract painter, certainly among the best Australian artist, arguably the best of her time?" However his answer, because her art is modernist, avoids, as Michaels also did, addressing the ceremonial significance of her work.

According to Smith, Kngwarreye's life experiences gave her a profound understanding of modernity. Firstly, she lived all her long life at the cutting edge of global modernity—the dislocation and appropriation of indigenous cultures around the world. Secondly, she had an intimate knowledge of the type of decorative practices that, throughout her life, have been the main inspiration of the most innovative European abstract art. Modernity dislocated all traditional cultures, including European ones. In this void, suggests Smith, the decorative rhythms of abstract art derived from Indigenous art around the world became the prime means of making pictorial space anew. For Kngwarreye in particular, this so-called modernist way of painting was always already powerful in its effects.⁴⁵ The modernity of her life and the modernism of her art only seems strange to those blinkered by Eurocentric notions of modernity and modernism, and who fail to grasp the global reach of its universal practices.

Like Michaels, Smith acknowledges the continuing importance of traditional values in the production of Indigenous art, but isolates these values from his main interest in the art's colonial and postcolonial relations of production. While admitting the role of traditional values in the revival of art practices since the 1960s, not considered is the possibility that these traditional values might

themselves be changing, as all traditional values do—that the so-called pre-historical is itself historical. They are not, as Smith implies, static hangovers from the past that “persist, quite separately from any contact”, but modernised traditions that creatively manage post-contact politics.⁴⁶

The usual way of reconciling traditional values with the contemporary world and preserving the integrity of both is by pointing to the effects of Land Rights legislation on Indigenous art production. Smith, for example, quotes the now famous words of the Pintupi acrylic painter, Charlie Tjaruru Tjungurrayi: “If I don’t paint this story some white fella might come and steal my country.”⁴⁷ This is a statement about traditional values of place and Country. However it neatly confirms the central importance of the revival of Indigenous cultural practices in the push, during the 1960s and 70s, for self-determination and Land Rights (that Smith subsequently discusses in relation to contemporary Indigenous art). It also illustrates one way in which traditional practices have contemporary social significance, and have been re-constituted (modernised) in response to the demands of modernity. The rationality of white law concerning land tenure, which demanded tokens of Indigenous authenticity in exchange for land rights, was readily assimilated into Indigenous cultural practice. However, white law did not demand the production of abstract acrylic paintings. In fact it demanded something seemingly quite different: so-called authentic traditional practices. Seated on the ground with other women and traditional ceremonial objects, her bare breasts and shoulders painted in earth ochres, Kngwarreye gave evidence at the successful Utopia land claim of 1979, ten years before she or any other of her people began painting with acrylics on canvas.

No matter how much Land Rights or whatever else may play in the production of acrylic desert painting, the real pretext continues to be ceremonial, to be Country; and it is in this respect that acrylic desert paintings are ultimately judged by its artists and community. Vivien Johnson points out that the acrylic painting movement at Papunya in the 1970s was originally opposed by other communities because of its damaging consequences for Country. Not only was the selling of Dreaming designs to white-fellas seen to be a desperate measure, but also more importantly, the traditional way of inflecting Dreamings in particular sites was threatened. In traditional ceremonies, the sites, bodies and even pigments of the designs all have a direct relationship to Country. In the acrylic desert paintings colour is no longer an integral part of place, but is reduced to an aesthetic relationship. Michaels points out “except for a caligrammatic residue, every essential feature of this ritual work is altered utterly in the shift to a portable, marketable object”.⁴⁸ If this did not necessarily diminish the ceremonial power of the designs, Johnson argued that the (universalising)

format of Papunya acrylic painting did transgress the ceremonial constitution of the Dreamings in particular sites and Country by effectively colonising other sites. "When the Dreamings pass through another tribe's land, custodianship passes into other hands. By proclaiming only the Papunya painters' rights to the Dreamings, their paintings had inadvertently torn the fabric of Western Desert society".⁴⁹ According to Johnson, the only solution was for the Papunya painters to desist or for all communities to join them. In deciding to join them, which the elders eventually did by themselves beginning to paint, the Dreamings were modernised. The decision to join rather than prohibit was a decision for modernity, or in contemporary parlance, for reconciliation and globalization, but also ultimately for Country. The mythical journeys of the ancestors are now hooked into the wider multi-tribal network of the new acrylic ceremonies being performed in the Western desert, and in one sense, in other parts of Australia and around the globe. While this might seem a new way of travelling for the ancestors, they were always, despite Indigenous placial cosmologies, inveterate travellers. Arguably their topophilic narratives are always already global.

The difficulty of deciding whether acrylic desert paintings are the manifestation of local or global imperatives is perhaps the most interesting question they raise in the current critical climate. The success of Indigenous art relies on it being both without contradiction. Such an ambivalent space is both postmodern and authentically Aboriginal. This is perhaps most evident in the way both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences interpret desert acrylic painting. The ambivalence of a meaning withheld that is experienced by most non-Aboriginal viewers of acrylic desert paintings (discussed earlier) is also the experience of Aboriginal viewers. Instead of contrasting the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal reception of acrylic desert paintings, as I did earlier, Michaels had the insight to understand a shared sensibility. He points out that even when those who are "initiated and competent in the stories and ceremonies and landscapes that are intimately associated with the sources of these paintings", "some meanings would remain inaccessible". This is because ultimately "their sources are in a participatory ritual where there is no proscenium, and no passive, distanced observer".⁵⁰ Or as Muecke observed: "a definite meaning of the Dreaming cannot be grasped"; its meaning is constantly "deferred", always put into a field of play grounded by an absent centre that can only be filled performatively, or by ceremony.⁵¹ In other words, both authentic Warlpiri ceremony and its aestheticised version of desert acrylic painting, are interactive in form—a form normally associated with a global postmodern aesthetic pioneered by computer games.

Today national identities are being squeezed between local and global tendencies, just as the World Wide Web is a rich mine of parochial discourses. The

unexpected resurgence of local identities and practices might be explained as the resistance of anachronistic regional forces to global capitalism. However, for Michaels, McLuhan's suggestion that it was a predictable effect of the electronic age tallied with his own experiences at Yuendumu. Hence he theorised acrylic desert painting and Indigenous television as authentic postmodern forms. The challenge is to also recognise the postmodernity of Indigenous cosmologies and cultural practices in general, and to see in them one more sign of the reversibility of history Baudrillard diagnosed in the late twentieth century.⁵² Then, to extend a comment by Howard Morphy, contemporary world art would be "one stage in the history of Aboriginal art".⁵³

Afterword

While the global significance of Indigenous art is increasingly taken for granted, it is not due to Michael's influence, but to the unexpected success, since his death in 1989, of a raft of art school educated urban Indigenous artists. They and not the Indigenous desert painters that Michaels championed, made the postmodern idea of global Indigeneity a reality. Nevertheless, Michaels would have enjoyed the ways in which these urban artists seamlessly participate in the postmodern global scene, blurring the boundaries between Aboriginal and postmodern concerns. Further, he would have celebrated it as another sign that Indigeneity and Aboriginality are being reinvented as a new nominal (or post) identity circulating with equal effect amongst others in a global postmodernity.

The urban reinvention of Indigeneity, however, has only been partial, and a politics of identity still haunts much contemporary writing on Indigenous art. Further, the reception of desert acrylic paintings has not followed that of urban Indigenous artists. Even though the global reach of acrylic desert painting is greater than any other Australian art, its reception often remains trapped in old modernist primitivist ideas. Theorised from his experiences of acrylic desert painting, Michaels' notion of global Indigeneity is still a radical concept that is yet to find a wide audience.

While, from an international perspective, acrylic desert painting is the most sought after Australian art, its artists are not generally seen to participate in the global chatter of contemporary art. In 1998 Morphy noted, "the inclusion of 'indigenous' art within the mainstream has not yet occurred" overseas, where it is still pigeonholed "as 'ethnic' art".⁵⁴ Acrylic desert paintings may be marketed as contemporary and sometimes exhibited in the international circuit of contemporary art biennales and fairs, but Djon Mundine complains that this is a limited and largely local (i.e. Australian) phenomenon. "Few if any [acrylic desert paintings] are in [overseas] art museums and certainly not contemporary art

museums.” Even their fevered reception in Australia derives from issues of taste that are peripheral to critical and pedagogical debate in contemporary art. As Mundine recently bemoaned, Indigenous artists, including urban ones, continue to be ghettoised “between two worlds” by the art industry, as if all its artists are caught in an identity crisis “apparently not felt by Europeans or ‘white Australians’ ”.⁵⁵

Mundine’s comments are a sobering reflection on the euphoric statements often heard in the recent past, such as Michaels’ comment that opens this essay. The failure of acrylic desert paintings to fully integrate into the postmodern scene is not just due to the legacy of a colonialist mindset. As I have emphasised, the artists openly celebrate their close relationship with specific sites while travelling the world, assimilating the vectors of a global economy into their cosmologies, rather than being assimilated by it. However such celebrations of the local are not necessarily out of tune with how globalism is being imagined in the twenty-first century. The “new world-space of cultural production”, says Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, is “simultaneously becoming more *globalised* ... and more *localised*”.⁵⁶ The Indigenous is being reinvented as an integral ingredient of globalism. For example, Homi Bhabha recently saw the mix of traditional and modern styles in the dress of the Afghan leader, Hamid Karzai, as a metaphor for globalism. Karzai’s conscious attempt in his dress to “give a precarious balance” to “both past and present”, said Bhabha, “is exactly where we are at the moment”.⁵⁷

The commitment of acrylic desert painters to traditional stories about place means that their art raises interesting questions about what global identities are. Their claims for contemporaneity are not made from within an homogenous postmodern global aesthetic in which the Indigenous is nominal or an empty signifier, but instead posit a *precarious* balance of past and present, tradition and modern, Indigenous and global. An “authentic” relationship with place is maintained with—rather than against—the processes of globalization. By inserting the past in the present, the traditional into the modern, the acrylic desert painters unsettle the historicist logic that formerly placed these terms in a binary and linear relationship.

For these reasons, the global Indigeneity of acrylic desert painting is exemplary of what Baudrillard dubbed “the vanishing of history” that characterises our times. We are, he speculated, fast becoming liberated from history’s linear narrative that separated past, present and future. Instead of this “straight line of Progress” from an ever-receding past to an endlessly deferred future, is a curved time that in true global fashion brings us closer to the point we are simultaneously moving away from. Now, says Baudrillard, “each apparent movement of history brings us imperceptibly closer to its antipodal point, if indeed to its

starting point. ... In this perspective the future no longer exists". Instead "we are faced with a paradoxical process of reversal", in which progress is a journey backwards to origins.⁵⁸ This is not due to nostalgic longing for what has been lost, but to the electronic age and its global effects, "where time is at last wiped out by pure circulation".⁵⁹ The global Indigeneity of acrylic desert painting asks to be thought of in terms of such an ending, in which movement towards the global is simultaneously a movement towards the Indigenous. Such a movement not only retraces, in a type of reversal, the history of colonialism and modernity, but also relocates the ontology of the global imagination from a futuristic modernist mindset to the coordinates of place and habitat. The global Indigeneity of acrylic desert painting is not a betrayal of authentic Indigenous values for global ones, but the invention of the Indigenous in the global.

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NOTES

- 1 Eric Michaels, "Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics", *Postmodernism: A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery*, ed. Sue Cramer, Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1989, 28.
- 2 For example, see Christine Nicholls, "The art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye: A Utopian tale", *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Body Painting Series*, New York and Adelaide: Robert Steele Gallery and Anima Gallery, 1997.
- 3 See Tuan, Yi-Fu, *Topophilia A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974; and Vladimir Jankovic, *Reading the Skies: A cultural history of the English Weather, 1650-1820*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000, 105.
- 4 Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon, 1998, 420.
- 5 Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 23.
- 6 Stephen, Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1992, 93.
- 7 I will follow contemporary practice and capitalise the term "Country" when it refers to a relationship of belonging and custodianship to particular sites.
- 8 Michaels, "Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics", 29–30.
- 9 Eric Michaels, "Western Desert Sandpainting and Postmodernism", *Bad Aboriginal Art Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994, 58.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, translated Harry Zohn, Bungay: Fontana, 1982, 227.
- 11 Michaels, "Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics", 33.
- 12 Ibid., 32.
- 13 The best evidence he offers is in his research of Indigenous television—but here he seems to argue that the narrative forms they develop are very different from those of conventional Western television.
- 14 Michaels, "Western Desert Sandpainting and Postmodernism", 60–1.
- 15 Eric Michaels, "Bad Aboriginal Art", *Bad Aboriginal Art*, 162

- 16 See Daniel Glyn, *The Idea of Prehistory*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964, 9–10.
- 17 Eric Michaels, "Hollywood Iconography: A Warlpiri Reading", *Bad Aboriginal Art*, 83.
- 18 See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, London: Routledge, 1989.
- 19 Michaels, "Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics", 27.
- 20 See Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, translated Brian Singer, New York: St Martin's Press, 1990.
- 21 Michaels, "Hollywood Iconography", 82–3.
- 22 Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilisation and National Cultures", *History and Truth*, translated Charles Kelbley, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965, 279.
- 23 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 16–17.
- 24 Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, translated Chris Turner, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, 7.
- 25 Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 78.
- 26 McLuhan, Marshall, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, New York: Mentor Book, 1969, 17.
- 27 Michaels, "Hollywood Iconography", 91.
- 28 The title of a report he wrote for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986
- 29 Ibid., 81.
- 30 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 138.
- 31 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture", *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated William Lovit, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977, 130.
- 32 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, London: Abacus, 1974, 15–16.
- 33 Michaels, "Hollywood Iconography", 84–86.
- 34 See McLuhan, *Understanding Media* pp. 33–36; *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 83.
- 35 Ricoeur, 275.
- 36 Ibid., 272.
- 37 Ibid., 281–3.
- 38 Ibid., 282.
- 39 Ibid., 283.
- 40 Ibid., 277.
- 41 Ibid., 282.
- 42 Michaels, "Western Desert Sandpainting and Postmodernism", 51.
- 43 Of course, there was nothing providential, mysterious, suspect or even untypical about either her emergence or success. An important, experienced and wily elder, she was a practised painter of the ceremonial Altyerre body designs that form the basis of her acrylic paintings. She played an important role in the Utopia Batik fabric printing business initiated in the 1980s, and was always looking for ways to sustain and promote her responsibilities as an elder. She was also amongst the first of her community to take up acrylic painting on canvas, following the success of other Desert communities, and it was only natural that she did it with her usual energy.
- 44 Quoted in Terry Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter", "Ammatyerre Artist", *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Issacs, Jennifer, Terry Smith, et al., Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998, 20.
- 45 See Terry Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter", 24–42.
- 46 Bernard Smith with Terry Smith, *Australian Painting*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992, 496.
- 47 Ibid., 495.

- 48 Michaels, "Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics", 28.
- 49 Vivien Johnson, "Especially Good Aboriginal Art", *Third Text*, 56, Autumn 2001, 44.
- 50 Michaels, "Western Desert Sandpainting and Postmodernism", 51.
- 51 Muecke, 94.
- 52 Referred to earlier in this essay. With very McLuhanesque reasoning, Baudrillard gives three reasons for this reversibility, each of which derives from the speed, implosion and simultaneity of the electronic age (*The Illusion of the End*, 1–9).
- 53 Morphy, 420.
- 54 Ibid., 417.
- 55 Djon Mundine, "Between two worlds", *Art Monthly*, 150, June 2002, 25–6.
- 56 Rob Wilson, and Wimal Dissanayake, "Introduction: Tracking the Global/Local", *Global/Local*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 1.
- 57 Quoted on Ann Wilson Lloyd, "Rambling round a world that's gone biennialistic", *Art Monthly*, 148, April 2002, 29.
- 58 Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, 10–11.
- 59 Ibid., 9.