ABORIGINAL ART, THE NATION STATE, SUBURBIA

Peter Sutton

In English we use the word 'country' in two main senses: to refer to nation states, and to speak about rural lands beyond the big cities and their suburbs. In Australia there is historically a third zone out past the country: the now quickly shrinking Outback.

Although there are some distinctive bits of Australian cities (the Opera House, Sydney Harbour, Adelaide tapwater) most of the images seen as special to Australia and able to typify it on a grand scale usually come either from the country or - now even more frequently - from the Outback. National image-mongering on the world stage requires the use of a sledgehammer - Uluru, the Rock, seems about the right weight.

But personal feelings of attachment to place, here as elsewhere, are most focused and real at a local and often unspectacular level - for most Australians the places where one grew up, or spent idyllic childhood holidays, or came to grips with adult life, or came through the heads on the refugee boat, and so on.

Still, it's often hard to separate these localised attachments from something wider, especially on an island continent where neighbours at the national level have no land boundary with us. The slip from local attachment to continental attachment, and from there to the dangerous platform of nationalism, is always a possibility. This is not to denigrate local attachments - I wouldn't want to be without my own. I'll go further: the ideal that one should be not only politically but also emotionally a 'citizen of the world' strikes me as both a difficult one to achieve and for most people a false one. There is no inherent equation between love of place, love of one's country, and nationalism or its pallid mate jingoism. Homesickness in the international traveller or migrant is not the inevitable pathway to crypto-fascism - although one sometimes gets this impression from the way anti-nationalist statements are made about the rather innocuous forms of patriotism one sees in Australia, at least in peace-time.

Partly mediating these personal feelings of attachment to place, and playing a far stronger role in projecting both the nation and nationalism, are the so-called 'myths of popular culture'; although it's probably impossible now to distinguish the grass-roots popular from the advertising campaign, or either of them from what the media subculture has decided on as this week's reality. (Do many people have any grass roots these days?)

The decline of the pastoral myth of colonial Australia, a welcome development to a lot of us, has been partly matched by the rise of Aboriginal culture as a mark of national identity. Australia has only three distinctive features as seen through the haze of international distance: open spaces and their natural wonders; unnatural species like echidnas, kangaroos and koalas; and Aboriginal people. None of these three can be attributed to the creative impulses of the human majority in this country. They are all entities that were here first. The majority's urge to identify with them, after a slow start, is now apparently in full gallop. Part of this gallop is in tandem with the desire of Aboriginal artists to place their work and their knowledge, and themselves on the national and international circuits of esteem, fame and money. Australia's national and commercial self-promotion might be interpreted as resting more and more on the exploitation of an egalitarian Aboriginal culture by the rich and powerful. Aboriginal tradition, though, is no stranger to inequality.

But the imbalance of power between the powerful clan and the marginal, the initiator and the novice, the sculptor of sacred objects and the learning apprentice, in classical Aboriginal cultural practice, is now matched in a complex and disturbing way by another imbalance of power: that between the Aboriginal artist and the consuming world originally beyond Aboriginal society and now interpenetrating it, to which the artist sells (or gives) her or his work. Although many works are still created for non-public ceremonial events in the bush, most

'Aboriginal art' is produced for the market. The art world, ironically, often prefers the objects that show the least market influence, while itself forming a linchpin in the very same market system through its validation of the objects as 'art'.

I'm not ignoring the conventional list of positive facts about the sudden entrée of Aboriginal art onto the national and international art scenes. This list includes vastly increased recognition and respect for Aboriginal culture and its owners; a cash source for many Aborigines who would otherwise be largely dependent on the welfare dollar or make-work schemes; the chance for Aborigines to work in a way that uses their knowledge and strengths as they are, without requiring assimilation to an industrial mode of living to make an income; and the education of non-Aborigines about the rich history of the landscape of this country, in a way typically Aboriginal in its reliance on visual revelation rather than complex verbal exposition. Whether or not these positives outnumber the negatives in some imagined set of scales, no complete praising or damning of the phenomenon is possible. Fifty-one percent of votes may decide an election but not much else. Most of life consists of ambiguities which we cheerfully, or grumpily, swallow. My criticism in this paper should not, therefore, be interpreted as a veiled way of telling Aborigines to stop letting their art go. That's their business.

On the sombre side: a lot has already been said about the ethical murk of political and economic inequalities in the Aboriginal art scene. I'm not going to add very much to that particular literature here, but there is another dimension to this negativity, which is both political and something deeper - a huge reality gap - on which I will comment.

The projection of the local, intimate, and personally known onto the national and international stage through print culture, the mass production of images, the separation of the object from its makers as it becomes a commodity on an open market, the gap in knowledge between producer and consumer, all of this (and more) is a source of disturbance for some people. This is not only because of the levels of domination, exploitation and other 'bad' things someone is doing to someone else in this context (usually analysed in terms of racial or cultural groups) but also because of the symbolic gulf this involves.

The gap between the intellectual origins of most Aboriginal 'art' and the culture that buys and collects it and uses it to promote the national image itself is central to this problem. Differences of understanding are one thing, but universalised false consciousness versus local knowledge is something else. Especially as a token of Australia as a nation state on the international stage, Aboriginal images have become imagined art, in the service of an imagined nation. (Here I am borrowing some ideas and words from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities*, London: Verso 1983.)

A nation is a more 'imagined' community than a village because it is both bigger and lighter, more susceptible to phoney definitions, and further/beyond intimacy. It is a large projection made possible with the paper castles of bureaucracy and reinforced by mass communication.

'Aboriginal art' is imagined in something like this way. The art is imagined because it is expanded, largely by people other than the artists, in new ways: through time, as the once mainly ephemeral is placed on Belgian linen and often curated or at least looked after; through space, in the sense that most paintings and sculptures leave their place of origin and go elsewhere; through social and cultural space, since they are extended via mass reproduction or gallerisation into icons or exemplars within urban industrial culture, so that their significance is directed away from their specificity to their role as a token of a class. They are particularly valued as far as they refer to, offer a window on, and encapsulate, something Aboriginal, almost denying the objects themselves as things. They are now symbols of symbols, domesticating - with some difficulty - a remote world that contains something people feel they have lost or want.

'Aboriginal art', as something in Venice, Paris or New York that 'Australia can be proud of' is a projection - both in the sense of an illusion, and in the sense of an enlargement. The miniaturised plates in a book on Aboriginal art are also blow-ups: they enlarge the number of people who can see 'the painting', they enlarge the fame (and dollar value) of the painting; they enlarge the name of the artist, the collecting institution, the collector, the curator.

This, in turn, is only possible through reduction. The object is reproduced in micro, flattened into two dimensions, turned into public not private property, made available at the book-owner's decision not that of the painter or the painting's owner, revealed when the reader, an audience of one, wishes to open to a particular page, not when the maker's group decides that revelation to the novice or visitor is now in order. Less is not always more.

People often look at art books in a random kind of way - for example, starting at the back, because it is easier to mechanically flip all the pages this way. At an exhibition the visitor can look at the works in any order - unless the artists are there to take one around. This is not merely a form of domination of the book's contents by the reader, or the exhibition's individual pieces by the viewer, but also an approach to the works themselves that is essentially foreign to the culture and social relations that produced the original works if they come from the Aboriginal classical tradition and its continuing descendants.

Why has it been easier for people to project, imagine (reimagine), popularise, colonise and appropriate Aboriginal visual arts than it has been for them to do the same to song, language or ceremony? (Aboriginal sacred narratives have undergone these processes, especially in the bowdlerised, infantilised versions published as children's literature in English - this happened historically earlier than the other forms of appreciation too.) One reason is that the painted or sculpted image can be held, held in sight, held in the imagination, for quite a while, and therefore, together with the observer-driven starting point for perception, *controlled* in ways that songs and dances cannot. And Aboriginal songs are so complex and hard to follow, and especially hard to reproduce, for members of the metropolitan cultures. Songs *refer* like paintings do, often to the same subjects, but, together with their language, they can be fairly unintelligible to the neophyte. A dot or a note is a dot or a note in any perception language, but what can a non-Arrernte speaker make of the Arrernte word *pmere*? And where does this observation leave the experience of intelligibility and translatability we might have when looking at Aboriginal dots?

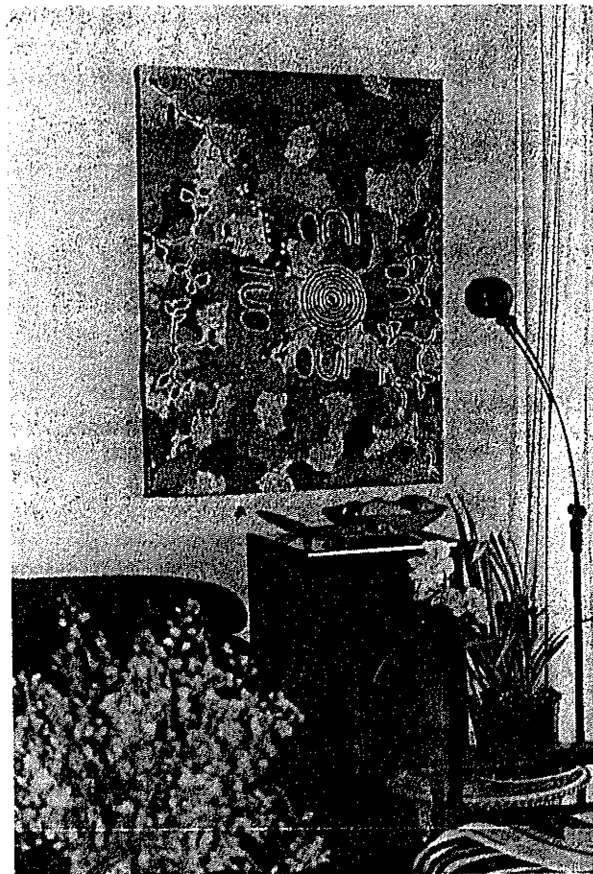
The use of Aboriginal art in presenting Australia both to Australians and others represents the final domestication of the Outback. The Outback is disappearing. There are now officially no intractables - no intractable spaces, and no populations beyond the alleged healing powers of policy, training programmes, drop-in centres, detoxification farms and sewerage. The passenger trains that opened up Australia's commuter suburbs and rural retreats (the guesthouses in those days were often just a walk from the station in the hills) have been supplemented by cars and buses, and lately by four-wheel drives, an increasingly popular choice for city people. Sales of Pajeros have been soaring. Telecom Australia is helping too. The eradication of the bush as the 'back of beyond' is also being made final by the intervention of

'wilderness', that refreshing, restorative space for holidaying professionals and retirees, the ultimate extension of the suburban backyard, where people in khaki uniforms patrol to protect the savage from the consumers of the savage. Local Aboriginal people may still see this invasion as a lot of strangers walking through their ancestral living-rooms, occasionally by agreement and sometimes for a modest fee, but mostly as the uninvited.

This is the end of a process that begins when suburbs enclose undomesticated spaces and turn them into parks. The remnant of bush where I played as a kid just beyond Melbourne's suburbia in the 1950s now has fences, a car park, and among others a sign which reads: "DOG OWNERS: Use scoopers provided to clean up after your dog. Deposit waste in garbage container. Local Law no.3"

Local Law no. 3 has plenty of siblings. The extension of the State into every aspect of one's life and environment is part of a widening tendency towards the defeat of entropy, the final solution to human messiness. If the exotic is good marketing fodder, it has to be sanitised, swallowed, digested and spat out - in an orderly way of course. The airline ad on TV that shows an outback landscape across which drift Disneyised graphics of X-ray rock paintings to the accompaniment of the inevitable digeridoo looks and feels more and more like Local Law no.4. As the national image becomes more comprehensive by engaging with an erstwhile Outback and a newly-glamourised, artistic and spiritual Aboriginal culture, it ironically comes to represent a more highly integrated, more law-driven and more controlled society than ever before. The squatters of the nineteenth century, the Aboriginal fringe-dwellers of the fifties, and the bagmen and combos of the Great Depression, were further outside the womb of the nation-state than most of the counter-culturals who have dropped out and dropped in to the north Queensland rainforests and e-mail. In the artworld as in the old pastoral frontier, by definition you have to be beyond the pale before you can be 'let in'.

The rhetoric of multiculturalism belies the creeping technical homogeneity of the basics of everyone's lives. Avant-gardism, once highly oppositional in this country, and riddled with wine-drinking, free-loving members of the Communist party, is now official. Diversity is a public good, so long as there's not too much of it below the folk-dancing and garlic. The Australian post-colonial struggle for a distinct national identity, just as it finally begins to succeed, at least on skin level, finds itself embedded in an international financial and diplomatic environment that is increasingly homogeneous and integrated, and all 12-year-olds are wearing the same hideous baseball caps. (Akubras look more and more like school uniform - and for the Olympic team and many kids on school camp they are already.)



Mount Allan painting in the suburbs.

Just as everyone - even the Prime Minister - has finally learned to use the words 'cultural cringe' and Australia is represented at the Venice Biennale by Aboriginal artists, the Big Mac you eat in Townsville tastes just like the one you eat in Moscow. Money is more and more under supra-national control. National governments are increasingly like branch managers, but it's getting harder to find head office. The forces that created nations out of human cultural and geographical patchworks in Europe and some other regions are clearly following the fate of the old-style imperial conglomerations; a number of them are devolving. Macro-organisation of people, along narrow nation-state lines, is in some degree of retreat. Old-style nationalism still exists, but it's not like it was in the first half of the century. It's becoming a false bogeyman. The opiate of the people, in this country at least, is no longer jingoism or religion but the ambiguous comforts of the dormitory suburb and their cultural validation through, and as, television.

Most of Australia's cultural power-brokers in the nineties come out of the Australian suburbia of the fifties. Against this background, usually and hastily considered to have been a cultural desert, Aboriginal art, among other things, has provided today's makers and breakers with a national cultural image both of distinction and of high distinctiveness. The works may be other people's images as far as most Australians are concerned, but they have also been made over into being 'Australia's' in a keen collusion between artists, the market, scholars/curators and the image machines of tourism and advertising.

The apparently inexhaustible energy of the industrial state in turning the subversive into mainstream product has coped as well in the case of Aboriginal art as in that of Death Metal and Grind Core. Yesterday's threat is something we should all have one of tomorrow. The products of an indigenous culture that classically prefers events to accumulations are now accumulated as never before, but perhaps the wheel keeps turning as they are also increasingly remade into events and abruptly jettisoned: the Aboriginal art moments of TV and radio, this season's ads and tee shirts, and an hour of cocktails with prospective plastic button exporters in front of the Clifford Possum at the embassy in Kuala Lumpur...

It's possible that turning some of the intellectual lessons of Aboriginal art back onto how we understand the suburbia of the Fifties (60s, 70s, 80s, 90s) might help shift the balance towards something more firmly grounded in reality, for most Australians. It also might flesh out Australia's national self-representation with a little mainstream self-exoticism, reconstituting the ordinary as the powerful, as something we think we understand but seldom do without re-visioning, without ritual. From Patrick White and Barry Humphries to Susan Norrie we now have something of a body of passionate

artistic engagement with what many still see as the banal, undramatic and dry world of the suburbs and the domestic lives of their inhabitants. But the vision seems hard to sustain as it approaches its half-century. Patrick White's novels, like himself, gradually moved from the outer suburbs and the bush to the inner city, and Barry Humphries has moved in emphasis from the exquisite ordinariness of Sandy Stone's Gallipoli Crescent, Glen Iris, to the harder, more 'up-market' savagery of a global Dame Edna. If suburbia is getting more difficult to typify, and harder to denigrate, that's probably good for the artists - most of whom, like most Australians including the majority of Aboriginal people, also live there.

The process of coming to grips with an ancient Aboriginal past is still highly problematic for most Australians. The bones of the non-Aboriginal dead, and the genes of the living, have only been mingling with those of Aborigines for a geologically short time. But most Australians have nowhere else they belong, not just legally, but also in terms of homesickness. In time, I suppose it's possible that symbols like Aboriginal art could shift from representing the spiritual Australian landscape (which hardly anyone believes in outside Aboriginal society) to more broadly representing the country - the country as a wide set of people connected by something real, rather than as the imagined nation of the state.

For the moment, though, Aboriginal art in the service of the nation (or of bits of it like the Northern Territory Tourist Bureau) is more representative of illusion, and of the accommodation of the dispossessed to the Hollywood offerings of a choice between bought fame and influence on one hand and welfare obscurity on the other. Change might depend, among other things, on a mellowing recognition that the separate pasts of Australians are being confronted and understood more and more from a point of view that recognises the reality of our mingled lives in the present. The strangeness of this new cultural perception, if it pans out, will hopefully be of the kind that can save homespun homogeneity from banality. If so, it might remind some people of these lines by T.S. Eliot:

> Home is where one starts from. As we grow older, the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated of dead and living. □

Note: This paper was prepared for and presented during a panel discussion on "Nation and Representation" at Artists Week Adelaide Festival 1992.

WHAT IS AUSTRALIAN WORK?

Susan Cohn

I am often asked where I originally come from. And, if I am in a wicked mood, I will try to embarrass the questioner with some non-answer. A persistent inquirer will ignore the flippancy, and further qualify their question by rephrasing the terminology to ask whether I was born in Australia (which, incidentally, was the form the question was usually couched in up to the late 1980s when issues of multiculturalism introduced a so-called obscure politeness).

I have never been able to understand why it matters where I was born, nor in what way it matters, particularly in the context of my work. But clearly it does matter because people keeping asking me. This question has as much relevance to the significance of a piece of creative work as does the question of whether it is made by a man or a woman.

But what becomes even more annoying is when an invitation to an exhibition, either in Australia or overseas, requests work which is 'Australian'. So what is Australian work? We've all got some idea, but the simplest and only accurate answer to the question is that it is work produced by Australians. My work is Australian because I am Australian.

No one can deny that in locating a particular cultural style certain societal attributes will often be identified. There will be talk of the flamboyance of the Italians, the austerity of the Scandanavians, the zen of the Japanese, the rigidness of the Germans and so on. But all these descriptions do not idealise the matter of cultural identity.

That's not the case, however, in Australia. Here we are preoccupied with national identity as the major theme and validation for Australian work. This goes from the fine arts right through to popular culture.

There is an overriding need to build a particular kind of cultural production that Australians and foreigners alike recognise as being Australian. It is perceived as Australian because it expresses the agreed themes of national identity.

Unfortunately, the idea of the Australian experience or spirit generally gets bogged down into thinking that Australian work has to reflect the landscape, or national symbols like kangaroos and waratahs - or the sophisticated updates of these images - in order to be authentically Australian.

This idea of agreed themes that express national identity is vividly demonstrated in the exhibition *Australian Fashion: The Contemporary Art* organised by the Sydney Powerhouse Museum of Arts and Sciences, launched at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1989, exhibited in Australia in 1990 and through Asia in 1991