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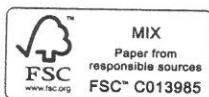
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FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON ART

Contemporary Outtakes

*Edited by Jacqueline Millner
and Catriona Moore*

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WOMEN IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIO

Invisible tracks in the Indigenous artist's archive

Una Rey

Born of the 1970s, second wave feminism and Australia's Aboriginal art movement have both matured gracefully: at first glance, we might acknowledge that they both won their original fight for art world recognition. Yet the question of whether feminism is welcome at the contemporary art table persists. Two recent exhibitions of Aboriginal women's art offered the opportunity to reflect on the intergenerational shifts of what I will call the post-essentialist, intercultural feminist practices that lie at the heart of these two 'historic' movements but are rarely acknowledged in the narratives of Australian contemporary art.

Over the summer of 2016–2017, the National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV) *Who's Afraid of Colour?* surveyed the work of 118 'great contemporary Indigenous innovators – transformers of tradition and precedent – who all happen to be women'.¹ Yet, rather than focus on the significance of gender, curator Judith Ryan was quick to emphasise the title's reference to both Barnett Newman's famous late modernist series *Who's Afraid of Red, White and Blue* (1966–70) and American racial politics (in which colour is a euphemism for non-white).² At least the NGV settled a debt incurred in 1981 when it showcased 328 male and no female artists in *Aboriginal Australia*.³

On a similar crusade, *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia* touring the US and Canada in 2016–2019 follows the all-male *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting* (2015–2016). The American collectors Debra and Dennis Scholl, whose works featured in both exhibitions, appear keen to demonstrate that Australian Indigenous art is a virile heir to the formalist adventure of modernism.⁴ But they also celebrate the distinct cultural identities of the artists, all drawn from remote community art centres across inland and tropical Australia.⁵

Was I alone in hearing echoes of Edward Albee's 1962 play on middle-class dysfunction *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and whispering the riposte 'Who's afraid of

feminism?' Are curators afraid that feminism's supposedly dated essentialist identity politics could evoke nostalgia for something that was never so simple, or disrupt the carefully constructed cultural essentialism of much Indigenous contemporary art?

Curatorial revisionism without penetrating scholarship can't resuscitate feminism, but an assembly of women's work is one way to take the pulse of contemporary practices in an art world where public institutions continue to underrepresent female artists and commonly disavow the influence of feminist theories and practices on contemporary art. However, tweaking the numbers is only a start. For nearly 40 years, Judith Ryan has orchestrated key exhibitions of all forms of Indigenous art, with one eye on modernist aesthetics and one on the social, cultural and political force of the work, including the development of women artists whom she called 'the sleeping giants of the Aboriginal art movement'.⁶ Yet, in reconstructing the castle of modernism, Ryan stays firmly within its walls. She does not take the opportunity to revisit anthropologist Diane Bell's critical analysis of 2002 that drew the obvious conclusion that 'Aboriginal women are indeed rewriting the patriarchal script and in so doing posing a number of challenges for feminists'.⁷

We may wonder how feminism can be imagined in the uneven, inequitable conditions of postcolonial Australia, so amplified in remote communities. Curator Hetti Perkins made an attempt when lamenting Aboriginal women's invisibility from the canon: 'First Fleeters carried to Aboriginal Australia an ethnic lens that asserted the subordination of women and took this sexist, and by extension racist, perspective to bear on the Aboriginal societies they met in the colony'.⁸ In other words, colonial histories rendered Indigenous women invisible and the Western art world doubled down on that blind spot.

At the same time, however, Western feminism brought wider recognition to Aboriginal women's cultural knowledge and authority and brokered the emergence of women painters in remote Australia. The modernising of Aboriginal communities had as much impact on traditional gender relations as it did in Western society, although the rates of change have been shaped by different complexities. What is clear is that the presence of female anthropologists, teachers, linguists, art coordinators, critics and curators invested in feminism together with the will of Aboriginal women bore a legacy that was instrumental in the development of women's Indigenous contemporary art.⁹ This was paralleled in the work of Indigenous women curators such as Perkins, Brenda L. Croft and Margo Neale who were paving the way for the work's urban reception.

So far so conventional: a local mirroring of the broader Western social and political history of the late 20th century, in which the Other (white ladies first) and 'the Rest' fought their way to the tables of cultural production and consumption. The tensions between white and black feminism and across generations of feminists have been so well scrutinised in academia that they have reached the point of cliché – as evident in a student FEMSOC poster on a regional university noticeboard: 'We are intersectional, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-heteronormative, anti-capitalist feminists, with an emphasis on DIY and relational activism in [insert place name].'¹⁰

This self-conscious brand of feminism suggests to me that the generative creative force of capital F feminism has plateaued, and may have limited traction against the trauma of colonisation, the variegated ambitions to 'decolonise' local art world institutions, and the complex manifestations of a postcolonial Australian consciousness. And yet, despite what might be read as an overreaction to essentialism among younger feminists, at least this intersectionality shows no fear of the F word.

Intersectionality – one of the potentially generative theories of post-essentialist feminism on the aforementioned student poster – was coined in 1989 by African American lawyer and civil rights campaigner Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her influential article, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'.¹¹ Crenshaw argued that black women were discriminated against by virtue of their gender *and* their race, and built cases that formally recognised this 'double jeopardy' of discrimination. In the decades since, intersectional feminism has travelled widely as a 'rallying cry' against 'single-issue feminist conversation', especially in white, middle-class media.¹² In one of many critiques of intersectionality, Devon W Carbado defends its capacity to operate across identities as well as across disciplines suggesting (after Edward Said's travelling theory) that 'rather than domesticating or enervating theories, movement might radicalise and reinvigorate them'.¹³

Crenshaw's article coincided with a transcultural turn in global contemporary art discourse and curatorial practice first writ large in Jean-Hubert Martin's *Magicians of the Earth* (1989).¹⁴ In concert with postcolonial theory, post-structural feminism and postmodern analysis, centre/periphery debates and theories of hybridity, Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality offers a guide to understanding the productive and provocative zones of cross-cultural contact where women, in spite of, and because of, their uneven power relations, find themselves face to face on the ground. In the Australian context, the art market has been the unlikely catalyst in this liaison, its multiple networks and willing audiences opening a space for numerous hybrid cultural forms.

Despite Ryan's claim that *Who's Afraid of Colour?* is neither an exhibition about feminism nor a feminist exhibition, there are, as always if you go looking, counter narratives about the politics of women's lived experience – both black and white. This is especially the case in remote communities, where feminism may never be uttered aloud – though women's rights and issues of domestic violence are critical. But if we follow Crenshaw, the interdisciplinary intercultural practices occurring in remote community art centres are rich sites of post-essentialist politics, and they generate much of the work being exhibited as far afield as Tokyo and New York.

These reconciliatory gestures, however, remain invisible on the gallery walls. The preliminary curatorial work being performed 'out bush'¹⁵ through black/white relationships is also largely rendered invisible: doubly so when the mediator is a woman. These mutable curatorial practices carried out in the art centre remain the most 'inarticulate' and under-investigated aspects of these transcultural art worlds, in spite of their influence and power. This is largely because the modernist paradigm and the cultural essentialism governing most exhibitions highlights 'genius'

and Indigenous identities, concealing feminist relational action which was a key factor in opening a space for Indigenous women artists in the 1990s.

Constant gardeners

The artist who most famously took advantage of this feminist opening was Emily Kame Kngwarreye, whose *Big Yam Dreaming/Anwerlarr Anganenty* (1995) is the indisputable queen of *Who's Afraid of Colour?* Eclipsing the scale of two of Australia's most iconic publically owned works, Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952) and *Spirit Dreaming Through Napperby Country* (1980) by Tjapaltjarri brothers Tim Leura and Clifford Possum, Kngwarreye's black and white register symbolises the interracial and intertextual. The painting's stark gestural glamour captures a protean signature of place and time, looping through the conceptual language of Anmatyerr women's ceremony (*awely*), and the artist's primary Dreaming, *anwerlarr anganenty*, the pencil yam at Alhalkere north-east of Alice Springs. Like Kngwarreye, the painting has assumed the status of a national treasure that accords infinite interpretations. As visual banner, it has rendered services as diverse as Deleuze's theories and the Indigenous botanical archive, while also offering a grand feminist challenge to the heroics of abstract expressionism (Figure 3.1).

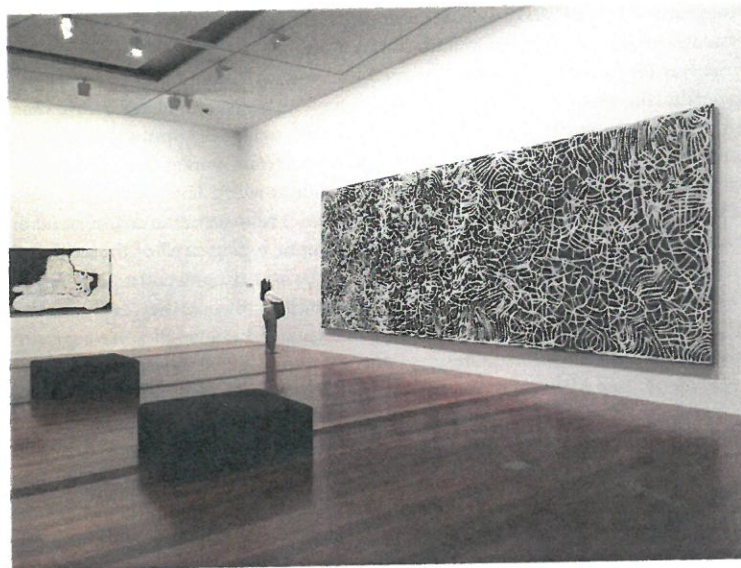


FIGURE 3.1 Tjitjiti, 2015. Carlene West and Emily Kame Kngwarreye's *Big Yam Dreaming/Anwerlarr Anganenty* 1995. Installation, *Who's Afraid of Colour?* National Gallery of Victoria, 2017. Photo: Una Rey

From the late 1980s until her death in 1996, Kngwarreye was the *magnum opus* of the Australian art world, epitomising the 'remote star' theory of contemporary art's mythologising and inadvertently announcing the women's turn in Aboriginal art from remote communities. Like an 'ideal feminist', the 'impossible modernist'¹⁶ never married, remained childless and was stridently independent in character while fulfilling all the interdependencies of Anmatyerr social, political and cultural being. *Big Yam Dreaming/Anwerlarr Anganenty* marks the apogee of Kngwarreye's art career, but the origins of her transactional painting practice first surface in the laborious efforts of craft: the low-cost and profane women's work well represented in *Who's Afraid of Colour?*

As the art/craft debate served second-wave feminist discourses in the 1970s, white women craft advisors introduced the women of Utopia to the laborious but socially invigorating batik process. The technique would ultimately be abandoned: craft may be reframed as critical practice, but it doesn't pay like painting does. Nevertheless, the genesis of Kngwarreye's art owes a debt to her decade-long apprenticeship in batik painting from 1977. Linguists Jenny Green and Julia Murray were central to this development: Murray managed the commercial batik enterprise for five years followed by a string of women coordinators, while Green would continue to work in Central Australia permanently.¹⁷

However, it was a man, Rodney Gooch, who acted as a catalyst to move Utopia women's work in a transformative new direction.¹⁸ Gooch began working for Utopia artists in 1987 and is written into the legend of Kngwarreye. His decision to introduce the artists to more ambitious art projects was first evident in *Utopia: A Summer Project*, in which he encouraged the women to add distinctive painterly borders to their large-scale silks, a hands-on approach that stimulated rather than obstructed the artists in their discoveries.¹⁹ It was his maverick approach in pushing the artists' work, paired with his eye to contemporary art market desires, that created a perfect storm with Kngwarreye riding the headwind.

In his PhD thesis, Quentin Sprague (an ex-art coordinator) examined a number of close creative intercultural partnerships against the rolling swell of the market,²⁰ with a focus almost exclusively on male 'brokers' who have proven to be the most visible examples of intercultural arts workers – in part because they easily inhabit the roles of mavericks and radical innovators, in part because they have proven better publicists. By contrast, there is an uncomfortably essentialist 'feminine reluctance' on the part of women coordinators to acknowledge their impact on the art being made and on the relevance of gender or feminist critiques of their practice. Nevertheless, Sprague's assessment 'that creativity will cut its own path regardless of the ideological barriers that so often surround cross-cultural engagements in Australia'²¹ applies across the gender divide.

Artistic waves: the patrilineal line

Like the conventional precis of feminism, the contemporary Indigenous art movement has been interpreted as having two historic waves. Both are, in 20th-century

fashion, masculine in tenor and heroic in ambition, narratives frequently revised to reflect contemporary prejudices and aspirations. The first eruption was the Arrerente artist Albert Namatjira's mastery of watercolour, a medium introduced by Rex Battarbee in the mid-1930s. This intimate relational exchange of worldviews which lasted until Namatjira's death in 1959 would have sweeping implications for Australian modernism, but more significantly it planted the seed for a new profession in Aboriginal Australia: becoming an artist.²²

A second revolution occurred at Papunya in 1971 when senior Aboriginal men, encouraged by schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon, began painting in acrylics for an outside audience. This now magnificent history obscures the little-known fact that the men were also introduced to tie-dye, batik and screen-printing – the 'lesser' media associated more with women's practice which were so significant in the Utopia story.²³ Like Battarbee before him, Bardon published his account of those heady days in books that made passionately subjective arguments for the artists and the radicalism of their work under the banner of Papunya Tula. In recent scholarship, Vivien Johnson – who since the 1980s has added critical insights into the Papunya art movement and been its most significant champion after Bardon – has granted considerably more agency to the artists' lives before and after Bardon's 18-month tenure. All the same, his 'foundation story' of the Western Desert painting movement has been 'told so intensely' and 'retold so often and so widely, that it has almost the force of a Dreaming narrative itself'. Even if 'the real Papunya is surely not the one of Geoffrey Bardon's memories',²⁴ he is perennially associated with Papunya Tula artists, just as Battarbee is with the Hermannsburg landscape painters.

The point here is to emphasise the commitment from both black and white individuals in creating new forms to communicate the richness of Indigenous knowledge, culture, sovereignty and political will. Both Battarbee and Bardon represent early examples of what is now a tide of arts workers moving in and out of the complex cultural field of the remote Indigenous community. While there are important differences between then and now – notably in gender and the broader racial politics of Australia – the continuities are remarkable: white interlocutors whose presence is essential but paradoxical within the Indigenous art story.

With the rare exception of Bunjalung curator and artist Djon Mundine who managed the art centres at Milingimbi from 1979 and Ramingining from c1983–1988, art coordinators are mostly non-Indigenous. This is unsurprising, given the administrative and financial skills required of an art coordinator and the structural obstacles that local Indigenous populations have faced in acquiring them, at least until recently.²⁵ While state and regional galleries are under increasing moral and political pressure to employ Indigenous curators to manage Indigenous collections and programmes, the art coordinator is not (yet) an 'Indigenous identified position'.²⁶ Mundine's example remains singular: his influential role as conceptual producer and cross-cultural mediator of *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1987–88) has not established a precedent for Indigenous art coordinators in remote communities despite bringing to the project rich political and cultural symbolism unmatched by any non-Indigenous coordinator.²⁷

Mundine's ability to engage and negotiate with the Ramingining community and the Sydney art establishment was crucial to the realisation of *The Aboriginal Memorial*, but such epic public works have not been the primary object of remote community art centres or their staff. Implemented by the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973, the role of arts and craft advisors was to market, promote and ensure the production of cultural material that conformed to an 'authentic' Indigenous product.²⁸ Improved infrastructure and communications along with industry support has made the coordinator's role less demanding at a logistical level, but negotiating across worlds remains central. Coordinators perform a contract of mutual obligation and need to operate in diverse and demanding fields, from the art world, to the dislocated and dynamic social realities of remote communities, to the perpetuity of the Dreaming. These imported workforces are studio assistants, curators, critics, administrators, dealers, strategists and writers who tacitly agree to downplay their influence and impact on the artists as they perform what is a relatively silent pantomime.

There are, of course, some noises from time to time: journalist and long-time critic of Indigenous art, Nicolas Rothwell, has called attention to the art coordinator's presence and participation in two-way influence and intimate exchange that is 'so profound... that it is almost a perversion of the record to underplay this hybrid aspect of the tradition.'²⁹ Anthropologist Fred Myers, in his analysis of arts coordinators at Papunya Tula, notes that coordinators are often 'significant theorists in their own engagement and practices',³⁰ an observation more applicable to the writings of men than women. An exception is artist and writer Kim Mahood, one of the most articulate observers of the intercultural field. While not an art coordinator, she has collaborated with Aboriginal artists and worked closely on several remote community projects. Her outback pastoralist heritage grants her a rare perspective – tempered with irony and wit – on the prosaic and sometimes tragic cross-cultural collisions of remote Australia, and her essays offer sharp insights into the art centre dynamic that neither appeases nor apologises to the cosmopolitan reader.³¹

My own experience as an art coordinator bears mention here as background to my long-term interest in the shifting priorities – aesthetic, ethical, gendered and political – of remote community art centres. In 1997 as a recent painting graduate I was employed as art coordinator at Ikuntji, Haasts Bluff, 220 kilometres west of Alice Springs. I was familiar with the artists' work and the nuances of the market following five year's employment in a commercial gallery in Darwin specialising in Indigenous art. The capacity to sell the art and to understand painting processes was critical to my appointment, and I would go on to work at Balgo in short-term contracts and on the Tiwi Islands as art coordinator between 2000–2002.³²

In each case, I was replacing women art coordinators, or working alongside them. By 2014, women accounted for around 70 percent of remote community arts workers, although definitive statistics are hard to establish given the average tenure of art coordinators is between two and three years.³³ This gender trend is reflected in curatorial and arts administration roles in metropolitan and regional centres elsewhere in Australia and is also reflective of the high percentage of women enrolled

in tertiary art degrees, though at the time of writing only one state public art institution has a female director.³⁴ It is highly unlikely that men at Papunya would have inculcated a woman into their painting plan as they did Bardon and subsequent male coordinators in those early years – even though the painters' wives would soon be helping with the laborious dotting of the large paintings. By the same token, Aboriginal women have been instrumental in inviting white women to work for them and with them, and the stream of willing urban women remains constant.

These women may be drawn to 'the adventure of art advising', as Myers described it, but how much of that 'adventure' is shaped by gender? More specifically, has the gender of coordinators had an impact on the art that gets made in remote communities and how that art is exhibited? In seeking some broad answers to these open-ended questions, I looked to the writing of women art coordinators as well as interviewed some long-term practitioners. My selection of subjects aims to capture some of the changes of the past two decades, reflecting different ages and professional backgrounds, including painters, art teachers, linguists, community arts workers, and arts administrators or museum professionals. Though none of the women identified as curators prior to their role as art coordinators, some have become active in this area and most consider 'curatorial thinking' one of the most creative aspects of the job; for some, curating has become part of their post-art centre practice.

Go West, young woman

The 1990s witnessed steady growth across the Aboriginal art market building on its incremental rebranding as contemporary art. Curatorial gestures such as Bernice Murphy's *Perspecta* (1981) and Nick Waterlow's Biennales of Sydney (1979, 1986, 1988) were instrumental in framing the work as culturally unique and conceptually avant garde.³⁵ A willing market; postcolonial, post-bicentennial (1988) optimism; and a liberally inclined art world coincided with the rise in university graduates enriched by second-wave feminist art practices to precipitate a surge in female art coordinators. The frontier mythology intrinsic to the Australian psyche was reimagined and feminised, a *zeitgeist* echoing the 19th-century Indiana journalist's famous challenge to dystopian urban youth: 'Go West, young man, and grow up with your country.'³⁶ The geopolitical landscape of remote Aboriginal Australia now offered an invitation to young women to test their mettle in a relatively new hybrid field of creative practice.

Karen Dayman and Marina Strocchi were emblematic of a generation of artists seeking new horizons in the desert. Strocchi, an insider with the Roar group of Melbourne neo-expressionist painters (her partner Wayne Eager was a founding member of the informal collective) first travelled to Central Australia and the Western Desert in 1990 with an enthusiasm for the Papunya Tula painters inspired by exhibitions at the NGV and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi.³⁷ This fieldtrip led directly to women at Haasts Bluff asking her to establish a women's art centre. Arriving with 'a suitcase full of white T-shirts, a roll of fabric and a slab of butcher's paper'³⁸ to run

screen-printing workshops, Strocchi would become the inaugural art coordinator at Ikuntji and a catalyst in the Papunya Tula women's painting movement.

Though Daphne Williams was the first female manager at Papunya Tula, a post she held for 20 years from 1981, she didn't encourage women to paint as artists in their own right.³⁹ This historic moment was instigated by Pintupi women at Kintore (kin to the leading Papunya Tula painters) when they instructed Strocchi to run a canvas workshop out bush in 1996. Her role in the *Minyma Tjukurrpa* [Women's Law] painting project was a reciprocal act of relational exchange, as the Kintore women had 'opened' the art centre at Ikuntji: 'We danced for you... bring us big canvas... When are you coming with the really big canvas, not little ones, really big ones?'⁴⁰

Big canvases were also taking shape further north in the Kimberley in 1996. By then, Dayman was already six years into her coordinator's role at Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency in Fitzroy Crossing; she would spend a total of 17 years in the job. Fitzroy's painting history predates Dayman's arrival, but the implications of the 1993 *Native Title Act* for the Walmajarri, Wangkajunga, Juwaliny and Mangala brought a different force to the Mangkaja studio – politically and aesthetically. Many of the forty plus custodians of the Great Sandy Desert who collaborated on the monumental *Ngurrara I* (1996) and *Ngurrara II* (1997) were key painters at the art centre, and more than half were women.⁴¹ Dayman – who humorously and self-deprecatingly referred to herself as 'paint monitor' – discerned an inventiveness and freedom in the Ngurrara canvases, 'not principally concerned with women's body paint iconography or detailed *ngarrangkarni* narratives...' The fact that they were painted on country half a day's drive from the art centre also explains the vitality of these historic canvases. As all art coordinators soon learn, visiting country is implicit to better understandings of the artists and their paintings; such experiences added to what was for Dayman 'an incredibly rich field of translations: the Bible, languages, paint.'⁴² Not surprisingly, writing would become a critical part of her practice and a way of interpreting the cross-cultural idiom of painting.⁴³

Strocchi and Dayman were key chaperones to what curator Margie West called 'third wave Aboriginal art'⁴⁴ coming out of the desert in the 1990s, that is, women's painting. Each can claim a legacy here: Strocchi's hand in the activation of Pintupi women painters and Dayman's role in the landmark Ngurrara canvases. In Strocchi's case, being a woman invested in relationships was significant to the women's painting project, whereas in Dayman's case, the collective language groups and mix of men and women collaborators suggests gender was not as important. In their respective art centre studios at Ikuntji and Mangkaja, however, both nurtured individual artists and encouraged experimentation and long apprenticeships painting on paper that generated works of exquisite subtlety. These could be framed in the art historical tradition of women's work: low cost, small scale works with an emphasis on dialogical exchange and materiality. As Dayman observed, 'it was the market that led to the use of canvas over paper – pure economics.'⁴⁵ While gender bears some conceptual, aesthetic and material influence in the studio, such as the women's drawing and printmaking that flowered under the auspice of coordinators

Diane Moon and Fiona Salmon at Maningrida in the 1990s, it is also true that art centres by decree are subservient to the market.⁴⁶

When Myers describes Daphne Williams's management style at Papunya Tula as pragmatic with an interest to the long-term stability of the business rather than with an eye to 'the adventure of art advising', it is tempting to take his observation as a gender template and apply it to other female coordinators. While Williams formed close relationships with the artists, unlike Bardon, she did not write herself into the narrative of Papunya Tula, nor have the stream of women who have worked in her wake, though their influence in subtle ways – mixing paint, selecting alternatives to large-scale canvases – can be discerned: the invisible tracks in the archive. As documenter, Strocchi leaves little evidence of her subjective experience as artist and art coordinator, her writing mostly confined to artists' oral histories and the community painting movement.⁴⁷ But Strocchi is also representative of the art coordinator/artist who treads a delicate line in maintaining her own artistic practice, which is often a motivation for working in the field. Ever conscious of the ethics of exchange and the conflicts of interest that surface in the cross-cultural terrain of Australian painting,⁴⁸ she has been careful to patrol the borders of interpretations of her own painting given its pictographic style that shares a formal resemblance to painters at Ikuntji and Papunya Tula.⁴⁹

Strocchi's agreement to exhibit in *Black White & Restive*⁵⁰ in 2016 and to be curated in direct relationship with Papunya Tula painters Narrabri Nakamarra and Wintjiya Napaltjarri suggests that the transcultural, feminist narrative within the grand schema of Aboriginal art history now meets with the self-assessment of her work. However, this is a recent turn for Strocchi, who declined to participate in *Roads Cross: Contemporary Directions in Australian Art* (2012) at Flinders University Art Museum. *Roads Cross* featured a number of female art coordinators and was co-curated by linguist and one-time art coordinator Fiona Salmon, who cut her curatorial teeth within the gendered dynamics of Maningrida in Central Arnhem Land.⁵¹ Strocchi's reservations were in response to publicity circulated about an exhibition in the AAMU Netherlands in which she and Wayne Eager were wrongly cited as art coordinators who introduced Pintupi painters in the CoBRA style.⁵² A piece of poorly researched publicity, Strocchi perceived it as potentially damaging to working relationships so prudently nurtured. Influence between black and white artists is still tightly enmeshed with the wounds of colonisation and art world aspirations for economic and aesthetic autonomy, and *Roads Cross* did attract minor controversy, stimulated in part by the competing interests of a new wave of women art coordinators whose art centre custodianship was facing different challenges (Figure 3.2).

Borderland action

By the early 2000s art centres were proliferating across the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands) and Ngaanyatjarra Lands, a combined area of approximately 350,000 square kilometres of sentient desert impervious to the

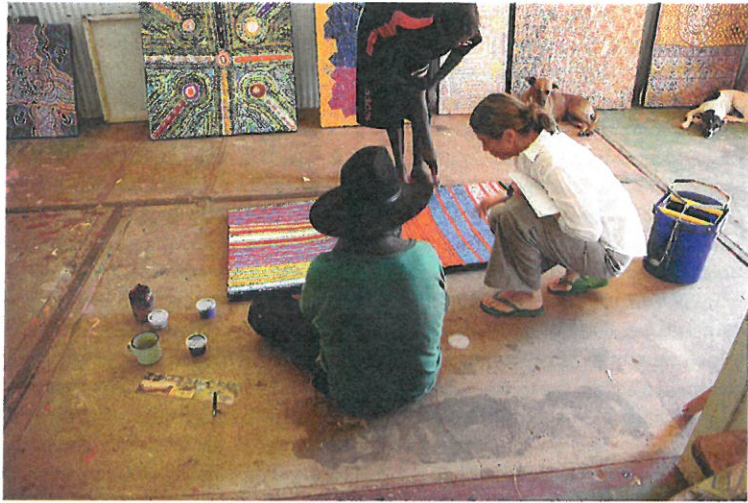


FIGURE 3.2 Edwina Circuitt and Peter Lewis working at Warakurna Artists studio, Western Australia, 2006. Photo: Tim Pearn

South Australia, Western Australia and Northern Territory borders that cut through the country. By the early 21st century most art centres were receiving government funding and following best practice models rather than inventing them through trial and error. These communities were also inheritors of a booming art market and a critical art world reception of Aboriginal painting, making Anangu artists especially vulnerable to independent dealers or 'carpet baggers' to use the pejorative term.⁵³

A veteran, serial art coordinator, Amanda Dent and her partner Brian Hallett began their apprenticeship at Wingellina (Irrunytju) in 2000. Here, Anangu women worked closely with Dent to establish Irrunytju Arts, selling second-hand clothing to finance infrastructure in the first instance. The quick success of the paintings – a vibrant expressionistic dot style with a strong underlying structure – brought tensions, as peripheral community interests wrested financial control from the artists and their original enterprise. Amidst these conflicts and contests, Dent gained a reputation as an art coordinator who balanced the competing demands of a productive studio against the expectations of an increasingly sophisticated audience for the work: that is, an emerging connoisseurship among collectors and a number of competitor/art centres, many in relatively close proximity making work in a related style.⁵⁴

Trained as a jeweller, Dent established her own exclusive studio practice in Perth in the 1990s before her desire to work more collaboratively in a community service role triumphed. Or so she claims: her attention to the form of the paintings along with her intuitive responsiveness to the developing vision of the artists reveals an

artist intent on the adventure of art coordinating and the quasi-maternal pleasure in nurturing painters and revelling in their painterly achievements – though she is quick to defer to the artist's agency and authority.⁵⁵

Reluctant to entertain feminist or gendered readings of her art centre role, Dent recognises the mainstream art world's prevailing gender inequities that are partly reflected in higher financial returns for men's paintings along with more institutional opportunities for male artists. That said, women were the high earners at the art centres she managed, though she has observed that exposure to 'mission activity, or tourist moneymaking ventures' could undermine an artist's work. A formative experience for Anangu women in the APY region was Ernabella Arts, established in 1948 and managed for 32 years by Winifred Hilliard. The first women-only art centre, it produced batik, pottery, pokerwork and gouache drawings for the tourist market. Hence when Dent actively encouraged old men to paint at Wingellina, some of them would say they couldn't do it. Their wives agreed, saying 'they [women] were the ones who knew how to paint',⁵⁶ a confidence reinforced through their history of selling art product to outside audiences. While gender power struggles and distinctly gendered cultural authorities are common in Aboriginal communities and by extension art centres, they do not align consistently with any singular approach to painting.

Dent raises concerns familiar to all art coordinators: the perennial issue of artist versus artisan and the tensions caused when cultural significance of an artist's story isn't reflected in financial returns. In countless informal studio critique sessions, primarily with younger and middle-age artists, conversation would return to the idea of Western visual preferences: '...we talked about ... palette... symmetry, and "breaking the cross"',⁵⁷ the 'Union Jack' composition that young painters often rely on. Over a 12- to 18-month period, Dent would work closely with artists to identify the habits and construction of their work on small-scale canvas boards – much like Strocchi and Dayman's paper experiments – constantly returning to the idea of a personalised response to *ijukurpa*⁵⁸ and ways of pushing pictorial habits into new ground.

Another of Dent's innovations was in keeping buyers away from the art centre, which relied on high-end galleries and an exclusive annual exhibition programme of 'boutique' product. Few art centres have the luxury of turning away direct buyers whose visits grant personal contact with the artist and enhance the cultural tourism and economic agendas of the small business enterprises. However, in Dent's experience, bringing the point of sale to the studio created adverse tensions. Today financial transparency and cross-cultural, bilingual 'money-stories' are common in art centres, and Dent and the artists shared endless informal conversations about cash, financial planning, strategic career planning and artistic profiles as well as using culturally relevant analogies to communicate the seemingly abstract logic of art market preferences to the artists.

By 2005 when Edwina Circuitt was employed as inaugural manager at Warakurna Artists, the professionalisation of the art centre was complete: custom built studios, broadband access and specialised database systems, a result of long-term benchmarking by industry peak bodies. With degrees in studio practice and

arts administration, Circuitt is typical of the current cohort of art coordinators. At Museums Victoria she had worked with an earlier wave of art coordinators including Julia Murray, John Kean and Philip Batty, who had stimulated her interest in the uniquely intercultural aspects of the work. She was mentored into her new role by seasoned arts workers Tim Acker and Tim Pearn who, along with the artists, had laid much of the logistical groundwork and modelling for Warakurna Artists.

Circuitt recalled the anticipation that attended the art centre's official opening and the artists' collective and universal existentialist enquiry, 'What should we paint?'⁵⁹ The hesitation was short-lived, and likely reflected the artists' self-awareness in terms of a localised market identity: they soon made their mark through regular exhibitions and continued to find new ways of negotiating the market after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008. Circuitt regularly questioned what the art centre could be and how it should best be served, and she was alert to the opportunities and dynamism – risks included – of more collaborative gestures, as two examples illustrate. One was Warakurna's invitation to anthropologist David Brooks and art historian Darren Jorgensen to collaborate on a book on the late style 'old wobbly' painters at the Wanarn Aged Care Centre,⁶⁰ in which Circuitt hoped to encourage a 'more playful' interpretation of the work beyond the ubiquitous 'selling the Dreaming, selling the Country, where there is little room for the artist's voice.'⁶¹ Another opportunity to depart from commercial imperatives was the Ngaanyatjarra History Painting project, in which middle-aged artists recorded early contact events such as the death of ill-fated explorer Lasseter in the 1930s, an early example of cross-cultural narratives.⁶² While these interactional models arguably owe a debt to feminist practices including socially responsive engagement, they are better described as intersectional and transcultural gestures: that is, more layered narratives of what makes Indigenous contemporary art so enriching.

With the increasing mobility of global artists both physically and virtually, 'cross-cultural collaboration' has become a regular feature of contemporary art. In Australia, this is optimistically framed as a 'relational' practice (after Bourriaud)⁶³ and more sceptically as a variant of Hal Foster's 'ethnographic turn' – though for Indigenous artists, collaboration is as old as culture itself. Curator Margo Neale and academic Marcia Langton are two Indigenous advocates of intercultural collaboration as a form of dual agency and intellectual exchange, although for many peripheral observers the risks of exploitation when black and white artists get together is a given, hence collaboration raises the alarm that appropriation did in the 1980s when white artists turned to Aboriginal paintings in search of new quotations.⁶⁴

The art centre studio and its creative cultural mixing present more nuanced conceptions of what collaboration and collective art production are, and all the coordinators I have spoken to are unequivocal in advocating the artists' agency. Firstly, they know as Dent states,

exactly what's right in terms of *tjukurrpa*, and won't compromise it – on pain of death... so that charges of appropriating or colonising culture, or of 'selling

the secrets' are redundant... and secondly, painting, it's a different thing [from ceremonial art], the canvas tradition. Artists know they are boss for the *tjukurrpa*, no question. But they think the white fella is boss for the painting, it is his/her tradition, s/he understands it the best, is the rightful authority.⁶⁵

Likewise, the artists defer to the art coordinator in decisions of canvas business. Herein lies the cultural diplomacy at the heart of the art centre: each to their own business, with a sharp eye on the common but shifting ground of cross-cultural communication and creative expression. Men and women may negotiate these dynamics differently at times, but to grandstand on gendered differences is ultimately limiting; rather, the intersections between women artists and coordinators reveal a series of feminised practices largely glossed over in Australian art world narratives. As an aside, finding photographs to illustrate this essay featuring female art coordinators on the job was surprisingly difficult – and revealing in itself.

One conclusion to draw from the examples of women art coordinators touched on here is that while they are engaged in post-essentialist feminist practices, they do not conform to a gendered position. Each is a willing participant in 'the adventure of art advising' and committed to Indigenous agency and cultural expression, and in their own ways each has made a creative practice responsive and alert to two overlapping art worlds. Whether subscribing to a feminist critique of their methodology or not, art coordinators (irrespective of gender) are all beholden to the market and they continue, by and large, to reinforce Western assumptions of artistic 'greatness.' It is left to curators and art historians to reveal the complex threads of intercultural feminism.

'...akin to singing or dancing'

American high priestess of post-conceptual art theory Rosalind Krauss insisted it was bad art history to rely on the artist's biography, but women's experience is still central to feminist practice, even if it has slipped out of vogue in contemporary discourse. Returning to *Who's Afraid of Colour?* two artists whose work encodes contemporary experience are Maryanne Mungatopi and Lorna Napurrurla Fencer, the latter's canvases hanging among fervent cultural-expressionist works proclaiming the resilience of women's ceremonial knowledge and the matrilineal abundance of country. However, Napurrurla's oeuvre was aesthetically uneven over her two decades of painting, and for good reason.

The NGV wall text amplifies only one part of the story: 'For Napurrurla, painting was a performative process, akin to singing or dancing.' However, her biography reveals more compelling forces at work on her life and art. She began painting in what constituted an Indigenous feminist groundswell at Lajamanu in 1986, when Walpiri women initiated a series of paintings for use as teaching aides at the school, launched in *Paint Up Big: Walpiri Women's Art of Lajamanu* at the NGV curated by Judith Ryan. Although never an art coordinator per se, linguist Christine Nicholls played a key part in organising *Paint Up Big*, and following her decade at Lajamanu,

she has made a significant contribution to the intercultural archive in her writing, curating and teaching. In her comprehensive essay for Napurrurla's retrospective in Adelaide, Nicholls portrays her subject as a solitary figure living within frenetic communities, an independent and mercurial woman whose polyamorous approach to the art market – there was no consistent art centre in Lajamanu in her lifetime – was both inspiring for its anarchy and sobering in its necessity. Napurrurla was determined to paint, with the help of whoever she could muster, and for whatever price was going. Her compulsive mark-making and prodigious output indicates her strength of character and her cultural authority, but as Nicholls writes, painting was also a form of expunging grief, or losing herself: here was a woman who outlived eight of her ten children. Ever her champion, Nicholls even claims 'she should be remembered as an artist rather than a "woman artist" or an "Aboriginal artist."'66 Should we say the same of Mungatopi, whose archetypal portraits of the leading players of Tiwi cosmology echo contemporary conflicts between men and women, gravely mirrored in her own biography?⁶⁷ In disregarding their gendered experience and by extension the strength and inventiveness of their creative triumphs, are we selling the artists short?

Who's Afraid of Colour? never promised us a room of our own, no matter how much Ms Woolf howled for us. Local institutional politics aside (the NGV's Indigenous galleries are a labyrinthine squeeze tucked away on the third floor), the exhibition begs the question: is there an institutional disinterest in the cosmopolitan textures of 21st-century feminism? *Marking the Infinite* tries harder in this respect, with Perkins's commissioned essay and curator Henry F. Skerritt paying tribute to women's agency and history: 'One of the great lessons of Aboriginal women's art... is that feminist responses take their own culturally specific forms', negotiating the constraints of local patriarchies and finding expressive opportunities within the market place.⁶⁸

The exhibitions discussed here are just two indicators that women are paragons of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement as it approaches its half-century. Nevertheless, they are generated within the modernist paradigm of the artist's individual genius and established discourses of cultural identity. Put differently, such exhibitions resist the intersectional narratives that would situate them as feminist projects within their political relations of cross-cultural production and consumption. For each interpretative claim for Indigenous contemporary art there is a dialectical counter claim, as real-world inequities across race, gender and class in postcolonial Australia are never far away. Feminism may be besieged by its many hybrid identities, but it remains a powerful force, however concealed, in bringing black and white women together in creative, generative exchanges. Who's afraid of that?

The author would like to acknowledge the art coordinators cited in this essay and the many others (both male and female) who took time to engage with these ideas and histories.

Notes

1 Judith Ryan, National Gallery of Victoria, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/whos-afraid-of-colour/ (Accessed 4 February 2017).

- 2 Judith Ryan, personal communication, 1 February 2017.
- 3 Commentary has been critical of Tony Ellwood's directorship in terms of gender representation. See www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/15/gender-and-the-ngv-more-white-male-artists-than-you-can-shake-a-stick-at (Accessed 24 June 2017).
- 4 *No Boundaries and Marking the Infinite* were curated by Henry F. Skerritt for Nevada Museum of Art, touring ten venues overall. Collector Dennis Scholl acknowledges the 'spirituality' and cultural power of the work, and also notes, '...these artists were all committed abstract painters...'; '...strong formalists, working in a consistent style, with traceable threads from work to work and year to year.' Henry F. Skerritt, *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting from the Debra and Dennis Scholl Collection* (London, New York, Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2014), 9.
- 5 'Remote' community art centres are government funded and collectively managed by Aboriginal artists on Aboriginal lands that employ (usually non-Indigenous) art coordinators. Most art centres are extremely isolated and far from metropolitan centres. Indigenous languages and pre-contact cultural traditions are still widely practised.
- 6 Judith Ryan, *Colour Power: Aboriginal Art Post 1984* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2004), 104.
- 7 See Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002): 101.
- 8 Hetti Perkins, 'A Gift from the Heart' in *Marking the Infinite: Contemporary Women Artists from Aboriginal Australia* (Munich, London, New York: DelMonico Books Prestel, 2016), 19.
- 9 The work of Bell and earlier anthropologists such as Catherine Berndt, Phyllis Kaberry and Jane Goodale has been significant in this field.
- 10 This flyer was circulated at the University of Wollongong, 2017.
- 11 In 1991 Crenshaw worked on the legal case in which Anita Hill accused (then) Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, galvanising Crenshaw's commitment to intersectionality as a way of recognising black women's experience in the eyes of the law.
- 12 Amanda Hess, 'How a Fractious Women's Movement Came to Lead the Left', *The New York Times*, 7 February 2017.
- 13 Devon W. Carbado, 'Colorblind Intersectionality', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 38 (2013): 812.
- 14 Martin's exhibition was a response to the much criticised "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art, 1984. The term 'transculturation' first appears in Fernando Ortiz's foundational text on cultural cosmopolitanism, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).
- 15 'Out bush' is a colloquial Australian term referring to the outback, desert, remote or isolated parts of the country. In Aboriginal English vernacular, it may refer to custodial country lying beyond settled communities.
- 16 See Akira Tatehata's essay 'The Impossible Modernist' in Margo Neale, ed. *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kingwarreye*, Tokyo: The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2008.
- 17 Judith Ryan and Robyn Healey, *Raiki Wara: Long Cloth from Aboriginal Australia and the Torres Straits*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1998.
- 18 See Philip Batty, 'The Gooch Effect: Rodney Gooch and the Art of the Art Advisor' in Fiona Salmon et al., *Gooch's Utopia: Collected Works from the Central Desert* (Adelaide: Flinders University Art Museum, 2008), 26–31, 26.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Quentin Sprague, *Making in Translation: The Intercultural Broker in Indigenous Australian Art*, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Wollongong, 2016.
- 21 Quentin Sprague, 'Pushing the Line: An Unlikely Artistic Collaboration in the Kimberley', *The Monthly* (2013): 38.
- 22 Namatjira is widely acknowledged by artists Australia-wide as an inspiration. His direct legacy continues in the Itja Njarra Many Hands Art Centre in Alice Springs.
- 23 Ryan and Healey, 10.

- 24 Vivien Johnson, *Streets of Papunya: The Reinvention of Papunya Painting* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015), 16.
- 25 Desart Inc. and ANKAAA are two advocacy organisations that support Indigenous Arts Worker Programmes in remote communities. It is worth noting that cultural and familial obligations within communities can put unique pressures on local staff in management roles, though Aboriginal arts workers and trainees are increasing.
- 26 Although not legislated, Indigenous Identified Positions are recommended best practice within the Australian Public Service following *Special Measures* amendments to the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.
- 27 First exhibited in 1988 at The Biennale of Sydney, the installation of 200 hollow-log coffins represents 200 years of colonisation and the countless Aboriginal people who died fighting for their land since 1788. The Aboriginal Memorial is on permanent display at The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. See Nigel Lendon, 'Relational Agency: Rethinking the Aboriginal Memorial', *emaj*, no. 9, 2016. At <https://emajartjournal.com/2016/06/15/nigel-lendon-relational-agency-rethinking-the-aboriginal-memorial/>.
- 28 Figures from peak bodies ANKAAA and Desart Inc. put the number of remote community art centres at around 100 in 2016. The Australian Government (www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-indigenous-art) estimates the Aboriginal art industry at \$200 million per year. 'Industry' is inclusive of tourist and souvenir product, fine art, secondary market auction resale and remote community sales, which average between \$30–35 million per year, Tim Acker, email 22 May 2017. See also Tim Acker and Alice Woodhead, 'The Art Economies Value Chain Report CrC-Rep Cr004', Alice Springs, 2014.
- 29 Nicolas Rothwell, 'Bridge between Worlds', *The Australian*, 18 April 2009.
- 30 Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 147.
- 31 Kim Mahood, *Position Doubtful* (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2016). 'Kartiya Are Like Toyotas', *Griffith Review*, no. 36 (2012). See also Una Rey, 'Women's Business: Cross-Cultural Collaborations in Remote Indigenous Art Centres', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art* 16, no. 1 (2016).
- 32 Ikuntji Artists at Haasts Bluff c. 250km west of Alice Springs was once serviced by the Papunya Tula company. Warlayirti Artists at Balgo in the Tanami Desert in Western Australia and Jilamara Arts and Craft on Melville Island, 80km north of Darwin, are leading Indigenous art centres established in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.
- 33 Acker and Woodhead.
- 34 Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, 1999.
- 35 Ian McLean, 'Aboriginal Art and the Artworld', in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Art 1980–2006*, ed. Ian McLean, Brisbane and Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011.
- 36 First published as an editorial in the *Terre Haute Express*, 1851. The quote is often attributed to Horace Greeley who made similar calls to populate the American west. www.britannica.com/topic/Go-West-1086091.
- 37 Pizzi was an early champion of contemporary Indigenous art, along with Melbourne dealers Vivien Anderson, Beverly Knight and Gabriella Roy in Sydney, and Sandra Le Brun Holmes and Dorothy Bennett, both in Darwin.
- 38 Marina Strocchi, *Ikuntji Tjuta Touring* (Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, 1999), 4.
- 39 Richard Kimber, 'The Solid Core: Daphne Williams', *Artlink* 26, no. 4 (2006).
- 40 Marina Strocchi, 'Minyma Tjukurrpa: Kintore/Haasts Bluff Canvas Project. Dancing Women to Famous Painters', *ibid.*: 104.
- 41 The collective campaign that produced *Ngurrara II* (now held in the National Museum of Australia) was eventually successful in securing land tenure for the claimants in 2007, a decade after the painting was presented to the National Native Title Tribunal. The Northern Territory Land Rights Act (1976) first recognised Indigenous possession of land; however, it was the 1992 *Mabo vs Queensland (2)* in 1992 that overturned the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* and led to The Native Title Act (1993). Paintings have been recognised as 'documents' of sovereignty and have been used in land and sea claims, most famously in the Yirrkala Bark Petitions of 1963 and in the Saltwater Collection, in which bark paintings were presented to the High Court in 2008 as evidence the Yolngu's claim to sea rights.
- 42 Interview with Karen Dayman, 25 January 2017.
- 43 Dayman completed a PhD thesis on the Ngurrara canvases in 2016 and has contributed reviews and written portraits of the artists. See for example 'Jimmy Pike: There Is More', *Artlink* 33, no. 2 (2013).
- 44 Interview with Karen Dayman, 25 January 2017.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 At Maningrida, drawing and printmaking were embraced by women who were active in fibre-arts: bark painting remained the men's domain. Salmon invited Waanyi artist Judy Watson to curate *Bush Colour: Works on paper by female artists of Maningrida region* in 1999.
- 47 Marina Strocchi, *Ikuntji: Paintings from Haasts Bluff 1992–1994* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 1995).
- 48 See Felicity Wright, 'A Complex Dance: Working in Indigenous Art Centres', *Artlink* 31, no. 2 (2011). For a more detailed account, see Felicity Wright and Frances Morphy, eds., *The Art & Craft Centre Story* (Canberra: ATSIC, 1999).
- 49 Sasha Grishin, 'The Unconventional Artist: Marina Strocchi', in *Marina Strocchi: A Survey 1992–2014* (Alice Springs: Marina Strocchi, 2015).
- 50 See Una Rey, ed. *Black White & Restive: Cross-Cultural Initiatives in Australian Contemporary Art* (Newcastle: Newcastle Art Gallery, 2016).
- 51 Interview with Fiona Salmon, 14 February 2017.
- 52 Interview with Marina Strocchi, 25 September 2012. See also: Khadija La, 'Breaking with Tradition: Cobra and Aboriginal Art', *Artlink* 31, no. 2 (2011).
- 53 For a history of the region's art centres, see Tim Acker and John Carty, eds., *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands* (Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2012).
- 54 Discussions with gallerists Gabriella Roy and Dallas Gold, and Nici Cumpston, curator of Indigenous art at the Art Gallery of South Australia. See Rothwell, *op. cit.*
- 55 Interview with Amanda Dent, 23 January 2017.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 Tjukurrpa is a term common across several Western desert language groups that refers to the Aboriginal ontological systems, a cosmological worldview of creation, Law and kinship often referred to as the Dreaming.
- 59 Interview with Edwina Circuit, 15 January 2017.
- 60 Wanarn Aged Care was serviced as an outreach programme under the regional strategy devised by Tim Pearn, coordinator of Ngaanyatjarra Regional Arts between 2003 and 2006.
- 61 Interview with Edwina Circuit, 15 January 2017. See David Brooks and Darren Jorgensen, *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa*, Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2015.
- 62 The project included joint painting workshops with Docker River and followed a legacy of similar paintings made at Warburton in the 1990s. While Circuit was circumspect as to 'the art outcome' of the project, the entire series was purchased and donated to the National Museum of Australia. See Pamela Faye McGrath, 'The Past Is Everywhere: Ngaanyatjarra History Paintings', in *Ngaanyatjarra Art of the Lands*, ed. John Carty and Tim Acker (Crawley: The University of Western Australia, 2012).
- 63 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002).
- 64 Post conceptual artists Imants Tillers and Tim Johnson are the best-known examples, provoking often vitriolic debate. Since 2001, Tillers has collaborated with Michael Nelson Jagamara, and Johnson also collaborated with many of the Papunya Tula artists through

the 1980s. These issues were further complicated by a series of copyright infringements which were, accordingly, taken up in courts of law.

65 Interview with Amanda Dent, 23 January 2017.

66 Christine Nicholls, 'Painting Alone: Lorna Fencer Napurrurla', in *Yityurlu Lorna Fencer Napurrurla*, ed. Margie West (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2011), 60.

67 See Una Rey, 'Maryanne Mungatopi's Tiwi Portraits', *Artlink* 31, no. 2 (2011).

68 Skerritt, 15.

4

THE PEARL GIBBS 'GAMBANYI' KANGAROO CLOAK

Lynette Riley with Catriona Moore and Jo Holder

Introduction: Lynette Riley's *Pearl Gibbs 'Gambanyi' Kangaroo Cloak*

In this chapter, Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi artist, writer and educator Lynette Riley explains how the important art form of kangaroo and possum skin cloaks is being revived through Australia's south-eastern regions. These cloaks were traditionally made and worn by the Wiradjuri people for warmth and protection, and were highly valued as ceremonial, trade and gift items, and as peace offerings during conflict.¹ In Victoria, Gunditjmarra Keerray Woorroong artist Vicki Couzens notes how possum skin cloaks, worn at the Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in 2006, sparked a major cultural phenomenon, a renaissance of an almost lost cultural practice.² The Games brought together the largest gathering of Aboriginal people in ceremonial cloaks in over 150 years, representing families, clans and communities in unity. This healing journey has fostered kinship, transference of knowledge and strengthening of identity, leading to the growth of cloak-making in other south-eastern groups in Canberra, New South Wales and South Australia.

Lynette Riley is a pioneer cloak maker in New South Wales, and her embrace of the materiality of this art form has helped her to re-learn Wiradjuri language (her father's Nation) and symbols, and those of her mother's (Gamilaroi) Nation. She designs the cloaks as history books for specific individuals, 'as an extension of that person' by incising the underside of the pelt 'with various designs to indicate the person's Moiety and Totemic connection as well as their journey through life and that person's status within the web of Nations and across Clan groups.'³

Riley made the *Pearl Gibbs 'Gambanyi' Kangaroo Cloak* as part of a broader project, the *Future Feminist Archive (FFA)*, curator Jo Holder), which crossed metropolitan and regional New South Wales archives and communities over a two-year period. Riley was one of nine *FFA* artists to engage with local histories to (re)value women's