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# Women's Business: Cross-cultural Collaborations in Remote Indigenous Art Centres

**Una Rey***

The Australian art world has developed a rich discourse on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art since the Western Desert painting movement entered its sights in the 1980s. The form, style and substance of this writing is cross-disciplinary, born of anthropology, art history, politics, curatorial developments and art criticism, ranging from the scholarly to the activist and the tabloid. Its writers are established and emerging, black and white, male and female, and they have encouraged the evolution of audiences for Indigenous art, positioning it firmly within the lexicon of Australian art. Missing from this discourse, however, is a sustained critique of praxis when Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists share creative ground, so much so that one might think that the intrinsically cross-cultural element is a defining taboo of the discourse, banished, like Plato's poets, from the Republic. But like all taboos, a few exceptions slip through the gates, most visibly sighted in cross-cultural exchanges between male artists in central Australia, such as Albert Namatjira and Rex Battarbee in the 1930s, and Geoffrey Bardon, Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers' associations with male painters at Papunya since the 1970s.

Though less visible, women's cross-cultural engagements share this history, from Margaret Preston's provocative modernist primitivism to Marina Abramović's (and Ulay's) desert sojourn in the summer of 1980/81[1] and Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels and Anne Mosey's long-term intercultural collaborations in the 1990s. Most recently, Fiona Hall's *Wrong Way Time* (2015), shown in the Australian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, included the collaborative installation *Kuka Irititja*, developed over two weeks near Pilakatilyuru in Western Australia with 12 Indigenous women working collectively as the Tjanpi Desert Weavers.[2]

In the interest of inserting women's cross-cultural and intercultural art practices into the discourse, this paper examines three contemporary examples of women engaging in such residencies or collaborations in remote communities.[3] Each has a different backstory, representative of the different ways artists are taking up these challenging, and often fraught, opportunities. Sydney-based interactive media artist Lynette Wallworth was first commissioned by Martumili Artists in 2010 to make what

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has become an ongoing series of films. Painter Ildiko Kovacs from Sydney first engaged with the Western Desert painting movement through exhibitions in metropolitan centres, and has since undertaken residencies in the Kimberley and Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. Raised in the Tanami region of Central Australia, artist and writer Kim Mahood is embedded within the local Indigenous population, and since 2001 has divided her time between these north-western desert communities and Canberra.

Most recent cross-cultural engagements have evolved from within the crucible of the remote community art centre, where since the mid-1990s a proportionately high number of Indigenous women painters have been active alongside a high percentage of primarily non-Indigenous women employed as art coordinators. The hybrid nature of remote community art centres, which over the previous 35 years have evolved into entrepreneurial, intercultural studios and interlocutors, has both enabled and curtailed cross-cultural engagements. Nevertheless, there remains deep suspicion surrounding the motives of non-Indigenous artists who either work as coordinators, run workshops or make art—collaboratively or collectively—in art centres. This suspicion inflects the limited critique of the artworks and trains a spotlight on the non-Indigenous artist's intentions, ironically foreshadowing the implicit agency of the Indigenous artist(s). This is to be expected, given the history of colonisation and broken trust that Indigenous people experience, and it likely explains why there has only been limited research to address the creative work of non-Indigenous artists in the cross-cultural field. It must also be acknowledged that the Indigenous voice in regard to such collaborations is often missing or reductive.

Suspicion, however, does not equate to prohibition, and such cross-cultural intersections are increasing in Australia, as indeed they are across the globe. Current cross-cultural interactions in remote Indigenous art centres are just one expression of artists traversing the borders that once delimited modernist art practices. Colonialism's history coupled with postcolonial aspirations for reconciliation may muddy the waters of exchange (or what are widely perceived as expressions of neo-primitivism); however, few artists are blind to the dangerous rocks below, marked as they are by numerous shipwrecks: clearly, such warnings have not extinguished fascination with the other as a means of creative stimuli—a fascination that runs both ways. Haunting contemporary Western engagements with Indigenous art is the biggest shipwreck, modernism's primitivism, in which the felt 'lack' of Western civilisation was expressed in symptomatic imaginary excesses that elevated the art of indigenous, infant and schizophrenic subjects into fetishes of liberation, banishing them to a utopic 'primitive', outside modernity.

Yet, as Ann Stephen and Andrew McNamara argue in their catalogue essay for *Future Primitive* (2013), while contemporary artists work within a situation 'in which the postcolonial critique of primitivism is now virtually official doctrine', surrealism's 'uncannily primitive'—the high point of modernist primitivism—continues to be a favoured strategy for 'addressing our repulsion and unease with our own society's less-than-savoury social outcomes'.[4]

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While the artists under analysis in this essay show no propensity for surrealism's Freudian manoeuvres, they may be accused of casting the desert as a contemporary Trocadero. However, to perceive their work as such would miss an essential difference between their enterprise and modernist primitivism: their muse is no longer the inanimate Indigenous art object, but the Indigenous artist(s)—individual or collective; a muse both animated and discursive in voice, one that calls out and answers back, dissolving any primitivist fantasies that non-Indigenous artists may harbour.

Collaborations have given rise to an intersubjective, rather than object-based, exchange, but this object−subject shift in contemporary art is not restricted to the cross-cultural domain of Indigenous art centres. Since the 1990s, 'participatory' or 'relational art'—most prominent in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002)—has effectively loosened postmodernism's strategy of appropriation from an encounter between objects and autonomous artists to one of relationships between subjects, communities and audiences. It is in this context that I use the term 'relational', as it forms a nexus for cross-cultural interactions: Indigenous cultural practice is inherently interdependent and relationship based, invested with comprehensive relational agencies. Certainly, this subjectivism in contemporary art has its own theoretical challenges. Claire Bishop's influential critique of socially engaged practice and its critical reception warns against 'well intentioned homilies', or what we might consider in the Australian context as ameliorative, tokenistic gestures between cultures. As a site of relational exchange and cultural production, the remote community art centre (saturated with the trauma of colonisation, diasporic identities and contested desires) is a magnetic zone for work that 'confronts darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament',[5] and, as Bishop argues, it is the very antinomy provoked in the tensions 'between autonomy and social intervention'—in this case, the cross-cultural unevenness—that lends the most successful collaborations their currency. Saliently, she warns against eliding the aesthetic experience of artwork in the interests of a self-consciously prescribed, asinine experience—what we might call the politically correct form. The question of whose politics, and whose 'correctness', is of course what challenges the critique of the works discussed here.

Whatever the original motives of these non-Indigenous artists—and of their Indigenous collaborators—their meetings open up possibilities that are not available in the psychodramas of surrealism. What, then, has been produced from such contemporary cross-cultural engagements, and how do we evaluate the outcomes?

My intention is not to affix existing theories to contemporary intersubjective relational art practices in remote Indigenous art centres: we are still a long way from being able to do this, and it is likely that new, or at least hybrid, theories are required. Postcolonial theories pose as many complications as they set out to address, and it is tempting to believe that the most fundamental achievements of Western feminism have failed to affect the remote community art centre—in spite of the number of women working in the field. Nevertheless, such theories are a starting point for

analysing and interpreting these practices and their reception; hence, a bricolage approach is employed here. Only by pushing at theoretical limits will new paradigms arise: it is more urgent to describe such practices, rather than ignore them for their perceived or actual transgressions.

In specifically addressing the colonial situation in Australia from a gendered perspective, Jennifer Biddle's 'breasted ontology' offers a theoretical model of subjectivity that encourages the Western participant to step over the threshold of spectacle into an embodied relational exchange 'within' the paintings. Biddle's argument transposes the commonly accepted cartographic map reading of desert paintings into an intersubjective domain,[6] as if the Indigenous practice of 'returning to country' is a way of inducting the outsider/visitor into the essential relational ontology of collaborating in country. Anthropologist Alfred Gell encouraged a similar approach, understanding the art object as the 'equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents',[7] and imagining art as a 'system of action'[8] that is constituted within specific relational contexts.

Griselda Pollock's neologism 'feminist desire'—'a counter desire *for* difference'—also shifts the focus from the (Freudian) art object to a feminised, performative space of relational exchange. Borrowing from Bracha Ettinger's '*fascinance* before a woman other', a concept of aestheticised sexual difference in which the girl's yearning to become woman is expressed through the 'prolonged gaze', Pollock argues that such 'feminist desire' offers a potential tool to 'perform the gaze' in exchanges between women artists: not in a specular or erotic sense, but in a gesture of sharing by showing or performing knowledge.[9] If transposed to cross-cultural collaborations in the Indigenous art centres, can we assume that gender might dissolve, to a degree, the breach of racial difference? If Pollock's employment of Ettinger's mother−daughter axis can be applied to women working cross-culturally,[10] and reframed as a gendered relationalism, can it simultaneously escape the overarching primitivism that historically framed Western engagement with Indigenous art? Can the 'ephemeral trace of the relational' continue to operate above and beyond the artwork, as Gell suggests, in the contemporary art space represented in film, painting or text?

Within the formally gendered and socialised arena of the art centre, the Western artist enters what she invariably experiences as the mythopoeic desert space. While theoretical propositions desert her and alterity greets her, her Indigenous hosts welcome and induct her as their guest. Herein, the artist/visitor is simultaneously embraced and reciprocates in an intimate but cautious intersubjective dance, the first steps of *fascinance*. No longer a stranger, she performs as family, metaphorically wearing a new skin.

The antiquity of collaborative and collective practices in Indigenous culture and its adaptations into a contemporary art format in the twenty-first century are well established in anthropological discourse.[11] Ritualised, collective and performative, the indexicality of ceremony incorporates sand, ochre and animal fat, now re-invested in acrylic on canvas, endlessly renewing ancestral narratives, demarcating familial and custodial responsibilities and substantiating land claims. This was emphasised in the 2014 exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, *Martu Art from the Far*



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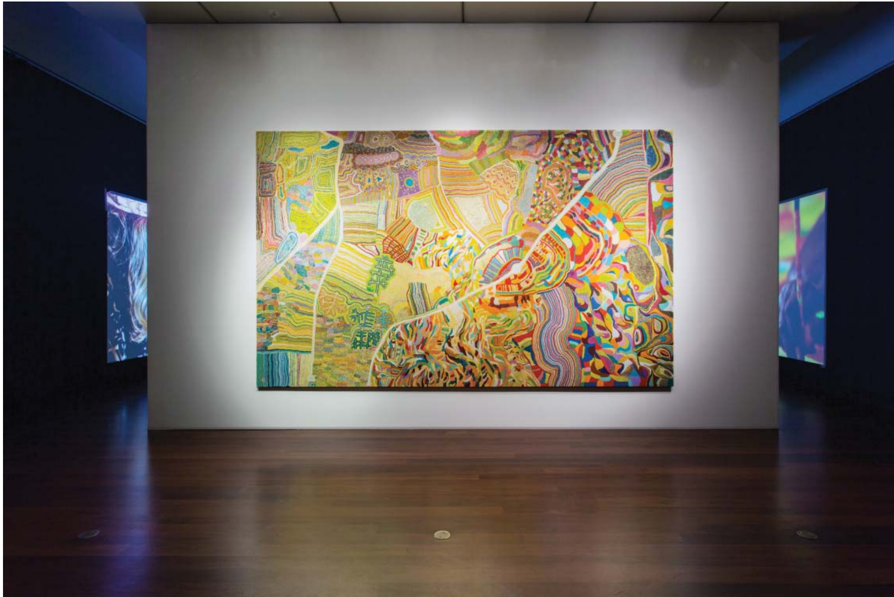

Figure 1. Installation view: 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, *Dark Heart*, Art Gallery of South Australia, featuring Martumili Artists, *Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground)*, 2013, and Lynette Wallworth, *Always Walking Country: Parnngurr Yarrkalpa*, 2013. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Saul Steed.

*Western Desert*, which focused solely on large-scale collaborative canvases including *Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground) Scale 1:2500 (or thereabouts)*, (2013, fig. 1, fig. 2), which is discussed further on in this essay.

Collaboration has been central in a move to rebrand Indigenous art as contemporary art, hooking it to the cart of relational practice.[12] For artists who take up the risk of cross-cultural collaboration, the value of relationships become the central tenets for continuity. As anthropologists know all too well, working in the discipline without a set of informants, a 'family' substantiated through long-term relationships, is like doing art history without the artwork. Perhaps this is why it took an anthropologist, John Carty, to question the critical silence in relation to collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists:

> Painting country is … inherently an act with social and political nuance and consequence; it involves years of apprenticeship, negotiation, ingenuity and an evolving spectrum of collaborators. In country, the authority, rights, techniques, confidence and desire to paint are all bound up in something bigger than the idea of collaboration encapsulates. But it's a start.[13]

Beyond the privilege of relationships and trust, what does collaboration mean to contemporary Western artists working transculturally with Indigenous participants in the shadow of colonialism? If, as I argue, the answer lies in both the overarching

Figure 2. Installation view: 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, *Dark Heart*, Art Gallery of South Australia, featuring Martumili Artists, *Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground)*, 2013, and Lynette Wallworth, *Always Walking Country: Parnngurr Yarrkalpa*, 2013. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Saul Steed.

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intersubjective relations and their quality of intimacy, collaboration requires its own unique assessment for each artist in each instance.

Lynette Wallworth, Martumili Artists and Antony's *Always Walking Country: Parnngurr Yarrkalpa* (2013) has all the hallmarks of contemporary art with its multi-screen moving image, collaborations and audio cross threads, its geographic and temporal intersections delivering a distinctly post-Western currency in spite of its deep-rooted sense of place. The work was the commissioned centrepiece, effectively the heart, of the 2014 Adelaide Biennial, *Dark Heart*, Nick Mitzevich's curatorial riff on Robert Hughes' 1987 classic, *The Fatal Shore*. Installed in the Art Gallery of South Australia's bunker-like ground-floor space, the first encounter with this five-piece ensemble was the 3×5 metre canvas: *Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground) Scale 1:2500 (or thereabouts)*, by Martumili artists Kumpaya Girgirba, Yikartu Bumba, Karnu Nancy Taylor, Ngamaru Bidu, Yuwali Janice Nixon, Reena Rogers, Thelma Judson and Ngalangka Nola Taylor.

High on the sensual register, *Always Walking Country* opens with birdsong, soon joined by New York-based singer Antony's operatic naming song in call and response to Kumpaya Girgirba and her Martu choir, the antiphonal chorus punctuating the next 45 minutes. The audience is chaperoned into an art shed in the desert at Parnngurr, in northern inland Western Australia, minus the 44-degree November heat and the extreme isolation. The central screen presents a birds-eye view of an unstretched black canvas—void like—spread on a paint-scarred floor. Filmed over

10 days with time-lapse shots every eight seconds, the artists come and go, almost spectrally. Throughout the film, the canvas is documented in entirety as the eight artists paint in their respective tracts of ancestral country in animated tableaux. At a superficial reading, the film becomes a glossed-up story, authenticating the painting in the tradition of the Indigenous art centre's certificate. Biddle notes that there are no paintings of infants in the desert genre; however, the slow, productive labour of the Martu literally on the canvas (imaginatively comparable to amateur home-birth films of the 1970s and '80s) can be metaphorically interpreted as the emerging infant/country. The filmic action hence becomes performative *fascinance*, not only revealing the instruction, and thereby induction, of Wallworth into a relationship with the artists, but equally, the productivity, the (re)birth of country. Through Wallworth's 'extended gaze'—viz. the camera—Martu invite the viewer into an empathetic relationship where they might become implicit in, rather than a consumer of, the art object.

As the canvas gains flesh through paint, landscape and interiors frame its evolution to seductive effect: white gums, iron-rich red sand, hunting fires and sunsets are cut with studio scenes of corpulent painting women in tropical prints, sleeping puppies and paint-pots. Conspicuously out of frame is the rubble and discontent often found peripheral to these environments. It is tempting to question this selective order, but this is Martu discretion and their decision making is paramount: the camera may be the all-seeing eye, but the eye is closely directed by Martu, working on the principle of revelation so constituent of Indigenous cultural instruction. As Wallworth stresses:

> It's important to know the level of control the Martu have over what is represented … I am operating within a site that they open up to me … I am given a space in which to work and I operate within that space … That is the nature of our collaboration. I am not privileging my camera over Martu to gather whatever I want, rather the camera is their vehicle for revelation. I have to be sensitive to what they are trying to reveal.[14]

Wallworth collaborates further in post-production with Pete Brundle and Liam Egan, working in editing suites in Melbourne and Sydney where they have editorial freedom with the image, their authority previously negotiated during filming, though the soundtrack is subject to further consultation with Martu. The intermediary role of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists coordinator from 2006 to 2015, has also been implicit in the process.

If there is a perceivable disavowal of authorship in Wallworth's pronouncements – which would perhaps be natural given film's inbuilt collaborative structure—she is also necessarily sensitive to the scrutiny applied to cross-cultural engagements. This is made more implicit by the contentious history of colonial representation, continued in mainstream media's fixation on the abject—something that Martu choose not to reveal in this piece.[15]

Rupture is beyond the scope of *Always Walking Country*. If a crack exists it is out of frame, elsewhere, in the viewer's experience or expectation—in reception rather than



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the artists' intentions. Seeking shards of gritty social realism to fracture the film's potential romanticism, primitivism, essentialist feminist readings or ethnographic stereotypes of the Noble Savage, merely to replace it with the equally antagonistic gaze of the voyeur seeking stereotypes of victimhood and postcolonial despair, only betrays the habits of the Australian viewer intent on 'addressing our [own] repulsion' with history. Rolf de Heer balances this in his collaborations with David Gulpilil and the Ramingining community, including the narrative film *Ten Canoes* (2006) and the loosely disguised Gulpilil biopic *Charlie's Country* (2013). Only an Indigenous filmmaker such as Warwick Thornton is positioned to make a drama such as *Samson and Delilah* (2009) that pulls no punches in its contemporary naturalism.

With an artistic practice that spans interactive installations, experimental use of new technologies and video, Wallworth is no stranger to collaborative, intersubjective and cross-disciplinary relationships with diverse communities and ecosystems. Originally invited to work with Martu in 2010 on the project *We Don't Need a Map*, Wallworth had initial reservations given the limited timeframe of two weeks for filming, a schedule incompatible with building relationships. Wallworth explains:

> I could not know if a collaboration was possible until I met the women and we saw if we might find a resonance. Therefore … I only agreed to go when it was explained that the artists simply wanted me to come. They probably felt the same: it was a risk, there was a possibility nothing may emerge.[16]

As it happened, the initial caution was well rewarded as Wallworth was inculcated into a much larger scheme, an opus still being imagined by the Martu.[17] The first episode, *Still Walking Country*, is Indigenous hunting genre NITV-style meets *Food Safari* with hyper-real production values and large-scale multi-projections. Wallworth and Brundle follow procedures in languid desert time as the Martu women set fire to country, catching goanna and bush turkey before cooking them in the sand and eating them. Here, the Martu choose to reveal the virility of the hunt and its bloody kill, a hallmark of the 'savage anthropology' paradigm that professional anthropologists have worked so hard to overcome, even if their reasons answer to the wrong audience.[18] For Martu, the hunting act is a climactic victory, easily misread as abjection by a white audience whose primary objections concerned animal cruelty[19] in publicity images, rather than the film's scopophilic desire or its distancing, ethnographic gaze—however spectacular these tropes are in blocking the view for urban Australian audiences. As Jennifer Deger discovered in collaborative filming at Gapuwiyak in Arnhem Land, the mimetic device of the camera is understood by Yolngu as a 'potentially problematic, but powerfully productive means of generating intercultural relations', which outmanoeuvres simple interpretation through a 'postcolonial politics of representation alone'.[20]

*Still Walking Country* was New York-based transgender singer Antony's introduction to the Martu. Recognition of formal elements in Kumpaya Girgirba's vocal range stirred the singer's interest in visiting Parnngurr to meet the Martu women; YouTube and Skype facilitated the introduction, Martu extending their



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welcome across the Pacific and thereby setting the narrative structure for *Always Walking Country*.

Very different to *Always Walking Country* is the short film *Kuruyurltu* (2014), directed by Ngaanyatjarra linguist and teacher Lizzie Ellis with cameraman, assistant editor and trainer Matt Woodham. While both films share themes of cultural maintenance through collaborative painting in country, in *Kuruyurltu* the tradition of oral storytelling is ascendant. Vocally animated and conspiratorial, it operates with more than a touch of Brechtian defamiliarisation. Set on site at Kuruyurltu, which translates as 'hollow-eye', the deep-sided waterhole gouged into a low-lying escarpment is laced with intersecting Tingari tracks. The area is also known as 'cowboy country' for its resemblance to Spaghetti-Western film locations, a favourite form of Indigenous cultural consumption in post-pastoralist regions. Like *Still Walking Country*, the film's action entails the ubiquitous painting-in-progress attended by artists, family and dogs. Narrator Tjawina Porter's subtitled performance given in gravelly whispers relates the Ngaanyatjarra dreaming tragicomedy where Tingari men fail in their hunt for the owl man. Lyall Giles corroborates, expanding on the men's side of the story and accounting for the distinct impressions left in the rocks by the Tingari men's boomerang. The delivery style is part eyewitness, part reality TV: historicism and temporality collapse in the immediacy of Indigenous oratory style, the ancestral owl and Porter's memories of her mothers and life as a young girl at Kuruyurltu sharing temporal frames.

The recurrent 'back to country' genre of these two films is dominant in the desert, but rather than being nostalgic, it is laden with productive, generative potential to reclaim sovereignty and fortify individual and collective wellbeing. As Lizzie Ellis observed post *Kuruyurltu*:

> … after the older ladies had been painting together in country … when they returned to the art centre they weren't painting what they normally paint. It [going 'out bush' to traditional custodial country] engages their perception, their view of the world and … how to express it on canvas. It just goes to show how country re-energises, re-invigorates, re-attaches…it gives 'extra sight'.[21]

The dialogue in *Kuruyurltu* may also be sufficient to deconstruct the pseudo-ethnographic frame in Wallworth's immersive screens, the rich ocular field reifying its co-authors/subjects within the desert setting and drawing a continuum between traditional hunter—gatherer ways of life and twenty-first century artists who pitch to an international audience. As the Martu know, there is another critical factor at play beyond recording country in paintings: 'It's good working with other artists, they learn from us, we learn from them, we've created something new to share […] with a BIG audience from all over the world.'[22] Here, it is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of cultural production in remote communities beyond painting for the art market and an outside audience. Archives are being developed across generations for consumption and enrichment within communities, from children's innovations on mobile phones to recordings of arcane language and restricted knowledge systems by senior custodians.

Applauded by Indigenous artist and curator Brenda L. Croft at the 2014 Desert Mob symposium in Alice Springs as a 'luminous cross-cultural collaboration', Croft also acknowledges the troubling complexity of collaborations such as *Always Walking Country*, given the colonial and postcolonial frames:

> There needs to be much more discussion about these kinds of collaborations: how collaborative are they? Has there been any progression since Marina Abramović and Ulay's 1980 foray into central Australia?[23]

I would argue that there have been immensely positive developments since the 1970s, most obviously in the Indigenous art centres that negotiate the terms of such collaborations. Ideologically, sensitivity and deference to Indigenous agency and authority has developed over the past 40 years. Croft has elsewhere argued that Western art discourse still dictates the terms of contemporary Indigenous art, its complexities 'distilled through perspectives of "authenticity", "authority", and "tradition" [so that] the capacity of contemporary Indigenous communities to engage globally with each other, across disciplines and ever-shifting borders, is misconstrued and ignored'.[24] However, the balance between Western hegemony and Indigenous agency is increasingly difficult to judge. In *Still Walking Country*, Indigenous artists are engaged in *fascinance*, performing culture and gender with generous intention before an audience so anxious to disavow its own subjective and acculturated reading that the gift genuinely can get 'misconstrued and ignored', and not always in the way Croft assumes: that is, Martu are delivering on their own terms, not enacting 'authenticity'.

The incommensurability of Western feminism with Indigenous women's performance of gender and its clearly defined social and cultural boundaries presents a challenge to the idea of a feminine, cross-cultural relational model. The imagery of *Always Walking Country* is fecund and matrilineal, redolent with essentialist motifs of woman as nature, as nurturer. If the subjects are 'performing gender' and 'performing culture' in equal measure—which I believe they are—can we locate an essential femininity that is performed in the social intricacies of cross-cultural parlance? As Susan Best argues in relation to Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Series*, 'one of the challenges for feminist theory is to distinguish between varieties of essentialism, and their efficacy for feminist ends'.[25] I would add that their efficacy for cross-cultural ends, though sensitively canvassed, should never be prescribed. The conceit of Westernism in suggesting that gender is *always* a cultural construct that requires deconstruction burns itself out in certain pockets of country.

If film can be especially challenging as a cross-cultural medium despite its collective and participatory nature, it should be noted that Australian audiences already have considerable practice in understanding Indigenous paintings as transcultural objects.[26] Wallworth nominates a particular image sequence in *Always Walking Country* where a slow pan across satellite imagery and the painting's surface seems to corroborate the artwork's mnemonic potential as a map of country, also underscoring two culturally distinct but cooperative ways of documenting



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knowledge. A similar perceptual overlap operates in Walmajarri artist Veronica Lulu and Kim Mahood's 2012 painting *Fire Ghost* at Paruku (Lake Gregory) in northern Western Australia (fig. 3). The painting's vantage point, drawn from Mahood's aerial photograph, references both Indigenous and European pictorial conventions: the aerial and the panoramic bird's-eye. The systematic dotting in *Fire Ghost* connotes its Indigenous status, but its readiness for a Western reading, the cartographic sweep of seasonal fire movements, gives the painting its double purpose. The work was first exhibited in *Desert Lake* (2013) at Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs. The exhibition was curated by artist Mandy Martin, who had joined a longer-term cross-cultural land care project between Walmajarri and outsiders around Paruku, on which Mahood had been working since 2005.[27] In *Fire Ghost*, there was nothing unusual in Mahood's roughing out the painting's structure as requested by Lulu: dotting in keys to vegetation and fire-scars was a natural progression, and created a topographic map that translates cross-culturally.[28] This form of mapping has become something of a contemporary genre in which black and white artists—as well as writers, anthropologists, oral historians and proponents of other disciplines—have found legitimate spaces to collaborate. Thus, it runs little risk of privileging the non-Indigenous artist or the art object.

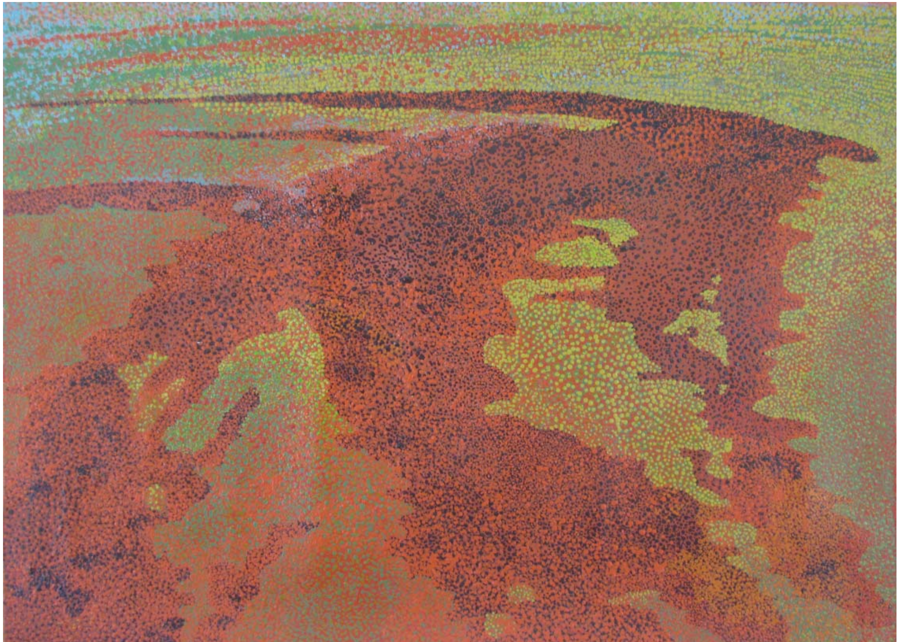

Figure 3. Veronica Lulu and Kim Mahood, *Fire Ghost*, 2012, acrylic on linen, 56×76 cm, Paruku Desert Lake Collection, Nevada Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artists.



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Time spent in country building the invaluable currency of relationships gives tacit licence to working creatively, and inevitably a temporal hierarchy emerges that elevates some outside collaborators above others. In this schema Mahood enjoys a naturalised privilege, her life-long investment in relationships with people and place giving her unequivocal insights and surety. As such, *Fire Ghost* is a token of the long-term friendship between two artists, as well as an initial template for further collaborations. The 2014 painting *Kilwa Claypans* exemplifies this softly softly approach to collaboration: a modestly scaled work in which Mahood brushes in the foundations and Lulu lays on the dots in a way that expands her repertoire while remaining faithful to custodial boundaries and cultural etiquette. While the work is technically collaborative, *Kilwa Claypans* remains aesthetically faithful to the dot-painting conventions of the Western desert, revealing little visible evidence of its cross-cultural conception. Mahood's interest in collaboration was first established with the late Alice Springs-based photographer Pam Lofts, with whom she shared a close working relationship. Informed by the cross-currents of feminism and postcolonialism and the binaries of black/white, male/female, urban/remote discourses, Mahood's ongoing creative enquiry seeks a visual language that does not compromise the cross-cultural exchange from either perspective: much of her work finds its sharpest edge in essays that address the cross-cultural interface in real time.[29]

For the uninitiated, literally getting on the ground in remote communities poses significant challenges. lldiko Kovacs is representative of many Australian artists: interested and willing, but rarely enabled. So, how much does the route of entry determine the reception of the work, and is *fascinance* always one-way? Kovacs works into the gestural, abstract tradition, which was first curatorially framed in quasi-primitivist terms in the exhibition *Talking About Abstraction*, curated by Felicity Fenner at Ivan Dougherty Gallery in 2004. Kovacs' art references abstract expressionists from Brice Marden to Tony Tuckson and a number of Indigenous painters; she also recognises the impact of Rover Thomas' void and Emily Kame Kngwarreye's condensation of what appears to be centuries of innovation and expression.[30] Kovacs observed Paddy Bedford working in the mid-1990s in Broome, but her first remote art centre residency was at Mangkaja Artists in the Kimberley in 2008, where she was invited to paint alongside, but not collaboratively with, Wakartu Cory Surprise and other women artists. It was, however, her first collaborative work with Pitjantjatjara artists including Molly Nampitjin Miller and Yaritji Connelly in 2010 that attracted attention. Like Wallworth, Kovacs was an invited guest, as Connelly explained: 'She [Kovacs] came out here [to Kalka, in South Australia] because we wanted to work in new ways. All the women wanted to learn new ways.'[31]

Conscious of the ethical terrain surrounding collaboration and Indigenous stylistic influence, Kovacs believes it is problematic *not* to engage with Indigenous artists either directly or indirectly, as it condones a one-way cultural vacuum.[32] Empathetic to, but disinterested in, the postcolonial discourse of painting or distinctions between centre and periphery, Kovacs takes seriously the painter's responsibility to work things through within the act of painting. Process becomes her



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relational manoeuvre, a push and pull against the canvas that acts as mirror between artist and canvas, canvas and viewer. Kovacs' gaze alone must interrupt the haptic exchange to recognise presence in the work. This internal discourse between the artist and her process may explain why Kovacs is less a collaborative painter and more mentor and student within the art centre. She attempts to move beyond mother/daughter and black/white binaries through the appropriation not of iconography, but of a relational, physical offering. In this classic poetic master/slave operation, Kovacs' mastery of her materials shapes the haptic exchange to, in a performative sense, make the artwork a site of embodied relations.

Having introduced new paints and rollers to the women at Ninuku, Kovacs worked on a number of collaborative and collective works with the painters. No dots pervade their rolled surfaces, so in that regard the works were stylistic departures for the Ninuku painters. The legacy of Kovacs' residency in studio terms can be traced through subsequent paintings, and as Molly Nampitjin Miller put it, 'We like to do collaboration because it's good fun. Thinking together.'[33] This might give reason to overlook the paintings' potential as subversions of a (Western) discourse, but it frames them in Pitjantjatjara terms, as Indigenous artists rarely, if ever, paint alone. Conversely, in Kovacs' practice, the paintings may be considered 'incidental',[34] and time will tell as to whether Kovacs will invest her energies further in such residencies. I have written elsewhere as to why I believe a single painting made between Kovacs and a senior male artist caused a minor controversy in the local art world.[35] Suffice to say, I suspect it was gender as much as racial tensions and art centre politics that led men at Tjala Arts to raise objections when an untitled painting by Kovacs, Connelly and Miller was exhibited in *Roads Cross: Contemporary Directions in Australian Art* at Flinders University Art Museum in 2012 (fig. 4).

However, such tensions—which led Wiradjuri artist, curator and collaborator Jonathan Jones to warn against inter-racial collaborations—will not deter artists from all different cultural backgrounds from collaborating in this age of globalisation.[36] A personal interrogation as to *why* one embarks on collaboration may be a responsible starting point, from which the challenge is to continue dialogue, rather than becoming locked in ideologue. There are protocols to follow, and intelligent sensitivity should prevail: I would argue each of these artists has taken those steps. While being alert to difference is critical, so is recognising connections and kinship across differences, however these differences may be defined.

Kim Mahood's ongoing interdisciplinary practice and self-reflexive approach to collaboration is substantiated through her longstanding independent relationships with Indigenous people and her critical examinations of difference and sameness as she moves between remote Australia and the nation's capital. Divested of the mystique factor for Indigeneity, she challenges the standing assumption that non-Indigenous artists always hold the upper hand in collaborations, and moves the idea of negotiation into a more conceptual space: 'if you are a serious artist, and you spend the time, something's going to happen, whether it's actually on the canvas or not.'[37]

While the gestural, embodied process of Ildiko Kovacs' painting could be written into the sand with blood, finding an Indigenous women's performative parallel in

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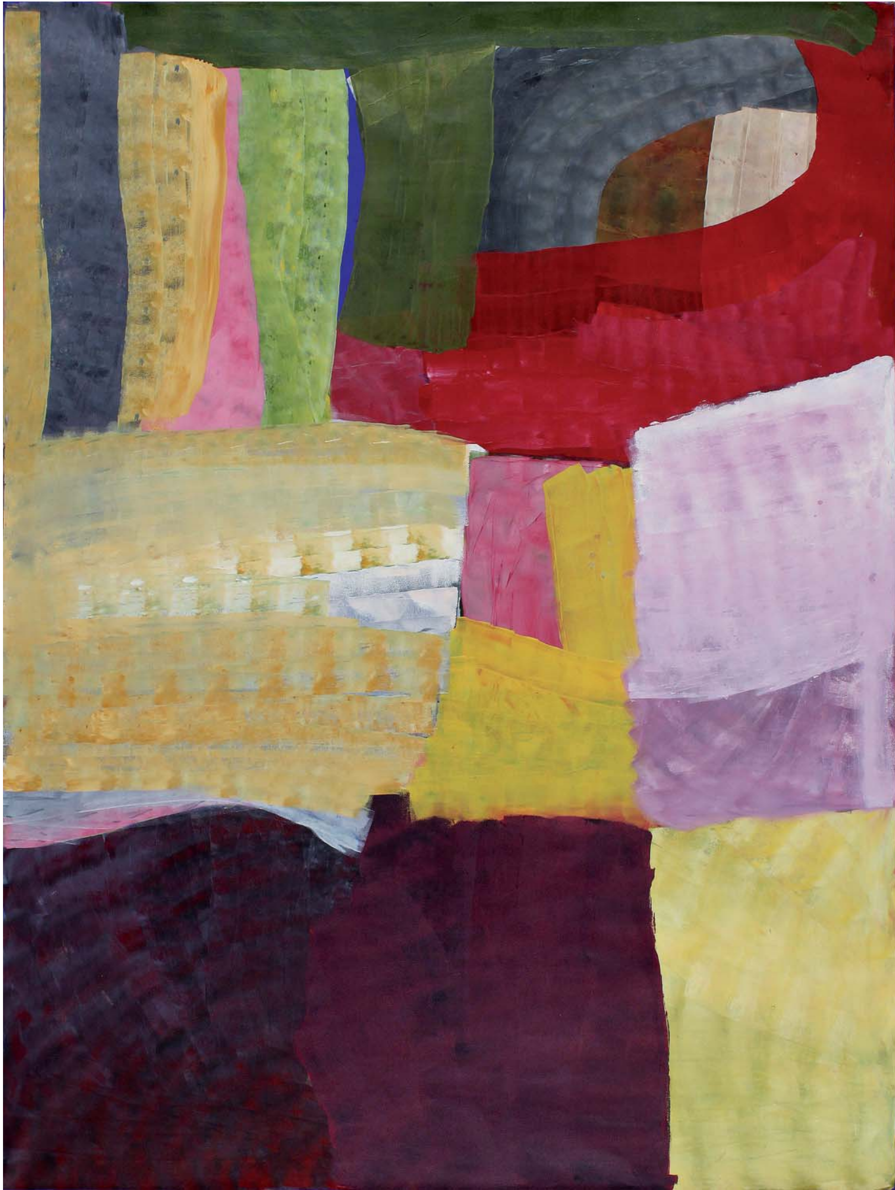

Figure 4. Yaritji Connelly, Ildiko Kovacs and Molly Nampitjin Miller, *Untitled*, 2010, acrylic on linen, 245×183 cm, Flinders University Art Museum Collection. Courtesy of the artists and Ninuku Arts.

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Biddle's 'breasted ontology', her primarily urban experience and art-school training rules that out. This is not a bad thing, as it acts as a natural restraint, but following strictly prescribed codes of conduct is not in itself any guarantee of immunity against criticism. The *Untitled* canvas that acts as an illustration of the Connelly/Kovacs/Miller residency, acquired by Flinders University Art Museum, is as interesting for its relational narrative as for its formal rendering: whether it represents another shipwreck or a new tack is still undetermined, but the crowd needs to stand back and form a relational circle too.

A triumphant *mise en scène*, *Always Walking Country* contextualises Indigenous painting with a magisterial lens and symphonic register, temporarily displacing the culture shock of both its collaborators and its audience. Showcasing the fortitude of Indigenous agency, the work is endorsed by the art centre, the Australia Council and the State Gallery, but to date its criticality remains largely untested.[38]

The works discussed here offer some evidence that the Western artworld's inherited primitivism is being increasingly left behind and reimagined in a new post- (rather than neo-) primitivism relational mode, where both parties are required to articulate their terms and move through the imperfections of practice, frequently cauterised by public censure. We are, after all, in an ideological conflict zone; hence, engagements across the cultural threshold bring an uncertain level of risk. But these cross-cultural explorations are the necessity of contemporary art in the age of globalism. They are the sites of postcolonial, and indeed post-Western, consciousness. It may be too early to adequately theorise these developments, but it is essential that critics begin to acknowledge, describe and analyse the moves that artists are making – together and sometimes against each other—from all sides of the colonial and postcolonial interface.

1. The resulting performance, *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction* (1983), also included the Papunya artist Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi and the Tibetan monk Ngawang Soepa Lueyar. See Charles Green, 'Group Soul: Who Owns the Artist Fusion?', *Third Text* 71 (November 2004): 595–608.
2. Roma Butler, Stacia Lewis, Rene Nelson, Takiriya Tjawina Roberts, Angkaliya Nelson, Sandra Peterman, Yangi Yangi Fox, Molly Miller, Nyanu Watson, Rene Kulitja, Niningka Lewis and Mary Pan collaborated with Hall on *Kuka Irititja (Animals from Another Time)*. The work was part of a project commissioned for the 2014 TarraWarra Museum of Art Biennial: *Whisper in My Mask*, curated by Natalie King and Djon Mundine.
3. Kovacs, Mahood and Wallworth were among 50 urban-based artists interviewed between 2011 and 2014 as part of Ian McLean's ARC Discovery Grant: The impact of Aboriginal art on contemporary urban Australian Art.
4. Andrew McNamara and Ann Stephen, 'The Double Risk of Primitivism' in *Future Primitive*, ed. Linda Michael (Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne 2013), 42. This restates surrealist transgressions, especially Bataille. See Hal Foster, 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art', *October* 34 (Autumn, 1985): 45–70, 42.
5. Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents', *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 178–183.
6. Jennifer Biddle, 'Breasts Bodies Art: Central Desert Women's Painting and the Politics of the Aesthetic Encounter', *Cultural Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (March 2006): 16–31, 25.
7. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.
8. Ibid., 6.
9. Griselda Pollock, 'Whither Art History', *The Art Bulletin* XCVI, no. 1 (March 2014): 18; Bracha Ettinger, 'Fascinance and the Girl-to-m/other Matrixial Feminine Difference', in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Griselda Pollock (Boston: Blackwell, 2006), 60–93.
10. Pollock's application is somewhat different, employing *fascinance* as a means of culturally and psychically destabilising the all-masculine canon.

11. For example, see Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008).
12. See Ian McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (Brisbane and Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011).
13. John Carty and Ngalangka Nola Taylor, 'You Don't Go Out in Country By Yourself: Collaborative Creativity in Martu Art', in *Martu Art from the Far Western Desert*, ed. Anna Davis (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2014), 30–35.
14. Lynette Wallworth, email message to author, February 3, 2015.
15. The work of Eric Michaels, Faye Ginsburg and Marcia Langton addresses the history, agency and subjectivity of film and new media in Indigenous communities in detail. See also Jennifer Deger, *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
16. Wallworth, email message to author, February 3, 2015.
17. Wallworth, phone communication with author, April 15, 2015.
18. Paul Basu notes the lack of critique of ethnographic film as a contemporary genre, along with an 'ethnographic turn' in popular culture that meets a lay-person's desire for this 'savage anthropology'. See Basu, 'Reframing Ethnographic Film' *Rethinking Documentary*, ed. T. Austin and W. de Jong (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), 97.
19. Concerning a photograph by Gabrielle Sullivan of Kumpaya Gigirba and Ngamaru Bidu killing a goanna. Email communication with Rilka Oakley, Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Curator, January 10, 2014. The issue was resolved between the hosting partner Fremantle Arts Centre and the Australian Classification Board.
20. Deger, *Shimmering Screens*, 91.
21. Lizzie Ellis, personal communication with the author, June 2, 2014.
22. Martu artists' statement in Nick Mitzevich, *2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Dark Heart* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2014), 166.
23. Brenda L. Croft, email message to author, November 25, 2014.
24. Brenda L. Croft, 'Sell-Abrasion of our Nations', *Artlink* 31, no. 2 (2011): 44–47.
25. Susan Best, 'The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta', *Art History* 30, no. 1 (February 2007): 57–82.
26. See Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Makings of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).
27. *Desert Lake* was shown at the Center for Art + Environment, Reno, Nevada in 2014.
28. Mahood, unpublished interview with the author, November 28, 2012.
29. See Kim Mahood, 'Kartiya are Like Toyotas: White Workers on Australia's Cultural Frontier', *Griffith REVIEW* 36 (Winter 2012): 43–59.
30. Ildiko Kovacs, unpublished interview with the author, February 20, 2012.
31. Yaritji Connelly, email correspondence with Fiona Salmon, cited in Stephanie Radok, *Roads Cross: Contemporary Directions in Australian Art* (Adelaide: Flinders University Art Museum and Charles Darwin University, 2012), 54.
32. Ildiko Kovacs, unpublished interview with the author, February 20, 2012.
33. Molly Nampitjin Miller, email correspondence to Fiona Salmon, cited in Radok, *Roads Cross*, 54.
34. Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaborations in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2001): xiii.
35. Una Rey, 'The Grass Ceiling: Painting, Gender and Intercultural Collaboration' in *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian McLean (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014): 45–69
36. Jonathan Jones, Keynote address, Desart Symposium, Araluen Art Centre Alice Springs, September 5, 2014.
37. Kim Mahood, unpublished interview with the author, November 28, 2012.
38. The installation *Always Walking Country: Parnngurr Yarrkalpa* will be exhibited in *Black White & Restive*, an exhibition of cross-cultural initiatives curated by Una Rey for Newcastle Art Gallery, 28 May–7 August 2016.

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