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Paintings, Publics, and Protocols: The Early Paintings from Papunya

Résumé

Les peintures acryliques d'Australie centrale sont connues pour leur capacité de concrétiser non seulement la présence autochtone, mais aussi les compréhensions indigènes du monde dans la société environnante élargie. Cependant, cette concrétisation du savoir d'un régime de valeurs basées sur la révélation en un autre savoir, organisé d'une autre manière, est empreinte de difficultés. La présence de certaines de ces peintures, exécutées au début de ce mouvement artistique, est aujourd'hui jugée inappropriée dans les expositions grand public, parce que leurs significations ésotériques sont confidentielles. Cette question a fait l'objet d'une grande controverse en Australie, et les musées et galeries doivent de plus en plus s'efforcer d'élaborer des protocoles pour satisfaire aux cadres épistémologiques autochtones.

Abstract

The paintings in acrylic media in Central Australia are known for their capacity to objectify not only indigenous presence but also indigenous understandings of the world in the broader, surrounding society. However, this objectification of knowledge from a revelatory regime of value into one organized in other ways, is fraught with difficulty. Some paintings executed in the early period of this art movement are now considered inappropriate for general pubic exhibition because of their restricted esoteric meanings. The issue has been a controversial one in Australia, and museums and galleries must attend increasingly to developing protocols to satisfy Indigenous epistemological frameworks.

The history of the acrylic painting movement in indigenous Australia has proved to be a telling case of what can occur in the movement of objects between distinctive regimes of knowledge and value. While much of current material culture theory emphasizes the significance of "things themselves," the movement of Aboriginal paintings from one ontological order to another (Myers 2004) cannot be extricated from the web of relationships that define the representation and contemporary production of Aboriginal culture. This does not diminish the power and presence of the objects, but it suggests the need to theorize objects within fields of representation and practice.

For the purposes of this essay, I want to use the concept of "regimes of value," a concept deployed first by Arjun Appadurai in the

groundbreaking collection *The Social Life of Things* (1986). However, I believe that the concept is underdeveloped and in fleshing it out, I draw on Louis Dumont's understanding of value as an organization of hierarchical form (1982: 204-41). Dumont describes value in terms of structures that can incorporate apparently contradictory but potentially coexisting values within a framework of encompassment rather than one of simple logical resolution. Thus, a regime of value is an *ordering* of value, an ordering that may recognize multiple forms of value but which organizes them in some sort of hierarchy. In delineating a "regime" in this way, I am further influenced by a sense of the dynamics of value in social life articulated in Victor Turner's accounts of the processes through which conflicts in norms and values are regularly addressed in different arenas—a process in which particular values are temporarily adjudicated with respect to each other and the situation (1974). I find Turner's framework—distinguishing a field of cultural values from the concrete arenas in which they are adjudicated with respect to each other—to be useful because in much of contemporary life, especially for indigenous people, the social world is now a space of multiple, possibly competing, ontological orders.

Acrylic Painting

First, I provide some historical background on the objects that motivate my consideration—Aboriginal acrylic paintings, and more specifically those objects produced in the first year and a half of this practice which are known as "early Papunya boards."[1] Acrylic painting in Central Australia is a contemporary social practice. While the transposition of indigenous ritual and communicative forms onto permanent two-dimensional surfaces has a longer history, in crayon drawings on paper for example, what one might call the "acrylic painting movement" began at the remote Aboriginal community of Papunya in 1971 under the guiding hand of the Euro-Australian schoolteacher and artist Geoff Bardon.[2] Here, 160 miles (260 km) west of Alice Springs, a government policy aimed at their assimilation brought together a community of recently settled, formerly semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. The older men of the community responded with excitement and enthusiasm to the unusual interest demonstrated by Bardon, with the transposition of ceremonial practices and iconography (traditionally applied to the body, the ground, or in the form of ritual objects) into the new medium of two-dimensional acrylic paintings. It is widely acknowledged that most Central and Western Desert painters represent the events or "stories" of their "country" (*ngurra*) that are understood to have occurred in the mythological period known as "The Dreaming" (Tjukurrpa), and that the form of the paintings draws on a ceremonial tradition of image-making as well as on a culturally-postulated significant landscape. The products of this art movement have achieved significant recognition in Australia and abroad through exhibition and sales, and in the process have helped to constitute a significant field of "indigenous art."

The works of the early period of painting at Papunya, often known as "the early Papunya boards," have achieved a special significance and value among collectors, curators, and art historians, as part of the origins of this striking history, uninfluenced by a later market. Possibly as representing a moment of extraordinary vitality, the painters explored the properties of a new medium and possibilities of expression for their rich ritual imaginations.

The early paintings are regarded by many as the "jewels" of the acrylic painting movement. This is an appropriate description since so much of this work is small in scale, involving the fine detail that is characteristic of the early Papunya Tula style. The term "early board" refers at once to the fact that the paintings were often done on masonite or composition board, rather than canvas or cardboard-backed canvas, but the term also alludes to a similarity with traditional sacred objects—often referred to as *churinga*, from the Arrernte designation made famous in the ethnological work of Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen (1899)—carved in wood, the very sacred objects that are part of the ritual repertoire extended in paintings. As examples of what Roger Benjamin called "the birth of a new form of beauty" (2009), the early paintings—limited in number as they are (perhaps 1,000 of them)—have come to be highly valued in the Western market and in

exhibiting the history of the art movement. There is, awkwardly but in fact, a kind of commensuration of values here.

Western Desert acrylic paintings are objects made to move between cultures, created by indigenous artists with introduced materials on permanent western surfaces to express themselves and their culture to a non-indigenous audience. They have never typically been purchased or held by those who make them, nor used in their own houses or ceremonies.[3] As I learned in my own field research, the Papunya artists wanted people to know and understand that the paintings were *tjukurrtjanu* ("from The Dreaming")—that their contents were not "made up"—and they wanted the paintings to be valued because of their relationship to this sacred tradition (Myers 1989). The paintings, we now understand, were political assertions of cultural value and, particularly, relationship to land in the face of the assimilating forces of government policy in that era. While the paintings have had an extraordinary trajectory, it has not been a simple one—because the protocols of viewing and knowing that are essential to their producers differ radically from those of the people who come to view them.

That the paintings of Papunya Tula artists are contemporary expressions of ritual, mythological, musical, and geographical knowledge implies more than a mere assertion of their "authenticity." Such knowledge and performance are part of a complex gender-segregated initiatory system. The translation of a system that distributes knowledge differentially into one that imagines freedom of access is always unstable. In indigenous knowledge systems as they have existed in Central Australia, the rights to know and perform different portions of stories distinguish those with a right to see or learn about these designs from those who are still learning, and all of them from females and uninitiated males. Restrictions can apply to initiated men and sometimes, more particularly, those from a particular local group. Women are excluded, but may also have their own exclusive ritual traditions. In this "revelatory" regime of value, control over the visual—over what can be seen and by whom—is central; the fundamental concern is to limit dispersal, to control the potential or manifestations of Tjukurrpa, objectifications of ancestral power identified with persons and groups. Aboriginal men of the Central and Western Deserts acquired—and acquire—knowledge of and rights to express these traditions through sequences of initiation and exchange. These rights were and still are part of the significant identities that linked people throughout the region, as shareholders, if you will, in highly valued religious traditions.[4]

The Anxiety of Circulation

By 1971, Aboriginal people had been explaining their religious life to outsiders for decades, allowing photography and making crayon drawings of their country that look remarkably like the early paintings. Yet this generosity of exchange, or the enthusiasm of displaying one's own culture's value, has not been an easy fit with the protocols from which it emerged. Throughout my many years of research, I have observed that many Aboriginal people came to regret their openness about the religious life, as its representations came back in unanticipated ways to their communities—in books, films, photographs, and paintings meant to circulate "outside" (at times with what appears to be consent, if not successfully being "informed") and not to expose local secrets within the indigenous community.

A variety of objects, designs, and performances in ceremony are considered "dear," and are sometimes "dangerous" to show to uninitiated persons. Yet representations of such forms were often present in the initial few years of the Papunya Tula painting movement, as the painters in this remote settlement did not imagine that their work would remain within the immediate sensory world of their own communities and expected, initially, that its circulation into the "whitefella" domain would be exempt from local contestation. Years of fieldwork have shown me that the painters were enthusiastic about their stories, and excited by the opportunities for expression offered by the new medium and by its apparent positive reception by a non-indigenous audience. It is not surprising that they crossed some lines of indigenous protocol in the new intercultural activity. Unlike the expressions and performances of prescribed ritual practice, artists typically painted in a setting apart from indigenous forms of authority.

At Papunya, and later at the community of Yayayi where I carried out research from 1973-1975, acrylic painting (unlike ritual performance) did not require the attendance and agreement of the many possible shareholders of the stories expressed (Myers 2002: 57-58). The painters at Papunya initially painted at the back of a schoolroom, sometimes in groups but groups that were quite mixed in terms of language affiliation and distinct from ritual associations (Benjamin 2009). They seem not to have regarded their productions as being circumscribed by the ordinary ritual rules, assimilating them more to the communications that took place commonly between Aboriginal men and outsiders. Indeed, the protocols of gender segregation and/or initiatory status had been regularly suspended for white people in the past. For example, the anthropologist Olive Pink attended and photographed men's ceremonies in Central Australia in the 1930s, as attested by her published photographs and article (Pink 1936).[5] Aboriginal women and children were excluded from the painting location and access to the paintings, but non-indigenous women and uninitiated people were granted access.

Problems of the Public: The Dangers of Transgression

By August of 1972, there were rumblings of criticism of the public display of stories in some of the Papunya Tula paintings exhibited at the neighbouring government settlement of Yuendumu during its well-attended sports weekend. As a result of the criticism by men who shared in the ritual traditions depicted in the paintings, the Papunya artists began to drop the restricted initiatory stories of the Kangaroo Dreaming from their painting repertoire. Inappropriate disclosure of knowledge of these stories, their music, or designs has customarily been punishable by death, and tales abound of women and children executed for transgression. For similar reasons, overt representation of ritual objects, too, began to be reduced or disguised—allowing for the expression of their knowledge of country, story, and ritual within allowable limits (see Kimber 1995; Myers 2002: 62-65; Myers 2014: 361-65).

In 1974, a previously established collection of early Papunya paintings was exhibited at the Residency in Alice Springs. A visiting indigenous man was angered by what he saw, which was a violation of what should be shown publicly. As a result, the exhibition was taken down, and the paintings sent into storage at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin (Kimber 1995: 130; Johnson 2010). This was not a lone case. Dick Kimber, who has catalogued this history most authoritatively, points out the dilemma that existed "where Dreaming tracks traversed the countries of people other than the artist, and where those people had not been consulted about transposition of the stories into portable modern art" (Kimber 1995: 134). While such paintings may not have transgressed the revelatory practices of initiatory restriction for Papunya Tula painters, their production and display had not recognized the rights of those from other communities who shared in the tradition. Nevertheless, for this different scale of transgression, compensation still had to be made (Kimber 1995; Myers 2002).

In response to these continued problems, the style of painting changed—hiding, disguising, or omitting the religious objects from obvious view and focusing visually on the less dangerous ritual traditions and dimensions of the stories. The "problematic" early paintings were themselves more or less secluded in a few museum collections, and their exhibition halted. In other places, where some of the early paintings might have been shown, the works may not have come to the attention of indigenous visitors or they withheld comment rather than draw attention to what ought not to have been shown. Viewing, hearing, and telling are serious matters in a cultural tradition where the right to know and tell are carefully guarded. Indeed, these rights are not just a matter of some kind of property; they comprise the very foundation of being. Sharing in rights to the stories of a place means sharing a foundational identity.

Although the practices of painting changed to remove transgressive references, the early paintings were being exhibited in museums, circulating in the marketplace and selling at high prices at auction. By the late 1990s, photographic reproductions of the paintings were common

in auction catalogues, and one could find reproductions on postcards and books. Vivien Johnson provides some insight and detail into the decisions about such reproductions in catalogues, at Sotheby's for example, in interview with Tim Klingender (Johnson 2010).

It became widely known, once again, that some of the early paintings were not appropriate for exhibition, but not always which ones. For a retrospective of Papunya Tula's painting at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* (2000), the indigenous curator Hetti Perkins consulted with the artists of the company about the paintings she proposed to show. They cleared the paintings in the exhibition and reportedly established a principle that it was allowable to show the paintings as long as no information was provided that would identify the images. If non-indigenous viewers saw the paintings, they wouldn't understand what they were seeing, so it would be okay to display the works: transgressive images hiding in plain sight. It seemed, from all this, that it might now be acceptable to show paintings containing overt religious material.

Managing the Threat of Transgression: Return of the "Early Paintings"

Recently, however, in planning for *Icons of the Desert*, the 2009 exhibition of early Papunya Tula paintings in the U.S., and in a flurry of discussion about the collection of early paintings at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), it became clear that this was not the case. MAGNT is in possession of more than 200 early Papunya paintings, including many of those removed from the Residency exhibition in Alice Springs in 1974. By 2006, some painters in the Papunya Tula arts co-operative began to say that paintings with overt religious material should not be seen by the uninitiated. At least a few of these men expressed opinions ranging from reservations about the exhibition of such images to declarative statements that they ought not be shown to uninitiated people. Vivien Johnson has reported on these conversations in her book *Once Upon a Time in Papunya* (2010), and the Alice Springs historian R. G. Kimber has made a number of reports over the years indicating continued uncertainty (Kimber 2006: personal communication). Nonetheless, Johnson's conversations, occurring at the same time as plans for the Icons exhibition, occasioned an intervention which I will discuss below. The point here is that opinions on how to treat these kinds of early paintings with overt references to religious material are not constant; they are unstable. For example, Bobby West Tjupurrula, a Pintupi director of Papunya Tula Artists, expressed concern to Vivien Johnson about the potential exhibition of certain images despite having told me enthusiastically, in 2000, of his pride at seeing his father's painting in the show at the AGNSW.

Kimber's subsequent consultation with relatives of deceased painters for the *Icons* show revealed that the principal reason for restricting access to some of the paintings with overt religious imagery was to prevent inappropriate and thus vulnerable people from the relevant indigenous communities viewing the images (Kimber 2009). It was okay, almost everyone said, to show all the paintings in the United States.

Meanwhile, the collection of early Papunya paintings at MAGNT instigated a crisis of a more public nature. It began with the attempted theft of six early Papunya paintings from the Museum on April 1, 2008, laying bare the dire conservation condition of these works so prized elsewhere. I remember Apolline Kohen, temporarily acting director of MAGNT, discussing a combination of fundraising for conservation to support an international exhibition—which would have drawn attention to the value of the Museum's collection.[6] In 2009, Alison Anderson—an indigenous politician, then Arts Minister of the Northern Territory, and herself a descendant of some of the Papunya painters—publicly "intervened to halt plans to take the collection known as 'the Papunya Tula Boards' on international tour in 2012, describing people who exploit sacred Aboriginal artworks as 'culture vultures'" (Murdoch 2009). Journalist Lindsay Murdoch wrote:

> Controversy surrounds the collection because some of the 220 paintings show secret, sacred men's cultural ceremonies. But Anderson, whose grandfathers (e.g., Long Jack Phillipus and Ronnie Tjampitjinpa)

> are the only living artists with works in the collection, has ordered a review to ensure that paintings deemed too sensitive are not exhibited. (2009)

So, how would this be done? Again, as reported by Murdoch, Anderson said that

> because she is a cultural woman, she cannot talk about the stories of the paintings, not even why they are sensitive. That is to say, Anderson respected the gender-segregated knowledge represented in the paintings. "The men have to do that," she said. (Murdoch 2009)

The decision to halt the plans for an international tour disturbed those in Darwin—described by Murdoch as "art lovers"—who had already begun to raise funds to support it. An echo of this disturbance, resonating with the friction between these regimes of value, can be found in art writer Jeremy Eccles's online review of the catalogue of the *Icons* exhibition, which had negotiated a restriction arrangement for problematic paintings. It is "a complex and still muddled story," he writes (2009). He goes on to say:

> The fate of more than a thousand Papunya boards—the genesis from which contemporary Aboriginal art sprang in 1971—and *our right* to view significant public collections at the National Gallery of Victoria and Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory hangs on the outcome. (2009, emphasis added)

Eccles, characteristically, places the blame at the feet of the "white interpreters" who are the authors and curators of the *Icons* material, assuming a familiar position of casting them/us as "cultural gatekeepers"—insisting on protocols that the people themselves have left behind—or as "anthropologists," as he wonders "whether the anthropologists were back in charge after twenty-five years of mainly aesthetic appreciation of Aboriginal art" (2009). Eccles ends his review of the catalog with a solution which, ironically, was that of its curators:

> But Northern Territory Arts Minister, former ATSIC Commissioner for the Desert and an artist herself, Alison Anderson has loudly pointed out that all those interpretations are by white people; the next step has to be to define who are the Aboriginal "contemporary cultural custodians" of these extraordinary works. For it may well be they who decide what "we" both see and learn in the future. (Eccles 2009)

Again, in the context of the Darwin tangle, Nicolas Rothwell, well-known art writer and Northern Territory correspondent for *The Australian*, also discussed the difficulties that threatened the *Icons* exhibition, and suggested that such exhibitions might be impossible in the future because of restrictions:

> The wheel has turned: the images inscribed on the early boards, which emerged from concealment at a crucial point in the history of the Australian frontier, are moving back into the shadows. It is most unlikely, despite the present urgent efforts of at least two big public galleries to mount Papunya board exhibitions, that anything like informed consent from the senior custodians of the desert for their display will be forthcoming in future years. The gems of the Wilkerson collection, on view in distant gallery spaces, half a world away from the place of their creation, are not just the tokens of an artistic renaissance: they are like the pale, precious light, revealed only for a moment, that floods from the sun in eclipse. (Rothwell 2009)

Who, then, might determine the fate of future exhibition of the paintings, if Alison Anderson herself could not speak? More importantly, one should imagine that broader politics had an influence as well, since indigenous politician Marion Scrymgour had promised the funding for conservation but now found herself in competition with Anderson.[7] In the midst of this social drama, Kohen was forced out of the Northern Territory Museum. It has been rumored that Kohen, previously a successful arts coordinator at Maningrida, had nominated herself to undertake the consultation on the Museum's collection, a role unsuitable to women according to Central Australian protocols. This would certainly have disturbed Anderson whose cultural affiliations are at Papunya.

Consultation

Since 2007, I have been involved in some consultations about early Papunya paintings, using photographic images to discuss them. The

planning in 2011 of a massive National Gallery of Victoria exhibition accelerated concerns for those who might lend paintings. Subsequently, this exhibition, *Tjukurrtjanu*, was shown at the Musée du Quai Branly (Fig. 1). As witness to some of the early discussions in the 1970s along with Dick Kimber,[8] I was invited to work in the consultation on the MAGNT collection for the review assigned to the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (Kimber 1995: 134). The consultations were illuminating. One of the elderly Pintupi painters with whom I spoke in 2010, for example, at first told me it was okay for everybody to see the paintings: "They are free," he said.[9] This was Ronnie Tjampitinpa, who had been among the youngest painters in the first phase of Papunya Tula. When I asked him whether it would be acceptable to have these paintings exhibited in Alice Springs, where women and children from that particular indigenous community could see them, the response was different. "No," he said, realizing what would be involved. Then he went through a pile of photographs of his own paintings and those of his close relatives. Ronnie sorted the paintings into piles: those that could be shown to everybody and those that women and children should not see.

For similar reasons, after a consultation by Dick Kimber at the *Icons* exhibition in New York University's Grey Art Gallery, we placed the nine paintings for restricted viewing in a separate area. As it turned out, this was more than a mere gesture. The arrangement proved to be a great relief for two Pintupi women painters who came to the exhibition along with a number of other visiting indigenous artists who arrived unexpectedly. The Pintupi women had been quite apprehensive about entering the gallery, even though they wanted to see the work of their relatives, because they feared they might stumble on something inappropriate for them to see. The caution exercised with the separation of these nine paintings allowed the women freedom of movement and the chance to follow their own protocols (Fig. 2).[10]

In the case of the *Icons* exhibition, in which I was a participant, we felt we had been able to establish an ethical principle for private collectors, in which they might agree to respect the wishes of the indigenous custodians of the traditions objectified in the paintings, yet still exhibit work. This principle reflects the local understandings of these objects as something more than mere "commodities," as themselves extensions—iconic and indexical—of the persons and relationships they instantiate. As should be clear, the paintings continue to be understood thusly by the descendants of the painters and it is in such terms that they identify their value. Their making and exchange has always been understood, at least partly, in terms of exchanges in which people present, show, and give their identity and sacred knowledge to others and thereby enter into a relationship of recognition. To respect these terms in exhibition is not simply to engage in an abstract political correctness. Rather, it is to present these objects in their genuine complexity, to allow viewers to

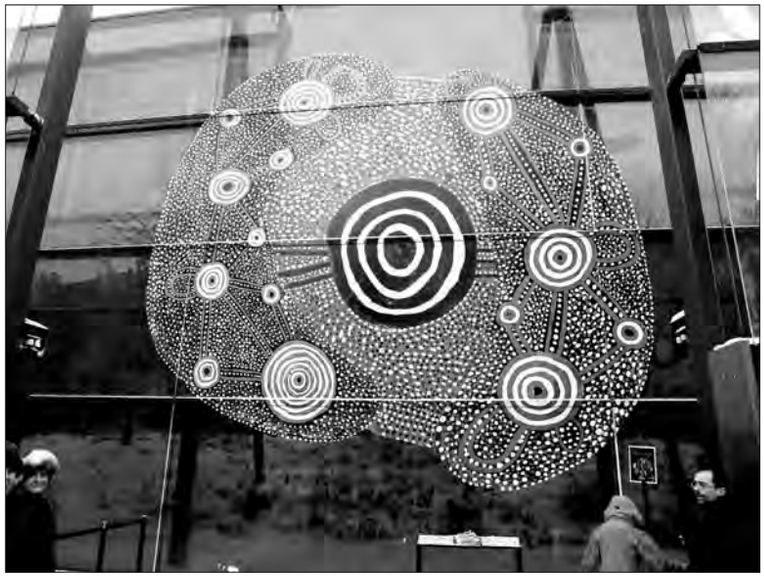

Fig. 1
Entrance to the Tjukurrtjanu *exhibition at the Quai Branly, Paris, January 2013. Photo by Fred Myers.*

Fig. 2
Two women Pintupi painters who visited Icons of the Desert *at the opening. New York, September 5, 2009." Photo by Fred Myers.*

engage with these cultural objects as profoundly relational and to learn from them in deeper ways.

Tjukurrtjanu: The Early Paintings Again

Once is not enough. Shortly after the *Icons* exhibition, a far more extensive exhibition of more than 200 early Papunya paintings was planned at the National Gallery of Victoria, entitled *Tjukurrtjanu* ("from The Dreaming"). For this, the curators engaged in consultation with the communities from which the paintings—produced some forty years earlier—came. The communities gave assent to the exhibition, but as the time approached and the results of consultations taking place for the MAGNT collection became clear, it seemed that the first consultation did not reflect the more considered opinions of custodians. This was the context of my interview with the elderly Pintupi painter Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, mentioned previously. Could it be that a consultation might be found wanting as time passed?

Here remains a significant question in moving objects between "regimes of value," a major problem with objects in circulation (Myers 2001). What are the conditions of decision-making and assent? It is assumed in museums, and other institutions that might be mobilizing the display of objects from "abroad," that individuals can enter into binding contracts of agreement about conditions of exhibition, However, in Aboriginal communities, opinion frequently shifts over time, as new information comes in and as new participants speak. It is difficult to establish a final decision that is not subject to reconsideration (Myers 1986).

Indeed, these are not abstract questions. Painters and their descendants can be harshly sanctioned for decisions to exhibit or display knowledge with which others disagree. It is quite possible that even a very thoughtful man might reconsider when he realizes more fully what a museum exhibition entails in terms of visitors who might be offended. Recognizing this, under some pressure concerning the potentialy harmful repercussions to the indigenous consultants, the National Gallery of Victoria decided to put the problematic paintings in a separate room.

Differences in understanding these considerations led to spirited discussions among various people involved in the NGV *Tjukurrtjanu* exhibition. For their part, the curators were committed to a "fine art" or "art historical" display, attending to the formal qualities of the works by showing them in seriation and grouped by artist. With more than 200 paintings in the show, the curators were able to provide numerous works by each artist and to delineate through this "hang" the distinctive styles and variations of individual painters. To remove key works, or even to place them elsewhere, challenged this principle—the art-equals-aesthetics principle echoed in the citations I have offered from the critics Eccles (2009) and Rothwell (2009). Despite their long association with indigenous people in Central Australia, some of *Tjukurrtjanu*'s curatorial group felt that the time for gender-based segregation was or should be over. Things had changed; perhaps observing this principle was more a form of political correctness on the part of white gatekeepers than it was initiated by the indigenous community itself. Here, we see again the concerns articulated by Eccles about "our right" to see, but now emanating from people who have had closer relationships with producing communities. Do we see here a reduction of accountability with temporal and spatial distance from the community—distance from the possibilities of retaliation but also distance from informal or quieter indications of dissension?

Second, in these conversations about *Tjukurrtjanu* the question was raised of whether a public museum or gallery could restrict any citizens from access to viewing. It was also

Fig. 3
Pintupi men at the door to the restricted room of paintings at Tjukurrtjanu *exhibition at National Gallery of Victoria. Melbourne, September 2011. Photo courtesy Luke Scholes.*

pointed out that members of the community had agreed to the exhibition and had signed releases. This again raises questions about the finality of consultation and whether consent was truly adequately informed. Were the consultations and permissions unintentionally compromised by the lure of payment at hand, and is a video recording an appropriate or culturally sensitive way to elicit response? It might be well-intentioned to offer compensation and to provide a sincere record, but one can see another side as well. Most significantly, I would argue, the temporality and finality of such a legalized documentation of consent can be misleading.

Indeed, I think the fundamental issue is the difficulty of ascertaining what "informed consent" is in such complex situations where people may not have thought through the consequences or contexts of exhibition. It should also be recognized that indigenous participants, at least in Central Australia, are reluctant to refuse those they know, something that curators eager to show work may unwittingly exploit. Pintupi regularly contrast Aboriginal people with white people in terms of their ability and willingness to "say no, right to one's face" (Myers 1986a, 1986b, 1988). The curators' desire to show paintings—using the comprehensive collection to display an art historical series as a formal aesthetic exploration would be an accomplishment for them—is experienced as pressure on the part of cultural custodians. By way of comparison, a recent breakdown of consensus in consultation for the *Songlines* project—a major project of recording and exhibiting Aboriginal culture and art—provides further evidence of the potential challenge to agreements (Rintoul 2013). Such difficulties in managing agreement and consensus—in ritual and other matters—were crucial elements that I have discussed and analyzed in Western Desert social and ritual life in earlier work (Myers 1986a; 1986b; 1988).

Let me reframe this social drama, as Victor Turner would have called it, in a more abstract way. Are these paintings to be seen finally and totally within the frame of art history and also as forms of knowledge that are available to all? Or are they, most essentially, objects of local value and identity? Thus, against a curatorial desire to exhibit in sequence, in totality, without restriction, a combination of aesthetic and democratic value, one has to answer with a concern for possible harm or retaliation to the custodians, a set of values embedded in local relations but translatable in terms of bodily and reputational harm. How does one consider these values in relationship to each other?

This seems an irreducible conundrum, a situation in which one set of values must inevitably prevail or encompass the others. However, there is also the question of what is the purpose of an exhibition. If it is to engage viewers with the complexity of these objects, their wonder and mystery, why try to erase this very difficulty? Why not build these questions into the exhibition itself? This would be a more conceptual dimension and one that acknowledges the actual history of these paintings.

People and Things: Refusing the Separation, Rethinking Property

This continuous story of revelation and regret makes it clear that some of the early Papunya paintings remain dangerous or problematic for open exhibition, particularly for those who are their custodians. Consultation is necessary in order to determine how the relevant local custodians of the traditions evaluate the suitability of exhibition. These consultations need to be careful and extensive, allowing for discussions and for views to change as those consulted consider other relevant shareholders. In 1975, for example, the Pintupi painters of the *Tingarri* stories had rights to those stories, but their Pitjantjatjarra neighbours also had rights. The two groups disagreed about the suitability of showing these stories (Kimber 1995).

Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge that while the painters and their descendants are custodians and authorities for the stories that were depicted, there may be others who share the rights to these stories, and they may have different views. Put in material culture terms, these objects are extensions of the identities of more people than their physical creators. Indeed, they are objectifications of quite complex relationalities of persons. Perhaps the adult child of a deceased artist thinks it is alright to show a certain work painted by his father, but what if he hasn't imagined what will happen when a visitor

from a related indigenous community visits the gallery? The history of turbulence around the exhibition of these paintings should force us to ask, following also the work of yet another observer, Ken Liberman, what is the status of a "decision" in Western Desert protocol (1980)? How do the determinations of a present group hold authority in the technologically and socially transformed current condition? It is an old Talmudic tradition, and a more general moral one, that if there is any uncertainty or ambiguity, one should err on the side of caution.

This is an inescapably difficult issue. It acknowledges that objects continue their lives as extensions of complex identities and selves. When seeking agreements for an exhibition, curators need to acknowledge the internal politics of custodianship and find ways to present the paintings that respect the complexities of indigenous protocols. This also means respecting the temporalities and openness of the negotiations in which the custodians and other stakeholders engage. In effect, I am arguing that they should be allowed to enter the frame of exhibition—in ways that genuinely sustain the values they embody—as objects through which relationships are mediated and brought into visibility.

Having made my somewhat truncated argument for the necessity of ongoing negotiation rather than a punctuated consultation and agreement—a position I regard as crucial to the real goals of cultural property claim, and contrary to Michael Brown's position (2004)—I would like to suggest there might also be value in finding a way to include some restricted paintings in the inventory of exhibition. I need to return to Alison Anderson, who has returned to this question very recently with the handing over of the consultation report to MAGNT. In this report, sixty-six paintings were regarded as inappropriate for exhibition, and the consultants have further asked that the reasons for their restriction not be available publicly. They did agree that senior men could give permission for appropriate outside men to view the paintings (Aikman 2012).

Alice Springs News Online reported on November 17, 2012, that Anderson, in a moving speech at the Alice Springs Araluen Gallery exhibition of locally held works from Papunya Tula, took the opportunity to re-state her view, calling "on those who love the art to be happy with its 'beautiful surface,' to not try 'to see behind the veil,' to not delve into its 'inner secrets'" (Finnane 2012). Anderson is quoted as saying:,

> This is an exhibition about my home, Papunya, and my law and culture, and about my youthful years, when I sat with all my dear fathers and uncles and grandfathers, and watched them as they painted the first boards and early canvases in Papunya and its camps. There are works here from recent years, by artists who are still among us, artists from Kintore and Kiwirrkurra.
>
> But it is also an exhibition about Alice Springs, the town that first saw and appreciated and loved western desert art. These paintings you see all around you are the collections of the town, its councils and its men and women. This exhibition is a bridge between these two worlds: a precious bridge.
>
> It is also a window into the past—a past I see very clearly, with the eyes of childhood. I see once more the painters from the early days, and you can walk around and see their works here on the walls, and feel something of their character, their wisdom and their grace.
>
> These are the people who taught me how to live; they taught me my culture. The heart and core of every western desert man and woman is on view in these galleries. I see the first painters in my mind's eye so clearly: Old Mick Wallangkari Tjakamarra, and Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula, and old Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi. (Finnane 2012)

For those without Anderson's depth of experiential knowledge, how are we to understand the dynamic of this art form, even to comprehend its surface, which became what it was and what it is through engagement with boundaries, challenges, and threats as a secreted religious life found expression in a new form? Perhaps these are reasons simply to keep the collection and its knowledge in storage for now, or to figure out a way to allow some of this dynamic to be seen. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the dynamics of revelation and concealment are intrinsic to the tradition from which these paintings emerge. Painters played at the edge of these boundaries, as they no doubt did in deciding when and what to reveal in ceremonies—sometimes

with unfortunate consequences. But curators must be mindful, indeed accountable, of and to those who will bear the responsibilities of revealing the work. For it to be "art," in the way that Eccles and Rothwell have desired (at least at this time), something has had to be stripped away in translation. At the same time, for us to recognize them for what Anderson claims—as objects with a special cultural history—one needs some sort of exhibitionary strategy that respects the problem of translation. More importantly, it must incorporate the genuine challenge these objects offer to the very limited frameworks of Western contemporary art that, ironically, have been espoused by critics like Eccles and, at times, Rothwell.

The Longue Durée

Since the discussions of Orientalism and Primitivism in the 1970s and 1980s, it has been a commonplace assumption that the power of the West to display the rest was overwhelming and that appropriation was almost an inevitability even if it was morally problematic. James Clifford's Surrealist call for "culture gone crazy" to disrupt the categories of the dominant art-system was a prescient incite, a recognition of a point of convergence between avant-garde challenge to the dominant system and the resistant qualities of objects with other histories. Such challenges are not carried through in a single moment. I want to end by placing the controversies over "early Papunya boards" and their exhibition in the longer history of engagement between Aboriginal regimes of value and those of the West.

There is a history of the interventions of Western knowledge and viewing practice that have surfaced in cultural and intellectual property cases concerning indigenous forms—the banning of Richard Gould's book *Yiwara* (1969) at Warburton Range Mission for revealing photographs of a secret men's initiation (Gould 1969; Peterson 2003),[11] and the injunction against C. P. Mountford's *Nomads of the Western Desert* (1976) by the Pitjantjatjarra to prevent its exposure of sacred lore.[12] While the Mountford case has received attention in subsequent literature on "cultural copyright" and intellectual property (Brown 2004; Antons 2009), it is less well-known how significant the response to *Yiwara* was. The distinguished Australian archaeologist John Mulvaney has written of the effect of this case in the academy:

> During most of 1971, I was Acting Principal of the AIAS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies). Reports that Aboriginal people were concerned about the attitude of researchers to places and concepts which they believed were secret-sacred matters (as the contemporary term had it). This came to a head when Richard Gould's otherwise excellent book *Yiwara* (1969) became known to people with whom he had worked. It contained images of sacred places and objects associated with informants, which caused anger. It was claimed that a girl's life was in danger because she handled this book and saw forbidden images. Other complaints came from the Western Desert region, so it was considered prudent to withdraw from the field those working on AIAS grants. I arranged a Canberra conference whose title "Access to the Field" suggested, accurately, academic concerns rather than Aboriginal interests. (Mulvaney 2006: 426)

From Arnhem Land, as well, one can trace a history of intervention from Wandjuk Marika's insistence that the Aboriginal Arts Board pursue the issue of cultural copyright, to Terry Yumbulul's case against the Reserve Bank of Australia for its use of his *Morning Star* painting (French 1991), to John Bulun Bulun's litigation against a textile company for unauthorized copying of his work.[13]

What is significant is that the unsettlement continues, nowhere with more force than in the Pitjantjatjarra homelands, close to the sites of Gould's and Mountford's work. Rothwell has recently written of the Pitjantjatjarra painters like Hector Burton who, he says, "formed a plan" for new paintings that were a "gateway into traditions and stories, but they were a barrier as well" (Rothwell 2012). They would protect their stories from curious outsiders, he writes, by using something other than the so-called traditional icons—not sacred rockholes and patterns in the landscape, but trees. Rothwell traces this new concern (which is not, as should be clear now, new) to meetings and discussions in 2011 among senior men who made a decision to shift away from "old icons" of religious life. In their place,

the painters of Amata have produced canvasses "that initiate and embody an art of concealment: that seek to turn the recent tide of revelations about desert beliefs" (Rothwell 2012).

While the practice of concealment lies at the core of Western Desert art, as I have argued repeatedly (Myers 2002; 2012; forthcoming), what is the occasion for this announcement of it as a novelty by Rothwell? It has been accompanied now by a series of denunciations and blockings of research projects already apparently negotiated by well-established researchers, such as Diana James's *Songlines* project with the National Museum of Australia (Rintoul 2013). Nearly two years later, the negotiation of consent for revelation and exhibition has recently reached the front pages of *The Australian* in another set of articles. Rothwell reports on the protest by a dissenting group of Pitjantjatjarra leaders and support by others, suggesting that the project has proceeded without legitimate support from key parts of the community, a claim to which James has posted a response (Rothwell 2014; James 2014). The dissenting Pitjantjatjarra, at the time of this writing, filed for an injunction against the first exhibition slated from the project, an exhibition of stories and paintings related to the Ngintaka (Perentie or Varanus major) Dreaming (Rintoul 2013).

Many on the scene regard these articles and the events in these communities as reflecting some emerging politics surrounding knowledge, academic research, and indigenous traditions. It may also be that the claims of exhibition-transgressing protocols of Tjukurrpa represent less the insistence on restriction of the sacred than attempts of local people to keep something for themselves. In any case, these events make it clear that one cannot imagine that the practice of consultation and negotiation will be—or can be—separated from the currents that roil contemporary life in indigenous Australia.

In undertaking to display this extraordinary early history of Papunya Tula Artists, its outburst of creativity, and intensity of attachment to place and tradition in paint, the curators of *Tjukurrtjanu* at the NGV—and later at the Quai Branly—have recognized how the perspectives of Western curatorial and indigenous authority can clash. These institutions and Papunya Tula Artists have sought to take a respectful path in consultation and exhibition—true to the complexities of the work—by placing the paintings that might concern indigenous viewers in a separate area, together with a caution for those who identify themselves as subject to the protocols of the indigenous communities of Central Australia. Like ritual, however, these decisions are human decisions, and their results—objectification of the personal relations and histories that underlie them—cannot be free from reconsiderations and accountability. Perhaps these determinations of the transit between regimes of value will prove unsatisfactory, but it is true to the epistemology and politics of knowledge that continue to define the intersection of indigenous and Euro-Australian regimes of value.

Notes

1. For a discussion of "the early Papunya boards," see Roger Benjamin (2009) and Vivien Johnson (2010).
2. For a history of painting in this community and the establishment of Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd. as a cooperative, see Bardon (1979, 1991), Johnson (2010), and Myers (2002).
3. The exception to this statement is discussed by Francoise Dussart for Warlpiri women's paintings—used in land claim hearings as evidence of their attachment and rights to land (see Dussart 1997).
4. For a full account of this knowledge system, see F. R. Myers (1986a).
5. Anecdotally, I have heard of permission being granted to allow white women to attend ceremonies in the past at Aboriginal settlements, but the point here is more generally that the restrictions for uninitiated outsiders have tightened over time.
6. This conversation occurred during a visit Kohen made to New York in 2006.
7. In her role as Arts Minister of the Northern Territory, Alison Anderson cancelled an exhibition of these paintings, contravening an election promise by Scrymgour who had proposed $300,000 to restore and show the paintings (Calacouras, "Secret Art Business Stirs Pot on Public Exhibition," *Northern Territory News,* May

20, 2009). Calacouras notes that Apolline Kohen, then acting director of MAGNT, had been supervising the exhibition, but "was removed from her job shortly after Ms. Anderson intervened." He reports that she might have been "removed after a series of 'ideological differences,' in particular relating to the Papunya show."

8. In 1974, Kimber and I had recommended removing all the paintings from public display in the Alice Springs sales venue for Papunya paintings and displaying them in a back room "marked 'Men Only'." See Kimber (1995: 134).
9. I had asked him, in Pintupi, whether these paintings could be shown in a museum. After further discussion with him, it became clear that this was not a good way to show the paintings to the public.
10. I have presented a fuller discussion of these issues and the significance of new protocols in Myers (2014).
11. Annette Hamilton had presciently predicted difficulties with the photographs in her review of Yiwara, published in Mankind that year. See Hamilton (1971).
12. For more on the injunction, see Foster and Others v Mountford and Rigby Ltd (1976) 14. ALR 71
13. For more on this case, see John Bulun Bulun v R & T Textiles

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