

Art in the Time of Colony

By Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll

Richard Drayton

The Sumerians and the inventors of the alphabet, and you and I, no matter what our genetic heritage, are in one category: heirs of post-Neolithic Old World Cultures. All stone age peoples, including the few still living... are in another... If we try time-lapse photography on Australia, we see no jack-in-the-box empires, no pyramids, no advancing frontier of cultivated fields – only the slowly undulant flicker of Stone Age technology... The Amerindians and Aborigines came late to the Neolithic Revolution, for whatever reasons and suffered for it. Traditionally the keepers of domesticated fowl have taught their birds to hurry up when called by using a stick to hit the last to arrive. History has similarly chastised the latecomers to the Old World's style of the 'Neolithic Revolution'.¹

So Alfred Crosby – lest you think I, let alone Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, could write in such terms – explained what distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’. His *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* of 1986 is an argument that Europeans had a kind of ecological and civilisational manifest destiny to colonise what he called the ‘Neo-Europes’ – that is to say the temperate regions of the world – so to achieve ‘demographic takeover’ from indigenous peoples. It is a kind of myth of origins of what we used to call the ‘White Dominions’.

Crosby is only a late representative of a way of understanding the difference between coloniser and colonised, West and the Rest, in terms of time. Time is of the essence of the colonial idea. The time of colony condemns the colonised, to a perpetual anachronism, always out of time with the mother/master time, of being ‘late’ to history, to science, to art, with lateness taken always as a condition of inferiority. The non-white, lined up in a queue behind the chariot of history in which the Australian Aborigines is taken as the tail, is perpetually delayed. But the white Creole too, in Australia as in Sarmiento’s Argentina, is also behind time’s vanguard, and so long as they accept this location, they are simultaneously out of place in the country they inhabit.

Aborigines and their art – the core subject of *Art in the Time of Colony* – in this way of seeing are on the other side of the museum glass from the art historical and historical intelligence. Aborigines would appear as ‘living fossils’, radically different from us, and their art, if indeed they are admitted to produce such a thing, a relic of an opaque primitive mysticism. The consequence of this vitrine, however, is not just to alienate those who look through it from those they look at, but in that time disjunction between us-modern and them-ancient/primitive/immobile we accept an alienation of cognition from sympathy and participation, an alienation, if you like, of corroboration from corroboree.

It is the task of this brave, complex, intelligent book to work against these kinds of alienation by making us think of Aboriginal and Western aesthetics, and the institutions and practices – taxonomic, perceptual, philosophical and political – which constitute the glass between the two, through a sequence of adventures, dare we say experiments or rituals of interpretation in which Aboriginal art from the foundational national period of 1802 to 1902, the core subject of the book, is juxtaposed with contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art in the post colony of Australia. By these acts of deliberately cross-temporal oppositions the author constitutes what she calls, ‘a

museum of a book', its chapters operate as installations in the contemporary artist's sense, in which a curator's intelligence has collected a kind of canon – in a confrontational way. Yet it is seeking an effect beyond either pedagogy or entertainment or archive, for this is not a museum which allows the reader the safety of spectacle, of hiding behind those lines which we think of as security for the objects but which also keep us safe from the art. We must instead participate.

The corroboree is the night time Aboriginal ritual dance, an embodied, inspired, located, worldly art, and is a recurring figure of this book, from the frontispiece image where Yakaduna's, Tommy McCrae, the Aboriginal artist go-between, locates William Buckley, that classic convict turned go-between, casting his white body in with the black dancers. The book invites us to pay close attention to these acts of mutual mimesis of Aboriginal and settler, in which selves were reconstituted in and through the gaze and cool presence of the other, acts which continue, it urges, into the present. For it is in such reflective mimetic compassionated play that 'her generation', as she put it in one candid phrase, can engage in the work of dis-alienating Australia, and can make accessible the ancient and modern Aboriginal resources for modern Australian selfhood and intellectual life.

The book is punctuated by aesthetic performances which confront and disturb us from the styles of reading to which we are accustomed. The emblem of this for me are the photographs scattered through the book, which were taken by Khadija in her role as art historian through the curator's microscope of elements of the famous Tasmanian proclamation boards. These are the boards, which were intended as a form of legal pedagogy, of a kind of emplacement of European law and presence on the Aboriginal landscape. There is a large board of four jinxed positions which represents the consequences of European Law: If we live in peace we all hold hands and live together, if the European kills the Aboriginal he is hung and if the Aboriginal kills the European he is hung and this is written as a logic of four lines. It is an extremely compelling, powerful image and it is one which the book returns to again and again. But what Khadija does is to zoom in, through the perfect optical gaze of a curator's microscope to represent elements of that particular thing and these are thrown into the book, in particular irregular ways almost as moments of logical punctuation. Now what is crucial about this is that these images are profoundly in optical focus, but so absolutely, disturbingly out of focus and context. They are disturbing images.

Now I take these as a tacit riposte to a comment made by Frederick McCoy, the nineteenth-century curator of Museum Victoria who inheriting the extraordinary collections formed by one of Khadija's heroes, the German explorer William Blandowski, dismissing these collections as having 'no focus'. Where Khadija punctuates the text with these images which are profoundly focused but out of focus she seeks to make us aware of the cognitive tunnels through which we retreat from participatory engagement with things as a whole, with time and place. For participation, the active choice of relationship, is central to the enterprise of *Art in the Time of Colony*. This is a book which is pointed 'towards an end located in the future', it seeks to change its world, through an act of attention, explanation, communication and engagement.

The book is divided into five main parts, each of about fifty pages at length. The first of these – 'Mimesis of Tradition' – is focused on the possum skin cloaks, which had represented a kind of original art form, a kind of literally second skin. I take this section – whether or not the author intended it to mean this – to be an evocation of the primary organs of art with the human experiences of the body and of clothing, the first skin and the second skin, the spaces on which the self and the world come initially to be represented via the tattoo, via the drawing, via decoration, via adornments or via this complex of these things which is this possum skin cloak. But at the same time this chapter is a kind of making clear of her method, juxtaposed with a film that was made about this relationship of contemporary Aboriginal communities to possum skin collections that in their original forms are still in the archives and in museums. There are ways to recreate these in one

way or another. This act of juxtaposing the historical and the contemporary seeks to create a kind of tension in our readings to bring something to the surface for us.

Now the point is to raise to the surface a number of problems. One is the question of authenticity. What happens when a contemporary Aboriginal artist who may look no different from you or me, because of the nature of their genetic ancestry invests in this particular sense of being, which is expressed by some form of Aboriginal aesthetic, participation and action. What does this mean? We have to take these acts of participation seriously, Zinnenburg Carroll is saying that out of this active relationship something is brought into being which can be used to make sense of the past as the past can be used to make sense of the present. It is critical however not to just argue for a kind of romantic continuity between the ancient primitive Aboriginal past and the present. What is critical about this book is a recognition of the way in which Aborigines themselves as much as settlers reconstituted themselves across history through living together, making worlds together and making art together. It is important she writes to resist that structuralist framework which would insist on explicit continuity in favour of seeing the inaccessibility of many historical techniques and knowledge bases as 'an index to forms of historic loss, which were experienced in the past'. This book represents something of a contribution to a certain kind of historical method or moment. It is critical however that art is not just on the medium but *in* the medium – skin, tree, sand.

In the second chapter the picture proclamation is an expiration of these images, these Tasmanian proclamations which propagate the European law in the countryside. Against the idea that Aboriginal art represents some kind of – in its modern form – simple subordination to the European style. She argues that influences moved in both directions. On the Proclamation boards, she argues, operated a kind of European mimicry of Aboriginal bark and tree painting. So the influences, the forms of self in art making go in the other direction. Similarly when Zinnenburg Carroll is writing about Wilhelm von Blandowski – the German explorer who creates his extraordinary baroque encyclopaedia 'Terra Australis'. It is important that *Art in the Time of Colony* explains how Blandowski is engaged himself in acts of intellectual mimicry. He tries to understand Australian space and nature through the terms of reference which Aborigines themselves understood the space and themselves. And in particular the book notes that Blandowski was trying to engage with the Aboriginal sense of time. Khadija explores in the subsequent section – 'Anachronistic Mapping' – how he performs a kind of European mimesis of Aboriginal mapping practices.

The last main section is tracing 'Race in Silhouette' and examines the space of those forms of art which constitute an idea of a self relative to others and juxtapose the kind of intersecting trajectories of Yakaduna and Buckley among other things to try to explain, not just the kind of confrontation of white power with Aboriginal experience, which is tragically expressed in Yakaduna's experience of having his own children taken away from him in the decade of the Australian federation, in the 1890s, but also something far more subtle about the kinds of exchanges of style, as well, 'as if a manner of thy friends' to borrow the culmination of Derek Walcott's 'Ruins of a Great House'.

A final chapter then addresses traumatised and dramatic relationships of Australian white settler culture to this Aboriginal past via a set of images and photographs in which Australian actors sought to explore in blackface what it meant to be Aboriginal, to live together in particular ways, to occupy space in particular ways. And her point is this, that we need to take blackface seriously. We need to try to ask what is happening? What are the rituals of self-constitution, which are being enacted in these moments of performance of the Aboriginal, which haunts Australian culture through the twentieth century?

The critical question in all this work is how does one think with fragments, with ruins, how does one think with small pieces, and how does one excavate silences, can one back cross from contemporary art with the fragments of surviving artefacts to amplify what was there in the past and

perhaps the present? Can an act of mapping one moment in its context be sharpened by a resonating act of interpretation at another moment? This is the key to her historical method. It represents to my gaze an original and significant contribution to the corpus of historical thinking.

Early in the introduction, she confronts the discomfort such a practice can cause with or within the Western historical intelligence. For central to our traditions is the Rankean ideal that each period can only be understood in terms of the sources and in terms of reference contemporary to it. But what are the consequences of this in a colonial context, where the traces of the subordinate were only poorly preserved, and where also the kinds of knowing we bring to the past are so cognitively biased towards the view of the dominant? This is not merely an Australian problem but exists across the postcolonial world.

As I read this book I could – as someone from the Caribbean – not help but think of texts to which I would juxtapose it. Walcott's 'Ruins of a Great House', but also his noble lecture: 'Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing in its original shape.'

One can productively compare the kinds of questions that are being asked here about the relationship between the Aboriginal and Australian – non-Aboriginal Australian present – with the Aboriginal past to the debates about the relationship of contemporary African-American culture in the Americas to Africa – in other words that particular line of work which comes through Herskovits' 'The Myth of the Negro Past' and leads via Mintz and Price's creolising discussions of the relationship of Afro-American culture to an African past and to an American present, to more recent attempts to recalibrate the balance between the to.

It is hard to read this book and not to think of Kamau Brathwaite:

*It is not it is not
it is not enough to be pause, to be hole
to be void, to be silent
to be semicolon, to be semicolony*

*fling me the stone that will confound the void
find me the rage and I will raise the colony
fill me with words and I will blind your god
attibon
attibon legba
ouvri bayi pou mwei
ouvri bayi pou mwe*

Much as Kamau invites the ancestors through the guidance of Legba into simultaneity with the contemporary cultural and political moment to creation, so Zinnenburg Carroll proposes a radical anachronism, which involves suppressing the distinction between past, past present and future, and instead holding these in a moment of simultaneous gaze. One way of understanding this is to think about what Blandowski tries to do with the fishes in the Murray River. Where instead of representing them as the Linnean science did, suspended as a kind of pure ideal type of each species, Blandowski guided by his Aboriginal informants captured these fishes in each moment of their lifecycle with all of their specific colours and shapes and mutations, and presented these, saying: These are the fish, these are different. Each of these moments represents something which is true, which has its own aesthetic, scientific and logical qualities. What he is trying to do is a kind of widening of the lens of history for the event, to discover simultaneity versus disjunction.

There are large philosophical questions looming in this book: What is the form of knowledge, which can seed the crystal of the creative imagination? One of the figures the author uses early on is Australian rock paintings from 40,000 BC, which were painted with living paint. The forms of paint change, the colours – the painting in other words – creates itself through its lifespan. What is involved in painting with living colours? How do we, through acts of paying attention to how others make meaning, set in motion a ritual of meaning-making which both resonates with the past and leads to futures beyond ourselves? How do we make the germinative choice of conjuncted seeing and self-seeing that is aesthesis? What is aesthesis's cognitive role 'towards an end located in the future'?

Zinnenburg Carroll appeals to the Wittgenstein that talks about names that resemble points and propositions that resemble arrows. The Wittgenstein of the 'Philosophical Investigations' that exalts the clunkiness of signifiers.

Critical to the book is the disjunction between the ceremony and the spectacle, the magic/ritual moment versus the moment of art. Khadija urges us to delay the processing moment when sense information is assigned an aesthetic or an epistemological role, ie when sense impressions are sorted out as 'art', 'knowledge', 'ritual'. From the other direction she asks us to be aware of our rupture of ritual versus spectacle, of the embodied human/social body knowledge, from the visiocognitive knowledge. Our knowledge of course is ritual too. It is typological, generalising, abstracting, decontextualising. It is a form of ritual which is aimed towards the creation of mobility, the creation of forms which are portable, which can be taken and replaced and displaced in other spaces. Versus forms of ethno-knowledge which are profoundly temporarily and spatially specific and which are opposed to a kind of abstracting typological ritual, which reduces the forms of complexity.

What are the resources in the mental worlds, which have not come out of the propertied/agrarian/economic cognitive universe, that path, which we took along to the Neolithic Revolutions with which I began? What are the resources which exist in these mental worlds for reimagining subject and world for those of us who are products of that propertied/agrarian/economic cognitive universe, which we entered into after the agricultural revolution? I pose this just as a question. It is a question possibly posed by the style of this book. There are some juxtapositions. We are presented with a striking prose voice in key transitional sections, in which we have a deliberate assumption of the passive voice used in the reports of scientific experiments: this or that was done, and yielded this or that insight. There is an attempt of a kind of homage of high seriousness and high play, without condescension or blackface towards this resource, this living paint, which is the Aboriginal presence.

¹ Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, 1989, p 20, pp 21–22, p 43

Richard Drayton is the Rhodes Professor of Imperial History in the Department of History at King's College London. He was born in Guyana and grew up in Barbados. He left the Caribbean as a Barbados Scholar to Harvard University, going then to Yale, where he wrote his doctoral dissertation under the direction of Paul Kennedy and Frank Turner. He also spent two years as a graduate student at Balliol College, Oxford as the Commonwealth Caribbean Rhodes Scholar. In 1992 he first came to Cambridge as a Research Fellow of Saint Catharine's College, moving back to Oxford in 1994 to be Darby Fellow and Tutor in Modern History at Lincoln College. In 2002 he was awarded the Philip Leverhulme Prize for History. He was Visiting Professor of History at

Harvard University in spring 2009.

Art in the Time of Colony was published in 2014 by Ashgate Publishing:
www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409455967