Power Publications
BOOK SAMPLE

About us
Power Publications was established in 1986. Since then, it has grown into a leading and award-winning publisher of books on contemporary art and theory, cultural studies, media studies and film and animation. We are committed to making available great writing on art at affordable prices to wide audiences.

We hope you enjoy this sample!

Copyright is held by the authors, artists and/or publisher as detailed in the copyright notice included in this PDF.

If you’d like to purchase a copy of the book, you can find it on the power publications website powerpublications.com.au.

Want to be the first to hear about podcasts, videos and publications? For announcements and special offers, sign up to our newsletter via our website.

Also stay in touch by liking us on Facebook, following us on Twitter or checking us out on Instagram via our website as well.
How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art
© Institute of Modern Art, Power Institute Foundation for Art and Visual Culture, and the individual authors and artists, 2011.


This book is part of the series Australian Studies in Art and Art Theory. It is published with assistance from the Australia Council for the Arts, the Getty Foundation, and the Nelson Meers Foundation.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission from the publishers. All possible effort has been made to contact the copyright holders of images and written material reproduced in this book. Where permission has not been expressly granted, the holder of the copyright is encouraged to contact the publisher.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:
McLean, Ian, 1952-
How aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art by Ian McLean. 1st ed.
ISBN: 978009952372 (pbk.)
Includes index.
Art, Modern.
Art, Modern--Aboriginal Australian influences.
Art, Modern--Primitivism influences.
Art, Aboriginal Australian--Influence.
Dewey Number: 709.94

IMA receives financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland (major sponsor), from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council (the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body), and through the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy (an initiative of the Australian Federal, State, and Territory Governments). IMA is a member of DAGs, Contemporary Art Organisations Australia.
Contents

13  What the anthology does
17  Aboriginal art and the artworld
77  Becoming modern

77  PROPHETS
    John Gardner Natives learn European art – 1945
    Alan McCulloch Modern innovations in geometric abstraction – 1961
    Tony Tuckson Future prospects: Seeing Aboriginal art as art – 1964
    Ronald M. Berndt Going a little further: The anthropology of art – 1964
    Dick Roughsey Portrait of the artist as a black man – 1971

84  APOSTLES
    Geoffrey Bardon Origin story – 1979
    Bernard Smith Cultural convergence: Towards an ethical future – 1980
    Galarwuy Yunupingu Painting is a political act – 1988
    Lin Onus Becoming an Aboriginal contemporary artist – 1990

94  WHAT IS ABORIGINAL CONTEMPORARY ART?
    Eric Rowlison Aboriginal art has not adapted to Western art – 1981
    Bernice Murphy Aboriginal art is cultural adaptation – 1981
    Peter Cooke Aboriginal art is ritual revival – 1982
    J.V.S. Megaw Western Desert painting is not traditional – 1982
    Eric Michaels Aboriginal art is esoteric – 1987
    Eric Michaels How to spot an Aboriginal painting – 1988
    Nicholas Baume Aboriginal acrylics are the fictional voice of white history – 1989
    Trevor Nickolls Aboriginal art is Australian art – 1990
    Philip Jones Aboriginal art is intercultural – 1992
    Peter Sutton Aboriginal art is traditional – 1992
    Hetti Perkins Even ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art is contemporary – 1993
    Howard Morphy Contemporary world art is one stage in the history of Aboriginal art – 1998
    Djambawa Marawili Aboriginal art will teach the world – 1999
    Charles Green Aboriginal art is international art – 2001
    Rex Butler Aboriginal art is universal – 2003
    Judy Watson Aboriginal art is country and western – 2003
[Contents]

Christine Watson Aboriginal paintings are not primarily artistic – 2003
Andrew McNamara 'Two-ways': Between tradition and innovation – 2004
John Mawurndjul Aboriginal art is changing – 2004

115 Zones of engagement

115 ARNHEM LAND
Margaret K.C. West Innovation and tradition in the work of Declan Apuatimi – 1988
Banduk Marika Change and agency – 1990
Howard Murphy The mask of secrecy: Inside and outside, knowledge and power – 1991
Nigel Lendon Space in Yolngu bark painting – 1997
Ivan Namirriki True painting: We have not abandoned the first ancestors – 2004
Elina Spilia Contemporary art, ancestral power and Yolngu printmaking – 2006

133 WESTERN DESERT
Nicolas Peterson Tradition and innovation in the Desert – 1981
Terence Maloon Beautiful abstracts survive cultural dislocation – 1982
Kenneth Coutts-Smith Postmodernism or cultural colonialism? – 1982
Imants Tillers Papunya painting is conceptual art – 1983
Michael Nelson Jagamara We still hold fast to our culture – 1986
Eric Michaels The authenticity of Desert acrylic painting – 1987
Eric Michaels The inauthenticity of Desert acrylic painting – 1988
John Kean Desert painting and the return to Country – 2000
Fred R. Myers Rethinking tradition in a contemporary context – 2001

146 URBAN AUSTRALIA
Andrew Crocker Traditional and urban Aboriginal contemporary art – 1986
Lin Onus Koori art: Light at the end of the tunnel – 1988
Djon Mundine The urbanisation of Aboriginal art – 1990
Marcia Langton The authenticity of urban Aboriginal art – 1992
Brenda L. Croft Picturing the 'invisible': Portraying ourselves – 1993
John Kean New regional Aboriginalities and national narratives – 1993
Gordon Bennett Subverting urban Aboriginal art – 1996
Judy Watson Fluid identities – 2003

159 THE AUSTRALIAN ARTWORLD
Graeme Sturgeon Meaningless decoration – 1982
Imants Tillers White Aborigines – 1982
Vivien Johnson Aboriginal artists move on the artworld – 1986
Tim Johnson Discovering Papunya painting – 1989
Terry Smith The collision of Aboriginal art with the artworld – 1991
Joan Kerr Australia’s greatest modern art movement – 2001
Fred R. Myers Ideology and the reception of Aboriginal art – 2002
Vivien Johnson Indigenous art is the mainstream – 2004
John Mawurndjul Painting for the balanda – 2004

170 ABROAD
Lance Bennett Paris: Our culture is as modern as today – 1983
Jill Montgomery Paris: Dreaming of the antipodes – 1984
Ronald Jones New York: Postmodernist primitivism – 1989
Andrei Kovalov Moscow: The universality of Aboriginal formalism – 1992
Bernhard Lüthi Düsseldorf: The postcolonial challenge – 1993

189 Issues

189 GENDER
Françoise Dussart Women Desert painters – 1988
Howard Morphy Really, women are the inside – 1991
Betti Perkins Liberating Aboriginal women artists – 1991
Marcia Langton ‘Aboriginal woman’ and other Koori fantasies – 1997
Lynne Cooke Gender as metaphor in Tracey Moffatt’s art – 1998
Jennifer L. Biddle The new performativity of Western Desert women’s art – 2003
Apoline Kohne Kurnajk women make art – 2004

205 ETHICS
Ian Burn Aboriginal art and the national collection – 1982
Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson Language and representation – 1988
Terry Smith How to write about Aboriginal art – 1993
Tim Bonyhady Aboriginal art and national narratives – 1998
Marcia Langton Postmodern distortions – 2004
Nicolas Rothwell The poverty of Aboriginal art criticism – 2004
Sebastian Smee The dilemma of curating Aboriginal art – 2006
Robert Nelson Everyone wants to be a whistle-blower – 2006
[Contents]

217 MODERNISM
Nicholas Baume Modernisms and Aboriginal art – 1989
Terry Smith Mimicking modernism – 1989
Nigel Lendon Aboriginal cubism or para-traditionalism? – 1994
Louis Nowra Aesthetic power: Blackness in Rover Thomas’s art – 1998
Roger Benjamin The fallacy of Aboriginal modernism – 1998
Rex Butler The impossibility of an Aboriginal art criticism – 1998
Howard Morphy The necessity of anthropology and the limits of art criticism – 2001
Hans Joachim Müller Modernism triumphant: Taming the rainbow serpent – 2005

234 AESTHETICS
Geoffrey Bardon Haptic predilections in Aboriginal sensibility – 1979
Eric Michaels Why there is no bad Aboriginal art – 1988
Howard Morphy Yolngu aesthetics: The ancestral sublime – 1989
Jimmy Robertson Jampijinja Dot is nothing for us – 1990
Ian Burn and Ann Stephen Namatjira’s intercultural aesthetic – 1992
Gordon Bennett Deconstructive aesthetics – 1993
Judith Ryan Sensibility and vitality in Aboriginal art – 1995
Jennifer L. Biddle Reading Aboriginal art – 1996
Christine Watson The aesthetic of touch – 1999
Fred R. Myers Taste and sensibility in Pintupi acrylic painting – 2002
Christine Nicholls The spatial aesthetic of Desert painting – 2003
Christine Watson Balgo colour: An intercultural aesthetic – 2004
Pijaju Peter Skipper Njirramanu: Making colour strong – 2004
Elizabeth Burns Coleman How to appreciate Aboriginal art aesthetically – 2004
Nikos Papastergiadis Being and becoming in Michael Riley’s portraits – 2006

263 Appropriation
Vivien Johnson Two worlds collide – 1985
Vivien Johnson Appropriation and Aboriginal art – 1986
Juan Davila Appropriation as neo-colonialism – 1987
Eric Michaels Appropriation as critical postmodernism – 1989
Marcia Langton Appropriation is a paper tiger – 1992
Vivien Johnson Five stories, nine shots: From appropriation to collaboration – 1997
Rex Butler and Morgan Thomas The ethics of appropriation – 2003
COMMERCEDICK Kimber Art for sale: Pretty pictures and easy stories – 1981
Kenneth Coutts-Smith Art market creates demand for primitivist art – 1982
Howard Morphy ‘Primitive fine art’ and market expectations – 1982
Jon Altman Selling art: Capitalism, power and prestige in western Arnhem Land – 1982
Paul Taylor The Aboriginal art craze: Paintings that turned into money – 1989
Fred R. Myers How commercial imperatives have changed traditional practices – 2002
Nicolas Rothwell From the Desert, profits come: The death of an art movement – 2006

POLITICS
Sylvia Kleinert The divided politics of Aboriginality – 1988
Vivien Johnson Reply to Kleinert – 1988
Geoffrey Bardon Painting to defeat the white man – 1989
Brenda L. Croft Controlling our own images – 1989
Roger Benjamin Profits and cultural empowerment – 1990
Fred R. Myers How art criticism colonises Aboriginal art – 1991
Peter Sutton The conundrums of agency – 1992
Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn Blak artists, cultural activists – 1993
Mick Dodson The social politics of Aboriginal art – 1996
Marcia Langton Can reconciliation come from an artwork? – 1999
Ngarralja Tommy May Native Title paintings – 2002
Richard Bell Aboriginal art is a white thing – 2002
Jon Altman The triumph of Aboriginal art – 2005

FUTURES
Alan McCulloch The future of Aboriginal art – 1984
Ian North The new Aboriginal Australia – 2001
Imants Tillers and Ian North Post-Aboriginality – 2001
Rex Butler An end of ‘Aboriginal art’ and the shock of the new – 2003
Marcia Langton Aboriginal art in the age of hyper-reality – 2003
Mick Kubarkku Today balandja are everywhere, so we send paintings to balandja – 2004
Kim Mahood Surreal faultiness – 2005
Vernon Ah Kee Paradigm me – 2006

333 How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art

346 Map
What the anthology does

The Australian artworld first noticed the Papunya Tula painting movement in the early 1980s. To many it was an historical aberration lacking legitimacy because the paintings had seemingly arrived from outside rather than through any internal artworld prerogative.

At this time the Australian artworld was adrift from its familiar moorings and anxiously learning to navigate the cross currents of postmodernism. Most considered the Papunya paintings a distraction, more an exotic curiosity than serious art business. Their poetry, now so striking and inventive, then seemed elusive and fragile, even a sham. In 1982 Graeme Sturgeon worried that they may look superficially the same as traditional Aboriginal art but be, in fact, meaningless decoration. Two years later Elwyn Lynn called them the Claytons of abstract art; what you swallow, rather uncritically, when you have given up Mondrian gin, Follock whisky and Poliakoff vodka; the kind of abstract art you like when you do not like abstract art. Many could not see the new fad lasting. At most it was a wildcard for uncertain times. Those few who sensed a spirit worth gambling on were vindicated. The artworld's hesitant curiosity about Papunya Tula painting quickly became an embrace. It grew into the most significant development of late-twentieth-century Australian art.

By 1990 Aboriginal art had given the Australian artworld a purchase in the emerging postcolonial scene of global contemporary art. Australian cultural criticism and curatorial practice now set the pace, especially when the context was Indigenous art. For the first time Australia seemed ahead of the game; its reception of Aboriginal art was breaking new ground.

The subject of the anthology is not Aboriginal art as such, but the ideas that shaped its artworld reception. The focus is the critical discourse that appeared in art journals mainly, but also in catalogues and books, and very occasionally newspapers. Issues addressed are typical of most writing on fine art, including definitional categories, schools and styles, aesthetics, ethics, reception agendas, tradition and modernity, and social issues such as gender, commercial imperatives and politics. Social and political issues are addressed in their relation to the meaning and reception of the art, and not the wider politics of race and Aboriginality. This is because the latter are not generally a feature of art discourse. Thus there is little discussion of such vexed issues as the contradictions between the beauty of the art and the often appalling conditions in which it was made. Likewise, tabloid headlines about fraud, copyright and other exploitations of artists are rarely addressed.

Despite this focus, the voices represented in the anthology are by no means homogeneous. After all, the artworld consists of often-conflicting discourses, propagated by the different interests of artists, critics, historians, curators, administrators and others. Further, Aboriginal art has, like no other, attracted people from a wide range of
disciplines outside the artworld.

To many readers, anthropologists will appear over-represented in an anthology purportedly on the artworld. However, this is for good reason: their voices have been amongst the most persistent and authoritative in the artworld reception of Aboriginal art. Before 1980 scholarly study of Aboriginal art was almost wholly the domain of anthropologists, and the stimulus created by the artworld's embrace of Aboriginal art in the 1980s encouraged anthropologists to further extend their study. Art and aesthetics became a growing field within the discipline. On the other hand, art historians did not greet these developments as a new opportunity. Very few Australian art historians have researched Aboriginal art in any substantial way, despite its prominence in artworld discourse.

Before the mid-1980s Aboriginal voices were unusual in artworld discourse. Their inclusion in this anthology is not an attempt to represent the other side, as it were, but to accurately reflect their presence in the artworld since 1980. They are not intended to represent 'the Aboriginal' point of view, but, like the other writers, are taken as part of the artworld mix—a mix that is increasingly intercultural and interdisciplinary. Today there are many Aboriginal voices in the artworld, and, as this anthology shows, they have many different things to say.

Aboriginal art has invariably been taken to mean the art of Aborigines living in remote communities—sometimes, but with decreasing frequency, called 'traditional' or 'classical' Aboriginal art. While most Aboriginal artists come from such communities, since the 1970s most Aborigines have lived in urban centres. A feature of this period has been the emergence of a significant group of urban-based artists, so that today the term 'Aboriginal art' refers to a large range of very different art styles and forms not imagined possible before 1980. This diversity might seem to preclude such a thing as an Aboriginal art movement. Yet, as Michael A. O’Ferrall wrote in 1989, despite their differences, Aboriginal artists ‘are closely linked with a concern to explore their physical and emotional worlds from a conscious and coherent Aboriginal point of view.’ Here, difference is the basis of inclusion rather than exclusion, which is also a feature of global contemporary art.

In providing snapshots of the artworld’s critical reception of this seminal period in Aboriginal contemporary art, the anthology should lay the ground for its considered evaluation. As editor I have sought to trace the shifting debates and ideas rather than arrive at a final judgement. To achieve this, the anthology collects texts that focus on ideas and theories that have shaped the artworld reception of Aboriginal art. This is a quite different subject from most publications on Aboriginal art. Publishers have, understandably, invested great effort into compiling important primary research, describing and explicating particular aspects of Aboriginal art production, documenting the achievements and aims of individual artists and communities, and providing useful overviews. By contrast, this anthology is an overview of the artworld’s intellectual
attempts to explain Aboriginal art as contemporary art. My choice of texts aims to convey the texture and diversity of the artworld’s thinking, and to give shape to the debates and currents those texts generated in the artworld.

By focusing on the artworld’s reception, the anthology inevitably gives the artworld a greater role in the success of Aboriginal art than it perhaps deserves. The artworld’s initial response to the new Papunya Tula painting was noteworthy for its resistance. Nevertheless, the changes that have occurred in the Australian artworld since its embrace of Aboriginal art as contemporary art are truly remarkable. Perhaps no other sphere was more changed by the ascendancy of Aboriginal art.

In compiling this anthology, I sought to create an account that could be read from start to finish. The thematic sections, designed as autonomous narratives, tell a series of interconnected stories that together weave a coherent— though not comprehensive—picture of the artworld’s infatuation with Aboriginal art. The only way I could conceive of achieving this in a readable way was to select concise, well-formulated excerpts from a large range of texts. Comprising nearly 150 excerpts (some less than 100 words, others up to 1800), the anthology provides a cross-section of the ideas that have percolated through the artworld since 1980. The disadvantage of this approach is that fine-grained subtleties in the original investigations and arguments may be lost. Hopefully the anthology is a portal that will encourage readers to return to the original texts.


2 Elwyn Lynn, 'Aboriginal works come to the fore', The Weekend Australian magazine, 26–29 January 1984, p. 12.
