

GORDON BULL

Curating in the Field

Abstract

This paper will discuss the exhibition of Indigenous art in *Australian Perspectives '83*, the 1983 survey of contemporary Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, particularly considering the activities of one participant, the Indigenous curator and writer Djon Mundine. It aims to show that in the complex interactions between remote communities, where Mundine principally worked, and metropolitan centres, to where he regularly travelled and also worked, the distinctions that appear in the reception of exhibitions at this time – particularly between fine art and anthropological frames of reference – did not operate in any clearly defined manner; indeed anthropological and fine art interests can be seen to overlap considerably. Although it is clear that Mundine viewed the contemporary art context as strategically useful, both in reaching its audience and market and in placing Indigenous art within the parameters of fine art discourse, and so raising the status of Indigenous art, working in the community involved him in employing methods developed in anthropological field work and in anthropological institutions, and he produced very similar exhibitions for both anthropological and fine art contexts.

This paper focuses on the collaboration of Djon Mundine, then community Art Adviser in Ramingining in Arnhem Land, with curators and other arts workers in metropolitan fine art contexts in producing exhibitions and building collections. Mundine was a curator in the field, in dialogue with artists and others in the community, and interacting with visiting anthropologists and arts workers.

In the contemporary art field the first key exhibition to which Mundine contributed was *Australian Perspectives '83* (AGNSW, 1983)¹, beginning a long-standing collaboration with Bernice Murphy, then-Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Murphy had included central and western desert paintings on canvas in the first *Australian Perspectives* survey exhibition of 1981 (Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Charlie Tjapangati). In the second *Perspecta* of 1983 she included work from

¹ Murphy, 1983a.

Ramingining, where Mundine was art advisor; this went on to form part of the São Paulo Biennial (Brazil) later that year.² These were significant innovations in the context of exhibitions of contemporary Australian art. Djon Mundine collaborated with Murphy in commissioning work from Ramingining artists for the 1983 *Perspecta*, and recalled that her visit to Ramingining at the time was, 'a big show of support'.³

It is interesting to note that the year 1983 sits at the historical moment that commentators such as Ian McLean and Terry Smith have identified as the point of crucial shift in the understanding and reception of Aboriginal art in Australia. McLean suggests that 'The screw first turned for the artworld around 1982';⁴ and Smith has suggested that the same year saw 'the rush of acceptance' of Aboriginal art in the contemporary art context.⁵ Although both are principally concerned with the developing interest in Papunya painting at that time, and McLean cautiously notes, 'However, few felt the earth move in 1982 or 1984.'⁶

Australian Perspecta '83 included work by seven Indigenous artists from Ramingining: nine bark paintings (plus a conical mat and a conch shell) by David Malangi; 33 photographs (Kodacolor II instamatic film) and a sixty minute audio-cassette tape by Jimmy Barnabu; and six paintings by a group of five artists (Joe Djimbungu, Jimmy Muduk, Ray Munyal, Andrew Marrgululu and Don Gundinga) catalogued under the name *Guku* (honey) accompanied by a set of five objects used for collecting honey (an axe, a pandanus bag, a chewed stick, a carrying dish, and a digging stick). At the time of *Perspecta 1983*, David Malangi and his wife Margaret Gindjimirri visited Sydney, to see the exhibitions and to take up the position of artists in residence at the Tin Sheds, the art workshops at the University of Sydney.

In discussion with Murphy, Mundine had developed proposals for *Perspecta '83*. At that stage, he said, he had three ideas, and that they all ended up in *Perspecta*. One was the idea of a suite of paintings describing Indigenous ancestral lands and classification systems. David Malangi's paintings were a series depicting sites in his clan estate, with the river and his estates on either side of it, then particular rocks, trees, and so on – in Mundine's words 'almost like a song-cycle.' Mundine also described the works as taking 'the stations of the cross type approach – using a Catholic analogy; Bernice and I are both Catholics, she understood it.'⁷ It was clearly a statement about land rights but also full of detail, what Mundine calls 'an annotated landscape. ... a really studied landscape.'⁸

The *Guku* suite is particularly concerned with Yolgnu systems of classification, and prefigures the development of this theme in the collection he assembled for the Power

² Murphy, 1983b.

³ Mundine, 2001b, p. 34.

⁴ Mclean, 2011, p. 38.

⁵ Smith, 1991, p. 501.

⁶ Mclean, 2011, p.40.

⁷ Mundie, 2001b, p. 34.

⁸ Mundine, 2001b, pp. 34-35.

Gallery at the University of Sydney in 1984 (subsequently the MCA) and later documented in the book, *The native born: objects and Representations from Ramingining*.⁹ In terms of both the Malangi paintings and the Guku suite, Mundine specifically recalls the influence of Peter Cooke, who had managed Manigrada Arts and Crafts from 1979 to 1982, in developing thematic exhibitions. Cooke had the idea of collecting lists of materials and techniques employed by the artists, knowing it was possible that they might disappear by the next generation.¹⁰

The Jimmy Barnabu photographs and audio-tape also had a distinctive documentary/ anthropological genesis. Mundine received the idea from Professor Shuzo Koyama, who visited Manigrada with other Japanese anthropologists from the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan.¹¹ Koyama wanted photographs of everyone at the outstation, many of whom were anxious about being photographed, so he gave a camera to a young person in the community and asked them to photograph their family, elders and the whole community.¹² Mundine was struck with the idea and discussed with Murphy employing it in *Perspecta* by giving someone in the Ramingining community a camera with an open brief. Jimmy Barnabu was given a camera and a Walkman (which recorded sound), one of the first ever in Ramingining. The tape and the film created a visual and sound landscape.¹³

The catalogue of *Perspecta* '83 makes it clear that all of the works from Ramingining-Milingimbi Arts and Crafts were conceived as a set of interrelated and complementary works. One clear motive was to make space for an Indigenous point of view. Bernice Murphy, in her catalogue note for Jimmy Barnabu, saw the project as:

an expression from 'within' Aboriginal culture, in contrast to similar photographic or auditory records that have been made in some senses 'outside' the culture. It was intended that no further intervention should occur in this production beyond the point of invitation – and eventual permission from the artist to display the work produced.¹⁴

Several sets of interests can be seen to operate in the interweaving of working in the field and the gallery. As a community Arts Adviser Mundine adopted and adapted aspects of the participant-observer method he had seen Shuzo Koyama use. For Professor Koyama, the key problem was to acquire a photographic record of community life by finding a way around the anxiety associated with photography for many community members. For Mundine, and Murphy, this practice is, appropriately, figured as deferring to the local Aboriginal

⁹ Mundine, 2000.

¹⁰ Mundie 2001b, p. 36.

¹¹ For details of Professor Koyama's research in Australia, see Musharbash and Barber, 2011, pp.125-26, 130.

¹² Peterson, 2003, p119-145. (For a discussion of this anxiety)

¹³ Murphy, 1983a, p.19.

¹⁴ Murphy, 1983a, p. 19.

agency of Jimmy Barnabu. The documentary photographs and sound scape appeared in the installation both as art and serve to locate the context of the production of the bark paintings and other objects.

Barnabu's work did not seem out of place in the exhibition. The show as a whole included some eighty exhibitors in an exhibition that Murphy in her Introduction to the catalogue described as having 'adopted the format of a broad panorama of contemporary Australian art.' and as 'an extensive anthologising of often contrary pursuits.'¹⁵ About a quarter of the exhibition comprised photography, or included photography, or documented performance art, or was in related media such as film and video.¹⁶ The theory and practice of photography and film was thus a key element of the visual arts.

In the context of the exhibition, perhaps the most closely related work to Barnabu's was a series of small acrylic paintings – clearly and explicitly derived from photographs – by Tim Johnson. Johnson's work documented both the 'new wave' band scene in Sydney in the late 1970s and early '80s (celebrating performers such as Radio Birdman), and painters, paintings and landscape at Papunya. Johnson's work, in part, documented life in another remote Aboriginal community, a place he had travelled to; and it made the work of the Papunya painters equivalent to an aspect of the cultural life of the metropolis, while Johnson cast himself as simultaneously not part of, but an observer and part-participant, somewhat outside but absorbed by, precisely a 'fan', of both.

The bark paintings by David Malangi and the *Guku* group had particular internal thematic coherence relating to land rights and Indigenous systems of taxonomy respectively. This kind of thematic focus was something that Mundine had been working to achieve in both the production and exhibition of work for some years. He first attempted this in 1981 in an exhibition for the Anthropology Museum at The University of Queensland: *The land the sea and our culture*, which included paintings, weavings and sculptures linked to clans, and with the two moieties exhibited on opposite sides of the exhibition space. Mundine's next major project was a thematic collection, being related to a particular ceremony, and had been inspired by an event in Canberra in the subsequent year. As Howard Morphy reports it in his 1998 book *Aboriginal Art*:

In 1982 the Anbarra community of the Liverpool River in Central Arnhem Land decided to widen the basis of their ceremonial exchanges by holding a Rom ceremony, which included the manufacture of a Morning Star pole, at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. The aim of the

¹⁵ *Perspecta* '83, p. 11.

¹⁶ Other photography in the exhibition included the work of David Cubby, John Delacour, John Dunkley-Smith, Miriam Stannage, David Stephenson, Gary Willis, 'The society for other photography'; the documentation of performances by Marina Abramovic/Ulay; there were also photographic elements in the work of Peter Burgess, Julie Brown, Adrian Hall, Ian Howard, David Jones, John Lethbridge, and Geoff Parr.

performance was to cement relations with the institute which was seen to play a significant role in recording Aboriginal culture and in making politicians and other 'important' people aware of Aboriginal concerns. The Anbarra saw it as a way of introducing Aboriginal cultural practices to what was perceived as the centre of Australian political power, and thereby continuing the Arnhem Land agenda of spreading understanding through sharing knowledge.¹⁷

Maningrida is the key centre on the Liverpool River, and Mundine was working there at the time the *Rom* ceremony was held in Canberra. Betty Meehan and Rhys Jones, in a volume published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies on the *Rom* event in 1986, describe the presentation of *Rom* as being 'augmented by an exhibition of bark paintings mainly depicting scenes related to the song series *Djambidj* and *Goyulan* and painted by Malkorda and Mundrugmundrug; the exhibition was set up by John Mundine, Charlie Godjuwa and Peter Cooke.' (*Goyulan* means 'Morning Star' and one of the meanings of *Djambidj* is 'Wild Honey.')¹⁸ The National Museum of Australia acquired the paintings. This Canberra experience led Mundine to gather together a collection of work related to the *Rom* ceremony, which became *Morning Star Bapurru*, a body of work acquired by the Australian Museum in Sydney in 1983.

Mundine regards the development of exhibitions with a thematic focus as have varying degrees of success, and the work for *Perspecta '83* as the result of a particularly successful set of negotiations. Comparing *Perspecta '83* with *Morning Star Bapurru* he has said,

that's also part of the thing about the Morning Star collection, was to try and look: there's a whole song cycle, to do with the Morning Star, and I said to these people, look can you come up with song-specific titles. Right? Compositions or images. Okay? And that's what they were trying to do, but they didn't. It just got lost in the translation. With the David Malangi, he understood it and painted this big painting of the river – there's the river and my estates on either side of it - and then I do parts: this is this waterhole, this is that rock, this is this tree, and almost like a song-cycle.¹⁹

Through these experiences the concept of thematic exhibitions became central to Mundine's practice as an arts adviser and curator. A theme, as a unifying concept or topic of a body of work, was for Mundine the outcome of a dialogue with artists in the community, along with an anticipation of the reception of the work by institutions and their audiences. He has described the process as one of observation, then discussion to verify whether his interpretation and focus was in accord with their experience and values, followed by further exploration of the theme in conversation, with necessary

¹⁷ Morphy, 1998, pp. 255 and 259.

¹⁸ Meehan and Jones, 1986, p. 29.

¹⁹ Mundine, 2001b, p. 34-35.

adjustments and guidance from the artists. Eventually an exhibition for outside audiences would be put in train, incorporating dialogue from the artists' side and from recipient galleries in distant places.²⁰

This process itself embodies the imperative of cross-cultural mediation that the art adviser's role demands. For Mundine, it had the virtue of avoiding *ad hoc* production of work for sale, and in particular the negative connotations of art produced to supply the tourist trade with what he has called 'suitcase art.'²¹ Negotiating a theme also enabled Mundine to connect local Yolngu interests and values with debates also current in Aboriginal affairs in metropolitan centres, such as land rights, the depredations of contact history and the continuity of Aboriginal cultures everywhere.

Mundine's work in Arnhem Land demonstrates that his work with Indigenous artists in the community depended upon and extended the experience and inspiration of others working in the community: arts advisers including Peter Cooke and Diane Moon; community managers and teachers such as Richard Trudgeon and John Rudder, and anthropologists, including Jon Altman, Shuzo Koyama, Howard Morphy and Luke Taylor. Mundine's achievements in managing Ramingining arts and in overseeing the production of work for sale and exhibition were founded on his ability to take up diverse tools and methods of working, and bring them into a new synthesis. The overriding aim for Mundine was to bring into focus the interests and concerns of artists in the community, and to cast them as interests shared by Aboriginal people everywhere.

The key characteristic of Mundine's gathering together of work for collections and exhibitions is his emphasis on thematically related work. Mundine's practice of commissioning interrelating works around particular themes served several interconnecting needs: to advance the process of negotiation and develop his dialogue with members of the community; to give impetus to the practical aspects of production, in particular encouraging work of different kinds in different media; and overall, to acknowledging the priority of Indigenous cultural values in producing art in the community for sale – or to be exhibited – to outsiders. From the point of view of the metropolitan fine art context, the effect of the thematic focus of his exhibitions and contributions to exhibitions curated by others was to help the work carry its context of production into the art gallery setting. This was one of its political aims.

Mundine did not distinguish between the kinds of exhibition he produced for fine art and anthropological contexts of exhibition, because his agenda of demonstrating the complexity and sophistication of Aboriginal visual culture, its diversity, its systematic and deep knowledge of land and landscape, and thus its importance as a political statement was equally served by art and anthropological venues. Anthropological and the fine art frames of reference

²⁰ Mundine, 2000, p. 79.

²¹ Mundie, 2001a, p. 9.

can be seen to be brought together in his curatorial practice, where the importance of establishing the cultural contexts of the art for the former is delivered to the latter. This sense of contextualising is neither singular nor immobile: Mundine strove to carry to the galleries both the context of remote communities with continuing traditions least disrupted by the process of colonisation, sometimes with a sense of the strained living conditions of remote communities (in the case of the Barnabu photographs), and the pan-Aboriginal context of living with the destructive effects of contact history.

At the same time Mundine established networks with contemporary artists, curators and writers, and especially young city-based Indigenous artists. He encouraged visitors to Ramingining, and he sought to take artists from Ramingining to exhibitions that included their work wherever they might take place, in Australia or overseas. Mundine's pan-Aboriginalism led him to the view that while different groups of Aboriginal people had different contact histories, they shared the same historical present in the same shadow of those histories. Along with this, for Mundine remote communities with continuing traditions represented what had been lost to the diaspora: to regional or city-based individuals, like himself, from communities more or less fractured or destroyed through contact history. Bringing Aboriginal people together was both part of his activism, and intrinsic to his curatorial practice.

I have tried in this paper to give some empirical density to discussions of the rise to prominence of indigenous art. I've tried to emphasise the processes of conceptualisation, negotiation and exchange involved in developing exhibitions. I want this to be a corrective to synoptic accounts which say things like "'Australian Perspecta 83" included the work of Arnhem Land artists in the form of bark paintings and other objects...[followed by a brief list].', which I said myself in Kleinert and Neale's Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture (2000). Such statements, although they have their place, can seem to suggest that Bernice Murphy might have plucked the work off the shelf in the supermarket. A lot more is in play than the galloping verb 'included' might suggest.

Biographical Statement

Gordon Bull is an art historian and theorist. He has taught at Australian universities since 1984. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Art History and Art Theory at the ANU, School of Art. His current major research interest is in Indigenous art in contemporary art contexts.

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