

Indigenous Australian Art Photography: an Intercultural Approach.

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Aboriginal art has become a big business over the last decades. This demand for Indigenous art, however, has mostly been reduced to paintings. Art photography produced by Indigenous Australian artists is hardly an issue within this context and mostly not associated with the term “Aboriginal art” in mainstream society and on the mainstream art markets. This is also, why most people, when I told them about my PhD project and the title of it, “An Intercultural Perspective on Indigenous Australian Art Photography”—they connected my topic immediately with photographs taken by Europeans of Indigenous people somewhere in the outback in Australia. Or, another common idea was that it is about art projects in which Indigenous Australian people are given cameras by Europeans in order to take photos themselves. So, in short, what people mostly connected to the term “Indigenous Australian photography” was not the view about an independent contemporary art movement and individual art projects as they are common all over the world in a variety of ways, but they mostly connected it to forms of colonization, European activities, European art. This brief example shows that for some reason, many people still connect the term ‘Indigenous’ with a view about people living in an indefinite, fossilized past (Langton, 1993:81), which is still a common stereotype about Indigenous Australian people, and in fact a very problematic one. Many scholars have commented on these representations, amongst them the prominent Indigenous anthropologist and head of the department of Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne Prof. Marcia Langton, whose research guest fellow I was for some months during my research period in Australia.

The postcolonial context we find ourselves within today – which is still heavily loaded with colonial outgrowths with political, cultural, social and economic impact – is indeed very contradictory and complex. Starting with the invasion of Australia, Europeans have portrayed Indigenous Australian people in photography, painting and film and many of these images have become widely popular in European countries. These representations have, without doubt, contributed to existing stereotyped, racist or simply wrong views, since these portrayals did not rely on actual facts and detailed knowledge about Indigenous people, but more on personal interpretations. (Smith, 2001:22-23) Langton has repeatedly referred to the problems of representations of Indigenous people produced by non-Indigenous people with – very often – no or very little inside knowledge into Indigenous cultures (Langton, 1993, 1994, 2003). There is, in fact, “a dense history of racial, distorted and often offensive representations of Aboriginal people”, as Langton points out, (1994:113) and she further argues that “the easiest and most ‘natural’ form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible” and “in positioning Indigenous people as objects.” (1994:122) In these racist representations, colonial photography played a key role. Much investigation has been made into the role of photography within colonisation and how the camera was used as a tool of control. Thomas Richard, for example, argues that the British colonial system was based on little military strength in relation to the large areas of colonised land and that the strength of the Empire was fundamentally based on its “passion for inventories, maps and pictures” (Wells, 2004:82). Photography and also related art exhibitions became a driving force in promoting the Empire’s strength and that of the new colonies. The wider public was, of course, very interested in what was shown to them by the ‘experts’. The numbers of museum visitors prove the strong interest of the public in pictures about the colonies, the land and its people: the 1851 Crystal Palace Great Exhibition in Britain had 6 million visitors; the 1924-25 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley had 27 million visitors; in Paris, in 1900, the *Exhibition Universelle* had 50 million visitors. (Maxwell, 1999:1) Clearly, these exhibitions broadly presented the colonialists’ views on Native peoples of the colonies and still today the public image of Indigenous Australians is rather negative, or romanticised. To break this cycle of mis-interpretation and mis-representation of Indigenous Australian people, self-representation through art becomes a highly important tool. Since art, however, always depends on the dialogue between artwork and viewer, the way how to look at it and how to analyse it becomes an essential factor.

To avoid misinterpretation of Indigenous cultures, and to adequately deal with today’s complex postcolonial situation, calls for an interdisciplinary, inter-culturally adequate and dynamic research method which is embedded within an anticolonial discourse. By this I mean a research method that transcends fields of

study and aims at a decolonisation of stereotyped constructs—which is highly important for counteracting misinterpretations of Indigenous cultures. The interculturally adequate focus has its foundations in a constant assessment and exchange of research results within an intersubjective team, as Langton and Wildburger have argued, which includes people from all different cultures that are involved in the respective projects. (Langton 1993; Wildburger 2003)

As mentioned above, photography has played a specific role in forming the views about Indigenous peoples. Instead of just telling stories in words, they show pictures which claim to show the world exactly as it is, and claim to provide proof of the world. In contrast to seeing photos as “objective views on the world”, as it was thought they were for a long time, it is today commonly agreed that photographs are “culturally constructed ways of seeing.” (Ryan, 1997:19) They are loaded with signs, symbols and references that have been historically and culturally established. Photographs carry a substantial load of cultural and social information and so I argue that aesthetics can be seen on two different levels. Aesthetics in the Kantian and Platonian sense imply aesthetic elements brought about by the internal, formal structure of an artwork. A second level of aesthetics can be found in the extension of traditional aesthetics and the inclusion of cultural and social contexts. Knowing the story behind the photograph and/or the cultural meaning/s embedded within it, raises the aesthetic experience to another level. In this sense, aesthetics cannot be entirely separated from the meaning of the cultural text and its connotations. This “contextualised aesthetics” (Gigler 2007), as I term it, stresses the importance of the cultural context of the artwork in relation to its aesthetics. Aesthetic experience, as I see it, is not contradictory to a contextual approach in the artwork’s analysis. Also, it has to be kept in mind that art is a form of cultural self-reflection. (Zijlmans in Volkenandt, 2004:245) Similar to Hall’s view of the constant transformation of cultural identities, Richard Rorty, an American philosopher, writes that each work of art is a new language which stands between the self and the reality. Language has to be continually adapted to new situations in a constantly changing world. In this way, cultural identities, and art as an expression of cultural identities, go hand in hand as they are always adapting to a changing world. (Rorty 1989:13,41)

These ideas are relevant since international art critics seem to deal with Indigenous Australian art photography in mainly three—quite restricted—ways: firstly, very often the artists are confronted with racist views that regard photography as not an ‘authentic’ form of Indigenous Australian art; secondly, Indigenous Australian art photography is assessed within so-called ‘universal’ criteria, neglecting cultural particularities; thirdly, it is evaluated only in regard to its socio-political content, neglecting aesthetic criteria, and thus devaluing its relevance as artwork. (Gigler

2007:195) This situation evidently presents a variety of underlying complex problems in the global art world, which go back to the time of Australia's invasion.

Indigenous Australian art photography developed from the 1970s and 80s onwards and there are a number of very famous Indigenous photographers today. One of them is Brook Andrew, whom I met during my times in Australia. I would like to present his artwork "Peace, The Man & Hope" in order to exemplify the above stated theoretical approach and concept of a "contextualised aesthetics".

BROOK ANDREW: "Peace, The Man & Hope"

Brook Andrew was born in 1970 in Sydney. He is a Wiradjuri (NSW) conceptual artist, lecturer and curator who works with installation, digital media, photography, sound, performance and film. He studies Visual Arts at the University of Western Sydney, worked as lecturer in Aboriginal Art and Philosophy at the Australian National University, Canberra, and he also worked on the editorial committee of the Photofile magazine. (Brady 2000a: 520)

With "Peace, The Man and Hope"⁶³, Brook Andrew creates an outstanding, powerful work, which includes "large scale Wiradjuri designs with political/social screen-prints" (no author, 2005). In the centre of the artwork is a photograph of the Indigenous boxing legend and rapper Anthony Mundine, which, as Brook Andrew explains, was taken in Mundine's father's gym in Redfern. Mundine has his arms held out, Christ-like. The background of this photo tells a variety of stories in their own right. Evidently the centre of attention is Anthony Mundine, who is called "The Man" and "The Black Superman" in boxing circles. By giving the title "Hope, The Man and Peace" to the artwork, Andrew emphasises Mundine's symbolic image as "The Man." Mundine functions as a positive figure for Indigenous Australian youth and is actively involved in the struggle of Indigenous Australian people. As a singer, he engages with Australian politics. The video to his first music single shows the burning of the British flag and the photo of former Prime Minister John Howard. His rap lyrics include text passages such as "I am just one man, it ain't the whole of the nation, politicians won't say sorry for the stolen generation" (McWhirter, 2007). Mundine openly functions as a political voice and, as an Indigenous and Muslim person, openly speaks about racism in Australia.

In the artwork, Mundine functions as a complex and ambiguous symbolic figure. As a boxer he stands for strength, fight, power and strong will, but also for a body which is hit and hurt again and again. Here, Mundine is represented as a superman

figure with his arms stretched out. The background design may correspond to patterns of an open coat hanging down from Superman's open arms. The zigzag design represents Indigenous cultural knowledge of Andrew's mother's nation, the Wiradjuri people. This design covers a part of the background like a big, protective coat. The two sentences, reading "Ngajuu ngaay nginduugirr" and "Nginduugirr ngaay ngajuu" mean "I see you" and "You see me" (Craswell, 2005). Through the text, Andrew makes us aware of the problems of translation, of understanding and of miscommunication per se. (Barlow 2007:30) The Wiradjuri sentences perhaps become "placeholder[s] for a complex culture that is largely beyond ... [the] understanding and awareness" of us, the non-Indigenous onlookers. (Barlow 2007: 30) One may argue that through the sentences, the informed onlooker is invited to enter an intercultural dialogue. On top of these Wiradjuri 'notice-boards', there are the images of cigarette packets carrying the fictive brand names "Hope" and "Peace" respectively. It seems obvious that "Hope" and "Peace" are important elements for the main messages of the artwork. In the context provided by the photograph, the messages "hope" and "peace" imply an open invitation to intercultural dialogues. "Peace" is usually promised but not fulfilled—what remains is "hope". What stands in between these two is man, the actual person suffering from the colonialist political structures.

An interesting detail is also the use of colours in the artwork. The words "hope" and "peace" are surrounded by the Indigenous sentences in yellow, red and black, the colours of the Indigenous flag and, on the other side, the colours of the Australian flag, blue, red and white. This can again be interpreted as a political statement about Australian politics in regard to Indigenous people and cultures.

This artwork is an excellent model case for a "contextualised aesthetics". The artistic composition of the photograph emphasises the socio-political context of the work. Interesting artistic perspectives within the photograph directly engage with the Indigenous perspective. The onlooker's attention, which is first caught by the artistic perspective, leads further to the particular Indigenous perspective represented through the text in Wiradjuri language. Brook Andrew is able to make use of elements in a double sense. The message of the photo which focuses on peace and hope for the world is written on cigarette packets. In this way, the artist combines different elements—signs of consumerism and signs of rich cultural values. He underlines the value of Wiradjuri culture which has fought to survive and keep its language alive. Global consumerism and Indigenous cultural values are thus contrasted, but also placed next to each other.

The cigarette packets symbolise a fusion of cultures, but simultaneously also a form of addiction. Human beings are addicted to notions of peace and hope, but

the contemporary world is at risk by the lack of appreciation for hope and peace. Once the cigarette is finished, what remains is the taste and the smell of tobacco and an instant urge for more. As the artist suggests, the global world finds itself in a complex situation dominated by consumerist behaviour and short-term pleasures. Contrasting these elements with the Wiradjuri culture, which has survived for thousands of years, it may be argued that the artist poses the critical question as to the deeper cultural values of mainstream society.

Marica Langton states that Brook Andrew “celebrates the postcolonial Aboriginal man as a hero of the resistance, overcoming racism with his extraordinary hard work and physical and mental focus and determination.” (Langton 2005:28) I see the emphasis in this artwork on the Indigenous hero figure as a form of mnemonic device, supporting the writings of Indigenous Australian history, which presents the strong struggle for Indigenous rights. Furthermore, it shows the participation of Indigenous people in global and international issues and battles against war, racism and xenophobia. Andrew states that he is interested in how

Aboriginal, Chinese, and other figures are absent from Australian history, its popular stories, and icons. There ain’t no sandstone or cast bronze statues erected in parks or government sites commemorating Aboriginal or other Australian heroes, past or present – let alone museums of the stolen generations. Mundine in this case may be just another *scary* black man, and a Muslim too. (Andrew in Papastergiadis, Riphagen and Andrew, 2007:23)

So, Andrew gives a ‘voice’ to aspects of past and current history which are usually silenced.

Moreover, Andrew includes Indigenous ‘insider knowledge’, albeit in a few lines in the Wiradjuri language. This special Indigenous perspective leaves the “western” viewer in a marginal position. One may argue that the non-Indigenous viewer is purposely given the position of the outsider. On the other hand, the lines in Wiradjuri language are integrated in ‘western’ and consumerist symbols, so the artwork expresses Andrew’s concern to break up stereotyped views of entirely encapsulated Indigenous cultures. Andrew makes the explicit point that “essentialism” categorises people and oversimplifies ideas, which does not help at all when trying to make sense of our complex world.

Conclusion

In this essay I have focussed on Brook Andrew’s photographic work “Peace, The Man & Hope” to show the relevance of an interculturally adequate approach to art.

I argue that in order to support the artworks' potential for establishing intercultural dialogues and exchange, both aesthetic criteria and cultural contexts have to be involved. Acknowledging the social function of art means acknowledging that art is both form and content and that it unfolds its greatest powers of communication out of the combination of these two features. A purely aesthetic analysis dismisses the culture-specific contents and contexts of the photo which makes the viewer miss out on a variety of culturally specific issues. On the other hand, a strict evaluation of the photographs in respect to their historical, political and socio-cultural importance only is restricting too, since it does not do justice to the photos as works of art. Looking at the photo as a piece of art and simultaneously as an intercultural "contact zone", that offers a complex process of intercultural learning calls for an elaborate and interdisciplinary approach in regard to art analysis.

Indigenous Australian art photography constitutes a specific area in its own right also because it does not fit the common idea many Europeans have about Indigenous Australian art. This creates a challenging opportunity for people to move beyond stereotyped views and to become aware of their mostly limited, inadequate and wrong views about Indigenous Australian cultures.

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63 Photo: Brook Andrew. Peace, The Man & Hope. 2005. Screen print. 145 x 252 cm. Due to copyright restrictions the photo is not reproduced in this article, however interested people can consult Brook Andrew's homepage for the image: <http://www.brookandrew.com/>