

Cross cultural conferenceville

Suzanne Spinner at *Wijay Na?* in Darwin

This conference was originally entitled "Representation on the Cultural Interface", but the convenors ultimately plumped for their catchier, *Wijay Na?* which means "Which Way Now?" in Kriol. Kriol titles have suddenly become very smart, they are poetic and concise. However it had a safer, almost apologetic subtitle: "Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Art and Artists' Forum". *Wijay Na?* took place at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin over the weekend of June 15-16 and was convened by 24 HR ART. It was conceived by Steve Fox and Thelma Hoahn in close collaboration with Marcia Langton, the head of the Faculty of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies at Northern Territory University.

I have always enjoyed the drama of conferences (*vide* Frank Moorhouse, *Conferenceville*, 1976) and, like Frank, I am all for them and *Wijay Na?* did not disappoint. Frank gives awards and ratings for things which did and did not happen at The Conference. He says, "the first thing I look for is trouble. Where is the trouble going to come from. I don't mind trouble, it usually brings out what the conference is about". At *Wijay Na?* trouble was personified almost to the point of self-proclamation by Tracey Moffat. Tracey said she doesn't usually go to things like this but her good friend Marcia, "who I call sister, big sister", said she had to come and so here she was. If there was any doubt about the agendas not coming out, inviting Tracey along assured their coming out.

The not-turning-up award was equally shared by two Larrakia artists, June Gunluckis Mills, who was to open the conference with a traditional welcome and



Brian Nyinwanga, *Shopping at Casuarina*

close it with a farewell, and Gary Lee, who was to speak on the representation of the male black body; but neither showed up, and we were none the wiser. The High Profile award went to Marcia Langton and the high-low-profile award went to Chips Mackinolty who did not utter a word until the very end when he was chosen by Marcia as one of the people to sum up the proceedings.

The assassinating allegation and the assassinating words at *Wijay Na?* were "collaboration" and "copycatting". Concern was expressed about "the hegemony of the dot" and an innocent conferee suggested at one point that a university of the dreaming was needed where we would/could all go and learn what Aboriginal art was about. In relation to collaboration, Marcia made the point that it was sad if we have to ask if there are genuine friendships between people, and even sadder if we assume there can't be. Mundine countered by saying that the art of friendship was invariably overshadowed by the elephant of appropriation.

140 people packed into the Museum Theatre and listened to some 25 speakers who talked about their work and we all argued solidly for the two days but there were no walk-outs and no full-on shouting matches. At times the atmosphere was tense (especially before Miss Moffat spoke) but it was all very lively and unconstrained. The diversity of the audience ensured things never got stuck in one groove—be it academic, ideological or even earnestly precious. It was by turns infuriating, provocative, and informative, and even occasionally funny. A genuine exchange of ideas happened; lots of slides and videos interspersed the talk, so it was always stimulating.

With the notable exceptions of Djon Mundine from the MCA (formerly art adviser at Ramingining) and Vincent Megaw, Professor of Visual arts & Archaeology at Flinders University, the speakers were all practicing artists. They were either Aboriginal artists or white artists who worked with Aboriginal people. Among the Aboriginal artists there was great diversity of practice including traditional Arnhemland men, Gawirrin Guman, a senior artist and bark painter and Brian Nyinwanga, a bark painter who now also works in acrylics and does contemporary urban subjects in a bark painting style, and from Yuendumu, Dolly Nampinjinpa Daniels, a dot painter who does collaborative installations with Anne Mosey.

There were a range of urban Aboriginal artists—Julie Dowling, Kootji Raymond, Julie Gough and Tracey Moffat who work mostly in contemporary media—photography, video, film, installation and only rarely paint; plus Shirley McNamara from outside Mt. Isa who is neither traditional nor urban and paints scenes of cattle station life and sculpts in spinifex grass. The local white artists included Anne

Mosey, Pam Lofts, Rod Moss, all from Alice Springs, and Annie Franklin and Peter Adsett from Darwin. Melbourne based traditional Chinese artist, Zhou Xiaping was the real maverick. He has worked extensively with people in remote communities and has depicted Aboriginal people and landscape ever since he spent time at NTU.

Djon Mundine's presentation on the curatorial issues relating to the exhibition *Tyerabarrbowaryaou—I shall never become*, set the parameters for the conference. Mundine began with his international conference party piece where he shows a map of Australia superimposed over a map of Europe or a map of Asia and points out the vastness of Australia and the range of sources of Aboriginal art so that his audience can see that just as there is not one thing which is European or Asian art, there is not one Aboriginal Art. He has been asked, "Do you speak Aboriginal?" and replies, "No, do you speak Europeanish?" He argued that *Tyerabarrbowaryaou* exemplified as many ways of doing Aboriginal art as there were Aboriginal artists and that no one way was *the way*.

Mundine was followed by Vincent Megaw who gave an historical perspective on both the range of Aboriginal art and the range of responses to representations of Aboriginal people by white Australian artists. Mundine and Megaw were sandwiched between the two extremes of Aboriginal art practice, being preceded by Gawirrin Guman and followed by Tracey Moffat who represented, in turn, both the ultra-conservatism of tradition and the wholesale piracy of postmodernism. So that by lunchtime on day one the field was well and truly opened up and it took the rest of the weekend to fill in the ground in between so that the optimum number of controversies and contradictions were animated.

This order of events created a rich field and a full context in which to place the attitudes and work of each of the artists who followed and allowed them to speak about their own work in great detail. The issues which generated the most heat were collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists; the depiction of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal artists and the question of the use of Aboriginal imagery and motif. Various speakers came under fire and were attacked and defended from the floor and vigorously argued and asserted their freedom to pursue particular collaborations and ways of showing Aboriginal people. Opinions still vary as to which way was promulgated but it was certain that now no *one* way, but rather many different ways—forward, through and around the ground—were acknowledged and their problematics ventilated.

Wijay Na?

Which Way Now?

24 HR ART, Darwin

suzanne spinner &
edwin ride

SUZANNE SPUNNER: "Wijay Na?", the conference, did not exactly tell us 'Which Way Now', but it lived up to the expectations of its instigators, **Steve Fox, Thelma John** and **Marcia Langton**, by ventilating if not fanning the flames of current controversies: the issue of collaboration between Black and White artists; the problematic representation of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal artists—racist stereotype or contemporary ideological romanticism?; and the issue of who owns styles, symbols and images—what, if any, is the difference between copycatting, appropriation and homage?

Over 140 people attended the weekend and there were some twenty-five speaker/presenters and plenty of comment from the floor. It all happened in the intimate confines of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory Theatre and there were no parallel sessions—in other words everyone stayed together for the entire weekend so all the splintering and fracturing remained fairly transparent. Until the transcripts are available, what actually happened at a conference may be different in the minds of the various conferencees. To test this theory Edwin Ride and I have "discussed" what we decided were the four hot issues. We agreed beforehand to write our responses independently and only then to put them side by side.

SS: COLLABORATION was raised as a potential capital sin. The assumption was that collaboration arose exclusively as an unequal power relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, that it was usually initiated by the White, who was the weaker, less well known and by definition waning artist who harassed the Black artist who was the rising or established artist but nonetheless was the one put upon for the benefit of the other. Patently a lopsided relationship.

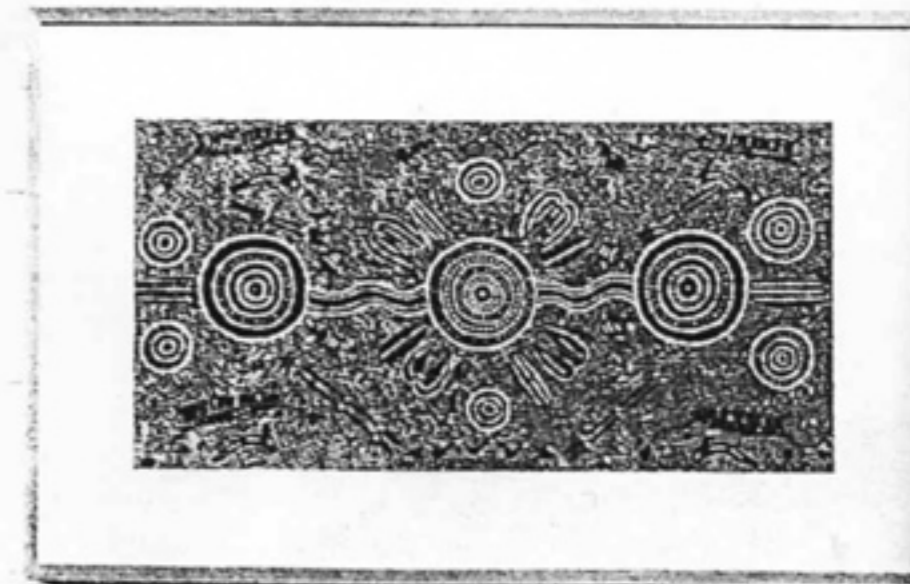
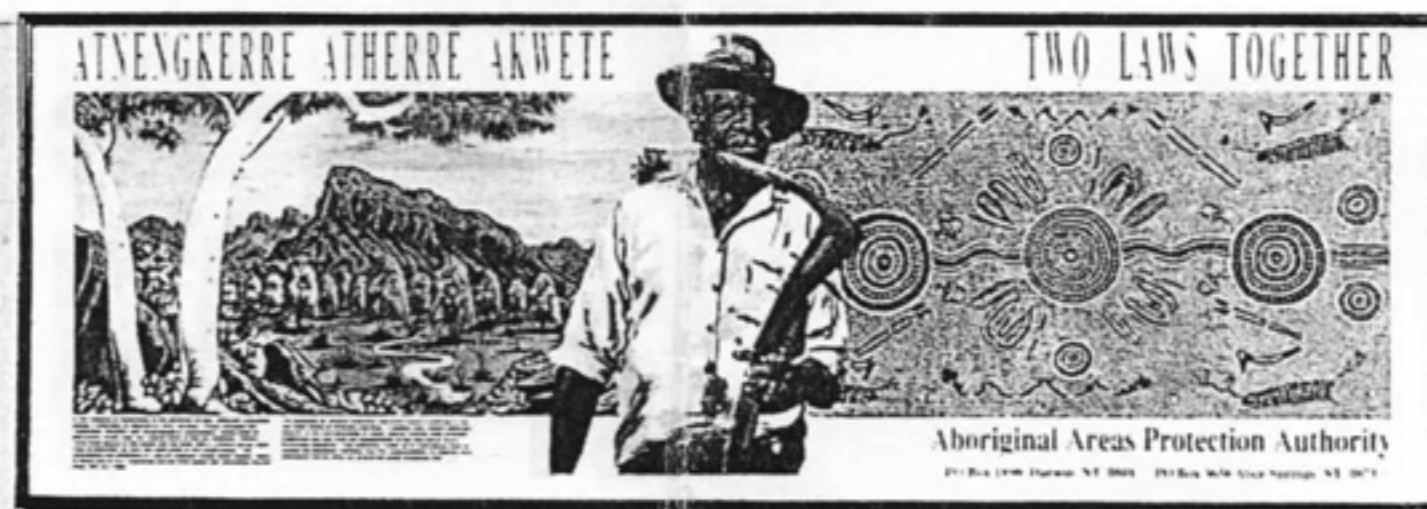
While this spectre was invoked, no specific examples were cited, save for a rumoured prospective collaboration between a great senior woman artist, **Emily Kame Kngwarreye** and a woman from Melbourne who paints angels—a collaboration supposedly based on the fact that both are old ladies! The white artist was not named but often pilloried. (Subsequently I realised it must have

been **Mirka Mora** who was so unjustly characterised). Someone in the audience suggested that the two may actually have wanted to work together, but the point was swamped in the rhetoric of the moment.

There was a lot of loose talk about this rumoured collaboration and by inference about artists who actually do collaborate like **Anne Mosey** and **Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels**. These two felt compelled to defend themselves during this session, a day earlier than they were scheduled to speak on that very topic.

Djon Mundine had strong views that Aboriginal artists ought to be left alone to get on with their art and not be bothered by whitefellas trying to ride on the backs. **Tracey Moffat**, who had led the charge against collaboration, contended that collaboration always produced weak inferior work, presumably inferior to that produced by the artists individually. Here is the crux of the matter—but inferior work is equally a danger in art collaboration, not just those which cross cultures.

EDWIN RIDE: COLLABORATION. "The Collaborator." Sounds like the title for one of those before-I-was-born-films about wartime France. And a startling coincidence that was the image shown to us by Tracey Moffatt in her own slide presentation. Her series of works, derived from magazine illustrations, contains a photograph of a shaven-headed collaborator with his German-soldier-fathered child dodging the sneers and taunts of her neighbours. But does the result of a collaboration have always to be a bastard piece of work? Later, when we had a chance to hear from speakers who actually do participate in this practice it was a delight to learn that the collaborations we would be discussing



were concerned with presentations of alternative points of view. The joint installations created by **Anne Mosey** and **Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels** illustrate the differences visible between the so-called 'haves' and 'have-nots', through recreations of traditional living spaces. As Nampijinpa points out, "Aborigines have sacred things. In that way they are rich".

Zhou Xiaoping's notion of collaboration extended little further than working alongside **Jimmy Pike**, each drawing pictures of the other, sometimes on the same page. Xiaoping sees this sort of collaboration as being particularly important to young Aboriginal artists who are interested in learning from other cultures. But isn't there a chance it might work both ways? Isn't there a chance that we might end up not only with a hybrid vision but also a deeper appreciation of the differences that lie between cultures without feeling the need to bridge them at all?

SS: REPRESENTATION of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal artists was raised in relation to Chinese artist Zhou Xiaoping who has lived in Australia since 1988 and has worked extensively in Aboriginal communities including Yirrkala. Seen superficially, his portraits and sketches have more in common with white Australian art of the fifties. However, he has made contacts and friends with significant figures in the field, like **Marcia Langton** and **Chips Mackinoly**, and through them has been introduced properly into the communities where he has been granted artistic freedom because all the relevant people know he is not racist even if his work looks stereotyped. But in the eyes of some of the white Fine Art academics his work is racist, offensive, and bad art besides. Interestingly, the people portrayed aren't offended—the offence seems to be more a sin against contemporary art practice and discourse.

Julie Dowling, an Aboriginal artist from Western Australia, showed her recent portraits—oils of historic moments in the story of the stolen generation—which really do look like William Dargie's work. Tracey Moffatt suggested that Julie's work reminded her of fifties black velvet paintings of Indigenous peoples. Apparently, however, Julie has embarked on work in this style because of its very accessibility for the audience she most wants to reach and to affirm, the "taken-aways" themselves. And to put a cap on it, in the final session Chips Mackinoly described certain white artists working in the NT with and for Aboriginal people, including himself, **Rod Moss** and **Annie Franklin**, as all being culpable of being romantics in their depictions of Aboriginal people. He believed it was an intention, if not an acknowledged ideological decision, to depict Aboriginal people in this way.

ER: DEPICTIONS. *If you wanted a topic that was bound to be controversial this was the one to stay up for. I have deep admiration for everyone who put themselves*

in the firing line at this conference, none more so than for Zhou Xiaoping who, in his romantic portrayals of Aboriginal subjects, opened a floodgate of Anglo-Celtic criticism. Strangely, once the hysteria had passed and real discussion began it transpired that the only thing politically wrong with his paintings was that they reminded us of Eric Jolliffe and his Witchetty's Tribe cartoons. These, first popular in the '60s, were by definition paternalistic, stereotypical and in every sense uncool. To be reminded of them today when we're falling over ourselves to be culturally sensitive simply reinforces the fear we whitefellas have of putting a brush stroke awry.

Is it OK to make paintings of Aboriginal people sitting on the ground? How about drunk? Naked? Xiaoping is correct in identifying that "many people are afraid to touch the Aboriginal subject because of the very heavy politics which are non-negotiable for non-Aboriginal people".

SS: "COPYCAT" AND THE HEGEMONY OF THE DOT. There was a lot of talk about the hegemony of the dot. Who owns the dots? Who can use them? The implied consensus was that the ownership of the dots is a bit vague (compared to rark designs). Apparently dots constantly appear in new age products sold in markets across the country; it was considered pointless to try to control works which could only dupe the ill informed tourist. Rark design very clearly belong to North East Arnhemland and should not be tampered with or used by those not entitled to them. A wide spectrum of Aboriginal art practices were seen at WIJAY NA, from senior North East Arnhemland man, Gawirrin Gumana who made it clear that he cannot use designs and motifs from another clan in his area, to Tracey Moffatt who positions herself as an international postmodern artist for whom anything and everything is up for grabs—whatever the artist says is hers, *is* hers. Moffatt cited her Beauties Project in which she finds portraits of Black men and women which she likes. Through her choosing of them for her series they become hers, and the original photographer is neither sourced nor credited. They have become part of her work. Once such an extreme position had been posited, plurality of perspective had to be recognised.

Tips for young players boiled down to the following: artists should know why they want to use or incorporate a particular Aboriginal element or image and be prepared to be open to and aware of potential implications. Certainly you should discuss it with whomever you understand to be the relevant people, but do not expect to be given "*carte blanche*" or a watertight guarantee of not offending anyone. Art is not like that anywhere, so why should it be any different in this arena.

ER: "COPYCAT". *In the 1995 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award Nikki McCarthy*



Julie Dowling, *Bootblack*. From *Wijay Na?* Courtesy 24 HR ART, Darwin.

(NSW) entered a sculptural piece which included dotted Guinea Fowl feathers chosen, according to the artist, for their symbolic connection to traditional Aboriginal art. And that is the reality of dots today. It's doesn't matter that dots have been used by western artists for centuries. It doesn't matter that an Aboriginal artist like Gordon Bennett says that dots belong to everyone, that we all come from dots. At this time, in this country, dots mean Aboriginal as surely as *Waltzing Matilda* means Australia.

Marcia Langton was vehement in her condemnation of Northern Territory University administration and lecturers in the School of Art over this topic. Langton certainly believes that anyone can paint dots and should not be told otherwise. However, it is important to know what you're referencing when you use such potent marks; I can easily imagine students being warned off such practices.

There was a statement repeated often during the course of the conference that attempted to deal with the multitude of interpretations people place on art: "The work stands by itself". I guess sometimes it does, but that's only after the doors are closed and the lights are off and there's nobody left to talk about it.

SS: THIS DISCUSSION COULD ONLY HAVE HAPPENED IN DARWIN. Sparks flew but no one walked out and everyone kept on arguing and talking to each other both in the sessions and on the lawns at the coffee breaks and it all continued into the long balmy night at the Water Ski Club over drinks and barbecue.

Hidden agendas were brought out in the open in a way that could only have happened in Darwin. It was refreshingly unprecious, respectful where appropriate and cheeky where necessary, serious but not too earnest. It was interesting and exciting because it defied the various attempts to define politically correct lines and practices, and instead revealed that those lines are dynamic and malleable. It's not as if anything goes, but some things are appropriate in some situations and are inappropriate at different times in other places. The important issue is to enter into dialogue.

ER: THIS DISCUSSION... Darwin is proud of its place at the top end of the Territory: the gateway to Asia; the Cultural Crossroads. Place where plenty of traditional Aborigines live. Place where you can call a blackfella a blackfella and not lose your job—and anyway she called you a whitefella first. 95% of practising artists and craftspeople in the Territory are Aboriginal—academics come up here to make their reputations in the field, southern Aborigines to get in touch. What would this discussion have been like anywhere else? It could not easily have taken place anywhere else because it was the audience that made it. Speakers needed to be imported—you can take them anywhere—but the audience mostly consisted of people who came to Darwin independently, but sharing a notion of the importance of being in the 'thick of it'. Of course, that doesn't mean that the conference was packed with traditional Aboriginal people either—there probably were no more than those who had been invited. All this talking is whitefella business: one thing you do pick up after a while here is that traditionally oriented Aboriginal people have a nice appreciation for information, that comes down to minding their own business.

SS: WIJAY NA?, the exhibition, was a strong and diverse show featuring the work of Gordon Bennett, Tracey Moffatt, Julie Gough, Carole Ruff, Jon Rhodes, Julie Dowling alongside locals Brian Nyinawanga, Gawirrin Gumana, Rod Moss, Pam Lofts, Kootji Raymond, Marie McMahon, Chips Mackinolty, Wenten Rubuntja, Dolly Daniels, Anne Mosey and Peter Adsett. The only regret was the lack of a catalogue and the brevity of the show. If only it could have been up longer and have toured to Alice Springs. However some of the works have been included in SUB-URBAN curated by Thelma John at the Fremantle Art Centre in Western Australia. It's a shame they won't be seen as a group on the east coast.

Edwin Ride is president of the Darwin Visual Arts Association and co-ordinator of the DVAA Woods Street Gallery. He is doing a graduate diploma in the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and has lived in the NT for three years.

Suzanne Spinner is a playwright and artist who writes on Territory visual art, and she has lived in Darwin for the last decade.