Dimensional Networks:
Aboriginal Abstract Painting in the
Contemporary Art World

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The aesthetics of Aboriginal abstract painting conjure a network, wholly contemporary yet deeply rooted in ancestry. Paintings by Aboriginal artists examine what it means to be native, each dynamic piece an exploration of old and new culture. Tension between the two—contemporaneity and indigeneity—interplay within the works. Geographic networks are integral to Aboriginal survival, and are anchored within the deep connections to place. Aboriginal peoples in Australia revolve around belonging to a place, a deeply inhabited landscape. Yet complex diasporas are woven through their history: indigenous attachments to place have transformed over the 40,000-year span of art production. A global network results, shaped by ceremonial practice, migration, and rituals. Geographic, aesthetic, and global art networks each feature distinct roots to place making and identity, and interplay with the indigenous experience depicted in Aboriginal art.

What is a network? As the world constantly evolves, layers of time and space become interwoven, resulting in a network which encompasses aesthetics, geographies, and relationships. One must look no further than the undulating rings present in Aboriginal paintings. Deeper inspections of the circular patterns conjure an otherworldly presence, an unraveling of the thousands of years of tradition and ceremony. The viewer is engulfed in the arrangement of intersecting planes, connections between ancient dreamings reimagined in contemporary context.

How museum shows translate the multeity of these networks remains the central question of art world scholarship today. This paper examines Aboriginal art of Australia in another direction, deviating from historical scholarship. Critics Terry Smith and Peter Weibel frame the contemporary art world as a global arrangement of power, shaped by cosmopolitan development. Artworks by Aboriginal artists are often neglected in this discourse. After examining the Western
views of Australia and museum exhibits, I consider the multeity of indigenous experience as an essential component of the web of contemporary art. This discussion will illuminate the networks both geographical and aesthetic that are positioned through works by Aboriginal artists.

Through research of three exhibitions, *Magiciens de la Terre, No Boundaries*, and *Everywhen*, I compare the spatial and informational organization of each exhibit, revealing the differences in representation of the indigenous identity. Interviews with scholars in fields of anthropology, ethnography, and curation also provide a deeper understanding of the confluence of cultural tradition and contemporary discourse. Accounts by artists, curators, historians and collectors offer a picture of the rapidly expanding network of the sacred, ritual, and aesthetic.

Aboriginal theology originates from ancestry: every living person and every living thing descends from a direct source. Everything has a material, bodily, and spiritual connection, and artist’s desire to create is driven from the obligation to express this narrative. The inclusion of symbols indicates the relationship to material, body, and spirit: a network, expressing the interconnectedness of our shared earth. The resulting connection between past, present, and future can be viewed in *Two Women Dreaming* by Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, depicting a narrative of two ancestral women at a desert well. Compact rows of overlapping dots animate the story, alluding to “the latent spiritual presence of the ancestors who shaped and walked through this landscape in the Dreaming.”

The connected rectangular forms attempt to portray the infinite: a motif that conjures a network, aesthetic and temporal.

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Ronnie Tjampitjinpa
Pintupi, born c.1943
Two Women Dreaming
1990.

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
150.2 x 182.4 cm (59 1/8 x 71 13/16 in)
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Attempting to decipher these encoded paintings leads to an unraveling of the amalgam of artists, advisors, collectors and curators that circulate within the art world. Contemporary art exists within cosmopolitan centers, not unlike the dense network of Aboriginal camps: centers of rich cultural knowledge, interspersed among the desert landscape. However, the general trend facing works by non-Western artists is a movement away from the old model of dominant centers, such as Paris and New York, instead to a web—a “polycentric network of connection”—operating in a pattern of connection and nodal relationships. Journalist Sarah Thornton chronicled the inner workings of this system in Seven Days in the Art World, observing:

The contemporary art world is a loose network of overlapping subcultures held together by a belief in art. They span the globe but cluster in art capitals such as New York, London, Los Angeles, and Berlin…The art world is more polycentric than it was in the twentieth century, when Paris, then New York held sway.\(^3\)

In this mode of translation and transportation, an artist from Australia has as much agency to contribute their outsider perspective to the global network. As a result, the history of art is being slowly amended to reflect the increasing diversity of the world arts, and make sense of the apparent chaos surrounding the intricate network. In his book, Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century, anthropologist James Clifford imagines a world system “that can no longer be spatialized into stable cores and peripheries, that is susceptible to deep crises and

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\(^3\) Thornton, Sarah, Seven Days in the Art World, Norton, 2008, pg. xii.
Globalization ushered in this remapping of contemporary art in the 21st century, of which the borders are still in flux. Connections are multiplied between different cultures and identities, leading to an abandonment of the binary model of center focused on Western art and the non-Western periphery. The global reality is no longer synonymous with “world”, but rather composed of a multiplicity of worlds.⁵

If museums are positioned at the center of the contemporary art model, producers radiate outward to all edges. The artwork of Aboriginals existed on the periphery until the last century, without a connecting link to the art world. Infiltrating the complicated network of the art world has proved tumultuous for producers of indigenous art globally: Native North Americans and artists of African descent have faced challenges. The geographic dispersion of Aboriginal tribes throughout Central Australia positions it as a microcosm of the larger global art production network: sites of cultural production anchored by art centers. Small tribes of Australia have become an emerging web of influence in the contemporary art world: a node in the network of contemporary art on a global scale. Yet structurally there is no reason why this is so: the communities of Aboriginal tribes in Western and Central Australia are remote, many isolated from spheres of influence.⁶ Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, an artist included in the Pintupi Nine, lived nomadically in the wilderness for twenty-two years before emerging to civilization. His art recognizes the navigation of these disparate worlds. Mamultjunkunya demonstrates his exploration of organic lines, and evokes watermarks through characteristically undulating

⁵ Buddenseig, Andrea and Hans Belting, “From Art World to Art Worlds”, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddenseig, and Peter Weibel, Published by ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, MIT Press, 2013, pg. 29.
⁶ Clifford, James, *Returns*, pg.199.
shapes. It is emblematic of borders, perhaps an examination of the frontier between Western and indigenous cultures.

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Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri
*Mamultjunkunya*
2009
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
182 x 244 cm (72 x 96 in)
© The artist licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd, courtesy Papunya Tula Artists.
Photo: Sid Hoeltzell.

Tjapaltjarri’s art reflects the current world picture: invisible boundaries of prejudice, colonization, and marginalization envelop these networks found in the interconnected dots. The documented history of Aboriginal art emerged in the 1870s, starting when Australia was colonized by Europeans. Settlement of Australian territories by British colonizers introduced a highly developed visual culture, and issued the advent of secular images and drawings by Aboriginals created for the *bundu*, or “white people”. Meant for circulation, these art pieces were viewed as ethnographic objects. This continued into the 1960s and 1970s, when artists began to produce elaborate paintings on bark, with imagery drawn from ancient rock paintings. These reached international spectacle, signaling the entrance of Aboriginal art into the sphere of fine art. Within this evolution of the definition of indigenous art, the theme of renewal, shaped by loss and past and present attachments, persists. Influences of social, cultural, and political strategies are present in the “rearticulations” of ancestral dreamings into contemporary art movements.  

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8 Smith, Terry, Phone Interview, 10/19/2016.
9 Clifford, James, *Returns*, pg. 69.
The establishment of Aboriginal art as a contemporary art movement emerged in the 1980s, in correlation with the migration of indigenous people from remote communities to cities. A realization by artists that the production of art could enhance societal, monetary, and welfare, prompted a dramatic increase in output. Art centers across Australia flourished, most led by Westerners. Terry Smith says of the art movement of Aboriginal abstract painting: “The most extraordinary art movement that has in a way been going on since its contemporary forms, since 1970. Now we are up to 2016—can you name another contemporary art movement that has lasted so long?”10 The story of Aboriginal painting is a narrative unfolding, shaped by migration, colonization, and globalization and market forces. The founding of the movement is described here:

In the early 1970s, a group of Pintupi men gathered in art teacher Geoffrey Bardon’s garage in Panpunya and began drawing on scraps of paper. This handful of drawings in pencil and watercolor are now held by two of Australia’s premier art institutions (the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney) and may be regarded as the founding documents of one of the country’s most acclaimed art movements.11

The founding images of the movement closely resemble a map, proving that the origins are deeply oriented to a connected network, of both geography and aesthetics. The very act of art production became the first node, uniting senior men from varying linguistic groups at

10 Smith, Terry, Phone Interview.
Panpunya. Historian Fred Myers writes of the founding: “The painters drew upon the iconography, ritual practices, and decorative forms of their ceremonial life and the mythological traditions invested in the sacred places they knew as their “country”. [Copyrighted image removed. Please read description below and visit this link to view](http://bit.ly/2m24EkI)

Unidentified Artist, Pintupi
 Untitled
1971
Paper, watercolor, graphite
355mm x H 465mm
Papunya Art Collection, 2008.

How does this diaspora affect the art’s display and preservation? Museums today are forced to balance and juggle commitments to old and new art, often attracting criticism from activist groups. Yet frictions like these drive museums to continually innovate and explore these interactions, and contribute to what makes the museum so vital to this day and age. As a result, the role museums play in society constantly changes. Established as guardians of national heritage and colonial collections, museums functioned as spaces built from colonial encounters, fostering contact between peoples geographically and historically separated. The increase of connections led to the transition of museum to a hub, “an international hub of artistic activities means a decentralized institution that will simultaneously conceive, curate, and participate in diverse projects in different places worldwide.” But this ideal depiction isn’t completely accurate: museums often fail to uphold their commitment to fair representation and diverse collecting of global cultures.

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12 Ibid.
15 Buddenseig, Andrea and Hans Belting, “From Art World to Art Worlds”, pg., 55.
Museums are working to reinsert Indigenous people within their spheres, a process which should be the “guiding principle of curatorial practice” today, according to Aboriginal curator Stephen Gilchrist, a visiting curator at the Harvard Art Museums.\textsuperscript{17} This results from a long history of erasing works by Indigenous artists from the present, a phenomenon in which Indigenous people “simply cease to be, leaving only their artifacts behind.” Curators possess the power to reverse this—ensuring the preservation of the narrative and shared humanity found in these dynamic works. It is in the examination of changing cultures that the role of the curator is most necessary. Curatorship is the distinct practice of mediation, questioning the limits and boundaries of a work of art.\textsuperscript{18} The practice of curating determines the ways in which art has been displayed, mediated, and discussed as part of our histories. The discipline is constantly evolving: the advent of the group exhibition has ushered in a paradigm shift “from the primacy of the artist toward the figure of the curator”.\textsuperscript{19} How is this translated in the curation of Aboriginal art today?

The first inclusion of Aboriginal art alongside mainstream contemporary art in a large-scale exhibition was the controversial \textit{Magiciens de la Terre} in 1989 in Paris at Centre Georges Pompidou. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, the show exhibited traditional objects next to mainstream international artists. Half of the 100 artists had not exhibited at an international venue, including Jack Wunuwun, Jimmy Wululu, Ken Unsworth, and John Mawandjul, all native to Australia. The inclusion of Australian art, both contemporary and traditional, brought controversy to the exhibit: the juxtaposition of Richard Long’s minimalism and the earthwork by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Gilchrist, Stephen, “Everywhen”, \textit{Everywhen}, pg.21.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} O’Neill, Paul, \textit{The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)}, MIT Press, 2012, pg.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid, pg. 2.
\end{itemize}
Australian Aborigine tribe. The exhibit left a major influence on subsequent large-scale exhibitions, redefining the curatorial narrative aligned to global exhibitions. Paul O’Neill writes of the exhibition in *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*:

“It included works from different times, places, and cultures that were selected on the basis of their formal, thematic, or contextual relationships. What the exhibitions had in common was a grouping together of diverse works, presented as if in mutual dialogue with another and mediated as a personal narrative proffered by a single author-curator.”

O’Neill argues that the exhibit featured an increased presence of the curatorial hand—a trend consistent today with following exhibitions. It came under much critical assault for “creating constellations of art from different places and times, without their contextual background. Artworks were almost interchangeable with one another, as if they were all coming from a space of equivalence.” It is viewed as romanticism of global art, and lacked an exploration of the deeper significance of world-shaping forces of colonialism and globalization. However, tensions between the disparate artworks is often the “bedrock of the stories it tells”, according to curator and art historian Rudi Fuchs. Fuchs writes, “A collection strives to bring together such diversity because presenting disparities is the purpose of the museum”.

Striking a balance within varying modes of presentation proves a challenge today. *No Boundaries*, curated by Henry Skerritt in 2015 at the Nevada Museum of Art, weaves together

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22 Ibid, pg.30.
23 Ibid, pg.31.
24 Fuchs, Rudi, “Excitement”, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
pieces by nine Pintupi artists. The works, presented in mutual dialogue, are “designed with the intention to be displayed as art, without ceremonial purpose”, according to Skerritt.\textsuperscript{25} Though the exhibition differs from Magiciens de la Terre in scope and size, exploration of connections between Aboriginals and contemporary artists are still present. David Walker, the director of the Nevada Museum of Art, examines this in the preface to the catalogue: “There are manifold connections among disparate artists, forged through a commonality of mark-making, the preservation of stories and cultural heritage, and the conservation of the natural world.”\textsuperscript{26} Skerritt writes: “Aboriginal art is the unlikely product of this interzone. It is the cosmopolitan art of the frontier, designed to travel the world to art fairs and biennials, while remaining embedded in a landscape that few outsiders will ever see, rooted in an arcane cosmology that few will ever understand.”\textsuperscript{27} The introductions by historians, curators and critics in the No Boundaries catalogue contribute to a sense of aura around Aboriginal art that Westerners are still seeking to fully understand.

\textit{Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia} (2016, Harvard Art Museum) explores the ways that Indigenous Australians manipulate and mark time within artworks. Curator Stephen Gilchrist is a member of the Yamatji people of the Inggarda language group of Western Australia, and contributes a perspective unique to scholarship on the subject. As a result, \textit{Everywhen} places a significantly larger focus on reconciliation and representations of colonization, evident in the preface in which David Haig writes, “We, as descendants of settlers

\textsuperscript{25} Skerritt, Henry, Phone Interview, March 2016.


and immigrants, honor these artists because their representation of country speak to our souls and our spirit of place, and yet we are discomforted. Is our embrace of their art another expropriation? Can us and them become we? How must we change to be healed?"²⁸ In an attempt to comprehend these questions, the exhibition is organized into four themes: transformation, performance, seasonality, and remembrance. Uniting the whole is the paradigm of the “everywhen”—a concept of eternal present in Aboriginal philosophies. The paintings themselves are examined in their translation of ancestral ritual, requiring “a balance between concealment and revelation”. Gilchrest writes: “This exhibition is an invitation for us all to become synchronous with the Everywhen, if only momentarily. The artists in this exhibition demonstrate how Indigenous people can be both couriers and keeper of what has been, what is, and what will be.”³⁰


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Emily Kam Kngwarray
Anmatyerr
c. 1910-1996
Anwerlarr angerr (Big yam)
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
245 x 401 cm (96 7/16 x 157 1/8 in)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased 1998
Photo © Emily Kam Kngwarray / © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VISCOPY, Australia

Networks both geographic and aesthetic resonate in the paintings included: Anwerlarr angerr (Big yam) by Emily Kam Kngwarray demonstrates a deep relation to land. It depicts a site sacred to the artist: the pencil yam at Alhalkere country in the central desert, celebrating the connectedness of the roots. But a greater significance is held in the four-paneled work: a network of intersected lines evokes the global and aesthetic power of Aboriginal contemporary art. The
lines are deeply ceremonial, mirroring striped body designs called *arlkeny* through the vivid brushstrokes. They also mimic the designs painted on women’s bodies for ceremonial performances, demonstrating the interplay between nature and human life.\(^{32}\) *Everywhen* presents an exploration of the ways in which Indigenous Australians conceptualize, mark, and manipulate time.

Vernon Ah Kee  
Kuku Yalandji, Waanyi, Yidindji, and Gugu Yimithirr  
b. 1967  
*many lies*  
2004  
Vinyl cut text  
Dimensions variable  
Collection of the artist  
courtesy of Milani Gallery, Brisbane

In contrast to *No Boundaries*, *Everywhen* examines the colonial and postcolonial history of Australia, incorporating politically pointed works of art.\(^{33}\) In differentiation from other exhibitions, the works feature a “passionate advocacy” for the rights of Indigenous Australians.\(^{34}\) Prominently installed in the exhibition is a textual piece by Aboriginal artist Vernon Ah Kee, titled *many lies*. The text speaks to the ethical questions enveloping the fair representation of Aboriginals today. Kee poignantly expresses these sentiments, writing: “many lies have been told about me… I try to remember my life / and words that make me strong / but the lies rake and tear at my roots / cutting me from the earth.” Gilchrist’s juxtaposition of the piece with abstract paintings draws attention to deep-seated biases that tear at the roots of Aboriginal artists, affronting their ties to place.

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\(^{32}\) Gilchrist, Stephen, “Everywhen” *Everywhen*, pg. 27.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
Richard Bell
*Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem)*
2003
Acrylic on canvas
240 x 540 cm (94 ½ x 212 ½ in)
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin

Contemporary responses to these ethical issues also present themselves in the works of Richard Bell, a Murri artist and political activist. Bell takes a stance against the approbation of Aboriginal imagery and its use in commercial advertising. In a style reminiscent of Western modernists and Aboriginal patterns, Bell’s *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem)* makes a statement against the commodification of Aboriginal art and its control by the Western art market. Across the paintings patchwork surface is the proposition “Aboriginal Art—It’s a White Thing.”

These ethical concerns are echoed in statistics surrounding the contemporary Aboriginal art movement. Bell writes, “30 years into the unfolding of the Contemporary Aboriginal Art movement, its artists dominate art production in Australia, and a relatively large number of Indigenous people hold key positions in its dissemination, public collecting, and interpretation—though not, as yet, in its marketing.” This sentiment reflects in exhibition catalogues, marketing of exhibits, and marketing of galleries such as the Booker-Lowe in Houston and Pollon Art in New York City, both specializing in Aboriginal art.

Icons of contemporary art—Damien Hirst, Marina Abramovic, Takashi Murakami—are too often condensed into “readily reproducible, in-your-face one-liners”. Aboriginal art exists definitively against this spectrum: it isn’t created for the purpose of shock value, instead its aesthetic value is ritual. An economy built on hierarchies of fame, wealth, affiliation and

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36 Ibid, pg.212.
education, the art world often operates with symbols.\textsuperscript{37} Prior to colonial settlement, Australian Aboriginal art was devoted exclusively to sacred ceremonial purposes. Narratives are repeated in rituals such as body paintings and burial performances. Although contemporary Aboriginal art is not made for secret ceremonial purposes, the current runs through it. With the aim of spreading spiritual information into secular contexts, successful pieces include simplified signs indicating place, travel, movement, and sacred beings.\textsuperscript{38}

Interpretations of these ritual symbols vary among art historians and anthropologists. Fred Myers refers to this as “doubling”—the “way in which an image can simultaneously be seen two ways, as combining two perspectives, or be both past and present”.\textsuperscript{39} However, I believe it is more of a tripling: a culmination of networks both geographic, aesthetic, and global, overlapping to provide a three-dimensional means of interpretation. This is best illustrated in Shorty Lungkarta’s \textit{Children’s Water Dreaming}. When examined through an aesthetic lens, the painting documents the creation of ceremonial objects from human hair using a spindle. But when considered through a lens of its geographic significance, the painting represents the artist’s birthplace of Lapinga. The curvature of the spindle transforms to depict water holes connected by small creeks, where the series of currents formed by overlapping concentric circles are constantly in motion. Deeper, still, is the connection of the painting to the broader contemporary art world. It evokes a map in constant flux: borders shifting with forces of migration,

\textsuperscript{37} Thornton, Sarah, \textit{Seven Days in the Art World}, pg.xii.

\textsuperscript{38} Smith, Terry, \textit{World Currents}, pg.203.

colonization, and globalization in which stories of the past, present, and future are interwoven among the landscape.

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Shorty Lungkarta Tjungurrayi Pintupi, 1920-1987
Children’s Water Dreaming (Version 2)
Synthetic polymer paint on composition board
61.6 x 44.5 cm (24 ¼ x 17 ½ in)
Collection of John and Barbara Wilkerson
Photo by Tony De Camillo for the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University

Aboriginal beliefs reflect the notion of network unlike any other producers of contemporary art today. The indigenous Australian concept of “the Everywhen”—also expressed as the “Dreaming”—emphasizes time as united: the present moment inseparable from the deep past of ancestral beings. 40 This intersectionality amplifies the web of connections in Aboriginal art. “When we think who we are connected to,” writes Smith, “we think of the living. But ancestry is different. The dead have things to say.” The future of Aboriginal art exists within this dynamic. Indigenous artists demonstrate what has been, what is, and what will be through their art, examining what it means to be deeply rooted to a place. Artists will continue to be rooted in their communities—yet explore ideas of migration, diaspora, and positioning within the unique network of the contemporary art world.

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