

Impossible to ignore: Imants Tillers' response to Aboriginal art

It is possible to write a history of Imants Tillers' engagement with Aboriginal art that sees it in progressive terms, reflecting at the same time a more general movement in Australia towards reconciliation and mutual understanding. In the beginning Tillers, without intending to, found himself at the heart of a controversy over the difference that was and still is located in some forms of Aboriginal art. Over time he developed a collaborative relationship with Aboriginal artists and at the same time Aboriginal art became incorporated more fully into Australian art discourse. In Tillers' own terms, Australian art had moved from a pre-Aboriginal art phase to a post-Aboriginal one. It is worthwhile developing this argument before challenging some of the grounds on which it is based.

In incorporating Michael Nelson Jagamara's *Five Dreamings* (1982) as one of the main images within his *The Nine Shots* (1985), Tillers opened himself up to accusations of appropriating Aboriginal imagery without permission and impinging on the moral rights of the artist. The offence was compounded by the very "placedness" of Aboriginal art, its apparent inseparability from locality. Aboriginal art was in place, and Tillers' art apparently challenged identities based on locality, removed images from their cultural contexts, and juxtaposed them with images from other places and times. After all, the very title – 'Locality Fails' – of his reflexive critique of contemporary art, almost his manifesto, written in 1982 can be taken as a challenge to Aboriginal art or at least to some people's hope for Aboriginal art: "The widespread though largely unstated hope (or even belief) in an 'indigenous' Australian art ignores", the logic of the postmodern world¹.

The Nine Shots eventually brought about Gordon Bennett's powerful riposte *The Nine Ricochets* (1990), which in turn borrowed images from Tillers. Much has been written about the apparent dialogue between the two works, often directed to explaining why they are different ethically and art- historically². However, I believe that the fundamental significance of Bennett's work must be understood in its own terms – in the multiple references it makes and

1 Imants Tillers, 'Locality Fails', *Art & Text*, 6, 1982, p. 54. This point is made by Ian McLean in the introduction his forthcoming book *How the Aborigines Stole the Idea of Contemporary Art*, and I employ his phraseology.

2 A point made by Rex Butler in 'Echo and Narcissus: Gordon Bennett and his Critics', *Postwest* 16, 2000, pp. 46–51. He writes: "What is interesting is that, for critics who in various ways are so concerned to overcome binary thinking, so much effort is expended trying to distinguish Bennett from Tillers. Of course the fact that so much effort is spent doing so, that the task must be taken up each time, suggests

interpretative possibilities it opens up – of which the dialogue with Tillers is only a small though important part. If there is a simple message, it is that all that has happened in the recent history of Australia has been made possible by the colonisation and often the deaths of Aboriginal Australians; a message that in the 1980s and 1990s did appear to be getting across to large sectors of Australian society – the idea that there was a wrong that needed to be acknowledged and addressed. It was a message about appropriation, pain and alienation. It made the point, to paraphrase George Orwell, that the human condition is the same for all, but more the same for some than for others.

Over the next decade, Tillers' engagement with Aboriginal art continued to develop, but it did so in an environment in which artists came into dialogue with one another across the racial divide. Tillers developed a personal relationship with Jagamara whose work he had originally incorporated into his own without permission. Working together in Brisbane as part of the Campfire Group, they produced collaborative works such as *Nature Speaks (Possum Dreaming)* (2001), based on iconic motifs from the Walpiri inventory of graphic signs. Two of these signs – for lightning and for possum – were subsequently included as recurrent elements in Tillers' *Nature Speaks* series³. Permission was granted and collaboration acknowledged. Tillers' inclusion of Aboriginal elements in his work seems to have become more explicitly a celebration of their aesthetic power. Aboriginal art had become something that was impossible to ignore in Australian art. We can even see Tillers' art become increasingly based in locality as he comes to be at home in the Monaro – a conclusion Tillers teasingly draws us towards in titling an article on his recent work 'When Locality Prevails'⁴. If Tillers' art has become post-Aboriginal, in the sense of referencing a component of Australian art that is no longer possible to ignore, does this mean almost by definition that it has become more Aboriginal?⁵ However, it

that it is not so easy to do" (p. 47). Butler is referring to works such as Ian McLean's *White Aborigines: Politics and Identity in Australian Art*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

3 For details of the collaboration as it developed, see Simon Wright, 'Some Other Ways: Michael Nelson Jagamara and the Campfire Group 85–97', in Michael Eather (ed.), *Shoosh!: The History of the Campfire Group*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2005, pp. 84-97.

4 Imants Tillers, 'When Locality Prevails', *Heat 8 (New Series)*, 2004, pp. 113–28.

5 The phrase "post-Aboriginal", first used by Tillers, can of course be viewed as highly problematic. It could be interpreted as meaning that such art succeeds Aboriginal art in the same way that Post-Impressionism described an art movement that followed on from Impressionism. Clearly Tillers means that it is art produced in Australia after the time when Aboriginal art made its decisive intervention (see Ian North, 'StarAboriginality', in Charles Green (ed.), *Postcolonial +Art: Where Now?*, ArtSpace Sydney, 2001, n.p. In that sense, all future Australian art will be post-Aboriginal. The difficulty with such terms is that over time they lose their contextual meaning and become labels for particular phases of art history. The problem is probably irresolvable, as it is the result of a tension between the need to categorise and describe, the need to have labels in order to communicate, and the fact that all categories and descriptions are provisional and contextual – as soon as they become too fixed in their meaning, they can inhibit rather than facilitate understanding both of contemporary action and historical process.

remains an open question as to whether Aboriginal art is treated differently from non-Aboriginal art in his work. In general there has been no change in his practice of using images by other artists as components of his own work, but it could be concluded that the moral issues of treating Aboriginal artworks in the same way has become more cloudy, perhaps less vital.

This progressivist view has its problems, even if at times Tillers nods in its direction. While there has been some progress – Aboriginal art has gained greater recognition over the duration of these developments in his art, and permission is often sought from Aboriginal artists before their work is used – the analysis I have presented both contradicts the spirit of Tillers' art and could give the impression that the various issues have been resolved. Acceptance of such an analysis could indeed result in a taming of Aboriginal art, a forgetting of its impact by gently incorporating it within the mainstream, by making it part of the repetitive mantra that has been the avant-garde. It could be part of a process of recreating such a mainstream, which of course in many ways is what Tillers' art has succeeded in overturning.⁶

The success of Aboriginal art almost offended many non-Indigenous artists. Its success as contemporary art was a shock because it apparently broke all of the rules. It came from outside the academy, from people who were outside contemporary art discourse, who did not play to the rules of the game and indeed did not know that there were any rules. The danger is that the progressivist history normalises Aboriginal art and makes it part of the discourse of contemporary Australian art without changing. It concludes that once we start talking to one another and become part of the same market, we become part of a global ecumene.

Tillers' conception of post-modernity had as a central theme the breaking up of and breaking out of rigid categories rather than the creation of a hybrid global avant-garde. It disrupted the temporal sequencing of art as much as it challenged locality. Indeed, it had been the linking of the spatial and temporal in an artificial and limiting evolutionary sequence that had become so deadening, culminating in the increasingly narrow yet ever-changing contemporary avant-garde. Tillers recognised the diversity of world art practice and the fact that in many cases the contemporary avant-garde had been anticipated, both in the forms and in the kinds of practices that came under the rubric of art-making. For example, it could be reasonably argued that the artists of Central Australia who incorporated sand sculptures within their ceremonies were substantively as much performance artists or installation artists as European artists who

6 For a more detailed argument of this position, see Howard Morphy, 'Imants Tillers and the Dislocation of the Avant-Garde', in Howard Morphy & Nigel Lendon (eds), *Synergies*, Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 2003, pp. 43–50.

intervened in analogous ways.⁷ They were not the same as the performance artists of the contemporary West – context makes a difference to meaning, culture and history affect experience, and the intentions may be very different – but as expressive forms and as modes of action these art practices had much more in common than had previously been allowed.

The categories of the modernist-oriented Eurocentric art world failed to allow for the creation and appreciation of meaningful dialogues with artists of other places and times, because they positioned them out of the present. The makers of sand sculptures were ritual experts, the designs they produced were sacred emblems, the hollow log coffins were functional objects – if a category had to be found for them, they could be placed in the generic categories of craft and of “primitive” art. They were not contemporary fine art. The categories that created limits on what the contemporary Western artist could produce also limited the ways in which other arts could be viewed. In essence, this categorisation failed to recognise art-making as a form of action that enhanced the agency of human beings, enabling them to do things that they could not do by other means.

In contrast, the perspective that Tillers adopts enables Indigenous art to be part of a global history of art-making that is not easily bounded in space and time, and is certainly not neatly divided into small, self-contained, easily grasped units of limited duration. And yet because art-making has always been connected to contexts and purposes, the particular works do have their differences and are not all the same kinds of things, even though they have much in common. Art can be made as a religious icon, to embellish a building, as a regal tribute, as a political intervention, as a challenge to authority. When placed in another context – taken out of a cathedral and placed in an art gallery, taken from the dining table and placed inside a display case, taken from a political protest and placed in a private collection – its original significance may be diminished or even contradicted. It simply is not the case that every contradiction can be resolved or that every difference is of equivalent value. The excitement and controversies generated by and over Aboriginal art as it entered Australian art discourse in the 1970s and 1980s concerned issues of real difference. It involved people taking bold and dangerous steps, often without knowing the ultimate consequences or the trajectories that the art – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – would take.

⁷ Tillers himself makes productive use of the analogical relationship between Papunya acrylic paintings and contemporary movements in non-Indigenous art in Australia, in particular relating aspects of Papunya acrylics to conceptual art (Imants Tillers, ‘Fear of Texture’, *Art & Text* 10, 1983, pp. 8–18). Interestingly, it is precisely as installation art that sand sculptures are included within contemporary exhibitions of Aboriginal art, often being produced as part of a “ritual” performance during the opening phase of the exhibition. *The Painters of the Wagilag Story* exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia in 1997, for example, was initiated by the installation of a sand sculpture and opened with a ritual performance.

While “borrowing from”, “being influenced by”, “finding inspiration in”, “learning from”, and “building upon” other people’s artworks is always going to be an integral part of art practice, it is never going to be without its dangers, since art is not limited to particular kinds of objects. It is the case that some Aboriginal art produced for sale is sacred art; it is the case that under Aboriginal law the rights to produce those works might be limited to a small group of individuals; it is the case that the rights in such works might be vested in a group; it is the case that the breach of rights in and the unauthorised use of such artworks can be seen as a form of sacrilege that affects the fabric of the artist’s society. This does not mean that the works concerned are not artworks. It means, as has been the case throughout human history, that a work of art can be other things besides itself – in the case of some Aboriginal art it is a mark of identity, a title deed to land, a sign or instance of ancestral presence.⁸ However, it is important not to essentialise Aboriginal art, since at every place where it is produced it has its differences. The boundaries between different categories of object are often blurred, and it is not always going to be clear what kind of work something is, or even how many different things it is. Aboriginal art is part of a dialogue with other Australian art. It is dynamic, changing, and responsive to different concerns, audiences and markets. As Aboriginal art becomes more visible and more integral to Australian art, an awareness of the subtle boundaries not to cross becomes more apparent, but the process of the inclusion of Aboriginal art in world art is always going to be complex, abounding in what may be irresolvable contradictions.

Given the nature of Tillers’ work, the exclusion of Aboriginal motifs would have been as remarkable as any inclusion and just as subject to controversy. Tillers’ canvasboard system – the thousands of boards that he sees as a knowledge archive – is in many respects analogous to an artist’s notebook and the invisibility of Aboriginal art in that notebook would have made a statement. Indeed, Tillers is quite explicit in his inclusion of Aboriginal art in positive terms, acknowledging its importance and its significant intervention in the history of Australian art, which ironically allows Australian art to refocus on landscape and the history of place. Tillers has seldom been explicit about his reasons for selecting particular images for inclusion in his work; his use of the word knowledge is an interesting choice. But it seems that both qualities of form and significances of content are factors at play in his choices.

Emily Kngwarreye’s *Big Yam Dreaming* (1995) is a case in point. Tillers writes: “While Kngwarreye’s majestic painting relates to the lifecycle of the yam, my interest in it apart from its stunning beauty was that her image with its network of tangled lines and worldly unpredictable

⁸ For a full discussion of relevant issues, see Elizabeth Coleman, *Aboriginal Art, Identity and Appropriation*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005.

trajectories seemed like an analogue for the complex networked connections within my canvasboard system”.⁹

There is a view that in Tillers’ work, particularly early on, the meaning of the borrowed work has played a lesser role in its selection than its formal attributes. Even if this were once true, it has increasingly been less so.¹⁰ Certainly context is part of meaning, and Tillers’ whole approach involves recontextualising, but not in a way that denies the significance the images have in other contexts. His work is not concerned with the historic specificity of the motifs used, but content is a strong motive for their selection. No one can look at works or series of works with titles such as *Diaspora*, *Nature Speaks: BC* (2003), *Outback: E* (2004), *Local Knowledge* (2005) or *Terra Incognita* (2006) without forming an impression that they may refer to or even cohere around important personal, historical or cultural themes. And yet at the same time the work is constructed to challenge contained meanings.

The canvasboard system as a whole comprises the thousands of individual boards that are an archive of creativity, that have the potential to be re-organised into different sets. The sequences of boards and the panelled sets that are made out of them present an emergent ordering. Parts of which are relatively more fixed than others, but the viewer is always conscious that the potential for reordering and reinterpretation was there from the beginning. As Tillers himself writes: “While the existing body of work (which is also a body of knowledge) determines to some degree what comes next, there is always within this system openness to chance, to serendipity, to coincidence and the possibility of new directions and unexpected interventions”¹¹.

For Tillers art is both “a solitary journey of introspection” and “above all, ‘a way of knowing’”.¹² The works that are produced provide the opportunity for others to enter into the artist’s world, and to engage with and respond to it, inevitably influenced by the artist’s own structuring of the information, but empowered to chart their own pathways and to form their own mental sets.

Howard Morphy

Excerpt from ‘Impossible to Ignore: Imants Tillers’ Response to Aboriginal Art’, in Deborah Hart, *Imants Tillers: One World Many Visions*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2006

9 Cited from an unpublished interview by Jennifer Slatyer for the exhibition *Not Yet Post-Aboriginal*, Hazelhurst Regional Art Gallery, Sydney, 2002.

10 Indeed, looking back on his work, Tillers can see a multiplicity of factors affecting his choice of images and patterning, not all of which he was necessarily conscious of at the time, but which became apparent upon looking back. (Imants Tillers, Interview by Howard Morphy, 22 January 2006.)

11 Imants Tillers, *Land beyond goodbye*, exhibition catalogue, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2005. n.p.

12 *ibid.*