

# The *Aboriginal flag* as art

Mathieu Gallois

Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney

*Abstract: Is the Aboriginal flag art? And, if it is, what end does that argument serve? Art is not a helpful noun; certainly it is a risky one on which to base an argument. Yet, to fail to read the Aboriginal flag as art or, more precisely, to fail to read it as Indigenous activist art, is to fail to understand the Aboriginal flag and, more broadly, the role of culture in Indigenous activism post colonisation. This reading of the flag, through my research, appeared in every direction, far on the horizon, until I spoke to Indigenous historian Victoria Grieves. Grieves helped me recognise the value and intent of this argument from an Indigenous perspective. The Aboriginal flag is art. The Aboriginal flag's Indigenous and Western art epistemologies are instrumental in shaping its form and semantics. As Aboriginal art, the flag represents a continuum with traditional Aboriginal themes and aesthetic values. In a Western context it is read as a flag and it exists as a mass-produced object. In all its guises the Aboriginal flag has melded itself into many aspects of popular imagination and become one of Australia's significant symbols.*

The understanding of the *Aboriginal flag*<sup>1</sup> as art outlined in this paper has three thematic foundations: the life of the flag's author, Harold Thomas; Aboriginal cultural practice; and Western art practice and theory. Together, these conditions and criteria frame and inform the *Aboriginal flag* as art and ensure that the artist's life and philosophy are central to the readers' understanding of the *Aboriginal flag*. As Aboriginal art, the flag is shown to share many aesthetic formal qualities and themes with traditional, pre-contact Aboriginal art. Western art theory, in the form of the Institutional Definition of Art (discussed later), is described and drawn upon to frame and substantiate an emerging consensus among art professionals that the flag is indeed art. Harold Thomas has consistently and emphatically stated that he conceived the flag as art. His claim is substantiated by Indigenous academic, activist and artist Brenda Croft. The arguments that substantiate the flag as art are neither complicated nor, upon reflection, contentious. They are nevertheless critical in that the acceptance of the

flag as art has second and third tier repercussions for our understandings and readings of the flag. The *Aboriginal flag* is universally accepted as a powerful activist ensign and, as such, the flag, once accepted as art, also has to be accepted as activist art. Accepted as art, the issues of the flag's use, ownership, copyright status and revenues are thrown into a complex terrain that traverses the values of two cultures and two mediums: art and vexillology (the study of flags). The paper concludes with a formal exploration of the *Aboriginal flag* that substantiates the argument that its design represents the drawn out, considered process of a serious artist.

## Genesis and readings

The *Aboriginal flag*'s exact genesis is hard to pinpoint. Harold Thomas and activist, actor and historian Gary Foley agree that they discussed the need to create an *Aboriginal flag* when they met days or weeks or months before the flag was first flown on National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC) day on 12 July



**Figure 1:** Cathy Freeman, 1994. Courtesy of Sport the library. Photographer: David Callow

1971. Foley, who was based in Sydney at the time, was a frequent visitor to Adelaide, where he was helping to set up Aboriginal medical and legal services, like those that had recently been established in Sydney. During one such visit to Adelaide, after a demonstration in support of Aboriginal fugitive Lionel Brockman, Foley recalls heading back to Thomas' place with some beers to workshop the idea and design of an *Aboriginal flag*. Thomas describes the creation of the flag as both protracted and instantaneous, as it involved a process of long gestation that took place over weeks, months or years. The need for a symbol of Aboriginal identity was sown in Thomas' mind after attending his first Aboriginal demonstration in 1970 where white supporters outnumbered the barely visible Aboriginal activists (ABC Radio National 2002). At some point, either in conversation with Foley or independently, the image of the *Aboriginal flag*, and its complex meanings, came to him fully resolved in a formidable moment of creative inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

Over the next few days or weeks Thomas engaged in a thorough, circular process that many artists would be familiar with. He got to know his creation; he thought about its symbolic meanings, he tried to evaluate its design objectively and he experimented with countless possible variations. At one point, the living room of his family home in Adelaide was transformed into an artist's studio of sorts. Iterations of the flag covered the table and floor. The flag's design was turned upside down, inside out and back to front. It had only one possible manifestation, its first. With the design accepted as true and resolved as a prototype by the artist, Thomas went to the haberdashery Harris Scarfe located in Rundle Place Shopping Centre, Adelaide. He must have been an odd sight in 1971, a black man selecting cloth among the ladies. With three lengths of fabric — one yellow ochre (cadmium yellow), one red and one black purchased — Thomas engaged Sandra Lee Hanson, a colleague at the Australian Museum, to sew the fabric into a large flag. That first *Aboriginal flag* is lost. It is not known if its exact proportions and colours were those of the now familiar flag. Off-cuts of fabric found at the Australian Museum in 2014, which are most probably from the original flag, suggest that the original flag was not symmetrical (Martin 2014). The now familiar *Aboriginal flag* consists of a rectangle divided horizontally in half by a black top and red bottom, and punctuated by a yellow ochre circle symbolising a sun. The flag's colours are Black, Red PANTONE® 179 and Yellow PANTONE® 123. The flag's proportions are even and constitute six equal parts. The flag's height is equal to twice the circle's diameter; the flag's width is three times the circle's diameter.

In his public statements over many decades, Thomas has been unwavering in stating that his creation, the *Aboriginal flag*, is indeed art (Forester 2015). Sitting at the intersection of two cultures and two mediums, the *Aboriginal flag* has a complicated and specific reading that sets it apart from other flags and works of art. In its symbolism, the flag describes the relationship of people to land, land to culture, and culture to identity: concepts of great profundity for Indigenous Australians. The *Aboriginal flag* affirms black pride, it claims and asserts Aboriginal land rights, it advocates Indigenous self-determination, it repudiates the insidious policies and culture of assimilation, and it has come to symbolise the complex notion and claim of Indigenous sovereignty. As the pan-*Aboriginal flag*, it represents Indigenous Australians but it is not a nationalistic flag that claims

the nation of Australia for Indigenous Australians. Rather, it is the flag and symbol of a displaced peoples. In this sense, the *Aboriginal flag* has a different reading and intended purpose to most nation state flags, such as the Australian flag. The *Aboriginal flag's* reading is also different to the West Papuan flag, which is also the flag of a displaced Indigenous people. The latter, however, *does* claim West Papua for Indigenous West Papuans. As a non-nation-claiming flag, the *Aboriginal flag* is best understood as a flag of identity, political activist agendas and ideals. In this sense, the *Aboriginal flag* has much in common with the Eureka flag and the Peace/Gay Pride flag, as they are flags that affirm identities and political agendas or ideals.

The national Māori flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag, both of which were inspired by the *Aboriginal flag*, are perhaps the flags with which the *Aboriginal flag* shares the greatest number of themes, agendas and historical contexts. Neither Māori nor Torres Strait Islander people claim, however, that their flags are works of art.

The *Aboriginal flag's* semiotic reading does not relate to flag art works like the Jasper Jones *Flag* or myriad other works of art that depict flags. Other more recent artwork flags, which are in the form of flags, such as Australian Indigenous artist Archie Moore's many flag art works, are not flags adopted by peoples, hence they too are in a separate category of art flags. Seeking to understand the *Aboriginal flag* as a work of Western art or flag design or within a Western vexillological tradition has many limitations.

The *Aboriginal flag* is rarely understood as a work of art. In academic contexts it has only recently been written about as an agent of activism. In a broad sense, this is systematic of alienated relations. As stated by academic Marcia Langton in 1994, and echoed by Indigenous journalist Stan Grant (2016:4) more than 20 years later, 'Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people' (Langton 1994:99). This is the much-quoted line from Langton's essay 'Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation'. Langton goes on to assert that although racial discrimination is a big problem in Australia, it is not 'the central problem' or hurdle for improved race relations. Rather, what is most at stake is 'the need to develop a body of knowledge and critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, whether written by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people' (Langton 1994:96). To these statements we should perhaps add the proviso, Australians do not know or understand Aboriginal

culture; or, more specifically, the flag's non-status as art reflects a poor understanding of the role of culture in Indigenous activism.

The flag's status as art has been confused by its frequent appropriation by a very large number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Indeed, it has come to be perhaps one of the most appropriated works of art in Australian culture. The Sydney-based Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative curated a major exhibition and publication on that very premise entitled *True colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists raise the flag* (1994). The exhibition's Aboriginal curators were Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft, then aged 22 and 20 respectively. At the time, they chose not to recognise the *Aboriginal flag* as a work of art in its own right.

Croft's conceptualisation of the *Aboriginal flag* would evolve over the next 15 years. In 2010 Sydney City Council, as part of the Eora Journey review — Hetti Perkins was the review's curatorial advisor — asked Croft to identify what she considered to be a successful public artwork. Croft, who had become in the ensuing years an Indigenous academic, activist and artist, nominated the *Aboriginal flag* (Perkins et al. 2010). In 2012 Croft wrote the essay 'Revolutionize me (and you, and you, and you)' for the curated exhibition *Decolonize me* (exhibited at Ottawa Art Gallery and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Montreal, QC). In her essay, Croft chronicles Australian and international Indigenous activism and discusses the *Aboriginal flag* as both an artwork and as a work of activism. Croft argues that in the face of many traditional political platforms being 'dismantled, devolved, erased', one of the few 'avenues available to Indigenous people by which to make their/our concerns known is arts and cultural activism' (Croft 2012). Indigenous cultural practice in the form of dance, theatre, visual arts or music has established funding structures, captive audiences and stages that are often used by Indigenous artists as a platform for their political concerns. Noteworthy examples include Arnhem Land artists' *The Aboriginal memorial* (1987–88), Yothu Yindi's song *Treaty* (1991) and, of course, the *Aboriginal flag*. Brenda Croft, independent of research interviews related to this paper and my doctoral thesis, is, to my knowledge, the only person who has spoken publically or written about the *Aboriginal flag* as both a work of art and a work of activism.<sup>3</sup>

### 'The flag is me'<sup>4</sup>

Thomas is a Stolen Generations Aboriginal person. Before being taken from his family at the age of six, he lived on the fringes of Alice Springs, the red centre of Australia. Most of his childhood was spent in white institutions and white cultural contexts in Adelaide. In 1969 he became Australia's first Aboriginal art school graduate. Hence Thomas' art derives from two cultural traditions — Western and Aboriginal. These biographical facts help explain Thomas' motivations for creating the *Aboriginal flag* and the nature of his design and they reinforce an understanding of his masterpiece as art.

The first six years of his life were spent on the fringes of Mparntwe (the local Arrernte people's name for Alice Springs), where he lived with his extended Luritja/Wombai family in an area called The Cottages. This was the 'suburb' of Mparntwe where 'half cast' Aborigines, as they were then referred to, lived. 'Bush people' inhabited the mission and stations; white people lived in the town main: Alice Springs. At six, in 1953, Thomas was moved 1500 kilometres away to Adelaide. Thomas was only to see his mother once again in his life. Between 1953 and 1959 Thomas lived with other 'half cast' Aboriginal boys at St Francis House, a 'home' for boys from the Northern Territory located in a coastal suburb of Adelaide called Semaphore.<sup>5</sup> At 12 years of age he was fostered to Reverend Donald Wallace, rector at St John's Church in Adelaide, and his wife Gwen, a white family (Ward n.d.). In 1965 Thomas received a scholarship to study at the South Australian School of Art. For Thomas, art school represented community and freedom from racialised thinking and institutions, which had so dramatically shaped the first decades of his life: 'I made a decision about going to art school, because, I thought, "At least I won't be on my own, I won't have non-Aboriginals telling me what to do"' (ABC Radio National 2002).

The last time Thomas saw his mother was when he was 11 years old. St Francis House had a policy of intermittently sending the boys back to their families over summer holidays. This happened only once for Thomas, who visited his family on a cattle station called Denippa in the Northern Territory where Thomas' father was the manager. More than a decade later, after the death of his mother (in 1965), Thomas found out where his father was living and visited him once again in 1968. Father and son found

themselves to be estranged. Both felt 'distracted': '[T]hey tried to be cheerful but, "he [his father] was feeling a bit struck by it"' (Thomas v Brown [1997] FCA 215).

Later in his life Thomas became an active spokesperson for the Stolen Generations. Thomas' parents and his 16 brothers and sisters are all Stolen Generations Aboriginal people.

In a broad-ranging radio interview in 2002 for the ABC program *Dimensions in time* Thomas reflected on the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s, his first job at the Adelaide Museum and the sequence of events that led to him designing the *Aboriginal flag*:

It was a great experience, because it was during the '60s, and during the period of change for a lot of young people throughout the world...I applied for a job at the South Australian Museum, where I became the first Aboriginal to be employed in a museum in Australia. I was with the biggest collection of Aboriginal art – artefact in the world, and I had virtually free access to it. So I gleaned over every artefact, every design. I sort of went back into it and felt, 'There's something powerful and strong here that should be expressed.'

Thomas (in Tetlow 2013) discussed the *Aboriginal flag* in terms of Indigenous pride and identity:

And over that period of time, I was thinking more about identity, about who we were. And that's why the *Aboriginal flag* was there. To say to people, 'I've got a symbol that represents me and who I am, whether I live in Redfern or Adelaide or Perth, I'm proud of it.' I was working in close association with activist Gary Foley. We were working on medical and legal services, and I thought we needed a symbol to get our message across. So I came up with the idea of a flag.

Thomas (in ABC Radio National 2002) describes the flag's choice of colours and symbolism:

So it went on from there — it was a sequence of events which led to me being the designer of the Aboriginal flag. When I look carefully at what the *Aboriginal flag* looks like, it comes from the simplicity and power of Aboriginal art itself. Simple colour, choice of colour, and a simple design. It's powerful, and the colours are important. And it took some time to think about it — Red ochre, the red soil — the country of Australia is all red. Why I chose the sun? Because it's another

colour that is used commonly in Aboriginal art — yellow ochre. But the sun is a great symbol for all people. When we look carefully at the colour black, which is an interesting one, it's more of a political inclusion, rather than a spiritual, Aboriginal concept. The black represents the pride of being black in Australia. Because, at the time, black pride came into Australian culture — during the '60s and '70s — influenced by Black American pride of their culture. If this is going to be an *Aboriginal flag*, it has to have black, because it represents the black people of the continent.<sup>6</sup>

These quotes are discussed in detail across this paper. At this point, it is instructive to pause and consider one fortuitous aspect of Thomas' life: his birthplace, Alice Springs, a small city at the symbolic heart and geographic centre of the vast Australian continent. A glance at any map or satellite image of Australia reveals that the landscape is dominated by the great central deserts that cover 70 per cent of the continent: deserts such as the Great Victoria Desert, Great Sandy Desert, Tanami Desert, Simpson Desert and Gibson Desert, that are larger than countries as large as Italy. Luritja people are part of the Western Desert language group that traverses several central Australian deserts. Throughout much of this country, the sandy earth is indeed the vibrant red symbolised in the *Aboriginal flag*. Only 3 per cent of Australia's population lives in the desert regions. Thomas' statement that 'Red ochre, the red soil — the country of Australia is all red' does not apply where most Australians live along the continent's coastal regions, where the soil is one of many shades or combinations of brown, black, red and yellow. However, by fortuitous coincidence for Thomas and admirers of the *Aboriginal flag*, the idea and myth of the outback and its red centre as the spiritual and mythological heart of Australia resonates powerfully. It is in the centre that Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured the red earth into Vincent Lingiari's hand in 1975 and symbolically transformed Australia's race relations. By coincidence or design, the formal composition of the *Aboriginal flag* mirrors some images of Uluru, a geographic icon of Australia (Figure 2). These associations, sentiments and histories have shaped modern Australian mythology and self-identity as a nation and permeate and enrich our conscious and subconscious semantic understandings of the *Aboriginal flag*.

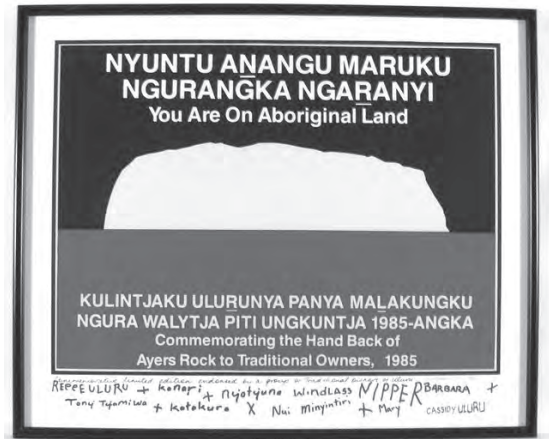


Figure 2: Chips Mackinolty, 1985, Commemorating the hand back of Uluru to Traditional Owners.<sup>7</sup> Reproduced with permission from the artist

### Aboriginal cultural practice

Thomas' art practice reveals that he simultaneously brought Indigenous ways of thinking, heritage and cultural knowledge to the design of the *Aboriginal flag*, as well as Western art school-taught sensibilities and epistemologies. The *Aboriginal flag* is part of a 50,000-year-old Australian Aboriginal art tradition, as well as being part of the relatively nascent Western or European art tradition. Both these ways of making art are characterised by their diversity, and both need to be understood in broad terms if we are to grasp the origins and meanings of the *Aboriginal flag*.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the literature of Aboriginal art is still dominated by non-Aboriginal academics. This reflects the complex statuses and dynamics of race relations in Australia, as well as the traditions, norms and demographics of each of these cultures. When Australia was colonised in 1788 it is estimated that there were between 300,000 to a million people, comprising more than 300 distinct Indigenous language groups or cultures, across the continent and surrounding islands. These diverse peoples shared a significant trait — knowledge was shared and maintained predominately via oral traditions. Through forced assimilation, over many generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have adopted European academic traditions such as the written word. By proportion, however, their demographics have inverted. Indigenous Australians now constitute just 2.5 per cent of the entire Australian population.

For much of Australia's shared history, the values of Western art were imposed on Indigenous cultural practice. It was first judged to be ethnographic material and was then framed as Primitive art, until it was 'discovered' to be 'contemporary' art, progressively, over the twentieth century<sup>8</sup> (Kleinert and Neale 2000:19, 454–60). According to Howard Morphy (1998:17), white Australians have somewhat reluctantly come to acknowledge that no single tradition of art (their own) has special rights or knowledge that affords it status as exemplar. Early European and American judgments of Aboriginal art reflected their colonial contexts and agendas; the vestiges of those early relations are still at play to this day. These many factors, the oral tradition in Aboriginal culture, their relatively small population, colonial agendas and vestiges, explain Indigenous people's relatively small self-representation in Western academia. Increasingly, there is a healthy dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics that reflects a maturing discourse. This first wave of Indigenous critics, according to Ian McLean (2011:61), has been instrumental in shifting the discourse away from modern and postmodern readings of Aboriginal art to a focus on the work's 'indigeneity'.

Knowledge, understanding and even appreciation beyond a superficial reading of traditional Aboriginal culture have some very significant hurdles. As identified by Peter Sutton (1988:49), the Dreaming is a belief system: 'While Aboriginal people may believe in the reality of the Dreamings...most others do not'. Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis expand on the implications of this argument: 'For non-Aboriginals, the spiritual can never fully operate as part of the work's meaning, because that would require a sharing of belief systems between producers, critics and viewers' (Fry and Willis 1989:114). Furthermore, only those who are initiated have access to its significant and sacred knowledges (Caruana 2012; Morphy 1998; Perkins 2007). This is an aspect of Aboriginal culture that both Marcia Langton and Indigenous curator/writer Franchesca Cubillo explore in their contributions to *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture* (Kleinert and Neale 2000). There are two fields of Aboriginal knowledge, 'the inner and the outer, or the secret-sacred and the mundane' (Kleinert and Neale 2000:23). This is a line of secrecy, which is constantly drawn according to Peter Sutton (1988:53); when he asked David Malangi the significance of a motif in his painting *Sacred places at Mimindjarr*, the

artist replied succinctly and emphatically, 'I know. You don't know.' While this dichotomy is not 'absolute and distinct' according to Langton, tight regulation of sacred knowledge is a powerfully determinate characteristic of Aboriginal culture (Kleinert and Neale 2000:23). In contrast, Christian religion and laws are publicly documented in the bible. Cubillo (in Kleinert and Neale 2000:29) both explores and describes the culture of secrecy in Aboriginal society:

Power, authority, status, and prestige are established in the telling and retelling of the ancestral stories. The identity of the narrator, the composition of the audience, the context, and the locality in which the myth is told — all these are factors that affect the extent and variety of information that is revealed.

These traditional structures of power that determine and regulate the sharing of cultural knowledge clearly transcend internal discourses among Aboriginal people. They are a significant aspect of colonial Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal power relations as well. Malangi's statement makes this point entirely clear. Indigenous people restrict knowledge to non-Indigenous people as a means of asserting power and control over their culture. As such, when looking at and thinking about Aboriginal art, all non-initiated people have to be mindful that they have access only to 'outside' or mundane representations of Indigenous culture. In a strict sense, traditional sacred–secret Indigenous art and its knowledges are 'off limits' to non-Indigenous people. It is literally unknowable. Through land dispossession and processes of colonisation that 'smashed the traditional way of life',<sup>9</sup> followed by decades of formal and informal policies of social and cultural assimilation, many contemporary Indigenous people have lost entry to the secret knowledges of their forbears. Aboriginal people with secret and sacred knowledge speak about their practices in very different ways from those whose songlines and Dreamings have been ruptured. Arnhem Land artist John Mawurndjul (in Perkins 2007:93) describes his art-making process in the following way:

I painted her, small painting of Ngalyod [Rainbow Serpent], at the start. I continued [painting] and, you know, my thinking. I had a dream about bark painting that made me want to go and cut the barks very large. So I went and cut a large bark.

It was enormous, and I did rarrk [a distinctive pattern consisting of cross-hatched lines] on it. It was a success! The Ngalyod that I paint...she has waterlilies growing out of her body. That Ngalyod placed herself into that site [Milmilngkan]. Absolutely no one is allowed to interfere with that place, no! We can only depict her with rarrk. At Milmilngkan I look after it. I look after Ngalyod, but no one can approach her. Only people of Yirridjja moiety can go for that place.

These words are part of a 4000-word monologue recorded in the handsome publication produced in 2007 by the Art Gallery of New South Wales under the editorship of Hetti Perkins, one of Australia's pre-eminent Indigenous curators. Mawurndjul reveals aspects of his traditional art-making process and his words also illustrate the great cultural divisions between his and Thomas' practice and, more broadly, the great cultural divisions between Western art and Indigenous Australian art practices. Clearly, Thomas and Mawurndjul speak very different art languages, as do Mawurndjul and I. Reading his monologue as an uninitiated person, I feel predominately estranged from a meaningful understanding of his culture beyond fairly inane generalisations; we 'occupy different historico-aesthetic space, as well as geographic, cultural and social space' (Willis and Fry 1988:9).

The challenge for all, white and black, who are interested in both Aboriginal art and Australia's race relations, is to not fall into the easy trap of forming essentialised archetypal generalisations about Indigenous peoples' broad and diverse traditional or contemporary art practices. Indigeneity is diverse. Every broad generalisation of traditional Indigenous art practice finds its exception in one of Australia's 300 Indigenous cultures.

Howard Morphy and Wally Caruana have introduced non-sacred understandings of Aboriginal art to wide audiences. Morphy's academic background is anthropological, whereas Caruana is a curator/writer with a degree in visual arts. Together they have researched and documented Indigenous art practice. In their books, both titled *Aboriginal art* (Caruana 2012; Morphy 1998), both keep their 'whitefella' observations relatively broad or specific to distinct language/cultural groups. Morphy's more ontological reading emphasises first principles and draws on a comparison of Indigenous and Western Euro-American art practice and values. He describes both Western and traditional Indigenous art objects

as being 'ones with aesthetic and semantic purposes that are used for representational or presentational purposes' (Morphy 1998:1). By this he means that both cultures produce art as a celebration of its formal aesthetic values, as well as a means of communicating shared social values in social 'ceremonies' such as corroborees or theatre productions (to name just two examples of many). Thus within similarities such as these, he identifies a space of 'cross-cultural' exchange that has facilitated Indigenous art's acceptance over time within the Western art canon.

Predominately, Morphy's focus is the significant differences between the two broad traditions, of which there are many. He observes, for example, that 'The designs are forms of knowledge rather than the products of individual creativity' (Morphy 1998:148). The former alludes to a radically different conception of the artist and his or her role in cultural practice, and a radically different conception of the art object, and its role in society. Traditional Aboriginal artists are custodians and conduits of knowledge between the spirit world and the mundane world. The individual artist is not seen as the source of creativity. Rather, the events of the Dreaming provide the great themes of Aboriginal art (Caruana 2012:11) and the designs of art, in the absence of written language, assume additional significance as repositories and signifiers of shared community knowledge.

Wally Caruana (2012:7) writes about Aboriginal art in more pedestrian terms, noting that 'Art is central to Aboriginal life. Whether it is made for political, social, utilitarian or didactic purposes — these functions overlap — it is inherently connected to the religious domain.' Most writers and academics emphasise the relationship between identity, art making and land custodianship as a critical foundation of traditional Aboriginal art (Caruana 2012:10; McCulloch 1999:12; Morphy 1998:148). And most identify traditional Aboriginal art to be a means 'by which the present is connected to the past and humans beings with the supernatural world' (Caruana 2012:10; Morphy 1998:48).

In contrast to the focus on the object of art that is at the forefront of much Western literature on Aboriginal art, senior Indigenous artist, writer, curator and educator Djon Mundine (2012:35) emphasises its social role: 'In Aboriginal society all art is a social act. Ceremonies are the coming together of different groups of people to collaborate along prescribed lines to create art in song, dance and structured ritual.' The

significance Mundine attributes to art as a social act finds representation in much traditional Aboriginal art in the form of a circle, the symbolism of which is discussed later in the essay. Mundine's description of the intensely social norms of traditional Indigenous cultural practice contrasts with Western norms. The archetypal Western artist works alone, and his or her practice is expected to be highly individualised.

In her reading of contemporary Indigenous art practice in *One sun, one moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, Hetti Perkins (2007) emphasises art's cathartic values for generations of Aboriginal people traumatised by more than 200 years of colonisation. She acknowledges that many Aboriginal artists have incorporated Western art values such as individual expression and innovation into their art. In her nuanced essay, Perkins (2007:14) describes how some Indigenous artists bridge both Indigenous and Western ways of making art in their practices: 'Indigenous artists have forged distinctive personal and visual expressions that embrace the communal, yet demonstrate the role of the individual as an innovator in the perpetuation of tradition.' These contemporary artists are best understood as hybrid cultural practitioners. They combine the values and techniques of both Western and Indigenous art in their practices.

### **The Aboriginal flag as Aboriginal art**

In Thomas' own words, the *Aboriginal flag* design 'comes from the simplicity and power of Aboriginal art itself. Simple colour, choice of colour, and a simple design. It's powerful, and the colours are important' (ABC Radio National 2002). Thomas is referring to traditional Aboriginal art that he studied at the South Australian Museum as part of his research for the flag. The South Australian Museum's collection of Australian ethnographic material is the largest and most representative collection in the world. It has more than 30,000 items from many different Indigenous communities, language groups and individuals across Australia. The collection has a focus on Aboriginal men's restricted objects and Aboriginal skeletal material. In his previously quoted observations relating to the South Australian Museum collection, Thomas essentialises Aboriginal art, which does have some broadly recognisable formal aesthetic characteristics. Aboriginal art features striking geometric design, strong graphic qualities, schematic representation, flat representations of things (compositions do not

have visual depth or employ perspective) and a limited earthy palette. The materials and palette of Aboriginal art, at a superficial level and in a way that has the potential to be misleading, are its most unifying elements. It is made from just a few readily available materials that are found across the Australian continent and surrounding islands: earth and earth-based ochres, wood, sand, stone, fibre, feathers, bone, seeds and shells. These materials were manipulated with basic tools such as stone axes and fibre or hair-based paintbrushes and applied to the body, rocks, bark and animal skins. The materials and palette of Aboriginal art are clearly determining aspects of its aesthetic, but they should not be thought of as constituting a 'style' or epistemological framework.

In traditional bark paintings and rock art there is little mixing of colours and variation in tone within the scope or palette of colours used by the artist. Instead, a work of art will characteristically feature single tones of just four colours: yellow ochre, white, red and black (Fairley 2015). To Western eyes, some Aboriginal art appears to sit between abstraction and figuration. Some aspects do simply represent abstract designs (Morphy 1998); however, geometric patterns such as the cross-hatching characteristic of Arnhem Land art are often coded and, as previously noted, akin to a basic written language. Sutton (1988:36) contrasts European impressionist painting (which seeks to create an impression) and Aboriginal art (which generally is reductive, or generative, depending on your view) to make the observation that the former approach is predominately perceptual, while the latter is generally more conceptual. By conceptual, Sutton (1988:49) means, 'The meaning of a symbol such as a circle or a depiction of a snake is not simply the object it represents; it is also what the object stands for.' The circle may represent, for example, a ceremonial gathering and all its social meanings as cultural locus. Clearly, as documented earlier, the way Thomas describes the meanings of the *Aboriginal flag* reflects this conceptual approach.

What is striking in both Thomas' description of traditional art and those of Perkins, Cubillo, Mundine, Caruana, Morphy and my own, is that the great majority of those broad generalisations apply to the *Aboriginal flag*. In formal terms, the flag is characterised by its striking geometric design, strong graphic qualities, sematic representation and limited palette; and it sits between abstraction and figuration. Of greater significance, as a work of conceptual art,



the flag expresses Indigenous knowledge, it serves political, social, utilitarian and didactic purposes, and it expresses individual and group identity that is strongly associated with land custodianship. The latter is visualised in historical and contemporary images of young boys from Arnhem Land, who, as part of their initiation ceremonies, are seen lying on their backs, having their totem designs painted on their bodies with various earth ochre paints. The elders are imparting the secrets tenets of Aboriginal culture to these young men. Here we have the earth as initiation, the earth as knowledge, the earth as bed, the earth as paint, the earth as culture and the suggestion of the earth as the body's final resting place. This is the essence of the *Aboriginal flag* as well. In Thomas' words, the flag represents the 'black people's connection to red land' (ABC Radio National 2002).

### The *Aboriginal flag* as Western art

As a Stolen Generations individual, the majority of Thomas' life before designing the *Aboriginal flag* was spent in white institutions and within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social milieus. At St Francis House, Aboriginal boys surrounded Thomas, but he was never to be initiated or taught the traditional ways by his Aboriginal elders. As part of his four-year Diploma in Fine Art (Painting) degree (1965–69), he was taught Western art history, Western art techniques and ways of thinking that have clearly been deeply influential on his practice. Thomas' creative practice is firmly rooted in two very different cultures, which have manifested themselves in contrasting ways. As such, it is vital to also understand and contextualise the *Aboriginal flag* within the canon of Western art.

As Australia's first Aboriginal graduate from a Western art school, Thomas was the first of a new generation and type of Aboriginal artist, urban or remote. Unlike his Indigenous predecessors such as Albert Namatjira, who also employed Western art mediums and techniques, Thomas was taught to think in a more conceptual and critical manner germane to a Euro-American artistic practice and traditions. The difference between the ways in which Namatjira and Thomas conceptualised their art is, to an extent, a reflection of the broader changing norms of how Western art was taught and conceived in two different art historical periods or epistemologies, as well as reflecting each artist's art philosophy and their relative connection to their traditional cultures. Though Namatjira painted in a Western style and

with Western materials, his watercolour paintings depict his people's significant ancestral places (Caruana 2012:106; French 2002:18, 19). Before the 1960s Australian art such as Namatjira's was based on traditional art skills (painting and sculpting), and this understanding of the history of art and Modern art. Art made in the 1960s and later, such as Thomas' *Aboriginal flag*, reflects art under the influence of the values, strategies and ways of thinking of the many art movements of that era, such as the American Black Arts movement, Minimalism, Arte Povera and Conceptual art. In this sense, the *Aboriginal flag* was very much part of the zeitgeist of its age. The way Thomas discusses the formal properties of the *Aboriginal flag* is to a Western artist such as myself very familiar: we speak the same Western, conceptual art school-taught language.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas as flag designer was a pioneer for subsequent generations of generally urban Aboriginal artists who would excel in this new Western art school-taught, hybrid conceptual way of making and thinking about Aboriginal art. Representative and exemplary of conceptual Aboriginal art practice are artists like Tracey Moffatt, Fiona Foley, Jonathan Jones, Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee and Brook Andrew. It is important to quantify these statements, however, by recognising that the *Aboriginal flag* is Thomas' best known artwork. The majority of his creative output has been figurative watercolour landscape paintings, which he describes as commercial art.<sup>11</sup> The latter has been a means of income for him since the mid-1980s and he has supported his family through the sale of his paintings and copyright revenues from the *Aboriginal flag*. In 2016 Thomas' painting *Tribal abduction* won the 33rd Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. The painting, which is perhaps autobiographical in its themes, depicts in a mannerist painterly style the taking of an Aboriginal child from his family by Australian Government officials. This work conceivably marks a turn away from figuration in Thomas' practice, back towards art that has a narrative and is conceptual or political in its premises.

As a work of art, the *Aboriginal flag's* most significant characteristics are its overt politics, its anti-establishment ethos, the context for which it was created (the street rather than galleries) and its semantic reading between mediums (art and flag insignia). These characteristics set it apart from most Modern art leading up to the 1960s, which was created for exhibition in galleries and was primarily

concerned with an internal art dialogue that explored the parameters and discipline of art making as a separate set of concerns to the day-to-day concerns of life. Understanding the flag within this Modernist art framework is instructive for a number of reasons. It reveals the conservative Modern art ideologies and agendas that seek to deny artworks like the *Aboriginal flag* status as art, and it reveals the many values to which the *Aboriginal flag* is antithetical.

Many conservative arts professionals (artists, curators and critics) oppose art that engages with that messy thing called life. In 2004 one of the art world's most influential conservative art magazines, *Artforum*, published a feature edition titled *The art of politics*. The editor, Tim Griffin (2004:205), introduces the collection of essays by stating that "The issue proved by far the most challenging to be assembled by the current editorial group at Artforum — due in part to a deep-seated resistance we felt to the pairing of art and politics, or, to recast the matter slightly, the pairing of art and its social context."

French-American academic Gabriel Rockhill (2010), in his talk 'Critique of the ontological illusion: rethinking the relation between art and politics', labours a simple and seemingly straightforward point: a thorough evaluation or critique of any work of art should encompass a wider knowledge base of the context of that artwork's creation and exhibition. In other words, art is not created in a social and political vacuum. It is surprising that Rockhill feels compelled to make this basic point to a group of art academics. Griffin's rejection of 'the pairing of art and its social context' is even more surprising. Many of the magazine's articles contradict this position — they discuss the lives of the artists they review, the social context of their works' creation, and their social and artistic influences. Both these positions and arguments are best understood within broad ideological divisions in the art world. The modernist, now conservative, art viewing approach emphasises self-referentiality (art for art sake) and the rejection (in theory rather than practice) of 'the pairing of art and its social context'.

Some answers to the initially puzzling insistence on this separation can be found in *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, Pierre Bourdieu's classic 1979 sociological study of class and distinction in France in the post-Second World War era. Bourdieu (1986[1979:3]) argues that 'the pure intention of the artist is that of a producer

who aims to be autonomous, that is, entirely the master of his product' and that "To assert the autonomy of production is to give primacy to that of which the artist is master, i.e., form, manner, style, rather than the "subject". Bourdieu (1986[1979]:6) convincingly frames 'autonomous' Modern art as a tool of social distinction and a means of reinforcing bourgeois values, famously stating, 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.' This order seeks to give primacy to the proponents of Modernism: the Modern artist, Modern critic and Modern art collector.<sup>12</sup> To open the door, to let the *social* enter the realm of 'art', is to forgo the 'aura' of the Modern work of art and its underlying constructed social and economic value to the bourgeois.

The system of exclusion described by Bourdieu has the potential to work powerfully for and against individual artists' agendas. A minority of artists profit handsomely from this system when their art establishes itself as being celebrated and highly sought after. Clearly, for an artist like Thomas, an outsider who has suffered deep discrimination, the rarefied and self-serving ideals of Modern art were the antithesis of his lived experience, culture and social class and his agenda as a radical young Aboriginal artist. Thomas imagined that art could serve agendas beyond the limitations and confines of bourgeois Modern art and he intuitively drew upon life to create his masterpiece. In this, he was not alone; the 1960s and 1970s saw many counterculture artists seek to undermine the arts establishment by creating often ephemeral, non-commercial art that would speak directly to the masses on the street. In Australia, exemplary artists included Geoff Hogg, Gwenda Wiseman and David McDiarmid, who created murals and posters that featured on the streets of Australia's main metropolitan centres.

The *Aboriginal flag*, as a cheaply reproducible ensign, undermines many of the structures of Modern art that Bourdieu describes. It represents the values of a social and economic minority, can be owned by anyone who has a few dollars, is not dependent on art institutions for its validation as a powerful sign and, since art collectors or traders have yet to find a way to market and profit from its sale, exists outside of a bourgeois value exchange system. These arguments explain, to some extent, the *Aboriginal flag*'s non-status as art.

In response to mass consumer culture, new and idiosyncratic ways of making art emerged in the

twentieth century that challenged how art is defined. In turn new theories also emerged that sought to describe how everyday objects became art. The Institutional Definition of Art — as described by Arthur Danto (1964) and George Dickie (1984) — is one such theory. It emerged in the 1960s around the time Thomas was at art school, and when he created the *Aboriginal flag*. Its ideas relate closely to the cultural, social and consumer contexts within which the flag was conceived, making its selection as a vehicle for understanding and defining the flag as art particularly appropriate and revealing. In the essay ‘The artworld’, Danto grapples with Andy Warhol’s radical *Brillo boxes* artwork/provocation. Danto seeks to understand the significance of objects (Brillo boxes) that exist simultaneously in a storeroom or supermarket and an art gallery, concluding that it is criticism, philosophy or theory that makes one art and the other not (Danto 1964:581). These ideas have their popular expression in the art world maxim ‘Art is anything defined as art’. George Dickie’s 1984 contribution to this discourse (*The art circle*) argues for a broader understanding of the definition of art, one that acknowledges the social mechanism at play in the art-defining process. He draws the following conclusions, which he presents in point form:

- *An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of art.*
- *A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be represented to an artworld public.*
- *A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared to some degree to understand an object which is presented to them.*
- *The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.*
- *The artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.* (Dickie 1984:80–2)

Within the Institutional Definition of Art model, part of the art world’s job is to determine what is art — this is what the art world does. It is equally important to understand Dickie’s social mechanism model as inclusive and empowering. Every artist and every member of the art world plays a role in determining the parameters of art and its dominant value judgments. This idea of art is circular and therefore a flawed system in the eyes of some. Like a snake devouring its own tail, art world constituents both police and are

policed in the Institutional Definition of Art model. Danto’s and Dickie’s ideas have broad currency and continue to describe, for many, contemporary art world socially determined definitions of art. Within the Institutional Definition of Art model, the first of a two-step process of the art world reaching a consensus on the status of Thomas’ flag as art is in place. Thomas is a trained artist and he consciously conceived the flag as art. Brenda Croft’s statements and essays, statements by Michael Anderson and Gary Foley, and, I hope, this present paper are steps towards the art world recognising the flag as art.

One way of understanding the ontology of art making (the way it comes into being) is to view it as a series of value judgments that the artist makes during the creative process. This process is as much about what the artist chooses to do as it is about what the artist chooses to leave out of the artwork. Within this understanding of art making, the *Aboriginal flag* final ‘design’ is simple. That said, the decisions Thomas made to create the flag reflect a critical process that resulted in a deeply satisfying design that has rich historical and semantic references and meanings. The following concluding arguments explore the flag’s essential formal elements, the flag semiotic readings and variations of Thomas’ design. Together these analyses reveal that the design of the *Aboriginal flag* was a carefully considered, drawn out process of a serious artist.

The flag’s composition depicts a landscape. This formal quality sets the *Aboriginal flag* apart from most flags, which are abstract and symbolic in design. Within the landscape, this aspect of Thomas’ design gives the flag a sense of formal resolution; the flag mirrors the context within which most flags are displayed. The ground (or earth), horizon line, sky and sun are all present and represented in the flag’s design; this landscape is the context in which the flag is most often flown. That said, the sun in Thomas’ flag is represented in the flag’s ‘landscape’, but not in a naturalistic way. Instead of the sun either receding behind the horizon (like a setting sun), or being placed in the ‘sky’ (as the Southern Cross star configuration is represented in the Australian flag), it is superimposed on the landscape. In Thomas’ design, he elected to superimpose a full sun in the composition and place the black band on top as the composition’s horizon. A less judicious, more literal approach may have resulted in the flag being reconfigured



Figure 3: Mathieu Gallois, Flag variation study #1



Figure 4: Mathieu Gallois, Flag variation study #2

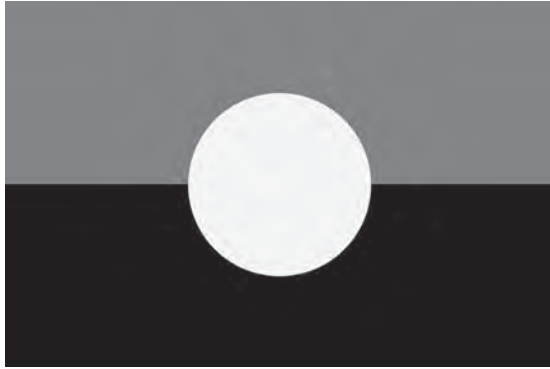
to present a more literal representation of the sun within a landscape (as a setting sun) (Figure 3). In this image, the magic of Thomas' design is clearly missing. The sun, surprisingly, is now more dominating in the composition, even though only half of its diameter is visible. The design now represents a setting sun within a landscape. In this reading, the sense so powerfully conveyed in Thomas' flag, that of the Aboriginal peoples' spiritual connection to the landscape, is weakened. A setting sun could be interpreted as symbolically representing Indigenous Australians' decline as a people, a deeply inappropriate reading of the flag that would be antithetical to Thomas' Black Pride agendas. Finally, this more literal landscape makes less formal sense — the sky in a setting sun landscape is never black, or dark (as in a night sky). Figure 4 shows the flag without a sun. This design is far more abstract in its reading — the illustration could still be a landscape that reinforces Aboriginal peoples' connection to their land, but it could also be read more like the German flag — a flag made

up of horizontal colour bands or strips that is abstract (it does not represent or suggest object(s) or a landscape).

A reading of the yellow ochre sun or circle not identified in any of Thomas' public statements on the *Aboriginal flag*, but nevertheless worthy of mention, is intimated in Peter Sutton's (1988:29) broader readings of what he describes as 'the aesthetic locus of Aboriginal art'; Sutton argues that the key locus of Aboriginal aesthetics, 'in the classical traditional', is ceremony and its symbolic representation in Aboriginal art is the circle. In Aboriginal art the circle is 'an almost universal motif' that 'reflects the intimacy and egalitarian spatial symbolism of the arrangement of a people around a single camp fire' (Sutton 1988:63). It represents and symbolises the physical arrangements of ceremonies. If Sutton's assertions are correct, they perhaps further help explain the affinity a great many Indigenous people feel across Australia's hundreds of Aboriginal language groups with the *Aboriginal flag's* symbolism. A fundamental precept of Indigenous culture, the circle, is found in its symbolism.

In the final flag variation study (Figure 5), the *Aboriginal flag* is shown with the black band at the flag's base. Black, as a heavy visual mass, makes this redesigned flag more like a traditional 'balanced' landscape image (usually, to balance a composition, the heaviest shapes and colours of a painting or design are placed at the bottom of an image). Thomas chose to place the black band at the top of the flag 'as a means of unsettling the composition of the flag'.<sup>13</sup> By placing the black on top (the colour with the greatest visual weight), Thomas reasoned that that colour, as the flag's 'political inclusion', made the design more compelling and powerful.

The *Aboriginal flag* appropriates a Western, non-Aboriginal idea of flag making, but its purpose and reading also have parallels in traditional Indigenous Australian language groups who create motifs and signs to identify cultural groupings and signify 'custodianship' of land. Thomas' flag was conceived in defiance of British, and later Australian, government claims of sovereignty over Aboriginal people. Finally, the *Aboriginal flag* reaffirms Aboriginal peoples' connection to their ancestral land. Aboriginal people see the who and what of Aboriginal identity expressed in their *Aboriginal flag*. Thomas' job at the South



**Figure 5:** Mathieu Gallois, Flag variation study #3

Australian Museum, which gave him access to the largest collection of Australian Aboriginal art in the world, enabled him to ‘glean over every artifact, every design’ in the collection (ABC Radio National 2002). In this ideal settling, Thomas was able to immerse himself, research and think about his Indigenous cultural heritage and conclude, ‘There’s something powerful and strong here that should be expressed’ (ABC Radio National 2002). Thomas states that the flag’s design was not ‘an accident, it was...planned’ (in Forester 2015). Clearly, these are not the recollections of an artist who got lucky and chanced a compelling flag design. Rather, these statements support the view that Thomas’ flag-conceiving process was indeed the drawn out considered process of a serious artist. At just 24 years of age, Thomas demonstrated remarkable maturity, ingenuity and confidence in his art-making value judgments. Thomas identified the strengths (as he perceived them) of Aboriginal culture and reconceptualised the ‘simple’ and ‘powerful’ graphic qualities of Aboriginal art into a compelling non-Indigenous contemporary cultural framework: flag making. In doing so, Thomas created a design that is both timeless and contemporary; he bridged two cultures, one ancient, the other modern. The *Aboriginal flag* possesses all the qualities of great art; it looks both backwards and forwards in cultural time and speaks a compelling visual language that transcends words and cultures.

### Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my father, Jean-Noël Gallois, in acknowledgment of his support of my research during a difficult year in 2015.

### NOTES

1. *Aboriginal flag* in italics as per the titles of artworks.
2. As stated in an informal unrecorded conversation with the author on 17 February 2016.
3. Michael Anderson affirmed that the Aboriginal flag is art when I interviewed him at Redfern Park, Sydney on 3 November 2014; the recording and transcript are stored in Dr Adam Geczy’s office, SCA Academic Programs, Sydney College of Arts.
4. In an informal unrecorded conversation on 17 February 2016 with the author, Harold Thomas stated ‘the flag is me’.
5. Activist Charles Perkins is an alumnus of St Francis House (Anon 1951:7).
6. Thomas chose his colours wisely. The flag’s three colours, red, black and yellow ochre, would come to transcend the flag to represent the colours of Aboriginal Australia, a feat that eludes the Australian flag. (Australian sports people are invariably dressed in drab green and gold, the colours of Australia’s national floral emblem, the wattle.)
7. A colour print on paper featuring a yellow representation of Uluru on a red and black background, similar in design to the Australian *Aboriginal flag*. The top section of the print is black with white text ‘NYUNTU ANANGU MARUKU NGURANGKA NGARANYI / You Are On Aboriginal Land’. The lower section is red with yellow text: ‘KULINTJAKU ULURUNYA PANYA MALAKUNGKU NGURA WALYTJA PITI UNGKUNTJA 1985-ANGKA / Commemorating the Hand Back of Ayers Rock to Traditional Owners, 1985’. Underneath the print, handwritten in black ink is ‘Commemorative limited edition endorsed by a group of Traditional owners of Uluru’, in pencil ‘JALAK / REDBACK “85” 18/44’, and in blue ink are signatures of traditional owners of Uluru. On the reverse is a silver sticker with the ‘ADC’ asset number ‘1 1770’ and a yellow framing sticker from ‘GREEN DOOR’. The print is under glass and has a black wooden frame. Object number: 2007.0053.0960.
8. In 1959 the Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibited *Seventeen ceremony poles from the Pukumani ceremony*. This exhibition is one of the first instances in which Aboriginal art was consciously exhibited as contemporary art (McCulloch 2008).
9. Excerpt from Prime Minister Paul Keating’s speech at the launch of Australia’s celebration of the 1993 International Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, Redfern Park, 10 December 1992 (Keating 1993).
10. I use the term conceptual art in an overarching way to designate an approach in which the emphasis is on the ideas of art, its politics and its social contexts, alongside its aesthetic and material qualities.
11. As stated in an informal unrecorded conversation on 20 July 2016 with the author.
12. This reading of Modern art is a twenty-first century reading of Modernism, one that acknowledges it

as a system of values that some artists choose to adhere to as contemporary artists. That said, in our contemporary context, Modern art represents an art ideology associated predominately with a European and American art-making period stretching from the eighteenth century to the 1960s. Within that same cultural Euro-American framework, Modernism has since become one of many isms (popism, conceptualism, minimalism, postmodernism) and it is critically no longer associated with progressive social values. Modern art in the twenty-first century seeks predominately to maintain and celebrate an archaic modern set of art values.

13. As stated in an informal, unrecorded conversation on 3 December 2013 with the author.

## REFERENCES

- ABC Radio National 2002 'Harold Thomas — creator of the Aboriginal flag', *Dimensions in time*, 25 March, <[http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions\\_in\\_time/Transcripts/s513731.htmBroadcast](http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions_in_time/Transcripts/s513731.htmBroadcast)> accessed March 2014. (Note: transcript of interview is held by the author.)
- Anon 1951 'St Francis' House, Semaphore', *Centralian Advocate*, 2 February, p.7, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/59840102>> accessed 27 October 2016.
- Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative 1994 *True colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists raise the flag*, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Chippendale, NSW.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1986 [1979] *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Caruana, Wally 2012 *Aboriginal art*, 3rd edn, Thames and Hudson Australia, Port Melbourne, Vic.
- Croft, Brenda 2012 'Revolutionize me (and you, and you, and you)' in H Igloliorte (ed.), *Decolonize me*, Ottawa Art Gallery and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Montreal, pp.46–73.
- Danto, Arthur 1964 'The artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61:571–84.
- Dickie, George 1984 *The art circle: a theory of art*, Haven Publications, New York.
- Fairley, Gina 2015 'Harvard makes new discoveries about bark painting', ArtsHub <<http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/museums/gina-fairley/harvard-makes-new-discoveries-about-bark-painting-249617>> accessed 27 January 2015.
- Forester, Lola 2015 Interview with Harold Thomas, *Black Chat*, Koori Radio, 10 August, <<https://soundcloud.com/koori-radio/feature-interview-harold-thomas-on-blackchat-august-10-2015>> accessed 17 October 2016.
- French, Alison 2002 *Seeing the centre: the art of Albert Namatjira, 1902–1959*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
- Fry, Tony and Anne-Marie Willis 1989 'Aboriginal art: symptom or success?', *Art in America* 77(7):109–17, 159.
- Gallois, Mathieu 2012 *Wellington: country, spirit and belonging*, Mathieu Gallois Wellington Project 2005–2012, Wellington, NSW.
- 2016 'The Aboriginal flag as activist art', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 5(1):19–31.
- Grant, Stan 2016 *Talking to my country*, Harper Collins, Sydney.
- Griffin, Tim 2004 'The art of politics', *Artforum International* 43(1):205.
- Keating, Paul 1993 'Opportunity and care, dignity and hope, 1993', National Archives of Australia, <<http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/galleries/audio/>> accessed 17 February 2016.
- Kleinert, Sylvia and Margo Neale 2000 *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Langton, Marcia 1994 'Aboriginal art and film — the politics of representation', *Race and Class* 35(4): 89–106.
- Martin, Sarah 2014 'Black circle may prove missing link to lost first Aboriginal flag', *The Australian*, 29 December, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/black-circle-may-prove-missing-link-to-lost-first-aboriginal-flag/news-story/2ec19f1dd876f39fe6a27e0d9462c361>> accessed 27 October 2016.
- McCulloch, Susan 1999 *McCulloch's contemporary Aboriginal art: the complete guide*, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- 2008 *McCulloch's contemporary Aboriginal art: the complete guide*, new edn, McCulloch & McCulloch Australian Art Books, Fitzroy, Vic.
- McLean, Ian 2011 *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: writings on Aboriginal art*, Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, Sydney.
- Morphy, Howard 1998 *Aboriginal art*, Phaidon Press, London.
- Mundine, Djon 2012 'The ballad of Jimmy Governor and post in the paddock', *Artlink* 32(2):34–37.
- Perkins, Hetti 2007 *One sun one moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
- , Julie Cracknell, Peter Lonergan, Carrie Mulford and Genevieve O'Callaghan 2010 'Eora journey: international review of contemporary interpretation practice', City of Sydney Council, Sydney.
- Rockhill, Gabriel 2010 'Critique of the ontological illusion: rethinking the relation between art and politics' in A Esch-van Kan, S Packard and P Schulte (eds), *Thinking – resisting – reading the political*, Giessen, Germany.
- Sutton, Peter 1988 *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia*, G Braziller in association with Asia Society Galleries, New York.
- Tetlow, Miranda 2013 'The man behind the flag', 105.7 ABC Darwin, 17 January, <[www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2013/01/17/3671660.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2013/01/17/3671660.htm)> accessed 29 September 2016.

Thomas v Brown [1997] FCA 215, <<https://jade.io/article/154789?at.hl=Thomas+v+Brown+%255B1997%255D+FCA+215>> accessed 27 October 2016.

Ward, Ted n.d. *The church: history*, St John's Anglican Church, Adelaide, <[http://www.stjohnsadelaide.org.au/church\\_history.html](http://www.stjohnsadelaide.org.au/church_history.html)> accessed 17 February 2016.

Willis, Anne Marie and Tony Fry 1988 'Art as ethnocide: the case of Australia', *Third Text* 2:3–20.

---

**Mathieu Gallois** graduated from the Institute of the Arts, Australian National University in 1996. He has exhibited both nationally and internationally, realising more than 50 exhibitions. His work has been selected for numerous national art prizes for which he has received awards and commendations. In collaboration with Wellington's (NSW) Wiradjuri Aboriginal community, between 2011 and 2013, Gallois researched and wrote the publication *Wellington* (2012). Gallois' grandfather Ernest Moulton (1905–1966), a British migrant who settled in Wellington in 1944, purchased the local *Wellington Times* newspaper and, as editor, became a prominent conservative voice in the community for the next 21 years. *Wellington* gives an intimate history of the town's race relations, processes of colonisation, and the community's tentative steps towards reconciliation, highlighting some of the complexities of cross-cultural engagement as well as issues of censorship and selective historicising.

In 2013 Gallois accepted an Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship to undertake a doctorate at the College of Fine Arts (UNSW). Gallois' thesis explores the *Aboriginal flag* as a work of activist art that has brought about social change. It is the first academic study of the *Aboriginal flag*. <[mgallois@hotmail.com](mailto:mgallois@hotmail.com)>