

*Communicating Knowledge about the World: Reflective, Collaborating Artists*

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**Abstract**

Art and filmmaking practices are shared across linguistic and diverse social contexts, reflecting a variety of epistemological views, of diverse ways of knowing about the world. There are points of connection and dissonance when one works with a cultural group that shares little of the language and cultural practice that an individual identifies as their own. This paper explores the experiences of four artists working in the Northern Territory of Australia. It highlights individual responses to adjust and adapt to artistic contexts outside their established perceptual norms as they work with Indigenous people. From these reflections come strategies to build effective collaborative art projects that develop a deeper, sustainable form of trans-cultural communication, where one way of doing and being does not seek to overwhelm or dominate the other. Visual expressions are shown as one way to break through difficult histories and current problems, extending empathetic discussion about what it means to know about art and the places it is created in. This notion will be illustrated by art-works created in this context. The underpinning idea is that a shift in epistemology works two ways when art practice is open to respect and change. The voices here are from people who have learned from interactions with Australian Indigenous people.

Keywords: visual art, collaboration, indigenous, filmmaking, epistemology,

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*Always remember that what makes you all Australian is the fact that you live on this land, on our ancestral lands and with our creation stories. Lastly what makes you Australian, is in fact your interactions with us, the First Nations peoples of this land- in the past now and in the future. It is what makes you different from your ancestors whose spirits lie in other land. It is what gives you belonging on and to this land.*

(Pamela Crofts cited in Mellor and Haebich, 2002)

## **Introduction**

Ways of knowing about the world are not restricted to being an intellectual exercise or confined to books and philosophies read by the highly educated few. Epistemological perspectives are grounded in places and people. Various ways of seeing the world extend ideas about what it means to be a human being in a particular place through their interactions with one another. Dialectical biologists such as Levins and Lewontin (1985); social theorists such as Gibson (1979) and Latour (2005); and linguists such as Sapir and Whorf (Whorf, 1956; Chandler, 2009); have explored variations in how people describe and attune world views according to their location. In seeking ways to embed ideas into a lived environment, these theorists commonly define a philosophy that considers an individual's knowledge as not separate and isolated from an environment, but part of it; living within it and interacting. This is an important issue in a world where distances and ideologies are aided by technologies that make physical place seem less of an impact while at the same time, the importance of identifying with and protecting places is commonly shared and essential for a sustainable future. Increasingly these perspectives can easily be shared through images, rather than words.

The ideas expounded in this paper highlight that ways of knowing are closely grounded in a particular place, accessing and using what is made available in that zone. Auto-ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) provided a vehicle to reflect on epistemological transformation by a small group of artists who had post-graduate qualifications in Visual Arts. These reflections provided insights into an individual artist's view or developing relationship to place and people when working within and for Indigenous Australian communities. The process of writing this paper was one where four artists provided a reflective narrative. These narratives were shared and considered to form the discussion of this paper. This extends the discourse about how artists and individuals can engage across cultural views, especially in post-colonial spaces.

The work highlights that within any one place, a person is surrounded by cultural beliefs and practices that can be absorbed, appropriated, rejected and/or ignored, whether this is in the urban high rise, the Australian 'bush' or other environments where humans live and learn. This interaction with the world is particularly true for the sojourning and resident artist who is prepared to explore different ways of seeing and doing artwork by working with others. The attempt to mediate between diverse world views is linked to perspectives of justice (Watson and Chambers, 1989: 8). While the acceptance or absorption into new ways of seeing can create dissonance with established norms, this process of learning helps to extend an innovative space of knowing through acting in the world.

Greater understanding can develop of how art and art-making may shift epistemology, or ways of knowing, in another direction (Banks and Morphy, 1998). Individual responses of adjusting and adapting to artistic contexts outside established perceptual norms in painting, printmaking, film and sculptural weaving reflects how collaborative or co-operative art projects can develop a deeper form of trans-cultural communication, where one way of doing and being does not seek to overwhelm or dominate the other. Through the discussion of the reflective practitioner, visual expressions are shown as one way to break through difficult histories and current problems, extending empathetic discussion about what it means to know about art and the places it is created in. This notion will be illustrated by art-works created in context. The underpinning idea is that a shift in epistemology works two ways (Ober and Bat, 2007) when art practice is open to respect of one another and openness to change.

### **Epistemology in art practice**

Australia was a nation formed for the utilitarian purpose of removing undesirable people from the industrialised domain within Britain. The Indigenous people within it were given little or no status or recognition as being the first people on the land (Reynolds, 1996). Many Australian non-Indigenous artists working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century recognise the effects of this colonial history and seek to address the impact when working with Indigenous people on what they recognise as usurped lands. Some of the situations are within an urban setting while others are as a visitor to predominantly Indigenous communities. This way of working adopts what underpins educational philosophy known as ‘both ways’ wherein Indigenous ontology and epistemology is respected and given credence as a way to know and be alongside western ways of thinking and operating in the world (Ober and Bat, 2007).

The relationships that develop when making room for an exchange across cultural perspectives is not without controversy and problems in the art world (McLean, 2014). Communication lines between the artists, working relationships with Indigenous people and the constructs within which these relationships develop exist within the shadow of history of appropriation of land and decimation of culture. Even so, these temporary residents (in relative time) in the landscape brush against Indigenous people and artists whose knowledge is imbued with that place’s form and very existence. This has influenced the sojourners thinking and ways of behaving towards the people and the places they inhabit. The experiences of the authors cannot be separated from a historical context but the process of engagement and reflection suggests that such interactive practices through ‘doing together’ help to shift the hegemony.

To decolonise ways of thinking, it is essential to acknowledge the colonial viewpoint of place. Perspectives of the land and how one relates to it have shifted for many people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Environmental philosophy is a relevant form of discourse in this context. Particularly pertinent is Val Plumwood’s (2002) analysis about Australian relationship to land and the affiliation with Indigenous perspectives as this raises many philosophical issues for people working with Indigenous people. How communication about the land Indigenous Australian academics Marcia Langton (2003) and Linda Ford (2005) have challenged the

metaphors of wilderness used to attract tourists and encourage environmental actions to protect places undisturbed by Western economic demands.

### **Art-making as an immersive practice; Four artists sharing knowledge**

Non-Indigenous artists' contact with Indigenous artists develops from an interest in that art practice. This interaction may be a part of a social or economic venture, often supported by government programs in Australia. Many artists venture into teaching and skill sharing projects leading to sojourn into the Indigenous world. This journey has been analysed in various ways, questioning motivations that may drive non-Indigenous artists and curators (Tomaselli, 2014) but this is not the purpose of this article. Rather, this work builds on what Lea (2012: 188) describes as 'immersed fieldwork, where issues of application, moral judgment, or authoritative policy advice are subordinated to the humbling task of rendering lives as they are and how they get to be so lived, fighting assumed epistemological and material superiorities in the process'. The popularity of art-forms such as weaving and basketry are earth-centric and this could be testimony of this shift in gaze from upwards to inwards. Beyond the debate of belonging, there is the increasing urgency for the redevelopment of community and village based ethics, valuing small communities and the hand-made rather than large scale and unsustainable.

Conversations developed amongst our group about how our art projects, which entailed close contact with Indigenous people, had shifted and changed our perceptions of self and our individual relationship to places in Australia. Birut (as an academic) suggested we each write reflecting on a set of questions. The writing is reflective and personal, looking for depth in analysing this changing epistemology in place and the influence of cultural contact with Indigenous people. Our experiences cannot be generalised but we hope these four narratives provide some insights into this domain. Each begins with a short bio about the artist.

***The Printmaker/ painter- Stephen Anderson (PhD)*** Stephen spent his first ten years in Sydney and later the Gold Coast. As a child he did not have direct encounters with Indigenous Australians. When he moved to a remote township west of the Atherton Tablelands in Far North Queensland, he met and shared time with Indigenous Australian people. As Indigenous children attending the local school, his young family started to engage more socially and developed friendships with the local Jiddabul rainforest people. He has worked with Indigenous art centres for much of his adult life.

*Given the history of Australia after colonisation, it became clear to me that Indigenous Australians have some real reasons to feel persecuted, marginalized and vilified. This country has a dark past that certainly needs to be told to put things into perspective for future generations. I see now is the time to move from a denial of terra nullius and embrace the diversity that is this country, inclusive of original inhabitants and newcomers. The questions arose while working in this area: Where is it that I fit in, if I am considered apart from? My PhD research was about working collaboratively with Indigenous artists from the Tiwi Islands, where I have worked and lived operating an art centre for over close to ten years. Working collaboratively has been an attempt to transcend the continued polarisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations (Green, 2001). I sought to challenge dominant power structures, acknowledging the practicalities of transitional social justice to include traditional*

*Indigenous knowing systems as valid and equally contributing forces. A 'third space' is envisioned where collaborative performance based actions address the understanding that personal development is foundational in the healing process that begins with self and is developed with another. For me, this became a way of exposing my shortcomings and weaknesses in being able to work with others in a wholly ethical manner. This was no simple task when the research became ultimately focused on my actions working collaboratively and the difficulty arose in how to maintain an equal contribution from collaborating artists.*



Figure 1: Maria Josette Orsto, Stephen Anderson and Vivien Warlapinni, *Kingplates*, 2014, etching and aquatint, 27 x 43cm.



Figure 2: Vivian, Maria Josette and Stephen at the Nan Giese Gallery April 2015 exhibition opening '*Walking and Working Together*'.

*Deeper thinking about one's ancestral origins and our relationship to all time; past, present and future, indicated where I was culturally orientated. When compared to the oldest living cultural tradition, my personal genealogical history certainly required some thought. This contemplation usually became unsavoury when viewed through the lens of colonisation. Assimilation and, its artistic counterpart, appropriation become a morality tale that no longer exists under the surface but screams, 'I am here. This is now. And WE are deadly'. As a consequence from working with others, I gained the insight that the ultimate outcome of collaborative practice is an extended awareness of relation to self. This is what I bring to the collaborative process. A self that is defined through relationship, that is curious to know how we can do this together, how we could relate to each other. The*

*prescriptive or the 'self-centred' is supplemented here with a 'centring of self', within the construct implied in the research question of our relatedness. It became obvious that an egocentrically located standpoint constantly shifted from insider to outsider when attempting to locate myself as research student.*

***The sculptor and weaver- Aly de Groot*** Aly spent her early years in Perth where she remembers feeling rather lonely and sad. She did have an Aboriginal friend who did not meet with approval from her family. As a teenager, she moved to North Queensland and then the Northern Territory, where she developed relationships with Indigenous artists and started to read about earth worship and feminist eco-philosophy (Starhawk, 1979). Aly has achieved high accolades in the Northern Territory and nationally in Australia for her artwork which she recognises has grown through her involvement with Indigenous people.

*As an Australian fibre artist with Dutch ancestry I believe that I continue a cross-cultural exchange that began 400 years ago when my predecessors first visited these shores. The land on which I live, learn and create upon in Darwin, was originally, and still is the, land of the Larrakia people. The first time in my life I had a feeling of 'belonging' was when I went to the Merrepen Arts Festival at the remote Indigenous community called Naiyu. I didn't know it at the time, but this was the first of what would become many occasions, I would sit down with weavers and watch and learn. It is still my favourite thing to do, and it is when I am doing this that I am happiest, especially if I am sitting near a creek. The master weavers at Naiyu influenced my early artistic life. They taught me how to strip pandanas and weave with the string fibres.*



Figure 3: *Weaving together* 2008 Photographer Zephyr Green

*Under the inspiration and guidance of many artists and mentors, I explored the use of plant and man-made materials along with various basket-making techniques to create woven sculptures and related works, which reflect upon the personal, political and environmental. It became apparent to me from the start that the traditional basket style wasn't mine. It belonged to the traditional weavers, so I started to experiment with different materials and forms, to make my own language and style. The first woven sculpture I made for an exhibition in 1995 was a doll-like, female figure titled *Sun Dancer*. I made it to help raise funds for the *Jabiluka* campaign, to support traditional owners in their quest to prevent a new uranium mine on their homelands near Kakadu National Park. I have since made similar weavings as in Figure 4.*

Figure 4: Aly de Groot  
*People in Nowhere* 2008  
pandanas, plant dyes, 8x8x120cm, 3x figures,



*At times I found working with Indigenous artists challenging, as I had to discard the familiar learning paradigms. I was accustomed to learning with a lot of talking, metaphors and explaining. Instead I had to watch and learn, which was frustrating, and overwhelming, as I had so many questions and insecurities running through my head. This was the first time I was exposed to what I now understand as the 'both ways' methodology, which recognizes and embraces western and traditional Indigenous learning methods (Ober and Bat, 2007). The emphasis is on the importance of relationships as the foundation for strengthening Indigenous identity 'Both Ways' acknowledges Indigenous teachers as role models in their community. The need to learn western ways runs in parallel to maintaining 'culture'. Teachers are also learners, as we never stop learning and teaching each other. This creates a common ground, a third space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous teach and learn from each other in a space that strengthens respect for each other and allows our different ways to come together.*

**The filmmaker and academic- Birut Zemits (PhD)-** grew up in the urban setting of Sydney. Birut's early artwork drew on her Latvian heritage and sought to define relationships with icons from a distant unseen place. Her domestic surroundings had Latvian designs, images and symbols in many corners and she emulated these through drawings, prints and batiks. When her hand turned to filmmaking, it was with a human, socio-cultural and educational focus. She had travelled to Darwin to live and work. Initially, the savannah landscape, while pleasing to the eye, was strange and not 'homely'. Her interest in visual representation of ideas led to a role as a documentary filmmaker with a particular interest in documenting and exploring environmental issues.

*I wanted to highlight Indigenous perceptions of place in a short film research project about the cultural uses of a local reserve that runs along eight kilometres of coastline<sup>1</sup>. I approached Larrakia Nation, the group that represents the custodians of a place that includes what is now known as the capital city of Darwin. The area includes coastal areas of mangrove, monsoon vine forest, tropical woodland in a larger surrounding ecosystem generally labelled as savannah. Following relevant organisational protocols, I established connections with Larrakia representatives. This initial contact required some negotiation and resulted in a number of interviews and a development of relationships with individuals. This led to future projects in film and education with Larrakia groups.*

*More importantly, this interaction and the sharing of time and perspectives with the traditional owners shifted my own views of the land I walked on. As women with*

*traditional knowledge, they showed me plants and explained the relationship their families had with the rocks, trees and other natural features of the land. For example, through the interview, I learned about the importance of a milkwood tree as a tree of knowledge. I saw it was no longer as a tree with corky bark but as a being of its own importance. I also learned about a significant rock that could be seen at low tide that should not be climbed. When I see it now, I think of the story of Dariba Nungalinya and the long history linked to this site. I could not fully identify with the traditional significance as my own cultural heritage is so different but I could come to terms with having a mediated relationship to the land through the Larrakia people.*

*Reflecting on these experiences, I see my role as part of a larger change in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the north of Australia. I am trapped in this time in history where political forces resist true recognition of the cultural groups who were here before colonisation. I do not closely identify with the colonial Anglo-Saxon perspective in Australia and am also aware that as a filmmaker I can shift perceptions only to some degree. This becomes a responsibility.*

***The Plein Air painter- Jennifer Taylor (PhD)*** was born and grew up in New Zealand and has worked from Alice Springs on Arrernte country for over ten years. She paints outside and seeks a closer understanding of the lands she represents in oils. Her understanding that this landscape cannot be separated from the people who inhabit it in the past and the present has extended. The colonial past includes ugly conflicts between Aboriginal people and pastoralists over land and water access, in places such as Undoolya station. This led to many deaths after 1872 (Central Land Council, 2011) in the places that Jennifer depicts.

*Having lived and worked in Arrernte country for many years before commencing my academic study, I presumed that a relationship between Arrernte country and myself already existed. The research process aimed to explore the nature and dynamics of this relationship as the foundation for ethical relations and a sustaining painting practice. The effect of relatedness to country on painting was investigated through critical reflection, community conversations and 'symposia', which included Indigenous people who live in or near Alice Springs. Cross-cultural histories were revealed during fieldwork, through photographs, conversations, and historical records. Through these interactions, layered histories 'haunted' the painting process, prompting a deeper integration of painting practice with its social and political context in Arrernte country.*

*At the beginning I focused on what I was drawn to in country. Confrontation with environmental damage led to questioning how painting could address the coexistence of damage and beauty. I explored cultural constructions of beauty in Arrernte and Western traditions, leading to a search for a painting practice that actively engaged with both perspectives. The decision to paint in just one location so I would know it more thoroughly exposed my limited understanding of the human history of the place, and precipitated inquiry into early contact histories and the legacy of frontier violence. The influence of sadness and haunting on relationships with place was investigated. The faces and stories of people who had been at Inteye Arrkwe (Ross River) in the 1930s were explored through portraits (Day, 2012; Nardoo, 2006). This helped me imagine the lives of these people and make connections with surviving*



*family members. The portraits were an unexpected addition to the project, acknowledging Arrernte peoples' continuity of occupation, and labour practices on the pastoral lease. I asked whether landscapes could be 'portraits' of place, infused by human relationships to country. The urgency of the commitment to landscape was framed by discussion of how landscapes are lost, for example through dispossession, environmental damage, and migration.*

*My encounters with Arrernte country have been deeply affected by Arrernte landscape painters' expressions of relatedness to country. Their work and words demonstrate their power to claim, reclaim and remember country. Reconsidering paintings by Albert Namatjira and others in light of events unfolding since colonisation has been humbling and inspiring. These painters' passion for country, and pragmatic, skillful deployment of landscape painting to claim and protect what they love, gives them moral strength and clarity of purpose. My own practice, though fed by the joys and sorrows of relatedness to country, will always be coming from a different place, that of a migrant whose heart is in two places and whose vision goes both ways. Painting practice has proven to be a way of testing out the ethics of relations with place, neither evading nor becoming reconciled to past and present damage, or to cultural and personal experiences of loss, but holding them up for discussion and re-imagining.*



Figure 5: *Undoolya sky line 2*, Jennifer Taylor 2012. Oil on board, 30 x 40cm

## **Conclusion**

Narratives such as those presented above help to build an idea of how an individual may change the way they perceive their sense of place and adjust their epistemology through interacting with a particular group of people. The places and the forms of interaction are different and the outcomes vary, but the process of changing world-views and identity is apparent through each of the narratives. Some experiences appear more didactic, others more activist or personally transforming. This reflects the individual nature of such interactions.

We provide a brief summary. The printer/painter, Stephen Anderson, reflects on a very active role, interacting and collaborating with Indigenous artists as a manager of the Tiwi Design shop. He discussed how ethics of painting collaboratively influenced every step of his work. His sense of injustice and the need for better understanding comes through. The weaver and sculptor, Aly de Groot, shows how immersion in the Indigenous context of communicating through 'being and doing' together has influenced her life, her thinking and her art practice. Academic and filmmaker, Birut Zemits, reflects on her wish to share knowledge of how to use filmmaking for action. She discussed how this communication shifted her view of where she lives. For plein air painter, Jennifer Taylor, the journey of communication began with immersion in painting on the land. Being in the places with a colonial history led her to engage more deeply with the people on whose land she was painting. Deep consideration of the meanings behind this interaction influenced her spatial representations with oil paints.

In writing these reflections, the authors have acknowledged their personal transformation and shown how this extends a potential for a reconciliatory approach, shifting personal philosophies through interactions. Each of these narratives can be considered a personal representation of experience. The crossovers into Both Ways philosophy are apparent. All have been respectfully influenced by Indigenous 'others' and feel a responsibility to treat this interaction with care. Different perceptions and experiences are shown with each of these artists, but the principle thread is one of being open to learning and being keen to extend an empathetic response where one shifts an element of their world-view. The respect for the people that each artist has worked with has left them open to connect to the beliefs and approaches to the land that the Indigenous people have. Of course, one cannot suggest that there is a similarity or a clear understanding of how to look through another's eyes. While each artist has a personal analysis what these experiences mean, their lived interaction provides a valuable narrative of non-Indigenous artists working in Indigenous contexts.

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