Blakatak.
Program of Thought at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.
A Report by Uta Daur

"*Blakatak*: Like a Choc Atak..." announces the promising red poster with black and white text created by Indigenous Australian artist Brook Andrew. The artist is both initiator and co-organizer of the *Program of Thought*, comprising four symposia, held in a monthly interval between September and December 2005 at the *Museum of Contemporary Art* (MCA) in Sydney. Participants were artists, academics and curators who discussed the current situation of Indigenous Australian art in the context of Australian and international art.

The first panel discussion *Dominant Doctrines of Beauty* engaged the role of Western aesthetics for the success and art critical framing of Indigenous Australian art: Which concepts of beauty are dominant in art critical discourse and how important is the notion of beauty in looking at art? Associate Professor Vrasidas Karalis gave a general introduction into several, particularly Greek notions of beauty and their emergence in art theoretical discourses until today. Indigenous Australian photographer Ricky Maynard and Chinese-Australian artist Lindy Lee both feel comfortable to talk about their art in terms of the beautiful. Maynard indeed favours a modernist approach in photography to achieve a "pure" image and depict a spiritual beauty found in objects and landscape. Besides this universal understanding of (formal) beauty that is often interrelated with notions of truth co-exists for Lindy Lee a more culturally specific version of beauty. In contrast to the artists MCA director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, of white Scottish background, finds it difficult to speak about ideas of beauty and (moral) truth in contemporary art. She explains this difficulty with the 1980s discussions around black art in Great Britain and their outspoken distance to right-wing claims on the importance of beauty and moral truth in art. In this context artists, who wanted to be taken seriously, had to renounce issues of beauty. However Macgregor sees a difference between Black

British art and Indigenous Australian Western Desert paintings, because the latter are admired as both beautiful and spiritual. Similarly Professor Roger Benjamin voices his uneasiness with universal understandings of beauty, which he believes is rather a "result of cultural conditioning", depending on specific cultural conventions and ideas. Instead Benjamin favours a cross-cultural aesthetic approach, which he explains with the example of the Mardayin Ceremony Paintings – admired both for their spiritual value and their formal qualities, depending on the cultural background of the viewer. He also calls for attention of remote community aesthetic categories in viewing these paintings, a claim supported by Brook Andrew. Andrew criticises the mere consideration of such paintings in Western terms that do not acknowledge the spirituality and sense of place the paintings are embedded in. According to Andrew this neglect of the cultural context of the paintings can lead to a mistranslation of some of the messages of the work or a loss of the original meaning of the work. However as Karalis and Benjamin outline there is an ongoing process of exchange and dialogue between cultures, a cross-cultural interaction, which also produces possibilities of change of the status quo. The question of empowerment through precisely a Western aesthetics is also crucial in this context. Importantly Andrew draws attention to those Indigenous Australian artists that explore the political within a visual framework of Western aesthetic notions of beauty.

Among the artists there seemed to be a great dissatisfaction with the way their art is viewed by critics, e.g., the framing of their art within dichotomies of black and white art and so-called urban and traditional Indigenous Australian art. Photographer Rea, for instance, demands the recognition of Indigenous Australian artists as contemporary and Australian artists and also artist Fiona Foley feels a "heavy weight of history always being on your shoulders here." However, although some curators might still apply these binary distinctions on Indigenous Australian art, there seems to have changed a lot in the past decade. For instance, as Macgregor explains, the MCA, one of the major museums for contemporary art in Australia, groups artists around themes and not in terms of race.[60]

The second of the *Blakataks* continued the demand for an acknowledgment of all forms of Aboriginal art as Australian or international art. The symposium centred on

[60] Being of white German descent I find myself using categories such as 'Indigenous Australian artists' for this report, but mostly neglecting the racial or ethnic identities of the white speakers. While this reflects partly the way the organisers of the symposium introduced particular people, I also intend to make clear particular speaking positions in cases where it helps to make the content and context better understandable for a German audience. The issues at stake in the symposium that itself emphasised its particular speaking position in its title *Blakatak* show that the demand to get rid of certain labels is not always without contradiction. The categories and frameworks for interpreting and writing about Indigenous Australian art are still highly debated and constantly shifting. Also, of course, there is no unity among Indigenous Australian artists regarding the framing of their work. For instance, some artists on the panel welcome the idea of a black *Perspecta* until 'things' have changed. What the one declares as a burden is for the other a tool of recognition.

the question of art adulation: "Is criticism of Aboriginal art dominated by Western approaches such as racial theory?" This debate also followed the question of a shortage of serious art criticism on Indigenous Australian art and analysed the stereotypes responsible for the exclusion of Aboriginal Art, especially 'traditional' Aboriginal art, from the canon of fine art.

Rise to criticism gave especially the 'urban'/ 'traditional' divide in categorizations of Indigenous Australian art, suggesting that there are neither innovative artists nor urban areas in remote regions. In these categorisations 'traditional' art appears as static and as Professor Marcia Langton put it "[artists] are trapped in a kind of primitive design syndrome". Following Professor Howard Morphy another reason for the need to overcome the 'urban'/ 'traditional' divide is that 'traditional' Indigenous art practices, which were formerly seen as 'primitive', fit now in various European conceptions of Avant-garde art such as Performance and Body Art. This calls very much into question an evolutionary and linear model of Western art history. In contrast to European categorizations Morphy sees some improvement in overcoming these categories in Australia. However he criticises that a lot of racial assumptions are still brought on Indigenous Australian art and artists that are not at stake when a work of a white artist is reviewed. One example is Tracey Moffatt, whose work has been subjected to questions of identity politics for a long time, although the artist constantly demands for her work to be analysed in its universal concerns and not just simply to be framed in terms of race. Professor Langton finds it also problematic that art historians equate Aboriginal art from the Central and Western Desert, such as the work of Emily Kngwarreye, with abstract expressionism. She demands instead that art historians should inform themselves better to understand the ways artists use particular designs and innovate with hereditary designs, innovations that are difficult to recognize unless the observer is very familiar with particular traditions. She also points out that there is a lot of literature written on these traditions, which should be taken seriously in order to appreciate these art works. Most others on the panel agree with this demand.

Howard Morphy rightly brings in that there is a sense in which people might adequately compare Aboriginal paintings, such as those from Arnhem Land, and modernist abstraction. But according to Morphy this comparison should be done on the level of analogies or formal resemblances only, which in turn doesn't tell anything about the intention or the historical context of the paintings. Thus Morphy stresses that if we dwell merely on this level of analogy, we fail to fully appreciate the paintings and their meanings. Morphy therefore demands that, in order to understand the diverse manifestations of Indigenous Australian art, the intentions of the artists have to be taken into account as well as 'classic' art historical research on the context of the works has to be done.

Associate Professor Nikos Papastergiadis confirms that we need to find pluralistic ways of approaching Indigenous art and culture. While he agrees that some analogies, e.g., the comparison of Aboriginal paintings with abstract expressionism

have been overstretched, he also explains that these categorisations usually develop because people try to find different ways for understanding art. In this context Papastergiadis further explains the historical value of the now so contested category of identity in art debates that originally has been introduced to open up spaces. It was intended to open the art world to a more inclusive approach at a time when aesthetic debates solely centred on the universal and neglected the personal, particular and historical as well as issues of identity and place. Papastergiadis thus advises us not to completely dismiss the question of cultural identity but use it as "a potential connection point", considering art as coming from a particular place without being restricted to it. In this way we could, after Papastergiadis, reach a more ambiguous "way of thinking about the relationship between the aesthetic, the political, our identity and our place, so that these things can ricochet around each other rather than get stuck in one part of the equation."

Another issue that came up in the symposium is that Indigenous Australian artist are often not engaged sufficiently in aspects of marketing or copyright of their work. Further the artists on the panel demanded more respect from art workers, who should at least demonstrate some effort to learn the language of the artists whose work they are promoting. Langton complains that the quality of criticism of Indigenous Australian art and culture hasn't improved much over the last decade. She assumes that most literature is not circulated widely, although she admits that there exists "terrifically informative literature which will explain works and designs and traditions and histories." She calls for the importance to inform art collectors and the general public about the context of these art works in order to break through the "mystery of Aboriginal art". The lack of dissemination of valuable information on Indigenous Australian art and culture, as Morphy explains, has also to be seen in the wider context of a general retreat of the Australian government from public funding of the cultural sector. Another issue Morphy raises is the question of why there are no Indigenous Australian curators of European painting in Australia.

The third *Blakatak* symposium *Respect yourself: historical amnesia, cultural ownership and respect* posed the question to whom we listen in regard to Australian histories: Whose accounts seriously engage with Australian history and whose are shaped by historical amnesia?

Indigenous Canadian speaker Gerald McMaster, senior curator of Canadian art at the *National Museum of the American Indian* in Toronto, addressed the question if Indigenous artists and intellectuals are complicit in historical amnesia. He answers this question in the negative, emphasising that Indigenous intellectuals should acknowledge the changes that have taken place and articulate them. According to McMaster they should identify convergences of different cultures and their occurrences in art. McMaster finds it deeply problematic that young people often learn about the history of colonialism only through stereotypes presented in films and other media. He therefore asks for the development of "new tools of argumentation". Hetti Perkins, Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander art at the *Art Gallery of New South Wales* in Sydney, also calls for the writing of further substantial monographs, which deal with Indigenous Australian histories of art. Unlike white historians, she argues, Indigenous Australian artists "can't have the luxury of historical amnesia", because this would offend the many people who have suffered previously and continue to struggle in Australia.

The panel continued discussing issues of copyright, especially the problems that arise when artists use signs from other cultures and then successfully claim copyrights for these signs. This concerns white as well as indigenous artists, e.g., when Indigenous Australian artists from the East Coast use Central Desert designs for painting dolphin dreamings. The discussion causes theatre director and writer Wesley Enoch to draw a distinction between on the one hand 'black fellows', who are forced to paint in order to survive economically and weren't to be seen as artists, and on the other hand artists, who develop ideas and create complex art works. Enoch also demands that ideas and concepts should be in the foreground of creating art and this process shouldn't be always restricted to someone's own culture. Further, after Enoch, Indigenous artists should take control over the writing of their histories and also be able to address problems within their own communities rather than avoiding these issues for fear of being criticised by their communities of enforcing negative stereotypes. In contrast to McMaster he argues that Indigenous Australian artists were complicit in terms of historical amnesia because for many the history is too painful to be engaged with on a continuing basis. In this context artist Judy Watson remarks that the criticism by one's own community can be at times more restricting in terms of the pressure that is exerted to deal with one's cultural identity.

Another topic discussed by the speakers concerns the question whether a museum that specialises in and focuses solely on Indigenous art is to be seen as an advantage or ghettoises Indigenous artists, keeping them away from contemporary international art, as McMaster puts it. He claims that a reliance on identity issues especially comes up in a European exhibition context where curators often favour 'traditional' Aboriginal art over international contemporary art from Australia.

Professor Vivien Johnson draws attention to the fact that often the innovative aspects of 'traditional' Aboriginal art forms are overseen. Art works such as those by Papunya Tula artists, after Johnson, appear 'traditional' in a Western context, but are highly innovative and radical in regard to their own cultural context. Johnson further raises issues of sacred content of such images, which makes it sometimes problematic to exhibit the images, e.g., when the permission of the community is not obtained. She demands that the current custodians of these dreamings should always be consulted "about what they want to happen to these paintings." Hetti Perkins adds that attitudes of artists regarding these issues change and some images that couldn't be shown previously can be now shown with the permission of the artist or community. According to Perkins some artists give explicit instructions that their works can be shown after they pass away, while others do not agree with the display of their work or name after their death. Perkins therefore confirms Johnson's

demand to talk to and get advise from the communities from which these pictures stem. She explains that asking artists about their particular view on their art and its display shows respect and also assures that the communities have control over their images.

The last symposium of the *Blakatalk* series focused on the theme of artistic politics. The panel aimed to explore if "the politics of place, of memory, of post-colonialism detract from or enrich Aboriginal art." Because the symposium was held shortly after the Cronulla riots in Sydney, this event dominated great parts of the discussion.

Choreographer and artist Raymond Blanco raised the question of responsibility of Indigenous Australian artists to their cultural group and assured that artists should become more political than those performance groups that restrict their program to what the government funding bodies find acceptable. Marcia Langton confirms the problem of artists being worried to loose their funding if their work is overtly political. 'Real' artists however, after Blanco, shouldn't let themselves restrict by funding issues. In regard to the Cronulla riots the panel raised the question of place wars and the strong connection of identity and place. In this context of the politics of place Professor Paul Carter situates "the white settler project" as an "aesthetic project" because it is shaped by nostalgia. This project would, after Carter, centre on the myth of home always being somewhere else and the concept that particular groups could define themselves in relation to this ideal, excluding others. Carter finds this myth prevalent especially in contemporary media commentary.

As a conclusion it seems that there is yet much to change in the art historical, critical and public discussion and appreciation of Indigenous Australian art. One important starting point is the refinement and clarification of categories brought to Indigenous Australian art and the declaration of each speaker's position. Curators and writers should constantly re-question their critical frameworks and inform themselves better about the context of the work and each artist's particular background, acknowledging the multiplicity of their voices. Existing categories and notions in the discussion of Indigenous Australian art are under constant flux and should be negotiated with Indigenous Australian artists, curators and intellectuals.

For more information on the events go to http://www.mca.com.au/search.asp?keyword=blakatak (April 21, 2006). There you will find a list of the speakers of each symposium. You will also find transcripts of all of the four *Blakatak* series, from which the above quotes are taken.