Indigenous art: how should it be taught?

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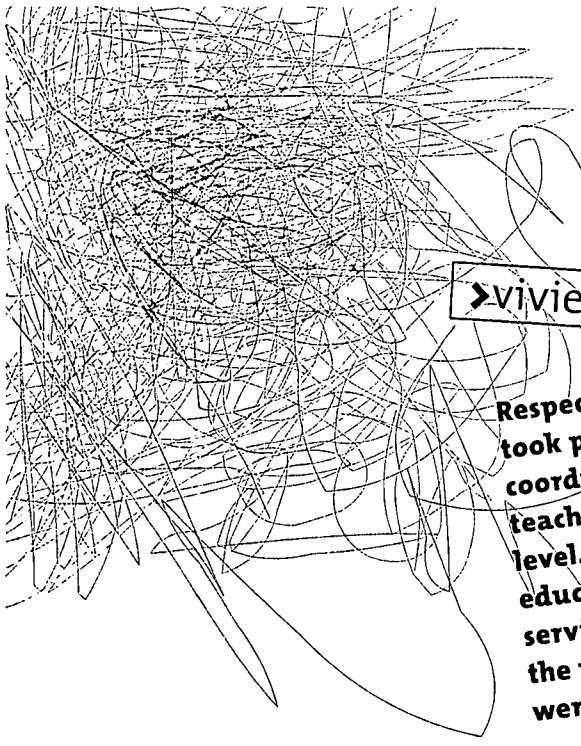


Indigenous art: how should it be taught?

>vivien johnson

Respected educators, artists and curators took part in a no-holds-barred workshop coordinated by Dr Vivien Johnson on the teaching of Indigenous art at tertiary level. Appropriation of imagery, bicultural education and the delicate balance between serving the market for overseas students and the needs of local and indigenous students were among the issues discussed.

VJ: Let me kick this off by characterising the two most commonly encountered approaches to teaching Indigenous art in Australia as the King Billy and the smorgasbord. The King Billy is a reference to those breastplates presented to Aboriginal people nominated by the colonisers to be spokespersons for Indigenous people – as when an institution solves its 'problem' of introducing Indigenous art into the curriculum by hiring an Indigenous academic, as if that relieved everyone else of the burden of coming to terms with the revolutionary changes in Australian art since the mid eighties. Not surprisingly, people who can shoulder such a burden, or would want to, are hard to find. So the other model, the smorgasbord approach, has often found favour, where the main burden of content is taken by a succession of predominantly Indigenous guest lecturers, whose collective contributions make up the course. Tess, I know you object to the pejorative overtones of 'smorgasbord' to describe this approach – do you want to launch in here?

Tess Allas: I firmly believe in the smorgasbord approach – if you can afford it. Aboriginal art history is a relatively new area for universities. When the students learn from Aboriginal people who were on the ground when it happened or as it is happening, they get an intimate detailed view. It's like having living oral history in the classroom. It's also crucial if there are any Indigenous students for them to get access to Indigenous artists and curators and art workers. In the classroom context, they can talk to them directly, develop dialogue, and hopefully form relationships. If we can keep this course going, eventually it will attract Aboriginal students to look into art history and theory – an area where we're falling down badly.

Garry Jones: The smorgasbord approach is really valuable, if you want to talk about theorising the teaching of Aboriginal art. For me, that's as real as it gets. Because these people come with their own theoretical framework – it's not about fitting them into your expectations of how the subject should be taught, but allowing them to teach it in the way they know it. That's not necessarily correct or the only way to teach it, but I think it communicates what needs to be communicated: that there's a diversity of views and understandings and experiences.

Danie Mellor: The model that's used at Sydney College of the Arts is a variation of the King Billy model – although to be honest, I don't find it that much of a burden. There are advantages and disadvantages with any model and the advantage I find with this one is that there's a certain degree of control over what is presented, while still allowing scope for invited guests. What I'm attempting to achieve is a kind of holistic approach in devising a curriculum and core set of principles in delivering a unit of study. A singular voice doesn't necessarily mean that you're speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people. You're addressing visual arts – and as part of that, addressing aspects of Aboriginal culture. Pre-settlement, there were more than 250 nations, each with an identifiable language and cultural boundaries. You need to be aware of Aboriginal cultural history but also settler history, so you can talk about their interaction and the whole set of issues that arise from those two things being parallel in Australian history.

Garry Jones: In terms of the issue of speaking positions, I think what is being proposed at Wollongong is an ideal opportunity to have that single voice who coordinates the multiple voices. The King Billy *and* the smorgasbord. It's a very positive way to go – if it can be afforded. In an academic context, it's not just people talking about Aboriginal art, it's about students engaging with a whole lot of critical analysis – they read texts, they look at films, there's a whole raft of resources – and I don't think they necessarily need to be Indigenous, because lots of people have a lot to contribute. If you follow Richard Bell's theorem that Aboriginal art is a white thing: it's about having a broad range of views, not only the Aboriginal voice.

Christina Davidson: I'm disturbed that people keep saying 'if we can keep the course going', 'if it can be afforded' – the tentativeness that still seems to be associated with the survival of many of these units. If Indigenous art *is* the mainstream of Australian art, as Vivien has been saying for some time (and its industry prominence and cultural leadership are undeniable), how is it that this area seems particularly vulnerable to axing, as if it were a sideline?

Catriona Moore: I also wanted to raise sustainability issues. The progress made over the last ten years is in danger of not being sustained in that these units are often taught by casual or contract staff. What are the steps that might be taken to entrench these courses? The smorgasbord model *is* incredibly expensive and what you might find in the future at places like this university is that you have fee-paying summer schools full of international students for a canonical course because that's where the big resources are – they're not in the community-based scenario – but that might fund a wonderful on country experience for hopefully a majority of Indigenous students. You might get different tiers of packaging, different kinds of western primitivism at play if you like.

Garry Jones: I think in principle it sounds like a good model: the canonical summer school to fund what you really want to get to. But then it comes down to what is this canon that you should teach. In terms of educational forms of cultural tourism, my experience teaching Indigenous studies is that the majority of students are full fee-paying overseas students. They're attracted to learning about Australia through Indigenous historiography and I think there's an interest in Aboriginal art studies for the same reason. The students are very respectful – in awe really – of anything Indigenous and it's a great opportunity to challenge their lack of real knowledge and their stereotypes and prejudices. But I suppose what does concern me is, Where are all the local students who I really want to get to, to educate about Aboriginal world views – values, people?

Audience Member: I'm wondering where Aboriginal art belongs in the university disciplines in view of the material that's covered. It seems that locating Indigenous art so firmly in the cultural and lived experiences may invite more of an anthropological setting – I'd rather make art history more open and fluid but given that the discipline is very narrow and privileges a certain way of looking at art...

Danie Mellor: Aboriginal art is now seen and discussed, at least in Australia, as fine art rather than material culture – as shown by this being a panel of art theorists/artists rather than anthropologists.

Christina Davidson: In our background research for this, we found there had been a very significant development in recent years of the integration of Indigenous art into the curriculum across the wider university. Indigenous art is taught in a whole range of areas: Anthropology, Archaeology, Australian Studies, Music and Indigenous Studies Centres at some of the universities; there's even a unit in Business Studies.

Within Australian art units some institutions put almost nothing in, perhaps a 'Papunya and since' lecture at the end, but others had significantly re-structured the curriculum to reflect cross-cultural perspectives on Australian art history.

Catriona Moore: I find that the revolution in Indigenous art and scholarship came about as a part of a massive inter-disciplinarity twenty years ago that has shrunk and I wonder whether people have a sense of a certain canonical history of Indigenous art solidifying around them – I certainly do.

VJ: There is a lack of advanced courses – most of the courses available are at a more or less introductory level.

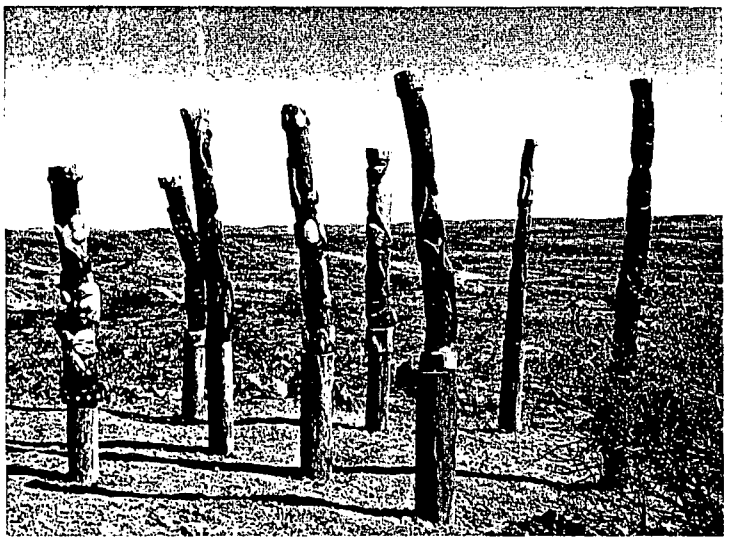
Tess Allas: Our course is more of a fly-over. I do urban Aboriginal art in one two-hour lecture when I could talk about every artist for at least that long.

Danie Mellor: This would be a good time to mention the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Arts at Queensland College of the Arts at Griffith University which Jennifer Herd has been running for Indigenous students at Griffith University for a decade or so. It's a very successful program and as far as I know the only dedicated Indigenous arts degree in the university sector.

Christina Davidson: There was an Associate Degree at Curtin (1997-2003) which has recently been converted into a bridging course, and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the NT also runs courses in Indigenous art for their students.

Tess Allas: But mostly the Indigenous students are in the TAFEs and CDEP courses, where right across NSW they are being taught by mostly non-Aboriginal teachers how to 'do' Aboriginal art. Lazy teachers who show them pictures by Clifford Possum or Emily or other famous Aboriginal artists and say 'They're Aboriginal, you're Aboriginal, paint like this.' That might be OK when people are learning how to paint, but sometimes these students are painting for exhibitions. It's the same in the gaols.

Mural depicting student activities on campus, created in 1990 by students under the supervision of art lecturer Karl Brand. ICT building Batchelor College campus, Darwin.



There is no way those people will get funded to do this kind of art once they are released because they've broken all the protocols that the OzCo or NSW Ministry for the Arts have put in place. Those students need more researched and considered teaching so they're better equipped to handle what's going on in the world outside the classroom.

Garry Jones: TAFE does have a national curriculum, but it's so flexibly applied there's a lot of ground for bad teaching. In theory these issues are supposed to be addressed but in practice they're not.

Christina Davidson: That flexibility can have advantages in allowing individuals to forge their own approach. In my research for this workshop I came across fantastic TAFE teachers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Brian Martin at Broken Hill TAFE and Sharon West at RMIT are both amazing success stories and brilliant exceptions. There are problems of disconnection in the universities too – where an art theory department has no idea that an Indigenous Centre the university acquired in one of its amalgamations is running an Indigenous art unit.

VJ: These Indigenous art units in art history and theory departments of universities and art schools we've been talking about, do they attract Indigenous students?

Tess Allas: We had one Indigenous student this year, but she dropped out. I wish she'd come and seen me so I could understand why. She was a local too: that's one thing – it might help if the course began with a lecture on art from this area – something the local Indigenous students could relate to, then move on to other histories from around the nation.

ABOVE: Collective Work by Broken Hill Art School Students, *Living Desert Story Poles*, displayed in country outside Broken Hill township.

Audience Member: The high drop out rate of Indigenous students is not just to do with the course – it often has to do with other aspects of the students' lives. Academia is not very flexible about family commitments.

Danie Mellor: It's easy to say why are Indigenous students dropping out – but people need to look at their own behaviours and to the comfort of Indigenous students in the classroom environment. There are blurred boundaries where because it's an academic environment the non-Indigenous students think they can say anything to Aboriginal people – air their prejudices – that it's only an intellectual debate. But for an Indigenous student it would be totally terrifying.

Audience Member: To me the teacher should mediate those situations, take the pressure off the Indigenous student and turn it into an opportunity to examine those ideas.

VJ: What about this scenario? A German international student is offended by a guest lecturer's criticism of non-Indigenous artists who copy popular styles of Indigenous art like dot painting. It turns out she is herself a painter – in the 'dot painting' style, and uses the desert iconography to spell out stories she has dreamed up about Aboriginal culture. 'Isn't it my artistic freedom to do this as a homage to the Aboriginal culture?' she asks. What would you say to her?

Tess Allas: I was in a pub in Newtown once and a non-Aboriginal painter approached me when he knew who I was and challenged me on this issue. My answer was: 'You've come here and you've taken away the land, the language, the children, the culture. One of the last things people have left is their own iconography in art. Do you want to take that too? Why do you want that? Why is it so important?'

Danie Mellor: Jen Herd has a very good analogy for this. That question came up – as I recall her saying – when she was giving a paper in America: Why shouldn't you copy the designs, especially from places where it's still connected with ceremony, initiation those sort of things? She used the analogy for someone outside of that community copying the designs and claiming them as their own, and by appropriating them in that way, that it's like someone going into your house and taking the deeds to the house and claiming ownership of it.

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki: I want to take up the German painter's intention of paying homage. From my own experience in New Zealand, what is generally not understood is that there are very powerful world-views and belief systems that underpin those languages of signs and patterns. Almost invariably when homage is intended it's read either as an insult or as a puzzle. It's like pakeha (white New Zealanders) who attempt a Maori greeting and just don't quite get it right. Are we supposed to be grateful for that? Are we supposed to think 'Well good on 'em for having a go?' – or are we allowed to wince and think, is the Mickey being taken out of us here?

VJ: We had hoped to have a comparative perspective, but our Maori speaker had to drop out at the last minute. Could I ask you to comment on the teaching of Indigenous art in New Zealand?

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki: In New Zealand there's a wide range of models you can look at – the 1987 Education Amendment Act made provision for *wananga* – Maori tertiary education systems. Some are urban, some very tribally based, but all deliver Indigenous art programs with varying degrees of success. Language is seen to be the key to culture and customs – if the students don't have those there's no point going further with the art. Students also learn traditional dance and incantation and that's lifted the knowledge that informs their art making. What comes out of that kind of art school is quite a powerful statement, but this is where it becomes very difficult, because there's no identified market for those graduates. The most famous and successful and the wealthiest Maori arts graduates have all come out of conventional Western art schools and universities.

Tess Allas: That's very interesting that the famous successful ones have come through the university system – whereas here if I ask the class on their first day 'who are the famous Aboriginal artists Australia has produced?', they would name Albert Namatjira, Clifford Possum. They wouldn't know who Fiona Foley was for example.

Audience Member: Where are the research outcomes in Indigenous art. Where are we publishing this material? Are the students seeing it?

Christina Davidson: I think there is a lot of potential for research-based teaching in this area. The Garma model is the most prominent – the way they've established partnerships with Melbourne University, Sydney University, RMIT and Charles Darwin to take courses up there. The students get the experience of participating and being taught by Yolngu elders, but also doing research that the community wants on their behalf.

VJ: Do people know about Garma?

Christina Davidson: Most people are probably aware of the Two Ways model pioneered with bilingual and bicultural education in the school system from the 1970s onward. It was developed originally and very forcefully by Indigenous groups as a reaction against assimilation policies in education and has recently been adapted for a tertiary context. At the moment it's the model of the Batchelor Institute and the Garma Cultural Studies Institute – the two major Indigenous controlled tertiary institutions in Australia. Both say they're teaching Both Ways or Two Ways philosophy, which is the idea of a reciprocal and equal exchange between two different groups – exactly what Indigenous Australians have virtually never had. The Garma Institute is part of a concerted effort by Mandawuy Yunupingu in particular, who came from a background in Two Ways school education and petitioned the university sector to build these relationships. So how do we think about Two Ways models in the context of teaching art history or theory in an urban context with mainly non-Indigenous students? It's about how higher education institutions might be able to explore ways of working collaboratively with Indigenous communities – and it would necessarily involve some devolving of power by these institutions for it to be Two Ways.

VJ: Could the Garma model be applied across the whole tertiary sector?

Christina Davidson: Maybe there's more modest ways that still allow Indigenous control of non-Indigenous input. Like the pilot program I developed with Boomalli Artists Cooperative a few years ago in a unit on artists' writings. Boomalli wanted interviews with their founding members, so students who were interested in Indigenous art came along and made it their project, but in the course of working with Boomalli they had to learn all about protocols. They left with a positive result for the Boomalli archive and several students went on to work with Indigenous communities – so this connection through the research allowed them to develop their interest further.

VJ: These small scale initiatives could be happening all over the place with art schools forming relationships and having productive exchanges with Indigenous organisations and communities.

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki: I want to comment on the localised meaning of 'Indigenous' in this discussion. Indigeneity is a global phenomenon and it's all part of a kind of politics of resistance by the post-colonial generation. There is a very significant network of Indigenous art curators and art historians globally which has enormous potential for everybody to tap into.

Audience Member: Indigenous curators – that's where the impact of Indigenous art has been felt in Australia, not the universities.

VJ: There's an ongoing cultural shift occurring in the arts in Australia – it may be that the universities are the last place to feel it.

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki: I can remember being at a conference in Australia previously and asking where are all the Indigenous art historians? There were a lot of white Australians who were very happy to talk about and on behalf of Aboriginal artists but there didn't seem to be any Aboriginal art historians. I just want to acknowledge the presence of Indigenous art historians in the field here – and this session. In its own modest way this is very, very significant progress for the Association.

This is an edited version of a workshop at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference at the University of Sydney, 1-2 December 2005.

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› Danie Mellor is an artist and associate lecturer in Indigenous art at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. His work was recently seen in *Primavera* at the MCA.

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