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Planning the Local Museum: Anthropology and Art in the Post-modern Era

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This paper will focus on the circumstances surrounding the plan to build a local museum in an Aboriginal town in Arnhem Land, North Australia. To understand the situation, the author investigates changing relationships between indigenous people and mainstream museums, as well as historical changes in the realm of Aboriginal arts. This study will make clear the differences of conception concerning art and representation. Aboriginal paintings have become famous internationally for their unique style. At the same time, they retain their local religious and social functions in the context of rituals and ceremonies in Arnhem Land. The plan to create a local museum in which sacred paintings and other artifacts would be exhibited as aesthetic objects has created controversy in the area. In discussing this situation, the paper argues that there exists a difference in attitudes toward exhibiting or showing knowledge, as well as between the outsiders' value of artistic excellence and the local value of clan mythology.

Key Words: art, museum, representation, knowledge, identity

1. Introduction

Historically, the affinities and boundaries between anthropology and art have been well recognized, for there have been obvious connections between the two domains. As Morphy and Perkins (2006) have pointed out, the rise of anthropology and the development of modernism in art were related. For modern art practitioners in the early twentieth century, the encounter with artifacts of Africa and Oceania was a liberating experience and awakened the appreciation of non-European art. On the other hand, the advent of modernism had the potential to disturb the anthropologist's preconceptions about what art was. As noted by Marcus and Myers (1995) among others, today's post-modern era demands renegotiation of the relationship between art and anthropology. Despite the historical closeness between art and anthropology, discrepant understandings of art are of concern, since the mutual importance of art and anthropology may even be increasing in

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the post-modern era.

This paper focuses on the background and consequences of discussions about plans to build local museums in Arnhem Land, North Australia, in order to understand why one such plan in the Aboriginal township of Galiwin'ku has not been realized. This case study clarifies discrepancies between notions of art in the outside world and in the area of my research. Paintings in the area studied, especially bark paintings, have a unique style and are nationally and internationally famous. These works from Arnhem Land are well known as authentic "Aboriginal Art." At the same time, the paintings retain their religious and social functions in the context of local rituals and ceremonies. Painting, locally, is not art for art's sake, although people do distinguish between rough and fine paintings. The fact that people from mainstream society now collect these paintings for their aesthetic value does enhance their local value and has influenced the nature of some paintings as they are modified for sale. The plan to create a local museum to exhibit bark paintings as aesthetic objects and as a place to keep sacred artifacts has created controversy mainly because it ignores the difference of ideas concerning the exhibition of knowledge. Conflicting artistic standards—differences between local and outsiders' measurements of artistic excellence—will also be discussed below.

Multifarious issues were raised in the discussions about creating a local museum. While analyzing these discussions and their circumstances, I focus here on the differing perspectives about painting and art in general that characterize each society. I also show how the values of Aboriginal people are changing and being renegotiated in the contemporary situation.

2. Reception of Aboriginal Paintings as Art

Arnhem Land is an area of about 100,000 square kilometers in the tropical far North of Australia. The area is famous for bark painting, one of the most widely known of Aboriginal arts. Bark painters strip off the outer bark of a stringy-bark tree, flatten it into a canvas, and paint with ocher and other natural pigments. The Yolngu area is particularly famous and produces one of the most typical styles of bark painting. Originally, the artists painted clan designs and visual depictions of objects related to clan mythology. Nowadays, bark paintings and other forms of Aboriginal art are prized both within Australia and abroad. Arts and crafts, especially bark paintings, are an important source of cash for Aboriginal people (Kubota, 1996). Production of arts and crafts was seen as a potentially profitable industry from the initial days of mission contact. It is said that as early as the 1940s, baskets

and string bags were produced for sale in the mission stations, but production was never on a large scale (Morphy, 1983a). Also in the 1940s, the missions tried to promote other commercial industries such as farming, fishing, and logging to encourage Aboriginal self-support. Almost all of these attempts failed, especially after the missionaries left. The arts and crafts industry is the only one that has kept going quite successfully until today.

In 1971, the government established Aboriginal Arts & Crafts, Pty., Ltd., to expand support for the marketing of Aboriginal art. This happened as a result of a referendum in 1967 calling for amendments to the constitution making the federal government responsible for Aboriginal matters and including the Aboriginal people in the census. An overwhelming majority of Australians voted for the change, which led to the establishment of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1972 and to more financial support for Aboriginal entities (Peterson, 1983). The government built art centers in a number of remote Aboriginal communities and employed art advisers. In 1981, fourteen full-time and three part-time art advisers were employed by the Arts Board (Peterson, 1983). Some of the advisers had backgrounds in the art, but most were qualified in other areas. The role of the art centers has been to facilitate the production and marketing of arts and crafts in order to control the quality and quantity produced, to promote artists at museums and galleries, and to organize exhibitions and sales. The art centers and art advisers thus became important for the promotion and circulation of Aboriginal art and helped make them popular both inside and outside Australia (Cooke, 1983).

Morphy noted that Aboriginal artifacts were for a long period not viewed as art in Australia (Morphy, 1983a). Although there was a long tradition of Western discovery of "primitive art" in Africa and the Pacific Islands, it did not extend to Australia, where Aboriginal artifacts were considered to be only of ethnographic interest. Thus, art galleries in Australia did not collect Aboriginal artifacts as art for a long time.

The general attitude to Aboriginal painting, in particular, began to change in the 1980s. Aboriginal paintings first appeared in Australian art galleries at the end of the 1970s. One of the first major public presentations of Aboriginal art was at the Sydney Biennale of 1978. In 1980, the National Gallery in Canberra and the South Australian Art Gallery in Adelaide bought Aboriginal acrylic dot paintings and exhibited them. Many smaller galleries and studios also began to hold exhibitions of Aboriginal painting in the 1980s. As the number of exhibits has increased, discourse on Aboriginal painting has also started to change (Myers, 2002). A major landmark in the history of Aboriginal painting was reached not in Australia but overseas (Myers, 2002), when a 1988 exhibit in New York called "Dreamings" (Sutton, 1988) attracted far larger audiences than expected. Aboriginal art has been very popular

among international audiences ever since. The "Dreamings" exhibit included acrylic dot paintings from the central desert area as well as bark paintings and carvings. Acrylic dot paintings were first produced in the 1970s in the western desert area. In these paintings, traditional designs were created with two new media: canvas and acrylic paint (Bardon, 1979). At first they were treated rather negatively and were not seen as genuine because they used introduced new media, but they gradually gained recognition during the 1970s and early 1980s. With success overseas, they became widely accepted as representing a major Aboriginal art style, one shared by many people in the central desert area. The international interest in dot paintings led to many exhibitions abroad. Art collectors began building personal collections of Aboriginal artwork, and art dealers established direct personal contact with local art advisers and Aboriginal artists. Thus, the international status of Aboriginal art has altered since the 1980s, and with international recognition has come a change in attitudes toward Aboriginal art domestically. Myers notes that it was the first time for mainstream Australians to "glance" admiringly toward the Aboriginal culture which they had long regarded as savage and inferior (Myers, 1995).

This change should be understood as having been influenced by international trends. In the 20th century art world, African and Oceanic sculptures were admired as primitive art. The Museum of Primitive Art was established in New York in 1957; and in 1984, the famous exhibition, "Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art," was held at New York's MOMA (Museum of Modern Art). Before that, in 1982, a collection of primitive art from Africa and Oceania was donated to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and made into a permanent exhibition. The two later exhibitions, in the 1980s, reveal changing views of "primitive art" internationally. It was now being treated as art and given equal status within the Western context (Yoshida, 1996). Thus the stage was set for the success of the 1988 exhibition "Dreamings," which in turn influenced the domestic climate surrounding Aboriginal art.

One of the powerful influences on Aboriginal art within Australia has been the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Since 1983 it has been presented annually by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) and is currently sponsored by Telstra, an Australian communications company. Aboriginal artists from all over the nation submit their works. Two judges are selected each year by MAGNT to award a Grand Prize (A\$ 40,000) and four lesser prizes (A\$ 4,000 each) in the categories of (i) bark paintings, (ii) mixed media, (iii) art on paper, and (iv) three-dimensional works. In 2007, there were 318 entries. From all the submitted works, 104 works were selected in a first step examination. These works, including the prize-winning works, are exhibited at

MAGNT for a few months and then spend the remainder of the year touring the country. The emeritus curator of MAGNT, Margaret West, was in charge of the award from its inception until 2005. In an interview with the present author, she observed how minimal the interest in Aboriginal art used to be, and how dramatic the change in attitude toward Aboriginal art has been over the past 20 years.

3. Metropolitan Museums in Australia in the 1990s

In the 1990s, several major changes took place in the relationships between mainstream Australian museums and Aboriginal people. One of these was the establishment of active programs of repatriation of sacred objects and human remains. Since the colonial era, museums in Australia and in England had been collecting various Aboriginal materials, paintings, ritual ornaments, and human remains from all over Australia. These had been stored, studied and exhibited regardless of Aboriginal concerns. During the 1980s, the repatriation of human bones to their home communities began, as public opinion around the world pushed museums to respond to Aboriginal claims. The demands and the responses they received were often politically motivated and extended in one extreme case to human remains that were approximately thirty thousand years old. Now it is general policy to repatriate all human remains to their original homes (Pardoe, 1996).

After the movement regarding human remains, the repatriation of secret-sacred objects followed. The South Australian Museum (SAM) was active in the repatriation of such materials from the mid-1980s to the 1990s (Anderson, 1992). One of the largest metropolitan museums in Australia, the SAM held a large collection of ritual objects, especially sacred boards, from central Australia. Sacred boards are revealed in secret ceremonies open only to male members of a group who have gone through initiation. These usually wooden or stone objects have strong connections to local creation stories. They are believed to be extremely powerful: just the sight of them may cause sickness or even death in an uninitiated boy or a woman.

The repatriation efforts were not always seen positively by Aboriginal people. Repatriation of sacred boards was especially difficult and led to local trouble in some cases. Many of the objects had been removed from their local communities long ago, and their original owners had died and their clans had become extinct in the meantime. For the repatriation of such objects, Aboriginal people needed to negotiate locally about how to handle them. Staff from the SAM traveled to each community to discuss possibilities for repatriation, with careful attention to both protocol and timing. In some cases, the

participants could not reach a conclusion even after multiple discussions. A new storage system was established at the SAM for use in such purposes. A special storeroom with a lockable door was made. Secure lockers in this storeroom can hold secret-sacred objects from each group. Keys to the room and to a particular locker are kept by Aboriginal representatives from each group and the senior male curator of the SAM. Aboriginal people can visit the room whenever they like, and if circumstances permit, they can request that the SAM return their objects at any time. Once this system was in place, many Aboriginal groups asked the SAM to keep their secret-sacred objects in a locker. Some have even come to the storeroom to hold a ritual there (Anderson, 1992). In 1993, the museum association in Australia published a normative policy on Aboriginal heritage, including a repatriation policy (Council of Australian Museum Associations, 1993). This is evidence of major changes in relations between Aboriginal people and metropolitan museums.

Another trend in the changing relations between Aboriginal people and museums was apparent from the end of the 1980s to the 1990s, in the lead-up to the centennial of the federation of the Australian states in 2001. Most of the major metropolitan museums carried out grand renovations in preparation for the centenary year. The space and emphasis given to Aboriginal exhibitions increased noticeably. Many museums began employing Aboriginal curatorial staff and organized local Aboriginal advisory committees in order to incorporate the opinions of Aboriginal people into their renovation plans (Sculthorpe, 2000). Table 1 shows the result of the changes according to interviews I carried out in 2003–2005. All of the museums interviewed, except the National Museum of Australia, were state museums. The case in which Aboriginal voices were most well represented is probably that of the Melbourne Museum. Their seven-member exhibition committee included four Aboriginal curators and spent four years developing an exhibition plan. A local advisory committee was formed and they repeated the discussion with local Aboriginal people. Generally speaking, although Aboriginal voices were less well represented at some of the museums—some of which had no Aboriginal curators at all—it is clear that all the museums recognized the need to consult Aboriginal opinions in their efforts at renovation.

As a result, the once common diorama-style display of tools and ornaments for hunting and gathering, with a model house and human figures designed to reconstruct the past life of Aboriginal people, has disappeared. Museums are now concentrating on the post-contact era and the situation of Aboriginal people today. The aim now is to show them as individual people living in modern mainstream society.¹ Some also feature the positive achievements of Aboriginal people. The most common theme is the Aboriginal concept of Land, that is,

Table 1. Involvement of Aboriginal staff/community in the renovation of Aboriginal Exhibitions in Australian metropolitan museums

Museum (City)	Year of Renovation	Full-time Aboriginal Curator	Advisory Committee	Consultation with Local Groups	Types of Exhibition
National Museum of Australia (Canberra)	2000*	✓	—	✓	Current issues; Historical representation from Aboriginal perspective; Torres Strait Islanders Gallery
Australian Museum (Sydney)	1997	✓	—	✓	Current issues; Historical representation from Aboriginal perspective
Power House Museum (Sydney)	2000	✓	✓	~	Positive Aboriginal achievements
Melbourne Museum (Melbourne)	2001	✓	✓	✓	Current issues; Historical representation from Aboriginal perspective; Criticism of museum representations
South Australian Museum (Adelaide)	2000	✓	—	✓	Richness of Aboriginal material culture; Aboriginal cultural achievements
Western Australian Museum (Perth)	1999	—	✓	✓	Current issues; Historical representation from Aboriginal perspective; Mainly Western Australia
Queensland Museum (Brisbane)	2005	✓	—	✓	Current issues; Historical representation from Aboriginal perspective; Mainly Queensland including Torres Strait Islanders
Northern Territory Museum and Art Galleries (Darwin)	2004	—†	—	~	Focusing on modern arts and culture

* The National Museum of Australia was opened in the year 2000.

† There has been an Aboriginal curator since 2006, but this person did not take part in this renovation.

Explanation of Symbols

✓ There was Aboriginal representation, or the local community was consulted.

— There was no Aboriginal representation, or the local community was not consulted in renovation planning.

~ There was informal, or personal level consultation from the local community in renovation planning.

their original connection to land, which highlights current Aboriginal concerns in Australian society.

These changes are the result of a large range of factors, particularly the changing place of Aboriginal people in Australian society and government concern to empower them in the international social climate. For example, the United Nations declared 1993 to be the "International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples" and the "International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples" began in 1995. Within Australian society, even before the centennial of federation, issues concerning Aboriginal people had been continuously in the public eye. The high detention rate of Aboriginal people and many cases of death

¹ For example, at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, which opened in 2001, about one quarter of the whole permanent exhibition area is occupied by Aboriginal materials, under the title of "First Australians." At the entrance of this section, a video plays on a TV monitor, featuring various "first Australians"—indigenous people including mixed descent people from all over Australia. They introduce themselves, talking about their history and local everyday life, in an apparently endless sequence.

in custody had become a major social issue in the 1980s. A Royal Commission on this matter was formed in 1987.² Then in 1995, a national inquiry into the so-called "stolen generations" was conducted. This was the result of concerns about Aboriginal children who had been forcibly removed from their original families for purposes of assimilation³. In 1988, the largest ever Aboriginal protest march was held in Sydney on Australia Day. It was the year of the Australian bicentennial celebration, and over 40,000 Aboriginal people from all over the continent gathered for the protest. To settle these matters, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation got underway between 1991–2001. The Mabo land rights decision of the High Court in 1992 was a critical decision that, after 204 years, recognized the prior ownership of Australia by Aboriginal people.

The changes at the metropolitan museums described above thus took place in the midst of wider changes in attitudes toward Aboriginal people within Australian society. Many people now see Aboriginal culture as an important element of Australian national culture and identity, and this is being reflected in museum exhibits (Kubota 2007). Changing trends among major museums were also instrumental in the planning of local museums in remote areas.

4. Local Museums in Arnhem Land

Arnhem Land was reserved for Aboriginal people in 1931 and designated as an Aboriginal Land Trust in 1978. In other words, the area has been closed to other Australians since the early 20th century. The traditional culture as manifest in language, social organization and rituals has been relatively well kept until today. Some 20,000 Aboriginal people now live in Arnhem Land.

The area which is the main focus of this paper is the Yolngu area of the northeastern part of Arnhem Land. The people there call themselves Yolngu, and the resident population is about 5,000. Methodist missionaries began establishing settlements in this area in the 1920s (Milingimbi in 1922, Yirrkala in 1935, and Galiwin'ku in 1942). The Yolngu people are said to have adapted relatively easily to these settlements (Keen, 1994; Kubota, 2000). There are now eleven Aboriginal townships in Arnhem Land that have developed from either mission or government settlements. Even in the ex-mission settlements, Christian missionaries

² The Royal commission was established in 1987 to inquire into the circumstances concerning Aboriginal deaths in custody. The report was submitted in 1991.
<http://www.deathsincustody.com/windex.html>

³ In 1995, a Royal Commission was established for a national inquiry into the separation of indigenous children from their families. The report was submitted in 1997.
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/>

have not controlled the settlements since the 1970s, due to changes in government policy regarding Aboriginal people. Now the townships are managed by Aboriginal people. Each town is equipped with a hospital, school, supermarket, town office, and post office and is connected to the nearest cities by light plane. Each is populated by 500 to 2000 Aboriginal and a number of non-Aboriginal people. All are provided with two- to four-bedroom houses with modern facilities built by the government. Some are employed in wage-labor, most of the children are enrolled in school, and most buy food and clothes at the supermarket and receive social services. At the same time, though, they continue to hunt and gather local bush food, often using rifles, 4WD cars, and motorboats. Even in these townships there is a strong emphasis on maintaining mythological knowledge and performing traditional ceremonies.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some moves to create local museums were already taking place in Arnhem Land. As I mentioned earlier, Aboriginal Arts & Crafts, Pty., Ltd., was established in 1971 and arts and crafts centers were set up in the area. Art advisers not only helped Aboriginal people promote and sell their arts but also helped raise awareness among Aboriginal people of the value of their culture. Most advisers lived in the Aboriginal communities for several years or even longer. Many of them were committed to establishing strong connections with the people and to exhibiting culturally valuable objects in the local context to help maintain local Aboriginal culture, especially because much of the best painting was done by elderly men.

One of the earliest such attempts in Arnhem Land took place in 1980 at Maningrida, where Peter Cooke, an art adviser, established the "Djomi Museum," named after the area's sacred waterhole. Bark paintings from each clan, ceremonial objects, hunting weapons and woven materials were collected and exhibited. When Cooke left town a few years later, and in the absence of adequate funding, the museum was soon closed. By 1986, when I visited Maningrida, the building had become a storage facility.

Another early example of a local museum was at Yirrkala. This was established in the late 1970s by an art adviser who planned and built an annex to the art center as a museum. When I visited Yirrkala in 1986, the one-room museum was still operated by the art center, and five dollars was charged for entry. The display was mainly of bark paintings by prominent local painters. This museum has since closed.

These two museums were forerunners. In both cases, the art adviser valued local art, saw its historical importance, and tried to keep a selection of the very best for the local Aboriginal people. In other words, art advisers were central to the development of local museums. At Galiwin'ku, it is said that arts and crafts used to have a high reputation,

especially bark paintings and sculptures produced there in the 1970s and early 1980s. With influence from Maningrida and Yirrkala, there was an attempt to build a museum in Galiwin'ku, but it did not come to fruition. Whenever residents discussed the museum, the matter of secret-sacred objects became an issue. Especially because of the incident of the memorial in 1957 (described below), people are very conscious of which clan controls secret-sacred objects, and it is difficult to reach agreements on who will possess what. Without strong initiative being taken by the adviser, consensus was almost impossible.

An art center had been built at Galiwin'ku, and it promoted the arts widely during the late 1970s, but by 1984 it was closed. The reason for this was the desire for an Aboriginal person to run the center. When the art adviser left in 1982, he was succeeded by an Aboriginal man for the first time. The new Aboriginal adviser was unable to manage the financial side of the job properly, he issued many bad checks, and the center went bankrupt.⁴ Since then, the people of Galiwin'ku have continued producing their arts and crafts, either selling them in neighboring towns or cities, or stockpiling them until they receive a visit from an art adviser making a buying trip.

A policy to build local museums has been prominent in the Northern Territory since the mid-1990s. This has clearly been connected to the metropolitan museums' policy of repatriating Aboriginal artifacts and human remains to their original communities. During the 1993–94 fiscal year, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC)⁵ increased the amount budgeted for support of repatriation efforts and promoted the building of local museums called "keeping places." A "keeping place" is a cultural center with a storage and exhibition area and space for cultural activities. Many semi-urban Aboriginal communities built such buildings during the 1980s.

ATSIC requested that metropolitan museums help establish local museums in remote Aboriginal communities. The local-government policy of the Federal Government at this time encouraged more autonomy for Aboriginal people, so the local museum program was pushed strongly. It became one of the important duties of curators of the metropolitan museums to assist with this program. In the Northern Territory museum for example, a new contract position as adviser for the keeping place or local museum was created in response to this policy. Thus, there was financial support and the propelling force of government

⁴ It is said that the Aboriginal art adviser at the time issued dishonored checks under pressure by his clansmen in order to buy up their works. Eventually, the account for the art center was closed and the budget discontinued. It is fairly common for Aboriginal men managing modern institutions to struggle in their relationships with their clans.

⁵ This Commission was first established in 1989 as a committee for administration under the federal government. The Commission made decisions about many matters and distributed some money to Australian indigenous peoples (Kamata, 2002). It was dismantled in 2005.

policy behind the reactivated talk about local museums. It was under these circumstances that both Maningrida and Yirrkala received special budgets and were able to reopen their museums in 1996.

At Galiwin'ku, on the other hand, a special budget of A\$200,000 was obtained in 1993 to recruit a new art adviser and reopen an arts and crafts center. This funding was needed to rebuild the art center, as the building used until 1984 had been demolished. In the course of planning for the new center, the plan to establish a museum was again discussed but with no success.

5. Aboriginal Paintings in Local Context

Although paintings and artifacts from the Yolngu area of Northeast Arnhem Land are now seen as art in the Western art world, they have different meanings in their local context. Paintings are owned by the patrilineal clans that are a basic component of cultural life in this area. There are about 50 clans in the Yolngu area. Each clan has its own creation stories concerning the beginnings of life and the creation of the present form of the Earth. Although the details vary between clans, there is a common pattern: before human existence, spiritual beings emerged from subterranean places inside the earth and journeyed across its surface, living a life much like human beings but on a grander scale. Their activities formed the features of the landscape. The place where each clan's founding ancestor emerged and to which he returned at the end of the creation period is the major sacred site for each clan. Yolngu people hold ceremonies in which they recreate in song and dance the creation journeys of the ancestral beings. In these ceremonies the participants paint designs or symbols on their bodies that represent those on the body of the clan's founding ancestor during the creation period.

These productions are not seen as personal art work but as work owned by the clan, and their expression is also controlled by the clan (Morphy, 1991). All bark painting and other art forms have sprung from these local ritual contexts. The content of the paintings symbolizes connections between the clan and its sacred place, which is the foundation of clan identity. Creating the paintings is central to the effectiveness of the ceremonies and remains in the hands of the senior males. While paintings made at the times of boys' circumcision are for public display, the most sacred paintings used in men's ceremonies are too powerful to be seen by women and children without being heavily smudged. The bark paintings sold to the art world are generally modified from their abstract form by the inclusion of figurative elements. Even then, their importance as clan property persists.

Morphy reported that in the process of commercialization of the bark paintings, there were various responses to such modification among different clans at Yirrkala (Morphy and Layton, 1981).

In 1957, a major incident known as the "adjustment movement" took place in Galiwin'ku (Berndt, 1962). Senior men of major clans in the area got together and erected carved and painted secret-sacred poles and objects, called *rangga*, in the public town area one night. Previously, such poles and objects had been off-limits to local women and children and to outsiders. The next morning everyone saw the monument and was extremely shocked. Many women were said to have become hysterical. It is said that the monument symbolized the acceptance of Christianity and peace between clans among which there had been continuous fighting. In other words, its erectors were trying to reorganize themselves according to mission life. It is also said that underlying the thinking of these Yolngu leaders was the idea of an exchange. By revealing their most valuable objects, the foundation of their society, the leaders hoped to prompt the mission to likewise reveal the secret of its power and material wealth (Berndt, 1962). Morphy (1983b) argues that the aim of the act was not only to set up an exchange relationship but also to exchange perceptions of value. They were demanding recognition of the value of Yolngu culture. In other words, they were trying to teach the Yolngu value system to outsiders.

This monument is locally called a "memorial" and still stands by the town beach. The sacred poles of some ten different clans, made of sculpted and painted wood, stand on a base made of concrete. On this base are written the names of the clans that joined the movement, along with inscriptions saying that they accept Christianity and have finished fighting each other. There were diverse reactions to the incident within the Yolngu community. For example, at one stage, people refrained from attending sacred ceremonies, and at another, leaders of the movement were excluded from the community. Whatever the local interpretation and evaluation of the incident, it is clear at least that something had changed in attitudes towards the release of important knowledge and secret objects. It is significant that despite the incident of revealing these sacred objects, the ancestral ceremonies did not lose their religious significance and continued to be held. Neither did sacred objects cease to be made and held secretly.

After about 50 years, the poles exposed in the monument at Galiwin'ku are weathering, and the colors are fading. Some of the poles are damaged. The secret bark paintings said to have been placed around the poles at the time of construction are all gone. Most visitors to this town do not notice the monument, and the Yolngu people do not care about it either. Weeds cover it, and rubbish lies all around it.⁶ Whenever there is talk of creating a local

museum, however, this memorial always becomes the focus of the discussion.

6. Difficulties in the Plan for a Galiwin'ku Local Museum

Although the political climate supports local museums, and the people say that they are eager to have one, there is still no museum at Galiwin'ku. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, there were financial difficulties. In Yirrkala and Maningrida, as we have seen, there were collections of bark paintings from the late 1970s representing various local clans. The socioeconomic circumstances surrounding the art market in Australia are now quite different. The reputation of Aboriginal art has grown both in Australia and overseas, and prices have gone up. At the same time, Aboriginal people's involvement in the cash economy has changed, and their need for cash in daily life has grown. Without an adequate budget for the museum, it is difficult to collect art works of sufficiently high quality from all the clans (there are about 12 main clans in Galiwin'ku at the moment). Artists do not want to donate works just to keep them in the local area; they want to sell them to earn money immediately.

In addition to the financial problem, there are also disagreements about the quality of paintings and differences in notions of displaying art between the Yolngu people and the art advisers. At Galiwin'ku, there are several well-known artists whose work has won prizes and been exhibited at galleries in the south. Not every clan has such quality artists. Curators from the metropolitan museums, as well as art advisers, were hesitant to display works of widely varying artistic standards alongside one another. For the Yolngu people, however, all clans must be represented equally. They understand that each painting is equally important to the clan that owns it, and it is essential to show work from each clan on an equal footing. The Yolngu people did not accept the idea of the artistic standards of outsiders influencing what was displayed, and the discussion of this issue upset them. This underlines the fact that there is a clear difference in how paintings are valued in the local context and in the metropolitan art scene represented by art advisers and visiting curators.

A further complication arose from the Yolngu people's being told that "important" objects should be in the museum. For the Yolngu people, the most important objects are the ones used in sacred ceremonies, in other words, secret-sacred objects that have

⁶ In the course of discussion with the curator from Northern Territory Museum about the local museum, they agreed to conserve the memorial. A thatched roof was erected to cover it and a chain fence was built around it in 1996.

restricted display. As mentioned earlier, such objects are off-limits to women, children, and outsiders. During discussions, the local people saw a need to divide the proposed museum into one room available only to initiated men, with a lock in place at all times, and a more general area where all could go. As the sacred works of the clans had to be strictly controlled, just locking them up together was not enough for some people at Galiwin'ku. It would be impractical to imagine someone, for example an art adviser, keeping an eye on all the materials 24 hours each day, and there was also the possibility of the art adviser being female. Thus the secret-sacred objects could not be seen as secure in the imagined system.

This discussion about a museum reveals how diametrically opposed attitudes toward information and knowledge can be. In Yolngu society, some symbolically important knowledge and objects are kept secret and only shared among certain members of the society. A strong bond is created among the few members who share this secret knowledge. In mainstream society, by contrast, important knowledge and objects are made to be viewed by the public, and they are expected to function in that way as the core of a shared identity, as Anderson noted (Anderson, 1991).

Another reason why Galiwin'ku had trouble agreeing to have a museum was the absence of an art adviser like those at Yirrkala and Maningrida. At these towns, the people who planned, designed and established the museums were non-Aboriginal art advisers. They valued Aboriginal culture and thought it important to maintain local artistic heritage, not because of any strong demand from the local residents. As Dobb (1996) has pointed out, local museums in the 1980s were built by outside initiative, and most of them have since closed. Dobb's suggested reasons for the failure included the perception of the museums as private institutions and their failure to function as cultural centers for their communities. It is for these reasons, he has said, that they closed soon after the departure of the person responsible for their establishment. The Galiwin'ku museum discussed here fits this pattern. In other words, if there had been such an adviser at Galiwin'ku, then a similar local museum would probably have been established.

In the 1990s, when local museums were being promoted and planned by ATSIC, the project's conception was based on expectations of active commitment among local Aboriginal people. The institutions were meant to become the center of local activities, providing a social and cultural community resource very different from the museums of the 1970s-80s, which had depended too much on outside initiative. In reality, however, the situation in Arnhem Land has not changed much. The reopening of museums in Maningrida and Yirrkala were major events, and local people celebrated them enthusiastically—but as passing events, not as the beginning of a new era. Neither of these museums now functions

in the way envisioned by ATSIC. The idea of a museum-as-cultural-center has not even been absorbed.

7. Conclusion

The move for the establishment of a local museum at Galiwin'ku has involved several interest groups. The people at the center are of course the Yolngu, the local Aboriginal people. They have reacted in various ways to stimuli from outside of their society. In adapting to the cash economy, they started to sell their paintings and crafts to obtain income. They negotiated and changed their way of painting to maintain the secret status of their art (Morphy and Layton, 1981). They cooperated with art advisers to establish museums in their communities in the 1970s, and with the funding offered by ATSIC in 1993, they supported the move to develop their own plans for building museums. Despite all these changes, Aboriginal painting still has a distinct significance within Yolngu society, a significance completely different from that of painting in wider society.

Surrounding the Yolngu are two other interest groups. The first is the Australian mainstream society and its agencies, such as ATSIC and the metropolitan museums. They promoted changes in mainstream attitudes toward Aboriginal people, altered the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and had a hand in promoting the repatriation of Aboriginal heritage. ATSIC tried to relate their repatriation efforts to the support of local cultural identity. From their point of view, the return of artifacts to their local contexts made the building of local museums essential.

A second interest group is the Western art world, which sustains art markets and the promotion of art. Since the 1980s, Aboriginal works have increasingly been treated as art rather than as souvenirs (Kubota, 2007).⁷ This follows a worldwide pattern of people of mainstream society finding aesthetic value in Aboriginal art, which has stimulated the production of art in the Yolngu communities and led to the establishment of a system of art centers to promote the marketing of the work. As attitudes toward Aboriginal art have changed, so too have attitudes toward Aboriginal people more generally. One reflection of this has been, as we have seen, changing relationships between metropolitan museums and Aboriginal people, leading to the push to repatriate cultural heritage.

Art advisers mediate between these agencies. They have taken up the promotion of

7 Regarding Aboriginal work as art has been an obvious trend in Australia and overseas since the 1980s, even though the work has been seen by some as modern art and by others as primitive art (Marcus and Myers, 1995).

Aboriginal work as art in the mainstream art world. Many advisers work to explain the symbolic and spiritual importance of Aboriginal works by Yolngu people to mainstream society while at the same time trying to contextualize the work with respect to the global art movement. Some advisers also recognize the importance of keeping some of the best painting within the Aboriginal communities to support the reproduction of local cultural identity by establishing local museums.

This account draws attention to two different views of Yolngu painting. Aboriginal paintings are seen quite differently by mainstream society from the way they are seen in the local Yolngu context. In mainstream society, works are examined and selected according to outsiders' aesthetic standards without regard to the social and cultural significance accorded them by the Yolngu.

Another discrepancy is manifest in attitudes towards information. In mainstream society, it is understood that interesting, valued or prominent information or knowledge—like that embodied in art—should be documented and made public. This is a widely accepted attitude, and it is believed that, by making art public, people can share an understanding of its symbolic and cultural meaning. According to this view, the release of culturally symbolic and representative information or knowledge to other people acts as the foundation of a shared identity. In Yolngu society, however, there is a different attitude. They generally restrict access to information. The release of valued knowledge is strictly limited by age and gender to certain members of each clan to guarantee their special membership or role within the society. Men in this society gain access to special knowledge after initiation and passing through a number of age-grade ceremonies. The social solidarity among them is strong, and maintaining the secrecy of their information is a strict obligation. For Yolngu people the knowledge that functions as a foundation of their identity is not to be open, public, and shared. Symbolic objects used in rituals are hidden from all except authorized participants in secret ceremonies. Many urban Aboriginal people, however, now have the idea that culturally important knowledge and objects should be made open, to support and strengthen their cultural identity. This is a Western concept, however, and is contrary to the Yolngu attitude.

The memorial discussed in this paper is a typical example of the effects of this discrepancy. For outsiders such as art dealers, museum curators and anthropologists, the memorial is obviously to be valued at least as a historically important monument. When they see it fading with time and being neglected, they begin to talk of restoration. This discussion often leads to talk of a local museum. They see the memorial as a sign that the Yolngu people have released their secrets to the outside world, not realizing that the

secrecy of these very objects remains vitally important to the people.

As a result of all the difficulties we have seen, the plan for a local museum in Galiwin'ku has still not been realized.⁸ Disagreements between Yolngu and outsiders' perspectives on cultural practices of painting lie at the heart of the failure of local museums to flourish. This is not only the result of a difference in attitudes toward the sharing and distribution of knowledge; Yolngu also have, as yet, no real reason for displaying aspects of their material culture in a local museum—other than, perhaps, to generate income. Given the very limited possibilities for generating substantial income, no real motivation for building local museums exists. Painting is still an everyday social and cultural practice, but placing it on display serves no function if it is abstracted from the context in which it is usually made and displayed. The rhetoric of material cultural maintenance is not one that belongs to the Yolngu, though they too sometimes lament the failure of young people to honor traditions. They have no strong reasons to oppose local museums, provided the importance of not displaying some items is recognized, but at the same time they have no compelling reasons to support the museums.

In closing, I would like to point to another possible interpretation of this material. We might see the Yolngu people's lack of support for local museums as "soft resistance," a non-positive and creative form of resistance (Matsuda, 1999).⁹ During the planning of a local museum, they obediently consider plans shown to them by metropolitan museums or governments, debating the matter over and over again, but without any concrete result. This withholding of results should be understood as refusal. The Yolngu people have passively refused to accept mainstream frameworks concerning art and knowledge by making it impossible to build local museums. They are dodging the imposed frame by means of "soft resistance." By choosing not to release materials to local museums, they are asserting their

⁸ In 2003, one senior man in Galiwin'ku applied for and received funding from the Northern Territory government to plan a "Knowledge Center," a concept that is similar to a "keeping place." The center was opened in 2004. The institution is planned to store local traditional knowledge in a secure place and also to digitize film and audio and store them. But it has caused local tension between clans, as it has made senior men of other clans suspicious that the person involved is attempting to seize power over other clans. As a result, the knowledge center was not functioning in 2006 (Kubota, 2006).

⁹ In a discussion of "weapons of the weak," Scott (1985) re-examined the everyday practice of socially and economically "weak" people, arguing that these can be seen as forms of personal resistance even when they are neither organized nor active. From this discussion, Matsuda suggests that some of these resistance practices can be called "soft resistance." Soft resistance, he argues, is not just the passive minimum living practice that incidentally serves as resistance "weapons of the weak," but rather a practice that has some deliberately creative aspects. He sees the autonomous practices of structurally suppressed people as resistance, and at the same time, these practices produce something quite unexpected creatively, apart from the intentions of the people in power (Matsuda, 1999).

own understanding of the symbolic relationships between art and the land and myth. That is far more important and valuable to them than the outsiders' standard and presentation of art. In this way, they may also be trying to avoid seeing their works placed in a context in which individuality and personal authorship are highly valued.

The characteristics of Yolngu art that are maintained by "soft resistance" can also be a possible contribution to post-modern art. Western art in the post-modern era is struggling to innovate and achieve relevance (Marcus and Myers, 1995). Aboriginal art, previously seen as craft or as ethnographic material, is now seen as marginal art that maintains strong and original connections to particular places and people-maintains, in short, a relevance generally lacking in the Western art world.

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