

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Satellite Cultures

INVITATION WITHOUT HOSPITALITY

"Satellite Cultures," an "overview of Australian video from 1975 to the present," ran at the New Museum in New York City from December 8, 1989 to February 4, 1990. The program, organized by Sally Couacaud, Director of the Artspace Visual Arts Centre in Sydney, presented over 20 videotapes by Australian producers. In this review, I would like to address two facets of the show: the installation and programming of Australian video by its American sponsor, and the content and form of the works produced by Aboriginal Australians.

The presentation of the work of indigenous peoples in the galleries of First World institutions of culture requires attention to the complexities of this collaboration. Too often the cultural productions of minority people are brought into museums or galleries without proper mediation, like poor relatives invited to visit but never properly introduced to the assembled company. This is in no way to suggest that such institutions should not continue to sponsor such shows. In fact one of the most exciting and valuable changes that "postmodern" cultural theory and criticism have engendered is interest and support from such institutions for the cultural production of disenfranchised groups (be they women, African-Americans, gay people, or Australian Aborigines). For those with intellectual, political or personal commitment to communication across boundaries of difference, this expanded notion of "artistic production" has exposed us to the work of artists we would not have seen even ten years ago.

However, the invitation to come and show one's work is necessarily only the first step. Showing and seeing the work of unfamiliar communities or cultures demands background information, education and discussion. Although the value of proper contextualization holds true for the presentation of *all* work, cross-cultural programming demands an even greater sensitivity, especially when showing the work of Third or Fourth World peoples to a First World audience. Precisely because of the manner in which cultural information is (not) disseminated, curators should assume that First World audiences have less than adequate knowledge of the histories, lifestyles and cultures of indigenous people. The recent New York show "AMAZON WEEK: Reflecting on the Brazilian Rain Forest: A Dialogue with the Insiders" is an excellent example of appropriate curatorial contextualization. This program included not only a large and diverse selection of film and video screenings but three panel discussions, the installation of an information and resource center, as well as written notes on all of the material screened.

Although this simply sounds like good programming, it is more often than not the case that indigenous production is not so adequately presented. I hope to explain that this is not because an organization like the New Museum *intends* to

exhibit improperly, but rather that their "invitation without hospitality" is marked by the legacy of what I will call a "post-colonial" relation. In a world where the ravages of colonialism are at last being considered and condemned, where the responsibilities of the (ex)colonizer to the (ex)colonized are being defined and enacted, the "post-colonial" relation re-enacts many of the operating power relations of the very colonialism it attempts to address. Proper mediation across boundaries of difference is at least one necessary form of attention to be paid so that even in the "post-colonial" situation, invitations from First World programmers to indigenous producers can be constituted with greater hospitality.

In the second section of this review, I consider what the guest curator Sally Couacaud calls the "speaking positions" which are taken and constructed by Aboriginal media producers. The coming of new media technology to traditional Aboriginal communities has been the subject of some debate among both Aboriginal people and those working with them [Michaels 1983, 1985]. The anthropologist Faye Ginsburg [1991] has characterized the positions in the debate as "Faustian Contract or Global Village." The AUSSAT satellite, launched in 1985, brought mainstream visual media to remote Aboriginal communities for the first time. This technology, yet another colonizing power, also provided new possibilities for "reproducing and transforming cultural identity for people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption" [Ginsburg 1991]. This analysis of indigenous production presented in "Satellite Cultures" will at once contribute to Ginsburg's more optimistic understanding of indigenous media, while also raising the problems of representing such media to Western audiences.

THE GUEST WAS LEFT IN THE HALLWAY

In a high-ceilinged and columned gallery space in Soho, a specially constructed triangle of white sheet-rock held three video monitors and six tiny, tinny speakers. From this installation six hours of video by Australians, both European and Aboriginal, played virtually uninterruptedly and virtually unannounced. The show, "Satellite Cultures," seemed an intrusion, an eyesore; its triangular installation and muffled, wafting sound jutting into and re-aligning the visitor's flow from ticket counter to main gallery space.

As a visitor who had come to see "Satellite Cultures", I sat on the uncomfortable black cement benches offered (oddly out-of-reach of the small screens displaying the program) and wondered what the New Museum thought it was doing. I thought to myself as people tracked by that the New Museum (as is often the case) was making important and innovative programming decisions: opening channels of communication between American and Australian people who have little exposure to each other. But then, if the New Museum did have "communication" in mind, I was puzzled about *how* the Museum had chosen to arrange its American visitors' encounter with the Australians' work. At the same time that I watched the tapes, I also watched potential watchers walk by. People peered, perhaps located the program notes tucked upon an opposite and distant wall, but rarely stopped long enough to watch the videos as they made their way to the "real" show in the main gallery space. It seemed that the New Museum was less prepared to enable its Australian videomakers to communicate *with* Americans than to do what

museums more typically do, simply display the production of artists. However, both the *Program Notes*, written by Sally Couacaud, and the tapes I saw, seemed to have a different intention which contradicted the New Museum's installation of the program. Couacaud explains that an Aboriginal artist in the show, Tracey Moffatt, for example, "constructs speaking positions for the Aboriginal histories, memories, and narratives rendered silent in the colonial construction of representation". One of the foremost concerns of the videos in the show seemed to be this notion of ending a long colonial silence (through the "construction of speaking positions"), both between individuals within Australian communities, and between Australian and other cultures. As I watched potential American watchers not watch, as I saw and heard the work with difficulty because of poor installation, I saw exemplified at the New Museum the specific distortions of a "post-colonial relation", which allowed Australian silence to be broken in only the most rudimentary fashion with an invitation that lacked hospitality. Yes, Australians had been invited to show their work, but this work was placed in the hallway to the main gallery space. Accompanied by only brief and complex program notes, an uninformed American audience was provided little information with which to frame the work, an inconclusive inclusion. The result was a partial, sometimes rewarding and always frustrating attempt at communication.

Couacaud opens her remarks about the program by stressing that media communication in the post-colonial situation remains a difficult, loaded enterprise, pre-conditioned by the long history of Australian colonization: "Colonialism is Australia's history; it is also a condition that the electronic media perpetuates". She seems to caution that while many new communication possibilities have been opened to Australians by the introduction of low-cost video production and satellite broadcasting, any counter-culture work in video by Australians is inevitably compromised by their use of a colonizer's medium. Thus although the conquest and consequences of colonialism are discussed, defined, and condemned in many tapes in the show, the structures which underlie this discourse and which shape contemporary interaction seem laden with the historically defined relations of colonialism. She continues, "Previous histories of obliteration and assimilation are repeated in television's insistent reduction and homogenization of geographic and cultural difference". Thus both the New Museum and the Australian videomakers they exhibit must be applauded for attempting the near impossible: offering alternatives to a history of "obliteration and assimilation" in a form that more often than not works to perpetuate these systems of discourse and control.

Importantly "Satellite Cultures" embodies a more optimistic and less totalizing view of the possibilities for post-colonial media production. Explains Couacaud: "Yet if it is true that, as Eric Michaels has pointed out, Australians have developed a 'suspiciously elaborate terminology for identifying the contradictions of colonialism and creativity', it is also true to say that it is in the field of video creation that these contradictions are most potently being addressed and explored". It is in the very production of media that Aboriginal Australians in particular work to challenge and re-define the complicated "speaking positions" which make up their post-colonial condition.

What is this complicated history their work re-works? Because spoken language provides non-literate Aboriginal language groups with access to their history,

tradition, law and ritual, there are limits, rules and conventions which govern access to speech between individuals within a language group: "In societies without print, where the word is inseparable from the author of the word, information can take on special value . . . To assure the maintenance of this economy, conventions arise and may be invoked with force of law regarding who may know and who may say" [Michaels 1983:3]. Furthermore, there are over 150 Aboriginal language groups, making communication between Aboriginals with similar needs difficult [Miller 1986:16]. And although Australian Aboriginals may be one of the most documented of indigenous people, like all colonized people they have historically been deprived of the means with which to contribute to their representation in the larger society: "To date, a staggering 6,000 or more films have been made about Aboriginals. However, the white community is still ignorant of Aboriginal culture. The problem has lain with the types of representation—or rather, misrepresentation—exhibited by filmmakers for almost a century" [Leigh 1988:79].

Media have come to the Australian outback in the form of ABC-TV, which began broadcasting by satellite to the remote central desert in 1985; in the form of video rental, through the advent of indigenous media production also sent over satellite airwaves by the Aboriginal television station, *Imparja*; and through the video production of independent Aboriginal artists. Couacaud explains: "The development of local Aboriginal video production and broadcasting first set up at Yuen-dumu and Ernabella is now at the point of rapid expansion . . . In 1988 *Imparja* started broadcasting to all Aboriginal communities within the satellite footprint, thus providing important diverse local alternatives to domination by the white, satellite-beamed network".

Now that Australian Aboriginals are using media to represent themselves and challenge their past (mis)representations, now that they are speaking both locally, nationally and internationally through media, I am interested in considering the complex construction of a new Aboriginal voice (or voices). Who speaks to whom, in what language, in what environment, with what intention? The varied Aboriginal videos presented in "Satellite Cultures"—a compilation of works produced by CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association), Mick and Rhonda Barker's *Extinct but Going Home*, and Tracey Moffatt's *Moodeitj Yorgas* (Strong Women)—exemplify the great range of possible answers to these questions.

BUT THE GUEST HAD SOMETHING TO SAY

The positions taken by and given to Aboriginal video producers can be usefully interpreted by applying two theories of "ethnographic film". First, Faye Ginsburg's [1991] interpretation of "indigenous media", most recently illuminated in her article "Indigenous Media: Faustian Contract or Global Village?", considers Fourth World media production as a mediation of identity both *within* that culture and *between* that culture and other (primarily First World) cultures. She explains about indigenous media productions:

They are all intended to communicate something about that social or collective identity we call "culture", in order to mediate (one hopes) across gaps of space, time, knowledge, and

prejudice. The films most closely associated with the genre (ideally) work toward creating understanding between two groups separated by space and social practices [Ginsburg 1991].

Thus in reviewing this show which attempts to "create understanding" between Americans and Australian Aboriginals, my analysis will consider cultural communication on two levels: both the "within" and the "between".

Sol Worth, whose foreshadowing work also discussed film practice as communication, provides important insight into the analysis of the "between". Worth understood that the production of media occurs both in its making (utterance) and in its interpretation (reading) by viewers: "the utterer must have intended an audience to recognize the intention behind the utterance" [Grice 1957:382, cited in Worth 1981:32; Worth's emphasis]. Worth suggests that questions can be asked of a text so as to understand its maker's intentions: "what things are said (or not said), why, to whom, and in what form" [Gross 1981:16]. I would suggest that Worth's questions should be asked by the American viewer of the videos in "Satellite Cultures", and of the New Museum's program in its entirety.

The Aboriginal video in the program exemplifies different intentions and uses for media production. For example, the CAAMA compilation is an hour of short programs "made by and for Aboriginal communities within central Australia and broadcast on the Aboriginal television station, *Imparja*" [Couacaud 1989]. I believe the diverse programs in this compilation were made to speak in many ways: among Aboriginals of the same language-group, between Aboriginals of different language groups, and between Aboriginals and Euro-Australian and American audiences. How then is this enormous task represented in CAAMA's work?

The compilation's first three segments document the ways of Aboriginal people: an interview with a health worker in an Aboriginal settlement who talks about Aboriginal health needs, a demonstration of the construction of a boomerang by an elderly Aboriginal man, a presentation of a woman's dream-dance. These sequences give little background information on the issues, activities and lives they document. Without a narrator's voice, or even explanatory opening titles to orient the viewer, these interview/demonstrations are more documents than documentaries. Although subtitled in English (therefore marking the will to communicate outside the language group of the people interviewed), many words are simply left untranslated, appearing in the printed subtitles in their Aboriginal form.

Such programming is perhaps the most "Aboriginal" in content and intended reception. Although the cultural outsider *is* allowed access into these "aboriginal" moments (because they were taped for satellite projection, and because they were subtitled), the media producers have allowed the cultural outsider at best the traditional observational position of the anthropologist—permitted to watch but not necessarily given all the tools for understanding. On the other hand, one can assume that the material functions very differently for those aboriginal viewers who watch the images of familiar and important cultural events, who recognize friends or family, or who appreciate the recording and preserving of familiar tribal history and activity. Such a local use of media production and reception serves communication needs *within* the community that is recorded, but places other Aboriginal peoples, white Australians, and "Satellite Culture" observers into the role of outsider.

A second example of CAAMA's programming is sequences which document

concerts and songs by Aboriginal bands. Organized around the “language” of music, these sequences suggest alternatives for more inclusive communication. They display a sort of postmodern collage where everything from the lyrics, band members, music genres, performance styles, instruments, to audiences and film techniques combine the Aboriginal and the European. We see a concert which begins with two Aboriginal performers in body paint, dancing to a traditional Aboriginal song, performed on traditional instruments (amplified by microphones). A back beat of an electric bass joins in. The white bass player is shown in close-up. The song begins, sung in English. The audience is predominantly Aboriginal. The subjects of the English lyrics are Aboriginal issues: a song about the effects of the satellite on the community by Isaac Yama, a song called “AIDS is a Killer”. It seems that Aborigines have found music to be useful for both education within their community and the communication of their issues between Aboriginal communities and the “outside world”.

Mick and Rhonda Barker's *Extinct but Going Home*, a documentary about their clan's fight for land rights after they have been deemed “extinct” by the Northern Land Council, seems even more self-aware as a communication to outsiders, even as it remains an internal documentation of their history and tradition. By stating their case in a video which will be distributed, their claim is “official” because it is made in a colonizer's discourse and told to people outside their community. The narrator, Rhonda Barker, explains that it is European notions of history and the law which have defined her, and her very live-looking family, as extinct. Largely because Barker and her family have taken on some European ways, and because much of their tradition was lost due to the murders and dislocations of colonialism, their claim of Aboriginal identity is suspect. Interestingly then, by taking up the video camera, even though another mark of her family's Europeanness, her family is also equipped to tell their side of the story, her family's Aboriginal history and law. She explains that this has never been recorded or told in colonialist discourse (thus in turn denying them their land rights because there is no record of their tradition), although the telling and remembering of history is a very live practice among her family.

It is the very process of mediating their issues and stories into a comprehensible video for the outside world which empowers their claim to tribal land rights. For in the act of documenting their elders' stories, their clans' history, images of their ancestors and their ancestral land, they not only legitimate but actually create their claim of a distinct tribal past and tradition. Because colonization has dispersed and killed most of the people of their language-group, taken from them their language and therefore their access to their history and rituals, their record and access to the past is the video they make about this colonial Catch-22. The camera plays another key role in their political project by recording all their encounters with often corrupt and deceiving individuals who attempt to deny them their land rights. The possibility of the public exposure of these recorded interactions serve to ensure accountability.

The most problematic feature of this video seems to me to be its unquestioning reliance upon Barker's body and voice as a register of the “Aboriginal”. Too often images of her body—contemplating the sunset, her legs walking through weeds,

her mouth eating traditional foods—are presented as evidence enough for her family's claims.

Tracey Moffatt's *Moodeitj Yorgas* serves as a helpful deconstruction of what is the *Extinct's* rather more essential understanding of ethnic identity, rooted in the Aboriginal body. Moffatt literally breaks Aboriginal identity from the body alone, by severing the sound and visual tracks during otherwise conventional-looking talking-head interviews of Aboriginal women: their mouths move as they speak, but the words we hear are not in synch. By separating these Aboriginal bodies from the words they speak explaining their lives as Aboriginal subjects, Moffatt suggests that the body and the voice must be understood as distinct registers of identity. Although the body will always register as Aboriginal—because of the color of skin, the shape of eyes—the voice, with its capability of speaking many languages and mimicking cultural forms and intonations, is a confusing and radical register of ethnic identity. An elder who speaks throughout the tape is even more conclusively separated from her body. We never see her image. When she speaks, her voice is accompanied by silhouetted women's bodies performing traditional tasks and dances. "Strong women all know how to speak the English language as well as their own. And they teach their children too," she says in her native language. Her Aboriginal identity therefore is confirmed in the tape, not through her dark-skinned body but through her use of language as she maintains it in the traditional way, by telling stories, dreams and history.

This voice tells one story again and again: about white men's preoccupation with dressing Aboriginal women in western clothes. She tells how Aboriginal women would take these clothes off as they returned to the desert; and even when they were forced to keep them on "we used to wear them inside out or even upside down". Moffatt suggests that the Aboriginal woman's body subverts Anglicization, while her voice will allow her to live and work in both worlds. This is perhaps a particular concern of Moffatt's work because of her personal history: raised and schooled among white Australians, trained at a Western art school, as adult she began to consider her Aboriginal identity within her work. Thus for Moffatt personally, and in the videos she makes, it is in the unification of these multiple registers of identity (the Aboriginal body, the multi-ethnic voice) where present-day Aboriginal identity is defined and/or contested.

This is well demonstrated as Moffatt interviews several Aboriginal women who have successful careers in white Australian society. Their black images are seen, their voices, separate and severed from synchronization with their moving mouths, speak about their work in white society. Similarly Moffatt, with her "art-school education", speaks the Western words of "avant-garde" video-production with fluency and grace, while the "body" of her piece retains an Aboriginal identity; as the sounds of *their* stories are heard, as images of *their* dances are recorded, as *their* photographs and faces are included in a new historical record. Moffatt, while clearly communicating between cultures by adopting the form and theories of contemporary video production, also communicates within Aboriginal culture, as she talks to an Aboriginal community of women and as she talks herself.

And how did Moffatt speak to me, seated in the foyer of the New Museum, staring at a large white wall, her images and sounds coming at me small and

distant in the room's immensity? Of all of the Aboriginal work, hers was the least difficult to view in this context, perhaps because as video-artist her work is made for such forums. The other Aboriginal work suffered much more from the New Museum's lack of contextualization and hospitality. However, this is not to say that it had no impact. For, as these guests spoke in the hallway over many weeks, their work accomplished what Couacaud describes as the Australian artist's typical relationship to politics: "its ability to disrupt contexts, a process that emphasizes local intervention in a seemingly seamless representation of reality". Even without proper contextualization the program presented strong videos with sounds, looks and content different from the museum's usual fare. "Disrupting contexts" is not communication, but perhaps it serves as a persistent reminder that, with proper hospitality, communication is a post-colonial possibility.

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