

Sites of persuasion – *Yingapungapu* at the National Museum of Australia

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The National Museum of Australia opened in March 2001, in the year of the centenary of Australia's Federation. It was Prime Minister John Howard's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday present to the nation. The museum's birth was delayed until after the establishment of the National Library of Australia (1960) and the National Gallery of Australia (1982) and for a while it appeared likely to be stillborn. While the idea of a national museum may lurk inevitably behind the idea of a national capital, as one of the symbols of nationhood, in Australia's case the gestation period was long and the birth late. The delay has had a significant impact on the final form of the museum since it finally came into being at a moment when Indigenous Australians began once again to occupy a central space in Australian political and cultural life.\*

The 1960s had seen the significant emergence of Indigenous Australians into the national political arena. The 1960s and 1970s saw the development of the campaign for land rights in the north of Australia, the demand for equal wages in the cattle industry, the end of segregation in New South Wales country towns and a burgeoning civil rights movement that set much of the national political agenda. At the same time Aboriginal culture, which had been rendered almost invisible by the evolutionary lens through which it was seen, began to make an increasing impact on Australia's cultural life. The place of Aborigines in the Australian nation and the redressing of their disadvantage became major issues that presented no easy solution. Australian governments in the last quarter

of the twentieth century tackled many of the problems associated with discrimination and introduced land rights and native title legislation. They also increased the resources allocated to overcome the problems of two centuries of colonisation. While none of these problems have been resolved, the national agenda has moved since the 1990s towards seeking a state of reconciliation, in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, while acknowledging their differences and the past history of injustice and indifference, will work together in a process of nation building. This hopeful agenda has been somewhat undermined by the Prime Minister's personal determination not to actually apologise for past injustices and by the watering down of beneficial native title legislation.

In 1965, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner wrote an influential article in the Canberra Times (later reprinted in Stanner 1979), under the headline 'Gallery for Southern Man for Canberra'. He argued that such a gallery would tell 'the story of the discovery, mastery and enrichment of the continent by the Aborigines ... one of the most splendid tales of its kind that any country in the world can offer' (Stanner 1979: 192). Stanner was an influential public figure in the small-town capital city that Canberra then was, and the idea of a museum that celebrated Australia's Indigenous heritage proved fertile. The Whitlam Labor government was elected in 1972 with, among other initiatives, a major agenda on Aboriginal rights and cultural heritage. It commissioned a report by Peter Pigott on the establishment of a national museum which contained within it the summary of a separate report on a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia (Australia: Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections 1975). The

recommendation resulted in the establishment of what amounted to an imagined museum that for some time seemed destined never to find a home. Successive governments were elected with a mandate to build a national museum, but it was not until the election of the Howard Coalition government in 1996 that the promise was fulfilled. The museum that was built was smaller in scale than the one recommended by the Pigott report, and focussed on three central themes: land, people and nation. In addition, a major section of the museum was to be set aside for the development of the First Australians Gallery.

The central role played by the First Australians Gallery in the National Museum of Australia is a reflection of a number of factors. Some of these connect to an earlier history of museums and collections, others reflect the national purpose and the political issues of the time. The museum already had a collection-in-waiting, the National Ethnographic Collection, which was housed in the Institute of Anatomy together with the National War Wounds Collection. The ethnographic collection largely comprised objects collected by researchers from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, itself founded in the 1960s, together with some earlier collections from Australia and elsewhere in the Pacific made by government officers.

The purpose of an exhibition or an institution is likely to be radically influenced by its historical positioning. The National Museum of Australia's late arrival on the scene required it to contextualise Aboriginal artefacts in a very different manner from how they might have been fifty years earlier, or even in Stanner's imagined Gallery for Southern Man. There was likely to be less emphasis on the 'traditional' past and more emphasis on contemporary ways of life, more emphasis on history and politics and less emphasis on

culture. During the period of the museum's gestation, Aborigines had moved from past to present, from assimilation to self determination, from public invisibility to considerable prominence (see Meekison 2000 for relevant discussion). Aborigines were part of the national agenda and part of Australia's developing image. Their political prominence made both their cultural products and their civil rights matters of international interest. The directors appointed to oversee the development stage of the National Museum of Australia and its opening exhibitions were both Indigenous Australians — Bill Jonas (an academic) followed by Dawn Casey (a leading public servant).

Museums are complex institutions with multiple functions. At the core of most museums are two activities: the making and preservation of collections, and the display and interpretation of those collections to the public. Both of these activities are what I have referred to elsewhere as 'value creation processes' (Morphy 2000: 129). These processes are ones in which particular kinds of interpretations and evaluations of objects are presented and disseminated. Museums as authoritative cultural institutions with large audiences are ideally positioned to create value and influence people's conceptions of their past. Value creation processes influence both the socio-cultural and economic value of things: value can be converted into economic return both through the increasing market value of the object and by increasing the resources devoted to its conservation, display and dissemination (1). Interpretation can change the way people think about objects and the cultural and historical contexts in which those objects can be placed and framed. The balance between objects and interpretation has shifted somewhat over time as the 'age of mechanical reproduction' allows for ever increasing substitutions and

additions to the 'exhibit'. Indeed the interpretative purpose can be conceived of as being relatively autonomous of objects. (2) The National Museum of Australia has foregrounded story telling as its exhibitionary genre, fitting neatly Tony Bennett's encapsulating phrase that 'the power to "show and tell"' has become the rhetoric of the new museum (Bennett 1995: 87).

As integral components of value creating processes, museums become sites of persuasion which people attempt to use to get their version of history, and their regime of value acknowledged and disseminated to wider audiences. The board of the museum, the political sponsors, the curators and the public are all pressing 'museums to display the version of history [they] prefer' (Lowenthal 2001: 166). A national museum has as part of its agenda the representation of the nation to itself. But that view of the nation's self has to be constructed and must acknowledge or deny the diversity of the people who are contained within it. The ideology of the National Museum of Australia's planners, perhaps somewhat radically, was to recognise the unfinished and contested nature of national identity: 'The museum where appropriate should display controversial issues. In our view too many museums concentrate on certainty and dogma, thereby forsaking the function of stimulating doubt and thoughtful discussion.' (Australia: Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections 1975: 73). Somewhat presciently, as it proved, the director of the museum, Dawn Casey, wrote: 'We are opening and presenting our messages to the public at a time when the issue of 'Australianness' is being debated possibly more vigorously than in any other period of the nation's history. ... We accept from the outset that there will be disagreements about the way we examine historic

processes or about our very choice of themes and stories and issues' (Casey 2001: 9).

However it was not so much Australianness as a general concept but rather the representation of Aborigines and Aboriginal history that became the focus of controversy.

In developing the First Australians Gallery the curatorial team were presented with a number of issues. They had to confront the colonisation of Australia, the history of massacres and population decline, of disadvantage and deprivation, and they had to show the diversity of lifestyles and values of contemporary Indigenous Australians. The greatest resource that the museum possessed in terms of collections was items of material culture and art that reflected the traditional way of life of Australian hunters and gatherers as they had been at the time of European colonisation. While this was acknowledged as an important resource connected to Australia's history and prehistory, the curators recognised the need to avoid a past-oriented view of Aboriginal Australians or one that positioned Aborigines low down in an evolutionary sequence of human cultures. The curators needed both to separate Aboriginal culture from its association with evolutionist perspectives on Aboriginal Australians and yet at the same time allow Aboriginal people who continued to practice traditional ways of life to be counted as contemporary Australians. The task is a difficult one since contemporary Indigenous Australians, while sharing much in common across Australia, have had very different colonial histories and differing and sometimes competing conceptions of their identity. The exhibitions have had to confront the fact that while some Indigenous Australians are lawyers, or leading public servants, or museum directors, others are oriented towards a

hunter-gather way of life and continue into the present holding to beliefs and practices that for much of Australia's colonial history were associated with a disappearing and devalued way of life.

The most controversial aspects of the First Australians Gallery proved to be the sections dealing with colonial history and the conquest of Aboriginal land, in particular the issue of frontier conflict (see Attwood and Foster 2003). The issue of frontier conflict, the invasion of Aboriginal land, and the forced removal of Aboriginal children are painful but unproblematic issues to most Aboriginal Australians: in the sense that they happened and they had a major impact on their lives and histories.\*\* However some members of the Museum's council and conservative historians conducted a strong campaign against the museum's representation of frontier violence. The exhibition planner's original intention was that such representations would be a step to reconciliation through admitting the injustices of the past. Other areas of the First Australians Gallery have been much less subject to controversy. Among these was the Yingapungapu exhibition.

The agency of Indigenous Australians from northeast Arnhem Land , and in particular Yolngu people from Blue Mud Bay, was centrally involved in curating this exhibition.\*\*\*. While on the surface it appeared apolitical, it reflected an ongoing campaign to protect their rights in law and maintain their autonomy. In the colonial history of Australia the frontier at times moved more slowly than at others, and the people of northeast Arnhem Land came under colonial rule as late as the 1930s. Their history of resistance has been as strong as that of other Indigenous Australians, but the

timing of the invasion of their lands enabled them to avoid the worst of the massacres and eventually retain control over most of their land. To them, their distinctive way of life is not a sign of past ways of life but a motivation for their present political action. The Yingapungapu exhibition was not singled out for political controversy because it could be interpreted by others as a representation of a traditional way of life associated with the past, yet it is every bit as political and entangled in value creation processes as the more overtly political aspects of the opening displays. Indeed the main motivation for taking part in the exhibition was that Yolngu, while having secure tenure over their land, are still involved in the struggle to gain rights in the sea, which they see as an indissoluble part of their inheritance.

One of the main changes in museums over the last 30 years has been a greatly increased involvement of indigenous people. This has taken many different forms: involvement in the planning of exhibitions has influenced the ways in which cultures are represented, active participation in the curation of collections has enabled people to regain some control over their objects, and roles in the management of museums have enabled them to gain a stake. The forms of involvement vary greatly according to the colonial history of the particular state and the degree of empowerment accorded to its indigenous populations (3). In Australia these developments are probably as far reaching as anywhere else. Exhibitions routinely involve consultation with the indigenous group concerned, museums facilitate access to collections, considerable potential control is exercised over collections by the object's makers and their descendants, and Indigenous Australians are playing an increasing role as museum professionals in managing and

curating collections.

There is a danger that these changes of the last 30 years may mask longer-enduring continuities of cultural process and engagement, and may result in a down-playing and even denial of ongoing indigenous agency. I would argue, indeed, that the value creation processes of museums have been influenced strongly by indigenous peoples. They have been more active agents in their own representation than has often been allowed. The (my) revisionist position holds that in two areas—the building of collections and cultural performance—indigenous people have been more than passive subjects. The majority of objects in museum collections are ones that have been manufactured for sale by indigenous people. The circumstances of the sale have varied greatly: sometimes they have involved seizing limited economic opportunities provided in oppressive colonial regimes, in other contexts purchases by museums have been a component in an expanding trading system (see essays in O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000). However the sale and exchange of goods has seldom been for economic reasons alone. Artefacts have entered museums as part of processes of value exchange, and of internal adjustment and transformation. Material culture is a means of educating the outsider into the beliefs and value systems of a society, a means of asserting that objects of value exist within it, and transactions involving material culture are a means to lock outsiders into commitments and cycles of exchange (for an African example see Kreamer and Fee 2002). This dimension of the artefact trade is one that until recently has been neglected, yet it is one for which, at least in Australia, convincing evidence exists. It was masked partly by the criterion of authenticity once used by museums. 'Authentic' objects could be used for

internal exchange but their involvement in transactions with Europeans ran counter to the view that they emanated from isolated, self-contained, uncontaminated societies. It is also the case that until recently there was little contextual data on collecting, and evidence of indigenous agency went unrecorded.

Similar considerations apply to the cultural performances associated with museums. They have been doubly problematic: the radical cultural critic views them as appropriations whose form is constrained by an alien performance context, and the anthropologist too often sees them as an inauthentic pastiche (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992 for a relevant discussion). There has always been a relationship between museums and other forms of public entertainment. People have often used museums as part of the process of performing difference. The Enlightenment brought Omai from Tahiti to the salons of Europe (National Library of Australia, 2001); anthropology helped bring Ishi into the Museum at Berkeley. There is a clear link between the way the artefacts are displayed and the way the performance is understood. People, it might be argued, go to the performance to see the exotic, to seize their last chance of seeing the 'savage', captured and safely displayed, before he disappears. Yet there is a danger in putting this argument, of failing to see and understand the motives of the indigenous performer, indeed of not seeing these as an issue at all.

The exhibition, titled 'Yingapungapu', occupies the temporary exhibition space in the First Australians Gallery. The exhibition is a collaborative effort that involved a continuous process of consultation with Yolngu people from Blue Mud Bay, from the inception of the idea to the opening ceremony. The exhibition primarily consists of

objects, 'props', labels and photographs, but there is strong performance element to it. The focus of the exhibition is a yingapungapu sand sculpture in the centre of which are three hollow-log coffins. The sand sculpture was made in a ceremonial performance, and in a sense continues to mark a ceremonial space. Films, made for the exhibition, that contextualise the sand sculpture, are continuously screened in an adjacent mini-theatre. My aim in this paper is to place the exhibition in the context of the recent history of Yolngu involvement in cultural events, to consider both their motivations and the consequences that such participation has within Yolngu society. Yolngu view museums as sites of persuasion, where the dominant society is seen to include Yolngu cultural performance in its own world and to learn something of Yolngu values and way of life. Recent Yolngu engagements with museums and national cultural events are part of a much longer history of exchange and involvement with people from other cultures and with public spheres of different scopes. Over time, those involved in such exchanges and negotiations with Yolngu have changed, at times becoming increasingly global in nature and reach. Recognizing the ways that Yolngu have communicated and acted as brokers in shaping these relations is also important because their roles would seem to confound a number of categories and expectations in recent literature on museums and exhibitions.

### The yingapungapu exhibition

Cross-cultural events and performances often involve mediators and entrepreneurs who move between different frames of cultural action. A major component of the

National Ethnographic Collection, which became the core of the Museum of Australia's collection, was built up as a result of research by grantees of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and I was one of those grantees. I had made a collection of some 150 paintings from eastern Arnhem Land during fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in the mid 1970s (Morphy 1991). In the early stages of planning the museum's opening exhibitions I was approached by Luke Taylor, who was then responsible for developing the First Australians Gallery, and asked if I would like to put forward a proposal to curate a segment on Narritjin Maymuru (1912-1981) and the art of the Manggalili clan. Narritjin was a leading bark painter and carver who played a major role in the Yolngu struggle for landrights. My current research centred on writing his biography,, and the museum has what is probably the largest single collection of his paintings. I expressed an interest, but did not take things further until when, in conversation one day at Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land with Narritjin's 'daughter' Naminapu, I was struck with the idea of curating an exhibition based on a yingapungapu sand sculpture.

A yingapungapu sand sculpture is an elliptical form used in mortuary rituals to contain pollution associated with a burial ceremony and to cleanse people after the burial has taken place (see Morphy 1999 for a discussion). Between 10 and twenty square metres in size, the sculpture can be made at different stages of a funeral. It can be made at the beginning to contain the shelter where the dead body lies or made towards the end to purify those who took part in the ritual. The construction itself a part of the ritual performance. In the purifactory stage of the performance it provides the arena for

washing and smoking ceremonies in which certain categories of relatives, or people who have performed particular roles in the ceremony, are 'freed' so that they can return to everyday life. Today it is also used for purifying vehicles that were used in the ceremony to carry the body, or objects used in the ritual. It can also be a context in which people express anger at those believed to have caused the death, and discharge feelings of aggression.

As with any Yolngu ritual artefact, the yingapungapu sand sculpture has a place in a social system confirmed by its mythological or ancestral heritage. Yingapungapu sand sculptures belong to four clans of the Yirritja moiety linked by the myth of the Wuradilaku sisters, ancestral women who travelled from Groote Eylandt to the mainland, creating sites along the coast. Three of the clans—the Dhalwangu, the Madarrpa \*\*\*\*and the Manggalili—are closely linked through intermarriage. The third, a Gupapuyngu group, is considered distant from the others. The Wuradilaku sisters were said to hide from men; they were women of extreme modesty who fished and collected shellfish off-shore from the coastal dunes. They covered their bodies with sheets of stringy bark or hid inside giant shells. When they had eaten their fill they buried the fish remains in shallow scooped out ovals in the sand where maggots gathered to clean up the remnants. These scooped out hollows became the model for the yingapungapu sand sculpture used in mortuary rituals to contain pollution and the mythic journey of the Wuradilaku women provides the basic structure followed in the ritual. The Wuradilaku women are particularly closely associated with places on three peninsulas that extend out into the north of Blue Mud Bay: Garrapara of the Dhalwangu clan, Yilpara of the Madarrpa clan

and Djarrakpi of the Manggalili clan. Each of these places is the site for historic burial grounds where people have been interred for generations. [MAP]

### A travelling ceremony

The recent history of the yingapungapu sand sculpture, however, includes extending its use to give Europeans access to ceremonial performance. I have argued elsewhere that Yolngu have a history of using art and performance as a means of attempting to persuade outsiders of the value of Yolngu culture (Morphy 1983, 1991). While the early history of such exchanges is hard to document, there is strong evidence for the involvement of the Macassans \*\*\*\*\*in Yolngu ceremony, perhaps for several centuries before European colonisation (McIntosh 1997). Yolngu mythology is in part an ethnography of the outsiders they have encountered; from the detailed accounts of the activities of the Macassans to those of Yolngu neighbours, the Groote Eylandters, in the Wuradilaku mythology (Berndt 1966). Yolngu exchanged names with Macassan sea captains and there are many Macassan references in Yolngu rituals (MacKnight 1976). This history of exchange may explain in part the willingness of Yolngu to allow anthropologists such as Lloyd Warner (1958), Donald Thompson (1949) and Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1954) access to ceremonial performance, and to engage in the sale of art and material culture. I have, in fact, argued that this may be a much more general characteristic of Aboriginal colonial history (Morphy n.d.). The many early accounts and engravings of ceremonial performance suggest that, where they were able to, Aboriginal people attempted to use ceremony as a form of engagement, only for their actions to be rebuffed or misinterpreted. In eastern Arnhem Land, Yolngu have from the beginning extended

ceremonial performance to intercultural occasions such as the farewell of a missionary or the welcoming of a politician, and with time these events have become increasingly elaborate.

In 1971 Narritjin Maymuru decided to open up the memorial ceremony commemorating his brother Nanyin, who had died the previous year, to the people of the newly established mining town of Nhulunbuy (Dunlop 1987). He had a number of different purposes in mind. Today, it would be called a gesture of reconciliation. After years of opposition to the development of bauxite mining on the Gove peninsula, Yolngu had lost the Gove Land Rights case and mining had commenced. Narritjin felt that the more Europeans understood the values of the Yolngu way of life, the more they would be sympathetic to their concerns. Narritjin also saw the opening out of the ceremony as providing a source of income, both through a paying audience and through the sale of paintings it could generate. He created his own art gallery from sheets of corrugated iron outside his house at Yirrkala and sold paintings and carvings to the visitors. The ceremony that was performed centred on the construction of a yingapungapu sand sculpture into which a large and elaborately painted box, containing his dead brother's clothes and other possessions, was placed before burial. [photograph?] In a speech to the audience, Narritjin drew an analogy between gifts of money as means of purification and white paint, arguing that it was unlikely that European women would choose to cover themselves with clay, so instead their husbands might hand over a dollar on their behalf—if the men paid the women would be “free”, i.e. cleansed from ritual pollution associated with death.

Tracing the origin of an event such as this is a complex task. At the time it seemed a unique, extraordinary and to an extent an uncomfortable event—the opening out of Yolngu mortuary ritual to outsiders for money. Yet further research shows it as part of a historical process that arises equally out of Yolngu cultural practice, their engagement with outsiders, and the trajectory of Narritjin's own life. Purification rituals are among the most public and the most light-hearted of Yolngu rituals. They are as far 'outside' as Yolngu rituals go and involve the equal participation of men and women. Their objective is to 'free' participants. The dances performed are often both joyous and humorous and they are intended to generate a sense of wellbeing. Before the purification ceremony participants are often anxious and nervous about moving around the community, food cannot be consumed, the local shop will be closed. Afterwards people can renew normal activities.

Narritjin had himself taken a very active role in engaging with Europeans in the past. He worked as an assistant for the two Europeans who first established long-term relations with Yolngu: the trepanger (gatherer of Beche de Mer) and pearler Fred Grey, and the founding missionary Wilbur Chaseling. Narritjin was an active bark painter who was very concerned to get a fair return for his work. In the early 1960s he is reported to have organised a strike of artists against the mission. He participated over a number of years in the Darwin Eisteddfod (a multi-cultural arts festival), and in 1962 toured venues in Melbourne and Sydney with a group of Aboriginal dancers from Arnhem Land sponsored by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust. On that visit he was impressed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where bark paintings from Yirrkala hung in adjacent

galleries to European works. He saw this as a sign of their equivalent status. Narritjin produced yingapungapu paintings (which incorporate iconography associated with the sand sculpture, the mortuary ceremonies and the Wuradilaku sisters' myth) for sale to Ron Berndt and the anthropologist Charles Mountford in the 1940s and I was not at all surprised to see that the dances he led in Melbourne and Sydney were ones usually performed in a yingapungapu ceremony. Narritjin's opening up of his yingapungapu thus can be understood as part of a conscious process of engagement with outsiders which took account both of the consequences on the internal structure of Yolngu society and its appropriateness to the new context. The objectives were broad ones and not necessarily shared by all of the participants, but they included economic and political objectives as well as more abstract exchanges of value. Narritjin died in 1981 but the yingapungapu has continued to be used in new contexts. The most significant event was the construction of three yingapungapu sand sculptures outside the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Sydney in 1996 as part of the 'Native Born' exhibition curated by Djon Mundine. The exhibition was associated with both claims of native title to land and the related issue of copyright in Indigenous art works, and the sculptures featured in Cathy Eatock's film *Copyrites*. The exhibition was the idea of Gawirrin Gumana, a minister of the Uniting Church, artist and leader of the Dhalwangu clan, and Andrew Blake, then arts adviser for Buku Larrnggay Mulka (an art cooperative), and was devised in order to demonstrate the operation of native title in Blue Mud Bay and the ownership of designs and ceremonies by interrelated groups. The connection with Narritjin's ceremony was recognised by dedicating the event to his memory. [PHOTOGRAPH?]

It should by now be apparent why I thought that the yingapungapu would provide a good subject for an exhibition at the opening of new National Museum of Australia (NMA). The spectacular ceremony is one that Yolngu have long used in their engagements with outsiders, and as a cultural broker I could feel confident that I was following a direction that Yolngu had already taken.

### Curating the exhibition

The initial stage of curating the exhibition was to get agreement from the leaders of the respective clans and begin discussing with them the possible scope of the exhibition \*\*\*\*\*. I hoped to restrict the exhibition to the three Blue Mud Bay clans strongly associated with Yirrkala, but was concerned that Yolngu protocol might not allow for the exclusion of the fourth group. However Gawirrin Gumana, the distinguished leader of the Dhalwangu, argued strongly that the focus should be on the Blue Mud Bay clans since they had a long history of working together.

He and the other clan leaders also saw an exhibition in Canberra as a means of continuing to demonstrate to a national audience their native title rights over the coastal waters of Blue Mud Bay. The people involved had been among the initiators of the Saltwater Country project two years earlier (Buku-Larrnggay Mulka centre 1999) and saw the yingapungapu exhibition as a means of continuing the argument. The Saltwater paintings were a set of large bark paintings produced in response to the illegal activities of barramundi fishermen in the coastal waters of Blue Mud Bay. The paintings were designed to show that Yolngu ritual law covered the sea as much as the land. The paintings toured Australia and have been purchased by the National Maritime Museum in

Sydney. The native title focus may subsequently have been reinforced by the fact that a native title claim to the waters of Blue Mud Bay is now underway.

The initial discussions I had with leaders of the Dhalwangu, Manggalili and Madarrpa clans suggested general support for the idea of a yingapungapu exhibition. However I felt I could not take anything for granted, since lines of authority in Yolngu society are complex and there are major internal divisions within some of the clans involved. Moreover it is necessary to maintain the support of the waku group, that is, children of women of the clan who would actually make the sand sculpture and authorise its use. Agreements are fragile because Yolngu political processes, as Nancy Williams (1985) has argued, are oriented towards consensus and the public disagreement of any party can prevent a decision being taken.

Once the Yolngu had agreed to take part in the exhibition I suggested that the museum make a contract with Buku Larrnggay Mulka, a local art centre, to help facilitate the exhibition process. This was partly because it proved necessary to commission a number of objects for the exhibition. In addition art centres in Aboriginal communities have developed as mediating institutions partly because they lie outside the bureaucratic and functional constraints of other local organisations. The Buku Larrnggay art centre is governed by a board of artists drawn from each clan. It has taken on the responsibility for copyright and other areas of cultural liaison with the outside world. The exhibition would require the participation of a group of Yolngu dancers at the opening and the art centre had experience in organising such events.

Interactive design.

The exhibition design developed over a period of two years and involved liaison with Yolngu and NMA staff but also with the Boston-based design team that won the contract to oversee the overall project, and the Acton Alliance, a Canberra-based consortium of government and business which was responsible for the building and the installation of the exhibition. The latter was being carried out by museum staff in association with a private contractor, Thylacine. Creating the national museum and its exhibitions, then, was an international project that entailed negotiating a range of local and international interests and agendas, as well as different ways of working and imagining the final product. Liaison with Yolngu was by far the easiest part of the process.

Anthropologist and co-curator Pip Deveson, and I developed a simple design that aimed to explicate the sand sculpture and place it in context. We wanted to show how the sand sculpture related to place and how it was used in ritual contexts, to represent the symbolic themes it contained and so on. As an organising structure we decided to focus on the journey of the Wuradilaku women as they visited each place in turn on their journey. We would emphasise the differences and similarities between each place and put them in the context of their ancestral and human history. While each place has a yingapungapu sand sculpture, each differs in subtle ways from the others. We intended to use this as a way of showing the uniqueness of each place and clan yet also their interconnectedness.

Curating an exhibition in a museum is a complex process, made more complex in the case of the NMA by the constraints of the building and the division of functions. When it was first suggested that I should curate an exhibition, the design competition for the

building had not been held and in my imagination I had been designing the exhibition for an unbounded free space, or for a large box-like structure with straight walls. We were going to reconstruct the coastline of Blue Mud Bay so that the audience could visit each place in turn. The myth and history of each place would be represented through paintings, sculptures, and historic and contemporary photographs. In front of each 'place' would be the yingapungapu associated with the respective clan in question, although we also considered the possibility that constraints of space would require a single sand sculpture to represent all three. When the design of the museum space finally arrived, we realised that we had no option but to have a single sculpture. We were allocated the largest open space in the museum, but it was neither unbounded nor regular. Like every space in the museum, the room has walls at irregular angles that intersect in every way imaginable. The space was divided in half by a grand staircase. We realised that the shape of gallery had two consequences: one was that the sand sculpture would have to be constructed in one half and the contextualising exhibitions in the other. The other was that the geographical order of places would have to be reversed. The entry point to the exhibition meant that the visitor had to walk along the coastline from east to west but the ancestral women had journeyed from west to east. We had either to reverse the order of the journey of the ancestral women or swap the locations of Garrapara and Djarrakpi, the journey's two end-points.

When Pip and I returned to Yirrkala, then, we had two problems that needed solving:

- 1) Could one sand sculpture represent all three places?
- 2) Did it matter that we could not follow the geographic logic of the landscape?

The first problem solved itself in two stages. Mungurrapin Maymuru, a Manggalili elder, argued that since the sand sculptures were differentiated on the basis of the number of holes that were inscribed within them, a sand sculpture without any would function for all three. When I put this proposal forward at a subsequent meeting no-one disagreed with Mungurrapin's suggestion, but they were reluctant to merge all differences. The problem was solved when Djambawa Marawili, the chairman of the artist's committee, suggested that a hollow log coffin belonging to each clan, each with its own distinctive clan designs, should be placed inside the yingapungapu thus representing both similarity and difference.

The geographical conundrum seemed unproblematic to most but came closest to causing the pack of cards to fall. The first people I asked understood the problem and felt that as long as the viewers approached each place in the right order that would be sufficient. It did not matter that Garrapara was in the 'wrong' geographical position as long as it was the first place visited, as that was the direction of travel of the Wuradilaku. I had only one other group to discuss the matter with—the Manggalili. They had previously been happy with the order of the exhibition, but a senior Manggalili woman now argued that geographic logic did matter and that in any case if the places were correctly in geographic space, this was indeed the correct order in which the places should be seen. Certainly the women had travelled from west to east but they really belonged to each place. The real order should be from Djarrakpi to Yilpara to Garrapara as that reflected the relationship between the clans. Manggalili were mother's mothers to both Madarrpa and Dhalwangu, and hence should have precedence over them. I spent a

long time discussing this issue, explaining that each place would be treated equally in the exhibition. I also felt that the concept of the journey of the Wuradilaku would be easier for the non-Yolngu audience to grasp as an introductory concept than one requiring an understanding of Yolngu kinship. Eventually all agreed to follow the ‘women’s’ journey.

Many details of the exhibition were added by Yolngu or resulted from discussions with individuals. It was Djambawa, for instance, who suggested that we put up a Macassan sail on the wall opposite displays representing the promontories of Garrapara, Yilpara and Djarrakpi, to give the feeling of looking out to sea and to show the symbolic connections between the sail and the cloud. Yingapungapu sculptures and paintings both condense multiple layers of symbolic meaning, combining references to Yolngu myth and history, mortuary ceremonies and community understandings of death, and also evoking a related range of heightened emotional experiences – all organized through the story of the Wuradilaku women’s journey across the land. Incorporating this complex world of meaning and evocation in ways that were simultaneously satisfactory to Yolngu and comprehensible to museum visitors was part of our challenge in creating the exhibition. A key element of the iconography of yingapungapu paintings, for instance, is an anvil shaped figure representing a wet season cloud [DIAGRAM of cloud design]. The shape of the cloud varies for each clan. The cloud is a central component of Yirritja moiety mortuary symbolism. A distant cloud is the sign of a storm at sea and a portent of death. Clouds also symbolise the emotion generated by a death. However clouds also call to mind the Macassan voyagers who once set sail for north-east Arnhem Land each wet season to trade with the Yolngu. The cloud design is similar in shape to the sails of the

Macassan praus which, when first sighted from the shore, appeared like the cumulus clouds on the horizon. The Macassans in turn are connected both with Yirritja mortuary rituals and the Wuradilaku women. The farewell ceremonies held for the Macassans at the end of the wet season when they returned with their catch to Sulawesi were a time of sadness and celebration. In mortuary rituals the farewelling of the Macassans is an analogue for saying farewell to the spirit of the departed. The blue and white cloth shade placed over the grave today is shaped like a Macassan sail. The Wuradilaku women are associated with both the cloud and the sail. The clouds are seen as manifestations of the Wuradilaku, representing the women's breasts billowing out on the horizon. They voyaged from Groote Eylandt and are associated with the Macassan voyagers who also travelled between Groote Eylandt and the mainland.

We discussed the content of each place represented in the exhibition with the clan leader concerned, and for the section on Garrapara, Gawirrin produced a new carving. We had originally wanted to have a scooped-out hollow of sand with a skeleton of a parrot fish laid in it. We wanted to show with this the relationship between the ancestral women, the burial of fish, and the invention of the yingapungapu. The museum staff were unhappy with the idea of fish bones and the scooped out hollow of sand did not fit in with the designer's overall design concept. So Gawirrin instead carved a figure of the ancestral woman from Garrapara in the form of her digging stick, with a yingapungapu engraved on it and a fish carved in relief inside.

Yolngu came down to Canberra on three occasions to discuss the plans for the exhibition, look at the site, and finally to check that it met with their approval. Their

response to the exhibition was generous, they were happy with how it finally looked and pleased with the prominent place it had in the museum building.. It is difficult for me to apportion responsibility for the exhibition between the Yolngu and non-Yolngu curators. I have worked with the people from Blue Mud Bay for nearly 30 years and written much about yingapungapu sand sculptures from paintings of them. The objects in the exhibition were all produced by Yolngu and the way we organised them to show the relationship between components, and the images we constructed to illustrate their symbolic referents, simply reflected the way I had been taught to see them by Narritjin, Gawirrin and Djambawa. Clearly incorporating these understandings and explanations into an exhibition format creates a very different context from the yingapungapu ceremony as a means of communicating ideas and meanings. However the ceremonial performance itself is only one of the contexts in which Yolngu themselves learn about the meanings that are experienced and conveyed. Yolngu learning involves producing and looking at paintings, learning songs and dances, travelling to significant places and walking through landscape, as well as today, books, film and digital media. The exhibition becomes another way in which the forms and ideas can be presented. The new context is added to the variety of contexts in which Yolngu perform elements of the yingapungapu complex, a modification influenced by the demands, potentialities and constraints of the situation. The museum audience itself has a more limited means of accessing the Indigenous experience of the yingapungapu and the performative elements can only glimpsed through the windows provided by the accompanying video or imagined by the space created by the sand sculpture. s.

Teaching is an integral part of Yolngu cultural performance and teaching outsiders is an extension of Indigenous practice. Ceremonies are put on partly to show people something that they have never seen before, partly for the joy of the experience, and partly to gain knowledge. This was brought home to me most profoundly when years ago I attended the funeral of a Dhalwangu boy, an eldest son of great potential who had died tragically in a car accident, one of the first Yolngu victims of alcohol. During his burial ceremony a whole series of dances from restricted regional ceremonies were performed. The explanation was that people were sad that he was going to miss those ceremonies in his life so they performed them for him at his burial. The exhibition at NMA was treated as an education for the audience and its preparation as part of my continuing education. Although I had written much about yingapungapu ceremonies and documented Ian Dunlop's film (1987) of Narritjin's ceremony, I had never actually been at a performance. In August 2002 I was asked by Djambawa to come to Yilpara for a week to film a burial ceremony of a Madarrpa elder. The day after the ceremony I was told to get ready to film the cleansing ceremony. I do not think it was a coincidence that it was done through the performance of a yingapungapu, enabling me to film it and incorporate it within the exhibition—though I had never mentioned the possibility to anyone\*\*\*\*\*.

### Yingapungapu in Canberra

The opening of the National Museum had been planned to be one of the major events in celebration of the centenary of Australia's federation. It was a major international event with a large gathering of media, yet simultaneously designed as a party for the people of Canberra, the nation's capital. The strong emphasis on Indigenous Australia in

the conception of the museum meant that a strong Indigenous presence was required in the opening performances, and performance at the opening became the means by which a group of Yolngu dancers were able to attend the event.

The culmination of the exhibition, as far as I was concerned, was the building of the sand sculpture at the museum the day before the opening of the exhibition. The plans for the opening performance were in a continual state of flux over the two and half years of preparation for the exhibition. It was always understood that Yolngu would build the sand sculpture as part of a ceremonial performance at the time of the opening. The one thing that was made clear to me at the start by the clan leaders was that they and a representative group of dancers would have to be involved in the opening of the museum. The sculpture could only be made as part of ritual performance. Djambawa's original idea was that they would make the sand sculpture one day and install the hollow log coffins in a public performance the following day. However, this was not possible both because of the constraints of space and fear of spreading sand all over the museum. In the end it was decided that they would make the sand sculpture in a private ceremony the day before the museum opening and in the evening introduce the Prime Minister to the exhibition in between courses of the celebratory dinner. They would perform publicly on the opening afternoon in 'the Garden of Australian Dreams'—a concrete architectural feature that occupies the Museum's central courtyard.

On the day the Yolngu arrived in Canberra plans changed on an hourly basis as the museum tried to fit all of the events into its busy schedule. The Yolngu were originally going to build the sculpture in the afternoon following the blessing of the Torres Strait

Island canoe. But at an hour's notice the performance was switched to the morning. The performance for the Prime Minister was originally curtailed for scheduling reasons but it turned out that in any case he had double booked for dinner. The Yolngu were extremely disappointed as they had worked out precisely the dance that they would perform for the Prime Minister: its English gloss is 'wake up!'. They assured me it was non-violent.

The yingapungapu sand sculpture was made in a large tray of sand in the centre of which the three hollow coffins had already been fixed. The ceremony started, as Yolngu ceremonies do, with the almost desultory tapping of a clapstick, then a song or two followed by an interval. This allowed the audience of museum staff, a contingent of the international media and a few distinguished visitors to build up. The performance when it began was full of drama, the floodlit patch of sand and hollow log coffins standing out against the subdued lighting of the interior of the museum. The large photograph of the lake of Djarrakpi on the far wall created an ambiguous sense of place. The sand sculpture was made rapidly and energetically by the waku (children of women of the clan) under the watchful eye of Gawirrin. Next the dancers bunched together, gripping tightly the bundle of spears held between them while shaking, quivering and rattling the spears to evoke the aggression of the makarrata (a peace making ritual). Finally they stepped into the sand sculpture and placed the spears against the hollow log coffins. While this final episode was going on I had been called aside to talk to the international press who were observing the event. At the height of the drama a French woman journalist took me aside and asked 'is it real?'. I replied: 'what do you think?' and she said 'it looks real'.

Is it real?

The question of whether the performance is real is an interesting one, raising as it does all those issues of authenticity. It is possible to ridicule the French journalist's query: did she think the people weren't real? Alternatively, we could position her as someone holding a stereotypic view of what indigenous reality is, as someone who came to the museum with the expectation of seeing the authentic uncontaminated Aboriginal person, the human equivalent of the artefact honed with stone tools and picked up by the first European to set foot in the desert. Instead I am going to take the question as it was intended and look at different criteria whereby 'its' reality might be defined and assessed.

The dances and songs were taken from the sets associated with the respective clans' yingapungapu. I had seen them performed on many different occasions in different contexts. The set of dancers who came down from Yirkkala reflected the right-holders in the ceremony. The owning clans were represented by their clan leaders, the waku were drawn from five of the clans into which women of the owning clans married, and three of the representatives were the senior djunggayi (ritual experts) of the clans, the people who would mark out the ground in indigenous ceremonial contexts. Djambawa, the Madarrpa leader, and Baluka, the leader of the Manggalili, were both accompanied by their eldest sons. Djambawa said that it was the first time his son had been outside Arnhem Land and he had decided it was time to begin training him to take over on public occasions. Djambawa himself played a different role from that he took at the yingapungapu opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney six years before. On that occasion he had led the dancing, while Gawirrin was the senior songman. On this occasion Djambawa joined Gawirrin as songman. If one considers the general form of

dances and songs performed and the right and authority to perform them, then, the NMA opening did not differ from what might have taken place in Arnhem Land. What other aspects of the performance might make it “real” or “unreal”, and from whose point of view?

The event seemed charged with emotion to me and Yolngu said that they felt the emotion too. Gawirrin said that when the waku began to make the yingapungapu he had felt pain in his gut, his gulun, which to Yolngu is the seat of the emotions. Yolngu see the performance of ceremonies on occasions such as this as the giving of a gift, an opening up of something potentially powerful to outsiders (see Myers 1991). The emotional tenor and texture of a performance and appropriate definition of the occasion for performance are also part of what might make it seem “real”, but considering these aspects brings to light differences of opinion as well.

While the participants were confident in what they were doing, not all Yolngu felt as certain. A senior Manggalili woman had expressed disquiet to me some months before the event. She was not sure whether her father, Narritjin, and the other men of the previous generation had been right to open things up so much to Europeans. Inevitably that meant an opening up of things within the society, to women in particular, and perhaps this endangered them. She stayed with us the week before the opening of the Museum and deliberately chose not to stay on for the performance. Her concern was a general one since the yingapungapu ceremony itself and the dances and songs that are performed are public ones (garma) open to all members of society. On other occasions she has celebrated her father’s vision in opening out ceremonial performance and

encouraging women like herself to produce clan paintings. Her concern at that moment reflected contingent factors but also express the dialogic nature of change in which individuals often contain within themselves the tension of alternative courses of action.

Disquiet is sometimes associated with a feeling that Yolngu get insufficient in return for their gift. While some Yolngu see such events as a propaganda exercise, part of a process of persuasion that will bring long-term rewards, others are concerned with more immediate returns—or lack of them. I think that to the Yolngu participants the ceremony in Canberra was no more and no less real than any other yingapungapu: it was a context for the transmission of knowledge, for exercising ritual roles, for passing on authority, for entering into exchanges—it was a powerful experience and potentially a dangerous one.

Was it 'real' in the sense of being uninfluenced by Australia's history and by its transformed context? Of course not, but then Yolngu reality is dynamic. This in itself can be interpreted merely as a cliché: all societies change, all people have to adapt to different circumstances. But I mean it in a stronger sense than that. Adapting ceremonial performance to the constraints of space is unproblematic to Yolngu; problems of scale are hardly problems at all. In their visual art Yolngu can create objects that fill a room or fit into a matchbox if required. In the case of dance, performance may take place with equal impact in a room of fifty people crammed around a corpse or in a football oval. This was demonstrated clearly in the dancing on the afternoon of the opening. The day before we were told that the performance would take place on special mats provided by the Bangara dance group. These would protect people's feet from the hard hot concrete

of the Garden of Australian Dreams. On the day of the performance we were told that Bangara's mats had gone and that a stage had been erected for the performance and they would have to dance on that. With five minutes to go, they were told that the previous dance group from the Torres Straits had found the stage too hot and burnt their feet so they would have to dance on the concrete floor of the Garden of Australian Dreams! The Yolngu seemed quite undaunted by all this. Their intention had always been to do a series of dances that followed journeys between places, interspersed with more static performances. Of course they could not resist trying out the hot stage that had defeated the Torres Strait dancers. The hollow stage vibrated with the dancer's feet as they transformed it into a giant musical instrument, pounding it into submission in a spear dance. It was, however, too hot, and for the remainder of the performance they moved around all corners of the arena, dancing in front of different segments of the crowd.

What is real depends on the criteria employed and the expectations of participants in an event. In cross-cultural events involving local and global, participants and audiences, what appears to be 'real' to particular individuals will produce a polythetic set of reactions and interpretations that reflect different presuppositions about the nature of the event itself. There are potential areas of overlap in the experience of the real between Yolngu and their diverse audiences. Yolngu dancers and many of the outside audience shared criteria of authenticity: that this was a performance charged with emotion that could have been performed in the Yolngu homeland of Blue Mud Bay. The majority of the audience of course would have no basis for knowing whether this was actually the case and could only intuit it from their sense of the performance and how it resonated to

them. They would also have imagined the Blue Mud Bay homeland as being more cut off than in reality it is, a separation confounded by the very context of the performance itself in the National Museum, but still present in the European imagination of the indigenous other.

Indeed this imagined raw, cut-off, emotional world makes it harder for the audience to imagine other components of the Yolngu reality: the intention to hold a ceremony in Canberra to open up the minds of politicians to the recognition of their rights to sea and to help expand global markets for their art and cultural performance. To Yolngu there is no incompatibility between the authenticity of their ritual performance and the contemporary reality of their lives, involving a homeland in which vehicles and shotguns are a component of hunting and gathering, and a way of life that requires the lobbying of politicians and the marketing of art. Gradually audiences are becoming more aware of Yolngu conceptions of their contemporary reality, which in turn provides a challenge to preconceptions of the authentic primitive.

#### Conclusion: a process of persuasion

It has been all too easy for some to assume that at the end of a colonial process all that is left is a pastiche of indigenous performance—tamed, safe and encapsulated—cut to fit the interests of the colonising. This view in its most simplistic is encapsulated in Fry and Willis's critique: “‘Aboriginal culture’ is something manufactured within the parameters of professional norms of careerists; it becomes a culture from which Aboriginal people are excluded either literally or by having to assume subject positions made available only

by 'the oppressor'" (1989: 160). However, that view is often not substantiated by historical research. Two fundamental problems with the view are that it presumes that the colonial process has ended and can no longer be resisted, and that it deems irrelevant the motivations and aspirations of the performers (see Myers 1991 and Dussart 1999).

From the beginning of the invasion of Australia in 1788, with the establishment of the British colony at Botany Bay, there is evidence that Aboriginal people tried to engage Europeans in the values of their culture by including them in ceremonial performances and trying to enter into relations of exchange. The record of those encounters is limited, however, and Aboriginal performance was soon masked by a 'history of indifference' (Stanner 1979). The motivations of the Aboriginal people concerned have been little explored, though even in the Sydney region evidence of continuing cultural processes exists into the present. In eastern Arnhem Land the evidence is much richer and Aboriginal people can clearly be seen to have been involved in a long-term process of resistance and persuasion. The Yolngu have had a long history of encounters with outsiders, with traders from Eastern Indonesia, European voyagers and police punitive expeditions. In the 1930s, with the establishment of the first mission stations in the region, they came under effective colonial rule for the first time. For much of their colonial history they, too, have been met by an indifference that at times threatened to mask their agency. But Yolngu have continued to move their performances and artefacts into colonial spaces, occupying stages that they have helped to create. Such forms of cultural display are contexts and modes of interaction and communication through which different values and relations of power are negotiated. For Yolngu,

yingapungapu have been a regular part of these processes, even as the nature and scope of the negotiations have changed over time to include various national and “global” circumstances.

From the 1930s onwards, Europeans are likely to have been present at the performance of a yingapungapu ceremony on many occasions. The anthropologist Donald Thomson, who was sent by the government to eastern Arnhem Land in 1933 in lieu of a punitive expedition, recorded and photographed a yingapungapu sculpture. In the mid 1940s Berndt recorded details of the mythology and Mountford collected a number of yingapungapu paintings. In 1963 Yolngu dancers in Sydney and Melbourne performed yingapungapu dances to a backdrop of bark paintings by Narritjin Maymuru, and in 1971 Narritjin opened out his brother's yingapungapu ceremony to the miners of Nhulunbuy and asked Ian Dunlop to film the ceremony (Dunlop 1987). At some point during this process Yolngu began to see these events as a means of persuading Europeans of the value of their culture and way of life. They also began explicitly to see the recording of their cultural performances and the creation of archives and collections of their paintings as a means of preserving a record for future generations.

Over time the spaces their cultural performances can occupy have expanded. In 2000 Yolngu dancers (and a Yolngu rock group) performed at the opening of the Sydney Olympics before a global audience. From an external, presentist perspective it may appear that the dances at the opening of the National Museum, or at the Sydney Olympics, are the result of a colonial cultural process that has produced essentialised and distilled images of otherness performed to satisfy the imaginations of the dominant

audience. From a Yolngu perspective, what that overlooks is the decades of resistance to their performances, the difficulties of gaining spaces for their art, the failure on the part of the wider society to show any interest in the meanings of their dances: in other words, the history of indifference to their cultural production. Ironically, what can be seen from one perspective as the production of stereotypes can be seen from another as a process of restatement, in which Yolngu again and again inserted particular ceremonial performances into different public contexts as the opportunities arose.

The performances have always required involvement with the colonial other in the form of anthropologist, missionary, government official, arts adviser, theatrical impresario or miner, acting as anything from audience to entrepreneur. On many occasions the Yolngu themselves have been the entrepreneurs, controlling the stage and setting the conditions of the performance. On other occasions they have had many collaborators, some working with them, some indifferent to their motivations. Yolngu have been forced to deal with constraints of space, with misguided objectives, with inappropriate framings of their actions and so on. But the process of persuasion goes on—a process in which their understanding of the dynamics and structure of the world into which they are moving develops as their agency extends into it.

While it may be the case that in the nineteenth century exhibitions were used to position indigenous peoples at the bottom of an evolutionary hierarchy (e.g. Bennett 1995:83), that should not deny their descendants in the twenty-first century the opportunity to present analogous cultural performances and displays as a means of asserting their autonomy and independence. Indeed to continue to argue that such

exhibitions inevitably position Indigenous societies in the past would be to implicitly accept the validity of the nineteenth century interpretations imposed on their material culture, positioned forever by a semiotic analysis of nineteenth century motivations. Indigenous societies have to use the very institutions that created earlier interpretations to change the climate of opinion about their way of life. The more successfully they achieve this, the more they will be involved in a process that influences the very way in which the institutions themselves change. This kind of dynamic is one that may well affect the future shape of projects of international (global?) as well as national scope, as indigenous peoples in different parts of the world consult with one another and form networks and associations of exchange/ interchange on their specific situations, tactics, and strategies. Interestingly, as far as the audience is concerned, most of the negotiations that went on over the yingapungapu exhibition will make little difference. They have no concern about which way the ancestral women travelled around the coast, or details of the kinship relations between clans. Indeed the audience may see relatively little difference between an exhibition in which Yolngu have a major curatorial role and one based on the same sets of artefacts in which they intervened less. To an audience that knows little about Yolngu culture, the initial impact is made by the objects themselves and the films and photographs that contextualise them. However, the fact of Yolngu engagement is fundamentally significant. The museum provides an arena, a frame of action, that enables them to work out ways of engaging with the wider society within which they are encapsulated. This is part of a process that ultimately ranges in scale from local festivals to national museums to the globally televised Olympic games. Moreover the wider

society — in the form of the curators and the museum staff and hierarchy — also has to acknowledge certain rules of engagement. Over time as the concepts that underlie exhibitions change, Indigenous agency will be part of that process.

Perhaps there is no such entity as an ‘exhibitionary complex’. At times, the institutional configurations and relations that the concept invokes may draw attention away from the very people, events and social processes that the notion encapsulates. Rather, exhibitions involve complex interweavings of motivations and negotiated outcomes between individuals and institutions with different objectives, all of who believe that they can gain something from participating in the enterprise. At particular moments of history certain dominant sets of interests and institutional agendas may combine to give the appearance of an exhibitionary complex with a temporary coherence and sense of direction. Bennett argued convincingly that the modern museum originated in the movement of collections, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from enclosed and private domains to the public arena, ‘where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting messages of power ... throughout society’ (Bennett 1996: 60). However, museums continue to involve discourse that occurs in the private spaces created by the curation and development of exhibitions, and those spaces provide opportunities for Indigenous people who are gradually reclaiming ownership of their collections to influence the messages that are broadcast on their behalf.

Endnotes/Footnotes

\* In this chapter I use two terminologies — Aborigines (Aboriginal Australians, Australian Aborigines) and Indigenous Australians — to refer to the same sets of people in different contexts. Indigenous Australians has recently gained some currency as a term that includes both Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders under the same rubric. It is also valued by some Australian Aborigines as a term with more positive connotations than the term Aborigine itself. I have generally used the word Yolngu to refer to the Aboriginal people of Eastern Arnhem land as that is the word they currently use to refer to themselves.

1) The concept of value creation has been frequently used in the analysis of the Euro American category of fine art (see Becker 1982) and been applied to the process of category shift for non-Western art (eg. Clifford 1991: 241, Morphy 1995). I am most influenced by Nancy Munn's analysis of *Fame of Gawa* which has shown how value creation processes in general are integral to the reproduction (and transformation) of society (Munn 1986).

2) This view is reflected in the Introduction by Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner to the National Museum of Australia's publication *Negotiating Histories* when they write, "Histories of colonialism and imperialism led to the formation of many national museum collections and the discourses of racial and social hierarchy and exclusion through which these were displayed. An increasing awareness of these discourses has meant that many museums often find their own collections something of a problem. This condition has perhaps fuelled a new understanding of museums... as no longer

essentially repositories for material culture but rather as media of communication”

(McIntyre and Wehner 2001: xvii).

\*\* The ‘stolen generation’ refers to Aboriginal children who often without the permission of their parents were taken away from their homes and placed in institutions or adopted out. In 1995 the government set up a *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Documentary accounts of experiences of children taken away from their homes are provided in Mellor and Haebich (2002).

\*\*\* Yolngu is the term used today to apply to the Aboriginal people of Northeast Arnhem Land in Northern Australia, people referred to by Lloyd Warner (1958) as the Murngin. Yolngu society is comprised of a network of intermarrying clans divided into two moieties Dhuwa and Yirritja (Morphy 1991) The people involved in the Yingapungapu exhibition belong to the southern Yolngu clans from the north of Blue Mud Bay where they live today. Many of them have strong historic connections with the former mission station of Yirrkala 150 miles to the north.

3) Ruth Philips (2001) has outlined how such processes have affected displays of First Nations’ art and material culture. James Clifford (1991) early on drew attention to similar processes happening at a more regional scale.

\*\*\*\* An underlined consonant signifies a retroflex pronunciation

\*\*\*\*\* The Macassans were traders from South Sulawesi in today's Indonesia who for some two to three hundred years regularly spent the wet season in northern Australia gathering and curing trepang (beche de mer) until they were prevented from doing so by

the Australian government in 1905. They established trading relations with Aboriginal groups who they encountered on a regular basis.

\*\*\*\*\* The exhibition was primarily curated by myself and Pip Deveson an anthropologist and filmmaker who had spent many years working with Ian Dunlop of Film Australia making films on the Yolngu people of the Yirrkala region. During the three years we worked on the exhibition three senior curators Luke Taylor, Dion Mundine and Margo Neale followed one another as senior curators of the First Australians Gallery. We were given considerable autonomy by the museum. We worked with the leaders of the respective owning clans: Gawirrin Gumana of the Dhalwangu clan, Djambawa Marrawili of the Maḍarrpa clan and Baluka Maymuru of the Manggalili clan throughout the planning stages of the exhibition. The organization of Yolngu participation was greatly facilitated by the Buku Larrngay Art Centre at Yirrkala and their art coordinators Andrew Blake and Will Stubbs.

\*\*\*\*\* If this was the case no one made it explicit to me, since engrossed in conversation I missed filming the initial stages of making the sculpture!

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In Morphy's detailed analysis ("Sites of Persuasion: Yngapungapu at the National Museum of Australia," 469-499), a powerful case is made for interactivity: "Indigenous societies have to use the very institutions that created earlier interpretations to change the climate of opinion about their way of life. . . . And the real 'the search for the authentic' will remain enigmatic. Indeed the role of museums and galleries in helping to disentangle different layers of the authentic will continue as one of its most important functions. Sandy Nairne Director, National Portrait Gallery. Please send comments about this review to editor.caareviews@collegeart.org. National Museum of Australia " Lawson Crescent, Acton, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2601 " rated 4.7 based on 429 reviews "I came to see the... The National Museum of Australia is where our stories come alive. We love sharing these stories with See more. CommunitySee all. 68,414 people like this. 69,903 people follow this. 57,034 check-ins.