

Visual Voices: Heeding the Microcultural Contexts of Art

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about art history are taking a multi-cultural turn,¹ yet they are still dominated by Eurocentric voices, even those attempting to accommodate the history and traditions of the Other. This paper makes a plea for a new relational mode of discourse, for recording and analysing a range of explanations of the experience of 'art', both within our own cultural parameters and relating to Other times and spaces, as well as the microcontexts within we make 'sense' of art and its history.

ART'S HISTORY

The history of art was founded as a Western academic discipline largely upon the work of German theorists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The discipline, from Winckelmann to Wölfflin, whilst constantly shifting its premises and elaborating its theoretical positions, tried to make epistemological sense of the heritage of Greek and Roman classicism, the humanist and scientific developments of the Italian Renaissance, and the subsequent efflorescence of Western art – particularly painting, sculpture and architecture.² James Elkins emphasises the Eurocentric focus of the discipline and its narrow conception of what it is that constitutes 'art': "most images are not art. In addition to pictures made in accord with the Western concept of art, there are also those made outside of the West or in defiance, ignorance, or indifference to the idea of art. Non-Western images are not well described in terms of art, and neither are medieval paintings that were made in the absence of humanist ideas of artistic value."³

In the twentieth century there were increasing attempts in the West to expand the notion of art,⁴ in terms of both time and space, to include, for example, the cave paintings of Lascaux, the architecture of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the skin-art of Polynesia: Roger Fry wrote about "The Art of the Bushmen" in 1910, "Ancient American Art" in 1918 and "Negro Sculpture" in 1920.⁵

This expansion of the Western concept was, and is, by no means universally accepted.⁶ However, the possibility of expanding the notion of art's history gradually gained some acceptance, due in part to Western experience of the art of 'others' as a consequence of 'exploration' and colonisation. In the wake of the Enlightenment curiosity about the Other became systematised into the science of 'anthropology'. Western scholars, such as Durkheim, Boas, Malinowski and Marquet,⁷ not only recorded, sorted the data, hypothesised paradigms of knowledge, but also began to make links between the role played by art in the cultures of Others and of the West. It began to be recognised that all images act in culturally specific ways as visual voices, bearing meaning, expressing feelings and desires, giving expression to culturally bound concepts, traditions, and 'histories.'

These attempts at recontextualising and expanding the West's normative sense of art,⁸ even floating the possibility of multiple realities,⁹ came from the fieldwork, the thoughts and pens of Western scholars looking in from the outside at non-Western cultures, often unreflectingly designated as 'primitive'. The art of the non-West was discussed, explained, spoken for, by Western voices comprehending the non-West through Western academic mind-sets.

SPEAKING FOR OTHERS, SPEAKING FOR ONESELF

Western scholars quite routinely speak for others, explaining the significance, even the meaning of the art of non-Western societies. Foucault and Deleuze maintain that any speaking or writing for others is, in itself, a form of repression. Western scholarship, for example, assumes, generally without question, the right to speak about the art of the living and the dead of all cultures. These assumptions occasionally acknowledge historical evidence from Other cultures which may convey local notions about the significance of visual and tactile objects: sometimes the opinions of representatives of contemporary non-Western cultures are canvassed. More commonly what appear to be arrogant assumptions of the right to speak from the bastions of cultural dominance, such as universities, publishing houses, journals, the electronic media, effectively stifle the voices of Others. The assumption of this right, as Foucault radically emphasised, is a form of fascism, a fascism 'in our heads', that is not, of course, limited to Western scholarship.¹⁰

Any attempt to overcome these fascist impulses entails a discussion of the right to speak, particularly about the cultural products of Others.¹¹

It goes without saying that we may speak on our own behalf, to express the way we experience and understand our selfhood, as well the world and its art. We also, it seems to me, have the right to review the records of history in the public domain, to seek to verify data relating to the production, utilisation, evaluation, collection, trade, recording, preservation and conservation of works of art from whatever culture. By 'evaluation' in this context I have in mind exclusively the documentary status of such records.

MAKING SENSE OF HISTORY

An ethical problem arises when we attempt to assess these records, recast them into a narrative, write a history, and make some sense of them. That 'sense' will depend very much

on the microcultural and historical position we are given and assume as speakers and writers. The choice of our topic of enquiry, the angle we take, the tenor of our voice, will reveal our relationship to the data of recorded history.

There is no doubt, in my mind, that we all have a right to 'make sense' of any recorded history. However, any making sense, any going outside the available record, will inevitably entail the engagement of critical judgement, the spin we put upon the archive. Language signifies, and when disseminated through the media, exercises, even manipulates, the minds, and hence the opinions, of others about the world and their place in it. 'Making sense' – scholarly discourse, criticism, popular journalism, points of view, are verbal processes enacted in fields of contestation: as competitive beings we forever exercise the fascism in our heads. We speak from a cultural context, and though that culture is forever in flux, it is also in direct contestation with other cultural positions.

We can try to be aware of this, to understand what it is that we do when we 'make sense' of art and its history, and recognise the effects that activity may have on others, and, reflexively, back upon ourselves.¹²

The archive, the record, the historians making sense of them, the institutions disseminating critical judgements, the media making them available to the public, are, for the most part, in the hands of dominant cultural élites, and therefore, by default, it is their opinions that are disseminated most widely and persistently, infiltrating the minds of the dominated, themselves usually educated within Westernising institutions of cultural authority. (Australian aboriginals, for example, learn about the history of their 'art' through the filter of Western scholarship and critical commentary.) Because of that dominance, it is generally the ideas of Western critical thinkers that are disseminated through the institutions of educational authority, voicing opinions related to the exercise of power, and their effects on the cultures of the powerless.

Discussing the position of the art of Aboriginals in the Australian artworld of the 1980s Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry made an impassioned plea for the West to understand that the exercise of intellectual appropriation is a major dilemma for culturally dominated/marginalised people.¹³ They claimed that the institutional mechanisms of the Western artworld applied to the emergence of the post-Papunya florescence of Australian Aboriginal art – dealers, galleries, criticism, commentary, buying and selling – was "overt or covert, structural and institutional racism", that "much of what is named as 'progress' is the assimilation of signs of difference into a homogenising system, the [Western] art market."¹⁴ In particular Willis and Fry emphasised the lack of any conceptual or practical link between a supposed 'progress' of Aboriginal artists in the Australian artworld and any shift to overcome the social marginalisation of the Australian Aboriginal people. In their attempt to 'make sense' of the 'fate' of Australian Aboriginal art Willis and Fry made a broader claim that there should be a necessary relationship between the marketability of non-Western art forms and political and social advancement (however that might be understood). Willis and Fry refer to other Australian writers who take positions on this subject, but nowhere in this debate could I hear an Aboriginal voice, or even that Aboriginals had been approached to offer their own opinions on what was being claimed on their behalf.

OTHERING

Hal Foster claims that “this othering in identification, in representation [a ‘selving’ of the other]...alienates the other, confirms rather than closes the gap between the two through a reductive, idealistic, or otherwise misbegotten representation.”¹⁵ The danger implied here, in speaking for the supposed plight of others, is to assume a truth in alterity and the exercise, however well meant, of ideological patronage.

EMIC AND ETIC

‘Making sense’ of history often entails giving meaning, not only to the narrative, but also to individual works of art. We may legitimately voice the experience of spectatorship, but often go beyond that to claim – albeit often without thinking – through experience, the fruits of scholarship, or the fascism of the mind, to know, or to have a lien on the meaning of a work, a group of works, a school, a culture.

For example, it would be presumptuous for a non-Māori to claim to know the ‘meaning,’ the somatic, psychic, cultural and historical significance for a Māori, of a particular ancestral cloak.¹⁶ To do so would presume the exercise of power, of cultural authority, to take it for granted that Western ‘knowledge’ is authentic knowledge, and that its expression outspeaks any Other voice. Such an act might foreclose any attempt to put an Other point of view, indeed might intimidate the Other into a shamed silence.

It might equally be claimed that any knowledge about the aesthetic and cultural significance of a particular Māori cloak can come only from an emic (insider) intimacy, a knowledge essentially unavailable to others, including Westerners.

Both positions create a binary opposition, a political contestation of rights to speak, of systems of knowing, between the culturally dominating and the dominated, those colonising the mind of Others, and rebellious Others seeking not only to decolonise their own pathways to knowledge, but also to shift the understanding of the West, to deconstruct, in various senses, the edifice of Western systems of knowledge.

Yet our relation to things is more complex than simple binary oppositions: narratives that seek to make sense of the world and the expression of spectatorship may be multiplied to infinity. For example, what ‘art’ is depends upon a variety of contestations in the mind of any practitioner, historian, critic or viewer. ‘Knowing’ what a thing is, and understanding the relationships between things and our attitudes towards them, are not discrete acts, bounded, forever fixed, but processes under constant review.

If we return to the putative Māori cloak, there is no way a non-Māori will not have access to the sight of it, and that sight will immediately trigger a visual and evaluative response, shuffling through the history of visual experience and evaluative criteria in the memory. For every non-Māori viewer the experience will be different. This act of visual experience then becomes a form of knowledge. That knowledge may be extended by enquiry, both within the repositories of discourse relating to such objects available to the viewer within their own language culture, but also through discussion with others, including Māori. ‘Facts’, opinions about the cloak, accumulate, to create constantly shifting fields of ‘knowledge’ about it.

These phenomenological experiences will be forever etic (outsider), but forms of 'knowledge' nevertheless, which the possessor has every right to voice, to disseminate, but strictly on the understanding that it is not 'the' knowledge, but a set of ideas and experiences that makes up a particular knowledge, a particular point of view that can always be contested by Māori and non-Māori alike. This is not appropriation, but a legitimate etic right to speak. To hold that this is not so is to indulge in a protective counter-culturalism, sometimes amounting to counter-racism, that so limits the right to speak, so compartmentalises the right to 'knowledge', as to lead to a rupture in communication, a ghettoisation of knowledge systems.

For example, Robert Jahnke, a Māori, an artist and university scholar, wrote a review of David Neich's *Painted Histories*, a study that related the intricate story of nineteenth-century Māori representational painting, which was heavily influenced by the conventions of both recently introduced Christianity and European art.¹⁷ Jahnke questioned whether Neich, and other non-Māori historians and anthropologists, could ever experience Māori art emicly (as insiders), even though Neich had a good knowledge of the Māori language. Jahnke claimed, in effect, that knowledge of a language, knowledge of a history, intimate knowledge of art objects, cannot, in themselves, create the conditions to experience art emicly. One must be a functioning member of a living culture to think, feel and communicate in such a way, a way, he implies, which is phenomenologically not only more authentic but also more legitimate.

There is no gainsaying the particular experience of the emic point of vantage. We can only learn about the experience of others through the expression of their emic (insider) voice. For example, Frantz Fanon and bell hooks have graphically described how it feels, emicly, to be fixed with blackness, out of their own experience of being black in white-dominated cultures.¹⁸

Jahnke questioned the cultural accuracy of some of Neich's conclusions about Māori nineteenth-century design, with post-colonial writers, as well as emic informants, in mind:¹⁹

I would argue that one cannot see oppression if one is not oppressed nor can one think oppression if one is not oppressed...When we view a *kahuhuruhuru* ([Māori] feather cloak) in the confines of the museum showcase our perception of this *taonga* [cultural treasure] is impaired by the institutionalised boundaries of display that include enclosure and articulation conditioned by contingencies of space and light. Although the enclosure may permit an accommodating vision, and articulation may offer a glimpse of structure, and illumination may generate an aura of seduction, interpretation is institutionally bound. Even the pedagogical label is a mere constriction of text that predicates an ethnocentric order...Unless one is able to don the cultural cloak, to feel its texture, to be encompassed by its warmth, to witness the reaction of surface to wind, rain and sun, to live in and to be at one with the cloak, a comprehensive sensual affinity with the cloak is masked by distance...All the senses must be implicated in the experience of the cultural cloak. One must witness the translucency and opacity of hue; hear the rustle of feathers; smell the odour of presence within the weft and warp, taste the secretion of age. Only then can one react to the nuances of the cultural imprint.²⁰

But does simply being the member of a particular culture entitle the speaker to claim to speak on behalf of the culture as a whole? Surely the concept of the authentic voice applies equally within the emic frame: one can speak on one's own behalf, from a particular knowledge, based upon upbringing, embodied experience, memory, set of opinions, but have no right to speak on behalf of others. In the case of a specific Māori cloak one would need to be an appropriate person in a functioning Māori society contemporary with the cloak's use, to be able to have an uncontested phenomenological sense of its 'meaning' and significance for a wearer at that time and in that space. It is not enough to be an historian, or even a descendent from within the same culture living at a time when the feather cloak no longer functions exactly as it did in the past. We might point out the metaphorical thrust of Jahnke's rhetoric, his passion to put the emic voice, to state the claims of the oppressed against etic, dominant scholarship. The effect of his review, however, it seems to me, is simply to raise the stakes in a binary contestation of systems of knowledge.

There will always exist problems of power in the relations of those with the authority to speak and those with a sense that 'their' culture has been taken from them and its history colonised by outsiders. But isn't it equally true to say that none of us possess an exclusive right to pronounce upon a subject merely through the claim of cultural association or ethnicity, not least because culture and ethnicity themselves are constructed from constantly shifting 'facts', attitudes, evaluations and systems of knowledge?

It is enough here to point out the ethical dangers that lie in wait when the social historian of art confers etic or emic judgements on art objects. After all, as actors in our own culture, we are ineluctably bound to its ways of thinking, valorising, systematising and writing history. There are rich veins of ambiguity in both emic information and etic assessment. Any attempts to 'iron' them out in favour of some, inevitably fictive, laundered theory are themselves open to question as to motive. Jahnke wants to bring our attention to possible pitfalls in assessments of Māori art by non-Māori, but the complexities of emic-cultural judgements are as extensive as those made cross-culturally. Such complexities are part and parcel of the richness of art and its history and evaluation, both for emic subjects feeling disenfranchised from speaking about their own culture, and for etic observers analysing a system to which they do not culturally belong.

EXPLAINING THE POSITION FROM WHICH WE SPEAK

If historians, of any ethnicity, have a right to speak about the work of Caravaggio, why not about Māori painting? Equally doesn't any Māori have the right to speak about Jackson Pollock, Chinese ceramics or African sculpture? What is said about any of these subjects is the responsibility of the speaker, but others have a legitimate right to ask for an explanation of their position – to enquire as to their own cultural antecedents, their ethnicity, the systems of knowledge to which they are in thrall, their experience of the subject matter, their evaluative criteria, the well-springs of their prejudices.

We are now in a position, due to the hard thinking of the past hundred years, mainly in the West, but also enriched by non-Western contributors (such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Trinh Minh-ha, Olu Oguibe), ironically usually writing for a Western audience, employed

by a Western-financed institution and published by the Western press (at present there are few other choices), to reconsider both the history of art and approaches to an understanding and evaluation of the contribution to our globalising culture of the art of the present.

At our most optimistic it may be possible to claim that art's history has been so laundered by theory as to be able to conduct a culturally nuanced approach to the study of the making, use and evaluation of works of art, of cultural attitudes towards the creation of their histories, and is able to situate them in the forever-fluid flux of political and economic dynamics. That flux would include all the voices that have been raised about particular manifestations of art and culture, whilst acknowledging that the voices that have been preserved will almost always come through the filters of dominant cultures, the exercisers of power. Most Other voices have been lost on the battlefields of cultural contestation, in the maelstrom of history.

RELATIONAL MODES OF DIFFERENCE

Yet, rather than emphasising binary structures of otherness, discrete space-times, or the emic-etic divide (in which the emic voice often re-inscribes itself into the etic history), might art history and criticism not be directed towards relational modes of difference, to recording and analysing a range of explanations of experience, the contexts within which 'making sense' takes place? Within such a matrix is it possible to extend the Enlightenment Project and postmodern speculation about the trajectories of histories and the right to speak?²¹

LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF OTHERS

Despite the destruction of traditions by globalising capitalism and the commodification of history, we now have the intellectual apparatus to hear a wider range of voices.²² However, to hear claims to a range of alternative histories, particularly those relating to unfamiliar or marginalised cultural groups, others – particularly Western Others – have to make the space to listen.

It is not that performances of listening are not enacted, but that these performances are often ritualised along lines of political correctness and cultural position-taking that only serve to re-emphasise the binary divide. For example, an exhibition of Māori art will open with a ritualised ceremony, yet the passage of such ritualised time only serves to underline difference, mutual incomprehension and condescension. After the ceremony each group will view the exhibition from their separate spheres. Indeed the art will probably be exhibited in a space where it has little any more to do with the daily lives of either Māori or non-Māori, but is, like many visual art performances, elevated into a space supposedly enclaved from commodification, but controlled by the dominant culture and placed outside the possibility of any day-to-day cultural and meaningful utilisation.

FIELDS OF CONTESTATION

Talking about art is an intellectual activity. Intellectual activities cannot be detached from struggles for power – the power of claimed knowledge, of the right to judge, of the authority of expertise, of the right to explain, of the control of exhibition spaces and promotional advertising.

Though everyone may exercise their intellectual muscles in bouts of cultural contestation, may raise their voice to be heard, the battlegrounds and speaking platforms are usually in the gift of power-sanctioned institutions: the lecturer speaks from the university podium, the historian writes in the peer-reviewed journal, the critic writes up shows in the dealer or civic galleries for the capitalist-controlled press.

Marginal groups often themselves engage on fields of contestation. The new media artist Rea, herself an Australian Aboriginal, made a three-screen DVD work entitled *maang* (2006). Part of one of the DVDs shows the removal of the Pitinjarra people from their ancestral land in 1965 to make way for a British nuclear test. As Rea pointed out in an interview at the Auckland Art Gallery (10 March 2007), the descendants of the Pitinjarra people tried to stop her using this film, or, as Rea put it, tried to exercise 'censorship', for unarticulated reasons of their own. As the film was already in the public domain Rea felt it possible to override the objections in a cause that was as much her own as that of the Pitinjarra.

Struggles to be heard are not for the faint hearted. The dominated and marginalised often fall silent, despairing that what they have to say will be ignored, and even if heard will be misunderstood.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

But, as Foucault has pointed out, the present does not rest upon immutable necessities.²³

If there is to be any mutual understanding of different cultural positions then all must have a right to speak and others a responsibility to listen and, in their turn, a right to be heard, and heard with sufficient patience for some mutual comprehension to take place. There is no essential 'truth' to be discovered, only the pursuit of a constantly re-engaged dialogue, an interweaving of explanations.

Such explanations would explore the origins of our knowledge, of our opinions, of our feelings about a work of art, how these have been formed by culture and experience. It will take us some time to unwind the complexities of our opinions, our feelings, our cultural positions, the history of our evaluative criteria. Without understanding that these complexities exist, and bear upon our understanding of the art of each 'other,' then art history will continue to ride roughshod over the potential sensitivities of its discipline in order to claim power for one position over another, to claim the authority for one culture's version of history over that of another.²⁴

It follows that seldom will voices be raised about art or its history in unison. Indeed there is no point in seeking consensus in such a variety of claimed facts and experience. Only by listening, in profound attentiveness, to the voice of others is it possible to gauge the common ground, the spheres of commensurability, and the fissures that divide, the paths of thought and experience that diverge.

- 1 See James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* (New York and London: Routledge 2007), but especially the chapter by Ladislav Kesner, "Is a Truly Global Art History Possible?", 81-111, and David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003).
- 2 See Eric Fernie's "A History of Methods" in E Fernie (ed.), *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London: Phaidon, 1995), 10-21.
- 3 James Elkins, "Art History and Images that are not Art", *Arts Bulletin*, December 1995, vol. LXXVII, 4, 553.
- 4 The origins of this expansion within the discipline of Western art history can be traced to the work of Aby Warburg (1866-1929).
- 5 All three are included in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, first published in London in 1920 and reprinted by Oxford University Press in 1981.
- 6 See the debate in Elkins: 2007, 113-176.
- 7 Such as Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Franz Boas's *Primitive Art* (1927), Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic Science and Religion* (1948) and Jacques Marquet's *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology* (1971) and *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts* (1986).
- 8 The word 'art' is so colonised by Western art historians that the term 'visual culture' may be more acceptable when talking about the art of the non-West. However, the term 'visual culture' is itself problematic, as it is used widely to refer to visual material that is seldom considered 'art' – such as advertisements and television.
- 9 On multiple realities see Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: M Nijhoff, 1962), 207-259.
- 10 See Michel Foucault, "Introduction" to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii.
- 11 I have reservations about capitalising this term. By dividing ourselves from Others we seem to be assuming a position that is detached, and yet in some sense also able to hold forth about difference, even to conceptualise the problem on behalf of Others.
- 12 On reflexivity see Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-Nation" in Rasheed Araeen et al (eds), *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 73, 77.
- 13 Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, "Art as Ethnocide: The Case of Australia", *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 123-131.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 15 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT, 1996), 174.
- 16 This is not the place to argue the case for Māori cloaks being 'works of art'. Suffice it to say that within certain cultures some objects of visual cultural significance will be different in form to those in other cultures – paintings on canvas in the West, multi-panelled wooden screens in Japan, vestimentary art in Papua-New Guinea. Within each culture some objects, also not defined by forms, but by function and history, will be more elevated in cultural prestige than others. These we may designate 'works of art.' 'Craft' is the skill to make things – all works of art are 'crafted'. However, not all crafted works, however skilled the practitioner, will be regarded as 'works of art', which depend upon specific cultural and historical evaluative circumstances for that constantly shifting designation.
- 17 Robert Jahnke, "Between Weft and Warp", Review of Roger Neich's *Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Paintings*, *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, 1995, pp. 9-20.

- 18 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) and bell hooks “Postmodern Blackness”, *PostModern Culture*, vol.1, no.1, Fall 1990 and *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990). It is important to emphasise that Fanon and hooks are not essentialising stereotypes of the experience of blackness, but speaking of personal experience.
- 19 For example, Jahnke quotes from Edward Said’s *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), Paki Harrison’s *Tane-nui-a-Rangi* (Auckland: The University of Auckland Press, 1988) and Sidney Moko Mead’s *Te Toi Whakairo: The Art of Maori Carving* (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986).
- 20 Jahnke: 1995, 19-20.
- 21 In using my own rhetoric to make a claim for an ideal position I am aware of the complexities of intellectual patronage, of my privileged position, of the conditionality of ‘giving space’ to the voice of others, so well described by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg’s *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.
- 22 But it would be a delusion to think that these were not given permission, a platform from which to make themselves heard, by some dominant institution, which might itself be in contestation with others (the dominant can only exercise its power if it suppresses or assimilates all competitors).
- 23 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Flamingo, 1984), 89.
- 24 I am fully aware that this paper may read like a manifesto, like itself an exercise of power. I’d like to hear the voices of others raised on this issue. Listening to others is the only way I can learn.

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