

rhythm and the
performative power
of the index

Lessons from Kathleen Petyarre's Paintings

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Is it possible to find an ethical and generative way to speak about the 'work' of Indigenous art? In a paper titled 'Three Notes on Western Cultural Politics and Aboriginal Representation', John Welchman acknowledges the 'problematic of *reading, interpreting, or otherwise knowing* ... Indigenous painting through and within Western institutions'.¹ However he also recognises that 'silence' is not a solution. Regardless of what prohibitions exist to protect sacred knowledge from the gaze of Western eyes, Indigenous work is circulating; it is being read, misread, interpreted, misinterpreted and otherwise known. How can a non-Indigenous person 'speak' about Indigenous art without reducing it to the diagram, collapsing it into Western modes of knowing, or intruding into the domain of restricted cultural information?

In October 2003, Noosa Regional Gallery contemporaneously exhibited my paintings alongside the Indigenous Australian exhibition 'Urban Blackness'. The press release advertising the exhibition described my paintings as 'an encounter between technology, optical art and colour field painting whilst under the influence of Indigenous Australian art'. My intention was not to appropriate or collapse Indigenous Australian art into Western paradigms of practice. Rather I was concerned with both acknowledging the immense debt my painting owes to Indigenous art and articulating how Indigenous cultural practices have the potential to transform what is thought about the nature of the work of art.² The problematic that I faced in putting that show together rehearsed the same dilemma I now face in writing this paper. How do I acknowledge my indebtedness to the profound power of Indigenous art?

Given the lessons of the Indigenous cultural practices, I propose that the work of art is performative and not merely representational. According to such a proposition, art can no longer be conceived of as 'just an image', but must be recognised as operating as a force in

the world. In this formulation, it is not a question of figuring Indigenous Australian art through and within Western institutions, but rather of acknowledging its particular contribution to theorising a performative understanding of the image in contemporary culture. Through attention to the operation of rhythm in Kathleen Petyarre's paintings, I propose to reconfigure contemporary understandings of performativity. In this formulation I will argue that in the dynamic productivity of the performative act, the world intrudes into practice, and in a double movement, practice casts its effects back towards the world. In this way I suggest that just as life gets into images, so imaging also produces reality. This mutual reflection is the work of art.

— THE DIAGRAM

Contemporary Western accounts of Indigenous Australian art currently take little or no account of the power of Indigenous art. Since the first Indigenous paintings began circulating in the Western art market, understandings of the paintings have been framed by the diagram, a system of representational and signifiatory interpretation.

From the beginning, Geoff Bardon believed that the diagram was a necessary aid to reading and understanding the paintings. He suggested that:

Since the paintings used signs and symbols to tell the story, or Dreaming, the abstract arrangement had to be deciphered with some kind of diagram to be understandable to any potential buyer (onlooker) of the painting.³

In a world where Western paradigms dominate the field of cultural production and frame what and how 'we' see and what 'we' believe about Indigenous cultural production, the diagram tends to reduce paintings to the symbolic, the illustrative and the narrative. In other words, interpretation is premised on Western representational and signifiatory modes of explanation. Visual elements represent. Motifs stand in for and paintings are figured as visual iconic metaphors for Dreaming narratives.

Benjamin Genocchio's critical review of Dorothy Napangardi's paintings exemplifies this mode of reading. He describes her works as 'symbolic maps as well as ciphers for the *Jukurrpa* or ... mythological stories of ancestral journeys across the country'.⁴ In these abstracted aerial views of her ancestral homeland, Napangardi's paintings are figured as both maps of place and narratives of her clan's dreaming:

This dreaming tells the story of a group of women ancestors who travelled across the country singing, dancing and encountering other dreamings. The long flowing lines in Napangardi's paintings represent the movement of the female figures as they dance their way across the country, while the small white dots reflect the indentations made in the desert sands by their feet over the sandy ground.⁵

John Welchman suggests that meta-diagrams and such textual readings decode permissible aspects of the image's symbolic system.⁶ However, in the satisfaction of the explanation, something else gets elided. The diagram predetermines how we experience the painting. Figured as narratives, such readings take us, as viewers, 'on a long diatribe through the brain'.⁷ In this discursive move, the meta-discursive framing denies the performative potentials of the painting. This is not to deny the important symbolic significance of the work. However in this framing the possibility that the paintings might come, as Francis Bacon puts it, 'directly across onto the nervous system' goes unremarked upon.⁸

So how can we take into account the forceful presence created in and by the work? Christine Nicholls alludes to this palpable presence when describing Kathleen Petyarre's work: 'Underneath the screen of Kathleen's very fine dotting the Dreaming exists as a barely tangible, shadowy palimpsest, overwritten, in effect, by the surface colours and movement'.⁹ She concludes that because the 'Dreaming is only ever visible as a shimmering, underlying presence it is rendered the more powerful'.¹⁰

— PERFORMATIVITY AND THE POWER OF IMAGING

How do we account for this subterranean presence that exceeds any symbolic or representational power of the work? Elsewhere I have argued for the radical material performativity of Indigenous Australian cultural practice, drawing on Paul Carter's elaboration of the term *methexis*. According to Carter, the performativity of *methexis* involves an 'act of concurrent actual production'¹¹ or mutual reflection between ritual practices and the Dreaming.¹² Whilst in contemporary Western thinking, the power of the performative has been related to performative speech acts, in Indigenous ritual practices, 'performativity' extends beyond the 'speech act' to encompass all forms of ritual practices. Frances Cornford's explication of *methexis* provides the framework to understand this mutual reflection between ritual practices and the Dreaming. According to Cornford, *methexis* involves a participatory relation in which:

The passage from the divine plane to the human, and from the human to the divine, remains permeable and is perpetually traversed. The One can go out into the many; the many can lose themselves in reunion with the One.¹³

In this way, as Christine Nicholls notes, 'Kathleen Petyarre and her Dreaming Ancestor *Arnkerrth* are one and the same being'.¹⁴ In the permeability of the passage from the divine plane to the human and the human to the divine, ritual performances such as painting, singing and dancing can and do effect forceful constitutive effects in the world. According to this view, there is a direct causal or indexical link between country, the body and ritual practice. Kathleen Petyarre explains this in relation to women's ceremonies:

The spirits of the country gave women's ceremonies to the old woman. The woman sings, then she gives that ceremony to the others to make it strong. The old woman is the boss, because the spirits of the country have given her the ceremony ... The old women sing the ceremonies if the people are sick, they sing to heal young girls, or children. The old women are also holding their country as they dance.¹⁵

— REFIGURING PERFORMATIVITY

Whilst the claim that there can be a mutual reflection between imaging and 'reality' in Indigenous Australian ritual practices is beginning to gain some currency in academic discourse, the suggestion that this understanding has consequences for Western cultural practices is less comfortable.¹⁶ Indigenous artistic practice remains as 'other' and its lessons are not seen as relevant to contemporary Western practice. However I would question this non-engagement. I propose that the productive materiality of *methexis* is critical for rethinking the power of imaging in contemporary cultural practices.

In Western thinking, the genesis of ideas about the power of the performative grew out of speech act theory. According to speech act theory, performative speech acts are those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. For example, when a judge pronounces the word 'guilty', the mere utterance of the word unleashes a chain of material consequences for the accused.

In her seminal work on the theory of the performative Judith Butler describes performativity as the 're-iterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names'.¹⁷ Whilst her project specifically addresses the way in which sex and gender are materialised, it could be argued that there are some curious similarities between this and the way in which 'art' becomes materialised. Art practice is performative in that it enacts or produces 'art' as an effect. Thus 'artists' engage with, re-iterate and question the 'norms' of 'art' existing in the sociocultural context at a particular historical juncture. The re-iteration that operates in an artist's practice produces a 'naturalised' effect, which we come to label as an artist's style. However, in her concern with performativity as the 'discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed',¹⁸ Butler's understanding of performativity is unable to account for the forceful and constitutive effects of the re-iterative and citational practices in Indigenous culture.

This concern with the ritual inscriptions as forces with effects finds a counterpart in Gilles Deleuze's attempts to develop a radical material performativity. In Deleuze's conception, re-iteration and repetition can be seen to inaugurate a dynamic relation between bodies and language. In developing his notion of *flexion*, Deleuze is concerned with the transformative or performative potential of language and bodies. For Deleuze, flexion is that 'act of language

which fabricates a body for the mind ... language transcends itself as it reflects the body'.¹⁹ In flexion, Deleuze proposes, there is a double transgression that occurs in both language and in flesh:

If language *imitates* bodies, it is not through onomatopoeia, but through flexion. And if bodies imitate language, it is not through organs, but through flexion ... In flexion ... there is a double transgression—of language by the flesh and of the flesh by language.²⁰

The body that writes and is simultaneously written suggests a mutual reflection between bodies and language.²¹ As the matter of bodies-language, flexion is a 'monstrosity' which effects de-formation at the level of matter rather than form.

Deleuze argues that in the disequilibrium that is produced through the radical performativity of flexion, the system bifurcates and 'language itself can be seen to vibrate and stutter'.²² When language stutters, says Deleuze, it

no longer affects pre-existing words, but, rather itself ushers in the words that it affects ... It is no longer the individual who stutters in his speech, it is the writer who *stutters in the language system (langue)*: he causes language as such to stutter.²³

When Deleuze talks of 'stuttering' as the limit of language, he evokes an outside—not as something external to language, but rather as an *outside* of language. The vibration and stuttering of the language occurs in the interaction of the matter of bodies with the language system. This different valency, it can be argued, shifts the notion of performativity from one in which the body is *inscribed* by language to one where the body *becomes* language. In this reconceptualisation, the language system is reconfigured by the rhythms and pulsions of the body.

— FLEXION AND THE INDEXICAL FORCE OF RHYTHM

What is this 'outside of language' that exerts such a powerful force on the body and on language? For Deleuze, it is the power of rhythm, a vital power more profound than all the senses, 'that exceeds each domain and traverses them all'.²⁴ In addressing this I want to return to the work of Kathleen Petyarre and the indexical power of rhythm in Indigenous art. The rhythm that runs through Petyarre's paintings is 'diastole-sytole', where, according to Deleuze 'the world that seizes me by closing in around me, the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself'.²⁵ In providing a vehicle through which to keep the Dreaming alive, dot paintings do not only operate at the level of symbol and narrative. The re-iterative and citational practices in Indigenous culture produce forceful and constitutive effects in the world. Here we witness the performative operations of the index.

According to CS Peirce, the index represents its object by being really affected by it.²⁶ In his semiotics, it is the index with its causal relation to its object that opens the sign to exteriority. In contemporary Western art practice, interest in the index has tended to focus on the use of *real* objects and elements in artworks.²⁷ In Indigenous culture, however, the indexical function assumes a much more profound force in the work. For Indigenous Australian painters there is a direct causal or indexical link between the landscape, the body and their paintings.

Kathleen Petyarre's paintings exemplify this connectedness through the operation of rhythm.²⁸ In *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (With Winter Sandstorm)*, 1996, for example, the rhythm of the dot matrix sets the visual field vibrating. The 'dot', as John Welchman suggests, is 'a trace of/on the ceremonial site; a granular magnification of the original sand support; and a daub on the surface of the body'.²⁹ Viewed at a distance, the dot matrix creates an oscillation and a pulsation. Under close scrutiny, each dot is still palpable, a mark in the process of becoming. Whilst we could explain this rhythm in terms of the effects of radial symmetry and the repetition of the dot creating a fine dot matrix, this pulse goes beyond mere visual effects. This rhythm rhymes the rhythm of the heartbeat and the cyclical rhythms of the Dreaming. Viewed *methetically*, the dot doesn't become a sign that stands in for something, rather it is performative. Through the repetitive and reiterative actions of Petyarre's body, the force of the Dreaming intrudes as a pulse or pressure in the work. The pulse is the rhythm of the Dreaming.

The intrusion of the rhythm of the Dreaming lies at the core of the power of Indigenous paintings. It is rhythm that connects the material presence of the paintings with the Dreaming. In observing painters from Balgo, Julie Dowling, a Yamatji artist, observed this rhythm:

as the girls were doing it they were singing a song about it [and] they were doing the actions with it ... Each step means there's another step to go on and this part of the country is this part of the picture so that as you are acting out the dot, dot, dot, dot, dot; even the action in itself is quite rhythmical, but when you bring that into connection with the heartbeat and also I'm telling a story now; this dot connects with this dot; this story is about this ... the whole connection with the land comes from the process up.³⁰

In the visual field, as in music, dancing and singing, notes Deleuze, 'rhythm and rhythms alone become objects',³¹ and it is these objects that provide a powerful force.³² Thus the 'dot, dot, dot, dotting' that make up Indigenous dot paintings create a rhythmic force that connects the basic beat of the body with the cyclical rhythms of the Dreaming. Indigenous Australian paintings don't just stand in for or represent the Dreaming. The paintings and the Dreaming are one and the same thing.

— CONCLUSION

‘Everything is rhythm’, says the poet Friedrich Hölderin. ‘The entire destiny of man is a single celestial rhythm, just as the work of art is a unique rhythm.’³³ In the light of Kathleen Petyarre’s paintings the powerful force that Deleuze claims for rhythm can be seen to operate as a double movement. In a reciprocal move, the world intrudes into the painting and the painting casts its effects back towards the world.

At the beginning of this paper I asked if it was possible to find an ethical and generative way to speak about the ‘work’ of Indigenous art? Through bringing the lessons of Kathleen Petyarre’s paintings to bear on a rethinking of performativity, it is not a question of figuring Indigenous art through and within Western institutions but rather of arguing that Indigenous art offers critical insights for retheorising the power of imaging in contemporary culture. It is here that a paradigm shift is required. If we can accept that the index stands in dynamical relation to its object I would argue that the work of art *can* become much more than a sign and much more than the medium that bears it. In asserting the possibility of a radical performative I would like to propose that in imaging there *can* be a mutual reflection between bodies and language. According to this proposition the material practice of art can transcend its structure as representation and, in the dynamic productivity of the performative act, produce ontological effects.

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1. John C Welchman, *Modernism Relocated: Towards a Cultural Studies of Visual Modernity*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995, p. 252.
 2. I wish to acknowledge the work of Estelle Barrett in raising the critical difference between appropriation of and indebtedness to Indigenous painting. See Estelle Barrett, ‘Narrative, Presence and Value: Affect and Embodiment in Aesthetic Practices’, conference paper, Narratives for a New Millennium Conference, University of Adelaide, 23–27 February 2000.
 3. Geoff Bardon quoted in Welchman, pp. 259–60. See Geoff Bardon, ‘The Origin of the Painting Movement’, in *Dot and Circle: A Retrospective Survey of the Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings of Central Australia*, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, April–May 1985.
 4. Benjamin Genocchio, ‘Traditional Abstracts’, *The Weekend Australian Review*, 25–26 January, 2003, p. 13.
 5. Genocchio, p. 13.
 6. Welchman, p. 260.
 7. Francis Bacon cited in D Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, third edition, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987, p. 18.
 8. Sylvester, p. 18.

9. Christine Nicholls, 'An Introduction to the Women Painters of Utopia, Northern Territory', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia*, vol. 32, no. 1–2, 1999, p. 14.
10. Nicholls, p. 8.
11. Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p. 84.
12. Barbara Bolt, 'Shedding Light for the Matter', *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 2, Spring 2000, pp. 203–16.
13. FM Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, p. 204.
14. Christine Nicholls, *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, SA, 2001, p. 10.
15. Petyarre quoted in Anna Voigt, *New Visions, New Perspectives: Voices of Contemporary Australian Women Artists*, Craftsman House, Roseville East, NSW, 1996, p. 221.
16. Jennifer Biddle, 'Inscribing Identity: Skin as Country in the Central Desert', in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Thinking Through the Skin*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 177–93. Jennifer Biddle supports the idea of a radical performativity when she proposes that ritual inscriptions (*kuruwarri*) have forceful constitutive effects on the Dreaming. Drawing on her fieldwork with the Warlpiri people, Biddle argues that the forceful and constitutive effects of these the re-iterative and citational practices include 'rejuvenating the country or a species; controlling fertility; regulating social relations and relatedness; causing illness and healing'. (179) The *kuruwarri* sign, according to Biddle, 'is not representation, not as that which refers, defers, to speech, sound or word, but rather as a force itself with effects: an inscription that inscribes, an imprintation that produces, marks that make'. (183)
17. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 2.
18. Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, 'Gender as Performative: An Interview with Judith Butler (London, October 1993)', *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 67, 1994, p. 23.
19. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. M Lester, eds C Stivale and CV Boundas, Athlone Press, London, 1990, p. 25.
20. Deleuze, p. 286.
21. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation*, trans. DW Smith, Continuum, London, 2003. Deleuze argues that the originary unity of the senses is to be found in the vital power of rhythm and it is rhythm that provides the force of movement that effect deformation.
22. Gilles Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', in C Boundas and D Olkowski (eds), *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 24.
23. Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', p. 23.
24. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation*, p. 42.
25. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation*, p. 43.
26. Douglas Greenlee, *Peirce's Concept of the Sign*, Mouton, The Hague, 1973, p. 70.
27. Anthony Bond, 'A Paradigm Shift in Twentieth Century Art', unpublished conference paper presented at the Australian Association of Art Conference, Adelaide, 1998. Bond argues that the contemporary engagement with the index has produced a paradigm shift in art practice. He traces this engagement to two different impetuses. Firstly, he argues, interest in the index was stimulated by an avant-garde reaction to the crisis in mimetic representation. As a result of this crisis, artists came to use *real* objects and elements instead of illusionism. Secondly, there has been a renewed interest in medieval beliefs in the force of the index. In medieval religious art, as Bond observes, 'the medieval icon could function as a holy object with spiritual power over and above its pictorial/iconic content. If the medieval icon contained a piece of the cross or part of a bone or a saint, contact with it could deliver real effects'. (2)
28. The pulse or rhythm in painting provides a force that disrupts visual narrative. Its 'subterranean presence is sensed by the viewer rather than actually seen'. Nicholls, *Kathleen Petyarre*, p. 13. In Indigenous Australian art this disruption to visual narrative works in a critical way in to protect restricted cultural information from the Western gaze. Thus Nicholls observes that artists such as Kathleen Petyarre and Emily Kame Kngwarreye have used 'art to conceal art'. Nicholls, 'An Introduction to the Women Painters of Utopia', p. 9.
29. Welchman, p. 257.
30. Interview with Jamatji artist Julie Dowling, April 1997.
31. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation*, p. 8.
32. Estelle Barrett has claimed that this powerful visual force hits us at the body as an object.
33. Cited in Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. S Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 30.