

the art of **dreaming**

*Merleau-Ponty and Petyarre on
Flesh Expressing a World*

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I do not understand painting very well, and especially not Australian Indigenous painting, the dot painting of Western and Central Desert artists such as Kathleen Petyarre.¹ This is not to feign naivety. The truth is: I have not had enough practice inhabiting this or any painting. I grew up without art on the wall, among gum trees, red dirt, dying wattle, and ‘two thirds (blue) sky’.² While this might suggest that I inhabit the same landscape as Petyarre, I also grew up without ‘the Dreaming’, the meaning that this dot painting is said to be about. How and why then can this painting have the impact on me that it does? And, given the history of colonisation in Australia, including the colonisation of Indigenous meanings, what is the politics of the impact of that painting?

The difficulty in answering these questions begins with the ontological baggage of western philosophy that comes with the label ‘the Dreaming’. As Howard Morphy points out, ‘the Dreaming’ was coined by anthropologists in the late nineteenth century and, while adopted by Aboriginal groups to refer to their varying ideas about the nature of the world, the term erases the differences between different language groups regarding what they might mean by ‘belonging to dreams’.³ Beyond that kind of colonisation, the term entrenches a peculiarly western model of representation and of ‘belonging’ (that is, of the relation between self, world and meaning). So, for much of the twentieth century, anthropologists have said that the Dreaming is, for Indigenous Australians, the era of creation when the Ancestors ordered the cosmos and created the world ‘out of themselves’,⁴ a world with a meaning and ‘moral authority outside the individual will and outside human creation’.⁵ While acknowledging that Indigenous descendants participate in, and so inhabit and belong to, the world of the Ancestors through ritual, storytelling and art, anthropologists have taken this contemporary

performance of the Dreaming to be mere mimesis without difference. More recently it has been conceded, by Alan Rumsey for example, that Indigenous descendents necessarily add some particularity of history and culture to their performance of the Dreaming.⁶ While thus attributing a degree of creativity to Indigenous artists, this still puts the Dreaming in the realm of shared timeless myth as opposed to the history of the real world marked by evolving social meaning and individual agency. There is, however, a third term that disrupts this severing of what Europeans might mean by timeless Dreaming from the sociohistorical world of the Indigenous artist's point of view: landscape. For Indigenous Australians, the Dreaming, according to Rumsey and others, is memorialised in country: where I see a river, Cocky Wujungu sees a boy's tears winding around a kangaroo's broken elbow.⁷ Where I see footprints in sand, Kathleen Petyarre sees the mountain devil lizard, the Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming carving up the dirt and creating a world of meaning as it wanders through the land.

Hence, these paintings are now more often understood to be about *landscape* marked both by the Dreaming, a timeless meaning that an Aboriginal group shares, and by the painter's specific social history in relation to that landscape. Fred Myers, for example, describes the landscape of this painting as 'how the Dreaming has been materialized, how it has been experienced' rather than 'an account of what it is'.⁸ While this idea of landscape adds much complexity and sensitivity to classic western ideas of the Dreaming, more could be done to address the implications of its neo-Kantian version where the 'landscape' of appearance lies between a realm of timeless meaning (what the Dreaming 'is' itself) and the punctuation of individual or group perspectives. A paradigm of coexisting but independent and possibly incommensurate experiences of belonging to a meaningful world does not easily account for how this dot painting has affected non-Indigenous Australians who do not have access to any form of the Dreaming. Nor, therefore, can it account for the politics and ethics of the transformative effects of that impact. While I too share this land of gum trees, dirt, wattle and sky, it is not my world, my landscape, that these paintings are about. And yet, this land and its meaning for Aboriginal Australians, engendered through belonging to it, is precisely the disputed territory of European colonisation of which I am part. On the one hand, without Petyarre's practice inhabiting her landscape of the Dreaming I cannot share her landscape: as Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us, while 'the world is *what we see* ... nonetheless, we must learn to see it'.⁹ On the other hand, if I learn to see anything of Petyarre's world through her art this cannot, or should not, repeat the European colonisation of land and of meaning that inflects it.¹⁰

As I am a creature of habit in the way I see, I hesitate before these paintings. My perception is uncertain. This unsettling of my perception of another belonging to landscape that I love provides a clue to how Petyarre's painting could have an impact on me despite being, in many respects, worlds of meaning apart. And because my perception is also uncertain

about the 'about' that is said to connect these paintings to the landscape of the Dreaming, the paintings' unsettling of my perception confronts the conceptual and material colonisation of which I have spoken. This involves addressing the enigmas of expression and access to the landscape of the real that are belied by the ontological assumptions of notions of dreaming, representation, and belonging to a material world that pervade our philosophical heritage.

— LEARNING TO SEE THE ART OF DREAMING

Through this unsettling of perception by the painting of Central and Western Desert artists, particularly Petyarre, I am learning to see, not the content of the artists' worlds, but the art of dreaming. Jennifer Biddle, for example, has taught me not to view 'dot paintings' as iconic representations of the real. In 'Dot, Circle, Difference' Biddle argues that the habit of juxtaposing these paintings next to iconographic maps (this arrangement of dots means water-hole, this means a lizard's track in the sand) has encouraged the European eye to see 'dot paintings', along with the Indigenous cultures that spawn them, as primitive and timeless rather than creative and transformative.¹¹ To see in this way, to see these paintings as pictorial maps of timeless myth inscribed in land, without history, culture or civil law, is to repeat the imperialism that, as Robyn Ferrell argues, justified dispossessing indigenous peoples in the first place of what Europeans saw as 'untitled' land.¹² So I learn that these paintings are about experiences of the landscape of the Dreaming. Not iconic representations of land unmarked by history, but expressions of what Marcia Langton refers to as 'human intimacy with landscapes' which engenders complex relations of 'human and non-human biogeography', 'sacred geography', and cultural and gender-specific land practices.¹³ Included in these expressions of relations to landscape would also be experiences of the history of colonising encounters over land.¹⁴

As these dot paintings are about landscape they are also about colour. Robyn Ferrell has also taught me about colour, through a beautiful blue photograph she captured under water that graces the wall of my lounge room. As if to prove that it does not matter so much what landscape the photo is of (as if the photograph re-presents another more authentic canvas), it took a comment from a friend recently to show me that the photograph hangs inverted and was taken from the ocean floor looking up to ripples of water touching sky, rather than from the surface looking down to ripples of sand. This knowledge of a different perspective however does not shake the certainty of my perception. What informs my perception is the blue and the patterns of light and the way both resonate with the colours and patterns of my life. Merleau-Ponty would say, for reasons I will get to, that insofar as I inhabit this photograph upside down or in any way at all I do so through 'flesh'; through the elemental intertwining of my habitual corporeal style with the world of the photograph it achieves a metamorphosis of the world of my body through art.¹⁵

It is Merleau-Ponty who has taught me how to appreciate painting a little more, or rather, what is going on in that experience. His accounts of 'expression' explain why I can inhabit some blues better than white; why I can feel strangely at home among the ochre reds and yellows of Bologna upon a first visit; and why I would find myself attempting to reproduce those colours on the outside of my house several months later without thinking and without much success. It would be the materiality of the meaning that inhabits my blood, flesh and bone (the blue-green haze of gum trees, the blue of two-thirds sky, the yellow of dying wattle and the ochre red of dirt) that gets animated and transformed by the affective impact of blue, red and yellow things on me. Just as important as the style of my body's incarnation and expression of the landscape is the impact of the landscape on me. It may not matter to some then whether the blue photograph was taken from the ocean floor looking up or from the surface looking down, but the landscape that this photograph produces does make a difference to the way the photograph orientates my body in relation to that landscape. Perhaps it is because I have lived too long with my feet in the sand looking up at two-thirds blue sky, that I can only, or at least most quietly, inhabit this photograph as the photographer would have it: up-side down. How then do the colours and ripples of Petyarre's painting drag my feet out of the sand?

— CARTESIAN DREAMING VERSUS PERCEPTUAL FAITH THROUGH FLESH

It is through his account of this strange ability of art to turn the world upside down, in terms of the transformative intertwining of body and world, that Merleau-Ponty has taught me to think again about the art of dreaming. It is more than simply fortuitous for this purpose of critiquing European definitions of the Dreaming and their ontological assumptions that Merleau-Ponty opens *The Visible and the Invisible* with a discussion of the epistemological habit of contrasting dreaming and the imaginary with true vision of reality and certitude of perception; an ontological contrast that can be traced back to Descartes' response to the scepticism of Pyrrhonism.¹⁶ When, in the seventeenth century, Descartes sat by the fire in his dressing gown to meditate about rational thought as the secure foundation for true knowledge, he began his doubting about the reliability of the senses by imagining that he was dreaming. Through this figment of imagination Descartes entrenched dreaming in the realm of timeless myth, a realm he locates, not in the landscape of the perceived, but in the interiority of the perceiving subject. If he were dreaming that he was sitting by the fire, then, Descartes says, his perception that he extended his hand would be false; or if the dream coincidentally were true, if as a 'painted representation' the dream of the extended hand did match the real, this would only be as a trace of perceptions of the real picked up when awake.¹⁷ Dreaming, for Descartes, is at worst false, and at best parasitic: a passive, static, internal re-presentation of more reliable wakeful perceptions of the physical world.

But as Merleau-Ponty points out, the issue in this contrast between dreaming and wakeful perception is *perceptual faith* as much as truth: Descartes abandons this line of inquiry in his pursuit of the foundations of certain knowledge, not simply because he assumes that dreams are false perceptions, but precisely because he had no way of telling for certain whether he was dreaming or not, and hence no way of knowing for sure whether his perceptions were on solid ground. While Descartes eventually finds this certainty of perception in rational thought (rather than the senses), this is not without 'secretly' invoking his perceptual faith in the reality of the sensible world by way of contrasting it with the false world of dreams and not without casting true perceptions, along with that rational thought that holds them, back into the same 'interior life' of dreaming of which he seemed so uncertain.¹⁸ Given that Descartes can only restore perceptual faith through these sleights of hand, the status of dreaming and imagining as opposed to rational thought remains an open question. Perhaps, after all, the world of dreaming does not remain 'forever what it is' or deficient in comparison to the 'plenum of the perceived' world.¹⁹ And perhaps meaning, as the Dreaming, is, as Indigenous Australians believe, located, not in 'interior life' but in the landscape of the perceived. Or perhaps the landscape of the Dreaming and the perceptual faith of those who live it take place somewhere in between. This suggestion however requires renegotiating the relation between interior life of the perceiver and the exterior perceived world of the real and rethinking what guarantees the certainty of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual faith is guaranteed by the 'flesh', at the border between what Descartes would take to be interior life and the perceived world. And it is this 'expressive operation of the body' intertwining with the perceived world 'that is amplified into painting and art'.²⁰

Painting and art enter this uncertain story of the Cartesian distinction between false dreaming and true perception through Merleau-Ponty's critique of André Malraux's distinction between expression in non-realist modern art and perspectival representation in classical painting.²¹ Whereas classical painting aims to represent the shared perceived world of a natural and timeless meaning through the technique of perspective, modern non-realist art, according to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Malraux, abandons the natural and the shared world to express the artist's affective and unique interiority. Merleau-Ponty admires the way Malraux, by finding something creative and unique in the artistic expression of the interior world, reverses the 'objectivist prejudice' in art. It could also be said that Malraux thus makes the internal realm of dreaming and the imaginary a creative distortion of what Descartes would say is a rational and shared representation of the landscape of the real. However, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, Malraux, while not 'objectivist', is too 'subjectivist' in his haste to abandon 'the domain of the visible world'.²² Hence, the same question of perceptual faith that Merleau-Ponty asked of Descartes could also be asked of Malraux: Malraux no less than Descartes

condemns the artist to solipsistic madness where the artist's unique interiority, deprived of any certain link with the real, would implode in on itself.

Conceiving of non-representative art in these subjectivist terms does little to alter the Cartesian epistemology that puts dreaming and representation exclusively inside the perceiving subject in the first place. Malraux's distinction between self-referential expression and world-directed perception keeps in place the dualism of a Cartesian theory of vision. On this model, the rational perceiving mind corrects the two dimensional representation of lines produced by passive mechanical vision by adding *ideas* of shape, size, depth and colour that fortuitously correspond with the real.²³ Hence, my ideas of shape, size, depth and colour should 'correct' my deceiving eye in my perception of the blue photograph. But they do not. When painting is said to similarly add depth, colour and so on to two-dimensional lines, it is figured in terms of representation of the world from the view of the mind of the artist in a way that allows the privileging of perspective in art.²⁴ It is the persistence of this epistemology and its dualist ontology that, arguably, accounts for the phenomenon that is the target of Biddle's critique mentioned earlier: the way Indigenous art of dreaming (and especially dot paintings) is viewed by a European eye as an iconic (and therefore primitive) representation of a timeless real. Equally, following Malraux, the same epistemology and dualist ontology would support the opposite proposition: that the Dreaming, as timeless and shared mythical meaning, takes the place of the landscape of the real and the artistic performance of the Dreaming is abstracted from this real in an expression of the artist's unique interiority, marked by history, individual agency, feeling and imagination.

But what if the art of dreaming dissolves these distinctions between interior and exterior life, between subjective perspective and an original timeless meaning, not to dissolve perceptual faith as Descartes feared, but rather to realise it? What if the Dreaming is in the landscape but inseparable from the body that is its unique expression?²⁵ What if expression is neither of the artist's unique interiority, nor of a shared and timeless real, but of something in between? What if it is the affectivity of flesh that opens and links the two? 'Flesh' is Merleau-Ponty's challenge to the ontology and model of perception that supports the epistemological and aesthetic distinctions between dreaming and true perception, the imaginary and the real, feeling and things. Flesh is the 'element' of intertwining between the 'the spatio-temporal individual and the idea' and between 'the within and the without', whereby my body is caught in the fabric of the world in such a way that the visible, the landscape of the real, is neither separable not completely merged with the vision: only through this intertwining and 'divergence' (*écart*) of flesh do we see.²⁶ Between seeing and being seen by things, between touching and being-touched, my style, by which I have already inhabited a world, is brought to a fragment of being such that it has meaning.²⁷ But as flesh is opened by the impact of the

strangeness of the world on me, that style, and therefore meaning is transformed in a unique expression 'undergo[ne] from things'.²⁸ Through that impact and its affect I see red as both 'a punctuation in the field of red things' and as a 'fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds'.²⁹ With this idea of flesh Merleau-Ponty argues that it is not that in dreaming I inhabit a phantasm in thought, while in true perception I inhabit the landscape of the real. In both cases I belong to and express a world through the divergence of flesh. Between the red sun and blue sea at the horizon of the world is a call to the red dirt and blue sky of my childhood. Between this and other materialised ideas of red, the red 'tiles of rooftops [and] the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution', I see red in the opening and divergence of flesh.³⁰ In an Australian context, however, insofar as the red of the landscape takes account of the displacement of the belongings of others, red would not be seen so much through the red flags of revolution as through the red blood of Indigenous massacres.

— LEARNING TO SEE PETYARRE'S ART OF DREAMING

This account of expression through the impact of world on body also describes the *production* of painting. Kathleen Petyarre would seem to agree that her artistic expression of the landscape of the *Arnkerrth* (Mountain Devil Lizard) Dreaming is inseparable from her everyday style of inhabiting the world. According to her authorised spokesperson, Christine Nicholls, Petyarre makes a direct correlation between her navigation of the landscape with her family through childhood, and her expression of the landscape of the *Arnkerrth* Dreaming in painting.³¹ Nicholls suggests that the artistic expression of Petyarre's spatial knowledge of the landscape arises from an 'ability to reconstruct, from memory, detailed and accurate mental maps' of the terrain of her childhood, so accurate that her canvasses of the landscape bear a remarkable resemblance to aerial photographs of the terrain.³² But if Petyarre's painting is a mental map, how did the Dreaming get into her mind and then how did it get transformed from a horizontal perception of the landscape to a vertical view of the world? Too many other matters that Nicholls reports suggest that Petyarre's expression of the Dreaming is not a mental map. Rather it would be an amplification of the corporeal expression of the landscape as described above: a transformed echo of her bodily orientation toward and expression of the land. After all, Petyarre does not exist completely apart from the landscape of the Dreaming. Nicholls's reports suggest that, through her inheritance of the stories of Ancestral tracings of the land and, hence, of the meaning of the Dreaming through dwelling with the elders and through her simultaneous bodily navigation of the land, Petyarre has herself become the *Arnkerrth* Dreaming. On her own account she is that 'bonsai dinosaur' with her grumpy and moralising ways.³³ Although, she could not be the same as the landscape of the Dreaming, otherwise she could not express it. There must be a difference, a divergence of flesh, for perception and expression to take place. It is not that the Dreaming

and its moral meanings are in Petyarre's mind borrowed from, then re-projected onto, the perceived world from her particular socio-historical perspective. She belongs to the landscape of the Dreaming through the intertwining and divergence of flesh.

Similarly, it is not that modern ('abstract' or non-representative) art expresses the artist's affective interiority, while classical (perspectival) painting represents the exterior world. In both cases the artist's work is the 'invention of a world' that 'adds a new dimension to this world too sure of itself by making contingency operate within it'.³⁴ 'it is the expressive operation of the body ... which is amplified into painting and art'.³⁵ This expressive operation of a body that is flesh does not impose a unique vision on the real as if perception in life or art were unidirectional. Nor does expression, artistic or not, passively reflect a fixed meaning already in a timeless real. The impact of the land upon the Dreaming, the real upon the ideal, disorientates the body and inserts it into the world and into truth. Neither the Dreaming nor the landscape, neither the imaginary nor the real, are timeless; rather, what is timeless is the difference that opens between the two. This divergence of flesh effects a 'metamorphosis of the seeing and seen' such that all art and all perception are both of a world but also of dreaming; or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, '[e]ssence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—a painting mixes up all our categories in laying out its oneiric universe'.³⁶ On this account Petyarre's painting is both an echo of the landscape of the Dreaming that she already inhabits and a reconfiguration of it; and it is an amplification and reorientation of her carnal intertwining with the Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming carved out as she wanders through the land. Insofar as the Dreaming is in the painting it is as a trace of mountain devil lizard tracks that give meaning to a world as the world impacts on it. That trace is timeless, not in the sense that its meaning is fixed, but in the sense that it signifies a divergence of flesh, a separation in the touching and being-touched, an alterity and 'contingency' that transforms meaning and that is not erasable by the style or individual belonging that it opens.³⁷

The way Merleau-Ponty and Petyarre bring flesh to art does not imply that non-realist painting is more creative than 'realist' art: perspectival art lays out its dream universe as much as what is deemed abstract painting. Nor does it imply that the artist, Indigenous or not, has essentially a more open corporeal relation to a landscape, than anyone else.³⁸ However the idea of flesh does not flatten art to make all art equally creative expressions of a world. While perspectival painting expresses its dream world by lifting the viewer above the lived world to the position that tends to sediment the significance of the relations between things, a creative expression of a world would not.³⁹ A creative expression of a world keeps the divergence of flesh open, thus allowing the landscape of the visible to continue to reverberate through the vision as the imaginary lives on in the real. Expression in such a painting is not finished when the brush is put to rest.

It is that art of dreaming with its trace of the timeless of alterity or the contingency of the divergence of flesh that opens Petyarre's painting to me. The strangeness of her painting can only animate me, however, if it resonates with and impacts on something familiar that matters. Her painting thus unsettles the certainty of my perception, by calling up and transforming the fossils of red, blue and yellow, of dirt, trees and sky from the depths of my imaginary worlds. In this way I am transported into the landscape of her painting. But I can only be transported into any landscape if, from the very start, the relation between the perceiving body and both the meaning and the landscape of the real it expresses is not a private and direct relation. What animates the perceiving body and its perception of the world is the opening onto and impact of the expression of other bodies. We will better understand the 'trespass of things upon their meaning ... when we understand it as the trespass of oneself upon the other and of the other on me'.⁴⁰ Or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts the same point, it is the expression of another body's perception of a world that, in entering the field of my body, 'multiplies it from within' and it is through this 'decentering' that, 'as a body, I am "exposed" to the world'.⁴¹

The idea that perception of a world is based on a fundamental intercorporeality and that, therefore, different 'belonging to dreams' and belonging to land impact on each other raises the issue of the ethics and politics of the appreciation of this Western and Central Desert art. It is all very well that this art fascinates, inspires and animates me. But that animation and the transformation of meaning and of belonging to landscape it effects, depends on keeping alive the alterity or divergence of flesh that provokes it. If these paintings are not to become just strange pictures on a wall we should be led by that strangeness, not only to an awareness of the cultural differences that generates that strangeness, but also to a questioning of the way one's own conceptual and material worlds may close that alterity down. As Petyarre's is not my world, I cannot share the specifics of her perceptual faith or, therefore, the same landscape of her expression. However, I can learn about the contingency of my own belonging to this land and the relations with others upon which it depends. And, with practice, I could catch a glimpse of what it might be like to inhabit a landscape not horizontally or upside down, but from on top of the world, or, as Petyarre puts it, 'looking from the sky'.⁴²

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1. This paper was first presented to the annual meeting of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature, University of Leeds, May 2003. I thank Robyn Ferrell and Jennifer Biddle for organising workshops for the preparation of the papers and for their feedback and that of others involved. Also thanks to one of the *Cultural Studies Review* referees for pointing out some recent anthropological literature on 'the Dreaming' and Indigenous art. I have only incorporated the most relevant of that here. The paper is more a critique of Western ideas of dreaming and representation and the colonisation that effects, than it is a survey of the wealth of anthropological and other literature on the Dreaming and Australian Indigenous art.
2. Sean O'Brien (dir.), *Two Thirds Sky: Artists in Desert Country*, Arcadia Pictures and SBS, 2002. This extraordinary and beautiful documentary on Australian landscape painting compares four landscape artists (Gloria Petyarre, Peter Sharp, Jenny Sages and Judy Watson) by juxtaposing shots of the artists working on their canvasses with shots of them wandering through the landscapes they paint. Without the need for any imposing commentary, the documentary raises the issue of the differences in how artists express their differing relations to land. It also questions how abstract 'abstract' landscape painting actually is. Both issues are taken up in this paper.
3. For Morphy's informative discussion of this point and his attempt to resurrect some of those differences see Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon Press, London, 1998, pp. 67–100.
4. Nancy Munn, 'The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjarra Myth', in RM Berndt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1970, p. 157.
5. Fred R Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1986, p. 69.
6. Alan Rumsey, 'The Dreaming, Human Agency and Inscriptive Practice', *Oceania*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1994, pp. 1–16.
7. See Rumsey, pp.11–13 for this description of how Cocky Wujungu experiences the Dreaming in the landscape.
8. Fred R Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002, p. 33.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968, p. 7.
10. Marcia Langton has argued convincingly that, without access to the 'sacred geography' and Aboriginal ways of being that inform these paintings and by viewing these paintings through often racist and limited intellectual and aesthetic traditions, a Western audience cannot understand the content of the paintings. Nevertheless she also suggests that these expressions of 'the possibility of human intimacy with landscapes' offers the 'settler Australian audience' something especially significant: 'caught ambiguously between old and new lands, their appreciation of this art embodies at least the striving for the kind of citizenship that republicans wanted: to belong to this place rather than another'. Marcia Langton, 'Sacred Visions and the Settler State', *Artlink*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2000, *Reconciliation? Indigenous Art for the 21st Century*, p. 16.
11. Jennifer Biddle, 'Dot, Circle, Difference: Translating Central Desert Art', in Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell (eds), *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1991, pp. 27–39.
12. Robyn Ferrell, 'Untitled: Art as Law', *Studies in Practical Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2003, pp. 38–52.
13. Langton, pp. 14–16.
14. For example, Biddle reminds us that the production of 'dot painting' as acrylic on canvas has a history inseparable from the impact of European settlement: she argues that the change of traditional practice from inscribing these Dreaming stories in sand to more permanent media of school doors at Yuendumu in 1971 and then more widely to canvas cannot be separated from the wider political discourses of Aboriginal land rights that emerged at the time. See Biddle, pp. 35–6.
15. I am summarising a connection between Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'flesh' in chapter four of *The Visible and the Invisible* and his idea of expression in painting in, for example, 'Eye and Mind', trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M Edie, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964. I return to discuss the details of this formulation of the relation between body, world, and art later in the paper.
16. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 4–6. Pyrrhonism is a sceptical tradition originating with Pyrrho (c. 365–270 BC) and encapsulated in the texts of Sextus that were rediscovered in the sixteenth century and to which Descartes was in part responding. Merleau-Ponty makes the point that Descartes attempts to solve the 'problem' raised by Pyrrho (via Sextus) of the uncertainty of true knowledge: Pyrrho

- believed that, as reasons for holding a belief are no better than reasons against, we may as well live in appearances. However, for reasons I go on to explain, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Descartes' response, positing an ontological difference between true vision and dreaming, is ultimately untenable in that it leaves us without what Descartes was looking for: perceptual certainty.
17. René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy', *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, trans and eds E Anscombe and P Geach, Nelson University Paperbacks, London, 1954, p. 63.
 18. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 5.
 19. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 6.
 20. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' in *Signs*, trans. R McCleary, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964, p. 70.
 21. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', pp. 47–59.
 22. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', p. 47.
 23. Descartes, 'Extracts from The Dioptrics', in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, pp. 241–56.
 24. Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', p. 174.
 25. Jennifer Biddle provides an alternative, although not incompatible, account to the one I go on to suggest, of how we might understand this process of artistic and corporeal performance of the Dreaming. See Jennifer Biddle, 'Country, Skin, Canvas: The Intercorporeal Art of Kathleen Petyarre', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, pp. 61–76. Less concerned with perceptual faith, Biddle's analysis combines ideas of performativity, indexical signs, writing, and Indigenous artist's own ideas about painting and the Dreaming to explain than how artistic performance of the Dreaming might mark the landscape as it also marks the bodies that perform it. Christine Watson, in part through the early (rather than the later) work of Merleau-Ponty, provides a detailed analysis of the corporeal dimensions of the art of Aboriginal women from the Balgo area of the Great Sandy Desert in terms of the relation between the skin of the body, the 'skin' of the land, and 'Kutjungka cosmology'. See, Christine Watson, *Piercing the Ground: Balgo Women's Image Making and Relationship to Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2003.
 26. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 139, and 135–6.
 27. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 139.
 28. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 139.
 29. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 132.
 30. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 132.
 31. Christine Nicholls and Ian North, *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2001.
 32. Nicholls and North, p. 7.
 33. Nicholls and North, pp. 8, and 10–11.
 34. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', p. 50.
 35. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', p. 70.
 36. Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', p. 169.
 37. I have borrowed this idea of a trace of a relation to alterity that is timeless (that is, not contained by history or particular cultural meanings) from Emmanuel Levinas. He applies this idea of the timelessness of alterity to the issue of intra-cultural 'communication' in 'Meaning and Sense', *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1987. There is some debate about whether Merleau-Ponty's idea of flesh also implies that expression requires the operation of such absolute difference or whether, as Levinas argues, Merleau-Ponty's idea of intercorporeal expression erases the foreign. See Emmanuel Levinas, 'On Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty' in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B Smith, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994. I have argued against Levinas' interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000, chapter 9. Similarly, Michael Sanders argues that there is a direct correlation between Merleau-Ponty's idea of the divergence of flesh and Levinas' unique idea of temporality where the 'instant [is] nothing short of an interruption or break that occurs within, but as distinctly apart from, the temporal flow of lived experience': Michael Sanders, 'From Time to the Flesh: Levinas and Merleau-Ponty', *Philosophy Today*, vol. 43, SPEP Supplement, 1999, pp. 146–53, especially p. 148.
 38. Christine Watson, in her otherwise careful and inspirational analysis of Balgo women artists' corporeal relation to land in *Piercing the Ground*, tends toward this conclusion: 'The sensorium and spatio-conceptual aspects flowing from Aboriginal autochthonous relationships with land are distinct and quite unlike the distance relations of western representational systems ... Aboriginal ways of seeing the world—internally coherent and markedly different from European ones—can fascinate non-Aboriginal viewers sensitive to their unfamiliarity with them'. (pp. 294–5) While I agree with the sentiment of where Watson is heading with this (that it is our unfamiliarity with Aboriginal ways of seeing, and our sensitivity to that unfamiliarity, that opens this art and its worlds to a non-Aboriginal audience), I worry how a non-Aboriginal audience could be open to

that art and be transformed by it if we didn't also have bodies open to the land and to artistic expressions of it or if Aboriginal ways of seeing were any more internally coherent (that is, not marked by alterity, divergence of flesh or contingency) than non-Aboriginal ways of belonging might claim to be. In other words, as I will go on to argue, while the specifics of ways of belonging to land would vary across different cultures, the *ontology* or 'mechanism' of that belonging (whether as the body open to land or, as I have put it, as expression of the divergence of flesh) must be the same if we are to explain both the impact of this art on people from another culture and intercultural 'communication' in general.

39. For Merleau-Ponty's account of perspectival art in these terms see, for example, 'Expression and the Child's Drawing', in *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973.
40. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Dialogue and the Perception of the Other', in *The Prose of the World*, p. 133.
41. Merleau-Ponty, 'Dialogue and Perception of the Other', p. 138.
42. For a discussion of how this motif of 'from up in the sky' operates across several examples of Australian Indigenous art, including Petyarre's painting, see Linnell Secomb's paper 'Petyarre and Moffatt: "Looking From the Sky"' in this volume.