

Curating Curiosity: Wonder's Colonial Phenomenology

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In places like universities, where everyone talks too rationally, it is necessary for a
kind of enchanter to appear.
Joseph Beuys

We may be this — but to what end?
Julie Gough

No words can adequately capture the meaning of these objects. Unspoken in their
purpose, to seek to comprehend them is to lend an ear to other voices.
Phillippe Peltier

In the Pacific islands on one of his voyages of discovery Captain Cook looked at the extraordinary Tongan *Tapa* (coconut-fibre cloth) and remarked: 'curious'. New Zealand paddles he noted were 'curiously stained'. Parkinson, a member of his crew, said of fish hooks that they were 'curiously carved', and the body of the Maori 'curiously tattooed'. Marquesian head ornaments he called 'a curious fillet of shell work decorated with feathers'; Marquesian diadems were similarly 'curious' (cited in Thomas 1991: 130). A sailor on board the *Endeavour* wrote: '[S]everal of [the Marquesans] had caps very curiously wrought in shapes not inelegant, and composed of feathers interspersed with spangles of mother of pearl, that looked very gay and were very becoming' (1991: 130).

Traders in curiosity, the Cook party expected at least a return gaze, or evidence of a common desire on the part of indigenous peoples to help them make sense of and integrate the new. But as they sailed down the Australian east coast in 1770 for the first time the Aborigines they encountered looked straight through them – as if they did not exist, as if refusing to accept that an object such as a ship must

appear 'so remarkable [...] to people who ha[d] never seen one' (Thomas 2003: 111). To the Australian Aborigines, the *Endeavour* was part of an incommensurable new cosmology.

Cook's party soon found to their disappointment that the Aborigines had no 'abundance of superfluities' to exchange.¹ Nor did the Aborigines invest any of their rich imagination in absorbing the meaning of the gifts they had been offered. They abandoned the fine neck-cloths and hair-ribbons they had been given and just walked away. What few items they possessed they had made themselves, and, like all refined design, these were objects of simple utility. Take, for example, a spearthrower (*woomera*) collected in 1923 from the Kimberley region in northwest Australia by E. Clement and later sold to the Peabody Museum.² The archive of drawings Clement made show that this spearthrower has two sides (Figure 1). Clement's drawings indicate a second dimension to the flattened one-dimensional object shown in the museum display case. The neat double of front and back in his drawings correlates with the received notion of a 'hybrid' as a mixture of two different things. Yet this object has at least four operative surfaces and might therefore be called a 'recombinant hybrid' – a hybrid that resists even this two-fold classification. The spearthrower allowed a hunter to throw his spear three times further (up to an extraordinary 180m). The *cadjie-cadjie* incisions on the *woomera*'s reverse side also indicate the object's involvement in an entirely different space – the *woomera* becomes the source of that most immaterial of arts in the sacred dances of a Corroboree when a boomerang is rubbed along these incisions to make music. What Clement doesn't mention in his notes is that, as well as percussion instrument and lever in spear hunting, a spearthrower may also be used as a mixing tray for pigments or tobacco, a utensil to make fire by friction and a wood-working tool.

¹ An observation from the archive of Captain Arthur Phillip's first settlement in Sydney (cited in Clendinnen 2003: 32). Clendinnen brilliantly reconstructs the Aboriginal Australians' strategic diplomacy and negotiation with the first settlers. In my own reading of the incommensurable nature of Australian space to the Enlightenment explorers I in no sense wish to perpetuate the view that there was no thoughtful agency in the negotiations that Clendinnen masterfully reconstructs from the settlers' statements.

² Archive of the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University.

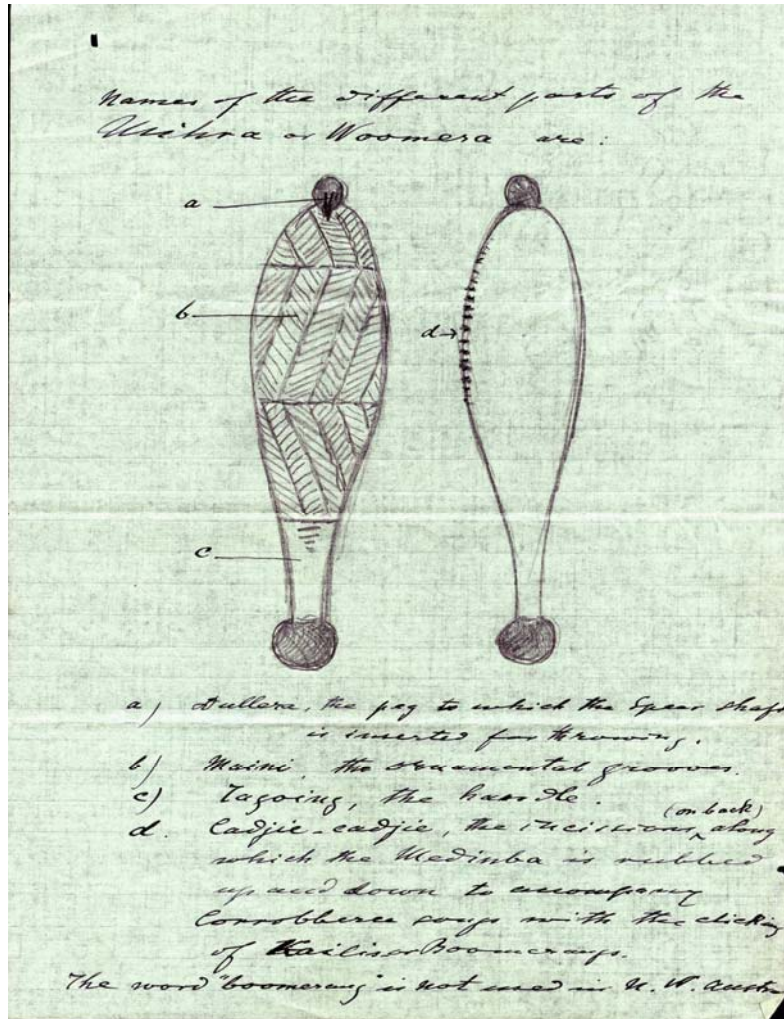


Figure 1: Archive drawing by E. Clement
Archive of the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University

What should we call an object whose ‘thingness’ appears so removed from our own understanding of a commodity?³ As Clendinnen observes, the issue of naming arises in the case of the spearthrower and many other objects in ways ‘[o]ften symptomatic of a wider incomprehension’ (Clendinnen 2003: 103). Just as artifacts become artworks when their maker is known, so objects become subjects for the museum when they can be viewed as animate. Colonial acts of (re-)naming subsumed the singular within a schema or preconceived whole on the basis of the operative category of curiosity. The category of curiosity is to be seen as distinct from wonder. For, rather than experiencing the sublime wonder that a new system presents, the colonizers brought the new they encountered on their voyages of discovery within parameters of understanding for which ‘curiosity’ served as a key term.

In analyzing the methods of display of the museum it becomes clear that taxonomy is by no means neutral, but is rather indebted to prevailing ideology. The system of taxonomy that the academy and the museum still follow today is descendant from the universal taxonomy issuing from the work of the Enlightenment botanist, physician and zoologist Carl von Linné. The burgeoning interest in science and geographical expansion in Linné’s day meant that the older aristocratic museums with their small rooms gave way to the ‘cabinets of curiosities’ in public display in the museums of the eighteenth century, thereby also making a new system of classification necessary.⁴ With the discovery of the New World and new trade

³ The Australian response to commodities contrasts with Marcel Mauss’ theory of gift exchange and extra-domestic trade. Yet Mauss also argues that objects in the Melanesian *kula* trade are not inanimate, indifferent things, but objects that are coveted – named, attributed personality, a history and even mythological status to the extent that people may be named after them. It is perhaps the particular material culture of Australia that leads to the conflation of the perceiver and the perceived in encounters where a ritualistic or religious dimension is present. Cf. Mauss 1967.

⁴ The English word ‘museum’ derives from the Greek *mouseion*, meaning ‘seat of the Muses’. In Boston this high ideal was used as a front for the scandalous theatre. The Boston Museum offered its visitors the educative entertainment of viewing curiosities before going to see the theatre discreetly hidden in the same building. The Boston Museum collection was replete with the crowd pleasing faux mermaid skeletons were then donated to Harvard in 1866 to begin the Peabody Museum. In a sense the Boston and Peabody Museums’ foundation in spectacle and visual deception – in favour of engaging people’s sense of curiosity – throws another light on current Marxist critiques of the ‘Disneyfication’ of museums.

routes, artifacts rapidly found their way into these eclectic and encyclopedic eighteenth century cabinets. 'Cook's journals had set the style and established the taste for dramatic doings in exotic places which could be elevated to science', Inga Clendinnen writes, 'by the inclusion of observations of curiosities encountered along the way: of birds, plants, animals and savages, usually in that order' (2003: 103).

Bronwen Douglas has argued that the scientific information that flowed back into Europe as a result of Cook's voyages contributed to a decline of neoclassical idealism in art and science and so helped bring about an important shift in taxonomy. By the end of the eighteenth century a new romantic sensibility in art and literature had triumphed, and a 'biologization' of the human sciences was promoting a new 'evolutionist' cosmology. While the earlier humanists thought of 'race' as a venerable variety within a divine whole, the scientific Enlightenment reconceived 'race' as a set of permanent physical differences between human groups that were passed on by hereditary to later generations (cf. Douglas 1999). Faced, therefore, with the unknown, wonder and curiosity came to mark quite different responses to the new. Curiosity, unlike wonder, does not illicit helplessness. There is no remainder once you have accounted for curiosity, while wonder entails an unaccountable remainder. The term I use for this unaccountability, this inability to measure, compare or even comprehend, is incommensurability. Like antinomy, incommensurability signals a contradiction or incompatibility in thought arising from the attempt to apply to the ideas of the reason relations which are appropriate only to the concepts of experience.⁵ In the colonial discourse from Captain Cook onward, curiosity and wonder shape the terms of response to incommensurability.

While curiosity and wonder often overlap in the same discourse, in the colonial context curiosity views novelty as something commensurable when wonder is lacking. I would like to propose that 'curiosity', which has been markedly omitted from inquiries in aesthetic philosophy, makes an interesting contribution to our understanding of the colonial encounter. In considering what wonder

⁵ A history of curiosity is yet to be written. Hepburn 1984 offers an insightful account of wonder from Plato via Aquinas to Leopardi by way of Francis Bacon, Adam Smith, Shakespeare, Kant, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss, Heinrich Heine and Wittgenstein. Antinomy is a term in the Kantian philosophy, while 'incommensurability' is treated as a term in Deleuze 1968.

might contribute to a colonial phenomenology I also treat hybridity as a possible strategy of adaptation to the new (and thus also survival) for indigenous culture. This is a story I tell in interwoven narratives: for more than two hundred years the *woomera* speaks of encounters with Aboriginal art in different keys. The different encounters work in combination and recombination. They do not constitute a linear narrative leading directly to the responses of artists today. Rather, the historiography of naming and classifying operates in at least three temporal registers: the indigenous taxonomy of objects; the collection enterprise of the explorers, and the contemporary status of 'Australian art'. I understand hybridity as the equivalent in art to the notion of recombination in physics and genetics where characteristics are combined differently from the way they functioned in a previous entity or self. 'Recombinant hybridity', I argue, offers a way to reconcile oneself to a lack of consistency. I chart this hybridity as it shifts from a purely conceptual category to one I find to be the governing practice of some Aboriginal artists today.⁶ In the reconciliation of what is ancient to a new future, hybridity has an element of modernity not usually conceded to indigenous understanding.

The first contact with New Holland was contact with an incommensurable culture, and the incommensurability of two worlds was manifest at the moment of exchange. It is in these exchanges that vastly different temporalities collided and in a sense updated or 'recombined' each other. The language that is used to talk about those objects seen in the first encounter sheds light on this cross-cultural incommensurability. Bernard Smith has suggested that 'to say that an object was "curious" was to express an interest in it without passing an aesthetic judgment' (cf. Thomas 2003: 130). In this view curiosity – the Cook party's obsessive incantation in responses to indigenous culture – stood for an absence of aesthetic judgment.

To specify further the relationship of curiosity to this absence of aesthetic judgment we may look at Wittgenstein's notebooks from 1916 where he writes about the aesthetic experience as wonder. The aesthetic moment, he observes, is one of wonder that the world exists,

⁶ Brook Andrew, Julie Gough, Fiona Foley, and Christian Bumbarra Thompson to name just a few.

‘that what exists, exists’.⁷ He notes that we do not wonder at *how* the world is, only *that* it is. Wittgenstein refines this idea in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* where the term ‘aesthetic wonder’ shifts to become a central concern with ‘the mystical’. Another way to translate these relational and spatial terms is that we wonder *at* the world but not *about* how it functions. Wittgenstein himself spatializes this claim in the next proposition in the *Tractatus*:

6.45 The contemplation of the world sub specie aeterni is its contemplation as a limited whole. The feeling that the world is a limited whole is the mystical feeling.

Die Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni ist ihre Anschauung als – begrenztes – Ganzes. Das Gefühl der Welt als ein begrenztes Ganzes ist das Mystische.

A return to his *Notebooks* from 1916 shows that Wittgenstein explicates wonder *sub specie aeterni* in relation to the artwork. He lays out the claims in the following set of propositions:

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view sub specie aeternitatis, from outside.

Die gewöhnliche Betrachtungsweise sieht die Gegenstände gleichsam aus ihrer Mitte, die Betrachtungen sub specie aeternitatis von ausserhalb.

In such a way that they have the whole world as background.

So dass sie die ganze Welt als Hintergrund haben.

Is it perhaps in this view the object is seen together with space and time instead of in space and time?

Ist es etwa das, dass sie den Gegenstand mit Raum und Zeit sieht statt in Raum und Zeit?

Each thing modifies the whole logical world, the whole of logical space, so to speak.

Jedes Ding bedingt die ganze logische Welt, sozusagen den ganzen logischen Raum.

The thing seen sub specie aeternitatis is the thing seen together with the whole logical space.

Das Ding sub specie aeternitatis gesehen ist das Ding mit dem ganzen logischen Raum gesehen. (Wittgenstein 1961: 85)

⁷ Wittgenstein 1961: 86: ‘Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist. Das künstlerische Wunder ist, dass es die Welt gibt. Dass es das gibt, was es gibt.’

Since it is a discipline's practice to legitimate a theoretical claim by providing an example, I will attempt to draw Wittgenstein back to the time of exploration, when the Europeans wondered at the world beyond their dominion. In Wittgenstein's terms, not being *in* this new world beyond Europe before the explorations, the Europeans perceived it as a wonder *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. *That* a world existed outside the maps made by the ancient world was cause for a most terrible wonder.⁸ It would only be later, *amongst* the contents of the New World, that the Europeans would become curious *about* the New World. That is why the first encounter is mysterious, because of a shift from a view *sub specie aeternitatis* to one *in* the time and space.

The literary genre of fantastic voyages and utopias attests to the European's wonder at the thought of the New World. In 1676 Gabriel de Foigny, for instance, in his novel about the as yet undiscovered southern land, cast Australians as blissfully self-sufficient hermaphrodites.⁹ While the eroticization of the Aboriginals in his utopia had the Swiss priest defrocked, it could be interesting to ponder to what extent these fantasies of the New World determined the way material was later collected and constructed as evidence for the Europeans of their fantasies of the first encounters.

Just as the genres of utopia and fantastic voyages were in fact a thinly veiled critique of European society, Captain Cook also composed a Rousseauian panegyric about the Australian Aboriginals:

From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon the Earth, but in reality they are far more happy than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniencies so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquility which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life, they covet not Magnificent Houses, Household-stuff &c, they live in a warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air, so that they have very little need of

⁸ How enormous the shock at sailing off the map, at going beyond the authorial dominion of the ancients, was only hinted at in Greenblatt 1991. Coleridge is cited dizzily: for 'outness' is but the feeling of otherness rendered intuitive, or alterity visually represented.

⁹ Cf. de Foigny 1993. The first (1676) edition in French and the English translation published the following year are held in Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Clothing and this they seem to be fully sensible of, for many to whome we gave Cloth & c. to, left it carelessly upon the Sea beach and in the woods as a thing they had no manor of use for. In short they seem'd to set no value on any thing we gave them, nor would they ever part with any thing of their own for nay one article we could offer them; this in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessarys of Life and that they have no superfluities. (Cited in Thomas 2003: 128)

This reflection on the state of nature may be the only one in Cook's diaries, yet its causal explanation takes stock of their thwarted attempts at exchange with the Aborigines.¹⁰ It renders evident the curious and rational nature that underlies Cook's firm grip on his purpose: to ascertain whether there was a southern continent, to map it, and to explore the possibility of trade. The experience of wonder, with all its attendant threats at disarming the individual of their expectations, seems at odds with this scientific purpose.

The relation of wonder to judgment can also be reconstructed on the basis of the diaries and drawings made on the Cook voyages. On his third voyage Cook stops at the southern most part of Australia, the island of Tasmania. He writes of the people there that were described to him as they appeared on shore after he had left:

Many of the children had fine features, and were thought pretty; but of the persons of the women, especially those advanced in years, a less favorable report was made. However, some of the Gentlemen belonging to the *Discovery*, I was told, paid their addresses, and made liberal offers of presents, which were rejected with great distain; whether from a sense of virtue, or the fear of displeasing their men, I shall not pretend to determine. (Cf. Nordyke 1999: 9)

Cook's restraint in passing judgment on the women is heightened by his care to report what was told to him by Lieutenant King. Like Montaigne in his essay on cannibalism, the virtues of the other culture are reported with an awareness of an inability to pass judgment on cross-cultural matters.¹¹ In Montaigne's comparison of the indigenous people in Brazil to the ancient Greeks, commensurability is

¹⁰ I think here of Karl Marx, 'The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof', in *Capital*, Volume One, Section 4, where the example of Robinson Crusoe's island is used to read the mysterious nature of commodities and the social character of the labor that produces them. Cf. Marx 2003.

¹¹ It is not clear whether a lack of empathy, or an excess of incommensurability is the reason for this. Montaigne 1958: 151–159.

undermined by the act of cannibalism. With great curiosity Montaigne interviews the ‘king’ of the tribe. He is impressed by how he measures his army, showing Montaigne the size of the space it would take to hold approximately five thousand men. All this is ‘discovered’ through gestures to the ground, in a process of *showing* not *telling*, because, as Montaigne reports, his interpreter follows ‘my meaning so badly, and was so hindered by his stupidity in taking in my ideas’ (Montaigne 1958: 159). Montaigne finds the tribal leader’s authority inscribed in the land when he asks whether his authority expires with war. He is told that as the cannibal moves between the villages that depend on him, his subjects make paths through the underbrush so he can travel comfortably through the jungle.¹² The tour de force self-reflexivity in Montaigne’s cross-cultural encounter however comes in the final line of his essay: ‘All this [means of spatial measurement etc.] is not too bad – but what’s the use? They don’t wear breeches’ (Montaigne 1958: 159). Even the short, experimental form of Montaigne’s essays reflects the limits he perceives in his own understanding. Judgment of another culture gives way to incomprehension and wonder. Though Montaigne may know something of their cultural practices, cannibalism remains incommensurable to the European’s perspective.

The incommensurability of behavioural rules in inter-racial experiences of contact has a long history in Australia (cf. Mulvaney 1989). The attempt to assimilate the Aboriginals into an entirely British system of law and exchange is illustrated sixty years after Cook in the Proclamation Board, a schematic series of paintings made to be hung on trees (Figure 2). The British crown had proclaimed Australia unknown country, *terra incognita*, and thus free to be taken. The Proclamation Board illustrates the hypothetical assimilation of ‘the savage’ under British law. Within each scene the narrative painting feigns an equality through mirroring: when read from left to right the teleology runs from savage crime to civilized punishment. The inscription on the back of the board says it was made to advertise law *visually* what could not be communicated verbally.¹³ Syntactically

¹² I would put ‘the cannibal’ and ‘the jungle’ in parenthesis to signpost my unease with the lack of a more specific name that could shift these entities from general exotic categories to a real example.

¹³ In his proposal of this drawing to Governor Arthur, George Frankland writes: ‘I have lately had an opportunity of ascertaining that the aboriginal Natives of Van

compact, such visual code was a dysfunctional strategy. A surveyor named George Frankland had seen Aboriginal paintings and thought they might therefore be educated by visual means. Yet soon after in 1830 the black war spelled the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines. The two-dimensional representation of hanging literally hung on the premise of universal legibility and the rigidity of the colonial system gave way to an incommensurability of sign systems.

What is wonder in relation to curiosity, which sees itself as within a world it is able to know? The German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant distinguishes in his terminology between *Verwunderung* and *Bewunderung*. The difference in the prefixes of the root *Wunder* (wonder, literally) is significant. As in *Verstand* (understanding) the *Ver-* prefix in German indicates a displacement. *Ver-wunderung* is then a displacement of *Wunder*, and in place of wonder colonial phenomenology produced curiosity. An object is sublime, Kant writes, provided it does not *verwundern* as a 'novelty

Diemen's Land are in the habit of representing events by drawings on the bark of trees, and that the march of a certain party of Europeans, over a country before unfrequented by us was found a short time afterwards drawn with charcoal on a piece of bark, by a tribe of natives who been observed attentively watching their movements – the carts, the Bullocks, the men were distinctly represented, according to the exact number that really existed. In the absence of all successful communication with these unfortunate people, with whose language we are totally unacquainted, it has occurred to me that it might be possible through the Medium of this newly discovered faculty, to impart to them to a certain extent, the real wishes of the Government towards them, and I have accordingly sketched a series of groups of figures, in which I have endeavoured to represent in a manner as simple and as well adapted to their supposed ideas, as possible, the actual state of things/or rather the origin of the present state/and the desired termination of Hostilities. The proposal which I venture to make is that if your Excellency approves of the drawings, they should be multiplied, and being made on more durable materials, should be fastened to trees in those remote Situations where the Natives are most likely to see them. It is, at best but an experiment, but as it will be attested by neither expense, nor inconvenience, your Excellency may perhaps consider it worth trying.' *Archives of Tasmania* LSD 17/1: 23. Surveyor George Frankland to Governor Arthur , 4 February 1829. I thank Julie Gough for bringing this letter to my attention.

exceeding expectation' can.¹⁴ Instead, *Bewunderung* is wonder or admiration that 'does not cease when the novelty wears off'.¹⁵

In light of Kant's telling distinction the word 'curious' is not neutral the way 'interesting' and 'peculiar' might be similarly common in the description of customs, occurrences and artifacts. These words certainly stand for the incommensurable in the first contact with the other in the colonies. However, the supplement to description in this supposedly 'neutral' term may betray some intent in the curious gaze. The political implications over time, furthermore, should lead to a rereading of colonial curiosity.¹⁶

Note how 'curiosity' both denotes the paddle, whistle, body, and describes the state of mind when looking at these. This confusion in terminology is possibly a strategy of the curious to deflect attention from their *Verwunderung*, the inability to grasp matched with a desire to control. If there was no aesthetic judgment in the curious apprehension of an artifact then there was certainly interest of a particular sort in the curiosity.¹⁷ It is useful to reiterate that curiosity is distinct in this sense from wonder, which certainly has, though not exclusively, an aesthetic disinterestedness.

What kind of observation is curiosity then, in these curious accounts, these accounts of curiosities? These accounts were instrumentalized, the curiosity was satisfied and the curios were taken back to England, and some were bought by the Peabody Museum. A curious order of events in which the cabinet of curiosities in Europe became institutionalized by the modern state and the museum made

¹⁴ As Thomas writes (2003: 124): 'New Holland was not the southern continent that had been sought, but it was a land replete with entirely new things. It appeared arid but was, for an emerging discipline obsessed with novelty, nevertheless a paradise.'

¹⁵ Cf. Kant 1957: *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* §29, General Remark; also §58. See also *Critique of Teleological Judgment* §1; and *Critique of Practical Reason*, Conclusion.

¹⁶ Notably Kant is writing about nature when he explicates sublime and the disinterested view. Nature does not have interests; therefore it is well suited to the kind of viewing that Kant takes pleasure in. What is at stake for anthropologists such as Fred Myers is to deconstruct the art-culture system of the 'free and creative' fine arts that assume to transcend and critique 'use value'. What underlies this seemingly irreconcilable antagonism between the utilitarian and the aesthetic object is in part at least the basis of aesthetic philosophy. Cf. Myers 2002.

¹⁷ Nicholas Thomas has taken on Bernard Smith's claim that to say an object was 'curious' was to express an interest in it without passing an aesthetic judgment (Thomas, 1991: 130).

the fetish for the curiosity into the science of taxonomy. Considering the colonial apparatus at work, can we still speak of curiosity as if it is a quality in the object that makes the viewer want to collect it?

The conflation of subject and object in the terms ‘wonder’, ‘curiosity’ and also ‘marvel’ is difficult to avoid. The experience of visual pleasure becoming transferred onto the object that gives pleasure is inscribed in these words. For instance ‘I wonder’ at ‘the curiosity’ – these words are used to describe both the visible object and the receptive experience internal to the subject. Stephen Greenblatt commits this conflation throughout when he describes wonder as the power ‘to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness’ (Greenblatt 1991: 1).¹⁸ ‘The power to convey’ has the puzzling implication of both the subject’s readiness to wonder and to project that power of wonder onto the object *and* the object or wonder’s active agency in this process.¹⁹

The inability to account for novelty also underlies the urge to order wonder in language and in a taxonomic system. The ‘incommensurable’ objects lying in the museum are in constant tension with the science that tries to order them. Wonder lies in-between. By contrast, one could say that curiosity can be satisfied, that satisfaction is accounted for by a means of taxonomy and classification and that an existing schema accommodates those classificatory means. Thus the incommensurable colonial artifact becomes a variation on an existing European model. We see this at work in the Hellenic casting of aboriginal subjects in colonial paintings of the heroic nude ‘savage’, or in indigenous mothers rendered in the guise of Renaissance Madonna and child, or in the Romantic landscapes that are made of New Zealand by William Hodges.²⁰

¹⁸ Notably Greenblatt’s interest is an entirely bookish one reflecting the Eurocentric obsessions of eighteenth century literature.

¹⁹ This is not just a phenomenon of uncomprehending discoverers to slip between ‘curiosity’ as embodied by a physical artifact and ‘curiosity’ as a mental state. This slip is common to ancient and contemporary aestheticians alike. To counter such confusion Irene Winter has translated the Sumerian descriptions of wonder instead as *ad+miration*, to account within the term for the ‘visual *spectacle* and the *spectator’s response*’. Cf. Winter 2000: 22–44.

²⁰ See Hodges 2004. An exhibition catalogue. The National Museum in Canberra makes the point in its display by contrasting drawings of classical sculptures with those of Aboriginal bodies.

In a state of wonder, as Wittgenstein writes, the subject is not, as it usually is, amidst the other parts of the world, but sees them *with* time and space. R. W. Hepburn in his commentary of Wittgenstein writes:

[A]ny hint of being at ontological odds with that spatial-temporal object-world, of being incommensurable with it, may prompt us towards interpreting a field of experience as a 'world in itself'. Accepting such promptings, taking this subject-matter as a world, we are taking it as a proper object of existential wonder. Cosmos-wonder is transferred with ease to any strangely inassimilable micro-cosmos. (Hepburn 1984: 150)

I would argue that to separate objects from the world, to create microcosmic wonders is in fact the modern museum's hope for its artifacts. Wonder is something a museum display tries to contrive in the visitor's reception of images. There is a sense in the museum that these wonders remain to some extent other and unmastered despite the neutral scientific rigor of the museum's Linnean genealogy. In Hepburn's terms 'wonder doesn't see its objects possessively'. In contrast, 'curiosity-knowledge' is a kind of possession, 'a tick on the tourist's place-list' (Hepburn 1984: 134). Hepburn shows how our perception of the nature of the world relates to wonder. Precisely when we perceive nature and our otherness to it, the germ of wonder grows. We need only think of the Enlightenment conception of the sublime in landscape paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and his prodigies of German Romanticism such as Eugene von Guérard who then rendered the Australian landscape (1852–1882) in the mode of the sublime.

There was an unacknowledged inability to understand each other in the first colonial encounters in Australia that constituted the climactic moment of aporia. Without wanting to relegate wonder to the supralingual realm, its relation to a lack of understanding is compelling. The far more controlled pursuit of curiosity may drive an encounter where a mutual unintelligibility threatens scientific order. Yet as soon as the subject can wonder how the other understands, every foreign word and artifact can open out into wonder.

In the colonial context curiosity is aroused over the *use* of artifacts from other cultures. When we look at the *woomera*, the question of *how* it was used by Aborigines arises as another articulation in the museum of our curiosity. So what of the debased, grubby curiosity that was dragged victoriously from otherness and possessed? Does the

'novelty value' identified in curiosity by Kant hinder its philosophical investigation over the test of time? Can we best define curiosity negatively (by saying it is not wonder)? If we claim that there cannot be incommensurable curiosity, then we may say curiosity is accompanied by a desire for the closure that measure and classification offer. Where there is a lack of closure there is wonder.

Opening a discourse to new bricolage (collection and reassemblage), wonder is a force at the beginning of investigations. Seeing worlds as an outsider sees them, *sub specie aeternitatis*, and moving always to find a better place at the periphery, lack of closure means also a lack of consistency in the positions of the wandering, the wondering, and the hybrid.

The displacement between the spaces in which a piece of material culture 'lives' has the potential to give an artifact new life beyond the death incurred by its extraction from a living culture.²¹ Thereby the spaces in-between, such as museums and their collections, gain an incommensurability of origin that is wondrous. This wonder focuses consciousness on a liminal (or in-between state), giving it agency in recombining spaces and temporalities for contemporary hybridity. Homi Bhabha speaks of the 'temporal breakup' that is inscribed in these 'in-between' spaces. Within the 'new international space of discontinuous historical realities' he says we are liminal (Bhabha 1994: 310).²² This being in-between may function *differently* in irreconcilable spatio-temporal structures. In-between the Aboriginal Dreamtime (in which there is no linear 'time') and the colonial sphere in which our chronological practices have likewise determined

²¹ Though in the context of the museums founded on French colonialism Chris Marker's and Alain Resnais' film *Even Statues Die* (*Les statues meurent aussi*) of 1950 (and censored for more than 10 years) beautifully portrays the fate of an art that was once integral to communal life but became debased as it fell victim to the demands of another culture.

²² The 'signification', Bhabha writes (1994: 310), of 'interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference' 'must be mapped'. This liminal space is open to potential, or what Nietzsche termed 'return', Heidegger described as 'thrownness', or Derrida found to be a 'trace'. If adopted into Bhabha's treatment of culture as a site of interrogation, the epistemology of colonial objects in the future could be in the hands of the wondering interpreter to find openness to the potential that at any time it may also open elsewhere.

Western practice, Australians may find new agency.²³ The atemporal indigenous cosmology absorbed the first sighting of the *Endeavour* as if with an intuition that wonder is directed at what can be pursued endlessly. Being in sacred time is being without time, and yet an individual can be part of both systems, can slip into no-time, or count themselves part of the arbitrary measure of hours. Consciousness formed in-between temporalities is a way the seemingly insurmountable border between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal cultures could be crossed, and crossed out.

Post-structuralism's attempt to break down binaries may find new ground where 'in traditional Aboriginal thought there is no nature without culture, just as there is no contrast either of a domesticated landscape with wilderness, or of an interior scene with an expansive "outside" beyond four walls' (Bennett 2006: 518).²⁴ There is vitality of deconstruction in Gordon Bennett's painting and writing (of which this is an example) that is a violent contrast to the collection practices of previous centuries. It makes rigid classification seem like a desperate symptom of the epistemic regimes that govern the museum.

Locating culture as Bhabha does in a negotiation of the incommensurable is especially liberating to those in Australia whose agency has been thwarted by the liberal representation of Aboriginal

²³ For a compelling treatment of the Marxist view that changes in technology determine culture and as that relates to language and creolization in colonial Africa, cf. Glissant 1997.

²⁴ Within Australia arguably the landscape is a shared discursive space – it is a referent available to all Australians and made sensible in hybrid artistic forms. Richard White (1981) has argued this at length. The notion of a shared or hybrid discursive space is a way in which this Australian material differs from Dean and Liebsohn's critique of hybridity: cf. Dean and Liebsohn 2003. Dean and Liebsohn argue that what is at stake in the notion of hybridity is 'our willingness (or need) to "see" the influence of European culture', when hybridity may be largely 'invisible'. In other words the recognition of indigeneity in art is driven by our desire to see that indigenous people were not completely vanquished. The term hybridity has the political charge of a discourse that deals with the power relations that engendered the conditions of encounter. The transformations that have occurred in indigenous art since first contact are therefore not recognized because they are not visibly 'indigenous'. This is certainly the case in the contemporary Australian art, especially by 'urban Aboriginals' who are not isolated from 'modern' media. Australian artists such as Julie Gough break with the stereotype of what traditional Australian art looks like – dot paintings on the body and bark, or since 1979 also on canvas.

culture as alien.²⁵ Politically convenient but unimaginative, this position has ossified attempts at fostering mutual understanding through ‘reconciliation’. Now it begs to be asked within the highly politicized reconciliation process in Australia whether it is really necessary to ‘understand’ each other in order to have successful coexistence?

The unreconciled languages, trade relations, and understanding of art and ritual as instantiated in that first encounter resonate in Australia’s continued failure to cross between these cultures, but it is not a justification for the future extinction of Aboriginal culture. As a strategy of survival hybridity need not conspire in the ‘assimilation’ of all Australian cultures.²⁶ It has been argued by Ian Anderson that the notion of cultural hybridity was a way for white history to equate the ambiguity of ‘Aboriginality’ with the notion of being ‘without culture’ (Anderson 1993–94: 10–12). Historically this may be true, however in our current zones of contact the location of culture now is the consciousness of those who move between interstitial spaces.²⁷

The cultural predisposition of the West is toward anxiety if we do not share language and its way of structuring time and space. It is destabilizing but also wondrous to think that two cultures may be incommensurable and yet not incompatible. How might we redirect the anxieties about the terms of exchange across cultures that differ

²⁵ Julie Gough’s summary of an email exchange we had about the liberating function of hybridity in art as it seeks to dismantle an essentializing impulse is published online in *Machine*, Issue 1.9, (<http://www.artworkers.org>) accessed on July 16, 2007: 10.

²⁶ Ellen M Smith has critiqued the relevance of Bhabha’s theory of hybridity when in relation to Indigenous and not migrant culture – in response to Anderson 1993–94: 10–12.

²⁷ Here I am borrowing the title from the 2006 Biennale of Sydney ‘Zones of Contact’, director Charles Merewether stated that: ‘the condition from which the work of art appears is specific and yet, contains the potential to cross boundaries, to be understood elsewhere and animate a sense of history as defined not simply by force of separation but by threads of entanglement. To experience the work of art is to enter an interval between time, a pause in time. In so doing, it offers a different ways of seeing who we are and a new zone of contact.’ *2006 Biennale of Sydney*, <http://www.bos2006.com/> (accessed on June 1, 2006). The Biennale’s thrust was towards art by those criss-crossing spaces of dislocation and displacement and by those living in another’s culture. The works explored the influence of different cultures upon each other, as well as the land shared. From zones of conflict around the world the international artists reflected how negotiations of fraught territory resonate with the history of land and culture in Australia.

both materially and immaterially in their understanding of the world?²⁸ Bhabha's and Robert Glisson's models for language could inform a map of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian subject and how it can relate to the material culture of the land. Gordon Bennett expresses Glisson's notion of 'errantry' when he writes that 'the path to "no place" [utopia] is one of attitude, a sensitivity to nuance and the possibilities of evolution toward a kind of ecological awareness in thought, and therefore in action. However, it is the path that is the key and not any final destination' (Bennett 2006: 519).

A struggle against the notion of an original is also paramount in acknowledging the mobility of objects. Though different from a human in its relationship to language, an object can be seen as errant, as a nomadic in-between, because of its crossing of tangible and intangible borders. Bhabha's model of cultural liminality in the 'new international space of discontinuous historical realities' means that an Aboriginal Australian can be one (id)entity in relation to the institution from which they make a living – say the art market in the case of a contemporary Aboriginal artist – and another in relation to their clan (Glissant 1997). Important is our rethinking of what has historically been seen as an impossible combination between the indigenous and modern. At the emerging periphery of cultural production contemporary artists challenge the claim of essential identity. Their work displays inconsistencies both within and in moving between and beyond the binary terms of indigenous/modern, traditional/contemporary, artisanal/academic.²⁹ Yet these inconsistencies do not undermine but rather open them and their artwork to recombinant hybridity.

²⁸ The UNESCO convention on intangible heritage acknowledges that material and immaterial culture is not separable. In lieu of this 2003 convention (which is still in the process of being translated, existing at present in draft in 42 languages), a study of indigenous heritage was carried out by Erica-Irene Daes in 2000 (see Brown 2003: 225). Also see the upcoming publication of the conference on *Intangible Heritage*, Harvard University Faculty Club, 4–6 May 2006.

²⁹ Akhil Gupta problematizes the term 'indigeneity' through the study of 'hybrid' uses of language and technology. Gupta points out that 'indigeneity' is defined by negation – it is by definition 'not modern' but bounded and local in the old dichotomy between traditional and modern. Furthermore, 'indigeneity' has been 'fetishized' and the politics of calling someone indigenous is a risky strategy because of the kind of taxonomy it adheres to (cf. Gupta 1998).

The *woomera* I threw in at the beginning of this story therefore returns.³⁰ In Christian Bumbarra Thompson's *Emotional Striptease* (Figure 3) a *woomera* is cradled by a young indigenous woman and the terms of 'incommensurability', 'curiosity' and 'recombinant hybridity' are revitalized in artistic practice. The temporalities of this narrative are also interwoven in these photographs. The backdrops to *Emotional Striptease* are the fragmented citations of Australian landscape in Melbourne's postmodern architecture. The institutions are flattened as backdrops – The Melbourne Museum, Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Federation Square – and before the buildings are indigenous people that deploy their own urbanity. By commanding our attention with the representation of the objects and themselves, the striptease intervenes in the identity politics of museum display as a kind of institutional critique. So unlike the popular image of indigenous people in ethnographic photography in this display of agency, they all hold an artifact of their material culture from the Melbourne Museum's collection. It is the way they bear this artifact, though, that makes it an emotional striptease. The gaze is no longer

³⁰ Sartre wrote that the violence of colonialism returns like a boomerang. In his 1961 prologue to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* he says, 'it is the moment of the boomerang; it is the third phase of violence, it comes back on us, it strikes us, and we do not realize any more than we did the other times that it's we who have launched it'. The boomerang was already a metaphor for the movement of time in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947): 'My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization – pardon me, our whole culture (an important distinction, I've heard) – which may sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. A beautiful girl once told me of a recurring nightmare in which she lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney. And so it is with me. Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.'

averted from the exchange. Their performance reclaims the dead from the museum. In their Victorian period costumes they ridicule the contorted superiority of the settlers and wear the uniform of power and civilization. This recombinant appropriation of temporalities shows how even a spearthrower may help us cover more ground when we wonder about colonial *curiosities*.

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Figure 2: Unknown, 1830, *Governor Arthur's Proclamation to the Aborigines*. Wood panel nailed to trees in Tasmania during the Black War, according to the label on the back 'to communicate, not knowing their language'. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



Figure 3: Christian Bumbarra Thompson, *Emotional Striptease*
Photographic series, 2005, courtesy of the artist.