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Introduction

The present volume grew out of an international symposium that was held at the Museum Tinguely in Basel from 22 to 24 September 2005 on the occasion of the exhibition «Rarrk» – *John Mawurndjul. Journey through Time in Northern Australia* which was initiated by Bernhard Luethi and generously supported by F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG.¹ Both exhibition and symposium were on John Mawurndjul and his oeuvre (see fig. 1), in other words on an Indigenous Australian contemporary artist. The brief reference already contains the clues to the central motives and themes that generated this volume: special emphasis is placed on the anthropological index of the Indigenous and how it seems to merge quite naturally with the internationally defined concept of contemporary art. Indigenous and international, anthropology and art history, contemporary artist and Aboriginal origin are categories that one – and by this we primarily mean self-referencing European notions – usually does not perceive as belonging together; on the contrary, more often one tends to register their contradicting qualities.

Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly evident that the two categories do form parts of a single whole and reference each other, and this is what makes the current volume so topical. It addresses issues and discourses within the framework of globalisation as an economic, social and cultural emergence. Contemporary art, i.e. contemporary artists and their works, figure in, and are shaped by, all three of these tightly interwoven and interdependent dimensions of the global process. Within this overall framework, the volume's special focus is on the question as to how art is encountered and dealt with in, and between, cultures.

John Mawurndjul and his work provide the field for bringing together the general framework and the thematic focus. One of the volume's main aims is to relate some of the basic issues ensuing from the globalisation perspective to the specificity of John Mawurndjul's art, in order to ascertain where they share common ground and what dissociates them. This does not mean that the general is to be tested on the specific, nor is the

1 See also Kaufmann C. and Museum Tinguely (eds.) «Rarrk» – *John Mawurndjul: Journey Through Time in Northern Australia*, Schwabe AG, Basel, 2005.



Fig. 1: John Mawurndjul in the Basel exhibition at the opening of the symposium, with Ian Munro translating, 2005. Photo Erika Koch.

singular to be raised to general validity; rather, the aim is to mediate between categorical reflection and actual or concrete situation. In the process, the attempt is made not only to do justice to the singularity of the artist and his works but also to make visible and trace the contours between cultural globalisation and its ramifications on the artist, his works and the way viewers encounter and perceive the works.

In other words, the aim is to thematise some basic issues concerning contemporary world art with a specific view on John Mawurndjul and his works, the conditions of their creation and the mode of their presentation in art museums such as in Sydney, Basel or Hanover where they were shown lately. In this sense, the present volume is different from earlier approaches to intercultural issues in the field of visual arts. By broaching issues of cultural relationships of power in art and art history these usually tend to be in the vein of postcolonial criticism, or else they address the question of the locus of the image and the global passage of images, where migration becomes the key to a trans-national cartography of contemporary art.

In our case, the road to new perspectives of contemporary world art begins in the introduction with the conditions under which John Mawurndjul's works are created and then sketches their journey to and through the various institutions of the art world. The approach presupposes that the works of John Mawurndjul have already been encountered and definitely been allocated the status of art. Also, the neat order of first describing work

creation followed by the works' passage into the art world is somewhat ideal-typical. We leave it to the single contributions to provide a more differentiated and concretised view.² But in the sense of an introduction we shall first follow the path as indicated above.

I.

John Mawurndjul normally lives at his outstation Milmingkan in western Arnhem Land in the northern part of Australia. It is here that he produces the majority of his paintings. They are paintings on bark. For producing them he needs a variety of materials: bark as a base, colour pigments, a brush and fixatives. In the initial steps of his artistic practice John Mawurndjul procures the materials he needs for his paintings. In practical terms this means he first has to go out and collect a bark from a Eucalyptus tree (stringy bark), strip it, dry it over the fire, then flatten it and finally smooth the surface by rubbing it down. All these steps John Mawurndjul attends to himself. For procuring the pigments John Mawurndjul proceeds in a similar manner: he collects the minerals from which he produces his colours from special sites on land surrounding his home. This is not a mere mechanical process. Whilst collecting ochres and white clay he communicates intensely with his clan ancestors, this means the work-step forms part of a ritual performance. This is necessary because the minerals are not regarded as crude materials that one simply extracts from the ground, but as a substance that is symbolically charged through its association with the Dreaming and ancestral mythology. Before using it he has to communicate with his ancestors and the creator beings to receive their permission and reassurance, a step which is itself contingent on his status as a clan elder. This shows that the materials are not freely accessible, and certainly not purchasable in the next do-it-yourself store. On the contrary: access and usage are subject to his initiation status and the terms of traditional lore; the pigments are spiritually charged, by virtue of their origin.

Mawurndjul paints his pictures at his Milmingkan outstation. Usually you see John Mawurndjul sitting cross-legged in the shade of the porch of his house, quietly and meticulously applying to the bark lying in front of him line by line of crosshatching (*rarrk*). Technique and method – starting from the procurement of the bark and the pigments, the brushes which he makes himself, to the position he sits in whilst painting – are in accordance with the traditional mode of bark painting, with the exception of the fixatives he uses. These are synthetic and he purchases them from a store. However, Mawurndjul has no qualms about this; it neither affects his self-image as an Indigenous artist nor does he regard it as a breach of tradition as some Western viewers might see it, who often tend to an 'either-or-view' of things, to a clear dividing line between tradition and present. This is not the case here; on the contrary, Mawurndjul sees himself and his bark painting absolutely in line with the age-old tradition of rock art, a tradition that, as we know, goes back in the

2 In order to avoid unnecessary duplication we almost completely do without bibliographic references in the introduction, and refer to the single contributions.

history of humanity anywhere between 9,000 and 60,000 years. This knowledge grants him a high degree of self-confidence, a quality that is absent in European Modernism that severed its ties with historic tradition. Moreover, in his reference to early rock art Mawurndjul sees the duty both to continue and to renew this age-old tradition.

It shows that when we are talking about John Mawurndjul and his image of self as an artist we are not only confronted with a different form of relationship to the concept of tradition and an alternative understanding of historicity, but also to a different presence of tradition which compels us to consider alternative ways of viewing and handling the concept. Actually, it is even questionable whether ‘tradition’ is the appropriate term for what we are trying to express in words since the term carries far-reaching (here only implicated) connotations of a European understanding of history.

When Mawurndjul has finished a work he takes it to Maningrida, about 80 kilometres away from Milmingkan, and delivers it to Maningrida Arts and Culture (MAC), the local support organisation for artists from Arnhem Land that takes over the task of marketing and selling their works. To be exact, he does not merely hand over his paintings, he sells his works to MAC that from then on is responsible for mediating his paintings and getting them to the market – in Mawurndjul’s case the global market. Before they are actually put up for sale the works are measured, documented and evaluated. Through this process the works cross the threshold and enter into the world of art, in both a material as well as a media sense. One could say that this step marks the publication of the works, for an audience that is radically different from the one that his art addressed in ritual and clan contexts before. Put even more succinctly: it is actually the first time that the artworks have to face an audience. This shift in function and target group raises a number of questions that the act of transfer itself engenders: what happens to the works’ earlier secret meanings – do they persist or do they disappear? What about the ban on, or at least the danger of, viewing that non-initiates were formerly subject to – is it upheld or has it become ineffective, lost its threatening dimension? Does this form of publication not lead to a profanation of ritual properties – with potentially serious consequences for the clan and ritual system? But on the other hand, do such questions not simply reflect the European experience of secularisation, the depletion of the significance of religion that the old continent has gone through? Is it not equally justified to say that by altering the traditional iconic idiom and by making his works public – irrespective of the context within which this occurs – John Mawurndjul is consciously recharging and updating tradition and thereby ensuring its continued existence?³

On the premises of MAC in Maningrida there is a small, affiliated ethnographic museum, called the Djómi Museum.⁴ This means that one encounters in the same building –

3 Our text tries to describe what Ivo Kummer’s dual video installation mediated to the audience at the exhibition.

4 See also the museum’s self-description at www.maningrida.com/mac/museum.php (viewed on 20 February 2007): “The Djómi Museum functions as an integrated element in the community’s cultural and regional development. It promotes the richness of the region’s artistic expression, it is the custodian of a wealth of historical and cultural material and an active source and repository of valuable reference and research data. Djómi is an official regional museum of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.”

depending on which entrance you take – two completely different worlds: on the one hand a world of art, on the other an ethnographic collection. Thus, in a very confined space, the history and present of the fundamental debate on how to approach and deal with non-Western art, or, to be more precise, art that is often labelled Indigenous or regional, meet head-on. Between the two entrances, and separating them into two worlds – although here the two look very similar – stands the fundamental question “what is art?” and, in conjunction with it, the issue of the presentation of art. To paraphrase, and expand on, a statement made by Guido Magnaguagno on an informal occasion, the difference we are talking about here is the distinction between “market art” and “ethnographic museum art”. It is a distinction between two genres of art: the former must be able to prevail in a space without additional contextualisation (apart from a white wall), while the latter cannot function without (usually cultural) contextualisation. At the latest by the time they arrive in Maningrida, John Mawurndjul’s works are joined by a series of questions that will accompany them on their journey through the various art institutions until they reach their final destination – in our case Basel. In the present case (and significant in view of the preparations for the exhibition and symposium in Basel), their first stop on the journey through the world of art was the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, that is to say: an art museum. It was there that in 2004 the exhibition *Crossing Country: the Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* was shown and which featured John Mawurndjul as an important representative. Above all, it featured him in the “white cube”. The event naturally attracted the attention of the media and the art world, and John Mawurndjul found himself having to explain his works, and having to speak in public and answer questions. He spoke in his own language, Kuniŋjku, so it needed an interpreter for the people in Sydney to be able to understand what he was saying. The language barrier and having to rely via an interpreter inevitably broached the issue of the social and cultural status of Aborigines in (white) Australian society today. This meant that John Mawurndjul’s public appearance and his words also carried a highly political message, although he does not directly or openly address politics as such in his artworks. Rather, the politically provocative potential of his work is lodged in the self-conscious mode with which John Mawurndjul asserts motives and themes from his own culture and encodes them in a specific iconic language. This display of self-confidence allows Aboriginal politics to acquire a new and distinct profile, although, it must be added, today Indigenous Australians are compelled to set their priorities differently: they are fighting for sheer survival, which leaves little to no room for refining profile.

During the *Crossing Country* exhibition in Sydney a symposium was organised under the motto “A day of artist talks, lectures and discussion providing a comprehensive insight into the historical and contemporary contexts of western Arnhem Land art.”⁵ Here too, John Mawurndjul was asked to give a talk, but it was in a different context, far from the bustle of the exhibition and the attention it drew from the media. The occasion provided

5 http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/sub/crossingcountry/3_EVENTS/events_symposium.html (viewed on 19 February 2007).

an opportunity – as did the exhibition catalogue – to turn to the work of John Mawurndjul and take a closer, one could even say critical look at it from an art historical perspective. This means that the works were subjected to the process of “art historicisation”, in the course of which art history, anthropology and economics, in their guise as academic disciplines, were given the floor to present their by no means compatible perspectives on the work and artist personality of John Mawurndjul. Other topics discussed included the maturing and differentiation of Mawurndjul’s art in the course of his career, its place in the tradition of bark painting in western Arnhem Land, the question of continuance and innovation in his work, iconographic and reference issues, but also questions dealing with style and whether his bark painting commands an aesthetics of its own. Other issues focused on the art market and John Mawurndjul’s self-conception as an artist. Also of significance were the interviews John Mawurndjul gave and the statements he made in the context of the exhibition; they provide important clues for art historical and anthropological research.

Integrating John Mawurndjul and his works into an art historical, that is, a scholarly discourse provides the chance for applying not only distinct, but differing modes of contextualising his works – that is why above we spoke of by no means compatible (scholarly) perspectives – in other words, we can distinguish between different reference frames. One such reference pertains to the context of the creation of the works, that is, the living and working conditions at Milmingkan outstation and/or the traditional function and spiritual background of bark painting. The other reference frame relates to the museum context, or, to apply a more ambitious vision, to a globally oriented imaginary museum where the works are, above all, viewed and judged from the perspective of their formal qualities. What stands to debate in these differing contextualisations is defining the apposite reference point for a suitable practice of dealing with the works. This is not merely a matter of difference between academic disciplines and their approaches, for example between art history and anthropology. It goes beyond that and addresses the fundamental question of the nature of scholarship and understanding and what role the museum should play in this field. Put in more general terms, what stands to debate is the difference between applying a universalistic and a contextualistic approach to art.

The present volume contains contributions on John Mawurndjul and his works from both perspectives. However, they do not stand as alternatives that exclude each other, rather more they attempt to explore the opportunities and probe the boundaries of each approach. Some of the authors also reflect on the circumstances and terms under which the works are received and dealt with in practice.

The journey of John Mawurndjul’s works from Australia to Basel, and in Basel the transfer to an art museum once more accentuates the question of contextualisation and therein the issue of the appropriate practice of dealing with the works. On the one hand, this ensues from the increased cultural distance that the journey created, calling for more cultural contextualisation at the works’ final destination; at the same time, distance also provides the chance for a more decidedly aesthetic appreciation of the works. On the other hand, the pertinence of the issue developed from the special circumstances in Basel, since the options and the venue of presentation constituted central issues of the exhibition concept. The Basel exhibition was the result of an intellectual collaboration and an institutional

cooperation, namely between an ethnographic museum and an art museum. Such a form of cooperation immediately evokes Europe's entangled history of exhibition practices and its institutions: the traditional place for displaying non-European cultures, including their art, is, at least in the tradition of German-speaking countries, the ethnographic museum or collection respectively. The ethnographic museum lumps together and displays cultural products, which European institutions keep strictly apart and exhibit separately when their own cultural achievements are at issue. In terms of museum types this means that a clear line is drawn between historical museums and art museums, between historical collections and art galleries.

On the old continent, art museums reacted to the growing output of European and, later, Western art in general, by establishing new institutional bodies to accommodate the increased artistic produce. These included art associations and societies, exhibition halls, museums of arts and crafts and, last but not least, museums of contemporary art. The ethnographic museums, for their part, did not change, at least not until very recently and then only in very few cases, and kept on amassing both traditional cultural products and new (transformed) artistic achievements from non-European cultures. Thus the question concerning the appropriate venue for displaying contemporary, non-European art triggers a controversial debate. Where should it be shown: in the above-mentioned, comparatively new museums of contemporary art, which, as their name implies, focus on modern, present-day art but do not incorporate non-European art? Or should it be shown in ethnographic museums that admittedly collect and also exhibit modern creative products from non-European cultures but at the same time appear not to be able to come to terms with the label 'autonomous art' and, to that effect, with the European concept of art – a concept that from the start seems to be inclined to assign everything non-European subordinate significance?

At the same time one must question how the European-Western white-cube mode of presentation as practised in art museums could be reconciled with cultural contextualisation that forms one of the tenets in the presentation strategies of ethnographic museums. Is it possible to implant a white cube into an ethnographic museum, or vice versa, feasible to integrate cultural contextualisation in an art museum? Does this not merely lead to an aesthetization of the ethnographic museum or ethnographisation of the art museum respectively? On the other hand, the question must be allowed whether a contraposition of this nature is actually relevant in a museum world that is constantly challenging its own set of norms. In fact, would it not make more sense to apply both approaches when displaying contemporary non-European art, irrespective of the type of venue? The fact that many artists would opt for the art museum does not really satisfactorily solve the problem of finding the mediation mode that truly does the works justice.

What goes for the institutional level also applies to the actual encounter with the works of John Mawurndjul in an art museum. Based on the European tradition of presenting works of art, the art museum's white cube is geared to the sensuous perception of the works shown therein. The intention is an eidetic encounter with the works within the framework of aesthetic experience. However, from a European perspective of viewing, the works of John Mawurndjul display a high index of cultural otherness in terms of iconic encoding, materiality and their uneven and corrugated formats. The encounter takes place in a ten-

sion field between sensuous challenge and unfamiliar presentation, between aesthetic proximity and uncertainty about the works' original contexts of creation and intended meaning. Going a step further, one could ask whether, in the environment of a European (art) museum, the viewer experiences the cultural otherness that the works of John Mawurndjul emanate as a challenge or as alienation.

In methodological terms, the question is how to accommodate otherness between reflexive approximation and exclusive reconstruction. In other words – pointedly articulated here as alternatives – do we approach the cultural otherness in John Mawurndjul's works in full awareness of its presence but also of its unreachability, or do we try to find orientation in the contexts of their creation and original significance? Put differently, do we enter into a direct visual dialogue in order to fathom the layers and explore the boundaries of the works we encounter, or do we – and herein lies its exclusiveness – absolutely disregard the place of the encounter – a European art museum – and its significance for understanding the works? The two approaches mark opposite ends of the field of intercultural reflection through which we are seeking to probe the conditions, but also the limits, of an encounter with Mawurndjul's works. It is exactly these questions that the present volume wishes to address in order to explore ways of reaching an understanding of his works, what options of understanding there are but also whether and where the boundaries to understanding lie, as seen from the perspective of contemporary world art. If we apply the approach to include visitors to museums in general it soon becomes apparent that the issues raised here do not relate to artworks of non-European provenance only. For non-specialists the works of mediaeval artists, even of artists of the 17th and 18th century, are just about as unfamiliar as are the works of John Mawurndjul; in the former case because we are no longer familiar with the living conditions and world views of that era, in the latter because we have not yet become familiarised with cultural alterity. To further explore the difference between historically motivated and culturally informed otherness would certainly be a worthwhile task for the future.

II.

The list of contents and the thematic emphases of the book follow the journey of John Mawurndjul's works as outlined above, from their origins in western Arnhem Land through the various art institutions and into the world of academic investigation. The focus is on the interrelatedness of the contexts within which we go in search of the works and encounter them, and from which the differing art histories grow in their quality as historiographies of art. In the process, basic questions bearing on the encounter and the mode of coming to terms with art within, and between, cultures take centre stage. The questions are explored along the path that John Mawurndjul's works took in four main parts: (1) deals with the local contexts within which the works of John Mawurndjul are created and stand, (2) reflects on the interrelatedness of art, context and art histories, (3) raises the issue of the globalisation of contexts and the shifts it engenders in the receptive attention, and, to conclude, (4) throws a light on the institutional consequences that the questions raised here could have.

Specific issues are woven like threads into the volume and are discussed from shifting perspectives within two levels of order. Next to the vertical order given by the four main parts, the threads crosscut and interlink the single contributions horizontally, thus tying in further the individual texts into the overall plot. In summary, the threads address the following topics: an art historical appraisal of bark painting as an art form in its own right (contributions by Ryan, Morphy, Volkenandt); an inquiry into, and reflection on, the modalities of a contemporary artist's biography, in this case John Mawurndjul's, examining the unfolding of a life story in a field of tension between the expectations on the part of his family and kin, his own goals and artistic aspirations, and his international renown and responsibilities in the world of exhibitions and collectors (Taylor, Kohen, Altman, Butler); an expansion of art history's traditional 'outside' view by exploring how local communities perceive changes to their own art traditions and what effect this has on the artists' strategies and framework of action (Morphy, Taylor, Altman, Bonnet); the significance of trans-cultural reflection on art and the necessity it engenders to explore, describe and practise novel modes of intercultural perception, discourse, criticism and valuation (Zijlmans, Bonnet, Martin, Butler, Onians); and finally, the urgency to develop and critically explore significant groups of works and collections and incorporate them in intercultural projects – exhibitions and other visual modes of mediating artistic expression – in order to include them in the debate on what art has to say (Taçon, MacMillan/Kaufmann, Ryan, Eigenheer, Lüthi).

III.

Symposium and exhibition together formed an entity. This is worth mentioning especially in view of the different and contradictory ways in which in Australia and Europe the achievements of Indigenous Australians are appreciated and valued as markers of cultural autonomy. While in Australia Aboriginal artists remain disadvantaged in terms of access to the market and face a political atmosphere in which the bygone spectre of forced assimilation is again knocking at the door, and in which they have to fight for their rights, Jean Nouvel, the architect of the new Musée du quai Branly in Paris, went novel ways when he invited several Aboriginal partner artists – prominently among them John Mawurndjul – to leave imprints of their artwork on this new cultural centre with all its service facilities such as museum shops, study centres and media library. The work was carried out between September 2005 and the opening of the museum on 20 June 2006. As against the new museum building on the quai Branly, the Mawurndjul exhibition in Basel chose to create both a historical and a cultural bridge to John Mawurndjul's art in order to provide a space for reflecting on the mode of presentation. The historical bridge was in the form of a display of bark paintings from the Kupka collection, that were shown in rooms adjacent to the actual «*Rarrk*» exhibition. In a special sense it provided a double arch: for one, because on his journeys to Arnhem Land from the 1950s onwards Karel Kupka collected bark paintings not as ethnographic objects but from the aspect of their aesthetic quality, that is as artworks in their own right; for the other, because the works

he collected in western Arnhem Land represented a specific period and tradition of bark painting that preceded John Mawurndjul, which again meant that the viewers received as a complementary context an impression of the artistic and cultural background to his works. The cultural bridge consisted of a video installation that was located in a separate room, showing John Mawurndjul in his living and working environment. The installation, in fact, consisted of two film projections: the first was a large-scale projection using the entire back wall as a screen, the second film, shown parallel, was screened on a television which stood in the middle of the room. Two rows of benches were placed so that the viewers could watch both films simultaneously. The film that was made by Ivo Kummer and his crew from Switzerland together with John Mawurndjul and his wife Kay Lindjuwanga on-site in Australia evokes in its dual projection mode an impressive portrait of the artist as a person. Without any form of off-commentary, Mawurndjul presents himself in the original contexts of his work, from Milmingkan to Sydney. While the film on the TV screen portrayed Mawurndjul in action, that is, working, explaining and showing, the projection on the wall captured the environments – both country and urban – through which he moves and which constitute his reference frames. John Mawurndjul and Kay Lindjuwanga also took part in the symposium where their presence left an indelible imprint.

To end we should like to express our gratitude to a number of institutions and people for their contribution to the success of the symposium project. The Basel Symposium was held at the Museum Tinguely. Independent of the museum budget, the event was made possible through generous contributions by the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft, Basel, the Max Geldner-Stiftung, Basel, as well as the Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften and the Swiss National Science Foundation. In the name of all participants we should like to thank all of them for making this event possible. Through their hospitality the director and the staff members of the Museum Tinguely created an atmosphere that made us all feel comfortable and that markedly contributed to the success of the event. In his opening speech and greeting, Prof. Meier-Abt, vice-chancellor for research at the University of Basel and member of the Research Council of the Swiss National Science Foundation, expressed the authorities' commitment to support intellectual enterprises of this kind. We also thank all the authors who contributed to this volume, not only for the texts as such but also for their willingness to adapt and revise their contributions so that new insights gained in discussions and conversations in and around the symposium have been allowed to flow into the volume and contribute to our knowledge and understanding. Alas, one person who from the start was a keen supporter of both the exhibition and the symposium was not granted the grace to witness the publication of this volume. Unfortunately Richard McMillan, who came across the tracks of Karel Kupka in Australia whilst working on the artistic legacy of the Australian painter Tony Tuckson (1921–1973), died on 12 July 2006. One text is a completely new contribution. We have included it because in it Sally Butler describes a visit to the exhibition and discusses the exhibition strategy from the viewpoint of an Australian art historian. Finally we should also like to thank Nigel Stephenson who not only translated the original German texts into English but also provided the text editing for the publication. Without his commitment this book would probably never have seen the light of day.