

Jan Svenungsson. Paper presented at "Drawn Encounters, complex identities", at The British School at Rome, September 18, 2008.

When I saw the program for this conference I realized I will be the odd man out, among the Aussies and the Brits. I don't mind. I'm a Swedish artist. I live in Berlin, teach in Finland. When I speak English my grammar is not perfect. Having said that, my talk will relate to an Australian art form, together with a couple of my own projects.

The bottom line for any serious artist is that you do what you can. After having established all the things you can't do, you're left with a palette of possibilities which correspond to who you are, and where you come from.

There is indeed some distance between what I have found that I can do, and what is possible for a contemporary Australian aboriginal painter. Nevertheless, I find it rewarding to speculate on what it is my colleagues from the deserts of Australia have decided they can do, and what and if there can be a relationship between us.

I should point out, that in this paper I will refer only to aboriginal painting made by painters who cling to a more or less traditional way of life, in contrast to so-called urban aborigines.

Paul (Thomas) said he's only a tourist to Australia. This applies even more to me. I went to Australia for the first time in 1998. I saw Sydney and I made an exhibition in Melbourne at a place called "h".

Visiting the museums in Sydney and Melbourne, like many art travellers before me, I was struck by the visual power of Aboriginal painting and the attendant assertions of **content**.

Andrew Crocker, in the early 80s an administrator for the artist's cooperative gallery Papunya Tula in Alice Springs, tells us these paintings work on four levels simultaneously:

- as mnemonics for stories which are depicted and which comprise Aboriginal lore and law;
- as cartography mnemonics which inform and remind of topography and proprietary rights to land according to Aboriginal law;
- as religious expression;
- as the authentic expression of a contemporary painter.

If you look at this list from a European point of view, I believe you would have to go back to before Renaissance to find a similar range of meaning in a painting. I can't help but finding this an envious position for a painter, to have this much to "talk" about.

My personal experience is that I always start from a void, and then I have to work to find ways to invent content in such a convincing way that eventually I will be able to believe in it myself.

In 1998 I remember being astonished before the "Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming" by Tim Leura and Clifford Possum, which as all the Australians here will know, is a painting about which an especially compelling narrative can be told. This narrative can be spun romantic, melancholic, tragic, but also conceptual and post-modern. The process is repeated every day, at the museum in Melbourne where it hangs.

I spent about ten days in Australia back then, and I left with a good number of books on Aboriginal art. In the pile was one of Geoffrey Bardon's books about the start of the painting movement in the settlement of Papunya, some 250 km west of Alice Springs.

Nine years later, in late 2006, I was preparing to go back to Melbourne, now to be Artist in Residence at RMIT School of Art. An exhibition would have to be produced during the six weeks of work there — I was looking for what to do.

I finally decided to make a video in the form of a "road movie", a film relating how I travel from the studio in Melbourne, in the centre of Australia's western civilisation, to the school house in Papunya, in the desert heart of the land. It would be a sort of pilgrimage, as this building is the site where the movement of contemporary aboriginal art got under way, in 1971. I had decided, in a romantic spirit and rather high-handedly, that this was the cultural centre of Australia.

Here a group of Aboriginal men had begun to paint adaptations of their ritual and ceremonial designs, first on the school wall itself, then on boards and canvases that could be brought to Alice Springs and sold for money, which delighted and astonished the painters. Little by little this activity developed into what is today a culture industry of crucial economic and also political importance to both the Aboriginal minority and Australia as a whole. Central to this cultural power is the idea, expressed in many different ways, that these images are uniquely **meaningful**.

In my own work I keep looking for ways to invent content, and especially: for ways to make it happen "outside of my control". I have no content before the work, and I'm not interested in illustrating theoretical ideas. Art works are not texts. Neither are aboriginal paintings, even if sometimes it might seem that way, when we look at the painstaking attempts at translation of what is thought to be their content. Luckily, these descriptions always struggle with major problems of both culture and language. There is such a wide gulf between the tradition that is the source for the meaning of the work, and the context in which this meaning is

being interpreted. For everyone involved, it is clear that whatever understanding comes out of this, it WILL BE full of misunderstandings. Thus, for all practical purposes this content is also out of control. And I can feel attracted to it.

Aboriginal paintings are often likened to maps. Almost every picture refer to a journey. I was always interested in maps: maps used for what they are, and maps used as image. In a map a myriad facts on the ground are reduced to coloured shapes on paper. Then there is the reversed process, where changing a coloured shape on the map leads to a myriad consequences on the ground.

Intermittently since 1994, I have made serial works I call Psycho-Mappings. A Psycho-Mapping is in essence a series of drawings or paintings, where each drawing is a copy, as perfect as possible, of the drawing which precedes it in the series. The first drawing will be a faithful tracing of a map. Over the course of the series this map will gradually change its form, because of the impossibility for me to make the perfect copy I set out to do each time. I either work on paper with ink and an old fashioned steel dip pen, or on canvas with a fine brush. Neither medium is exactly high-tech, which is a deliberate choice. I do not allow myself to use technical help, such as light tables or projectors. I'm also not allowed to sketch, or use erasers. My technical arsenal comes down to my hand, my eye, my patience and most of all my mental determination to do everything "right".

Here's my studio the other day. I am working on Psycho-Mapping Europe version 2.0. This is the 18th and the 17th painting in that series. Here now, in rapid succession, all the pictures in Psycho-Mapping Europe version 1, from 1998. These images were produced as prints on paper, scanned from the original ink drawings and coloured in the computer.

When a work is finished, I always play around with different ideas for what it could mean. For these works, I once thought: isn't this the most basic form for how culture is transmitted and how it develops? We set out to copy patterns of signs, or patterns of behaviour, and at first we just try to do it right? What comes out in the end is the result of our accumulated failure to fulfil that ambition...

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In the Psycho-Mappings I try my best to be a perfect copyist, but nevertheless I always get small and sometimes not so small things wrong, and over the course of the series these little mistakes starts to accumulate and to interact. As a result, the original map is gradually transformed. Its new shape, with its attendant new geo-political content, is a surprise to me. Crucially, this new content or form is not a vision I have tried to shape. The new content is the sum of my failings. But on another level, this new shape is exactly what I had wished for, precisely because it is **something else than what I knew**. The work does not propose a version of my knowledge, it **produces** new knowledge, until now unknown also to me.

What we just saw was the first half of Psycho-Mapping Scandinavia, in which the order of the copies is reversed.

A comparison can be made, with how the aboriginal cultures of Australia have used memorized song, dance and visual forms as the medium for transfer of knowledge over generations. The principal understanding of this knowledge, commonly called "the Law", is that it is fixed and unchanged since times immemorial when mythical ancestor figures roamed the earth and created everything that is. Nothing has changed since. This unchanging knowledge has been transmitted over millenia, through ceremonial copy processes.

An extreme claim for the permanence of this knowledge is made by Geoffrey Bardon when he relates the story from 1971-72 of Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi's "Ice Dreamings". The painter had received no western schooling what so ever. He was the custodian of an "Ice Dreaming", a particular mythological narrative which is both a story and an image. Living all his life in the desert he had seen real ice only in the form of hail, and in a refrigerator, but when he explained his paintings to Bardon he said they represented "when ice made the mountains in my country".

The last ice age in Australia reached its high point some 20 000 years ago. The Aboriginal culture stretches back as far as 40 000 years.

An example from the other end of the scale, illustrating the illusive permanence of knowledge, is the observation that memories from the traumatic Coniston massacre in 1928 (when more than 50 Aborigines were killed in revenge for one white man), have already become part of the mythical narratives of the tribes concerned.

I made the first Psycho-Mapping series in 1995, and there has been several years between subsequent works. This has been necessary, in order to build up enough motivation for doing it again in the right way, that is, enough motivation to be able to go through the whole tedious process without shortcuts while avoiding all aspects of deliberate design – which would destroy the veracity of the failures that make up the result. There is a huge difference between honest failure and deliberate failure.

The aborigines in Papunya had been rounded up and brought there, during the ten years that precede the painting movement. Before coming there most of them had not had much contact at all with white society.

(namerari)

In the earliest paintings on canvas and board, a lot of the content can be understood to be fairly uninfluenced by white man's culture. But what is it then that takes place over time when painting becomes a professional commercial activity, carried out regularly by people from a culture diametrically different from the culture towards which the paintings, are

aimed?

What earlier had been a visual tradition for knowledge transfer, must now become inspiration for production of visual expression in permanent media. The paintings produced accumulate as physical objects. At some point, for the individual, there has to be a change in emphasis from conservatism to inventiveness – simply in order to be able to sustain production, like for any artist! This means that the visual mnemonics of tradition now change and develop much faster than ever before, with a clear risk of over-heating.

(tjampitjinpa)

There is a collision of interests here, which is difficult to come to terms with. It's different from when so-called "primitive art", produced within one culture, gets picked up by another and is re-contextualised and exploited in this other culture – for which it was never aimed.

In the case of contemporary aboriginal painting there is an ambition on the part of the producer to address the consumer and the individual within the other culture. Through the repetition of this act a gradual change will be taking place, which, I believe I can playfully compare to the **(2 maps)** gradual change that takes place within a Psycho-Mapping series. The producer, me, or the Aboriginal Painter, tries hard to hold on to the content that exists as a non-negotiable set of facts (the markings of the map, or the ceremonial design handed down), but influenced by circumstances, or his own inherent tendencies, myself or the aboriginal painter, will gradually veer of course and **start mapping new territory.**

When I am busy doing the copying that make up a Psycho-Mapping process I may never add intentional deviations. If I would, the whole process would lose its interest. It would be equally bad to start trying to correct mistakes made in a previous copy, in the copy I am currently working on. The interest of the outcome is dependent on my ability not only to do good copies, but on the conceptual control I am able to apply to myself during my efforts.

Naturally, there is a number of peculiarities that occur during this process, which makes rules necessary. For example, I have a tendency to make the copied marks (and especially the distance between them) slightly larger than in the original. I know this and I try to fight against this tendency, but still it happens to a large degree. The result of this inclination has to be regulated. Either I can allow the consequences, and then the image will grow and grow, until nothing is left on the paper. Or, I can say that in each copy all marks that are in the original will have to be retained, and this will then mean that towards the end of each image

lines will be accumulated on the little space that is left. This, of course, creates a distortion, which is particular to me, the copyist, and would come out completely different if I would assign somebody else to do the work for me.

Just as impossible would be having somebody else choose your compulsive interests for you. When I was quite young, I had an obsessive interest for all things Man Ray, and in particular his studio, on rue Ferou in Paris. Later, I changed my obsessive focus to Volos, the birthplace of Giorgio de Chirico, a small industrial town in northern Greece. No traces of the painter remain there, none except those I have invented... My decision of going to Papunya had come about in a similar vein. Soon after, I found out it would not be possible.

Shortly before leaving Europe, I learned that Papunya is located in an area which has been given back to Aboriginal control. The last 200 km of my journey from Melbourne would require permits from the Central Land Council in Alice Springs. This application process always take several months. I didn't have this time – and here my video project died. I had run into another aspect of Aboriginal Law, that I had to respect.

I was very disappointed. Then later the same day I got the idea to **look** at – from above – where I would have been going, using Google Earth. I did not expect to see much. But Papunya, in the faraway Western Desert, was represented by a fantastic, crisp, high resolution image that was striking not only for its technical quality, but even more for the shape of Papunya itself. As seen from the sky, it reproduces a form from a painting, a honey ant dreaming, I have later been able to establish.

How could this be? Who had made the effort to draw this image in the red sand, just like it had always been drawn in the sand during ceremonies – but on this vast scale, and seemingly permanent. Why had I never seen any reference to this unique earth work – until now!

Traditional people in the desert never built villages. Forcing them to live in settlements was a policy in order to control them, and to change their culture. When Papunya was built by the government at the end of the 1950's it could be compared to a prison camp. It seemed simply inconceivable that it would have been laid out then in the form of a traditional symbol. So when had this transformation taken place, and on whose initiative? During my time in Melbourne I was never able to find out. This mystery became a part of my work there. I made a giant painting from the satellite photograph. I called the painting "A Place on Earth".

Some told of the social situation on the ground and said my picture was an idealization – but until today I only know Papunya as an image, not as reality.

I focused on Papunya's meaning to me, which is a meaning I am free to chose how I like. It seemed to me that my big map-like picture from above was like the starting point for a chain of associations for every individual – this time I only produced one image in the series. Instead, I came up with the idea for

a companion piece. Unable as I was to travel to Papunya, I would dedicate myself to where I was, Melbourne. My original idea for a road movie was now turned into a local version seemingly without beginning or end, where I run around in Melbourne holding a small video camera in front of me. The film is not cut, after more than an hour and a half I return to where I started and the run begins again. It was shown opposite the painting, on a monitor.

You run around your own area, and keep looking towards the vision of the OTHER place.

After my return to Europe last year I continued to look for clues to the Papunya mystery. Nothing in the big books and catalogues. It wasn't until a few months ago, that I finally got some information. A friend of mine, Will Owen, an American librarian who collects all that is published on the subject of Aboriginal art, had a look in a very rare catalogue from 1985. (from RMIT, of all places) In it was a Papunya town plan in the form of a honey ant dreaming, with a reference to an extremely obscure 1974 book by a Reverend J.H. Downing: "Aboriginal 'Dreamings' and Town Plans". Will managed to track down a single copy of the good reverend's opus in the library of the University of Queensland. This little book was sent, across the sea, to Will in North Carolina, through intra-library loan. When he received it he scanned all the pages and sent them on, electronically, to me in Berlin! The Papunya town plan almost circled the globe! The book is not more than 26 pages, it has a few diagrams of proposals for changing the town plans of government settlements into designs taken from aboriginal culture. Published in 1974, by the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs, there is not a word on whether or how these plans were implemented. As far as Will and I have been able to establish, it seems Papunya is the only one of its plans that was carried out – and then only in part, as there are no traces in Google of the aboriginal housing that the plan includes. That's where the track of my information now ends. Imagination continues.

to conclude:

In the middle of the Western desert, there is a honey ant design on the ground, a painting in desert sand one mile wide, copied — as you can see from this slide — from an acrylic painting, which in its turn is a copy or a version of a ceremonial sand painting, which has been copied repeatedly over millenia. It marks the place where aboriginal art was re-invented in 1971. A satellite photo of this honey ant desert painting has now been copied in acrylics by me, before I knew what it was. What will now be the next step in this chain of cultural transformation – or generation?