

"I am not Sorry": Richard Bell Out of Context

The question of location became a contentious issue in Australian art in the 1980s, and nowhere more so than with regard to debates around the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery by white artists. This appropriation, seeming to entail some kind of "dislocation" of Aboriginal art, a loss of its original context, led to a rejection or suspicion of appropriation on the part of many Aboriginal artists. In some of his recent work, however, the Brisbane-based artist Richard Bell offers us a new and unorthodox way of reflecting upon these debates which, while they may have taken off in the eighties, have never really retreated from view. With Bell, we are confronted by an unexpected refusal of the constraints of locality and geography and by an openly displayed use of strategies of appropriation. If the artistic and political force of Bell's work often follows from the ways in which it takes up problems of locality and appropriation in the Australian context, it is also clear that his approach to these problems cuts against the prevailing understandings of them and their assumed consequences, both in Australia and elsewhere.

To begin to examine Bell's treatment of these problems, let us consider two of his 2002 paintings, *Rational Eyes* and *Bell's Theorem* (figs. 1 and 2). The two works are almost completely reliant on letters, words and phrases. They are composed on a series of canvas panels and are crudely painted in what we could read as a deliberate rejection of the labour-intensive finish of much traditional Desert-style painting. Sometimes Bell's text is simply painted on the surface of the work. Sometimes - and we will come back to

this obscuring or encryption and the relation Bell sees between it and traditional Aboriginal art - it is formed out of gravel which is glued to the surface of the canvas and painted over, making it difficult to see. (Hence the limitations of the standard photographic reproductions of Bell's "gravelled" paintings, which evidently miss the oblique-angled view that they generally demand.) Clearly, the use of canvas boards and words in these works is significant here. Beyond any actual content to be found in the works, in *Rational Eyes* and Bell's *Theorem* Bell appropriates pictorial elements that we associate with the work of Imants Tillers. The paintings suggest what is perhaps an uneasy dialogue with Tillers' work. What would be occurring in such a dialogue?

Let us look first at *Rational Eyes*. The painting presents an array of words and phrases, many of which carry Biblical or Christian allusions, the largest and most prominent of which are: "I AM/ [NOT]/ SORRY". These words are set against a pattern of receding square figures, painted in thick black stripes, which alternate with squares in various shades of white, cream and pale brown. The "NOT" appears to be a semi-detachable or partially elided component of this sentence or sequence, formed as it is out of gravel and not painted in its own distinctive colour. In *Rational Eyes*, it seems, Bell vexatiously adds a qualifier to the famous "I AM" of Colin McCahon's *Victory over Death* (1970). (As if in counterpoint to *Rational Eyes*, another work from 2002, entitled *A Deep Regret*, announces: "I AM/ HUMILIATED" (fig. 3). The fine print of this painting - the ghostly uncapitalised text that provides the muted lavender background to its central declaration - concludes: "You didn't steal any of our children. You didn't even steal any of our lands. Neither have you committed Genocide. You can justify everything. I was wrong... I am sorry." The double punch that

is landed in much of Bell's work depends on this kind of combination of pathos and biting irony, as well as on what results from it - the final impossibility of deciding who is speaking in, or through, Bell's texts.)

If an indirect allusion to Tillers - among the most notable of McCahon's many appropriators - can be discerned in *Rational Eyes*, this connection is made much more explicit in Bell's *Theorem*. The central text of this painting reads: "ABORIGINAL/ ART/ IT'S A/ WHITE THING". Here Tillers (or his best-known piece of writing) is "appropriated" in the title of the work and in the words "Locality FAILS", which appear upside-down along its top edge. More cryptically if also more colloquially, Tillers is again appropriated in some of the other words and phrases scattered around the painting, for example, "chance", "Gödel", "butterfly FX", and "order". The black and white "E" shapes which are strewn amidst these phrases can also be taken as an allusion to Tillers and, in particular, to Tillers' problematic relationship to Aboriginal art. It is worth noting in this regard that Bell's *Theorem* was first shown in an exhibition entitled "Discomfort: Relationships within Aboriginal Art", curated by Bell at Fire-Works Gallery in Brisbane in late 2002. This show included a collaborative work by Tillers and Michael Nelson Jagamara, which features the "E" shapes often used by Jagamara to indicate possum tracks, along with a painting by Emily Kngwarreye and one by Tillers which appropriates Kngwarreye. Yet it may also be significant that in Bell's work the words "ABORIGINAL" and "THING" are both painted in a reddish brown, unlike the other words in the sentence. This chromatic coding could be understood to allow another way of reading it, according to which "art" or "Aboriginal" art would indicate its condition as an "Aboriginal thing", thus undermining from within the primary sense of the

proposition to which these words contribute.

Evidently something is at stake in the way that Bell responds to Tillers in both of these works, not just formally, with regard to their various pictorial devices and trademark use of language, but more specifically in terms of what Bell writes. These works manifestly involve a debate, even a dispute, with Tillers. Why is this important? A widely held view of Tillers' work is that the particular variant of post-modernism that it elaborates deliberately excludes any wider social or political stake. For some art writers, Tillers' procedure of wholesale appropriation and its underlying theoretical justification, most notably laid out in the essay "Locality Fails" (first published in 1982 in the magazine *Art & Text*), results in what is little more than an amoral and game-like conceit. Tillers' practice is seen, most often in the context of readings of Gordon Bennett's work, as lacking ethical or political consequences or as implying the denial of such consequences. And, indeed, from this perspective, Tillers' use of quotation may well appear to encourage a forgetting of the social and historical particularity of the sources on which it draws - along with a forgetting or flattening of its "own" specific meaning, its "own" positionality. It would be difficult not to agree that Tillers' quotations, unlike those of Bennett, appear deliberately decontextualised and dehistoricised in a way that seems designed to attest to the failure of locality. (If we might take a pervasive melancholy as the characteristic sign of this failure in Tillers' paintings - and we could think of his early use of the work of Giorgio de Chirico in this light - with Bell, on the other hand, the assertion of such a failure seems almost to assume the form of a promise, even to mark itself as a gesture of emancipation and defiance.)

We could argue, however, that the ways in which artists like Bennett and Bell respond to Tillers indicate that something is missing from those readings of his work which associate it with the absence or disavowal of the political. The thread of appropriation running through the work of these artists (and others) may be seen as challenging the idea that it carries a negligible social and ethical charge, that it issues from a post-modern mannerism that is sterile or obsolete. To trace the relations between the work of these artists is inescapably to see that the kind of appropriation that is going on between them does not lead to an increasing neutralisation or loss of reference, that it does call forth a response, that it does lead to "real-world" consequences. (We might equally question the idea that appropriation is to be understood as a masterable "strategy" which, insofar as this would evoke the self-conscious pursuit of a predetermined end, too easily implies a detached, intellectual game. Such associations jar not just with the rough-edged and improvisational nature of Bell's responses to Tillers, but also his references to other Aboriginal artists, notably Emily Kngwarreye and Rover Thomas in the two series "Desperately Seeking Emily" (2000-2002) and "Mind Rover Matter" (2001).) The very response it receives - whether critical, affirmative, ambivalent, derisive, or any or all of these things - is effectively a demonstration that Tillers' use of appropriation is artistically and politically consequential.

Let us suggest, then, that appropriation in art necessarily implies a politics, an ethics. Here the crucial point is that what Tillers calls a "failure of locality" - which we can think of as a fundamental principle of dislocation - not only constitutes the underlying framework of artistic appropriation (indeed, the rule of any work of art in modern culture), but can also be said to mark the very structure of ethical

experience, insofar as this experience calls for a certain loss of identity and place. It is by virtue of such dislocation that the present is exposed to something other than the present. Ethical thinking places itself elsewhere, outside of itself, in order to reflect on the place where it is - and precisely the injustice of the place where it is. To understand dislocation, or the "failure of locality", in these terms as the common ground of ethical experience and the experience of art is to see why the practice of appropriation puts those engaged in it - artists, critics, spectators - on the line. We could think of appropriation in art as that which ensures that there is never an easy distance that an artist, critic or spectator can take on what it is they see or what it is they speak of. We are always subject to this principle of dislocation which brings the artwork (in its difference, its strangeness) immediately before us; we are always implicated in it. If it is the case that artworks remain definitively out of place, the presence of this distance nevertheless prohibits us from placing ourselves at a "safe" remove from them. This ethical dimension of Tillers' "Locality Fails" - the link it makes between the failure of locality and the possibility of freedom - is rarely considered.

But in order to extend our discussion of the ethical and political aspects of the problem of appropriation, let us return to the direct references to Tillers' "Locality Fails" in Bell's *Bell's Theorem*. As we saw earlier, not only does the title of the painting cite one of the key points of reference in Tillers' essay, but the title of that essay also comes to figure in Bell's painting, where it is placed upside-down and in this sense subjected to another turn, another dislocation. In "Locality Fails", Tillers uses what is known as Bell's Theorem - an obscure result from quantum mechanics in which what happens in one scientific experiment is mysteriously able to affect another - to argue for the principle of the failure of

local causes and thus for the impossibility of an identifiable regional or national art. And, taking this logic further, Tillers, extremely daringly if we recall that the publication of his essay coincided with the time in which Aboriginal art in Australia started to be recognised as such, argues for the need to resist constructions of Aboriginality that seek to localise it or fix it in place. (Intriguingly, in an essay accompanying the "Discomfort" show, Bell is also strongly critical of what he calls the "regional system" used to classify Aboriginal art, and ultimately the very category of "Aboriginal" art itself.) In this way, Bell here "dislocates" part of Tillers' work to give his own its title, appropriating it not simply in the sense that he quotes it, but also in the sense that he literally (and arbitrarily) claims it as his own, as "Bell's". And yet at the same time it is this principle of dislocation that underwrites or entitles the main text of the painting itself. As we have already seen, the text of Bell's Theorem contests, in a seemingly Tillers-like manner, the very notion (or Aboriginality) of "Aboriginal art".

It is also interesting to think of Bell's "Desperately Seeking Emily" paintings with regard to these questions. In this series, in which Bell sometimes employs dots like Kngwarreye - along with Pollock-style pours and drips - the use of gravelled text evidently recalls the encryption or veiling of meaning that is so often associated with her work. We see, for example, the phrase "KILL MABO" encrypted in, or underneath, one of the paintings in the series. It is possible to take this series as an unqualified bid on Bell's part to claim Kngwarreye's work; it is also possible see it as stemming from a wish on Bell's part to claim proximity to her work, in this way cutting across the geographical and cultural differences between them. Yet, again, while the title of the series makes a candid acknowledgement of this appropriative

desire, it appears to want to tell us that the search for Kngwarreye will never be over, that the appropriation of her work can never be total or brought to a conclusion. For Bell, it seems, Kngwarreye eludes us precisely insofar as we try to appropriate her - the will to appropriate her and the failure to appropriate her are intimately bound up with one another. Or, to put this in its most acute form, it is in the name of Kngwarreye - all of the interpretations of whose work are perhaps deeply colonialist, the art-historical equivalent of discovering "KILL MABO" - that we would oppose her appropriation.

To think further of the ways in which Bell's use of appropriation would link up with ethical concerns, let us turn to a work shown in the exhibition "Lines II" held at Fire-Works Gallery in early 2002, Bell's four-part installation called *Worth Exploring?* and in particular the left-hand panel of this work (fig. 4). This panel is a blown-up version of a statutory declaration made by Bell concerning the illegal status of the white occupation of Australia. Bell's claim here is essentially that everything subsequent to this occupation must logically be judged to be *ultra vires*, that is, beyond or outside the law. For Bell, this really means everything. Every attempt at reconciliation, every attempt to reflect on Aboriginal art, every attempt to render justice to the Aboriginal people - it is all wrong from the beginning, all countable as one item or another on the unending list of flawed consequences of an initially invalid premise. (And this would also be why, in the current set-up of Australian culture, Aboriginal art can only be a white thing, why every attempt to decipher the meaning of Kngwarreye's paintings can only be the equivalent of "KILL MABO".)

Here Bell's reasoning certainly does not seem to leave much room for negotiation. It does not appear to lend itself to the kind of dialogue we spoke of earlier with regard to the cross-appropriations taking place between Tillers and Bell. Indeed, to use an expression Bell adopts at the very end of his text at Fire-Works, the situation looks "hopeless". Yet to whom, in fact, is Bell's declaration addressed? Strangely enough, in the first instance to Bell himself. Looking at the last lines of the text, we read that it has been "taken and declared before me at Brisbane" and that it is signed "Richard Bell" and dated "the 12th of Never". This plea for justice - a plea for what we would call an impossible or unrealisable justice - is, then, self-addressed. Here, in a fascinating way, it is as though Bell is first of all accusing himself, as if he were the very law to which he is appealing and, at the same time, accusing of having failed him. Thus what is at issue is a justice that as much authorised by Bell as it is applied to him. It is a justice that Bell presents himself as at once aspiring to and failing to live up to.

It is tempting at this point to think of the moral law as it is famously formulated by Kant - the law which comes from above and outside me (a law which, like Bell's statutory declaration, is always greater and infinitely more demanding than anything I could imagine, anything I could present to myself) and yet which already exists within me (that is, a law which I finally impose upon myself, which is always addressed to me alone). To put it another way, in this panel of Worth Exploring?, Bell acts as both the officer of the law and the man who comes before it. If he comes to the defence of a certain Aboriginality, he is nevertheless implicated in those same crimes which he wants to prosecute (for example, the status of his own work as a "white thing").

What is being enacted here (and in Bell's recent work more generally) can perhaps be said to intimate the structure of a certain Aboriginal justice. And Bell's articulation of this structure elucidates something of the awe we experience before great works of Aboriginal art (whether they are classified as "traditional" or "urban"), and, indeed, the awe we experience before great works of art tout court.

Considering Bell's work in these terms, we see the way such awe-inspiring effects hint at something immeasurably alien to our experience, something that could only be betrayed by any attempt to speak of it, yet we also see why it would be necessary to say that Aboriginal art is a "white thing" or "I am not sorry". Is there not a connection here with what Tillers means when he speaks of locality failing and when he links this failure of locality to a structure of "connectedness" in his essay?

For Tillers, the failure of locality would be another way of naming the ethical connection or bond, another way of invoking the impossible promise of a human community. In these terms, there is no distance between "us" and the "other". This law of appropriation means that I and any such other would not live in "space-like separated" areas (to use Tillers' term), but in the same place. In short, we could say that the law of appropriation that Tillers sets out - and Bell too, in his turn - is akin to Kant's moral law. This failure of locality, this absolute connection with the other, is something we always aspire to and which we always fall short of. (Analogously, thinking in more overtly Kantian terms, the desire for a seamless communication between the moral law within and without would always be predicated on and destined to non-fulfilment.) From this perspective, one would find fault with Tillers not so much for his appropriation of Aboriginal art as for the way in which he still maintains a

certain quasi-objective distance with regard to it, for his failure to allow locality to fail, his failure to appropriate Aboriginal art fully and unconditionally. This may well be Bell's point vis-à-vis Tillers. It perhaps also suggests where and in what sense a recent collaborative work by Tillers and Jagamara entitled *From Afar* (2001) seems to "go wrong". But it is also important - this is the double-edged aspect of the moral law, the way it does not work unless it comes from us, from "within" - that the logic that allows us to make this accusation is elaborated first of all by Tillers himself. In this sense it is Tillers himself who would be the first to accuse himself of failing to appropriate the other properly or fully - this is why Bell can, in a sense, speak as his conscience or pose as the conscience, principle or "theorem" underwriting Tillers' essay of 1982.

Let us conclude by observing the strange reversal that takes place in such exchanges. We have noted a marked devaluation of the practice of appropriation and quotation as a mere strategy or empty rhetoric on the part of many (white) commentators and critics on Aboriginal art. Against this, we have also encountered its understanding as a form of ethics on the part of a number of artists, including Aboriginal artists. What Richard Bell's work shows us here - against the tide of a generation of post-colonial critics and defenders of Aboriginal art - is that it is not the appropriation of the other as such that we must distrust but the "qualified" appropriation of the other, the kind of appropriation that would want to maintain a superior, objective, right-thinking critical distance on its subject matter. In this sense we could say that it is only in the unqualified appropriation of the other, in the abolition of the distance that guards the integrity of regions and localities, that the ethical possibility arises.

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