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| Indigenous Modernisms |
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| Indigenous modernism is not to be confused with earlier ideas of modern Indigenous art, though they do to some extent pre-empt it. In the mid-twentieth century, some Indigenous artists who made or responded to Western art forms were referred to as modern. For example, in 1952 the Namatjira School of landscape painting in Central Australia was dubbed modern Aboriginal art, while Ulli Bieir made similar claims about African artists in the late 1950s and 60s. In the 1960s and 70s, emerging interest in non-traditional and tourist Indigenous art resulted in scholars and auction houses applying the terms modern and contemporary to distinguish such art from traditional works. However, the concept of Indigenous modernism applies to Indigenous art in general, whether considered traditional or not. For example, bark paintings from Arnhem Land originally valued and collected as primitive art have recently been interpreted as forms of Indigenous modernism. The term Indigenous modernism, then, refers not to art that emulates Western modernisms, but to art that engages with experiences of modernity from an Indigenous perspective — a notion with profound consequences for how modernism is generally conceived and theorised. In particular, it challenges stylistic and classical accounts of modernism, and the centre/periphery model of modernism. These challenges, arising from theories of alternative and multiple modernities more generally, have created new interests in modernism, but have yet to be theoretically worked through. |
| Indigenous modernism is not to be confused with earlier ideas of modern Indigenous art, though they do to some extent pre-empt it. In the mid-twentieth century, some Indigenous artists who made or responded to Western art forms were referred to as modern. For example, in 1952 the Namatjira School of landscape painting in Central Australia was dubbed modern Aboriginal art, while Ulli Bieir made similar claims about African artists in the late 1950s and 60s. In the 1960s and 70s, emerging interest in non-traditional and tourist Indigenous art resulted in scholars and auction houses applying the terms modern and contemporary to distinguish such art from traditional works. However, the concept of Indigenous modernism applies to Indigenous art in general, whether considered traditional or not. For example, bark paintings from Arnhem Land originally valued and collected as primitive art have recently been interpreted as forms of Indigenous modernism. The term Indigenous modernism, then, refers not to art that emulates Western modernisms, but to art that engages with experiences of modernity from an Indigenous perspective — a notion with profound consequences for how modernism is generally conceived and theorised. In particular, it challenges stylistic and classical accounts of modernism, and the centre/periphery model of modernism. These challenges, arising from theories of alternative and multiple modernities more generally, have created new interests in modernism, but have yet to be theoretically worked through.  The idea of Indigenous modernism first appeared around 2005 as a way of understanding post-contact Indigenous art in terms of its engagements with modernity. Its main function is to write revisionist histories of post-contact Indigenous art from the perspective of new theories of globalisation. These revisionist histories transform post-contact Indigenous art from an anthropological to a historical category, effectively placing it inside rather than outside art history, and therefore within the overarching schemes of modernity and modernism. It thus suggests that modernism is not just a Western practice, and that art considered primitivist or otherwise diametrically opposite to Western modernity may actually be conceived as examples of modernism.  Modernity was originally theorised as a totalising set of Western discourses, institutions, and practices that were imposed either completely or incompletely on the rest of the world. Likewise, modernism’s proliferation has usually been understood in terms of cultural imperialism, in which Western civilisation and its cultural forms are disseminated from Western centres with ethnocidal consequences for other cultural traditions. In this scenario, non-Western cultures become trapped in perpetual limbo, their hybrid expressions lacking the authenticity, authority, and invention of either their former traditions or the prescribed modernism.  These classical theories of modernity and modernism lost considerable currency as notions of globalism and post-colonialism galvanized contemporary critical discourse in the 1980s. As a theoretical idea, Indigenous modernism is a version of Rasheed Araeen’s arguments against Eurocentric notions of modernism posited in the post-colonial art journal *Third Text*, which he founded in 1987 (he was, however, mainly interested in so-called Black British art, not Indigenous art). Araeen argued vehemently against the policy of multiculturalism because it ghettoised non-Western art as ethnic rather than modern.  There has been a massive amount of research into post-colonial cultures since the 1980s, and the globalisation of economic and political power has led to sociological theories of multiple and alternative modernities that were proposed at the end of the 1990s. In 1999 Charles Taylor coined the term ‘alternative modernities’ in order to lend agency to local non-Western cultures and their traditions. His theory suggested emplaced sedimented histories that reconfigure the discourses of dissemination and provincialism dominant in the modernist period.  Taylor’s focus was non-Western industrialised societies, and this remains the case with most discussion of alternative and multiple modernisms to this day. In this respect, the idea of Indigenous modernism might seem an extreme, even invalid type of alternative modernism, especially in regard to Indigenous communities where traditional tribal practices remain strong. However, a Foucauldian approach focusing on discourses and institutional formations reveals that even the most remote Indigenous communities respond in their art and other cultural practices to the global reach of modernity. James Clifford and Eric Michaels initiated such an approach to interpreting Indigenous art. Now even art collected by anthropologists viewed as authentic examples of a primitive culture in the early days of European modernism can be interpreted as forms of Indigenous modernism commissioned by one of the earliest agents of modernity: the ethnographic fieldworker.  Terry Smith’s theory of ‘contemporary art’, which he has been developing since 2001, is a version of multiple modernisms, as he proposes three main currents of contemporary art, one of which includes indigenous art. However, his focus is on art since the 1970s, whereas the idea of Indigenous modernism theoretically includes all post-contact Indigenous art.  Today there are numerous scholars working in the emerging field of Indigenous modernism. Because notions of alternative and multiple modernisms have greatly expanded the field of modernism from its former Western confines to a truly global scope, immense pressure is now being put on those institutions invested heavily in Western-centric histories of art. For example, in recent years Tate Modern has appointed curators and developed programs to greatly expand its conception and collection of modern art. In 2013 The Pompidou Centre in Paris reorganised its galleries to reflect the new global reality of modernism’s histories. However, these efforts have mainly focused on the sort of non-Western cultures that have been of most interest to theorists of alternative and multiple modernities, and not on Indigenous art. |
| Further reading:  (Eisenstadt)  (McLean)  (Mercer)  (Morphy)  (Taylor) |