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**Relational Agency: Rethinking *The Aboriginal Memorial***

**ABSTRACT**

Twenty-two years after its first exhibition at the 1988 Biennale of Sydney, and following numerous subsequent iterations, in 2010 *The Aboriginal Memorial* was re-designed and installed in the foyer of the National Gallery of Australia. This essay seeks to reinterpret the circumstances of both its origins and its historical trajectory in the Biennale, in the National Gallery of Australia, in its subsequent international contexts, and in its current situation. Its original context and conventional recognition as a masterpiece of contemporary Australian art (Waterlow, Mollison) plus the processes of its redefinition as “installation art” (Davidson, Desmond) and later its presentation as a form of international cultural exchange, all suggest a process of reinterpretation and realignment as a manifestation of a late modernist sensibility, which was validated by its ultimate institutional recognition. In this essay I argue that despite the distance from its original political origins and motivation, revisiting *The Aboriginal Memorial* and what I call its “constitutive literature” invites new modes of interpretation that allow *The Memorial* to regain its original sociopolitical power. By investigating the social relations of its production and reception, the nature of the creative motivation of its forty-three Yolngu artists plus its “conceptual producer” Djon Mundine, I seek to apply a concept of collective agency informed by models of relational art first introduced by Bourriaud, Kester, Bishop et al. in order to amplify the social relations of its reception as a paradigm of intercultural artistic production.

Key words: The Aboriginal Memorial, National Gallery of Australia, Installation art, collective agency, relational art, co-authorship, collaborative art, Djon Mundine.

*The Aboriginal Memorial* (1988) is a complex sculptural ensemble of 200 painted *dupun*, cylindrical hollow log coffins, that occupies the foyer of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.<sup>1</sup> As I will elaborate below, given the prominence of its location, its character as both an exemplar of contemporary Indigenous Australian art, and as a memorial to the Indigenous lives lost during the colonial occupation of Australia, it is uniquely emblematic of the place of contemporary Indigenous art in the national consciousness. It is a work that successive Directors of the National Gallery have both hailed as a ‘masterpiece of Australian art’, and recognised/celebrated in its particular sacred dimension for Indigenous Australians.<sup>2</sup> *The Memorial* is conventionally attributed by the National Gallery, and in the existing literature, to the forty-three Arnhem Land artists who collectively produced the work.<sup>3</sup> As I will demonstrate, this attribution limits our understanding of *The Memorial*

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge the co-authorship of Ian McLean in an earlier version of this essay written for the *Alternate Modernisms* conference in Cardiff in 2013. I am grateful for his subsequent critical input as the text evolved, and that of Djon Mundine in discussions of the essay in draft form. I am also grateful to Pamela Faye McGrath for her insightful comments on the essay in its draft form. I am also indebted to Sue Jenkins’ research (Jenkins 2003) as the source for numerous accounts and interpretations employed in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, 2003, p. 215. See current manifestation of *The Aboriginal Memorial* on the National Gallery of Australia website: <http://nga.gov.au/AboriginalMemorial/home.cfm>, accessed 24 May, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The Aboriginal Memorial is attributed to 43 artists: Djardie Ashley, Joe Patrick Birriwanga, David Blanas, Roy Burrnyla, Mick Daypurrun 2, Tony Dhanyula, Paddy Dhatangu, John Dhurrikayu 1, Jimmy Djelminy, Tony Djikululu, Dorothy Djukulul, Tom Djumburpur, Robyn Djunginy, Charlie Djurritjini, Elisabeth Djuttara, Billy Black Durrugumba, Gela Nga-Mirraltja Fordham, Toby Gabalga, Daisy Ganyila 2, Philip Gudthaykudthay,

insofar as the creative agency of *The Memorial's* coordinator, Djon Mundine—elsewhere referred to as its 'conceptual producer'—is, in the absence of a theory of collective agency, neglected. This is a circumstance that limits, I argue, the ways in which this work of art has hitherto been interpreted.

In rethinking *The Memorial*, I suggest a model of collective agency both as a way of gaining new insight into the processes of its production and as a way to describe *The Memorial* as one of the most recent instances of a longstanding tradition in Aboriginal art. This distinctive mode of collective agency is echoed in that of its precursors: the Elcho Island Memorial, the Yirrkala Church Panels, the Bark Petitions, the Yuendumu Mens' Museum murals and the Papunya School mural. Each of these involved multiple authors and forms of intercultural agency in the specific sociopolitical contexts of their production and exposure to an outside world.<sup>4</sup>

When *The Aboriginal Memorial* was first installed as part of the Biennale of Sydney in 1988, the year of the Australian Bicentennial, the Biennale Director Nick Waterlow described the work as 'the single most important statement in this Biennale.'<sup>5</sup> Subsequently James Mollison, then Director of the Australian National Gallery, who had commissioned/acquired *The Aboriginal Memorial* for the national collection, proclaimed that it was 'one of the greatest works of art ever to have been made in this country.'<sup>6</sup> Encapsulated in these two laudatory comments one finds a crucial conceptual transition between two stages in the public manifestation of this work: from its initial disclosure in a setting given to ephemeral installations in a contemporary art exhibition, to the various iterations of its incorporation into the canon of Australian art in the National Gallery of Australia.<sup>7</sup>

In its first context, it was located within two much deeper historical frames. In his introduction to the Biennale catalogue, Waterlow conceived a time frame for Australian contemporary art that began in the 1940s, which he poses as being coincident with the advent of "modernist culture" in Australia. However, *The Aboriginal Memorial* is embedded in a more complex time frame than 'modernism' or 'contemporary art'. This time frame, partly attributable to Djon Mundine's conception of the *Memorial*, includes both the whole time frame of colonisation, and the evocation of the deep historical time frame of its Indigenous traditions.<sup>8</sup>

Waterlow's conception of contemporary art as a subset of the modern is expressed in terms of its 'works' and 'statements' — contemporaneous figures of speech that enabled him to

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Neville Gulaygulay, Don Gundinga, George Jangawanga, David Malangi Daymirringu, Jimmy Mamalunhawuy, Terry Mangapal, Agnes Marrawurr, Andrew Marrgululu, Clara Matjandatjpi (Wubukwubuk), John Mawurndjul AM, Dick Smith Mewirri, George Milpururru, Peter Minyngululu, Jack Mirritji 2, Jimmy Moduk, Neville Nanyjawuy, Victor Pamkal, Roy Riwa, Frances Rrikili, William Watiri, Jimmy Wululu, Wurraki 2, Yambal Durrurringa.

<sup>4</sup> See my 'Relational Agency: *The Elcho Island Memorial*', in McLean, 2014, pp. 91-116.

<sup>5</sup> Waterlow, 1988, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins, 2003, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> The first and second stages of the work's trajectory — its conception and production — are discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> *The Aboriginal Memorial* did not acquire its capitalized *The* until its inclusion in the collection of the Australian National Gallery, which itself in 1992 changed its name to the National Gallery of Australia. For the purposes of this essay I adopt the final titles in both instances throughout. In this discussion I alternatively refer to *The Memorial* in reference to *The Aboriginal Memorial*.

incorporate the overtly political intent of *The Memorial* without embracing its politics explicitly. Ambiguously, Waterlow referenced *The Memorial* as addressing ‘the most civilizing and creatively challenging element in our world.’<sup>9</sup> In the absence of further elaboration, one takes this to mean the question of reconciliation, given that the Biennale took place in the year of the bicentennial anniversary of British colonisation, in which the question of reconciliation was implicit in the politics of the year’s events.<sup>10</sup> In this manner *The Memorial* was presented in an exhibition context that was notably apolitical, albeit held in a year that couldn’t have been less so.

In this essay I seek to reassess both the intent of *The Aboriginal Memorial* and the historical trajectory of its reception in its subsequent sociopolitical and museological settings. I will address both the social relations of its production and reception by examining those aspects of its productive processes that can be described as “relational”, or as an outcome of collective agency, and with what consequences.

By “collective agency” I mean the circumstances and processes of production that involve multiple participants (not just artists) whose roles in the creative process entail complex sets of hierarchies and inputs. By the use of the term “relational agency” I mean to make a connection between the characteristics of ‘relational art’ (Bourriaud, Kester, Bishop et al.) and a concept of artistic agency that addresses the complexities of the work’s authorship and impact. In addition, combining these ideas under the term relational agency enables a mode of reception (on the part of the viewer, the audience, and other participants) that is more socially and politically engaged than the conventional space of individual contemplation. Rather than employing other more familiar terms such as “political art” or “socially-engaged art”, such concepts are relevant in investigations into the social relations of collective creative production. In this manner, by exploring the origins of the work through the practices, ideas and values of its makers, and specifically those from which the various motivating dynamics emerged, I will assess the various aspects of the evolving meaning and sociopolitical significance of *The Memorial* in the various contexts in which it has existed.

For the purposes of this essay I speak about the stages of *The Memorial*’s historical trajectory so that the reader may keep in mind the many manifestations of its existence, from the circumstances of its conception and production to its current resting place in the foyer of the National Gallery of Australia. In parallel with this account of *The Memorial*’s exhibition trajectory I will examine the history of its reception, or what I have described elsewhere as its “constitutive” interpretation, by which I mean the cumulative and self-referential literature that has evolved with the passage of time, each an interpretation of its precursors, each a contributor to the next level of discourse.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to *The Aboriginal Memorial*, its constitutive literature begins with Djon Mundine’s own exegesis in the 1988 Biennale of Sydney catalogue essay and his subsequent texts and commentary, and continues with critical responses and interpretations that have accumulated along the way.<sup>12</sup> In this essay I also set out to review two other related aspects

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<sup>9</sup> Waterlow, 1988, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> The ambiguous use of the expression “work” as shorthand for “work of art” had become commonplace in the 1980s.

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Desmond Manderson for suggesting this approach to the literature (Manderson, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Curiously, there was little immediate critical reaction to the Memorial in the context of the Biennale. One notable exception was that of Julie Ewington, 1988, pp. 95-98.

of *The Aboriginal Memorial*'s 28-year history. The first is the specific character of its authorship, and how by paying attention to the original motivation for the work one learns more about the exegetical accounts that surround its origins. Additionally, the circumstances and roles of those who instigated the work, and those who facilitated its advent into the public spaces of the Biennale and the National Gallery have played crucial roles in its progressive interpretations. Secondly, by paying attention to its constitutive literature I indicate the limits and possibilities of existing art-historical accounts and in particular the subsequent theoretical interpretations that now constitute its contemporary "meaning". In this respect I pay particular attention to Terry Smith's essay in *Critical Inquiry*, 'Public Art between Cultures: The "Aboriginal Memorial", Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia', published in 2001.<sup>13</sup>

### At the Biennale of Sydney

The original installation of *The Aboriginal Memorial* took place in the end section of Pier 2/3, a nineteenth-century enclosed wharf structure that projects into Sydney Harbour, located only about a kilometre away from the original landfall of the colonial settlers. The fact that the 1988 Biennale of Sydney occurred in the year of the Bicentennial celebration was not lost on the artists of *The Memorial*, or many of its audience. The site of the wharf had been adopted by the Biennale as the location for ephemeral installations, with the result that as one approached the Memorial one walked past a dozen or so examples of the latest developments in installation art practice (with, among others, installations by Rebecca Horn, Hermann Nitsch, and Arnulf Rainer).

*The Aboriginal Memorial* occupied the end section of the wharf building in a space some thirty meters wide. The viewer approached *The Memorial* with the advantage of a perspective provided by an empty space separating the work from the other installations. This enhanced the landscape effect — as if one was approaching a forest of trees.

In its original setting, the lighting levels were low, an effect intensified by the dark wooden walls and ceiling structures that surrounded it. The *dupun* — which range in height from several meters high down to the smallest of approximately 30 cm — were fixed individually to the wooden floor of the building, emerging from a modelled plane of red sand, the original ground that references the bauxite-rich dirt of Arnhem Land.<sup>14</sup> The layout of the logs followed a cartographic plan which echoed — in stylized form — the disposition of clan territories in relation to the Glyde River, which is the major watercourse in Central Arnhem Land, running from the Arafura Swamp to the ocean opposite the island of Milingimbi. This sinuous river formation created a pathway through the forest, which enabled visitors to enter and see each of the hollow logs close-up, and from all sides.

In 1988 the form of the painted hollow log coffin was still relatively unfamiliar to its contemporary art audience. By contrast with the more familiar Arnhem Land bark paintings, the painted hollow log is experienced as if a painting (sometimes with carved elements) has been wrapped around the cylindrical body of the tree trunk from which it has been cut. Often the painting on the *dupun* is iconographically the same as the bark painting, like an offset

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> *Dupun* is the term used in Central Arnhem Land languages for the Hollow Log Coffin. Elsewhere in Arnhem Land the form is named *Lorrkon*, *Djalambu*, *Badurru*, and other names dependent on language group.

print, each version the mirror image of the other. Hollow logs were exhibited in the context of contemporary Aboriginal art as early as the David Jones exhibition in 1941, and the mirroring aspect was first referenced by Charles Mountford in 1956 when he illustrated *dupun* graphically “unwrapped”, showing the image on a log illustrated as if it were a bark painting.<sup>15</sup> Equally, they may be seen as painted bodies, as Mundine later described them:

They are representations of a human form. Like a human being they are painted with body designs. Those body designs are, in essence, what you are, what you could call a moral insistence. They’re about saying this is how my soul looks, this is how I am inside. This is how my essence looks. This is how I am all the time. I have an outside appearance, but this is how my inside looks.<sup>16</sup>

The opening of *The Memorial* was marked by a ceremony of dance, song and speech. The four participants (Paddy Dhatangu, David Malangi, Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, and John Dhurrikayu 1) being both senior songmen and a younger dancer, had their bodies “painted up” in traditional white clay in splashed gestural markings. The authors of *The Memorial* had collectively created a spellbinding aesthetic immersion into a world of forms and images that were relatively alien, in a medium unfamiliar to most visitors to the exhibition.

### ***The Memorial’s* constitutive literature**

In his Biennale catalogue essay Mundine offered the following broad interpretation of the work’s politics:

Originally being living trees, the installation is like a forest — an Aboriginal vision of the forest and landscape... Each Hollow Log is ceremonially a Bone Coffin, so in essence the forest is really like a large cemetery of dead Aboriginals, a War Cemetery, a War Memorial to all those Aboriginals who died defending their country.<sup>17</sup>

He also took time to outline his role as Art Adviser at Ramingining, and his motivation to find a way for the distinctive characteristics of contemporary secular versions of the traditional *dupun* to gain recognition in the wider art world. ‘The problem was to change people’s perceptions of Aboriginal sculpture and art in general. A “*tour de force*” was needed. This cynically commercial venture lurked in the back of my mind until the Pilger program crystallised these thoughts.’<sup>18</sup>

The following year Mundine further elaborated on the intent of *The Memorial*. It was, he said

a statement that touches the crux of black/white relations in Australia. Its acceptance or non-acceptance touches directly on the question of the readiness of white Australians to come to terms with a horrific past that needs to be addressed, reflected upon, and remedied. Dealing with this past is crucial to a constructive and creative future. It is a necessary foundation for improved black/white relationships, from which black people and white Australians may go forward, for the first time in a constructive

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<sup>15</sup> Mountford, 1956, p. 324.

<sup>16</sup> Djon Mundine, from an unpublished lecture given at the National Gallery of Art, 6 November, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Mundine, 1988a, p. 230.

<sup>18</sup> Mundine, 1988a, p. 230. See also Pilger, 1985.



partnership in facing the future as one strong nation, instead of being burdened by an unresolved past, continuing tensions and eternal guilt.<sup>19</sup>

It was not until 2010 that Mundine spoke more candidly of his role in the conception of *The Memorial*:

Over 1986-8 I created the concept of The Aboriginal Memorial... and talked the artists at Ramingining through the idea. And endless set of discussions took place with most of the senior artists in the community and all took on board the concept of using what are sacred forms for a wide metaphorical honouring of all those Aboriginal people who died as a result of colonization.<sup>20</sup>

Thus it is clear from his catalogue essay for the Biennale and in these subsequent publications that Mundine had taken a crucial role in both the conception of the work, its facilitation, and its translation/interpretation for the wider art community who encountered the work at the Biennale, and subsequently.<sup>21</sup>

In the contemporaneous texts Mundine also made clear the political dimension of their collective motivation, anticipating the context of protests, boycotts and controversy surrounding participation in bicentennial celebrations of all kinds. The production and presentation of *The Memorial* was, he explained, in the context of the Bicentennial, both to 'convert the white community and make real statements', and 'to make a true statement... without celebrating [the Bicentennial].'

The majority of critical, descriptive, and explanatory texts produced in response to *The Aboriginal Memorial* have engaged with its reception in the contemporary art world. Within its various museological settings, whether as "installation art", or on tour in Europe, as a war memorial, or in relation to its present permanent context at the National Gallery of Australia, its setting within the frame of contemporary art has dominated its discourse. With few exceptions, such articles focus on the multiple ambiguities and complex challenges to interpretation posed by the work itself.

Art-historical studies, such as the unpublished lecture by Virginia Spate (1991), and the substantial published thesis by Susan Jenkins (2003), have engaged in fine detail with the iconography and authorship of its myriad elements. Other writers (Bordo, Smith) have sought to interpret the work in its broader cultural and political/historical context and to situate it within the canon of contemporary (modern) art history. As is to be expected, the authors of key surveys of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art (Morphy, Caruana, Sayers) have given particular attention to its iconic place in Australian art history. However Mundine's agency is seldom examined specifically, and sometimes he is not mentioned at all.<sup>22</sup>

Some of these authors have substantial first person experience of the contexts of origin of the 200 *dupun* that comprise *The Aboriginal Memorial* (see Mundine's own writings, and that of Jenkins, Morphy, and Caruana). Those who have lived and worked in Central Arnhem Land for extended periods of time, who have been incorporated into the kinship

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<sup>19</sup> Mundine, 1989. In this article Mundine gives his full title as 'Arts and Crafts Adviser' and describes his role as having 'coordinated' the work.

<sup>20</sup> Mundine, 2010, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Mundine, 1990, pp. 3-4. See also Mundine, 1999, pp. 45-59.

<sup>22</sup> Caruana, 1993, pp. 206-7 and Sayers, 2001, p. 220.

system, and who have direct experience of the multiple processes of production of the Yolngu works of art from this region, bring a degree of socially informed knowledge to their accounts of the work.

By contrast, the majority of critical commentaries, or attempts to interpret the work as it has been encountered in its various iterations, in its gallery or exhibition context, as well as in attempts to define its relationship with other works in similar contexts, has been from the perspective of an art audience.

### **Collective agency and Mundine's authorial role**

Mundine's own account at the beginning of the constitutive literature speaks about the authors' collective intentions as if he was a degree removed from its production.

The idea of taking part in this particular Biennale... was to create a representation that would be an authentic Aboriginal statement for 1988 — not joining any rhetoric of celebration, but presenting a collective Aboriginal work, in Aboriginal cultural forms, in a context of a survey of world contemporary art. If people truly accepted Aboriginal art, this was meant to say, they would accept the larger statement of cultural integrity and rights that was being made through this work. They would receive the work in the variety of its dimensions and reflect upon its meanings.<sup>23</sup>

The characteristically self-deprecating reserve in the ways in which he has elsewhere described his agency is understandable, yet often misunderstood. His circumspection is not simply derived from some personal modesty, or a concern with the question of authenticity, but it is also a matter of the social protocols which apply to the complex incomer/indigene social relations which apply in remote community settings like that of Ramingining, in Arnhem Land and its surrounding regions more generally.

Even though Mundine shares an Aboriginal heritage (he is a descendent of the Bundjalang people from Northern New South Wales), it is the case that any incomer into Yolngu society sets out on a never-ending process of revelatory education on which is based the complexities of social inclusion/exclusion and complex inter-familial responsibilities. Thus the question of authorship of *The Memorial* is never represented as fixed, in the sense that it is never individually "owned" or professed, in the manner of other works of art, conventionally understood. It is, rather, the very model of collective conceptual agency, which translates in this instance, to this complex and socially innovative, albeit authorially ambiguous work of art.

Such a complex work of art — whether regarded in its singularity or as 200 painted hollow-log coffins by 43 artists arranged in a cartographic relation to the clan territories of Central Arnhem Land — demands unconventional analytical procedures. The apparent conceptual ambiguity of *The Memorial's* collective authorship and form — is it a "work of art" in the singular sense, or is it 200 separate works by 43 (or 44, including Mundine) socially related individuals, or is it an amalgam of 200 discrete elements, each of which is iconographically significant? The reconciliation of such questions is essential to its meaning and underwrites the distinctiveness of the work: the scale of its ambition, its deep history as well as its contemporary import, its political motivation, plus its innovative character. In this work,

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<sup>23</sup> Mundine, 1989, p. 44.

innovation is evidenced in its encyclopaedic scale, social specificity, and social reach, plus its powerful adaptation of cartographic metaphors.

*The Aboriginal Memorial* is neither wholly the work of its “conceptual producer” Djon Mundine, nor any particular one (or group) of the artists who produced it, nor the curators or designers and architects who have contributed to its various physical manifestations. Despite such subsequent interventions, it was Mundine’s crucial aesthetic contribution — the cartographic aspect — that has enabled *The Aboriginal Memorial* to be understood as a singular work of art, and that has provided its continuing capacity to address the contemporary imagination in its ongoing political and aesthetic significance. It also becomes clear from reading the variations on his original account that Mundine himself sought and took advice from his senior advisors in the Ramingining community, Paddy Dhatangu and David Malangi, with whom he was in a grandfather/grandson classificatory relationship, plus other senior Yolngu.

It was, however, Mundine’s conception of the synthesis of all the different elements in the form of a stylized landscape that connects all the individual works in a manner that enables its multiple frames of reference: as a microcosm of the individual to the whole, of individual Yolngu people in relation to the Glyde River landscape, as the relation of Arnhem Land to Aboriginal Australia, or of Aboriginal Australia to Australia, and ultimately its occupation of ambiguous social spaces (the Biennale, the Museum), and the ultimate deployment of its primary political historical purpose — as a *war memorial*. However, Mundine’s agency is characteristically downplayed in the literature and by Mundine himself; as if to discuss his creative role — other than as an outsider, or as the manager of a commercial enterprise — might call into question the authenticity of the work.<sup>24</sup> Hence the necessity to acknowledge the relational character of its collective agency.

At this point it is revealing to examine in detail the first two stages of its historical trajectory involving its conception and production, in order to rediscover the collective agency of its motivation and origins.

### **The backstory: the history of its evolution**

Two precursor events that led Mundine and his senior Yolngu advisors to initiate the project are normally given as motivation for the generation of *The Memorial*. Mundine relates how in late 1986 the circumstances of watching the videotape of *The Secret Country* by John Pilger in the company of one of his senior Yolngu mentors was one of the triggers that led to the work.<sup>25</sup> Mundine describes how moved he was by Pilger’s argument that there were no memorials by which to remember the Aboriginal peoples killed in colonial conflicts.

Coincidentally, in late 1986 David Malangi had been commissioned to paint a mural at the Gold Coast City Art Gallery, together with Avril Quail and Ysola Best, a Kombumerri woman. During the course of the project they met with Kombumerri people and became aware of the plans to re-bury the skeletal remains of some 200 people, which had been accidentally excavated during a Gold Coast building project, and being held in trust by the Anthropology Museum at the University of Queensland. They were due to be returned and

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<sup>24</sup> The exception is Jenkins, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Pilger, 1985.



re-buried. Clearly this was a dramatic and confronting issue which was the source of much discussion amongst those involved, which continued back in Ramingining.<sup>26</sup> According to Mundine, it was Malangi who ‘suggested the possibility of performing a type of *dupun* (hollow log ceremony) at the reburial. Upon our return to Ramingining, Malangi and I discussed the possibility of making about 200 hollow log coffins, one for each person’s remains.’<sup>27</sup>

Thus it was the conjunction between his reaction to Pilger and his discussion with Malangi that had ‘crystallised his thoughts’ about the plan to provide for the reburial of the Kombumirri remains.<sup>28</sup> However, as circumstances transpired, the latter plan never eventuated. An alternative agreement with artists of the neighbouring art centre at Maningrida resulted in woven baskets being made for the re-burial of the Kolumbirri remains.

Both the Kombumirri peoples’ dilemma and the encounter with the Pilger argument had occurred in the same time frame, in 1986/7, just prior to the invitation to participate in the Biennale. Thus it was in the same time frame as the David Malangi mural commission that the idea for a location for a memorial comprising 200 poles was conceived. Prior to this, Mundine had already proposed a “forest of *dupun*” in response to the requests from the new Parliament House planning committee for works from Ramingining. As the concept had evolved, and in response to the Pilger tapes, the purpose of the project expanded to encompass the whole history of colonial conflict. As Mundine explained ‘spiritually I thought that it would be a great statement to make for 1988, that we were putting these souls to rest for the first time.’<sup>29</sup> For a while, the two projects were conceived as one: ‘So that’s how it started out and the 200 poles would go to the Biennale, be exhibited there, and then be taken to the place in Queensland, to be permanently installed.’<sup>30</sup>

The project had started without a clear sense of how the work would be resolved, either financially or in terms of its final destination.

David Malangi and Tony Danyula were among the first to start collecting and painting hollow logs for the installation. They were two of the eight senior artists who were expected to complete the project. However the community’s great interest meant that many more wanted to contribute, and in the end, the Memorial included the work of 43 artists.<sup>31</sup>

Significantly, it is clear that this aspect of the project was primarily “cultural” (rather than commercial, as Smith suggests) in the sense of its initial motivation as an exchange between two Aboriginal peoples, in Central Arnhem Land and Surfers Paradise, some 3000 kilometres away. Subsequently, in its Biennale iteration, it was “political” in the sense that it was understood to be a pan-Aboriginal intervention in the bicentennial celebrations.

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<sup>26</sup> In the short statement in the Biennale catalogue there is no mention of these other events that were simultaneously influencing the thoughts of both Mundine and his senior Yolngu advisers in 1986-7.

<sup>27</sup> Mundine, 1999, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Mundine, 1999, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Mundine 1990, pp. 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Mundine 1990, pp. 3-4. ‘The idea of so many people for whom proper burial rites had not been performed led me to think of the painted hollow log coffins made for artists today. The idea for The Aboriginal Memorial was born.’

<sup>31</sup> Mundine 1999, p. 49. The original artists were Tony Danyula, David Malangi, Neville Gulaygulay, Tony Daypurryun, George Milpururru, Jimmy Wululu, Neville Nanytjawuy, and Phillip Guthayguthay.

### **The circumstances of the production of *The Memorial***

The second stage of its trajectory, the actual production of the 200 *dupun*, was a remarkable logistical and entrepreneurial exercise. In its origins it must have seemed like an impossible practical and conceptual task, focusing the creative energies of initially a few senior men, and later numerous other men and women, and marshalling unheard of resources to maintain the necessary momentum to make it happen.

It was in mid-1987 that Djon Mundine met with Nick Waterlow, armed with a few sketches of what the installation might look like, including those describing its cartographic logic. Waterlow immediately saw its potential, and understood the significance of the metaphor of a cemetery for the victims of colonial conflict. Once accepted into the Biennale of Sydney, Mundine had to raise the resources to enable the work to take place, to remunerate the artists, to pay for documentation, transport, and installation.

Support and finance came from multiple directions. Mundine had persuaded the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council to fund the transport, and by the end of 1987 the work was under way. However, it rapidly became clear that the resources of the art centre, Bula'bula Arts, could not support a project of this scale. Artists who were committing all their creative energy to this one project were not producing and selling their art as normal. At the beginning of 1988 the Darwin artist Chips Mackinolty, then a journalist with the Northern Lands Council, suggested Mundine approach James Mollison, the Director of the Australian National Gallery.

Together with Wally Caruana, then Senior Curator, a meeting was facilitated. In no time Mollison appreciated the significance of what was being proposed. Not only did he agree 'on the spot' to provide the funds to complete the project, he agreed that a work of this nature would be accepted on the condition that it was to be on permanent display. Mundine recalls Mollison's enthusiasm for the proposal: 'He said the Gallery was looking for powerful and inspirational Australian works of art to match in iconic status Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* and Constantin Brancusi's *Birds in Space* in the Gallery's collection.'<sup>32</sup>

While the project was conceptually based on Central Arnhem Land, soon artists from other communities also became involved. On the western fringe of Arnhem Land from Mimi Arts at Katherine the famous Paddy Fordham Wainburunga and four other Mimi artists together contributed 35 pieces to the ensemble. Closer to Ramingining were those artists working out of Maningrida (Marwurndjul), and others from Milingimbi, and Elcho Island.

As the project gained momentum, numerous other people became involved in the project. The photographer Jon Lewis was commissioned to document the project, and Wally Caruana and Gary Lee (both then on the curatorial staff at the NGA) came to assist, along with the local artists Roy Burryyila and Charlie Djota. Other Indigenous artists from outside the region, Lawrence Leslie and Barry Djarryang, were also recruited to assist in various ways. Once the *dupun* had been shipped to Sydney, a whole team of art school students (including the Indigenous artists Fiona Foley and Gavin Duncan) assisted with the installation at Pier 2/3.

From the sheer scale of the operation, and the numbers of people involved, the complex nature of its authorial agency can begin to be grasped. Mundine could hardly have

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<sup>32</sup> Mundine, 1999, p. 52.

anticipated the conceptual complexities raised by the work when the idea began to form in conversation with the key elders in the community, David Malangi, Paddy Dhatangu, George Milpurrurru, and Jimmy Wululu. Bearing no reference to any other collaborative work these Yolngu had produced, this was unlike any other ceremonial manifestation of Yolngu cultural life. The ambition of this collective work coalesced the social structures of clans and moieties in a way that left it without a traditional authority structure, which is otherwise present in instances of other Yolngu works of art, and which may be simplified as a self-regulating structure of “owners” and “managers”. In the instance of *The Memorial* there is no such structure of authorship, and hence the central (neutral) role of the “art advisor”, as Djon Mundine then described himself, became a crucial innovative factor. As coordinator, Mundine had to strike a balance between the interests and authority of individuals, families, clans, the moieties, and the regions. Thus the work had created a new kind of network of relationality: one to one, one to many, many to many. Against all odds, the collectivity worked.

### **The theorist’s dilemma**

Historians and theorists have not always been sensitive to the complex circumstances and details of *The Memorial’s* authorship. The most extensive published account is that by Terry Smith, whose 2001 *Critical Inquiry* essay raised issues that merit close examination, correction, and challenge. As an historical account, Smith’s essay is flawed by factual errors and scant reference to the constitutive literature.<sup>33</sup> Given its prestigious publication context, it is the reference most commonly cited.

Smith based his critique on three issues, or presumptions. The first is the question of the work’s implicit *inauthenticity*, based on the presumption that the motive for *The Memorial* was primarily commercial. The second was the suggestion that the work could be understood as a “visual creole”. On this basis Smith’s substantive conclusion is his assertion that *The Memorial* embodies an unresolvable cultural incommensurability. Such a claim excludes the possibility of a relational basis for the interpretation of *The Memorial*, as argued here. Smith’s account promises a complex and challenging agenda, and therefore necessitates a comprehensive engagement.

Smith’s reading of the Biennale catalogue essay begins his analysis of *The Memorial* and leads him to suggest that Mundine’s reference to the commercial dimensions of Yolngu art production is indicative of a compromised artistic and political status: ‘there is no question that the Aboriginal Memorial was conceived as a commodity for sale on the art market.’<sup>34</sup> In such a manner Smith suggests, but does not argue, that the politics of the work is somehow flawed. And yet as we have seen in the constituent literature, and as Howard Morphy had observed in multiple contexts, the Yolngu characteristically use their art to communicate the beliefs and values of their culture. Whereas a large proportion of the contemporary

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Despite crediting seven critical readers prior to publication including, apparently, Djon Mundine, key aspects of the essay are either erroneous, or superficial in its research into its constitutive literature. For example, he claims the work was “made by twenty men” whereas in fact it was made by 36 men and seven women, plus Djon Mundine as “conceptual producer”. In addition, he overlooks crucial references to precursor projects, such as the original plan to produce the 200 hollow logs to enable the reburial of the remains of the Kolumbirri people in Surfers Paradise. This latter aspect has been in the literature since 1992.

production of artworks is made for the outside market, such works are also made for internal ceremonial purposes. In 1991 Morphy wrote:

As far as many Europeans are concerned, Yolngu art has become a commodity. It is impossible to analyse Yolngu art without taking this into account... It is arguable that to the Yolngu, art has never become an alienable commodity in the sense that Europeans understood it. Yolngu... entered into exchange relations with Europeans partly for economic returns and partly to engage them in a discourse over cultural relations.<sup>35</sup>

As one of the artists, Djardie Ashley, was later to say ‘We were... happy the world will see this and understand our history and culture.’<sup>36</sup>

The fact that a work of art has a commercial or monetary value does not, for its Yolngu author, compromise its social and political authenticity. What Smith failed to recognise is that Yolngu art always has a didactic and pedagogical dimension, no matter what is the circumstances of its production.<sup>37</sup> In different contexts, to different audiences, the meaning of a work may be revealed, or accounted for differently, whether for a member of Yolngu society, as an aspect of its “inside” or sacred meanings, or for an outside audience, in some appropriate translation to suit the occasion or audience. As I have elaborated above, understanding the complex and fraught nature of the economics of the project is ill-served by simplifications of this kind. Its motivation, as is made explicitly clear in its first publication, was as a war memorial, expressed in terms nobody could misinterpret: ‘Lest we forget’.<sup>38</sup>

More remarkably, having focused on the work as a commercial exercise, and therefore, by implication, as politically opportunistic and inauthentic, Smith then suggests *The Aboriginal Memorial* is understandable as a form of *creolisation*.<sup>39</sup> Referencing Mundine’s catalogue essay, he writes:

Indeed these remarks embody in text form the creole that serves as an artworld language in these contexts. I will argue that a similarly structured visual creole shaped the Aboriginal Memorial.<sup>40</sup>

By this the reader is left to presume that Smith means a hybrid merger of two poetic systems, Aboriginal and Western, into a new and distinct language.<sup>41</sup> It is also possible that Smith’s use of the term ‘creole’ derived perhaps from his frustrations with the limits of cross-cultural discourse, which he had previously characterised as ‘a kind of pidgin art language (actually an English-local language creole) used in conversations between

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<sup>35</sup> Morphy, 1991, pp. 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Caruana, Jenkins et al., 1999, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> In another sense this reveals a complete lack of comprehension of the complex economy of an art centre in a remote Aboriginal community, which Smith reduces to “trafficking”.

<sup>38</sup> Mundine, 1988b. See Fig. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 638.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 634.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 638. ‘The contemporary Aboriginal art movement... is itself a hybrid formation between Western modernity in Australia and Aboriginality.’

Aboriginal artists and white art advisors and dealers.<sup>42</sup> At this more personal level he characterised Mundine's own writing style as such an example of this artworld "creole".<sup>43</sup>

However, for Smith to propose that he 'will argue that a similarly structured visual creole shaped' *The Memorial* itself is a more challenging suggestion.<sup>44</sup> While he writes that this was the basis of his argument, nowhere in the essay does he further substantiate either provocative claim, nor produce any argument to support the suggestion that *The Aboriginal Memorial* might be understood as *visual creole*.

Cultural incommensurability was, rather, the base concept Smith evoked in his interpretation of *The Memorial*. He was dismissive of those who believe that Indigenous contemporary art amounts 'to an indigenous modernism — indeed, to some, an indigenous postmodernism.'<sup>45</sup> Without referencing his source, he described such observations as 'typical artspeak contractions, half-truths that deny the more challenging realities of cultural encounter and incommensurability.'<sup>46</sup> For Smith, intercultural "incommensurability" was the underlying "evident fact" of cross-cultural communication and this was a persistent observation in his writing on Aboriginal art.<sup>47</sup> However (and the conjunction is somewhat contradictory) in a 1993 article he had asserted that 'valuable communication can occur if both parties recognise that, while cultural incommensurability is the bottom line, it does not erase the positive potentials of difference.'<sup>48</sup>

Whatever these 'positive potentials of difference' might imply, Smith had a lot invested in the notion of cultural incommensurability, concluding that the key intent of *The Memorial* was 'to defend and secure incommensurability in the belief that survival depends on maintaining difference.'<sup>49</sup> This is a deduction he draws from his interpretation of its authors' motives, and his longstanding frustration at not being able to "read" the works.<sup>50</sup>

Smith concluded the passage in which this occurs by admitting to a kind of 'blindness'. This is a figure he derived — without acknowledgement — from the texts of others: 'This keeps the invisible invisible, while satisfying the observer that something unsayable has been revealed. A pure uncontaminated beauty, openly presenting its truths... but as a white blindness, with all the dazzling opacity of a mosquito lamp.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Creolization" was a characteristic of the Caribbean focus of the discourse associated with Okwui Enwezor's "Platform 3" associated with Documenta 11 in 2002. However it has never elsewhere been applied to contemporary Australian art.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 634.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 634.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 633.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, 2001, note on p. 633.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, 1993, pp. 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, 1993, p. 11. In another text published in 2002, Smith makes a one-line reference to *The Memorial* as 'a kind of gateway between two incommensurably difficult cultures' (Smith, 2002, p. 164).

<sup>49</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 641.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 641.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 641. In this bizarre and undeveloped set of metaphors Smith adopted an expression previously developed in this context by Jonathan Bordo: 'The Aboriginal Memorial is thus not what it appears to be, and it has given nothing away. It thus fulfills all the necessary condition for its "authenticity", that is, as a sign it is the visible whose first imperative is to keep the invisible invisible' (Bordo, 1996, p. 189). Bordo acknowledged the source for this striking expression "...the visible functions to keep the invisible invisible", in an essay by Phillip Ravenhill (Ravenhill, 1993, p. 58).



Mosquito lamps aside, Smith's invocations of cultural incommensurability justified his adoption of the status of outside observer, thus maintaining an intellectually (culturally) disconnected and prescriptive stance. However, he never unpacked the condition of 'incommensurability', either in the general sense, or specifically in the realm of cross-cultural communications. In this context, from both a legal and an anthropological perspective Mantziaris and Martin have suggested that so-called cultural incommensurability is never as absolute as Smith implies:

The incommensurability of systems of meaning is not necessarily absolute. It may be partial. There may be areas of both commensurability and incommensurability as between systems of meaning. Thus, in the context of linguistics, one explanation of the process of translation between linguistic systems is that it occurs through mutually intelligible sets of meanings, which form 'bridgeheads' between different systems.<sup>52</sup>

The problem for Smith was that the notion of incommensurability left him without any secure means of interpreting the work, of trusting his own judgment. For Smith, *The Memorial* is 'one of a special class of works with presence beyond the confines of art object exchange, beyond markets, beyond the languages of art criticism and the audiences for art, works that seek to make a statement in the broader public sphere.'<sup>53</sup> He was also unable to decide what *The Memorial* actually is, oscillating between regarding it as a singular entity, and as 200 individual works, and then as 'more than a work of art':

It is a work of art and is more than a work of art. And it is more than a museal object in the sense that while being subject to the museum's memorialising processes, it has already transcended them.<sup>54</sup>

Smith described *The Memorial* as 'a double statement of death and redemption.'<sup>55</sup> To arrive at this position he invoked the 1996 Australia Day speech given by the then Governor General Bill Hayden to suggest the 'redemptive' power of [Aboriginal] art 'to teach nonindigenous Australians about themselves and their land'.<sup>56</sup> Smith progressed to posit the work as a 'countermemorial', and speculated that it 'reflects the perspective on death of the authors of the Aboriginal memorial that death is redemptive, a passage to spiritual growth.'<sup>57</sup>

Whether or not this intuition would mean anything to *The Memorial's* authors, it leads Smith to his final figure. He suggests *The Memorial* belongs to a mysterious (and undefined) category of 'becoming-beings', concluding his essay by writing that such beings 'work to transform our static sense of being into one that is itself in a state of becoming.'<sup>58</sup> In his search for an appropriate metaphor, Smith falls into a trap of his own making. The only cross-cultural association he gives for such figures of speech is his brief (and unsubstantiated) reference to a creole 'that serves as an artworld language in these contexts.'<sup>59</sup> Herein lies his dilemma. His metaphor is that of an outsider, lacking any grounded cultural reference, trapped by his assumption of incommensurability.

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<sup>52</sup> Mantziaris and Martin, 2000, p. 30.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 642.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 646.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 636.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 631.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 658.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 658.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 634.

### A very mobile installation

*The Aboriginal Memorial* has been moved nine times in its lifetime.<sup>60</sup> When the work was first installed in the NGA's Sculpture Gallery (Gallery 1), in the fourth stage of its trajectory, it was contextualised by its proximity to the Brancusi *Birds in Space* and a Beuys installation. In this setting a crucial conceptual shift was effected. By this gesture it had been sanctioned as a 'work of art' in the most emphatic institutional sense possible, despite all its social, political, religious and conceptual complexities. One has to admire James Mollison's foresight when he made the commitment to engage with such issues. His successor, Betty Churcher, had other complexities and controversies to deal with once the work was re-installed in a more prominent location at the Gallery entrance.

The installation of *The Memorial* in the National Gallery was, and remains, controversial to some visitors.<sup>61</sup> However, initially the Gallery dealt with its conceptual ambiguity, regarded as a work of art or as a memorial, together with its secular/sacred status, with a considered recognition of its multiple character. Notably, it was Director Betty Churcher who acknowledged its continuing *sacred* dimension most explicitly.<sup>62</sup> In a letter written in 1990, as she explained to one petitioner, who had argued that the work was stripped of its power by its museum setting, that this was the 'express wish' of its creators.<sup>63</sup> She wrote that 'three of the artists involved, David Malangi, George Milpurrurru, and Roy Burrenyula performed a ceremony in the Gallery in September 1988 to consecrate the Memorial in its new home.'<sup>64</sup> Her recognition of its sacred character — not a characteristic conventionally associated with the Gallery's modernist mission — was a bold distinction to make. Subsequent directors have treated *The Memorial* in a more cavalier fashion.

In its subsequent spatial progression from one location to another, both in the Gallery, and around the world, together with its associated conceptual reclassifications from political statement to architectural feature, has resulted in multiple interpretations and variations to its original intent.<sup>65</sup> As a consequence, I argue that the work has been progressively transformed from a postcolonial memorial, to an example of contemporary installation art, to the centrepiece of an international cultural exchange (Lausanne, Hanover, St. Petersburg), and finally in its overbearing architect-designed resting-place in the new National Gallery extension, it has been redesigned as an entirely new kind of entity.<sup>66</sup>

Thus while it has been heralded simultaneously as a work of contemporary art and as a kind of war memorial, as contemporary Indigenous art it has also been accommodated—albeit uncomfortably—within the modernist canon.<sup>67</sup> This process began to occur conceptually from the moment it was included in the Biennale of Sydney, to its institutional acceptance as a "masterpiece" of the National Gallery of Australia.<sup>68</sup> Now that it is finally (literally)

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<sup>60</sup> For more details, see Jenkins, 2003.

<sup>61</sup> Jenkins, 2003, p. 215.

<sup>62</sup> Betty Churcher, Letter in response to petitioners, ANG file 87/463. Cited in Jenkins 2003, p. 215.

<sup>63</sup> Jenkins, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> Jenkins, 2003, p. 215.

<sup>65</sup> Caruana and Jenkins, 1999.

<sup>66</sup> See my commentary at <http://www.iconophilia.net/does-the-ngas-new-extension-eclipse-the-aboriginal-memorial/>, accessed July 7, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Desmond, 1996.

<sup>68</sup> Caruana and Jenkins, 1999.

*embedded* in the nation's supreme manifestation of that institutionalized aesthetic ideology, where *The Memorial* has (shamefully, in the view of many) been *made to fit* — *The Memorial* appears no longer as a work of art, but as an architectural feature.<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion: how might we now see *The Aboriginal Memorial*?**

This essay asks: What are the consequences of recognizing relational agency as the basis for a new mode of interpretation? Does it open up the possibility for an ongoing (political) relationality that continues to activate the relation between the work, the viewer, and its originators in the wider context of intercultural relations?

In creating a work that has no single author, and in the absence of a traditional hierarchy, such as that prescribed by the relations between the moieties, or of the relation of works of art to rights over particular tracts of country, the collectivity of authorship has elevated the role of the non-Yolngu participants (specifically, in this instance, Djon Mundine's role as "conceptual producer") in an unprecedented and unpredictable manner. However, specific elements do come into play, such as the acknowledgement of traditional modes and protocols that prevail in all other forms of cultural production, and the approval of the initiatives taken by outsiders. It is the case, however, that such relatively new modes of cultural production that take place with works like these, anticipating their distribution and reception in the outside world, are dependent to a high degree on the initiative, experience, advice and skills of negotiation of outsiders.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to address the consequences of *The Memorial's* mobile existence in its trajectory from gallery to gallery, both in Canberra and around the world, as it has morphed its way through these different contexts, I have argued that the approach taken here, through a focus on collective agency, on the social relations of production, and on the interpretation of its constitutive literature, enables the reader/viewer access to an evolving discourse of meaning. By which I suggest that the multiplicity of interpretations that *The Memorial* has attracted, from aesthetic to transcendent, from cultural to political, is ongoing and will remain ongoing, for better or worse.

In conclusion, I would argue that despite its multiple reconfigurations, and despite its multiple reinterpretations, *The Aboriginal Memorial* has retained its dramatic capacity to challenge the circumstances of its various transformations. *The Memorial* presents the viewer with a paradigmatic instance of collective agency which provides a perfect opportunity to outline an account of the social relations of production. This ranges between traditional seniority and inter-clan and inter-moiety relations and new kinds of relations with incomers and outsiders, in communities, in institutions, and as well, the capacity to re-engage *The Memorial's* new audiences over the passage of time. The passage of time also enables contributions to its constitutive meaning to provide new modes of access and a new social relations of reception.

The very motivation for *The Aboriginal Memorial* derived from the processes of social interaction rather than the inspiration of an individual author. With no primary author, its

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<sup>69</sup> In a revealing response to my enquiry concerning the choice of black basalt gravel as a ground for the installation of the poles, the then Director of the National Gallery, Ron Radford, revealed the extent to which the details of the redesign of the Memorial in its current setting were determined by design criteria (the "palette" of the building, etc.) that clearly have nothing to do with its origins. See Lendon, 2011.

‘collectivity’ effectively, if not explicitly renounces (consciously or not), one of the key assumptions of modernist, or for that matter post-Renaissance Western art, whereby the viewer imagines a one-to-one experience of aesthetic appreciation. By entitling this essay with the term “relational agency” I have set out to propose a mode of reception (on the part of the viewer, the audience, as participants) that is more socially and politically engaged than the space of individual contemplation. The social relations of reception mirror the social relations of its production. Thus the new paradigm of social-to-social has the capacity to supplant the modernist paradigm of individual-to-individual, creating a novel paradigm of communication.

In the interpretation of the lasting legacy of this work, it is important therefore to interrogate its relational character — the inter-social, inter-related and inter-linked motivations which led to the work being initiated in the first place. Given its strongly diachronic character, with its complex references to both past tradition and to the future, its interpretation as a “contemporary” (for which read late modernist) work of art now makes little sense. This essay therefore invokes theories of collective agency and the ubiquity of relational aesthetics, to investigate the synchrony of the social relations of *The Memorial’s* production and the processes of its incorporation within an institutional framework of Australian art.

However, *The Memorial’s* current setting challenges the nature of a beholder’s experience of the work. It is no longer the same *Aboriginal Memorial* as it once was. Its formal character has been transformed on multiple occasions throughout its historical trajectory — none of which has been as interventionist as its current architectural internment. The authors of the work are no longer consulted in the design process. In its current guise it has been radically transformed (literally) spatially, formally, and in its material qualities. Nevertheless I would argue that in its twenty-eight year history, as it has passed through successive contexts and circumstances, it still remains possible to see *The Memorial* through the lens of an intercultural relationality, no matter how compromised is its current formal setting.<sup>70</sup> It exists, despite such reservations, as a paradigm of inter-sociality, leaving open its continuing capacity to engage and reactivate the social relations of its reception.

The multiple potential audiences and the multiple potential readings of this work continues this process. The diachronic axis asserts itself over the synchronic. Just as its original impact as contemporary art has waned, so its continuing relational significance emerges as its most powerful dimension. As Djon Mundine expressed it in 2005:

The other thing is that it was really for Aboriginal people. It was not in fact so much for white people. Generally white people see it as a reconciliation statement. As absolution. I don’t necessarily see it in that way. It was more to allow Aboriginal people to feel something for all those people who were the “unknown soldiers”, as it were, who were killed in these wars.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> This may be the only “masterpiece” of Australian art that has been periodically re-designed by the gallery that owns it. See my online conversations beginning with: Lendon, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Butler, 2005, p. 88

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## **Illustrations**

Fig. 1. Djon Mundine, Drawing for *200 Burial Poles*, c.1987. (Courtesy of the artist).

Fig. 2. Djon Mundine, Preliminary Installation sketch for *The Memorial*, 1987. NGA. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 31 p. 39.

Fig. 3. Djon Mundine, Working sketch for a floor plan for *The Memorial*, 1987. NGA. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 32, p. 40.

Fig. 4. Djon Mundine, Planning sketch for *The Memorial* opening ceremony in Sydney, 1987-88. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 33, p. 41.

Fig. 5. Djon Mundine, Notes regarding *The Memorial* groups and imagery, 1987-88. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 34, p. 42.

Fig. 6. John (Djon) Mundine, (ed.), brochure produced to accompany the installation of *The Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, 1988. (cover).

Fig. 7. Djon Mundine, Diagram of the Sydney Biennale installation, 1988. In John (Djon) Mundine, (ed.), brochure produced to accompany the installation of *The Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, 1988. p. 3.

Fig. 8. John (Djon) Mundine, (ed.), brochure produced to accompany the installation of *The Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, 1988. (back cover).

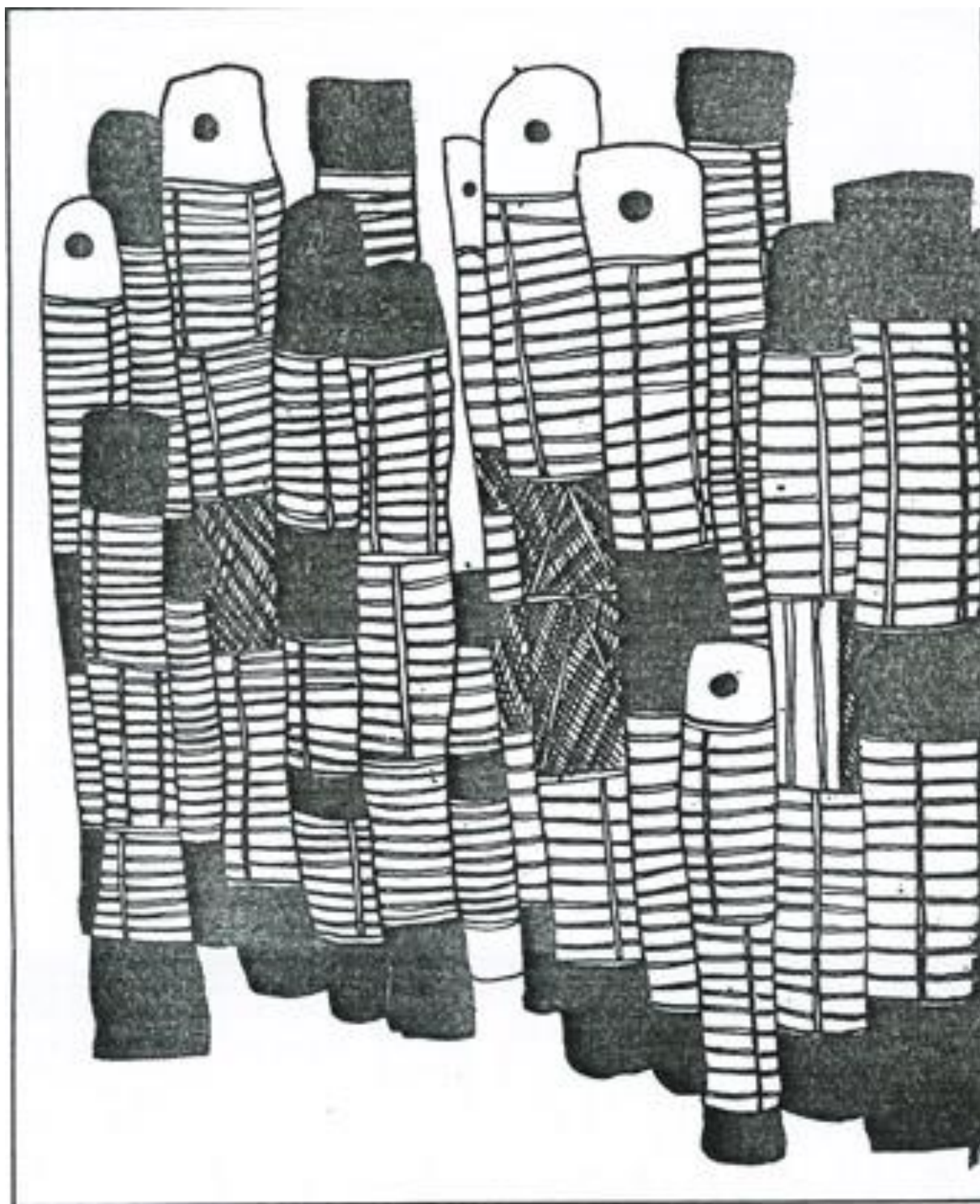


Fig. 1. Djon Mundine, Drawing for 200 Burial Poles, c.1987. (Courtesy of the artist.)

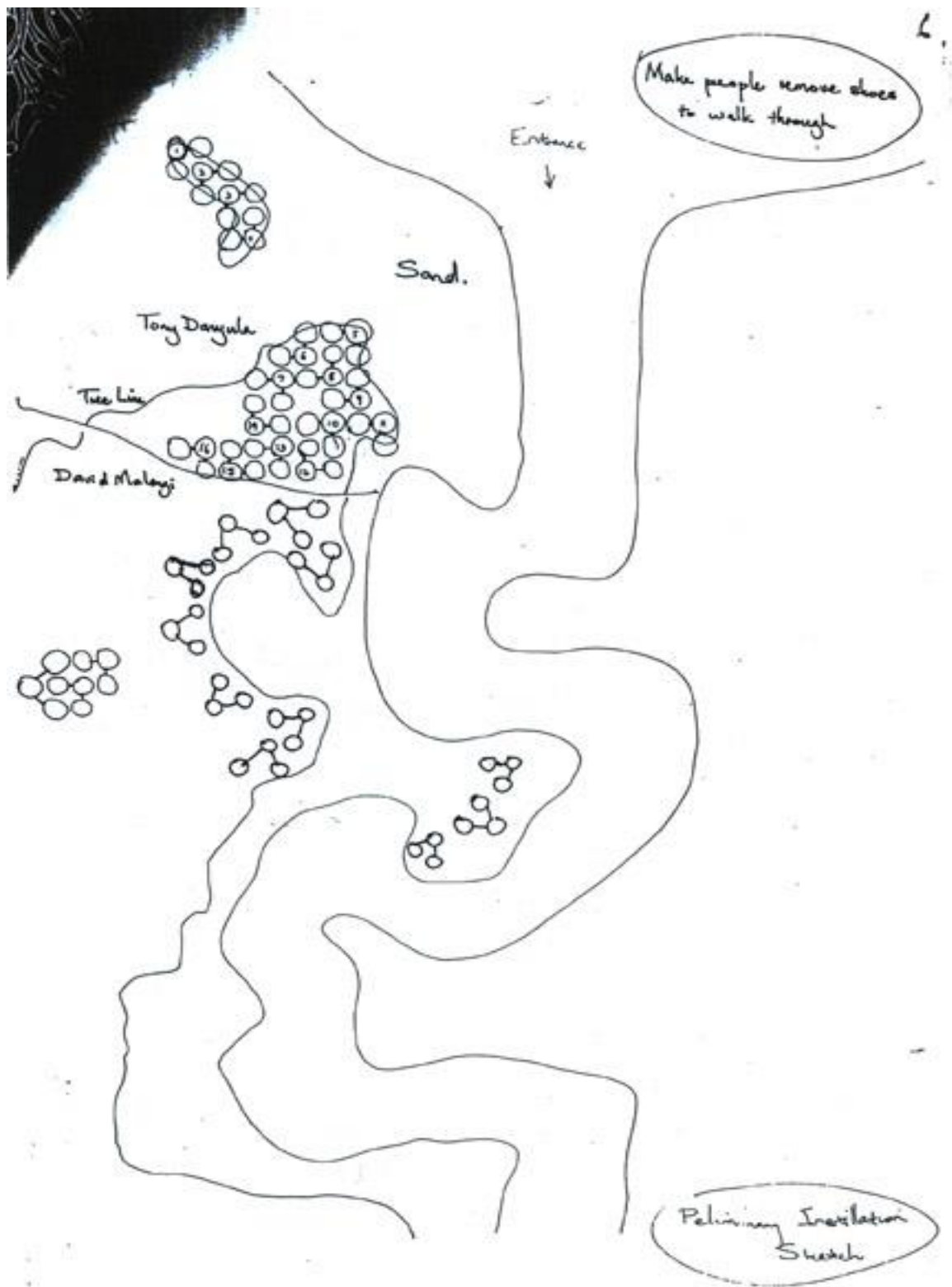


Fig. 2. Djon Mundine, Preliminary Installation sketch for *The Memorial*, 1987. NGA. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 31 p. 39.



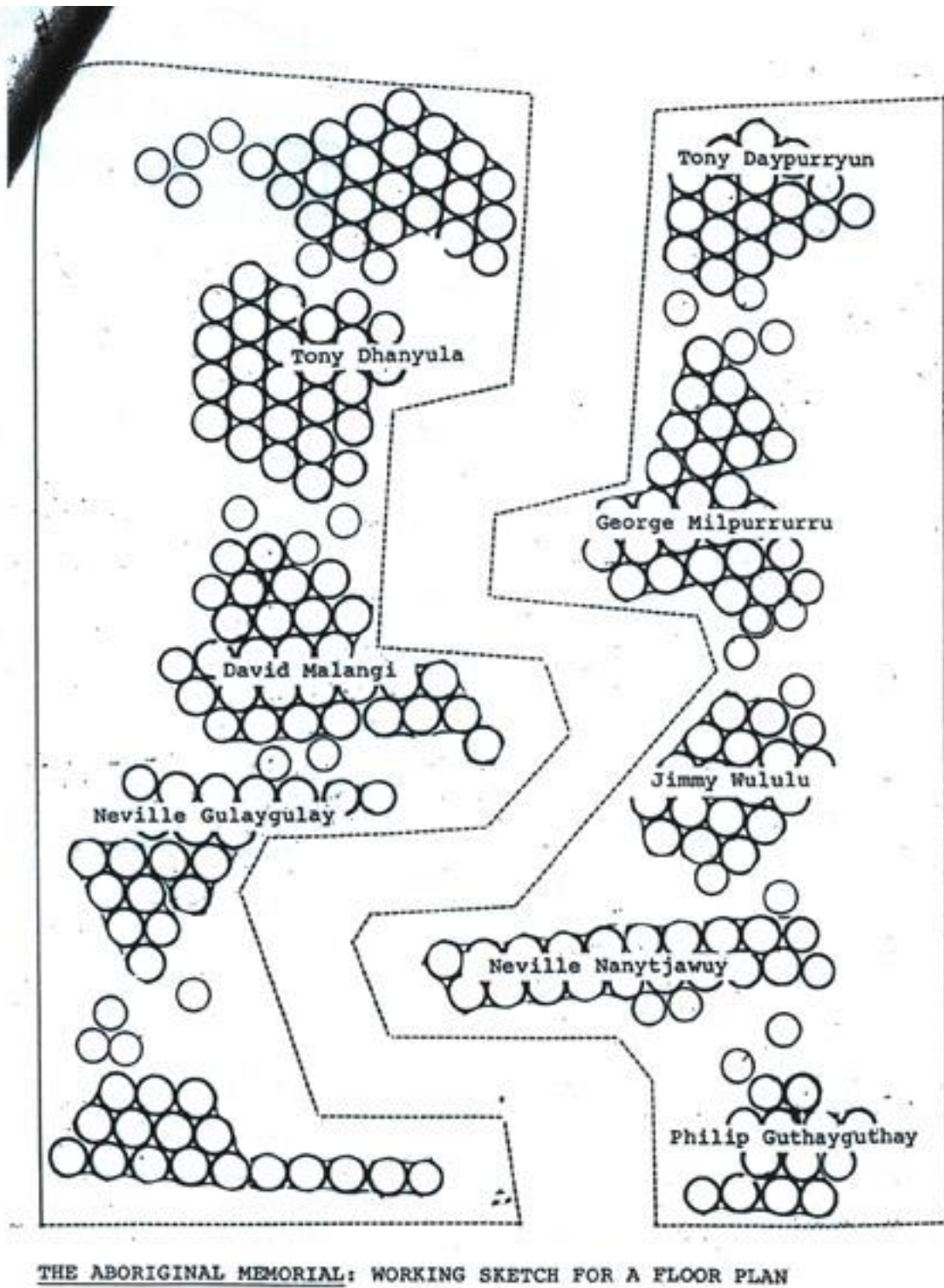


Fig. 3. Djon Mundine, Working sketch for a floor plan for *The Memorial*, 1987. NGA. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 32, p. 40.



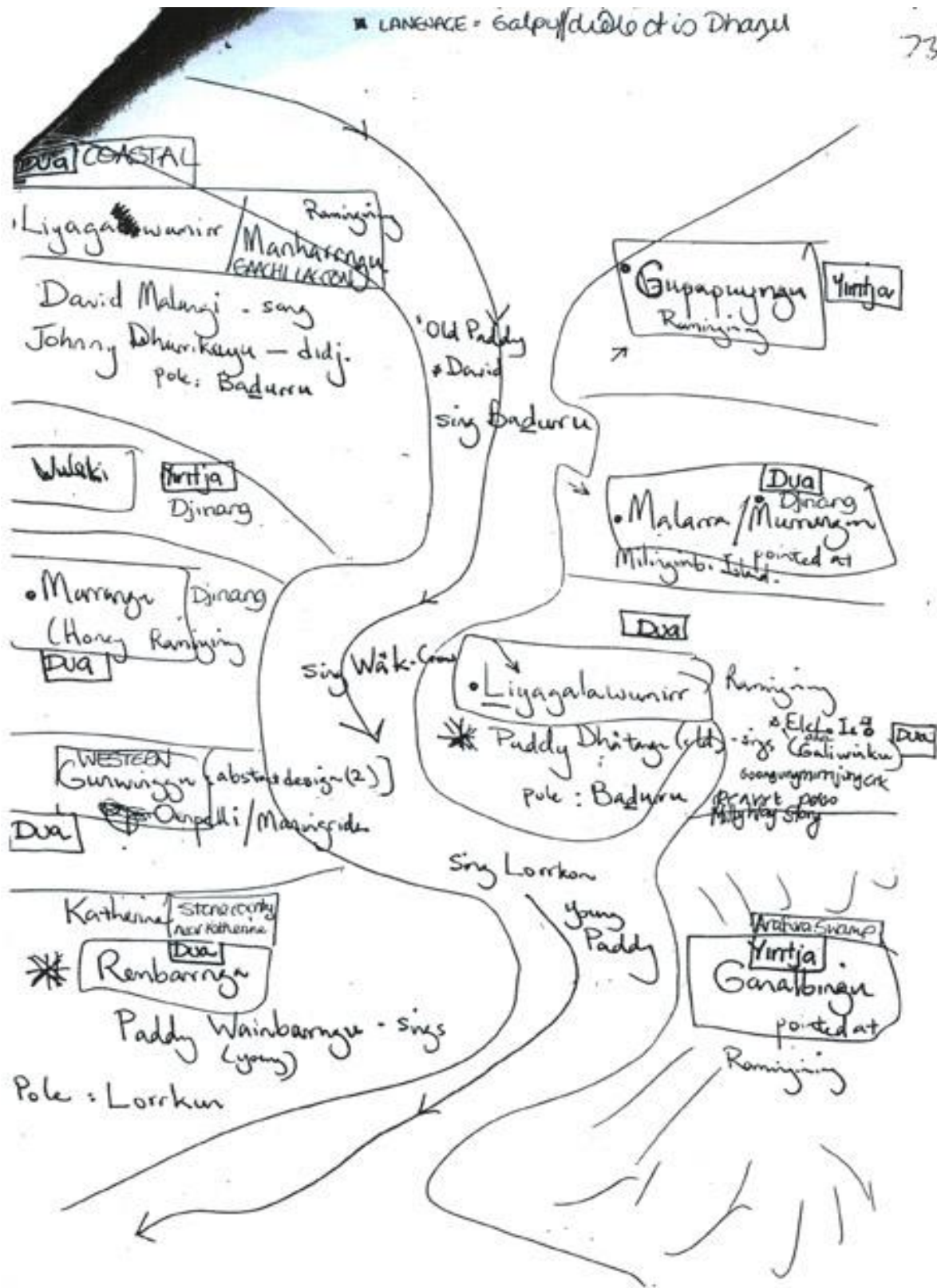


Fig. 4. Djon Mundine, Planning sketch for *The Memorial* opening ceremony in Sydney, 1987-88. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 33, p. 41.

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**Jagawumir/Manharngu**  
 King Brown Snake, Clame (Durga) (Murgu/ Durgu)  
 Blue Tongue Lizard Djabakale  
 Death Adder Ruri & Ell. (i) S...  
 White Belly Bush Raga/Gurba  
 Blood yam Ringy...  
 Crows Wok Malngi  
 Carfish eel, tortoise  
 Waterily bulbs, Waterily leaves

**Wulaki**  
 Eel tail Catfish Gungy/Walawari  
 Diver Duck Burain/Gurrupudu  
 Long neck Tortoise Minhala/Banda

**Marrang/Wurkigangjar**  
 Honey - Nose of the hive / trunk of Tree  
 Mewal - Honey Spirit being  
 Geckos (fat tail), Frilled Lizard Ngalhardi  
 Worms (dotted line), Catfish  
 Fresh water fish  
 Dilly bags Stone Axe  
 File Snakes Sacred Stone (women spins)

**Gurwinger**  
 Rarrks Bushes?  
 Quills!

**Rambanya**  
 Turtle  
 Spirit figures  
 fish (barramundi)  
 Rainbow Serpent (headhead)  
 Yams  
 Cornnet

**Gupapuyngu** 74  
 Murruga (Hog spines)  
 Niwuda (Honey) Diao  
 Ginginy (Catfish bones)  
 Minhala - Long Neck Tortoise  
 Nharang - Bush Apple  
 Raryuk - Barramundi  
 Dhulambuk Water lilies  
 Wuh'kura - Bandicoot Clams

**Malara/Murrungur**  
 Yalur Sea Snakes  
 Barracuda Warrnang  
 Garfish Lorrhan  
 Sea Urchins  
 Blood yams  
 Segmented yams - Galu  
 Guinness (forests) Djard  
 Rifle Fish - Gupla

**Liyagalawumir/Wudwin/Ga**  
 Wajilag Sisters  
 (Witig) Olive Python, Blue Tongue L...  
 Landscape design, Glider P...  
 (Kum) Fish, Fish boxes, Fish Trap  
 Skulls bones, Pythons, Sard...  
 Hollow Log, Conch Shell, seeds  
 (Dymy...)  
 Magpie Bees  
 Flying Fox S...  
 (4 lowest des...)

**Ganalbrngu**  
 Mundakul/Karrigarr  
 Skull/Bones Water Pythons, N.E. Wind  
 Gurruga - Black headed Pythons, Frogs (Gurruga)  
 Native Bamboo Spiders (Garr)  
 Yarru - Water lilies, Long neck tortoise Gurruga

Fig. 5. Djon Mundine, Notes regarding *The Memorial* groups and imagery, 1987-88. (Courtesy of the artist.) Illustrated in Jenkins, 2003: pl. 34, p. 42.

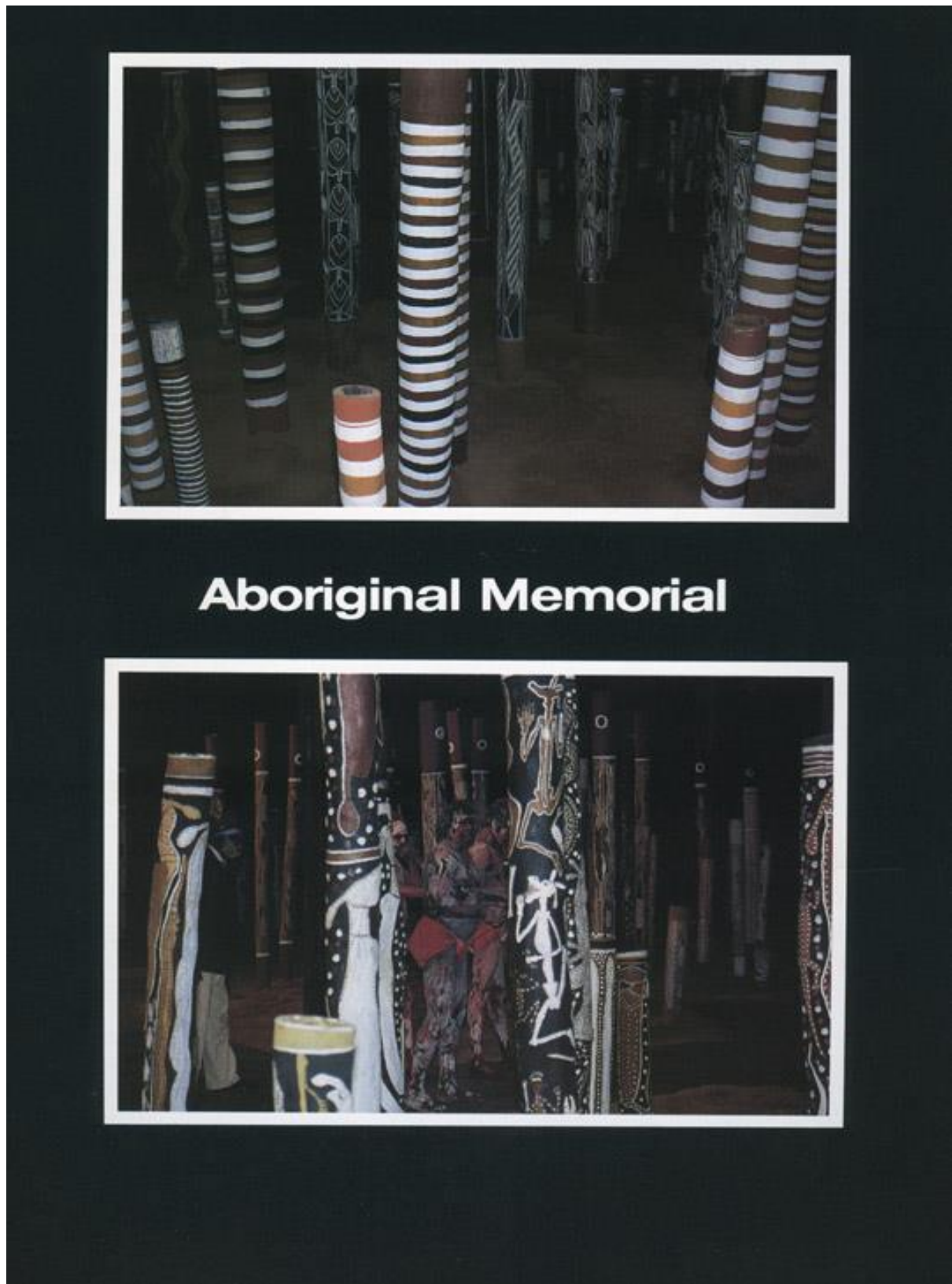


Fig. 6. John (Djon) Mundine, (ed.), brochure produced to accompany the installation of *The Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, 1988. (cover)



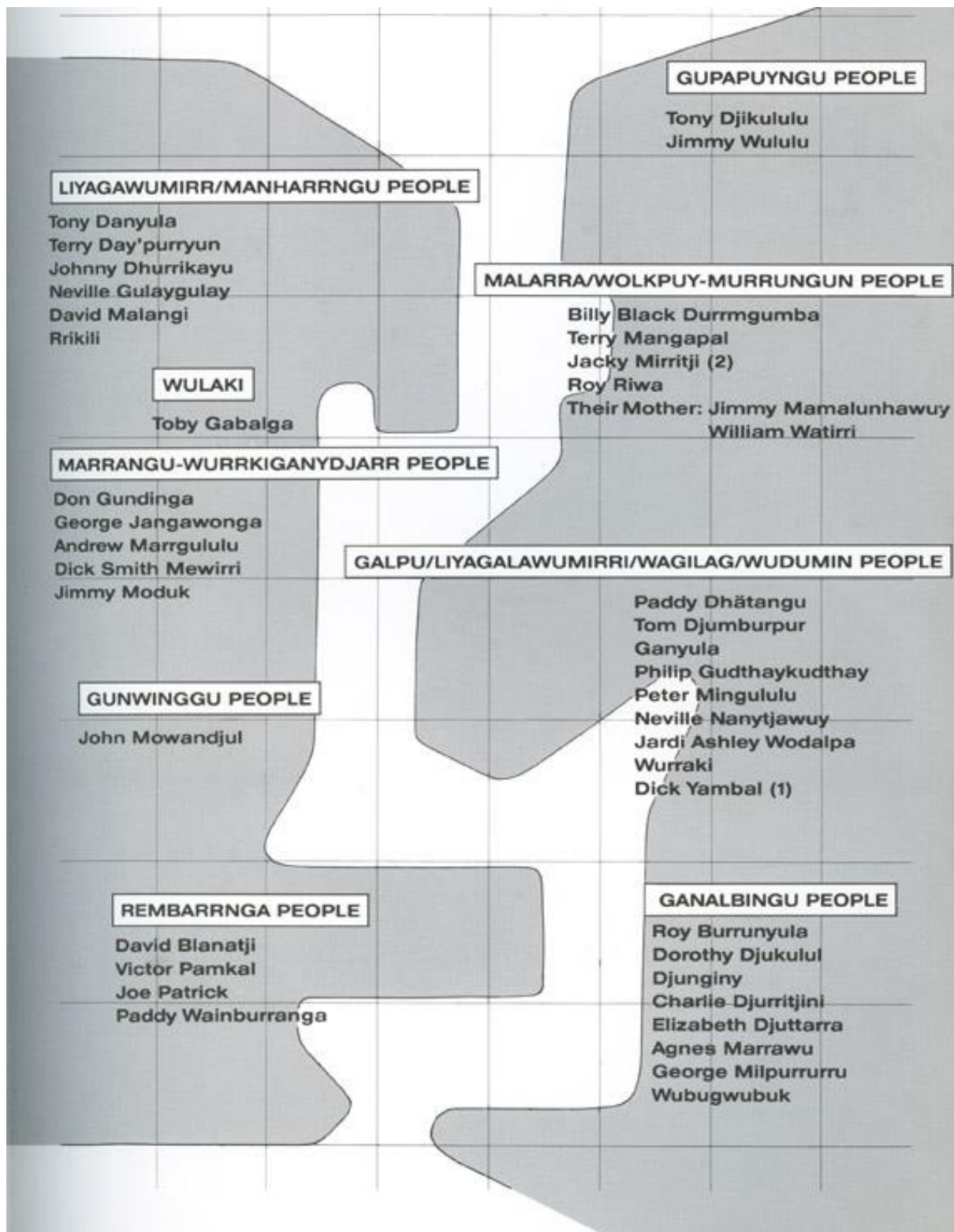


Fig. 7. Djon Mundine, Diagram of the Sydney Biennale installation, 1988. In John (Djon) Mundine, (ed.), brochure produced to accompany the installation of *The Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, 1988. p. 3.



George Milpururru and son – Ganabingu Group

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**Collection commissioned and permanently installed at  
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Fig. 8. John (Djon) Mundine, (ed.), brochure produced to accompany the installation of *The Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, 1988. (back cover)