

RELATIONAL AGENCY:
THE ELCHO ISLAND MEMORIAL

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Fig. 5.1 (left). The *Elcho Island Memorial*, 1957. Photographer Ronald Berndt, 1958. Courtesy the University of Western Australia, Berndt Museum.

Fig. 5.2 (right). The *Elcho Island Memorial*. Photographer Neil Lanceley, 2013. Courtesy Neil Lanceley.

In 1957 and 1988 two remarkable yet unrelated sculptural ensembles were created in the nearby Yolngu communities of Galiwin'ku and Ramingining in Arnhem Land, northern Australia. Each was entitled a "memorial"—the *Elcho Island Memorial* (1957) (fig. 5.1; Plate 1) and *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1988)—and each provides a case study for understanding the processes of relational agency. Both works reveal how

truly radical forms of art may emerge in transcultural contexts, yet each is very different in its conception and reception. Whereas *The Aboriginal Memorial*'s recasting of traditional mortuary rites into a large contemporary art installation met with acclaim when it was exhibited in the 1988 *Sydney Biennale* with several other contemporary installation artworks, the *Elcho Island Memorial*, an architectonic ensemble of modern materials, bright enamel paint, Yolngu and Western iconography (including text), with a powerful performative function, shocked the Yolngu community, failed to be recognised as art, and was interpreted as the demise of authentic Yolngu culture. After a half-century exposed to the elements in its original location in Galiwin'ku, the *Elcho Island Memorial* now barely exists (fig. 5.2). By contrast, *The Aboriginal Memorial*, which has undergone multiple relocations and re-designs at the hands of directors, curators and architects, is now permanently located in the foyer of the National Gallery of Australia.¹

The *Elcho Island Memorial* is little-known in the artworld and has barely been studied by art historians. What commentary there is relies on Ronald Berndt's award-winning anthropological account² or the constitutive character of its various interpretations. Few outsiders have actually made the journey to the remote location where it now lies in ruin.³

When Berndt's account was published in 1962, the very concept of Aboriginal art was a critical issue for both anthropologists and art historians. Since the mid-1950s contemporary Aboriginal artefacts had begun to gain acceptance as works of fine art in the galleries of public art museums, thanks, in part, to the advocacy of Berndt and his wife Catherine. Nevertheless, for Berndt, writing in 1964, there was still a "fundamental cleavage between an anthropologist who writes about Aboriginal art, and an art historian, art critic, or artist" who appreciated the work's aesthetic qualities in an intuitive and associative manner.⁴ In general, Berndt was uneasy about applying Western aesthetic concepts of art to the artefacts of a culture that, he recognised, has no word for art.

The point of the present study is not so much to claim another starting point for an Indigenous modernism—the emergent character and potential of which was so strenuously denied by Berndt throughout his writing—but

¹ For a discussion of *The Aboriginal Memorial* see my "Relational Agency: rethinking *The Aboriginal Memorial*," *emaj*, (forthcoming).

² Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (La Haye: Mouton & Co, 1962)

³ Berndt, "Preface," in *Australian Aboriginal Art*, ed. R Berndt and C Berndt (Sydney: Methuen Australia, 1982), 10.

⁴ Berndt, "Epilogue," in *Australian Aboriginal Art* (1982), 69.

to demonstrate how, to Berndt, the *Elcho Island Memorial* was unrecognisable as art, and that it has retained an ambiguous status ever since. Being reliant on Berndt's account, its subsequent interpretants (Morphy, Smith, Cubillo et al.) have never fully engaged with the radically innovative form and unfamiliar authorial structure of the *Memorial*, despite its regular inclusion in their respective histories.

In this essay I will explore how in its collective mode of agency the authorship, formation, interpretation and actual mode of representation of the transcultural work of art may be revealed. In his original analysis of the *Elcho Island Memorial* Berndt's methodology favoured an account of the precursor iconography of the individual elements of the work over questions of the originality of its intent or the equally innovative social relations of its production. It is the latter aspects that now seem crucial to an understanding of all forms of transcultural artistic production.

The *Elcho Island Memorial*

On a February evening in 1958 the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt were watching a slide show in the mission house at Yirrkala, on the northeast tip of Arnhem Land. They were shown a creative work that was, for them, entirely unprecedented, despite their wide-ranging experience of Yolngu artistic production. The slide depicted a complex wooden and concrete architectural infrastructure, complete with a "pulpit," as Berndt called it, plus pictorial artefacts that had been created at the mission community of Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island, 150 km to the west of Yirrkala, some six months earlier. The Berndts recognised forms and imagery known as *rangga*, the ceremonial objects normally restricted to the secret domain of "inside" ceremonies (specifically the *nga:rra* ceremony).⁵ They soon learned that the intention was to continue adding these ceremonial objects to the *Memorial*, and there were plans for a keeping place ("a special hut") for further paintings. This new kind of assemblage had already been named a "memorial" and had been installed for all to see in a public space in the community since August of the previous year. Within a few days the Berndts had made their way to Galiwin'ku.

The Yolngu people at Yirrkala had close ties to the burgeoning community that had grown around the Methodist mission established on

⁵ Ian Keen, personal communication, July 29, 2013.

Elcho Island in 1942.⁶ While still in Yirrkala, Berndt discovered that four of the senior men from Yirrkala had already travelled to Galiwin'ku to see the *Elcho Island Memorial*, and one of them, Mawalan Marika, had at some time after the revelation contributed two paintings and four *rangga* to the ensemble.⁷ Before he left for Galiwin'ku Berndt spoke to Mawalan. Despite having been a contributor, Mawalan told Berndt that he regarded the construction and exposure of the *Memorial* to the public gaze as highly problematic. Some women were reported to have been so disturbed by it that they had left the island.⁸

In Galiwin'ku Berndt's primary informant was David Burrumarra (1917–1994) who was recognised as the main force behind its creation.⁹ In August 1957 Burrumarra had “called out” to Yirrkala leaders to witness the public exposure of this work, with the result that Mawalan and three other countrymen had visited the *Memorial* some time in 1957, after it was first exposed.¹⁰ However it did not prove to be the success Burrumarra had hoped for. Berndt quotes “Mawalan and others” as saying:

As soon as the *mareiin* [sacred objects] were shown the people went mad. They became silly with *mareiin*. Mr Shepherdson... tried to stop them, but Burrumarra was too strong. Everybody blames Burrumarra! As soon as we heard this word, this new custom, all of us at Yirrkala were very worried—and we still are.¹¹

Berndt's encounter with the *Elcho Island Memorial* formed the basis of a considerable body of ethnographic and art historical references in the literature. The majority of Berndt's subsequent monograph, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*, was in its first iteration an essay which he had written in 1958 immediately after he and Catherine had returned to Perth, and which he then successfully submitted for the Royal Anthropological

⁶ In 1957 there were 138 adult Yolngu and twenty missionary staff at Galiwin'ku. (Bos, “Jesus and the Dreaming,” Canberra: Australian National University PhD thesis, 1988)

⁷ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (La Haye: Mouton & Co, 1962), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ Berndt had worked with Burrumarra previously at Yirrkala. Berndt uses the spelling “Buramara,” however the later acceptable spelling of his name is (David) Burrumarra, which is the form of his name I shall use throughout this essay. Burrumarra was the father of Terry Yumbulul, and was father-in-law to his biographer Ian McIntosh.

¹⁰ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

Institute's Wellcome Prize in the same year.¹² In an Appendix to the original essay, written after his second visit to Elcho Island in 1961, he revealed that the revelatory act itself remained a cause of considerable interest, despite there being nobody taking care of the *Memorial* itself.¹³ The cumulative impact of the installation of the *Memorial*, the consequences of its disclosure, and the subsequent political motives of its instigators, remained intensely provocative and became the aspect most discussed in the literature it generated. What Berndt could not have anticipated is that, half a century later, the complexity of the *Memorial's* innovative form—the aspect he found most difficult to read—seems remarkably predictive of other instances of Aboriginal art that have emerged out of similar circumstances of intercultural exchange.¹⁴

In this essay I argue that Berndt's particular anthropological aesthetic ideology framed all further considerations of the specific nature of the *Memorial* as a work of art by those who have contributed to the literature. As I shall demonstrate below, Berndt's preference for traditional forms of Aboriginal art led him to interpret the *Memorial* not as a work of art but more like a symbolic “shrine” (Peter Worsley's expression) to the processes of social transformation that were coming to a head on Elcho Island in the late 1950s.¹⁵ Referencing its “symbolic” function was the closest Berndt came to an analysis of its character as a work of art.

The Production of the *Memorial* and the Circumstances of its Disclosure

The Berndts arrived at Galiwin'ku six months after the moment of the *Memorial's* disclosure—that is, after its presentation to the public gaze of men, women and children, both Yolngu and Balanda (people of European or other non-Yolngu descent). Thus Ronald Berndt's encounter with the object itself, and his contact with the three men who had authored it, the “head man” Batangga (d.1960), (Wili) Walalipa (d.1983), and (David) Burrumarra (d.1994), was already subject to a degree of retrospective interpretation. Their discussions took place in circumstances where the

¹² It was subsequently completed by the addition of an eight page Appendix for publication in the *Cahiers de l'Homme* series in Paris in 1962, written following his second visit in 1961.

¹³ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 95–103.

¹⁴ For example, the Yirrkala Church Panels (1962–3), the Bark Petitions (1963), the Papunya murals (1971) and the lesser-known Yuendumu men's murals (1971).

¹⁵ Peter Worsley, “Review #58,” *Man*, March–April (1965).

memory of its production and the circumstances of its origins and revelation were already becoming eclipsed by the political debates it had triggered. Thus the social and political consequences of its production were already in a process of evolution and consequential political rationalisation on the part of Berndt's informants, principally Burrumarra.

Neither in his immediate accounts, nor subsequently, did Berndt accord sufficient significance to how, when, and by whom the elements of the *Memorial* had been made, over what period of time, and of what materials, nor the actual circumstances of their revelation. In fact he records very little in relation to the actual circumstances of the production of the *Memorial*. Almost in passing, he notes that "both men and women" made it and yet makes no comment on the fact that this could never have happened in traditional practice.¹⁶ The implicit suggestion in this observation is that, from the moment of its conception, the Yolngu authors' intentions were socially and culturally transgressive, in a manner Berndt chose not to explore further.

In John Blacket's historical account of religion and politics on Elcho Island, published in 1997, he relates the recollections of Batangga's son Dayngumbu:

In 1957, Batangga, with the help of Wili [Walalipa] and a younger elder, Burrumarra, led the people in a very significant action. Dayngumbu told me how the men went out into the bush where Batangga talked about God's ways and led them in prayer. Then they made some of their tribal *rangga* ... As the men and boys made these, they sang the songs of their totems and ancestors."¹⁷

According to Dayngumbu, who was in his early twenties at the time, Batangga had said to them:

If you're going to bring them into the open, the Lord will bless us. All the good things that we have in our life is the Lord blessing us. Your life, my life is what is important in Christ, not our totems! He wants us, not our totems ... This is something different happening in our life, that we're going to bring the *rangga* outside.¹⁸

¹⁶ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 45–46.

¹⁷ The reference to "boys" could mean young men at an appropriate stage of their traditional education. The reference to the participation of women could have been some peripheral action, still noticeable, especially if their participation was innovative in itself. I am grateful to Ian Keen for suggesting such qualifications.

¹⁸ Blacket, *Fire in the Outback* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1997), 59–61.

Dayngumbu also described the process of revelation as follows:

In the middle of the night, they all brought them out—quietly. So next morning, everybody was very surprised: the totems were all there and everybody had a special service there—in a Christian way, not any *bunggul djama* [Yolngu ceremony]. They offered themselves and these *rangga* back to God.¹⁹

Later, Burrumarra himself described the disclosure in similar terms: "There was no *bunggul*. We just brought them out and sat back."²⁰ This event has been the subject of multiple subsequent interpretations. From the account given by Ian McIntosh in 2000, citing Burrumarra as his informant: "For senior Yolngu, the action was an affirmation of the Aboriginal presence and a proclamation of sovereignty." And yet, as McIntosh relates, "No public statement was made to the missionaries, or government."²¹

Berndt's text, plus the recollection of Batangga's son, suggests that the very process of making the *rangga* for the future "memorial" had itself been reinvented as an "outside" ritual in which women may participate, and younger men ("boys") also. As Berndt and others have described, the role of women in contemporary Yolngu society was an issue that was foregrounded in the long-term political strategy initiated by the *Memorial's* authors.²² From these accounts, it becomes clear that the production of the *Memorial* was by no means conducted according to traditional customary ways of handling *rangga*, the most secret-sacred of all Yolngu artefacts. It suggests, to the contrary, that the innovative character of the objects that comprised the *Memorial* were possibly conceived as having a secular purpose—that by *indirectly* referencing the secret-sacred in their innovative forms and media, its authors hoped to avoid the ultimate transgression of exposing the traditional objects that embodied the deepest authority of the clan leaders.²³

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰ McIntosh, *Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming* (Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 104.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²² This was especially so given Batangga and Burrumarra's long-term campaign to empower women and disband the promise system. Ella Shepherdson's diaries relate that they were "on a campaign" on this issue from as early as 1952. (Shepherdson archive, State Library of South Australia, PRG933/6, 1952.)

²³ As Keen has observed, the *rangga* themselves were subject to ongoing interpretation: "a group's sacra should not be seen as a system of determinate (or discoverable) interpretations but as an open and strikingly creative system of

Berndt's accounts emphasise the "syncretistic" nature of this new concrete and sand *nga:rra* (ceremonial ground) in which the previously secret-sacred *rangga* were now displayed, including the one that incorporated a prominent crucifix. As I will show, it was this syncretic character, among other aspects, which prompted him to *not* conceive of it as a work of art.

Yolngu Motives and the "Adjustment Movement"

In 1958 Berndt coined the term "Adjustment Movement" in response to the complex processes of modernisation that were sweeping through Arnhem Land as a consequence of missions, the war, and government policies. In Galiwin'ku such processes were physically manifested in the creation of the "Memorial." Berndt's conception of the "movement" focussed on:

These few men, [who] with a fairly substantial following, are grappling with the problems of social and cultural change as they envisage them, at the level of practical manipulation. The way in which they have set about this, culminating in what I have termed an adjustment movement centred about a Memorial, is fundamentally rational and logical, despite its marked concern with the super-natural or non-empirical.²⁴

Berndt recognised that these political aspirations had become possible as a consequence of the "happy coincidence" of permissive attitudes to religion and economics on the part of the mission administration and government agencies, producing a complementary potential for a "*rapprochement* between the alien and the indigenous."²⁵ Later, he wrote:

The Memorial itself stands as a symbol of the potentially integrative nature of this movement. It represents a deliberate attempt, through manipulating indigenous ideology, to bring together separate *mada* [language groups] and *mala* [clans] to unite all eastern Arnhem Landers and even those beyond on the assumption that they have a common Aboriginality, a common cause.²⁶

potentially innovative interpretations." Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in Aboriginal Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 229.

²⁴ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

Thus the concept of an "Adjustment Movement" was entirely Berndt's idea.²⁷ By contrast, the prior conception of a "Memorial" was entirely that of its Yolngu authors. This was a term that was already in the vernacular when Berndt first saw the photograph of it in Yirrkala, and which was adopted by him as a convenient way of acknowledging the historical specificity of the ensemble without necessarily incorporating it into the canon of Aboriginal "art," about which he had already published several accounts.²⁸

The subsequent integration of the two terms (movement and memorial) by Berndt and others is highly problematic. It assumes that the concept of a "movement" pre-existed the "memorial," and that the *Memorial* therefore commemorated the concept of the Movement. Even though Berndt suggests the movement preceded his first visit ("In telling me about the Movement, Burrumarra...") such a prior conceptualisation appears nowhere in the exegetical account given by his Yolngu informants.²⁹ Once established by Berndt, however, this conflation of motive, authorship and event persists throughout the literature. As one sees from the embedded Yolngu texts, if anything the *Memorial* commemorates the formation of the mission, and the participation of the key Yolngu figures in that process and their continuing political aspirations. How that prior motivation was transformed into a metaphor for social and political change was, I suggest, a consequence of Berndt's intervention, his role as interlocutor, and the authorship of his interpretation of the *Memorial* in his 1958 essay and the subsequent monograph.³⁰

²⁷ The concept of the "Adjustment Movement" was first articulated in Berndt's Wellcome Prize essay, yet not published as the subsequent monograph until the year following his second visit.

²⁸ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 24 fn. 1. In looking for the original meaning of "Memorial," one finds that the term was adopted by Berndt from a statement by his informant, the chief protagonist, Burrumarra, whose English was fluent. Writing on the basis of his 1958 research experience, Berndt notes "There is no local equivalent of the term 'movement': the word 'Memorial' is used quite freely, but so is the ordinary word *nara*"—which means "men's sacred ground." In this text I adopt the contemporary orthography *nga:rra*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39 fn. 1.

³⁰ Much had already changed from the time of the actual revelation in August 1957 and that of Berndt's first visit the following year. The political momentum that had built around the *Memorial* was captured in the record of his discussions with Burrumarra and others, and elaborated in his analysis of the moment. That Burrumarra was later identified by Berndt as his key informant in the interpretations of the social implications and political consequences of the formulation of the Movement should however be separated temporally and

Berndt's adoption of the term "adjustment" signals his interest in the responses to the modernising effects of the mission-oriented social changes taking place around the Yolngu authors of the *Memorial*.³¹ Yet modernity (the modern, modernism) is not a term to be found anywhere in Berndt's texts of this time, even though it was a potential artistic development that Elkin was willing to entertain in the book on Arnhem Land art that he and his wife had co-authored with Berndt in 1950.³²

The *constitutive* meaning of the *Memorial* as an intercultural entity follows from Berndt's invention of the term "Adjustment Movement" and his understanding that the proponents were seeking "something in return for the erection of the Memorial."³³ Later authors tended to conflate Berndt's various translations and interpretations of the original Yolngu texts and the subsequent Yolngu exegeses that form the core of his account, as if the *Memorial itself* constituted a kind of "manifesto" or a "series of demands" for social and political progress within their community.³⁴ That is, the Yolngu authors' original intent was subsumed by Berndt's account of its subsequent politics, and, if anything, it was Berndt's text that constituted a "manifesto." However, Berndt's interpretation proved persuasive to subsequent readers as it emphasised the agency exercised by the Yolngu, by contrast to the imposed political

conceptually from the original motivation for the creation of the *Memorial*, despite the fact that Burrumarra was also identified as the "instigator" of that prior process.³¹ "Adjustment" was for Berndt a term which accommodated what he saw as the inevitability of modernity, recognising the developments taking place in Arnhem Land, and elevating his subjects above the intense contemporary discourse taking place around developmental processes in indigenous cultures internationally. For him it was a term whose "meaning [was] sufficiently clear... to make discussion of it unnecessary" in "an attempt to reconcile or integrate two different ways of life or two different cultural traditions." Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 25 fn. 2.

³² Elkin, Berndt and Berndt, *Art in Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1950), 115.

³³ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 85–86.

³⁴ Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 240; *Becoming Art* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), 62–63. Morphy cites Berndt's account of the leaders' expectations as constituting "a kind of manifesto of demands." Personal communication, June 24, 2013. More inventively, Cubillo sees the *Memorial* as the outcome of a "mythological warrant... as evidence of Aboriginal people's historical consciousness and their considered response to the impact of radical change." Cubillo, "The Politics of the Secret," in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Kleinert and Neale (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32.

processes of assimilation that were dominating the political discourse elsewhere in Australia at this time.³⁵ In his 1965 review in *Man*, Peter Worsley wrote:

In displaying their *rangga*, the aborigines are doing more than express[ing] a new sense of common identity; they are making claims upon the White Australian. They themselves, however, are also making offers. They are offering that which is the "quintessence of their culture": the *rangga*: goods which, to use Stanner's term, have an "inordinate" value in their culture. In turn, they expect reciprocity: the opening of the totality of the White man's culture to them.³⁶

From a reading of *An Adjustment Movement* it is by no means clear what the specific circumstances were that led to the production of the *Memorial* in the years before Berndt's arrival—other than the references to Burrumarra's social and political disquiet, and his seeing the creation of the *Memorial* as a strategy to achieve political gains: "for some years [Burrumarra] had been thinking... about the general problem of adjusting or bringing together traditional Aboriginal and introduced ways, in order to achieve the maximum benefit from the latter."³⁷

These passages in Berndt's account and the emphasis thus placed on Burrumarra's key role in the production of the *Memorial*, plus the subsequent articulation of the political agenda Berndt attributes to "the Movement," all call into question the extent to which a "movement" existed beyond the participation of the three mission-oriented leaders, plus the ten other named contributors, to its initial stages at the time of the actual production of the *Memorial*. And by the account given in the final section of Berndt's book, written after his second visit, it is clear that the idea of a political movement had failed to take hold, and it was to be a further two decades before a subsequent politico-religious movement emerged in the "Revival Movement" of 1979.³⁸

By 1958, the year of the Berndts' first visit, the political agenda of the leaders of his "Adjustment Movement" was certainly remarkable for its complexity and ambition. It involved religious politics, cultural politics (including the question of gender relations), external politics, plus the personal ambitions of the authors of the *Memorial*. Ian Keen attributed

³⁵ To place this in context, see Merlan, "Indigenous Movements in Australia," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34 (2005).

³⁶ Worsley, "Review #58," *Man*, March–April (1965), 64.

³⁷ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 39–40.

³⁸ See Bos, *Jesus and the Dreaming* (1988).

their motives to "the existence of contradictions and discontinuities in settlement authority, and a desire for a new social order."³⁹ However, by 1972 Kenneth Maddock was openly sceptical of the Yolngu politics that had been at play: "As is usual in politics the leaders were guilty of duplicity. Berndt does not bring this out in so many words, but he implies it by his reference to 'subtle manipulation and direction which ... speaks volumes for the leaders' resourcefulness and perspicacity."⁴⁰

By the time of Berndt's second visit three years later, much had changed. Following the unexpected death of the "head man" Batangga from an asthma attack, his son Dayngumba was lobbying for ascendancy to his role as supreme leader, and Burrumarra and Walalipa seemed to be playing a diminished role in the community. Other issues had captured the attention of key players, and the "Movement" seemed to have lost its *raison d'être*. A decade later, when Burrumarra and Walalipa were once again significant in their leadership roles, Burrumarra was interviewed by Robert Bos, who reported: "he had a sense of failure about the movement because of the 'damage' done to Yolngu law without attaining the sought-for unity and peace."⁴¹ Later still, in 1989, he told his biographer Ian McIntosh: "The Adjustment Movement was wrong, but we had to do it. I know I was brain-washed by the missionaries and there is no pleasure in looking back on it, but it served its purpose."⁴²

One might well ask whether Berndt's definition of a "movement" following his first visit amounted to a kind of unwitting intervention on his part. That is, would the idea of a "movement" have existed if it were not for Berndt providing Burrumarra with a receptive audience for the ideas he was generating in the period of time following the initial disclosure of the *Memorial*? And was Berndt's own agency already implicated in the political processes under way by the time of his second visit?⁴³

³⁹ Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in Aboriginal Religion* (1994), 277.

⁴⁰ Maddock, *The Australian Aborigines* (Ringwood: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972), 5.

⁴¹ Bos, *Jesus and the Dreaming* (1988), 170.

⁴² Ian McIntosh, *The Whale and the Cross* (Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1994), 110.

⁴³ On his second visit Berndt relates how he became implicated (against his will) in leadership struggles, and how Burrumarra was "disappointed" his book was not yet published "since it would, they assumed, have provided them with powerful ammunition in that it would have supported their point of view." Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 96.

The Ambiguous Character of the Form of the *Memorial*

The fact that the *Memorial* was comprised of an accumulation of *rangga*—albeit new forms of *rangga*, the like of which Berndt had never seen before—draws attention to the important place of this particular category of artefact within Yolngu society. Berndt reported the community having been "shocked" when, in the 1950s, they were shown films and photographs taken at the time of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, led by C.P. Mountford, and the later visit by Richard Waterman to Yirrkala in 1952, in which secret-sacred *rangga* were displayed.

We got a shock. We're not supposed to show these *mareiin*, these *rangga* to just anybody... And everybody saw it... we've got no power to hide (these *rangga*): they are taking away our possessions. Are we to lose all this? Our most precious possessions, our *rangga*! We have nothing else, this is really our only wealth.⁴⁴

That their *rangga* were subject to the mediating technologies of incomers was recognised by the Yolngu in other surprising ways. In Berndt's publications on Aboriginal art (1950, 1958, 1964) it was common practice to reproduce both *rangga* and other forms of art regarded as "secret-sacred" that had been collected by the authors. In the final part of his monograph Berndt relates how his previous book (*Djanggalwul*, published in 1952), once it had found its way back to the Yirrkala community, was itself regarded as "an important *rangga*."⁴⁵ Previously, in 1950, Berndt described the *rangga* as at the distant end of a spectrum of artistic production, as a kind of precursor artefact: "The art of making sacred *rangga* seems to be the oldest of all the arts."⁴⁶

One of the key issues Berndt never fully developed was a concept of the relation between *rangga* and the other categories of post-contact artefacts he was willing to accept as works of art. *Rangga*, both for Berndt and his contemporaries, were seen to be the precursors to the art that was made for the outside world, or that which was retrospectively integrated into the (institutionalised) canon of art. And, in their formal character, they were seen as both functional artefacts for intracultural ritual purposes, and as the carriers of mnemonic meanings, revealed (or not) to their professional interlocutors, the anthropologists, who made the first collections of such

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁶ Elkin, Berndt and Berndt, *Art in Arnhem Land* (1950), 34.

sacra. Thus even though *rangga* were illustrated in the first Aboriginal art books, Berndt and other anthropologists considered them to be a different category from the European notion of "art."

Much was at stake. As Morphy has subsequently expressed it, for the Yolngu "The *rangga* (sacred objects) as the ideological 'foundation' of Yolngu society could be thought of as central to or connected with all aspects of society and as representing an almost archetypal sign for Yolngu discourse."⁴⁷ So although Berndt recognised the *Memorial* as having been conceived as a "gift" to those who represented the outside world (missionaries, government welfare officers, teachers, etc.), he also understood it as existing closer to the precursor category of the restricted, deep secrets of past examples of such *non-art* objects, including those that he reported had been held back from the process of disclosure the *Memorial* so vividly represented.

Perhaps it was for these reasons that the *Memorial* was so conceptually challenging for Berndt. He failed to consider (or even see) either his participatory role as interlocutor, or as a potential contributor to its "syncretistic" political character, or its innovative formal characteristics. In 1964 he summarised his attitude towards innovative form in the following general terms: "Because of [the] close religious significance of much of Australian Aboriginal art, and because it was largely symbolic and concerned the perpetuation of the past in the present, there was a minimum of innovation."⁴⁸ With this reasoning, he concluded that the Adjustment Movement—and by implication the *Memorial* as the prime example of its effects—had been instrumental in the "deterioration" of traditional art on Elcho Island:

The bark paintings which I collected there [Elcho Island] early this year (1958) apart from a general deterioration of traditional art (paralleling the growth of an 'adjustment' movement in that island) show less preoccupation with detail, which is still (early in 1958) much in evidence in Yirkalla.⁴⁹

For Berndt, observing the social and cultural hybridity that was evident on Elcho Island was as close as he came to recognising the potential of innovation:

⁴⁷ Morphy, "Now You Understand," in *Aborigines, Land, and Land Rights*, ed. Peterson and Langton (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1983), 111.

⁴⁸ Berndt, "Preface," (1982), 4.

⁴⁹ Berndt, "Some Methodological Considerations in the Study of Australian Aboriginal Art," *Oceania*, 29 (1) (1958), 34 fn. 22.

On the one hand much that can be broadly termed traditional is still a vital part of the contemporary scene. On the other hand the whole region has been subjected over a long period to alien impact, so that much of what we have today is not 'traditional' in an indigenous sense but a combination which is partly Aboriginal, partly European.⁵⁰

In this sense the innovative material and formal characteristics of the *Elcho Island Memorial* was anathema to Berndt, proscribing any recognition of its radical potential significance as a work of art on his part.

The Status of the Yolngu Texts as the Origin of a Constitutive Literature

As well as Berndt's account of his encounter with the *Memorial*, the reader has the remarkable good fortune of being able to access the texts written by the artists themselves, painted on or embedded in the *Memorial*, as photographed and translated by Berndt. These inscriptions provide one with unique access to the Yolngu account of their intentions and their motivations. In his detailed transcription and translations of these inscriptions Berndt ascribes a political purpose more clearly oriented towards its Christianising agenda. As Burrumarra relates:

We began to think of this Memorial, a memorial for the [Yolngu]... The Bible came to our hearts and to our minds—it spoke of graven images, and we thought of our *rangga* [sacred objects]. The word of God made us ashamed... And we began to think of the Memorial.⁵¹

The embedded texts reveal an original intent to *memorialise* (to "commemorate" is the way Berndt expresses it) the establishment of the Mission, and the roles of those involved in that historical process. These texts also serve to assert the politico-religious authority of the two senior leaders cited, Batangga and Walalipa. Arguably, the political strategy of seeking to unify the interests of all the clans, as related by Burrumarra, was its most ambitious agenda. In this respect, it was the association of the Christian leaders with the depiction (or representation) of the *rangga* that served to intensify the authoritative (and therefore political) effect of the whole ensemble. Berndt concludes: "The *Memorial* itself is intended to symbolize this *bungguwa* [leader] solidarity."⁵² That is, Berndt's perception

⁵⁰ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 73.

of the intent of the three primary authors/artists to enhance their political and religious status provided him with the basis for his conception of a political "movement."

As the *Memorial* itself has become more and more physically degraded over the half-century of its existence, most of these texts are no longer legible. However one can still see a crucial part of this document (inscribed in concrete, like a foundation-stone) that shows the kind of detail to which Berndt did not attend in his analysis (fig 5.3). This text, one of those which he introduces as "commemorative," was translated by Berndt as follows:

August 1942 this mission came back from Milingimbi. [It was] brought back and made here by Mr. Shepherdson, Mr. Shepherdson, [repeated] here sat [made the settlement]. Long time south 15 [years] Milingimbi and 15 Galiwin'ku 30 years altogether at this time 1957. Father [Shepherdson] sat [made settlement] here north side [North Australia] this side [Arnhem Land] long years.⁵³

What little Mission Superintendent Harold Shepherdson ever had to say about the *Memorial* was summarised by his recollection some thirty years later:

The Elcho Island Yolngu inaugurated the movement and were of course encouraged by me. Burrumarra had quite a lot to do with it, he was the chief spokesman ... These madayin would not normally be shown in the open. To me it was a great step. It was linked with the headmen agreeing together not to have ceremonies that conflicted with what they understood of Christian values. Yolngu in other areas predicted dire consequences because of the movement. I don't remember any reaction from the Church as it only concerned Elcho at the time. The movement held for many years but lately many Yolngu have turned back ... I can see it happening in my mind's eye.⁵⁴

However at the time, Shepherdson was concerned that political change was proceeding too quickly. In a speech to the Village Council that had been formed in the years between Berndt's two visits he said: "Our people are being pushed at a pace too fast for their own good."⁵⁵

One element revealed by the photographic record that was overlooked by Berndt is significant: Shepherdson's name is repeated twice because the

⁵³ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 48–49.

⁵⁴ McIntosh, *The Whale and the Cross* (1994), 105.

⁵⁵ Shepherdson archive, State Library of South Australia, PRG933/6.

second time it is inscribed not in capital letters, as with the rest of the text, but in the style of a signature. We will never know whether Shepherdson himself inscribed his signature in the *Memorial's* concrete foundation stone, or whether this was a replica-signature, included by the Yolngu authors, as if to lend the mission's authority to the constellation of objects arranged on the *nga:rra* ground beside the church. Such a confirmation of the leaders' *authority* was a crucial purpose for the whole enterprise, as we shall see below. In reality, it was the Yolngu's own texts inscribed on the *Memorial* that were, literally, its foundational texts. While Berndt translated these texts, he never interpreted them.

Interpreting the Meaning of the *Memorial*

In searching for the Yolngu understanding of the term "memorial" one needs to recognise that what Burrumarra and Berndt each meant by the word "memorial" may have been quite different.⁵⁶ For instance, in a different context, Burrumarra refers to the Nabalco factory at Melville Bay, constructed on a sacred site, as a "memorial" to his mythical ancestor Bukulatjipi.⁵⁷ In this sense one could argue that the *Memorial* was as much *in memoriam* to the loss of traditional pre-Christian ways as anything else, and yet, with the reality of its exposure, on the evidence of the Yolngu texts, the *Memorial* had become much more. Equally, one could see the *Memorial* as "commemorating" (which was Berndt's expression) the advent of modernity that had arrived twenty-five years earlier with the establishment of the Mission.⁵⁸

In the context of the changes to traditional practices and beliefs, as Berndt observed, following the banning of "most of the great sacred rituals" and the elevation of new hierarchical mission-related social structures and controls on Elcho Island, this new non-secret form of

⁵⁶ Ian Keen observes that a *nga:rra* ceremony is often performed in memory of a recently deceased leader, or someone thought about to die. Personal communication, July 29, 2013.

⁵⁷ McIntosh, *The Whale and the Cross* (1994), 5–6.

⁵⁸ I follow Charles Taylor's definition of modernity as "that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)." Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture*, 14(1, Winter) (2002), 91.

ceremonial ground in which the new syncretic “performances” or “sermons” were enacted, dramatically signified the advent of the new.⁵⁹

By their authorship of the ensemble, and their control over the revelation of the *rangga*, the mission-oriented instigators of the *Memorial* were asserting both their authority and the capacity of their leadership into the future. Similarly, the construction of the new kind of hybrid *nga:rra* ground signified a kind of control over the public performative space of political and religious discourse. Equally, the manipulation of new technological forms signalled the authors’ familiarity with, and power over, the new materials and technologies of modernity.

In the central section of *An Adjustment Movement* Berndt concentrates on an extremely detailed iconographic analysis of the *Memorial* and the *nga:rra* in which it was embedded. And yet, by reducing the complex forms of the *Elcho Island Memorial* to a set of icons, it was as if all he could see were the references in the imagery to their traditional antecedents. Despite the fine detail of its descriptions (carefully rendered as a plan, and with line drawings of each element) by which Berndt spells out the origins of each of the *rangga*, their makers, and the symbolic relationships implied by their arrangement, nowhere does he step back and interrogate the ensemble as a singular entity.⁶⁰ Neither does he examine the significance of its self-evident modernity, as evidenced by its “European” materials—its machined timber, concrete infrastructure, non-traditional colours and enamel paint with which the *rangga* were rendered. Such elements enabled the whole to be seen as an array, mounted on rectilinear plinths in a field of concrete, each supporting multiple objects (the new versions of the *rangga*, plus the paintings, and the text-panels) all of which can be seen as an elaborate frame for the “pulpit,” constructed so that the Yolngu preacher (in most instances the “head man” Batangga) could be immersed in these symbols of authority, as Berndt’s photographs reveal.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 99.

⁶⁰ He describes how the individual *rangga* are personally relevant to the leaders and their political ambitions, how certain meanings remained secret to a few senior leaders, and the consequential effects of the dominance of the Yirritja moiety clans.

⁶¹ It may well be that what we now interpret as signs of modernity could have then been the result of a strategy to keep the old and the new at one remove from each other.

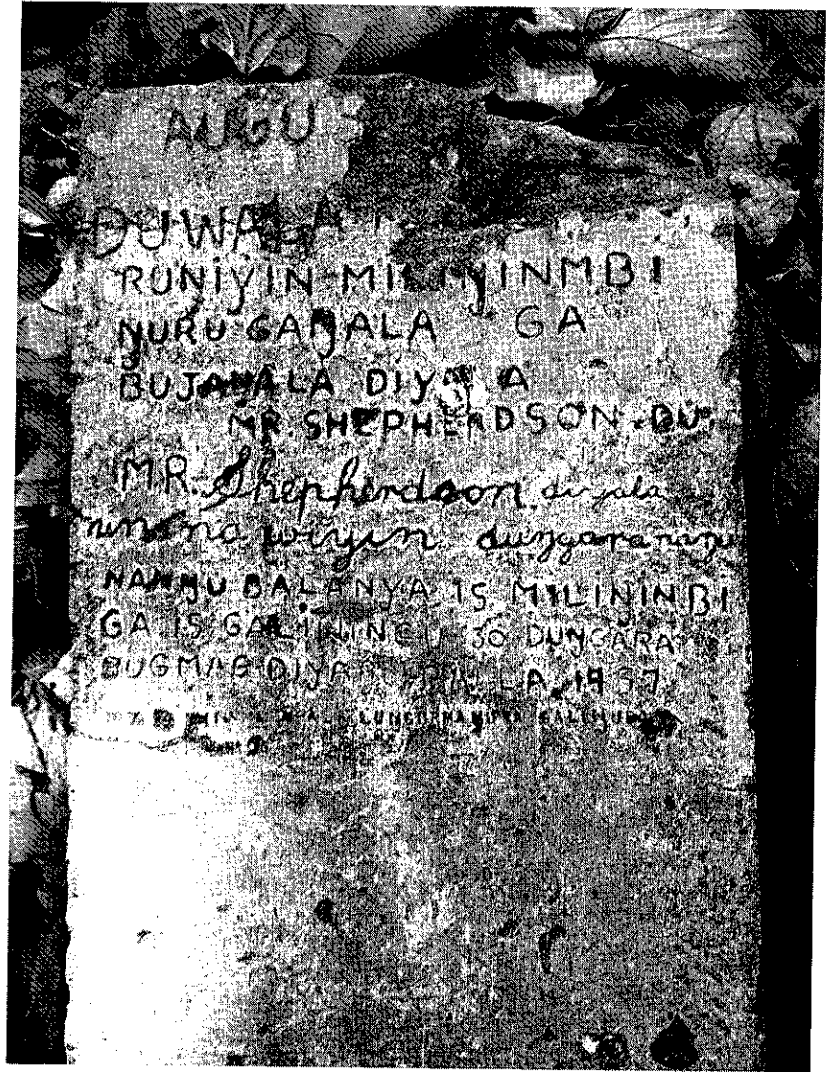


Fig. 5.3. The *Elcho Island Memorial*, 1957, “Commemorative” text inscribed in concrete. Photographer Neil Lanceley, 2013. Courtesy Neil Lanceley.

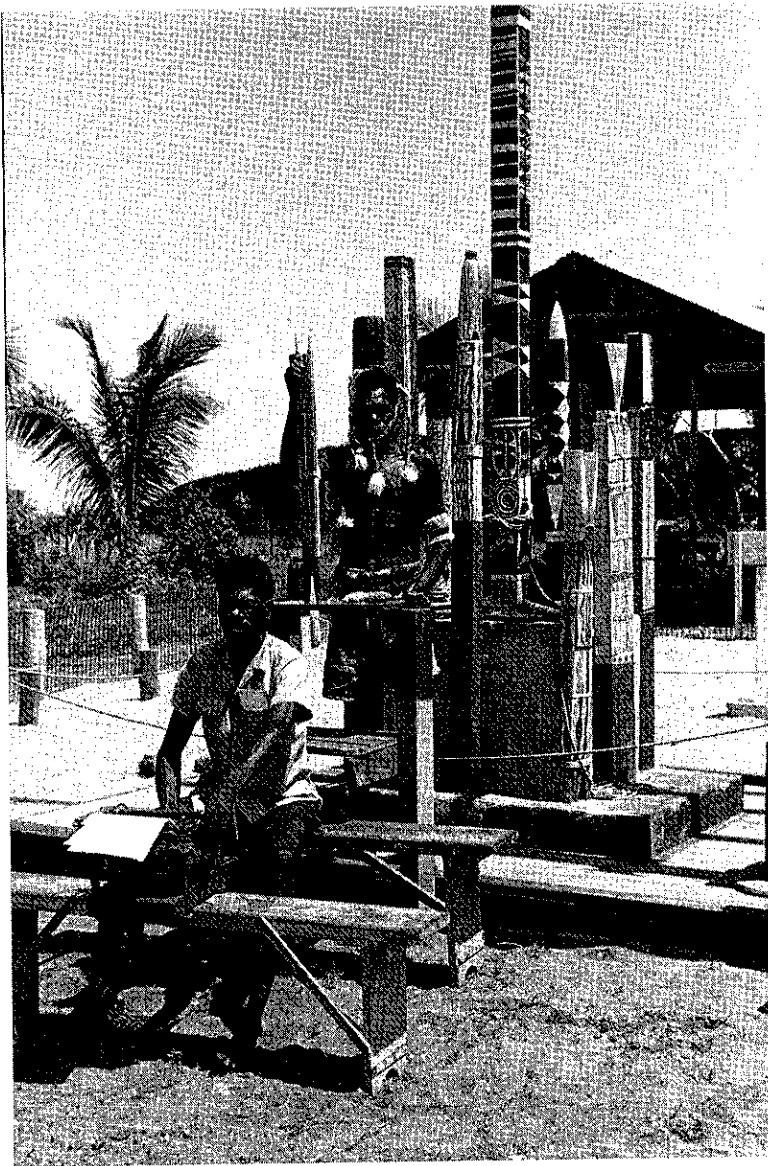


Fig. 5.4. The *Elcho Island Memorial*, 1957. Photographer Ronald Berndt, 1958. Courtesy the University of Western Australia, Berndt Museum.

Despite the fact that it was an ensemble worthy of interpretation as a new kind of entity, or, as one might now suggest, an entirely new kind of art, such conceptions were not available to its authors, or to Berndt, at the time. The *Memorial* stands as an extraordinary instance of the capacity of remote Indigenous artists to respond creatively to the advent of modernity. And yet it was as if Berndt was blind to these aspects, insofar as he didn't know how to classify the *Memorial*, or what to call it, given that it certainly did not fit any of the categories of Aboriginal art that he was concurrently writing about for *Oceania*, or for that matter any type of art as he understood it.⁶²

Other Ways of Interpreting the *Elcho Island Memorial*

If one looks at the *Memorial* in its singularity, as a complex structure of forms and materials, its radically innovative character predominates. The configuration of the seventeen sculptural forms of the *rangga*, when viewed in conjunction with the structural elements by which they are integrated—the concrete infrastructure, “the pulpit,” plinths, ropes, signage, the paintings and other artefacts “stored” within the ensemble—presents one with an amazing concatenation of unfamiliar and non-traditional forms and colours. And yet the drama of its presence is not in itself unusual for the Yolngu, whose ceremonies are often “operatic” in their scale and dramatic effects.⁶³ Its religious syncretism, combining Christian with Yolngu iconologies, was equally dramatic and innovative, and one could add, transcultural.

One of the most strikingly inventive characteristics of the *Memorial* was the materials used in its construction, and their treatment. Most of the structure was made from the machined cypress pine that was produced in Shepherdson's mill, which imposed an unusual rectilinear spatial character on the groupings—itsself reflected in the rectangularity of the *nga:rra* ground and the concrete structures and plinths in which the *rangga* were embedded. Some of these square-section timber elements—themselves the product of industrial production—were carved in low relief, or engraved, or assembled before they were painted.

The painting of the objects, in enamels, in a strikingly non-traditional palette of bright red, green/blue, black, white and grey, was applied both to

⁶² Berndt, “Some Methodological Considerations in the Study of Aboriginal Art,” (1958).

⁶³ “Operatic” is a term I owe to Djon Mundine as a way of describing the sensory complexity of ceremonial performances.

the designs on the sculptural forms of the *rangga* and to the concrete plinths on which they stood. The status of the actual paintings included in the ensemble is itself an issue worthy of attention. Paintings, as such, were the easiest elements of the *Memorial* for Berndt to accept as art. He describes them as "sacred" paintings. However, these paintings had intrinsically innovative material qualities that Berndt describes, but never interrogates. They were painted in the same "European" paints (and presumably colours) as the *rangga*, and on synthetic supports—one of which, with four images, was painted on a "plank," and the others were painted on "introduced board." Curiously, such details as these were not subject to any interpretation, whether by Berndt, or others.

Equally, the arrangement of forms, designed to accommodate the integration of the performers (as revealed in Berndt's photographs, or those published by Douglass Baglin) would have been entirely novel to its Yolngu audience. Other elements in Berndt's account signify the modernity of its effects: the costume worn by Batangga photographed posed as if delivering his "sermon," the signage, (which presumed literacy on the part of its audience, or which deployed literacy as a marker of authority) and remarkably, the role assumed by Burrumarra, who is posed with a typewriter in one of the photographs as, presumably, he recorded Batangga's words for posterity (fig. 5.4).⁶⁴

In another sense, the circumstances of the *Memorial's* complex formal character reflect the collective agency of its production. It was made by a group of people according to the plans of a few who exercised their hierarchical authority, with the direct or indirect involvement of others, and with cross-cultural effects and consequences, as indicated above.

Twenty Years Later it Still Didn't Look Like Art

For the next two decades, the only people who were aware of the existence of the *Memorial*, or who had seen Berndt's images, apart from those who actually visited Elcho Island, were those who read the anthropological literature of the time. Nothing about the *Elcho Island Memorial* appeared in the art historical literature until the early 1980s.

In 1982, together with his wife Catherine and John E. Stanton, Berndt published *Aboriginal Australian Art: A Visual Perspective*, in which the *Elcho Island Memorial* is afforded three colour photographs. However the *Memorial* fitted none of the Berndts' former stylistic categories, and was too far from their preference for the traditional to be admitted to their

⁶⁴ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), plate 5A.

canon of Aboriginal "art." The text describes the *Memorial* not as a work of art, but as the "central locus in the Elcho Island Adjustment Movement, a syncretistic development that drew upon and emphasized traditional cultural features."⁶⁵ Berndt, it seems, could only see the *Memorial* as the end of something rather than as a beginning.

One might argue that the *Memorial* was at the outset a complex creative invention that was a visual, textual and architectonic *representation* of the realm of the secret/sacred. That is, it was a creative work that kept at one reserve the authenticity of the original sacred *rangga*. Seen thus as a representation of the *rangga*, the non-traditional media and innovative forms chosen for the work are crucial signifiers of the authors' capacity to invent a *mediated* mode of visual discourse—between the authors and their kinfolk (men, women and children), between the authors and their non-Christian kin, and between the authors and the missionaries, European outsiders and occasional anthropologists who were a part of its audience. Its mediatory character is evidenced, quite literally, in the foundational texts embedded in and on the *Memorial* itself and, presumably, in the lost records of Batangga's performances shown being typed by Burrumarra in the Berndt photographs.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out to explore three aspects of the historical interpretation of the *Elcho Island Memorial*. Each aspect poses a challenge to the constitutive literature that has been built on the particular aesthetic ideologies established by Ronald Berndt and subsequently adopted uncritically by his successors in the anthropological and art historical literature.

The first is his resistance to innovation, and therefore his inability to recognise the *Memorial* as a work of art. Contextually, the concept of the new, or the attention then being given to contemporary art in the cosmopolitan art centres of the world, were not likely to have been influential in Berndt's thoughts in the 1950s and '60s. Hence his prickly relation to the ideas espoused by Tony Tuckson in their 1964 volume coincides with his rejection of innovation as a consequence of commercialism. He saw both innovation in art and the advent of modernity as acting in conflict with Aboriginal tradition, and therefore in opposition to the intrinsic values of Aboriginal art. In the case of the *Memorial*, the

⁶⁵ Berndt, Berndt, and Stanton, *Aboriginal Australian Art: A Visual Perspective* (Sydney: Methuen Australia, 1982), 85.

degree of innovation was itself so radical, and its intercultural social and political implications so profoundly unlike the accepted role of art Berndt shared with his contemporaries, that it seems he could not even conceive of the *Memorial* having a legitimate place in the canon of Australian art.

Secondly, the analytical methodology he adopted—iconographic and stylistic analysis plus a generalised sense of symbolic function—set limits on his interpretation of the *Memorial*. Neither Berndt nor his successors in the literature were alert to concepts which might have revealed its contemporary significance in a more comprehensive way. The complementary potential of iconographic and formal analysis—exploring the complementarity of anthropology and art history—might have revealed how the profoundly radical character of form and materials has enhanced the *Memorial's* potential significance as an icon of modernity. As I have shown, Berndt's detailed iconography reduced the subject matter of the elements of the *Memorial* to image analysis (subjects, meanings, relations, precursors, function) whereas the analysis of form enables the additional examination of the significance of media, materials and dimensionality—including, in this case, the provision for the inclusion of its human actors as a significant component of the whole ensemble. To limit his analysis to the imagery of its constituent elements that could be identified with tradition was to exclude a crucial dimension of its social and cultural efficacy that arose from its radical novelty. It was, I argue, much more than the "symbol" of a "movement."⁶⁶

Thirdly, there is the question of what Berndt implied when he referred to its *syncretic* character. In this sense, given his role as interlocutor and interpreter (and publisher) he can be seen to have played a role that implicated him in the complexity of the creative socio-political exercise in which he became involved. From the set of roles played by those involved in its production to its function as an expression of religious and political authority, the social relations of both its production and reception acquired a distinctive transcultural dimension, in which Berndt himself had played a crucial part. In these circumstances, the *Memorial's* novel agentive character, with its multiple players, perspectives and effects, was more like the production of film or theatre, and, within the conventions of the day, it was radically *unlike* a work of art.

When re-reading Berndt's original text, what emerges is his sense of excitement at his engagement with the circumstances of the *Memorial* as they had developed in the six months of its existence before he first encountered it. In this regard, and in relation to the Yolngu instigators'

⁶⁶ Berndt, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), 63.

subsequent account of their political intent, his role as interlocutor and author becomes almost synonymous with their roles as artistic authors and political activists. Berndt's use of the term "syncretistic" to describe the *Memorial* was, from his perspective, a term of exclusion from the category of art. Equally, its transcultural intent and effects were diametrically opposed to the priority he gave to tradition. Today, however, the transcultural social relations of production and the relational character of artistic practice are defining characteristics of much contemporary art. Thus we can now ask: could Berndt have even conceived of the suggestion that we might now regard this dramatic ensemble of artefacts as not just a work of art, but also as a transcultural and relational artwork?

Over the half-century since its production, the concept of "art" has changed around the *Elcho Island Memorial*, and one can now value elements and characteristics that (despite being out of phase) enable the transcultural recognition of its collective agency, its challenges to conventions, its transgressions, the novelty of its forms, and the multiplicity of its narratives, including its political and cultural effects. Indeed, one might now see in it a precursor to the dominant characteristics of contemporary art. As the world has changed around it, the *Memorial* has "become" art—to use Howard Morphy's felicitous expression—albeit in the most accident-prone (and yet prescient) manner.

One problematic aspect to our understanding of the work is this diachronic dimension—that is, how its meaning and significance has changed over time. Paradoxically, as its physical condition has diminished its representation in the literature has expanded. In this sense, its place in the history of Aboriginal art is primarily a consequence of its visibility in the literature that now constitutes its audience's experience—thanks, chiefly, to the publication of Berndt's original photographs in 1982. Thus we can now ask: In what sense is it (now) a work of art? And can it now be seen as a kind of *relational* artwork? To ask such questions risks a kind of retrospective value projection with which I am reluctant to engage. Nevertheless, in its use of "modern" materials, the innovative manipulation of forms, its challenges to convention, and in the willingness to generate novel effects (immersion, transgression, challenge), as well as in its political consequences, it makes one think again about the origins of relational art and other aspects that now galvanise thinking about contemporary art.

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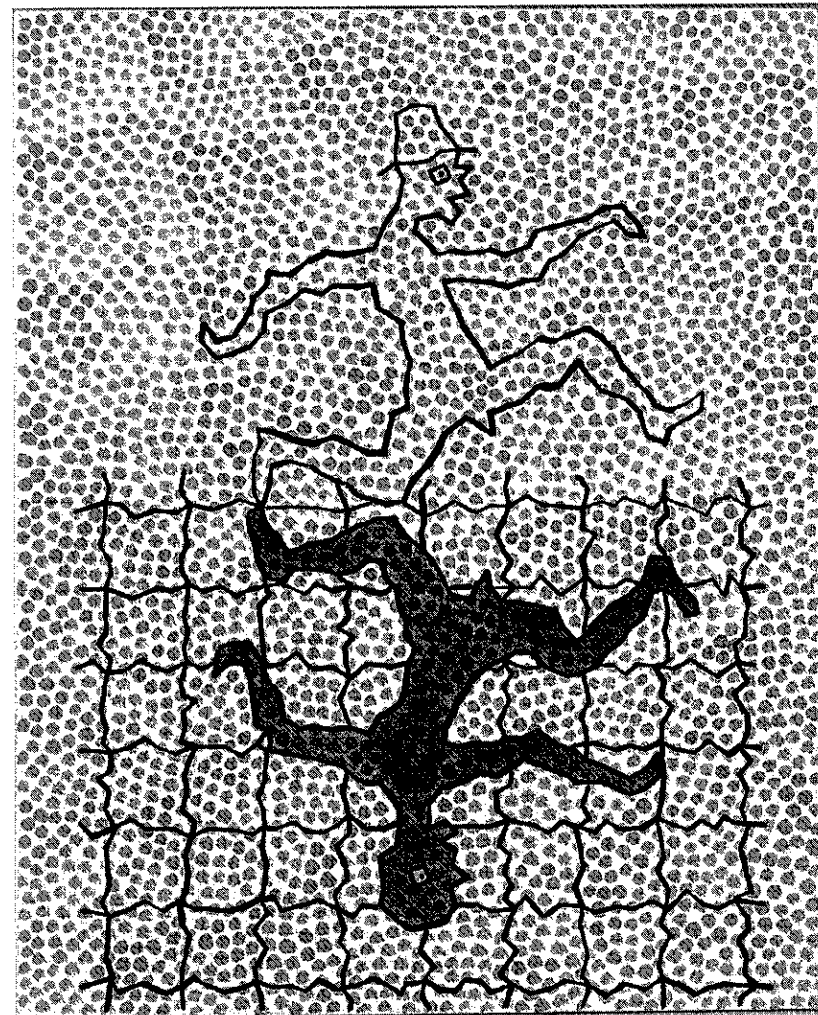
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Gordon Bennett, *Polyptych (Running Man)*, 1993, detail