

The symposium ‘Art and Appropriation post The Apology’, was held at the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts, Sydney, 1-2 May, 2009. The conference drew together artists, academics and writers to discuss issues surrounding indigenous art and appropriation in the context of the Australian government’s apology in 2008 to the ‘Stolen Generations’ and in an Australia that continues to become more diverse in its ethnicity and philosophies and in the wake of recent debates about freedom of expression. The symposium comprised three sessions—‘The Nature, Roles and Value of Art: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Perspectives’, ‘Indigeniety and Appropriation’ and ‘Freedom of Expression, Limitations to Freedom of Expression and Protocols’. The following three texts by David Garneau, Felicity Fenner and Rex Butler were presented during the symposium.

thoughts on inappropriate appropriations



DAVID GARNEAU

Every picture you make in your mind or on a canvas is informed by previously seen images. Art depends on borrowing, combining and reworking things already seen. If all were equal, the art field would be a polyphonous give and take across cultures. However, the playing field is uneven. Some people have more access than others to money, materials, visual resources, education, travel and markets for their products. When privileged people ‘borrow’ visual ideas from less enfranchised people, such takings are not simply expressions of creative licence, but are also an exercise of power.

My mother used to volunteer at a penitentiary (in Canada). She is a calligrapher who taught these tough men delicate lettering. The inmate artists were popular, because for a fee they would make exquisite cards for their friends to give to their sweethearts. They were also famous for inventive tattoos. One fellow, whose left arm was missing, told my mother this story of double misappropriation. Years earlier, he was in a San Francisco tattoo parlor, admired some flash and had it reproduced on his arm. He was happy. Life’s progress sent him to prison, where his ink was much admired. Among the curious, though for proprietary reasons, were members of an outlaw motorcycle club who noted that the tattoo was one of theirs—and later that night retrieved their property.

Not all appropriations are theft. Appropriation is the making one’s own something that belongs to another. Theft is misappropriation—the acquisition of property without either the rightful owner’s permission or a public sanction. People misappropriate cultural property because they are ignorant or assume that they can get away with it. It is currently popular to get tattoos from cultures not one’s own. Those who do so had better watch for Haida or Maori bikers!

Some wonder why indigenous artists are applauded when they appropriate and distort Western cultural images, while White artists, who quote Aboriginal images and styles, are pilloried. Contemporary indigenous artists are bi-cultural. They were raised in the Western tradition as surely as their non-Aboriginal colleagues and so have the same right to speak that visual language—and correct its misrepresentations. White artists ought not to imitate indigenous culture, because it is not theirs for the taking. When white people ‘borrow’ indigenous imagery or styles, the intent is rarely critical. It is for gain: financial, social or spiritual. Caucasians are not, for example, in the habit of hijacking unflattering pictures of them by Aboriginals and refiguring them to set the record straight. There is no need. The dominant culture produces innumerable images to reflect their many possible selves—some good, some bad—but there are plenty to either choose or ignore. Indigenous people, however, are represented less frequently, less accurately, less flatteringly and with less range. Until recently, Aboriginals were typically pictured as savages, antiques, or, the ever-popular “deficient subjects in need of charity or correction”. There is no wonder that some contemporary indigenous artists make an industry of correcting these mistakes and providing better examples.

When artists refer to their practice as appropriation, rather than misappropriation, they are asserting an *a priori* claim that their borrowings-without-permission are justified. The usual support for this declaration is the notion of ‘artistic licence’—the belief that creative people have an inherent right to take and use whatever they require to satisfy their artistic needs. This is not an argument, but an axiom; a claim that is only true as long as we believe it. This fiat is not valid always, everywhere and for everyone. Confidence in these claims erodes when the borrowing is no longer credible. When an artist’s copies are patently motivated more by money than higher ideals, appropriation becomes a euphemism for theft. Artists are granted artistic licence—or rather, their ‘borrowings’ are tolerated—under the condition that they generate a social value greater than the rights of the individual, whose property is being infringed. In cases of such transgression, the onus is on the artist or curator to demonstrate the benefit the violation provides before they show the work.

As an artist, I believe that artists should be unrestrained. As an Aboriginal person (Métis) I see that the dominant society’s drive to make everything available for view and use, at a price, is at odds with Aboriginal worldviews and that rampant appropriation is disrespectful and damaging to our cultures. However, I do not think this must trouble the artist. It would be nice if artists saw themselves as citizens as well as creators. I would appreciate it if they recognised their privilege and exercised power with care. But I know that ethical behaviour is not a necessary condition for being an artist. Ethics is, however, a requirement for curators. In their studios, artists should do as they please. But publication of their work is another matter, a social matter. When cultural misappropriations are shown in public galleries, the work is no longer the expression of an individual artist but becomes a State-sanctioned event. Artistic licence and freedom of expression are concepts not facts. These beliefs must not be blindly supported but their merits must be demonstrated if they are not to decay. Some artists stress the limits of these ideas and occasionally go beyond the pale—or at least where we thought the pale was until they exceeded it and we had to catch up. The curator’s job in these cases is not, as a proof of the freedom of expression, to admit any work simply because it violates a taboo. There must be better reasons. The work should only be admitted if the curator can balance the reasons for its display against its potential harms to the culture it appropriates. Potentially offended parties are likely to accept such exhibits if a sound argument is presented. If the curator refuses to contextualise the borrowing, one has to wonder if there are sound reasons and if ‘freedom of expression’ is a licence for the privileged.