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**A Politics Of Proximity:
Tjanpi And Other Experimental Western Desert Art**

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Abstract: This paper is about new and experimental Western Desert Australian Aboriginal art. It develops an analysis of Tjanpi, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) women's fibre art, as an exemplary experimental art form that invents tradition for the first time, and, in so doing, collapses otherwise stable boundaries between subject and object, human and non human. The vital materiality of Tjanpi production is shown to uniquely inaugurate a conjointly female specific way of being with one another, and of being in country; sentiment and sentience woven directly into the object form itself. This paper explores the radical politics as hand-made Tjanpi become hand-held by the consumer.

Keywords: Affect, sensation, phenomenology, anthropology of art

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Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kulpurlurnu (Patrick et. al., 2008, p.2), Artistic Director of the newly conceived, experimental Warlpiri festival Milpirri (which combines traditional ceremony with hip hop and break dance) describes Milpirri: "It was an unseen thing and now it is a seen thing".¹

Bruno Latour (1990, p. 65) calls experiments "an event and not a discovery" because experiments reveal that which will seem obvious only after their emergence. Experiments set in train irreversible convergences of people, objects, forces and affects; new configurations destabilize accepted knowledge in ways which become as if inevitable over the course of time. That is, experiments invent the history and the conditions that made them possible (not the other way around).

This paper is about Tjanpi as an experimental art practice in these terms. Tjanpi are not normally characterized as "experimental" art. They in fact may appear at least at one level as innocuous works of traditional women's handicraft—baskets, bowls, figurative soft sculpture—benign if not banal objects in both content and form. This does not however de-radicalize the gesture contained in their form, that is, the capacity to engender an encounter of tangible life world exigencies—providing a speculative analysis of the banal, the everyday, as itself a radical site of ontological experimentation and politics, as this paper explores.

Experimentation in remote Aboriginal art is neither new nor anathema to tradition. It may in fact be critical to what is that "tradition" can become for the future. Experimentation in this sense is not a matter of luxury. It does not arise in response to art historical or abstract philosophical debates. Art under occupation, as I have elsewhere identified Western Desert art, is art "as means of survival".² The necessity to materialize objects, memories and events in the present through "acts of imaginative rediscovery" as Stuart Hall calls it (1998) is critical if the past is not to become an archeological archive. Experimentation responds to the pressing issue of how cultural knowledge is to be kept potent and relevant through practice in the present. Experimentation is integral, potentially revealing what tradition is *for the first time*.

This paper asks how Tjanpi—an introduced experiment in women's fibre art practice—*became* traditional art. In less than two decades, since its experimental beginnings in 1995, Tjanpi has spawned a major Western Desert art industry, with over 400 artists from 28 communities across three states now producing Tjanpi. Ten years following its introduction, Tjanpi won the highest accolade, the prestigious Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Award, in 2005 for the 5m long life-sized tray back *Tjanpi Grass Toyota* by Tjanpi Weavers from Blackstone Community: Kantjupayi Benson (deceased), Shirley Bennet, Nuniwa Donegan (deceased), Margret Donegan, Melissa Donegan, Janet Forbes, Ruby Forbes, Deidre Lane, Elaine Lane, Freda Lane, Janet Lane, Wendy Lane, Angela Lyon, Sarkaway Lyon, Angaliya Mitchell, Mary Smith, Gail Nelson .

¹ This quote is from a larger context of discussion of Ngurra-Kurlu (itself a new form of collaborative working with Warlpiri) that Jampijinpa has developed with Miles Homes and Alan Box (Patrick et al 2008). Milpirri is an experimental Warlpiri Festival held bi-annually since 2005, developed by Jampijinpa in collaboration with Lajamanu Warlpiri and Tracks Dance Company.

² See Biddle (2010). My model is indebted to Watson's (2009) modeling of "art under occupation".





Fig. 1. Tjanpi Weavers from Blackstone Community: Kantjupayi Benson (deceased), Shirley Bennet, Nuniwa Donegan (deceased), Margret Donegan, Melissa Donegan, Janet Forbes, Ruby Forbes, Deidre Lane, Elaine Lane, Freda Lane, Janet Lane, Wendy Lane, Angela Lyon, Sarkaway Lyon, Angaliya Mitchell, Mary Smith and Gail Nelson, *Tjanpi Grass Toyota*, 2005. Photo by Thisbe Purich. Copyright NPY Women's Council.

What follows below is an experiment itself in critical form. My analysis does not quite “follow the object” in the strict sense of Latour or John Law (2004). I may have long-term expertise or “bush cred” as Fred Myers (2011) has dubbed it, but I have not done fieldwork in Anangu homelands and acknowledge in advance greater experts in the field.³ Nevertheless, my work shares a commitment to taking the object form as primary. Tjanpi is a deeply social fact and active agent both in a field otherwise dominated by either subject-centric analyses (anthropology) or more object-focused chronologies (art history). My task here is not to bring these two fields together (disinclined as I am to the promotion of either) but rather, a different task altogether, namely, how to keep the art I analyse alive in the terms it presents itself. Tjanpi arts are affective and performative, alive and enlivening, and these capacities are not secondary to what these works otherwise achieve. That is, I privilege here an analysis of the experimental art object as both encounter and event. Put simply, I argue that Tjanpi’s experimental success is due to its vital materiality⁴. This vitality, as it is produced and consumed in an active participatory sense, engenders implicated relationships between object and subject, human and non-human. This paper explores the implicated vital politics of Tjanpi as the works themselves demand.

Tjanpi is not about something else. It is *the* thing. Unlike acrylic Desert paintings, where the historical tendency has been to rely upon a Dreaming story or supplementary account

³ Eunice Porter, Judith Chambers and Polly Butler, Ngaanyatjarra Tjanpi artists from Warakurna, generously shared their knowledge and enthusiasm of Tjanpi with me at the Tjanpi Workshop, Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, 2011. Tjungkayi Phillipa Robertson provided cultural and linguistic knowledge as well as technical support for this paper. Michelle Young, NPY Tjanpi, provided invaluable assistance with image sourcing as well as providing reproduction permissions.

⁴ “Vital materiality” is a phrase I borrow from Bennett (2010) in which she develops a Deleuze-inspired framework for an object-centred ontology.



to tell what it *really* is, Tjanpi's unique capacity is unmediated; a potent "hit" direct to global audiences and markets. How has this (by no means small) achievement taken shape? What has the event of Tjanpi's experiment revealed?

I identify below what it is about Tjanpi that exemplifies its place within emergent remote experimental art, identifying four aspects of its imperative to engender what I call preliminarily a "politics of proximity".

Secular Beginnings

Tjanpi is not of course the only introduced experimental art form to have taken off geographically and aesthetically "like a grass fire" across the Western Desert, as Margie West (2007, p. 23) describes the spread of Tjanpi from its introduction at Blackstone in 1995, to its spread today across Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) communities and homelands today, traversing several hundred thousand square kilometers. That this was the same period of time in which mobile phone technologies went viral for the first time across the Desert, needs equally to be thought here. The new public intimacies and assemblages of hand held technologies and techniques (what networks are literally activated and demonstrated by activation—technologies, art etc.) is crucially important.

In Tjanpi, what we see is the mapping and making for the first time of an NPY collectivity through art. Rather than community based or art centre-managed, Tjanpi are made and produced across a pan-NPY-region (facilitated by the greater pan-regional NPY women's council.) Thus, a new and distinct assemblage (peoples, places, events, things: that is, the emergence of a new public identity) was forged by Tjanpi. Anangu homelands became known as, and by, handicraft and are arguably still better known for Tjanpi than acrylic painting (McLean 2010). Equally important (though un-remarked in Tjanpi art history to date) are its boundaries. Minoritarian arts by definition re-territorialize as they reconfigure established borders. The frameworks of traditional Aboriginal alliance, as von Sturmer notes (2010, p. 16) are the "opposite of inclusiveness; not them but us". Tjanpi is not practiced to the north or east of NPY country (which includes Warlpiri, Anmatyere and Pintubi peoples). Warlpiri women now say "we Yapa (Warlpiri) don't do that", even though it is clearly not the case that they can't technically do so (as exchanges between Ngaanyatjarra and Warlpiri at the Darwin 2011 Aboriginal Art Fair revealed).



Fig. 2: Dorcas Bennett, *Papa Pina Rikina Ninti Mulapa (Guide Dog with Good Ears)*, 2010. Photo by Belinda Cook. Copyright NPY Women's Council.



The Papunya Tula art movement (itself an experimental art) went viral in a not unparalleled move some two decades earlier. The introduction of high Dreaming forms to canvas for the first time was at the time slowed at any number of points by fierce debate (concerning the secret/sacred nature of revelation) in NPY communities particularly (see Mclean, 2010, and Biddle, 2007 discussion of Warlpiri). Tjanpi by contrast, began as an experiment in non-traditional object making (basket making) with non-traditional materials (e.g. imported fibres)⁵. Thisbe Purich began to teach coiled weaving at Blackstone in 1995 with jute string (later, the popular raffia would become the mainstay of Tjanpi production). Importing fibres, and the additional shop-bought and/or found wools, cottons, strings, plastic, wire (all of which have made their way into Tjanpi), as well as recycled tinned meat cans as the base of larger baskets, demonstrates a strategic and utilitarian ethos in utilizing whatever is at hand—found, imported, cheapest. This practice lends itself to any number of analyses of the inventive necessity of art from the margins and minoritarian aesthetics. That so-called “remote” Desert artists purchase raffia (produced in Thailand and Indonesia, and which forms the basis of locally-produced Indigenous art, is less paradoxical than a brute reality assemblage-affirmation of the asymmetrical flows and inequitable exchange that make Indigenous art *glo'cal* by definition. Acker and Altman (2006) show how the market price of Tjanpi baskets (and thus, in turn, what any particular Tjanpi artist is likely to receive for their art) has to be determined comparatively with the price of handcrafted baskets produced in Southeast Asia and India.

Crucially, in terms of experimentation, imported materials are less risky. As David Martin (2010) suggests in relation to Aurkun art production, because non-local materials are inherently secular, they possess no direct reference to country, to the transcendental (and dangerous) realm of Tjukurpa (Law, Dreaming) and its intensely political affiliations and groupings. That is, they are *safer* because they are *free* from the dictates of Law, Dreaming, Tjukurpa. Margie West (2007) and Thisbe Purich (2007) note that the fact that Western desert women did not have functional traditions associated with weaving (traditions of net making, bilum or bags as Top End weaving traditions have had) has freed up Tjanpi women to work more creatively with fibre materials than either their northern or southern neighbours.

Living Up: Animation

For cultures which are supposedly non-materially inclined, the process of weaving itself has to be considered in more than instrumental terms.

Tjanpi forms take shape through repetition whether by coiling, wrapping, stitching or a combination of all three. Wrapping, coiling, binding serves a double function of wrapping around, tracing a form, and creating it in the first place. That is, wrapping and coiling create presence; they bring into being by tracing what *already is*. This technique is not arbitrary. How things are made matters. Here, the experiment that is Tjanpi finds its greatest moment, for it is arguably not what the Dreaming as Law means but how it is made and remade that matters.

Tracing or coiling in Tjanpi is a critical technique, at least in my thinking, akin to the mark making I have written about at length elsewhere (Biddle, 2007), where outlining, the making

⁵ Antecedents to Tjanpi are dated to a number of sources. Pitjanjatjara weaving of rugs at Ernabella since the 1950s (Eikelkamp, 1999; West, 2007, p. 14); cane weaving undertaken by the Country Women's Association throughout the Kimberleys in the 1960s; raffia coiling practices undertaken in the Pilbara by missionaries at Mount Margaret (Nicholls, 2007, p. 39); to arguably, the wire sculptural forms of making animal and or human figures or “bush toys” as they have come to be called at Santa Teresa in the 1960s (Kimber 1999)—all “introduced” practices. Traditional antecedents include string, grass and feather objects, spun by spindle and thigh twining, made up into belts, head bands, string skirts, and/or other ceremonial objects, which were and are common practices throughout the Western and Central Desert (Purich, 2007; Nicholls, 2007). The fact that the Anangu word “manguri” (a term referring to the hair string rings for putting on the head under a coollimon or wooden dish to carry water, seed or a baby over long distances) is the same word used today to refer to Tjanpi baskets, is indicative of a perceived historical continuity in practice and perception. However, there is no doubt that the contemporary form of Tjanpi “was never a traditional practice in Central Australian societies” (Purich, 2007, p 29).



of Ancestral marks potent, alive and animate takes shape through tracing—dotting in acrylic painting, lines that outline and trace in body paintings. The subsequent outlining makes a flat, ordinary two-dimensional mark on the surface of the canvas into a three-dimensional, textural terrain, where Ancestral mark and human mark conjoin, and where the line or trace, dotting, creates a mesmerizing undulating verticality of movement between the visible world of the everyday public and the underworld invisible of the Ancestral realm. Dots and lines push, poke, trace, and thus create a 3D-like screen that moves, undulates, quivers, or “shimmers” as Howard Morphy (1989) has famously described the work of *raark* in bark painting, and which Jennifer Deger (2006) describes the animation of the shimmering screens in the work of contemporary screen digital photography and film⁶.

Tjanpi production developed from the making of baskets to the making of figures (animals, birds, people, Mamu/Ancestors) and things (tea cups, pots, trucks etc.). The life-like animus of Tjanpi is its discerning, if not disarming, affect. Non-human things, objects, are made redolent with sentience.⁷ Alice in Wonderland-like teacups come to life; pink and orange and blue broilgas poise to take flight. Potent almost perfect exactitudes, it is the vitality of mimicry that surprises, delights (and dismays, disturbs).



Fig. 3. Niningka Lewis, *Tea Party*, 2008. Photo by Emma Diamond. Copyright NPY Women's Council.

Larger than life, and almost over-determined, these works come as close to direct indexicality as possible, in ways which border on the *memento mori* of the tourist fantasy. Incarnate forms of animals, birds, dogs, humans index country and everyday life directly (that they are marketed as “craft” more than “art” makes this more the case). Touching/feeling reversibility

⁶ It is not by chance that recent work by PAW Media in the *Animating Jukurrpa* (2010) series and Yolngu film makers of Kunwinjku at Gozer Media and Yanyuwa in the visualizing Yanyuwa Narratives projects are all currently turning directly to the work of animation itself to bring to life literally Dreaming stories.

⁷ Arguably, the way in which the Anangu word *Tjanpi* is pronounced in English—*jumpy*, as in the verb *to jump*—helps to heighten the degree of animation associated in English with the object form, as in, *can't stand still*, *jumping with life*.



(Sedgwick, 2003): the hand made by Anangu becomes hand held. Tjanpi objects uniquely unite cultural traditions of labour, somatic memories and emotional associations woven into the object form, which are felt directly by the consumer.

Here the inseparability of touch and sight of “primordial perception” that Merleau Ponty (1993, p, 65) describes—the sensation of green in Cezannes’ green apples, is, he argues, as tasted as much as it is seen—is literalised. Kosofsky Sedgwick (ibid.) claims that texture is both felt and heard. The proximate and haptic-based sound of corduroy’s “brush brush” is an experience conjured by the look of texture alone. Texture is compelling because it draws us near, proximate, as if by touch to what is generated by vision alone.



Fig. 4: *Station Scene*—Kuru Alala, 2009. Artists from Ernabella—Milyika Carol, Malpiya Davey, Pantjiti Lionel, Niningka Lewis. Photo and Copyright: Moving Images.

Geoffrey Bardon’s (1997) original analysis of Western Desert aesthetics (long before “iconography” became the defining model) was that it was a “haptic” not a visual mode. That Tjanpi are rough matters—particularly in comparison with the finer gauged, technically tighter and more structured weavings of the northern Peppimenarti artists or further north Yolngu or Elcho Islands artists. Nadia Searle (in Nicholls, 2007, p. 45) has dubbed the distinctively rough and thus almost hyper-texture of Tjanpi as “mongrel stitching”: “an unstructured and sometimes raw quality that formally combines coiling, stitching and cobbling”. What makes Tjanpi particularly uncanny is that despite their roughness, their fidelity to life is unstinting. A realism of pose; stance; characterizations of lizards, goannas; cheeky dogs perhaps; a jealous wife; the elaborate and detailed construction of a windmill, or a steering wheel replete with grip covering. Alive, emboldened, animated forms. This is not the result of obsessively detailed work, as is characteristic of much so-called naive art where the devil is in the detail: rather, it is larger quixotic postures that convince. Garrulous, garish and gargantuan at times too: dogs might bark, trucks take off. This is an irrepressibly sentient landscape as Stanner (1965) first famously described Aboriginal country, in which inanimate objects are animated



and all things infused with human sentiment, characters and qualities. Shared felt and exchanged experiences dominate relationships yet between the so called objective world as it was created by Ancestral-humans, and as it is created yet again today in activity, through art, in the contemporary.

Over time, Tjanpi has come to reveal the sacred. Not all Tjanpi but specific Tjanpi are high and specific Tjukurpa. As Rigney (2009) discusses, for example, the Early Days Bush Family, while on one level presented a so-called traditional family scene—husband, wives, children, grass windbreaks, sleeping camp dogs—it nevertheless emerged over the course of their making that these figures were recognised as Eagle Man and his two wives Super-Crested Cockatoo Lady and Crow Lady, a major Tjukurpa for Ngaanyatjarra women. Tellingly, Tjukurpa was not, however, the original aim. The slippage and vacillation between the sacred and the secular, the inseparability ultimately of the sacred from the everyday, the incarnate means by which Tjukurpa is not invented but revealed through process-based, ritualised, collaborative making(s), means in fact, that Tjanpi has been incorporated, because it has been found to incorporate Law, Dreaming, Tjukurpa. The sacred is not to be approached directly, at least in my experience. The new may be “free” but not without its own risks. The risk that modernity poses is that people might become what John von Sturmer (2010, p.16) calls “people without history”, no longer beholden, indebted, no longer “proper human”. It is not a small thing, in short, that Tjanpi as an experimental art form now engenders Ancestral visibility and thus, viability.

In 2006, according to Thisbe Purich (2009) the first ever *inma* (Ngaanyatjarra term for ceremony, dance, song, Tjukurpa) was performed at the boriginal's Women's Law and Culture gathering; an astonishing canonization in just over a decade for such an experimental art. This inaugural event attested, as Josephine Mick (Tjanpi Desert Weavers et al 2009, p.3) put it, that “Tjanpi has Tjukurpa too”. What has often been recognized, argued, by anthropologists, is that the Dreaming is not a fixed or static repertoire, but, in fact, feeds off the life-world of the living (not only the other way around).

The presence of “Whitefellas”⁸

The work of Tjanpi is unabashedly collaborative, flagrantly intercultural. Since its inception in 1995 and onward, NPY Women's Council has supported the basket weaving movement with non-Aboriginal tutors (Nalda Searles, Philomena Hali and Renita Glencross, and more recently Jo Foster) who brought their own technical skills in weaving and art production to the workshops held biannually on homelands, and to more day to day interfaces (Searles, 2007; West, 2007). Tutors and workshop leaders from Bachelor College include Jenny Taylor and Alison Clouston. More recently fibre artists (Alison Clouston and Maria Fernanda Cardoso) were invited guests to collaborate in producing artworks on Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara lands.



Fig. 5. Kanytjupayi Benson, *Early camp crockery*, 1996. Photo by Thisbe Purich. Copyright NPY Women's Council.

⁸ I borrow this phrase from Faye Ginsberg (per com) who has been threatening to title her final article on Indigenous film making “The absent Whitefella”, to refer of course to the fact that Whitefellas are rendered invisible, absented, far too frequently in so-called Indigenous media production.



Co-sharing and collaborative exchange is not contested. Acker and Altman (2006), and McLean (2009), note the comparison with acrylic painting could not be sharper, given the controversy that has historically raged about the collaborative art of Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers; the legal battles and provenance challenges that have besieged the careers of Kathleen Petyarre and that old man PossumTjapaltjarri; the rumors and mud-slinging generated by the presence of carpetbaggers, or white art advisors and gallery owners who direct or influence artists in how to paint, and the policing of boundaries that can and have made Aboriginal art, in the now infamous accusation of Richard Bell's theorem (Bell, 2002), "a White thing".

Tjanpi not only escapes this tired debate, it trumps it. Its object form could not be more explicit. What are illegitimate sites of inequity and exchange are here teasingly, even provocatively, mimicked and mined for all they are worth. Tjanpi "things" are things with attitude, irreverent imitations and cheeky quotations: Toyotas, teapots, TVs, movie cameras. This is not collaborating with the enemy nor stealing their prized possessions as much as it is licentious license and sheer caprice. An almost raucous audacity finds the reproduction not of anything and everything but specific hyper-signifiers of modernity. What doesn't rust, decay, or desist; an almost Mad Max-like world of post-historical futurity. Not a rarified world of the ancestral sacred but an everyday real of contact, colonialism and camp life.



Fig. 6. Pantjiti Tjiyangu Mackenzie with Niningka Lewis's tjanpi film camera, Sep 2007. Photo by Jo Foster Copyright NPY Women's Council.

High (not post) modernism—technological things. The march of progress and modernization: transport, water, trucking, how things work, how they move (the blades on Tjanpi wind-mills to look like they should turn). It is the halted-still that produces the uncanny hit; like stop-motion animation in hard reverse. Yet the subject matter is hauntingly eternal-return. Tjanpi objects are outmoded historical relics: 1950s tray backs, a 16mm movie camera: not Holden commodores or a digital camera. History itself stopped (or did it start?) in a 1950s "then". Yet, what was then is now, but not nostalgic necessarily. There is almost something unremarkable about the kind of silent stealth-like witness that Tjanpi presents, not unlike how people tell



history, their own stories sometimes—often, flat, direct, emotionless, a *fait accompli*. History, as von Sturmer (2010, p. 18) says, is “something you negotiate around. If you can”. Fidelity to truth yes, but not memorialisation. Even though monumental in size and stature, Tjanpi Blackstone Weavers et al *Tjanpi Grass Toyota* (Figure 1) is not a memorial.

Tjanpi is counter-history. It provides for the first time original witness, testimony—Anangu historical perspectives and experiences—to the national archive and historical memory. Crucially important, it does so by providing memory and counter-history in Anangu-specific form. Tjanpi insists on an indexical primacy of mark making as a form of historiography. History leaves traces. What dots and dominates the landscape, Tjanpi tells us, is our own Whitefella traces, remnants, remains. The gesture here may appear more whimsical insistence than insurgency perhaps, but no less serious ultimately. It is not only Ancestors who left indelible traces in the country; not only their marks which matter today. As Tjanpi artist Niningka Lewis (Tjanpi Desert Weavers et. al. 2009, p. 25) put it:

People came from over the sea bringing camels and donkeys which have multiplied into the millions. This is true. Their animals and things have multiplied everywhere and now there are millions of donkeys, camels, bullocks, sheep and cars everywhere...all over our land.

“Remembering Forward”

As Thisbe Purich (2009) notes, there was simply a need in 1995 to introduce a new craft that was more culturally appropriate than the normative model of working inside an art centre (then, a women’s centre) from 9-5. Such work (art production) meant leaving family responsibilities at home, working inside and shut off physically from other community responsibilities and activities. Tjanpi, however, could be practiced not to the exclusion of life world immediacies but present and available to it. Tjanpi production is seemingly immediate and interruptible, present and available to lived community exigencies. Or what Basil Samson (1997) has identified as the defining requirement of Aboriginal societies—being present, witness, to and for others.

Tjanpi forms are, above all else, both portable and durable art objects. Non-technologically dependent, Tjanpi travel, move, as women’s lives command, across communities, distance, responsibilities, the desert homelands. Arguably, Tjanpi re-incite a certain “nuclear script” (Tomkins 1963) of country, place and practice: a conjointly female-specific way of being with one another, and of being in country. A primacy of affective orientations, attenuations, organization and modes of response is here to the bodies of others as much as it is to country. Imbrications of habit, affect and encounter take shape through co-oriented bodies in “concernful absorption” by which country becomes a place of feeling as much as practice: what Casey (2001) might call a *thick* place (as opposed to a *thin* or *unpracticed* place), a critical revivification of country for increasingly community-based contemporary existence.

Crucially, Tjanpi was revealed to be made—makeable—not only *in* and *on* country but *from* country directly. Early experiments may have been with imported materials but Tjanpi quickly moved to experiment with locally sourced plant fibres; minarri and wangurnu (Purich, 2006, p. 31), which often today are found as the inside “stuffing” of figurative forms, with raffia or other fibre (wool, cotton) as “wrapping”. The use of grasses, rushes, camel hair, human hair; collected, cut, dried, spindle spun, spat on even, caressed, fondled, held (the viscera of country, person, and above all else an enduring, intimate relation between hand, technique and object) becomes woven directly in the object form. Traditional Tjanpi grasses may mix up, vie, be abandoned for raffia, if not available, “no matter” Tjanpi artist Eunice Porter said when I asked about what was the best material to work with.

Memory is acted out through social practice, reversing the Western assumption of art as the teleological result of memory and reflection, rather than an instigator itself in the process. This memory is not archival. Tjanpi does not serve to accumulate historical memory as an official repository; the compulsive necessity to collect and store in order to ward an ever-receding memory and the death drive both, as Derrida (1998) characterises Western cultural “archive fever”. Nor is this necessarily a “melancholic identification” historicism of the kind I



have earlier depicted of Western Desert women's acrylic painting (Biddle, 2007, p. 200) in which the imperative to repeat is indicative of grief, of loss (melancholy not mourning) of an irreparable wound ultimately. Tjanpi in this sense inaugurates a far more practical and practice oriented object-relationality. In its more predominant, prosaic, forms (a tea cup, this bowl, some baskets) its radically secular if not irreverent quotidian of the everyday banal: practice based relationship to country is insisted upon. What experimental art—acrylic painting, Tjanpi—now provides is ritualised forms of caring for country. Concrete processes in which country is held in the mind as much as it is in the hand. Country can only remain fertile, productive if it is looked after, tended to, cared for, fed properly. An incarnate form itself, country will starve without care, is starving now (Biddle, 2007). And that means work, ritual, labour, what Warlpiri might call in English the “business” of looking after: a labour of lifelong attachment.



Fig. 7. Nora Holland posing with a half made basket—like being on television, 2010. Photo by Jo Foster. Copyright NPY Women's Council.

Country is dependent upon humans for the making and keeping of their viscera (species, flora, fauna, social relations and relationships) animated, enlivened, activated and attached to lived sentiments and sensibilities. The labour of Tjanpi (hunting, camping and art-making) is materially productive in these terms. This then is a memory of what might be called “remembering forward”⁹, where a female-specific responsibility for looking after country, person and knowledge is acknowledged, supported and nourished through art making. This responsibility is increasing as I have discussed (2007) in previous research, for demographic reasons alone as men die younger and women live longer and I don't want to romanticise this existential insecurity, as Di Austin-Broos (2011) has recently identified it: that is, the daily trauma of extremely high rates of avoidable deaths of young men specifically which

⁹ This phrase is borrowed directly from the title of an exhibition and catalogue on acrylic painting, not on Tjanpi .
“Remembering Forward” (2011) is borrowed here as a term only, it needs to be noted, and developed in my own analytic terms.



finds a smaller number of women looking after a larger and larger number of both direct and extended family. That figurative Tjanpi works finds human-family figures, children specifically, presented in this context may well be for good reason (c..f. the abundance of mamu and other haunted children-figures in *New Sculptures by Tjanpi Desert Weavers*, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, 2011).

In the encounter with Tjanpi, the proximity of this politics, a vital material politics, is inescapable. Tjanpi objects collapse the literal space between art object and viewing spectator in an encounter of participatory command both immediate and temporal. The three criteria Shelly Errington (1994) argues are necessary for primitive art to become fine art (portability, durability and frameability) are here elided. Tjanpi have no frame, no distance from which they can safely be hung, inert and cauterized spectacle, for ocular purposes alone. As Jo Foster (2009 p. 15) put it: "There is no escaping its pulse. It is a binding force". Even without directly touching, these works make and bring the world of incarnate intimate association close, proximate, even (apparently, for some) too close. Arguably, the ambivalent place of Tjanpi within the high-art category, the ere-reductive "is it art or is it craft?" is about this ambiguity.

Destiny Deacon (ABC 2005) describes her reasoning for judging the Blackstone Weavers *Tjanpi Toyota* as the 2005 NATSIA winner, it was "art you could smell", identifying in an instance the visceral hit that Tjanpi engender. Smell, like touch itself, confounds the distinction between subjective experience and object matter, human and nonhuman, inside and outside, me and it. Tjanpi in this sense border arguably on a Kristevean (1982) sense of abjection; compelling and fascinating because they will not settle ultimately with the bordered, bounded sense of Aboriginal art: other, over there, elsewhere, but because they insist on the proximity of Aboriginal life world, embodied, alive, present, here now.



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Figures

- Fig. 1: Tjanpi Blackstone Community Weavers: Kantjupayi Benson (deceased), Shirley Bennet, Nuniwa Donegan (deceased), Margret Donegan, Melissa Donegan, Janet Forbes, Ruby Forbes, Deidre Lane, Elaine Lane, Freda Lane, Janet Lane, Wendy Lane, Angela Lyon, Sarkaway Lyon, Angaliya Mitchell, Mary Smith, Gail Nelson, *Tjanpi Grass Toyota, 2005*. Photo by Thisbe Purich. Copyright NPY Women's Council.
- Fig. 2: Dorcas Bennett, *Papa Pina Rikina Ninti Mulapa (Guide Dog with Good Ears)*, 2010. Photo by Belinda Cook. Copyright NPY Women's Council.
- Fig. 3: Niningka Lewis, *Tea Party*, 2008. Photo by Emma Diamond. Copyright NPY Women's Council.
- Fig. 4: *Station Scene—Kuru Alala*, 2009. Artists from Ernabella—Milyika Carol, Malpiya Davey, Pantjiti Lionel, Niningka Lewis. Photo and Copyright: Moving Images.
- Fig. 5: Kanytjupayi Benson, *Early camp crockery*, 1996. Photo by Thisbe Purich. Copyright NPY Women's Council.
- Fig. 6: Pantjiti Tjiyangu Mackenzie with Niningka Lewis's tjanpi film camera, Sep 2007. Photo by Jo Foster. Copyright NPY Women's Council.
- Fig. 7: Nora Holland posing with a half made basket—like being on television, 2010. Photo Jo Foster. Copyright NPY Women's Council.



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