Abstract
We examine two important instances of cultural diplomacy in Australia’s history. In each case an extensive exhibition containing Indigenous art was staged in the US to gain political legitimacy and influence. In 1941-2 the government aimed at forging closer ties to the US and a nascent UN. Indigenous art was exhibited to set Australia visually apart from the British Colonial empire and to symbolize a common settler-society history with the United States. In 2009 the government exhibited radical Indigenous protest art to bolster its campaign for a Security Council seat in the context of a UN deeply concerned about Indigenous rights.

We argue that when art is used politically far more is at stake than straightforward cultural diplomacy. We highlight two unique but not fully appreciated elements: the potential of art to advance radical political ideas and its ability to escape being instrumentalised for political purposes. We further argue that the key to understanding these features lies in the inherently ambivalent nature of art. Because it works indirectly, through abstractions and symbols, art can push the boundaries of what is politically acceptable. This link between ambivalence and radical politics manifested itself differently in the two cases we examine. But each time Indigenous art took on a kind of radical ‘Dreaming’ function: it merged past, present and future by visualizing alternative narratives to the ones that dominated politics at the time.

Introduction
States have for long used art and other cultural products to promote either domestic or foreign policy goals. Numerous cases stand out. The Nazis employed the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl to lend aesthetic appeal to the government’s racial agenda. The US during the Cold War promoted abstract expressionism in an effort to demonstrate its cultural vibrancy and superiority over the Soviet Union. A

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1 We are grateful to Nilanjana Premratna for valuable research assistance.


The purpose of this essay is to contribute to these debates by exploring how Australia used Indigenous art to promote foreign policy agendas in two highly symbolic instances. In each case extensive exhibitions were staged in the US in an explicit attempt to gain cultural and political legitimacy and influence. In 1941-2 an exhibition called Art of Australia, containing several Aboriginal art works, was staged to promote Australia’s alliance with the US and to gain credibility with a nascent United Nations. In 2009 an exhibition called Culture Warriors, consisting entirely of Indigenous art (both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island art)\(^5\), was staged in the context of a bid for a United Nations Security Council seat. The aim was to bolster Australia’s human rights credentials in the context of a United Nations increasingly concerned with the treatment of indigenous populations.

We examine the political dimensions of these two art exhibitions associated with the early and most recent phases of Australia’s United Nations aspirations. We do so to historically document two important instances of cultural diplomacy and to answer two fundamental conceptual questions: 1) how is art used to increase a state’s foreign policy objectives? 2) how does art communicate the political and how is this communication different from conventional political representations?

We argue that when art is used for political purposes far more is at stake than straightforward cultural diplomacy. We highlight two unique but not fully appreciated elements in the links between art and politics: the potential of art to advance radical political ideas and the ability of art to elude efforts to instrumentalise it for political purposes.

We further argue that the key to understanding these political potentials of art lies in its inherently ambivalent nature. Because visual art is not as explicit as other forms of communication, because it works through symbols and plays with meanings, it can push the boundaries of what is politically acceptable. This is, in

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\(^5\) We use two terms to refer to Australian Indigenous art in this essay. ‘Indigenous art’ is the collective term for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures. The Torres Strait Islands form part of the Australian nation, but their indigenous population do not identify as Aboriginal. When we use ‘Aboriginal’ we refer to the mainland indigenous population only.
many ways, the essence of art: to go beyond external appearances and to reveal the complexities of the world and our relationship with it. But the manner in which this ambivalence acquires political dimensions is not yet sufficiently understood. Ambivalence entailed in interpreting a work of art is usually linked to its poetic or even esoteric dimensions, not to political questions. But it is precisely this ambivalence that contains the potential to advance radical political thinking. It is not by surprise that artists have often been the vanguard of political movements in authoritarian societies. They could dare to depict what could not be said. Because their messages were ambivalent, they could get away with expressing dissent in a way that would have landed others in prison.

Seen from such a perspective the two exhibitions – the one in 1941 and the one in 2009 – both expressed very radical views for the time they were staged; views that were not yet acceptable enough to be expressed through conventional political channels. This link between ambivalence and radical politics manifested itself differently in each of the exhibits and corresponding political campaigns.

The very idea of including Aboriginal art in an exhibition staged in the US in 1941 was radical. At the time Aboriginal people were still more than a quarter of a century away for being recognized as Australian citizens. Aboriginal visual culture was not considered art and was not held in public art collections or exhibited in public art galleries. Regarded as ethnographic remnants of an all-but extinct culture, the inclusion of Aboriginal art was thus not made in the spirit of recognizing indigenous life and culture. The purpose of the exhibition was to stress to the US and the nascent UN that Australia is an independent and culturally distinct country, set apart from the British Empire and displaying parallels with the settler-society mentality in the US. But even if unintended and largely unrecognized, the effects of including Aboriginal art had a radical dimension. Consider bark paintings, which were seen as decorative crafts but, in fact, contained highly complex symbolic representations of the relationship between Aboriginal culture, spirituality and land. These artistic representations advanced an implicit but radical political claim to land and self-determination. At minimum they paved the way for later recognition of Aboriginal life and culture.

The 2009 exhibition, called Cultural Warriors, did not contain hidden political messages but embarked on an explicit and radical political attack: it visually narrated the violent encounter between the Indigenous population and the settlers. Indigenous artists and people are seen at war with Australian history, Australian politics and Australian racism. Although the government at the time was not ready to offer a full public admission of this highly problematic past, the use of art could present such a radical political agenda without officially doing so. The ambivalence of art managed to communicate what was not yet communicable. This was important in order to gain credibility with a United Nations deeply concerned with human rights and with indigenous rights in particular.

Underlying these dynamics are patterns that reveal how the very ambivalence of art always manages to elude its appropriators. There is always an excess to a work of art, an element that cannot entirely be grasped or managed or understood, a kind of extra political meaning that spills over and slips through the hands of those who want to control it. In doing so Indigenous art – both in 1941 and 2009 – managed to resist attempts of the Australian government to instrumentalize it for foreign policy purposes. The ambivalence of art thus turned cultural tokenism around and transformed it into a vehicle for political accountability and radical ideas.
about indigenous rights. Not every work of art does so, of course. The radical political potential of art can go both ways. It can open up new spaces for progressive politics but it can just as much close them, as the example of Riefenstahl’s compelling visualizations show. While we acknowledge this dual nature of political art, in this essay we are primarily concerned with how art has managed to convey indigenous concerns in a way that normal political movements were unable or unwilling to do.

**Appropriating Aboriginal Art: Australia’s Early Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives**

When Australia found itself militarily isolated during the Pacific theatre of WW2, the Australian government instigated its first diplomatic forays independent of the British Empire. The core objectives consisted of building a stronger bilateral alliance with the US and establishing the nation’s credentials to participate in negotiations about the formation of the United Nations. In 1940 the Australian government formally opened its first overseas missions and wrested governance of its international relations, or what was then termed “external affairs”, from the British Empire’s headquarters in London. The Australian parliament appointed R.G. Casey as Australian Minister to the US in 1940, shortly to be replaced by Sir Owen Dixon in 1941.

The Australian government took an active role in the formation of the UN at the time, assuming that a revitalized global institution would offer more security for Australia than the association with the British Empire. Doc Evatt was a key political figure in this regard. He was Deputy Prime Minister, Attorney General, and Minister for External Affairs from 1941 to 1949 and went on to become the President of the UN General Assembly in 1948-49. Evatt also helped draft the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and was instrumental in Australia attaining a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 1946-7. All of these political endeavours created an imperative for the Australian government to find ways of profiling Australia’s newly independent policies on international peace and security, social and economic development, and human rights. As the key figure in Australia’s international diplomacy at this time, Evatt directly oversaw the activities of both Australian Ministers to the US, Casey and Dixon.

Cultural diplomacy was an integral part of these political efforts. They were meant to showcase an Australian way of life that ostensibly underpinned the nation’s policy framework. This is why in 1941 the Australian government organized the first comprehensive exhibition of Australian art to tour the US. The exhibition was titled *Art of Australia* and appeared at several key public art institutions where core values of the state are symbolically validated: The National Gallery of Art in Washington, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Museum of Modern Art in New York; and the Department of Fine Art at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (which helped organize the exhibition). The collection was then expanded into a broader Australian art, science and history exhibition, held at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1942. The location at the West Coast is crucial for at a time of the Pacific crisis, art exhibitions offered an ideal platform to forge cultural bonds aimed at strengthening the US-Australian political and military coalition.

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The inclusion of Aboriginal artworks in the exhibition – fourteen out of a total of 134 - was both historic and radical. Two reasons stand out.

The first one is of a cultural nature. The exhibition marked the first international occasion where Aboriginal visual culture was represented as fine art. Aboriginal visual material before then had been regarded almost exclusively as ethnographic artefacts. Respective artworks were held not in art galleries but in Australian and international anthropological collections. The inclusion of Aboriginal art works in this major international exhibition thus tacitly amounted to a recognition of indigenous culture. It certainly put Aboriginal art on the world map. Consider how The Washington Post at the time drew particular attention to the bark paintings, stressing that "nothing like them has been shown before."

The second highly significant aspect of the exhibition is of a political nature. The inclusion of Aboriginal art stands in stark contrast to how the Indigenous population was treated at the time. Federal and state governments during the 1940s maintained a policy of protectionism for a race that was believed to be all but extinct, and incapable of survival in the modern era. A series of state-governed protection or welfare boards oversaw all fundamental matters of Aboriginal life including housing, employment and education. Aboriginal people were distinguished as either 'full-blood' or 'half-blood' and on that basis were restricted to government reserves or religious missions; or as disenfranchised nonentities living on the fringes of towns and metropolitan centres. Up until 1967 Aboriginal people were not eligible for citizenship and had no rights to vote in political elections. In 1937 a federal policy of assimilation was adopted that would launch a campaign for government agencies and missions to force Aboriginal people to assimilate to white society and relinquish most, if not all, traditional practices, beliefs and languages.

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The 1941 cultural diplomacy initiative was, however, not intended to rectify this situation and advance the right of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, it is rather ironic that at the very time when Aboriginal cultural traditions were virtually outlawed, the Australian government was introducing traditional Aboriginal art to the world as the emblem of its unique national character. The exhibition’s catalogue even speaks of Australia as a “Terra Incognita” and of “a last continent to be discovered,” as if there had been no Indigenous population prior to the arrival of the settlers or as if it all was a matter of the white man’s “taming of a vast continent.”

The inclusion of Aboriginal art had much more to do with a careful orchestration of a diplomatic narrative that focused on a tacit bond between Australia and the US through shared settler and frontier origins. Both countries were meant to be seen as sharing British cultural antecedents and a history of dealing with an apparently “defeated” ‘ancient race’ of indigenous inhabitants. In the catalogue’s foreword, Casey, the soon to be deposed Australian Minister to the US, puts race-relations and the status of art in very clear terms: “Against the background of the bark paintings left by the world’s most primitive aborigines, the art in the present exhibition records the progress of European, and particularly British, people in this struggle.” For some commentator, the inability to reflect on the nature of such settler states lies at the heart of obfuscating ongoing colonial practices. This is why Aboriginal art could be presented as backwards and in stark contrast to how modern (white) Australia came of age in a new world modelled on US values. Casey here stressed the need to promote an Anglo-American racial equivalence characterized by resourcefulness, industriousness, and stoicism:

Perhaps no two peoples have such similar origins, such parallel conditions of growth and development, as have Australia and the United States. Their pioneers were sturdy folk of much the same stock, who looked with faith toward new lands and a life free from the restraints of the old world. They faced the challenge of a new world, with its demands for ceaseless effort, and found themselves repaid by rapidly expanding possibilities.

The kind of cultural diplomacy at play here was rather different to how it is sometimes seen: as an exchange of art and other cultural artifacts and ideas in the spirit of genuinely increasing cross-cultural understanding. Cultural diplomacy, in the case of Australia, was targeted, pragmatic, political. It had less to do with facilitating understanding than with advancing a calculated

10 Casey, “Foreword”, Art of Australia 1788-1941, p. 5.
12 Casey, “Foreword”, p. 5.
13 Richard T. Arndt, The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century (Washington DC, Potomac Books, 2006). Examples of such cultural diplomacy can be seen in how France and Germany have for long spread their cultural and linguistic traditions via institutions like the Göthe Institut and the Alliance Française.
strategic effort to promote the national interest – with what Joseph Nye famously called soft power: “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”

There is an inevitable aesthetic dimension to such cultural initiatives. Brent Steele stresses that states present themselves aesthetically no differently than people do. Individuals put on nice cloths, style their hair or wear make-up. They do so to feel better or to project a certain positive image of themselves to others, often also to gain strategic benefits. States too care a lot about their aesthetic and their self-image. They too dress up to feel better and, in particular, to feel secure and in control. Political aesthetics, then, has the function of make-up: to let a state appear differently than it otherwise would:

more united, for instance, or more ethical, or more powerful. This is why the resulting aesthetic practices are far more than merely “cosmetic.” They are, as Steele convincingly shows, part of how a state uses its power to “deploy its material and strategic resources in global politics”.

The so established aesthetic narrative of US-Australian cultural bonds circulated within the diplomatic community and in the public realm through opening events, public speeches and media reviews. The Washington Post reported that a private viewing of Art of Australia was hosted by the Australian Minister to the US for 400 attendees that included “diplomats, Cabinet officers, and just plain art lovers.”

Casey’s Foreword was quoted at length in a subsequent article in The Washington Post, featuring those sections emphasizing US-Australian similarities.

Art, Identity, Politics

The inclusion of Aboriginal art also, and somewhat paradoxically, presented a visual distinction to Australia’s otherwise very British artistic inheritance. This is significant because the military and political break with the British Empire at this time marked the beginning of an Australian identity crisis. As late as 1967 the historian Geoffrey Serle would write of Australia as still lacking any strong sense of nationality.

Australia needed a unique cultural symbolism that would help channel its political ambitions on the international stage, which is why the organizers of the exhibition recoded Aboriginal artefacts as art and shipped them abroad under a brand new banner of ‘Australian art’.


Aboriginal art thus provided a distinctive mark in an Australian art tradition that was considered conservative and derivative of British influence. Casey’s Foreword to the catalogue fully acknowledged that a “tenacious conservatism has until recently dominated the artistic scene in Australia”. He went on to argue that this was due to, “the relatively short time that the white man has lived there, and to his natural nostalgia for the remembered old world”. Except for the Aboriginal pieces, the exhibition featured purely figurative art in conventional genres of portraiture, landscape and still life. Such aesthetic themes alone would not likely have impressed cultural elites in the US, which had become an international hub of avant-garde art movements. Abstract expressionism was at the forefront, signalling a new radical national ethos of freedom and opportunity.

Installation of Art of Australia at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, October 1941, West Building Ground Floor.

Aboriginal art insinuated itself into other parts of the exhibition. Margaret Preston’s Aboriginal Still Life (1940) included Aboriginal shields sitting on a table behind a bowl of native flowers, and a palette that echoed traditional Aboriginal ochre pigments in texture and colour. A bronze portrait titled Aboriginal Head (1939) by Lyndon Dadswell appeared as the last image in the catalogue, with a caption that stood in curious contradiction to the rhetoric of Aboriginal extinction pervading other text in the publication. The caption read, “Present-day Australians show a lively interest in all phases of aboriginal life, which, owing to the unsuitability of much of the country to white man’s exploitation, still survives in considerable extent and purity”.

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19 Casey, p.5.
20 Plate 134, npn, Art of Australia, op.cit.
The 1941 show was then redeveloped into a more general Australiana exhibit in 1942 at the Los Angeles County Museum. Now titled simply Australia, the LA exhibit retained approximately 50 paintings from the original Art of Australia but spread across six of the museum’s galleries to include a panorama of Australian history, maps, flora, fauna, geology and marine life.21

This Australia exhibition opened in the months following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and its LA location provided an ideal platform to consolidate the notion of a ‘Pacific alliance’ between Australia and the US. Australia’s new Minister to the US, Sir Owen Dixon, presented his inaugural public address to the US when opening the exhibition, reiterating the geographic bonds between the two ‘Pacific’ nations. The subject of the exhibition was ostensibly ‘Australia’, but the diplomatic overlay of the event clearly demonstrated that this exhibition was all about war in the Pacific. A military guard featured at the exhibition opening which was attended by international diplomats and civic leaders, including Major General Maxwell Murray, Commanding General of the US Army’s Southern Californian Sector; Rear Admiral Ralston S. Holmes, Commander of the 11th Naval District; L.A. Mayor Bowron, and Eric. A. Cleugh, British Consul to Los Angeles. In his speech Dixon was emphatic about the diplomatic intentions of the exhibition when he orated that,

    Australia knew even before it opened that the civilization of all Anglo-American peoples was at stake in this titanic struggle... But against the enemy threatening her very existence she has not only her own men to rely upon. She has the solid help of an expeditionary force of the United States and the leadership of a renowned America(n) [sic.] (LA Times)22

US media coverage of the Australia exhibition disseminated Australia’s public appeal for US aid in the Pacific. Reiterated as well were cultural bonds articulated in the

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exhibition's rationale.23 Political intentions of cultural diplomacy often operate at an implied level, but in the case of these wartime exhibitions the politicization of cultural relationships was overt. Consider an article in the Los Angeles Times, which advertised the exhibition as such: “Would you like to learn lots about Australia – the continent-nation “down under” where Gen. MacArthur and his American boys are fighting a war and learning a new brand of slang?”24

Inevitably linked to the task of forging Australian-US war-time bonds was Australia’s ambition to be involved in the emerging United Nations. Whilst its official inauguration was still three years off, the theme of the UN regularly recurs in public discourses associated with the exhibition. The Los Angeles Times, in a discussion of the exhibition, described Australia as the “United Nations headquarters in the South Pacific.”25 In his opening address, Dixon leaves little doubt about the key focus of this cultural diplomatic effort, stressing that Australia “must look for help from the resources of the United Nations” and “that without them we cannot hope to restore civilization and security to mankind”.26

Hidden Radical Politics: Bark Paintings the Visualization of Indigenous Rights

So far we have highlighted how Australia used Aboriginal art in a conventional campaign of cultural diplomacy. Doing so could be seen as radical, even though it was not intended as such. In the presence of major US fine-art exhibitions, Aboriginal art gained an unprecedented international presence and legitimacy.

The truly radical nature of the Aboriginal artworks exhibited in 1941-2 becomes evident only once one engages with their provenance and symbolic meaning. This symbolism, particularly with regard to Aboriginal rights, governance and land, would come to light only later, when outsiders gained an improved understanding of Aboriginal cultural traditions and social organization.

The exhibited Aboriginal artworks consisted principally of bark paintings that belong to particular communities of Aboriginal people living in a far northern region known as Arnhemland. This is an area where colonization had relatively lesser impact on Aboriginal traditional life because of the extremely remote and inaccessible nature of the wetland terrain. These conditions of an almost untouched traditional life attracted anthropological studies throughout the twentieth century, with the result that there has been an almost forensic study of the art and its semiotic function. Luke Taylor in particular provides close analysis of structures of meaning in bark paintings very similar to those in the 1940s exhibition.27 Aboriginal people maintain an extremely holistic mind-set that highlights the inter-


24 Arthur Miller, ibid.

25 Arthur Miller, ibid.

26 Ibid.

relationships of all aspects of life. Their art plays a vital role in symbolically anchoring this inter-connectedness. This is why it is impossible to dissociate the secular from the sacred, culture from politics, life from land.

The paintings included in the 1940s exhibitions stem from 1912 and belong to a particular tradition of x-ray style painting that has a highly structured system of multiple meanings. This is because the meanings of the images, or elements of the imagery, are contingent on the identity of the viewer and the context of viewing. The basis of this x-ray style is a concept of what Taylor describes as the “divided body” through which anatomical features of a human, animal or spirit figures are exposed. The meaning of the image or elements depends on one’s degree of ritual knowledge, or more accurately, the degree of one’s right to this knowledge. Rights here are defined by an individual’s status in terms of age, gender, family, marriage and stages of spiritual education through ritual initiation. In this way, the shifting scale of what Taylor describes as inside and outside (private and public) meanings assists in maintaining social organization, moral order and a system of law.

An example of the kind of x-ray bark painting exhibited in the 1940s shows.

Consider, as an example, one meaning associated with these “flesh paintings:” they instruct hunters how to dissect the kill, avoid bones and keep good cuts of meat in tact. The act of creating these paintings thus helps novice hunters to memorize internal structures of various animals. Another dimension of meaning for the same image determines who has the rights to various part of the kill, and yet another dimension envelopes all of these meanings within an Aboriginal cosmology, whose significance is only ever fully disclosed to spiritual elders of the community.

The cross-hatched patterns unique to bark painting, called rarkk, also have a significant semiotic structure and are in no way simply decorative. Rarkk’s arrangement of linear composition and contrasting colours encode distinct kinship identities and their relationships to various totems, mythological narratives, and rights to particular areas of land.
Particularly significant is that these patterns and symbols visually signal a group’s sovereignty over a particular area of land, and as such compare to the concept of nationhood in western traditions. Kinship groups today do, indeed, often refer to their country as their ‘nation’. Land rights within Aboriginal customary law are not vague, but in fact are demarcated by distinct geographical boundaries and complex structures of kinship status.

Visual art has a central role in Aboriginal culture in providing memory anchors for an oral tradition where customary law has no other permanent record. The perpetual encoding of law in rock art and in the continuing practice of painting as an act of remembering is thus key to the authority of the system. In this way rarrk is the metaphoric glue for an Aboriginal concept of ‘country’ that underpins their worldview. ‘Country’ situates particular groups of people, spiritual figures and an area of land together with its entire natural ecology, into a relationship of reciprocal obligation and a relationship of power. It is these structures of reciprocal obligations between people and place – embedded in the art – that in later decades would authenticate Aboriginal land rights and claims for political self-determination under Australian Crown law.

The highly political nature of the Aboriginal art included in the exhibition is rendered even more radical by the long-standing links between art and Aboriginal protests against colonization and assimilation. In the year immediately after the adoption of the assimilation policy the Aboriginal Progressive Association declared a Day of Mourning to mark 150 years of European occupation. The then initiated protest movement endures to this day and revolves around the status of Indigenous land rights, social inequality, injustice and governance. From this point of time the Aboriginal population of Australia maintained a public program of political protest against the negligible recognition of indigenous rights. From the outset, art played a vital role in this movement. Aboriginal protestors began sending petitions for recognition of their rights to British and Australian political representatives as early as 1935, but the first to be formally recognized was the Bark petition of 1963 that consisted of three traditional bark paintings from Arnhemland that included a list of their demands for land rights and the power of determination regarding the burgeoning uranium mining on their land. These three bark paintings feature the same symbolism as those included in the 1940s exhibitions. Further bark petitions were sent to the Australian parliament in 1968, 1988, 1998 and 2008. The original 1963 Bark petition is now displayed in the ceremonial hall of the Australian Parliament House and is in company with the nation’s founding documents in the form of the Magna Carta and Australian Constitution.


29 Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, op.cit.
Neither the organizers of the 1941-2 exhibition nor the general public had any idea of the radical political nature of the Aboriginal artworks that were included. Margaret Preston, one of the non-Aboriginal artists in the exhibition, came closest to guessing that the symbolism in the bark paintings held deeper meanings than it seemed. She wrote that “aboriginal art represents not only objects but essential truths which may or may not be visible to the human eye.” But Preston had little interest in exploring the meanings of these symbols, focusing more on how the respective “limitless possibilities” provided inspiration for her own art. Little did she know that within twenty years bark paintings as political petitions would start arriving at Parliament House.

The radical nature of art lies in its ambivalence. A work of art does not communicate political content in direct ways. It works via symbols and these symbols need to be interpreted. Jacques Rancière stresses that there is no fixed and pre-established principle that can determine the “correlation between the politics of the aesthetic and the aesthetics of politics.” 31 Questions of power and politics inevitably come into play when it comes to determining what the prevailing and generally accepted meanings are. Ranciere speaks of the “distribution of the sensible.” In this sense, the interpretation of art is no different from the very nature of politics, for it revolves around the struggle to determine “what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak.”

The politics of art is thus not always evident at first, as in the case of the bark paintings. A painting may work like Paul Celan described the function of a poem: as a ‘message in a bottle,’ a plea that is sent out with the hope that some day it will be washed onto a shore, onto something open, a heart that seeks dialogue, a receptive political reality. 33 Once bottled, the message leaves the painter and embarks upon

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an undetermined journey with an undetermined task, leading “a subversive, subterranean existence.”34 Alex Danchev, likewise, speaks of the artist as “moralist” or “moral witnesses” who thrive on hope – hope that “there is, or will be, an audience of sentient spectators, viewers, readers.”35 The message in the bottle may not be picked up immediately. In 1941-42 nobody knew how to read the bark paintings. At this point there was no collective knowledge among non-Indigenous people to make sense of a work of art and the moral message it contained about Aboriginal culture, governance and land rights. But the radical political content did not stay bottled forever. Indigenous rights became a major political issue and art played a key role in getting to this point.

Diplomatic Hypocrisy: *Culture Warriors* and the Australian Campaign for a UN Security Council Seat

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century Australian cultural diplomacy continued to employ Aboriginal art exhibitions to advance the nation’s status as a unique state distinct from the British Empire. But in 2009 there was a major shift in the use of Indigenous art in cultural diplomacy. Until then, exhibitions exclusively highlighted the cultural aspects of art.

The turning point came in September 2009 when an Australian-sponsored exhibition of Indigenous art, entitled *Culture Warriors*, opened in Washington DC. It too was part of a concerted effort in cultural diplomacy. Dennis Richardson, then Australian ambassador to the US, hoped that this “high-end arts program would put Australia front of mind among decision makers in the Obama administration.”36

But *Culture Warriors* was political not only in intent, but also in content, which made it highly unusual and different from anything seen before. The theme of the exhibition could not have been more radical: to visually document the racial discrimination of Indigenous people and their and struggle against colonialism – formal and, after 1901, informal - and its legacy of oppression. The extraordinary and paradoxical feature here is that the Australian government provided an international platform for radical political ideas at a very time when Indigenous rights in Australia were at their lowest point since the end of assimilation.

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35 Danchev, *On art and War and Terror*, p. 3.

The ambivalence of art here was not about concealing a message that might at a future point become political. It had more to do with using art to express ideas that the government could not – or, rather, did not want to - articulate in more conventional political terms. At first sight this paradoxical stance seems unusual. But such major gaps between diplomatic lip-service and political realities are a normal part of politics – what Stephen Krasner called “organized hypocrisy”; those frequent moments when international actors promote and uphold certain global norms while, at the same time, violating the very core values of these norms.\(^37\)

Although different in nature, the Australian government used Indigenous art just as strategically as in 1941. Here too, the exhibition was part of a broader Australia Presents cultural diplomacy initiative explicitly aimed at bolstering Australia’s foreign affairs and trade relations with the US. Perhaps more importantly, the initiative was meant to provide legitimacy for Australia’s campaign launched in March 2008 by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, for a seat on the UN’s Security Council.\(^38\) The level of state self-criticism in this exhibition was unprecedented, but government representatives presented the respective art in a more positive light: as identifying a shared history of civil rights protest movements between the US and Australia.\(^39\)

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\(^38\) Australia had previously launched eight attempts at a Security Council seat. Four of them failed (1951, 1990, 194 and 1996) and three of them succeeded, leading to tenures from 1956 to 1957, 1973 to 1974 and 1985 to 1986.

\(^39\) Australian Ambassador to the US quoted as saying that the significance of the exhibition identified similarities between US and Australian civil rights protest movements.
The staging of Culture Warriors must be seen in the problematic context that surrounded the launch – in 2007 - of Australia’s campaign for a Security Council seat. This context is crucial but so far largely neglected, even by scholars who otherwise offer detailed and insightful analyses. Australia was one of only four nations that voted against the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, which in September that year was adopted by the UN General Assembly. The four negative votes were overwhelmed by 143 nations voting in favour of adopting the Declaration. Australia’s UN campaign commenced immediately after this poll, brought upon by a change of government in late 2007.

The new government now had a major reputation problem in the UN. The rejection of the Declaration ostensibly amplified Australia’s on-going racist reputation. Memories came back of Australia’s first campaign for a Security Council seat in the 1940s – a time when the openly racist ‘white Australia’ policy was still widely practiced.

Events earlier in 2007 compounded Australia’s racist reputation when the federal government attracted widespread national and international criticism for launching the Northern Territory (NT) National Emergency Response. Referred to as “the intervention,” this initiative instigated an escalated level of government control over Indigenous welfare provision, law enforcement, and land tenure – all in response to allegations of child sexual abuse and neglect in NT Aboriginal communities.

Media coverage of ‘the intervention’ entailed extraordinary front page photographs of the deployment of 600 soldiers from the Australian Defence Force moving into Aboriginal communities. The military were shown enforcing new restrictions on alcohol, pornography, welfare benefits, customary law and cultural practices, and permits to Aboriginal land. At the same time the government enforced compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal townships, using legislation that negated existing title provisions. For many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians this

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41 Malcolm Booker, op.cit.

“intervention” was a return to the protectionist era of the early 20th century, and a shocking example of home-grown inequality and prejudice. These restrictions stayed in place after a new Federal government took office in 2007. The military presence was removed only in late 2008. An investigation by UN Special Rapporteur, James Anaya, later found the Emergency Response to be racially incriminating and an infringement of human rights.43

The government clearly had to do something to counter its highly problematic reputation with regards to the treatment of the Indigenous population—otherwise a campaign for a UN Security Council seat was unlikely to succeed. The government identified a “special commitment to the Indigenous peoples of the world” as one of eight key elements of the campaign, stressing that Australia is “home to one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world” and that it “seeks to advance the interests of First Peoples around the world.”44 Substantiating such claims was not easy, given Australia’s history, so the government took initiatives on both the domestic and international levels.

The standout event at the domestic level took place in 2008, when Prime Minister Rudd made headlines with an official ‘Apology’ to the ‘Stolen Generation’ - Indigenous people who had been forcibly removed from their families under the protectionist and assimilation phases of government policy. This was a radical and widely applauded move. In the candidature brochure for the Security Council seat the government highlighted the apology as “a turning point in Australia’s history.”45 But criticism followed soon, in part because of lacking implementation. Indigenous commentators appealed for more than symbolic moves and “token gestures”, calling for political recognition, such as official acknowledgement as the first Australians in the Australian Constitution; the drafting of a formal treaty; and a new deal on political self-determination.46

At the international level one of the key responses was the use of the Culture Warriors exhibition as a way to highlight Australia’s willingness to confront and deal with its problematic past. Other efforts to promote Indigenous art – not just paintings, but also music, dance and literature - took place at the same time, such as smaller exhibitions and performances at Australian embassies, Consulate Generals as well as museums and galleries in different parts of the US and around the world.47 The need for such initiatives become all the more compelling when, in 2008, the US was in the midst of a political campaign that would see the first African American


45 Ibid, p. 27


take office as the US President. The subject of civil rights thus offered itself as a
timely, although unusual, diplomatic approach to bolstering US-Australian relations.

Explicit Radical Politics: *Culture Warriors and the Continuous Quest for
Indigenous Recognition*

*Culture Warriors* presented a history of civil rights protest in Australia. As the title of
the exhibition suggests, it focused on how Indigenous culture is a weapon in their
fight for rights. The exhibition originated in 2007 as the National Gallery of
Australia’s first instalment of a triennial survey of recent Australian Indigenous art.

The result was nothing short of a radical and major political statement of
Australian Indigenous perspective. The exhibition included only Indigenous
artworks and was produced by an Aboriginal curator. The majority of the essays in
the exhibition catalogue were written by Indigenous authors. The exhibition also
marked the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, which bestowed Indigenous
Australians with citizenship status for the first time.

Many of the artworks in the exhibition confront and explicitly critique the
racism and injustice which the Indigenous population suffered since the arrival of
European settlers. Examples include Daniel Boyd’s 2007 portrait series of
Governors of early Australian colonies. He depicted them as lawless pirates,
featuring eye patches and parrots perched on their shoulders. There is Judy
Watson’s 2007 *Under the act* (frontispiece) that featured her grandmother’s
‘exemption card,’ which Indigenous people required to get permission to leave
government reserves. Richard Bells’ *Psalm singing* (2007) art work included the
words ‘I live in the valley of the shadow of death’ and ‘there is no hope.’ Christopher
Pease’s *Target* (2005) superimposed a bull’s eye target over a scene of early
of a young Aboriginal woman, represented below, depicted in traditional dress and
armed with a rifle and handgun.
The government’s media release makes no mention of the highly political nature of the exhibition, preferring to present the initiative as “an important cultural exchange between Australia and America.” But the artworks themselves leave little doubt about the anger and the critique and the political call for action depicted in the exhibition. This political position was then reinforced by Artist Statements published both in the exhibition catalogue and on the wall next to the art. Take this text by HJ Wedge, whose naïve style painting conveyed the psychological trauma of modern Indigenous life:

When Captain Cook came and landed and called it a new country in British justice or whatever you want to call it.... I can’t help thinking... what it would be like if the native people did start to spear them, frighten them and kill them all... You know this land was ours, but it’s yours now. But there’s still a lot of people out there fightin’ for us so that we can get it back one day, maybe in one lifetime.\textsuperscript{50}


The strength of the exhibition and its political significance emerges from the combined presentation of all artworks within a consolidated political front. *Culture Warriors* made no distinction between the politically explicit artworks referred to above and the abstract imagery of Desert Painting or bark paintings from Arnhemland – artworks that normally featured in Australia’s cultural diplomacy program. The exhibition featured a 2005 bark painting by an Arnhemland artist that was remarkably similar to those included in the 1940s exhibitions. But by now this bark painting is no longer seen as a mere decorative art piece, void of political meaning. In the 1940s, the ambivalence of bark painting imagery provided Indigenous art with a foothold in Australia’s cultural symbolism that would in later decades transform into an icon of political accountability. Today the same decorative art piece is read as an explicit political claim for Indigenous law and Indigenous self-determination. This is why the curator’s essay anchored the entire exhibition in a tradition of art and political activism commencing with bark paintings, and highlighted by the 1963 Bark petition that enjoyed a full-page reproduction in the catalogue.51

Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek Barrk – black wallaroo after fire 2005

Artistic diversity is now presented in the context of Indigenous solidarity about the need to rework prevailing understandings of history since European ‘invasion’. Whilst the meaning of each individual piece of art remains unique and ambivalent, the overall presentation of the exhibition clearly contained appeal, if not demand, for Indigenous rights.

*Culture Warriors* gave shape to radical political ideas about privileging First Nation Australians in the Australian Constitution; the formation of a treaty; and the possibility of Indigenous sovereignty – all at a time when Indigenous rights appeared to be going backwards. Indeed, the Australian government is far away from contemplating any of the radical ideas that the exhibition highlights. And yet, by sponsoring the exhibition it could highlight to the world it’s human rights credentials while actually being able to refrain from implementing them. A message conveyed through art – ambivalent as it is, even when it takes on explicit forms – does not have the same consequences as policy declaration or a new law.

Reactions in the US to the Culture Warriors exhibition were mixed. We do not have the space here for a comprehensive review, so we are only pointing to the two main trends. On the one hand there was admiration of the complexity and diversity of the art; for the radical nature of the initiative and for insights about Indigenous Australians and an hitherto unknown history. On the other hand there was considerable scepticism about the motives of the Australian government in supporting a civil rights agenda. Complaints regarding the poor quality of the venue for the exhibition reinforced the belief that the exhibition was more about diplomacy than promoting the art. This is why several prominent commentators saw the exhibition as a “run-of-the-mill cultural diplomacy exercise” or, at best, “a more mature approach to the export of Indigenous Australian culture for diplomatic purposes beyond the purely celebratory.”

Australia did win a seat on the Security Council in 2012. Whether or not Culture Warriors played a decisive role in this victory cannot be known. Cultural diplomacy does not necessarily work in causal ways. But it frames more conventional diplomatic initiatives in a way that consciously or subconsciously conditions those who encounter the respective artworks. We do know that Australia did make Indigenous issues one of its prime priorities in the campaign for the Security Council. We also know that in the first round of voting 140 out of 193 states voted for Australia. Finally we also know, rather curiously but perhaps tellingly, that once elected Indigenous issues no longer featured on the Government’s webpage that outlines “our” approach to the Security Council. A case of organized hypocrisy indeed.

The last word has not been spoken yet. The Australian government may well have been successful in using Indigenous art to increase legitimacy with the UN. But, as Steele points out, if the power of a state is projected not just materially but also through aesthetics, then this aesthetic construction can also be challenged. These moments of counter-power often emerge by surprise and can lead to important political dynamics. In 1941 the Australian government declared Aboriginal culture and identity dead. Nobody in power expected the kind of concerted protest movement that Culture Warriors so powerfully documented. In turn, the more radical aspects of Culture Warriors, such as genuine recognition and sovereignty,

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57 Steele, Defacing Power, p. 46.
seem far-fetched today but may not always stay so. Just as in 1941, Indigenous art may be ahead of its time today too.

**Conclusion: Radical Political art as Dreaming Politics**

We have examined two symbolic and important instances of cultural diplomacy in Australia’s history. In each case an exhibition containing Indigenous art was used to promote very specific foreign policy goals. In 1941-2 the government aimed at forging closer ties to the US and desired to gain credibility with negotiations that were going on about the creating of the United Nations. Indigenous art was included in the exhibition in the US not as a radical gesture, but to set Australia visually apart from the British Colonial Empire and symbolize a common settler-society history with the United States. In 2009 the Australian government staged an exhibition of Indigenous art in the US in order to increase its human rights reputation, deemed central in view of attempts to gain a seat on the UN Security Council.

We tried to show that there is much more at stake here than a mere use of art as tools in cultural diplomacy. We argued that the issues at stake can best be appreciated in reference to the inevitably ambivalent nature of art. A picture speaks a thousand words, the stereotype goes, but this is precisely what distinguishes art from other representation. It does not aim for an authentic, mimetic depiction of the world. Art plays with meaning and interpretation. That is, indeed, the power of art: that it goes beyond showing us what we already see, thus providing us with some kind of inner emotional reaction. In a sense, art does not represent the world or some external reality. Instead, art “creates realities and worlds” and it does so in ambivalent, multiple and at times perhaps even contradictory ways.58

It is this ambivalence that allowed Indigenous art to add an inherently radical element to the more conventional cultural diplomacy campaigns. In 1941 the radical political message contained in bark painting was neither intended nor recognized by the government. Deemed mere decorative crafts, bark paintings included in the exhibition contained a range of visual allusions to narratives, governance and land, thus implicitly claiming a stake for Indigenous cultural and political recognition far ahead of time. The 2009 exhibition did, by contrast, contain works of art that were explicitly political, depicting a narrative of Indigenous anger about and resistance to a long history of colonial occupation and racist governmental policies. The politics of ambivalence was different here. The very fact that art, even when explicit, is not a black-and-white political message allowed the artworks to express a claim for a radical rewriting of history and a claim to Indigenous sovereignty that traditional political channels could not or did not want to communicate.

The very ambivalence of art also shows that it can never entirely be appropriated by political campaigns. In both cases we examined how the Australian government used – or some would say – misused Indigenous art for pragmatic political purposes. But in both cases art also resisted this appropriation. There is always an excess to art, a kind of extra level of meaning that defies dominant interpretations and appropriations. The meaning of art changes as our relationship to it changes. Look at how the Nazi rulers put on an exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* in an attempt to discredit modern art and to uphold a more classical ideal of aesthetic

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representation. Cubism survived this attempt at political appropriation just as Indigenous bark paintings survived the attempt of the Australian government to manipulate them in 1941. More than anything, the hidden but radical political message of bark painting anticipated and to some extent also initiated a long struggle for Indigenous rights. We are still to see to what extent the even more radical *Cultural Warriors* exhibition anticipates and initiates a next round in Indigenous activism. But one can also say that in both instances Indigenous art took on a kind of radical Dreaming function: it merged past, present and future through a visualisation of alternative narratives to the ones that dominant political discourses promulgate. The essence of this radical Dreaming is perhaps best left to the words of Indigenous people themselves. Carol Dowling, sister of Julie Dowling mentioned above, in the *Culture Warriors* catalogue:

> With every breath, we wish to remain sovereign peoples. We struggle to maintain our languages, our customary law and our oral traditions. With the ratification of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples, we dream that the world will hear our call for justice and freedom as the oldest living culture on the planet.\(^5^9\)

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\(^5^9\) Carol Dowling, Catalogue entry for Julie Dowling, *Culture Warriors*, op. cit., p. 96.