

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PERFORMANCE

THE INTERWEAVING OF POLITICS AND AESTHETICS IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS

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Dance performances in ceremonial and other intercultural political encounters in north-east Arnhem Land strive to achieve several general goals: to achieve co-presence through forms of participation; to engage total attention through a movement backward and forward between different levels of intensity or feeling; and to express something beyond what is represented. How are we to talk about participation? What are its critical components? What is its role in the effectiveness of performances? In locating the meaning of Yolngu dance performances in aesthetic experience—a modality of participation—the author explores the nature of this participation as a doing that accomplishes itself in the single act of its production and reception. Beyond symbolism and structure, referential meaning and exegesis, the force of performance is in the first instance itself, in its very actualization, in the responsibility it demands of performer and public to create the conditions of possibility for the social to realize itself, through a series of investments involving reciprocal recognition, engagement, commitment and accountability. [Key words: performance, phenomenology of dance, aesthetic experience, participation, Arnhem Land]

When a poet invokes the sea, we genuinely feel the sea's presence. But the sea is not present as it would be for a swimmer or for a geographer... It is present all the same, with a presence which we must call affective and with a truth of its own which can be discovered only through art. [Dufrenne 1973:137]

Eternal truth becomes a temporal operation and submits itself to happening, effectively, according to the limits of the timetable and the calendar. This is what is called "taking place". The duality of expression and inexpressiveness—that is of infinite expression—resolves itself finally as the effectiveness of a single act. [Jankélévitch 2003:78]

THE BEGINNING OF AN ENCOUNTER: EXIT FROM THE FIELD

Toward the end of my initial period of fieldwork in Milingimbi, Northeast Arnhem Land (1990–92), I was summoned by Charles Manydjari, my "mother's

brother" (ngapipi) and Liwagawumirr elder, who had played an active role as my teacher and mentor since my arrival in the community. Like other times, he invited me to sit down next to him to share a cup of tea but, on this occasion, the conversation was mainly about the unexpected breakup of my ten-year marriage to my English husband and my impending departure and return to London. As usual, his words of advice and encouragement were wise, and his concern for my distress and emotional turmoil soothing. At the end of our meeting he produced a piece of string from his pocket and told me that he needed to measure the circumference of my head. While doing so, he jokingly noted that I have a rather large head. I laughed but did not inquire about this unusual request, as I knew that questioning one's mother's brother is not appropriate. A few days later Ngapipi summoned me again, this time to another camp. It was late afternoon at the tail end of the dry season when the cool of the evening still brings relief from the heat of the day and stirs people into activity. A small crowd was assembled at a distance from the

main day sitting area where the women, children, and visitors usually sat every afternoon.¹ Ngapipi invited me to sit next to him in front of an empty stretch of sand. Opposite, facing us at a distance of a few meters, sat seven young men in a straight line, thus delimiting a small space. Nobody was wearing any body paint. They wore ordinary clothes: short trousers and singlets. Despite the relaxed atmosphere, it was clear that something was about to happen: they were waiting for me and inviting me to be not just *a* but *the* spectator of the unfolding events. I was positioned to witness and to receive. After a short while, Ngapipi started singing, and the men—mainly my *waku* (sons) and *dhuway* (husbands) of the Djambarrpuynu clan under the leadership of my *maralkur* (MMBS)—stood up and started dancing Shark, approaching and retreating with every short song unit performed, in and away from Ngapipi and me who were seated. The Shark is the major ancestral being of the Djambarrpuynu clan, the clan of my children and the clan of Manydjari's matrilineal grand-children (ZDC).² I recognized the song from the first beats of the music and from the stance the dancers assumed before advancing: the body becomes rigid, the legs are bent, the arms are straightened slightly behind the torso, palms down, the head turns with a jerk to the left and right, the eyes stare in a fixed and threatening gaze. As they advanced, maintaining this posture, they dragged one foot after the other, toes into the sand, slightly turning their bodies to both sides. In this fashion they left a track behind them marking the ground with curved intermitted lines that reproduce the characteristic swaying movement of the shark.³ The tensing of the body, the turning of the head and the staring eyes of the dancers capture the rage and frustration of the Shark ancestor toward his murderer, as he lies motionless before dying.⁴ The event was contained by its brevity—probably just over ten minutes—and by the limited number of people involved, yet the dancing was solemn, creating the powerful atmosphere and intensity which demand total attention. As in ritual ceremonies, what is crucial are not the steps, which are often so sub-

tle as to be almost imperceptible, but the tension of the gestures, the contraction of the muscles, the stillness of posture and the intensity of concentration. As in ritual ceremonies, the efficacy and meaning of this dance was not simply in what was being represented: the symbolic meaning of the ancestral Shark's death and the emotions that the dance enactment of his death evoked for all the participants. The intensity with which this dance and song was performed demanded the total attention of the performers and participants alike. I was shaken, moved and overwhelmed by the performance as I realized that I was part of it. I was crying profusely by the time one of the Shark dancers approached with a bright orange feather crownlet and placed it firmly on my head on the last beat of the music. The sadness mixed with the anger of the Shark expressed in this dance resonated with my own loss: being abandoned and abandoning many people I had lived with and had become close to over the previous two years. Being in many ways an element of the performance itself, my sobbing needed to be contained; it was cut short by Ngapipi who stopped it with a stern "enough now" (*bilin*).⁵ He then explained to me the significance of the gift. The crownlet is made of a thick cord of matted hair taken from deceased relatives, which is then smeared with beeswax and covered with the bright orange feathers of rainbow lorikeets. *Yalu* or nest is the public outside (*warrangul*) name of this sacred object owned by Ngapipi's clan: one of the many body adornments which covered the Djang'kawu Sisters' bodies as they emerged in all their beauty out of the sea foam off the Eastern seashores near Yirrkala, and traveled to the West across Northeast Arnhem Land, shaping and naming the country at the beginning of time and space. In his words,

This is your mother, it is private, and it is for you to take away. I give it to you to take to London where you should not forget that you can always put your Yolngu cap on. However, you should only wear it [the object itself] on important occasions.

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In the anthropological literature, stories of *exit* are not as popular as the ones of *entry* into the field.⁶ The cultural difference and the awkwardness one experiences in arriving and inserting oneself into a new social scene are certainly perceived as more appropriate topics of anthropological inquiry than the similarities one has not only recognized but accepted as a matter of course. While the event I recount above from memory may sound unusual and exotic, at the time it seemed natural although unexpected: a way of acknowledging my stay in the community by marking my departure, perhaps also an appreciation of my interest and assiduous participation in ceremonies as a dancer and seated participant, a way of stressing our mutual responsibilities as close kin, a way of saying goodbye, consolidating the passion of our relationship (Sansom 1995:308), a way of loving. There is now no doubt in my mind that this moment marked a beginning and not an end; it was a welcome and not a farewell, an act of appropriation and integration. As John von Sturmer commented on this event, “If they can attach you to the dead, you can never leave. The dead never leave” (personal communication, July 2004). At that moment, I was not merely the departing *balanda* (white) anthropologist but a person in my totality, the person I had become through my engagement in everyday relationships as a sister’s daughter to Manydjari, a mother, wife, sister, mother-in-law and all the other kinship relationships I had negotiated with many of the members of my close extended family in Milingimbi. The moral dimensions of the gift, the compulsion of giving, receiving and reciprocating (Mauss 1966) engaged us in a promise and a commitment to each other: an “obligation to return, to hold and to care” (Michaels 1994:140). Only now, however, over 12 years from that day and after many returns, can I begin to appreciate the meaning of this gift in terms of the ongoing fulfillment of our reciprocal responsibilities and in terms of the process of knowing that such a mutual engagement engenders (Tamisari 2006). Speaking from my own perspective, I continue to understand the significance of Yolngu dance events at a local level and begin an exploration of Australian indigenous performance as spectacles in intercultural settings more generally from the knowledge gained in the immediacy and intimacy of this experience. As Ngapipi mentioned, from putting my “Yolngu cap on” and seeing things differently.

This episode is not an anecdote but the ethnography of an encounter, a new beginning, which allows me to develop two important points with regard to Yolngu dance events. First, I propose that Yolngu performance needs to be analyzed in its totality, in the interweaving of the political, the religious and the aesthetic (in terms of the affective) constituting the social. Second, I continue to privilege an approach that finds and grounds meaning in experience (Tamisari 2000a, 2004, 2005).

In contrast to recent accounts of Australian indigenous performance which have mainly, focused on the competitive micropolitics of ritual (cf., Keen 1994; Dussart 2000), I argue that the political and the aesthetic are not only inseparable but mutually constitutive and productive.⁷ If dancing is one of the most effective ways of claiming, affirming and legitimizing one’s knowledge and authority in ceremonial contexts, the effectiveness of these “dancing statements” cannot be realized merely through acquiring the technical skills required for their flawless execution nor through an explanation of their complex symbolism. More importantly Australian indigenous dance, in local and intercultural contexts, needs to be understood in terms of intersubjective relationships. It is the nature of this intersubjectivity, or more correctly “intercorporeality” that allows the performer, and with her, the spectators to enter into an empathic space where the other person is encountered at a deeper level of intensity. In the context of Yolngu ceremonies, empathy does not, however, mean an affective communion with the other—one’s participation and total identification in the other’s feelings. Empathy is rather a modality of co-presence and co-presencing, an initial contact that opens up the way to establish and/or consolidate a relationship with another person (Tamisari 2000a).

In other words, if the political and the aesthetic are interwoven, if the effectiveness of one’s dance performance resides in the ability to affect others and if, in turn, this ability needs to be matched by one’s openness to be affected, then it is necessary to give equal attention to these dimensions (Tamisari 2000a:283; cf. Schieffelin 1985). Locating the realization of performance in experience—the fact that there would be no visual art, poetry or performance without a viewer/reader/spectator’s sensuous participation (Dufrenne 1973:45ff)—leads to a second point, namely the privileging of a phenom-

enological approach which, paraphrasing Dufrenne's (1987b:119) observations on poetry, aims to describe the lived experience of performance in order to bring out the meaning of dance expressed in the experience. Focusing on the experience of performance—simultaneously its production and reception, how the work and the viewer complete each other—allows a double reorientation. In the first instance, it critically addresses the methodological tendency in anthropological studies of art and ritual to privilege structure over aesthetic experience, representation over expression, symbol over feeling, form over context (Best 1978:137; Kapferer 1986:192; Langer 1953:183; Losche 1997).⁸ Most significantly, this approach shifts our attention to what performance accomplishes in the singularity of its unfolding in time and space, how it exudes an “atmosphere” which remakes the real (Dufrenne 1973:169) or how by “charm,” it unleashes the meaning of meaning that fixes an event in historical time (Jankélévitch 2003:78).

This shift echoes a critique leveled at the ways in which the “actualizing” of performance—both the creative conditions of performance and the artwork itself (Schechner 1973:8)—has been approached, or rather neglected in several disciplines. In psychology, Erwin Straus (1966:3ff) observes, in relation to movement, a privileging of sensation over sensing, of the gnostic over the pathic moment of movement.⁹ In musicology attention is given to the musical score over the musical performance—“the operatic work over the opera live and unfolding in time” (Abbate 2004:505). In art history the emphasis has been on what an art work represents rather than what it expresses (Dufrenne 1973; Merleau-Ponty's writings on painting in Johnson 1993; Heidegger 1996). In folklore studies rules and regularities of communication have been stressed over the appreciation of performance as a unique contextualized mode of existing and realization of specific traditions (Hymes 1975:11). In literary criticism the concern has been with what Roland Barthes refers to as the “obvious meaning”—in terms of information and symbolism—over the “third” or “obtuse meaning” that intellection alone cannot quite grasp (1985:44).¹⁰ In anthropology the structure and symbolism of ritual, and the social roles of participants in any given ceremony, have been emphasized to the detriment of experiential dimensions. In general, scholarly concern has been with the nature of knowledge and referential meaning rather than with the process of knowing (Tamisari 2005).

While a phenomenological perspective offers a new beginning in understanding the complex modality of aesthetic experience—the nature and structure of participation in production and reception of art objects and performances—there is a profound gap between philosophical and anthropological approaches. While I remain indebted to Mikel Dufrenne's (1973:155ff and 528ff) insightful and inspirational work, ethnography demands stress on the social dimension of aesthetic experience, an aspect that Dufrenne seems to neglect or subsume under the general rubrics of history and the real. Conversely, in formulating an anthropological theory of art, Alfred Gell insists that aesthetic principles and experience need to be considered in the course of social interaction (production, reception and circulation) but, by defining them as “interior mental acts,” he subsumes them to the social in terms of “agency, intention, causation, result and transformation” (1998:1–11). If Yolngu people, like many other indigenous groups in Australia, emphasize that knowledge, whether in the context of education, ritual, everyday encounters at local levels or in intercultural exchanges is, in the first instance, a matter of “seeing, doing and active participation” (Christie 1992), “going through” before talking (Tamisari and Milmilany 2003:6), action before thought (Sansom 1995:281; 1980); it is necessary in these contexts to approach art in general, and dance events in particular, through the way that the here and now of their unfolding in time and space strive toward reaching unique social and historical syntheses. In any manifestation, performance is prior to, and more effective than, any commentary, and it is thus in aesthetic experience as a form of participation—a modality of co-presence and co-presencing—that its “meaning” emerges. The force of performance is neither in the motivating intentions nor in the expected purpose or end, but in the performance itself: it is a “doing” which, by accomplishing itself in the event, in the very single act of production and reception, submits a specific truth to a happening (Jankélévitch 2003:78ff).

THE SINGULARITY OF PERFORMANCE: REPRESENTATION AND EXPRESSION

The common traits of any performance, be it a ritual, a play, a ballet or a symphony, reside in achieving general aims in order to be successful: they aim

to reach co-presence through different forms of participation, they move back and forth between different levels of intensity or feeling as a mode of attention, and they must express something which goes beyond what is represented. As Yolngu say for all rituals, mortuary ceremonies in particular, there is no Yolngu Law (*rom*)¹¹ without participation. This applies to dancing and singing, looking after the body, crying, worrying for the deceased and close kin, offering gifts, or just being there. But what is the nature of this participation? What is its significance? How does this participation make the ritual or any other performance successful?

In drawing attention to the nature of the intensity in generating expression and the effects/affects it produces in the context of ceremony, I focus on one of the aspects of performance that is distinctly and immediately experienced yet escapes analysis (Dufrenne 1973:263). I will, therefore, first explore how the notion of singularity is expressed through the interplay of representation and expression in Yolngu mortuary ceremonies and, from this perspective, I will consider its significance when Yolngu and other Australian indigenous ceremonial traditions are performed in intercultural settings in the community and elsewhere in Australia.

MORTUARY CEREMONIES AND THE EXPRESSION OF SINGULAR SOCIAL WORLDS

Like other Australian indigenous ceremonial traditions that bring together song, music and designs in a ritual context, Yolngu ritual performance is one of the most elaborate and effective ways of negotiating, reproducing and interpreting the Law (*rom*). It is in the staging of Yolngu ceremonies that people retrace and reenact the ancestral journeys which shaped and named the land, and in this way bestowed it to specific groups of people. All details of these law-giving ancestral journeys are retraced in the events of the songs which, like road maps criss-cross the land, connecting land and people. The creative power of naming is condensed in the chanting of ancestral names, ancestral places are recreated through the polymorphic plasticity of visual media such as designs, sculptures and ground patterns and the ancestral beings' particular transformative actions are embodied by the dancers' movements and choreographies. It is thus in the reproduction of this ancestral knowledge associated with

specific places that the performers claim their ownership and assert their authority over them. Yolngu mortuary rituals are extremely elaborate sociopolitical and religious events whose successful execution depends on the production of particular effects and the attainment of specific transformations, and usually require sustained planning, preparation and participation from all the close relatives of the deceased. While the major religious function of these ceremonies is to guide and send the bone-soul (*birrinbirr*) of the deceased to merge with his/her country of origin or bone-country (*ngaraka*), the ritual process involves complex social and political negotiations which may entitle particular relatives to acquire or legitimize their knowledge over the deceased's country or the country belonging to his or her patrilineal and/or matrilineal kin. According to the biological and classificatory kinship position each individual occupies in the complex network of ancestral connections in the region, each mortuary ceremony is unique to the extent that specific ancestral connections are retraced and reenacted in order to compose and decompose the singular socio-physical identity of the deceased in terms of his or her unique ancestral affiliations. From this perspective, the deceased is the fulcrum of a network of relatives who not only construct the deceased's identity, but also, as nodes in this network, reassess their positions, their duties, their responsibilities and with them their own sociopolitical identities. Thus, while all mortuary ceremonies maintain similar structural features, what distinguishes them is the *singular* social world they express, that is the world of the deceased and the re-configuration of the sociopolitical network revolving around the deceased.

This notion of singularity or difference, as it may be better described, is crucial to the ways the ritual phases are organized, and it is central to what dance performances express. In the first instance, all relatives participating in the ritual have a role to play, a political statement to make in negotiating the ancestral knowledge associated with the deceased's clan territory (in terms of inheritance as well as transferal of authority). In dance performance, however, this singularity also characterizes the most spectacular and politically effective performances. From the perspective of this uniqueness or difference, there is no doubt that what is represented is crucial. It is in fact the myriad symbolic details, such as the choice of ancestral paths re-

traced, the execution of particular versions of paintings, dance movement and choreographies, which determine the “contingent associations...posited to link beings, places, manifestations, practices and tracks” (Samson 1995:261). However, in Yolngu ceremonies there is something else that produces meaning beyond the “strings of associations” establishing “esoteric particularity of significance” (Sansom 1995:260–261). It is how these representations are performed, and in particular, the attention that performance demands of the performers and participants alike, that brings to presence ancestral law-giving actions.

Symbolic meanings are not expressive in themselves. They merely constitute an indispensable setting, a necessary background to performance and, in this way, contribute to expression. In a similar manner, we could say that design, song and dance manifest ancestral presence in their own way, through visual means, language, music and movement, and thus constitute one another’s background. However, it is in their unity, as they fuse different aspects of ancestral presence, that they truly participate in expression. This unity in Yolngu mortuary ceremonies creates the field where the rhythm of the ritual unfolds into an “atmosphere” (Dufrenne 1973:49, 168, 181) which culminates in particular climactic phases of the ceremony. These climaxes are reached at crucial moments, such as the arrival of the body, its transportation to the cemetery, and the official arrival of close kin who come to mourn. Transformations occur during these phases: the deceased body becomes his or her ancestral being, his or her bone-soul is finally dispatched to its place of origin, and the dance leaders make the most forceful political statements through dramatic, intense and spectacular performances. The most charged phases of a ceremony are easily recognized by the use of particular forms of performance. Yolngu ritual vocabulary distinguishes between big (*yindi*) and small (*nyumukuniny*) songs and dances. So-called big songs (*yindi manikay*) are characterized by the chanting of ancestral proper names that are particularly powerful and by an elaborate music form (*rinngitj*, literally the body of the song), which is contrasted with ordinary songs (*wana manikay*, literally the arm of the song). As the small song progresses along the ancestral path, recalling ordinary details of ancestral actions along their journeys (for example, their fishing, flying and gathering activities), the big songs accompany their

law-giving actions as they shaped and named the land. The gradual embodiment of ancestral cosmogonic actions is also accompanied by a distinction between big and aggressive dances (*mardakaritj bunngul*) and small dances. Whereas the latter are characterized by stylized and abstract movements representing only a part of the ancestral body in motion, such as, the tail of a snake, big dances are characterized by complete mimetic actions reproducing the ancestral body in its full shape, action and movement, such as, the coiling of a snake (Tamisari 2000b).¹² The coming together of the elaborate music form, the chanting of ancestral proper names and the execution of big dances brings forth ancestral presence in its totality and force. Ancestral presence is finally manifested when the ancestral actions of movement, trajectory and naming are re-composed in the visual, poetic and music dimensions of performance. These media are not simply brought together. Ancestral presence is manifested by a complex synesthesia in which the song text evokes movement rather than sounds, the visual becomes musical in the dance and the musical becomes pictorial in the designs and choreographies (Dufrenne 1987a:1ff.).¹³ The unleashing of this presence is made evident when all performers and participants leave the ceremonial ground abruptly at the end of the ceremonial climax that usually concludes an important phase of a ceremony. If ritual works and develops through a crescendo, the presence finally manifested is ephemeral; only silence and emptiness can be left behind. It is the nature of spectacular performances to take the dance event to a higher level of uplifting and uplifted attention and, as Yolngu say, “make things happen” (Tamisari 2004).

PARTICIPATION: ATTENTION AND FEELING

Ancestral beings literally planted the law (*rom nhirrparr*) into the land along their journey and, by giving it to people, transformed this lawful (*rommirr*) land into their own home country (*waanga, ngaraka, and rinngitj*). However, it is people who continuously interpret the law, or as the Yolngu say “hold” it (*rom ngayatham*) according to socio-historical circumstances. As Joey Yapupu said to me in relation to dance: “Yolngu dance because they hold the law. Ancestral beings taught us how to dance, and now it is Yolngu people who dance to show that we have law and culture (*rom*)” (personal communication, April 1992). “The

Law of the dance” (*bunngul rom*) and “the Law of the songs” (*manikay rom*) reside in the *holding*, namely the very act of performance both in the distribution of rights and duties when authority is negotiated and in the correct reenactment and experience of the law. In other words, performance is a fusion between the social, the political and the aesthetic.

The way in which aesthetic experience fuses these elements is evident in the Yolngu notion of *maarr* and, in particular, in the practice of *wamaarrkanhe* that I have discussed at some length elsewhere (Tamisari 2000a). Rather than “ancestral power,” as it is commonly glossed in the anthropological literature on this region, the notion of *maarr* is first and foremost a “feeling of affection,” a “desiring...a yearning” which refers to people’s innermost feelings of love, care, compassion, moral strength and aggression for country and relatives (Thomson 1975:5). In the context of performance, this notion, embedded in the expression “wa-maarr-kanhe” is pronounced by a spectator in appreciation of an unexpectedly spectacular dance performance by which a dancer affected, or as Yolngu say “saw” and thus “entered” the inner feelings of the spectator (*maarr nhama*). As the dancer dared to “see” the innermost feelings of the spectator, the spectator responds to this invasion by proffering a compliment (the expression *wamaarkanhe*) which, in turn, has the capacity of affecting the dancer by challenging his or her well-being. The dancer who does not satisfy the requests of money or objects which follow this appreciation could fall ill or even die. It is clear that here, what performance expresses, as Dufrenne argues, goes beyond representation, presence and the body, and establishes a “secret commerce” or even a “mutual possession” between the performer and the spectator. In Yolngu terms, it is an encounter between the inner feelings (*maarr*) of the dancer and of the person who pays the compliment.¹⁴ It is important to clarify that what transforms a dance into a spectacular performance with the power to affect others, and in turn leaves the performer susceptible to be affected by others, is not merely a skillful and technically flawless execution that meets the many aesthetic criteria of Yolngu dancing, such as the rhythm and energy of the stepping, the inclination of the body, and the marks a dancers leaves in the ground (Tamisari 2000a). As Dufrenne notes for art, aesthetic criteria and overall technique are general qualities, and although they are indispens-

able, it is how technique is surpassed and put to use in a *singular* way by an artist or performer that “surprises and possesses us” (1973:387). What I want to argue is that, in Yolngu dancing, it is not a question of excelling in dance technique as such, but it is rather a matter of how technique “serves expression.” How a dancer displays his own interiority and demands total attention through technique (Dufrenne 1973:478ff). This leads me back to the nature of participation and how this participation is an integral part, if not indeed the very actualization, of all Yolngu dance performances.

THE DISPLAY AND THE TESTING OF SELVES

In this section I draw from Dufrenne’s notion of “feeling” and I also refer to the Yolngu notion of *maarr* in the expression *wamaarrkanhe* discussed above. In performance, *maarr* is a mode of attention, and not a mere sentiment; it is a form of transformation and constitution of self and other, a sort of “testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self” (Merleau-Ponty 1964:120). In Dufrenne’s words: “I must make myself conform to what feeling reveals to me and thus match its depth with my own. That is why, through feeling, I myself am put into question” (1973:377).

Although all dance events, from mortuary ceremonies to impromptu performances (including the one organized for the departing anthropologist) are highly charged with strong emotions, the success of a ceremony does not depend on the intensity of the emotions staged in this way. While the ritualization of emotions in mortuary ceremonies dominate entire phases of mortuary rituals and are highly contagious, all displays of emotion in ceremonies need to be and are contained. Emotion is a means and not an end of the ceremony.¹⁵ The ritualization of these emotions offers a field, or a setting, which allows male and female performers to reach an uplifting and uplifted state of consciousness; that is, a way in which these performances affect the performer as well as others is through *feeling*. Feeling (*maarr*) is the participation, the secret commerce established between performer and spectator through dance and song. Feeling establishes an inner communication, a mutual resonance, between the depths of the dancer and the inner being of the spectator. Thus, feeling opens up the self and makes one receptive not only to emotions but to knowledge. In Yolngu terms,

maar has to do with one's change in attitude, a real *subjection* of the self both to ancestral presence and to the other participants with all the socio-physical transformations and consequences this submission implies. This feeling is also intelligent and intellectual, a way of learning, transferring and negotiating the law through perception and experience. The learning of the law is an intellectual process which must be, nevertheless, literally absorbed through one's body (Tamisari 2000a). Indeed, as Dufrenne writes, while the knowledge (*savoir*) of the work of art, for example, the categories that inform and educate us on its constitutive elements, its composition and history, is part of a deep self, we would not fully understand (*connaissance*) an artwork in its totality without feeling. He thus concludes that "feeling revives this knowledge which in turn renders feeling intelligent" (1973:471). In Yolngu terms, we can say that feeling (*maarr*) activates knowledge, and knowledge, in turn, is grounded in the experience, engagement and commitment of the self through the other.

The notion of *maarr* and the practice of *wamaarrkanhe* in Yolngu performance stress that feeling, sometimes as a mode of "feverish attention," is at the basis of intersubjectivity, in which the other does not exist simply in terms of one's aims or intentions, but also in terms of the transformation of one's self (Dufrenne 1973:394 n.1). In art and ritual intentionality is not merely a consciousness of something, but a being subjected to, not an intention toward but a participation and association with, a "being alongside with," an intimacy which strengthens as well as makes one vulnerable (Dufrenne 1987b:3–11; cf. von Sturmer 2001:1041; de Monticelli 1998:181–182; Jackson 1998:1).

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SOCIAL: ENGAGEMENT, COMMITMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

What performance accomplishes in itself thus needs to be sought in the nature of participation and approached through an analysis of aesthetic experience. From this perspective, I now turn to the issues I raised at the beginning of this article, especially to the role that indigenous dance performance plays in intercultural settings, whether these are in the community or in the more formal diplomatic encounters with Australian governments and institutions. The adaptation and execution of dance sequences from a

group's ceremonial repertoire has now become common for such occasions. These contexts include land rights and Native Title claim hearings, court decisions, openings of art exhibitions, conferences, sport events, and national arts festivals (Magowan 2000; Mundine 1997).¹⁶ Although dance performances in these intercultural contexts have no doubt increased in frequency in the last twenty years and have been more visible through spectacle-seeking media coverage and visual representations of authentic and pristine Aboriginality for the tourist market, this is by no means a new phenomenon. As reported in early accounts of the establishment of the British colony in New South Wales, dance performances or "corroborees" were at the center of the first formal colonial encounters (Collins 1910:298; Moyle 1977). To this list, I would like to add dance events, which, although performed within indigenous communities and to predominantly local audiences, are nonetheless intercultural in character. These include Christian fellowships and rallies, graduation ceremonies, the opening of new public buildings such as shops and offices, as well as welcomes and farewells of visiting politicians, ex-missionaries, teachers and anthropologists.¹⁷

Despite an overall lack of sustained interest in the "politics of theatre and spectacle" (Magowan 2000:309) among anthropological studies of Australian indigenous performance, one of the first analyses to focus on and interpret the significance and the dynamics of such events in Australia is Ronald M. Berndt's (2004) 1957 study of Aboriginal Yolngu responses to the rapid social, political, economic and epistemological changes brought about by the introduction and integration of Christian beliefs, values and practices of the Methodist Missions in Northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.¹⁸ In 1957 at Galuwin'ku, a mission station in Northeast Arnhem Land, a memorial of painted and carved objects was displayed next to the local church. The revelation of these sacred and secret objects (*rangga*) alongside the church was explained by Berndt in purely economic terms, as an "Adjustment Movement" or "rapprochement between the alien and the indigenous" (2004:14) in which the Yolngu leaders aimed to exchange their most sacred possessions and esoteric knowledge for education, employment and increased political control over their own affairs. However, as Howard Morphy (1983) points out, the display of these objects in 1957

and, similarly the presentation of the Bark Petition in the early 1960s, is concerned with the relationship with Europeans in general. Rather than an exchange of objects, they should be understood as an exchange of values and principles mainly to obtain respect and recognition from white Australians. The primary objective of a release of secret knowledge, according to Morphy (1983) is to educate white people, to make them understand the intrinsic values of Yolngu culture. By participating in such a negotiation, the political message or strategy of Yolngu people was to enter this dialogue on their own terms, introducing Yolngu symbols into European political discourse. The implied message of these actions was thus a subversive one, namely to assert Yolngu autonomy and independence (Langton 1992, 2003).¹⁹

I propose that the Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land and other national and international events where the production and reception of visual art and performance occupy “the intercultural space...of colonialism, primitivism and globalization” (Myers 2002:6) should be approached not merely as an attempt to educate, a performative means toward a political end (Morphy 1983; Magowan 2000; Dussart 2000), nor simply a strategy of communication or translation of culture (Myers 2002:273) but as a *doing* where meaning is generated and understanding reached through the possibility of affecting and being affected. I propose that the effectiveness of these events is not explained simply in terms of economic exchange, the encoding and decoding of culture and the assertion of political autonomy. Rather, as I have outlined above, it should be understood in terms of our sensual participation and social engagement in, or refusal of, the possibilities, risks, and immediacy of a knowledge that the here and now of aesthetic experience opens up to the participants.

While both Morphy (1983) and Myers (2002) touch on the significance of aesthetic experience in generating a meaning that goes beyond the display and production of art, they do so only in passing, but see Morphy 1990. In commenting on the significance and eventual impact of the Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land, Morphy notes: “what it did was to dramatize the issues and place within a single frame (both temporal and spatial) and with a central focus, a series of irresolved and perhaps irresolvable problems” of the colonial relationship (1983:111). Indeed, as Berndt

reports, soon after its installation, and especially the death of one of the movement leaders, interest in the Memorial waned and it “was treated in a casual way” by men and women alike (2004:99). As with all rituals, once the ceremonial proceedings are over, people abandon the ceremonial ground abruptly and ignore it for a long time afterwards.²⁰ Similarly, in his concluding remarks on the two-day construction of a sand painting by two artists from Papunya, Central Australia, on the occasion of the “Dreamings” exhibition held at the Asia Society in New York in 1999, Myers notes that its relevance could also be understood in the “real time, unscripted and engaged” process of performance itself and more specifically in the “transport” of aesthetic experience (2002:274).

I would like to return to a focus on participation in understanding the significance of art and dance performances in intercultural contexts. All these events can be considered together from the perspective of participation, their difference being in the degree and depth of engagement rather than in their type. As a “doing,” performance—the revelation of secret designs, the execution of a dance or an art installation—can also be approached as an experience that is grounded in the historically lived meaning it produces. Thus, I propose that the significance and effectiveness of dance performance and art in intercultural contexts resides in the relationship it consolidates or crystallizes in the single act of its actualization, including production and reception. In adopting a phenomenological approach to the analysis of Yolngu production and consumption of video, radio and television programs in Northeast Arnhem Land, Jennifer Deger argues that, “these exchanges aren’t simply about a symbolic exchange of culture at the level of representation” but should be understood in terms of “a politics of presencing” which by bringing together concerns about “depletion and appropriation, showing and seeing, giving and receiving” produce and mediate a reciprocal relationship of respect and recognition “derived from the experience of being touched and transformed by the mimetic power of Ancestral presence” (2003:170–172). My thesis is that the potency of this relationship does not derive only from the ancestral domain but from the sensual participation of performer and viewer, a participation which constitutes the unfolding of performance in a particular space and time and produces a truth of its own. It is the actualizing of performance: the “spe-

cial kind of behaving, thinking, relating and doing” of drama (Schechner 1973:8), which allows the pathic (Straus 1966) or *drastic* (Jankélévitch 2003) way of knowing in aesthetic experience. In intercultural contexts, we should seek the significance of the performative in the immediacy and intimacy of this knowledge that only art can produce. More specifically, beyond political motivations, expectations and assertions of indigenous actors in realigning their cultural values to particular historical circumstances, and beyond the politics of (self) representation, it is in the here and now of its singularity, that the performative creates the condition of possibility for the social to realize itself in a concrete, although fleeting, manner. The social is to be understood here in terms of engagement, commitment and accountability (von Sturmer 1995). Wherever, whenever and however performance is employed, it does not establish a relationship nor does it simply mediate it in cultural terms. Rather, performance takes the relationship between indigenous performers and non-indigenous viewers to a moment of consolidation or, even better, of activation where, if it is to progress at all, it needs to be grounded in an openness to participate. In this participation, it becomes possible to find the responsibility of our reciprocal historical and moral position. It is a participation in which questioning the other depends on being questioned; and affecting demands an openness to being affected, in a mechanism that allows us to recognize our history and act on it.

At all levels—between individuals or groups, personal and public, formal and informal modes, anthropologist and politician, from exhibitions of Aboriginal art to the courtroom—performance should also be understood as a reminder that respect and recognition run deeper than the legal and political sanctions of indigenous property of land and human rights, and involve the complex negotiations which oscillate between the generosity and risk, acceptance and refusal, the enthusiasm and indifference of social relatedness (von Sturmer 1995). In the face of the continuous and growing rejection of an equal commitment to social and moral engagement and accountability, whether at state or individual levels—from the recent draconian proposals put forward in Aboriginal affairs by the newly re-elected Howard government to the boredom and unease of a woman in a “little black dress” at an art opening, who refuses to sit on the floor or is lost without knowing the meaning of dance movements (Mun-

dine 1997)—the performative continues to say that the social is still possible, against all odds. It can be, and, at times is realized in all its potency through experience rather than explanation, participation rather than communication in a feeling whose truth “is intelligent in a way that intelligence as such can never be” (Dufrenne 1973:406).

POSTSCRIPT: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PERFORMANCE

As Ngapipi instructed me, I took the feather circlet with me to London but, rather than keeping it wrapped somewhere, as sacred objects are usually stored, I placed it in a glass case which, since then, has been hanging on my bedroom wall. As he told me, this is a private object which can only be displayed on special occasions. The first opportunity presented itself after the defense of my Ph.D. dissertation, which took place at the London School of Economics in 1994. At the end of the discussion, I took the circlet out of my bag and posed for a photograph tall and proud with it firmly on my head standing between my two examiners. Later the same year, with a copy of all the audio and written material I had recorded for my dissertation, I took the photograph to Milngimbi and showed it to everybody.

The second opportunity was in 1999 when I received my Australian citizenship at the Leichhardt Town Hall in Sydney. Wearing a black dress to make the orange feathers stand out in their brightness, I donned the circlet at home and kept it in place throughout the ceremony and for the usual photograph taken with the Mayor while one holds the citizenship certificate. In retrospect, the most amazing aspect of this event was not the fact that I felt honored and privileged to show that I had already been granted what could be understood as the symbol of Yolngu Aboriginal citizenship, but that nobody in the room either commented or even looked at this very unusual and beautiful object. Like one of my Euro-Australian friends who sneered at it, no doubt others must have found my wearing it rather eccentric.

In displaying this object on important occasions, as instructed by Ngapipi, I continued to learn about the significance of the performative from a Yolngu perspective. While at the time I thought that these occasions warranted the display of this object because the circlet would be the Yolngu equivalent of a Ph.D.

award and a citizenship certificate, I now understand that the significance of this gift is not the object itself nor what it stands for in terms of acceptance and group membership in Yolngu society. The significance of this gift resides in the possibility I was given to display it, the responsibility of performance: a demand for participation open to others and at the same time challenging them with all its risks and potentials. Not only was I made a member of Yolngu society but also an emissary. While there will no doubt be another important occasion to be accountable for my “breakthrough into performance” (Hymes 1975), I am also constantly reminded of my obligations and responsibilities in my everyday performances as a teacher and as a writer.

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NOTES

- ¹ The people who live at this camp are members of the extended family (Ngayimil) who have strong kinship and ceremonial links with Manydjari’s family and clan group and with the family and clan group into which I was adopted (Birrkili-Gupapuyngu). This is one of the camps where, from the beginning of my initial period of fieldwork to my most recent visit in 2004, I usually spent time in the company of its occupants and other relatives who gather there at lunch time, in the late afternoons and evenings.
- ² Each of the two patrimoieties (Yirritja and Dhuwa) comprises groups or clans which are patrilineally related (as MM-ZDC, ma:ri-gutharra and Z, yapa relationships (Keen 1994:101ff.; Morphy 1991:39-56; Williams 1986:37ff.). The moieties are exogamous, and marriage is ideally between genealogical and classificatory cross-cousins. Alliances between clans through marriage are usually reproduced over several generations. For example, many women of the Birrkili-Gupapuyngu clan (Yirritja moiety) have

continued to marry Djambarrpuyngu men and are mothers of Djambarrpuyngu children. In this case, having being adopted as a member of the Birrkili-Gupapuyngu clan, I refer to the Djambarrpuyngu clan as my “husband” and “child” clan. The same kinship terminology is used at egocentric and socio-centric levels.

- ³ In several Yolngu dances the performers’ feet mark the ceremonial ground in such a way as to leave a track (dhukarr) reproducing the ancestral being’s characteristic walking, swimming or crawling movements. Spectators often note and comment on these marks in appreciation of a dancer’s skills (Tamisari 2000a).
- ⁴ The generic name for shark is burl-manydji. In the dance of the Shark the morpheme “bul” is chanted by male dancers as they turn their heads to both sides (manydji). It refers to the head movement that accompanies the predatory zigzag motion that sharks make before an attack. This term is a good example of what I refer to elsewhere as “kinesiopoeic” names. Modelled on onomatopoeia, “kinesiopoeia” is a neologism I adopt to refer to generic and proper names which evoke the characteristic movement rather than the sound associated with the designated animal or thing (Tamisari 2002:97). The death of Shark, speared by a hunter of the Yirritja moiety, is one of the most charged phases of Djambarrpuyngu ceremonies. The central theme of this reenactment is the rage of the Shark and the aggression felt by Djambarrpuyngu men who witnessed his agonising death. As the song texts reveal and the dances embody, the men’s anger comes out and “they burn inside with anger” (ngoy nhaara). Physical power, aggression, rage, courage and fierceness shared by the men and their ancestral being are conveyed by the characteristics of the Shark’s body: the sharp rows of his serrated teeth, the tooth-like scale (or denticles) of his skin, its predatory zigzag motion (yir’yir’yun), and the frenzied movement of his head (wanthun). All these attributes constitute the basis of group and individual identity of Djambarrpuyngu men (Tamisari 2004).
- ⁵ At the end of the important phases of a ceremony all performers and participants fall silent and then leave the ceremonial ground abruptly. See below.
- ⁶ However, for anthropological work in Australia, see Fred Myers 1986:244-245, Basil Sansom 1995:286ff., and Françoise Dussart 2000:1-5.

- ⁷ These recent ethnographic accounts in turn reacted against the trend which approached and analyzed Australian Indigenous ritual mainly as religious rather than political events (for instance, see Stanner 1963 and 1979).
- ⁸ Over the last 25 years there have been notable exceptions in the anthropology of ritual and performance. See for example, Steven Feld 1990, 1996; Steven Friedson 1996; Bruce Kapferer 1983, 1997; Corinne Kratz 1994; Edward L. Schieffelin 1977, 1985. In relation to Australian Indigenous performance, see Fiona Magowan 2001; Deborah Rose 2000; John von Sturmer 1987.
- ⁹ Straus defines the pathic moment in perception as “the immediate communication we have with things on the basis of their changing mode of sensory givenness” and as “the immediately present, sensually vivid, still preconceptual communication” which is consequently “so difficult to understand conceptually” (1966:12). It is interesting to note that while Straus (1966:20) discusses forms of spatiality in general, it is in dancing that the fundamental differences between the forms of movement in optical and acoustic perception are revealed.
- ¹⁰ Barthes refers to the third or obtuse meaning as “the one which appears ‘in excess’, as a supplement my intellection cannot quite absorb, a meaning persistent and fugitive, apparent and evasive...outside (articulated) language, but still within interlocution” (1985:44, 55). It is the ineffable nature of this meaning that “disturbs” and “sterilizes” the metalanguage of criticism. See also Barthes’ (1985:268) distinction between “the predicative” and “the ineffable” in music, and following Julia Kristeva (1974), the distinction between “pheno-song” and “geno-song” (270). See also Gilles Deleuze’s (2003:111ff.) discussion on the intertwining of the “analogical” and the “digital” in painting.
- ¹¹ The English terms law and culture are often used interchangeably with the Yolngu terms *rom* and *mar-dayin* to refer to a body of moral principles, jural rules, practices and orientations which derive from the cosmogonic journeys of ancestral beings. It is at the basis of the Yolngu system of land ownership and authority and regulates all aspects of life (Williams 1986; Keen 1994).
- ¹² Although it is not unusual for older women to join in the execution of big dances, these performances are dominated by men.
- ¹³ On synesthesia in Yolngu songs, See Magowan 2001:44-45 and Feld 1996:92-94.
- ¹⁴ In critically reviewing his earlier “meaning-centered analysis” of the healing ritual among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, Schieffelin shifts his attention from what the Gisaro ceremony communicates to the nondiscursive elements of ritual work. In doing so, he stresses that “meanings...are created during the performance, in the negotiation between the principal performers and the participants who ‘share its action and intensity’” (1985:722). In his earlier monograph, Schieffelin interpreted the relationship between guest dancers and host participants in terms of a “drama of opposition...within a structure of reciprocity” (1977:197). Being moved to tears by the guests’ songs and dances the hosts turn their sorrow to anger and reciprocate the pain they suffered by burning the dancers’ shoulders with torches. The balance between the two is finally reached with payment of compensation to the hosts by the dancers. The opposition drama enacted in the Gisaro ceremony is then explained as analogous to similar structural oppositions of meaning in Kaluli beliefs about death and curing (Schieffelin 1977: table 11.1:218-219).
- ¹⁵ Anger and grief are the two inseparable facets of mourning. In Yolngu ceremonies there is an emotional division of labour between the sexes: big and aggressive dances are dominated by men; small dances dealing with themes of worrying (*warguyun*) and compassion (*gurrupurungu*) are dominated by women (on women’s “crying songs,” see Magowan 2001). The division of emotional labour is limited to the representation and not the experience of these emotions. Both men and women experience anger and compassion for their deceased and living relatives (Tamisari 2004).
- ¹⁶ In exploring the significance of indigenous dance performance as a means of political representation, Magowan focuses on “early Australian concert programs of indigenous dance” (2000:309), two indigenous dance companies (the Tjapukai Dance Theatre and Bangarra Dance Theatre) and a few national events: the impromptu dance performed by Gladys Tybingoompa in front of the High Court of Australia on the occasion of the Wik decision in 1997; and the introduction of Prime Minister John Howard to the phases of a secret sacred ceremony on Elcho Island

in 1997, just before the approval of the “Ten-point Plan” he had proposed to amend the Native Title Act (McIntosh 2000:55ff). Djon Mundine (1997) comments on the unease of the non-indigenous audience at art exhibition openings. Some of the most recent and spectacular Australian indigenous initiatives and events which are clearly cast in terms of performative politics come from Arnhem Land: namely the Garma Festival organized by the Yothu-Yindi Foundation every August at Gulkula, near Yirrkala (web page: <http://www.garma.telstra.com/>) and the ceremonial presentation performed in 2003 by several Yolngu clans from Yirrkala at the Northern Territory High Court. The latter marks the official acknowledgement of the mistrial and mysterious death of Dhakiyarr, a Yolngu leader, who was never seen alive after his release from the Darwin prison 70 years ago (Murray 2004). For another example of a similar event, see Steven Wild 1986.

- ¹⁷ In Milingimbi, where I conducted most of my fieldwork, a dance was performed a few days after Princess Diana’s funeral in London (Northern Territory News 1997, September 9:6). According to the accounts I was given, the event was organized by the Milingimbi Council and included a speech by the vice-chairman.
- ¹⁸ The politics of theater and spectacle have not been neglected by anthropologists elsewhere: among others see, for example, James Peacock 1968; Victor Turner 1986; Johannes Fabian 1990; Don Handelman 1998; Najwa Adra 1998. In Australia see Dussart 2000, 2004; Rosita Henry 1998 and 1999.
- ¹⁹ Marcia Langton explains the “efflorescence...of Aboriginal artistic production...as a process of incorporating the non-Aboriginal world into the Aboriginal world view of cosmology to lessen the pressure for Aboriginal people to become incorporated or assimilated into the global world-view” (1992:7; 2003:101).
- ²⁰ Berndt (2004:46) notes that half of the enclosure surrounding the Memorial is taken up by the dance ground. Yet, he focuses on the symbolic meanings of the objects and designs displayed and makes only passing reference to the dances performed alongside the objects. This cannot be explained only in terms of Berndt’s arrival in Galuwin’ku a few months after these events took place. He pays attention to what the performance represented rather than what it expressed as an event.

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