SPEAKER ABSTRACTS

KEY NOTES

Dr Fiona Foley
Who are these strangers and where are they going?

Queensland’s relationship with Aboriginal sovereign nations is a precarious thin line of give and take. More often the status quo has involved Europeans taking. Once the colonial frontier was of a physical dimension. Now it has shifted to an intellectual occupation. There are still entrenched legacies from the possessive acts of colonialism which collectively we are yet to overcome.

Aboriginal academic Chelsea Bond argues that, “our [Aboriginal] presence [is] merely an accessory adding to the aesthetic of white knowing”. The academy and art world are full of “white knowing” when it comes to Aboriginal art but devoid of Indigenous Knowledges pertaining to Aboriginal frontier memorials.

The Aboriginal Memorial, made for the Bicentenary, galvanised the feelings of many in 1988. This is evident in its impact. It is a potent forerunner in the nation’s Aboriginal memorials made by Aboriginal individuals and societies for our war dead. In this respect it inspired a whole genre of Aboriginal art. It also impacted other fields of research, as in the History Wars at the turn of the 21st century, and its concerns reverberate with increasing force every year.

The Aboriginal Memorial inspired Foley to think at a deeper level about unearthing this country’s truths and to stand by her convictions. The research that she and her research assistant carried out between 2002 and 2004 unearthed 94 Aboriginal massacre sites on the public record in Queensland and became the focal point for the public artwork created outside of Brisbane Magistrates Court titled Witnessing to Silence (2004). This work was a considered response to a statement made, ‘that Australia was settled peacefully’.

Professor David Garneau
Indigenous Contemporary Memorial: Art as Social Medicine

As the truth of Aboriginal oppression slowly roots into public consciousness, it disturbs the foundations of Settler culture and pushes Aboriginal trauma toward the light. This second enlightenment recognizes colonial ways of being as no longer morally, ethically, or environmentally tenable. It requires the remaking of us all. If Truth and (Re)conciliation between Settlers and Aboriginal people is to succeed, it must be cast in terms that recognize the past but is not beholden to those methodologies. Non-colonial, not-quite customary practices, and novel hybrid forms are required. Alongside political debate and scholarly intellection, our moment craves enigmatic public objects with and through which we can express and comprehend our unsettled states. This presentation considers the unique status of Indigenous memorials that are also works of contemporary art. In particular, I will consider works of Indigenous contemporary memorial art that have multiple authors, are activated by not-quite customary ceremonial events, and that both engage and evade customary Aboriginal, art world, and memorial culture expectations. I will show how Indigenous contemporary memorial art works, such as The Aboriginal Memorial, are a form of social medicine.
SESSION ONE: The Aboriginal Memorial from Ramingining to Sydney

Bernice Murphy

*Prehistory of the present: Aboriginal art, exhibitions and curatorship in the 1970s and 1980s*

This paper will revisit the context and support systems for the public emergence of Aboriginal art as contemporary art in the 1970s and 1980s. Significant changes required dismantling of categories imposed historically from outside Aboriginal communities – especially in the case of communities maintaining their culture on Country, far from centres of exhibition, circulation, collection and evaluation of art in southern cities and major institutions. Critical changes in the same period also vitally included interconnections and recognition of urban and rural Indigenous arts, artists, and intricate cross-cultural networks in capital cities, as well as their emergent support systems. The significant role of exhibitions in directly stimulating changes in broader social and critical reception of Indigenous arts will be traversed, along with the emergence of Indigenous curatorship (in particular by Djon Mundine, when based at Ramingining) as among the most consequential achievements of the period.

Dr Catherine de Lorenzo

*The Aboriginal Memorial in the context of the Sydney 1980s Art Scene*

Sydney during the 1970s and the 1980s was the national epicentre of Aboriginal activism, with many marches for self-determination and land rights, and the founding of key health and legal institutions. It was also a time of flourishing creative industries, spurred by Indigenous initiatives and significant funding from the Australia Council. Exhibitions in Sydney were particularly exciting including art from communities in Northern Territory as well as bold and poetic work from city-trained artists. Politics and creative expression seemed inseparable, and there was much evidence of cross-cultural collaboration within the art scene. Importantly, the 1980s was also a time when the Aboriginal curator came into prominence with key exhibitions crated by Marcia Langton, the Boomalli team, Djon Mundine, and into the early 1990s, Tracey Moffatt’s exhibition of Mervyn Bishops’ photography. *The Aboriginal Memorial*, which was the stand out work at the 1988 Sydney Biennale, seemed to be the culmination of an era that would also be a turning point to a new one. This paper will situate *The Aboriginal Memorial* within the larger context of the Sydney art scene and reflect the challenges provided by the new art to both art history and curatorship.

SESSION TWO: The Aboriginal Memorial at the NGA and beyond

Wally Caruana

*8 blue poles: The beginnings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art collection at the Australian National Gallery culminating in the acquisition of The Aboriginal Memorial*

In 1984, two years after its opening to the public, the Australian National Gallery (ANG) established a department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art with a dedicated acquisitions budget and a brief to collect the continuing traditions of Indigenous Australian art. The Gallery saw its role as building on the historical collections of Indigenous art that had been made in earlier decades and housed in other national and state art galleries and museums. As a national institution the role of the ANG was to collect art from across the continent, to represent regional styles and classical traditions. Furthermore, the Gallery was to track contemporary developments and identify major artists. The collection was to be representative and comprehensive. This paper will track the early years of the evolution of the collection, focusing on major acquisitions and artists that were to become the foundation for future collecting, leading up to the commissioning of *The Aboriginal Memorial*. 
Susan Jenkins

The Aboriginal Memorial: from Yolngu mortuary traditions to art installation

The Aboriginal Memorial is a contemporary art installation that draws on traditional Yolngu mortuary rituals. This paper traces the transformation of the use of hollow logs in Yolngu mortuary practices into contemporary art forms, of which The Aboriginal Memorial is the quintessential expression, and the ways in which it draws on these mortuary traditions for its expressive power and meaning. Once in the gallery domain, The Aboriginal Memorial also had to be curated as an art installation, which I will discuss in the context of its various installations within the NGA and in its international iterations in St Petersburg’s Hermitage, Lausanne’s Musee Olympique, and Hanover’s Sprengel Museum.

Stephen Gilchrist

Eulogies in Ochre: Curating ceremony, cartography, relation and grief

The Aboriginal Memorial is curatorially informed by a responsiveness and commitment to Indigenous cultural, social and political values. Reflecting on Djon Mundine’s embeddedness within Arnhem Land communities and his own Bundjalung identity, this paper looks at the ways in which he foregrounds Indigenous practices of ceremony, cartography, relation and grief. An alertness to the inner curatorial strategies of The Aboriginal Memorial allows for the emergence of new theorisations and practices of Indigenous museology which both reflect and anticipate the Indigenous curatorial turn.

SESSION THREE: Representing Trauma

Dr Wulan Dirgantoro

Beginning to Remember: Representing Historical Violence of 1965

This paper will discuss the representational complexities of memory that engage with the state-sanctioned violence of the 1965/66 anti-communist mass killings in Indonesia. In the absence of state recognition of the mass killings and strong resistance from the broader society, the survivors and families have had to pass on their memories in personal ways, making their meanings of the painful past within families and communities of former political prisoners. This paper will discuss how some contemporary Indonesian artists, such as Agung Kurniawan, Dadang Christanto, Tintin Wulia and Rangga Purbaya, have developed a strategy of remembering through performative works, collaborative practices, and mnemonic devices. The paper will address the complexity of speech and articulation of historical trauma, narratives and silences around violence, and the transmission of intergenerational memory in Indonesia.

Professor Desmond Manderson

Ghosts and Superpowers – On “The Crimes of Justice”

Perhaps the greatest artwork to address the relationship between law, art, and trauma is tucked away on the back stairs of the Supreme Court of Mexico. The Crimes of Justice (2009) is a confronting work of critique that speaks without compromise to modern law’s complicity in injustice. But the artist, Rafael Cauduro, does not simply diagnose a problem. His visual language and formal innovation provide us with superpowers – art’s superpowers. Cauduro’s visual language speaks directly to the expression and representation of trauma, and to the aesthetic and political resources needed to confront it. Thus armed, we can begin to see the world differently and seeing, begin to change it.
SESSION FOUR: Memorialising Trauma

Professor Sue Best

*Trauma, Art and Repair*

This paper considers trauma, art, repair and the irreparable. Drawing on the framework of Best’s recent book *Reparative Aesthetics: witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography* (2016), she considers how the work of Brisbane based Indigenous artists; Judy Watson and Robert Andrew occupies the ambivalent space of reparative aesthetics. In contrast, the work of artists, such as Gordon Bennett and Vernon Ah Kee, underscores the irreparable and deep marks of trauma. The paper considers how these different strategies memorialises traumatic experiences that normally escape capture.

Dr Greg Lehman

*Genocide Memorial in Tasmania*

While genocide in the Tasmanian context continues to be a subject of debate, the influence of events culminating in the exile of Aboriginal people to Flinders Island and the decimation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal population has been lasting. My research has focused on documenting the visual history of the period of colonial aggression against Aboriginal nations, including attempts by colonial artists to memorialise the attempted extermination of a race. Through a number of recent projects I have explored the potential of musical performance, exhibition and urban redevelopment as vehicles for remembrance, acknowledgement. These projects have indicated a public desire to engage honestly and powerfully with the reality of Australia’s history of frontier violence; especially through creative processes.