

The Artist as Ethnographer

By Chris Barry

My research/projects draw together three main areas of inquiry—a reflexive ethnographic practice, an Aboriginal pedagogy, and the practice of art. As an artist, these are the methodologies one needs to step into an “unknowable” culture and produce a body of work out of the “experience”. However, more importantly, the history of ethnographic practices, and, in particular, the post 1980s re-evaluation of the discipline, is central to this type of artistic/scholarly project. By positioning “the artist as ethnographer” I am able to draw together the key tenets of inter-cultural engagement and the political and ethical dilemmas of cultural production, as well as my own subjectivity in this collaborative process. This analysis is then translated into local terms—the everyday lived life of Alice Springs—articulated through an Aboriginal “enunciation”—and a history of sustained relations amongst a specific group of Aboriginal families, generously initiated by Erica Franey. My relationship with Erica and her family and kin, began in 1999 and continues into the present. These projects, then, emerge from a network of extensive relations and the contingencies and sociality of a specific location.

My means of translating the experience of “being there” into an appropriate representational form is through a “politics of the performative”, a re-enactment and re-presentation of subject identities within our culturally imbricated (and agonistic) relations—the dramaturgy of inter-cultural encounter. Performance, then, mediates the politics of identity and enables an assertive Aboriginal “presencing” to occur—where the participants themselves test colonial models of representation, and, in particular, the ethnographic/racial gaze. Performance, then, from the participants’ perspective, is one in which they take control of the representation and their subject-identities—and a conceptual re-enactment of culture is presented as a self-conscious, constructed, and staged public document. The challenge, of course, is to dismantle preconceived assumptions, conventions, and expectations that inform representation and the production of cultural identities.

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Artist’s Statement - Interventions: Experiments between Art and Ethnography