This is not another book about Aboriginal art. Rather it is a portrait of archives as subjects in their own right. The ‘archival turn’ in contemporary art has seen the emergence of archives as places which are representative of contemporary cultures, needing ongoing and ‘extensive hermeneutic revision’. The archives discussed here range from art centre archives in remote communities to those which are housed in state museums.

In the introductory essay Ian McLean states that ‘the Archive relies upon archives that are idiosyncratic and political, and dependent upon technologies and powers.’ (p. xvi). This was probably never more the case than in remote communities, with low levels of staff retention and the consequent loss of records.

In the first essay, the primary role of the Art Centre manager is revealed as that of archivist. Art centres are ‘often the only source of externally generated income in remote communities’ (p. 82). Moreover, they are meeting places for deeper aspects of Aboriginal culture with the outside world. At the intersection of worlds there is incommensurability and the convergence between the radically different realities of the Dreaming and modern art where ‘the same person can be a successful contemporary artist in his day job at the community art centre and a shaman working similar signs in ceremonies at night’ (p. 8). What are sacred objects to one culture are aesthetically pleasing artworks to another. The advent of the community Art Centre facilitated the move from ‘shamanism’ to the aesthetics of acrylic paintings. Primitive art became contemporary art, a process which is most easily seen in the Papunya Tula archive, which originated from Papunya, 300km west of Alice Springs.

Many of the most sought-after artists spoke English as another language. Consequently, the record has been controlled through English, the language of the dominant society. For example, there is only one recorded instance of artist Emily Kame Ngwarrey telling her story through an interpreter. There appear to have been few attempts to bring linguistic knowledge to bear on art interpretation.

The archive is not sacrosanct; rather, it is a limited record. The essays are instrumental, and even prosaic in their concern with the physical records of the archive; the certificates and authentication provide ‘verifiable documentation’ of the paintings. The essays explore the more organised of those archives such as the Papunya Tula with the exceptional documentation of Peter Fannin to those which have been haphazard and dispersed, such as those of the Utopia Artists (northeast of Alice Springs) who lacked a proper art centre.

Where there are contested Art Centre histories such as at Warmun in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, there must be an appeal to the historical record. The rewriting of histories is made possible by the archive. The essays in the second section augment the official records with additional research in an attempt to deepen understanding of art history. Reminiscent of sociologist and writer Vivien

Johnson’s recent revisionist contributions, John Kean explores the way in which Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula was inspired by a La Niña weather event and previous generations of watercolorists at Haasts Bluff, and not only the immediate context of the Papunya ‘School of Bardon’. Essays on Kalumburu in the northern Kimberley region of Western Australia and Patjarr in the Gibson Desert (near Warburton Ranges in Western Australia) are off the beaten track and show the degree to which this volume’s editors make a serious effort to be inclusive in their coverage of the most remote ‘outstations’ and communities.

The third section consists of four essays which concern general archives built by Indigenous people, for example the comprehensive Ara Irititja archive which contains substantial amounts of artwork from Western Desert artists. This archive lives and grows and is far from static, but creates an interface and tension between traditional Aboriginal concerns about safekeeping and the accessibility of digital modernity. Archivists have made, and are remaking, Aboriginal identities and histories.

In the final section six essays concern highly urbanised centres and the decolonization of archives in an earlier incarnation, and their repatriation to Indigenous owners.

The book is valuable as an attempt to fit the contemporary Indigenous art archive into a history and context as it has developed in the Western world and been extended to remote Australia. It records fascinating changes in the archiving practices of art centres from a large swathe of remote Australia in a kind of meta-archival overview by an assemblage of scholars with experience of the Indigenous art world. A number of the authors are experienced archivists. They show how archives intersect with traditional Aboriginal societies and how, as with the experience of Warmun, they sometimes collide.

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