

# Relationscapes: How Contemporary Aboriginal Art Moves Beyond the Map

Erin Manning

## Three examples

1. *Mina Mina* (Dorothy Napangardi Robinson, 2005) measures almost two metres in height (198 x 122 cm). Black on white, its white emergent through the black dots, it encourages us to look-across, to move-with the fragile dotted lines that compose its labyrinths. 'Looking at' is too stable for this shifting landscape that moves, already, in many directions at once. This movement-across is not a symmetrical one that would obediently follow a horizontal or vertical perspective: it is a vibrating movement, a resonance that forces itself upon our vision, transforming it into a politics of touch. This is a politics of touch because what the painting compels is not a static viewing but an activity of reaching-toward that alters the relation between body and painting, creating a moving world that becomes a touching of the not-yet touchable. This touching is rhythmic. It occurs not on the lines or with the points but across the vista the painting elaborates, an experiential vista that is already more-than the space of the canvas can convey. These are more than traces, they are material becomings toward a worlding immanent to the experience of viewing. The becoming-world called forth by this black and white painting is a creation of an event of which I am part. It takes me not somewhere else, but right where I can become, to a force-field that is an eventness in the making, an exfoliation of experience.

The painting envelops space, creating new spacetimes of experience, new viewing bodies. It literally quivers with its dissonant becomings. This is not a metaphor. Spacetime is ontogenetically recreated through the process. The painting has incited me to move, and with the movement I have altered the dynamic of viewing initially set forth by this viewing experience. I become part of the composition, part of the activity of relation through which the painting achieves its morphing form. I feel its limits, its openings, its diagram.

Deleuze writes: 'We do not listen closely enough to what painters have to say. They say that the painter is already in the canvas, where he or she encounters all the figurative and probabilistic givens that occupy and preoccupy the canvas'.<sup>1</sup> A painting's diagram is expressed in this already-thereness, in the virtual event out of which the painting emanates. James calls this a terminus, by which he means the end-point that virtually envelops the beginning, creating the potential for the event to take place. *Mina Mina's* diagram comes together through the dotted black line on the upper right side of the canvas, a line that almost cuts off the corner from the rest yet embraces the painting as a whole. This self-embracing gesture is not only a compositional device, it is the painting's imminent force, a tension that constrains the experience to the singularity of its own eventness, a shapeshifting process.

*Mina Mina* speaks of salt lines, a mapping not of a territory but its passages, the traces it leaves in the landscapes it uncovers. A map is discovered here, not uncovered. This is a durational event, an *activity* of mapping that directs our bodies not toward its representation but toward its liveliness. This mapping is a creative vector of experience: it maps the future, not the past, leading us toward a recomposition of experience, a collaborative striation that smoothes the space of encounter.

2. *Alhalkere* (Emily Kame Kngwarreye, 1991) covers the whole wall. Three metres wide, it is powerful in its vivid evocation of the land, dancing with both grace and force. A-signifying traits merge to create a nonrepresentational, nonillustrative and nonnarrative field: 'marks that no longer depend on our will or our sight'.<sup>2</sup> The diagram can be felt emerging from the deep reddish burgundy spilling from the top left-hand corner of the painting. It is as though the rest of

the painting overflows from this dark corner, merging into a transformative activity of dot-painting, overpowered, finally, by yellow dots that transfuse with the surface, becoming surface, dense and airy at once. This quality of yellowness becomes the asignifying trait that propulses the canvas into an event. This event is rhythmical: it moves between the red and the yellow, creating a quivering that dances the passage from the dot to the surface to the rhythm in between. For diagrams are ‘a chaos, a catastrophe, but ... also, a germ of rhythm in relation to a new order of the painting [that]... unlocks areas of sensation’.<sup>3</sup> Felt in *Alhalkere* is the very act of painting, the materiality of rhythm.

*Alhalkere* activates time-lines that are like plateaus of experience. Refuting the ‘purely optical’, *Alhalkere* makes palpable the immanent materiality of colour and shade, of movement and rhythm. Demanding an active listening, it breathes surface and depth, noise and calm even while it carefully creates a minimalist gesture, a diagram of restraint that covers not the space as such but a sensation that is clear and precise. This precision is what allows the body—of the painting, of the viewer—to evolve with every encounter. It is what allows the painting to be both here and there, alive in its Aboriginal context in and beyond Australia. This precision, it seems to me, catches us by surprise in each of Kngwarreye’s paintings. It is felt like a colour, but really it is a force that holds the painting to itself and allows it to be much more than a painted surface. *Alhalkere* takes form through the activity of Dreaming, its diagram culminating in the almost uniform yellow that invites us to weave our own stories, to dance the eventness of the layerings of experience.

A map? Only if we conceive it as a layering-in, a dotting-to-infinity, where the folding-in is also a folding-out. Not a direction, but a dance, a palimpsest alive with the resonances it creates. It leads us nowhere in particular, capturing us in its passing.

3. *Arnkerrthe* (Kathleen Petyarre, 2001) speaks to the movements of a Mountain Devil Lizard. But this square painting, asymmetrically symmetrical, does much more than that. One metre twenty squared is a forceful enclosure for a becoming-movement. Squares seem to seek diagrams that

conform to their limits. Petyarre resists these limitations, creating a becoming-body of movement-across that subtly emerges on the right quadrant, shading down through the otherwise almost-straight lines. There is a shadow here, a passage not yet quite actualised, that challenges the structure, bringing a fragility to its inner limits. On the lower left hand quadrant, the line thickens and there is a sense of duration moving toward a tremulous centre point. This point is not fixed: it is the pulsation of an activity of duration that envelops the whole painting. A meeting point, rather than a vanishing point. This point is what Deleuze would call haptic, evolving from a line to a touch that is distinct from its purely optical function. The Mountain Devil Lizard's passage is not one simply to be followed, but one to be lived via a politics of touch that must remain a reaching-toward, a touching untouchability. Touching here is completely interwoven with the painting's diagram which emanates from the elastic point at its centre, scrambling the painting's parameters, shifting the constraint from the square to the triangle, from the triangle to the parallel line, from the parallel line to the shadow to the speed of the dots to their fragile mergings into new spacetimes of experience. Passages already travelled, actualised in their transformations, alongside passages set as markers for future explorations. The movement is squared with a difference, a differential becoming-elastic moving across the formation, a becoming-form barely visible yet felt. If this is a map, it is not a topography. Its diagram is the process active between these directional tendencies and between their textures. The diagram is the evolution of the shadow that moves-with, its lizarding creating relational matrices, circles in the square.

#### **That dreaming been all the time<sup>4</sup>**

To paint the landscape with acrylics is a relatively new form of art for the Aborigines of Australia. Until the early 1970s, the creation of the land through stories was narrated mostly on other media—sand, bark, wood. In the desert, the sand paintings marked trajectories not only on the sand, but with/in it. Today, acrylics produced in the desert are a voice of transition, marking the uncanniness of the future-past of the land, its mappings, its dreams, creating presents in the making.

Dreamings—*Jukurrpa*<sup>5</sup>—are an integral aspect of life in Central Desert society and it is in the main these Dreamings we experience through Aboriginal art.<sup>6</sup> Stories told for more than forty thousand years, Dreamings not only speak about the landscape and its vicissitudes, they create spacetimes out of which landscapes are prehended and lived. This creative alchemy sustains not only a reciprocal relationship to the land, it is also an enactment of the Law. Dreaming evokes the lived landscape as mythology, spirituality and lived experience as all of these coexist with the Law that upholds them. To dream is to take response-ability seriously. I return to the Dreaming here to explore how the Dreaming-as-event takes form in the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists, creative mappings of a future-present. Returning to what the Dreaming does in Aboriginal culture will clarify what it can do in the context of more abstract renderings of its lived potential.

Life is Dreaming in the sense that the coordinates of spacetime out of which everyday lives emerge are significantly in line with creation and recreation of the land and its Laws. But even this is too simple: the land is not an extension of the Aborigines—it *is* them. To be the land is to *become* in relation to it, in relation not to space itself, but to the strange coordinates of a topological relationscape that embodies as much the Law as it does the grains of sand that symbolise it. The land and the Law are not two, are not juxtaposed. They are not sustained in a present-future symbolism. They are one: a becoming multiplicity.

The challenge to a spacetime of the Dreaming is a performative one that in turn alters all dimensions of experience. To understand a Dreaming as a story of creation is to touch only one aspect of the concept. Dreamings are mythological and cosmogenic stories that are not simply stories of creation (with all attendant dramas and misunderstandings, love stories and disappointments) in the Biblical sense, they are also stories of the creation of the future-present. For a Dreaming to be perpetuated the community must recreate it—it must be sung, drawn, danced. Ritual performances are not concerned simply with remembering the Dreaming, but living it, keeping it alive as it keeps them alive.

All Dreamings are sustained by multiple guardians. Members from different clans are *Kirda* and *Kurdungurlu* for the Dreaming,<sup>7</sup> which means for instance that while one person is responsible for the iconography of the Dreaming's location, another will be responsible for parts of its story. An individual cannot single-handedly decide to paint a Dreaming, even if he or she is *Kirda* for that Dreaming. The *Kurdungurlu* must be included in the process. Relation is already inscribed in the Dreaming whose pastness the present activates. The trajectories of the songs that populate the spacetime of the Dreamings is similar. No one ever owns a complete trajectory. For songs to be sung, communities must be assembled, sometimes even inter-tribally. The Law is played out in this relationship of reciprocity. A sharing of the land is not simply a theoretical concept for the Aborigines, it is a performance that creates a present-passing.

'To paint a Dreaming is at once to regenerate one's forces and to connect the object or the person to the earth and to the spacetime of the hero who "dreams" the life of people and their environment'.<sup>8</sup> To dream is never an individual affair. Even night dreams in Aboriginal communities are extended beyond the individual body: my dream may be your dream experienced through the vessel of my becoming-form. The earth-as-body is the support not only for the traces of ancestral bodies, but for the metamorphoses of experience in the present, a mnemonic for the Law of the Dreaming. To dream is to be in contact with others, to dream their dreams: 'The agreement of others is necessary. An oniric vision is attested as "real" only on condition that it is connected to pictorial forms and narratives ... that have been transmitted for hundreds of generations'.<sup>9</sup> There is never a single version that works for all Dreamings, but as many versions and contexts as are necessary for the story to be composed again.

Associated with the Dreaming is a certain birthright. In Aboriginal Central Desert society, you are born where the Dream enters you. To be born in Warlpiri is 'palkajarri' — 'becoming body'.<sup>10</sup> A virtuality actualises itself in the birth, a virtuality that is crystallised through a verse of a song that will be sung for generations to come. This song will 'belong' to the becoming-body in the form of a Dreaming for which he

or she will remain Kirda. To become-body is to materialise as song, as Dream, as rhythm.<sup>11</sup> It is not to materialise individually but to be sung again, to become as a multiple body of communal experience. 'Warlpiri philosophy does not oppose images to the substance or the essence of things. The two are indissociable.'<sup>12</sup>

The cosmology of the Dreaming must be understood as both actual and virtual.<sup>13</sup> It can be thought as an overlapping of the two, where reality and dream are not opposed but superimposed. Aborigines of the Central Desert animate time in space. In their rituals, the present is ancestralised not as a nostalgia for the past but as a becoming-present. The past and future, the actual and the virtual are traces of becoming whose dimensions are experienced in shifting continuity as through the spiral of Nietzschean eternal recurrence. When time is activated in this way what emerges is a time-line that is not linear. The present is always in the mode of performance not of a forgotten past but of a remembering future-present.

#### Experiencing-with from afar

*Arnkerrthe*, *Mina Mina* and *Alhalkere* are prehensions of Dreamings. Prehension is a Whiteheadian term that draws perception into activity, transforming the oppositional model of viewer/receptor into a directly relational experience. To 'prehend' the Dreaming is to move-with it, composing with it an experiential world. Prehension turns perception into an event, ridding perception of its dependence on essence or representation. To prehend the Dreaming involves more than narrating an instance of it. It is to call forth the activity of the land's eventfulness and to pull this eventfulness into the present-passing such that a new actual occasion — a world — emerges.

This is not a pre-mapping of experience. Prehensions populate actual occasions in an activity of relation whereby perception cannot be separated from experience, nor experience from the world. Prehending the Dreaming, paintings such as *Alhalkere* feel the resonance of what a Dreaming can be, drawing its eventness onto the canvas. Transversally political, these paintings call forth a new way of seeing, a seeing-with that moves the body. This elicited movement-with

is affective: its tonality (its modalities, its resonances, its textures) alters both what a body can do and how the world can be experienced.<sup>14</sup> To experience *Alhalkere* is to feel the recomposition of a living landscape that is not separate from my viewing body, that in fact repositions my viewing body in the living landscape it conceptually proposes. *Alhalkere* is the Dreaming insofar as it incurs concern for the event that is the shapeshifting of experience. Moving-with its own eventful becoming, *Alhalkere* becomes a metastable system that cannot be thought outside the experiential field it opens. Whether here or there, what *Alhalkere* does is ask that we have concern for the Dreaming.

Concern is not an identity-based practice. Concern for the Dreaming is an ethics of encounter with the unknowable—an event in the making—that far exceeds the specificity of a specific piece of land. This is not to dismiss the importance of land-claims in Aboriginal politics nor to romanticise space as ephemeral. It is to take the immanent materiality of the Dreamings seriously and to believe that what paintings such as *Alhalkere* do exceeds the parameters of their landmarks. This concern is for an event, not a pre-determined location. It is not based on an identity politics that would promote an exclusive dialectics of inside/outside. Experience itself is at stake, *in the making*. The fluidity of experience does not speak of an empiricism guaranteed simply by pre-informed historical circumstances. It speaks, also, to a kind of radical empiricism, where what is to be felt is also to be invented. Because Dreamings are never there once and for all: as Jennifer Biddle points out, ‘Dreaming stories and “icons” [do] justice to the force and effect of these paintings in the material terms they themselves effect’.<sup>15</sup> The immanent materiality of these paintings call forth an empiricism that is directly experienced, that is directly relational. And that is how they reach me, ten thousand miles away.

For James, the relation must be ‘accounted as “real” as anything else in the system’.<sup>16</sup> The relation is not composed after the fact, it is immanent to the event. The event cannot be predicted because it is different each time. Prehensions are infinitely variable and produce an infinity of actual occasions. As events of concern for the Dreaming, these paintings ask to

be lived again. The repetition of the act—the painting of the dots, one at a time, for hours on end—is a differential living-with that belongs to the territory of Aborigines even as it exceeds the very notion of stable territory, calling forth worlds that extend far beyond what geography can map.

‘To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced’.<sup>17</sup> Radical empiricism is a practice that Aboriginal ‘dot painting’ makes felt. The intimacy of relation is experienced in the pulsations of the dots, in the rhythms of the layered surfaces at play, of intensities interweaving. These paintings ask us to move (move away! come closer! look again!), figuring movement such that what is felt is not the representation—the figure—but the act of feeling itself, its affective tone. These felt relations create conjunctions *and* disjunctions, asking, as Kngwarreye is famous for saying, ‘a whole lot’, calling forth a directly perceived relation with their own materiality that succeeds the dichotomy between unity and disconnection, bringing to the fore the force of the event rather than simply its putative content. They map not a place but a diagram out of which a taking-form emerges.

### Of maps and dots

To speak of maps is always to return, in some sense, to the evocative work of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c. 1932–2003). Clifford Possum’s art has been revered for its precision and breadth, which is not surprising as he was one of the more experienced artists among those who painted in the early years of the Papunya Tula movement. Clifford Possum’s map series, created between 1976 and 1979 are well known in their emphasis on Aboriginal practices of map-making.<sup>18</sup> These ‘maps’ draw out the challenging reorganisation of spacetime the Dreaming makes possible even while ostensibly doing so within the vocabulary of a Westernised concept of a map. In these early acrylic paintings, Clifford Possum sought to clarify both his relation to the land and the interrelatedness of the Dreamings for which he is custodian. In the Central Desert, a particular individual is identified not only with a network of trails, animals, food and landmarks passed down through

patrilineal descent, but with myriad interrelated components that keep all of these categories open. A person's birthplace, where their parents or grandparents were born or initiated, extended residence networks, all of these factors influence the positioning of the individual with/in his or her Dreamings. To think of Dreamings as discrete spaces is both to underestimate the ways in which Dreamings challenge linear spacetime and to forget the relational aspect of ownership within Aboriginal culture. The Dreamings no more belong to the land than they do to the people. The people and the Dreaming are co-extensive, they are ontogenetic networks of reciprocal exchange. A Dreaming is not an entity, not a place. It is a movement, a song and a dance, a practice of mark-making that does not represent a spacetime but creates it, again and again.<sup>19</sup>

To assume a regular passage from past to present to future is to be imprisoned within Cartesian coordinates which have little to do with Central Desert culture. For Aborigines of the Central Desert, the past is *activated* in the present, not passively remembered. Culture and politics in the Central Desert are there for the (re)making, challenged and expressed by an opening to certain stories of creation that intertwine in complex and infinite ways the present and the past, the human and the animal, space and time. The collective memory of the past-future is passed on from generation to generation through sand paintings, dances and songs that shift the story in spacetime. To think of the future as a linear progression in time is to underestimate the ways in which time passing entails an actual shift in space and vice versa. The Aborigines today are not reliving their past. They are recreating their present, endlessly, making use of a topological structure in which time is embedded in shifting space.

The itineraries of the Dreaming must be seen not as a plane that can be adequately captured on a two-dimensional surface, but as functioning in many dimensions at once. As Clifford Possum paints them, the Dreamings are like knots where the actual meets the virtual in a cycle of continuous regeneration. The itineraries of the Dreaming are rule-bound but not fixed: these knots of experience are always shapeshifting across spacetime. Timespace is at the heart of this complex art as are conceptual slidings, performative experience, rituals

of emergence and disappearance. This timespace is not haphazard: Dreamings must be performed lest they disappear into disuse, their songs forgotten or unsung.<sup>20</sup>

The country for which Clifford is response-able forms a wide arc with a radius of some one hundred kilometres centred approximately two hundred kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. It stretches from Waltunpunyu, west of central Mount Wedge in the south, up through Napperby and Mount Allan stations, northwest as far as the blue hill of Wakulpa just north of Yuendumu, and northeast across Mount Denison and Conisten Stations.<sup>21</sup> This is Anmatyerre country from the perspective of a Cartesian geography. Topologically, Anmatyerre country is more complex.<sup>22</sup>

Topology departs from the angle-line coordinates we have learned to rely on in our perspectival teachings about the landscapes we inhabit. The learnings that allow us to conceive of landscapes as perspectival entities operational *in* time space are in the main Euclidean. In Euclidean geometry, we know one space from another not primarily by the ways in which our bodies *create* that space but by the ways in which we *inhabit* or *enter* it. Space becomes an inarticulate container. By privileging inhabitation (where space always pre-exists experience), Euclidean geometry enables a rendering-abstract of space: it is abstract in the sense that it is empty before our arrival. Because of this abstraction of space, what is measured in Euclidean geometry is considered concrete: planes and contours are concretely categorisable as entities beyond and unaffected by the extensions of my body. This means that I do not associate the landscape with my body. My body and the space are not one: they are always two, 1+1, body+space. It is due to this linear grammar of geometry that the coloniser is able to assert that seemingly empty space is uninhabited.

Topological spacetime refutes this dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete. Topological spacetime is not 1+1 but  $n+1$ , always more-than. This more-than can be conceptualised as the Dreaming: it is the conceptual event of locating land, body, space, time, experience all in one moment, one moment that embodies the perpetual movement of time. Topological rendering connects relationally nature and existence where no single element of nature is a permanent support for changing

relations. In this relational network of experience, *innovation* is at stake even while the traditions of the past carry weight in the present. Innovation does not mean the erasure of the past. It means creating a foundation for the shifting relations of past and future in the present. Ontogenetically, through the Dreaming (which means through the land *and* the Law), the multiplicity, ‘the many become one and are increased by one’.<sup>23</sup>

Topology refers to a continuity of transformation that alters the figure, bringing to the fore not the coordinates of form but the experience of it. Topologies suggest that the space of the body extends beyond Euclidean coordinates to more abstract spacetime. In topological geometry, I am both here and there, actual and virtual, real and abstract. Topology potentially deforms linear progression, rendering the concrete abstract. Topologies are as current as are Euclidean geometries. Even our bodies are topological. As Masumi asks, ‘What if the body is inseparable from dimensions of lived abstractness that cannot be conceptualised in other than topological terms?’<sup>24</sup> To think topologically is to begin to think beyond coordinates. It is to envisage the body in metamorphosis, a body that is continuously qualitatively altered by the worlds it creates.

Journeying from Dreaming to Dreaming requires an abstract relation to spacetime that departs from Euclidean geometry. To engage the Dreaming topologically is to break down the dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete, setting them side by side as aspects of a singularity. The Dreaming does not function wholly abstractly or wholly concretely. It lies somewhere in between, with moments that are performatively actualised and moments that remain virtual. This continuity of the actual and the virtual creates a Law of alliance which is neither concrete nor abstract. This Law of alliance rests on an implicit understanding that spacetime is as spiritual as it is physical, as topological as it is geographic. The landscape moves, and with it, the Dreamings shift and bodies metamorphose.

A map of the landscape that relies on x/y coordinates asks me to already be able to position myself in space. Turn your body this way, it says, face this direction. To read a Cartesian map is to ask a preformed body-concept to conform to its

gridding. Topological spacetime works otherwise. This is why Clifford Possum did not always render the Dreamings in a 'geographically accurate' way. To understand the 'geographically accurate' we must already have had the experience of the x/y grids of the mapping of Euclidean space that takes for granted that our journeys begin and end in directions that can be pre-gridded. It is to suppose that a body never shape-shifts, that it always sees from the same perspective and within the same conglomerate of potential relations.

Clifford Possum's maps do not ask to be read in this way. This is because he painted his great map series by moving the canvas around him. The land shifted and with this shift so did its relations. Instead of strictly linking locations in gridded geometrical space, the canvas's attention turns to the Dreaming's intensive movement on a painted surface. This immobile voyage moves toward experience rather than location: Possum takes his bearings not with a concept of due north but with the living relation between Dreamings. 'The sites and journey lines relating to each narrative strand are correctly positioned in space and with respect to one another, and also to at least one other strand, so that two or more Dreamings tie in with each directional re-alignment.'<sup>25</sup> What is at stake in Clifford's maps is not the omnipresent observer's bird's eye view of the landscape operating according to pre-established coordinates of spacetime, but the relation between one Dreaming and another from the standpoint of the painting (dreaming) body. Like a tracker who continuously updates his or her bearings and alignment in space with each change of direction in the chase, Clifford Possum is not creating an archival representation of his land, he is creating his land/ his Dreaming in relation to his communal painting body. He is not *representing* the Dreaming but *indexing* it in the passage from the virtual to the actual.<sup>26</sup>

The Western tradition of landscape art has taught us to read paintings (and most perspectival visual phenomena) as maps. Perspective is not innate, however: it is taught. Recent research in fact suggests that humans orient more by the shape of the space than by its visual cues. That means that we orient rhythmically, responding to the movements of topological twistings and turnings.<sup>27</sup> This way of feeling space

as duration foregrounds the proprioceptive sense, inverting the relation of position to movement. When movement is no longer indexed to position (when mapping becomes an event), position begins to emerge from a relation of movement itself. For Clifford Possum, Dreamings emerge relationally. Whether or not they are all spatially 'correct' in relation to pre-given landmarks is not an issue to him because what matters is not the position—not where they lie as such—but what they are capable of *in relation* to the emergent bodies the Dreamings make possible.

A fissure emerges between cognitive mapping and orientation. What Clifford Possum is trying to do with his great maps is to orient the Dreamings in relation not to a void, but to a becoming-body of the future-past. To orient is to actively engage in the process of mapping. It is to make maps even as we read them. This has for thousands of years been the practice of the Aboriginals of the desert, a practice that has taken the form, among others, of drawing in the sand. These traces—the shapes in the sand—were used to teach people about time and space as they intersect. To draw a circle could mean many things: a campfire, a waterhole. What is important—and how their 'meanings' are read—depends on the direct perception of relation as it takes form. What such mappings teach is to locate an intensity of reaching-toward, not an entity. The landmark is not outside but part of my becoming-body, a worlding.

What is calculated in the mapping is not distance (if you ask Clifford Possum about distance he will speak in terms of walking days, or car hours). What is calculated is experience + ability. How do I get there? The 'how' of directionality creates a permutation such that spacetime shapes itself around continuous shiftings. The ground trembles. The desert is not one space: it is the many overlapping spacetimes of experience that Aboriginals call Dreamings. These Dreamings can be drawn into maps, but such maps will never lead us anywhere if we expect them to do the walking for us. At most, these maps will help us back-grid our experience.<sup>28</sup>

### Landing sights

Clifford Possum has described his map series as land titles. This series of paintings followed in the wake of important

protests claiming Aboriginal rights to land at a time when outstations were not yet the norm and Aborigines of different tribes were forced to live together in imposed centres such as Papunya. As a political statement, his maps could be seen to perform a kind of active reading of the land, using the Dreamings (as would be done often subsequently to challenge the destruction of land by mining and road building) as a way to position himself and his people within the land rights movement of the Central Desert. But to understand this as a straightforward reclaiming would be misleading, because it would imply that the land as such was what was at stake. Clifford Possum was not delineating landmarks on a cognitive grid. He does not own the land, nor would he claim to. What he owns is a particular relation to the land. Aboriginal understanding of land must by extension alter what is usually meant by land titles. It is not the space-itself that the Aborigines are calling for through their art, but the topologies of spacetime the land incites in relation to Dreamings of which they remain an active part.

Land rights as painted by Clifford Possum are dimensions of experience. The folds of this experience are the rituals that make up the reliving of the eventness of the Dreamings. Synesthetically, through a dynamic interference of the senses, Aboriginal rituals call forth new sense-dimensions directly emergent from the land. To touch is not simply to touch, it is to reach-toward the experience of sensing-with<sup>29</sup> that is the Dreaming. Clifford Possum's paintings are alive in their multi-dimensionality, not only as examples of 'abstract' art that has 'content' but as a rethinking of abstractness itself. Clifford Possum's maps engage the concrete by means of the abstract, synesthetically creating an experience of land whose claim is not for ownership, but for the eventness of experience.

The spacetimes of experience created through Clifford Possum's map paintings can be thought as a topological hyper-space of transformation. It creates relays that are not simply geographic but experiential, proprioceptive, where space and time fold into one another.<sup>30</sup> Space here is performed, folding into durations that become part of the materiality of the painterly event. Be it the land 'itself' or acrylic, the point of the Dreaming is that it is not a location or a representation. It

cannot 'exist' in a Euclidean spacetime, but must always move topologically, situating itself in relays that are changeable depending on seasons and moods.<sup>31</sup>

Although most topologies are non-Euclidean, topologies are not necessarily non-Euclidean. The effort here is not to create a dichotomy that would suggest that there are specific experiential states to which the Central Desert Aborigines have direct access as opposed to the spiritually impoverished urban dweller who can only think in terms of Euclidean coordinates. The point is rather that experiential space is topological and gets re-gridded within Cartesian coordinates in part because such geometric grammars seem easier to capture. To think topologically is to think dynamically: it is to situate the movement of thought at its transformational vector, deforming it into its potential. When we re-render the form static, when we stop the process, we are shortchanging the experience.

Within topological transformation, an infinite number of static structures can emerge. This would begin to explain the complexity of Aboriginal life today. To suggest that Aborigines live exclusively in transformation would be as senseless as to say that all urban dwellers are only sustained by Cartesian maps. The potential of experiential space is everywhere present. The question is how we map it, how we live it, how it transforms us. The transformation of a topological figure into a static instance creates an object. This object—be it a doughnut or a coffee cup, both of which belong to the same topological figure because their shapes can be deformed into each other without cutting—stands for itself. What is interesting about it is not necessarily its shape but its process: the fact that its ontology is one of continuous deformation. To create an object is one thing—to create a relationscape another.

### **Dancing the dream**

Deleuze speaks of marks made accidentally. These accidental marks are free—free of the medium, free of the context of their representation. They are not unconscious but hyperconscious. They are marks out of which new concepts are born. To watch Emily Kngwarreye paint was to watch a woman dancing, her whole body engaged in the act, the plane of composition

emerging directly from her shoulder along the elbow, wrist held firmly, painting with both hands.<sup>32</sup> She was not a writing woman, she was a dancing woman, her wrists taut with the activity of reaching-toward and moving-with. Her paintings reflect this intensity of movement, the wholeness of the emergent line or dot, its activity of creating the becoming-form of the body-land-canvas. In this movement-with, she creates the improbable, unspeakable not because she cannot articulate it, but because its dimensions are as infinitely complex as the Dreaming she evokes.

Kngwarreye paints the reaching-toward out of which dancing dreams are composed. This reaching-toward is an almost-touch: it touches the not-yet through which futurity will emerge. Painting the untouchable is an event that instills time in space. It is to pre-paint, to pre-accelerate the urgency of the taking-form these extraordinary paintings propose. This suggests a noncoincidence always present in the act of mark-making, a rhythmical disjunction that recalls the latency or the virtual in any actualisation. To actualise in this sense is to make-present both the future and the past. This potential is always within the act of painting as a concrete aspect of creation.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the untouchable too often becomes articulated as the unconscious (the has-been-touched). Kngwarreye's art is not unconscious. What she paints is absolutely real, eventful, its untouchability always an incitation to touch.

It is the rhythm of the land I see in Kngwarreye's relationscapes, a rhythm that refuses to subjugate the image to the text, the dance to the music. The rhythm is all around, it is the 'whole lot': the weather, the seasons, the births and deaths, the rituals and performances, the body painting and batiks, the Dreamings eventfully pursuing the journeys that will create future spacetimes of experience. These rhythms are sensations of the boldest kind, sensations that alter the very core of what it is to sense. There is no inside/outside to the sensations: they are as much of the body as of the land, extending synesthetically beyond all comprehension of three-dimensional spacetime, leading us not toward a dimension as such but toward a topological hyperspace of relationscapes, to an immanent transcendence that is profoundly of the land, of

the here and now.

Experiential work defies description. As lines become planes become topologies, the singular mark synesthetically transforms the whole. The colours reflect not only off one other but within the shades they help create. These shades are events: Dreamings in the making.

Topological geographies create new art histories. Red against yellow, black against brown, dots, lines, circles, footprints, all of these gestures toward the Dreaming extend themselves beyond a body or a canvas, creating a movement of thought. This movement of thought provokes response-ability: I cannot but move. I cannot but sense the shades of difference that create the activity of the land. I cannot but respond relationally. I cannot engage and then refuse the immanence of the 'whole' these paintings generate.

This is the power of contemporary Aboriginal art. It incites cross-cultural transformation at an artistic as well as a political level, asking us to rethink the map, the landmark we presumed we could locate, the direction we thought we knew how to follow. In the end, we remain foreign yet politically—relationally—charged. A qualitative change has occurred shifting us from the realm of the passive observer toward the political: the topological hyperspace we encounter through Aboriginal art has qualitatively altered our capacity to relate on shifting ground.

Relationescapes abound. They are not strictly relegated to the Aborigine and their experience of the Dreaming. Emily Kngwarreye was not the first to annihilate figuration. What art such as that of Kngwarreye, Napangardi, Petyarre or Possum does is create a movement of thought, a movement that is *marayin*, at once painting, song, dance, sacred object and power word. Through their work, we move toward a topological hyperspace of experience, asking once again how emptiness is configured, how topologies extend our worlds, rhythmically (de)forming them, and how maps that sense-across create durations which eventfully alter what experience can be.

## Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2003, p. 81.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 4 Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri in Vivien Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2003, p. 16.
- 5 *Jukurpa* was earlier referred to as 'Dream Time'. It means both Dream (story) and Law.
- 6 Many of these observations are also valid for other Aboriginal peoples. Rather than make wide claims about Aboriginals as a whole, however, my focus here is on the Aboriginals of the Central Desert and the ways in which their art practice continues to sustain the Dreaming.
- 7 *Kirda* 'own' given countries and have primary economic and spiritual rights as regards these spacetimes. *Kurdungurlu* are guardians for the countries owned by the *Kirda*. *Kurdungurlu* ensure that *Kirda* fulfil social and ritual obligations associated to the Dreamings in their care. They also affirm that the *Kirda* maintain the responsibility of associated sites and access to economic resources of their country. In ceremony, *Kirda* and *Kurdungurlu* interact closely. Their roles are complementary: when *Kirda* have their bodies painted for ritual purposes, *Kurdungurlu* grind the ochres, do the actual painting and give advice on appropriate symbols. The roles are reversed for other sites and Dreamings (Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, 'Dreaming in Acrylic: Western Desert Art', in Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreaming: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking Press, Ringwood, 1988, p. 95).
- 8 Barbara Glowczewski, *Les rêveurs du désert: Aborigènes d'Australie*, Plon, Paris, 1989, p. 83. All of Glowczewski's work is originally in French. My translations throughout.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 10 It can also happen that the birth of a child happens in a 'no man's land', a zone that is not part of that clan's Dreaming itineraries. In this case, the person will create his own clan in relation to the dream of conception associated with his passage from the virtual to the actual (Glowczewski, *Les rêveurs du désert*, p. 206).
- 11 For the Yolngu, a single word, *marayin*, designates at once painting, songs, dances, sacred objects and power words (in Barbara Glowczewski, *Rêves en colère avec les Aborigènes australiens*, Plon, Paris, 2004, p. 311).
- 12 Glowczewski, *Les rêveurs du désert*, p. 212.
- 13 To consider the Dreaming as a finished narrative is to overlook the fact that for each Dreaming site there is the potential of emergence of other associated Dreamings. Dreamings by definition are mobile, leaving traces that remain to be deciphered and performed. To perform is not an accessory of the Dreaming. It is the way the Dreaming affirms itself and is actualised. Dreamings are sites of negotiation rather than entities. As with the sand drawings, the creation of stories demands a continual erasure. To create is to start again. As a member of the Warlpiri at Lajamanu states: 'Our Law is not written. It is firm, like a rock, a becoming trace, like the sea that rises, that ebbs and flows' (in Glowczewski, *Rêves en colère*, p. 302). For an excellent reading of virtuality, see also Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Affect, Movement, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- 14 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Free Press, New York, 1933, p. 176.
- 15 Jennifer Biddle, 'Country, Skin, Canvas: The Intercorporeal Art of Kathleen Petyarre', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, p. 61.
- 16 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Longman Green and Co, New York,

- 1912, p. 42.
- 17 Ibid., p. 42.
- 18 These paintings are entitled Warlugulong (1976 with Tim Leura), *Warlugulong* (1977), *Kerrinyarra* (1977), *Mount Denison Country* (1978) and *Yuutjutiyungu* (1979).
- 19 ‘Without the story, the painting is nothing’ (Michael Jagamara Nelson in Vivien Johnson, Michael Jagamara Nelson, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1997, p. 133). This notion of story has been quite difficult for ethnographers, curators and consumers of Aboriginal dot painting to understand. Johnson writes: ‘The “correct” ascription for a particular design element in a painting is in fact not always so readily determined—not even by the artist himself’ (Johnson, *Michael Jagamara Nelson*, p. 134). The imposition of truth misses the point of the Dreaming. The stories themselves must be told correctly, but how they are performed varies greatly. A story told by the wrong person is unauthorised, a concept far more important than the ‘inauthentic’. Copying or standard forms of authorship are not the issue. What is at stake is working out the correct relation between the Kirda and the Kurdungurlu as well as being able to recount the stories by singing their trajectories: most paintings are sung even while they are being created. To criticise a painting on aesthetic grounds is to criticise the artist’s Dreaming—the artist’s very Becoming.
- 20 Dreamings can fall into misuse due to the death of a Kirda, or they can re-manifest themselves in a dream. Dreams, shared in performative rituals with the members of a community, can re-become Dreamings this way, creating geographies that re-stratify in time, creating new lines of flight.
- 21 Vivien Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2003, p. 21.
- 22 Topology refers to mostly non-Euclidean geometry where figures are subjected to deformations so drastic that all their metric and projective properties are lost, creating an elliptical geometry that challenges the very notion of stable form (Richard Courant and Herbert Robbins (eds), *What is Mathematics: An Elementary Approach to Ideas and Methods*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p. 235).
- 23 Alfred North Whitehead in David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (eds), *Process and Reality*, Free Press, New York, 1978, p. 26.
- 24 Massumi, p. 177.
- 25 Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, p. 92.
- 26 Jennifer Biddle also makes this point in her very interesting article entitled ‘Country, Skin, Canvas’. She writes: ‘The potency of Petyarre’s work arises, arguably, from the very materiality of marks made in the Central and Western Desert context. It is not what these marks represent but how they are made that is determinative. To stay within the Piercian framework, these marks are not so much “icons” (signs which look like what they represent) as they are “indexes” (signs which remain existentially tied to what they “represent”). Central and Western Desert marks are “indexes” in so far as they embody original Ancestral potency. This potency does not simply arise. It must be enacted by precise repetitions and regulatory operations—what might otherwise be called Law.’ (p. 64).
- 27 The Möbius strip is a type of topology.
- 28 For a more on back-gridding and its relation to movement, see Massumi.
- 29 For a more detailed exploration of the conception of sensing-with or reaching-toward, see Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2007.
- 30 Massumi writes: ‘The folding of the Euclidean and non-Euclidean into and out of each other is itself understandable only in topological terms. This

hinge-dimension between quantitative and qualitative space is itself a topological figure—to the second degree, since topology already figures in it. It is a topological hyperfigure. The non-Euclidean, qualitative, and dynamic is more encompassing than the Euclidean, quantitative and static, by virtue of this double featuring' (p. 184).

- 31 I am not saying the Dreamings themselves walk away. To understand the landscape of the Dreamings as topological it must first be clear that we are not talking about points on a grid. Uluru remains Uluru. What changes is the intensive movement of the relationscape. By intensive movement I mean the relational network between my prehension of Uluru and its condensation in spacetime. To say that Uluru is stable is to suggest that space is there to be encountered (and left behind). The point of Aboriginal land claims is that space is alive.
- 32 Videos exist of this experience of dancing-while-painting or painting-while-dancing.
- 33 Deleuze writes: 'So the act of painting is always shifting, it is constantly oscillating between a beforehand and an afterward: the hysteria of painting' (p. 80).