

Ethics and Aesthetics

D Harding meets the Luciano Benetton Collection of Australian Aboriginal art in *Terra Incognita: inclusiveness is a good way*, Chiesa di San Teonisto, Treviso 2022.

*'We don't exclude anyone;
we allow people to exclude themselves.'*
Milton Lawton

Because their guiding principles aligned, D Harding was a natural fit as the candidate for curating an exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art from the Luciano Benetton Collection for Fondazione Imago Mundi. Referring to their Bidjara philosophy, D wrote in their proposal: *'We don't exclude anyone; we allow people to exclude themselves.'* They met at the confluence of a similar ethos and aesthetics that underpins D's art practice and Fondazione Imago Mundi's projects.

In agreeing to D's proposal, which was conceived of as an invitation to an idea, Fondazione Imago Mundi didn't exclude itself, so D was compelled to follow through. In accord with the Bidjara ethics of inclusivity, D tends towards opportunities for differences to intersect at mutually beneficial points rather than amplify their disparities.

The Bidjara are the ancestral people of what is now the Carnarvon Gorge National Park, in the central Queensland highlands. Continuing an unbroken connection with the area, D's Bidjara inheritance and its ethos provide a purpose and conceptual foundation that have shaped their person and art. In offering D an opportunity to apply this ethos, this project also presented an opportunity to transform it into an artwork within D's conceptual art practice. Conceptual art prioritises the coherence of ideas. This also aligned with Luciano Benetton's sense of duty to the guiding idea and ethos of his collecting process: *'It's not a collection',* he said, *'but rather an idea [my emphasis] that keeps evolving'.¹*

D's idea was to include every Australian Aboriginal artwork in the collection, effectively transforming the exhibition into an archival art installation. Due to the size of the collection and the limited space of the Chiesa di San Teonisto in Treviso, in which it was to be installed, D's compromise solution was to include one work by every artist represented in the collection. The installation archives artists from two collections: the Imago Mundi Collection of tiny 10x12 cm artworks from all corners of the globe, and larger works from Luciano Benetton's personal collection.

This *ethos* of inclusivity is also at the heart of the Imago Mundi Collection, which focuses on collecting work generally excluded from the mainstream. Its aim, said Luciano Benetton, is *'to foster openness towards the world and new horizons, and the coexistence of expressive diversity'*, which he believed was most effectively done in the frame of a shared *'artistic experience'*.

¹ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/luciano-benetton-imago-mundi-collection-330682>

This idea had also guided the cataloguing and display of the Imago Mundi Collection ‘*very differently*’, said Benetton, ‘*from the approach usually seen in museums or galleries and other conventional art market platforms*’.² In wanting to emphasise how art is a connecting force between the many disparate cultural traditions and expressions of the world, the Imago Mundi Collection is displayed as a world map of national or regional groups, with the small works physically displayed as a grid on vertical screens between which one walks as if weaving their collective presence into an aesthetic feeling.

D also conceived their exhibition, which they called *Terra Incognita: inclusiveness is a good way*, as an idea that takes the form of a collective cartography. To make this point in a conceptual way that aligned with Fondazione Imago Mundi’s idea, D’s proposal included several maps of Aboriginal Australia, including the well-known AIATSIS mosaic-like map of Aboriginal language groups.

For differences to meet meaningfully, they cannot be evaded. Whatever similarities there are in the philosophies of D and the Fondazione Imago Mundi, each emanates from opposite sides of the world and two very different histories in which lurks the shadow of the European colonialism. Facing this difference is the real point of the meeting, as if *Terra Incognita* is a Bidjara diplomatic mission, which aimed to achieve a greater mutual understanding that would promote friendship and trade. D was particularly encouraged by the site Fondazione Imago Mundi proposed for the mission, which because of its sacred associations, gave it an ancestral authority and temporality that was auspicious, and for this reason has history as a traditional site of Australian Aboriginal diplomacy.

Treviso is the ancestral home and headquarters of Benetton. In 2010, Luciano Benetton purchased, restored and gifted the Chiesa di San Teonisto to the Fondazione Benetton. Badly damaged in WW2 and neglected for many years, the desacralized church was built on the site that had hosted the relics (remains) of Saint Teonisto and his two African companions who were martyred in ancient times. The current church was originally built in 1434, about the time the newly discovered single point perspective was invented and was rapidly being adopted by Italian artists. Now a diplomatic cultural centre for the Benetton group, it provides a site steeped in sacred cultural history and Western art history.

Instructed in the importance of Bidjara ancestral sites in the rock art caverns of their homeland in the Carnarvon Gorge National Park, D felt the power of the Chiesa di San Teonisto as a site for the project. Despite the sometimes-fraught history of Christian missions in the European colonial project, Aboriginal Australian leaders have used the symbolic architecture of the church (and also the school) to their political advantage. One of the great Australian artworks, the Yirrkala Church panels (1962-63) and their offspring the Yirrkala bark petition, originated as diplomatic missions in the Yirrkala church that reverberate to this today in the politics and art of the nation.³

Christian church architecture, like all such venerated places, derives its symbolic meaning and power from investing ancestral connections in significant sites and relics, and is generally framed within a cosmological relationship between the earth and the heavens in which each is conceived as a mirror of the other. Bidjara cosmology gives precedence to the earth, but D had initially thought to incorporate the church’s vault, which is a metaphor of the sky hanging over the earth would mirror the power the *Terra Incognita* earthwork on the floor. In the end, D returned to the arrangement of the paintings in the earthwork hovering just above the earth (church floor), as if here, in the text of D’s diplomatic communique to Fondazione Imago Mundi, the points of difference would achieve their greatest clarity.

² <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/32320/luciano-benetton-collection-imago-mundi/>

³ <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/111/345649/marking-places-cross-hatching-worlds-the-yirrkala-panels/>

In their curatorial text, D in diplomatic fashion referred approvingly to Luciano Benetton's endorsement of André Malraux's belief that '*the only language of painting is painting*', and it is in the language of painting that D concentrated his alignments of differences; in the structural terms of language – the langue – as well as its content – parole. By contrast, the Imago Mundi Collection is arranged as geographical metaphor of mapping the world's cultures, not on the language of the paintings within it.

The most obvious structural difference in the pictorial language of *Terra Incognita* and Imago Mundi is the horizontal format of the former versus the vertical format of the latter, which follows the conventional way of displaying paintings that is geared to the possessive eye/I of the standing human viewer. The penultimate expression of this verticality is the single-point perspectival pictorial space of modern Western painting, which became a convention in fifteenth century Europe when paintings were attached to transportable grounds that could easily be bought and sold i.e., capitalised on 'art market platforms.' The Australian Aboriginal paintings in the Benetton collection were painted in this modern economic format but D revives their ancestral origins as earthworks.

In the way it draws the eye and so the mind to the earth, the horizontal format works very differently at psychological and conceptual levels from the vertical format. The Imago Mundi Collection project '*TerraForms*' or '*EarthForms*', also aims to draw the mind to the earth, but an earth conceived as a world. However, the horizontal format does this in a more literal way that retains the earth in the world through bowing the head and eyes downwards. Importantly, the horizontal format, around which a group of people can more easily gather to exchange words and looks, makes it a more inclusive, performative and collective experience. It also synchronises with the cosmology of the exhibited paintings, as their designs originate in traditional ground and body paintings associated with ceremonies that build and strengthen kin relations between everything born from the earth. The paintings are visual forms of song and dance that relate stories of the earth upon which they are performed, and reflect an epistemology of the earth, in which the life it supports is known by its presence and tracks imprinted in the earth. It is an epistemology or way of knowing embedded in a cosmology in which the earth is a transcendental force that gives and takes life, includes and excludes and rolls the dice in all those chance events of life and death.

The habit of looking up from the earth to the vanishing point on the horizon, which is the foundation of Western single-point perspective, produces a very different epistemology that conceives the world and relations in terms of distance. The difference between earth and world might appear subtle but it's also profound, producing different forms of knowledge and concepts of being.

The ancestral memories of the Australian Aboriginal artists which are embedded in the earth are very present in *Terra Incognita*. Like their ancestors, the mainly Western Desert artists represented in the collection continue to paint on and from the earth and often within a collective situation to the rhythm of songs given to them from the earth. As if drumming the earth's skin, the horizontal format reverberates with the ancestral origins and truths of these modern acrylic paintings laid in a grid on the floor of the Chiesa di San Teonisto in Treviso.

The other point of difference D was keen to address was the content of actual works acquired – or not acquired – in the collection. Having decided because of spatial restraints to include one work from each artist in the collection, D had, as with decisions of inclusion more generally, made an exclusion, in this case of other work by the artists in the collection. To rectify this exclusion, D needed an idea or system by which the paintings included themselves. As a conceptual artist, D particularly wanted to avoid the inclusions and exclusions of taste. Conceptual art redefined Western aesthetics from subjective feelings that reflected individual preferences, to the language structures or relational systems that produced feelings from sensuous perception – an understanding of aesthetics that was closer to traditional Indigenous practices.

D's idea was to select the work by an artist that was first archived into the collection, and to have these works arranged by this temporal order of acquisition as much as possible within the confines of the grid established by the rectangular platform that floated them just above the floor. This would by its own volition create an aesthetic arrangement that D envisaged as the feeling of 'a field of colour', 'vibrance and vitality'. This, as D said in their curatorial text, is the footprint or brand of Aboriginal people at every point where they can be found. Hence, it was a winning argument.

That was not the end of it. Despite Fondazione Imago Mundi's ethos of inclusivity, D was very aware of the unintended exclusions in the collection i.e., in its content. This is the legacy of the selling power of modernism's primitivism and the Aboriginal art industry in which the brand of Australian Aboriginal is Western Desert painting, and in which the Luciano Benetton Collection is complicit. When D looked at the mosaic of Western Desert paintings on the floor of the Chiesa di San Teonisto, the earthwork, they saw a map that mainly comprised 'blank spots', a terra incognita of Australian Aboriginal art.

D's response was to neither admonish nor exclude collectors such as Luciano Benetton or by implication the Western Desert art and Aboriginal Art Industry with which they had worked and taken advice from, but as D wrote in their curatorial text, 'to encourage the Benetton Collection to live long and to grow into its relationships with Aboriginal people'. To do this, D conceived a supplement in the form of a stack of posters that visitors can take away with them. In a gesture to the Imago Mundi Collection, it prints on a background grid small reproductions of types of Australian Aboriginal art from other regions of the continent that are excluded from in the collection, as if an archive from the future of images yet to appear on the floor of Chiesa di San Teonisto.

Ian McLean

Hugh Ramsay Chair of Australian art at the University of Melbourne

<https://sites.research.unimelb.edu.au/cova/home/people/advisory-board/professor-ian-mclean>