

Encountering *Ples Namel* (Our Place)

By Michael A. Mel

Ples Namel was collaborative performance installation by Anna Mel and me. It was one of four works selected to represent Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) that took place in September 1996. The APT is an exhibition undertaken by the Queensland Art Gallery and has aimed, among other things, to provide an awareness and knowledge of the contemporary art of the Asia-Pacific region within Australia. For the artists from the region this exhibition served as a bridge and facilitated the sharing of ideas and exchanging knowledge of their practices and cultures. Other participants and visitors came from within Australia and without to listen to, talk and become visually aware of the rich and diverse traditions, practices and influences that were emerging from the region. A conference and various publications during the exhibition also generated different perspectives on the region and its cultures in terms of their history, their present experiences and future in contemporary art.

This is a very brief perspective of the APT provided in order to establish a context in which *Ples Namel* took place. Our experiences of presenting *Ples Namel* drew a variety of reactions from the audiences that saw the performances. The entire adventure experienced in its preparation and presentation would be beyond the scope of this paper. What follows is an account of the opening performance of *Ples Namel* as an encounter with the audience in the APT. To allow some clarity and focus the rest of this paper can be put into four areas: a) APT as a discursive object; b) *Ples Namel* as a discursive object; c) *Ples Namel* as a discursive performance; d) *Ples Namel* as an embodied performance. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are presented in this way for the benefit of discussions relating to *Ples Namel*.

The APT as a discursive object

The APT as a discursive object structured with assumptions, values and biases of European Art. Much was written and recorded various forms by Europeans about the Asia-Pacific region in terms of it being seen as exotic, different, new and strange. These representations have held a strong place in the minds of Europeans. Inevitably these 'boxes' of representation helped to contain and limit the meaning of images and experiences in art and culture of the region. Most often the activities from the region were deemed to be historical and traditional. New images and changes in style or motifs of the activities in the region as derivatives of more established European practices. Moreover, the language used to describe and talk about the region's art was always laced in and around the European perspective. It is with that knowledge that the APT served to provide a platform for other voices to be viewed heard and experienced. It would be fair to say also that there has been, since the first APT, a concerted effort to dislodge and dismantle the above. There has been, since the first APT, a concerted effort to dislodge and dismantle the above.

When *Ples Namel* selected for the APT we knew we had to participate in a practice that related to art exhibitions and its definitions within a European perspective. There

were artists, painters, carvers, printmakers, hangings, technical staff, and managers who supported this perspective. The people who came to look at and talk about the activities of the gallery for the APT (writers, critics, the media and the general public) also identified with a specified behaviour and set guidelines of etiquette. In other words, people in general knew what to do, how to behave, how to react and respond when coming to the Queensland Art Gallery. The rules and regulations of attending and viewing *Ples Namel* or any other work in the APT was already pre-determined. *Ples Namel* would be quite conveniently placed within their frames of reference and be visually dismantled and constructed as knowledge. In our view *Ples Namel* was not to be another object from Melanesia. It was an activity that had its own rules of behaviour and conduct, and its meaning ultimately was from within that context.

***Ples Namel* as a discursive object**

As indigenous artists we knew that *Ples Namel* had its roots deeply embedded in a context that had a long history. There were specific rules and regulations surrounding *Ples Namel* among a pantheon of others had been placed quite confronting and difficult situations regarding that knowledge through the traumatic experiences of colonisation. As a result of this experience we did not want to create a *Ples Namel* that perpetuated and maintained a particular kind of knowledge that fitted into the Europeans' perspectives. Our early education and further training trained us to see and work within the dominant perspective. We walked a very fine line constructed and presented *Ples Namel*. On the surface *Ples Namel* would be ours. But deep down would we contribute to constructing another 'traditional culture', an Arcadian spectacle from another culture? This and other related questions led us to develop an underlying premise to the project of *Ples Namel*. It was to provide an alternative voice. We wanted to offer a different perspective to seeing and experiencing art. This voice had to come from within an indigenous context.

The preparation of the space for *Ples Namel* replicated the rectangular village centre of the Hagen area of the Highlands of PNG. Within that area or space, the indigenous community constructed and participated in its art activities. Those that came to see the art located themselves in that space. Both performances and audience mingled and exchanged stories prior to and during performances because there was no visible marker that divided the two groups. The communal space provided a location for the performer to show and display his/her art and for the on-looker to view and experience the performance. In keeping with that a miniature rectangular space was created on the lawn outside the gallery. Along the perimeter of the space cordyline leaves were planted with bamboos at each corner. The middle of the rectangle was bisected lengthwise by two casurina trees planted towards the ends of the space.

Usually there was a 'round-house' at one end of the space where the men usually sat to discuss and prepare for the performance. For the APT the 'round-house' was located inside the gallery on the way to the outside space to enable members of the public to view the 'house' before moving to the space to encounter *Ples Namel*. A circle filled with red/orange loam held three head-dresses: two worn by male dancers flanked the female head-dress on both sides. The head-dresses were held above the loam by three cylinders of the same height facing the onlooker. There were no faces on the cylinders. Surrounding the 'house' were the shields of Kaibel Kaa. Kaibel was also selected to represent PNG in the APT. The placement for the shields around

the 'house' and its relationship to the head-dresses and indeed the village center outside was important symbolically in both the social and spiritual senses. The social occasion brought the community together. Each member of the community contributed in some way in make the performance take place. They did this by building or constructing something (house, frame for a head-dress, platform, clearing the space); by giving or loaning something (feathers, aprons, leaves, pig, oil); or, by simply being there among other on-lookers. The performance was the culmination of a long process of negotiations and discussions in the 'round-house' that led eventually to the central for the performance. It is the linking of the performer with the accoutrements provided (mostly loaned) and the contributions made from the outset which created a personal space to experience the swaying feathers, leaves, and the dancer and the on-looker in the dance. For a detailed look at the dancer and the experience of the dance readers are advised to read the chapter by Michael Mel in Susan Cochrane's Book: **Contemporary PNG Art**, Crawford Press, Bathurst, 1997.

Prior to the performance we decided to replicate the rectangle of the space with a picture frame. The frame served as a frame but was also a metaphor for framing as in the conventions of European art in framing other cultures and their art for their own convenience; the conventions of framing other cultures through anthropology has been a dominant way of reading and translating other cultures. The frame also served as a vehicle for creating and framing a picture that emerged through contributions from performers and on-lookers during the performance. To supplement this process around the frame were displayed an array of feathers, beads, shells, necklaces, oil, leaves, paints, brushes, water and various odds and ends to accomplish the performance. A high stool is also placed before the frame and slightly to its side.

Ples Namel as discursive performance

Anna had completed tying the apron made of dried reeds covering her back and front. I then quickly took the wig that had been prepared prior to the performance and placed it on her head and fastened it on her with a small twisted twine. The wig would serve as the platform for the aviary finery we had earlier placed around the frame. I then put across her forehead a curved white enamelled tin cut into the shape of a diamond and tied and ends of the strings at the back. The back of the head was caressed by a strip of cuscus fur that came over the ears and across the forehead. I tied the ends of the strings and buried the knot under the enamelled tin. I changed into a *laplap* and singlet with garlands of tropical frangipanis made out of plastic and criss-crossed my shoulders and around my head. I picked up the *kundu* and struck it to sense its pliability. It sounded right.

The audience had gathered about half an hour earlier around the space demarcated by the cordyline plants. From inside the tent that served as our 'change room' I started beating the *kundu* and we walked out along the patio leading to the space. Anna's skirt of reeds made a swishing sound as I pounded the *kundu* drum in time with our footsteps. Anna had taken her top off and apart from the wig and the other items decorating her head she walked in with a small circle of white painted over her nipples. The nipples painted in this way would discourage a child who was breast-feeding to want a drink. We walked toward the space and the audience sat and watched as the two black figures, one half or almost naked while the other dressed in

flowers and *laplap* and hitting a drum walked into space. Anna walked through the line of cordyline plants and into the frame and stood and looked through the frame and stood through the frame at the on-lookers that had come to watch the performance. I shouted in time with the *kundu* a monologue:

‘Come ladies and gentlemen to the world of the native. Located here for all to see, framed and captured. Now we shall see the native. Framed in this way we can watch from a distance and talk about, discuss and write with confidence and the security of home. It is safe. Come and see for yourselves, the specimen of a native. Never seen before, now made present before your very eyes. But ladies and gentlemen we should allow the native to sing, dance and perform for us. We want to see them play for us. We like that, don’t we?’

With that I step into the frame and ask for Anna’s hand. She reaches out through the frame to me and walks out of the frame and sits on the stool. She poses for the on-lookers like a model. I then move back.

***Ples Namel* as embodied performance**

‘Ladies and gentlemen the native is ready to perform. Let us prepare her. Come! Who is first? Yes, come her! I’ll guide over.’

I move around and through the audience waiting for someone to come on. For a brief moment there is an air of uncertainty about this and what is unfolding before their eyes. I without a moment to lose select a variety and range of persons randomly. They walk up to the space and I tell each one to select an item that has been laid out and put on Anna. Following the indigenous performance process, we start with the face painting. One of the participants’ hands with the brush dabs some blue over the face following the designs on the painted face on a small photograph. Another hand follows with the red and white stripes down the cheeks of Anna’s face. These are shaking almost uncontrollably. I encourage the hands to be careful with the painting and soon the face is painted. I move over and again randomly pick members to put the beads and necklaces and shells. Each item is carefully placed around Anna’s neck. The next stage is to put the feathers. Similar action is repeated of selecting individuals from the on-lookers and each one is given a feather to stick on the wig. Upon completion the final stage in decorating is to put oil on the skin. The oils is usually put on using leaves and massaged on the skin with the palm of the hands. I select a couple to come and put the oil. I ask them to cup their hands and I liberally pour a sizeable amount of almond oil on their hands. I then gesture for them to rub and spread the oil over the body of Anna from shoulders to toes. One of the members is very slow to touch the skin of Anna. She finally decides not to rub the oil on her body. The other member is encouraged and takes to rubbing Anna all over her body from shoulders, breasts, sides, thighs, legs and feet. Finally, she is ready. I thank all those who came in and decorated the native. She will now perform. I beat the *kundu* and sing a women’s song for the dance and Anna follows and dances.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, our native is dancing. We created the dancer. Now let us enjoy the dance.’

After several rounds of the song I move over to other members of the audience to 'unpack' Anna. They move quickly to undo the beads, shells, feathers and armbands. Everything is once again laid out before the frame and I take Anna's hand back to the frame and show into the frame. She steps in and turns and holds the same pose she began with earlier.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the dancer has come and gone. You made the dancer, now she is gone. All you have is a memory of performance. It seems that the native is back in the frame. But the frame is different because our experiences were more than the framed native that you have in front of you. That experience is but a small window into making natives of our choice and framing them. We now know what is possible without the frame. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.'

We curtsy to the on-lookers and walk back to the tent amid applause from the on-lookers.

Ples Namel represented an encounter. Their hands touched a black native who happened to be woman! They helped to construct the native dancer! Contained in the brief narrative I have recounted are moments of personal experience, which speak of sense of disruption and feelings of unsettlement. A brief discussion this part of *Ples Namel* will sum up the final part of this paper.

Things that seem new and strange hold an undeniable sense of fascination and seduction. In the context of the Europeans' way of knowledge and of looking at the world this axiom of what appears to be different or alien represents a sense of otherness and is the site of difference. Difference becomes the repository of anxieties and fears. This has been aptly demonstrated through and during colonization with its agenda to bring order and civility to other cultures. The creation of civility and goodness becomes the centre and what are deemed as the contradictions, inadequacies and anxieties of the expelled to the periphery. In order to set out order civility colonizers had to create alienated images of chaos and primitivity. Cultures that were uneducated and therefore uncivilized had to be educated and be civilized. There are of course other examples of this binarism (male/female, God/Satan, heaven/hell, hetero/homosexual). The differences have been well established through various modes of writing, research, film, World Expos, Primitive Art exhibition and establishing disciplines of study like anthropology. By ordering, translating, refining and analysing images of difference the creation of alien cultures had enabled those cultural differences to be rendered as very real and therefore incontestable knowledge for the colonizers. It is without question that such knowledge has been made transparent in order to substantiate the colonizer's knowledge and power.

The salient question for *Ples Namel* then became thus: were there alienated images real and tangible? Allow me to use the analogy of a map and a territory. Territory would refer to the colonial discourse of primitive, chaotic and uncivilized cultures, natives, and being black. *Ples namel* in its discursive performance (c) would be the map. The placement of the map over the territory was the embodied performance (d). It was a process of simulating for both the performers and on-lookers the existence of the alienated images within a colonial discourse using indigenous performance strategies. Importantly the effectiveness of the simulation could not to be based on the conceptual knowledge of the alienated images held by the performers and on-

lookers prior to the construction of the 'dancing native'. In *Ples Namel* we were interested in the medium through which this knowledge would be brought into existence in the performance. If there was going to be any authenticity to that knowledge of alienated images this had to be created through an embodied medium. Suddenly both performers and on-lookers were required to realize and authenticate the native, the primitive, the other. They had to touch and feel the black person. Participants who were eager to participate found themselves required to submit THEIR bodies to a real experience. What was real and what was play or western art? What seemed to be western theatre, performance and art did not seem like what they meant in the context of APT and the gallery space. Suddenly an embodied simulation induced us into thinking of the real existence of the alienated images through indigenous performance strategies. Some participants were 'shaking' and showing physical 'reluctance' to authenticate the 'native'. There were those who went through the experience without any signs of 'shaking' or reluctance. In *Ples Namel* there was a meeting between the participants and the alienated images they reacted by responding those ways. But where are those alienated images? Are they real and tangible?

Perhaps Michael de Certeau might provide some clues:

'The credibility of a discourse is what first makes believers act in accord with it. To make people believe is to make them act. But by a curious circularity, the ability to make people act – to write and to machine bodies – is precisely what makes people believe' (1984:148).

Reference:

Certeau, Michael de (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley: California University Press.