

“Tobias Titz and Martumili Artists Photographic Encounters between Germany and Australia” [short text for 2011 Goethe Institut (Sydney) exhibition]

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There is a longstanding tradition of German fascination with things Australian, which has manifested itself in many ways, including in German tourism to Australia, in the German reception of Australian literature and film, as well as in the generation of German literary and filmic texts about Australia. Thematically, an important aspect of this fascination has revolved around Indigenous Australia, although the engagement has been to various degrees and has had several different moments.

Perhaps most well-known are the films of Werner Herzog (*Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984)) and Wim Wenders (*Until the End of the World* (1991)). Whilst these films have been criticized, among other things, for seeking in Indigenous Australians another type of Noble Savage capable of soothing guilt and redeeming the German, other German filmmakers have engaged with Indigenous Australians in a different fashion. For example, in her 1979 WDR tele-film *Das Uran gehört der Regenbogenschlange*, the filmmaker-activist Nina Gladitz used the issue of Aboriginal land rights, and the opposition of Aboriginal groups to uranium mining on their land, as a moral argument against the use of nuclear power in Europe. She and the Aboriginal activist Gary Foley subsequently forged transnational, activist links. Gladitz also became a European champion of the rights of Aboriginal people, writing pamphlets about their status for the *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker*. It is in this tradition of engagement with Indigenous issues that German-born, Australian-based photographer Tobias Titz’s body of work with Aboriginal Australians ought to be viewed.

Tobias (born 1973 in Trier) is a freelance photographer, who has been based in Australia since 2001, although he works internationally. He works both in commercial and documentarian-art fields, and has received a number of awards and accolades. At the conclusion of his study, at the State Academy of Photo Design in Munich in 1998, Tobias commenced what he refers to as his “Polaroid Scratch” project. This was partly inspired by some of Robert Frank’s later photos, which exhibited handwritten marks etched into the emulsion of the film. Using a special technique enabled by Polaroid technology, Tobias applied a similar approach to the realm of portrait photography. It is this “Polaroid Scratch” project, in particular, which has been well received in the photo-art field. And although the project is larger than the body of images he (and his Indigenous photographic “subjects”) have created, it is this work with Indigenous Australians which has perhaps found the greatest resonance and uptake.¹

Tobias takes two Polaroid photos: the first is a portrait; the second is an identical shot, taken a moment later, after the subject-collaborator has walked out of the frame. He then hands an awl and the “empty” negative to the subject-collaborator, who is free to scratch anything he or she wishes into it, whilst the emulsion is still wet. He or she is able to look at the portrait whilst scratching a response into the companion negative. The final image is then composed of the original portrait side-by-side with a print made from the second, personalized negative. The whole process has an ethical dimension for Tobias, who has stated in a recent interview:

¹ Tobias has worked with Indigenous peoples from a range of communities over the last 5 years. These include Port Hedland, Yandeyarra, Carnarvon and Warralong (all W.A., 2007); Parngurr (W.A., 2009); and Ngukurr (N.T., 2010).

Usually the subject in a portrait has no possibility to interact with the photo. The subject can relate to the photographer as the shoot progresses, but once the shutter has fired, that's it. I thought I would give them the opportunity to comment or contribute to the image itself, that I had just shot. [...]. When you ask people to have an input - to leave a mark, it gives them an active role not a passive role. (quoted in Atkins 2007)

In terms of his work with Indigenous Australians, his subjects are thus given a voice in relation to their representation—something which has been rare enough in the field in the past. Presentation of the images is subject to Tobias' editorial choices and to community approval. Notwithstanding these structural matters, Tobias likes to leave the images open, with only a minor caption identifying the subject, if at all. It is up to the viewer to make sense of the image him or herself, and (s)he is guided as much by the marks made by the subject-collaborator, as by the photographic image itself. The other ethical dimensions of Tobias's documentary photographic project relate not so much to the aesthetic of the Scratch process, but to his broader practice—his engagement with Indigenous communities has also involved workshops designed to develop community members' photographic skills; he also allows his subject-collaborators to use the resulting images for their own purposes: the Martumili artists depicted here used their photos when their artworks were exhibited in Melbourne, for example.

The Martumili artists series were undertaken at the Martumili Arts Centre in the Pilbara Western Desert community of Parngurr in 2009. Some of the subject-

collaborators in this series are also recognized artists in their own right—although a comparatively young Arts Centre, several of the artists have already successfully exhibited, *inter alia* at the William Mora Gallery in Melbourne.² Most often, these artists responded to their images by contributing graphic representations of their country. Whilst their responses were in a sense limited by the Polaroid technology (black and white line drawings), this series is perhaps moving even closer to a true collaboration with Tobias, with both partners typically operating in visual, non-linguistic media.

There is an irony to Tobias's project. He has developed a workable model of interacting with Indigenous Australians in the photographic realm. Aesthetically, he has made photography more dialogic, and opened up a valuable new space, which his collaborators fill with signs, linguistic or otherwise. Those signs are “quasi-auto-captions”, but they by no means close off interpretation by the viewer; indeed they drive the viewer into an active role (just as Tobias encourages his subject-collaborators into an active role). He has also developed best practices which involve a *quid pro quo* of community development—which by, promoting photographic skills and practices, dovetails with the policies of the Pilbara's new arts centres. In these ways, Tobias is at the cutting edge of photographic interaction with Indigenous Australia. But to return to the irony: Polaroid 665 film has not been manufactured since 2007. When Tobias's stockpile of it is exhausted, his Scratch Project will come to an end. New ways of photographing dialogue will have to be sought, using new technologies.

² For a history of the Martumili Arts Centre, see http://moadoph.gov.au/exhibitions/online/marnti-warajanga/art_and_music.html