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# Resisting pictures: representation, distribution and ontological politics

## *John Law and Ruth Benschop*[1]

> addressing a picture with a general rule feels rather like addressing a peach with a billiard cue (Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 1985, p. 12)

To represent is to perform division. To represent is to generate distributions. Distributions between painter and observer, between a depicting surface and object depicted, between places located on a surface, between that which is depicted and that which is not. To represent is to narrate, or to refuse to narrate. It is to perform, or to refuse to perform, a world of spatial assumptions populated by subjects and objects. To represent thus renders other possibilities impossible, unimaginable. It is, in other words, to perform a politics. A politics of ontology.

This chapter explores four visual depictions and the different ways in which these make subject/object distinctions, narratives and spatialities. Our object is to lever these different modes of performance apart to create an area of play in which we may learn something of the politics of subject/object division, of narrative, of spatiality. Along the way we may learn about a politics which tries not to legislate about such divisions but, rather, explores the labour of division. Two of the visual depictions are taken from the great *corpus* of Western 'high art': paintings by Paolo Uccello and Jan Vermeer. The other two are contemporary. One is a painting by Rémy Blanchard, from France. The second, by Tim Leurah Tjapaltjarri, takes us to a recent tradition of Australian Aboriginal art. These four paintings do not simply differ from one another in their generation of distributions but also come from different times and places, differ in the status attached to them, and where we have to go in order to see them. We will not focus extensively on these other differences—but they make the approach towards each painting a little different, and mean (or so we hope) that we avoid falling into the trap described by Bryson above.

Our method is straightforward. We use each successive depiction as a yardstick to magnify differences between it and the subsequent painting. In this way we pay a necessary tribute to the ways our representations of these four depictions are constituted by technologies of representation. Thus the moves we make from picture to picture are neither innocent, nor fully dictated by their inherent structure. Instead they are part of a political exploration of representation, which is also a progressive trail: in time, from then (the fifteenth century) to now; in space, from here (the Western world) to there (Australia); from incompleteness to wholeness; and from the concealment of ontological work to its exposure.

## Narrative Euclideanism: the rationalisation of sight

The first visual depiction is the painting (Plate 1) by Uccello of *The Battle of San Romano* (c.1435 to c.1455; National Gallery, London).[2] An art-historical account of this kind of painting tells that it *illustrates a narrative*,[3]—in this instance a battle in which the Florentines beat their opponents.[4] This painting shows an event that has occurred in the real world. Painter, viewer and object have been organized around and through this painting in the manner of the new perspectivalism of the Italian Renaissance.

The story told by art historians (including contemporary Italians themselves, and most notably Alberti), runs approximately so.[5] On the one hand there is a world, on the other, an observer. A faithful representation of the world understands the point of view of the observer as an eye that looks through an imagined windowpane onto the world. The canvas becomes the imagined windowpane. The world that is transformed to fit onto the canvas/windowpane is a Euclidean volume. The objects making up the world may be viewed through that window in accordance with a set of geometrical rules. Representation is a matter of projection from the observer's eye of the geometrically determined three dimensions of the world onto the two-dimensional surface of the windowpane. This means, *inter alia,* the construction on that surface of a vanishing point. Together with that construction, a series of transformations is made of the three-dimensional which allow a geometrically appropriate conversion of a perspective on a volume into a surface. Such is the theory: an application of humanist reason to the problem of representation.[6]

Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* may be taken as an early application of the visual reasoning of linear perspective to

depiction. According to Gombrich, Uccello seems to be playing with the forms and colours that make the surface of his painting. The 'blocky' horses make, as it were, statements about the projected volumes that they occupy in the world behind the representational windowpane. We also see Uccello experimenting with foreshortening, for instance, with the vanquished soldiers lying on the ground, their feet towards the observer. In addition, the fact that the painting as a whole is constructed with a vanishing point that assumes distance in the world is witnessed by the fall of the lances, pointing, as they do, to the perspectival vanishing point.[7] So what we see of those volumes varies in size as a function of perspec- tival projection and the imagined distance from the observer. Conversion is possible from the two dimensions of the painting to the three dimensions of the world according to the logic Narrative Euclideanism. The two-dimensional resources that Uccello offers us make it possible, at least in principle, to reconsti- tute the volumes from which they were derived.

### The observer, the world and its representation

We can tell stories about the art-historians' way of looking at Uccello's painting, stories of Italian Renaissance perspectivalism Although the versions vary, for our purposes they can be aligned reasonably well. To summarise, it may be said of the *observer* that she:

is a *point,* constituted by the rules of perspective.

is a point at which matters are *drawn together.* A series of transformation rules render matters coherent at that point.[8]

is a point that is *not included in* the world that it observes. Subject and object are separate.

has only a single *perspective* on the world. She does not see everything at once, although inexhaustible other partial perspectives are possible.

is to some extent in a *relationship of control* with the world. Within the logic of Narrative Euclideanism the flat surface of the canvas is converted into a potential experimental site. Depictions could be re-arranged to re-present other thereby generated volumetric worlds.[9]

It may, in turn, be said of the *world* that it:

*is separate* from the observer.

is a *volume* containing objects, which is three-dimensional and *Euclidean* in character.

exists *prior to* its depiction, awaiting discovery.

contains objects which have *continuities.* They pass through time revealing substantial geometrical stability—or differences— explicable in terms of object-interactions, collisions, etc.

has a need for *narrative,* for stories that illuminate the character and displacement of objects in the world.

Finally, it may be said of the *representation* that it is:

*illustrative* because the world and its narratives are separate from the depiction. They pre-exist their depiction. The stories are as it were out there, in reality. Depictions illustrate that world—a world apart.

*limited,* finite. It is a revealed perspective on the world. As we've already noted, other perspectives are possible. This means that the world is *inexhaustible* with respect to representation. Other constructions are always possible.[10]

### Resisting narrative Euclideanism

It is often suggested that the geometrical art of narrating the Euclidean world of the Italian Renaissance became, in one guise or another, the hegemonic set of framing assumptions for much depiction in the West through to the nineteenth century.[11]

This claim may be nuanced in several ways, for instance, by including the cartographic geometries that generate views from nowhere.[12] But such nuances do not disqualify the claim completely. Thus though it is possible to find exceptions—and we will explore some of these below—geometrical ontologies have been naturalized in many contexts to the point where the (narrative) ways in which they constitute subject, object and spatiality are difficult to resist. For certain purposes they have performed themselves through, and into, us. Contemporary Westerners have, to a large extent, been constituted as Euclidean subjects at least when they think about representation.[13] Indeed, the naturalization has proceeded to the point where the conventions of perspective are often treated as a part of the order of things. A single mode has worked itself into places which might be-or even are—made in other ways.

An immediate consequence of this is that it is difficult to avoid treating the Italian discovery of linear perspective as the proper of relating to representation — indeed as a discovery of the nature of reality rather than as an invention.[14] But it is possible to resist this, and a number of recent art historians and many artists do just that.[15] Our interest in joining that resistance is quite specific. We wish to resist the *ontological naturalization* implied if we allow that linear perspective is part of the order of things. We want to remind ourselves that Narrative Euclideanism may be imagined as invention rather than discovery (Edgerton, 1976:6).[16]  If linear perspective is a way of *constituting* subjects and objects, rather than revealing relations that are given in the order of things, it follows that subjects, objects and spatialities do not have to relate in that particular way. Studying other depictions will help to discover other possible forms of the labour of division between subject and object, other ontological possibilities. It will help to rediscover, in short, that representation is not only about epistemology but also about ontology. Such rediscovery or resistance is thus a *technical* matter, a matter of colliding representational details.

## Descriptive assemblage: planes and grains

The attempt to make space by imagining alternatives to Narrative Euclideanism takes us first to the work of Svetlana Alpers. In *The Art of Describing* (1989), she argues that much classic Dutch art constructs itself, its objects, and its subjects, differently from Italian Renaissance perspectivalism. So let's move to the 17th century Netherlands. Look at this painting (Plate 2) by Jan Vermeer, his *View of Delft* (c.1660; Mauritshuis, Den Haag). We are looking across the river to a townscape, the roofs of Delft. Alpers, talking also of other Dutch art, makes an argument in four parts.

   Such paintings she says, *describe,* a depiction which is not, however, to be understood as the illustration of a narrative.[17] In Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* a story is being told about the glories of a battle and,  by implication,  of the part the Medicis play in that battle. The Vermeer is different. There are people, but action there is not. The painting does not depend on, or appear to demand, a story. One might add that the picture is less obviously humanist than its Italian counterpart. 'Man' is not the measure of things Which is not to say that Vermeer doesn't have room for the human, or to suggest that his art fails to constitute subjectivity and

objectivity.[18] Rather, he is going about the matter in a different way.

Alpers' second point is that in this kind of painting no particular point of view is adopted. The *View of Delft* is not obviously geometrically perspectival. There *is* no viewpoint. It may best be understood as a view from nowhere. Nowhere in particular. To explain this, Alpers suggests that Dutch painting derives in part from the conventions of cartography: the various Western cartographic projections derive, most often, from a view from nowhere. For cartographic conventions may not be *perspectival,* but they are projections none the less. Global volumes are projected onto the flat surfaces that we call maps. These maps conserve certain relations, for instance those of area, distance, altitude or orientation (though all cannot be conserved simultaneously, choices must be made). The distinction between observer and representation is geometrical here again, but the rules are different.[19] Maps create a form of subjectivity distinct from Narrative Euclideanism. These particular cartographic constructions resonate with what Donna Haraway in another context has called 'the God trick' or the 'unmarked category'.[20] The unmarked category refers to a centred subject without a location. This centred subject sees (the important aspects of) everything, but is itself nowhere (to be seen). The question is whether this is what the Vermeer painting is up to. Is it creating a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity that generates an overview of the world from nowhere? Is it playing a trick that resembles Narrative Euclideanism in its distribution of object and subject? A distribution which assumes that there are object-volumes which can be caught in a system of geometrical transformations and can then be projected onto a surface? A trick that differs from Narrative Euclideanism in its dependence on a form of all-knowing subjectivity from nowhere?

Alpers argues against this interpretation. She shows how the *View of Delft* resembles the depictions of cities commonly found on the margins of the 17th-century maps familiar to Vermeer.[21] These representations of cities *are* views from nowhere. But *'nowhere'* is not an unmarked location constructed by the application of geometrical means. Something is going on which has more to do with the desire for travel. The wish to *move,* and to find out what may be seen in the course of that movement. The wish to learn about places with the help of engravings, and without the need to leave home (Alpers, 1989:152). Alpers' argument is that Vermeer is transforming this tradition of virtual travel. As an instance of transformation,

in the painting of Delft he drops the roofscape from its conventional point high up in city depictions—with the effect of creating an overwhelming sky.

Third, Alpers' distinguishes Dutch painting from Narrative Euclideanism by claiming that in the latter '[t]he world stain[s] the surface with color and light, impressing itself upon it; the viewer neither located nor characterized' (Alpers, 1989:27). In the unlocated and uncharacterized viewer we recognize Haraway's God trick. But perhaps not quite. The painting becomes '[a] surface on which is laid out an assemblage of the world' (Alpers, 1989:122). Note that term: the painting is an *assemblage,* she argues, of textures and surfaces, which have material, or visual/material attributes. These attributes may be detected by a moving eye, that changes its regard. An eye that sees as it travels. An eye that sees in a manner that is continuous with its subject matter.

Alpers' fourth and final point is to note that the *View of Delft,* like many Dutch paintings, isn't framed. It stops at the edges of the canvas. The edges seem to be placed arbitrarily, they could easily have been somewhere else. The picture is neither a window on the world nor a story illustrating a separate reality. It is 'an unbound fragment of a world that continues beyond the canvas' (Alpers, 1989: 27). In her terms, it is 'optical' in character rather than 'geometrical', because the eye moves around, discovers textures and surfaces, and translates them onto the canvas.

*The observer, the world and its representation*

What do Alpers' stories about Vermeer tell about the way subject and object are distributed? What is the character of representation, of the spatiality that is being arranged? And where, if anywhere, is there narrative?

Both the Uccello and the Vermeer *distinguish* between subject and object. A distinction is being made between what can be seen (and its depiction) on the one hand, and that which sees on the other. In addition, there is a suggestion of continuity in the external world. The world is always already out there, quietly waiting to be discovered by an inquisitive eye. Objects in the world have some kind of duration. But at this point the similarities start to give way to differences.

The Vermeer suggests that *space is topologically complex*. The travelling eye sees, but it does not reduce itself to a unified prac-

tice of perspectival transformation, with its singular assumptions about volumes and projections. The Vermeer does not generate a coherent cartographic view from nowhere. Vermeer's complex topological space is closely related to the way subject and objects are distributed. Subject and object are much more interconnected than in Narrative Euclideanism. Compare, for instance, the paintings and drawings of Pieter Saenredam which often create an alternative to the Italian system of perspective—the so-called 'distance point' approach which was formalised by Viator in 1505 (Alpers, 1989: 53 ff). In this approach, vision and the eye are the point of departure, but they are not constituted as a geometrical vantage point outside the painting/windowpane. The eye is located on the surface of the canvas, *not outside*. Then two 'distance points' are created on either side of the eye/surface. 'It is solely' writes Alpers, 'to people and objects in the work, not to the external viewer, that these three points refer' (Alpers, 1989: 53). The subject is located in the same plane as its objects. The subject *is among* the objects, in the world. Or, the subject is also an object.[22]

Objects are not limited and definable volumes located in a world itself constructed as an inclusive boundary-free Euclidean volume. Instead, the world *and* its objects are constructed as a set of intersecting surfaces, planes and lines of sight. All these construct many possible points of view. As noted above, a topologically complex space is created in which the eye moves. This moving eye discovers, from one point of view to another, the sur-- faces that impress themselves upon it, the surfaces and the relations between them as they overlap or butt up against one another.[23] Many commentators on Dutch art have commented on the obsessive, almost tactile concern with textures, fabrics, clothes, weaves, the materiality of surfaces.[24] This is what happens when the eye roves through the world. Surfaces impress themselves upon it, not only in their spatial attributes but also in their feel—which is transmuted to vision. The vision of the texture of a rich fur, or a sheet of paper.[25] Objects are made as sets of surfaces with discoverable relations between them. These sur-- faces have orientations, but they also have material attributes like the grain of a piece of wood, or the reflected gloss of a brooch.

But the subject is complex as well as the object. The subject in Vermeer's painting is not a straightforward God-trick, but is rather a set of movements of the eye. The eye of the observer, we have already noted, lies alongside objects. It takes the impression

of the surfaces over which it travels. And thus, 'it' is not single. There are many points of view, many spatial and textural impressions. Alpers writes: 'The many eyes and many things viewed that make up . . . surfaces produce a syncopated effect. There is no way that we can stand back and take in a homogeneous space (Alpers, 1989:58). The painted subjects are at once the viewing subjects: both are effects that move across the surfaces of a representation like Vermeer's *View of Delft.* These painted/viewing subjects make a series of different connections between objects. Like the objects, subjects might here best be understood as assemblages.[26]

## Deconstructive excess: uncomfortable ambiguity

Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* displayed the making of subjects, objects, and the spatial organization of the world by geometrical means. These subjects and objects stand in narrative relation to one another, the eye of the observer outside the depicted world. In Vermeer's *View of Delft* the depiction of space is linked to virtual travel. The space is organized by the movement of the subject-eye as it passes through the world. This movement through space makes subjects and objects by means of juxtapositions and impressions. Uccello and Vermeer differ, but both approach a world that is larger than the eye can behold, larger than the painting can represent. Again, they not only share some representational traits, but are also both well-known and highly regarded. On the walls of the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands hangs a painting by Remy Blanchard (Plate 3) which does not have a prominent place in the annals of art-history: *Le chat dort, les souris dansent* (When the cat's away, the mice do play) (1982).[27] In the middle of the painting we see a white, sleeping cat. Around the frame of the picture—in a sense making the frame—is a series of mice. They have grey fur, made it seems from the material used for cheap children's puppets. Their eyes, red and orange, are made from slices of French bread.

As a representation this painting doesn't seem very *literal*. In fact, it is more or less *impossible*. The figures are not depicted perspectivally as volumes in a Euclidean space. Neither are we in a world of assemblage, although perhaps this is a little less remote for here too the textures—the fur of the mice, the contentment of a sleeping cat—indeed impress themselves upon us. But is that all we

can say about the painting?[28] Rather than reading art history, in this case we sat in front of the picture in the Groninger Museum and looked at it, waiting and watching. Most immediately, the painting is about a white cat, and about the lurid circling mice. A kind of ghost figure in pale violet and blue rises from the sleeping cat. It is a sad, ghostlike figure, but also with a hint of the demonic. But we are unsure *what* it is—this is the first ambiguity.[29] Perhaps it is the cat's dreaming self. But if the figure is a dream, then what does it 're-present'? Unlike the cat, the 'dream' has his eyes wide open. Is this figure staring at the mice? Staring in reprimand, admonishing them for playing 'when the cat's away'. Does it seek, but fail, to still them because the cat is asleep, away? Rather than its dreaming self, the figure may be the cat's other side. Against the white goodness of the sleeping cat, its undomesticated aspect. The demon within. What exactly is the link between the good cat, the dreaming demonic figure, and the eerie grey mice?

These tentative explorations of what this painting represents, do not fit into the schemes we have thus far explored. Indeed, they suggest that this painting makes another kind of representational possibility, that of ambivalence or impossibility. Take, for example the connection between the cat and the mice. The cat cancels the mice. They can only exist—play—because the cat is away, asleep. But the cat is not away, it is right there. There is another ambivalence. The centre, the cat—away, asleep—creates its frame, the mice who can therefore play. The cat, however, also seeks to deny its frame, those mocking mice, running round and round. The mice present the borders of the cat's possibilities, they are—literally—its limits But at the same time the cat is sleeping right through it all, and thus denies those limits.

Each of these ambivalences suggests a specific narrative. A Freudian account might settle the connection between cat and mouse in terms of superego and id. The cat represents a moral conscience, which is momentarily absent in sleep. The mice then are the id, having wicked fun in the cat's dreams. Anton Ehrenzweig might give an art-theoretical version of the Freudian account, discussing a tension between conscious thought (currently asleep) and the creative child's attention with its 'low level' scanning (represented by the mice).[30] A Durkheimian version might note that 'mouse-crime' is necessary in order to define the limits of 'cat-law'. These narratives, although providing ways of understanding the painting, are arbitrary as to where they begin. It doesn't seem to make a lot of difference whether they start from the cat or from the mice, from

centre or periphery. They also seem to end arbitrarily. How many times do we need to shift from cat to mice in order to provide an adequate account of the painting?

This arbitrariness suggests that another kind of story might be appropriate. Lyotard's version of post-structuralism *starts* with undecidability, rather than concluding with it. [31] The undecidability implied in a Lyotardian story cannot be assimilated. In such a story order makes disorder, but disorder also makes order. The two *necessarily* go together, but they do so impossibly. They could never, know one another fully, or at the same time. [32] They could never be represented together, because each is unimaginable, excluded by the other. Applying this post-structuralist narrative to Blanchard's painting expresses the impossible relations between the cat and the mice, the picture and its frame, and the shifts between them. It displays a form of representation that insists on the continuity of relations in order to make impossible discontinuities. [33]

### The observer, the world and its representation

How does this post-structuralist account translate into the way the observer is constructed by this painting? What kind of world are we encountering, and in what way is this world shown to the viewer? What does an ontology of unassimilable ambiguity, of unavoidable excess, look like? Blanchard's painting makes sense and then it does not. The continual shifts make it an uncomfortable painting, so maybe the right way of exploring it is to do so uncomfortably. [34]

The painting lays bare its own workings. Instead of solving the problem of how to differentiate between different objects and between subjects and objects, it makes it manifest. [35] By displaying its labour of division, it does not, however, simply show everything. It *confuses* divisions. The Groninger Museum, where we saw this picture, disrupts in a similar fashion: some of the paintings hang so high up on the wall that they are difficult to see. Walking around, you are never quite sure what is functional and what is decorative. The painting similarly works at displaying and hiding, laying bare and covering up. For a moment it holds together but immediately negates the illusion and no longer fits. It cannot be subsumed in a single narrative. Rather than allowing a summation after close and proper scrutiny, this painting requires continued exploration. This exploration leads to the discovery of an ambiguous relation which always, immediately, opens up a new exploration.

The Italian rules of projection have disappeared. However, the representational rules of Descriptive Assemblage don't work either. The painting does not solve the problem of how subject and object relate to one another, yet it is about subject/object divisions. It is a *discussion*, a deconstruction of these distinctions. This discussion is conducted by destabilizing, or reworking spatialization. The destabilization works, for example, by transgressing the frame of the painting, while at the same time the painting insists that the mice are a frame. The painting divides inside and outside, centre and periphery, and it does not. It constitutes a labour of division between subject and object, and it does not. In effect the painting is a meticulous performance and projection of *heterogeneity*. Heterogeneity, in the Lyotardian sense mentioned above, as related unassimilability. Some observations about heterogeneity as an effect of Deconstructive Excess:

We witness the depiction of *relations*. The objects in the painting are linked, or better, the objects are relational effects. This is a post-structuralist trope (though not unique to post-structuralism). Whatever its provenance, there is a shift away from a primary concern with objects and their relations in favour of a primary concern with relations and their (occasionally achieved) objects.[36]

This concern with relational effects is *ontologically unsettling*. Although it is possible to read the representational surface as an obscure depiction of the relations between recognizable objects, it can also be decoded as expressing ontological uncertainty. Or to put it differently, a labour of division is being performed, rather than a division of labour. This reversal reminds us that the effects of labour as division are insecure and could be otherwise.

We are in a world that combines the *necessary and the unassimilable*. The relations that are made don't add up. The cat (the painting) and the mice (its frame) are mutually dependent, as it were, stapled together. But there is no single way that we can *tell* of this link. First, there are several different inconsistent ways in which we might do so. Second, we ourselves are caught up in a related inconsistency. We are the subject-objects that lie beyond the frame, that view the picture from outside. Alternatively, we are the object-subjects in a frameless representation of which we form a part. Such pairings cannot be told together.[37] There is an excess which is developed within and through the painting.[38] For, as we have seen, the painting projects the subject inconsistently.

At one moment the subject looks at the centred cat, but in the next moment, the subject is caught up in the cat, it is projected to the periphery, among or beyond the mice. At that moment it is converted from the principle of order that it was a moment ago, to a principle of disorder. But then, as a form of mouse-like disorder, there is another shift. For that disorder is necessary to the order that made the subject in the first place. The subject continually shifts between order and disorder, from what is visible to what is invisible, from the centre to the periphery.[39]

Heterogeneity, in another way of putting it, is a representational effect which consists of multiple and *mutually exclusive narratives.* In telling those narratives we oscillate. One story is applicable within one domain, and another in another. But holding both of them together at the same time is not possible. The viisual heterogeneity of Blanchard's representation shows precisely that impossibility: the impossibility of holding two mutually exclusive narratives together.[40]

If all narratives are part of the same surface then there is an important sense in which they have been homogenised. In a sense, at just the moment that the painting succeeds, it fails. At the moment we refuse to keep shifting we see a *failed* representation of necessary impossibility. Because to represent the unassimilable is to assimilate it, to render it, in one way or another, conformable. To represent heterogeneity is to colonize it, to make it comfortable.[41] In this sense, the Blanchard alludes back, or beyond, to that which cannot be imagined.

## Ontological recovery: finite dreaming

Unlike the Uccello and the Vermeer, Blanchard's painting makes the relational work of representation explicit. The labour of division is no longer backgrounded to produce an ontological effect that seemingly resides in the order of things—which in retrospect becomes a description of what the Uccello and the Vermeer may have been up to. The painting resists producing a hidden ontology that comfortably grounds an epistemology (that may become naturalized). Instead the contingency of entities—and the labour of division in which they are generated and distributed—is made visible. But is this the only possible way? Is ontological foregrounding necessarily dependent on tension and incompleteness? Does it depend on the notion that representation is necessarily incomplete, the world necessarily in excess of the painting?

Our last picture is by Tim Leurah Tjapaltjarri, assisted by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (Plate 4). Painted in 1980, it is entitled *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne).[42] This is a huge painting, over twenty feet across. It is an artistic expression, but as such a function of an uneasy relationship between Aboriginal and white Australian culture (including an art market for Aboriginal paintings).[43] At the same time, it is a statement of political resistance, an exposition of the character of social and kin relations, a cosmological enactment, a geographical allocation, and (not least) an articulation of spiritual experience.

The painting is, precisely and explicitly, a *performance* of a right order of things. It enacts the reiteration of a pre-existing and proper order. In this order everything is related to everything else. The artist himself is also located within this order. It expresses itself, as it were, through the artist and his production. By virtue of its creation, the painting constitutes a further revelation and production of that order. To put it another way, it is an order which produces the world and the artist along with his painting.[44]

We are in the Australian desert, the Northern Territory. We are witnessing one of the performances—expressions, revelations, reiterations, re-negotiations—of an ordering that was determined at the beginning of the world. Usually, this ordering is translated into English as 'Dreamtime' or 'the Dreaming', though Helen Watson-Verran suggests that 'a more helpful name for this conceptual resource is the "epistemic imaginary" of Aboriginal knowledge systems' (Helen Watson-Verran, 1994:5).[45] The dreaming, or the epistemic imaginary, tells of Ancestral Beings that came out of the ground and moved across the world, by their actions creating people, animals, geographical and sacred features. Their movements and actions were foundational to the world and its inhabitants— they made everything. In particular, they made people-and-places-and-animals together, as a set of relations. These particular places, species, groups, generations, and moieties, were then and still are all bound up together. In this logic, it makes just as much sense to say that (for instance) the Anmatjera belong to the country of Napperby Station, as it does to put it the other way round. Or, it makes sense to say that a tribe belongs to, is related to, a particular animal.[46]

The world as a whole, was made at the time of the dreaming. This was the time the original stories were enacted. Nowadays a telling, or a ceremony, or a painting, is a re-narration of what is. The re-narration *finds* what is there, the world is revealed again. At the same time, the order of things is being re-asserted.

> The fact that Ancestral Beings socialized the landscape and thus created its identity in that 'other time' does not mean . . . that the world is unchanging. The interrelated cosmos must be maintained by constant intervention—negotiation and renegotiation—by those responsible. There are no dualistic oppositions here, between good and bad, right and wrong, background and foreground. All elements of the world are constitutive of all other elements in the cosmos, through being related to them, and are in some sense responsible for them. (Helen Watson with the Yolngu community at Yirrkala, 1989:30)

The transcendent and responsible narratives of the dreaming allow us to make some sense of Tim Tjapaltjarri's painting.

> The painting evokes the Death Spirit being as he travels the known earth of his homeland, revealed as a stylized map of the places where the Anmatjera lived, hunted, ate, fought and rested. The depiction of the spirit being as a human skeleton journeying along the central spiralling line dramatized his eternal presence in the landscape: not dead but supernatural. (Bardon, ndb:47)

The painting or *dreamscape* does not only provide an origin story, it is also a statement by the artist of his own (places in the) dreaming. His life trajectory is expressed as it is made by the dreaming. But some of what is told is not known to outsiders who do not have rights over, were not constituted in, the narratives of the various relevant dreamings. Some features in the painting may however be identified by outsiders with particular episodes in specific narratives. For instance, the artist tells that the dominant wavy line represents the journey of the Death Spirit being through (what is called by Westerners) the Napperby District at the time of the dreaming. The circles represent the resting places of the Spirit. The skeletal figure is, in part, a depiction of the figure of the Death Spirit. Many of the arcs represent windbreaks. Other motifs are projections of a boomerang or (in the case of the wavy lines) running water. Yet other features depict people eating meat. And although the dominant dreaming is that of the Death Spirit, the painting also depicts three further dreamings with which the artist had a special relation, and to which he had a particular responsibility: those of Old Man, the Yam, and the Sun and Moon who are lovers.

The painting is thus a gigantic re-presentation of this small area of central Australia, as well as a depiction of the dreamings of the

artist. But since the artist is responsible for, belongs to, and is an expression of, the narratives of dreamtime, it is also a negotiation of (his location in) that ordering. Posed in territorial terms, it is thus a reaffirmation of the character of the tribal land, and it represents an angry political statement. A political statement which repudiates the white people's (mis)understanding of the land, its inhabitants and its physical and spiritual features.

> Tim often said to me that he did not really wish to know the white Australians, and the painting is his perception of his own tribal lands and spiritual destiny of the Napperby cattle-station areas. He appropriates Napperby to himself as his own Dreaming, and by implication takes it away from its white owners. This is one of the meanings of the paintings. (Bardon, ndb:46)

### The observer, the world and its representation

This representation has little to do with Narrative Euclideanism – though it has everything to do with narrative. It has little to do with Descriptive Assemblage—though it has a good deal to do with description. And it has little to do with Deconstructive Excess— though it is quite explicitly about what is what, and how everything relates. Five observations:

> *Narrative* is foundational. It distributes, it allocates. It forms links between the entities which it makes. This is the import of the dreaming. A dreaming is transcendental, it recreates itself in features and ceremonies in the present-day. This narrative is not centred on humans. 'Man' is not the measure.
>
> *Narrative is foundational of space.* Space is an *expression* of narrative. The stories enacted in the dreaming, that are told and retold, *make* Aboriginal space. Space is a set of relations between places in a story, or between stories. Euclidean notions have no meaning in this cosmology. The idea that space might be experienced as a container or a patch waiting to be populated makes no sense at all. This is the political import of Tim Leurah Tjapaltjarri's representation. In this context, his painting is best understood as a statement of, or in, the ontological politics of spatiality. The world is not what you, the white men, believe it to be: an area with certain neutrally-topographical attributes. Space, land, social and kinship relations are all bound up together and made in narrative, a narrative that you do not (and partially cannot and may not) perceive.[47]

The distinction between object and subject is not really obvious. What we might imagine—coming from Uccello, Vermeer, or Blanchard—as objects, act. *Objects have agency* in Aboriginal narrative. There is no difficulty in imagining a tree or a rock as an active agent. [48] The ancestral beings frequently converted themselves into such objects. The narratives of dreamtime perform themselves in rocks, hills, rivers, or rainstorms, through flora and fauna, through abstractions, and through persons and their kinship relations. All are related, more or less distantly, by the web of intersecting, partially overlapping, narratives.

Like objects, *subjects are narrative effects* caught up in, performing, and reflecting their roles in and responsibilities for those narratives. The overlap, or rather, the irrelevance of the subject-object distinction, is natural, given the character of the narratives of Dreamtime. The skeletal figure in Tim Leurah Tjapaltjarri's dreamscape illustrates this. The figure represents the Death Spirit being. It also represents the artist's progress along the dreamline of the Death Spirit, his own perception of his position, and his premonition of his own death (Bardon, nd:46). The artist is caught up in the painting. Other Aborigines are—to a greater or lesser extent—similarly caught up in it. Only the non-Aboriginal is outside this web. [49] We—the outsiders—are not, as it were, constituted as both subjects and objects in this depiction.[50]

Deconstructive Excess imagines the *creation* of incompleteness by generating unassimilabilities. In this—high modernist—sense it can be seen as a radicalization of the 'perspectival' constructivism we began exploring with Uccello. Alternatively, in a more post-modern reading, the Blanchard renders the distinction between completion and incompletion, or between finitude and infinitude irrelevant. Ontological Recovery is different again. The world is not incomplete, it is finite. It is a finite set of interweaving narratives. There is no possibility of constructing something new, another perspective. Somewhere, everything is already known, has already been told. The world is complete within narrative. Least of all is the world unknown, because it is constituted as a set of metaphors for linking, joining, and negotiating. While most of the narratives are not known to all the individuals or social groups (for they are owned by specific groups, while reciprocally, 'owning' those groups), the idea that the world is a finite set of known metaphors makes perfect sense. A representation is simply a revelation that extrudes itself in the form of specific metaphors in specific places under specific circumstances. The

restless idea of construction—linked to the possibility that the world is of an indefinite incompleteness—is not available here.

## Afterwords: paintings and politics

The interferences between different modes of making the world have created a kaleidoscope. The movements of the kaleidoscope have helped to de-naturalize the assumptions built into representation. They give us pause, making it easier to explore the character of those assumptions: the varying methods for constituting subjectivity and objectivity; the different ways in which the spatiality of the world is produced; and the diversity that is possible in the relationship between spatiality and narrative.

We have sought to resist the naturalizing epistemological account of representation that assumes that there is a common order of things. Or the notion that differences between representations can only be understood as some analogue of perspectives. Or that differences between representations can only be understood in terms of rules of method that more or less satisfactorily carry the burden of accurate or workable description.[51] The moving kaleidoscope of representational modes highlights the *ontological* character of representation. We have argued that representation not only describes, but also works upon the world that is described. Description is never innocent. The movements of the kaleidoscope have served to uncover the representational labour of division that generates the subjects, objects, their relations, and the worlds in which these exist.

We value the relatively safe haven these paintings have offered to explore such a precarious topic. Something can be said for an 'inappropriate' experimental site when the stakes are high. Not because the outcomes will be obscure or hidden, but because such a site may itself create a pause. It may arrest movement for a moment and thus make it easier to note the necessary detail.

Research like this tries to make a space for what we might, following Annemarie Mol, imagine as an *ontological politics.* An ontological politics asks how it is that the representational practices that make up worlds—and so the worlds made up in those practices—co-ordinate themselves. How it is that worlds go together, or don't.

How they *might* go together is what is at stake in this politics. It is a form of politics that works in the play between different places, seeking to slip between different worlds.[52] It is a form of politics that imagines that there always is such play. It imagines that repre-

sentative allocation may be less standardized than, for instance, the hegemonic pretensions of Narrative Euclideanism might suggest. Accordingly, it moves away from a politics of perspectivalism (which asks how best to co-ordinate different views on the same world) towards more multiple worlds and views. It explores good ways of making partial connections, better connections, between many worlds. Between, we might suggest, the many worlds we all carry and perform.

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[2] See, for example, Wegener (1993) on the series of three paintings by Uccello

on the battle of San Romano.

3  See, for instance, Gombrich (1989).

4  It notes, as historical specification, that Uccello was commissioned by the Medicis to paint celebratory accounts of one of their battles, to paint an adjunct to a human-centred, if not humanist, narrative. So the artist is located in a structure of patronage.

5  See the accounts offered, for instance, in Alpers (1989), Baxendall (1972), Blunt (1962), and Edgerton (1976). See also Alberti (1435-6/1966).

6  See Serres (1988) for an exploration of the motif of classical geometrical representation grounded in the (absence of the) point.

7  See Vasari (1568/1987).

8  The term 'drawing things together' comes from Latour (1990).

9  This is in part where Bruno Latour draws his notion of 'immutable mobile'. Note, however, that like Latour, we are not saying that the world 'is' a set of volumetric entities in a three-dimensional space. Rather we are saying that it is possible to build it that way under certain circumstances by using the representational performances of Narrative Euclideanism.

10  Marilyn Strathem, in her analysis of constructivism, talks of this set of assumptions as 'merological'. See Strathem (1991,1992).

11  See Edgerton (1966:4) and Foster (1988).

12  See, for instance, Turnbull (1989), and for more general discussion Harvey (1990). We will have a collision with cartography—of a kind—in section 2.

13  We—the authors—are, of course, contemporary Westerners. Yet apparently we are able to note, to regret, to resist. Or, rather, we will do so. In this paper our object is to utilize other representations to forge a distance from Narrative Euclideanism. This distance does not provide a stable ground for organized resistance, but does provide a brief gap which we may pass through.

14  Mieke Bal (1991:216), writing more generally of realism, observes 'The problem with using a realistic mode of reading and looking exclusively is that it helps to off content as "natural" and thus fosters ideological manipulation. Yet realism has succeeded in becoming so "natural" a mode of reading that denying or ignoring its pervasiveness will not help.'

15  See, as examples, Norman Bryson (1990) on still life, and Philip Fisher (1991) on 'hand made space'.

16  The trope of 'invention' has its own problems, not the least of which is the often implied notion of an autonomous, creative, individual inventor. For our purposes here, invention amends the innocent and passive connotations of discovery.

17  Alpers makes a contrast with Italian painting and, though the Uccello is scarcely contemporary with the Vermeer, it serves to make the point.

18  On the inclusion of the spectator in the realm of the painting, and on the distinction between the world of man and the world of things see Barthes (1988) on Dutch painting.

19  See the work of Turnbull (1989) and Wood (1992).

20  See, for instance, Haraway (1989, 1991a).

21  Vermeer makes his own version of these fringe depictions in *The Art of Painting* (1666-1667, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

22  These points are illustrated in *Jan Vredeman de Vries, Perspective,* published Leiden, 1604-5, plate 2.

[23] See *Jan Vredeman de Vries, Perspective,* published Leiden, 1604-5, plate 28.

[24] See, for instance, Bryson's discussion of the character of texture in Dutch representation, in the context of the tensions between the tactile and the development of long distance trade in luxury objects (Bryson, 1990:125 ff).

[25] Alpers illustrates these points in a discussion of *David Bailly, Still Life,* 1651. This is at the Stedelijk Museum 'de Lakenhal', Leiden.

[26] Norman Bryson in his *Vision and Planning* (1983), notes that the detail of the different surfaces depicted by Vermeer in, for instance, *The Art of Painting* varies from the fine-grained to the impressionistic. He treats this as a further commentary on the art of painting by a subject that displaces itself through different positions.

[27] See Strathem (1991,1992).

[28] For a discussion of Blanchard's work, see the exhibition catalogue *Blanchard, Boisrond, Combas, Di Rosa* (1983).

[29] We are not suggesting that other paintings are in no way ambiguous, that ambiguity is strictly a property of the mode of representation we call Deconstructive Excess. In this chapter, we are focussing most particularly on the differences *between* paintings, not on those *within.* The yardstick provided by looking at Uccello and Vermeer indicates the ambiguity of the Blanchard.

[30] See Ehrenzweig (1993).

[31] See Lyotard (1991).

[32] This argument is developed by Robert Cooper (1986).

[33] The observer becomes part of the picture, like, for instance, the viewer (or the adjacent pictures) in Jasper Johns' *Target* (Museum of Modern Art, Vienna, 1974). See Fisher (1991:77-80).

[34] The Uccello and the Vermeer are comfortable (made so, seem so). But we have shown how this comfort is contingent, constructed. We have used an uncomfort-able (post-structuralist) approach to render the naturalized comfort uncomfort-able. For a discussion of discomfort and subjectivity, this time in the context of the paintings of Francis Bacon, see van Alphen (1992).

[35] A matter of working on the surface of the canvas which goes back at least as far as Cezanne, and is arguably one of the dominant themes and preoccupations of painting for over a hundred years. See Fisher (1991).

[36] Some of the implications of this shift are indeed explored in post-structuralism and those STS versions of the post-structuralist sensibility reflected in actor-network theory (Latour, 1988), feminism (Haraway, 1991b) and cross-cultural studies (Watson, 1990).

[37] Telling impossible pairings simultaneously would be like painting a Uccello and a Vermeer on a single canvas. The simultaneous painting of impossible perspectives is achieved in the cubist work of Braque and Picasso.

[38] There is always excess. Sometimes (Uccello, Vermeer) this distinction is not located within the representation, but between the representation and some other location.

[39] The argument here mimics some aspects of Charis Cussins' (1996) work on identities in fertility treatments. And also that by Vicky Singleton (Singleton and Michael, 1993) on the UK cervical smear campaign. Both papers explore

(necessary) oscillation between centering and decentering.

[40] This argument is somewhat similar to Frederic Jameson's notion of 'cognitive mapping' (Jameson, 1991). In particular, his analysis of the Frank Gehry house makes the argument that this house is a device for thinking which conjoins two incompatible but mutually dependent forms of being: the First World and the Third World experience of global capitalism. In Jameson's way of thinking, the Blanchard painting might be treated as a form of cognitive mapping. (For further commentary on this, see Law (1997a).) Note, however, that Jameson appears, if ambivalently, to have made a prior decision about the order of things: that there is a beast called global capitalism that generates incoherences.

[41] We are grateful to David Turnbull for a version of this argument. Applying it to the Gehry House described by Jameson, he has noted in discussion that if the house turns out to be comfortable to *live in* then the tension between the two narratives has been lost. They do, indeed, fit together.

[42] These are the titles given to it respectively in Ryan (nd) and Sutton (1989). Titles for Aboriginal paintings are usually labels attached to them by whites after discussion with the artists.

[43] The development of a market-related artistic tradition of Aboriginal painting is relatively recent, dating from the early 1970s, and appears, at least in central Australia, to have grown from a particular station, Papunya, under the impetus of art teacher Geoffrey Bardon. For more details of this extraordinary and savage story see Bardon (nda).

[44] A cosmology in which agency performs itself through animals, aspects of the landscape, or spirit-like dreamings as well as through people sits uneasily with attributing special creative agency to the Aboriginal artist. Agency thus performs itself more or less ubiquitously as an expression of the order of things.

[45] 'It is', she continues, 'this epistemic imaginary, celebrated, venerated and providing possibilities for a rich intellectual life amongst all participants in Aboriginal community life, which enables the eternal struggle to reconcile the many local knowledges which constitute Aboriginal knowledge systems.'

[46] The way the world—produced by and re-enacted in each account of the dreaming—belongs to the people—also made by that dreaming and re-enacted in *each* account—and vice-versa, has nothing to do with the feminist analysis of the *cam.* era as the proprietary male gaze onto the female body. This latter analysis examines the invasion by the camera of the woman's ownership of her body—the male, gaze does not belong. The way world and viewer—to put in those terms—belong together does not invade ownership, but constitutes it. Of course, the limits this mutual belonging are tragic. The world originally dreamt, did not include the invading forces of the Western world. This invasion does resonate with the feminist analysis of the gaze.

[47] Helen Watson-Verran notes that these different notions of spatiality and the way subjects are constituted generate profound misunderstandings between Aboriginal and Western negotiators over matters such as land rights. For a discussion of the difficulties and the historical asymmetries, see Watson-Verran (1994). For other discussion of the performed character of regional spatiality see Mol and Law (1994).

[48] This notion of the active object resonates with the actor-network notion of the agency of non-humans (see, for instance, Callon, 1986). However, in Aboriginal cosmology, the act of non-human—or human—agent never brings anything new

into the world. Actor-network theory appears to be framed by the assumption of restless change that is built into many current Euro-American practices.

[49] Who the non-Aboriginal is, where 'outside the web' is, is not at all obvious. In this chapter, we have named non-Aborigines, Westerners, white people, white men, outsiders. Us and them. We, the authors, appear as the ultimate exception. While we are not constituted 'inside the web' we seem to describe the representation as if we were. We have initially approached this representation as an artistic expression. In this sense, it fits into our Western web. The representation as an artistic expression coincides with the representation as a political statement, as a re-enactment of the constitution of the world. The webs are not sealed off from one another. Nor are the links between them there to be discovered. The explanatory links that relate art with politics with ontology need to be forged carefully.

[50] This means that before Aboriginals can deal systematically and consistently with a white person, they have to locate her in their kinship system by allocating parentage by adoption. In this way Helen Watson-Verran is located in the kinship relations of the Yolngu of North East Arnhemland (Watson-Verran, 1993).

[51] Unlike texts, paintings are not typically understood in terms of accurate description, but rather in terms of artistic expression and aesthetic appreciation. It is a consequence of our textual bias—located as we are in STS which still tends toward textual connotations—that we have sought to argue against the naturalism of the former rather than the latter.

[52] We begin to see the possible character of an ontological politics. This is the work being done by Helen Watson-Verran (1994) in her mediation between the Wik, an Aboriginal people of Cape York, and the pastoralists; by Annemarie Mol (1997; and Mesman, 1996) in her work on the relationships between medical practices (including representational practices); by Donna Haraway (1989, 1991b) in her motivated denaturalising of metaphors for distinctions between subject and object; and by John Law (1996, 1997b) in his analysis of the collusive character of discourses which operate to generate, and simultaneously presuppose an ontologically stable 'virtual object' which is projected behind and beyond the surface of representation.