The work and ideas of Brook Andrew

Chris Chapman
right: BROOK ANDREW,
BUUGA-BUUGA, 2000,
animated neon,
202.5 x 160.5 cm, courtesy
the artist.

opposite page: BROOK
ANDREW, Sexy and
dangerous, 1996, duraclear
print mounted on Perspex,
produced in various sizes,
courtesy the artist.
Brook Andrew's work has generally been discussed in terms of its polemic — that is, the staking of a position or argument. And his work does seek to engage with politics, most pointedly, with the politics of representation. While Andrew's earlier work foregrounded issues of individual identity, there has always existed an intelligent interrogation of social political issues at large.

Brook Andrew is Wiradjuri. His art draws on and deals explicitly with his experience as a man of both Wiradjuri and Euro-Australian identity. However, in this discussion I wish to emphasise the significance of his work as an interrogation of contemporary social politics, beyond genealogical imperatives.

Andrew's well-known work *Sexy and dangerous*, 1996, incorporates text in Mandarin and English with a nineteenth-century archival image of a young Aboriginal man. He redeployes the image as a marker of anthropological curiosity, placing it within a contemporary discourse of identity and desire. Significantly, the presentation of the image using the advertising medium of the duraclear print relates to Andrew's interrogation of codes of consumerism.

An important aspect of Andrew's practice is the examination of issues of media coercion and the structures, expressed through public visual culture, which render the individual powerless and enforce subjectivities based on consumerism rather than citizenship. Writing about a group of work created by Andrew during his recent residency in Delhi, India, Meaghan Delahunt posits: '[his] work deals with the collisions/collusions between what is seen and unseen — he compels us to look at what is voiced and what is silenced in this era of globalisation. He says, "It's about denial — about who's in and who's out."'

*STILL*, 1998–1999, one of several billboard-size images from Andrew's 'Contention' series, deliberately uses the format of contemporary propaganda in order to destabilise the message generally conveyed by advertising. *STILL* shows a fighter-plane in flight, freeze-framed in the manner of a video still. The pairing of this image with the word 'still' implies a deadpan and unhappy recognition: that this is still happening; and a kind of reparative declaration: that this might stop still. The work also emphasises the use of text as a visual and linguistic signifier in Andrew's work.

As well as creating art that deploys the formats of contemporary advertising, Andrew has always produced work for public spaces. This use of public space could be called a form of 'hijacking' — using the medium of consumerism to defuse its own message. And this is true to the extent that the artist not only changes the 'message', but utilises languages that have the capacity to overwrite and corrupt it. *NGAJUU NGAAY NGINDUUGIRR*, 1998, was the first of Andrew's neon works.
STILL, 1998–1999, DELIBERATELY USES THE FORMAT OF CONTEMPORARY PROPAGANDA IN ORDER TO DESTABILISE THE MESSAGE GENERALLY CONVEYED BY ADVERTISING.
Importantly, it places a photographic image in a complex relation to the neon text. He says of this work:

The neon is mounted on the wall whilst the photographic work hangs suspended from the ceiling three to four metres away from the neon. The image of an Aboriginal man from New South Wales is taken from an anthropological archive. The viewer can either walk behind the eyes and see through and out to the neon, or walk in-between the neon and eyes. *NGAJUU NGAA NGINDUUGIRR* means 'I see you' in Wiradjuri. The act of looking at the Aboriginal body through the colonial gaze is reversed by having the eyes looking out and advertising this fact through a contemporary neon sell-factor. The link to neon as an advertising tool of dominant western modes is used in ways to return the favour of voyeurism, a cruel act of looking at cultures through the narrow field of western perceptions; here the Aboriginal man and those within his gaze return the favour.

There is a great poetic sense in the work of Brook Andrew. His installation for Adelaide’s Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in 2001, *NGAJUU WANT TO BELIEVE*, was a direct response to the Australian Government’s policy on asylum seekers, particularly in relation to the *Tampa* crisis of September 2001. The exhibition catalogue contained various poetic texts, including the following by Andrew:

> and under the stone there is lust
> and under your feet there is me
> and under your mind there is nothing
> and underneath all of you is nothing – but an aching
> an aching of you
> and in the title of the world i give u the moment that we are looking for in the seasons that broker ambition and the fathom of all natural occurrences of the west, and then bow down to the power that be in the natural world, the power of sublimity and contentment towards

The exhibition was sparse and dimly lit, so that the large open space of the EAF gallery was palpable. An empty armchair was placed near a spotlit birdcage, its shadow on the wall appearing stark, large, distorted. On the floor in the centre of the space were three stacks of large posters,
As a part of the process of writing this essay, I suggested to Brook Andrew (whom I have known since 1995) that we look at images of his work together. I had two aims in mind: to select images that represent significant aspects of his current practice and would reproduce well in a magazine format; and to learn the meaning and significance of the grammatical terms he uses in his works. What follows is a notional list of meanings which can be cross-referenced with the artworks reproduced on pages 451 to 453.

**Buunji** is Wiradjuri, meaning 'to share', and has morphed into 'to bludge'; **Nginduugir** means 'you' in a collective sense.

On the yellow sign pointing to the right (part of the outdoor installation in Delhi in 2001 titled *the unseen*), the Hindi text reads: **THIS WAY**.

Andrew's neon animation of a large yellow club (a *boondi*) sends flying cartoon red sparks, and BAM BAM BAM! energises **BUUGA-BUUGA! – POUNDING VERY ROTTEN MEAT!** Andrew's use of the words *buuga buuga* also plays on western historical usage of the words *ooga booga* to signify the gibberish of Indigenous, specifically 'black' languages.

**NGAANDHI NUURRUY DHALAAY YUUWIYN NGUUNYN POLEMICS YUULAYN NOW**

This uses Waradjuri and English language to read: Those who live passionately offer a social exchange. **POLEMICS** is the skin of NOW.

When Andrew travelled to Europe in 2002 as an exhibitor at the ARCO art fair in Madrid and as a speaker at one of the associated forums, he was impressed by the power of graffiti as social declaration. He recorded several examples in a notebook (some of which he is developing into neon-sign works that involve text and imagery), including:
KAPITALISMOA TERRORISMA
In western rhetoric the terms capitalism and terrorism are placed as opposites; however, their interrelationship at many levels is more complex: terrorism can be understood as a tool of capitalism, as it is deployed by the world's most powerful agencies. Andrew's presentation of KAPITALISMOA TERRORISMA as a suspended 'street sign' utilises a prevalent capitalist form of display and promises the operation of consumerism.

Andrew is developing a neon work that declares:

E RIAPPARSO L'IMPERO SUI COLLI FATALI DI ROMA
This translates as: The empire has reappeared on the fateful hills of Rome. As Andrew points out: 'Mussolini used this as a neon sign in the late 1930s in all large Italian cities to proclaim the new imperialism of the fascist state. I use this as a marker for the centre of and the influence of power, strength, art, religion et cetera, especially for the West.'

The unfortunate relevance of this attitude for current society is emphasised and hijacked by Andrew's representation of this phrase as a neon sign. In a work being planned, a flashing neon sign will read:

IMAGINE BEING AMERIKAN
This statement asks viewers to be aware of, and consider, the power structures that exist in all cultures. It should not be read as a slander of the cultural imperialism of the United States of America or of the acquiescence of that nation's populace in mediocrity and bullying tactics (you can interpret American cultural and economic politics as you wish). Andrew's deployment of this imaginary graffiti, presented in the form of a neon sign (a device of advertising and urban spectacle), proposes a question to each of us as individuals. We are a part of a contemporary global society where the balance of power lies not within ourselves, but issues from the external forces of corporatism and exclusionary politics.

Brook Andrew's translation of personal, anti-corporate and anti-totalitarian messages into neon signs that use the latest in sequenced, flickering and flashing-light technology foreground the absence of personal expression in the public domain. They also declare its absolute necessity.

The title of this text is taken from an admonition of the character Jonnyboy in Kief Hillsbery's novel Warboy, Picador, 2000. I thought it an appropriate attitude for Brook's work. Brook Andrew's website includes documentation of his work, essays and other information. It is very user-friendly, and the net address is www.ngaay.ws

Brook Andrew, email to Chris Chapman, August 2002.
Brook Andrew, NGAIJUU WANT TO BELIEVE, exhibition catalogue, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 2001.
Brook Andrew, email to Chris Chapman, July 2002.

Chris Chapman is an independent writer and cultural producer. His website is www.chrischapman.com.au
right: BROOK ANDREW, POLEMICS, 2000, animated neon, internally mirrored, 170 x 100 cm, courtesy the artist.

opposite page left: BROOK ANDREW, (the unseen), 2001, tin, wood, enamel, installation view, Delhi, India, courtesy the artist.

opposite page right: BROOK ANDREW, BUUGA-BUUGA, 2000, animated neon, 202.5 x 160.5 cm, courtesy the artist.