Destiny Deacon’s reclaiming of female Aboriginal identity through the use of dolls, colonialist language and humour

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1) Introduction

During my internship for the master’s programme “Comparative Women’s Studies in Culture and Politics“ I had the chance to conduct research on the topics of identity negotiation as well as ethnicity and gender of Aboriginal Australian artists in their art. This research was intended for a cooperative project between Kosmopolis Utrecht, a platform that has the goal to enhance dialogue between communities through art and culture, and the Museum for Contemporary Aboriginal Art Utrecht (AAMU). They planned an exhibition with the working title “Blak,“ named after a neologism coined by the artist Destiny Deacon. ‘Blak,‘ as opposed to ‘Black,‘ indicates a self-defined identity rather than one determined by stereotyping and racism. In Australia ‘Blak‘ is an accepted term among people of Indigenous heritage. The term raises the question of who defines identity. The usage of the term ‘Blak‘ is supposed to give the definition of identity of Indigenous people back to them. It affirms a different understanding of Blackness than has been formed in the US during the Civil Rights Movement. Here, ‘black’ was an affirming term itself and was also used in a positive and empowering way. ‘Blak’ on the other hand is intended to undermine the close association of Blackness mainly to skin colour. ‘Blakness’ in opposition to ‘Blackness’ is meant to be defined less racially but more in terms of social experience. The relevance to the Netherlands is to be found in its colonial past and how everyday racism is dealt with today in dutch society today.

During the research my interest in Destiny Deacon and her photographs of dolls was sparked. She is unveiling racism and gender stereotypes by taking pictures of black dolls that she buys in second hand shops in order to, as Deacon says herself, “rescue them“ (Fraser 2004:108). Similar to many of the artists in her environment she works with satire and sarcasm to bring her point across. The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture states about Deacon:

> “Mixing fantasy, reportage, humour, and political comment with mass and trash media forms, her work evokes – sometimes simultaneously – stereotypes of debased and trivialised subjects, the world that produced them, and invented parallel worlds only slightly removed. (...)“ (Kleinert/Neale 2001:571).

Deacon’s art has been analysed by curators and art critics. In the following thesis, I will consider Deacon’s artwork as a feminist social-political strategy with the intent to make subvert stereotypes of female Indigenous identity. I will conduct an analysis on how her visual methods and linguistic tools are interweaved. My focus is on the

interconnections between language, humour and politics of gender and ethnicity in Deacon’s work. While they have been considered separately, I believe a coherent analysis of them within the field of women’s studies has not been conducted yet. As Deacon, renders dolls anthropomorphic in her art and uses sarcastic and colonialist language my main question in this thesis is: How do these methods change the perception of female Aboriginal identity?

On the one hand, I am interested in how the dolls come to bear a certain meaning in her photographs and evidently obtain agency. As curator Natalie King puts it in an essay on Deacon: “Whether scripted or improvised, Deacon’s moody stories skilfully elicit different emotions from inanimate objects – they appear disdainful, naughty, wicked, cheeky and deviant“ (King 2004:19). The dolls, once innocent toys in the eye of the beholder become representations for Aboriginal people, changing the perception not only of the dolls’ meaning but also of Deacon’s artworks. On the other hand, Deacon is reclaiming her own identity from the hands of those claiming to know what defines Aboriginality based on stereotypical perceptions using ironic language, often using colonialist language. I call this use language colonialist, as it uses the same patterns used to refer to Indigenous peoples during colonialism. Her positioning of the dolls has a certain effect on the recipients of her work. Thus, I am interested in further examining the functioning of the effects of the language on the perception of her images as well.

My working hypothesis of how her works are perceived is that Deacon uses familiar and sometimes trashy objects, such as dolls, to suggest a lightness of her artistic subjects. However, after the first impression the perception of her works changes. I believe that Deacon achieves this play with expectations through her positioning of dolls and language, the exact workings of which are going to be the concern of my thesis. Her own positioning in postcolonial structures, linguistic reversal of colonial relations and her reclaiming of female Indigenous identity show a potential for an empowering effect. The social-political impact of art Deacon’s art is relevant for the consideration of feminist strategies that intent to subvert hegemonic structures. Joanna Isaak for example finds revolutionary power inherent in women’s laughter. Where else is can we find revolutionary power to subvert hegemonic structures? I suggest that Deacon’s artistic use of dolls and language is one place to find it, which is part of the reason why I intend to analyse her means to use it.

To be able to answer the question driving me I will use a linguistic as well as historical approach. The linguistic part of the approach will be concerned with how meaning and representations come to exist. Here, I will mainly work with Stuart Hall's framework on representation. On the degree of intent within agency Hall says that one can decide on what is intended to be said, however, this decision does not include whether to use language or not. Language is not only words in this case, but it consists of codes and meanings. Language can be regarded as a social phenomenon, as Saussure stated. This is because no one can make up rules of language alone, as language only comes into existence through a shared set of codes and meanings (Hall 1997:34). In my argument, I will thus start by examining what is being said and where it originates. In this case, Deacon's usage of the doll in her art points towards what she intends to say and how she chooses to say it while drawing on previous layers of meanings of the doll. The political positioning of Deacon as an Indigenous artist would then be another part of her intent in the creation of meaning. Next to Hall I will draw from theories on agency, representation and gender by Alfred Gell, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler and others in order to get a hold of the context of ethnicity, gender and identity in Deacon's art. The research on the colonial roots of stereotypical ideas of Indigeneity, on the discourse on Indigenous cultural, artistic and ethnic authenticity as well as the use of dolls will focus on historical resources.
In the first chapter I will lay out the historical and political background in Australia that is relevant to Deacon's art as Indigenous artist. This serves the purpose of clarifying the historical part of where a certain meaning that is conveyed by Deacon's art and specifically the dolls, has its origins in the historical background of Australia. The chapter will deal with parts of the aftermath of colonisation in Australia's society today: the Stolen Generations and the loss of Aboriginal languages, ethnic marketing and the white art market as well as the public discourse about who and what determines Aboriginal identity. In the second chapter, I will focus on the artist herself. Afterwards I will move on to examine a second layer of how the meaning of the artwork is influenced. Here, with a specific focus on dolls in art and in relation to gender as well as in relation to ethnicity. This will serve the purpose of determining where the doll as a representational tool originates from and what is actually done differently in Deacon's art. Furthermore, the function of humour will be investigated in order to determine how humour can specifically be an influence in the perception of

her artworks. In the final chapter of my thesis I will conduct two analyses of Deacon‘s work: I will examine the photograph “Axed“, as well as the photograph series “Dance little lady dance“ more closely. This will provide a context for the last two sections, where I will deal with the specifics of Deacon’s use of language that is referring to colonialist mechanisms and how she renders the dolls anthropomorphic in her work. I will conclude with a final consideration of my findings.

2) Female Aboriginal identity: The historical context of colonialism in Australia and its effects in the Australian society today

In this chapter I will introduce the main historical influences on Deacon’s artwork that are relevant to her use of dolls and language.

First, I will address colonial practices that influenced the social realities of Aboriginal people today: How British colonial government achieved the fragmentation of Aboriginal families and the British ban on Aboriginal languages as a means of assimilation politics. This will show the parallels between the Stolen Generations and Deacon’s use of dolls as well as point out in which way her use of language is colonialist and why she uses this language. In the second part of this chapter I will address the issue of authenticity concerning Aboriginal art in the Australian art market and how this connects to ethnographic photography. This is necessary as it is an important part of Deacon’s rewriting of Aboriginal identity and showing which stereotypes her definition of identity are trying to resist. Lastly, I will engage in the issue of ethnic authenticity not only in art, but also in Australian society. More explicitly, how the stereotypical views on Aboriginality are denying any progress to Aboriginal peoples and trap them in traditionalism as the only acknowledged way of being Aboriginal. This is relevant for this thesis as it sheds light on a part of the discriminating social environment of Aboriginal people in Australia addressed by Deacon’s artworks.

2.1) The Stolen Generations and loss of Aboriginal languages: The aftermath of British imperial practices in Australia

In 1788 the colonisation of Australia under the rule of Britain began. When Britain started settlement it is estimated that up to one million people part of about 300 Indigenous nation-states with a multitude of languages were living in Australia (http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au/publications/Fact%20Sheets.pdf, accessed 03.08.2012,

8.30 p.m.). In the process of colonisation not only the number of languages, but also the population was reduced drastically through imperialist methods (Petitjean 2010:16). One specific practice, also subsumed under the politics of assimilation, was to remove Indigenous children from their families. These children are known today as "Stolen Generations." This colonial practice occurred in Australia from approximately 1910 until the 1970s and was especially directed to children of mixed descent (Petitjean 2010:17f.). It is estimated that the "Stolen Generations" are consisting of about 100,000 children who after the removal from their families were brought up in orphanages far away from their respective birthplaces. This number is not definite and it might not seem high without a frame to relate the numbers to: Peter Read describes the situation specifically for New South Wales. He analyses the statistics and points out that about one in six to seven Aboriginal children were taken from their families in the 20th century. In comparison, only one in 300 white children were taken away from their parents. According to Read, this leads to the situation that in New South Wales every Aboriginal person knows or is related to someone "institutionalised by the Whites" (Read 1981:26). This accounts for the rise of the term "Stolen Generations."

Once taken from their families the children were not only forbidden to speak their native languages, they were also prohibited any contact to their families being punished if they did have it. Some of the children were adopted into white families; others were forced to work for low wages (Petitjean 2010:18). These practices resulted in the loss of many Indigenous languages continuing until today. One aim of the assimilationist practices was furthermore the "breeding out" (McGregor 2002) of Aboriginal peoples into Australian society. The official government policy of assimilation had the goal of 'integrating' Aboriginal people socially into the western majority of Australia. To achieve this Aboriginal people were forced to give up their cultures and languages. After the Second World War many were forced to resettle to reserves or missions (Petitjean 2010:17). Out of originally 500 Aboriginal languages, today only about 150 remain, further decreasing rapidly (Petitjean 2010:16).

As late as May 1967 Aboriginal people were granted full citizenship and rights. Aboriginal people often used their new status as equal citizens to claim back land that had been taken away from them during British settlement. In 1976 the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* granted Indigenous people the right to claim back their country. By 1992 the first decision in favour of an Aboriginal people, the

Merians, had been made. This annihilated the notion of 'terra nullius,' which claimed that the continent of Australia had been uninhabited when it was settled by Britain. In order to be entitled to the ownership of the land, Aboriginal Australians have to prove their ancestral bonds with the land. This has been legally established in 1993 through the federal Native Title Act, which determined that Indigenous people could legally claim land with which they have maintained an inalienable bond (Petitjean 2010:18). Not only the term "Stolen Generations," but also the existence of this practice itself has been and is still questioned by history revisionists in Australia (Browning 2010b:23). The Indigenous community waited a long time until the Australian Government acknowledged the reality of this practice. An official apology for the practices from the government was regarded as essential for Aboriginal rights activism. In 2008 the Labour government officially apologised to the Stolen Generations (Petitjean 2010: 18). The Aboriginal peoples and white Australia still have to deal with conflicts arising from the aftermath of colonialism, where the descendants of the colonized and colonizers are still trapped in the respective roles of their ancestors. On the side of the Aboriginal peoples this means an ongoing fight for equal rights as well as a fight against historical denialism of the Australian Government and society. The loss of languages is significant in the loss of voice of the Indigenous people and also refers back to Deacon's use of colonialist language, as a substitute for her own. This strategy of using language to point out power relations will be examined further in the last chapter. Gayatri Spivaks account on the voice of the subaltern can also be used here. The heterogeneity of the Australian Indigenous people and the discussion on their identity often being led without hearing the subjects of the discussion fulfils her criteria of the unheard subaltern (Spivak 1995: 26-27). Spivak defines the subaltern as a group whose identity is mainly defined via its difference. They are neither part of any dominant group nor do they have access to any privileges. This group can only be considered as speaking for itself if its voice is heard unmediated. But as the subaltern is not a homogenous group that can articulate itself, it cannot be heard. It will always be heard through someone speaking for them. The representation of the subaltern will thus, never be formed by itself, but by those who are offering it to be represented (Spivak 1995: 26-27). As the Aboriginal people have not only spatially, but also linguistically been forced into another system, the English language, they can only represent themselves inside the space that is given to them but not inside the space that they

actually occupy. Furthermore, they are stereotypically viewed as one monolithic group instead of a complex group of several historically interweaved peoples.
The public Australian discourse on Indigeneity in relation to a demand of ‘authenticity‘ by the non-Indigenous Australian public will be contextualised in the following two sections.

2.2) “Aboriginal Art – It’s a White thing“: The connections between the acceptance of contemporary Aboriginal Art in the art market and ethnographic photography

After having elaborated on the significance of colonial practices and Aboriginal language loss in the last part I will now move on to discuss the relevance of ethnographic photography and the hegemonies in the art market to the development of stereotypes and discrimination against Indigenous artists in Australia.
There is a vibrant debate in Australia about what is to be considered Aboriginal art and to what extent the intent of its production is artistic or rather economic. Furthermore, the accusation of Aboriginal art being derivative of Western art as soon as it moves away from the traditional technique of dot paintings is in the centre of this debate. In the discussion of these issues Richard Bell, an Indigenous Australian artist, has been a relevant figure in the past years. He is known for his controversial approaches to topics related to Indigeneity, gender and discrimination. His essay “Aboriginal Art-It’s a White Thing,” also known as “Bell’s Theorem,“ has received a certain amount of attention in the discussion on contemporary Aboriginal Art and what is considered as ‘authentic‘ in this context. Richard Bell’s essay accompanied one of his paintings for which he received a prestigious art prize. In his essay he describes how Aboriginal Art is kept from developing into fields that are considered modern contemporary art by arguing that any art following a western artist is derivative and cannot be considered Aboriginal. Bell argues that following this argumentation only ‘dot paintings’ are to be considered Aboriginal art, which is also highly influenced by demand. Bell‘s works often very obviously refer to Roy Liechtenstein, Jasper Johns and others as a protest of this ban on development on behalf of Aboriginal authenticity: He is forbidden to use his own language, thus his only way to speak is to use that of others, states Bell himself (Mclean 2010:41f.). He refers not only to the language loss of Aboriginal peoples and to the colonial prohibition to speak them, but also to the art worlds decision not to recognize

contemporary Aboriginal art using modern technologies and not dot techniques as 'authentically' Aboriginal.
This problem of representation and being able to speak and be heard is also present in Destiny Deacon's works with dolls: Her dolls are substitutes acting out situations that are representing aspects of Aboriginal life (King 2004: 19). She is "inscribing Indigenous presence onto Western canons, exposing the erasure of Indigenous representation in Western art" (King 2004:22). "White people say what's good. White people say what's bad. White people buy it. White people sell it," stated Richard Bell in "Bell's Theorem" in 2003 (Mundine 2006:58). Bell here refers to the white dominance in the Australian art market and the lack of influence by Indigenous people. Moreover, he gives graphic examples on how much of the profit margin reaches the artist and his respective influence on what happens to his works (Bell 2007: 27f.). The influence as well as the financial profit are fairly small and especially less than for a white artist, which gives ground to Bell's claim of white hegemony in the Australian art market for Aboriginal art. In an essay discussing the non-Indigenous vs. the Indigenous influence on the art market Djon Mundine, Aboriginal art curator, debunks all "unempowered art appearance" as being reduced to touristic purposes. This practice robs the artist of appropriate representation and reduces it to a form of ethnic marketing. "There are two feelings abroad in the field of Aboriginal art: one is that Aboriginal art is too important to be left to Aboriginal people; the other is to think that the struggle is over, and that Aboriginal art has found a place in Australian society" Mundine declares (Mundine 2006:58). He protests that high sales are in no way equalling acceptance of the representation of Aboriginality within the sold art as independent from stereotypical perceptions of Aboriginal identity (Mundine 2006:58). There seems to be interdependency between the acceptance and the marketing of Aboriginal art as 'authentic' and the determining invisibility of whiteness in contemporary Australia (Nicoll 2006:1). In this context Aboriginal art is linked to a "possessive investment in patriarchal white sovereignty" (Nicoll 2006:2). Fiona Nicoll means by this firstly that the acceptance and marketing of Aboriginal art under the label of authenticity is a means of keeping Whiteness as an ethnic category invisible as well as constantly reinstating it as the norm. If Aboriginal art is not 'authentic' it becomes integrated into the general art market. And it becomes an agent within this market instead of being a passive part that is catering to a niche. Secondly, she refers to Aboriginal art as being linked to economical means via the need to guard

whiteness as the norm. White people buying an ‘authentic‘ piece of Aboriginal art are investing their money into upholding the “patriarchal white sovereignty“ as they are reinforcing the mechanism of keeping Aboriginal art in its niche. The heteronomy of Aboriginal ‘authenticity‘ goes as far as to deny any use of modern technology or techniques into the realms of Aboriginal art: Some approaches classify photo media works as “not really Aboriginal.“ Artists who are not living in rural areas, but in the cities or have attended universities are clashing with those approaches to Aboriginality as they do not fit in to the stereotype of the exotic Aboriginal ‘Other‘ excluded from modern society (Riphagen 2011:61f.).

The conception of ‘authenticity‘ of Indigenous Contemporary Australian Art is highly influenced by the images embossed through anthropological photographs of the nineteenth century. These photographs played a major part in Western colonial conquest, as Marianne Riphagen points out (Riphagen 2011:49). She elaborates, referring to Maxwell that with the invention of photography anthropologists almost immediately began to use it for their purposes of documenting who they perceived as “primitive“ peoples. Moreover, photography was used in order to determine the supposed state of ‘evolution‘ of the colonised subjects (Riphagen 2011:49). The notion of ‘primitivism‘ from colonial understanding of other societies also influences the distinction of high art, meaning Western ‘evolved‘ art, and low art, meaning ‘primitive‘ art that is static. The conceptions of primitivism and Indigeneity are closely intertwined and reinforced through ethnographic photography. Brenda L. Croft, an Australian curator, even allegorizes the ethnographic picture taking as “a metaphor for the dislocation experienced by Indigenous peoples throughout the history of the world“ (Riphagen 2011:50). A dislocating effect of Indigenous experience in history through distorted perceptions by anthropologists is also underlined by Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, Barbara Sykes and Elizabeth Weatherford when they examine the impact of male anthropologists on the conceptions of Aboriginal gender relations. They show that male anthropologists often used their understanding of western patterns of gender relations in the analyses of non-western gender relations, placing the Aboriginal women in a more submissive position to Aboriginal men than Rohrlich-Leavitt, Sykes and Weatherford came to understand them (Rohrlich-Leavitt/Sykes/Weatherford 1975).

Furthermore, not only the side of production of ethnographic images, but also how they are generally perceived and who they are produced for, is relevant to fully

understand its impact on stereotypical images of Aboriginality today. Fiona Nicolls argues that no matter how Aboriginal art is framed by non-Aboriginal viewers, the viewer himself is remaining at the centre of his occupation with it: Either as "the pseudo-anthropological in search or the world of 'the other' or as the narcissist subject in search of representations of the individual and national self" (Nicoll 2006:3f.). According to this, the viewer is either following the exoticizing effect of marketing Aboriginal art as ethnically imprinted by seeking for what is different from him or he is looking for a reaffirmation of a part of himself. Both ways he is not focussing on what is presented to him, but on his own place in relation to it. Corresponding to this Shohat and Stam are warning of a mere reversal of the eurocentric world view by positioning the West in the centre of all evil instead of at the centre of all good (Shohat/Stam 1994:3). They call for a more differentiated perception of international relations than this, one that is not keeping the West at the centre of all definitions. The protagonists of ethnographic photography are the photographers and the western audience, but the Indigenous objects of the pictures are not always only passive. Ethnographic photography is not only a document of the Indigenous people who were intended to be portrayed, but it also documents the Western practices of encounter with Indigeneity (Moreton 2010:88). Dr. Romaine Moreton specialises in Indigenous philosophy and film and also contributed to a special edition of the Australian art magazine artlink that focused on and was edited by Indigenous artists, curators and art critics. She continues that the images were produced for the Western audience displaying Indigenous people as passive subjects in accordance with the propaganda of a nation established without violence, but peaceful settlement (Moreton 2010:90). However, ethnographic photographs are not solely regarded as evidence of the passive, subordinated position of Indigenous peoples in Australia. In the same issue of artlink, Australian curator Brenda L. Croft comments on ethnographic photography. To her, in the photographs of Indigenous peoples taken by J.W. Lindt, a German ethnographic photographer of the 19th century, " is the silent clash of worldviews, temporalities while at the same time being an act of defiance and resistance which is reflective of the culture of resistance evident in contemporary Indigenous society" (Moreton 2010:90). Croft here refers to her understanding of these specific pictures, which are perceived not only by her as documents of how the photographed occasionally succeeded in displaying resistance while being photographed. Marianne Riphagen even gives examples of Indigenous

people cooperating with the ethnographic photographers and actively taking part in the process of picture taking. (Riphagen 2011:50f.). These examples show that ethnographic photography has to be contextualised and cannot be evaluated in a binary of good and bad. It fulfils and follows certain structures playing into every picture. By this I am referring for instance to the colonial circumstances and the mindset of the photographer.

In summary, the perception of Aboriginal art and its marketing in the art market is linked to ethnographic photography via the stereotypical images produced in ethnographic photography, which are then reinforced in the ethnic marketing of the art market. Similar mechanisms of an exoticizing view on the other are at work, enforcing and maintaining hegemonic structures through a different kind of paternalism. All the while, a history of eurocentrism and colonialism has led to a negative stereotypical understanding of Indigeneity.

2.3) "Blak takes the 'c' out of bloody black cunts": Stereotypes of Aboriginality and the question of ethnic authenticity in Australia

Having given an insight into what 'authenticity' means in the context of Aboriginal art in the art market, this part will now focus on the public perception in Australia of what 'authentic' Aboriginality is. This serves the purpose of further clarifying the context of Deacon's photography. The main question I am dealing with, discussing 'authenticity' in relation to Indigineity on the public level and that of contemporary art, is the question of how Indigenous Australian identities are defined and by whom. I will start looking for an answer by discussing Deacon's coinage of 'Blak' followed by a description of an Australian court case dealing with the question of 'authenticity.' This is in order to relate it to the public reactions and discussion following it. Lastly, I will return to the specifics of the different understanding of ethnicity in parts of the Indigenous community that is not relying on racial categories.

Destiny Deacon is known for the coinage of the word 'Blak' in 1991 (as opposed to 'Black' with a 'c') as a means of self- determination over Aboriginal identity. 'Blak' has become an important term in the context of the Indigenous experience in Australia as it implies agency on the stage of Indigenous identity negotiation (Riphagen 2011:80). As she puts it, "Blak takes the 'c' out of 'bloody black cunts'" (Browning 2010a:19).

Riphagen describes the understanding of blakness as a commonly shared identity that is shaped by individualised expressions (Riphagen 2011:81f.). Aboriginality then

is not defined by the colour of the skin or other visual features. The main marker is shared social experience. Also, identities are defined to a high extent by the person herself or himself and what has been passed on by previous generations. I will further elaborate on this after giving an example of public Australian discourse on 'authentic' Indigeneity that will provide a clearer context to the specific understanding of Indigenous identity negotiation I am discussing here and what it is distinguishing itself from. A recent process convicting a newspaper columnist of racial vilification displays the common perceptions of 'authentic' Aboriginality in Australia that are not only applied to Aboriginal Art, but the people themselves as well. In April 2009 the columnist Andrew Bolt accused 16 Aboriginal people of public life of exploiting their Aboriginality in order to gain illegitimate access to privileges reserved for those of Aboriginal descent. Amongst other things, Bolt wrote that who does not look Aboriginal, being fair-skinned, does not face discrimination and thus is deciding on emphasizing Aboriginal descent because it is currently fashionable not because of cultural socialization. In his point of view, he was attempting to preserve the 'authenticity' of Aboriginality, basing his arguments primarily on physical appearance and racial purity (Gilchrist 2010:74). Although he was convicted of racial vilification in the following legal case in 2011 (http://www.theaustralian.com.au/media/andrew-bolt-x-racial-vilification-court-case/story-e6frg996-1226148919092, accessed 03.08.2012, 8 p.m.), Stephen Gilchrist, writes that the majority of the white Australian public seemed to be agreeing with Bolt's view of a biological determined Aboriginality (Gilchrist 2010:74). The understanding of a racially pure 'Aboriginality' is not only racist to its core, but is additionally forcing a preservation of a colonial conception of Indigenous identity. Stephen Gilchrist states that Bolt's accusations "had a strangely solidifying, rather than divisive, effect on the Aboriginal community" (Gilchrist 2010:74). He describes Aboriginality as not being defined by physical appearances, but primarily via shared social and cultural experiences (Gilchrist 2010:74), which is referencing back to definition of identity constituted socially rather than racially, which Deacon uses as well. Gilchrist is not the only one discussing the racist accusation of "not being black enough." Daniel Browning is arguing against Gerard Henderson, who is ideologically close to Andrew Bolt, detecting an "underlying white anxiety" in his statements concerning Aboriginality. Browning writes, the idea of a "genetically untainted Aboriginality" is vilifying in itself. In the context of the colonial practices to erase Aboriginal peoples he sees this as the basis for a new kind of discrimination

and paternalism. In Browning's point of view, the need to seemingly defend "real Aboriginality" for the Australian Aboriginal community exists out of a need to tell the 'other' from the 'self.' (Browning 2010b:23). Prevailing white anxiety of racial impurity closes the circle from the white supremacist ideology of colonialism and the control of images of Indigeneity starting with the beginning of photography back to contemporary forms of racism. In the previous section, on Indigenous art and 'authenticity' the commonalities of ethnographic photography and the ethnic marketing of Indigenous art were clarified: An underlying paternalistic structure that supports the constant reinforcement of supposed white supremacy and hegemonic structures. Similarly, I also see this mechanism at work in the process of public questioning Aboriginal 'authenticity.' While here the racial connotations are more obvious, the ethnic marketing of Indigenous art keeps the racist connotations somewhat more hidden. On the other hand in the environment of the art market with its derivation of ethnic marketing from ethnographic photography the contemporary sediments of colonizer-colonized relations are more obvious. While in the public discourse the postcolonial aspects of the discourse around Indigeneity are often denied, a case like that of Andrew Bolt, shows white Australia's fear of losing its hegemony. Thus, the challenging of Aboriginal identities, which are varying from the stereotype of the 'primitive' Aboriginal, is originating in a similar kind of paternalism.

Returning to the terms of what can constitute Aboriginality in its difference, the understanding of ethnicity described by Fiona Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis is close to the description of "Blakness" as a social, rather than a physical category:

> "Ethnicity at its most general level involves belonging to a particular group and sharing its conditions of existence. This will include not only being regarded as having the right credentials for membership but also being able to muster ethnic resources which can be used for struggle, negotiation and the pursuit of political projects, both at the level of individuals making their way but also for the group as a whole in relation to other groups" (Pilcher/Whelehan 2004:133).

They further refer to ethnic groups possibly being shaped through social relations with other ethnic groups (Pilcher/Whelehan 2004:133). According to Yuval-Davis ethnicity is then mainly a political process. A process constructing the collectivity as well as defining what it is constituted by (Yuval-Davis 1994:182).

In contrast to the public Australian understanding of ethnicity the social upbringing, not indicating class here but shared social experiences, and how an ethnic group negotiates its values and limits are then the main characteristics. In the case of

Indigenous people in Australia, who have started to understand themselves under the category of “Aboriginal“ or “Indigenous“ only in the aftermath of colonialism and have been superficially unified as a group in the process of colonialism, this is what shapes their collectivity and political interests. On the other hand, they still are a heterogeneous group. Deacon’s coinage of ‘Blak‘ is one of her attempts to take back control over collective and individual definitions of identity from non-Indigenous people. In her artwork she uses other tools that will be subject of the second chapter.

3) Deacon’s toolbox: Dolls and humour

In this chapter I will focus on the artist Destiny Deacon and her background. I consider this relevant, as Deacon’s art is highly political and influenced by her personal experiences. Her background is relevant to how and why she attempts to change the perception of female Aboriginality. Moreover, I will examine two of her main tools: dolls and humour. Dolls are objects that contain many layers of meaning not only historically, but also socially. After a closer look at the doll in art, there will be a distinction made between the gender aspects and the ethnic implications of dolls. In the last part the mechanisms and functions of humour relevant for the later analyses of Deacon’s works will be taken into consideration.

3.1) Subverting the stereotype: Destiny Deacon and her art

Destiny Deacon’s career as an artist started relatively late. She began working as a photographer in 1990, when she was 33. Before working as an artist she had worked as a history teacher, a Commonwealth public servant, a broadcaster and as an actor (King 2004: 18). In a relatively short time Deacon, who is descending from K’ua K’ua and Erub/Mer peoples, managed to become one of the most controversial contemporary Aboriginal artists in Australia. She achieved this by creating haunting photographs that explore the layers of identity and the experience of the modern woman (http://nga.gov.au/retake/artists/00000003.html, accessed 03.08.2012, 1.15 p.m.). Furthermore, her controversiality is fuelled by the political relevance of her work: She brings the female Aboriginal experience in Australia (Reihana 2004:55) to the forefront and reveals racist and misogynist mechanisms. One way of exploring those layers and making them more accessible is by ‘rescuing’ black dolls (or golliwogs) and other inanimate things by including them in her artwork: “I mainly got

engaged with it because I felt sorry for the objects and wanted to rescue them, bring them up to another level," she says (Fraser 2004: 108). Not only through this method, her works often entail subtle but sharp comments on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and its mechanisms. Marcia Langton, Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne says about her work that it "serves as a barometer of postcolonial anxiety as a window of understanding for new generations of Australians turning away from the psychosis of the colonial relationship but seeking to establish a considered and meaningful grammar of images in an environment full of colonial memories" (Langton 2004:74). Before becoming an artist Deacon had already been a political activist for Aboriginal rights. She grew up in urban Melbourne (Fraser 2004:109) and has been involved not only in Indigenous but also in feminist politics. Following these experiences her artwork "examines how language and representation can be both tools of oppression an ammunition for resistance" (Macgregor 2004:7). Being asked whether her art making works as a substitute for political activity, which she mentioned to be fed up with at the time, she replied "I want people to get ideas. That's the best you can hope for" (Fraser 2004:108). And about her photography she said: "I want my pictures to tell a story. Stories of Blak/Koori identity, racism and sexism. Plus the truth as I know it" (Deacon 2004: 106). The reason for becoming a photographer for Deacon is to make pictures that can be seen as a contrast to the photographs of "expert white travellers" who "still take and make the usual stereotypes." (Deacon 2004: 106). These repetitive, stereotypical pictures irked her so much she gives them as a reason to start photography (Deacon 2004: 106). The photographs of "expert white travellers" can be considered an effect of ethnic marketing, in which only pictures that are according to the common stereotype are taken because this is what the majority believes to be Aboriginal reality. Ethnic marketing is happening with Aboriginal art for instance as well as with other items that are being sold on the basis of ethnic 'authenticity' (e.g. postcards with ethnographic photographs, dot paintings).

Deacons art can be considered not only very political, as it addresses issues of gender stereotyping along with racism in contemporary Australia and the effects of colonialism remaining today, but also very ironic. She uses the power of humour to address serious issues like violence, drug abuse and forced adoption.

I add that not starting her photographed scenes from a serious angle helps the artist to reach her audiences consciousness through an unusual channel: The dolls incite a

reminiscence of childhood and light-heartedness. Also cut off heads, as displayed in “Axed“ *(fig.1)* and other works, are not giving the viewer immediately a feeling hopelessness and danger, because almost every child cuts off the head of a doll at some time to find out what is inside. After having taken a closer look at the photographs though, the viewer experiences a change of perception. The darkness of the pictures, the blurred, unknown surrounding slowly creates a sense of danger, maybe even fear. The viewer starts to sense that the dolls are not going to get out of these situations unharmed. From this starting point I would position the representation of gender and ethnicity in Deacon’s work as Deacon succeeding to reveal complex mechanism of modern western societies in her works. She does this by taking the viewer on an emotional journey from childhood memories, to irony and sadness. Deacon states on how the ambiguity of irony and sadness in her works comes to be: “I labour for an idea, one that usually ends up being sad or pathetic, and then during the agony process of getting the image done, somehow things take a turn towards the ironic. Humour cuts deep. I like to think that there’s a laugh and a tear in each picture“ (Fraser 2004: 108). Resulting from Deacon’s emphasis on the dolls in her artwork they will be the topic of the following sections. I will return to the specifics of her language when talking about the dolls first in a theoretical account on humour and finally in the fourth chapter linking it more specifically to her art.

3.2) Anthropomorphic objects: Dolls in art

In this part the use of dolls in general and in art will be examined more closely here. This will set a frame to position Deacon’s use of dolls and how they are obtaining agency. This chapter will deal with the layers of meaning of dolls as representational tools, which I will later link to Deacon’s reclaiming of female Aboriginal identity. First, I will focus on dolls in terms of their use in contemporary art. Secondly, I will attempt to deconstruct the gender aspects of dolls and their social impact. Lastly, I will focus on the ethnic implications of dolls, specifically on how their ability for representation and anthropomorphisation is influenced by adding the angle of ethnicity.

3.2.1) A toy, an ideal and a man-made threat: Meanings inherent in dolls

The doll has been used for a plethora of purposes and has received several meanings in its history. According to Stuart Hall meaning can only exist when it is shared. It is fluid to a certain extent, but the meaning that is residuent in a term is

always the starting point that a new meaning evolves from. This must not be mistaken for a natural meaning inherent to an object. Instead it is a reference to a "code, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system" (Hall 1997:21). I will not deal with the residuents of previous meaning in the word 'doll,' but use this framework to position the doll as a visual sign, with a visual meaning that is referencing conceptual systems. With the help of a book of essays, originally made to accompany an exhibition that took place in 1999 in Düsseldorf, Germany, I will point out two main streams of use of different layers of meaning of dolls in art. One is the doll as a toy, while the other concerns its anthropomorphic characteristics. Pia Müller-Tamm and Katharina Sykora gather several accounts on the topic of the significance of dolls, as well as anthropomorphic machines, in art throughout time and in connection to their exhibition. These essays are a valuable source in my effort to find out more about the doll.

The doll conceptualised as a toy contains three main aspects it signals towards: the use by children, which also connects to gender issues dealt with in the following section, as well as the doll as a space for imagination and fantasies. Them being a space for imagination leads to the third aspect of the doll as a toy, which is its sexualized use. Thus, as a toy it has several connotations: for one it is a toy that children play with, it is part of their social learning process. At the same time toys are also a product of mass consumption. They are perceived as objects that help children learn social norms. Children play with their dolls and project their fantasy world on to them. However, in this context they are not connected directly to art, but because of their connection to mass consumption to an at first glance contradictive field, Lüdeking points out (Lüdeking 1999:220). Armin Zweite agrees with him, positioning the doll as a crossover between fine arts and mass culture (Zweite 1999:18). On another account, the doll as a toy is not only part of the world of children's toys. It also is part of the realm of sexuality and sex toys and thus is connected to the question of sexual availability. In the doll the child's imaginary meets the imaginary of adult (Müller-Tamm/Sykora 1999:259). Concerning the level of gender inherent in dolls, the doll is very closely connected to body images and images of femininity, which I will elaborate on in the following section that focuses on gender aspects of the doll (Sykora/Müller 1999:81).

The second stream of meanings the doll can embody deals with it being an anthropomorphic object and is mainly defined by ontological questions: the creation

of dolls and the parallels of the human-doll relationship to a god-human relationship. The doll is a man-made object that has anthropomorphism as its most striking characteristic. It comes into existence as an object offering space for human imagination. At the same time the man-made object has to obey its creator: it serves the purpose it is made for without the ability to escape it, as Lüdeking points out (Lüdeking 1999:223). Furthermore, Müller-Tamm and Sykora locate a seductive appeal in dolls as artificial humans, as they are allowing an objectified self-image to come to life as well as proving the creative force of humanity. This contradiction of the doll being self-image as well as creation again reinforces the godlike potential of humans in the human-doll relationship (Müller-Tamm/Sykora 1999:65). The parallels to a god-human relationship leads to the fears of man-made dolls gaining agency, acting by themselves just as some parts of humanity have left their belief in god behind. Thus, the doll has a component of doom: the invention of a new kind of humanity. A flawless humanity made of ‘new humans‘ who are the epitome of rationality as they lack emotion. This also contains a signal for the end of all individuality, as it leaves humankind without space for the imperfections of the old humankind (Zweite 1999:16). Furthermore, the fear of the artificial human taking over and making humans dispensable arises. And with this the doll as object receives an agency of its own that is not being controlled by its creator but instead threatens his very existence (Müller-Tamm/Sykora 1999:65). The threat originates not only in the perfection the human being can never achieve, but also in the lack of individuality. The doll is exchangeable, a mass product (Zweite 1999:14). Sykora and Müller-Tamm further point out that at the same time that the object doll is allowing to place imagination upon it, it rejects it through its materiality (Müller-Tamm/Sykora 1999:67). Other differences between the artificial human, the doll, and the human are predominantly defined by lack: the lack of a soul, the lack of body fluids or haptic characteristics of human bodies. The doll is merely a replica of the body it absorbs. It is an imitation of the human just as the human tries to imitate the doll, seeking perfection (Müller-Tamm/Sykora 1999:67).
How can the doll then be interpreted in terms of representation and meaning in the context of all these different means of use? And what does that mean in terms of art projects and the artists intentions? “Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between the members of a culture“ (Hall 1997:15). The recipient of art can only perceive what the artist intends on the

basis of shared signs and codes. Following this the artist has to take into account which codes he shares with the recipients of his art in order to make any impact at all. For the anthropomorphisation of dolls, taking them out of the strict realm of objects, it is necessary to draw on the shared code of identification with an object that mirrors the outer appearance of humans. Through this, the meaning inscribed on human bodies is translated to that of the doll.

3.2.2) Barbie and gender stereotyping: The gender implications of dolls

As I pointed out before the doll is closely connected to body images and images of femininity. One main point of this is the function of dolls to teach girls gender norms and societies general expectations to their social behaviour and appearance. This also gives them a connection to gender stereotyping, as the dolls produced for girls are mostly concerned with traditional images of femininity. Müller-Tamm and Sykora describe the doll as creating a female alter ego of women and a space to discuss the constructional character of femininity (Müller-Tamm/Sykora 1999:p81). The doll, being constructed as a female alter ego, normalizes certain bodily characteristics securing an illusion of a unified shared beauty paradigm. (Sykora/Müller 1999:81).
The doll is not only interweaved with the social expectations towards women's life, like ideas of maternity, domesticity or beauty. Ideas of (mass) consumption, objectification of women and the idea of perfection, an ideal to measure up to, are also inherent to them. In the first sentence of “Made to play house“ Miriam Formanek- Brunell writes: “Toy stores sell dolls that promote self-fulfilment for girls through superficial, sweet maternity and very earnest materialism“ (Formanek-Brunell 1993:1). She clearly refers to dolls as teaching girls about social norms. These norms however are not naturally inherent in the dolls. Concerning the body and gender, Judith Butler suggests that the body does not per se have a gender but becomes its gender by constantly performing in accordance with it. She perceives the gendered body as a product of repeated acts that create the body rather than as a predetermined structure or a natural occurrence (Butler 1999:274). Transferring Butler's theory of gender performativity to the doll, it becomes an aid to the child's becoming of its gender. The doll, at least not those produced for children, does not per se have a gender, as it does not have what would correspond to sex organs and it is also made to repeatedly perform the gender the child imagines.

The object status of the doll is another important aspect of it in terms of gender. As referenced in the first section of this chapter, part of the difference between doll and human is their status as object relatively as subject: The doll is a naturalistic, always available object without its own agency that as a consumers' good furthermore widens the spectrum of availability from economic consumption to imaginary and sexual availability. Next to teaching girls their supposedly appropriate gender performance, it also offers them a space to project their desires onto. These desires are in part controlled and shaped by society not only adherent to social norms, but also to capitalist economy. Formanek-Brunell elaborates that doll play and girl's socialization is contemporarily assessed by which themes and values the doll has presented over time and which of those have stuck to it. She considers the history of dolls as "significant not only for comprehending the past but also for understanding the construction of gender in the present" (Formanek-Brunell 1999:6). The dolls instrumentation in the construction of gender, its constant imaginary and economic availability and its object status of the doll, lead me to the conclusion that it is also possible to find theoretical links of the doll to aspects of the objectification of women. This would also tie in with the following theoretical occupation with the Barbie doll.
The Barbie is probably the most analyzed example of a doll as well as widely known. It is commonly considered as reinforcing gender relations and having influence on what girls learn to consider the ideal of femininity. However, not all scholars see Barbie purely as a carrier of false images of female identity. One example is Michael A. Messner. In his essay "Barbie girls vs. Seamonsters: Children constructing gender" he describes and analyzes what he considers an example of the Barbie doll being used as a tool in the declaration of girl power. He does not always see the Barbie doll as a reinforcement of hegemonic meanings of white femininity (Messner 2000:777). The setting he describes it that of a girl baseball team, the "Barbie Girls," and a boy baseball team, the "Sea Monsters," waiting for the baseball season opening ceremonies to start. The teams of five-year-olds each chose their respective name and made banners for their team. The girl team however has a mascot of a Barbie doll instead of a banner. Being bored waiting the girls start singing the "Barbie song" and dancing. Messner describes the boys' reaction as hostile, starting to call "no Barbie" after noticing the girls' behaviour (Messner 2000:767f.). He interprets this scene as the children performing gender, placing themselves in opposite groups and being perceived by their parents as behaving "naturally" gender appropriate

(Messner 2000:769f.). He continues to describe that the girls firstly ignore the opposition of the boys and later chase them away when they try to stop their "celebration" not only by chanting back. To Messner this is a sign of the girls not allowing the boys to silence them and making a statement that they are occupying this public space. He sees a "public moment of celebratory 'girl power'" here (Messner 2000:777). Thus, he suggests the possibility of reclaiming Barbie as a means for female bonding. All the while, acknowledging the "hegemonic meanings encoded in Barbie", Barbie being a "model of ideal teenhood (Rand 1998, 383)" according to Rand, and "perhaps the icon- of true white womanhood and femininity (Du Cille 1994, 50)." (Messner 2000:775). He concludes that social structures not only constrain but also enable, and thus the actions of the Barbie Girls and the connection to the meaning of the actual doll being able to be interpreted on not just one, the suppressive, level (Messner 2000:782). Messner's article is relevant to my argument as he is giving an example of how dolls could be part of a strategy of reclaiming of femininity and points out relevant gender aspects of the Barbie. However, I do not fully subscribe to his analysis. I position the problematic effects of Barbie on the body image of girls as well as its role in their socialisation to gender norms. This remains a problematic image even if the girls may be confidently occupying public space: not only are they very young, but they are also finding their bonding experience in the "icon of true white womanhood" as Messner himself quotes Du Cille. This, I find rather concerning instead of empowering. A last characteristic of Barbie is mentioned by Formanek-Brunell. She points out that dolls have been affected by "a variety of contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political forces." One of the main characteristics of Barbie, however, is the representation of "the ultimate consumer" since the 1980s (Formanek-Brunell 1993:186). With this, I conclude my examination of the doll in relation to gender.
In summary, in terms of gender dolls gain meaning in terms of gender norms and gender stereotyping, their function in terms of (sexual) objectification and the links to mass and consumers culture.

3.2.3) Representational power and agency: aspects of ethnicity in dolls

In the last two sections I have focused on the doll in art and its gender implications. Now I will add a consideration of the aspects of ethnicity of dolls to this framework.

Hetti Perkins, Aboriginal curator, describes Deacon's work with dolls in specific connection to ethnicity and gender:

> "In Destiny's hands they *(the dolls, N.E.K.)* are not merely the cast-offs of childhood fantasies. For many they represent an antidote to the early learning tools of stereotyping; the blonde-haired, blue-eyed baby dolls that grow into supermodel Barbies, offering black kids an unachievable and, in retrospect, unenviable ideal.
> The innocent gaze of these dollies is cast in a complex web of frontier politics amidst the warp and weft of sexual, cultural and territorial conquests." (Perkins 2004:105).

Perkins understands the dolls as a tool reinforcing the stereotyping and the marginalization of black kids and women. The doll, that children are supposed to relate to and play with is in this case showing them what society expects of them, in addition to the social norms concerning gender behaviour, and at the same time that they can not achieve it: being white. Richard Dyer is criticizing the invisibility of whiteness as a category: Whiteness lacks an attachment to a specific identity or stereotype, because it is considered the norm. Thus, according to Dyer, whiteness is everything and nothing at once, which gives it representational power (Seiter 1995:100). This statement by Richard Dyer on Whiteness is important to understand the relation of ethnicity and dolls. Dolls, which are made for the masses and predominantly made alike to the white majority, become indicative of the representational power of whiteness and at the same time of the marginalization of other ethnicities. The doll as a mass product works in this case as a reinforcement of the representational power of whiteness as well as being a tool for the reinforcement of gender norms. This is marginalizing all those who are outside the norms of ethnicity and gender. The result of this marginalization concerning ethnicity can be a feeling of lack of agency as bell hooks describes in "Art on my mind – Visual politics." She refers to how black image production in daily life in the US before racial integration was a sign to African-Americans of not being able to control their own images. She sees photography becoming available to the masses as "a disruption of white control over black images" (hooks 1995:59). In Australia the ethnographic photography forcing Indigenous people into stereotypical images can be considered as the white control hooks sees disrupted by photography becoming available. Furthermore, "Photographs taken in everyday life, snapshots in particular, rebelled against all those photographic practices that reinscribed colonial ways of looking and capturing the images of the black ‚other'" (hooks 1995:62). This coincides with Langtons proposition of the perceiving the doll as "central to Destiny's rewriting of a

black feminine subjectivity“ (Langton 2004:71). This description also reinforces the connection of the doll to its possible role in ethnic identity negotiation.
Similar to the shaping of a normative body image through dolls described in the last section, the ethnicity aspect of this can be found via Fanon's notion of "Black skin, White mask.“ The doll is shaping the desire of children, wanting to fit into society not standing outside of it (Young 2003:144). The doll fulfils a function of translating the children's desires into the desire for whiteness, extending the idea of beauty to characteristics such as skin colour. Their desires become transposed, but the children cannot become actually white. It is a toy that turns children into colonial subjects. If it is a doll representing a white person it does this by keeping them on the outside and if it's a black doll, the kind that Deacon works with, by reaffirming stereotypes of blackness (Young 2003:144). The representational power of the doll can only be disrupted if it is known what it is representing.
This last section shows how the different origins of representational norms intersect in dolls, namely gender norms as well as representational norms of whiteness. But it also shows another angle of the characteristic of the doll as object: objectification of women and objectification of former colonial subjects. Lastly, the desire for the normative idea of perfection inherent in dolls, for example concerning the body, has been linked to ethnicity. Deacon's second tool, humour, will be the subject in the following, last section of this chapter.

3.3) Open up and relax: The Power of Humour

The second tool in Deacon's rewriting of female Aboriginal identity is humour. Even though her humour is not jokingly, but rather an ironic and sarcastic form of humour. The question of what constitutes the power inherent in humour will be the topic of this section.
Deacon reveals colonialist and racist mechanisms through humour. She enables the recipients of her work a distancing of the shown scenes by using dolls and giving them a familiar entrance point. At first her carefully constructed scenes are giving a sense of ease, the dolls serve as a reminder of childhood memories. At the same time she renders the dolls anthropomorphic, creates dark atmospheres in her photographs. This may include a shock moment for the recipients, realizing what they have been laughing about and what is actually at display in Deacon's art. Namely, that her photography is displaying scenarios concerned with violence, discrimination

and stereotyping. There are several important aspects in this. One is that of the higher degree of perception for new ideas when using a humorous approach. The strategy to make recipients more open to question their own perception of the world is valid according to Morreal. According to him humour and negative emotions can displace one another and humour is a way to enable people to be more flexible mentally. Thus, humour opens up the possibilities of thought and enables to see new possibilities and think critically (Lockyer/Pickering 2005:18). Linking humour's ability to open up mentally, all the while signalling to relax, to humour being based on the rupturing of expectations previously built then is a powerful combination: Tom Veatch's theory of humour is putting emphasis on how humour raises expectations of normality and in the following violates these expectations (Billig 2005:33).

A second, political, aspect of humour in art is that it can "expose delusions, pretensions, duplicities and hypocrisies, not least among those in authority and positions of power" (Lockyer/Pickering 2005:18f.) via exaggeration. This it achieves through pointing out incongruities (Lockyer/Pickering 2005:18f.). Robert Provine speculates that laughter originated in early humans as a social signal to others that they could relax (Morreall 2005:67). This hypothesis would explain humour creating a social bond between those laughing. As Morreall continues, "this social bonding seems to work especially well when the humour is based on either some strength in the group or some shortcoming in what is funny for one group is not funny for their enemies" (Morreall 2005:67). Humour serves in all cultures to maintain social codes. However, there is no universality attached to neither the social codes nor humour. This leads to disputes about what is appropriate, morally right and funny. Following this, humour "is a matter of moral, politics and aesthetic debate" (Billig 2005:28). Humour and jokes lead to a stronger social bond, but also to a stronger demarcation towards those who are not included in the group bonding. It is not always directed at those in the superior position, but can also be a directed at those in the inferior position. When it comes to jokes about ethnicity and stereotypes it is crucial whether the person who is telling the joke is inside or outside the group that is being joked about. This detail changes not only the outcome of the joke but also its aim; it distinguishes between a stereotype being mocked and it being reinforced (Billig 2005:31f.). These two main aspects of humour - humour as a tool to achieve mental flexibility to make new points of view more accessible and humour signalling the ability to relax - can be combined in a powerful tactic. In "Feminism and

Contemporary Art - The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter" Isaak detects laughter as a catalyst that enables a subversion of the established social structures (Isaak 1996:14f.). How Deacon uses this subversive power of humour, in her case irony and sarcasm, will be part of my analyses in the last chapter.
The connection to Deacon will become clearer in the analyses as well as in the following section on her language use in the coming chapter.

4) Destiny Deacon's photography and her self-determined definition of identity via the reclaiming of "Aboriginalia"

Characteristically, Deacon's art focuses on gender as well as ethnicity. She uses objects that she buys in second hand stores. The history of these objects as well as her own social, ethnic and political background help her construct an artwork conveying new representations of a self-defined female Aboriginal identity. She reclaims objects from their former use and places them in scenes directed by her. Deacon's photo media artwork, which positions the dolls in place of Indigenous people, reveals the ambiguity of heteronomous definition of Indigenous identity. Her dolls resist the inscription of stereotypes while at the same time displaying the mechanisms of hegemonic encounter with Indigeneity. They are sometimes a reference to the Stolen Generation. Also, the language loss and authenticity discourse are aspects of how Deacon uses the dolls. The dolls, when found in the second hand stores where Deacon buys them, represent the stereotype to those who possess them. They are objects and as such cannot have agency in how they are being perceived, they are dependent on the surrounding they are placed in by their owner. In a way, this is another angle of the dolls aspect of doom, of threatening human existence by being 'perfect.' By perfection I do not refer to flawlessness but to a perfect representation of the stereotype of Indigeneity that Deacon is trying to subvert. She discharges this threat by placing them in her artwork, giving them her voice, instead of that of white Australia. Here, I see parallels to the language loss and forceful use of the English language under colonialism. Deacon is then not only subverting the common stereotypes but also places herself in the place of a creator. This corresponds to the godlike doll-human relationship described in the previous chapter. She creates the doll as a subject rather than an object.

In regard to the identification issues connected to ethnicity there is another reversal taking place. This time, there is a lack of possibility to identify for the white audience, giving them the possibility to distance themselves from feeling threatened but also questioning their possible role as part of the threat.

A last aspect I would like to connect to on the meaning of the doll is that of consumption and authenticity of art. On the one hand, the photographs of Deacon evoke memories of pop art: trashy objects declared art challenging the distinction of low culture and high art. This is a different question of what can be considered art, what is 'authentic.' The dolls are objects of mass consumption, which points to aspects of class and economic means. Economic means that were denied for a long time to Indigenous people. Now, having access to them, Deacon is using them to subvert the stereotypes of Indigeneity formed by the white majority.

How Deacon uses humour, or rather irony, as a tool is more difficult to pinpoint. Deacon puts the dolls in the place of what is being mocked. As Billig pointed out one of the important details in mocking stereotypes or reinforcing them are the details of the setting (Billig 2005:31f.). The dolls, representing the stereotype of Indigenous people as well as the Indigenous people in Deacons understanding, offer the recipient a way of finding familiarity in the picture, an expectation is being established: dolls are the toys of children and innocence seems to be inherent to them. The first association made is thus a positive one. Deacon then draws the recipient out of this positive association by the way she sets up the scene: a sense of threat and insecurity arises. Deacon, who says the dolls are representational for Aboriginal people (King 2004:19), makes the recipient switch quickly between being an insider and an outsider of the joke. She uses a whimsical way to make those looking at her art more perceptible to another account of Aboriginality. This way of displaying the dolls is not an open, unsubtle form of humour: It is rather a cynical, ironic form of humour.

Having given a first short positioning of where I locate Deacon's use of dolls and the ironic aspects of her work, I will now move on to conduct two analyses of Deacon's photography. In the last two sections I will then return to the detail of my research question: The specifities of Deacon's use of language and how she renders her dolls anthropomorphic, giving them emotional agency.

4.1) “Axed“ and “Dance, little lady, dance:“ Two Analyses

4.1.1) Childish destruction and resisting the stereotype:“Axed“

“Axed” *(fig.1)* shows a beheaded black doll with the white stuffing coming out of her neck and an axe lying at an angle next to it on wooden floor. The lighting is poor, but lighter surrounding the doll. The lighting connotes a very dense atmosphere. Deacon uses the innocence the dolls connote as toys to give the viewers the possibility to withdraw themselves from the setting: the cruelty to axe off the head of a doll, the darkness of the picture; all this seems to contrast the symbol of the doll. The sadness that a doll with a cut off head is portraying, as it is the destruction of a childhood symbol, is met by the nostalgia of the light-heartedness connected to childhood. Through the positive entry points for the viewer like the connotation of childhood memories Deacon manages to draw the viewer in and discover the intent of this photograph. The doll helps Deacon to act out a threatening situation while not directly provoking resistance to look at it further. This way she has the possibility to point out race and gender relations as well as power inequalities. In combination with the knowledge about Deacon rescuing the dolls for a better future and seeing them as surrogates for her people “Axed” represents a scene of the cruelty of racist and colonialist stereotypes. The doll refers to a reaffirmed set of stereotypes connected to women and Indigenous people: the heteronormative image of the helpless woman being dependent on men to survive and that of the helpless savage being rescued by the strong arms of the West. The doll as a representative tool for Indigeneity is alluding to lack of agency of Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women. A doll is a thing to play with and to use for enactment your own imagination. The several meanings of the doll here refer to the relation of gender and ethnicity. The doll is a reminder of the colonial image of the infantilized, feminized savage.

On another level, also linked to the title “Axed“, the photograph is the beheading of the stereotype of the Aboriginal woman. Here it is a fierce reclaim of a self-determined definition of black female Indigenous identity. In the end, Deacon is the creator of the doll, saving it from a different future, as well as destroyer of the doll by cutting it up. She has the agency to decide what the doll becomes, what it represents and what will happen to it. At the same time the doll is representing her, she is destroying a representation of herself. This is, on the one hand, a reclaiming of her identity as an Aboriginal woman. On the other hand, it is an intricate re-enactment of colonial relations, equalling Aboriginal people including herself with an inanimate

object that is only seemingly human. This way she is also drawing parallels between the contemporary discrimination of Aboriginal people and the colonial policies. She is identifying racism, discrimination and their colonial roots. Furthermore, she is re-enacting oppression, but at the same time empowering herself in the scenario she creates. Deacon is occupying every possible space: creator, destroyer, colonialist, colonial object. And in this I suggest that she is subverting the inequalities at display.

4.1.2) Dancing to whose beat?: “Dance, little lady, dance“

“Dance, little lady, dance“ *(fig. 2-5)* is a photographic series of four photographs depicting a black doll wearing a t-shirt. On the t- shirt one can see the Aboriginal flag: red and black with a golden circle in the middle. The lower part of the photographs is blurred. The background is dark, nothing but the doll can be seen. The only light is coming from the side of the spectator and is reflected by the plastic limbs of the doll. The four photographs differ in the angle that the photograph is taken from and the placement of the doll in it. The doll in the photograph seems to be moving when the photographs are placed next to each other, which is coinciding with the title of the work “Dance, little lady, dance.“ The title is suggestive on several levels: First ‘little lady‘ is an infantilisation and refers to femininity. ‘Dance‘ stands in contrast to the created feeling of threat in the photographs. It seems to be a command, which reinforced by the doubling of ‘dance‘ in the title. Furthermore it suggests the presence of an audience that cannot be seen by the viewer of the photograph and the performance for an audience; the sense of a demanding audience suggests a threatening situation, which is emphasized by the connotation of childishness of the doll. Striking about this photo series is that it shows only one doll dancing. It is singled out, outside of any community with no sense of communication. This is part of what creates the sense of threat: Firstly the doll is representing a female woman, a “little lady.“ The dress of the doll with the Aboriginal flag on it is pointing at it being representative for an Indigenous woman. Secondly, the doll being alone, dancing, while the title of the photograph is an imperative, suggests that there is someone commanding it to dance placing it in a passive position with a lack of agency. Referring to the doll as “little lady“ is a paternalizing, condescending choice of words.
The lighting of the photograph suggests the scene is dangerous and taking place at night. In connection with the blurriness of the lower part of the picture a perception of the doll dancing develops, especially when the pictures are placed next to each other. The lack of visible surrounding is putting the mind of the viewer to the test:

What to do with this space for imagination? This empty dark space is left open to be filled by the recipient. Filling it with stereotypical images would be equivalent to placing the doll in the representation of stereotypical Indigeneity Deacon wanted to rescue it from. The knowledge of this possible understanding of the series in combination with the title “Dance, little lady, dance” is in my understanding making the invisible threat a repeated placement of the doll into the violating stereotype, again denying it agency. As Lisa Reihana interprets it: “The doll acts out a female Aboriginal experience speaking of hidden cruelty and the need to perform for an audience. It also offers salvation; to dance is to find your own beat and your own freedom“ (Reihana 2004:55). In combination with my analyses above, Reihana’s interpretation is referring to the hidden cruelty of racism, the need to perform according to a stereotype and the salvation to be freed of this and define one’s identity in a self-determined manner. Furthermore she points out the connection of ‘Dance, little lady, dance‘ to the lyrics of a ‘joyful‘ disco song (Reihana 2004:55). This knowledge makes the scene that Deacon is suggesting complete: not only on the visual level but also adding an imaginary auditive level to the photograph. The tune, the doll is being asked to dance to, is the sound of a disco song.

Both of the works chosen, “Axed” as well as “Dance, little lady, dance” are dealing with the resistance to stereotypical representation. Deacon is cutting up the dolls, violating the material, threatening them and at the same time destroying the stereotype. It is a reversal of roles on all levels. She chooses the roles and scenarios. Deacon positions herself in both works in multiple positions: object as well as subjects and as a godlike creator with the ability to destroy. Her omnipresence is where I locate the irony and sarcasm in her work. Specific about “Dance, little lady, dance” is that she additionally takes the position exerting the invisible threat: The angle of the photographs places the viewer in the very role of the unknown threatening position. Thus, Deacon is threatening and being threatened at the same time, as she linguistically positions herself in the spot of the doll as part of the Aboriginal people. Deacon’s use of language will be the focus of the following section.

4.2) Rescuing them: The reclaiming of kitsch and Deacon's use of colonialist language

Deacon's use of dolls is a strategy of reclaiming kitsch and souvenir imagery, which she calls "Aboriginalia," to address gender politics and racial stereotyping (Reihana 2004:55) as well as pointing out effects of past colonialism in today's society in Australia. One main aspect of her strategy connected to the use of dolls in her artwork is how she speaks about them. The language Deacon uses when she is talking about her dolls is a constant reminder of colonial thought. For instance, she describes feeling sorry for the dolls and that she is rescuing them for another future (Fraser 2004: 108). That she phrases it like this can be interpreted as an allegory to the 'burden of the white man.' Elsewhere Deacon says about the dolls that they are her surrogate objects because they don't talk back (King 2004: 19). This appreciation of unquestioned dependency is hinting at the relationship between colonizers and colonized. She states to feel sorry for the dolls and wanting to save them from the people who would buy them if she didn't. "I mainly got engaged with it because I felt sorry for them" Deacon said in an interview on her relation to the kitsch she uses in her art (Fraser 2004: 108). The act of buying the dolls in second hand shops and using them in her art is considered by Deacon as an act of reclaiming the imagery that has been forced on Australian Aboriginal people by white Australia. This leads to the conclusion that her doll analogy does not only serve to reclaim kitsch and souvenir imagery to address gender politics and racial stereotypes (Reihana 2004:55), but it also is an act of claiming the right to determine her own identity herself in every aspect, may it be gender-related or in relation to ethnicity. This perception is reinforced by her explanation that she thinks that the blak dolls represent "us as people." She continues to explain that she doesn't think that white Australia sees Aborigines as people (King 2004: 19). On the one hand, Deacon talks about rescuing the dolls from a worse future, on the other hand she destroys and cuts up the dolls for her photography work. How can this be seen as a 'rescue', when the dolls would have been played with in a family home or maybe placed on a shelf somewhere? In relation to a video work of hers Deacon speaks about the emotional violence of being forced into images. The work called "Forced into images" features two of her four-year-old cousins sitting on chairs with paper masks that Deacon gave to them. Deacon justifies her choice of four-year-olds with their quality of being uncontrollable, which makes them a perfect fit for the idea of being "forced into

images“ (Fraser 2004:109). Having given the background of colonialist history and the force of stereotyping in previous chapters I am suggesting that this violence is what she is rescuing her doll objects from. Namely, she is rescuing them from the violence of being forced into a stereotype as an identity that is forced on them by the non-Aboriginal majority. But: Even the contortion and destruction of the dolls fits into the analogy of her rescuing the dolls. She treats them as if they were her colonial subjects: She rescues them from a different future by cutting them up and taking pictures of it. On the one hand this can be seen as her cutting up the stereotypes that white Australia forces upon her and other Aboriginals, on the other as her re-enacting the ‘Burden of the white man‘-ambiguity: Claiming to rescue when really destroying. And at the same time as she destroys the dolls she rescues them from the playground of racist stereotypes. No one is going to force their imagination or a stereotypical image of the dolls on them but Deacon and she chooses to give them the main representative role in very real scenarios.

The way she works with her dolls can also be seen in the context of how children play with them and imagine their own world in the existing world. Deacon herself says “it’s about (re)creating a world of my own outside my own world“ (King 2004:18). Saying this, she is pointing out that her work with dolls has two sides to it: to point out power structures in the real world, as well as subverting them. E. A. Macgregor also sees this ambiguity, describing it as Deacon examining how language and representation can be tools of oppression as well as ammunition for resistance (Macgregor 2004:7). Thus, one aspect of Deacons artwork is that the dolls are helping to confront prejudice and inequality. Furthermore, to King they also signify the Stolen Generations (King 2004:19).

In addition, her use of language can be connected to the language of the colonialists and via this back to the loss of Indigenous languages due to colonisation practices. I have elaborated on this in the first chapter. Richard Bell blatantly uses the artistic language of western contemporary art that is supposedly rendering his art inauthentic, while justifying it by his voice having been taken away by the West and thus western language being the only one remaining (Mclean 2010:41f.). Just like Bell, Deacon’s use of language points back to the forceful removal of her own voice, equalling her agency in defining her identity.

Hetti Perkins, Aboriginal curator, points out another aspect of the dolls: She sees the dolls as an antidote to the blonde, white Barbies. Barbies, she continues, offer black

kids an ideal, in relation to race as well as gender role models that they can never achieve (Perkins 2004:105). A last linguistic aspect of Deacon’s aim to reclaim Aboriginal identity as self-defined apart from the stereotypical perception in the non-Aboriginal society is her coinage of the term ‘Blak‘ as a strategy to take control of her own image (King 2004:20). In this context Marcia Langton sees the dolls as central to Deacon’s ‘rewriting of black feminine subjectivity‘ (King 2004:19).

In summary Deacon’s language is very distinctive in referring to postcolonial structures and the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. I consider her use of language one of her most effective tools.

4.3) Rendering the dolls anthropomorphic: How Deacon’s dolls come to ‘feel‘ and ‘act out‘ Aboriginal female experiences

In this final section I will return to my research question of how Deacon renders the dolls anthropomorphic and how this influences the perception of female Aboriginal identity.

How does Deacon achieve the effect of dolls conveying emotions? Hetti Perkins says about Deacon’s dolls that they are doll and idol at the same time. To her they have a different inscription than being “pretty empty-headed playthings“: They are agents of Deacon’s intent, objects of her whimsical strategies, Aboriginal kitsch, and familiar to everyone as they are closely connected to childhood dreams (Perkins 2004:105). I have discussed before that dolls are usually perceived as anthropomorphic because of their similarity to human beings. They are considered representations of humans in several ways. Following Hall’s definition of representation as part of the process producing meaning (Hall 1997:15), the art of Deacon, more specifically the dolls in it, can only come to a new meaning through the use of known meaning. In the words of Hall: “It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that produces meaning, that makes things mean“ (Hall 1997: 24). Also as meaning is never finally fixed “taking meaning,“ as Hall calls it, then always presupposes active interpretation of it (Hall 1997: 32).

I have shown that Deacon addresses known meanings of language through her use of it as a reminder of colonialism. Furthermore, the dolls she uses are signifying certain preconceived meanings in relation to history, gender, ethnicity and other social aspects. The meaning that the dolls connote before they are incorporated in her artwork is manifold. One of the meanings is influenced by the dolls being a toy: It is a reminder of childhood, an object that offers space to play with the own

imagination as well as an object that signifies the need to be taken care of. Another one is the connotation on the level of gender. Dolls are usually seen as a toy for girls, thus being predominantly female even if it is a male doll. This draws parallels to the gender stereotypes of the ‘strong‘ and ‘independent‘ man, and ‘weak‘ and ‘dependent‘ woman, that is in the case of the doll almost completely exchangeable with a child that needs to be taken care of. Thus, equalling women with dolls places them in the inferior, dependent position as well. Furthermore, dolls are regarded as artificial humans and offer the ideal space for the projection of self and identity. Lastly, in the light of the colonial history the specific dolls Deacon uses result from the dolls also carry the meaning of female Aboriginal experience as well as to colonizer-colonized relationship. They are inscribed with a superior being helping inferior being and a relationship dominated by paternalism and even the feminized notion of the ‘primitive‘ in the colonial worldview. These preconceived meanings of the doll are part of why the dolls are perceived as emotional and animate. It is important to point out here that none of these aspects are placing Deacon in a place of full control of the meaning of the dolls within her artwork or her artwork. The meaning is produced in a more complex way. Yet, Deacon gives the dolls a “voice by communicating feelings“ and uses the dolls as “transitional objects“ that “confront prejudice and inequality in their inimitable way (...)“ (King 2004:19). In his anthropological theory on art and agency, Alfred Gell deals with the question of how in art inanimate objects can gain agency. In the process of this he elaborates on the doll as a ‘thing‘ with social agency, explaining that not all social relationships are between human beings. He illustrates this with the example of a little girl and her doll, which she might love and even consider her best friend. Even though the doll is an object there exists a social relationship of the two, the girl and the doll (Gell 1998:17f.). However, Gell does make a distinction between intentional beings as primary agents, and artefacts such as dolls as secondary agents “through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu and render their agency effective“ (Gell 1998:20). According to this, the influence Deacon has, as primary agent, on how the dolls, as secondary agents, are perceived is through the visual methods she uses. This is another aspect of how Deacons work with dolls is being perceived as work with animate subjects. In her work Deacon prefers low-tech media to others. She takes pictures with a Polaroid camera and afterwards transfers them to laser, bubble or light jet prints in order to offer scale (King 2004:18). Working with

Polaroid gives Deacon the possibility to see the results of her work in print immediately, which coincides with the short time frames in which she finishes her works (King 2004:20). Using Polaroid not only influences the time consumed by the process of taking the photograph, but also the way it is perceived. Polaroids are known for their immediacy, as the photographer does not have to wait for the product longer than a few moments. The character of them has come to suggest a certain immediacy that is far from careful planning. Even Deacon suggests that she is an unskilled photographer, further playing with the stereotypical images she is constantly questioning (Croft 2004:50). In addition to the immediacy that is offered by working with Polaroid, the atmosphere of the photographs as also being highly influenced by the darkness and chosen scale of the photographs: Her pictures are often dark and dense while the viewer is denied to see the surrounding of the scene in focus, being left guessing about the forcefulness of the displayed situation and the kind of danger the dolls might be in. The viewer is being forced to realize her or his own stereotypical prejudices, when unconsciously filling in the empty spaces.

Returning to my hypothesis of the viewer being provoked to laugh at the first glance, due to the trashy appearance and a closer look at the work reversing the impulse to laugh. While the second, closer look focuses on the threat inherent in the photograph, which is invoked by the unknown surrounding and the dark atmosphere. In other words Deacon uses the childlike doll to lure the viewer in, suggesting a light-hearted, maybe even humorous, work of art. On a deeper level however she refuses the viewer to escape the darkness and reality of her work. This way Deacon manages to have the silent dolls, which usually provide the canvas for young girls' imagination, communicate feelings in the scenes she sets up. But she breaks the expected imagining of positive worlds as she puts the dolls into scenarios where they are decapitated, amputated or contorted. However, there are two sides of humorous aspects in Deacon's art: In the case of the doll photographs analysed, one aspect can be found in the first impression of her art, when it seems to be displaying the light-hearted destruction of a mass product. This humour is not an enjoyable kind as it is quickly disrupted. The second humorous aspect of her work has become clearer after the analysis of her works: Deacon's omnipresent positioning in her scenarios. Her play with the stereotypes, her being placed in every role is provoking laughter of relief at her intricacy of after all constructing a positive as well as negative image. It

also is resulting in a relieving laughter at her deconstruction of negative stereotypes of female Indigeneity.
This is, next to her language use, a main part of how she achieves the dolls to gain emotional agency creating the illusion of ‘feeling‘ and ‘acting out‘ female Aboriginal identity. And how she takes back the definition of female Aboriginal identity.

5) Conclusion

Having taken a closer look at the historical background, Deacon’s toolbox of dolls, colonialist language and humour as well her artworks I return to my research question, that has been answered in the last part: As Deacon, renders dolls anthropomorphic in her art and uses sarcastic and colonialist language my main question in this thesis is: How do these methods change the perception of female Aboriginal identity? A first result of the examination of dolls and what leads to their anthropomorphisation is that the doll as a toy and anthropomorphic object poses ontological questions on the god-human relationship. Furthermore it being closely connected to construction of gender, matters of objectification, desire and normativity are the dolls main characteristics on a level of gender. Lastly, I have looked at the doll and ethnicity and how it can be a tool of disrupting whiteness as a norm and its hegemonic power over images. A second result is how Deacon’s use of colonialist language serves as a replacement for her own voice in order to gain agency, instead of being controlled by stereotypical and racist images forced on her. Additionally, her language use bears satiric aspects, especially with the background of the colonial Australian history, that help her strategy to point out female Aboriginal experience apart from the stereotypical forces. A last result of my thesis concerns my initial working hypothesis of how Deacon draws her viewers in, by suggesting light-heartedness of her works, rejects that first perception and concludes by leaving her viewer more open minded to deal with the serious topics of her photographs. The examination of this hypothesis had led me to consider Deacon as positioning herself in a multiplicity of roles. In her works she can be found on either side of the stereotypical representation, using the stereotype to display its deconstruction. Thus, another step has been added to this pattern of perception, which is the final stage of deconstruction and returning to a different form of the initial positive perception.

Ultimately, Deacon uses the implications of gender and ethnicity inherent in the black dolls to change the perception of female Aboriginal identity. Her strategical use of dolls and humour opens up the minds of recipients to misconceptions of ethnicity and gender relations. This way she is acting against misconceptions, both unveiling them and empowering herself to self-determined definition of female Aboriginal identity.

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Annex

fig. 1: "Axed"

Destiny Deacon "Axed," Gallery Roslyn Oxley:
http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/2/Destiny_Deacon/231/33872

fig. 2: “Dance, little lady, dance,“ #1

Destiny Deacon “Dance, little lady, dance,“ Gallery Roslyn Oxley:
http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists

fig. 3: “Dance, little lady, dance,“ #2

Destiny Deacon “Dance, little lady, dance,“ Gallery Roslyn Oxley:
http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists

fig. 4: “Dance, little lady, dance,“ #3

Destiny Deacon “Dance, little lady, dance,“ Gallery Roslyn Oxley:
http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists

fig. 5: “Dance, little lady, dance,“ #4

Destiny Deacon “Dance, little lady, dance,“ Gallery Roslyn Oxley:
http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists