

# Brokering Aboriginal art

A critical perspective on marketing, institutions, and the state

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## **Acknowledgement**

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## Preface

This volume presents the Kenneth Myer Lecture by Professor Jon Altman Foundation Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, Canberra. I am delighted to be presenting this important key note lecture in partnership with the Koori Business Network. The outstanding work done by the Koori Business Network in conjunction with Arts Victoria, recognising and promoting Victorian Aboriginal artists through the *Tribal Expressions* exhibition and *Deadly Expressions* catalogue of selected works, is testament to the quality and diversity of art work being produced in Victoria. As the Arts Minister, Mary Delahunty MP states in her message on the catalogue, it is an important reminder that this art sits side by side with the desert art produced in remote areas of Australia. It is appropriate that this important address sits side by side with the work of the Koori Business Network.

The issue of the Aboriginal art market is of keen interest to arts managers. The first arts management programs appeared in the 1980s in Australia. Traditionally, these programs were located in schools of arts and performing arts, emerging as a consequence of the need to re-define and reinvigorate their programs. Deakin University is truly unique in offering an integrated, creative arts management program in an innovative business faculty, nurturing artists and arts managers by having lecturers exposed to the latest issues and trends in management as well as experience in the cultural industry. In a sector concerned with performance, it has required a paradigm shift to see culture as fitting in a business environment.

In his keynote address, Professor Altman discusses the paradox of the international success of the Indigenous art market and Indigenous Australians' stagnating socio-economic conditions. Examining state sponsorship of arts infrastructure from an historical and analytical perspective, Professor Altman argues that, although the market appears successful, it remains fragile and complacency in policy and practice would be detrimental to its sustainability. His lecture concludes with arts policy observations intended to ensure the development of the Aboriginal arts sector, particularly in the light of recent changes to Indigenous affairs organisations.

Australia has experienced a significant shift in investment and employment towards leisure and recreation fostering the growth and development of the art market. The Indigenous art market plays a key role in promoting appreciation for Aboriginal culture. Despite the growth in status and impact of Indigenous art over the past decade very little scholarship or resources exist to assist their development and analyse their impact on economic or social wellbeing. There is still a lot that we need to know about Aboriginal art. This keynote address analyses economic, social and cultural advancement for Indigenous art from an

inter-cultural perspective, highlighting some of Professor Altman's seminal work with Aboriginal artists in the Northern Territory.

This publication places on record the important Aboriginal art market issues chosen for debate by the George Fairfax Fellow. It raises questions about the translation of rhetoric into policy and practice. This approach balances a process of scholarly and practical inputs for future inquiry. This volume places Aboriginal art at the forefront of discussion, in order to emphasise its national importance to debate.

Jenny Treloar has assisted in the preparation of the events surrounding the Kenneth Myer lecture. I appreciate her tireless efforts in working long hours to complete this project. Angela Osborne provided expert assistance in sub-editing the lecture. Thank you, Angela, for your dedication to this important project.

**Ruth Rentschler**

Melbourne April 2005

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To begin, I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Wurrundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, the traditional owners of Melbourne. I would like to dedicate this lecture to Balang Nakurulk [Jimmy Njiminjuma], a good friend and great Kuninjku artist who passed away on 2 October 2004.

## **Abstract**

Over the past 30 years, visual art has shone as a beacon of Aboriginal cultural survival, adaptation and efflorescence in post-colonial Australia. This success has occurred within a broader national context where Aboriginal socio-economic status is perceived to have either stagnated or declined. Yet dynamic and innovative art movements thrive in many remote communities that are regarded as the most problematic in terms of welfare dependence and social disintegration.

This lecture explores this apparent paradox by focusing on a history and analysis of state-sponsorship of arts infrastructure in that Aboriginal arts sector, a form of sponsorship that has provided the inter-cultural mediation, or brokerage, that has been pivotal to this unusual arts movement. By then drawing out some emerging tensions, contestations and challenges I argue that that there is no room for complacency in arts policy or practice—the new-found success of Indigenous arts remains fragile.

The lecture concludes with a discussion of the risks to Aboriginal art posed by recent changes in Indigenous affairs and makes some broad arts policy observations, based on historical evidence, for the ongoing development and growth of the nationally significant and internationally acclaimed Aboriginal visual arts sector.

## A long introduction

Aboriginal visual art has been one uncontested and spectacular area of success in Indigenous affairs in the last 30 years.<sup>1</sup> I would hazard a guess that all of us have walked into a public art, or commercial, gallery in Melbourne or Sydney and been moved by a skillfully cross-hatched bark painting from Arnhem Land or a massive and colourful canvas from the Centre. When we do so, our first focus is on the art and its creator. Understandably, little thought is given to the institutions that foster and support artists and that broker the marketing of their art. The hard-won success of Aboriginal art has been, and remains, highly dependent on public patronage and active brokerage between Aboriginal artists and the fine arts market. Since the early 1970s, an unusual inter-cultural mediating institution, the Aboriginal art centre, has evolved, that is crucial to the development and ongoing success of Aboriginal art. This lecture sets out to provide a critical reflection on the brokering role played by this institutional form.

I begin with two paradoxical vignettes.

*Vignette 1: I have spent my entire research career tracking two trends in Aboriginal Australia over the last three decades. One is the trend in Indigenous socio-economic status which at the national level has improved, albeit very slowly: closing the gap in well-being between Indigenous and other Australians has proved difficult and in some areas, especially rural and remote Australia, it is worst and appears, at times, intractable (Altman, Biddle and Hunter 2004). The other is the trend in engagement of Indigenous Australians in the arts, and particularly in the visual arts sector. This trend has been upwards, not just in terms of arts practitioners, new art forms and inter-generational sustainability, but also in terms of an increasingly prominent presence in public art institutions and incorporation into the national, and even international (if not global) imagery. I am not suggesting any cause and effect here, merely observing that the despondency currently evident in Indigenous affairs overlooks some miraculous success achieved over a very short period of commercial engagement with the market.*

*Vignette 2: In 2003, the Clare Martin Northern Territory Government sponsored the development and then funded a multi-year Indigenous Arts Strategy for the NT. This was launched initially on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August at the Garma Festival in north-east Arnhem Land in both Yolngu Matha, the local language, and in English. It is believed to be the first major new policy statement delivered bilingually on Aboriginal-owned land. A week later on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August it was launched again in a more conventional way at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT. Symbolically too, this was the day that the winners in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) were to be announced—NATSIAA is an iconic institution celebrating the best in Indigenous visual art that has grown in stature annually since its establishment in 1984.*

*The winner announced later that day was Richard Bell's *Scientia E Metaphysica* featured the statement emblazoned across the painting 'Black art: it's a white thing'. In an explanatory article Bell further elucidated his theorem (Bell 2003), lamenting the fact that 'Aboriginal Art has become a product of the times ... a commodity ... the result of a concerted and sustained marketing strategy, albeit, one that has been loose and uncoordinated. There is no Aboriginal Art Industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginal. They are mostly White people whose areas of expertise are in the fields of anthropology and 'Western Art'.*

Bell's articulated concerns provide a springboard for this lecture. In one sense, of course, Bell is quite right, Aboriginal art is a white thing, without state patronage, without white art advisers, and without white audiences for black art, Aboriginal visual art would probably not exist today to any widespread extent outside its localized ceremonial contexts. But in another sense, Bell is quite wrong—the critical mediating institutions, community-controlled art centres are not white institutions, they are both inter-cultural and hybrid—they have been born of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal processes, they are both black and white. Seen from this perspective Aboriginal art is an inter-cultural thing.

This lecture sets out to trace the innovative creation of these inter-cultural brokerage institutions. These organisations (usually termed art centres) have been at the forefront of mediating between Aboriginal artists, many living in geographically remote and culturally very distinct contexts, and the fine art market for Indigenous art that has also evolved over the past thirty years. It is salutary to consider whether this body of art would have reached the market and how new regional arts movements would have flourished in the absence of these mediating institutions.

I argue that Bell's pessimism is overstated and that Aboriginal art is at the vanguard of a cultural efflorescence driven primarily by artists usually (in numerical terms) as members of art centres, in close collaboration with non-Aboriginal advisers and intermediaries and the market. I make my argument by referring to the institutional framework that has developed to market Aboriginal art, and to the agency of Aboriginal artists in symbiotically using commercial opportunities provided via art centres to enhance their cultural, social, economic and spiritual well-being.

In numerical terms alone Aboriginal artists are predominantly from discrete Indigenous communities—of which there are about 1,200 with a total Indigenous population estimated at 120,000–150,000—in remote parts of Australia. It has been estimated on a number of occasions now that there are between 5,000 and 6,000 artists in this population although estimates are rough and very definition-dependent (see Altman 1989; Wright 1999; Myer 2002). The

market mechanism does not operate very effectively, for art or for anything else, in these discrete, generally small, and geographically-isolated communities. But most Indigenous art is produced in such situations where there is a geographic distance between the artists and their prospective audiences. There is also a cultural distance between Aboriginal artists and the purchasers who are generally non-Aboriginal—the artists and the buyers often speak different languages and there is little basis for communication, let alone unmediated exchange.

Consequently, selling Aboriginal art requires careful and considered mediation over vast geographic and cultural distance. This mediation can take a diversity of forms—it can be undertaken formally by commercial dealers and agents or by individual artists, or informally through a diversity of social or commercial relations between artist and buyers, some more acceptable than others. In this lecture, I focus mainly on the dominant form of mediation undertaken by Aboriginal art centres governed by Aboriginal committees and employing specialist staff.

To signpost, the discussion is set out as follows. To begin, I will say a little about the period I term the 'pre-modern', before 1973, the year a new cultural support framework for Aboriginal artists was established. I then examine the birth of the modern Indigenous arts movement and the political and policy circumstances of the early 1970s. Next I examine the art centre model, describing in general terms what it is, how it is structured, what it does and its diversity of forms. Since their establishment, almost all Aboriginal art centres have been supported by the state. This in turn requires an assessment of their evolution over the past 30 years. I next critically engage with some inherent tensions and contestations under three headings—marketing, institutions and the state—before making some concluding comments about the future. An important caveat I make at the outset is that I recognise that very many successful Aboriginal artists operate independently, especially in metropolitan cosmopolitan Australia. Couzens (2004), for example, provides an important overview of contemporary Indigenous art in Victoria in the catalogue *Deadly Expressions*. This lecture focuses primarily on artists in remote regions operating as members of arts organisations. But in my concluding comments I also consider the transferability of this model to urban settings.

## Arts marketing in the early years

The modern Indigenous arts movement has a short history replicating closely the modern policy era in Indigenous affairs that followed the 1967 Referendum and the introduction of the policy of self-determination in 1972.

However, the history of arts production and exchange in Australia obviously has a much earlier genesis. Indigenous Australians have always produced art in ceremonial and secular contexts and have produced and traded artefacts and commodities for millennia. At times, such trade was conducted via elaborate and extensive ceremonial exchange networks. Since they first encountered Aboriginal people, Europeans have been fascinated by Aboriginal art, and a great deal was exported as artefacts and curios to museums and private collections. Members of the First Fleet documented some of the earliest exchanges between Aboriginal people and Europeans (see, e.g. Collins 1975 [1798]; Tench 1961).

There is a new emerging art history that recognises that art was always there, it is just that its 'marketing' was highly informal, ranging from outright stealing to exchange that Aboriginal people actively sought. With significant regional variation, from the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were 'trading posts' and church-run arts and crafts enterprises at mission communities.<sup>2</sup> Couzens (2004: 5) notes that Victorian artist William Barak (c. 1824–1903) was the first known Aboriginal artist who created art for the market place with introduced materials. Ernabella Arts in the north of South Australia established by the Methodist mission in 1948 (see Wright 1999: 26) was the earliest community art centre established; but the missionaries, not the artists, controlled it. The role of missionaries in encouraging the production of Aboriginal art for sale cannot be underestimated. The production and sale of art was somewhat paternalistically viewed as a mechanism to introduce the cash economy in remote mission communities. But it was also a means to demonstrate Aboriginal cultural vibrancy and to demonstrate to government and the public the successful role of missions in 'protection and preservation'. Among the earliest commercial outlets for Aboriginal art in the 1960s were the missionary society shops in Sydney and Melbourne. Arts agents who initially worked closely with the mission authorities also mediated some early collecting and selling.

As an aside, collections now housed here at Melbourne Museum and collected by Baldwin Spencer and Donald Thomson are crucially important exemplars of early trade. In a recent major retrospective of Western Arnhem Land bark paintings *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* (Perkins 2004) the earliest works were from Spencer's collecting in 1914. Spencer and Gillen initially collected the Museum's significant collections of ceremonial objects from central Australia. By the 1920s this had developed into an extensive trade in objects due to national and international demand auspiced by the Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg (Batty 2004).<sup>3</sup>

## The modern Aboriginal arts movement

There were two landmark developments in the early 1970s that coincided with the birth of the modern marketing of Indigenous art. The first was the establishment of a marketing company Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd as a retail/wholesale operation (Peterson 1983). The precursor to the establishment of this company was Australia's first comprehensive tourism report completed in 1965 that identified a possible opportunity for Aboriginal arts, especially in sales to inbound visitors. The consultants recommended the establishment of an Aboriginal arts 'industry', but reflecting values of the time, suggested that only items that are 'natural' [traditional] had commercial potential. More importantly, the report recommended government intervention to establish a marketing authority to ensure quality control and authenticity (Harris et al. 1965). In 1971, acting in part on this recommendation and partly reflecting emerging changes in Aboriginal affairs policy, the federal government sponsored the establishment of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd. The 'government company' played a major role in establishing credible outlets for Indigenous art in most State capitals for over twenty years.

The real watershed occurred in the early 1970s, a time of rapid development in Australia's cultural policy. In 1972, the Whitlam Government was elected to office with policy commitments both to the arts and Aboriginal Australians. The former saw public patronage of the arts escalate rapidly. In 1973, the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) was created as a discrete and important element of the proposed Australia Council that was given statutory form in 1975. The AAB replaced an Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee of the Australia Council for the Arts that was made up of a number of nominated academics, as well as the arts stalwart Wandjuk Marika from Yirrkala. In contrast, the AAB was all-Aboriginal and had Marika as its inaugural chair.

Groundbreaking social policy change saw self-determination become the central element of Indigenous policy (replacing assimilation and integration) and a land rights royal commission established. It was also at this time that the outstations movement saw a major migration of Aboriginal people out of artificially established townships and missions back onto traditional lands. The movement was supported by the new self-determination policy approach. A confluence of all these factors resulted in a cultural renaissance spearheaded by visual arts practice. There were attitudinal shifts in Australian society, a greater accommodation of cultural difference and diversity and consequently there was greater acceptance of Aboriginal art. From the Aboriginal perspective, art provided an opportunity for many for cultural revival; others used artistic expression to make powerful political statements about their rights in land and about local and regional identity affiliations to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. And

for those at outstations art produced for sale provided the only means to earn cash while living away from mainstream labour markets.<sup>4</sup> The AAB and the new Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs positively and vigorously supported the arts for their constituents. In particular, from the beginning the AAB looked to support community-controlled arts cooperatives, or art centres, at remote communities.

A concurrence of other events in the early 1970s further enhanced the public legitimisation of Aboriginal art as a distinct component of Australian fine art. The AAB was provided with discretionary resources and immediately provided funding for Aboriginal arts promotion, development and marketing. An ambitious exhibitions program was established that generated public interest in Aboriginal art both in Australia and overseas—purchases for exhibitions provided significant and strategic (especially when some were experiencing dire cash flow problems) direct support to the embryonic arts movements in Central Australia and Arnhem Land. Grants were provided to individual artists for professional development and for projects; while the task of underwriting the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Company and its expanding network of retail outlets was transferred to the Board.

At the same time, and coincidentally, there was the sudden emergence of Western Desert art for sale at Papunya, the acrylics-on-board art style that generated excitement as a 'new' fine art style almost from the beginning. Without doubt, the acceptance of Western Desert art was an important catalyst for the more widespread acceptance of other regional art styles as fine art (Perkins and Fink 2000; Myers 2002; Bardon and Bardon 2004), although it was not until the late 1980s that Aboriginal art was on a sound footing.

## The art centre model: a new institutional form

The early 1970s saw the crucial emergence of government support for community-based arts organisations. As noted above, some infrastructure already existed at places like Ernabella, Yirrkala and on Bathurst Island but this was generally provided on a part-time and, at times, paternalistic basis by missionaries. Utilising a version of the mainstream community arts model, the AAB made a radical departure from the existing model by providing communities with independent and targeted resources to employ arts advisers that were directly accountable to the artists. The professionalisation of mediation between artists and the market was underway.

The emerging organisations, Aboriginal art centres, were mainly located in remote regions and operated as collecting and marketing agencies. Part of the rationale for their existence has always been couched in terms of 'market failure'—without subsidized institutional support arts marketing would be impossible. But the model has other important features—encouraging new forms of arts practice, nurturing and encouraging younger artists, and mentoring more established artists and providing professional development advice. With generally non-Aboriginal arts advisers operating as inter-cultural mediators, art was initially sold to Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd—the government company—and then to a growing network of mainstream and specialist commercial galleries.

The fundamentals of these arts organisations are similar, even though there are significant regional variations in their particular form owing to differing histories of development and differing locations. Art centres are invariably incorporated organisations that have artists as their members.<sup>5</sup> The members elect management committees that form the governing body and this governing body in turn employs staff. These are hybrid organisations, at once cultural and commercial, local and global, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—fundamentally inter-cultural and operating between thoroughly different locales.

A crucial factor in the success of art centres has been the employment of professional and dedicated staff, almost invariably from outside the art producing community. The arts centre model has worked, on the one hand, because it suits the artists whose prime interest and speciality is producing art. Staff employed, on the other hand, provide a very different skills set—expertise in marketing and an understanding of commerce and the fine arts market. The tasks of these arts advisers are diverse and have been documented in a growing literature (Altman, 1989; Mercer 1997; Wright 1999, 2000; Wright and Morphy 2000; Myers 2002). They buy, sell, document, conserve and transport art; they accompany artists to exhibitions, host visitors, deal with intellectual property issues, administer grants, run projects, look after a small business, manage other staff, supply artists with



materials, and support the governing boards who employ them. As a general rule, arts advisors or managers, as these staff centres are usually called, are not easy to stereotype. They are people who can communicate cross-culturally and who can cope with the distinctive pressures and stresses associated with remote community living. As a general rule, arts advisers have to be resourceful, energetic and resilient. And even with all these qualities, elements of their often pressured roles mediating as agents for artists with the market means that on average they last only two to three years before they 'burn out' (Wright 1999).

## The evolution of art centres

Over the last 30 years, the rapid growth of the Aboriginal arts market and the number of art centres has been inter-linked. It is very difficult to accurately define and estimate the overall value of the Aboriginal visual arts market—in 1980 it was estimated to be worth \$2.5 million (Pascoe 1981); in 1987–88, \$18.5 million (Altman 1989); and most recently somewhere around \$100 million per annum (see Altman 2003).

The number of art centres has also increased from 16 in 1980 (Pascoe 1981) to an estimated 100 Australia-wide in 2002 (Myer 2002). The regional location of art centres has remained heavily skewed to remote regions, in part because this is where discrete Indigenous communities are located; and in part because opportunity for individual artist engagement with the market is most constrained in such circumstances and consequently needs ongoing infrastructure support. Nevertheless, there are also some high profile and successful urban Aboriginal art cooperatives, like Boomalli in Sydney, that have very effectively adopted and adapted the art centre model to their particular needs (Croft 1999). More recently in Melbourne, the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria collaborated in the *Tribal Expressions* exhibition in 2003 and the exhibition catalogue *Deadly Expressions* (Esmail Manahan et al. 2004).

A national review of the Aboriginal arts and crafts 'industry' in 1989 resulted in a consolidation and growth of support for Aboriginal art centres as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) program.<sup>6</sup> The 1989 Review was partly driven by the growing demands of Aboriginal art centres on the finite resources of the Australia Council that became increasingly stretched. A policy opportunity arose at the time to shift the locus of Aboriginal visual art support from cultural policy within the Australia Council to the Aboriginal affairs portfolio—a blending of the cultural with the commercial. From 1992, about 40 art centres have been supported directly under ATSIC's National Arts and Crafts Industry Support Strategy (NACISS). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board (or ATSIAB, as the AAB became) of the Australia Council now focuses its support on arts promotion and advocacy and professional development for individual artists. ATSIAB has also supported two important Indigenous arts advocacy agencies, Desert for central Australia and the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA) for the north that have existed since the 1980s. To simplify, ATSIC focused its support on community-based organisations, while ATSIAB supports specific arts projects, arts promotion, and individual artist development.

As the Aboriginal arts market has become more sophisticated, so have the art centres. This has been possible in part because of institutional strengthening,

experience and associated organisational longevity all based on more stable core support. Many of the now long-established art centres recognise that their viability is dependent on buyer confidence in the quality and cultural and artistic integrity of Aboriginal art and they have developed sophisticated web-based marketing, exhibiting and art conservation techniques, while also using computerised databases for documentation and authentication. Other changes have seen the physical infrastructure of art centres improve, many now having community museums or culture centres associated with them. And with more stable resourcing the overall number of staff supporting arts practice has increased, with many art centres now also offering opportunities for local arts workers in remote localities where jobs are extremely scarce. Such jobs, and being able to make a livelihood as an artist, has been largely predicated on the rapid expansion of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, a flexible Indigenous-specific employment and income support program in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Artists very heavily access the scheme.

## The recent policy landscape

The growth in Indigenous visual arts in the 1990s, fuelled by a burgeoning secondary arts market since the first specialist Indigenous arts auction in 1995, has placed the existing policy framework under pressure.

In 2002, the *Report of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Crafts Inquiry* (Myer 2002) recommended enhanced support for Indigenous visual arts. In 2003, the Martin Labor Government in the Northern Territory (NT), the heartland (and genesis) of the modern movement committed (as per its election promise of 2001) to develop an Indigenous Arts Strategy. In 2003, for the first time ever two Indigenous art strategies were launched in the same year.

In August, the NT strategy *Building Strong Arts Business* (NT Government 2003) was launched symbolically, as described earlier, at the Garma festival in north-east Arnhem Land. While this strategy covers all art forms, not just visual arts, it is heavily focused on growing and stabilizing Indigenous visual arts infrastructure as a priority, building on the historic evidence base of its success and its strong links to tourism, a mainstay of the NT economy. It is also the first Indigenous-specific State-based arts strategy, appropriately for the NT where the majority of Indigenous artists reside.

Not long after, in October 2003, the Commonwealth launched its *Indigenous Art Centres Strategy and Action Plan* (Australian Government 2003) a joint initiative of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) and ATSIAB of the Australia Council for Arts. At least at the Commonwealth level, this policy was promoted as a whole-of-government initiative. The Strategy's objectives 'aimed at building a strong and sustainable Indigenous visual arts sector, characterised by a stable and profitable base of Indigenous art centres producing and distributing works of artistic excellence'.

With ongoing concerns about the well-being of Aboriginal people, governments in 2003 appear to have belatedly recognised the undoubted development potential of, and national interest in, the visual arts sector. It appeared that the policy environment was about to change.

## Critical issues

My hypothesis that the brokering role of art centres has been fundamental to the success of the modern Indigenous arts movement does not mean that there are not inherent tensions and contestations as Richard Bell's views noted above indicate. Whether such tensions are avoidable, inevitable or manageable, is perhaps the more pertinent issue. I want to focus on three broad areas here, marketing, institutions and especially the role of the state and provide my own critical take on emerging problems and their possible amelioration.

### Marketing

An ongoing debate from the early 1970s has centred on whether Indigenous art production is cultural or commercial (and similarly whether art centres are cultural or commercial enterprises). On one hand, there is a strong Indigenous sentiment that as Aboriginal art embodies living cultural heritage, its integrity must be protected at any cost and that its role and that of art centres is fundamentally cultural. On the other hand, there is public policy pressure to interpret the marketing of Aboriginal art as commercial, with some expectation that market demand will influence art supply and that art production will enhance Aboriginal economic and social well-being. While such debates have ebbed and flowed over the years (see, *inter alia*, Altman and Taylor 2000; Myers 2002; Langton 2003; Perkins 2003) there has been some resistance to recognising both the art and the centres as hybrid institutions that combine the cultural (or customary) and the commercial (or economic). As I suggest below, an ongoing failure to recognise this hybridity lies at the core of art centre fragility and vulnerability.

What of the artists? In recent times, relationships between agents and key Aboriginal artists have become more complex and there has been a growing competition to market 'the stars'. While it is normal for white artists to have a number of agents, there seems to be some discomfort that major Aboriginal artists, like the late Emily Kame Kngwarraye, operated in this way. The popular media appears intent on sensationalising occasional informal and opaque commercial arrangements as concerns about the welfare of artists. In reality, some Aboriginal artists, often without access to conventional forms of financial credit and with constant pressures from kin, do convert stored cultural knowledge to cash by quickly producing art for sale outside the arrangements they have with art centres.<sup>8</sup> Such practice can have negative impacts not just on wider perceptions of the art's integrity, but also the career prospects of the artists. Arguably, such are the ways of cultural difference and diversity in a heterogeneous Australia—some artists conform, others choose to resist, others operate two or more ways.

An associated set of issues is whether the institutions and legal instruments of Australian copyright and moral rights law afford Aboriginal art sufficient protection. Similar issues surround questions of authorship, with much Aboriginal art unsigned and dependent for the unwary buyer on 'certification of authorship' and issues of authenticity. These are complex issues that cannot be readily teased out here. It is noteworthy though that there have been some very effective copyright infringement prosecutions in recent years (Janke 1998; Johnson 2000) and a recent successful action by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission under the Trade Practices Act against a manufacturer falsely attributing design authorship to Aboriginal artists.<sup>9</sup>

## Institutions

What about the pivotal role of arts advisers? Are they, as Bell (2003) suggests, just anthropologists and western arts experts? I would argue that both these disciplinary qualifications have been central to the development of the arts movement, but in reality, arts advisers need a wider and more idiosyncratic range of abilities. They need to facilitate the production of art that the market appreciates (that is, buys) while at the same time looking to educate the public, the potential buyers, in Australia and overseas, about what to buy. Ultimately though, their success (and that of the art centres they manage) is predicated on an ability to be accurate and honest communicators between the market and the artists.

What are some of the contradictions in their roles? To be successful, arts advisers need to grasp some of the cultural underpinnings of the art. But at the same time, they must strive to remain neutral and unbiased in working with artists from kin-based societies because there will be pressures to develop preferential relationships that the art market cannot bear. At once they must inform artists, sometimes very senior people, about the vagaries of arts market demand, while at the same time trying to educate and influence the market about some of the subtleties and hidden meanings embedded in the art.

There are complex issues of competing cultural views about value that advisers frequently and uncomfortably have to mediate. Myers (2002: 192) relates a story from Papunya Tula adviser Dick Kimber that will resonate with many advisers and commercial gallery dealers. One artist, Yanyatjarra Tjakamarra brings in a painting and Kimber allows him to set the then astronomical price at \$1,000. A week later, another artist Old Walter brings in a much smaller painting and seeks a similar payment. When Kimber indicates that he cannot pay the same amount for the smaller painting, the artist's response was 'Same Dreaming; got the same power'. The market overrides local valuations repeatedly, but the artists seem to bear it, sometimes in my experience modifying the Dreaming and size of paintings

to suit the market. At other times, advisers consciously or unconsciously form affiliations with particular language communities and this in turn encourages some artists over others (Altman 2004). Negotiating value cross-culturally is an ongoing process.

Over time, arts advisers accumulate a form of cultural capital that makes some centres shine, but inevitably they move on (with some notable exceptions) and despite mischievous anecdote these are not particularly well paid jobs nor are there obvious career paths within the sector. As some art centres get better and better, further tensions arise. On one hand the need to plan succession and always recruit high calibre advisers with skill sets required is increasing all the time. On the other hand, there is an emerging hierarchy of centres, with some with a long history and proven track record becoming sector flagships, while others stagnate or perform at a lower level. The issue that emerges is whether to target the successful or the unsuccessful with finite public resources?

## The state

The most critical challenge to the Aboriginal arts sector is currently posed, in my view, by the state, with some of the very positive policy proposals of 2003 already appearing dated, less than two years on and even before implementation.

The argument that I have put forward in this lecture is that the success of Aboriginal art over the past 30 years has been largely dependent on state support. Yet I am sure that it would not surprise this audience that while this has been crucial and welcome, there has never been enough, a common enough complaint in the cultural sector. However, in the Aboriginal arts sector under-investment appears especially problematic because such clear success from government support has been relatively rare, yet both policy makers and the bureaucracy have invariably misunderstood the hybrid nature of art centres, as both cultural and commercial enterprises. And there seems to have been limited effort to fund arts support on any equitably or transparent needs basis.<sup>10</sup>

On the historical funding side alone, the size of the NACISS program has remained frozen in dollar terms since its establishment some 13 years ago. This has meant two things. First, there has been constant pressure on art centres to become independent of public support, a pressure contingent on viewing them as commercial rather than mixed enterprises. During the 1990s, as some art centres expanded and became more successful, the knee-jerk state response was to cut their support. Such action was not informed by their performance, but rather by the fact that funding was fixed and there was no capacity to expand into un- and under-resourced regions, including in more settled parts of Australia, without defunding some of the successful. Some art centres may have

the capacity to eventually become self-sustaining, but in situations of ongoing market failure this is unlikely.

Second, a major problem with defunding the successful is that, unintentionally but very clearly, it provides perverse incentives—success is penalized! It is more appropriate to recognise the success of the arts as a means to convert customary and contemporary specialities to economic and cultural benefit and, perhaps, compare outcomes with other programs in an open and contestable way. Surely, it is preferable to continue to support those that shine and that can be held up as aspirational models for newer centres.

Third, the stagnation in operational funding has diverted attention from the capital funding needs of art centres for physical infrastructure, including art centre buildings and staff housing. There are indications that there are significant backlogs developing and a failure to address this issue will result in serious bottlenecks that will jeopardise the potential of the sector.<sup>11</sup>

Of broader concern are the changes in Indigenous affairs in Australia in the past 12 months that have seen the abolition of ATSIC, the national Indigenous representative body, and the transfer (or mainstreaming) of its arts and culture programs to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA). The central terms of Indigenous affairs have shifted dramatically in the last year from self determination, self management and self governance, to mainstreaming, whole-of-government, and shared responsibility agreements (SRAs). Underpinning this shift in discourse is a policy commitment to re-allocate Indigenous-specific resources away from urban situations to the more remote. This does not augur well for urban-dwelling Indigenous artists who may wish to access NACISS and other arts support programs.<sup>12</sup>

Such ideologically-driven policy shifts represent significant potential risks to community-based art centres and are far removed from the successful 'at arms length' model of funding community arts practice. It is of considerable concern that public patronage of the arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may not be as philanthropic, or as enlightened, as the cultural initiatives of some 30 years ago. Of particular concern is that in the headlong rush to deliver 'joined up' government with all the coordination benefits this may deliver, the state appears likely to require art centres to sign SRAs, without due consideration of the particularities and peculiarities of the arts, as distinct to other community activities.<sup>13</sup> An associated issue is how artists' participation in the CDEP scheme will be viewed, with engagement in the arts likely to be regarded as a 'community development' rather than as a proper income-generating job.<sup>14</sup>

There is a real risk in this new approach that the arts will get caught up in political and bureaucratic attempts to address the paradox with which I began:



how is it that dynamic, innovative and successful art movements thrive in the squalor evident at many remote Indigenous communities? And more worryingly perhaps, how might the state seek to fiscally influence the arts, via SRAs, to ensure that it plays a role in closing the socio-economic gaps created by the colonial encounter, historical legacies, cultural differences, intergovernmental buck passing, and decades of neglect? Surely there is a real risk that too much will be asked of the arts in such contexts, with too little being invested in the complex inter-cultural brokering on which its success is founded.

## Conclusion: Aboriginal art at a crossroads?

I would like to end this lecture by returning to the two vignettes I introduced at the beginning, but in reverse order. I began by referring to Richard Bell's pessimism about the current state and future of the Indigenous visual arts sector. Bell (2003) laments that 'the number of artists holding the knowledge is declining and younger people are reluctant to take up the 'Old Ways'' and that 'Given the above, a dying, soon dead, culture is being raked over'.

Some two years on, I share some of Bell's pessimism, but I also believe that he underestimates the energy and vitality and inventiveness of the artists and the potency of art centres as brokering and advocacy institutions. There is no evidence that the number of arts practitioners is declining, nor of any decline or death of contemporary Indigenous visual art forms—if anything the opposite is true, there are more and more artists, alongside artistic innovation that remains unmistakably Aboriginal in style. As Clemenger Prize winner, Kuninjku artist John Mawurndjul sees it, 'I am doing things differently. I am thinking about what my father told me. ... The way I paint is my own idea from my own way of thinking. I changed the law myself. We are new people. We new people have changed things (Mawurndjul 2004: 136).

This has certainly been evident in some recent major blockbuster exhibitions, *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* (Perkins and Finke 2000), and *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Wesern Arnhem Land Art* (Perkins 2004) at the Art Gallery of NSW; and *Colour Power: Aboriginal art post1984* (Ryan 2004) at the Ian Potter Centre, NGV Australia. At such exhibitions, intergenerational reproduction from many parts of Australia has been clearly on display; and in commercial galleries, old and young artists have emerged, old art forms are being recalibrated for the market and exciting new art styles are emerging.<sup>15</sup>

The appalling socio-economic circumstances of some remote Aboriginal communities where the arts flourish are more difficult to explain. As already noted, such circumstances have complex, diverse and highly contestable explanations. The nature of relations with the state is certainly among them and even today it is clear that the transition of many Aboriginal people to sedentary township life is incomplete and only partially successful. Another explanation is the ongoing tussle between two very different value systems and their complex articulations. The wonder of Aboriginal art is that it straddles these competing worldviews; it is arguably the perfect inter-cultural product. It is a form of fine art that non-Aboriginal audiences and arts aficionados value highly; it is a cultural product with unquestionable value and status in the artists' home communities; and it is a means for artists to make a living while simultaneously making powerful political statements about the things that matter, land rights,

robust customs, kin relations and identity. This amalgam explains both the distinctiveness of this art and why it works so well inter-culturally.

It would be nice to end by stating unequivocally that the arts efflorescence of the last 30 years will be replicated for the next 30 years. Such a prognosis is possible, but it will be contingent on maintaining sight of the foundations of past success—community-controlled organisations that professionally and effectively collect, document, and market Aboriginal art. The ultimate challenge for the state is to recognise the fundamental centrality of such inter-cultural institutions to the ongoing viability of Aboriginal art everywhere in Australia. The ultimate challenge for us is to hold the state accountable for maintaining and enhancing this success through political processes and arts activism, avenues that might not be so readily available to artists and their brokering institutions.

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## Author's note

**Professor Jon Altman** is an economist and anthropologist who has researched the production and marketing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual art for over two decades. His arts research is largely animated by his ongoing collaborations with Kuninjku artists from western Arnhem Land and the major arts organization Maningrida Arts and Culture with whom he has worked since 1979. In 1989, Altman chaired the federal government's review of the Aboriginal arts industry that developed the blueprint for the current National Arts and Crafts Industry Support Strategy. In 2003, he advised the Northern Territory Government on the development of its Indigenous Arts Strategy *Building Strong Arts Business*. Recently, he collaborated with Hetti Perkins, Apolline Kohen and Luke Taylor in mounting the major retrospective exhibition *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2004. In 1990, Professor Altman was appointed the Foundation Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, Canberra where he remains some 15 years later.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> While I use the term Aboriginal art throughout, I recognise that there are also many Torres Strait Islander artists and so the term is used inclusively but in preference to the less common option Indigenous art.
- <sup>2</sup> The La Perouse community south of Sydney has a long history of producing artifacts for sale to tourists, a practice first recorded in the Aboriginal camps at Circular Quay and Botany Bay in the 1880s that continues today (Hinkson 2001: 122).
- <sup>3</sup> Philip Batty (pers. comm. 31 January 2005) also believes that the production of churingas for sale to tourists paved the way for the transfer of churinga designs onto canvas as evident in the early work of Kaapa Tjampitjinpa (illustrated in Bardon and Bardon 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> Note that welfare payments were only partially available at outstations until the early 1980s.
- <sup>5</sup> Incorporation is required to receive public funding, although some may in fact be unincorporated business units within larger organisations.
- <sup>6</sup> The term industry is ugly and was principally a historical response to the government of the day's focus on industry strategies under the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (Australian Government 1987). Mea culpa, I saw this as a means to an end during the opportunity provided by the arts review, now I prefer the more value-free term Indigenous arts sector.
- <sup>7</sup> Like mainstream artists (see Throsby and Hollister 2003), arts income alone is rarely sufficient to support artists and their families and access to CDEP scheme income as well as other citizenship entitlements provides a crucial income base (or income supplementation) for artists.
- <sup>8</sup> Referred to in the central Arnhem Land context as 'baki' (tobacco) art or more broadly as tourist art produced by fine art practitioners.
- <sup>9</sup> See ACCC ejournal catalogue <[www.accc.gov.au](http://www.accc.gov.au)> description of action taken by ACCC against Australian aboriginal Art Pty Ltd over a s.52 Trade Practices Act alleged misleading or deceptive conduct in relation to the authenticity of Aboriginal souvenirs.
- <sup>10</sup> A problem that is evident for funding of all services to Aboriginal people as noted quite forcefully by the Indigenous Funding Inquiry (Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001).
- <sup>11</sup> This issue has been raised by ANKAAA, Desert Inc and Ananguku Inc (2004). In a recent infrastructure needs assessment, Desert (2005) has conservatively estimated this backlog at over \$8 million for its 34 members in central Australia.
- <sup>12</sup> This is counter to representations made to the Inquiry to the Needs of Urban Dwelling Indigenous Peoples (Parliament of Australia 2001: 100–01) by urban artists who highlighted the lack of recognition (and support) of the diversity in contemporary Indigenous art.
- <sup>13</sup> See DCITA 'Guidelines for Funding' at <[www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au)> released on 11 February 2005 which suggest that funding priority will be given to applicants who are included in a SRA.

- <sup>14</sup> See the CDEP Discussion Paper released by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations on 21 February 2005 <[www.dewr.gov.au](http://www.dewr.gov.au)> the mainstream state agency now running the CDEP scheme and its proposal to trifurcate the scheme that will also be dependent on SRA sign-off.
- <sup>15</sup> Examples here are very numerous and include for illustrative purposes only Walpiri artist Shorty Tjangala Robertson making a late entry into the market at Alcaston Gallery in his 70s; the natural fibre and ochre ground paintings on board by Ted Egan Tjangala, Dinny Nolan Tjampitjinpa, Johnny Possum Tjapaljarri and Albie Moriss Tjampitjinpa presented in the exhibition 'Wamulu' at the Annandale Galleries in March 2005; and the works in wire and other materials by Swan Hill Koori artist Lorraine Connelly-Northey represented in the 2003 RAKA Award and at the NGV.