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**artsource**  
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**Inquiry into the Indigenous visual arts sector  
Artsource, the Artists Foundation of WA Ltd  
November 2006**

**t h e a r t i s t s f o u n d a t i o n o f W A**

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## **ARTSOURCE**

Artsource is the peak representative body for visual artists in WA, and provides practical support and information services to over 2000 artists, art workers, clients and associates. In 2005, artsource referred in excess of \$2.9m worth of opportunities for its artist members. Over 600 artsource members + subscribers enjoy a range of benefits including access to our expertise, networks + our comprehensive range of services. We run three programs and a range of services for artists. *Further information attached to this document.*

## **SUMMARY**

Indigenous artists and communities have exhibited an extraordinary generosity by sharing their culture and lives through the contemporary and traditional artwork they have created over the past sixty years. In order for all Australians to benefit from the creative capacity of Indigenous Australians it is necessary to nurture the capacity of the sector and reward the individuals and communities through:

Acknowledgement of the wealth of creativity and the important place it has in the development of an Australian culture

Appropriate, committed ongoing funded programs and education as a minimum requirement

Development and mentoring of Indigenous people wishing for a career within or associated with the arts sector

Ongoing infrastructure support for art centres and communities where arts are practiced

Whole of government approach with shared reporting and acquittal requirements

## **ARTSOURCE CONTACT, RELATIONSHIPS WITH INDIGENOUS ARTISTS AND COMMUNITIES AND SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

Since 2002, and in response to a gap in service delivery, we have been working intensively with Indigenous artists in regional and metropolitan WA. It is fair to say that from time to time, our staff and visiting artists have almost been overwhelmed by the outstanding talent and ability of some of the artists we have met. And yet, for the most part, these artists are on an existing CDEP scheme that has no capacity to engage with an arts development practice. In that time and through our workshop program and intensive one to one work with Indigenous artists we have observed that:

- There are considerable numbers of artists whose practice is not supported in any way via art centres, galleries, agents or communities.
- There is little understanding by Indigenous artists of the role and practices of the commercial art world and a limited willingness to question those practices.
- There are real opportunities for Indigenous artists to engage with public art through a client base of state government, local government and a private sector hungry for the input of high quality Indigenous artwork either through consultation or design and construction.
- Many Indigenous artists view their art practice very differently from the western model of developing a CV, building a reputation, exhibiting in ever more prestigious galleries and being collected by state and corporate collections. These are not issues that many of the artists we work with place high on their agenda. The goals tend to relate more closely to gaining an income, rather than building a career.
- With few exceptions, the earlier and more intensively a particular region was inhabited by European settlers, the less connection to a confident and clearly identifiable art practice is evident.
- Even major regional centres have little in the way of cultural infrastructure that effectively tells the story of the area and represents the practices both past and present of their Indigenous peoples. This lack is compounded in smaller regional areas.
- The areas where social, economic and cultural benefits are most clearly seen are those where a holistic approach has been taken to the community and where ownership of direction is indisputable.
- The use of the term 'Aboriginal style' has become a mask for unscrupulous practice and passing off
- Art Centres and small communities need to invest an inordinate amount of time preparing funding applications, writing reports and acquitting grants to all sorts of sources.
- There is confusion among many communities about the mark making artists are 'allowed' to use and the ethics of particular styles of art including the deeper meaning of those marks and symbols.

## **INQUIRY ISSUES**

### **The current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector**

We are only in a position to comment on the scope of visual arts in regions in which we have worked. Apart from the high end of painted canvas works shown in galleries and art centres, there are two other key areas of development; public art and the tourist market – both expanded on in the section on future opportunities.

Since 2002, we have worked with over 500 artists, at all levels of development. The interest in production of small scale and souvenir style products in some regions is very high, with small canvases, carved and painted objects, writing paper, jewelry etc being very popular lines of production.

### **The economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector;**

The benefits delivered by the sector to individuals, local communities and to Australia as a whole through the triple bottom line method of accountability have been written about and described at length, particularly in terms of the real benefits derived by the makers of artworks and their communities.

Perhaps a less visible but vitally important issue, relates to mainstream Australia's competitive spirit. We are a nation that is extraordinarily proud when we find we are the best at something. Almost everyone in Australia, whether holding an interest in the arts or not, is aware that art by Indigenous Australians has attracted world wide attention, praise and market share. This has caused a wave of interest in Aboriginal art by a sector that would have been otherwise uninterested and has proved to be a key to altering perceptions by mainstream Australia and a new interest in investing in art by companies and individuals.

### **The overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector;**

While individuals within the sector – particularly those who have been nurtured through the Art Centre model have benefited and there has been a flow on benefit to their communities, there are a frightening number of stories of carpet-bagging, outright theft of work and mis-use of copyright.

In order to create a sustainable industry, a holistic approach that recognises the integral nature of art practice combined with cultural practice, daily living and social development and support is fundamental. There is a lack of infrastructure that bleeds into every facet of community life.

Specific issues include:

- The need for generational passing on of knowledge and stories in order to feed the next generation is a pre-requisite for continuation.
- Appropriate infrastructure geared to the needs and capacity of small communities

Affecting the future capacity of the sector is its credibility in the marketplace. There has been much written about carpet baggers, issues of authenticity.

- Crucial to a sustainable industry is the integrity of the product and systems for educating and informing the purchasing public.

Few Indigenous artists are fully aware of the role and practices of the commercial art world and there is limited willingness to question those practices and to insist on ethical written contracts and agreements.

- Education at all levels is necessary in order to equip art centres, communities and individual artists with a sense of the marketplace and its operation

**Opportunities for strategies and mechanisms that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability, including to deal with unscrupulous or unethical conduct;**

When Governments use the term 'sustainability', they seem to mean 'without ongoing government funds'. Whereas sustainability is really the capacity to be maintained and continue – and continuing is currently at risk for many artists and small art centres, let alone those communities that have never been able to afford a working studio space.

The great difficulty with attempting to deal with unscrupulous behaviour is that it tends to find its home in more regulation; and the cost of implementing those regulations become administrative costs for governments to bear. The reality is that unscrupulous behaviour will occur wherever there is a profit to be made.

At a minimum, artists need to understand the environment in which they are operating and be given the tools with which to protect themselves.

Governments need to understand and commit to growing capacity and true sustainability (continuation), and the clearest way to do this is to resource the sector sufficiently and with ongoing assured program funds to ensure that the education and understanding that artists and the industry require can be provided. Integral to this should be the employment, mentoring and training of

Indigenous people capable of gaining knowledge of the sector and systems and the capacity to transfer that knowledge over a considerable period of time.

In a modest way, artsource endeavours to provide Indigenous artists with the knowledge of the arts industry, ethical practice, understanding of copyright, moral rights and how to present themselves and their art practice in the best possible light. While we have built a considerable network of Indigenous artists practicing outside of art centres, those practitioners are still highly vulnerable to risky practices as they search to generate an income from their practice and be independent of government support. The pride of artists who have been able to distance themselves from income support is a significant reminder of the will for independence.

**Future opportunities for further growth of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, including through further developing international markets.**

We have established through our Employment Agency that there are real opportunities for Indigenous artists to engage with public art through a client base of state government, local government and a private sector hungry for the input of high quality Indigenous artwork either through consultation or design and construction. This represents a considerable avenue for employment and income for artists to operate either as design consultants for a team or as single operators.

Necessary for artists to enjoy this market is an acknowledgement and support of mentoring systems that allows Indigenous artists to develop skills in concept development, understanding artwork briefs, contracts and sub-contracting, and the materials used in constructing works on a larger scale and in an external environment.

The tourist market is particularly interested in a cultural experience and learning, almost more than the acquisition of objects. A good cultural experience is often hitched to a purchase and the arena is limited in employment and training of Indigenous operators at all levels. Sustainability again requires employment of Indigenous people with a knowledge of the visual arts training and working as arts administrators, curators, consultants, teachers, artists in residence, gallery and museum attendants. These are only a snapshot of the avenues open to Indigenous practitioners.

#### *Attachment 1*

### **ARTSOURCE BACKGROUND AND RELATED PROGRAMS**

As the peak representative body for visual artists in WA, artsource provides practical support and information services to over 2000 artists, art workers, clients and associates. In 2005, artsource referred in excess of \$2.9m worth of opportunities for its artist members. Over 600 artsource members + subscribers enjoy a range of benefits including access to our expertise, networks + our comprehensive range of services. We run three programs and a range of services for artists:

#### **PROGRAMS**

##### **Employment Agency**

Channeling real income-earning opportunities to artists, connecting artists with projects + clients. Building best practice artist projects. Between January and October 2006, artsource filtered over \$4m of project opportunities to WA artists. A substantial number of those opportunities were either directed directly towards Indigenous artists or included Indigenous artists.

##### **Regional + Indigenous Artist Development**

Commonly known as Artist Mob, the program provides regional and Indigenous artists with opportunities to run a successful art practice. The program began operating in 2002 and has been developed and funded with a focus on the needs of Indigenous artists while always endeavouring to include regional artists.

The program aims to ensure that sufficient visual arts knowledge, interest and skills are developed and remain within the community, ensuring continuity and growth of the sector. We do this by developing and maintaining relationships between artists, local government and the private sector.

Artist Mob has run professional development workshops in the Great Southern, Goldfields Esperance, Mid West, South West, Pilbara and Gascoyne regions of WA as well as assisted the development of individual artists through intensive one to one advice and support.

**In 2006 artsource appointed 3 regional project officers to support artists locally on a part-time basis. Two of these positions are occupied by Indigenous Australians as part of artsource commitment to growing Indigenous participation in the arts administration sector.**

The Program delivers:

- Professional development in all arts related areas
- Potential for mentorship and collaborations with other artists
- Real opportunities for commissions and purchases of artwork
- Access to, and discussion about, stimulating visual material from other parts of the country and internationally
- Connections to Local Government, Regional Development Commissions, Industry and State Government for potential projects
- Knowledge to assist a broader understanding of the arts industry
- Information about the arts and funding agencies based in Perth, what they can do for artists

##### **Studios, Residencies + Exchanges**

Providing affordable spaces for artists to extend their practice + infusing local communities with creative industry.

Artsource manages four buildings housing 34 artists studios and is currently developing a new studio space specifically for emerging Indigenous artists.