

Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector

Cross Cultural Art Exchange (ccae)

Company overview

Cross Cultural Art Exchange (CCAIE) believes that the future of the Indigenous art industry will depend on the support and encouragement of young emerging artists. Our contribution is to promote and exhibit these artists in an international and national environment.

We aim to promote Indigenous art internationally by exhibiting works at prestigious commercial outlets and increase public awareness via non-selling exhibitions. Working closely with Indigenous Community Art Centres, CCAIE aims to encourage international markets to buy ethically and to educate them on cultural aspects of Indigenous Australian people.

With this in mind I would like to concentrate on points (c) (d) (e) and (f)

(c) The overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector;

Community Art Centres often represent the nucleus of diverse language groups living in close proximity to one another. They are the engine for nurturing and encouraging artists, guaranteeing artistic quality, maintaining standards and ensuring the fair distribution of monies. Under the guidance of art co-coordinators and staff, these Centres are one of the only forms of regulation and protection for Indigenous artists in remote Australia. They act as a buffer between the harsh realities of a highly competitive art market, and the cultural validation and reproduction which the creation of these works represents for their artists. Art Centres have proven themselves to be highly successful in brokering Indigenous Art to the broader market. It has done so via hard working, multi-skilled people working under difficult circumstances, in an under-resourced environment. That the industry has been so successful is not just testimony to the skill of the many artists but also the hard work of the co-coordinators. This said I see no reason to change the Art Centre model apart from significantly increasing funding to assist in staffing and resources.

Many Art Centres are reliant on CDEP (community development employment program). By subsidizing the employment of local people, CDEP assists in basic training that provides a stepping stone into the organizing and running of a Community Art Centre. This in turn builds significant skills in assisting inter-cultural relations and furthering self-determination. As Art Centres act as a mediator between artists/community and art market, then it is vital that training of local people be not only maintained, but further encouraged.

The withdrawal of CDEP threatens the local people keen to enter the art industry and adds additional pressure to already under-resourced Art Centres.

(d) The current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector;

Financing is the critical priority for the Indigenous Art Industry. As the industry expands so too does the role of the Art Centre Coordinator or Field Officer. Not only do these skilled workers maintain vital client artist relationships but also juggle marketing, finances, documenting, retailing and freight. The amount of funding has not risen with the increased demand for the work.

Other areas requiring increased funding are:

- Staff housing in remote communities
- Adequate storage facilities for Art Centres
- Mediating bodies such as ANKAAA and DESART
- Technologies such as internet training and web building
- Educational programs and material

(e) 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;

Recent media has focused on the methods and practice of unscrupulous and unethical conduct of certain companies and individuals. The negative pressure that these people put on the artists and the artists' family is extreme and threatens the future of the industry. These issues are not new and have been present in some form since Indigenous art became commercially viable. To implement some accreditation to discourage these activities is overdue. While this would alleviate some of the existing problems it would not eliminate it. Artists' obligations towards family, relatives exploiting artists by family rights to intellectual property, the desire or need for quick cash or simply the artists right to choose who they want to paint for will hinder the success of such regulation.

Education of all industry sectors is an important process to combat unscrupulous and unethical conduct. Most consumers, when made aware of industry issues, are more than interested and happy to proceed with their purchase knowing that it is ethically correct.

Educating the artists is equally as important as educating the consumer. Artists need to be aware of the possible damage to their career by selling their work for a "quick dollar". Due to financial constraints and cash flow issues most Art Centres are forced to wait until the work has been sold to the

public before being able to pay the artist. In many cases that delay is too long when the production of art is the only form of income. Adding to the problem of income is the strong cultural obligations that bind the artists to his/her family which includes the fair dispersal of money. Carpetbaggers exploit this urgency to procure artwork.

The communication void that exists between the artists and the market demonstrates the lack of understanding between point of production and point of sale. Understanding can only be achieved through more emphasis on the communication strategies between the players.

The Art Centre has a crucial role in educating both consumer and practitioner. Education needs to be a gentle process in which all participants can slowly absorb knowledge and change. Art Centres do this by acting as a buffer between the highly competitive art market and the cultural environment of "country". Courses at educational facilities, such as Charles Darwin University, that relate to specific Art Centre roles would also be advantageous.

Educating the market is one of the most effective tools against unscrupulous and unethical conduct. However without adequate funding most Art Centres lack the human resources to implement this effectively.

As the continued success of the industry largely lies in the next generation of artists, then educating them about marketing strategies and the commercial aspects of the art industry is beneficial. This education, through specific courses, CDEP scheme, or internships minimises the opportunity for carpetbagging. These initiatives also require future funding.

(f) Opportunities for existing government support programs for Indigenous visual arts and crafts to be more effectively targeted to improve the sector's capacity and future sustainability;

Jon Altman states: "There is a need for expert assessments to be made of appropriate options to incubate and support currently under-resourced Indigenous art forms such as literature, music, performing arts and multi-media. These art forms may experience particular difficulties owing to NT diseconomies of small scale. Each may require the formation of innovative and hybrid arts support infrastructure, possibly linked to mainstream arts infrastructure that provides a mix of developmental, marketing, and grants and opportunity identification support "¹

Young creative minds should not be confined to only a few forms of artistic practice. To broaden their artistic practices, artists need modern facilities and equipment such as digital cameras, film, computers and relevant software within the community or Community Art Centre.

¹Jon Altman, An Indigenous Arts Strategy for the Northern Territory: Recommended Framework Incubating Under resourced Art forms page 9, 2003

These facilities would attract young members to the arts contributing to the long term sustainability of the industry.

Currently there is a lack of young Indigenous men participating in the art industry. Senior members of communities are concerned by this lack of interest because art is closely linked to the generational transmission of cultural knowledge. Introducing alternative forms of artistic practice has the potential of attracting a new generation of artists.

Support organizations such as ANKAAA and DESART should have a greater role in controlling the Indigenous Art Industry. A primary function of the ANKAAA charter is to protect the rights of artists and promote ethical business practice. The main functions are:

- Foster and develop the Aboriginal Art Industry for the benefit of its member artists and their organizations
- Provide industry specific information
- Provide advice and direct practical assistance with bookkeeping, submissions, marketing contacts, employment issues, license agreements, product development and e-commerce etc
- Provide representation at an industry level
- Provide advocacy, liaison and lobbying for the development of the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry
- Act as a contact/information point for government departments and agencies, institutions, art galleries and organizations, independent merchandisers, exhibition curators and other industry groups
- Circulate information
- Facilitate Aboriginal art training courses within the Northern Territory, promoting greater access to training for artists, through community workshops and structured certificated courses.
- Network with other art support groups, promoting Aboriginal Art at a national level
- Provide advice and referrals for Aboriginal copyright²

Recent attention on these organizations has forced them to be more outspoken in regards to industry issues. However they need to be better funded and given a clearer definition of their current role(s)

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

A common question from community art co-coordinators is "do we need to create an international market?"

²ANKAAA website <http://www.ankaaa.org.au/aboutus.htm>

Their question is generated by the current demand for senior artists and the knowledge that an international market will increase the pressures placed on those artists. International exhibitions could provide one avenue to young emerging artists whose work is under-appreciated in Australia. This will assist in alleviating added stress that could be placed on senior artists.

This year saw an increase in major exhibitions presented internationally, amplifying the need to control the integrity of the industry, the quality of the work and to ensure the fair distribution of money back to the artists and their respective communities.

As interest in Indigenous art grows globally, it is imperative for exhibitions to be ethical. There is a risk of national issues being transferred to the international market.

The wildly fluctuating prices being generated between auction houses and the commercial outlets only increase consumer confusion of the market. Regulation is paramount to prevent international markets becoming apprehensive.

Conclusion

There are industry concerns that with the passing of senior artists, cultural integrity will fade. With the correct support from funding, education and modern equipment, and with the mentoring of the senior artists, young emerging artists will continue to develop a vibrant and profitable arts industry.

In a time when communities are so marginalized and disadvantaged, then what better way to increase moral, pride and self-determination than through the arts.

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