

Submission to the Inquiry into the Indigenous visual arts and craft sector

From C. Godden, Alice Springs NT

Introduction

I write as a private citizen with some experience in this industry sector. My submission concentrates primarily on the importance of Aboriginal-owned Art Centres in Central Australia and the need for Government support for these important organisations. My experience in this industry sector is attached as Appendix A.

My responses to the TOR of this Inquiry are as follows:

(a) The current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector

Little research

The reason that nobody knows the current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector is that there is almost no research apart from that done by Professor Jon Altman, which is very valuable but does not yet give us the full picture.

Cash economy

In Central Australia, because such an enormous amount of art product changes hands for cash, even if research was done amongst private sector and Aboriginal-owned enterprises which actually keep accurate records, it would still record only the tip of the iceberg.

One of the reasons the industry is so beset by problems of exploitation in Central Australia is the preference of many disadvantaged Aboriginal people to receive cash or goods in return for their artworks, as well as their lack of ability to provide receipts or keep records, and on the other hand the reluctance of many purchasers such as dealers or middle men to keep any records since this would require tax compliance and evidence of, in many cases, exploitation.

(b) The economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector

Already identified benefits

Many people have written eloquently and in detail over many years of the benefits of Aboriginal owned Art Centres in remote communities. It is, in my view, tragic that we should have to be justifying the benefits of the sector to our own Government in this day and age. Surely by now, some twenty years after the establishment of the 'industry' in Central Australia, the Government it should understand the value of the sector which is well-described in many texts and in extensive research papers including *The Art And Craft Story* by Felicity Wright and in Professor Jon Altman's work.

The Indigenous Art Centres Strategy and Action Plan

Under Minister Richard Alston much progress was made within the Government, and the Minister and his staff seemed relatively well-informed, their understanding and intentions for support is expressed, if briefly, in the Government's own *Indigenous Art Centres Strategy and Action Plan*.

Unquantifiable benefits

Pride, self esteem, maintenance of culture, transmission of culture, inter-generational learning, meaningful activity, purposeful life, creative achievement, recognition from peers; recognition from national and international art media, provision of much of our nation's 'corporate identity'; provision of 'Australia's greatest cultural export' and other social and spiritual benefit are difficult to quantify. But they should not be discounted even in the most rational market economies. This is an industry that cannot and should not simply be measured in statistical economic data.

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

Cultural and artistic sustainability

I believe the Central Australian contribution to the sector is culturally and artistically sustainable. Central Australian Aboriginal culture is rich in tradition and has an ability to evolve and adapt to contemporary challenges, after all it has sustained the people for thousands of years. Aboriginal artists constantly surprise us with their versatility, talent, originality and their ability to generate artworks with contemporary expression and traditional resonance.

Economic sustainability

It takes many years for an Aboriginal owned Art Centre to become financially self-sufficient. In whitefella culture most small businesses will start with an investment of contributed capital or capital obtained from a loan. Most Central Australian Art Centres are started from nothing, with virtually no resources, and are unable to generate sufficient cash flow or accumulate sufficient working capital for many years.

Add to this lack of start up resources the other challenges: the difficulties of recruiting and retaining professional staff; the appalling lack of physical infrastructure such as housing for staff and safe or suitable work spaces; the pressures of extreme climate and remote location; inter-cultural challenges on both sides such as the lack of governance experience or expertise of artists or the lack of knowledge of cultural priorities or Aboriginal languages of white staff; the difficulties of communicating with people with little or no shared language about complex business arrangements and legal obligations, not to mention the need to understand the artists' *Tjukurrpa* or tribal 'business', their activities and obligations.

I believe that for the Central Australian portion of the sector to become sustainable it will need substantial Government investment.

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

The current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of Central Australian Art Centres was detailed in the Desart report already provided to the Federal and Territory Governments.

(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

Improving industry practices

There is a good body of ‘best practice’ policies, procedures and systems in the industry, which are followed in well-run Aboriginal-owned Art Centres, ethical commercial galleries and ethical auction houses. There are few opportunities however to transmit ‘best practice’ except through the occasional funding from project grants for training or workshops or through Desart and ANKAAA organised activities.

Without resources it is difficult for the sector to raise overall standards. There is a flood of poor product onto the market. In Central Australia some proportion of poor products comes from under-resourced Art Centres, the majority from town artists working for private dealers. Within Central Australia it is also possible to source fake artworks mass produced presumably in China or Indonesia.

I submit suggestions relevant to improving industry practices by supporting Art Centres in section (f)

Consumer education

Consumer education is important, but there are few opportunities or resources for this to happen. Industry groups such as Desart or ANKAAA have neither the financial or professional resources to reach a wide audience. For example, a brochure *Purchasing Australian Aboriginal Art – A Consumer Guide* produced in 2005 with the support of the NT Government, could be more effectively written, better designed, produced in substantial quantities and distributed widely right across Australia. The message could be reinforced with a media campaign including print advertising, TV advertisement and improved internet access to the message. Without substantial funds the important message is not getting to potential markets.

Dealing with unscrupulous or unethical conduct

There are private dealers, commercial galleries and backyard production groups that operate with great respect and care for their Aboriginal artists. They pay fairly, support artists and their families with health and other issues, look after intellectual property issues, invest their artists’ earnings, and manage their estates after they have passed away. It is important that such people are not tarred with the same brush as the very large number of unethical operators in the industry in Central Australia.

Aboriginal-owned Art Centres are obligated (and rightly so) to provide their audited financial statements to ORAC. However they must compete with dealers operating with substantial cash resources and no requirement for transparency or accountability. One wonders how these individuals and businesses account to the Taxation Department for the massive profits they make at the expense of Aboriginal artists.

The opportunities to deal with unethical practices include:

- Consumer education
- Widespread adoption of the proposed Code of Conduct
- Better resourcing of Aboriginal owned Art Centres so they can better compete with carpetbaggers who offer cash
- In particular, strong support for Aboriginal owned Art Centres in Alice Springs – there are three at present which provide alternatives to carpetbaggers
- More accommodation alternatives for artists visiting Alice Springs from remote communities so they do not fall prey to motel and taxi operators
- ATO investigation of the large number of known unethical operators in Alice Springs

(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

Recognise the invisible industry

In Central Australia we are inundated with supposed economic opportunities for Aboriginal people – there are constant seminars and symposia to talk about Indigenous pastoral industry, Indigenous tourism, and Indigenous involvement in the mining sector, Indigenous training in hospitality, or horticulture, or retail, or other careers. The few art development programs, for example those run by Batchelor College in Alice Springs are under-resourced and reaching only a few of the many communities who would welcome training.

Amidst all this plethora of ‘opportunities’ the one truly successful industry appears invisible to both Governments. Here in Alice Springs there are at least 40 outlets selling Aboriginal art, and goodness knows how many white people, not to mention the overall \$40 million contribution to the economy. Yet this vibrant industry does not rate a mention in the most recent Alice Springs ABARE Regional Outlook Conference (November 2006).

The effective model of supported Art Centres

There is no doubt that the example of ‘successful’ Art Centres demonstrates the viability of the model. For example, when able to raise funds for good infrastructure, when able to recruit and retain good staff, when supported through to sustainability and where supported by their artists and their communities Art Centres can become shining examples of Aboriginal owned and controlled enterprise.

Good examples

One can, for example, point to Warmun Art Centre, Warlayirti Arts at Balgo, and Warlukurlangu Artists at Yuendumu. The first two although now well able to sustain themselves without operational funding have had substantial Government funding to provide adequate infrastructure in the past. Warlukurlangu Artists, with both operational and capital works funding support, have transformed themselves in a few years from a \$320,000 p.a. business to a \$1.75 m turnover supporting 400 artists in two communities, exhibiting internationally and nationally, and bringing added benefits to their community such as an eye health program, a dog program, and contribution to a new community swimming pool. Such contributions from strong Art Centres include Papunya Tula's substantial support for the dialysis unit at Kintore.

Poorly supported Art Centres

At present there are a large number of Art Centres on a drip feed of just enough NACISS funding to employ one person, but without sufficient infrastructure funding to create suitable conditions and without sufficient operational funding to achieve any effective training, production of quality product or an effective level of sales. Many Art Centres are operating without the most basic of requirements such as a toilet, air-conditioning, or running water, by harassed over-extended staff and being virtually 'funded for failure'.

Lack of Northern Territory Government support

NT support for Aboriginal Art Centres is almost non-existent. Their Strategy is impressive on paper, however to date financial support has been a trickle of project grants. No infrastructure funding has been available, and despite a number of staff with titles relating to Indigenous arts little practical assistance or advice has been forthcoming in the Central Australian region. This contrasts very markedly with the WA model where the Office of Aboriginal Economic Development has provided a very effective and committed project officer to support remote Art Centres, and that office has galvanised funding support for a number of WA Art Centres. In addition, Country Arts WA has provided specific and effective funding to support Art Centres, for example to Tjanpi Aboriginal Baskets and to the work of a Regional Arts Officer for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

Some arms of the NT Government are undertaking activities that can be seen as counter productive to strengthening the industry. For example, providing a building to a community for an 'Art Centre' where the community does not have its own Aboriginal-owned and managed enterprise, and where the community paints for a private dealer, where 'book up' is reputed to be the currency for the artworks and where there is no transparency of transactions. Thus the NT Government is effectively subsidising a private business.

SRA funded Art Centres

The Federal Government is also providing 'Art Centre' buildings under SRA arrangements to some communities. There has been no investigation as to whether these communities meet the Desert minimum criteria for sustainability which include: a working governance structure; a cohort of artists; a definable arts product; a presence in the market; sound business practice; appropriate infrastructure and a history of success in attracting additional support for a range of projects.

Well established Art Centres that meet these Desert criteria but are in desperate need of adequate infrastructure find it confusing that communities are being 'given Art Centre buildings in order for the Government to achieve SRAs. Some of these communities receiving so called 'Art Centres' have no idea that DCITA NACISS funding has been inadequate for many years and that their chances of getting professional staff to support their artist is virtually non-existent.

Unfortunate results

Thus both the NT and Federal Governments are setting up expectations in communities that without operational funding support are very likely to lead to further failed community projects and the associated disappointments.

Suggestion to Governments

Before making high profile awards to private businesses dealing in Aboriginal art it would be worthwhile if Government agencies asked if the transactions with artists were transparent and documented, if 'book up' was involved, if the artists were completely happy with the arrangements or whether they had made complaints about their treatment.

The Federal Government needs to support Art Centres

Remote communities are currently in a high level of flux, with the Government moving the goal posts on so many programs. I am not averse to challenging welfare dependency, but it needs to be recognised that these substantial changes to community operations add yet another level of challenge to creating sustainable enterprises. Three current issues in particular impact on Art Centres. They are changes to the permit system; the new leasehold proposals on Aboriginal lands; and changes to Centrelink benefits. Changes to the permit system and the ability to lease land and set up enterprises in communities could open the doors to carpetbaggers working more openly on communities.

At present, all but the strongest Art Centres cannot survive unsupported within remote communities. However with a reasonable investment from Government Art Centres can flourish and grow, and continue to provide wide ranging benefits to remote Aboriginal communities. This 'reasonable investment' is outlined below under (f).

(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.

I submit the following opportunities should be pursued:

- The NACIS program should fully implement its own *Indigenous Art Centres Strategy and Action Plan*, including providing stabilised three year funding. The strategy itself is sound, apart from its neglect of physical infrastructure. The NACIS program would be more effective if staff turnover was reduced and staff were better able to travel to see Art Centre conditions first hand.

- The NACIS program should receive substantially more funding so it can better support Aboriginal owned community based Art Centre enterprises. Currently it distributes only \$4 million p.a. for operational funding right across Australia. The need in Central Australia alone is far greater than the funds available.
- The NACIS program should also be given capital works funding to provide adequate infrastructure support Aboriginal owned community based Art Centre enterprises.
- NACIS operational funding should be extended to all Aboriginal owned Art Centres in Central Australia, provided they meet the appropriate criteria.
- Communities should not be given Art Centre buildings or infrastructure through SRAs unless they also receive NACIS operational funding, provided they meet the appropriate criteria and provided they have the capacity to govern such Art Centres.
- NT Government should not give Art Centre buildings to communities that do not have Aboriginal owned Art Centres enterprises and/or do not have the capacity to govern such Art Centres.
- NT Government should effectively implement its own *Building Strong Arts Business* strategy by actually providing support and funds to Aboriginal owned Art Centres.
- The Australia Council ATSIAB Art Centre support fund (VACS funding from the Myer report) should be continued and further resourced.
- The Australia Council ATSIAB range of grants should be further funded and extended. They have proved a very well-targeted and valuable source of funding to the sector in the past, but as the industry grows their pool of funds needs also to grow.
- All Governments should work to ensure industry support and widespread voluntary adherence to the new Code of Conduct. No government funding or awards should be provided to organisations that do not abide by the Code of Conduct.
- Substantial funds should be available for consumer education about purchasing authentic Aboriginal Art. A nation wide campaign should be conducted.
- Further support should be given to Desert and ANKAAA for the on-going delivery for valuable programs such as Networking the Nation; providing a locum position to assist Art Centre staff to have breaks or to keep Art Centres open when staff leave; Governance training, Desert Mob and other support activities.

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

I have nothing to submit on this topic.

C. Godden
27 November 2006

Appendix A Experience in this industry sector

I am a small business consultant with experience in strategic planning, business planning, marketing, business development and the development and implementation of various management systems including OHS&R, QA, Environmental Management, and HR. With qualifications in the Visual Arts (Master Fine Arts) and Business (MBA) I have had a thirty year career in various fields including in arts administration, business development, marketing and systems, as well as having taught visual arts at tertiary level, at two University based art colleges. My reviews and articles on the visual arts have been published in Sydney Morning Herald, Art and Australia and other journals.

Since moving to Alice Springs in early 2003 I have been particularly effective in assisting a number of small, primarily Aboriginal-owned organisations with strategic and business planning, and to gain Government funding, or to raise funds from other sources and to win tenders. I estimate I have assisted these organisations to raise funds to the value of approximately \$12 million.

I have worked closely with Desart, undertaking a number of consultancies for that organisation, as well completing numerous individual projects for various Aboriginal owned Art Centres. I have also undertaken arts-related consultancies for ATSIIS and Arts NT. I have had extensive contact with Aboriginal Art Centres in Central Australia. I have undertaken one project in which I visited all the Art Centres across the Kimberley. I have also done work related to Art Centres in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, the Barkly region and in Arnhem Land. Although a relative newcomer to the industry, I have had good exposure to the concerns of Aboriginal-owned Art Centres and can contribute to this Inquiry from my own perspective.

My submission concentrates therefore primarily on the importance of Aboriginal-owned Art Centres in Central Australia.