



MANINGRIDA ARTS & CULTURE

Inquiry into the Indigenous visual arts sector

Maningrida Arts & Culture overview

Mission statement:

MAC exists to promote the cultural assets, both artistic and knowledge based, of the Aboriginal people of the Maningrida region, principally through the efficient marketing of art of high quality and cultural integrity from the region, ensuring optimum returns to artists, protection of intellectual property, and promotion of cultural resource maintenance and enhancement objectives.

Maningrida Arts & Culture (MAC), formally established in 1973, is one of the oldest Aboriginal Arts Centre in Australia. Based in Maningrida community (North Central Arnhem Land), MAC is currently servicing more than 700 artists from Maningrida and its surrounding 34 outstations, covering an area of more than 10,000 square kilometers.

MAC pays its artists up front when works are brought into the arts centre and has a total acquisition policy which means that MAC buys each and every artwork that is brought by an artist. This creates certainty and security for artists, insures that their work is treated with respect, encourages the career of young and emerging artists and provides an income to ageing artists who are no longer producing their best work.

Since its establishment in the 1970s, MAC has developed an enviable reputation in the fine arts market for high quality product with comprehensive cultural and biographical documentation. However, it is only in recent years that MAC has evolved into a larger and more complex arts and cultural research organisation. MAC currently organizes more than 20 commercial exhibitions per year to promote its artists. This has proven successful to provide a career path for artists and raise their profile at a national and international level.

In addition to supporting more than 700 hundred artists, MAC is a significant local employer of Aboriginal people in the community. People work in packing and freight areas, photography, conservation, visual display and conduct tours of the

community Museum. Additionally the arts centre engages in cultural maintenance activities including the production of dictionaries, music recording, preservation of the archives, supporting researchers and students, responding to the community's request in respect of Cultural maintenance.

MAC has also opened its own retail outlet in Darwin in 2004.

MAC and MAC Darwin currently have currently 10 staff members, including 6 Aboriginal staff members employed under the CDEP scheme. MAC receives funding from the NACISS program which is put toward some of its salaried positions.

The economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector

The production of art in remote communities like Maningrida is often the only non-government money coming through the community and art has an enormous economical impact. For example, in the financial year 05/06, more than 1,1 million was distributed to artists in the Maningrida region. Art is a major success story for Maningrida people, and the self esteem, wellbeing and growing confidence of the artists cannot be overvalued.

As also previously stated, arts centres located in remote communities are often a significant employer of Aboriginal people who work as Arts Workers.

This is why **Arts Centres** in remote communities are crucial to the life and economy of communities. Arts Centres need the support of the government through efficient funding programs. Arts Centres also need to have proper infrastructures to service artists and this should be supported by the government to allow arts centres to grow and service in professional manners the artists it represents.

The overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector

MAC has worked hard to establish key partnerships with institutions, commercial galleries and private collectors which is fundamental in enabling artists to embark on a career trajectory. MAC provides a safe, honest and professional environment for artists.

Professional artists require professional marketing and it falls to the arts centres to provide this. A disturbing development in the Aboriginal art trade in Australia has been the emergence of the so called carpetbaggers. These are individuals who directly approach established artists with offers of immediate payment for their work. This payment usually takes the form of cash, but can also be alcohol, vehicles and recently, and most alarmingly, drugs. Carpetbaggers are the enemy of art centres, artists and good quality art. As opposed to art centres, carpetbaggers tend to neglect artist's career development, target only big name

artists, and pay the bare minimum for work. In their most evil manifestations, they have been known to confine artists to sweatshops. Maningrida Arts and Culture has worked long and hard for the artists and has managed to keep carpetbaggers largely at bay, however they remain an ever present threat. Invariably carpetbaggers are not effective agents for artists. Conversely, MAC is a genuine representative and advocate for the artists. Unlike Arts Centres, the carpetbaggers direct no effort towards the future development of the industry. The carpetbaggers have already had a negative effect on the market due to doubtful artists' provenance and lack of quality control. This will have a dramatic negative impact on the future of Aboriginal art production if nothing is done about it.

Recommendations:

- Support arts centres through adequate funding and increase of current funding available from DCITA
- Strengthen arts centres through adequate funding for training staff members and artists
- Organise a campaign to inform the public about best practices of arts centres and risks of buying from carpetbaggers

The current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector

Many arts centres are in need of additional funding support for both infrastructures and operational costs. Many arts centres in remote communities are operating from suboptimal buildings. For example, MAC is housed in a converted soup kitchen built in the 1960S. The building is inadequate and inappropriate for the display, storage and conservation of the artwork. Despite its successes, MAC is not in any position to build new facilities without government support.

The current funding available to arts centres is on yearly basis which does not allow arts centres to make accurate business planning. The constant stress of not knowing if an arts centre will receive some funding from one year to another is detrimental to the operations of arts centres. There has been also a tendency to de-fund arts centres that have been doing well. This is not encouraging arts centres to perform at their best. Successful arts centres should be rewarded in order to strengthen their operations and to allow them to grow to the next level.

Recommendations:

- Triennial NACISS funding for arts centres instead of yearly funding
- Create funding opportunities to upgrade or build arts centres facilities in remote communities.
- Provide training opportunities for artists and arts centres staff

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

- The government should embark on a campaign to educate the market and make consumers aware of Aboriginal Arts Industry issues
- Keep the Permit system for entry into Aboriginal Land. This will help to keep some of the carpetbaggers at bay.
- Keep the CDEP system in place to employ arts workers in remote arts centres. It provides meaningful jobs for people in communities
- Support Art Centre model
- Ensure Arts Centres have trained staff through creating training opportunities for arts centres staff
- Attract qualified staff in arts centres. Too often arts centres staff are poorly paid and housed in poor conditions if living in remote communities. This does not attract the best people for the job. Ensure funding is made available to attract quality staff and for staff housing in remote communities.
- Review the current Performance Indicators that NACISS funded arts centres have to fill for quarterly reports. The current format is inadequate and does not provide to DCITA a clear picture of arts centres' operations and achievements. With a better questionnaire, DCITA will be in the position to better assess arts centres performances and being able to act accordingly to ensure best practices across the board.

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

There is a need to educate the international market about Aboriginal art. Too often, the commercial shows one can see overseas are of poor quality and do not reflect the quality of current art production. I have seen many shows organised by carpetbaggers in Europe that give a poor name to Aboriginal art. Only a handful of successful arts centres such as Papunya Tula Artists and MAC have been able in recent years to organise quality shows overseas. This year, MAC had successful shows in the Kingdom of Bahrain, France and United Kingdom. MAC is National finalist in the 2006 Export Awards and is planning to dedicate more energy to expand its presence on the international art scene. However, a lot could be done to further developing international markets for Aboriginal artists through intelligent funding programs.

Recommendations:

- Provide funding for travelling non-commercial shows in overseas institutions to educate the market. This exposure to good quality works will provide a platform to establish new markets.
- Establish a touring exhibition program to educate overseas markets
- Austrade to work more closely with arts centres

- Provide funding support to arts centres for market research and promotion of art overseas
- Continue to fund arts centres for website developments and updating

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