

15th February 2007

Dr Ian Holland
Secretary
Environment, Communications, Information Technology & the Arts
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Holland,

Re: Inquiry into the Indigenous Visual Arts and Crafts Sector

My name is Beverly Knight, I am the founder and Managing Director of Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne and the State President of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Commercial Gallery Association (ACGA).

Established in 1989, Alcaston Gallery specialises in Indigenous Art. We have developed the careers of many important indigenous artists, and mentored and encouraged both fledgling and young artists.

I have traveled extensively over a 25 year period to remote and urban indigenous communities all over Australia, working closely with artists, their families and art enterprises. Alcaston Gallery exhibits nationally and internationally on a regular basis.

My interest in indigenous enterprises not only focused on the art sector, but also sport, in particular the AFL. As a director of the Essendon Football Club for the past 14 years, I have mentored, guarded and developed strategies for young athletes and their families.

As a director of AFL SportsReady, the national training company for the past 12 years I have also developed strategies for employment of young indigenous men and women with a significant degree of success.

As a non indigenous Australian, I support the inquiry in principle, but have not addressed the Terms of Reference as such, because as an individual, it would be impossible.

The following document gives you my personal view of the indigenous art sector.

Inquiry into the Indigenous Visual Arts and Crafts Sector

The Parliamentary Inquiry instigated by Senator Rod Kemp was welcomed and timely.

The initial response was to unite as many colleagues and art sector groups to support the inquiry, so as –

1. Senator Kemp and his parliamentary colleagues might be informed of the benefits and problematic issues associated with the sector;
2. The bureaucrats associated with both National and State Parliament might be informed of the issues and;
3. Most importantly, some form of regulation or Set of Standards could be adopted for the Indigenous arts sector, to go forward.

I accepted the invitation as a member of the ACGA to join the NAVA Reference Group for the National Indigenous Art Commercial Code of Conduct and Ethical Trade Strategies, chaired by Aden Ridgeway.

NAVA engaged consultant Jill Gientzotis and together the reference group is formulating a Code of Practice, which we believe will be acceptable, scalable and be able to be adopted by all groups within the Indigenous Art Sector.

I have read most of the submissions on the DICTA website; some are succinct and very good; some are bitter and short sighted; some very personal and of no benefit to anyone.

I would like to give you an overview of what my feelings, experience, thoughts and aspirations are at this point.

- As a non indigenous person, I feel an overwhelming pressure to ‘fix’ the problem myself! Of course this is quite ridiculous.
- I also believe the Indigenous art sector is being used as the ‘scapegoat’ for all the wrongs, injustices, and transition to the future, which indigenous Australians are experiencing.

This phenomena is happening because Indigenous Australians have found a way to communicate (via paintings) and develop a cash flow (by the sale of the paintings) in remote and urban Australia, where many other enterprises and economies have either collapsed or never eventuated.

So, once you ponder and develop these issues, you begin to realise that *this is really not about art*. But with some form of regulation and set of standards, there could be a bright light shinning at the end of a very long tunnel for all indigenous Australians.

Key Issues

The support of the art centre concept is crucial.

This support concerns infrastructure in the communities at a basic acceptable Australian standard level. This includes housing for staff, office and art centre building equipped to deal with a fledging economy and global business.

- A set of standards for Art Centre Management.
- Education for indigenous and non indigenous people to suitably equip themselves for positions of management, technical training, bookkeeping and remote living.

Universities and Technical Colleges graduate thousands of art students each year, without prospects of employment.

A 'remote' art centre stream would be a great opportunity to encourage a new and dedicated group of professionals rather than the often unqualified personnel that remote enterprises have to employ and rely on. This needs funding to attract qualified personnel.

- In general, the art sector in Australia suffers at the higher or skilled management end of the job market because we lose good graduates, curators etc in their 20's due to the poor pay and career prospects.

(Curator positions rarely come up in institutions and most commercial galleries employ 2 to 5 staff with a hands on working owner. Positions are highly competitive)

Developing the roles in art centres and related entities for young graduates would be most beneficial to the Australian Visual Arts Sector.

- The management of people, money, time and distance is a great learning curve. This visionary approach to post graduate employment must come with a basic living standard, accommodation facilities, mentoring program and good remuneration. The need for see funding is evident.

The infrastructure necessary to run an art enterprise in a community, should be aligned with other 'friendly' enterprises. The current idea that 'art' will survive all periods of 'boom or bust' is comical and unrealistic.

Joint ventures, with the tourism industry (already happening in some communities), training in language and most importantly computer skills are needed. Maybe I am saying an adult education centre, a school with no doors??? The old Open College of TAFE system? A cultural centre.

- Most of the submissions posted on the Senate Inquiry web site relate to remote community issues, but I would like to draw the committee's attention to urban or city based indigenous people and their hope of a future economy through the art sector.

The great model of success was Boomali, the indigenous art co-operative based in Sydney in the 1980's and early 1990's, and now reinvigorated.

From an outsiders point of view, the success of Boomali was based on 'support of one another' no great pressure to sell artworks, rather develop ones art, and the long lasting comradeship that appears to still exist today between the original members. Sort of like an AFL football team?

In these city areas would a 'team type' approach work?? – This means the artist comes each day, sees their mates, has access to professional mentors like accountants, health workers, arts practitioners, arts managers etc.

Artists would have a go-between to develop relationships with commercial galleries and not for profit community and Council organisations.

Some universities do have facilities where city based indigenous artists are encouraged to go to learn (to paint), however I am promoting a co-operative, open to all concept. Mateship is fundamental in my experience with indigenous people.

What does the inquiry expect to get out of these submissions and meetings – a Set of Standards that are applicable to all indigenous art sector participants?

- Few submissions touch on the importance of indigenous and non indigenous people working together, admiring and sharing what we each do best. The submissions so far, mainly discuss the negative issues, but there are very successful relationships now and in the past. With a Set of Standards we could develop Regulations that current and new relationships can continue to be maintained and developed for the benefit of all.

I believe the exploitation of Indigenous art and the unsavory elements that encouraged the Minister to have this Inquiry, will in fact dissipate in the not to distant future. The aboriginal art market is flooded; History tells you, unless there are quick cash turnovers, unscrupulous traders will soon move onto the next 'quick buck!'

The remote community as we know now, is also changing. Up until five years ago, a private trader had to set up out bush, deliver those cheap cars out bush and directly compete in the community with the art centre.

Now, the artist either comes to town voluntarily (or is driven unwillingly with family members, wanting some time in town with food and alcohol). They are paid daily a survival fee, which often suits them. This is not going to go away. The transition to town based economies (painting) needs to be addressed.

Papunya Tula Artists is the benchmark here. With the opening of their new art centre at Kintore in March this year, with their current facilities, art gallery and retail outlet in Alice Springs and remote facilities at Papunya, Kintore and Kiwirrkurra, they maintain excellent business relationships with commercial and not for profit sector all over Australia. They are an independent, privately owned aboriginal business.

Papunya Tula supports over 200 artists and their families and extended families. This includes not only the source of income for those people but welfare support, health and sporting opportunities.

A set of standards that would assist an art centre business like Papunya Tula Artists long term

Examples only –

- The local school teacher, nurse or policeman i.e. government employees, do not deal in art in their community. Their employment contracts should state this. They may collect in a way acceptable to established ethical standards.
- Funds from Australian Government sources like Australia Arts Council, Austrade, State and National institutions, assisting purchases or exhibitions must comply with this Set of Standards i.e. the provenance of works fits with the guidelines (of the Set of Standards).
- Funds available to assist indigenous people to understand and add to a scalable Set of Standards. This was promised when I assisted many communities with the introduction of the GST. The GST moratorium I believe is still in place and education for artists has failed miserably.

It goes without saying the ATO and ACCC with a Set of Standards will better understand implications and problems of the indigenous art sector.

Specific issues relating to a commercial gallery in 2007 which exhibits Australian Indigenous Art.

- Generally speaking it is like no other art business ever experienced before in Australia.
- Protocols, code of ethics, representation, price control, commissions and sales including GST is not understood by the majority of indigenous artists practicing today.
- To regulate traditionally unregulated (in non indigenous terms) groups of peoples is extremely difficult
- The artist, working in an art centre is the commercial galleries greatest asset, and supplier, but also their greatest competitor.

The competition playing field is uneven, as the artist does not pay GST, so an automatic 10% discount is received (unable to be offered by the commercial gallery). They also have the privilege of selling their art at wholesale rates or heavily discounted rates.

- The proliferation of auction houses and secondary market sellers, have no regulations. They should be bound by the second hand dealers / pawnbrokers license and a Set of Standards.
- The general representation of artists by community art centre personnel prevents one-on-one relationships developing in a traditional art gallery/ artist environment. This is problematic for long term exhibiting and developing an artist's career, especially, internationally.
- NAVA Code of Ethics once finalised, endorsed by artists and published will be excellent for commercial and not for profit institutions and galleries.

The NAVA Code will need funding, so all sectors within the Code can understand and implement the guidelines.

It will also be scalable, so ongoing funding is necessary so it will continue to have positive implications for indigenous artists and the art sector.

- Export opportunities are often lost, because there is not a united effort in the marketing and exhibiting of indigenous art.

Institutions, art centres and artists, together with commercial galleries or dealers need to develop strategies that see them combine their specific skills for the long term benefit of the art sector.

Currently, the international export of art and exhibitions is fragmented and each does their own thing. Follow up and long term strategies are almost non existent.

- The Australian Commercial Gallery Association (ACGA) commit to their code of practice (www.acga.com.au) and that of NAVA. The not for profit ACGA is ideally placed to market, encourage and grow the indigenous art sector via its members, who are by design, the most ethical and professional galleries in Australia.

Most of these galleries exhibit internationally too, via relationships with international galleries and major art fairs.

Funds delegated by the Federal Government for the ACGA to promote an ethical set of standards, would have quick and far reaching consequences for the success and implementation of regulation outcomes from this inquiry.

- I personally support the submissions of Desart, Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd ANKAA, NAVA and Warakurna Artists

Senator Kemp has relinquished his portfolio as Arts Minister, where to from now?

Thankyou for the opportunity to be actively involved in the inquiry, and I would like to repeat, **this inquiry is not really about art**, but rather the whole socio economic future of Australian indigenous people.

Yours sincerely,

Beverly Knight
Managing Director, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne