

CHAPTER 25

AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS ART: LOCAL DREAMINGS, GLOBAL CONSUMPTION

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Indigenous Australian visual art is an outstanding case of the dynamics of globalization and its intersection with the hyper-local wellsprings of cultural expression, and of the strengths and weaknesses of state, philanthropic and commercial backing for cultural production and dissemination. This chapter traces the development of the international profile of Indigenous 'dot' art – a traditional symbolic art form from the Western Desert – as 'high-end' visual art, and its positioning within elite markets and finance supported by key international brokers, collectors and philanthropists.

Indigenous Australian visual art frequently headlines in international auctions. The names of artists such as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Paddy Bedford (Goowoomji) are synonymous with authentic Indigenous culture. The Western Desert 'brand' attracts affluent aficionados of the arts from across the globe. These paintings, mostly created in third world conditions, finish up adorning first world living spaces and galleries (Altman et al., 2002; Myers, 2002). While critically acclaimed and highly valued, Indigenous Australian 'high art' is mostly made in places with limited basic infrastructure, high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency, poverty, illness, substance abuse and violence (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006; Creative Economy, 2006).

Yet Indigenous visual art has become arguably Australia's most significant cultural export. Terry Smith (2007: 25) captures the terms of this stunning emergence:

By the mid-1990s, Aboriginal art had become the strongest force in Australian art according to any measure: the quality and challenge of much of the work, as well as its sheer quantity and attractive variety. It had become a contemporary art in its own right, and it was actively setting the terms of its own reception. A cultural movement can, when it gains momentum, force a shift in perception of 'quality', largely by its own force as an emerging paradigm.

However, as Myers (2002) illustrates in his seminal study *Painting Culture*, public subsidy and support mechanisms – while sustaining production in the 1970s and deepening production capacity in the 1980s – have mostly facilitated the domestic market. International success has been driven by individual agents, drawing finance from private, philanthropic and foundational sources. This is both a strength (private sector passion and entrepreneurship may have achieved more than public sector processes) and a weakness (the market has been subject to unethical, corrupt and exploitative behaviour detrimental to Indigenous benefit and sustainability).

Over the last three and a half decades, Indigenous Australian visual art has become an industry whose turnover is estimated to be as high as AU\$500 million per annum (Papunya Tula Artists, 2006), growing strongly from between AU\$100 million and AU\$300 million per annum in 2002 (Altman et al., 2002; Australia Council for the Arts, 2006). Accurate data in this field is extremely hard to achieve. Most work is produced in very isolated communities, records are often unreliable, and much data is privately held and not subject to mandatory release. It was estimated in 2003 that more than half the total number of Indigenous visual artists are in remote areas of the Northern Territory (see Altman, 2003). Demand for Indigenous visual art has increased dramatically, particularly in international markets. Estimates suggest between 5,000–6,000 artists and painters work in the industry (Altman et al., 2002; Myer, 2002), making up between 25 and 50 per cent of all working Australian visual artists. This is a remarkable figure considering that the Indigenous population comprises about 2 per cent of the Australian population.

This case study examines the international profile of Indigenous 'dot' art – a traditional symbolic art form from the Western Desert – as 'high-end' visual art, and the relationship between its positioning within elite markets and finance. There are multiple ironies and 'category busters' in this story. While

Indigenous visual art has enjoyed strong, at times insatiable, international demand, the art of non-Indigenous Australians (a category used to encompass all settlers and migrants, including the white population) struggles in the international marketplace. As the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry (Myer, 2002: 259) observed, it is 'extremely difficult' to sell Australian exhibitions and artwork more generally to galleries outside of Australia – with Indigenous art the only exception. The works circulate as 'mysteriously' symbolic high art, yet they are mostly representations of spiritual knowledge (Dreamings) that document geographical locales with careful precision.

They embody, for many buyers and aficionados, the lure of the primitive, but have been produced in many cases out of sophisticated and reflexive commodification processes which are nevertheless not immune from egregious exploitation. While Indigenous visual art has become a multimillion dollar export industry, the financial returns to Indigenous artists themselves run from the reasonable to the scandalous (the average practicing visual artist is estimated to earn a meagre \$7,200 per annum (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006). It would be awfully easy to decry the exploitation, the cultural ignorance and the theft of intellectual property and leave it at that, were it not the case that sales provide often the only non-welfare finances in many communities. It would be easy as well to denounce the commodification and reification of an authentic and fragile culture were it not that many artists have managed their careers and reputations deftly and successfully.

The Indigenous Australian value chain

Toby Miller (1994; 1995) offers a brilliant epigram for the importance of Indigenous Australia to the country's place in the world: 'When Australia became modern, it ceased to be interesting.' Before Australia became a sovereign nation (that is, modern) in 1901, Indigenous Australians were of critical importance to much foundational intellectual inquiry seeking to examine questions about origins, authenticity and 'human truths'. Indigenous Australians 'provided Europe with a photographic negative of itself' (Miller, 1995: 7). When Australia became a nation, it eliminated the 'birth right of citizenship from people of colour'. Australia became just another British colony filled with 'white-fellas'; it became 'dull, boring and

obvious' to intellectual debate (Miller, 1994: 207). Internationally, Australians were transformed 'from dashing blacks living out of time into dull anglo-celts living out of place' (Miller, 1995: 7). Indigenous Australian visual art now circulates in a postmodern *Zeitgeist*, where its cultural ambassadorial role is again unparalleled.

Culture and knowledge: creating value

A careful comparative examination of the value chain in Indigenous visual art (cf Keane and Hartley, 2001) highlights key continuities and differences with standard cultural value chains. For Indigenous people in Australia, as elsewhere, the raw material of content creation is culture and knowledge, which is to say their everyday lives, beliefs and practices. Combined with the creative talent of the artist, the performer and the technician, this becomes a unique and distinctive intellectual property that finds its way into several markets (domestic – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – tourist and international) of which the most profitable is the elite international art or 'high art' market.

Indigenous visual arts resemble mainstream creative industries, insofar as they are generally characterized by an over-supply of content-providers clustered around the most profitable links in the chain, notably distribution. The circulation and delivery of Indigenous art, given the often vast distances – both culturally and geographically – between supply and demand, see cultural intermediaries play a key role, sometimes drawing inappropriately large profits from their activity. Indigenous artists rarely negotiate directly with commercial galleries or retail outlets for the sale of their work. Their work is handled by Indigenous art centres or cooperatives. These organizations are staffed by art coordinators who operate as both commercial and cultural mediators between producers and mainly non-indigenous procurers of indigenous art.

Market demand and tensions for Indigenous artists

The markets for Indigenous art are complex and highly differentiated. The Indigenous market, obviously the most culturally proximate, is also by definition the smallest, least remunerative and most discriminating. There are what we call the domestic consumer market, the particularly international tourist market, the public sector or 'grants' market and breakthrough markets such as international art galleries and museums, and major investors/collectors.

The demands of the international marketplace, while driving and sustaining production, create tensions for Indigenous artists. The United States is a major international market for global visual art exports. It accounts for 41 per cent of the world market and US\$3 billion of global annual sales (Australian Trade Commission, 2006). It is a key market for Indigenous visual art exports. However, while US galleries and auction houses generate strong demand for Indigenous Australian 'dot-art', there is little interest in the many other forms of Indigenous art. (Dot-art styles and motifs rode on the back of phenomenal critical acclaim in the 1980s and 1990s, becoming almost synonymous with Indigenous visual art.)

This market segmentation belies the rich diversity of traditional, contemporary and geographic styles that comprise Indigenous visual art. Contemporary artists are forging a variety of styles, most of which have little opportunity to achieve international recognition because of the 'displacement effect' of the dominance of dot painting. Nevertheless, the force of traditional Indigenous art ultimately derives from 'ancestral stories of the land from which Indigenous people draw physical and spiritual strength'. According to Megaw and Megaw, Indigenous artwork has a religious nature – a 'perceived relationship to the dreamtime', ancestral spirits and the 'inextricable links' between individuals, groups and land (2001: 97). And despite temporal and geographic varieties, artworks have 'a certain basic symbolic vocabulary... seen in geometric patterns', the meanings and interpretations of which, for Indigenous artists and in some cases communities, are 'strictly controlled' (2001: 97).

Because of these intrinsic cultural elements, paintings have been used as 'evidence of title' in land claims. Art also acts as an important bridge between generations, contributing to the maintenance of cultural and spiritual knowledge (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006). In central Australia, the *tjukurrpa* (dreaming or story) are essentially overhead maps 'of locations and the journeyings of individual characters in the ancestral dreamtime'. Artworks are therefore a medium for the transmission of knowledge and this is revealed step by step to the young (Megaw and Megaw, 2001: 97–8). Before colonization, there were over 700 Indigenous Australian languages. Now some 200 remain; of these, all but 20 are endangered.¹ Bereft of the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation through forms of

cultural expression such as art, many other aspects of the Indigenous way of life are under threat of extinction.

The lure of lucrative sales can encourage artistic compromise – the abandoning of personal or custodial styles to produce popular or 'traditional' styles sought by elite markets. This can have serious ramifications. Artists producing artworks with no relations to custodial ownership or ancestral dreamings, can sever 'the inextricable' links between artist, clan/totem, belief systems and their spiritual connections with the land.

Market trends for Indigenous visual art

As we have seen, the markets for Indigenous Australian visual art are recently established, volatile and complex. The Australian art market, for example, has experienced a dramatic shift over the last two decades, marked by a steep rise in Indigenous Australian art market share and a decline in non-Indigenous Australian auction sales. The following typology, adapted from Keane and Hartley (2001), is a representation of the limitations and potential of markets for Indigenous Australian visual art:

The international tourist market: Tourists seeking to purchase authentic Indigenous Australian cultural artifacts and experiences represent an important market for Indigenous art. Cultural theme parks and general tourist markets provide important outlets for the sale of Indigenous visual art. Popular tourist destinations strongly associated with images/notions of Australia and Indigenous people/culture such as Uluru (Ayers Rock), create opportunities for artists, collectives and communities to sell directly to tourists. Product differentiation is important within the tourism market in order to appeal to different market sections, namely: 'overseas tourists; people interested in learning about Indigenous Australian culture; young people; adventurous people and those interested in reconciliation' (Keane and Hartley, 2001: 31). The darker side of this trade is the high incidence of opportunistic copying and cloning, with value not being returned to the producer.

The domestic consumer market: Indigenous visual art, like many elite forms of traditional culture, often meets with apathy within the domestic market. The problem of disinterest in national cultural treasures is often seen by supporters of such forms to be due to a lack of financial support. However, the relative

availability and seeming everydayness of such forms can detract from their value at home. As a recent survey found, 55 per cent of all Australian respondents had no interest in indigenous tourist attractions, products or activities (Colmar Brunton Social Research, 2004: 114).

The public sector market: The government and public sector agencies are a major market for Indigenous art with procurement policies seeing artworks adorning the halls and lobbies of local, state and federal government agencies, educational institutions and universities. The 'grants' market is also a large market for Indigenous art. This is where artists, galleries, collectives and art enterprises compete for a limited supply of government and foundation funds for activities and projects that enhance national or regional identity. Ideally, enterprises which access grants or benefit from procurement policies use these to leverage their ability to meet wider markets. Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd is one example where an Indigenous art enterprise, although initially fostered by government funding, has since become a viable and sustainable private enterprise without government assistance for ten years (Papunya Tula Artists, 2006).

Breakthrough market: International elite markets, such as Sotheby's auctions, are an example of breakthrough markets. Product from the developing world finds itself occasionally celebrated as unique and valued. The market for Indigenous art represents a breakthrough into this narrow but lucrative market. It is to this remarkable aspect of Indigenous art history that we now turn.

The international uptake of 'dot' painting

The beginnings

Until about 40 years ago, several Indigenous Australian tribal groups lived in Australia's Western Desert without any involvement in the 'cash economy'. Like many other Aboriginal clans across Australia at the time, the Aranda, Anmatjira Aranda, Warlpiri, Loritja and Pintupi were brought in from their tribal lands by the government during the 1950s and 1960s and settled on a government reserve at Papunya, northwest of Alice Springs. It was here, as one commentator has noted, in 'oppressive, desolate and poverty-stricken conditions... with one sixth of residents dying of treatable disease between 1961–1966' (Allan, 2001) that the Papunya Tula Art

movement emerged during the 1970s giving birth to contemporary acrylic 'dot' painting (see Bardon (1991) for a moving account of this 'birth'). A school teacher posted at Papunya, Geoffrey Bardon was an important figure in these early developments. Before his arrival, Western Desert art was largely confined to Aboriginal ceremonial practices and some small-scale tourist sales (Allan, 2001). In 1971, Bardon submitted several acrylic works to the Alice Springs Caltex Art competition. The competition resulted in AU\$1,300 in cash sales and ultimately introduced the Papunya artists to the cash economy and commercial production practices. Bardon encouraged an artist's cooperative at Papunya and in 1972 he helped form the Papunya Tula Artists limited liability company. From this initial success, over 600 paintings and 300 smaller works were produced over the next 18 months (Allan, 2001).

Policy and market development

From 1973–5, Papunya Tula art production increased. The cash market, however, was still small-scale and largely informal. Arts advisors visited painting communities periodically to pay artists for completed paintings and to commission new works. There were small-scale exhibitions and modest sales to museums and art galleries in the Northern Territory but the survival of the Papunya Tula art collective was largely the result of government action.

The principal backers throughout the 1970s were two government bodies: the Aboriginal Arts Board and Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd. The former was a board of the Australia Council for the Arts – the national arts funding body – and the latter was a federally sponsored retail/wholesale company with an important role to play in marketing and retailing Indigenous art (see Altman (2005) for a historical account of the institutions involved in marketing Indigenous arts). These two bodies had initial success in developing a market for Aboriginal art, but, according to Myers (2002: 134), 'there was a tremendous problem in maintaining a viable stream of circulation between artists' desire to paint and scarce demand'.

A major policy problem that emerged as production increased was the inadequate purchasing procedure of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts. The company was developed to stabilize an income flow, foster production, increase employment and increase economic returns for artists. The company purchased

paintings from artists, and acted as a wholesaler selling artworks to metropolitan retail outlets. The company paid for artwork upfront, with the respective artist receiving payment immediately, not on consignment as was the procedure of most commercial galleries. The company, however, failed to match sales – because of limited demand – with production rates, resulting in stock over-accumulation, and the exhaustion of the company's funds – with funds invested in stockpiles not being sold. Consequently, no new paintings could be purchased leading to prolonged delays between sales, new purchases and thus cash flow back into art collectives. Without start-up capital, arts advisors – important intermediaries between artists and the market – were unable to buy collections for potential exhibitions. Artists regarded the halt in sales 'as a sign of disrespect' and 'failure on the part of the advisor' (Myers, 2002: 138).

In response, Aboriginal Arts and Crafts developed a 60-day system, where artworks would be held for 60 days, allowing time for items to be sold before a payment was made to the artist. However, this system also failed with artists wanting immediate payment in exchange for their work. Soon artists and advisors began selling artwork to sources outside of the company. Private collectors were later to become important buyers. Grants from the Aboriginal Arts Board largely kept the Papunya Tula cooperative operational during the 1970s with its funds purchasing stockpiled paintings for museums and international 'cultural preservation' exhibitions (Myers, 2002: 143). In addition, the policies of the Arts Board led to the establishment of arts and crafts centers throughout the Northern Territory during the 1970s and 1980s which has been described as 'absolutely vital to the Indigenous arts infrastructure and industry and a positive focal point for the community' (Myers, 2002: 198).

The early stages of this market can be categorized as a *grants market* focused on *domestic demand*. Papunya Tula and other art collectives competed for and became reliant upon limited funds from Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Aboriginal Arts Board. Myers comments that public support for the development of a market during this period can be characterized as a 'welfare' approach (2002: 135). Change occurred because, in the words of Altman et al. (2002: 2), recognition that Indigenous arts and crafts policy 'might provide a means to combine cultural maintenance and economic activity for both

Indigenous and National benefit' was linked to increases in Indigenous visual art production and 'in part growth in domestic and inbound tourism and a demand for "authentic" indigenous cultural product'.

During the early 1980s, government policy shifted from a focus on cultural preservation to an emphasis on the development of an Aboriginal 'arts and crafts' industry – a broad term encompassing all visual arts, souvenirs, crafts and performing arts. With this policy shift a more structured 'art world' emerged, generating increased journalistic attention, a growth in institutional recognition and acquisition and an expansion of retail galleries, collecting and curatorship. This policy rearticulation with a focus on 'economic enterprise' marked a concerted shift away from public subsidy. In the 1990s, the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission launched the National Arts and Crafts Industry Support Strategy which effectively wound down government-supported wholesaling and retailing operations and invested in fostering 'more substantial and consistent support of... community-based art centres' (Altman et al., 2002: 2). There are now over 106 art and craft centers in operation across Australia. It was during the late 1980s period of policy restructuring and industry development that the international success and development of international markets for Aboriginal 'high art' began to materialize, largely outside of public funding mechanisms.

The 1988 Dreamings exhibition in New York

The 1988 Asia Society exhibition, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, held in New York from October to December, was instrumental in the achievement of international critical acclaim and recognition, and the initiation of a commercial export market. The exhibition drew an attendance of 27,000 people, becoming the most successful event ever to be held at the Asia Society. It elevated Aboriginal art from being 'ethnographic art' to internationally renowned 'high art' sought after by elite up-scale galleries and collectors. The exhibition was important for a number of reasons. It exemplified how a *specific targeted audience* can be reached. The organizers of this exhibition carefully selected the venue. At the time, the Asia Society galleries were important in the mediation of culture and commerce relations between the US and Asia; the art was displayed in ways that corresponded to 'high art' styles, in renowned galleries rather than in museums as it had been in the past (Myers, 2002). The financing of this

event was indicative of the move towards new private partnerships and illustrated the use of informal social networks and institutions. The organizers sought to raise private and corporate finance through the Asia Society's numerous networks and connections. Exploitation of the Asia Society's organizational structure was critical as it possessed an extensive business network, trustees and other ancillary connections including 'hired consultants who could make connections to corporations' (Myers, 2002: 243). Indeed, the organization's structure provided triangulation between the US, Asia and Australia, bringing together three spectrums of interest and potential financial support. The strategy was directed at mobilizing informal social connections and elite networks and through the utilization of the Asia society's private consultants.

Finance eventuated from a range of relatively unexpected sources. The exhibition witnessed the beginnings of US financial interest in Aboriginal art, with funding coming from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the New York-based non-profit funding organizations the Andrew Mellon and Starr Foundation[s]. Other corporate/private financial support came from the Westpac Banking Corporation and associates of the Asia Society galleries network.

The New York market, private collectors and philanthropy

While there are now a large number of public funding and grant schemes available for Aboriginal artists and arts enterprises through the Australia Council for the Arts, international enthusiasm and most notably the New York market are significant forces driving demand, production and the development of the *high-end* of Indigenous Australian visual arts. In July 2003, Sotheby's in New York sold 560 Aboriginal art works at a total of AU\$A7.5 million (Cho, 2004). Sotheby's percentage of international Indigenous Australian art sales has risen from 20 per cent in 1996 to 70 per cent in 2003 (Reid, 2003). International markets for Indigenous Australian art are now characterized by a growing number of very serious collectors and a large number of occasional buyers (Reid, 2003). New York art galleries are important purchasers of Indigenous Australian art. Since the *Dreamings* exhibition in 1988, the number of up-market galleries specializing in Indigenous Australian art has increased significantly. As well, general galleries now have substantial sections

dedicated to Indigenous Australian art. There are now direct linkages between up-scale galleries and 'talented artists' and cooperatives. Galleries foster and encourage artists to produce works either specifically for their galleries or to be auctioned at Sotheby's, New York.²

Private collectors and philanthropists have become significant purchasers, and in some cases, sources of finance for the production of Indigenous Australian art. An outstanding example is the private collection of Florida billionaire, John W. Kluge. Kluge has amassed one of the largest collections of Indigenous Australian art outside of Australia containing 1,600 works from between the 1940s and 1990s. Kluge reportedly 'fell in love with Australian Aboriginal art' after seeing the *Dreamings* exhibition in New York in 1988 (Genocchio, 2004: 11). He bought his first selection of Indigenous Australian art in 1988 – a total of 130 paintings for US\$500,000. The money from this sale was reported to be used by the 'impoverished reservation style community of some 700 people' to build an arts centre to contribute to the development of the region's art communities (Genocchio, 2004: 11). He also commissioned many pieces from individual artists and art collectives providing them with sources of income and investment. In the 1990s, arts agents hired by Mr. Kluge invested in several Aboriginal arts communities in Northern and Western Australia.

Conclusion

This case study exemplifies that a high-growth, high value, export-oriented sector can emerge from severely economically marginal communities. It illustrates key aspects of the dynamics of a globalizing cultural economy. Individual agents can successfully adapt 'traditional elite' cultural forms (without sacrificing cultural uniqueness or integrity) to appeal to the tastes of a specific *targeted* international audience and market. The mobilization and utilization of informal social networks can be a successful method of establishing an international network with linkages to important financial sources. The leverage of institutional networks with formal or informal international networks can be an important means of obtaining finance and establishing financial streams. Finally, philanthropic, foundational and private investment can be important financial sources for the production and distribution of art considered quite marginal.

This, of course, is not to the exclusion of public sector contribution: witness the provision of a permanent showcase for some of Australia's most respected Indigenous painters in the iconic *Musée du quai Branly* in Paris which opened in 2006.

The development of Indigenous Australian visual art markets from remote 'outback' beginnings is a truly remarkable achievement considering the obstacles. However, these successes at the same time demonstrate the fragile nature of the Indigenous cultural economy as well as the intrinsic value of visual art to the Indigenous people. It has alerted Indigenous people to the monetary value of their culture and encouraged the use of their culture as a

resource. Contemporary Indigenous creative ventures are increasingly characterized by entrepreneurial flair, innovative business models and investment drawn from private partnerships and collaborative ventures.

They might also be making Australia interesting – again.

Notes

- 1 Australian Museum Online (2004) 'What is Cultural Heritage?', Australian museum: <http://www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/culture.cfm> [accessed: 20/03/2007].
- 2 'Struck by the beauty of Aboriginal art', *Doncaster Templestowe News*, 3 December 2003.

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