

AUTHENTICATION: THE ROLE OF ABORIGINAL ART CENTRES

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On contemplating this paper I found myself wondering what I should be talking about, or, more specifically, why I was floundering with its content. Steeped daily in the 'authentic' and possessing a naive sense that people will deal fairly, I have not given the problems much thought. It seems ironic, but the issue of authenticity is not one of great significance for us during our daily routine at Mangkaja Arts.

The omnipresence of the debate surrounding these issues on the radio and television has not gone unnoticed in Mangkaja. Questions raised in the recent Four Corners program and the documentary titled Art from the Heart? are ones that we have discussed, but they do not impact on the artists to any great degree; and with that realisation, I am moved to ask why? Perhaps a brief overview of the operations of the art centres would be useful.

Community based art centres began to appear in the Northern Territory in the mid-seventies with the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council being the main avenue of support. The development of new centres continued in an ad hoc fashion throughout the eighties with arts advisers resorting to a wide range of creative approaches in order to source funding through a disparate range of programs and agencies.

The centres are established to service the needs of Aboriginal artists living in remote communities with the main problem being that the word 'needs' here is open ended. The tasks are as broad as the community may want to set and are in part determined by the patience and skills of the art centre staff. The main tasks are the distribution through exhibition and consignment of locally produced artworks however depending on the structure and the level of community involvement, the profile of each centre varies accordingly.

The centres provide a strong focus for often fractured communities, a cultural base for artists and cultural practitioners, a source of income for people who have very little option of employment and with that income the option to purchase commodities such as refrigerators, washing machines or perhaps a vehicle. In areas where the average temperature for nine months of the year is above 42, there are no laundromats, (some women still boil their washing in flour drums), and no form of public transport these understandably are desirable possessions.

Mangkaja's development is typical. In the early eighties, the Aboriginal Arts Board sent some money to the resource agency in Fitzroy Crossing to build an art centre. A small building tentatively took its place threateningly close to the highway, on the main thoroughfare past the town. Artists worked with very few resources and travellers bargained directly with the producers. The building was a modest concrete and tin structure with no windows. It took on the name *Mangkaja* a *Walamjarri* word for the wet weather shelters that the artists built in the desert during the rain time.

For a number of reasons the artists did not continue to use the old Mangkaja space and it became a drinking place. The new Mangkaja appeared in a shop space in the supermarket complex where it operated for several years before being forced to close its doors again due to its narrow funding base and an inability to access staff with management and/or curatorial skills.

In the early nineties when we revived the centre for the third time, the ATSIAB had wiped their hands of the organisation due to unacquitted grants from previous years. We secured one wage through a DEET training program grant and a small project grant from Arts WA. The centre is still located in the same retail space and has continued to grow. With the current staff of five full time workers and around eighty members it is now, as one worker called it, “that mad little place”.

Like many art centres, we provide a wide range of services to the members. Some of these include: the provision of legal advice for copyright issues such as reproduction and agent’s agreements; workshops in communities; major projects with allied organisations such as the Kimberley Land Council; provision of a place to make artworks; maintenance of a small book and video library; documentation of all artworks on slide and production of catalogues to accompany exhibitions. We also sell art materials and run an exhibition program of around six to eight shows annually.

In 1994 Mangkaja became a fully incorporated body under the Federal Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (1974). As such the members have a range of legal responsibilities and moral obligations which have a bearing on the issues of authenticity. Firstly it is a legal requirement of the organisation’s constitution that the members of the corporation are Aborigines. Since we only market work that is produced by the members of the corporation, it is therefore a given that the work which is sold through the art centre is authentic Aboriginal product. This would be the case with most art centres.

In Mangkaja there is a certain calm about the problems. I am able to joke about whipping up paintings ‘out the back’ and getting the top artists to sign them, or maybe swapping a painting for a carton or two however the humour has emerged from serious discussions we have had in committee meetings. Here, the discussion operates on more significant levels. We have discussed a range of situations as direct information or experience is usually how such forums are triggered.

One example is Tommy May’s desire to discuss the actions of a previous co-ordinator in a community he visits regularly due to family ties. On one visit he was told about the way in which the co-ordinator dictated the colours to be used and had put the brush to the canvas himself in order to ‘fix up’ the work. He was also concerned about the fact that the elected chairperson of the corporation was a very old man who could not understand critical issues, even with an interpreter. Tommy’s interpretation of this was that it suited the co-ordinator as the necessary clearance of the chairperson’s signature could be easily accessed. I do not mention this here in criticism of my peer’s approach to the job as the management of each centre develops out of the conditions under which you operate. It is significant however in that the role that Tommy has chosen is that of a dynamic director of a facility that he feels is truly the artists’ own.

This same acceptance of moral responsibility then flows into areas that affect authenticity with the sentiment that you cannot trespass onto another person’s country either literally or in paint. Peter Skipper announced to me several weeks ago that when two works by another artist had sold, that I would have to give him half of the money, his logic being that the artist had painted into his country.

The same issue arose when Daisy Andrews returned home after winning the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Her success became entwined with the issue of country and ownership, with her sister (who did not paint at the time) insisting that she be given half of the prize money. In these two examples we see the way in which internal systems of maintaining authenticity are at play with each of the artists feeling the pressure of scrutiny by their peers and countrymen.

The development of the Ngurrara canvas to be presented as proof of ownership of vast areas of the Great Sandy Desert is a magnificent example of this process in action. The artists worked for twelve days on the painting. The whole was carefully considered and each artist was clear as to his or her area of responsibility before work began. The resulting work is an undeniable affirmation of the inter-relationships of the claim group through their individual connection to areas of the country under claim. Trespass in tandem with questions of authenticity has no tenure.

The obligation which family members carry to other members is not taken lightly and this flows through in other areas as well. One of the major points raised most recently relates to the problems associated with multiple authors. We have several artists who work together for different reasons. One striking example is that of Tommy May and his wife Doris who have done a work which juxtaposes their individual styles without pretense, there is no doubt that the two worked independently on either side of the canvas. The work was done in fact as a response to recent discussions following on from Art from the Heart. Other examples of conjugal collaboration exist, notably Stumpy Brown and Hitler Pamba who have produced several major works together.

Another useful example is the work that Paji Honeychild is producing. She is one of the oldest women working through the centre and she is getting weaker. She still loves to paint however her two granddaughters often help her with her work. (They are themselves in their late fifties.) The resulting work is clearly collaborative if we compare it to paintings she has done alone, something that is not necessarily easy for the consumer to establish.

An incident that serves to illustrate this forcefully relates to the purchase of a Honeychild work by an experienced curator. She purchased the work from another outlet in town and brought it in to show us. The work was clearly a collaborative piece and on questioning them, neither of the two artists involved denied it. Honeychild still saw it as her painting since the country depicted was her own and not Jukuna's however the curator decided to return the work. Without the intervention of information from the art centre, the work would have entered a major private collection and been publicly exhibited and documented without the correct attribution.

Another issue in the authenticity debate in the public sphere is the question of whether an artist has copied another artist's style or traditional motifs. The introduction in the Australia Council's funding handbook states,

The board is very concerned that over a period of years there has been strong evidence of appropriation of traditional imagery and design. In the interest of protection of copyright and cultural ownership, the Board strongly urges all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to develop their own designs or only utilise designs in keeping with their specific cultural identity.

Daisy Andrews again has suffered as another artist has chosen to paint in Daisy's style, perhaps with the perception that if she does she will be as successful. This causes Daisy a certain amount of grief as she is constantly commenting on the copies of her work that appear regularly. When asked about the habit, Ivy is adamant that she does not paint Daisy's country, that there is no way she would do this since her own country is a long way from Daisy's. Ivy is sufficiently successful in mimicking that her work, if not correctly attributed could be mistaken for Daisy's. This is an important role that the art centre can play in the correct marking of each individual artist's work.

Many of the problems seem to occur away from the source in places where labels get lost, names may get mixed up and stories incorrectly attributed. There are galleries that do not seem to be concerned and the artists have no idea that this is happening. The artist is paid and the agent who onsold the work has no real concerns. This is sloppiness but not deceit.

If a consumer has purchased a work and s/he is not entirely sure of its origin, determining the provenance of the work should not be a difficult task in areas where art centres exist. Each art centre has a specific method of marking the work that they sell. Once you are familiar with this system, the work can be easily attributed. If a query came to us for instance as to the validity of a work, even if someone had copied the numbering code we use, we could check the photographic record and accessions register that we keep. This way the work can be positively identified.

In Mangkaja we have been using the same system for the past nine and half years. The artist's signature appears on either the back or the front. We mark the back of the work with pencil (if it is on paper) or felt pen (on canvas). Each work is assigned a number and a work code (WP - work on paper, PC - painting on canvas, PB - painting on board etc). This is written below the artist's full name and Mangkaja Arts is written below this.

If the work has no such marking, then the art centre staff or artists may still be able to identify it. There is usually a clear knowledge of artists who work in the area, beyond those who sell only through the art centre. The activity and therefore work of all the artists is usually known to many community members, as painting is such a visible process. We often get requests for further details for artworks purchased away from the centre.

It is distressing to learn that the certificates which we produce to accompany the works are discarded by some galleries as they do not agree that we should have our addresses and / or contact numbers freely available to their clients. Recently, when I asked one gallery if we could announce an upcoming exhibition as being in conjunction with Mangkaja Arts, the abrupt reply was that the gallery was promoting the artists, not the art centre. It is hard to imagine the event going ahead without the assistance of the art centre, a service that the gallery receives free of charge.

However it is not my intention to continue on such a negative tack. Lively, at times colourful debate between galleries and art centre co-ordinators will continue and I doubt that either side would want it to cease. While the examples given should illustrate the key role art centres play in providing assurances for the consumer I hasten to add that we are not in it alone, that while we are key players we cannot function in isolation. This serves to highlight my underlying belief in fostering on-going relationships that are based on sound business practice.

The challenge to the galleries and agents with whom we deal is to provide a service to the members of the corporations with benchmarks such as the rate and levels of the returns to artists being the main criteria on which to gauge the success of this service. In return, we should be able to offer validity and assurance of authenticity of the work that we supply.

In summary, there is little doubt that the art centres can provide certainty for consumers. By publishing catalogues, issuing certificates, artists CV's, profiles and statements, the centres provide valuable tools for the verification of the work in the marketplace. Beyond these standard practices, they can also afford close relationships with the artists through either direct contact or through the galleries with whom we deal. After all, the issues surrounding authenticity become less critical as the consumer gets closer to the source.

Now, perhaps I am closer to an answer to my original question. As the source of the artwork, community based Aboriginal art centres are in a privileged position in relation to authenticity; it is not a contentious issue. The artists themselves are the provenance of their own work.