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# Australian Indigenous 'artists' critical agency and the values of the art market

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- 1 The recent integration of Australian Indigenous arts in the field of contemporary art is the fruit of a complex historical process deeply rooted in social and political relationships. The Aboriginal art market has grown exponentially over the last 40 years and the artwork has become an international icon of Australian identity. However, Aboriginal art has been, and to a certain extent, is still endangered by cheap imitations, fakes and the transgression of Indigenous artists' rights and community protocols. These issues have been addressed by various inquiries and reports since the 1990s. Recently, a new paradigm has emerged from the scholarship produced by researchers, such as Howard Morphy, John Altman and others. These scholars conducted research on the community-controlled art centres and outlined in particular how they could be taken as business models. In their studies, the art centres are presented as intercultural institutions, which are both commercial and cultural enterprises in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are active agents. The expression 'Aboriginal Art. It's A White Thing' of the awarded-painting *Scientia E Metaphysica* (Bell's Theorem) by Richard Bell highlights another vision of the Aboriginal arts sector. Drawing on the debates generated by this prize-winning work, I will analyse how artworks and discourses surrounding these debates are entangled in a complex process of value creation.
- 2 In this paper, I will first use Richard Bell's theorem as an example of the critical agency of Aboriginal artists living in metropolitan cities, in order to draw attention to their valuable contributions to the arts sector. I will argue that their position as urban-based artists as well as Indigenous people gives them an overview of the process of definition, representation, circulation and regulation of what constitute the Australia's Indigenous arts sector.

- 3 As key agents from the art world use many evaluative processes to construct and justify their choices, in the second part of this paper I will demonstrate how the marketing process reveals complex power relations within the Australia's Indigenous arts sector. Some reports recommend that art dealers benefit from funding because they are more efficient than public officers to increase exports. What are the limits and effects of this financially-driven vision? To address this question, I will take France as a case study. Firstly, I will show that some major points are missing in the lists established by the government-agency reports. Secondly, I will address the dangers of having art dealers solely representing Aboriginal art. My conclusion will address the economic, social and cultural potentialities of stronger interactions between the art market, public institutions and the civil society.

## I. Urban-based Aboriginal artists' contributions to the debate on the art industry's regulation process

- 4 In August 2003 the 20th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Award was given to the painting *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* by Richard Bell. The painting was accompanied by a text, entitled 'Bell's Theorem', in which the artist describes his views of the art industry. According to Richard Bell, the Indigenous arts sector is dominated by non-Indigenous intermediaries (art coordinators, anthropologists, curators, art dealers and critics) who define, assess, and control Aboriginal art. Bell argued that these intermediaries favour personal interests over that of the artists, imposing a 'romantic' notion of Aboriginal art. Bell denounced the commercial exploitation and hijacking of Aboriginal imagery. He also critiqued the industry's favouring of Aboriginal artists from remote communities to the exclusion of those from the Southeast, whose works, associated with New Media, continue to have limited exhibition in museums and commercial galleries. Through his theorem, Bell argued that the industry should evolve and commit to training Australian Indigenous people instead of funding the employment of non-Indigenous people. 'Bell's Theorem' summarised the criticisms commonly expressed by Aboriginal artists working in cosmopolitan cities; it also echoed the critics developed in the report *We can do it!* The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples published in 2000.
- 5 The Contemporary Visual Arts and Crafts Inquiry, known as the Myer Inquiry, was commissioned in 2001 by the Minister for the Arts to "identify key issues impacting on the future sustainability, development and promotion of the visual arts and crafts sector". Amongst the recommendations, it was stated that the Federal Government should undertake research into the needs of the Indigenous visual arts and craft sector. Following this recommendation, the Senate established in 2006 a Committee for inquiry, with particular reference to, as you can see, the needs to improve its capacity and sustainability.
- 6 Richard Bell wrote his theorem the year the Myer Inquiry was commissioned; the exploitation of the most vulnerable artists by unscrupulous art dealers was not known to the large public at the time. As he stated in his introduction, Bell's aim was to bring to the public eyes some of the issues that was at that time only addressed by scholars and experts. As Howard Morphy (1995: 234) and other scholars have shown, Australian Indigenous people have been struggling to make Aboriginal art part of the agenda of

Australian society. From colonial times, elders have intentionally transformed some of their cultural practices in order to generate a space of encounter with non-Indigenous people. As Marcia Langton said (1994: 90): "it is a process of incorporating the non-Aboriginal world into the Aboriginal worldview or cosmology, to lessen the pressure for Aboriginal people to become incorporated or assimilated into the global worldview". The recent growth of the Aboriginal art and its integration in the field of contemporary art are the fruits of a complex historical process. Nonetheless, the rapid growth of the sector has led to new issues that Richard Bell challenged in his theorem.

- 7 Richard Bell's 12-pages theorem is a difficult document to work with as it is a mix of points made with irony, pathos, angry and seriousness. I agree with John Altman when he balances Bell's demonstration saying that (2005: 1) "Bell is quite right, Aboriginal art is a white thing, without State patronage, without white art advisers, and without white audience for black art, Aboriginal visual art would probably not exist today, to any widespread extent outside its localized ceremonial contexts. But in another sense, Bell is quite wrong - the critical mediating institutions, community-controlled art centres are not white institutions, they are both inter-cultural and hybrid - they have been born of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal processes, they are both black and white." If we agree that Bell's Theorem isn't a structured analysis of the Indigenous arts sector, I propose for our analysis to see it as a performance. In this instance, Bell's performance is a practice that transgresses the norms, questions the artistic production and engages the viewer in the process.
- 8 Richard Bell highlighted several points that years after the publication of his theorem became addressed by a broad panel of artists, art-workers and scholars who urged the Federal government to regulate the sector. Indeed he described the issue of the middlemen that work around Aboriginal artists in remote communities and bypass the artists' relationships with art centres. Bell also critiqued the art industry which at that time hadn't yet regulated seriously the issues of copyright, appropriation and fakes. In his conclusion, Richard Bell Stated in favor of an artists' resale royalty and recommended the establishment of an advocate that could intercede on behalf of artists to effectively deal with such issues . These three points are amongst the major recommendations made by many artists, scholars and advocacy bodies in their submissions to the Senate Inquiry.
- 9 It is interesting to note that the year after Richard Bell's performance at the Telstra award, the Queensland Government founded a new agency. The Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA) is dedicated to leading the international marketing and export of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. By promoting the diverse work of Queensland's Indigenous artists this agency has done a marketing work similar to the one done by the art centres from the remote regions. It has established opportunities for arts-practices and training, network expansion and enable more artists to gain national recognition.
- 10 Although the Aboriginal art market appears to be successful, it remains fragile and dependent on State patronage (Altman, 2005). Public funds are often politically-motivated and inconsistent. I argue here that Bell's performance, as well as other artists' discourses, are an attempt to address the lack of coherence of governmental policies in relation to Indigenous affairs. At the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues in April 2010, the Bundjalung artist and curator Jenny Fraser pointed out in her talk that the Federal Government who had orchestrated the national Apology to the

Stolen Generations should be careful in distributing the allocated funds. She Stated that the funds should not be only directed to reports and consultation programs. Funds should also be allocated to Aboriginal initiatives and groups who are willing to conduct their own experience. The sharp blend of pathos and irony in urban-based Indigenous artists's artworks and talks is often a response to a certain political context where public Statements and legal acts often do not point in the same direction.

### To conclude this first part

- 11 Since the beginning of the 21th century, there has been a rise in initiatives and campaigns undertaken by key arts organisations, resulting in the establishment of new industry codes and in the introduction of a range of governmental measures such as the introduction of artists' moral rights, Indigenous communal moral rights, and an artists' resale royalty. Artists, both from remote and urban regions, have played a major role in this evolution.
- 12 Many urban-based Aboriginal artists have arts-related occupations in the fields of museum, education and media. Many of them also sit on boards of advocacy bodies and arts departments. This broad experience gives them a global view on the art industry, from the producer's side to the regulator's side. Furthermore, as artists living in cosmopolitan cities and as Indigenous people, they often have a high understanding and knowledge of public funds, both from Indigenous agencies and arts departments, as well as of public policies. Collaboration between researchers - scholars or consultants - and artists could therefore be explored to address the needs of the sector and its sustainability. Indeed museum studies foresee how the creativity generated through arts skills stimulates innovation in the academic and cultural sector.

## II. International Market

- 13 As Fred Myers highlighted it in the 1990s Aboriginal culture became "increasingly, the source of Australia's self-marketing for the international tourist industry, the 'difference' they have to offer". (Myers, 1991 : 53). Indeed, Aboriginal art became the basement of a multi-millions industry. The Myer inquiry and many other surveys that aimed to address the economic, social and cultural benefits of the Australia's Indigenous arts sector have pointed out the need to further developing international markets. These reports mainly frame the promotion of Aboriginal arts in terms of business opportunities. One of them States that the public sector is less skilled in the area of international cultural trade than the commercial sector. To question the effects and limits of this economic vision of culture, I will now address some issues related to the promotion of Aboriginal arts in France.
- 14 Austrade is the Australian Government's export and international business facilitation agency. In their submission to the Senate Inquiry, they provided a list of 7 Indigenous art export initiatives that were held in France in June/July 2006. Without any further inquiry, I can already count five more initiatives. Amongst these missing files, some of them have been conducted by art dealers who were the first ones to promote Aboriginal art in France. One of the other missing initiatives is an exhibition which received the support of the Australian Embassy.

- 15 Several reports recommend that art dealers should benefit more from public funds: they argue that with their knowledge of the art world and their networking art dealers would increase Aboriginal art sales overseas. This argument is highly problematic: as I have shown previously, policies makers don't always have a big picture of the art international circulation chain. Secondly, the art promotion by art dealers often reflects economically-driven choices. The economic rationality influences art dealers to promote certain artists and make choices that are often different from the ones made by curators. To give a quick example, amongst all the art dealers who are currently working in France or who have done business here, only one has ever worked with an urban-based Aboriginal artist. They explain this choice saying that it's difficult to market urban arts; they prefer to work predominantly with artists from remote communities and mainly from the Northern Territory. What are the consequences of this economic rationality in regard to the representation of Aboriginal culture in France?
- 16 There are several arts dealers who promote Aboriginal art in France and their various experiences are reflected in their commercial strategies. The dealer who has the most classical training in art history emphasises the value of the aesthetic. Another art dealer emphasizes his own career as an artist who has lived in the bush, his way of life becoming the argument for the authenticity of the works presented. I mention these autobiographical strategies to show how a third art dealer who has neither the argument of the life experience nor the diplomas has shifted the focus on the value of the meaning. He publicly acknowledges Indigenous values while he is in fact introducing artificial values that mainly serve his own economic interests. Let's call him Mr. Pinçont.
- 17 Pinçont has a small gallery in the French countryside but he often organises exhibitions and conferences all around the country and edits catalogues, mainly written by him and illustrated by his own art collection. In his public talks and articles, he focuses on the Dreamtime and presents it as a fixed/ahistorical notion.
- 18 Death has always been central to the art word and it is not different in the Aboriginal art industry. Art dealer Pinçont, establishes a parallel between the death of the artists and the death of Aboriginal culture. He comments widely on a so-called lack of interest of the youth for the initiation process and for Indigenous values; He often speaks about the drug and alcohol issues. With this discourse, he creates the idea that "his" artists are the last ones able to paint "authentic" stories. This vision does not only represent Aboriginal society as a dying society, it also leads to a dangerous process of being prescriptive about what Aboriginal art should be and dismissing experimental forms chosen by some artists (Tamisari, 2007).
- 19 With the international boom of the Aboriginal art market as well as the increasing number of scandals around the Aboriginal art industry, the art dealers based in France have modified some of their strategies. Since the mid-2005, art dealer Mr Pinçont has presented more secondary-quality paintings: to his audience, he describes them as artworks done by famous artists and he justifies his small prices saying that conversely to his colleagues he doesn't take a high commission and do not pay art centres' commission as he bypass them in buying directly from independent workers.
- 20 The Myers and the Senate Inquiries both analyse how independent workers make deals with Aboriginal artists, bypassing relations with art centres. Although some of them are respectable and pay artists a decent wage, others have dubious practices. The worst

of the carpetbaggers' practices are unfair prices, payment with alcohol, and violent conduct. The most unscrupulous carpetbaggers attempt to disconnect the artists from their communities, inviting them to paint in cities, in hotel rooms or in backyards. By isolating the artists for a few days, they can influence them to paint specific stories, patterns and styles. In so doing, they encourage artists to neglect Indigenous protocols and to produce what consumers expect.

- 21 Many Aboriginal artists are aware of the feeble amount of money carpetbaggers pay them, self-consciously creating poor-quality paintings in return. The famous painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye has commented several times on this strategy of producing bad quality paintings for bad people. As one can expect, Indigenous agency, such as the one expressed by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, is rarely made visible in the art dealers' discourses.
- 22 If Mr Pinçont is a clear example of the Aboriginal arts exploitation, we should also note that in France most art dealers promote artists only if they fit with a certain vision of aboriginality. Some of them dare editing the story that goes with the certificate of authenticity made by the art centre or create the whole story if there is no certificate in order to make the paintings look more "Aboriginal". To my knowledge, none of these issues are described in actual reports and surveys on the Aboriginal art exports opportunities.
- 23 At the moment, the Australian Embassy's website draws attention to the Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct. The Code is the result of the Senate Inquiry and aims to promote fair trade practice.
- 24 On the Australian Embassy's website it is stated that "members of the Indigenous Australian arts industry are expected to have signed-up to the Code by early 2010, after which the Embassy will give preference to working with Australian commercial entities that are signatories to the Code".
- 25 The art dealer referred in my paper as Mr Pinçont is in the list of art dealers indicated by the Embassy under the previous Statement although he is not a signatory of the Code?

## Conclusion

- 26 The Big Picture project recommends that "the Federal Government needs to appoint more cultural officers attached to Australian embassies and consulates to facilitate international exposure of Australian art and craft, and opportunities for practitioners to achieve direct representation." In regard to the French context, more cultural officers could indeed conduct investigations and establish archives from the various commercial and non-commercial events that have represented Aboriginal arts since the 70's. Reports written in Australia reveal a good understanding of the complexity of the Aboriginal art production chain and its circulation within the national territory but as I have quickly demonstrated here, their representation of the French network and how Aboriginal art come to France is not yet that accurate. Some might object that public officers take such reports as indicators of a tendency and not as exhaustive surveys. But with regard to how the sector operates, I argue that such reports are both symbolic of the dominance of the financial value over the cultural exchange value and vehicles for its reproduction. From the research I conducted during my PhD I can state

that there are many more export opportunities in France than the ones suggested in the reports. There are indeed several museums with historical and contemporary Aboriginal art collections and many other non-profit associations who are willing to foster their relationships with Aboriginal Australia. As we know in the field of social sciences, interactions between the art market, public institutions and the civil society can be beneficial to each sector, with an increase of knowledge and art sales in return. Artists frequently acknowledge small-independent projects and recognize the values of alternative models of education and art dialogue as a critical counterweight to the expensive art fairs and biennales. In regard to the French export market, it could be interesting to investigate further how Aboriginal artists value these alternative events in comparison with the more-traditional commercial exchange setting.

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