

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN

Connecting Studio Pedagogy to the Indigenous Art Market

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Abstract

The paper investigates a number of issues related to cross cultural collaboration with Indigenous artists in Western Australia and their relationship to the international art market. The issues resulting from this are used to form the basis of discussion between American undergraduate students and international artists / academics to establish an international perspective for the analysis and critique of our cultural norms. The paper is presented in three sections:

1 A brief contextual history of post colonial Indigenous / non Indigenous relations in respect to the artists agents and commercial market forces, designed as pre-reading to promote debate within a group of students undertaking the Global Art World on-line curriculum at the Farleigh Dickinson University New Jersey / Harvard University Department of Comparative Literatures in Cambridge Massachusetts. The extracts are meant as provocative reading to focus debate on the socio-political issues that contribute to the construction and perception of the Aboriginal art market internationally.

2 An academic perspective on the relationship between creative, industrial and educational partners through the activities of the “Open Bite Australia” print workshop within the School of Contemporary Arts Edith Cowan University. The workshop combines educational, commercial and professional activities through partnerships that bring together artists, students and professional arts administrators. Through this, the workshop assumes an ethical position in its relationship to Aboriginal artists that is educationally rather than commercially driven.

3 A reflective summary of an on-line project conducted with students at the Farleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. The on-line discussion board within the Global Art World curriculum has utilised the Open Bite project as a point of focus, and through this has formulated active discussion centred on the underlying reasons behind cultural stereotyping and the expectations of the international art markets.

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In this paper I wish to briefly establish the way in which the contemporary marketing of indigenous art as commodities has conceptual and organisational links with colonial practices. Having raised this phenomenon, I will focus on an innovative project by the *Open Bite Australia Print Workshop*¹ to illustrate a different approach to generating artworks and finding an audience for Aboriginal art, before assessing the implications of this ethical approach to the production and consumption of indigenous artworks. I will conclude by mentioning the international connections this approach has established.

It could be said that the history of the Australian Indigenous art market is a history of exploitation and abuse, and a reflection of the colonial attitudes that created it. Within this view it is important to remember that the parameters in which Aboriginal art production exists, and as such supports and sustains the international art market, are inextricably linked to the social, political and cultural history of white Australia. This market has been built on the foundations of cultural practices such as the constructed image of the “noble savage” as depicted in early colonial photographs of the late 19th century².

Posed photographs taken by early British anthropologists in Australia such as those made on the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898-9 by A C Haddon and Baldwin Spencer provide a unique visual legacy, that can encapsulate a contemporary vision of the origins of Aboriginal art. The image of the noble savage, spear in hand and grass skirt neatly trimmed, was constructed to satisfy colonial aspirations and attitudes towards the colonised, or the inferior ‘other’ and to fit the European stereotype of the indigenous native.

This lasting legacy has cemented our image and perception of the indigenous person not only from Australia but also from many ‘ancient or ‘primitive’ cultures. This image has broad currency of course and supports the international art market’s hunger for the ‘naive’. European culture have always longed to inherit the symbolic and narrative languages of pure synchronic cultures, particularly ones so potent as Aboriginal, in the hope of inheriting some of the eternal spiritual qualities that are absent in many Western societies.

Even though Edward Said and other scholars have explained how the art, imagery and literature of the Imperial reaches find their way back to the centre and continually feed its cultural dominion, the ‘otherness’ of Aboriginal art remains virulent.³
Marcia Langton 1996

Unfortunately in the heavily market driven and consumer conscious economy of new Australia, the endemic attitude toward the primitive has spawned a history of contradiction and exploitation toward the Aboriginal artist. We must read this in the context of the very brief history of colonial / indigenous relations. Until the mid 1960s for example, Aboriginal people were classified under the flora and fauna act of Australia and were the responsibility of the Australian department of Agriculture and Fisheries. Only in 1967 were Aboriginal people allowed to vote and granted citizenship in their own country. In 1972 Aborigines constructed their own embassy (tents) on the lawns of Parliament House in the first step toward the recognition of traditional Aboriginal land rights⁴.

It is therefore easy to see that the dealer / artist relationship that currently exists has not exactly been built on firm foundations of equality, respect and social justice. A number of significant changes took place in the 1950’s in the area of human rights, and more recently a number of government agencies were established in the early 1970s to protect artists through the establishment of a range of copyright and ownership laws, and the even more contentious

laws regarding moral rights. Throughout this turmoil, the visual arts have played a significant role in the visibility and recognition of Indigenous Australians, both culturally and politically, and the market reflects this.

From a tiny 1.7% of the Australian population, Aborigines make up at least 25% and probably up to 50% of working visual artists. As well they contribute more than half the total value of Australian visual art sales and they dominate the export market. The total value to the Australian economy (not including imitations) was at least 100 million Aus dollars a year.⁵ David Langsam 2001

In the context of this major contribution to the cultural and financial wealth of Australia, a continuing history of shoddy practices between government, Indigenous Australians and their artists have been well documented and reflect the cultural norm.⁶ Until 2004 for instance, artists have had little or no *droite de suite* (resale royalty agreements) or ownership rights in line with common practice for musicians and writers.

The sustained popularity of indigenous art within the international market⁷ is totally dependent on the consumer's expectations of what constitutes "Aboriginal" art in the first place. If we take into account that all the producers of this work are indigenous but all the registered traders, dealers and agents who seek to profit from 98% of income generated from sales are non-indigenous, it is clear that the cultural framing and marketing of the work internationally is not in the hands of its maker. Aboriginal art displays complex and sophisticated visual languages, yet commercial pressure has driven an approach to art marketing and the categorisation of its artists to maintain the profitable appetite for what is marketed as the naïve and the primitive.

Given the stereotype of the 'traditional' indigenous artist and their work, where does this leave the contemporary Indigenous artist working outside of this canon? Speaking of her own early career Brenda Croft has said;

In those highly charged days art and politics were absolutely co-joined. We were used to our work being denounced as not being 'traditional' enough, being 'unauthentic' and/or 'bastardised' versions of the 'real thing'. We were used to being told that if our work did not fit certain stereotypes then it was not real Aboriginal art. Most definitely we were told that photography, film and video could not be considered Indigenous art, which may be why so many of us chose to work in these fields. This rejection of our work was, in effect, a rejection of us as 'authentic' indigenous people. This only fuelled our determination to be taken seriously as indigenous artists, and people, in our own right.⁸ Brenda Croft 2001

Cultural stereotyping in this case is more a symptom of the demands of commercial classification than cultural incommensurability. In response to this and other classification issues, the *National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association* launched the 'label of authenticity' in 2000 with the main intent to protect the rights of the individual. Although it might be argued that this was an honest attempt to redress the past and to account for the ownership of artworks, many indigenous artists, such as Brenda Croft, referred to this as "dog tagging" and likened it to the government pass issued in the 1980's that allowed indigenous people to "move around" unhindered by the authorities. This earned them the heady mantle of citizens of Australia due to their accountability and conformity to the euro-centric social ideal, the basis of cultural dominance and racial stereotyping mentioned by such authors as Elkin⁹ and Goehring¹⁰.

Issues with authenticity, ownership and copyright infringement have been highlighted not so much because the artists' work within what might be termed "non traditional" practices (collaboration, reproduction), but because historically the art market has blatantly taken

advantage of shoddy practices to their own advantage. The long term credibility and sustainability of the art market has forced changes for the good however, and these issues lay at the core of establishing significant rights for indigenous artists and have effectively forced major changes in law recently for the benefit of the artists. But again we must consider how appropriate these laws are and who stands to benefit the most.

Copyright protection is not available where the authorship of a work cannot be established. Aboriginal art is by its nature an 'anonymous' medium. Some Aboriginal people are concerned about the emphasis on the individual artist as the author and owner of copyright in a work for the purposes of copyright protection, being an emphasis, which is not always consistent with tribal custom or law. Thus, the copyright protection provides a benefit almost by default, at least in some instances, rather than a benefit, which goes to the heart of the needs of many of the artists and their communities.¹¹ Colin Golvan 1991

Contemporary Indigenous artists working outside of the traditional canons and the associated expectations of the international market often find it advantageous to deny their Aboriginality in order to compete on a more level playing field. Other artists are actively attempting to change the perceptions of others and to re-present contemporary Aboriginal art as that of a shifting rather than a static culture. Renowned artist Judy Watson was angered when Christies of London would not allow her inclusion in more than one category of indigenous arts as a multi-dimensional practitioner. Her point was that it was up to her to define herself, not someone else. The whole idea of attempting to classify and define a culture that has such diverse local and regional traditions and is so broad in its activity can be said to be folly and symptomatic of the museum culture in which these particular colonial ideals are framed. Hanna Fink and Hetti Perkins description of indigenous art probably comes closest to defining the undefinable: 'Aboriginal Art is a protean phenomenon, a way of introducing change to maintain continuity'¹²

It was partly in response to this un-even and unethical relationship between the producer and consumer of indigenous art, that the Open Bite Australia Print Workshop¹³ was established in 1997 to develop an alternative position. A number of partnerships with industry and the local indigenous communities allowed artists to use professional print facilities in collaboration with our students, setting up a unique relationship which has since fostered life long friendships and creative collaboration between artists, students and the wider arts community.

Open Bite is taking advantage of its privileged position as part of an educational program, to establish an ethical and inclusive relationship with its artists. These relationships are driven by educational rather than commercial demands and offer both artists and students an alternative space in which to work collaboratively and cross culturally, made manifest by the support and critique that is particular to the educational environment. Through an association with local agents *Desert Designs*, and more recently *Indigenart W.A.*, the workshop has developed industrial partnerships and residency programs for indigenous artists already involved in the West Australian art market. Artists are invited to work in conjunction with local students in the print studio in Perth and in their regional arts communities, to produce prints and develop print technologies that can be utilised in the remote desert areas of northern and western Australia.

The first major project involved the late Jimmy Pike, and his uncle Peter Skipper who were founder members of *Desert Designs* in Perth. The students worked with the artists on bush camp for one week at Leewana in the south west of the state to experience printmaking under very basic conditions. Here a makeshift print studio was set up in an abandoned garage to encourage the artists to produce work directly, and to develop a sense of multiple ownership with the students.

The following week saw a return to the studio, where students were exposed to the discipline and rigours of proofing and professional printing methods under controlled conditions. The production of a large number of limited edition prints from both artists was neither expected nor planned, but did help cement the viability of the workshop within academic and institutional thinking.

The priorities of Open Bite are educational, and output is viewed as a documentation and celebration of the artistic experience rather than a marketable commodity, and therefore seeks to advantage both artist and students. This frees up the artists to work in a completely uninhibited way and allows the development of longer lasting relationships based on trust. Beyond the payment of printers, any profits from publishing activities, which may result from projects such as this, have been fed back into technical research, community workshops or local arts sponsorship.

In the printing and distributing of an artwork, any dual relationship between artist and printer needs negotiation and respect, particularly when established practices are to be re-negotiated. If we add to this the artist's agent, whose motivation is mostly always commercial, then issues of ownership, artistic integrity, authentication and copyright will inevitably surface. This is a common concern for any artist but is inherent in the print medium, as its origins lie in the established role of the professional print workshop, that of replicator. Historically, respect for ethical and cultural values have often taken second place to the expectations of style and marketing, the artists therefore assuming a subservient role within the triangle of the dealer / educator / artist relationship. The question therefore is, could an educationally driven community workshop such as Open Bite break this cycle while facilitating the production of creative works that might not normally be produced or marketed?

The industrial partnerships established by Open Bite acknowledge the historical and cultural dilemmas in which it operates, and in the long term seeks to address some of these problems through a more collegiate approach to artistic production and publishing. Open Bite attempts to break the commercial cycle by removing the influence of the agent and replacing it with an open educational framework that allows artists and students to approach cross cultural dialogue from a position free of commercial expectations.

For its long-term interests, Open Bite has integrated research and development projects with community workshops run in the remote regions of WA. Our most recent workshop was held in Ninga Mia, east of Kalgoorlie, as part of a major research project we are undertaking with the University of Maine, examining non toxic print chemistry suitable for use in the extreme desert conditions of Western Australia. Acrylic polymer technology has been developed by fellow researchers in the USA and tested in the Ninga Mia and Broome arts communities by Open Bite artists. These workshops serve a number of educational, cross-cultural and research needs in addition to promoting the print medium beyond the traditional studio based approach.

As part of our educational philosophy, we involve as many indigenous students, community leaders and mediators as possible in the delivery of our workshops. In order to foster a greater understanding of the issues associated with this type of collaboration, our artists (with their permission) are recorded in dialogue with students and staff, and our students are exposed to cross cultural theory and indigenous protocols as a longer term insurance against the indiscretions of the past.

Open Bite activities are not limited to working with contracted indigenous artists. The project page of the web site acts as an archive for our activities, and demonstrates the breadth of international artists that have worked with us since 1997. A little over one hundred artists from America, Europe, Africa and Asia have undertaken a range of diverse projects with us, many of which have not produced tangible outcomes, but have enabled the artists to engage in

work of a cross-disciplinary nature that often reflects our unique position both geographically and philosophically.

The implications of finding new ways of approaching the production and consumption of indigenous art have been very tangible. Because of the success of the Open Bite project, I was invited by Farleigh Dickinson University¹⁴ in New Jersey, U.S.A., to represent the Oceanic region within its on-line Global Art World curriculum. Farleigh Dickinson University is one of the leaders in on-line education in the USA and is a subsidiary of Harvard University's Department of Comparative Literature in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The program connects students to a number of international scholars from a range of disciplines and encourages interactive dialogue based on a geographic or cultural focus. Within the visual arts program, students interact with key international artists and academics to expose them to the principal issues that affect the internationalisation of cultural identity. Within this context, Open Bite has taken an active role in highlighting some of the underlying reasons for the apparent dichotomies that characterise the Indigenous art market. The interaction with the students at Farleigh Dickinson University has acted as a case study to gauge the response to the cultural, theoretical and political issues raised in their pre-reading, and the practical attempts by Open Bite Australia to offer an alternative approach to the production and distribution of artworks within the international market.

The project has been intensive and has generated some in depth and at times heated discussion, due mainly to the student's scant knowledge of the social and political issues that determines the internationalisation of this culture in particular. Although only twenty percent of the artists involved in Open Bite are Aboriginal, it is the Indigenous issue that has focused the interest of these students.

The questions were direct and confronting, prompting the inevitable political dialogue because the underbelly of socio-political manipulation and the skeletons in the closet of the white Australia policy were regularly exposed. In many cases comparisons between the North American Indian peoples and the Australian Aboriginals became a reference point for discussions on the similarities and differences between the experiences of indigenous peoples in the U.S.A. and Australia. This would invariably uncover a number of complex and inter-dependent relationships that are common in all forms of cultural inequality and institutionalised racism. The issues of race based politics and its connection with multinational media monopolies was a regular talking point, especially within the context of the perpetuation of stereotypes within complex multi-cultural societies. It is outside the scope of these forums to provide a theoretical armature for these discussions, but the debates have been invaluable as a way of raising consciousness of this issue.

In conclusion, Open Bite is challenging the established view that Aboriginal art destined for the international market must be produced under commercial conditions. Open Bite is attempting to achieve a redefinition of the relationship between artist and market through the context of an educational framework. In addition, it has created a number of pure and creative research opportunities and established ethical parameters in which commercial demand and educational pedagogy can co-exist. In a broader sense, this oppositional model has also promoted a much-needed forum for international dialogue in which ideas of cross-cultural engagement and collaborative practices can be critically discussed within a uniquely creative and productive environment.

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References & sources

¹ The Open Bite Australia Print Workshop is unique in its educational focus in comparison to more established models such as the Australian Print Workshop in Melbourne and Northern Editions in Darwin.

² The concept of the noble savage is not a singular representation of indigenous people nor is it particular to Australian post-colonial history. It does however carry the most currency in terms of the underlying perception of Australian Indigenous art within the international market

³ Langton, M. 1996 'Homeland : Sacred Visions and the Settler State' *Artlink* vol 20 no 1 pages 11-16

⁴ After the 1967 referendum outcome gave Aboriginal people a place in the Australian Constitution, many were optimistic that the win would result in greater rights and equality. However, successive Federal Governments failed to embrace the spirit of the changes. A major sticking point was the slow progress on land rights. In 1972 a group of Kooris met in Sydney responded to this by setting up their own embassy in Canberra. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy, complete with it's own flag, represented a sovereign Aboriginal nation. Governments have tried to remove the embassy by banning it, using police force, through planning guidelines and direct negotiation. Some simply turned a blind eye hoping the embassy would fizzle out. But in 1995, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy's place as a symbolic site was recognised through its listing on the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission. It was the only place offered national recognition for the role it played in the political struggle of Aboriginal people.

Source: Liddell, C. 2000 ' Aboriginal Tent Embassy' *Australian Social Justice Almanac* radio scripts for 2SER-FM Sydney page 11. Electronically distributed by <http://www.cbonline.org.au>

⁵ Langsam, D. 1996 'Aboriginal Art: Australia's Hidden Resource' *Art Monthly* no 87 pages 4-5

⁶ Although accurate figures are hard to come by, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 the Indigenous art market has quadrupled to \$400 million AUD income / year, with 75% of these sales attributed to overseas clients. Interestingly in the same time period, it was recorded that \$4 million AUD was paid to about 4,000 artists for whom data was available. This equates to the artists themselves only receiving roughly 2% of the income from Aboriginal art sales in Australia and on average each artist is living on \$1000 AUD income / year . This income only accounts for the primary sale of the work. Until 2004, artists receive no income when the work is sold on, often for vastly inflated prices on the international market. *Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics website <http://www.abs.gov.au>*

⁷ A recent survey estimates that 40% of overseas visitors purchased art or craft items and that of \$296 million spent on arts and craft, \$155 million (52%) was spent on Indigenous product. 75% of all sales of Indigenous product (not including sales by overseas galleries) are to overseas clients. *Source: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Industry Strategy, Canberra, ATSIIC 1997 page 5*

⁸ Croft, B. 2001 'Labelled – Buyer Be Aware' *Artlink* vol 20 no 1 pages 84-85

⁹ Elkin, A.P. 1979 'The Australian Aborigines' Angus & Robertson Sydney

¹⁰ Goehring, B. 1993 'Indigenous Peoples of the World' Purich publishing Canada

¹¹ Golvan, C. 1991 'Aboriginal Art & Copyright Infringement' *Aboriginal Studies Press* Canberra

¹² Frink, H. & Perkins, H. 'Writing for the Land' *Art & Australia* vol 35 no 1 pages 60-03

¹³ Open Bite Australia website: <http://www.soca.ecu.edu.au/school/print/openbite/index.html>

¹⁴ Farleigh Dickinson University website: <http://www.fdu.edu/>