

## THE DEVIL'S TRIANGLE

An academic perspective on the relationship between creative, industrial and educational partners through the activities of OPEN BITE AUSTRALIA print workshop

*This paper outlines some of the activities of "Open Bite Australia", a print workshop established in 1997 within the print media studio of the School of Visual Arts Edith Cowan University. The workshop offers a sympathetic and responsible relationship between artist printer and agent, in light of a history of exploitation of Australian indigenous artists particularly in the areas of reproduction and copyright. Within a teaching and learning context, the workshop acts as a catalyst for a number of teaching and research related activities that support and supplement the academic programs to which they are aligned. The workshop therefore combines educational, commercial and professional activities through partnerships that bring together artists, students and professional arts administrators. Its broader ambition is to promote arts practice for students within a cross cultural and cross disciplinary context.*

*The paper also explores the ethics of cross-cultural collaboration, particularly within the context of contemporary Australian indigenous artists. The historical framework of the relationship between euro-centric attitudes to the naïve native and their expectations within the cultural stereotypes that result, are explored as a basis for Open Bite's philosophical position and contribution to the commercial domain.*

*This paper accompanies an illustrated presentation utilising the Open Bite Australia web pages, accessible at: <http://waapa.cowan.edu.au/disc/sova/openbite.htm>*

### Education and creative partnerships

The Open Bite Australia Print Workshop was established in 1997 to give access to specialist facilities for students who had completed their studies at undergraduate and post graduate level. The ability to continue art practice beyond the confines of an educational program is essential for all young artists attempting to establish their practice within a national and global community. While the workshop fulfilled this simple mission in its early days, the workshop developed a number of partnerships with industry and the local indigenous communities through its artist in residence scheme. This allowed artists to use the facility under the guidance of their agents and more importantly in collaboration with our students, setting up a unique relationship which has since fostered life long partnerships and creative collaboration between artists, students, indigenous communities and the global arts industry.

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 a neutral space in which to work collaboratively and cross culturally. The triangle of artist and printer is completed by the agent, perhaps the most influential driver of this relationship and undoubtedly the most powerful. 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. Most of these artists are established painters and in a similar manner to the European resurgence of printmaking in the 1960s, are looking to printmaking as a means to reproduce and distribute their work to a wider audience.

Any dual relationship between artist and printer needs negotiation and respect, particularly when cultural control is at stake. If we add to this the artist's agent, whose motivation is mostly always commercial, then the age-old problems of ownership, artistic integrity, authentication and copyright will re-surface. This is particular to 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 has often taken second place to the expectations of style and marketing, the artists therefore assuming a subservient role within the triangle of the industrial / educator / artist relationship. The question therefore is could an educationally driven community workshop such as Open Bite Australia break this cycle while facilitating the production of creative works that would not normally be marketed.

### **The ethics of cross cultural collaboration**

Exploitation of indigenous artists is endemic and surfaces in many forms within the arts community, and in the brief history of white colonial rule in Australia this can certainly be said to be ubiquitous. A number of contemporary texts (Crowley 1976) (Elkin 1979) and (Goehring 1993) have developed a historical and political context by which global indigenous communities can be framed. Within the specific context of Australian indigenous arts and its contribution to stereotyping, paintings and photographs from early colonial settlement have provided a unique visual legacy in which the depiction of the native and the myth of the noble savage are grounded within the European classic style. The photographs of J.W.Lindt (1845-1926) of aboriginal hunters build on Augustus Earle's paintings of the early nineteenth century (ref 1) in which the European classical painting assumes a particularly colonial attitude toward the Indigenous family unit. The perpetuation of this stereotype has enabled euro-centric cultural structures to survive to the present day, structures that demand cultural hierarchy, stylistic control and ownership plus the ever present need to categorise indigenous art within western ideals. Although the constructions of indigenous stereotypes are now less blatant, the colonial mindset that created them is still fundamental to their market niche. Cultural perceptions are therefore market driven to sustain an industry that feeds our timeless hunger for the naïve and the exotic. This point was made clear to renowned indigenous artist Judy Watson by Sothebys of London who requested that she categorise her work as either "aboriginal" or "contemporary" but not both. (Croft. B 2002)

In a recent article by Brenda Croft (curator of indigenous art at the Australian National Gallery and an Open Bite project artist) the inherent problems associated with this are exposed. In the highly charged days of the late 1980's when art and politics were co-joined, her work was denounced as not being "traditional" enough, being an inauthentic or a bastardised version of the real thing. She says, "We were used to being told that if our work did not fit certain stereotypes then it was not real aboriginal art". (Croft.B 2002)

This is driven as much by the demands of commercial classification as 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. In the context of the history of exploitation this was an attempt to redress the past and to account for the ownership of artworks. However, many indigenous artists see this as membership of a "club" (ref 4), a particularly colonial approach and perhaps one that was responsible for the problems in the first place. Brenda Croft refers to this as "dog tagging" and likens it to the government pass issued in the 1980's that allowed indigenous people to move around unhindered by the authorities, and therefore seen fit to be considered as full citizens of Australia. They were considered fit because of their accountability and conformity to that of a euro-centric social ideal, the basis of cultural dominance and stereotyping mentioned by such authors as Elkin and Goehring.

### **An educational perspective**

So how do we break this cycle while respecting the needs of both the artist and the agent? The industrial partnerships established by Open Bite Australia acknowledge the historical cultural dilemma 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. Within the field of printmaking, we inevitably enter into the debate of copyright and authentication due to the reproductive nature of the medium. The term "print" can mean many things, from pure printmaking to commercial reproductive technologies, the latter of which has facilitated some of the worst cases of unauthorised reproductions of indigenous artworks. Open Bite attempts to break this cycle by removing the power of the agent and replacing it with an educational framework that allows artists and students to approach cross cultural dialogue from a position of neutrality.

### **The project**

The first major project involved the late Jimmy Pike, and his uncle Peter Skipper who were founder members of Desert Designs in Perth and unlike most other artists we have worked with, had already gained some experience in basic print processes. The students worked with Jimmy and Peter 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 the artists returning to the studio, students in turn were exposed to the discipline and rigours of proofing and professional printing methods under controlled conditions. Because of the skill of the artists and the intensity of this two-week inaugural project, nine suites of images were editioned and published over the following six months including relief prints, etchings and stone lithographs. This huge creative outpouring was neither expected nor planned, but did help cement the viability of the workshop within academic and institutional thinking. The immediate success of this project for both artists and students opened the floodgates and almost by chance established the workshop as a main producer of limited editioned prints in Western Australia. The workshop now regularly produces limited edition fine prints for Mary Maclean, Gordon Landsen, and others, in addition to running community workshops within remote communities.

Cultural issues aside, industrial partnerships of this kind invariably construct an asymmetric and hierarchical relationship across aesthetic, technical and commercial boundaries. Because the priorities of Open Bite are educational, product is viewed more as a documentation and celebration of the artistic experience 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 lasting relationships based on trust and community spirit. Beyond the payment of printers, any profits from publishing activities, which may result from projects such as this, are fed back into technical research, community workshops or local arts sponsorship. The prints produced by Open Bite are strictly limited and distributed through the Australian Print Network in Sydney. More importantly the artist controls the production of the artworks.

### **Creative research and community engagement**

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 the extreme desert conditions of Western Australia. Acrylic polymer technology was developed by fellow researchers in the USA and trialed in the Ninga Mia arts community 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.

A number of important long term concerns have been raised about the introduction of printmaking to aboriginal communities, one of which is the continuation of these being delivered by non indigenous artists. It was always the intention of the project to take the print processes back to the communities that requested them, and for local indigenous artist groups to be involved in these projects. As part of our educational philosophy therefore, 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 problems associated with this type of collaboration, our students are educated in cross cultural theory, social ethics 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. Artists from America, Europe, Africa and Asia have undertaken a number 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. It has also benefited our students through the ability to work on real life projects with artists and administrators of international standing.

Open Bite has developed both an inter-dependent and pro-active position where educational philosophy works hand in hand with commercial activities, in turn funding industrial research and development projects and community workshops to strengthen its educational base. The student has in effect replaced the artist agent in the triangle at least temporarily.

This has allowed Open Bite to direct its energies toward the creative act, and more importantly has promoted a boundless collaborative spirit within all of its artists.

The following is a summary of opportunities and outcomes that derive from the Open Bite Australia project:

**Cross cultural understanding**

Indigenous protocols and cultural ethics for students plus special opportunities and experiences beyond the educational program.

Respect for cultural difference / dialogue beyond arts

Opportunities for artists outside of the commercially driven environment

**Student / professional artists**

Experience in collaboration / professional engagement and mentoring opportunities

**Inter-disciplinary**

Teaches a broader creative context / encourages dialogue and interchange of ideas  
Real life outcomes

Students involved in commercial publishing (work-based learning)

Publishing through the Australian print network/

Professional activity and employment

**Industry partnerships**

Indigenart / Desert Designs

**Sponsorships**

Western mining awards / Xerox / Pearl & Dean /etc (attracting art associated sponsors particularly to benefit the local communities)

**Community**

Students have access to professional facilities and artists beyond their educational programs

Workshops in the Ninga Mia communities forged links with industry and local agents.

Students benefit from community support through public art projects

**Commercial**

Publishing raises revenue which funds research and development and community projects / sponsorship

**Research**

Develop desert friendly technology with community involvement. Research partnerships with University of Maine USA.

**Student centred learning**

Empowers students and artists to establish creative and collaborative practices which complement the learning environment

**Promotion and reputation**

Reputation of programs and its students. International reputation through R&D and web projects

**Internationalisation**

Attracting international artists / researchers and exchange / exhibition opportunities

**Conclusion**

The re-assessment of priorities and the resurgence of collaborative practices for many artists are not confined to cross cultural activity. Cross-disciplinary practice on a global scale has radically redefined ownership and copy write laws due mainly to the development

of communication technologies. In a recent paper by Simon Ringe and John Pengelly given at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Computers in Design Education Conference in the UK, they argue that, “as a consequence of new technologies, creative practice is becoming an increasingly ‘nomadic’ activity. It may be the case that the artist has to relinquish control over final outcomes and that end results are less important than process” (Ringe S / Pengelly J 2003). This is also the case within the artist / agent relationship as a consequence of this project. While Open Bite seeks to re-establish ownership and control to the artist for ethical reasons, its concentration on process rather than outcomes is consistent with recent post modernist attitudes toward the focus of creative collaboration in general. Interestingly, this approach has its roots set firmly in eastern philosophy and culture, where ritual often takes precedence over the permanency of an artwork. Ritual within visual culture has been predominantly concerned with the connection between people and their land, and is a characteristic of a synchronic culture. Open Bite has therefore created a significant shift toward recognition of this through its pedagogic processes.

To summarise, the Open Bite project has achieved a redefinition of the relationship between artist and agent through the context of an educational framework. The quality and relevance of the learning outcomes are more difficult to quantify within educational parameters as these are often particular to the needs of indigenous communities or individuals. Within the context of teaching and learning, this and other projects have attempted to bridge the gap between the demands of academia and pure creative and commercial practice. It also attempts to integrate teaching and learning and research and development practices through the establishment of networks and industry partnerships. These partnerships take many forms, and above all serve to empower artists, students and professionals alike within a creative and supportive environment.

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Ringe, S., & Pengelly, J. (2003). New Topologies. Unpublished conference paper. Given at 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Computers in Art & Design Education Conference, Hull, UK.

**Web Pages:**

Australian Copyright Council [www.copyright.org.au](http://www.copyright.org.au)

National Association for the Visual Arts [www.visualarts.net.au](http://www.visualarts.net.au)

National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association Inc [www.niaaa.com.au/index.html](http://www.niaaa.com.au/index.html)

Open Bite Australia <http://waapa.cowan.edu.au/disc/sova/openbite.htm>