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The Wizards of Oz

Nation, State, and the Production of Aboriginal Fine Art

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In the years between 1973, when I began fieldwork in Australia with Pintupi-speaking people, and 2000, there emerged an enormous interest in and market for a range of objects (and performances) made by Aboriginal people. Estimates are that Aboriginal “arts and crafts”—a catch-all phrase that includes everything from fine-art-quality bark and acrylic-on-canvas paintings to handcrafted boomerangs, carved animals, tea towels, and T-shirts—generate anywhere from \$18 million to \$50 million Australian in sales per year (fig. 6.1). Aboriginal painters in the small communities of the Western Desert in which I lived are represented by the cooperative known as Papunya Tula Artists. The “company” has regularly had sales of between A\$700,000 and A\$1 million per year. Literally hundreds of exhibitions of these acrylic paintings have been mounted in Australia, the United States, Canada, and Europe (see Altman, McGuigan, and Yu 1989:78; Perkins and Finke 2000). About them many journalistic articles have been written, catalogs published, government studies made, and policies articulated. Aboriginal art is a sociocultural phenomenon of considerable weight, sustained by a complex set of practices and institutions, and for that



FIGURE 6.1

Aboriginal art for sale in a gallery in Alice Springs. Photo by Fred Myers.

reason it is a particularly interesting location for the study of intercultural formations.

One account of the development of Papunya Tula Artists (Johnson 1994) predicated its success on its having been included in the category “contemporary Australian art.” While this may be true, my interest is in what this means and how it was accomplished. In the story I discern, a particular commodity formation—Aboriginal fine art—emerges in relation to a specifiable form of “modernization” in Australia: transformation of the managed Australian economy, a postcolonial shifting of cultural identifications, and the ascendancy of a new technocratic-managerial class at the heart of the “enterprise.”

Discussions about Aboriginal art’s “success”—and there have been many—have tended either toward the “triumphal” or toward critiques

of it as “appropriative” and “exploitative.” Both sorts of discussion derive from distinct *critical* perspectives on “Western cultural practices,” perspectives that are elaborated within the arts and that imagine the possibility of an authentic cultural realm (see Lattas 1990, 1991, 1992). A third strand of discussion and practice has focused on the policies of developing an Aboriginal arts and crafts “industry.”

Whatever the first two approaches might tell us—and they have been very productive—they ignore what, from the point of view of the practitioners, was actually accomplished, and how. Thus, I want to look at the very placement of acrylic paintings in the category of fine art. I want to consider the material “practices” through which these objects have moved and explore some unexpected linkages between the market for fine art and Australian national redefinition. My focus is on delineating the effects of distinct discursive formations and specific institutions that have as part of their function the “re-presentation” of Aboriginal culture.

The shifting discursive formulations of Aboriginal art (in the form of acrylic paintings), from “art as enterprise” to “art as cultural and spiritual renewal” or “art as Aboriginal identity” (see Myers 1989, 1991, 1994), have significant implications. First, far from being simple artifacts of an enduring Western or Australian culture, these discourses are mobilized not only within some general national culture but also within the bureaucratic institutions of the Australian nation-state, by community arts cooperatives and art galleries, and by specific segments of the populace. Second, these arts and their aesthetic values are articulated within frameworks of broader cultural policies—policies toward the culture of some of the government’s subjects—and are therefore an aspect of “governmentality.” Policies for Aboriginal people aimed at “protection,” “assimilation,” and “self-determination” (as they were successively described in the twentieth century) are themselves culturally formulated or produced. In other words, such policies are increasingly brought under the direction and administration of bureaucracies and producers of specialist knowledge (anthropologists, sociologists, patrol officers, welfare workers) in distinct institutions. What is particularly interesting and challenging about these institutions and practices as sites of cultural production is the centrality of the discourse of “economics” in assessing production and consumption, which I believe

must itself be subjected to interpretation as a kind of sociocultural transformation.

Finally, orientations to these objects and their circulation seem simultaneously to be formulations of the personhood—indeed, of the nature of people as subjects—of those among whom they circulate. Although the narrative of the arts and crafts industry's development and the policies addressed to it imagine and implement impersonal processes of bureaucratic rationalization and commoditization, the story I discern is one in which these processes are countered, if not "resisted." They are countered not only by the strong presence of personal relations, claims, and identifications among the participants but also by the value such personal traces have for the peculiar commodity of Aboriginal "fine art." At the point where the personal and the impersonal processes run into each other most directly, one finds the institutional role of the "art adviser," or "arts coordinator," whose situation is central to my understanding. We should view the "aesthetic" appreciation or recognition gained by the paintings not as a universal attribute that might be taken for granted but as something *produced* in specific historical actions and contexts (see Miller 1994).

These are shifting and contested formulations. The paintings are circulated, defined, and transformed in meaning and value through a network of persons and a range of institutions. One could impose on this a neo-Marxian analysis emphasizing the articulation of different modes of production. One *does* want to track the way acrylic painting has been commodified through the market processes of consumer capitalism, through the practices of the Australian state, and through the demands of Aboriginal activists for greater recognition. To leave the analysis there, however, risks losing the rich, often ironic, sense that ethnography provides of the way these new formations put people into different relations to each other. In each of these formations there are complex sets of social relations in which the everyday vagaries of social life are played out.

Thus, I hesitate to circumscribe this nexus as the "art market" or the "arts and crafts industry." To a significant extent, these terms are signs, cultural constructions that define a reality as much as they represent an already existent one. The "market" is not simply the mechanism through which value is assigned to Aboriginal paintings; it is also

understood as involving a specific attitude toward kinds of cultural value as enmeshed in debates about value. It emerged at least partly in relation to self-conscious planning and policy concerns on the part of the state, which attempted to integrate a range of political, social, and economic goals.

In analyzing the growth and development of the category “Aboriginal fine art,” I discuss three periods or “moments”: the beginnings (1972–81), a time of little demand and serious cash flow problems; the boom years (1981–89), which saw a dramatic growth in sales and exhibitions; and the privatization period (1989–2000), with its “settling out” or establishment of a distinct and calibrated market for Aboriginal “fine art.”

ORIGIN STORY

If, in numbers of sales, Western Desert acrylic paintings (fig. 6.2) are but a small proportion of all Aboriginal arts and crafts, they nonetheless represent a significant component of it and one particularly identified with the “success” and rise to prominence of Aboriginal art. These paintings, produced mainly for sale, are a transposition onto canvas of stories and designs derived from central Australian Aboriginal religious and iconographic traditions in which the images are usually made as ground or body paintings. It was as recently as 1971 that Aboriginal men began to paint these designs on canvas at Papunya, Northern Territory, which was then an Aboriginal settlement maintained by the government for about 1,000 persons (Pintupi, Warlpiri, Luritja, Arrernte, and Anmatyerre) (see Bardon 1979, 1991).

There is, of course, an origin story for this practice, and although it is contested by some (see Johnson 1990, 1994), it is adequate for our purposes. Such painting, a culturally hybrid form, grew out of the collaboration between several Aboriginal men living at Papunya and Geoff Bardon, a schoolteacher-artist originally from Sydney, who saw in the designs they showed him something of great aesthetic value (Bardon 1979, 1991). His evaluation was soon supported by events outside the settlement. In August 1971, Bardon recorded, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa’s painting *Gulgardi* shared first prize in the Caltex art competition in Alice Springs, bringing to the painters a sense of what Bardon identified as cultural esteem, but coded in cash: “That weekend, over \$1300



FIGURE 6.2

*Freddy West Tjakamarra making an acrylic painting, Papunya, Northern Territory, 1981.
Photo by Fred Myers.*

cash was raised from the sale of paintings. It was a sensation at Papunya. The Aboriginal men were jubilant. At least five large cash sales were made during the following months, involving some six hundred paintings by twenty-five men” (Bardon 1991:34).

There is some political stake, obviously, in whether the painting

originated in “authentic” Aboriginal aspirations and creativity or in Bardon’s leadership, but roughly speaking, the events conform to Bardon’s account. His emphasis on Aboriginal artistic creativity and its value is evident in his letter of application for a grant from the Australian Council for the Arts to support continuation of his work at the time. Reporting that the painting movement had already earned more than A\$3,000 from the sale of 170 works in just four months, he argued that “the story paintings [as he called them] and designs show great vitality and intelligence and as Gallery Art [the work] clearly is a valuable contribution to the reputation of aboriginal culture” (Papunya Tula File at Australia Council/Aboriginal Arts Board 76/840/022 II, 26 January 1972).

Named after the local Dreaming site, Papunya Tula Artists was incorporated as a company of limited liability in 1972, with 11 original Aboriginal shareholders; by 1974 the artists’ cooperative had 40 producers. Throughout this early period, the producers were almost entirely senior Aboriginal men, and certainly all were post-initiatory, fully indoctrinated in their own ritual heritage.¹ The number of participating artists has at times risen toward 80 and has come to include some women, but the number of shareholders has remained steady at 40. The cooperative is a community-based enterprise, owned by the Aboriginal shareholders, with emphasis on group decisions and choice of arts coordinator. These sorts of enterprises are commonly known as “art centers.”

Although the wholesaling and retailing of artwork is one of the principal objectives of such centers, at Papunya a particular set of practices emerged that emphasized group identity and Aboriginal values—quite in line with the emerging national policies of Aboriginal “self-determination.” Purchases of paintings are managed by the arts coordinator, with payment usually made at the point of sale. Moreover, arts coordinators have felt obliged to purchase all the paintings produced, although they have sometimes been able to reduce the payment for those found unsatisfactory in quality. Similarly, outside retailers seeking material for exhibitions have usually not been allowed to specify the works of individual artists but have been expected to take a consignment of paintings that included the work of many members of the cooperative. This was consistent with the local Aboriginal position that

all the work was valuable (“dear”), because it all represented the Dreaming (see Michaels 1988; Myers 1989). A growing complaint by dealers in the 1990s concerned precisely this practice, which they saw as preventing the true quality work from emerging and maintaining its value, supporting instead “inconsistency” in quality (Altman, McGuigan, and Yu 1989; Kronenberg 1995). The fine art world’s logic or mechanism for establishing hierarchies of aesthetic quality means keeping the “cheap stuff,” the “dots for dollars,” out of the same circulation as the good work.

THE STATE AND THE PROBLEM

OF “ENTERPRISE” ACCOUNTING: 1972–1981

One cannot understand how acrylic paintings circulated beyond Papunya (and its outstations) beginning in the early 1970s without recognizing the role of the Australian state, its policies and institutions, and its changing relationship to Aboriginal people. The social and cultural value of acrylic paintings has generally been articulated within two main components of this complex: Australia’s administration of the so-called Aboriginal problem and its development of a consensus, managed economy. The components are related, of course, in that both represent areas of social practice submitted to rational, directed planning. I hope to show that in the 1970s and 1980s, these arenas of practice were coordinated by and identified with the ascendancy of a distinctive class fraction, the public managerial class or, as Barrett (1996:128) described it, “the bureaucratic bourgeoisie: the public servants, teachers, academics, community workers and art and culture workers, the expanding administrative class which had grown over the previous decade [before Whitlam] as Australia had developed the character of a resource-based industrial democracy.”

The “Aboriginal Problem”

For much of Australia’s history since colonization, from 1788 until the 1930s, Aboriginal people were seen as primitive, inferior, lacking civilization, and having no rights to land; their culture was considered valueless. As they were being killed off (“dying out”) along the moving frontier, evolutionists of the nineteenth century endorsed the policy of displacing or missionizing them for their own “protection.” Later views

led to arguably more enlightened policies of education and assimilation in order for Aborigines “to take their place in a civilised community” (Tatz 1964). These policies at best saved lives, but they destroyed or erased traditional cultures, which were seen as impediments to progress: these cultures were too collective, too kinship oriented, too attached to place. First articulated in 1939, such policies had by 1954 come to be accepted by the Australian government as a commitment to planned, directed change that would produce “useful black citizens...who would perhaps gradually migrate to ‘better places’” (Davis, Hunter, and Penny 1977:11).²

It was only in 1967 that Aborigines gained the rights of citizens in Australia and official policy began to move away from the modernizing fantasy of assimilation toward a goal of “self-determination,” the program endorsed by the Australian Labor Party on its election in 1972. Especially important was that after 1967, Aborigines became a federal responsibility, a subject of *national* concern and political technologies. The Gove land rights dispute in 1969 further figured an Aboriginal culture and identity acceptable for national recognition: the “traditionally oriented” Aboriginal with religious and spiritual links to the land—and far from white settlement. This was the Aboriginal identity circulated in acrylic paintings. It was one that did not overtly confront white Australians with its physical presence or with political conflict.

An important part of the administrative response to the Aborigines’ continuing poverty and high mortality was to find them a place in the economy. The assimilationist programs of training had largely failed to get Aborigines to take up the “worker” role imagined for them. Indeed, reports frequently mentioned the difficulty of getting Aboriginal people to adopt a Western concept of work. With the perception of this failure came a sense among administrators and critics that cultural difference needed to be recognized in a different way, that ripping people away from their cultural roots was not good, leading rather to demoralization and despair. These realizations, at least in part, underlay an interest in providing “culturally meaningful” work, which could itself be one discursive link (though not the only one) to a concern with preserving or maintaining Aboriginal culture(s). Perhaps, it was thought, Aboriginal people would be motivated to participate in their changed situation if they were able to do things that

interested them, activities linked to their own cultural values and ways of conduct.

This was clearly a theme resonating at Papunya. Built in the late 1950s to house a growing population of varied, displaced language groups, Papunya was part of the Commonwealth government's assimilation policy, which sought to prepare Aborigines for entry into the dominant society by educating and training them (see Rowley 1972). By 1972, however, Papunya was known as a troubled and demoralized place with a high rate of morbidity, riots, violence, and visible disrepair.

Geoff Bardon and Peter Fannin, who had both come to Papunya as schoolteachers (Bardon 1971–72, Fannin 1972–74), were the first two people to act in the role that became known as “art adviser,” and their time with Papunya Tula overlapped the end of this assimilationist administrative regime. In Bardon's writings (1979, 1991) and Fannin's letters to the Aboriginal Arts Board, the two framed the significance of the art in that context. Bardon's fuller, later account (1991), with some bitterness characterized the government's policies and agents as committed to breaking down Aboriginal people, to demoralizing them—the government was unable, he wrote, to recognize these men as human, much less as talented. The counterpoint offered by Papunya Tula's success and the promise he believed it held for its residents' self-esteem and independence was significant (Bardon 1991:36). In this sense, the recognition of their art's value stands as a stinging indictment. Bardon articulated the value of the paintings through a humanistic discourse, writing that “the painting movement had brought forth an enormous passion in the desert people to develop their own style and their own sense of self. In a way they were being freed, and redeeming themselves and their culture, by their creativeness” (Bardon 1991:41–42). Through this art, Papunya people could find confidence, rather than demoralization and despair, in activity linked to their own values.

In Bardon's account, the economic valuation and the cultural valuation of the paintings compete for relative, if not absolute, significance. These two kinds of value represent distinguishable visions of Aboriginal personhood as articulated within the context of “Aboriginal policies” and an educated Sydney-sider's understanding of the conditions of modern Australian cultural life. If art could glorify and restore, then money was the corruption that undermined the communion

Bardon had with the men and turned them into a “travesty of what they had once been.” He furnishes a recognizable narrative about the destructive effects of capitalism on cultures not built on a monetized economy:

I seemed to find it much harder to communicate with the painters after that first demand for money and, though I was still liked, I knew somehow everything had changed. While the men were painting, I had witnessed the sense of the glory that the Aboriginal people bring forth in their ceremonies and dances and songs. Now there seemed to me only the stale, sick stench of the camps, the awful physical nearness of the used-up sand, the filth, and the destitution of the alcoholic faces about the tracks and streets....

It was in the painting shed itself that the final blow came. The painters were waiting for me, surrounded by paintings half-completed or just begun. There must have been as many as forty men there that day in June 1972 and when I came in they threw their paints and brushes on the sand. They would not paint, they said. Nor could I prevail upon them to paint without money. The monstrosity of it was not lost on me as they began to chant in their own languages amongst themselves, then at me: “Money, money, money.” (Bardon 1991:44)

In 1972, Bardon left Papunya, and Peter Fannin, a fellow Papunya schoolteacher who had earned a B.A. and a B.Sc. from Sydney University in the mid-1950s, took over from him as art adviser. Two years after Bardon began, Fannin found Papunya to be more open to the aims of the artists’ cooperative, because the settlement had come largely under Aboriginal control. And though he still experienced the somewhat changed political realities as harsh, Fannin expressed a kind of primitivist nostalgia for what he saw as “non-materialist culture” that offered an alternative vision for what he, like many other Australians, perceived to be Australia’s crass materialism. Fannin saw the art as providing emotional insight into a way of life that was totally different from his own, in a way “no verbal description can hope to match” (Fannin to Department of Education, 12 October 1974, Papunya Tula Art file, Australia Council 76/890/00).

I hasten to add that it was not only Bardon and other art advisers who recognized value in these objects (see Myers 1989). The Aboriginal producers continued to think of their commercial paintings as related to and derived from ceremonial designs and rock paintings associated with important myths, and therefore as possessing value other than that established merely in the marketplace. Nevertheless, by at least 1973 they expected (with continual disappointment) this value to be reciprocated in appropriate sums of money. For both artists and their white intermediaries, the promise of combining culturally meaningful work with money was an intriguing policy possibility for a situation some saw as desperate.

Success in supporting the enterprise probably owed much to the way in which proponents tacked back and forth between the two poles of value. It was in this context that forms of “Aboriginal crafts” could hope to receive governmental support and interest, and in its earliest stage, the “sudden flowering of art in the [Papunya] area” received critical support from H. C. (Nugget) Coombs at the Aboriginal Arts Committee of the Australia Council for the Arts and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (Papunya Tula file, Australia Council/Aboriginal Arts Board 76/840/022 II). Much of Papunya Tula’s early support came from the Aboriginal Arts Board, which was formed in 1973 out of this earlier body, especially through the special interest of its director, Robert Edwards, in Sydney and the presence of local Aboriginal representatives on this national body. Edwards was particularly interested in the Papunya paintings, and through the Aboriginal Arts Board he worked creatively to satisfy the producers’ need for financial support to continue their painting.

Edwards occupied a distinct social location for an aesthetic framing of Aboriginal art. As curator of ethnology at the South Australian Museum, he took an interest in recording Aboriginal sites and protecting cultural heritage. In the 1960s he was excited to recognize that many of the Aboriginal craft traditions that had produced material culture still survived (Edwards interview, 5 May 1994). His concern to allow such traditions to be preserved and even to thrive grew into an interest in what he called “the living arts.” From this orientation, it made sense that Aboriginal art ought not to be included with other Aboriginal needs and activities, such as health, under the rubric of an

institution like the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, where funding for art might have to compete with funding for research. Putting it in the Australia Council for the Arts, he said, “included Aboriginals with other artists.”

The framework articulated by Edwards represented acrylic painting as having significant value, but it was somewhat different from Fannin’s “spiritualization” or Bardon’s emphasis on artistic creativity. Edwards’s support through the Aboriginal Arts Board tended to emphasize the paintings’ basis in local knowledge and practice—their preservation as a living art. This formulation, partly a response to painters’ desires to renew their inspiration by visiting their sacred sites and partly reflecting an interest among some art advisers to participate in that knowledge, was shared by Dick Kimber, an art adviser in the mid-1970s. Kimber defined his role as combining development of the sale of Papunya painting, through education and improved documentation, with preservation of what he sometimes called “the living culture” in the form of frequent trips with Aboriginal men to visit the sacred sites represented in their paintings. He worked to preserve, as Bob Edwards wrote to him in a letter of acknowledgment, “an ongoing interest in an Aboriginal way of life.” Like many others hopeful of a modern cure for modernity’s own problems, Edwards and Kimber imagined a governmental intervention of mimesis to reproduce—in artificial form—Aboriginal culture.

Despite this sympathetic policy and recognition of the art, money was always short. Incommensurate systems of value and circulation intersected in defining these objects, and the contradictions and conflicts came to rest most heavily on the art advisers. A crisis atmosphere was developing that long endured.

Government and Art Enterprise

Although the arts and crafts industry was never simply an economic enterprise, maintaining the cash flow to support its objectives was nevertheless a critical problem. Throughout the 1970s, two institutions provided the bulk of support for Papunya painting and Aboriginal arts and crafts generally—the Aboriginal Arts Board and the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Propriety, Ltd. (AACP). These governmental enterprises originated, to some extent, in distinct discursive

formulations of the Aboriginal situation, and they increasingly came to represent the objectives of supporting the production, respectively, of cultural value and economic value. Moreover, in policy terms, the delineation of Aboriginal painting as an economic enterprise tended to increase in importance over time.

The two government enterprises differed in the way in which they integrated the values of culture and enterprise. At its inception, the AACP had little to do with what the government funded formally as “the arts.” It emanated from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and was delineated primarily as an economic enterprise, a means of economic development for Aborigines.

The Aboriginal Arts Board

In 1973, following the first election of the Labor Party in several decades, Aboriginal policy was officially transformed toward the encouragement of “self-determination” and then “self-management.” Both goals emphasized greater respect for Aboriginal culture. At the same time, a broader program of cultural policy endorsed increased support for the arts generally; indeed, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was also minister for the arts. In the expanded and renamed Australian Council for the Arts, a separate Aboriginal Arts Board was established to provide grant support for a range of arts activities—visual arts, literature, theater, and film. This transformation of the government’s role in relation to “culture” was perhaps the salient mark of a new direction in Australian national life.

This new organization, funded significantly by the federal government, was unusual in the extent of Aboriginal control, both substantive and procedural, over its decision making. According to the minutes of the first meeting of the Aboriginal Arts Board, in May 1973, members were told that “the Prime Minister [Whitlam] was seeking their advice on arts.” This was a new age for Aboriginal self-determination, and the minutes register that direction: “On procedural control, it was noted particularly in the meeting that, ‘Board members agreed that Aborigines should be in charge of promoting the Arts in Aboriginal society and protecting existing cultural values and practices.’”

Robert Edwards regarded this development in procedure as central, and he took pride in his support for such a transformation. But the

transformation was not simply a policy paternalistically handed down. Aboriginal activists, operating under the banner of “black power,” had already shown their political muscle in a variety of outspoken ways. At the founding Seminar on the Aboriginal Arts, meeting in Canberra just prior to the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board itself, Edwards’s diplomacy held potentially explosive events to a productive course, resulting in a number of serious resolutions that guided Aboriginal Arts Board policies. The degree of Aboriginal involvement appears to have been an innovative step in more than one way. Edwards was clear about the way in which he organized an effective Aboriginal autonomy, namely, by allowing Aboriginal members to make the decisions and having an able (largely white Australian) staff who could figure out how to implement the plans in a way acceptable to government accounting.

The structure of the Aboriginal Arts Board was perhaps overdetermined. At a time when Aboriginal activism was putting pressure on the Australian state for more resources and a greater role in the national narrative, the state responded by giving money for cultural activities that Aboriginal people could allocate themselves. The approach was also consonant with the ethos of Whitlam’s government and its new breed of public servants. Participants in this new bureaucracy experienced the times as heady ones. One person I interviewed likened the ethos of Whitlam’s government to that of “America’s New Dealers” (Anthony Wallis interview, 1 January 1996). As Edwards said, they were “not concerned to make money, but to do a job.”

Of course, it took money to do this job, and Edwards was adept at finding accountable ways to allow money to be spent in sustaining Aboriginal objectives. Part of what kept the Papunya Tula company afloat during the 1970s was the support of the Aboriginal Arts Board, whose funds seem to have paid for the largest number of paintings. The board purchased paintings for exhibitions such as one organized by the Peter Stuyvesant Trust for Canada in 1974 and others in Nigeria and Indonesia. Dick Kimber, at least, from his position in Alice Springs as supporter and sometime adviser of Papunya Tula, regarded Edwards’s interventions as critical: “Bob Edwards is the key reason why it kept going....There were no other people with an interest” (Kimber interview, July 1991). And for Edwards, with his lifelong interest in Aboriginal material culture and heritage sites, purchases made

through the Aboriginal Arts Board not only contributed to an emerging “industry” but also supported an activity valued by Aboriginal men that helped to preserve, maintain, and record traditional Western Desert skills.

With expertise gained in his early career in business, Edwards knew how to make the bureaucracies and rules work and how to build a market. At the Aboriginal Arts Board, he did so in order to make possible the Aboriginal cultural activities that had been his real passion. “Most paintings are of superb quality,” he advised in an internal memo, “and should be stock-piled for museums and exhibitions in order to enable the artists to continue painting.” Donating collections of paintings to foreign governments—Korea and Canada, for example—was an explicit policy, supported by the Aboriginal members of the board. Work sent overseas for exhibition should be given—left there—rather than returning to clog the Australian market. Thus, through a subtle comprehension of the market, demand of a sort was maintained and activity sustained in the Aboriginal communities.

The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Propriety, Ltd.

The AACP’s beginnings can be traced to a combination of factors, including a tourism plan for central Australia that recommended Aboriginal arts and crafts as a basis for economic development in Aboriginal communities and a proposal put forward by the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs (Peterson 1983). In 1971, this proposal materialized when “the then Office of Aboriginal Affairs established Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd....to both wholesale and retail Aboriginal artefacts” (Altman 1988:52).

The first appointment to the AACP, or “the Company,” was the market research officer, Machmud Mackay, who was chosen “to undertake a survey of production, distribution and marketing of Aboriginal art and craft to place the industry on a sound footing” (Peterson 1983:60). The goal was to increase economic returns to artists and craftsmen and to stabilize the flow of income. In his second report, Mackay argued for a tightly controlled market for Aboriginal arts and crafts, rather than a free enterprise arrangement, “because it was the key to the control of the supply, making it possible to influence the quality of the art and craft and the selection of outlets” (Peterson 1983:60). Aboriginal communi-

ties would sell to the Company, which would wholesale to retail outlets in all the major cities. The Company's special mission was to market Aboriginal art and craft work in order to "encourage high standards of artistry and craftsmanship with a view to creating greater appreciation of and respect for traditional skills and the preservation of the culture; foster the production of arts and crafts as a means of creating employment opportunities; [and] ensure maximum possible economic returns to the artists and craftsmen" (Peterson 1983:61).

This mission was soon subjected to rationalization. After rapid growth in its subsidies from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (A\$220,086 in 1973–74), management consultants appointed to study the Company in 1975 suggested that its objectives be redefined with an emphasis on becoming economically self-sufficient (Peterson 1983:62). This redefinition was articulated not only as a consequence of some extravagant failures in Aboriginal expenditures but more significantly as deriving from the economic downturn facing the entire Australian economy soon after Whitlam's election. The AACP's sister organization, the Aboriginal Arts Board, was to take on the broader, complementary responsibility for encouraging and reviving pride in and knowledge of Aboriginal culture by "assisting the best professional work to emerge in the arts among the Aboriginal people."

Despite the attempt to split the economic from the cultural, a central problem was to manage marketing and promotion in a way consonant with "the integrity of Aboriginal cultural traditions," avoiding what one marketing study called "the ill effects of commercialisation" (Pascoe 1981). From an economic point of view, however, the marketing was not particularly successful. During this early period, and following shortly on the 1975 report, the Company's wholesaling function expanded, yet it did so not as a result of increased sales but rather in order to boost production (Peterson 1983:62). The development was not market driven; in some communities, 70 percent of production was being bought by the Aboriginal Arts Board itself.

As Aboriginal arts and crafts production grew in volume, it came to be evaluated in terms deemed appropriate for "economic enterprises," and concern was expressed about the continuing need for government support. On the other hand, given the mixed and sometimes contradictory goals imagined for Aboriginal arts and crafts, participants to the

policy debates recognized that assessing the value of government subsidies was not a straightforward matter. There were other grounds on which artifact production might be valued as important to Aboriginal communities—for example, “in maintaining cultural life, in capitalizing on unique skills, in allowing wide community participation, in giving individuals an opportunity to earn money, and in providing communities with their only export” (Pascoe 1981).

By the late 1970s, as the Australian economy began to sink, the development of Aboriginal art did not look an easy task. In meetings of the board of directors of the AACP, where discussions had once included questions of whether the Company should emphasize fine art or crafts, increasingly they were about how to survive the next cut of funding. The Company was meant to be self-sufficient rather than simply to support Aboriginal employment. As soon as it began to generate money, the bureaucrats thought they could move it over to what they regarded as “enterprise,” reducing subsidies.

The emergence (or development) of Aboriginal “fine art” should be understood in relation to the actual practices through which objects were moving. The central dynamic of the AACP was “cash flow,” which also defined the relationship between Aboriginal producers and a “market” that those producers understood to be the government body rather than any abstract economy. The cash flow problem was this: the Company did not buy on consignment, as most dealers would, but instead paid up front for the objects it acquired. Aboriginal producers received their payment as soon as they transferred their objects. Increasingly, as the Company failed to sell as much as was sent to it, a huge stock accumulated, and all of its capital was gone, tied up in stock and out to the producers. No new paintings could be purchased—something the producers took as a sign of disrespect or of failure on the part of the art adviser, which led to acrimony and recrimination.

The difficulties with cash flow led to a change of operation. After finding that it could not continue to acquire more stock, the Company shifted to a system of waiting until it had an item for 60 days before sending the money. This form of operation, it was hoped, might allow the Company to sell some of the work before having to transfer the money to the producers.

The “60-day system,” however, merely transferred the problem to

the art advisers, who collected the work and sent it to the Company. Now it was the advisers who had the “workers” angrily asking where their money was. The producers began to sell the best of their work to outsiders, not to the Company, in order to get cash. Consequently, the Company was getting the lower-quality work, unsuitable for sale, which meant it piled up in their storerooms and ate up their capital. Such a conflict between two sets of values—between the market for art and community-based enterprise—was experienced as a flaw in the policy and practice of the AACP.

It also put tremendous pressure on the art advisers, whose role was central to brokering Aboriginal cultural products to the marketplace and the wider public. In the early years, the art advisers mediated primarily between the Aboriginal communities around Papunya and either the AACP or the Aboriginal Arts Board, whose grants were the life-blood of the cooperative. The position, as Bardon found early on, was an impossible, even tragic one; when he left Papunya in 1972, it was after having undergone what many presumed to have been a nervous breakdown. Fannin, too, ended up leaving the position for medical reasons—nervous exhaustion—after rolling his vehicle over during a trip between Alice Springs and Papunya. Fannin’s letters to the Aboriginal Arts Board read eloquently of cash-flow and work-load problems, the difficulty of providing documentation, and vehicle failure, repair, and destruction. The stress came preeminently because of the pressure from Aboriginal painters for payment and purchase of substantial numbers of paintings even when, as in Papunya’s first several years, the cooperative’s unsold stock was reaching levels of 500 paintings or more. Intercultural communication across these domains of value and expectation, where there had already been a long history of cheating and suspicion, was vexed.

The art coordinator’s job was not (usually) just an economic or business mediation, which made it both desirable and destructive. From early on, the relationship of the art enterprise to cultural knowledge was a significant consideration of government support, especially for the Aboriginal Arts Board, but the link was also representative of Aboriginal views in which the paintings were considered an intrinsic part of the painters’ relationship to country and ceremony. To accept this link was to acknowledge that painting, as an economically viable

activity, and looking after their country composed a single cultural domain of activity and to reject—somehow—the claims of a modernizing impulse that would separate “painting” from “religion.”

In the daily life of the art adviser, balancing two cultural worlds, these conflicting values were dramatically played out between completing the annotations and the account books and taking the painters out to their country. The quality of knowledge desired of an art adviser gave “travel with the painters” value, too. Because the amount of money charged to the government budget for vehicles and travel was sizable, Aboriginal priorities were very real and challenging to government values and the rationalizing impulses of cost accounting.

THE “INDUSTRY”: EXHIBITION SUCCESS AND ECONOMIC RATIONALIZATION, 1981–1989

In the 1980s, Aboriginal art became a new “social fact” through a combination of state support for a cultural formation that was “good” for the state and economic processes that further transformed the new commodity. The move was toward arts and crafts as an “industry,” however, more than an activity of cultural preservation. The issue of Aboriginal art was increasingly constructed along lines of economic enterprise—in terms of profitability rather than subsidy. The years from 1981 to 1989 were also a period in which acrylic painting began to receive legitimation and purchases by Australian cultural institutions. Public, journalistic attention to the artwork and its producers emerged, institutional recognition and acquisition grew, and retail galleries, collecting, and curatorship all expanded.

The Australian government under the Labor Party leadership of Hawke and then Keating—corporatist in orientation (Alomes 1988) and given to managed consensus for the economy—was, overall, trying to *remove* government from enterprises. The 1980s were characterized by the growth of marketing surveys and government policies that emphasized Aboriginal employment and the arts and crafts industry as keys to Aboriginal development, as well as accountability for the tax dollar. Many commentators have recognized this complex shift in Australian national political discourse toward economic rationalization and “enterprise accounting.” The balancing act between economic and cultural valuation had always been unsteady, and the increasing

scrutiny now given to budgets for Aboriginal affairs intensified this contradiction between ways of evaluating the worth of Aboriginal acrylics.

A marketing study conducted by Timothy Pascoe for the Australia Council and the AACP in 1981 really ushered in the new era. It was particularly concerned with the relationship between commercial activity and cultural integrity, but it took a strongly economic orientation and produced a special kind of knowledge of the circulation of Aboriginal products as an "industry." The study identified and evaluated different effects for different kinds of products. For example, it found that a few kinds of products sold by the AACP made up a disproportionate share of total production and sales. "Paperbark landscapes," small bark paintings, small carvings, and boomerangs were 80 percent of the items sold and 40 percent of the sales value. Thus, items of low economic and cultural value for the Aborigines were the dominant product groups. Other components of the study suggested that Aboriginal economic need was the strongest spur to production: more production came from communities with fewer alternative sources of income. Such an orientation to the market, the study claimed, might suggest that selling artifacts would lead to a tendency to produce small souvenirs and to deterioration in quality. Other studies, however, suggested that "quality items" earned a better hourly rate (Morphy 1977, 1980, 1983, 1992). They implied, moreover, that the effect of this pattern of remuneration was actually positive on valuing skills and did not destroy the "artistic system." Thus, commercial activity was *not* deleterious to maintaining the standards of Aboriginal cultural integrity.³

If, in Pascoe's study, economics were allowed to support the cultural arguments, the study itself seems to have paved the way for a different approach in cultural policy. In the broadest perspective, the shifting formulation of "Aboriginal arts" among such bureaucratically relevant categories as "enterprise," "cultural renewal," or "social welfare activity" (generating community esteem) should be seen as resulting from the intersection of different technologies of intervention into Aboriginal life. Yet there is no doubt that the discourse of economic rationalization was ascendant, subsuming other forms of value within its own.

Indeed, as forms of Aboriginal material culture become commodities, their properties enter into a process of symbolic transformation

that needs to be understood as much as it is criticized. The circulation of Aboriginal material culture is a varied phenomenon, with distinct streams—“product classifications”—through which objects move. Recognizing that different classes of objects have different sorts of value and properties for consumption, marketing surveys are forms of cultural practice that both represent and transform the social phenomenon of intercultural circulation. Such surveys rely on existing implicit notions of value in delineating their versions of what Appadurai (1986) called “the social life of things,” because classes of objects have different sorts of value. The original four classes recognized by the AACP, for example, were arranged in terms of a theory of acculturation: “traditional,” “transitional,” “adapted,” and “market.” Borrowing from Graburn (1976), the 1981 marketing survey adjusted these frameworks to clarify how the streams of objects might be differentiated according to the intersection of two other axes of value—Aboriginal cultural value and Western aesthetic value (Pascoe 1981:20). The result was a four-cell matrix (fig. 6.3) that defined types of artifacts and delineated for each group of objects the “likely customers and therefore the type of marketing needed to reach them.”

Thus, the category of “bicultural” artifacts—which would have included the acrylics—was seen as “of high cultural value for Aboriginals and aesthetically appealing to non-Aboriginals.” Along with acrylics, quality but non-sacred bark paintings and carvings fit into this class as objects “suitable for art collectors as well as museums and collectors of ethnographica.” According to the study, bicultural artifacts needed presentation in “specialist commercial gallery surroundings” (Pascoe 1981:21).

The so-called bicultural artifact was indeed a category in which expansion took place. Papunya paintings began to enter into the category of “contemporary Australian art” through exhibition and marketing that focused on “quality.” Throughout the late 1970s, demand had been slight, and rather than encourage painters, the art advisers felt they had to slow down production. In 1980, the Australian National Gallery in Canberra purchased its first acrylic painting, Old Mick Tjakamarra’s *Honey Ant Dreaming* (1973), and this began the process of legitimation. Later that year, the South Australian Art Gallery made its first major purchase of a Papunya work, *Men’s Love Story* by Clifford

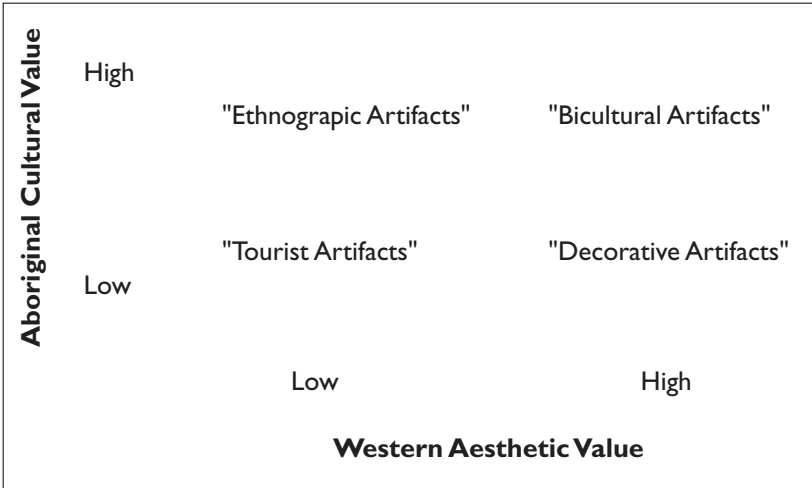


FIGURE 6.3

Classes of aboriginal artifacts as they relate to different categories of value (after Pascoe 1981:20).

Possum Tjapaltjarri, and hung it in its display of contemporary Australian art, an act of curating that Johnson (1994) regarded as particularly significant. In 1981, curator Bernice Murphy included three major Western Desert works in the inaugural “Australian Perspecta” exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Overall, however, Johnson attributed the breakthrough to Andrew Crocker, the art adviser from late 1979 to the end of 1981. “The new manager,” she wrote, “had a different attitude toward the paintings from all previous incumbents of the Papunya job.... His insistence that the paintings be seen as contemporary art rather than ethnographic artifacts had undoubted effectiveness as a promotional strategy in attracting the art world’s attention to works it had previously thought of only in the context of an ethnographic museum” (Johnson 1994:55). A Cambridge graduate, Crocker was neither ethnologically oriented nor Australia identified, and he sought to turn the enterprise into one with a sounder business footing. In terms of sales, however, not much changed until Crocker sold a substantial collection—26 paintings—to the wealthy Australian businessman Robert Holmes à Court.

Although the purchase gave a push of legitimacy to the movement,

Holmes à Court did not pay a large price. It was only after Daphne Williams took over as art adviser in 1982 that Papunya Tula's earnings began to grow. Its sales in Australian dollars went from \$382,595 in 1985–86 to \$595,168 in 1986–87 and \$1,050,395 in 1987–88 (the year leading up to the Australian Bicentennial). This was an unprecedented rate of growth and volume of sales. Not only was Papunya Tula's work suddenly the subject of enormous publicity, but its sales were the highest of any art center in Australia. A number of factors facilitated this upsurge—the Bicentennial and the accompanying growth of tourism, for example—and the whole Aboriginal arts and crafts market grew during this period. The placement of acrylic paintings in the category of fine art was critical to that economic success.

The growth in sales, however, owed little to private galleries of the sort thought likely to handle “bicultural artifacts” during the early part of this period. Sales to the ordinary tourist market, even with support from AACP, were unable to satisfy the producers' aspirations. The 1981 marketing survey showed that less than 5 percent of all tourist sales were of acrylic paintings. The producers were kept going only through sales of these paintings to museums and governmental collections.

Even when sales began to pick up, a substantial number of paintings apparently still went to the public sector rather than to private consumers. In other words, the “Aboriginal art phenomenon” was not a simple case of consumer interest, in that there were never many collectors or investors. According to Anthony Wallis, who in 1986 took over the former AACP, by now renamed Aboriginal Arts Australia, there was never much of an external market for arts and crafts; this is corroborated by other materials I have seen. At Aboriginal Arts Australia, Wallis in one year raised sales from \$1.5 million to \$3 million, mostly from sales to government offices. The paintings sold, for example, to Artbank, which rented out art to government office buildings.

Sales to the public sector created an impression of massive success, which the “industry” aimed to do. There is some evidence for a deliberate sort of staging in which the art market had no real foundation in consumption. It reminds me of the film *The Wizard of Oz*, in which an effect is created for the public by an operator behind the scenes—in this case by the Australian government, which primed a belief in the art's value. Anthony Wallis claimed that he once spoke to the director

of a general art gallery located in a major department store. The director was impressed when he heard that Wallis did \$3 million in sales, and said that in 10 years the gallery had never actually made any profit (Wallis interview, 21 December 1995). Its exhibitions of art were sustained, it seems, in order to give some class to the overall retail operation. This anecdote indicates that the art market is full of wizardry, smoke and mirrors, by which objects acquire stature and value—a process amusingly figured in the famous scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when the dog pulls back the curtain to show the wizard as a little man turning cranks on a machine to create the illusion of power and authority. This is a normal part of art market practice, but in Australia it is shaped in a particular way because of the inescapable connection of “Aboriginality” to changing formulations of Australian national culture and the reframing of the national image.

Thus, one of the puzzles about the so-called “market” is that few Australians were really interested in or knew much about Aboriginal art, even at the time of a 1993 review of the industry (MacMillan and Godfrey 1993). The government purchases were clearly inspired by a changing national construction that embraced Aboriginal culture as part of Australia, a construction that must have been supported, if not among the majority of Australians, then at least among those involved in politics and cultural production.

At the same time that pressures toward economic rationalization were being realized in the organization of an “arts and crafts industry,” another, apparently contradictory cultural shift was equally noticeable. “Aboriginal culture” increasingly came to be formulated as central to a distinctive Australian national imaginary linked to the land and oriented away from the country’s European ancestry or its American “big brother” (Hamilton 1990). Not only did the Australian government need to respond to growing, visible Aboriginal protest about inclusion, but also in the 1980s the image of the nation—its self-representation—moved away from Europe and America and toward the commodification of its tourist market, for which traditional Aboriginal art and culture took on new value. Aboriginal art, and acrylic painting in particular, came to be associated with a formation of Australian national identity. This was marked most explicitly and dramatically in the selection of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra’s Western Desert painting design in

1985 for the mosaic forecourt at the new billion-dollar Parliament House in Canberra, dedicated on 9 May 1988. The embrace of Aboriginal culture (in a limited sense) in the national imaginary is also indexed by the widespread acquisition of Aboriginal art for government offices.

The contexts for this shift are both specific and general. The Australian Bicentennial in 1988 provided the occasion and the resources for renewed cultural production around questions and problems of national identity, for Australians were faced with the necessity of staging themselves in public, not only for themselves but also for a large tourist audience. Predictably, these stagings became occasions of social drama in which enduring hierarchies of value were contested and became unstable. It was not only Aboriginal political activists who placed themselves at center stage in the ensuing “debates,” by contesting the celebration of “discovery.” Bicentennial funding also supported the exhibition of Aboriginal culture and art on a new scale, allowing it to play a significant role in celebrations of “Australia.” Representations of “the Aboriginal” were constructed, additionally, in the form of an artistic “primitivism” that received considerable attention from critics in the arts during the 1980s, especially for the complex role of the “primitive” in constituting the “modern” (see Clifford 1988a; Foster 1985b; Said 1978). Critiques of modernist primitivism drew attention to the themes of nostalgia for an organic relation to place, a tie with a premodern Australia, and a specifically Australian modernist interest in the “other,” inspired by the Vietnam War’s impact in pushing Australians toward the international counterculture (see Hamilton 1990; Lattas 1990, 1991; Myers 1991).

As in the case of Native American culture at important times in the United States, Aboriginal forms provided Australia with a native, local identity, a means to distinguish itself from its European colonial past. This transformation was already well under way by the late 1970s, as ties with England were severed after World War II and new relations were forged in alliance as America’s “junior partner.” The new positioning was signaled, according to Barrett’s (1996) study of “Whitlamism,” by cultural allegiance on the part of Australia’s new elite to a kind of “modernist internationalism,” which itself began to falter with the economic downturn of the mid-1970s and Australia’s detachment from the

“American century.” Barrett maintained that the National Gallery of Australia’s controversial, costly acquisition of Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist *Blue Poles* in September 1973 marked the modernist internationalist aspiration of Whitlam’s government, which was endorsed by the rise of a particular class fraction in Australia, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. In turn, the ascension of Aboriginal art to its status as a representation of Australian distinctiveness filled the gap left by the collapse of the modernist fantasy. *Blue Poles*, to speak metonymically, opened up a new space that came to be filled with Aboriginal art, in ways reminiscent of the development of the Southwest Indian art market in the United States after World War I.

I find Barrett’s delineation of this rising Whitlamist class very suggestive. National imaginaries, as they have been called, are tied to changing political economies and are produced by specific social sectors. Indeed, although Aboriginal art and Aboriginal identity gained a place in the Australian national imaginary, that place appears to have been sustained by the taste and hegemony not of the working class, the immigrant ethnic groups, or the elites of the old “squattocracy” but of the historically distinct class fraction of university-educated public servants and bureaucrats who took over the Australian Labor Party. These technocrats were presumably the people into whose offices one-third of Papunya Tula’s paintings, purchased by Artbank, went and whose “cultural” (national) identity was expressed through such appropriation. There is, therefore, a revealing link between economic rationalization and the cultural reevaluation of Aboriginal art, a link whose compromise formations made the artistic success of acrylic paintings a significant national symbol. The linkage was fashioned by a new class of Australian elites in a specifically “postcolonial” situation that was both economic and political.

These sensibilities did not fall from heaven. They were produced. Unquestionably, art criticism—the institutional domain in which aesthetic value is appraised—is important in providing a basis for discrimination. Exhibitions are the raw material of art critical writing and curatorship because they provide occasions for the practice of these activities by bringing objects into the arena of evaluation. Art criticism and curatorship are both necessary for the structure of art selling because they provide a means for establishing connoisseurship or

“quality control”—a knowledge of the objects and their relative worth. The problem for dealers (sellers of art) is to synchronize the market with the criticism. It is clear that during the 1980s, a time when interest in “ethnic arts” was burgeoning throughout the West, positive critical reception from outside Australia secured a sense of value for Aboriginal art and acrylic painting in Australia. This sense of value had not existed earlier. For example, James Mollison, curator of the Australian National Gallery, was completely uninterested in Aboriginal work until 1980. This new reception was important for the cultural value assigned to the “Aboriginal” as well as to the monetary worth of the paintings.

Moreover, these sensibilities and imaginings were produced in particular, located social actors—namely, members of the professional managerial class. My evidence for this is more anecdotal and inferential than I would like, although it is implied by Lattas’s (1990, 1991) discussions of Australian intellectuals as well as by Barrett (1996). The results of a 1993 marketing survey (MacMillan and Godfrey 1993), conducted in several cities, suggest that the new interest in Aboriginal art as part of Australian national culture was not the sentiment of a majority of Australians. The largest part of the market for Aboriginal arts and crafts was still overseas customers (travelers and tourists), and not Australians themselves. Only 38 percent of adult Australians had “ever bought” Aboriginal arts and crafts, including T-shirts. The Australians who did buy were likely to be high-income earners and those with at least some tertiary education. These were said to be the people most likely to visit displays. And the most popular items were not fine art objects but weapons, clothing, carvings, and accessories with Aboriginal designs. Despite the enormous publicity of the 1980s, studies of focus groups found that most Australians had “only a limited experience of Aboriginal people and their arts” (MacMillan and Godfrey 1993:15).

Such information suggests that the cultural themes dominant in the formulations of Australian intellectuals should be located within a context of ideological “struggle”—in a specific, globalizing political economy and in the tastes (or identities) of a specific class fraction (Bourdieu 1993b)—a fraction that is to be understood as the professional managerial class. These people were, it seems to me, those who participated most definitively in the Whitlam “revolution.” I think we

have seen their brothers and sisters elsewhere—in *Songlines* (Chatwin 1988), for example, as the quirky whites of the Aboriginal industry, trying to find an Australian identity in absolutely non-European practices. These were people who, for their own identity, needed to constitute Australia as an authentic cultural space, and they put intellectual energy into creating an authentically Australian culture as “culturally productive.” The “managed economy” was not, as one might expect, at odds with these new national imaginings; the two were, instead, deeply connected. Cultural export has played an important role in Australia’s self-conception.

My emphasis in considering the “middle period” of acrylic painting and the development of the Aboriginal arts and crafts “industry” has been on the material practices of cultural production, the infrastructures through which an Aboriginal practice and product moved on the way to becoming something like a commodity. The issue has been how the broad category of “Aboriginal fine art” was manufactured and sustained. First, I have tried to show that the paintings were subsidized by the state, originally as a solution to the “Aboriginal problem” and then as an aspect of the production of national identity—which has always struggled to place Aboriginal people in relation to the state through policies and practices ranging from destruction and assimilation to self-determination. Second, I believe the machinery of the state was mobilized to this end by a particular set of agents and the Whitlamist concern with culture. Those agents were the class fraction I call “the wizards of Oz,” prefigured by Robert Edwards. Aboriginal culture had been something otherwise unassimilable with which they had to deal—and through art, it could be assimilated, either economically or culturally. Like the wizard in the film, the agents of this class were involved in the production and circulation of imagery, mobilizing, often to good ends, the tricks of the bureaucratic machinery of Oz to create the structures of Australia against an unknown and magical landscape.

Because of the substantial absorption of acrylic production first by the government and later by galleries in the context of Australia’s changing self-definition and the wizardry of its new managers, acrylic painting came to broader attention as a success. It became its own “thing,” a social fact, acquiring an aura that combined its economic

success, aesthetic recognition, and Aboriginal authenticity. It lay somewhere between the pure commodity—value defined in market discriminations—and the Aboriginal artifact—value defined by use as signs within a community. This Aboriginal “presence” in the paintings was critical to the value of the commodities: consumers preferred to “buy direct from makers rather than retailers” and “to buy only genuine, original hand-crafted Aboriginal arts and crafts” (MacMillan and Godfrey 1993:17).

Now that the category of Aboriginal fine art was a social fact, now that the paintings had status as “commodities,” dealers wanted to exploit them to their own ends just as the government wanted to divest itself of its subsidizing role and to subsume Aboriginal art to economics. After 1989, “Aboriginal fine art” as a signifier came to be further separated from its cultural base as the selling of Aboriginal art was increasingly dominated by the structures of the Western art market, in which the need for “discrimination” and “quality control” defined the practice of its mediation.

BEYOND ABORIGINALITY: 1989–2000

In this last section, I can sketch out only briefly the most recent period in the acrylic painting market. It has been characterized by an emphasis on connoisseurship, a delineation of a hierarchy among painters, and a movement away from the emphasis on “Aboriginality” and national identity. This transformation followed on the dismantling of the centralized system for marketing the paintings in the 1980s, which happened not only because of conflicts over centralization, which were spearheaded by arts coordinators, but also because of attention to the economic rationality of government subsidies, which was articulated by private retailers. Both were set in motion by overall emphases on “rationalization.”

In 1987, Aboriginal Arts Australia (AAA, successor to the AACP), then under the control of the Aboriginal Development Commission, came under attack from the arts centers and coordinators when the minister for Aboriginal affairs, Clyde Holding, announced a policy of intensifying the centralization of marketing. With all funding for art centers to be passed through AAA, the proposal was threatening to the arts coordinators, who resisted it with a strike that eventually led to the

dismantling of AAA. With the demise of centralized marketing, a substantial number of private dealers and galleries moved in. Whether buoyed by reality or by illusions of success, the retailing of Aboriginal arts and crafts no longer lacked for players.

The practices of retailing and the identification of distinct streams of art products led to differentiation in outlets. Altman and colleagues (1989:74) found three broad types of specialist outlets: “Aboriginal fine art outlets,” “Aboriginal tourist art outlets,” and “mixed outlets.” These differentiations depended upon the recognition of a class of “fine art.” As Anthony Wallis and others had recognized, people would not pay large sums of money to buy paintings in a shop cluttered with tourist souvenirs. Not uncommonly, specialists established different outlets to straddle different market segments. The Dreamtime Aboriginal Art Centre, for example, had tourist venues in the Argyle Centre in Sydney and a fine art gallery in Paddington (Hogarth). Coo-ee had an “emporium” for tourists and a nearby gallery for collectors (Altman, McGuigan, and Yu 1989:75).

The differentiation of outlets—and especially the sustaining of a higher-end category of fine art—required retailers to present themselves as knowledgeable. Interest in buying “direct from makers” and in buying “only genuine, original hand-crafted Aboriginal arts and crafts” reflected the value of the items as mementos or souvenirs of travel that needed to be indexed to a location and people. Correspondingly, the meaning or “story” associated with the items was considered to be an important dimension. For visitors who purchased such items, they represented a mnemonic of tourism. For this category of consumer, such “art” was a turn to an aesthetics in which objects were memorable not because of their intrinsic value but because of the effect they had on their viewer at specific times and places.

On the other hand, the interviewees in MacMillan and Godfrey’s (1993) marketing survey—suspicious consumers, apparently—believed that retailers in cities would carry only low-quality stock, and best-quality artwork would be available only at the source of production. This information suggests a combination of interest in “authenticity,” personal significance (associated with the connection between producer and consumer), and a concern to get the best value. There was a corollary defining the terms of a dealer’s self-presentation as knowledgeable

and connected with producers: “In the event of buying Aboriginal art from a local source, consumers often felt that they would need to obtain reassurance and guidance in purchase from an art expert or dealer. Understanding the meaning and stories associated with Aboriginal art was also thought to be a means of assuring authenticity” (MacMillan and Godrey 1993:17).

“Knowledge” is critical in mediating sales of objects, in making them fine art (Plattner 1996; Savage 1969). This is not particular to Aboriginal art. Where information is lacking on value, as is the case with Aboriginal forms, the seller’s mediation becomes even more important. For good Western art, the question is the track record of the artist, which is somewhat harder to show for Aboriginal artists, although dealers are evolving in that direction. In Alice Springs, as the market changed, dealers attempted to enter it on terms related to their closeness to “supply,” upgrading their own reputations as connoisseurs and “sources.” One such practice on the part of retailers involved taking the stories that came with the paintings from an arts cooperative (that is, documented by the art adviser) and copying them so that the gallery appeared to be the authenticator, the source with close ties to the producer.

Even if the largest part of the market has been tourist mementos, the separation and reaggregation of tourist art and fine art is an ongoing issue. “Fine art” seems to require a less cluttered context, a presentation or “framing” of the product separately from other products. The number of tourists who will buy \$400 to \$500 items is apparently small, but galleries have evolved to engage these persons. The reason Aboriginal Arts Australia’s Kent Street gallery in Sydney was good, Anthony Wallis told me, “was that it looked classy. It had books in it.... People could feel they were getting educated and that they were getting something worthwhile.” Younger tourists, whom he classified as “backpackers,” typically bought this art. They were, he said, even willing to pay \$2,000 to \$3,000 for a painting: “They thought it something authentic.”

This account presents “fine art” as being secured and legitimated by the (modernist) context of the gallery, a context strongly in contrast with that of shops in Sydney’s “the Rocks” tourist district, with their more jumbled interior displays. People do not want to pay large sums

of money for something that looks like part of a tourist enterprise. Galleries, dealers, and a modernist style of exhibition began to emerge in the 1990s along with curators and dealers from the government enterprise known as Aboriginal Arts Australia, such as Djon Mundine, Ace Bourke, Gabrielle Pizzi, and Gabriella Roy, all past employees, and gallerists such as Christopher Hodges.

The opening up of the market introduced another set of meanings through the effects of competition. At least 161 different venues for selling Aboriginal art and crafts were identified in the database in Altman, McGuigan, and Yu 1989, and there was a good deal of competition among them and among the art centers. The arts and crafts industry had become less a “cultural” question and more an “enterprise.” Increasingly, participants discussed the movement of the paintings in terms that delineated the structure of the fine arts world, where value was sustained by distinctiveness, trajectory, and quality control. The common phrase I heard was “settling out,” referring to the drying up of demand for any old kind of acrylic painting and a discrimination of quality. This meant that there would be a different market for work regarded by retailers as of lesser quality, which might have to move to outlets of a different order.

The remarks of a well-known curator with a long career in Aboriginal art to some extent celebrate the turn to “quality,” “taste,” and “discrimination.” In an extended interview at the Hogarth Gallery in Sydney in 1991, Ace Bourke told me,

I think what’s going to happen with Aboriginal art is that a few people have had a good run under the Aboriginal umbrella but now it’s just coming down to the Gordon Bennetts, the Tracey Moffatts, the Trevor Nichols, I mean, the real artists. The ones who just compete on an international art front. It’s just going to be as simple as that. The novelty of Aboriginal things has worn off, particularly from the media’s point of view. I mean, they’re just not interested. They think it’s yesterday’s news. In fact, the art is extraordinarily gorgeous. You know, the dot paintings are an extraordinary phenomenon in the world...history of world art, well, this century especially. So it’s just especially good and it’s got something to say, there’s real weight behind most of it.

So it's very simple why people are interested in it. And the interest has only just begun. And there are real problems like over-production. Too many paintings indiscriminately evolved....It's shaking out. Getting better rather than worse.

The curatorial realities that Bourke referred to are illuminated in his remarks about a then-current show at Aboriginal Artists Australia, where he had once worked and toward which he was somewhat ambivalent: "These days you don't get a package deal. You have the good artists, and the bad ones can just go fuck themselves. You know, *why carry them?* It's just unprofessional and it's just not how it's done.... [It] just shows amateurism as far as I'm concerned. Why carry a bad artist? You don't sell anything. You don't do the artists any good, and it just makes you look bad. It takes away from a good show."

Although his comments in this case referred chiefly to urban-based artists, his curatorial position is quite at odds with the expectations of painters in places like Papunya, who have expected, as Gabrielle Pizzi said, "that all work there would be purchased on completion" (quoted in Kronenberg 1995:7). To some extent, such practices had helped guide curatorial practice for a while, in the form of an emphasis on group shows, even if they unintentionally colluded with the practices of shadier "entrepreneurs" who sold and displayed paintings without regard to their effect on the painter's career.

In the accounts of dealers and curators, if "standard" practices prevailed, then the good would survive and the so-called "weaker" painting would dry up. These accounts outline the common understanding of how a fine art market is structured. "I was finding it increasingly hard," Gabrielle Pizzi said in an interview, "to promote Aboriginal artists, both in Australia and internationally, when their work was simultaneously being sold in tourist shops and vanity galleries.... That means mediocre work is finding its way onto the market and, more damagingly, is being sold in commercial outlets, and this can lead to a destabilisation of the market" (quoted in Kronenberg 1995:7-8). Such a "lack of control in the market" might compromise a dealer's "professional integrity and reputation" (Pizzi in Kronenberg 1995:8).

This is not, I should say, simply a hostile position that greedy dealers take against Aboriginal interests. There is great concern about a

“flood” of poorer work being marketed by those who want to make a quick dollar, and this is distinguished from responsible participation.

The remarks of Christopher Hodges, who represents Papunya Tula in Sydney’s Utopia Gallery, extend this analysis of the “new market” and the changing place of Aboriginal fine art. Hodges’s central concern is the development of connoisseurship, or knowledge, as a basis for appreciating artistic value—as a way to discriminate “quality.” This requires education of the viewer and the capacity to know individual styles through “research,” something in which a good dealer must engage. At this point, Aboriginal fine art—articulated for the high-priced world of collecting and connoisseurship—is becoming detached from its base in Aboriginal cultural practices. Hodges told me:

There’s no doubt in my mind that every one of the artists that is producing work at the moment is producing it for a marketplace and knows it gets exhibited. They’re not producing it for sacred ceremonies. It’s a viable income-producing form of labor....

Their paintings are influenced by what’s happening to them. They’re important statements about the big issues, and the fact that it’s abstract fitted in with the Western tradition of abstract painting. And so abstract painting had lost its punch by the seventies, by the late seventies, abstract art had run full cycle until it was pretty much looking up its own navel, and so when this stuff came along it was full of content, it was powerful, it had all the energy in it, and it was volatile. And most of the art at that time had lost its real vitality. And so it went into the art world as a fresh, new thing, which continued a tradition that had begun in completely different cultures. We use the phrase, “beyond Aboriginality.” And the idea was that once the work had transcended the specific culture, it still has an effect on people who know nothing about the specifics of the work. The best pictures, they hit you. That ability to hit, even though there are no cultural records. It really makes a difference. (Hodges interview, 21 June 1991)

Entering into this fine arts world does not, in Hodges’s view, necessitate indulging in “primitivist nostalgia” for the “noble savage.”

Hodges was very clear that what he expected to sell was “painting,” rather than “Aboriginality,” and the expensive paintings were sold on the basis of knowledge—moving buyers ever further toward “stronger” art. Hodges explained his idea of appropriate relationships as involving what he called “proper representation.” But this is exactly what most of the so-called reputable dealers believe is not occurring:

There’s a lot of potential to do things internationally with this art. There are lots of chances to go and show this work to a larger audience. But it’s got to go out in the proper way. It’s got to go out supported well. Go out with the same care the work of the top white artists [goes out] with. If that’s going to happen, it means cooperation from everybody on a long-term call. Ninety-nine percent of the people involved with Aboriginal art, I reckon they just rank out of it. The places that show art in Sydney, most of them started out as tourist shops that have become galleries. Like Hogarth—down at The Rocks—who runs a tourist shop, and then they’ve got a museum and gallery, and then they’ve got the Dreamtime Centre Gallery in Paddington. So they come from a background of splitting their options three ways. (Hodges interview, 21 June 1991)

This sort of comment, not uncommon among dealers, reflects the relationships of competition among them, too. At the time of my interviewing, Emily Kngwerreye’s work was receiving the greatest critical attention, and galleries were vying for her paintings. Indeed, “representation” could be said to have become meaningful entirely within this entrepreneurial environment.

I believe in representing artists. To do the right thing for your artists, you have to support them. You have to work together. But your aim is to develop their reputation so that they have a long-term future in the arts. Now because of the exploitation by opportunists who don’t understand the art market, who don’t understand anything about art, wouldn’t know a good painting if they fell over it...many of the major artists...are basically hugely undervalued, because the opportunists stop proper representation occurring.... The entrepreneurs have just under-

mined the pricing. Every time somebody is nominated, you know—like Emily Kngwerreye—they took advantage of all the efforts that had been made by everybody before that. Coventry Gallery actually mounted an Emily Kngwerreye show. Gabrielle Pizzi mounted one and Hogarth Gallery has mounted an Emily show. (Hodges interview, 21 June 1991)

These shows were obviously the point of the competition, but they clearly reflect the difficulty of the “unsettled” art market. The dealers all struggle with “opportunists” and entrepreneurs who have no long-term involvement, which seems to be understood as the stabilizing force. Ace Bourke had complaints about competition, too, and seemed to dream of a curatorial autonomy that was denied him in the mercurial world of Aboriginal art:

We’ve got Balgo [the Balgo art cooperative], and Balgo showed at Coo-ee earlier in the year and wanted to show in Kent Street later in the year. And I’m the monster because I said no way [to a Balgo show at his own gallery, the Hogarth]. I’m just sick of it.... They can be as amateurish as they like. [If] they’re going to show with someone, they’re going to show with me and they’re going to show once a year or I’m not interested. They can just drop out or drop dead. It’s not like a big chocolate cake you share around; you know, have a go at the Hogarth and then move on to Kent Street. (Bourke interview, July 1991)

The future of the Aboriginal fine art market seems to be the system familiar to Western art, but in the new guise of Hodges’s version of “proper representation.” And this future will follow the “settling out” of the finer artists from the others, not the continuing endorsement of Aboriginal identity per se.

When all this stops, and people really look at it, and the entrepreneurs have dropped out, and we have people capable of making judgments about Aboriginal art the same way they are capable of making judgment about white art, with the same degree of scholarship and commitment. And you’ll have somebody say, “Turkey Tolson’s stripe paintings from the late eighties, early nineties, those are the best paintings he ever did.” I think that’s what will happen. (Hodges interview, 21 June 1991)

There are aspects to what is afoot, however, that may be depressing to some of those involved in the fine art market. Sales have declined overall, and “unscrupulous” dealers have been able to get into the market. This is perhaps the expectable result of the shift toward Aboriginal arts and crafts as an industry. According to at least two recent accounts I heard, Papunya Tula is having trouble that is indicative: a problem keeping its artists. The cooperative is undermined by people who want access to the Aboriginal communities but gain it by sowing discontent among painters who are not selling well at the time. This is something that has long been visible: People are angry because their paintings are not being sold, and so someone in Alice Springs tells them they are being robbed. The artists have begun to sell to anybody in town, and dealers are coming to Alice Springs to take advantage of this. Indeed, one rumor was that a gallery down south had managed to have an assistant from Papunya Tula act as its agent, bypassing the cooperative and sending work directly to the gallery. One “mixed outlet” from Melbourne was also reputed to have an agent in Alice Springs and to pay artists on the spot—with cars. In another case, a shop owner in Alice Springs reportedly told an artist, in order to get him to paint for him, that Papunya Tula did not look after him properly and the dealer would do so. The artists never had a great deal of loyalty to Papunya Tula, always feeling themselves impelled by need to sell where they could, but their association with the cooperative has been further eroded.

Dealers who operate in this fashion cannot provide accurate provenience information, which is critical for selling paintings at the high end. Before, they could guarantee authenticity for buyers with a number on a painting that linked it to a document on file at the cooperative. As a result of the changes, I understand, the market has now turned back to the earlier period of the art, when paintings were inherently limited in number, controllable, and linked to more culturally “isolated” times. Apparently, paintings from that early period are going for large sums.

These changes may challenge the “authenticity” of the work, both commercially and culturally. One view holds that after the generation passes for whom this art is really linked to ceremony and traditional concerns, the movement will die. What people buy it for, in this view, is

that connection with Aboriginal culture. But it may also be that the demands of the art market always move on, and that different explorations will take place from a basic cultural repertoire. The tropes of modernism and modernization take us just to here, for now.

Notes

I want to thank the many people involved in Aboriginal art who have given me generously of their time and thoughts. Most of them are mentioned by name in this chapter, but there would have been nothing to write about had I not had the experience of being taught about this business by Pintupi painters themselves. Work on this chapter has been supported by grants from a number of agencies over the years, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, ACLS, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, and by a sabbatical from New York University. Earlier versions of the chapter have been presented at the Departments of Anthropology of Cornell University and Princeton University and at the Institute for Advanced Study. I have benefited greatly from critical comments by T. O. Beidelman, George Marcus, Toby Miller, Gwen Wright, Annette Weiner, and Vincanne Adams, but I am especially indebted to Faye Ginsburg for her many contributions. I thank Jane Kepp for her wondrous editing. The essay is dedicated to my friend Annette Weiner, who died before its publication.

1. That the painters were almost entirely male is probably a consequence of the relationships that Bardon had—principally with men—when he initially formed a group of painters. Aboriginal women of ritual standing, likely participants in painting, would not have been on such close terms with a white man. It was certainly the case that at that time, male painters took great pains to ensure that women in their community would not see the paintings, lending credence to the view that painting was necessarily “men’s only.”

2. The legal framework for the implementation of these policies was provided in the Welfare Ordinance of the Northern Territory Legislative Council (1953), which replaced the Aboriginals Ordinance (1911–47).

3. The study showed that there had been little growth in sales since the Company’s founding in 1973. In 1981 the system was still substantially subsidized by grants from the Aboriginal Arts Board and by Aboriginal communities—to the tune of \$1 million. In terms of total revenue, artifacts were seen to contribute less than 1 percent of Aboriginal revenue, and in terms of disposable

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cash income, they accounted for 4 or 5 percent on average. These crass economic findings were arrayed against “cultural values,” however, allowing the authors of the report to maintain that “artefact production is still very important to Aboriginal communities” (Pascoe 1981:16). It was said to be important in “maintaining cultural life,” for example, because “most artefacts produced for sale also have a physical and spiritual role in the traditional life of Aborigines. Production for sale as well as for use helps to keep the culture alive.” In retrospect, many commentators regard arts and crafts as almost the only successful Aboriginal enterprise.