

# Acting in a community

## Art and social cohesion in Indigenous Australia

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The word 'community' has long been used in everyday language in two distinct but related senses. On the one hand, it can refer to a group of people who interact, who occupy the same space or are a part of a collective entity: the community of people who live in a particular suburb or who belong to the same school. On the other hand, it refers to a sense of shared identity that people have—for example, by having certain interests in common or sharing a similar sense of being in the world: the artistic community, the Catholic community or more abstractly the community of like-minded individuals. In this second sense, the community can comprise a set of people who never or rarely meet together and can be applied so broadly that in most respects the people included by the term have little at all in common—the ethnic community, for example. Just because a term defies simple definition or seems to break down under close inspection, this does not, however, mean that there is not a valid idea behind it. A term that is used as often as community and that indeed is thought by its users to have a degree of moral force that implies commitment is likely to signify something important in human society.<sup>1</sup>

There will be cases where a broad commonality of interests is reflected in real groups of people who live together as neighbours in the same place, but, more commonly in complex societies, communities cut across residential patterns. The idea of community becomes less problematic as soon as it is realised that individuals can be members of many different types of community and that membership of any one community does not prescribe its identity. This brings out the ambiguity of the two senses of community: it is possible for people who occupy the same residential space—people who belong to a community in the first sense—to belong to many different communities in the second sense. Nonetheless, in the case of both senses of the term, there is likely to be a moral dimension.

In the case of residential communities, even if they are not historically constituted, there is a pragmatic requirement to act as a moral community at least with respect to those interests that enable members to live together—common interests arise out of living together. On the other hand, the dispersed communities that are created through sharing interests in common or having a shared sense of identity or history are often motivated to act together. Members are likely to congregate together on an occasional basis through

meetings, fellowships or conferences or, if possible, meet on a daily basis. While dispersed, they act together at a distance through newsletters and magazines and, today, by forming groups on the Internet. It is important to recognise that the residential communities in the first sense can differ nearly as much from each other in their constitution as the communities of interest in the second sense that crosscut them. And, almost by definition, the residential community is going to reflect diverse communities of interest in the second sense—interests that might even be conflicting. Social cohesion clearly requires a complex balancing act between moral forces that encourage people to act together and interests that separate people from one another.

Social cohesion at a national level means something very different from social cohesion at a local level. At the local level, social cohesion refers to the capacity of people to work together on the ground and to have a sense of obligation to the community as a whole. At the national level, it is a much more abstract concept since it must link groups and individuals with vastly different and often opposed interests; a cohesive society needs to include people who believe that the arts are an essential component of a society requiring government funding and those who believe that art is a luxury or a commodity that should simply be left to market forces. Hence, social cohesion at a national level requires compromise and a balance of interests, and must allow for diversity. In the arts, social cohesion will be achieved largely by artists acting in and on behalf of the community. Nationally, a number of different factors will be involved.

Different communities and interest groups need to feel that they have access to resources on an equitable basis and are included in the decision-making processes. Factors of identity politics, however, are also likely to be crucial: there are sub-communities. For these, it matters how inclusively Australian art is represented in local and international contexts. And for these sub-communities, the extent to which the artistic community itself embraces cultural diversity, gives space to different practices and recognises value in different histories also matters. Feelings of social inclusion in the case of Indigenous Australians are influenced by the extent to which their rights are recognised and by the success or failure of government policies in alleviating social disadvantage. Equally important has been reversing the history of exclusion that for many years removed Aboriginal Australians from the public face of the nation. The absence of Aboriginal art in the museums and galleries and the failure to resource Aboriginal art practice were signs of this exclusion.<sup>2</sup> A sense of shared identity or commonality of interest can be influenced by the ways in which institutions that operate at a national level articulate and contribute to the success of organisations at a regional or local level. If those links work well then, even if local communities still feel disconnected from the national identity, they will at least be able to take advantage of mechanisms for inclusion.

## Art as action

I begin with the premise that art is a way of acting in the world.<sup>3</sup> Art is a way of expressing knowledge—a means of expressing the experience of being in the world and a means of communicating ideas and values. As a form of action, art can influence the world in innumerable ways. Art can be a means of political intervention and identity formation, it can help transform the environment in which people live and provide inspiration or comfort to individuals and communities by expressing emotions in aesthetically powerful ways. As a form of action, art requires a community—a community of speakers, of viewers, of actors—and helps build communities.

In this paper, I will focus on two complementary examples: the ways in which Yolngu people have used art to mediate the impact of European colonisation since the 1930s and the role of Boomalli (established in 1987) in the development of a networked community of artists in south-eastern Australia. Yolngu might appear to be more like a community in the first sense (of people who live together) and Boomalli might appear to be a community in the second sense (of a dispersed set of people who share interests in common), but there are overlaps. And in both cases art plays an important role in helping to make and remake the communities in enabling them to act as the world changes around them.

Art can enable people to be active as agents in determining their own futures. I will show how art creates and maintains ties within a community and helps resolve important political and social issues, and how it enables communities to act effectively in their engagement with the world outside. In the Yolngu case, I will focus on the cases of the *Yirrkala Church Panels* and the Saltwater Collection of bark paintings held at the National Maritime Museum. These examples will allow me to show the ways in which art, by playing a role in the maintenance of a regional community of people who live together, also enables artists to work together to achieve wider community objectives. In the Boomalli case, I will show that the organisation brought together a previously dispersed set of artists who were able to create opportunities that were otherwise denied them. I will argue more generally that the arena of public culture—arts exhibitions and awards, cultural institutions and their audiences—provides a framework that enables local communities and communities defined by shared interests to influence the national agenda and change the face of the nation. Art both enables the creation of local identities and contributes to the building of a cohesive nation by enabling people to communicate to different audiences and thereby helps create a national discourse.

## The bite in the bark

The history of the *Yirrkala Church Panels* and the bark petition is too well known to be repeated in detail. What is often not realised is that they were not simply

directed towards outside audiences but reflected the creation of regional Yolngu polity based at Yirrkala. The view that Aboriginal society comprises small isolated social groups disconnected from each other has long been discredited. Yolngu people now number some 6000 speakers of closely related languages. There has always been a loose regional system of governance that enabled people to travel across the region safely and find their place in all corners of the Yolngu world—to establish their '*gurrutu*' (relationships to other people).<sup>4</sup> The system of governance was and is underpinned by the '*madayin*'—the sacred designs and songs that were created by ancestral beings in place but which extended in a network of ties across the region. Underlying the region's artistic production is a system of rules that people follow and that has widespread recognition.<sup>5</sup> It is also, of course, an expression of the ancestral forces that underlie society and country. Before European colonisation, people knew the vast Yolngu world through the *madayin* but would never have met together as a whole (even though as individuals many would have travelled widely across the region). Rather, they knew their own part and how they fitted into a whole. With the establishment of the mission stations across eastern Arnhem Land in the 1920s and 1930s, Yolngu began to congregate together in larger settlements without ever losing their connection to their own country. In those larger settlements, they were faced with the problem of living together and organising their world in close proximity to one another; a segment of the Yolngu community that had previously been dispersed across eastern Arnhem Land came together as a whole. And in those mission stations they had to present themselves as a whole to the outside world—to the missionaries, anthropologists and government officials who intervened in their lives.

Within a very short time, Yolngu living at Yirrkala produced paintings for the outside market. They worked with anthropologists such as Ronald Berndt, Charles Mountford, the artist-ethnographer Karel Kupka and the artist-curator Tony Tuckson and his collaborator, orthopaedic surgeon Stuart Scougall. They worked together in partial seclusion in spaces set aside for the purpose. These collaborations in a communal space, outside the context of a ceremonial performance, brought together artists from Melville Bay to Blue Mud Bay. Tuckson and Scougall's visits in 1959 and 1960 laid the foundations for the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Yirrkala collections and art became a means whereby Yolngu communicated the value of their culture to the outside world.

The *Yirrkala Church Panels* were produced in 1962, but the groundwork for them had been prepared by these earlier visits from anthropologists and collectors. While the forms of the paintings reflected traditional Yolngu clan designs, the grand scale and composite structure of the paintings reflected the dialogues between outsiders and Yolngu that had occurred in previous years. Artists from Yirrkala developed a form of episodic narrative paintings that traced the journeys of ancestral beings across Yolngu land. They often combined a

number of designs from different places on the same large sheet of bark or, in the case of Berndt crayon drawings, on the same large sheet of brown butcher's paper. Yolngu artists decided how they would use their art in communicating with outsiders and how their sacred law could be presented in public contexts. Thus, when it came time for the Methodist Mission under Edgar Wells to build a new church, it was also the moment to introduce Yolngu religious iconography into a Christian context. It was Narritjin Maymuru who originally suggested to Wells that Yolngu paintings should be included beside the altar.<sup>6</sup>

The Yolngu had many motivations; however, the two core reasons were to show that Yolngu had their own sacred heritage and to emphasise its connection to land and land ownership. Yolngu were by then aware that others were showing an interest in their land—in the immense reserves of bauxite that lay just beneath the surface of the Gove Peninsula. The *Church Panels* comprised two huge sheets of masonite painted with the sacred designs belonging to the clans of the region. Visitors to the church would be able to see the ways in which paintings mapped their rights in land and also apprehend the sense in which land was a sacred endowment.

The *Church Panels* were as much for the Yolngu worshippers, who formed the main congregation, as they were for outsiders. Yolngu society is divided into two moieties—Dhuwa and Yirritja—and so too were the panels. The Dhuwa and Yirritja panels were placed on either side of the altar. In this way, fundamental features of the structure of Yolngu society were incorporated in the design of the church: the house of God housed the Yolngu world and they were able to worship more comfortably within it. Syncretism has been a strong theme in Yolngu religious life and there was no sense that their beliefs were incompatible with Christianity.<sup>7</sup> The placing in the context of the church also made the paintings public—open to be viewed by people irrespective of clan membership, age or sex. They were a step towards creating a public regional identity that reflected the underlying structure of the Yolngu polity. In painting the panels, the senior artists felt they had to take account of the regional system as a whole and needed to include those who were not represented at the mission as well as those who were. Thus, paintings belonging to the Munyuku and Madarrpa clans were produced by secondary rights-holders with the permission of their leaders, who were residing in mission settlements to the south. Having taken the step of mapping out the region, it was important to make it inclusive. The paintings did not cover the entire Yolngu area, but the subregion associated with the eastern and southern clans, the majority of whom moved to Yirrkala.

The *Church Panels* were part of a process for dealing with outsiders that could be traced back to well before European colonisation and included encounters with the Macassarese. The panels were, however, a significant intervention in Australian politics and, in addition, they provided an effective model for future

action. The most immediate impact was that they became the stimulus for the Yirrkala Bark Petition. Gordon Bryant and Kim Beazley, Sr, visited Yirrkala in the year that the panels were installed in the church. The paintings communicated the message Yolngu intended and Beazley suggested that in making their concerns about mining known to the Commonwealth Government in Canberra, a petition painted on bark would be most effective.

## The Saltwater collection

The Yirrkala Bark Petition was an important step on the road to land rights in the Northern Territory. Yolngu took the Commonwealth Government and the mining company NABALCO to court in 1971 over the granting of a mining lease over their land. Although they lost that case, it was the catalyst for the Woodward Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights, which eventually resulted in the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976*.

Although the *Land Rights Act* granted Yolngu ownership of their land down to the low watermark, it left certain areas of their tenure unclear—in particular, ownership of the intertidal zone. Yolngu are dependant on the resources of the sea and shore for much of their livelihood and the majority of today's settlements are coastal. In the 1990s, Yolngu again sensed a threat to their land ownership as a result of leases being granted for fishing and crabbing enterprises that included the intertidal zone. Matters were brought to a head in 1996 when Yolngu found the severed head of a crocodile in a temporary camp of barramundi fishermen near Garrangali in the top of Blue Mud Bay. The place where the head was found was associated with B̄aru, the ancestral crocodile. B̄aru is a creative ancestor of the Madarrpa clan and the clan's leader was Djambawa Marawili. Djambawa was a leading artist and was at the time chairman of the Buku Larrnggay Mulka artists' centre at Yirrkala. Interestingly, it was the Madarrpa clan that was not included in the paintings of the *Church Panels*. In this case, Djambawa too responded not as an individual but as a member of the community of interconnected clans along the coast from Blue Mud Bay to Melville Bay.

As a result of a number of meetings, Yolngu artists and clan leaders decided to produce a series of paintings that represented different clan countries along the coast, asserting their historic rights over the land and sea. On this occasion, rather than remaining on display in Yirrkala, the paintings became a travelling exhibition, accompanied by a detailed catalogue documenting the meanings and localities represented. The paintings were eventually acquired by the Australian National Maritime Museum as part of its permanent collection.

The making of the Saltwater Collection signalled Yolngu concern about their rights to the intertidal zone—a concern that resulted in them bringing a case before the Federal Court under the *Native Title Act 1993* and the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. The production of the collection of paintings

provided an Indigenous mechanism for community action that could be transformed into a body of evidence and used in the Australian legal framework.<sup>8</sup> The paintings embodied and encoded people's relationship to land and required that they exercise their traditional laws and customs on a regional basis, and the exercise of those laws and customs was in turn a demonstration of native title rights under Australian law. As a consequence, during the hearings of the case in the Federal Court, examples of the Saltwater paintings were used as evidence and incorporated in witness statements. The legal action on this occasion was successful and the claim over the waters of the intertidal zone was finally recognised by a decision of the High Court in July 2008.

### **Art action, dialogue and change**

Yolngu are able to use art as a means of action because it is an integral part of their system of knowledge and way of life. It comes out of their past but it can also be an instrument of change and part of the process of community transformation as circumstances change. Those transformations are in part the consequence of European colonisation and the particular forms it has taken. In Arnhem Land, the establishment of mission stations created regions that cut across Indigenous societies in every way imaginable: kinship, language, regional trade, ceremony, and so on. Those missions, inevitably, over time became a focal point for regional Indigenous lives. They were not determining; and certainly connections remained strong across the region quite independent of introduced settlement patterns.<sup>9</sup> The mission stations, however, had consequences on the way in which Indigenous societies articulated with Australia as a whole.

Yolngu artists acted in multiple frames. They painted the chests of boys in circumcision ceremonies, made ground sculptures and created complex sacred objects. They also, however, produced work for sale to outsiders, in the context of the evolving post-European settlement structures. While those settlements did not determine the particular form of the art, over time, the settlements became part of the process for creating subregional styles and individual artistic identities. Hence, within the Yolngu region, the art from Yirrkala, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwin'ku and Maningrida all developed somewhat different trajectories according to local circumstances. Each community has been influenced by its particular local history, which provides different contexts for artistic intervention on a community basis. The history of the Yirrkala region includes a strong theme of national political action, in part because of the particular nature of their encounter with Europeans and the threat to their land posed by mining. Precisely those same underlying structures and potentials for action that enabled Yolngu to act as a community in the case of the *Church Panels* and Saltwater paintings also, however, enabled the Yolngu artists of the Ramingining region to participate in collaborative ventures such as the Aboriginal Memorial.<sup>10</sup> Many similar processes can be seen at work in other regions of Indigenous

Australia: the Ngurrara canvas produced by the Gidja people as part of their native title claim<sup>11</sup> or the large canvas from artists from Kintore produced to support dialysis programs in Central Australia.

The pattern of mission and government settlement can also be seen to be a factor in producing stylistic differences within the region. Often the distinctive styles reflect diversities that already existed within the broader region but which began to be associated with particular communities. In north-eastern Arnhem Land, it is possible to distinguish between stylistic features of paintings produced in the Yirrkala region and those in the Milingimbi region even though they belong to the same group of interacting clans. Certain contemporary stylistic movements such as the *buwuyak* movement in the north of Blue Mud Bay influenced art from Yirrkala and not from Ramingining.<sup>12</sup> In western Arnhem Land, the art produced by Kunwinjku-speaking peoples at Maningrida<sup>13</sup> and Gunbalanya (Kunbarlanja)<sup>14</sup> has diverged, with the former emphasising the tapestry-like covering of the surface form of the bark with intricate cross-hatching and the latter emphasising x-ray and figurative art. None of these particular differences is fixed in time, since the regional systems as a whole are dynamic and community art centres are in dialogue with each other. The Aboriginal Memorial generated from Ramingining in the 1980s provided the basis for the expansion of interest in hollow-log coffins as artworks from which the Yirrkala community benefited greatly.

A similar analysis could be made of the impact of community on art style in Central and Western Australia. The distinctive art styles associated with different community art centres are in part the product of recent local art histories: people working together in a community and creating works that express their contemporary regional identity. Location and interaction with the art market are clearly factors in creating and maintaining the distinctive differences between Balgo, Papunya, Yuendumu and Lajamanu. Interestingly, artists often move between those communities and, in some cases, switch styles according to where they are painting. The art being produced in each community differs over time and, as the writing of Central Australian art histories develops, patterns of cross-influence will emerge.<sup>15</sup>

## **From grassroots to national institutions**

The development of Indigenous art practices has been influenced and facilitated since the 1970s by policy initiatives by government, cultural institutions and by the private sector—by what I refer to as the domain of public culture.<sup>16</sup> Resources provided by the government to the Australia Council and to support Indigenous arts initiatives, including local art centres, have provided opportunities that would otherwise not have existed. The development of national and regional awards for Indigenous artists helped to promote Indigenous art

and enhanced the prestige of artists within local communities. And gradually, over time, commercial galleries have developed specialisations in Aboriginal art. The interventions have aroused considerable controversy, with art centres and government marketing agencies coming under attack at different times from different directions. And some initiatives that were once strongly supported have perhaps gone out of favour forever—a centralised government marketing organisation could be one example. Adopting a historical perspective on the past 30 years, however, we can see the interventions as being largely positive and can identify a trajectory in which Indigenous agency has had a considerable impact.

The past 35 years of Aboriginal art have been a time of experimentation and change in the form of the art produced and in the art market. While the durability of institutions is not always a positive sign, I would argue that in times of change, organisations and structures that last or continually re-emerge are signs that something is working. Art centres are one type of institution that has survived—albeit a varied type. Indigenous arts awards have thrived. There are good reasons why peak organisations such as the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA) and the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres (desArt) keep rising like a Phoenix out of the ashes. At a higher level of structure, the Australia Council has played a very significant role. None of these is without controversy and nothing lasts forever. The reason why these organisations have a degree of durability, however, is that they have been built from the community up or have responded to community needs and they have played a role in creating social cohesion and community identity in a changing world. It is important to see them as agents of change, but in harmony in many respects with community values. They work with the community rather than against it.

Art centres in general are examples of grassroots local organisations and the success and durability of centres are an index of social cohesion and a factor contributing to that cohesion. Clearly, in individual cases, art centres fail and in some places there seems to be a pattern of failure, which needs to be diagnosed. And clearly, ‘art centres’ are not going to work on the same basis across Australia.<sup>17</sup> They could, however, have affinities with institutions that exist elsewhere—with community centres, print workshops, adult education centres, schools of art, and so on—institutions that bear a family resemblance with Indigenous art centres. And, as I will go on to argue, I see an institution such as Boomalli belonging firmly within that diverse set.

One of the reasons why art centres work in many communities is that they pre-existed the government initiative that funded them. Indeed, the funding of art centres came out of local action. In the Yirrkala case, the art centre came out of a history of some 50 years of embryonic existence.<sup>18</sup> The history and origins

of Papunya Tula, a very different kind of operation, provide another example.<sup>19</sup> But why an art centre? The reasons are multiple, but two stand out. First, the remote location of many communities means that a coordinated marketing strategy is required—there needs to be someone to manage the sale and distribution of art on a community basis. Second, the art itself is in many cases embedded in a system of rights and restrictions that extends across the community; the production of paintings for sale involves the exercise of rights in communal property.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, there are very sound reasons to set up regional art centres on a community basis. Working in harmony together in new contexts is likely to increase social cohesion rather than result in community dissolution. And cohesive action in one domain of activity is likely to provide a model or impetus for cohesive efforts in other areas.<sup>21</sup>

A productive way of looking at Indigenous art centres and community art production in general is that they provide a potential point of articulation between Indigenous bodies of knowledge and systems of governance, and the broader Australian society. For art to be a successful Indigenous business, issues of local governance have to be taken into account, yet at the same time what is produced must enter into global markets. It is remarkable how well Indigenous communities have managed these issues. Art centres have rarely been held back by disputes about what can or cannot be produced. There are, of course, some notable occasions when major disputes have occurred, but they have generally been quickly resolved, and anyone working in an art centre will know that problems that require solutions crop up on a daily basis. My experience, however, over 35 years working with artists from Yirrkala, is that they have managed complex problems of cultural adjustment to a new context of art production incredibly well. Art centres can be seen as models of the ways in which new organisations based on Indigenous foundations and systems of governance can develop in the space between local communities and national institutions.

The process is two-way since art centres require both national resources and a place in the national agenda, but in turn provide government with local institutions that can manage national investments in an accountable way. There is a need to create strong networks that link the local communities with the actors and institutions in the national domain, networks that connect people at the local level but also provide linkages with the public and private sectors. It is in that context that institutions such as desArt and ANKAAA play a potentially important role. It is also important not to draw too hard and fast a distinction between these different levels of organisation.

Government funding, if mediated through institutions that have strong connections with local trajectories, is likely to be more effective than if it is allocated according to a top-down model. Modelled locally, it can also enable or

facilitate developments that encourage social cohesion while allowing for diversity.

## Moving south

My focus so far has been on the agency of artists in communities in northern and Central Australia. The initial stimulus for many of the changes that resulted in the inclusion of Indigenous art and artists as part of the national agenda came from 'remote' Australia. The Aboriginal Arts Board in its early years had a bias towards what were seen to be more traditionally oriented communities, and the Aboriginal Arts Award established by the NT Museum and Art Gallery had a similar focus and was certainly criticised on that basis by some. Their focus, however, shifted quite rapidly over time and became broader. Indeed, the people who were involved in setting up such organisations early on were very responsive to the critiques that developed and helped change the focus of institutions such as the Aboriginal Arts Board.

Indigenous artists in south-eastern and Western Australia originally felt themselves to be as much excluded from the mainstream of Australian art as did artists in the north, and in many respects their artworks were less visible. The lack of visibility and lack of support, however, did not mean a lack of active engagement with arts or a lack of art practice.<sup>22</sup> Aboriginal people in southern Australia demanded recognition and support for their creativity. Many Indigenous artists were emerging in south-eastern Australia in the late 1970s and 1980s, at a time when Aboriginal art was beginning to be more firmly established in the national consciousness; artists such as Leslie Griggs, Gordon Syron, Lin Onus, Robert Campbell, Jnr, Arone Meeks, Fiona Foley and Avril Quail were beginning to establish their reputations at that time. As Brenda Croft wrote, however, 'at the time there was significant resistance to this new set of artists. The reaction was based on assimilationist assumptions that had existed covertly from the first half of the century.'<sup>23</sup> These assumptions positioned the art of Indigenous people in the south as inherently inauthentic. And, just as in the north, it was the agency of the artists themselves that created the grassroots organisations with a capacity to grow. The best-known example of an Indigenous art cooperative in south-eastern Australia is Boomalli, established in 1987. Croft's outline history of Boomalli shows how it grew out of a group of activist Indigenous artists who eventually came together to create a network of support for each other, to overcome prejudices against their work and to create a place for it to be exhibited and sold.<sup>24</sup>

The circumstances of Indigenous artists living in south-eastern Australia are clearly very different from those in many of the communities in northern Australia, though no hard and fast boundary should be drawn. The artists of the south come from many different communities with different histories and

in many cases have developed distinctive individual styles.<sup>25</sup> In some cases, the artists are self-taught, others are reconnecting with 'local' traditions and many are art-school trained and are familiar with Western art discourse and theory. Taking account of their diversity, however, they found themselves in a similar position in the art world, struggling with issues of authenticity and identity, sharing a history of exclusion and attuned to many of the same themes in their lives and the lives of their families. 'For urban and rural Indigenous people the visual arts provided a long-awaited platform from which to present their perspective, and previously disregarded collective history that acknowledged different experiences.'<sup>26</sup> Hence, an organisation such as Boomalli grew out of the artists' common interests and a desire to work together and collaboratively achieve common objectives while at the same time maintaining individual identity; 'they shared experiences that formed a bond between them and encouraged them to exhibit collectively'.<sup>27</sup>

The same governmental structures that supported the art of remote regions were used to facilitate the development of Indigenous organisations in south-eastern Australia. Boomalli was strongly supported in its early years by the Aboriginal Arts Board under its then director, Gary Foley.<sup>28</sup> Support for travelling exhibitions overseas and representation in art awards were equally important as means of establishing presence in the art world, but also as signals of identity. The political context was, however, different: in the south-east, people faced the challenge to their 'authenticity' as Indigenous artists. Initially, Boomalli's aim was to create the spaces within the national framework for the art of Indigenous people from south-eastern Australia. This meant engaging with and challenging the structures of organisations that had been set up to support Aboriginal artists, ensuring that they were oriented towards the diversity of Aboriginal art practice rather than particular sectors. In the case of art awards, it required changing the conception of Aboriginal art and broadening categories.

Boomalli began as a collective venture for its ten original members and has survived into the present through a number of transformations. It has changed as circumstances have changed and as the original members' lives have developed in different directions. Early on, it addressed a national agenda, responding to the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations by inserting an Indigenous presence, increasing opportunities for urban artists and developing exhibition programs. Boomalli provided a creative environment for artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Robert Campbell, Jnr, and leading curators including Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft. Inevitably, Boomalli has a different history from an art centre such as Buku Larrnggay Mulka at Yirrkala, where the focus is on expanding the connections of the local community with the national and global. At Boomalli, there is a stronger focus on individual careers. Both, however, are evolving grassroots organisations that provide a focal point for community action.

The struggle to include the diversity of Indigenous Australian artists within the same overall framework could have been divisive, but on the whole it has had almost the opposite effect. The opening out of the categories of Indigenous 'art' and 'artist' also opened up art discourse across the Indigenous community and created many collaborations. Indeed, the pioneering exhibition *Koori Art '84* included the Yolngu artist Banduk Marika, who had just begun her career as a printmaker. It was this exhibition that provided the seeds from which Boomalli grew. In the mid-1980s, artists such as Lin Onus and Fiona Foley established close relationships with artists in Arnhem Land and Central Australia, and the collaborative curatorial practice of Djon Mundine opened up exciting areas of art practice and exhibition. Over time, Aboriginal art has come to be an arena in which diversity is accepted, and once diversity is accepted room is created for relatively autonomous traditions to exist side by side and for local and regional art histories to be produced.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, the possibility for opposition and conflict remain always present. Art skirts the boundaries of authenticity and identity: people can deny that what others are producing is art or challenge the Indigeneity of what is produced. Such heat seems always to be a potential of art practice where art is integral to the ways people act in the world.

## Conclusion

Buku Larrnggay Mulka and Boomalli both represent communities of artists and artists who come from communities. In both cases, they facilitate cohesion at the local level and enable people to act in relation to common interests. The Yirrkala artists are from a community in place. Art has been integral to the continuity of their society and it has been an instrument of their engagement with the world outside. Buku Larrnggay Mulka as a community art centre has a board of Yolngu artists, which manages it according to Yolngu customary law and is concerned with the continuity of cultural practices. While Yolngu art is highly innovative, the governing board emphasises working in traditional media such as bark and the use of Indigenous pigments. Yolngu artists work to maintain the relative autonomy of their society and to communicate their values to outsiders.

Boomalli's objectives are different and yet overlapping. Boomalli includes artists from a wider region. Although Sydney based, it includes among its listed members artists such as Arone Meeks from Cairns, Fiona Foley, who is a Badtjala from southern Queensland, and Christine Christopherson, who is Iwatja from western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Its original purpose was to support 'urban Indigenous artists finding it difficult to have their own work shown as authentic Aboriginal art in the mainstream'. It established a '[c]o-operative to provide a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Straight [sic] Islander artists to exhibit and promote urban Indigenous art on their own terms'.<sup>30</sup> As such, Boomalli needed to encompass a diversity of artists from very

different backgrounds—and to strike a balance between the common concerns of the artists and their different histories and identities. The initial emphasis on urban art reflected the need to challenge the view that the only authentic Aboriginal art was that produced in remote communities in continuity with ‘traditional’ practices.<sup>31</sup> As Boomalli developed, however, in Croft’s words, ‘it became increasingly apparent that the restrictive and inaccurate categorisation of work by urban and rural Indigenous artists was no longer tenable’.<sup>32</sup> Artists associated with Boomalli were themselves connected to places and to local communities. The members of Boomalli began to emphasise their local identity and the diversity of Indigenous art practice, opposing the categorising of people under gross labels.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, artists from communities in Arnhem Land and Central Australia became an increasing presence in the urban environments of southern Australia. Exhibitions of Aboriginal art and general books about the subject began to reflect the diversity of the Indigenous population. For example, *Aratjara*, the major international exhibition that toured Europe, was not premised on the basis of a dualistic division between traditional and urban art.<sup>34</sup> The result was that organisations such as Boomalli, rather than being opposed to ones such as Buku Larrnggay Mulka, became complementary.

In their different ways, both Buku Larrnggay Mulka and Boomalli have played positive roles in building and maintaining communities. And, as communities of different kinds, they have intersected and complemented each other. Together, they exemplify the diversity of Indigenous society—a diversity that has had a significant impact in the domain of Australian public culture. Buku Larrnggay Mulka has maintained the relatively autonomous traditions of Yolngu artists yet collaborated with other art centres through peak bodies such as ANKAAA and desArt in areas of mutual interest, such as Indigenous copyright and lobbying for government funding of support staff, training and development. Boomalli, as well as supporting its own members, provided a venue for the exhibition of Indigenous art in Sydney and a springboard for collaboration across cultural boundaries. The intersection of such community organisations has introduced the complexities of Indigenous art to a wider public. The simplistic dualistic division of Aboriginal art into categories such as tribal or rural in opposition to contemporary or urban has been successfully challenged. The idea that creativity is the product of either individual genius or cultural inheritance has been problematised since some Indigenous artists will emphasise their individuality while others emphasise collective rights.

Some of the changes that have occurred in art production have certainly been influenced by the colonial structure of settlements, opportunities created by the market and government instrumentalities. The process of incorporation within the wider Australian polity, however, has not been passive in nature. Indigenous groups have often been able to utilise these new institutions to achieve their

own objectives and they have also been able to change government policy and have some impact on the institutional structures and practices of the encapsulating society. Indigenous Australians in turn have had an impact on Australia's cultural institutions and policies, often giving greater agency to the artists in the ways in which works of art are exhibited. Often the issues that Indigenous Australians are concerned with are ones that affect artists more generally—issues of moral rights and resale royalties being examples. The increasingly important position that Indigenous artists are gaining in the arts community as a whole has the potential to mediate the concerns of local communities at the national level and provide effective channels of communication through art.

Social cohesion can be achieved at a national level only by facilitating the building of social cohesion at the local level, by creating the environment in which people feel that they are able to act as members of communities to improve the worlds in which they live. In Australia, the institutional structures that have been created in the arenas of art, culture and heritage have played a significant role in enabling Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to act through art to create some positive changes in their lives and in the lives of their communities.

The concept of community in social theory has always been in dialogue with that of society. The concept as I have used it involves the recognition of diversity at the local and the national level. It envisages an Australian society in which diversity is recognised and is transparent at the level of public culture. At the local level, communities enhance social cohesion in effect by emphasising difference; communities comprise people who share common interests and values that often differentiate them from others. At the level of society, social cohesion requires that local interests are encompassed and accommodated in the public domain. This involves a shift from holding a particular set of values in common to valuing a framework, and an institutional structure, that allows for differences to be expressed and that is opened up to processes of persuasion. Within a nation-state, the public sphere is going to be influenced by the diversity of communities it contains. And within Australia, social cohesion at the national level requires the accommodation of Indigenous Australian interests in discourse in the public sphere. In the long term, this has the potential to affect the character of the society.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sally K. May provides an excellent review of the relevant theoretical literature on community in her study of the Injalak Art Centre in Gunbalanya (Kunbarlanja) western Arnhem Land. May, Sally K. 2006, *Karrikadjurren: creating community with an art centre in Indigenous Australia*, Unpublished PhD thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> Morphy, Howard 2007, *Becoming Art: Exploring cross-cultural categories*, Berg, Oxford.

<sup>3</sup> Morphy, Howard 2008, 'Art as a mode of action: some problems with Gell's *Art and Agency*', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 5–27.

- <sup>4</sup> Morphy, Frances 2008, 'Whose governance, for whose good? The Laynhapuy Homelands Association and the neo-assimilationist turn in Indigenous policy', in J. Hunt, D. Smith, S. Garling and W. Sanders (eds), *Contested governance: culture, power and institutions in Indigenous Australia*, CAEPR Research Monograph No. 29, ANU E Press, Canberra.
- <sup>5</sup> Morphy, Howard 1991, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal system of knowledge*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- <sup>6</sup> Wells, A. 1971, *This is Their Dreaming*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.
- <sup>7</sup> Morphy, Howard 2005, 'Mutual conversion: the Methodist Church and the Yolngu, with particular reference to Yirrkala', *Humanities Research*, vol XII, no. 1, pp. 41–53.
- <sup>8</sup> Morphy, Frances 2008, 'Enacting sovereignty in a colonized space: the Yolngu of Blue Mud Bay meet the native title process', in D. Fay and D. James (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Land Restitution: 'Restoring what was ours'*, Routledge-Cavendish, Abingdon and New York, pp. 99–122.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Jenkins, Susan 2003, *It's a Power: An interpretation of 'The Aboriginal memorial' in its ethnographic, museological, art historical and political contexts*, National Institute of the Arts, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- <sup>11</sup> Dayman, Karen and Lowe, Pat 2000, 'The Ngurrara canvas', in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 493–6.
- <sup>12</sup> Morphy, *Becoming Art*, pp. 105ff.
- <sup>13</sup> Taylor, Luke 2005, 'John Mawurndjul—"I've got a different idea"', in Christian Kaufmann (ed.), *'raark'—John Mawurndjul: Journey through time in northern Australia*, Museum Tinguely, Basel, pp. 43–8.
- <sup>14</sup> May, Karrikadjurren.
- <sup>15</sup> Morphy, Howard 1998, *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon, London, pp. 299ff.
- <sup>16</sup> Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steven D. 1992 (eds), *Museums and Communities: The politics of public culture*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- <sup>17</sup> For an overview, see Wright, Felicity and Morphy, Frances 2000, *The Art and Craft Centre Story*, ATSIAC, Canberra.
- <sup>18</sup> Morphy, *Becoming Art*, section 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Perkins, Hettie and Fink, Hannah 2000, *Papunya Tula: Genesis and genius*, Art Gallery of New South Wales in association with Papunya Tula Artists, Sydney.
- <sup>20</sup> For a more detailed history of Yolngu art in relation to the outside world, see Morphy, *Becoming Art*, section 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Morphy, Howard 2005, 'Indigenous art as economy', in Diane Austin-Broos and Gaynor Macdonald (eds), *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, pp. 19–28.
- <sup>22</sup> For a relevant historical background, see Kleinert, Sylvia 1994, 'Jacky Jacky was a smart young fella': a study of art and Aboriginality in south-east Australia 1900–1980, PhD Thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- <sup>23</sup> Croft, Brenda 1999, 'Boomalli: from little things big things grow', in Luke Taylor (ed.), *Painting the Land Story*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, p. 101.
- <sup>24</sup> Croft, 'Boomalli'.
- <sup>25</sup> There have been very few studies of community arts in regional southern Australia. Lorraine Gibson's research in Wilcannia provides an ethnographic perspective on recent art practice in a NSW country town in relation to issues of identity and difference. Gibson, Lorraine 2008, 'Art, culture and ambiguity in Wilcannia, New South Wales', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 314–30.
- <sup>26</sup> Croft, 'Boomalli', p. 98.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 104. The original members were Bronwyn Bancroft, Euphemia Bostock, Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Fernando Martins, Arone Raymond Meeks, Tracey Moffatt, Avril Quail, Michael Riley and Jeffrey Samuels.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 104.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 111.
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted from the history section of the Boomalli web site (<<http://www.boomalli.org.au>>).

<sup>31</sup> See Morphy, Howard 1995, 'Aboriginal art in a global context', in D. Miller (ed.), *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the prism of the local*, ASA Decennial Conference Series, Routledge, London, pp. 211–39.

<sup>32</sup> Croft, 'Boomalli', p. 111.

<sup>33</sup> 'Instead of speaking generally of urban art, I believe it would be helpful and true to recognise different people's countries. I am a Butchulla person. I think that artists working in the city should be identified in terms of their people's country.' Foley, Fiona 1991, 'Urban art', in Rosemary Crumlin (ed.), *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality*, Collins Dove, North Blackburn, Victoria, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Morphy, 'Aboriginal art in a global context'.