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Address to CDU Symposium 'Mwerre Antherre, Art Works, Communities Thrive'

Alice Springs Convention Centre, 1 October 2008

***Crossing Boundaries – How do the Arts work
in Cross Cultural Exchange?***

Art Centres – The Essential Link

Indigenous Art Centres are the backbone to the Aboriginal Art Industry. The role of the Art Centre is to promote and protect the social, cultural and economic part that artists play within the art world, and to enlighten the wider public about keeping this vital art industry strong and just.

Tangentyere Artists was established in 2005 and is an Aboriginal owned and directed Art Centre situated in Alice Springs, managed by Tangentyere Council. We provide art support and marketing services to over 380 artists from 19 Alice Springs Town Camps. These camps are home to around 2000 Indigenous people from both the local area as well as many visitors from remote communities across Central Australia. The Town Camp artists represent 20 different central Australian languages, clearly a more complex situation than a remote community of 1 language group. The Town Campers are among the most highly disadvantaged people in Australia, living in the most challenging physical and social conditions.

Our job descriptions are extended well beyond developing a successful Aboriginal enterprise, they consist of: organising and accompanying artists to doctors appointments and operations, liaising with vets for dog care, providing transport for funerals, acting as a general spokesperson for welfare payments, safe shelters, police and financial management – all the things non-Aboriginal Australians take for granted.

The Tangentyere Art Centre provides an alternative for artists to low value cash transactions on the street, swapping art for fuel, food, accommodation, grog or drugs; and provides an alternative to exploitative commercial relationships with unethical art dealers and 'carpet baggers'.

This new Arts Centre particularly benefits un-represented artists, under-employed people, young people, and those senior people keen to pass on traditional culture through art practice. This Centre however, is not remote, and the disadvantage of the Town Camp population, its size, and its location, makes these artists particularly vulnerable to exploitation. This clearly provides strong reason for the Federal Government to support an Art Centre such as Tangentyere Artists.

Success of an artist is not solely defined by a record price at an auction house, or sellout exhibition or winning an award. The Indigenous Arts is *socio-cultural* and *commercial*. An Art Centre combines both these streams, and one is just as critical as the other.

Art Centres work tirelessly to implement and maintain best practice benchmarks, authenticity, and codes of conduct, equitable returns, ownership of copyright, cultural and intellectual property, governance, training, educational programs, professional and artistic development, economic independence, and improved living conditions for Indigenous artists.

The Tangentyere Art Centre has a responsibility to its' artists, and our artists have a responsibility to the Art Centre. They have to nurture each other and without this united support the centre will not work.

In turn, the Art Centres too have a responsibility to the galleries, and the galleries have a responsibility to the Art Centres. Together their position is to operate in the most impartial, transparent and ethical practice, without this, the industry will be undone.

In a climate of immeasurable new private dealers and unscrupulous operators - call them what you may - taking advantage of vulnerable artists and exploiting them to the last degree, by confining artists to hotel room floors and painting behind locked gates, is where the role of the Art Centre within the industry is critical to improve this situation.

Fore mostly we must have the interests of the artist at heart. As said by MK Turner, a local elder and artist 'The people are the stories, the leaders are the creators of the stories'. Art Centres provide an opportunity for artistic expression, but what we must not forget is where the art has originated from, from great customs and culture, sacred knowledge and songlines. To keep the industry strong all cultures and practioners must respect the art practice and act ethically. The future for Indigenous art is a cultural inheritance for future generations and this cannot be taken for granted. Indigenous art is a multi million-dollar industry in Australia and is celebrated widely around the world. If we want to continue this excellence we must all play a part in contributing towards its best practice.

Thank you.

Tangentyere is one of the largest Indigenous organisations in the country

Benefit

Tangentyere Artists provides employment for several Indigenous employees, and an independent source of income and activity for over 350 town camp artists. The vast majority of participating artists have no other form of employment, and may otherwise be engaged by unethical art dealers. Tangentyere Artists provides a transparent system of payments based on peak body Desert's best practice recommendations. This means that artists get a fair return for their work, that they learn that there are different ways of doing business, and that their work has greater value if they develop their skills. Town camp artists are particularly vulnerable to "carpet baggers" due to their accessibility for unethical dealers in Alice Springs.

In addition to developing the capacity of individual artists to earn an income and reduce their dependency on welfare, Tangentyere Artists contributes to the development of the art industry through its ethical practices and its emphasis on developing the skill base of artists.

Participation in the Tangentyere Artists programs empowers artists to develop not only their artistic skills, but also their ability to manage their materials and production, skills which have transferability to other work roles. Artists pay for their materials and this provides an appreciation of the costs that are associated with private production.

Aboriginal people make up 70% of the 170 staff of Tangentyere Council. In the Tangentyere Artists Program, 2 Indigenous people are currently employed, out of 4 permanent employees. There is scope for more employment if the Art Centre had the space to accommodate them.

In addition, all 350 artists participating in the Art Centre programs have the opportunity to participate in weekly art development workshops, led by an experienced art teacher, and held at Tangentyere's Conference room. These could be held more often if there was space for artists to come and paint on site at the Centre.

Artists are employed to teach cross cultural workshops as tourism opportunities arise. More frequently visitors are wanting to have an 'Indigenous Experience' and take away some understanding of Aboriginal culture. Tangentyere Artists has developing relationships with: Tourism NT; Austrade; the Alice Springs Convention Centre; and the Alice Springs Desert Park, where these links and occasions will further benefit artists when the Tangentyere Artists can run them from the permanent Art Centre.

Tangentyere Artists also offers regular professional development opportunities by way of formal training and forums for Indigenous arts workers and artists.