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# Entangled Values: construction of a global conception of Australian Indigenous arts

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*« Ainsi, les acteurs économiques et les acteurs culturels, sans qu'on sache toujours lesquels donnent le la, contribuent indissociablement à la définition et à la hiérarchisation des valeurs artistiques et des réputations des artistes. Le circuit culturel s'impose au marché comme épreuve de vérité. »<sup>1</sup> (Moulin, 1992 : 79)*

The recent integration of Australian Indigenous arts in the field of contemporary art is the fruit of a complex historical process deeply rooted in social, political and cultural relationships. The Aboriginal art market has grown exponentially over the years and acrylic dot paintings and bark paintings have become international icons of Australian national identity. Aboriginal art has been, and to a certain extent is still, endangered by cheap imitations, fakes and the transgression of Indigenous artists' rights and community protocols. These issues have been addressed by various inquiries and reports since the 1990s. Recently, a new paradigm has emerged from the scholarship produced by researchers such as Morphy and Wright (2000), Jon Altman (2005) and others. These scholars have particularly investigated the community-controlled art centres and outlined how they could be used as a business model. In these studies, the art centres are presented as inter-cultural institutions, as both a commercial and a cultural enterprise in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are active agents. With artists, art coordinators, curators, art dealers, public officers, art critics, journalists and visitors who interact to define what Aboriginal art is and where and how it should circulate, we could easily consider the Aboriginal art industry as an art world. Drawing on Danto's work, Howard Becker (1982) describes an art world as "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that art world is noted for". What evaluative processes do the cultural intermediaries use to construct and justify their choices? Such "loose network of overlapping subcultures held together by a belief in art" (Thornton, 2008) are challenging fields to explore the process of value creation. This paper is focused on the marketing side of

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<sup>1</sup> *"Therefore, economic actors and cultural actors, without us knowing exactly which ones give the 'la', contribute to the definition and prioritization of artistic values and artist's reputation. The cultural circuit imposes itself to the market as a of truth test". My own translation.*

the Aboriginal art world because this field reveals significant power relations within the Australian Indigenous arts sector; power relations that open to the construction and negotiation of a complex regime of entangled values.

Reports and academic research often make reference to France in regard to the exportation of Aboriginal art works, probably because of France's historical role in the Art history. However, key information is often missing in these reviews. Through an overview of the structure and visions of the Aboriginal art market, I will address the values that consciously or unconsciously motivate this incomplete assessment. Most of the art dealers who are based in France prefer to work predominantly with community-based artists, mainly from the Northern Territory. Observing the impact of this economic rationality on the representation of Aboriginal culture I aim to analyse how art dealers discuss and locate value differences within or between the economic and cultural fields. This will lead me to consider the potential for better economic, social and cultural collaborations to happen between the academic world and the public and private sectors.

#### I. Structure and visions of the Aboriginal art market in France

Aboriginal art began to be represented by art dealers in France in the second half of the 1990s. Stéphane Jacob established his company Arts d'Australie in a private apartment in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, and receives visitors on request. The dealer Marc Yvonnou, a former import-export executive, also opened his gallery in 1996-97. Le Temps du Rêve (*Dream Time Gallery*) is located in the small village of Pont-Aven, Paul Gauguin's hometown. Centered on the tourism market, art dealers trade thousands of reproductions of Gauguin's iconic paintings. Two other art lovers also promoted Aboriginal art. Alain Serval exhibited his collection of desert acrylic paintings and bark paintings several times. His collection was built up over his many trips to the Northern Territory. As he is not a full-time art dealer, he still occupies a particular place in the Aboriginal art market, at the border between the art lover and the business entrepreneur. Baudoin Lebon, who manages a contemporary art gallery in the Marais district in Paris, occasionally exhibited Australian Indigenous artists, such as the two recipients of the Moët et Chandon Prize, Judy Watson and Gordon Bennett.

After the introduction of so-called 'tribal arts' (*arts premiers*) into the Pavilion of the Louvre in 2000, new agents became involved in the Aboriginal art business in France: Morteza Esmaili, an Iranian didgeridoo player, founded the Yapa Gallery in the heart of Paris

and Alison Dalbis opened the Dad Gallery in the Parisian suburb of Mantes-la-Jolie. Then, in 2006, the year of the Musée du quai Branly's opening, another step was taken: the Australian gallery Indigenart started a collaboration with Mary Durack with the intention of creating a store of several hundred works in Paris. The Australian commercial art gallery Lauraine Diggins Fine Arts rented a space at the Paris Art Fair at Grand Palais. African Muse Gallery, Luc Berthier's tribal art gallery, widened its scope to include Aboriginal art, first by receiving works selected by Marc Yvonnou, then by developing its own partnerships with Arnhem Land art centres. Of all the initiatives that were conducted in the Musée du quai Branly's wave, only two have maintained their business and are still active today. Since then, further new social agents have appeared on the scene, which reveals a strong turn-over. However, if we concentrate solely on the exhibitions organized and the pedagogical dimension (meaning art dealers participating at public talks and publishing articles and/or interviews), we can count four art dealers who are currently major agents in the Aboriginal art market in France and most of them are the historical founders of the market.

Most of these professionals regularly publish brochures, exhibition catalogues or coffee-table books. The majority of their texts discuss Aboriginal art in relatively well-referenced terms, presenting it as a practice defined by Indigenous rights and social obligations. Despite the fact that they share a similar commercial strategy, which is to organise and participate at educational activities, they have different visions of the Aboriginal art world. I am analysing their viewpoints with regards to various anecdotes I have collected over the years while I attended their events. It is interesting to note that their own life experience colours their commercial strategies. One of them, who has a classical training at the Ecole du Louvre, highlights the aesthetic value: his arguments often lie on notions of technique, sense of composition and colours. Two others emphasise their own career as artists who have lived and worked with Indigenous artists, their way of life becoming the argument for the authenticity of the works presented. Highlighting their experience of living in remote communities, they define themselves as initiated people, using for example the kinship name to suggest that they have been adopted by an Indigenous family. The integration of biographical elements in publications and conferences is a strategy used by many art dealers in an attempt to make public the private world of art production. The potential buyer is being given the possibility to live this experience through the buying act.

But as I will show now this strategy causes some of the art dealers to emphasize certain values and suppress others. The third art dealer who doesn't have the argument of the life experiences, nor the diplomas, has shifted the focus to the value of the exoticism of the works.

How does he publicly acknowledge Indigenous values while he is in fact introducing opposite values that mainly serve his economic interests? I will address this question in two parts, focusing firstly on the carpetbagging issue, and secondly on the death value.

## II Manipulation of value systems

Like most of his colleagues in France, this art dealer – we'll call him Mr Piront – only works with community-based artists, mainly from Central Desert and Arnhem Land. He has a small gallery in the French countryside but he organises exhibitions and conferences across the whole country. His descriptions of the paintings emphasise Dreamtime stories. This notion has been widely analysed in social sciences but the art dealer presents it as a fixed law from ancient times. He doesn't acknowledge its continuing reinterpretation according to historical events and social needs by the Indigenous groups; neither does he show that contemporary arts are influenced by various initiatives lead by elders in the context of both colonial and *post*-colonial encounters. This art dealer uses basic anthropological notions to create a sense of exoticism, not to reveal the values that artists want to share with the non-Indigenous viewers. But the books that sit on his gallery's shelves still make a strong impression upon the non-specialist visitors who see him as an “expert” and an “art lover” who cares for Indigenous artists and their communities. Educational activities lead the art dealers to assert their reputation even if their actions are not always in line with what most Indigenous artists recommend.

The term carpetbagger designates an intermediary who works directly with an Aboriginal artist, bypassing relations with art cooperatives. Although some are respectable intermediaries who pay artists a decent wage, others have decidedly dubious practices. Authors from *the Contemporary Visual Arts and Crafts Inquiry* led by Rupert Myer (2002), and the *Senate Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector* (2006) have identified that carpetbaggers practice unfair prices such as paying with alcohol or second-hand cars. The Myer Inquiry was commissioned in 2001 by the Minister for the Arts to “identify key issues impacting on the future sustainability, development and promotion of the visual arts and crafts sector” (2001). Amongst the recommendations was that the Federal Government should undertake comprehensive research into the needs of the Indigenous visual arts and craft sector. Following this recommendation, the Senate established in 2006 a Committee for Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector, with particular reference to its current size and scale, the economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector, the infrastructure needs and the strategies that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability,

including dealing with unethical conduct. In June 2007 the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts completed its report *Indigenous Art, Securing the Future: Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector*.

These reports indicate that the most unscrupulous carpetbaggers attempt to disconnect the artists from their communities, inviting them to paint in cities, in hotel rooms or in backyards. By isolating the artists for a few days, they can influence them to paint specific stories, patterns and styles, in particular those which are most popular on the market. In so doing, they encourage artists to neglect the protocols of Aboriginal Law, the channel through which these patterns, in accordance with specific rights and social obligations, are passed down from the ancestral beings. In most Indigenous groups, there is an *owner*, the person who possesses rights on the Dreaming, and a *manager*, the person who must perform and paint the Dreaming (Glowczewski, 2004; Morphy, 2008). Carpetbaggers neglect the specificities of this form of cultural transmission and cooperation, influencing artists to produce what consumers expect and to paint collectively with whoever is available. Songs and other stories cannot be shared in such a context of industrial production. As many analyses focused on arts centres show (Morphy and Wright, 2000; Altman, 2005), while art centres primarily seek to manage the artists' best interests, investing in equipment, developing exhibitions, and initiating cultural projects for the centre, carpetbaggers influence the hurried production of works. They encourage prestigious artists to paint for a meagre sum, and persuade talentless artists to copy highly valued works. Borrowing Raymonde Moulin's expression (1992), I call these works 'paintings by the dozen', an expression that emphasises the notion of reproduction.

Carpetbaggers exert pressures on Indigenous people to encourage a process of production rather than creation, and reproduction over the creative act. As Raymonde Moulin demonstrated (1978), in Montmartre and other tourist sites visitors can find seascape and rural landscape paintings inspired by European masters from previous centuries. These works appeal to foreign purchasers who want to buy what they believe is a piece of art for a relatively moderate price. The art dealers who sell such products must develop a discourse that serves to reassure their clientele. Instead of notions of style and quality, art dealers specialized in Aboriginal art emphasize the Indigenous origins of the artist. Their labels indicate the name of the artist, his/her kinship name, the birthplace, their clan-affiliation and Indigenous language(s). These are indeed important indexes of the artist's identity and most of the Australian Indigenous artists wish to see them transmitted. But in some art dealers' discourses, these indexes that express intimate connections with the land are entangled in another process of

value creation: their singularity is used to express exoticism and rarity. Indigenous values are carefully selected by the art dealers to fit with the Western representation of uniqueness, which is indeed what the art world always looks for. But if some art dealers do it in a subtle way, combining the aesthetic value with the value of singularity, others express it solely within the parameters of the exoticism, even pushing it toward the myth of the disappearing Indigenous society.

In the process of value creation, the notion of rarity is essential. Death has always been central to the art world, and treated with a certain form of cynicism: it is the death of a man that many admire as well as a new journey for the ones who have been collecting his work. As an anecdote illustrates it, it is not different in the Aboriginal art world: in 2006 a coffee-table book was published - a catalogue entitled *Art of Utopia*. It showed a photo of the Anmatyerre artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye's grave with the legend stating « the story continues... ». The second line indicates the gallery's website. Some art dealers establish a parallel between the death of the artist and the death of the society. They play on both the individual's death and the symbolic dimension to it, which is the disappearance of the Indigenous culture.

With the international boom of the Aboriginal art market and later with the increasing number of scandals, French art dealers have modified some of their strategies. I will not comment on strategies of denigration and rumour used by art dealers - as this is common to any art market. I would rather explore further the process of value creation. As the debate is largely controlled by art dealers who are scared to bring these issues into the public sphere, potential Aboriginal art buyers in France were not aware of the issues of cheap imitations, fakes and artists' exploitation. This left the art dealers free to manipulate the audience for their own benefit and sometimes at the expense of Indigenous people's expectations. As I previously said, the art dealer Mr Piront regularly organises commercial exhibitions and public talks, during which he not only promotes secondary-quality works but diffuses broadly stereotyped discourses on Aboriginal art and culture. He speaks about the fast disappearance of the culture and denies Indigenous agency. Many Aboriginal artists are aware of the feeble amount of money carpetbaggers pay them, self-consciously creating poor-quality paintings in return. The famous painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye commented several times on this strategy of producing bad quality paintings for bad people. In Central Arnhem Land, people refer to it as 'baki', tobacco painting. For a long time, this situation had never been addressed publicly by any art dealer in France. But with the increasing publication of reports and articles in popular newspapers and their publication online, French art dealers have had to address the issue of

unethical practices. One of them started to comment much more on the function of the art centres, describing them as a site which unites social networks, and guarantees cultural transmission. This art dealer often describes the degrading living conditions of many Aboriginal people, in contrast to the way the artistic co-operative system pays artists fairly. The connection made by him between the bad living conditions of Aboriginal people and the utility of the art presents the buying act as attractive. It is a means of injecting money into remote communities as a way of participating in the “Closing the gap” campaign. This strategy built on the ethics of fair trade is diametrically opposed to the views of Mr Piront, who blatantly demands the right to refuse to work with art centres. According to him, the recommendations made by Desart and Ankaaa do not further the interests of artists who must be allowed to produce as much as they want and sell their works for the price they want. These arguments are reminiscent of those voiced by the Australian journalist Robert Nelson in response to the questions raised by Nicolas Rothwell. To a certain extent, we could say that Mr Piront uses notions of both disfunctionality (cf. Garond this volume) and sovereignty to remove the artist from any support network that could constrain his own business. Mr Piront comments widely on a so-called lack of interest of the youth for the initiation process and for Indigenous values. Like other art dealers, he also emphasises the problem of alcoholism and violence. The reference to this 'dysfunctionality' helps them to suggest that “their” artists are the last ones able to paint “authentic” stories, which makes them a good investment. This vision does not only represent Aboriginal society as a dying society, it also leads to a dangerous process of preconceiving what Aboriginal art should be at the exclusion of other experimental forms. This context must be taken into account when considering urban artists’ critiques of this system, their desire to break with the idea of a presumed authenticity and with the predicted death of a culture (Le Roux, 2012).

But nothing is clearly bad or good. Some of the art dealers who seem to have high ethics have in reality doubtful practices. They dare to edit the story that goes with the certificate of authenticity in order to make the paintings look more “Aboriginal”. They substitute themselves in place of the artist in choosing how the painting should be explained. Experts know that art centre coordinators sometimes do this, but it is done under the supervision of the artist and with his/her prior agreement. Art dealers who edit the story are manipulating an important cultural value to encourage sales. Whereas the Dreamtime story is seen by potential buyers as an index of authenticity, it is in reality the effect of an intercultural relationship in which power relations change over time. At the end of the commodity’s chain, when the artwork has left the community, the art dealer has the capacity to manipulate the index of authenticity. This



power relation around values is also seen in the promotional choices made by art dealers: when they promote the buying act as an ethical action that promotes Indigenous sovereignty, they don't mention that they only support some artists and not the ones who don't fit with the popular vision of Aboriginality. Mr Piront's public statements clearly show how the Aboriginal arts exploitation system works. But as we have seen, it is a far more complex process of value creation with aesthetic, political, economic and social values entangled together.

### III The value of knowledge

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the pre-eminent policy and funding role of the Australia Council has diminished with the expansion of programs and funds managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and new State and Territory arts funding authorities. As Fred Myers highlighted in the 1990s, Aboriginal culture increasingly became "the source of Australia's self-marketing for the international tourist industry, the 'difference' they have to offer". (Myers, 1991: 53). Indeed, Aboriginal art became the basis of a multi-million dollar industry and its international exports are worth several millions of dollars. The Myer inquiry and others surveys that aimed to address the economic, social and cultural benefits of Australia's Indigenous arts sector have pointed out the need to further develop international markets. These reports mainly frame the promotion of Aboriginal arts in terms of business opportunities. One of them stated that the public sector is less skilled in the area of international cultural trade than the commercial sector. What are the effects and limits of this economic vision of the art industry?

Following the Myer report, the Senate called for an Inquiry and invited artists, art dealers, arts advisors and arts officers to share their experience in addressing the issues and challenges they faced and their vision for the future of the sector. Austrade is the Australian Government's export and international business facilitation agency and provides access to overseas markets through export market development grants. In their submission to the Senate Inquiry, Austrade provided a list of seven Indigenous art export initiatives that were held in France in the year 2006. This number is incorrect; amongst the missing events, some were conducted by art dealers and one was an exhibition supported by the Australian Embassy's fund. However, if most reports have a good understanding of the complexity of the Aboriginal art production chain and its circulation within the national territory, their knowledge of the distribution of Aboriginal art overseas, and in particular in France, isn't as relevant. Some of these reports recommend that art dealers should benefit more from public funds: they argue

that with their knowledge of the art world and their networking capability art dealers would increase Aboriginal art sales overseas. Of course artists and art centres need sales and these sales are the result of strategies developed in partnerships with art dealers and other cultural intermediaries. But if policy makers don't see the big picture of the international art circulation chain – this could be partly due to the public officers' turn-over – how can they select the art dealers who will receive the funds? Furthermore, the artistic promotion developed by art dealers is motivated by economic choices. The economic rationality influences art dealers to promote certain styles, mainly the ones created by community-based artists, which in return influences the representation of Australian Indigenous cultures overseas.

Undertaken in response to reports of unethical treatment of Indigenous artists, the Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct was published in 2010. It represents the commitment of individuals and organisations across the Indigenous visual arts industry to put an end to exploitative practices which take advantage of artists and negatively affect their communities. The code specifically addresses the notions of fair payment and the transparency of the negotiation process. The Australian Embassy's website in France draws attention to the Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct<sup>2</sup>. On this website it is stated that members of the Indigenous Australian arts industry are expected to have signed-up to the Code by early 2010, after which the Embassy will give preference to working with commercial entities that are signatories to the Code. The art dealer referred in my paper as Mr Piront was until mid-2013 in the list of art dealers indicated by the Embassy under the previous statement although he is not a signatory of the Code. What I am suggesting by that anecdote is that any analyses of the values of the Aboriginal art industry must contend with a variety of practices that are motivated by different value systems. Reports written in Australia reveal a good understanding of the complexity of the Aboriginal art production chain and its circulation within the national territory but their representation of the French network and how Aboriginal art arrives in France is not accurate. Some might object that public officers take such reports as indicators of a tendency of the Aboriginal art world's infrastructure and not as exhaustive surveys. But with regard to how the sector operates, these reports are actually both symbolic of the dominance of the financial value over the cultural exchange value and vehicles for its reproduction: there are indeed many more export opportunities in France than the ones suggested in the Australian reports. There are several museums with historical and con-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.france.embassy.gov.au/pari/artgalleries.html>

temporary Aboriginal art collections and many other non-profit associations who are willing to foster their relations with Aboriginal Australia. But because these agents don't have the same visibility and the same power to mobilize public funds, they are invisible in public reports. As we know in the field of social sciences, interactions between the art market, public institutions and the civil society can be beneficial, with an increase of knowledge and art sales in return. Artists frequently acknowledge small-independent projects and recognize the values of alternative models of education and art dialogue as a critical counterweight to the expensive art fairs and biennales. In regard to the French export market, it would be interesting to see how Aboriginal artists value these alternative events in regard to the more-traditional commercial exchange setting<sup>3</sup>.

In the process of art commodification, cultural intermediaries play with different values systems to justify their choices and build a highly-valued object. But in the context of the Aboriginal art industry carpetbaggers do not only create values, they impose norms to artists: they influence them to adapt their artistic practices to the liberal work model: they put them in a restricted space, where they will not be bothered by other people's requests; they ask them to paint certain stories, and they also encourage them to share the labour with whoever is available. In that context, Indigenous values such as cultural transmission are partly suppressed from the production sphere. Art dealers are uncomfortable in addressing the issue of fakes and works of poor quality, rendering Aboriginal art an authentic product, unaffected by the issues relating to markets. In other words, they hide to the visitors' eyes Indigenous agency and how artists, individually or collectively, are engaging with different value systems.

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<sup>3</sup> I am currently conducting a survey of the events organised or sponsored by the Australian Embassy in Paris since the 70's.

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