



**Australian Government
Productivity Commission**

Issues paper: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts*

Submission from Agency Projects

Tuesday, 7 December 2021

To Whom It May Concern,

Agency is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led not-for-profit organisation that supports Indigenous communities to celebrate and preserve cultural knowledge, and promotes global recognition and appreciation of Indigenous Australian art and culture.

Developed in response to an identified need in the sector, Agency's mission is to initiate and facilitate new streams of investment in the promotion and maintenance of Indigenous art and culture in Australia and beyond, through strategic partnerships in government, corporate and private sectors.

Through our extensive work in remote Indigenous communities, we have witnessed first-hand that Indigenous knowledge, and the economic potential of cultural maintenance is undervalued. Cultural leaders want an advocate who can promote a portfolio of arts and cultural projects to supporters. Equally, funders from the public and private sector want to know how they can support, but often feel uncertain about how to help and the ethical use of their funds.

Agency responds to this need. Our role is two-fold: 1) to support Indigenous social enterprise and entrepreneurship to thrive and 2) to mitigate risk for funders by guaranteeing that our projects are Indigenous-led, built on trust and mutual respect, and delivered to budget in a timely and effective manner.

We achieve this by partnering with Indigenous Arts Centres, communities and individuals to help identify and develop ethical projects that celebrate and preserve Indigenous knowledge, language, culture and tradition, generate skills development and new employment pathways for Indigenous Australians, and connect these initiatives with social investment to create measurable benefits for Indigenous communities on a national and international scale.

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Agency's current and past projects and initiatives can be found on our website:
agencyprojects.org

We would like to submit the following responses to the questions outlined in the Australian Government's paper on *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts*.

1. Questions on the nature, size and scope of the markets:

Our experience shows that the market for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and craft goes beyond objects (artworks and artefacts) to also encompass intangible products, such as events, talks, arts and cultural tours that are Indigenous-led and aim towards the promotion and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and cultural leaders.

An example of successful activity in this regard is Agency's series of talks UNTOLD, which brings together leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative practitioners and thinkers from across Australia and beyond. Recent UNTOLD talks have been supported by the Australian Embassy in Washington DC, COMPOSITE and Bus Projects, Melbourne, and Kluge Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia. The program has also been awarded a major grant from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to take place globally.

Another example of a program that fosters the market for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists internationally, by encouraging scholarly research on their work, is the publication series KNOWN—which Agency is developing in collaboration with the publishing house Perimeter Editions and the support of the Australia Council for the Arts and private funders. KNOWN promotes and celebrates contemporary Indigenous Australian artists and facilitates cross-cultural dialogue between First Nations artists and curators in a global context. Profiling three contemporary Aboriginal Australian female artists (Noonkanbah woman Sonia Kurarra, Yindjibarndi woman Katie West and Djapu woman Marrnyula Mununggurr) the inaugural series will include essays by celebrated First Nations female curators from key collecting Institutions in North America. The result will be three unique profiles of prominent Aboriginal Australian artists, that will provide a timely response to the critical vacuum surrounding contemporary Aboriginal art, and have the ability to nurture relationships that influence acquisitions for collecting institutions and private collections across North America.

Finally, Agency is working to deliver a suite of Indigenous-led and Indigenous-centred talks, performances and workshops for the public program of the MPavilion, Melbourne, taking place in February 2022—which will see the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, curators and cultural leaders from across Australia.

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All these projects contribute to the definition and growth of markets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and craft. They enhance the visibility of the participants—as well as their work—providing them with alternative sources of income and professional engagement that go beyond the mere selling of artworks and craft objects.

2. Questions on the effectiveness of government investments

Government investments are crucial for the development and continuous work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, Art Centres and organisations. However, in order to access funding, remote art centres have to dedicate a consistent amount of time and resources, which they do not always have and/or which require the assistance of non-Indigenous arts workers to prepare and submit applications.

Agency regularly works with art centres and their coordinators and managers to support the development of funding applications and deliver projects. Examples in this regard are grant applications developed with and for the Art Centres of Hermannsburg Potters and Tjungu Palya. Hermannsburg was submitted to support the realisation of a publishing project that celebrates and cements the 30 year legacy of the Hermannsburg Potters artists. Tjungu Palya was instead geared towards the production of an exhibition of works by the Tjungu Palya artists that will be presented by Agency at Bus Projects, Collingwood Yards, Melbourne, in January 2022.

Thus, while government funding is essential to foster and sustain the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and cultural sector, it is also important to promote cross lateral work to build bridges between public/private funders and the direct beneficiaries of funding programs and investments, i.e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, practitioners and artists.

3. Questions on issues affecting dealings between artists and dealers

In order to nurture fair and ethical dealings between artists from remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, dealers and buyers, it is important to create and sustain opportunities for Art Centres to work independently in the spaces of the market. Peak bodies such as the Indigenous Art Code, Desert or DAAF act to—respectively—ensure authenticity, promote good governance and provide a platform for the exclusive selling and buying of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, craft and design.

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Agency has taken a step forward by partnering with the Melbourne Art Fair to produce the inaugural MAF Indigenous Art Centres Program at the 2022 Melbourne Art Fair. This new initiative supports the participation of Indigenous-owned art centres at Melbourne Art Fair with the express aim to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary artists, in addition to providing economic benefits, employment opportunities, access and capacity building support for remote communities. The program is supported by the Australian Government Office for the Arts, Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) Program and the Federal Government's RISE Initiative. It has provided a fully funded exhibition package for five remote Indigenous Art Centres to participate within the 2022 Melbourne Art Fair.

This program offers an example of fair, ethical and Indigenous-led trade for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art within the wider space of global contemporary art.

4. Questions about the role of art in communities

Recent research demonstrates that, despite the highly advanced technological wealth of urban territories in Australia, remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres still experience a high degree of digital isolation. With exception of few cases, a highly resolved example is the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala, Arnhem Land), the majority of Indigenous artists still need to deal with difficult access to the internet and rely on the help of non-Indigenous arts workers to engage with technology. This limits the development of Indigenous art, both locally and globally, as well as the role that art can play in communities.

In 2020 Agency developed a 4-day workshop with the Google Creative Lab to provide answers to the question 'What is a Digitally enabled Art Centre?' The program involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, curators, art professionals, Art Centres' coordinators and representatives of the peak bodies (e.g. the Indigenous Art Code, ANKA, AACHWA and DAAF) who, alongside the team of Google Creative Lab, brainstormed and conceived a series of practical responses to the issue of digital isolation, further exploring its opposite: the potential of digitisation for remote Indigenous Art Centres and sites.

A result of this research endeavour is a project that Agency has recently launched, in partnership with regional and remote Indigenous Art Centres, to transform their community collections and galleries into interactive and immersive digital experiences. The outcome is an exciting community-owned and operated project that empowers remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to create and share unique and energising arts and cultural experiences that amplify Indigenous voice, leadership and enterprise through digital platforms, and attract new and diverse audiences to experience Indigenous art, culture, people and Country. This project is funded by the Federal Government's RISE initiative.

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To conclude, our response to the questions raised in the paper can be summarised as follows:

We see the definition of markets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and craft as expansive as it also includes intangible products, experiences and the growth of knowledge around the practice and work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. As such, alternative sources of income and professional development opportunities need to be considered when framing the definition of benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and cultural leaders. It is therefore important to invest in fostering the market ethically, through fully indigenous-led processes and platforms, but also in relation to the global systems and structures of contemporary art and craft. Ultimately, it is crucial to support projects that address and seek solutions to overcome the digital divide that still affects many regional and remote communities—to promote innovation and risk-taking in order to attain best practices and ensure the realisation of high-quality Indigenous-led projects.

We would be happy to be contacted for further comment as required and wish the Committee all the best for the Inquiry.

Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box redacting the signature of Kade McDonald.

Kade McDonald
CEO

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