

The Inevitable Collision between Politics and Indigenous Art

by **Gary Foley**
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In the past thirty years we have seen a revolution in the history and politics of Australian indigenous art. Since the late 1960s perceptions of indigenous art have progressed from quaint disinterest to international excitement and the creation of a multi-million dollar industry. From a tiny 1.7 percent of the Australian population, Aborigines make-up at least 25 percent and probably around 50 percent of working visual artists as well as creating more than half the total value of Australian visual fine art and dominating the export market. Australia-wide the Aboriginal art industry is estimated to make in excess of \$200 million a year and to be growing at 10 per cent a year. Aboriginal artists in the Northern Territory are the largest producers in the industry. Their work has an estimated value of \$110 million annually.

Unfortunately, the practitioners and custodians of the art work itself continue to be marginalized and exploited to such an extent that less than one percent of the millions generated by their work is returned to them or their communities. Further, the intense international interest created by indigenous art rarely translates into an appreciation of the enormous historical injustices that continue to have a destructive effect on indigenous peoples throughout Australia.

The whole world it seems is excited by indigenous art of Australia. The same whole world simultaneously demonstrates total disinterest in the reality of the present day indigenous social, political and economic condition. That such appreciation of art and indifference to suffering can reside together is a contradiction that shall be examined in a small way in this essay. Through an examination of a few significant moments in the recent history of indigenous Australia I shall illustrate the struggle by indigenous artists to assert their self-determination, challenge exploitation at the same time as altering the cultural and political landscape of Australia.

The three significant moments I shall refer to are, the political assertion of control of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council in the 1980s; the 1988 Bicentennial celebration, dubbed by indigenous activists as the 'Great Masturbation of the Nation'; and the Australian High Court Decision in the Mabo Case and the resultant Native Title Act in 1993. Each of these three events elucidate the contradictions of the intense cultural wars that are currently waging in Australia.

The Lunatics Take Over Asylum (Aboriginal Arts Board 1982 -86)

In 1982 the newly elected Labor Government of Bob Hawke appointed as Chair of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB), Mr Charles (Chicka) Dixon, a former wharf labourer and long term political activist. Dixon recruited myself as the Director of the Board and we set about with a clear political agenda to "Aboriginalize" the Board. By that Dixon meant that it was time for indigenous artists to seize control of the indigenous arts bureaucracy. From its creation a decade earlier, the AAB had been run by an exclusively non-indigenous administration. Dixon and his Board felt that non-indigenous administrators had not done enough to protect or promote the interests of Aboriginal artists and performers and so set about implementing aggressively pro-Aboriginal policies.

Dixon also felt there had been an undue preference in previous funding that favoured so-called 'traditional' artists in Northern Australia, so he introduced new policies to correct the imbalance. Among those who immediately benefited from these new policies were artists such as Tracy Moffatt, Lin Onus and Bronwyn Bancroft. The AAB under Dixon also effectively

doubled funds available to assist indigenous artists by introducing a rule that only indigenous artists should be funded by the Aboriginal Arts Board. It might seem amazing today, but Dixon had found that in the 12 months prior to him becoming Chair of the Board, it had given more than fifty percent of its annual arts grants to non-indigenous people! So as if to further emphasize his point about Aboriginal control, he told the 13 non-indigenous staff of the Board (there was only one indigenous employee) that he intended to 'Aboriginalize' the AAB and that they should seek alternative employment.

Within three months the Board had 14 staff (only one non-indigenous staff member). The Dixon AAB also aggressively pressed other Boards of the Australia Council to increase their funding of indigenous projects, and many of today's significant Aboriginal and Islander theatre and dance companies were to benefit from such policies. Indeed, the veritable explosion in indigenous creative arts that occurred during the past twenty years can in part be attributed to the work of Chicka Dixon's Aboriginal Arts Board and that of Lin Onus' subsequent Chairmanship.

Here was an example of the necessity of indigenous people (in this case artists) regaining control of their own affairs and subverting the institutions that affected them. As such it was a continuation of the ideas and philosophies that had exploded in Australia during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the form of the so-called Black Power movement and the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy. It is important to note that Chicka Dixon was one of the key architects and planners of the Aboriginal Embassy, and it was the political principles he had espoused at the Embassy that he brought to the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1982.

The ideas of the Embassy in turn had derived and evolved from the famous 1938 'Day of Mourning' protest which was the significant challenge to white sovereignty and hegemony of its era. Thus the radical actions of Dixon in 1982-6 could be regarded as very much part a long established political resistance, and thereby it cannot be said that the situation today in the world of Aboriginal art is disconnected from the political struggle for justice.

This politicization of the primary administrative/support structures in the 1980s in part produced a parallel overt political artistic outcome in the emergence of artists like Lin Onus, Gordon Hookey, Richard Bell and Gordon Bennett. The work of these artists and others who were encouraged and nurtured by the Dixon AAB changes, make a more direct challenge to the status quo. As Brenda Croft has pointed out, 'socio-political circumstances always impact upon, and are reflected in Indigenous cultural expression'.

One of the most important exhibitions to germinate during the Dixon led AAB was the Aratjara exhibition that toured Germany, England and Denmark during 1992. Aratjara was born when a Swiss artist called Bernhard Luthi approached the AAB in 1984 and expressed the view that Australian indigenous art should be exhibited in the modern art galleries of Europe rather than the ethnographic centres where at that time it languished. This idea was enthusiastically embraced by the AAB and they provided funding to enable Luthi to develop the idea. This ultimately resulted in a major exhibition, comprising of both so-called 'traditional' and 'urban' art works, that in 1992 showed in modern art museums in Dusseldorf, London and Copenhagen. The Aratjara exhibition was to this day the most successful (in terms of people through the door) Australian art exhibition to ever leave Australia's shores. It also made a major contribution to the expanding international interest in Indigenous art from Australia.

1988 - "The Great Masturbation of a Nation" Bicentennial

The period of Chicka Dixon's Chairmanship of the Aboriginal Arts Board coincided with the lead up to the 1988 Bicentennial activities during which Australians were asked to celebrate 200 years of white occupation of Aboriginal lands. There was always going to be tension

between those who wished to celebrate and those who regarded the event as a 'Day of Mourning', but the situation was exacerbated by the actions of the Hawke Federal Labor government since coming to office in 1983. When Hawke had been first elected Prime Minister, he had unequivocally declared that his government would deliver justice to Indigenous Australia through 'national uniform land rights legislation'. This legislation would enable Aborigines to claim land in freehold title and begin the process of re-establishing self-determination by way of economic enterprise leading to full economic independence.

Unfortunately, Hawke was attacked by representatives the powerful pastoralist and mining industries who saw Aboriginal land justice as a threat to their vested interests. Under intense pressure, Hawke wilted and Land Rights for Aborigines was off the agenda. In the face of such political cowardice, the Aboriginal political movement staged major demonstrations at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games and threatened to disrupt the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. Tension mounted and soon Hawke's Minister for Aboriginal Affairs began to interfere in the administrative operations of the Aboriginal Arts Board. This interference became intolerable for myself as Director of the Board and on the 1st May 1987 I tendered my resignation.

As the Bicentennial approached the tension between the Hawke Government and indigenous Australians became more intense. Prominent among those critical of the Government were indigenous artists and performers who developed a strategy of challenging the powerful cultural mythology of what the Bicentennial represented. Part of that strategy involved the creation of a music and art project called "Building Bridges", which was designed to communicate to white Australia an alternative understanding and vision for the future.

On the 26th January 1988 the Australian Bicentennial celebrations went ahead in a white orgy of fireworks and alcohol. In contrast, with a remarkable expression of restraint and dignity, the biggest assembly of Indigenous Australians in 60,000 years marched and rallied in the heart of the city of Sydney. This moment clearly showed that Black Australians were able to culturally subvert the underlying themes of the Bicentennial. Simply by still surviving and resisting both the original invasion and 200 years of attempts to eliminate them through programs of 'assimilation'.

The Mabo Decision - "Native Title is NOT Land Rights!"

By the end of the 13 year term of the Hawke/Keating Labor Government, Aboriginal Australia not only did not have the Hawke promised 'national uniform land rights legislation', but in fact were further dispossessed through a legal sleight of hand called Native Title. In 1993 the High Court of Australia, in the Mabo case, finally dispensed with the fallacy of 'terra nullius', which had been the legal justification for the acquisition of sovereignty of Australia by the British for more than 200 years. Instead, the High Court declared, Indigenous Australians apparently had what British Law deemed 'native title' in 1788.

The 'catch-22' was that native title (being the most inferior form of land tenure under British Law) was 'extinguished' by freehold title. In other words, all the settled areas of Australia (ie the best land) were lands that could not be claimed under the new Native Title Act. Thus the Mabo decision of the High Court and the resultant Native Title Act drawn up by Labor PM Paul Keating, represented the greatest single dispossession of Aboriginal people (without compensation) since the arrival of Captain Cook in 1770.

The advent of the Liberal Government of John Howard has further exacerbated the sense of alienation felt by indigenous communities throughout Australia. Today we are in the midst of major 'culture wars' in which Prime Minister Howard has taken a clear public stance by declaring his support for historian Keith Windshuttle who claims he is fighting against 'Black

Armband' histories. Those who Windshuttle has deemed the 'black armband brigade' of historians include the few Australian historians of the past thirty years who have begun to explore the history of this land from an indigenous perspective.

This exploration of the unspoken aspects of Australian history is perceived as a threat by a Prime Minister who some might say has embraced a racist position on history in order to win over the significant minority of Australians who voted for the racialized policies of Pauline Hanson. Hanson was an Australian version of populist racist political groups that have emerged throughout Europe in the past 20 years. Given that the voice of indigenous historians has effectively been silenced in the great debates of today's culture wars, it has been indigenous artists and performers who have become the most effective resistance fighters.

The win by Richard Bell in the 2004 Telstra National Aboriginal Art Award signifies the central importance of contemporary artists such as him, Gordon Bennet, Vernon Ahkit et al as the indigenous voice in the debates that form the culture wars. Their subversive work has a subtle undermining effect on nationalist assertions that attempt to normalize British notions of Australian 'history'. In doing so they place themselves (wittingly or unwittingly) at the centre of the political/cultural argument that will define Australian identity for the next few decades.

As an integral part of the strategy is the use of humour in their work. As Richard Bell states, "I like to use satire and other tools of humour to soften the blow, so to speak, because ultimately, it's about communication." Whether the art utilizes humour or other means, the important point remains that the cultural/political integrity of indigenous Australia is as much under threat as it ever was.

Bell's win of National Aboriginal Art Award is one of the most powerful recent statements by an indigenous person who rightfully insists on being regarded as a 'contemporary Australian artist'. His winning entry, *Scientia E Metaphysica* (Bell's Theorem) 2003, was accompanied by a 4,600 word essay titled "Aboriginal Art Its a White Thing" in which he challenged not only the 'Aboriginal Art Industry', but also the ongoing denial of justice for indigenous people. The fact that such an overtly political piece of work would win the most prestigious indigenous art award in Australia clearly placed politics at the centre of the indigenous art mainstream.

Today's most important indigenous artists are 'wise to and savvy about the economic and political context in which they work.' As indigenous people first, before they are indigenous artists, they are as conscious as any person in the indigenous community of the new hostile political landscape that confronts us under the vision of John Howard. The irony of this is that in the world of John Howard's most ardent supporters, namely the boardrooms of corporate Australia, one would be hard pressed to find a boardroom or corporate HQ that does not have at least one mandatory work of indigenous art gracing their walls. This point returns us to the beginning of this essay, emphasizing again the contradiction between the vast amounts spent on indigenous art by some of the wealthiest people in the world, yet the people who produce this work are among the poorest and most oppressed in the western world.

Hopefully in exhibitions such as this people might remember that there is another dimension to the wonderful art work before you, and sometimes realize that these indigenous people and their present political/economic situation should be a consideration in your appreciation of their art.

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Note: Mr Foley has since left his position at Museum Victoria and now is a lecturer in History, Politics and Education at Victoria University. He is also currently completing a PhD in History through the Australia Centre at University of Melbourne.

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