



building audiences

ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER ARTS



**Building Audiences:
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art**

August 2015

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The Australia Council for the Arts, Deakin University and the Melbourne Business School respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culture. Readers should be aware that this report may contain references to and images of members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who have passed away.

We would like to acknowledge the Country where this research took place. We acknowledge the ancestral lands and traditional owners of the Wurundjeri, Wathaurung, Euroa, Turrbul, Larrakia, Kurna, and Noongar peoples. We pay respect to the elders of these communities both past, present and future for the privilege to produce this research on their lands.

This document summarises the key findings. For the full research report, which includes art form differences, please refer to the Australia Council website.

COVER:

Kahl Wallis

Image credit: Israel Rivera

FOREWORD

As a culturally ambitious nation we are shaped by our cultural engagement and it is an important catalyst for critical discourse. It is vital that audiences and artists discuss their experiences, enabling us as a community to come together through engagement with diverse practice that challenges and entertains. This research has been undertaken in response to the Australia Council's strategic vision for a nation where there are no borders to accessing Australian arts, and all Australians are able to experience and cherish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and culture.



Building Audiences provides an insight into the nature of existing Australian audiences and the broader public. It reveals how Australians engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts in the public sphere as audiences, highlighting that this engagement is part of a broader national dialogue about their relationship with and towards Indigenous Australia.

The Australia Council's research report *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts* (2014) highlighted that nine in ten Australians believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are an important part of Australian culture. Although two thirds of Australians had a strong or growing interest in Indigenous arts, only one quarter of Australians had engaged with Indigenous art in the past year. This gap between attitudes and actual audience participation prompted the research project *Building Audiences*.

Building Audiences explores the connection between the collective experiences of arts audiences and the public by examining the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that frame their responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and culture.

This research brings together key insights from the Australian public as well as the arts sector. This project explored some of the key barriers faced by audiences in engaging with Indigenous Arts, and the report outlines how some of the issues might be addressed. One of the barriers identified is the limited exposure to Indigenous art experienced by many Australians. Audiences are uncertain about how to engage appropriately and have limited understanding of the breadth of what is on offer.

The findings having the potential to inform what we each do on a daily basis and change the way the audiences are engaged. To help audiences navigate their experience we must consider all aspects of the arts and cultural landscape. This information is also a valuable resource for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts community as an advocacy tool and to inform audience development strategies – from representation of Indigenous peoples in key roles, to marketing and presentation strategies which better reflect the diversity of Indigenous arts.

The findings of this report present a significant opportunity to increase awareness across the national arts sector and inform future activity. The research supports much of what we intuitively know, but it is important to strengthen the evidence base which will inform future support and planning. Our sector is strong and vibrant, with artists producing an incredible depth and variety of work which is recognised globally.

Thank you to all those who gave their time to contribute to this important piece of research. I hope these findings assist you in reflecting on how your work can contribute to building strong audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and culture, and celebrate the richness and diversity of Australia's culture.

Lydia Miller

Executive Director

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts

INTRODUCTION



As expressions of the world's longest continuing culture, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are globally unique. They contribute significant social, cultural and economic benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities' and are seen as an important part of the broader Australian culture.

Ninety-two (92%) of respondents in the Arts Participation survey consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts an important part of Australian culture.² Two-thirds (64%) of Australians have a strong or growing interest in art created or performed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples.³ Despite this strong interest, only a quarter (24%) have attended Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander arts events and activities in the last year.⁴ This significant gap between audience attitudes and behaviour presents an opportunity to explore the current issues affecting audience development in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts.

This research aims to identify challenges, opportunities and strategies that will enable the Indigenous arts ecology to build audiences for their arts. Increasing audiences will help keep Indigenous culture strong, provide economic opportunities based on this strength, affirm the primacy and identity of Australia's First Peoples, facilitate reconciliation, and enrich Australian culture.

There are opportunities and challenges in all facets of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology that impact audience development. Given the level of interdependence between the various members of the ecology, all have a role to play in developing audiences, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. No one member can develop audiences in isolation.

Key questions addressed through this research include:

- What factors are present in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology that facilitate and impede audience development?
- What currently motivates audiences to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts?
- What are the barriers (perceived or real) to audiences engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts?
- What is currently being done to address audience development in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology?
- What opportunities exist to develop audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts?

RESEARCH APPROACH

This project examines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts audiences from multiple perspectives through a five stage research approach illustrated in Figure One. A mixed method approach is adopted and utilises multiple data sources: existing secondary information, key industry informants, engaged and potential audiences (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and arts institutions from across Australia representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual art, music, literature, theatre and dance.

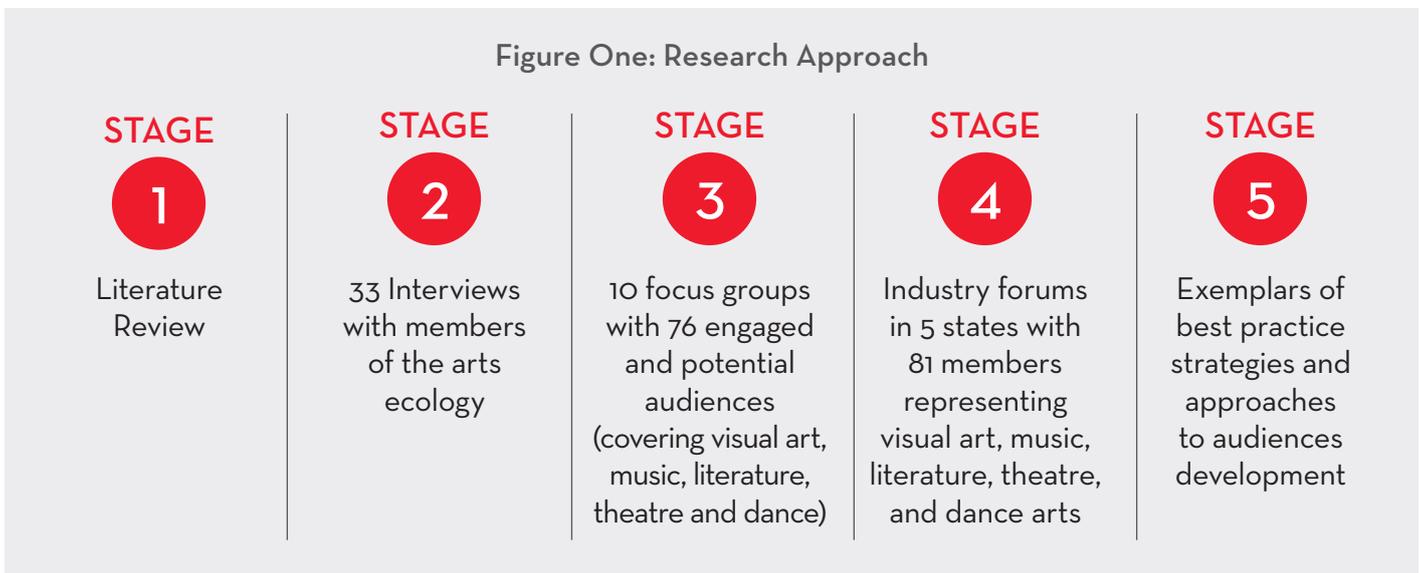
The literature review included both academic and grey literature written about the ecosystem and the issues that influence audience development. It documented existing knowledge and identified gaps for exploration in subsequent stages of the project.

The review of existing literature revealed that there has been limited examination of the audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art to date. As one study on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre notes: 'Primary research with audiences for Indigenous theatre is scarce, which further contributes to the underdeveloped marketing strategies of Indigenous companies.'⁵ In the context of visual arts, an author explains that, 'In the [lower and middle] price tiers of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market, in which most of these products are bought, this [consumer] understanding is ad hoc and anecdotal, with stakeholders operating according to widely held but unproven assumptions.'⁶



Daniel Boyd, *untitled (T13)*, 2015
oil and archival glue on linen, 487 · 213cm
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9
Gallery, Sydney, Australia

Figure One: Research Approach



This reinforced the need for the following stages of primary research, which drew on the perspectives of members throughout the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology, as well as audience perspectives.

Interviews were conducted with a broad range of members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology. Participants ranged from artists and producers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous presenting organisations and advocacy bodies including key stakeholders from the Australia Council. Interviews focused on identifying the strengths, challenges and strategies in the ecosystem that influence audience development.

A series of exploratory **focus groups** were conducted in order to understand the motivations and inhibitors to attendance and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander art across art forms. Participants were selected based on their attendance behaviours and interest in specific art forms. They were characterised as either current attendees or potential attendees. The majority of focus group participants were non-Indigenous.

A series of five **industry forums** were convened across Australia to test the findings with a larger representative group and as a means of work shopping strategies for audience development. The forums include a cross-section of participants from artists to presenting organisations, educators and government agencies, marketers and distributors.

Finally the project profiles **exemplars**, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and organisations that have successfully addressed an audience development challenge. The profiles aimed to provide tangible examples and stimulate conversations around what various members of the ecology can do to increase audiences.

Kill the Messenger, 2015, Belvoir
Sam O'Sullivan and Nakkiah Lui
Image credit: Brett Boardman



KEY FINDINGS

This research project uncovers a number of key strengths and challenges that directly affect audience development. The research also brings together a range of strategies that can be implemented to increase and develop audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts in Australia.

STRENGTHS

The research findings reveal a number of strengths that can be used to develop audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. The diversity of art that is created and presented provides a strong platform for developing audiences. Other strengths include audience attraction to human stories, contemporary experiences, unique experiences, personal connection, and opportunities for cultural insight and deeper understanding.

Diversity

The diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia is seen in its many countries and language groups. This diversity manifests traditionally in the many forms of painting, wood carving, rock etching, weaving, body adorning and performative practices. This tradition has been retained and has also developed into a range of exciting contemporary art practices. Diversity is also evident in contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture with new media, contemporary dance, literature, acrylic paint on canvas and glass work, for example.

Figure Two:

Arts Ecology Members' Image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts



Figures Two, Three and Four use a word cloud technique to illustrate the characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art that resonate most strongly with members of the arts ecology and audiences. The larger the word is depicted, the more commonly it is used by research participants.)

Attraction to stories

Audiences are also attracted to the storytelling quality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. As seen in Figures Two and Three, the storytelling is a strong association for both engaged and potential audiences. For instance, an engaged dance audience member explains why they are attracted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance:

“*Storytelling, because there is probably more of that in Aboriginal dancing than a lot of other dance that you see... To me I see the dance dancing out sentences of stories, but in movement, and I find it really incredibly powerful.*”

For potential music audiences, it is the storytelling quality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music in which they are primarily interested. Potential audiences highlight the importance of lyrics, which they see as having a powerful narrative quality. Emphasising the honest, human stories told through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music can attract new audiences.

Attraction to contemporary experiences

Audiences are attracted to opportunities to engage with what they perceive as contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Audiences are increasingly attracted to contemporary art experiences; in terms of the stories being told and the ways in which they are presented and communicated.

Bangarra Dance Theatre, *Patyegarang*
Image credit: Jess Bialek



For instance, audiences are particularly motivated to engage with artists and work that capture and explore the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today. An engaged visual arts audience member explains their preferred experience:

- ☞ *Would probably be the gallery that does the younger and the contemporary Aboriginal artist. And giving them the opportunity to stand up and say 'I am Aboriginal and I am proud of it and this is my art. It might not be the storytelling of a hundred years ago, but this is what I did today'.* ☞
-

Attraction to unique experiences

Members of the arts ecology link audience interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art to its unique heritage. As one support organisation staff member explains:

- ☞ *I think the motivation is this sense of being part of this unique part of Australia and a culture - it's unique in the world really - that you would have something that would survive so long.* ☞

Engaged audiences are also interested in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art due to the unique experience it offers. One theatre audience member says:

- ☞ *I definitely find it educational and I value the opportunity to learn more about that culture, but more than anything it's just seeing something different too.* ☞

While potential theatre audiences have a more limited experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre, many are also attracted to what they perceive as its uniqueness. One potential audience member comments:

- ☞ *I love experimenting with new things...for me it would be a different thing altogether and I would enjoy it because, with other shows you anticipate something, but with this one, it's going to be something fresh, something very different.* ☞
-

Personal connections

Familiarity and connections to other people are seen as a strong motivator for audiences to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. One Indigenous staff member at a contemporary art organisation comments:

- ☞ *Community. If someone knows someone who's in a show here or part of that fashion event we recently had, it will be filled, we'll be completely sold out. There's definitely a huge community aspect to having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts happening here.* ☞

Similarly, arts ecology members observe that positive word-of-mouth by someone within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is a powerful motivator for others to engage. As a staff member at a contemporary visual arts organisation reveals:

- ☞ *It's word of mouth, I think if people come along and they've really enjoyed it then they'll tell their family or they'll tell their friends and it feels like they've given me the OK... It's almost a validation that it's okay to go; it's an endorsement.* ☞
-

Desire for cultural insight

The desire to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and stories is considered by arts ecology members as a strong motivator for non-Indigenous audiences:

“I think curiosity and a search for some knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture... I think art is an accessible way for people to understand Aboriginal culture and understand Australian history in a meaningful way.”

In general, engaged arts audiences across art forms have a strong aspiration to discover more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, both its historical roots and more contemporary experiences. Art in all its forms is seen as an important and valued source of cultural insight.

Engaged literature audiences have a keen interest in a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature that can provide cultural insight. One engaged literature audience member explains:

“I would say to sort of educate me in something that I perhaps haven't thought about. There's sort of something in me that makes me want to go and learn a bit more about something else.”

Engaged literature audiences are self-motivated learners. They have an appetite to know and understand more about both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and the lived experience today.

Potential theatre audiences value the opportunity to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture through theatre. As one member states:

“The stories that they tell, to learn more about culture, to just hear another perspective.”

Potential theatre audiences are interested in this aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre, but are uncertain about how to access it.



Judy Watson
Image courtesy of the artist

Desire for deeper understanding

Audiences across art forms have a desire to extend and deepen their engagement with and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. There are strong aspirations to know more about the context and content of the art being presented. Audiences seek opportunities for greater engagement with practitioners in order to understand the motivations and background of artists and their works.

Engaged audiences are attracted to visual art experiences that give them the opportunity to understand more about the artist and how the work is created. As one participant explains:

☞ *To have a connection with the artist and I find that really helps you to connect personally with what's going on, rather than just to seeing something that's in front of you and going 'well, that's [sic] was fine'. But actually connecting to people who wrote the story or the dance or music or something like that. It helps your understanding...the accessibility...I find that for me that's why I go because I can stand and talk to the artist. ☞*

CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges that currently inhibit the development of audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. These challenges relate to perceived barriers for audiences to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. They include uncertainty, awareness and image. There are also aspects of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait arts ecology that limit organisations' and artists' ability to develop audiences. Ecology challenges include capacity, representation and support.

Uncertainty

Both members of the arts ecology and audiences note the uncertainties many people have about engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and that this may limit their motivation to engage:

☞ *What if it's about behaviours of people? What if it's about the space? What if it's about people being unsure about their engagement with the arts? That's not ticketing, that's not car parks, it's not retiming performances. That's a valid discourse that we need to have with potential audiences to enable them to feel very comfortable in that space. ☞*

Some arts ecology members feel that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have uncertainties about attending mainstream venues. One director of a non-Indigenous presenting organisation expressed their desire to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel 'comfortable in our venue'. A staff member of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts advocacy body also highlights the importance of 'making organisations or institutions safe for Indigenous communities and audiences'.

Audiences express uncertainty about how they can and should behave at live events. Audiences also desire authentication of the provenance when purchasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works of art or products. While such uncertainty and lack of knowledge is currently a barrier, it is also a sign of the audiences' deep respect for a culture.

For instance, a potential dance audience member notes a concern that they would offend or appear disrespectful as a result of their limited knowledge:

☞ *I think it's really hard if you're not Indigenous to know how you'll actually react to the dancing, whether you should be rocking your body with the beat of the didgeridoo or whether you should be concentrating on being solemn and respectful, because you don't know whether you're going to offend someone. ☞*

Potential audiences perceive their lack of knowledge as a personal deficit. One audience member comments: 'I'm embarrassed, I get very embarrassed'. To which another responds: 'I don't know whether I'm embarrassed, but I'm offended with myself the times I don't understand'. This uncertainty and its impact on expectations present a major barrier to attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre:

☞ *If I have to spend a lot of money I would definitely choose things like Jersey Boys or Lion King because I'm guaranteed it. There'll be dancing and singing that I love, rather than trying to figure out. ☞*

Awareness

Given that there is not a critical mass of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, it is harder for the genre in general to be seen amongst the broad range of arts marketing. For some art forms, there is a lack of awareness about specific events (that is, lack of advertising). For other art forms, such as literature, it is a lack of general awareness of the art form itself and its visibility in a cluttered marketplace. One engaged music audience member explains: *'You can't see something if you never know about it'*.

Audiences indicate that, while they are open to the idea of engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance, they are not likely to actively seek information in order to do so:

'I wouldn't actively think of it, not that I don't want to, but it actually wouldn't pop into my mind as something to consider seeking out...I lead a very busy life and it would literally have to come across the TV or through a newspaper that I read.'

The perception of a lack of promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art through avenues accessed by these potential audience groups, coupled with the disinclination to actively seek information, illustrates the significance and complexity of awareness as a barrier.

Frances Andrijich, *Pound 1*
Image courtesy the artist and Warlayirti Artists Balgo Art Centre



Image

Some audiences perceive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art to be a serious and educational experience. Whilst these qualities can often be a virtue, when competing for audiences' leisure time and entertainment dollar, it can also be a barrier to attendance.

Past research into building audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts has raised this point. A case study of Kooemba Jdarra⁷ revealed that audiences expect traditional productions featuring spirituality and mythology or injustices and social issues.⁸ The researchers find that non-Indigenous audiences believe that, while theatre is a good medium to learn about the latter, it could also alienate mainstream theatre goers seeking to be entertained and be a barrier to audience participation.⁹

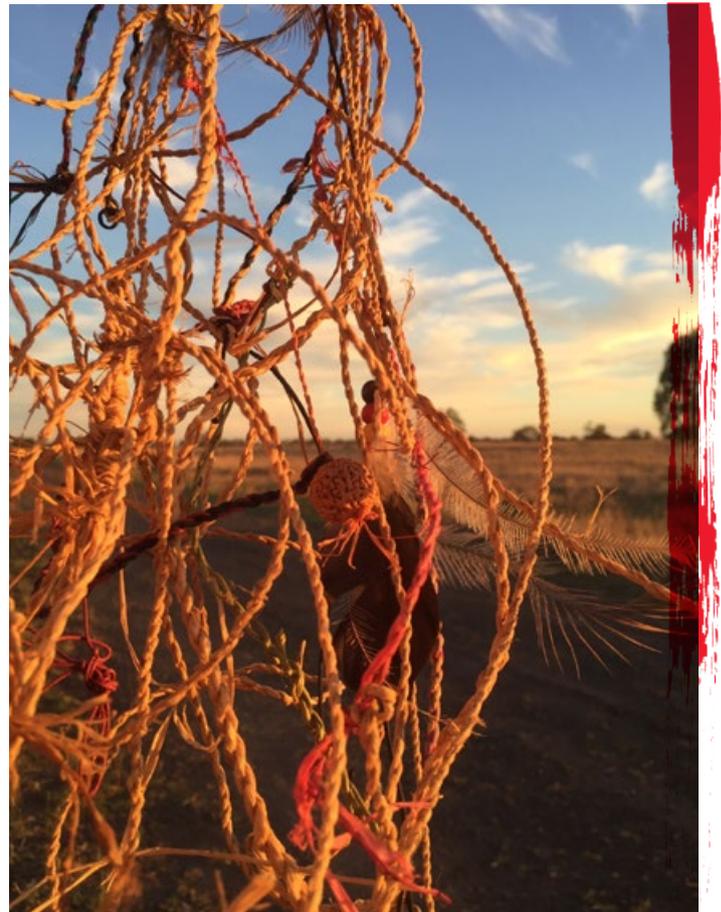
This current research reinforces this point. For many engaged audiences, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art is seen as embedded in traditional cultural practices. There are strong associations with ceremonial practices, the didgeridoo, ochre, fire, dots, dust, protest, celebration and the Dreamtime. These associations engender a high degree of respect from engaged audiences, but also create an image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art that is very serious.

One engaged theatre audience member explains how this image may, at times, impact their decision to engage:

☞ *It kind of depends just on what mood I'm in. So a lot of the time these plays are educational or culturally whatever, but sometimes I just want to relax and just not worry about what's wrong with Australia... I'm probably more inclined just to go down the entertainment path than the educational route.* ☞

Even for audiences interested in educational experiences, they may not be interested in such experiences all the time. The image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre as educative may, therefore, present a barrier at times for these audiences. The engaged theatre audience discussed the popular appeal of Disney's stage production of *The Lion King*. The audience members suggest that a similar production anchored in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture could appeal to both engaged and new audiences seeking entertaining experiences.

Potential audiences have a fairly superficial and stereotypical image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. The strongest and most positive aspect of the image relates to the storytelling qualities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Perhaps because of their limited exposure to diverse experiences, potential audiences anchor their perceptions on the ceremonial nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Such an image is linked to traditional and historical (old) cultural practices that involve the use of the didgeridoo, ochre, dots and body art. Potential audiences view such experiences as spiritual, soulful and serious. The image is positive, but lacks depth and is not strong enough to attract them to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.



Outbackarts string
Image courtesy the artist and Outback Arts, Australia

Potential audiences attribute this serious image to early experiences. As one potential dance audience member explains:

☞ *Just from school... the experience you have was sit down quietly and watch this and that's how we were taught. Even at that time it wasn't move around or get involved, it's watch and interpret and understand and do it quietly and calmly. So we can only go from that experience. ☞*

Capacity

The capacity of organisations to effectively market Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and to develop audiences is discussed by arts ecology members.

☞ *Practically, I think without the employment of staff to activate spaces and activate and develop programming, you're not allowing for the growth of your audience. If you've only got one Aboriginal staff [member] working at the organisation you're in that's been the same way for five or 10 years, it's not possible to grow an audience. ☞*

Some members note that problems with audience development are tied to a lack of skills development. This skills development relates specifically to training in the marketing frameworks that are used in the mainstream arts sector, such as market segmentation, target marketing, branding and marketing communication. There is a recognised need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers to be equipped with the same marketing skills:

☞ *The frameworks that we have been working in, not just in art forms but also in marketing or publicity and promotions, the formulas, the methods and the practices of all of that, they're not familiar to an Indigenous practitioner so that's why I say there's a lack of skills in relation to those fields. ☞*

Representation

Existing research in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature has found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing is often reviewed by non-Indigenous reviewers. The research explains that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers feel that non-Indigenous reviewers have a limited understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing.¹⁰ Existing research argues that there needs to be greater numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working across the writing industry – reviewers, editors and publishers – to enhance the marketing and distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature.¹¹

This current research finds that many art ecology members believe that the management and marketing of much Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art is led by non-Indigenous people. As one Indigenous artistic director says:

☞ *Most Indigenous artists are still at the beck and call of the non-Indigenous artists and companies... To get a show, to build a career, often you are being curated by a non-Indigenous person. Now that could be a wonderful benevolent dictator, it could be a carpetbagger who just wants to make lots of money out of you, there's so many different ways, but the gatekeepers of your career are still not people who are sensitive to the cultural understandings of why you make the work and where it comes from. ☞*

One of the greatest challenges is the limited number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in audience development and marketing roles. As the staff at an Indigenous visual art presenting organisation argues, this has a significant impact on the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art is marketed:

“I think the key challenge has always been about audience and in marketing to target audiences and even secondary audiences. What we don’t have are skilled marketing personnel who understand Indigenous art to adequately promote that.”

Support

Existing research suggests that the single biggest impediment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists accessing public funds is the kind of ‘functional literacy’ demanded of artists by governments.¹² *Song Cycles* states, ‘Practical issues reported to us include barriers presented by public programs only being available to people with high levels of proficiency in text based English and programs that require substantial preparation time.’¹³

This current research also identifies that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners may have difficulty in accessing support. This impedes their ability to develop their arts practice and engage new audiences. As one staff member at a mainstream visual arts organisation states:

“It’s really difficult with a small staff and, while we would love to teach them [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists] how to market themselves effectively and I would love to write the funding proposals for them, it’s impossible. I wish that we had more capacity or organisation up here that was in between us, as a presentation venue, that they could go to as a first step.”



Black Diggers, a Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival production
Image credit: Branco Gaica

STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP AUDIENCES

Members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology identify a range of approaches to developing audiences for their art in Australia. The strategies seek to leverage existing audience motivations and directly address the current impediments to audience development. The strategies can be categorised under six key areas: capacity and career development, representation and authenticity, presentation, awareness, image, and uncertainty.

Capacity and career development

Critical to audience development is the need for capacity building within the ecology. A strong ecology will provide the foundation for long-term audience development. One success story in this area is *Performing Lines*. Karilyn Brown explains that, over the past decade, *Performing Lines* have worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and organisations to facilitate and drive opportunities. She feels that it is a critical time for all organisations to be providing skills development, advice and resourcing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. Brown comments: ‘

☞ *The performing arts in the Indigenous world is really on the cusp of something quite extraordinary and we need to be backing that in every way we can.* ☞

Career development strategies could include raising the visibility of arts roles and also making careers in the arts a more financially stable employment option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Another suggestion is to provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers to connect with each other for support and professional development. Members at the Western Australia forum explain:

☞ *We have three or four Aboriginal people out of a staff of 250 so it's very difficult... especially when you're on your own journey and then you find yourself taking on the community's journey and everybody else's stuff and it's very difficult for them. It's important for these people to be connected to their peers in a state and nationally so they keep doing the work.* ☞

Long-term career planning can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers to remain a constant in the ecosystem. This is at the core of establishing strong relationship marketing strategies, which will provide ongoing audience development benefits.

Representation and authenticity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts audiences value authenticity and seek signposts for trustworthiness and legitimacy. Such authenticity is best communicated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers. A member of the Victorian forum explains how their organisation's employment of an Aboriginal staff member has a direct impact on the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences:

☞ *We have a producer on staff...who works on our projects and we know that Indigenous artists come to our shows because [his] name is on it as he's there; the community knows they have a contact in the organisation; and that [he is] involved in producing, making and communicating work and issuing invitations. It's critical to make sure that an organisation... that's making work for main stages has a community contact.* ☞



Archie Roach and guitarist Craig Pilkington,
Australia Council Awards 2015
Image credit: Branco Gaica

One example of success in this area is the *Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)*. Alongside the MCA's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming, representation and authenticity is secured through the Indigenous Advisory Board. The Board provides MCA with 'advice, support, feedback, links, opportunities', with their expertise critical to MCA's success. Heather Whitely Robertson explains:

❧ *We don't pay lip service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs or audiences or artworks or exhibitions, we actually have a strong integrated approach right across the museum... I think that [a] major consideration of our positioning and relationship with Australian Indigenous culture is quite a driving force for the museum and certainly it is one of the strategic goals of the museum to integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and we are also at the final stage of defining an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy which actually spells out what our commitment is across the museum in different areas of the business. ❧*

Arts ecology members highlight that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are needed in decision making roles. There is a belief that such representation will help to ensure the appropriate programming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

Arts ecology members note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art requires specialised marketers and recommend the development of such roles. Another marketing recommendation is the development of a national marketing summit to collectively harness and leverage knowledge across the arts ecology.

Presentation

Increasing the visibility and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art works being presented will provide audiences with more opportunities to broaden their engagement. With presentation, a number of arts ecology members highlight the need for the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts or cultural institutions of scale. Members present at the Queensland forum argue:

“We need those trained personnel to help form, set up and run Indigenous major cultural institutions and...there was the National Museum of Indian Art in America and the Banff Centre in Canada. So it’s those long term visions for investment that we’re looking for.”

The development of new or potential audiences could also be enhanced by leveraging relationships with non-Indigenous companies and arts practitioners. Such relationships could give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists more opportunities to present their work to diverse audiences. As one forum member suggests:

“The greatest opportunity is capitalising on the relationships with non-Indigenous companies and practitioners and tapping into their audience bases as well.”

The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art within a mainstream and community context is critical to developing audiences. Suggestions include more colour-blind casting and more opportunities for ‘main stage’ or ‘mainstream’ performances and exhibitions.

Yirra Yaakin Artistic Director Kyle Morrison explains that the key challenges and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre are about where and by whom Aboriginal theatre is being produced and presented. Morrison notes that there is growing support for Aboriginal people within mainstream theatre organisations:

“One of the beautiful things about it is there is more support for Aboriginal people in mainstream and major orgs, like Malthouse Theatre, like Belvoir St Theatre. The investment in Aboriginal directors, writers, producers has been really good.”

The challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre companies is, as Morrison explains, that they do not receive the investment to enable them to have the capacity or resources to produce and present their own stories to the same capacity as mainstream organisations:

“The investment for Aboriginal people to do that ourselves is still not where it needs to be for the authentic Aboriginal voices to be told. Belvoir and Malthouse are investing for people to do this and that’s really fantastic but the [Aboriginal theatre] companies aren’t able to access that kind investment to tell our own stories our way.”

Awareness

Members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts ecology suggest a range of strategic approaches to raise audience awareness of their art. Early education through schools, communities and the use of social media and other marketing mechanisms will help to make potential audiences aware of the diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts experiences that are available.

Key amongst these strategies is a focus on engaging children and youth with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in their early years, both within the education sector and through funded extracurricular activities. Members at the New South Wales forum discussed Arts NSW Fresh AIR program as an example of innovative approaches to building awareness and developing future audiences:

☞ *We talked about the Arts NSW Fresh AIR program with artists in year-long studios so that students get to see them in contemporary practice. It's a three year strategy... The school needs three top practising artists in their school for three years, which is exciting. If people can pick up and inspire along the way, it's going to have long term impact. ☞*

During its 25 year history, *Bangarra* has built strong awareness with audiences. Stephen Page explains how this image is based on the strength of the works themselves, deep community connections, and mainstream marketing mechanisms. Page explains that there is 'also a mainstream mechanism or infrastructure that has developed with new technologies, especially over the past decade' that is a key component of the success of *Bangarra* in building audience awareness. He comments that when *Bangarra* tours performances through main stage venues the company also works in partnership with the in house marketing teams of those venues. Page uses *Bangarra's* 10 year residency with the Sydney Opera House to illustrate how both groups contribute and collaborate in this type of marketing and audience development partnership:

☞ *[The Opera House contributes] their knowledge of how they play with all the different technologies and satellites and mediums of marketing...and they learn from what we do because of the stories that we work with...and they definitely utilise Bangarra's cultural glossary or protocols as part of their tools. ☞*

Image

Despite evidence of positive image associations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander art, inaccurate preconceptions are recognised as an inhibitor to audience development and engagement. For example, Sam Yates, *Country Arts South Australia* Manager of Arts and Cultural Development Manager explains that:

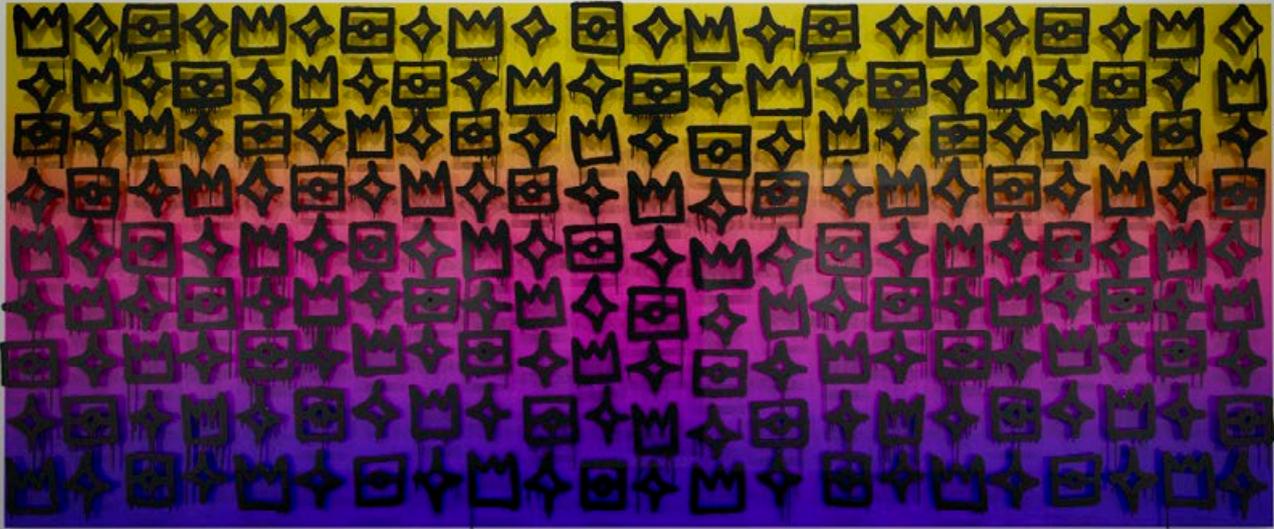
☞ *There's that expectation from people that know nothing about Aboriginal culture that they're going to get some kind of traditional experience rather than the contemporary experience. So there is a challenge there to shift people's mind set. ☞*

Country Arts SA addresses these challenges through programming that seeks to increase familiarity with and image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts:

☞ *To actually put more shows, as many shows as possible on the stage or in regional galleries. I think the more shows we put out there the more the people are going to understand this is legitimate art and the equal of anything that White Australia can produce. I'm pretty sure that we're making some inroads in that regard. ☞*

Bringing the fun and humour to education and engagement strategies are seen as simple, yet powerful approaches to changing the image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. As one member at the Queensland forum suggests:

☞ *Whether it's a place online or at a festival, all the questions you always wanted to ask, but were too scared...a spot where people can go and ask those stupid questions... it's meant to be a humorous thing as well and if it was ongoing it could become tedious and educational and we don't want to be tedious and educational. We want to be funny and spur of the moment and break down fear. ☞*



Reko Rennie, *Regalia*, 2015
aluminium, steel, synthetic polymers 240 x 560 cm
Courtesy the artist and Blackartprojects

Profiling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts workers represents another opportunity to craft a more approachable and relevant image for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. A member at the NSW forum suggests:

- ☞ *Simple ways that you can profile Aboriginal people. For example, somebody like Wesley Enoch and who he is and what he does and getting that out through social media in a nice simple marketing campaign that just introduces people. ☞*

Uncertainty

While audience uncertainty about how to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art exists, it is not an insurmountable challenge.

The success of the *ILBIJERRI Theatre Company* in addressing audiences' uncertainties can be found in their support of high quality theatre presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and the use of creative initiatives to develop deeper audience engagement.

Rachael Maza explains that one of the key ways to break down audience barriers for non-Indigenous audiences is through the work itself. Using the example of *Jack Charles v The Crown* she describes how access to his story and his generosity in sharing his story allows the work to reach audiences in a 'very affecting way'. Maza explains with such a work it is not possible to:

- ☞ *Sit in the audience and not ...get over your uncertainty or awkwardness. I believe it's through the work that we start to break down that uncertainty if that's the term, or I would call it awkwardness, and start to demystify. ☞*

Maintaining ongoing communication with audiences has contributed to *ILBIJERRI*'s relationship with its audiences. One example Maza provides is when *ILBIJERRI* undertook a crowdsourcing initiative to raise funds for a production. She notes that:

It is more than just about fundraising, it is about engaging with your audiences in a meaningful way...I realised that they had become actively engaged. The relationship [with audiences] becomes very real in that moment as opposed to 'I'm just a passive audience member'. It's like 'You're actually a partner now'. 🗨️

Our research also suggests that a focus on accessible experiences that are within the comfort zone of potential audiences could provide an entry point into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. When discussing the challenges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presenting organisations face, one member at the Western Australia forum reflects:

Our key challenges: people not feeling comfortable going to art venues in any art forms for various reasons and that can be Aboriginal people or non-Aboriginal people. So we were interested in the idea of putting effort and energy into festivals...different multiple entry points, families, adults, youth sector so you can have something that families can go to earlier in the day and a young couple goes to something in the evening. Making spaces where everyone feels safe culturally. 🗨️

A focus on assisting audiences to navigate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art experiences could substantially reduce the sense of anxiety that many audience members express. The use of emoticons and cultural sharers are simple, but powerful tools, as suggested by members at the Victorian forum:

Permission is a big thing. Permission to be able to laugh, permission to be able to engage and interact and feel, cry. It's not just about laughter, but also about sadness and working on their own emotions. So we talked about having money for cultural sharers within venues and exhibitions and other things so there are people that are casual, laid back, 'hey how do you like this show?... great to see you here, have you been with Aboriginal people before?'...so there are people there that they know they can talk to. 🗨️

Audiences often feel uncertain about engaging in new experiences and with people they do not know. Providing opportunities for artists to engage directly with communities over long periods of time could help to foster a sense of deeper connection and comfort between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities.

Footnotes

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