Introduction

In the years between 1973 -- when I began fieldwork in Australia with Pintupi speaking people -- and now, there has emerged an interest in, and a market for, a range of objects (and performances) made by Aboriginal people that is astonishing in its magnitude. Estimates are that Aboriginal "arts and crafts" -- a phrase that might be queried but which includes everything from fine art quality bark and acrylic on canvas painting to hand-crafted boomerangs, carved animals for tourists, tea towels, and tee-shirts -- generates anywhere from $18 million to $50 million dollars Australian in sales per year. The Aboriginal painters in the small communities of the Western Desert in which I have lived and done research are represented by the cooperative known as Papunya Tula Artists. The "company" regularly has had sales of between $700,000 to $1 million per annum. Literally hundreds of exhibitions of varying scale and focus have been shown (see Altman, McGuigan, and Yu 1989: 78, Perkins and Finke 2000) in Australia, the US, Canada, and Europe, many journalistic articles written, catalogs published, governmental studies made, policy articulated, and so on. It is a sociocultural phenomenon of considerable weight, sustained by a complex set of practices and institutions, and for that reason, it is a particularly interesting location for the study of intercultural formations.

One accounting of the development of Papunya Tula Artists has predicated its success on being included in the category of "contemporary Australian Art" (V. Johnson 1994). While this may be true, my interest is really in what this means and how it was accomplished, not only in terms of particular sales but at the level of more basic material practices. In the story I discern, a particular commodity formation -- Aboriginal fine art -- emerges in relation to a specifiable form of "modernization" in Australia: transformation of the managed Australian economy, a postcolonial shifting of cultural identifications, and the ascendancy of a new technocratic-managerial class at the heart of this "enterprise."

Discussions of the phenomenon of Aboriginal art's "success" -- and there have been many -- have tended either towards the "triumphal" or towards critiques of it as "appropriative" and "exploitative." Both sorts of discussion derive from distinct critical perspectives on "Western cultural practices," perspectives elaborated within the arts that imagine the possibility of an authentic cultural realm (see Lattas 1990, 1991, 1992). A third strand of discussion and practice has focused on the policies of developing an "Aboriginal arts and crafts industry."

Whatever the first two approaches might tell us, and they have been very productive, they ignore what -- from the point of view of the practitioners -- was accomplished and how. Thus, I want to turn my attention towards the very placement of acrylic paintings in the category of fine art, considering the material "practices" through which these objects have moved and exploring some unexpected linkages between the market for fine art and Australian national redefinition. The focus is on delineating the effect of distinct discursive formations and specific institutions that have as part of their function the "re-presentation of Aboriginal culture."

The shifting formulations of Aboriginal art (in the form of acrylic paintings) between the discursive formations of "art as enterprise" and those of "art as cultural and spiritual renewal" or "art as Aboriginal identity" (see Myers 1989, 1991, 1994) have a number of significant implications. First, far from being simple artifacts of an enduring Western or Australian culture, these discourses are mobilized not only within some general national culture, but also within the bureaucratic institutions of the Australian nation-state, by community arts cooperatives and art galleries, and by specific segments of the populace. Second, these arts and their aesthetic values are articulated within the frameworks of broader cultural policies -- policies towards the culture of some of a government's subjects -- and are therefore an aspect of "governmentality."


*The Wizards of Oz: Nation, State, and the Production of Aboriginal Fine Art*

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Policies for Aboriginal people aimed at "protection," "assimilation," and "self-determination" (as they have successively been in the 20th century) are also themselves culturally formulated or produced. In other words, such policies are increasingly brought under the direction and administration of bureaucracies and producers of specialist knowledge (anthropologists, sociologists, patrol officers, welfare workers) in distinctive institutions. What is particularly interesting and challenging about these institutions and practices as sites of cultural production is the centrality of the discourse of "economics" in assessing production and consumption, which I believe must itself be subjected to interpretation as a kind of sociocultural transformation.

Finally, orientations to these objects and their circulation seem simultaneously to be formulations of the personhood -- indeed, the nature of people as subjects -- of those among whom they circulate. While the narrative of the arts and crafts industry's development (its maturity, and so on) and the policies addressed to it imagine and implement impersonal processes of bureaucratization and commoditization, the story I discern is one in which these processes are countered (if not "resisted") not only by the strong presence of personal relations, immediacies, and identifications among the participants but also by the value of these traces for the peculiar commodity of Aboriginal "fine art." At the point where the personal and the impersonal processes run into each other most directly, for example, one finds the institutional space of the "art adviser," whose situation is central to my understanding. We should view the "aesthetic" appreciation or recognition gained by the paintings not as a universal attribute that could be "taken-for-granted" but as something produced in specific historical action and context (see Miller 1994).

These are shifting and contested formulations. These paintings are circulated, defined and transformed in meaning and value through a specific network of persons and a range of institutions. One could impose on this a neo-Marxian analysis emphasizing the articulation of different modes of production. One does want to track the way acrylic painting has been commodified materially (1) through the market processes of consumer capitalism; (2) through the practices of the Australian state in which "Aboriginal art" gains a new role; and (3) through the demands of Aboriginal activists for greater recognition. However, to leave the analysis there risks losing the rich, often ironic, sense ethnography provides of the way these new formations put people into different relations to each other. In each of these formations there are complex sets of social relations in which the everyday vagaries of social life are played out.

Thus, I hesitate to circumscribe this nexus as the "art market" or the "arts and crafts industry." To a significant extent, these terms are signs, cultural constructions that define a reality as much as they represent an already existent one. The "market" is not simply the mechanism through which value is assigned to Aboriginal paintings; it is also understood as involving a specific attitude towards kinds of cultural value, as enmeshed in debates about value. It emerged at least partly in relation to self-conscious planning and policy concerns on the part of the state that attempted to integrate a range of political, social, and economic goals.

In analyzing the growth and development of the category of Aboriginal fine art, I will characterize three periods or "moments" of the circulation of acrylic painting and the development of the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry: the beginnings (1972-1981) - with little demand and serious cash flow problems; the expansion boom years (1981-1989) -- with the dramatic growth of sales and exhibition; the privatization -- with the "settling out" or establishment of a distinct and calibrated market for Aboriginal "fine art."

Origin Stories, Corruption Endings: Art, Culture, Money

If, in numbers of sales, Western Desert acrylic paintings are but a small proportion of "Aboriginal arts and crafts," nonetheless they represent a significant component and one particularly identified with the rise to prominence and "success" of "Aboriginal art." These paintings (mainly for sale) are a transposition onto canvas in acrylic paint of stories and designs drawn from Central Australian Aboriginal religious and iconographic tradition, usually practiced as ground or body painting. It was as recently as 1971 that Aboriginal men began to produce these paintings at Papunya, NT, which was then an Aboriginal settlement maintained by the government for about 1000 persons (Pintupi, Warlpiri, Luritja, Arrernte, and Anmatyerre) (see Bardon 1979, 1991).
There is, of course, an origin story for this practice, and while it is contested by some (see V. Johnson 1990, 1994, it is adequate for our purposes: Such painting, as a culturally hybrid form, grew out of the collaboration between several Aboriginal men living at Papunya and a schoolteacher/artist Geoff Bardon, originally from Sydney, who saw in the designs they showed him something of great aesthetic value (Bardon 1979, 1991). This aesthetic evaluation was supported by events beyond the settlement. In August, 1971, Bardon records, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's painting "Gulgardi" shared first prize in the Caltex Art competition in Alice Springs, bringing a sense of what he identifies as cultural esteem to the painters, but coded in cash:

That weekend, over $1300 cash was raised from the sale of paintings. It was a sensation at Papunya. The Aboriginal men were jubilant. At least five large cash sales were made during the following months, involving some six hundred paintings by twenty-five men. [Bardon 1991: 34]

There is some political stake, obviously, in whether the painting originated in "authentic" Aboriginal aspirations and creativity or Bardon's leadership, but roughly speaking, the events conform to Bardon's account. Bardon's emphasis on Aboriginal artistic creativity and its value is evident in his letter of application for a grant from the Australian Council for the Arts to support continuation of his work at the time. Reporting that the painting movement had already earned sales of over $3000 from 170 works in just four months, he argued that "The story paintings [as he called them] and designs show great vitality and intelligence and as Gallery Art clearly is a valuable contribution to the reputation of aboriginal culture" (Papunya Tula File at Australia Council/Aboriginal Arts Board 76/840/022 II, 26 January 1972).

Named after the local Dreaming site, Papunya Tula Artists was incorporated as a company of limited liability in 1972, with eleven original Aboriginal shareholders; by 1974 the artists' cooperative had forty producers. Throughout this early period, the producers were almost entirely senior Aboriginal men, and certainly all were post-initiatory, those fully indoctrinated in their own ritual heritage. This number has risen at times towards 80 and has come to include some women, but the number of shareholders has remained steady at forty. The cooperative is a community-based enterprise, owned by the Aboriginal shareholders, with emphasis on group decisions and choice of arts coordinator. These sorts of enterprises are commonly known as "art centers."

While the wholesaling and retailing of art work is one of the principal objectives of such centers, at Papunya a particular set of practices emerged that emphasized their group identity and Aboriginal values -- quite in line with the emerging national policies of Aboriginal "self-determination." Purchases of paintings are managed by the arts coordinator, with payment usually at the point of sale. Moreover, arts coordinators have felt obliged to purchase all the paintings produced, although they have sometimes been able to reduce the payment for those found unsatisfactory in quality. Similarly, outside retailers seeking material for an exhibition have usually not been allowed to specify the works of individual artists, but were expected to take a consignment of paintings that included the work of many members of the cooperative. This was consistent with the local Aboriginal position that all the work was valuable ("dear"), since it all represented The Dreaming (see Michaels 1988, Myers 1989). A growing complaint by dealers in the 1990s concerns precisely this practice, which they see as preventing the true quality work from emerging and maintaining its value, supporting instead "inconsistency" in quality (Altmann, McGuigan and Yu 1989, Kronenberg 1995. The fine art world's logics or mechanisms of establishing hierarchies of aesthetic quality through "quality control" means keeping the "cheap" stuff, the "dots for dollars," out of the same circulation as the good. The State and the Problem of "Enterprise" Accounting

One cannot understand how acrylic paintings circulated beyond Papunya (and its outstations) beginning in the early 1970s without recognizing the role of the Australian state, its policies and institutions, and its changing relationship to Aboriginal people. The social and cultural value of acrylic paintings has generally been articulated within two main (but related) components of this complex -- namely, Australia's administration of the so-called "Aboriginal problem" and its development of a consensus, managed economy. The components are related, of course, in that both represent areas of social practice submitted to rational, directed planning. I hope to show that in the 1970s and 80s, these arenas of practice are coordinated by and identified with the ascendancy of a distinctive class fraction, the public managerial class or, as Lindsay Barrett described, "the bureaucratic bourgeoisie: the public servants, teachers, academics,
community workers and art and culture workers, the expanding administrative class which had grown over the previous decade [before Whitlam] as Australia had developed the character of a resource-based industrial democracy” (Barrett 1996).

"The Aboriginal Problem"

For much of Australia's history since colonization, from 1788 until the 1930s, the cultures of Aboriginal people were seen as valueless, primitive, inferior, lacking civilization, and having no rights to land. As they were being killed or pushed aside ("dying out") along the moving frontier and seemed unable to be "developed," evolutionist theories of the 19th century endorsed the policy of displacing or missionizing them for their own "protection." Later views of these cultures as either valueless or unsustainable with the requirements of modern life led to arguably more enlightened policies of education and assimilation "to take their place in a civilised community" (Tatz 1964), at best preserving the Aboriginal bodies but destroying or erasing traditional cultures -- which were seen as impediments to progress: too collective, too kinship-oriented, too attached to place. These policies were first stated in 1939 and by 1954 had come to be accepted by the Government, as a commitment to planned, directed change. Thus, in an important report for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs on Papunya's history and future, Davis, Hunter, and Penny (1977: 11) summarize these policies:

It was expected in addition that the settlement would train useful black citizens, neat, clean and well-advised, who would perhaps gradually migrate to 'better places'. It was thought at the time that the first main fruits would come after ten years or so, when there would be an increasing number of Aboriginals who had regular jobs in the wider economy....

It was only in 1967 that Aborigines gained the rights of citizens in Australia and the official policy of the preceding era began to move away from an emphasis on the modernizing fantasy of "assimilation" and the eradication of Aboriginal culture and its practices towards one of "self-determination," the program endorsed by the Australian Labor Party on its election in 1972. Perhaps a key result of 1967 is that the referendum made Aborigines a Federal responsibility, offering them as a subject of national concern and political technologies. The Gove land rights dispute (in 1969) further figured an Aboriginal culture and identity acceptable for national recognition: the "traditionally oriented" Aboriginal with religious and spiritual links to the land -- and far from White settlement. This was the Aboriginal identity circulated in acrylic paintings, not one that overtly confronted White Australians with its co-presence and political conflict, but one that apparently could be redeemed without loss or threat.

An important part of the administrative response to continuing Aboriginal presence, poverty, and high mortality was to find them a place in the economy. The assimilationist programs of training had largely failed to get Aborigines to take up the essentially "worker" role imagined for them. Indeed, reports frequently mention the difficulty of getting Aboriginal people to adopt a Western concept of "work." With the perception of this failure came a sense among administrators and critics that cultural difference needed to be recognized in a different way, that ripping people away from their cultural roots was not good, leading rather to demoralization and despair. These realizations, at least in part, underlay an interest in providing culturally meaningful work, which could itself be one discursive link (not the only one) to a concern with preserving or maintaining Aboriginal culture(s). Perhaps, it was thought, Aboriginal people would be motivated to participate in their changed situation if they were able to do things that interested them, activities linked to their own cultural values and ways of conduct.

This is clearly a theme resonating at Papunya. With a reputation as perhaps the most "troubled" and seemingly demoralized of the many government enclaves established during the period, Papunya was built in the late 1950s to house a growing population of varied, displaced language groups. The construction of Papunya as part of the Commonwealth government's "assimilation" policy sought to prepare Aborigines for entry into the dominant society by "educating" and "training" them (see Rowley 1972), but it was known by 1972 as a place with a high morbidity rate, riots, violence, and visible disrepair.

Geoff Bardon and Peter Fannin, who had both come to Papunya as schoolteachers were the first two people to act in the role that became known as that of “art adviser,” and their time with Papunya Tula overlapped the end of this assimilationist administrative regime. They have framed the significance of the art in that context. Bardon's fullest, later account (1991), with some bitterness, characterizes the government
policies and people as committed to breaking down Aboriginal people, demoralizing them, -- being unable, he writes, to recognize these men as human, much less as talented. The counterpoint offered by Papunya Tula's success and the promise he believed it held for their self-esteem and independence was significant, especially because of Papunya's reputation. Against the dreary picture of "Commonwealth government policies, which aimed at terminating Aboriginal traditional life, culture and languages" (Bardon 1991: 36), the recognition of their art's value stands as a stinging indictment. Thus, he writes that "the painting movement had brought forth an enormous passion in the desert people to develop their own style and their own sense of self. In a way they were being freed, and redeeming themselves and their culture, by their creativeness" (Bardon 1991: 41-42). The value of the paintings is articulated through this humanistic discourse. In this art, Papunya people could express themselves, demonstrate their creativity, and develop their "own sense of self." That is, they could find confidence, rather than demoralization and despair, in activity linked to their own values.

In Bardon's account, economic and cultural valuation of the paintings compete in relative, if not absolute, significance. These aspects of the painting represent distinguishable visions of Aboriginal personhood and being necessarily articulated within the context of "Aboriginal policies" and an educated Sydney-sider's understanding of the conditions of modern Australian cultural life. If art could glorify and restore, money was the corruption that undermined the communion Bardon had with the men and turned the men into a "travesty of what they had once been." He has a recognizable narrative of the destructive effects of capitalism on cultures not built on a monetized economy:

I seemed to find it much harder to communicate with the painters after that first demand for money and, though I was still liked, I knew somehow everything had changed. While the men were painting, I had witnessed the sense of the glory that the Aboriginal people bring forth in their ceremonies and dances and songs. Now there seemed to me only the stale, sick stench of the camps, the awful physical nearness of the used-up sand, the filth, and the destitution of the alcoholic faces about the tracks and streets. These ragged, dirty settlement bands of Aboriginal people seemed more and more like some terrible travesty of what they had once been and there seemed now nothing I could do to help...

It was in the painting shed itself that the final blow came. The painters were waiting for me, surrounded by paintings half-completed or just begun. There must have been as many as forty men there that day in June 1972 and when I came in they threw their paints and brushes on the sand. They would not paint, they said. Nor could I prevail upon them to paint without money. The monstrousness of it was not lost on me as they began to chant in their own languages amongst themselves, then at me: “Money, money, money.” [Bardon 1991: 44]

Caught personally in this political and cultural web, Bardon discerns a familiar shape in money's destruction of artistic and cultural value. "Yet at that very moment," he writes, the Aboriginal painters had conceptualized a new art form. On the canvases and boards at Papunya something was being made that had never been seen before. But as the door was just about to open onto this new world, there was talk about money and nothing else, and so it seemed to me that the journey was ending just as quickly as it had begun...

... this money, it had become painfully apparent to me, and the obsession for it, were as much a sickness in the interior deserts as anywhere else... [Bardon 1991: 45]

Peter Fannin -- a Papunya schoolteacher who earned a BA and B.Sc. from Sydney University in the mid-1950s -- eventually took over from Bardon. Two years after Bardon began, Fannin found Papunya to be more open to the aims of the artists' cooperative as the settlement had itself come largely under Aboriginal control. And while he still experienced the somewhat changed political realities as harsh, Fannin expressed a kind of primitivist nostalgia for what he saw as "non-materialist culture" that could offer alternative vision for what he, like numerous other Australians, perceived to be Australia's crass materialism. Fannin saw the art as providing emotional insight into a way of life that is totally different, in a way "no verbal description can hope to match."

I hasten to add that it was not only Bardon and other arts advisers who recognized value in these objects (see Myers 1989). The Aboriginal producers saw the paintings to be "dear," because of their origin in what is translated as "The Dreaming," a value which by 1973 (at any rate) they expected (with constant
disappointment) to be reciprocated in appropriate sums of money. During this period, the Pintupi continued to think of their commercial paintings as related to and derived from their ceremonial designs and rock paintings, associated with important myths, and therefore possessing value other than that merely established in the marketplace. For both Aboriginal producers, and their White intermediaries, the promise of combining culturally meaningful work with money -- cultural maintenance and employment -- was an intriguing policy possibility for a situation some saw as desperate. Success in supporting the enterprise probably owed much to the way in which proponents tacked back and forth between the two poles of value.

It was in this context that forms of "Aboriginal crafts," therefore, could hope to receive governmental support and interest, and in its earliest stage, the "sudden flowering of art in the [Papunya] area" received critical support from H.C. (Nugget) Coombs at the Aboriginal Arts Committee of the Australia Council for the Arts and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (Papunya Tula File at Australia Council/Aboriginal Arts Board 76/840/022 II).

To keep the economic and cultural venture going involved terrible pressure for occupants of the adviser position, and Bardon left, having undergone what many presumed to have been a nervous breakdown. But, convinced of the value of their painting, the painters kept on. Mrs. Pat Hogan, who ran the Stuart Art Centre (in the Stuart Caravan Park on Larrapinta Drive) in Alice Springs, and who had been handling Bardon's consignments of paintings, took on oversight of this enterprise. In this early period, she reports receiving and consigning hundreds of paintings between July 1971 and August 1972 (Hogan 1985). There were relatively few buyers, although Hogan and others regarded sales of $3000 as very promising and were ebullient about the interest shown in the work -- which they characterized as "fine art-ethnology," something more than tourist souvenirs.

This "compromise" formation -- "fine art" and "ethnology" -- is well suited to its object. In the intercultural world of Aboriginal acrylic painting, recognition and the establishment of artistic reputation followed a career path well established for Western artists, such as judged competition. Kaapa Tjamptjimpa's painting was entered in a competition for works that might form the nucleus of the future Alice Springs art gallery and was chosen to share the Caltex Art Award (Kimber 1985: 43). Another arena of validation involved recognition of legitimization by national arts funding groups, a recognition whose basis involved criteria different from those of a commercial art market. Much of Papunya Tula's early support came from the Aboriginal Arts Board, formed in 1973, especially through the special interest of its Director, Robert Edwards in Sydney and the presence of local representatives on this national body.

Tracing Edwards's career briefly delineates the development of a different social location for an aesthetic framing of Aboriginal art. Initially an amateur prehistorian, Edwards's interest in recording Aboriginal sites and protecting cultural heritage, as Curator of Ethnology at the South Australian Museum, led him to be very excited at recognizing, in the 1960s, that many of the craft traditions that had produced material culture still survived (Edwards, interview, 5 May 1994, Sydney). His concern to allow such traditions to thrive, to be preserved, grew into an interest in what he called "the living arts." From this orientation, it made sense that Aboriginal art ought not be included -- under the rubric of an institution like the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies -- with other Aboriginal needs and activities (such as health) where it might compete with research. Putting it in the Australia Council for the Arts, he said, "included Aboriginals with other artists.

When I interviewed him in 1994, Edwards cited an early Aboriginal Art Board member's insistence on the role of culture in their survival as a people: "Our culture, our Law is our anchor," he remembers Albert Barunga to have told him. "So the [Aboriginal] Arts Board was to help sustain that culture." He saw the Arts Board processes themselves as part of Aboriginals' having self-esteem and confidence. His role, as he articulates it, was to help them do things, to advise them and work out ways for it to happen. He was particularly interested in the Papunya paintings, and through the Arts Board worked creatively to satisfy the producers' need for financial support to continue their painting.

This framework represents acrylic painting as having significant value, but it is somewhat different from Fannin's "spiritualisation" or Bardon's emphasis on artistic creativity. Edwards's support through the Arts Board tended to emphasize its basis in local knowledge and practice -- preservation as a living art. This formulation, partly a response to painters' desires to renew their inspiration by visiting their sacred sites and
partly an interest among some art advisers to participate in that knowledge, is exemplified in the role of Dick Kimber as art adviser in the mid 1970s. After years of overseeing Papunya Tula from the sidelines as a confidante to Bob Edwards (with whom he shared interests in material culture) and to the early advisers, Kimber was seconded from the Department of Education to an art adviser position with Papunya Tula, as part of a research and education project. Kimber defined his role as combining development of the sales of Papunya painting, through education and improved documentation, with preservation of what he sometimes called "the living culture" in the form of frequent trips with men to visit the sacred sites represented in their paintings. He worked to preserve, as Bob Edwards wrote to him in a letter of acknowledgment, "an ongoing interest in an Aboriginal way of life." Like many others hopeful of a modern cure for modernity's own problems, Edwards and Kimber imagined a governmental intervention of mimesis to reproduce -- in artificial form -- Aboriginal culture.

Despite this sympathetic policy and recognition of the art, money was always short. Incommensurate systems of value and circulation intersected in defining these objects, contradictions and conflicts that came to rest most heavily on the arts advisors. A crisis atmosphere was under way that long endured.

Government and Art Enterprise

While the arts and crafts industry was never simply an economic enterprise, maintaining the "cash flow" to support its objectives was, nevertheless, a critical problem. Throughout the 1970s, two institutions provided the bulk of supporting Papunya painting and Aboriginal arts and crafts generally -- Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd (AACP) and the Aboriginal Arts Board. These "governmental" enterprises each originated to some extent in distinctive discursive formulations of the Aboriginal situation, increasingly coming to represent the particular objectives of supporting the production of economic and cultural value. Moreover, in policy terms, the delineation of this enterprise as economic has tended to increase in importance over time. (This industry should be seen as a microcosm of the very broad attempt in Australia - - as described by my Australian colleague Toby Miller and most crucially evidenced in the Hawke government of the 1980s -- "to broker business and welfare," making all businesses into something like welfare subjects [Toby Miller, personal communication, 16 December 1995].)

Overall, support for Aboriginal arts and crafts has been realized in a fashion identifiable with a "welfare" approach, with distinctive effects in the way economic value and cultural value are linked in the case of remote Aboriginal people. Thus, support for Aboriginal arts and crafts was not directly to producers, in terms of fellowships or income support schemes, but was realized in supporting a marketplace. An approach different from that taken to fine arts more generally, the marketplace support was seen as a culturally appropriate strategy for Aboriginal producers. In this regard, cultural policy was itself produced in part through the agency of Aboriginal intervention.

Aboriginal Arts and Crafts

AACP's beginnings can be traced to a combination of factors, including a tourism plan for central Australia that recommended Aboriginal art and craft as an important basis for economic development in Aboriginal communities and an idea put forward by the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs (Peterson 1983). In 1971, this proposal materialized when "the then Office of Aboriginal Affairs established Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd ... to both wholesale and retail Aboriginal artefacts" (Altman 1988: 52).

The first appointment to Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty. Ltd (AACP, "the Company") was the market research officer, Machmud Mackay, chosen "to undertake a survey of production, distribution and marketing of Aboriginal art and craft to place the industry on a sound footing" (Peterson 1983: 60) with a goal of increasing economic returns to artists and craftsmen and helping to stabilize the flow of income. In his second report, Mackay argued for a tightly controlled market for Aboriginal arts and crafts, rather than a free enterprise arrangement, "because it was the key to the control of the supply, making it possible to influence the quality of the art and craft and the selection of outlets" (Peterson ibid.). Aboriginal communities would sell to the Company, which would wholesale to the retail outlets in all the major cities. The "Company's" special mission was to market Aboriginal art and craft work so as to:

- encourage high standards of artistry and craftsmanship with a view to creating greater appreciation of and respect for traditional skills and the preservation of the culture;
- foster the production of arts and crafts as a means of creating employment opportunities;
- ensure maximum possible economic returns to the artists and craftsmen. [Peterson 1983: 61]

This mission was soon subjected to rationalization. After a rapid growth in its subsidies from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs ($220,086 in 1973-74), management consultants appointed to study the Company in 1975 suggested that the Company's objectives be redefined with an emphasis on becoming economically self-sufficient (Peterson ibid. 62). An emphasis on such economic self-sufficiency was articulated not only as a consequence of some extravagant failures in Aboriginal expenditure, but more significantly as deriving from the economic downturns facing the entire Australian economy soon after Whitlam's election. The Aboriginal Arts Board was to take on the broader, complementary responsibility for the encouragement and revival of pride in and knowledge of Aboriginal culture by “assisting the best professional work to emerge in the arts among the Aboriginal people.”

Despite the attempt to split the economic from the cultural, a central problem in these developments was to manage marketing and promotion in some way consonant with "the integrity of Aboriginal cultural traditions" to avoid what Pascoe's marketing study calls "the ill effects of commercialisation" (Pascoe 1981). From an economic point of view, however, marketing was not particularly successful. During the early period, and following shortly on the 1975 report, while the Company's wholesaling function expanded, it did so not as a result of increased sales but rather in order to boost production (Peterson 1983: 62). The development was not market-driven; seventy per cent of production was being bought from some communities by the Arts Board itself!

While the enterprises of Aboriginal arts and crafts grew in volume, they came to be evaluated in terms of discourses deemed appropriate for "economic enterprises," and there was concern expressed about the continuing need for government support. On the other hand, given the mixed and sometimes contradictory goals imagined for Aboriginal arts and crafts, participants to the policy debates recognized that assessing the value of government subsidies was not a straightforward matter. Some suggested that the ratio of one dollar of state subsidy generating one dollar for producers was a rather cost-effective intervention. There were also other grounds, as the authors of the marketing study maintained, on which artifact production might be valued as important to Aboriginal communities. Such production might be valuable “in maintaining cultural life, in capitalizing on unique skills, in allowing wide community participation, in giving individuals an opportunity to earn money, and in providing communities with their only export” (Pascoe 1981).

It is fair to assume that these values resonated both with some of the values of local Aboriginal communities and also with larger policy values in the Australian political environment at the time. An emphasis on "cultural" life and expression, as enunciated in the list presented, corresponds with themes ushered in with the arrival of Whitlam's government (Alomes 1988, Barrett 1996). In this policy environment, the institutional foundation of art and craft circulation, Aboriginal art came to be attached to these meanings. While such a convergence, or compromise formation, appears to have been rhetorically successful in 1981, the situation began to change significantly in the late 1980s, when the emphasis on the "industry" and its "rationalization" seems with increasing force to have constructed the issue along the lines of economic enterprise -- in terms of profitability and moving away from subsidy.

Aboriginal Arts Board
Let me turn back again for a moment. In 1973, following on the first election of the Labor Party in several decades, Aboriginal policy was transformed officially towards the encouragement of "self-determination" and then to "self-management." Both emphasized greater respect for Aboriginal culture. At the same time, a broader program of cultural policy endorsed increased support for the arts generally; indeed, Whitlam, the Prime Minister, was also Minister for the Arts. In the expanded and renamed Australian Council for the Arts, a separate Aboriginal Arts Board was established that provided grant support for a range of arts activities (visual arts, literature, theatre, and film). This transformation of the government's role in relation to "culture" was perhaps the salient mark of a new direction in Australian national life.

This new organization, funded significantly by the Federal government, was unusual in the extent of Aboriginal control -- both substantive and procedural -- over its decision making. According to the minutes of first meeting of the Aboriginal Arts Board, May 1973, members were told that "the Prime Minister
(Whitlam) was seeking their advice on arts." This was a new age for Aboriginal self-determination, and the minutes register that direction: "On procedural control, it was noted particularly in the meeting that, 'Board members agreed that Aboriginals should be in charge of promoting the Arts in Aboriginal society and protecting existing cultural values and practices.'"

In assessing his own role, Robert Edwards regarded this particular development in procedure as central, and he took pride in his support for such a transformation. But the transformation was not simply a policy paternalistically handed down. Aboriginal activists, operating under the banner of "Black Power," had already shown their political muscle in a variety of outspoken ways. At the founding Seminar on the Aboriginal Arts, in Canberra, just prior to the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board itself, Edwards's diplomacy and organization of an agenda held potentially explosive events to a productive course, resulting in a number of serious resolutions that guided Aboriginal Arts Board policies. This was always a compromise, however, with a rather boisterous and resolute Aboriginal presence.

The degree of Aboriginal involvement appears to have been an innovative step in more than one way. Edwards was very clear about the way in which he organized an effective Aboriginal autonomy, namely by allowing Aboriginal members to make the decisions and having an able (largely white Australian) staff who could figure out how to implement the plans in a way acceptable to government accounting. "That's the sort of report we had going to the Board," he told me, "so that no one could question the information they got, but we didn't deal with it in this form. So on one side we had paper for the system going, while on the other side we'd sit around in a circle and talk about it" (Edwards, interview, 18 May 1994, Sydney).

Aboriginal historical realities were engaged in another important feature in this new organization, as well, in the combination of Aboriginal members on the Board from both "urban" and "tribal" communities. The combination brought together Aboriginal people with potentially different and competing agendas, sometimes suspicious of each other despite the rhetoric of Aboriginal unity. Edwards said the effect was that not only that they would meet together face-to-face to make decisions in the allocation of funding, but they would do so in visits to different locales in the country in order to gain knowledge of local conditions.

The structure of this Arts Board was perhaps over-determined. At a time when Aboriginal activism was putting pressure on the Australian state to have more resources and a greater role in the national narrative with such visible protests as the recent Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972), the state responded by giving money for cultural activity that Aboriginal people could allocate themselves. The approach was also consonant with the ethos of Whitlam's new government and the new breed of public servants, and participants experienced the times as heady ones. One participant in this new bureaucracy likened the ethos of Whitlam's government to America's New Dealers, ... in saying that one needed entrepreneurial managers and capable people running government stuff. So they brought in excellent people, and increased the salaries to make it attractive. This was not liked by business people, but it resulted in forward-thinking and creative people. [Anthony Wallis, interview, New York, 1 January 1996]

As Edwards said, they were "not concerned to make money, but to do a job."

Of course, it took money to do this job, and Edwards was adept at finding accountable ways to allow money to be spent in ways that sustained Aboriginal objectives. What kept the Papunya Tula company afloat for the 1970s was the support of the Aboriginal Arts Board, whose funds seem to have paid for the largest number of paintings. The Aboriginal Arts Board purchased paintings for exhibitions such as the one organized by the Peter Stuyvesant Trust for Canada in 1974 and others in Nigeria and Indonesia. From his position in Alice Springs, as supporter and sometime adviser of Papunya Tula, Dick Kimber regards Edwards's interventions as critical: "Bob Edwards is the key reason why it kept going. I just can't see it going anywhere. There were no other people with an interest..." (Dick Kimber, interview, Alice Springs, July 1991).

As pointed out above, Edwards had a lifelong interest in Aboriginal material culture and heritage sites. And if this work partly was inscribed within the category of art, it was equally seen as an important record of skills -- and mentalités -- that were in danger of passing. As much as they might have been contributions to an emerging "industry," purchases through the Arts Board were clearly seen as supporting
an activity valued by the Aboriginal men and seen as preserving, maintaining, and recording traditional Western Desert skills.

With skills gained in his early career in business, managing the Apple and Pear Marketing Board in South Australia, Edwards knew how to make the bureaucracies and rules work, and how to build a market. At the Arts Board, he did so to make possible the Aboriginal cultural activities that had been his real passion. "Most paintings are of superb quality," he advised in an internal memo at the Arts Board, "and should be stock-piled for museums and exhibitions in order to enable the artists to continue painting."

Donating collections of paintings to the Korean government, to the Canadian government, and so on was an explicit policy, supported by the Aboriginal members of the Art Board. Work sent overseas for exhibition should be given -- left there -- rather than returning to clog the Australian market. Thus, through a subtle comprehension of the market, demand, of a sort, was maintained and activity sustained in communities. The flow -- or stream -- of products was maintained.

The two government enterprises differed, therefore, in the way in which the values of enterprise and culture were integrated. At its inception, to summarize, Aboriginal Arts and Crafts had little to do with what the government funded formally as "the arts," emanating more within the arena of Aboriginal Affairs and being delineated more as an economic enterprise, as a means of economic development for Aborigines.

Representation: Cash Flows

Such development did not look an easy task. On the Board of Directors of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts, if the discussions once included questions of whether it should emphasize fine art or crafts -- increasingly they were about how to survive the next cut of funding as the Australian economy began to sink in the late 1970s. The Company was meant to be self-sufficient, rather than simply to support Aboriginal employment. As soon as it began to generate money, the bureaucrats thought they could move it over to what they regarded as "enterprise," reducing subsidies.

The emergence (or development) of Aboriginal "fine art" should be understood in relation to the actual practices through which objects were moving. The central dynamic of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts was "cash flow," which also defined the relationship between producers and a "market" that Aboriginal producers understood to be the government body rather than any abstract economy. The cash flow problem is this: The Company did not buy on consignment, as most dealers would, but paid, instead, up front for whatever objects they acquired. Aboriginal producers received their payment as soon as they transferred their objects. Increasingly as the Company failed to sell as much as was sent to them, a huge stock accumulated, and all of their cash/capital was gone, tied up in stock and out to the producers. No new paintings could be purchased -- which the producers took as a sign of disrespect, failure on the part of the adviser, and so on, and which led to acrimony and recrimination.

The difficulties with cash flow lead to a change of operation. After finding that they could not continue to acquire more stock -- to continue paying "craft workers," as one document said -- they shifted to a system of waiting until they had an item for 60 days before sending the money. This form of operation, it was hoped, might allow the company to sell some of the work before having to transfer the money to the producers.

The "sixty-day system," however, merely transferred the problem to the advisers, who collected the work and sent it to the Company. Now it was the advisors who had the "workers" angrily asking where their money was. The producers began to sell the best of their work to outsiders, not to the Company, in order to get cash to pay the artists. Consequently, the Company was getting the lower quality work, which meant it piled up in their storerooms and ate up their capital, unsuitable for sale. Such a conflict between two sets of values, between the market for art and community-based enterprise, was experienced as a flaw in Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Propriety Limited.

There was also a problem experienced by those who act in the role of "arts adviser" or "arts coordinator" to local communities of producers, a role that is the central ("pivotal") role in the brokerage or mediation of Aboriginal cultural products to the marketplace and the wider public. For most of the 1970s, Papunya paintings were sold either to Aboriginal Arts and Crafts (the government marketing group) -- at a small mark-up (in the 1970's, it was sometimes a further 20%) -- or to a local retailer, usually a tourist type
shop in Alice, or perhaps to someone who had specially commissioned work. Not infrequently, especially in
the early days, producers would circumvent this route and sell directly to local retailers in town, or to white
worker/residents -- and sometimes to the (unscrupulous) store manager -- in their settlement communities. I
won't consider here the effect of these variations on price structure, a significant concern in "markets."
However, in the 1970s, despite an early critical success and interest, there was a terrible problem in
maintaining a viable stream of circulation -- of a great desire to paint and relatively little demand. This could
lead, at times, to a great oversupply of paintings at Aboriginal Arts and Crafts with no cash flowing back to
the Company to purchase more paintings. The mismatch revealed a gap in expectation between market and
indigenous value.

In the early years, the art adviser operated primarily between the Aboriginal communities around
Papunya and the Arts Board, whose grants were the life-blood of the cooperative. Fannin's numerous letters
to the Aboriginal Arts Board, which paid for his position out of grants and acquired most of the production
from Papunya and Yayayi, read eloquently of the cash flow/work load problem. The principal buyer of the
paintings was the Arts Board and Aboriginal Arts and Crafts, and the art adviser's preoccupation -- as
gleaned from their prolific, written accounts of the situation as well as my own field experience -- has the
feel of "robbing Peter to pay Paul." They involve the problem of cash flow, the difficulty of providing
documentation, and an impressive litany of vehicle failure, repair, and destruction. For example, on
receiving news of a grant for $8500, Peter Fannin requested that he be allowed to use it to clear the existing
overdraft for his salary from the company. The lateness of grants had led "to serious liquidity problems. In
fact, business was suspended for several weeks through sheer inability to write a check that wouldn't
bounce..." (Fannin to Anthony Wallace [sic], 20 May 1974).

The position, as Bardon found early on, is an impossible, even tragic, one. Fannin ended up leaving
the position for medical reasons -- a second bout of nervous exhaustion -- after rolling his vehicle over on
one of these trips between Alice Springs and Papunya. The stress came preeminently because of the
pressure from the Aboriginal painters for payment and purchase of substantial numbers of paintings even
when -- as in Papunya's first several years -- the cooperative's "stock" (backlog) was already reaching levels
of 500 paintings or more. Intercultural communication across these domains of value and expectation,
where there has been a history of cheating and suspicion, was vexed.

The art coordinator's job was not (usually) just an economic or business mediation, which makes it
both desirable and destructive. From early on, the relationship of the art enterprise to cultural knowledge
was a significant consideration of government support -- especially for the Aboriginal Arts Board, but the
link was also representative of Aboriginal views in which the paintings were considered an intrinsic part of
the painters' relationship to country and ceremony. To accept this link was to acknowledge that painting as
an economically viable activity and looking after their country comprised a single cultural domain of activity
and to reject -- somehow -- the claims of a modernizing impulse that would separate "painting" from
"religion."

Within the daily life of the art adviser, balancing two cultural worlds, these conflicting values were
dramatically played out: between completing the annotations and the account books and taking the painters
out to their country. The quality of knowledge desired of an art adviser gave "travel with the painters"
value, too. Since the provision of time and money from the government budget for vehicles and travel was
sizable, Aboriginal priorities were very real and challenging to government values and the rationalizing
impulses of cost accounting.

The "Industry": Exhibition Success and Economic Rationalization

Aboriginal art became a new social fact through a combination of state support for a cultural
formation that was "good" for the state and economic processes that further transformed the new
commodity. The structure through which work moved in the 1970s involved the local cooperatives and the
art coordinators, the Aboriginal Arts Board, and Aboriginal Arts and Crafts. Money and problems of sale
were the major difficulties, and it seems as if the enterprise was kept afloat by the exhibitions organized
around the world involving the Aboriginal Arts Board (sixteen of them). In the 1980s, however, the move
was towards arts and crafts as an "industry" more than an activity of cultural preservation; there is an
emergence of public, journalistic attention, a growth in institutional recognition and acquisition, and an
expansion of retail galleries, collecting, and curatorship. Overall, the Australian government under the Labor Party leadership of Hawke and then Keating -- corporatist in orientation (Alomes 1988) and given to managed consensus for the economy -- was trying to remove government from enterprises. The 1980s were characterized by the growth of marketing surveys and government policies that emphasized "Aboriginal employment" and "the arts and crafts industry" as keys to Aboriginal development, and accountability of the tax dollar. This is a notable contrast with the cultural critique model of appreciation instantiated in art adviser Peter Fannin's comments about "non-materialist" culture or in the complex policies of cultural preservation initiated by Bob Edwards and undertaken by the Aboriginal Arts Board -- whose support had declined appreciably by 1986. These mark the complex shift in Australian national political discourse that many commentators have recognized, towards economic rationalization and "enterprise accounting."

I now want to turn to the next period in the acrylic painting phenomenon (1981-1989), the one I identify as central to new formations of national consciousness. This is a period in which acrylic painting begins to receive legitimation and purchases by Australian cultural institutions. The balancing act of economic and cultural value that I have been describing was an unstable one. The increasing scrutiny given to budgets for Aboriginal Affairs, under the rubric of "enterprise," intensified this contradiction between ways of evaluating the worth of Aboriginal acrylics.

As emphasis turned towards Aboriginal employment and what came to be called the "arts and crafts industry," especially after 1985 (see Altman et al 1989), discussions and evaluations of Aboriginal arts and crafts followed economic discourses. While the main substantive questions were the possibility of AACP "requiring more than its current grant and also the increasing cost of maintaining craft advisers in the field" (Pascoe 1981), these changing constructions -- a term which I use to index their historicity -- define or shape understandings of Aboriginal cultural production in interesting ways that should be noted. With the circulation of objects framed increasingly in these terms, among the main concerns identified for the "industry" have been the "stability of the stream of production" and the "effect of marketing on quality." In studies made to investigate these effects, art "products" have been differentiated into categories of commodities which reflect the mediation of the market formed through Western consumer categories and Aboriginal intentions. Clearly, these categorical differentiations also entered into the practices of marketing.

The Pascoe study of 1981 really ushered in the new era. It was particularly concerned with the relationship between commercial activity and cultural integrity, but took a strongly economic orientation and produced a special kind of knowledge of the circulation of Aboriginal products as an "industry." The study identified and evaluated different effects for different kinds of products. For example it found that a few kinds of products sold by AACP comprised a disproportionate share of the total production and sales. "Paperbark landscapes," "small bark paintings," "small carvings," "boomerangs" were 80% of the items sold and 40% of the sales value. Thus, such items -- of low economic and cultural value (for the Aborigines) -- were the dominant product groups. Other components of the study suggested that Aboriginal economic need was the strongest spur to production: more production came from those communities with fewer alternative sources of income support. Such an orientation to the market, the study claimed, might suggest that selling artifacts would lead to a tendency to produce small souvenirs and to deterioration in quality. However, other studies suggested that "quality items" gained a better hourly rate (Morphy 1977, 1980, 1983, 1992), implying, moreover, that the effect of this pattern of remuneration was actually positive on valuing skills and did not destroy the "artistic system." Thus, commercial activity was not deleterious to maintaining the standards of Aboriginal cultural integrity.

If, in this instance, economics was allowed to support the cultural arguments in this study, the study itself seems to have paved the way for a different approach in cultural policy. In the broadest perspective, the shifting formulation of "Aboriginal arts" between such bureaucratically relevant categories as "enterprise," "as cultural renewal," or relatedly as "social welfare activity" (generating community esteem), should be seen as the intersection of different technologies of intervention into Aboriginal life. Yet there is no doubt that the discourse of economic rationalization was ascendant, subsuming other forms of value within its own.

Indeed, as forms of Aboriginal material culture become commodities, their properties enter into a process of symbolic transformation that needs to be understood as much as it is criticized. The circulation of
Aboriginal material culture is a varied phenomenon, with distinct streams -- the "product classifications" -- through which objects move. Recognizing that different classes of objects have different sorts of value and properties for consumption, marketing surveys are forms of cultural practice that both represent and also transform the social phenomenon of intercultural circulation. Such surveys rely on existing implicit notions of value in delineating their versions of what Arjun Appadurai (1986) called "the social life of things," as these classes of objects have different sorts of value. The original four classes recognized by Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty. Ltd, for example, were arranged in terms of a theory of acculturation: "traditional," "transitional," "adapted," and "market." Borrowing from Graburn (1976), the 1981 marketing survey adjusted these frameworks to clarify how the streams of objects might be differentiated according to the intersection of two other axes of value -- Aboriginal cultural value and Western aesthetic value. "As a basis for marketing analysis," the author wrote, "we have found it useful to designate artefacts as having high or low cultural value for Aboriginals and separately as having high or low western aesthetic appeal. Given that artefacts are produced in one culture for sale in another, we feel that it is helpful to make this cross over explicit" (Pascoe 1981: 20).

The result is a four-cell matrix that defines types of artifacts (Table 1):
Table 1: Classes of Aboriginal Artifact (after Pascoe 1981, p. 20)
These cells also delineate for each group of objects the "likely customers and therefore the type of marketing needed to reach them."

Thus, the category of "bicultural" artefacts -- which would include the acrylics -- was seen as "of high cultural value for Aboriginais and aesthetically appealing to non-Aboriginais." Along with acrylics, quality but non-sacred bark paintings and carvings would fit in this class as objects "suitable for art collectors as well as museums and collectors of ethnographica." According to the study, bicultural artifacts needed presentation in "specialist commercial gallery surroundings" (ibid: 21).

The so-called "bicultural artifact" was, indeed, a category of object in which expansion took place, with Papunya paintings entering into the category of "contemporary Australian art" through exhibition and marketing that focused on "quality." In a period I remember quite well myself, throughout the late 1970s, demand was slight, and rather than encourage painters, the art advisers felt they had to slow down production. Every now and then there was an order for a big canvas, and the expectations of economic return were high: "They all wanted a motorcar" (Kimber, interview, Alice Springs, July 1991).

The lack of demand continued through the time of John Kean as art adviser and into Andrew Crocker's time (from late 1979 to the end of 1981), although some independent collectors began to be interested. In 1980 the Australian National Gallery in Canberra purchased its first acrylic painting, Old Mick Tjakamarra’s “Honey Ant Dreaming” (1973), and this began the process of legitimation. Also in 1980, the South Australian Art Gallery made its first major purchase of a Papunya work, “Men’s Love Story” by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, and hung it in its display of contemporary Australian art, an act of curating that Vivien Johnson regards as particularly significant. In 1981 curator Bernice Murphy included three major Western Desert works in the inaugural Australian Perspecta exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Overall, however, Johnson attributes the breakthrough to Crocker. "The new manager," she writes,

...had a different attitude towards the paintings from all previous incumbents of the Papunya job... His insistence that the paintings be seen as contemporary art rather than ethnographic artifacts had undoubted effectiveness as a promotional strategy in attracting the art world's attention to works it had previously thought of only in the context of an ethnographic museum. [Johnson 1994: 55]

A Cambridge graduate, Crocker was neither ethnologically oriented nor Australia-identified and sought to turn the enterprise into one with a sounder business footing. From the point of view of sales, however, not much changed until Andrew Crocker sold a substantial collection (of twenty-six paintings) to the wealthy Australian businessman, Robert Holmes à Court.

While the purchase gave a push of legitimacy to the movement, Holmes à Court did not pay a large price. It wasn't until Daphne Williams took over as art adviser in 1982 that Papunya Tula's earnings began to grow. In the mid 1980s, Papunya Tula sales went from $382,595 in 1985/86 to $595,168 in 1986/87 to $1,050,395 in 1987/88 (the year leading up to the Australian Bicentennial). This was an extraordinary, unprecedented rate of growth and size of sales. Not only was their work suddenly the subject of enormous publicity, but in fact their sales were the highest of any art center in Australia. There are obviously a number of facilitating factors for this upsurge -- the Bicentennial and the accompanying growth of tourism, for example -- since the whole Aboriginal arts and crafts market grew during this period. The placement of acrylic paintings in the category of fine art was critical to that economic success.

There was very little activity through private galleries -- of the sort said likely to handle "bicultural artifacts" -- during this period. Sales to the ordinary tourist market, even with support from AACP, were unable to satisfy the producers' aspirations. The 1981 marketing survey shows that less than 5% of all sales were of acrylic paintings. It was only kept going through movement of these paintings to museums and governmental collections.

Even when sales began to pick up, it still looks as if a very substantial amount went to the public sector -- rather than to private consumers. In other words, the production of the "Aboriginal art phenomenon" is not a simple case of consumer interest -- in that there were never many collectors or investors. According to Anthony Wallis (and corroborated by the materials I have seen), there was never that much of an external market for arts and crafts. When Wallis took over Aboriginal Arts Australia, in one
year he raised the sales from $1.5 million to $3 million -- mostly from sales to government offices, the public service. They sold, for example, to Art Bank, which rents out art to government offices. This was a big part of the placement of the artwork.

Sales to the public sector created an impression of massive success, which the "industry" aimed to do. This sort of staging, in which the art market has no real bottom or solid foundation in consumption, has some evidence. When I realized this, it was like seeing the Wizard of Oz -- an effect created for the public by an operator behind the scenes, and surely not one confined only to Aboriginal work. Anthony Wallis claimed that he once spoke to the director of Blaxson's Gallery, a general art gallery located in a major department store. They were really impressed when they heard he did $3 million in sales, and said they'd actually never made any profit (Anthony Wallis, interview, 21 December 1995, New York). In ten years! Their exhibitions of art were sustained, it seems, in order to give some class to their overall retail operation. The Blaxson's anecdote indicates that the art market is full of wizardry, smoke and mirrors, by which objects acquire stature and value -- a kind of process amusingly figured in the famous scene in the film The Wizard of Oz, when the dog pulls back the curtain to show the wizard as a little man turning cranks on a machine to create the illusion of power and authority. This is a normal part of art market practice, but it is shaped in a particular way because of the inescapable connection of "Aboriginality" to changing formulations of Australian national culture and the reframing of its image.

Thus, one of the puzzles about the so-called "market" in general is that not that many Australians were really interested in or knew much about Aboriginal art, even at the time of the 1993 review of industry. The government purchases have clearly been inspired by a changing national construction which embraced Aboriginal culture as part of Australia, a construction that must be supported, if not among the majority, at least among those involved in politics and cultural production.

At the same time as the pressures towards economic rationalization are being realized in the organization of an "arts and crafts industry," another -- apparently contradictory -- cultural shift is equally noticeable, with the increasing formulation of "Aboriginal culture" as central to a distinctive Australian national imaginary linked to its land and oriented away from its European ancestry or its American "big brother" (Hamilton 1990). Not only does the Australian government need to respond to growing visible Aboriginal protest about inclusion, but the image of the nation-- its self-representation -- moves in the 1980s away from Europe and America and towards the commodification of its tourist market, for which traditional Aboriginal art and culture took on new value.

"Our Aborigines," as Australians still can be heard to say, remain very important to new constructions of Australian national identity in a more general context. Aboriginal art, and acrylic painting in particular, comes to be associated with a formation of Australian national identity. This was marked most explicitly and dramatically in the selection of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra's Western Desert painting design in 1985 for the mosaic forecourt at the new billion-dollar Parliament House in Canberra, dedicated on May 9, 1988. The embrace of Aboriginal culture (in a limited sense) in the "national imaginary" is also indexed by the widespread acquisition of Aboriginal art for government offices.

The contexts for this shift are both specific and general. The circumstances of Australia's Bicentennial in 1988 provided both the resources and occasion for renewed cultural production around questions and problems of national identity as Australians were faced with the necessity of staging themselves in public, not only for themselves but also for the large tourist audience expected to visit. Predictably, these stagings became occasions of social drama, really, in which enduring hierarchies of value were contested and became unstable. It was not only Aboriginal political activists who placed themselves at center stage in the ensuing "debates" by contesting the celebration of "discovery" and so on. The availability of Bicentennial funding supported the exhibition of Aboriginal culture and art on a new scale, allowing it to play a significant role in the context of celebrations of "Australia." Representations of "the Aboriginal" were constructed, additionally, in the general form of a "primitivism" that has received considerable attention from critics in the arts during the 1980s, especially for the complex role of the "primitive" in constituting the "modern" (see Clifford 1988, Foster 1985, Said 1979). These critiques of modernist primitivism draw attention to the themes of nostalgia for an organic relation to place, of a tie with a pre-modern Australia, and also of a specifically Australian modernist interest in the "Other," inspired by the

As in the case of Native American culture at important times in the US, Aboriginal forms provide Australia with a native, local identity, a means to distinguish themselves from a European colonial past. This transformation was well under way by the late 1970s, as ties with England were severed after World War II, and new relations were forged in alliance as America's "junior partner." The shift to this new positioning outside the ambit of its colonial British heritage was signaled, according to Lindsay Barrett's study (1996) of "Whitlamism," by cultural allegiance on the part of Australia's new elite to a kind of "modernist internationalism" which itself began to falter with the economic downturn of the mid-1970s and Australia's detachment from the "American century." If the controversial, costly acquisition of Pollock's Abstract Expressionist Blue Poles in September 1973 marked the modernist internationalist aspiration of Whitlam's government endorsed by the rise of a particular class fraction in Australia, as Barrett maintains, the ascension of Aboriginal art to its status as a representation of Australian distinctiveness fills the gap left by collapse of the modernist fantasy.

Here I find Barrett's delineation of this rising Whitlamist class very suggestive. National imaginaries, as they've been called, are tied to changing political economies and produced by specific social sectors. Indeed, while Aboriginal art -- and Aboriginal identity -- have gained a place in the Australian national imaginary, this place appears to be sustained by the taste and hegemony, not of the working class or the immigrant ethnic groups or the elite of the old squattocracy, but of the historically distinctive class fraction of university-educated public servants and bureaucrats who took over the Australian Labor Party. These technocrats are presumably the people into whose offices one-third of Papunya Tula's paintings, purchased by Artbank, went and whose "cultural" (national) identity is expressed through such appropriation. There is, therefore, a revealing link between economic rationalization and the cultural reevaluation of Aboriginal art, a linkage whose compromise formations make the artistic success of acrylic paintings a significant national symbol. The linkage is fashioned by a new class of Australian elites in a specifically "postcolonial" situation that is both economic and political.

These sensibilities did not fall from heaven. They were produced. Unquestionably, art criticism -- the institutional domain in which aesthetic value is appraised -- is very important in providing a basis for discrimination and has both national and international dimensions. Exhibitions are the raw material of art critical writing and curatorship, since they provide occasions for its practice by bringing objects into the arena of evaluation. This, of course, is what the Aboriginal Arts Board tried to do in organizing cultural performances and selling exhibitions around curated shows. Criticism and curatorship are both necessary for the structure of art selling as a means to establish connoisseurship or "quality control": knowledge of the range of objects and their relative worth. This is elementary art market knowledge, and the problem for dealers (sellers of art) is to synchronize the market with the criticism. An interest in "ethnic arts" -- the "art of the other," so to speak -- has burgeoned over the last decade throughout the West. It is clear that positive critical reception -- the critical gaze -- from outside secured a sense of value in the enterprise of Aboriginal art and acrylic painting in Australia. This sense of value did not exist earlier. For example, James Mollison, curator of the Australian National Gallery, was completely uninterested in Aboriginal work until 1980! This reception, then, is important for the cultural value assigned to the "Aboriginal" as well as to the monetary worth of the paintings.

Moreover, these sensibilities and imaginings are produced in particular, located social actors -- namely, those of the professional managerial class. My evidence for this is more anecdotal and inferential than I would like, although it is implied by Lattas's (1990, 1991) discussions of Australian intellectuals as well as by Barrett (1996). The results of a 1993 marketing survey (MacMillan and Godfrey 1993), conducted in several cities, offers a tentative hypothesis, suggesting that the new interest in Aboriginal art as part of Australian national culture may not be the sentiments of a majority of Australians. The largest part of the market for Aboriginal arts and crafts was still overseas customers (travelers and tourists) -- not Australians themselves. Only 38% of adult Australians had "ever bought" Aboriginal arts and crafts, including tee shirts! This is evidence of the utility of this interest in Australia's projection of itself to outsiders. Second, the Australians who did buy were likely to be high-income earners and those with at least
some tertiary education. These were said to be the people most likely to visit displays. Third, the most popular items were not fine art, but rather weapons, clothing, carvings and sculptures in wood, and accessories with Aboriginal designs. Despite the enormous publicity of the 1980s, studies of focus groups found that most Australians had "only a limited experience of Aboriginal people and their arts."

Such information suggests the cultural themes held to be dominant in the formulations of popular Australian intellectuals should be located within a more definite context of ideological "struggle" -- in a specific, globalizing political economy and in the tastes (or identities) of a specific class fraction (Bourdieu 1993) -- a fraction that is to be understood as the professional managerial class. These were, it seems to me, those who participated most definitively in the Whitlam "revolution." I think we have seen their brothers and sisters elsewhere -- in Songlines (Chatwin 1988) for example, as the quirky Whites of the Aboriginal industry, trying to find an Australian identity in these absolutely non-European practices. These are people who, for their own identity, need to constitute Australia as an authentic cultural space, and they have put intellectual energy towards the creation of an authentically Australian culture as "culturally productive."

Academic work on popular culture, cultural policy, and Aboriginality has a distinctive and salient profile in Australia. If Australia is unusual in the amount of activity and the recency of its attempt to create a national culture through the state's cultural policy, its intellectuals and managers are deeply engaged with it -- in contrast with the relatively more marginal relationship between intellectuals and state practice in the US.

The "managed economy" is not, as one might expect, at odds with these new national imaginings; they are, instead, deeply connected. Cultural export has played an important role in Australia's own self-conception. As Toby Miller suggested to me, Aboriginal art must be understood as part of what he called "Australian triumphalism," along with Australian cinema, pop music, and live theater. Forms of cultural production that received international recognition, these industries have been supported by government subvention with international marketing boards, and so on. This international recognition is the national form of the Lacanian mirror in which one finds one's identity.

The Effect of the "Industry"

My emphasis in considering the "middle period" of acrylic painting and the development of the "Aboriginal arts and crafts industry" has been on the material practices of cultural production, the infrastructures through which an Aboriginal practice and product moves on the way to becoming something like a "commodity." The issue has not been the meaning or evaluation of a particular painting but rather with the question of how the broader category of "Aboriginal fine art" is manufactured and sustained as a commodifiable activity. The claim is two-fold. First, I have tried to show that the paintings were subsidized by the state first as a solution to the "Aboriginal problem" and then as an aspect of the production of national identity -- which has always struggled to place Aboriginal people in relation to the state through policies and practices ranging from destruction, to assimilation, and to self-determination. Second, the machinery of the state was mobilized to this end by a particular set of agents and the Whitlamist concern with culture. In this view, represented by the class fraction I have called "the Wizards of Oz," Aboriginal culture had been something unassimilable with which they had to deal, but here it could be assimilated -- either economically or culturally. My use of the image of the "wizard" is intended. The agents of this class are involved in the production and circulation of imagery, mobilizing, often to very good ends, the tricks of the bureaucratic machinery of Oz to create -- as with the mythical Oz of the story -- the structures of Australia against an unknown and magical landscape.

From the local Aboriginal perspective around Papunya at least, painting provided them with something that had value for "Canberra" (the state), something through which they could negotiate a meaning for their presence. They were giving or showing "to Canberra" images of intrinsic, ontological value, even images that asserted their Aboriginal right of being on the land. While other groups had skills, or labor, and so on, Aborigines had art and land.

Because of the substantial absorption of acrylic production by the government, and by galleries, in the context of Australia's changing self-definition and the wizardry of its new managers, acrylic painting came to broader attention as a success. It became its own "thing," a social fact, acquiring an aura that combined its economic success, aesthetic recognition and Aboriginal authenticity. They are somewhere between the pure commodity -- value defined in market discriminations -- and the Aboriginal artifact --
value defined by their use as signs within a community. This Aboriginal "presence" in them was critical to the value of these commodities: consumers preferred to "buy direct from makers rather than retailers" and "to buy only genuine, original hand-crafted Aboriginal arts and crafts"; correspondingly, the meaning or "story" associated with the items was considered to be an important dimension (MacMillan and Godfrey 1993: 17). The contradiction was heavily borne by the art advisers who mediated between two systems of value -- between the Aboriginal emphasis on the equality of their paintings as all (equally, more or less) representative of The Dreaming and the art market apparatus of aesthetic discrimination.

However, the discursive effect of the development of an "arts and crafts industry" is more far-reaching. Now that the category of Aboriginal fine art is a social fact, now that the paintings have status as "commodities," dealers want to exploit them to their own ends just as the government wants to divest itself of its subsidizing role and to subsume Aboriginal art to the economic. As I will try to show, as a signifier, "Aboriginal fine art" is coming to be further separated from its cultural base as the selling of Aboriginal art is increasingly dominated by the structures of the Western art market, in which the need for "discrimination" and "quality control" defines the practice of its mediation.

After the Fall -- in the Arts Industry

I want to consider the curious fact that almost nothing of this work is ever designated 'bad' -- a lacuna that would not seem to make it easy to sell anything as especially good, either. [Eric Michaels, "Bad Aboriginal Art" 1988: 59]

In this last section, I can only sketch out briefly the effects of the most recent period in the acrylic painting market. It has been characterized by "settling out": an emphasis on connoisseurship -- a delineation of a hierarchy among painters and a movement away from the emphasis on "Aboriginality" and national identity. This transformation follows on the dismantling of centralized marketing in the 1980s, which resulted not only because of conflicts over centralization, spearheaded by arts coordinators, but also due to attention to the economic rationality of government subsidies, articulated by private retailers. Both were set in motion, as it were, by overall emphases on "rationalization."

Then under the control of the Aboriginal Development Commission, providing support for Aboriginal "enterprises," Aboriginal Arts Australia (the successor to AACP) came under attack from the arts centers and coordinators in 1987 when the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, announced the policy of intensifying centralization of marketing through the AAA. With all funding for art centers to be passed through this agency, the proposal was very threatening to the arts coordinators, and it was resisted by a strike that eventually led to the dismantling of AAA.

With the demise of centralized marketing, a substantial number of private dealers and galleries have moved in. By 1989, AAAL represented only 6% of the specialized outlets (of 91 identified), although its turnover was disproportionately high (still 16% in 1988 although down from the 40% of 1980 (Altman et al 1989: 65). In any case, buoyed by reality or illusions of success, the retailing of Aboriginal arts and crafts does not lack for players.

The practices of retailing, and the identification of distinctive streams of art products, have led to differentiation in outlets. Altman et al (1989: 74) found three broad types of specialist outlets, "Aboriginal fine art outlets," Aboriginal tourist art outlets," and "mixed outlets." These differentiations really depend most of all upon the discrimination of a class of "fine art." As Wallis and his compatriots at AAAL had recognized, people would not pay large sums of money to buy paintings in a shop cluttered with tourist souvenirs. Not uncommonly, specialists establish different outlets to straddle different market segments, so the Dreamtime Aboriginal Art Centre has tourist venues in the Argyle Centre in Sydney, a fine art gallery in Paddington (Hogarth) and so on. Coo-ee has an "emporium" for tourists and a nearby gallery for collectors (ibid: 75).

The differentiation of outlets -- and especially the sustaining of a higher end of "fine art" -- requires a particular self-presentation by retailers as knowledgeable. Interest in "buying direct from makers" and in buying "only genuine, original hand-crafted Aboriginal arts and crafts" reflects the value of the items as mementos or souvenirs of travel, needing to be indexed to a location and people. Correspondingly, the meaning or "story" associated with the items was considered to be an important dimension. For such visitors, art represents a mnemonic of tourism. In this sense, and for this category of consumer, such "art" is
a turn (or "return," as some might have it) to an aesthetics in which objects are memorable not because of intrinsic value but as a consequence of the effect they have on their viewer at specific times and places.

On the other hand, the interviewees -- suspicious consumers, apparently -- believed that local retailers (in cities) would carry only low quality stock, while best quality artwork would only be available at the source of production. This information suggests a combination of interest in "authenticity" and personal significance (associated with the producer and the consumer's connection) and a concern to get the best value. There is a corollary defining the terms of a dealer's self-presentation, as knowledgeable and connected with producers:

In the event of buying Aboriginal art from a local source, consumers often felt that they would need to obtain reassurance and guidance in purchase from an art expert or dealer. Understanding the meaning and stories associated with Aboriginal art was also thought to be a means of assuring authenticity.... [MacMillan and Godrey 1993: 17]

"Knowledge" is critical in mediating sales of objects, in making them fine art (Plattner 1996, Savage 1968). This is not particular to Aboriginal art. Where information is lacking on value, as is the case with Aboriginal forms, the seller's mediation becomes ever more important. For good Western art, the question is the track record of the artist, which is somewhat harder to show for Aboriginal artists, although dealers are evolving in that direction. Thus, in Alice Springs, as the market is changing, dealers are also attempting to enter the market on other terms related to their closeness to "supply," upgrading their own reputations as "connoisseurs" and "sources." One such practice involves taking the stories which come with paintings that a retailer might get from an arts cooperative and copying it -- so that their gallery appears as the authenticator, the source with close ties to the producer.

Even if the largest part of the market has been "tourist mementos," the separation and reaggregation of tourist and fine art is an ongoing issue. "Fine art" seems to require a less cluttered context -- a presentation or "framing" of the product and its separation from other products. The segment of the market that would buy $400 - 500 items as tourists is apparently a small one, but galleries have evolved to engage these persons. The reason Aboriginal Arts Australia's Kent Street gallery in Sydney was good, Anthony Wallis told me, "was that it looked classy. It had books in it," and so on. "People could feel they were getting educated and that they were getting something worthwhile." Younger tourists he classified as "backpackers" more typically would buy this art. They were, he said, even willing to pay $2000-$3000 for a painting: "They thought it something authentic."

This account presents "fine art" as being secured and legitimated by the [modernist] context of the gallery, a context strongly in contrast with the "Rocks shops" in Sydney's tourist district, with their more jumbled interior displays. People don't want to pay large sums of money for something that looks like part of a tourist enterprise. Galleries, dealers and a modernist style of exhibition began to emerge, along with curators and dealers from the original government enterprise now known as Aboriginal Arts Australia such as Djon Mundine, Ace Bourke, Gabrielle Pizzi, and Gabriella Roy (all past employees), as well as gallerists like Christopher Hodges.

The opening up of the market has introduced another set of meanings through the effects of competition. With at least 161 different venues for selling Aboriginal art and crafts, identified in the Altman report database, one finds a good deal of competition among them, and among the art centers. The movement of the arts and crafts industry has become less of a "cultural" question and more of an "enterprise." Increasingly, the participants discuss the movement of the paintings in terms that delineate the structure of the fine arts world, where value is sustained by distinctiveness, trajectory, and quality control. The common phrase I heard was "settling out," referring to the drying up of demand for any old kind of acrylic painting and a discrimination of quality. This will mean that there will be a different market for work regarded by retailers as lesser quality, which might have to move to outlets of a different order.

The remarks of a well-known, acerbic curator with a long career in Aboriginal art draw the somewhat bitter picture, and to some extent celebrate the return to "quality," "taste," and "discrimination." In an extended interview, Ace Bourke told me

I think what's going to happen with Aboriginal art is that a few people have had a good run under the Aboriginal umbrella but now it's just coming down to the Gordon Bennetts, the Tracey Moffatts, the Trevor
Nichols, I mean, the real artists. The ones who just compete on an international art front. It's just going to be as simple as that. The novelty of Aboriginal things has worn off, particularly from the media's point of view. I mean, they're just not interested. They think it's yesterday's news. In fact, the art is extraordinarily gorgeous. You know, the dot paintings are an extraordinary phenomenon in the world ... history of world art, well, this century especially. So it's just especially good and it's got something to say, there's real weight behind most of it. So it's very simple why people are interested in it. And the interest has only just begun. And there are real problems like over production. Too many paintings indiscriminately evolved... it's shaking out. Getting better rather than worse. [Ace Bourke, interview, Hogarth Gallery, Sydney, 1991]

The curatorial realities to which he refers are illuminated in the following discussion of a then-current show at the Aboriginal Artists Agency, where he had once worked, and to which he was somewhat ambivalent:

AB: These days you don't get a package deal. You have the good artists, and the bad ones can just go fuck themselves. You know, why carry them? It's just unprofessional and it's just not how it's done... [This] just shows amateurism as far as I'm concerned. Why carry a bad artist? You don't sell anything. You don't do the artists any good, and it just makes you look bad. It takes away from a good show. I'm saying that instead of saying 'Yes, doesn't it look good!' [Ace Bourke, interview, Hogarth Gallery, Sydney, 1991]

While the discussion is more of urban-based artists in the case, his curatorial position is quite at odds with the expectations of painters at places like Papunya and Yuendumu, who have expected -- as Gabrielle Pizzi said -- "that all work there would be purchased on completion" (Gabrielle quoted in Kronenberg 1995: 7). To some extent, these practices had also guided curatorial practice for a while, in the form of group shows, even if it also colluded (unintentionally) with the practices of shadier "entrepreneurs" who sold and displayed paintings without any regard to their effect on the "artist's" career.

In these accounts, if "standard" practices prevailed, the good would survive and the so-called "weaker" painting would dry up. They outline the common understanding of how a fine art market is structured. "I was finding it increasingly hard." Pizzi said in an interview, to promote Aboriginal artists, both in Australia and internationally, when their work was simultaneously being sold in tourist shops and vanity galleries... That means mediocre work is finding its way onto the market and, more damagingly, is being sold in commercial outlets, and this can lead to a destabilisation of the market. [Gabrielle Pizzi, in Kronenberg1995: 7-8]

Such a "lack of control in the market" might compromise a dealer's "professional integrity and reputation." (Gabrielle Pizzi, in Kronenberg1995: 8).

This is not, I should say, simply a hostile position that greedy dealers take over and against Aboriginal interests. There is a great concern about a "flood of poorer" work being marketed by those who want to make a quick dollar, and this is distinguished from responsible participation.

The remarks of Christopher Hodges, who represents Papunya Tula in Sydney's Utopia Gallery, extend this analysis of the "new market" and the changing place of Aboriginal fine art. Hodges's central concern is the development of "connoisseurship" or knowledge as a basis for appreciation of artistic value -- as a way to discriminate "quality." This requires education of the viewer, the capacity to know individual styles through "research," something in which a good dealer must engage. At this point, Aboriginal fine art - - articulated for the high-priced world of collecting and connoisseurship -- is becoming detached from its base in Aboriginal cultural practices. Thus, Hodges told me,

There's no doubt in my mind that everyone of the artists that is producing work at the moment is producing it for a marketplace, and knows it gets exhibited. They're not producing it for sacred ceremonies. It's a viable income--producing form of labor. And so I keep pushing the point very hard.

....Their paintings are influenced by what's happening to them. They're important statements about the big issues, and the fact that it's abstract, fitted in with the Western tradition of abstract painting. And so abstract painting had lost its punch by the 70's, by the late 70's, abstract art had run full cycle until it was pretty much looking up its own navel, and so when this stuff came along it was full of content, it was powerful, it had all the energy in it, and it was volatile. And most of the art at that time had lost its real vitality. And so it went into the art world as a fresh, new thing, which continued a tradition that had begun in completely different cultures. We use the phrase, 'beyond Aboriginality.' And the idea was that once the work had transcended
the specific culture, it still has an affect on people who nothing about the specifics of the work. The best pictures, they hit you. That ability to hit, even though there are no cultural records. It really makes a difference. [Christopher Hodges, interview, Sydney, June 22, 1991, my emphasis]

Entering into this "fine arts" world does not, in Hodges's view, necessitate indulging in "primitivist nostalgia" for the "noble [Aboriginal] savage." Hodges was very clear that what he expected to sell was "painting," rather than "Aboriginality," and the expensive paintings are sold on the basis of knowledge -- moving buyers ever further towards "stronger" art. Hodges explains his idea of appropriate relationships as involving what he calls "proper representation." But this is exactly what most of the so-called reputable dealers believe is not occurring:

CH: There's a lot of potential to do things internationally with this art. There are lots of chances to go and show this work to a larger audience. But it's got to go out in the proper way. It's got to go out supported well. Go out with the same care the work of the top white artists takes their work out with. If that's going to happen, it means cooperation from everybody on a long-term call. 99 percent of the people involved with Aboriginal art, I reckon they just rank out of it. The places that show art in Sydney, most of them started out as tourist shops that have become galleries. Like Hogarth -- down at The Rocks -- who runs a tourist shop, and then they've got a museum and gallery, and then they've got the Dreamtime Centre Gallery in Paddington. So they come from a background of splitting their options three ways. [interview with Christopher Hodges, 21 June 1991, Sydney; my emphasis]

This sort of comment, not uncommon among dealers, reflects the relationships of competition amongst them, too. At the time of my interviewing, Emily Kngwerreye's work was receiving the greatest critical attention, and the galleries were struggling over her paintings. Indeed, "representation" could be said to have become meaningful, produced entirely within this entrepreneurial environment.

CH: I believe in representing artists. To do the right thing for your artists, you have to support them. You have to work together. But your aim is to develop their reputation so that they have a long-term future in the arts. Now because of the exploitation by opportunists who don't understand the art market, who don't understand anything about art, wouldn't know a good painting if they fell over it...many of the major artists... are basically hugely undervalued, because the opportunists stop proper representation occurring... The entrepreneurs have just undermined the pricing. Every time somebody is nominated, you know -- like Emily Kngwerreye -- they took advantage of all the efforts that had been made by everybody before that. Coventry Gallery actually mounted an Emily Kngwerreye show. Gabrielle Pizzi mounted one and Hogarth Gallery has mounted an Emily show. [Christopher Hodges, interview, Sydney, June 21, 1991]

This was obviously the point of the competition, but clearly reflects the difficulty in the "unsettled" art market. The dealers all struggle with "opportunist" and entrepreneurs who have no long-term involvement, which seems to be understood as the stabilizing force. Ace Bourke has complaints about competition, too, however, and seems to dream of a curatorial autonomy that is denied him in the mercurial world of Aboriginal art:

AB: We've got Balgo [the Balgo art cooperative], and Balgo showed at Co-ee earlier in the year and wanted to show in Kent Street later in the year. And I'm the monster because I said no way. I'm just sick of it... They can be as amateurish as they like. [If] they're going to show with someone, they're going to show with me and they're going to show once a year and I'm not interested. They can just drop out or drop dead. I t's not like a big chocolate cake you share around; you know, have a go at the Hogarth and then move on to Kent Street. [Ace Bourke, interview, Sydney, July 1991]

The future of the Aboriginal fine art market seems to be the system familiar to Western art, but here in the new guise of his version of "proper representation." And this future will follow the kind of settling out of the finer artists from the others, not the continuing endorsement of Aboriginal identity per se.

CH: When all this stops, and people really look at it, and the entrepreneurs have dropped out, and we have people capable of making judgments about aboriginal art the same way they are capable of making judgment about white art, with the same degree of scholarship and commitment. And you'll have somebody say, "Turkey Tolson's stripe paintings from the late 80's, early 90's, those are the best paintings he ever did." I think that's what will happen. [Christopher Hodges, interview, Sydney, June 21, 1991]

At the other end, however, what is afoot may be rather depressing.
Sales have declined overall, and the "unscrupulous" dealers have been able to get into the market. This is, perhaps, the expectable end result of the shift towards the "Aboriginal arts and crafts industry." According to at least two recent accounts I heard, Papunya Tula is having trouble now that is indicative: a problem keeping the artists. The cooperative is undermined by people who want access to the communities but do so by sowing discontent among those people that are not selling very well at the time. This is something that has long been visible: People are angry because their paintings aren't being sold and so somebody else in Alice says, they are robbing you. The artists have begun to sell to anybody in town, and dealers are coming up to Alice Springs to take advantage of this. Indeed, one rumor has been that a gallery down south had managed to have an assistant from Papunya Tula act as its agent, going around the structure of the cooperative and sending work acquired on buying visits directly to the gallery. One "mixed outlet" from Melbourne is also reputed to have agent in Alice, and they pay the artists with cars -- which they have right there. This is very attractive for artists, and indeed has long been among their material aspiration for the work. In another case, one of the shop owners in Alice Springs is telling Timmy Payungu that Papunya Tula Artists doesn’t look after him properly and the dealer will do so, to get him to paint for him. The artists never had that much loyalty to Papunya Tula, always feeling themselves impelled by need to sell where they could when necessary, but their association has been eroded.

One of the problems with this is that these dealers cannot really provide provenience, which is absolutely critical for selling paintings at the high end. Before, they could guarantee authenticity for buyers -- with a number on a painting that linked it to a document. As a result of these changes now, I understand, the market has turned to the earlier period of the art -- as they were inherently limited in number, controllable, and linked to more "culturally" isolated times. Apparently the paintings from that early period are going for large sums.

These changes may challenge the "authenticity" of the work, both commercially and culturally. One view holds that after the generation passes for whom this art is really linked to ceremony and traditional concerns, then the movement will die. What people buy it for, in this view, is that connection with Aboriginal culture, and the painting is becoming more and more of a commercial deal. But it may also be that the demands of the art market always move on, and here they move from Papunya to Yuendumu to Balgo, as different explorations take place from a basic cultural repertoire. The tropes of modernism and modernization take us just to here, for now.
Postscript/Conclusion -- On Class Fractions and National Identity

As a postscript, let me step back and place the development of the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry and the ascendance of acrylic paintings in a broader perspective of a shifting Australian cultural imagination and cultural struggle. The question of why Aboriginal painting (and Aboriginal identity) could come to exercise such a place on Australian national identity is a pressing one, especially since it is clear -- both from the surveys of Aboriginal arts and crafts and also from the growing political power of immigrant ethnic groups -- that Aborigines do not constitute such a valuable subject for even the majority of Australians. Who, then, has developed this formulation of national consciousness and what does it represent? This is the question of cultural production that Bourdieu regards as central to the field of cultural production:

The field of cultural production is the area par excellence of clashes between the dominant fractions of the dominant class, who fight there sometimes in person but more often through producers oriented towards defending their ideas and satisfying their 'tastes', and the dominated fractions who are totally involved in this struggle.[ Bourdieu 1993: 102]

An account would have to begin with the changing place of "culture" in Australian life following on the 1960s Liberal Party's "culturalist" support for wider tertiary education and the growing number of Australians with advanced education.

In September 1973, shortly after I began my fieldwork and during Papunya Tula's infancy, the Australian government's controversial purchase of Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles (for the not yet built Australian National Gallery) "marked Australia's move from a British colonial entity into the everyday life of American internationalism, the British oriented primary produce exports which had created and shaped the nation being replaced by a network of supermarkets, factories and mining operations" (Barrett 1996: 47). As Guilbaut argued, within the landscape of Cold War politics Abstract Expressionism had come to stand for concepts of freedom and freedom of expression, and this defines Blue Pole's significance in Australia: Whitlam's government had declared itself obliged to ensure an environment in which human beings could develop their full potential, an environment that included access, in the geographically isolated nation, to what were perceived to be the "Masterpieces of Civilization" (Barritt 1996). Blue Poles stood as the government's statement of its cultural maturity, international relevance and modern outlook. The shift in colonial identity, position and allegiance occurred during a period "in which many of the nation's social and cultural theorists and bureaucrats -- Robin Boyd and Donald Horne to Barry Humphries -- were attempting to redefine and/or recreate notions of an 'authentic' Australian identity and sense of being" (Barritt 1996).

Many Australians, however, identified the painting with the abuse of personal freedoms in the old and degenerate centers of Europe and North America -- they highlighted this in regarding it as "vomit-like," painted by alcoholics. The purchase of Blue Poles, then, delineated a new alliance and new opposition salient in Whitlamism (and central to the emergence of Aboriginal art). Between the traditional intellectuals and the new administrative class (the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie of public servants, teachers, academics, community workers, culture workers) against the traditional working class Labor voters, tabloid editors, and conservative politicians. If the long-reigning Liberal Party of Menzies, rooted in the traditional economic elite, had been the support of the conservative Academy of Australian Art, Whitlamism as the political expression of the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie -- overseers of the resource-based industrial democracy -- had a different trajectory as they emerged from the position of what Bourdieu in his study of cultural production calls "the dominated fraction of the dominant group" and moved away from Labor's die-hard traditionalists. This new ascendant bourgeoisie legitimated themselves through their commitment to extend services to the growing urban areas in the form of new public sector programs.

Yet, this moment of modernist internationalism served mainly to validate the significance of art and culture, as the globalizing forces of the international political economy cut Australia loose from an identity as America's junior partner and sent its economy into decline. Blue Poles, to speak metonymically, opened up a new space which came to be filled with Aboriginal art as its content -- in ways reminiscent of the development of the Southwest Indian art market in the US after World War I. While Australians -- and especially those of this class -- came to embrace the value of human beings developing to their full potential,
they discovered that there were masterpieces of civilization at home, allowing Australians to develop their potential without borrowing from others and even to contribute to the whole, thanks to “our Aborigines.

When I first arrived in Australia in June 1973, I experienced these shifts without understanding them. The people I met, when I was attempting to establish a field site for research, were mostly academics, the Australians who were to become my cultural guides to their own nation. They were strongly anti-British, preferring as well “native flora” in their gardens and ardently Australian (despite their wide reading) in their stance, while strongly pro-Labor and ecstatic at its arrival. They were members of the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie, finally arrived at a degree of prosperity and power, many associated with Labor Party politicians, and hostile to encroaching Americans, identified with Vietnam. In this light, the question “Why did you come to Australia? Why don’t you stay in your own country and do research there?” seems less the simple expression of anthropological territoriality and more the movement towards Australia’s new situation.
NOTES
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I have made it clear in other writing that I find the "exploitation" perspective problematic, but the rhetoric of "triumph" and "success" is also suspect (see Myers 1991). If one turns away from the "truth" of the debate to its cultural effects, "triumphalist" arguments also display a discernible "attachment" -- or identification -- with their object, a vehemence of endorsement.

Andrew Lattas has drawn critical attention to the apparently laudatory discursive deployments of Aboriginal culture. Going beyond its similarity to other forms of "primitivism" and recognizing the connection to a specifically Australian national project, Lattas argues that the figure of "the Aborigine" has operated significantly in the discourse of intellectuals as providing "a form of redemption from the superficial nothingness which is seen to be invading the modern, western self... In this discourse, Aboriginality becomes part of a quest for national authenticity" (Lattas 1992: 45). Perhaps just as significantly, Lattas maintains, "popular Australian intellectuals are empowered by producing and circulating such a sense of national spiritual crisis..."

While not herself present during the events, Viv Johnson's interpretation, for example, gives greater emphasis to the longstanding desire of the Aboriginal people finding its expression.

The fact that the painters were almost entirely male is probably a consequence of the relationships tha Bardon initially had in forming a group of painters, which would have been principally with men. Aboriginal women of ritual standing, likely participants in painting, would not be on such close terms with a white man. It is certainly the case that at this time, the male painters took great pains to ensure that women in their community would not see the paintings, lending credence to the view that painting was necessarily "men's only."

Some aspects of policy attempted to eradicate the bodies also through practices of racial separation. Officially ended in 1937, another form of "assimilation" had the children of mixed European/Aboriginal parentage "removed" from their Aboriginal parent and educated with other "half-castes" -- who would, it was expected, through continued separation from "full-bloods" become "white." The memories and consequences of this for Aboriginal people and their identities are movingly recalled in Archie Roach's song, "The Children Came Back."

The legal framework for the implementation of this policy was provided in the Welfare Ordinance of the Northern Territory Legislative Council (1953) which replaced the Aboriginals Ordinance (1911-1947).

The counterpoint offered by Papunya Tula's success is significant, especially because of Papunya's reputed demoralization, which some critics at the time saw as a predictable consequence of the regime of "total institutionalization" as a form of management and which a contemporary critic might regard as the
resistance to "governmentalization." In Bardon's words, these regimes are aimed at the destruction of "Aboriginal traditional life," which offers the true base of authentic personhood (see Bardon 1991: 36). For another account of these early days, see Kimber (1985).

In a letter asking for support from the Department of Education, Fannin wrote, The potential value of the Papunya Tula Art movement is twofold. It can help the world at large to gain insight into a non-materialistic society at work. As humanity simply will not survive unless the present dominant materialistic culture is modified, it is hard to over-estimate the value of such models. From an aboriginal point of view, proper respect for their treasures as represented in this art could help the new culture that they must [hope] to be better than the despair and dependence which is being forced on them. [Fannin, letter to Dept. of Education, 12 October 1974, Papunya Tula Art, in Australia Council File 76/890/001, my emphasis]

There is obviously a good deal of confusion about exchange, right from the beginning. While Bardon records the excitement painters felt at the prospect of money and its necessity in the enterprise, Kimber has a different memory about monetary value. The giving of paintings in those days, he told during an interview, was like that for other exchanges, in which "you give with no specific, certain notion of getting something back... that sometime, he will be doing something for you" (Kimber, interview, July 1991, Alice Springs). I think this is true when personal relationships are believed to obtain, as would be the case with Kimber, but probably less clearly so once Bardon had begun to sell them.

There appears to have been a struggle to take over the Australia Council grant to Bardon and control of Papunya Tula, with the Papunya settlement superintendent approaching the Arts Board -- an act protested by Bardon's brother successfully.

A significant early collection of seventy-eight paintings from the first three consignments to Pat Hoga was purchased at this time by the Northern Territory Museum, then under the direction of Colin Jack-Hinton, and there were, at times, modest sales. The early exhibitions were often quite informal, arranged mostly by art advisers and their friends, mainly in an effort to establish a market. Thus, Peter Fannin sent 14 canvases to Melbourne with a friend, for example, with the arrangement that he get 50 per cent of the framed sale price. (Fannin letter to Kate Khan, Aboriginal Arts Board, 25 Sept 1974). I believe only two paintings were sold at this exhibition.

Edwards emphasized that basic policies and major decisions, such as the way painting was supported, were made by the Aboriginal members at the Aboriginal Arts Board. Thus, he said, "They decided to send paintings overseas when the Board commissioned them. They thought people there would like them and influence the market at home." Further, "it was their idea not to give grants to individuals, as the Australia Council does, because Aborigines wouldn't paint. They would stop" (Edwards, interview, 18 May 1994, Sydney).

The model for such an intervention in cultural production is the Keynesian one, championed in Australia by H.C. Coombs, of priming a market by creating demand.

Thus, in 1981, according to the marketing study conducted for the Aboriginal Arts Board (to which AACP was then affiliated), the total subsidies and assistance provided to Aboriginal arts and crafts ($1 million) was about the same as the revenue received by producers (Pascoe 1981). The study argued that this was a tiny amount compared to the major sources of subsidy to Aboriginal communities. The initial budget of the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 was $502,000 and by 1980/81 it grew to $1 million, of which it gave $.8 million to support visual art and crafts. In 1989/90, the budget of the Aboriginal Arts Committee was $3,447,333 (220 separate grants).

Edwards knew that production was outpacing demand, and he thought the Board should make provision to acquire the surplus at cost -- at the 20% markup (Edwards, 15 June 1974, Letter in Papunya Tula File at Aboriginal Arts Board, Australia Council).

According to Nicolas Peterson (personal communication, New York City, 1995), the first realization that Aboriginal work could circulate as fine art "came as something of a revelation" to them all, but it seems to have occurred at Aboriginal Arts and Crafts, when it developed two shops -- one (known as "the Collectors Gallery") for the better quality barks.
Fannin's salary initially came half from a grant from Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund, applied for by the Papunya men, and half from the Aboriginal Arts Board. This seems to have been a continuation of what was arranged for Geoff Bardon in 1972 (Ken Farnum letter to Barry Dexter, OAA, 14 March 1972).

The study showed that there was not much growth in sales over the nine years since the Company' founding in 1973. The 1980 system was still substantially subsidized by grants from the Aboriginal Arts Board and by Aboriginal communities -- to the tune of $1 million. In terms of total revenue, artifacts were seen to contribute less than one percent of Aboriginal revenue, and -- in terms of disposable cash income -- to account for 4 or 5 % on average. These crass economic findings were arrayed against the “cultural values,” however, allowing the authors of the report to maintain that "artefact production is still very important to Aboriginal communities" (Pascoe 1981: 16). They were said to be important in "maintaining cultural life," for example, because "most artefacts produced for sale also have a physical and spiritual role in the traditional life of Aborigines. Production for sale as well as for use helps to keep the culture alive."

In retrospect, many commentators regard arts and crafts as almost the only successful Aboriginal enterprise. These paintings were "Ancestral Possum Spirit Dreaming” (1980) and “Warlugulong” (1976) both by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, and “Tingarri Story” (1980) by Freddy West, Charlie Tjapangarti, John Tjakamarra and Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi.

Kimber put it very directly: Andrew Crocker really set it off. He used the phone... He'd call nationally, internationally. He called up Holmes à Court. I reckon that was the key to it. There's the big upmarket bloke. Only Bond and Packer could also have had such an effect. [Kimber, interview, July 1991, Alice Springs]

In 1986, Wallis took over management of Aboriginal Arts Australia (formerly AACP), which had been losing $800,000/year. In three years, Wallis brought this enterprise to no operating loss. Published figures support Wallis's account of AAA success. See Altman et al.1989: 241, Table 12.4.

Altman et al (1989) reported, correspondingly, that there were very few big private collectors, and that the "boom" (of the late 1980s) might be endangered once the major museums and galleries had "caught up" by purchasing collections. The same sort of phenomenon occurred with the boom in sales for Ramangaming, which was really inflated by the massive purchases of collector billionaire John Kluge, who was buying $500,000 in a year. This is not a "steady stream,” as Wallis put it.

In Distinctions, Bourdieu (1984) discusses some of these differences in "aesthetics" among different classes of consumers of "art," in which such mnemonics of tourism would not constitute the disinterested contemplation appropriate for "high" art. This is not, however, the absence of an aesthetics. The habitus represented by tourist consumers such as those I imagine for Aboriginal artifacts would be quite different from that of a collector, whose objects of taste would comprise a series emphasizing the formal properties of a set.

This is seen by many to be threatening to the raison d'etre of the activity, but also chaotic personally. There is instability for arts coordinators, and they are finding that the art business is not that institutionally secure.