



Tjanpi Desert Weavers
NPY Women's Council

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To it may concern,

RE: Consultation Paper on Growing the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry

Tjanpi Desert Weavers welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed Action Plan. We also gratefully acknowledge the additional support we have received this year and historically through IVAIS, Australia Council for the Arts and other Commonwealth funded programs.

Before we provide commentary on the four themes, a little about us: we are the social enterprise of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council, enabling women living in the remote Central and Western deserts to earn an income from fibre art. We represents over 500 Aboriginal women artists from 26 remote communities in NT, SA & WA. Our two Creative Development officers and Anangu (Aboriginal) Arts and Culture Assistants travel to these communities on a regular-basis to purchase artworks from Anangu women, supply art materials, hold workshops, facilitate commissions and enable grass collecting trips. These artworks are brought back to our head office in Alice Springs and sold and exhibited in our gallery, online, at art fairs and through a network of wholesalers and commercial galleries by a dedicated Sales and Marketing team.

Theme 1: Sustainable Growth

A practical action to assist in sustainable market rehabilitation is access to increased multi-year operational funding (e.g. administrative costs, staff salaries, assets and infrastructure). There is a healthy supply of funding available for discrete creative projects but not core operations. Art Centres then run more and more projects to maintain funding income and end up in a vortex of applications and acquittals that detract from operations and base KPIs. Historically, the IVAIS program provides operational funding which is immensely helpful but it has remained stagnant in the amount received by an individual Art Centre since at least 2009 due to the burgeoning number of Art Centres and the overall amount provided to the Department. With increased access to operational funding, we anticipate Art Centres, including Tjanpi, will be able to solidify and grow core business (e.g. facilitating artwork creation, sales and exhibitions to build artists profiles), increasing sustainability.

Theme 2: Capacity Building



A priority for Tjanpi is increasing and enriching Indigenous employment in remote locations. Historically in our region, Indigenous employment has centred on 'technical' roles that involve canvas priming, grass collecting and material preparation. In the last five years, Tjanpi has been challenging this employment model to build a system that enables Anangu staff to career progress from entry level roles into other areas of the social enterprise. This has had enormous benefits for Tjanpi and has demonstrably increased our capacity. However, it has not been straight-forward and has required a strengths-based, grass roots approach. For instance, the typical recruitment, on-boarding and supervision frameworks have had to be completely re-thought to work in a trauma informed, cross-cultural space. We recommend that the Action Plan considers the requirements of successful and meaningful Indigenous employment beyond the funding of Indigenous identified roles.

Another area we propose for consideration is the infrastructure requirements of remote Art Centres. At present we only have one office / residence across our 26 communities. This results in our two Creative Development officers driving across 350,000sqm on a monthly basis, a hugely inefficient system. It also means Tjanpi's artists can only sell their artwork once every few weeks, crippling their ability to create an income. Our remote office/residence is also on the point of requiring significant repair and upgrade (which is very expensive in a remote area where unblocking a sewerage pipe costs us \$5,000 or rewiring a light fitting \$2,000). The lack of infrastructures means that our artists (who are often elderly or have chronic health conditions) and staff have to work outside all throughout the year in temperatures ranging from 11c to 45c. Equally there is very little disability supports in place within the environs of the Art Centres, such as disabled toilets and showers, wheelchair access ramps etc. It is completely unacceptable that some of Australia's most celebrated artists are working in third-world conditions. This situation is endemic to the central Australian Art Centres. A greater investment in capital infrastructure would ensure that we have the resources to build architecturally responsive working places that dignify the artists and their practice.

Theme 3: Access to Market

Tjanpi was in a unique position at the start of COVID-19 to have a newly rebuilt website and highly functional online sales platform. This meant we were able to quickly shift the majority of our business online. This has been crucial to our success in this period after we lost significant income from the closure of our gallery and cancellation of art fairs. The flexibility of this platform also meant we were able to successfully launch a new product (our 'Learn to Weave' kit) and accompanying education video. Our ability to move online quickly and diversify into new income streams has meant we were able to meet and exceed our sales KPIs for FY19/20 and are on track to do the same in FY20/21.

Whilst phenomenally successful, this shift has required a drastic change in our operational processes. It required a restructure our Sales and Marketing team, creation of an additional role to manage ecommerce and complete physical restructure of our offices (permanent photo studio, additional storage space, new monitors, software & computers, packing station). It also required us to outlay a significant amount of money and time to have the SAM (Stories Art Money) database upgraded to merge with our Shopify platform. This process highlighted the age and un-adaptability of SAM and the difficulty of working with SAMs developer for Art Centres moving forward.



With these operational restructures completed, we are now casting our eyes to the ongoing implications of ecommerce. The first of these revolves around competitiveness. With more and more Art Centres, social enterprises and creative businesses moving online we now need to optimize our website, social media and online marketing. To do this requires additional resourcing and a highly specialised knowledge-set that does not traditionally reside amongst staff in an art centre.

With many art fair organisers considering operating physical fairs as well as an online spaces we also need to consider how we will meet these additional demands. Whilst we have been able to facilitate online art fairs this year, this has only been because staff have been diverted from other tasks impacted by COVID-19. With online and physical requirements we may need to consider additional staffing to manage sales as well as facilitating more artwork creation to sell in both spaces.

In relation to the international market, more does need to be done. In our experience, the international market does not understand the social and artistic value of contemporary Aboriginal art. A single art centre is not able to address this lack of understanding on any meaningful scale. This hinders our ability to tap into an enormous market. One strategy that the Action Plan may wish to consider is large, institutional-based, international touring exhibitions (e.g. *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters*). This strategy has proved incredibly valuable in Australia in elevating contemporary Aboriginal art and ascribing its value as 'fine art', and subsequently driving sales and awareness.

Theme 4: Legal Protections:

We believe that the current Indigenous Art Code has made good in-roads, particularly around 'inauthentic' Aboriginal art, but there is more to be done, including the implementation of a mandatory Code.

As part of the Action Plan, we also recommend that work is done to untangle unethical practice, particularly in relation to 'carpet bagging' in Central Australia. This term is used broadly and interchangeably in our region to refer to people such as the disreputable gallerists 'stealing' artists from community to paint for them in return for 'book-up debt' as well as the state Department of Education community school teacher who purchases baskets directly from a community member in contradiction of their Land Permit (and hence employment) conditions (this is the unethical purchasing practice that most impacts Tjanpi). It is important to 'unpick' this space (and gather quantitative data as to its prevalence and impact on Art Centres) as they represent an unethical (and often illegal) spectrum of practices that require different solutions (e.g. Government Departments educating their staff and then reprimanding those who breach their permit conditions and strengthening those conditions more widely across state jurisdictions.). Equally, artists need to be able to access language-based resources and training to learn further about this multifarious issue to ensure they make the most appropriate decisions. Whilst the argument for artist agency is often employed in this complex environment we argue that poverty will override artist agency.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed Action Plan and welcome any further opportunities to do so.



Kind regards,

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