A CALL TO ARMS

Clotilde Bullen

I first started in the arts business before I'd even turned 21. I was doing an internship at a commercial gallery,[1] and being mentored by a woman from an Irish-Catholic Australian background who was not much older than me. She was acutely aware of the dearth of Indigenous arts professionals in the Indigenous arts field, and believed passionately that once I had learnt all I could from her, she would step back from her position of Manager and encourage me to take the reins. She was true to her word, and two years later I was going it alone.

The example that she set has stayed with me over the last 20-odd years and, as I become increasingly aware of the significance of having great mentors and teachers and the importance of continuing to pass knowledge on, it has crystallised in my mind.

When I became a mother, the idea of succession planning became as logical as breathing to me. The Collins English Dictionary defines succession planning as 'a process for identifying and developing internal people with the potential to fill key business leadership positions in a company.' Succession planning is designed to increase the availability of experienced and capable employees that are prepared to assume particular roles as they become available. The underlying philosophy argues that those willing and able to take on key roles within an industry must be encouraged and managed in such a way that the industry as a whole continues to grow and move forward.

The fundamental importance of this notion is not lost on me, working as I do in the Indigenous visual arts field. In Australia we have a multi-million dollar Indigenous visual arts industry,[2] yet there are no more than 20 Indigenous curators working in government institutions across the country, and roughly no more than 100 Indigenous arts professionals working solely in paid positions either for themselves or for not-for-profit organisations (this does not include Indigenous artists who both create and curate, or volunteers).[3] This deplorable situation points to the fact that it is non-Indigenous people who are the dominant, controlling force in the Indigenous visual arts industry. As Richard Bell put it, 'Aboriginal Art: It's a white thing!'

It may seem curious that I would advocate the continued employment of Indigenous arts workers in institutions that can be seen to decontextualise and anthropologise objects and works of art in a predominantly Eurocentric art context. My answer would be that subverting (and ultimately controlling) a system has to commence from a point of origin within that system. Indigenous arts workers placed within these institutions have an opportunity to resist the homogenisation of massively diverse Indigenous works of art and culture by educating the staff and broader public – in collaboration with artists and communities – on how to present these works in new and unique ways, rather than placing them in one broad collection. There is also, then, the opportunity to become guardian to one of our most valuable cultural assets: our works of art. I've seen the worth of acquiring works of art from communities and artists to be held in perpetuity. Not just in financial terms, but in the pride, the fearlessness that grows within an artist when they, and often then their community, succeeds; the desire to grow and challenge and create that is facilitated when a practice is recognised as being exceptional and extraordinary.

From 2006 to 2008 I was privileged to intern a young leader in the arts through the Art Gallery of Western Australia's Indigenous Curatorial Internship, a program unique to WA but which occurred in different formats simultaneously in other state institutions around the same time. Later in 2010, as one of the members of the Advisory Committee for the Wesfarmers Indigenous Arts Fellowship, I was involved in a series of exciting meetings with the National Gallery of Australia and Wesfarmers as they conceived the Indigenous Fellowship and Leadership Program. We discussed in depth the idea of an alumnus – a group of future leaders who could continue to share knowledge and maintain links with each other, as well as develop professionally over the course of time. Curatorial development programs were also initiated by other state institutions, and these, along with artistic development programs such as the Canning Stock Route project and the provision of greater resources to community arts centres to train arts workers have all been measures designed to increase the field of people potentially able to step in and step up.

The question is: Has it worked? Have we succeeded in building a generation of younger arts professionals who are ready and willing to step up – not just for themselves but for their communities too? Not entirely. Perhaps the weight of expectation and responsibility placed upon these young leaders is too great, resulting in few people who elect to enter the business. Or perhaps it is because those of us with the knowledge and experience to pass on have become cynical gatekeepers, so depleted, unsupported and under-resourced ourselves, we have neither the time nor inclination to mentor and to teach.

Notes

[1] The gallery was Artist in Residence, where the well-known artist Shane Pickett was the resident artist. It was an initiative of the Aboriginal Economic Development Office (as it was known then) and only sold work that had been directly acquired from community art centres that existed in Western Australia, and from local Nyoongar artists.

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[2] Based on a review of financial reports lodged by the 101 corporations registered as making and selling Indigenous art, the average revenue since 2007 was $186,000 per organisation. This is the primary market and doesn't include secondary market sales, which were $8million in 2012. [Source: Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, At the Heart of Art: A Snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporations in the Visual Arts Sector, 2012]

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[3] According to the Australia Council for the Arts' Art Facts, only 524 Indigenous Australians were recorded as being employed in visual arts and crafts activities as their main job in the 2011 Census. [Source: <http://artfacts.australiacouncil.gov.au> Accessed 15 January 2014]

Whatever the reason, Indigenous arts workers have seen little of the trickle-down benefits that the Indigenous visual arts industry has to offer, and not just in financial terms but in the levels and types of support, training, education and positions offered.

I believe we need to recall what is core to succession planning – in our way. In our cultural way, Elders were expected to provide teaching, mentorship and a way into cultural knowledge that was shielded from outsiders. There's been a dynamic shift in this idea from a singular and direct transmission of knowledge, to this knowledge being shared in multiple ways – between and amongst knowledge sharers. The younger generation of Indigenous arts workers utilise new media and technology in ways that inspire and, frankly, astonish me. Still, central to the tradition of Indigenous succession planning is the idea that ownership of knowledge is privileged, and that the ownership brings responsibility and an innate degree of advocacy that is required for cultural continuity. In broader contemporary terms, continued in-house ownership of knowledge, control of resources and advocacy for others (in this case the Indigenous visual arts community) provides the socio-political base and platform for economic and cultural sustainability.

However, the responsibility for succession planning cannot be laid solely at the feet of Indigenous arts professionals. Institutions themselves need to understand the importance of succession planning and how it may benefit them also. Some do it already, usually because resource allocation to succession planning has been seen as a priority. In my opinion, Indigenous money shouldn't have to be used to fund Indigenous curatorial and arts worker positions including internships and those sequestered for succession planning. It should be an intrinsic component within the overall staffing resource allocation, embedded within the cultural values of the institution.

I would advocate a community Legacy Collection above and beyond all else. A great example is the collection held by the Warburton community in Western Australia. It provides the potential for an Indigenous curator, and in time, the opportunity for an Indigenous conservator, to be funded to remain on their own country, caring for and working with important works of art and culture in the long term. It is placing importance on, and adequately resourcing, succession planning that sows these seeds and allows individuals and communities to grow. The greatest dream I have, apart from seeing my own children live to become healthy, happy and decent human beings, is to facilitate the development of a Nyoongar Legacy Collection, held and cared for by Nyoongar artists and arts workers. It won't happen by itself. No one else will do this for us, and nor should they. It's up to us.