Marketing art from the desert

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Abstract This case study examines key issues facing art centres marketing Indigenous Art from remote area Australia. It focuses on the exhibition Balgo 4-04 held at Warlayirti Artists Art Centre (WAAC), Balgo, Western Australia at Easter 2004. Art exhibitions in remote area communities are not a new phenomenon. The element that differentiated Balgo 4-04 was that the characteristics of a major commercial exhibition were transported to an art centre in the middle of the Tanami desert. The event Balgo 4-04 reflected many of the commercial pressures placed on the art centre by the art market. These include the constant demand for high quality work from collectors and dealers; the demand by major commercial galleries for solo exhibitions of major artists; the expectation of special treatment and personalised service by collectors; the pressure on artists to produce work and the art centre’s role as both a wholesale and retail outlet. As well, there was a fundamental change in perspective due to the withdrawal of government subsidy concerning its business operations. There was a clear focus on the core business of art production and maximising returns through sales. Simultaneously, Balgo 4-04 revealed the inherent risks in seeking independence, no matter how transitory, from commercial galleries, through retailing art directly to collectors rather than through the usual practice of wholesaling art. Balgo 4-04 was a unique event. In the case study that follows, an analysis of the details of the event shows the phenomena of marketing art from remote areas and the challenges faced by art centres trying to remain viable in remote locations.

Biography Jacqueline Healy is Director of Bundoora Homestead Art Centre. She has a doctorate from the University of Melbourne on the marketing of Australian Indigenous art from remote area communities. She is a former director of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

Introduction

Balgo 4-04 was an art exhibition held over Easter 2004 at Warlayirti Artists Art Centre (WAAC) in Balgo, Western Australia. The Warlayirti Artists Aboriginal Corporation (WAAC) is located in the Aboriginal community of Balgo Hills (Wirramanu) about 300 km south of Halls Creek, situated on the edge of the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts in northern Western Australia. Balgo Hills was established in 1964–65 as a Catholic mission station for people who came mainly from the Kukatja group from the remote areas south and south west of Sturt Creek. The exhibition showcased the work of renowned and emerging artists from Balgo, Billiluna, Yagga Yagga and Mulan. During Easter in 2004 over eighty visitors travelled to Warlayirti Artists Aboriginal Corporation (WAAC) in Balgo for the exhibition Balgo 4-04. Many flew from major capital cities to Alice Springs or Kununurra, and then by light aircraft charter to Balgo Hills. Others travelled by road along the Tanami Track from Alice Springs or Halls Creek. I flew into Balgo from Alice Springs and arrived at noon on Easter Saturday, 10 April 2004, to observe the event and interview participants. Balgo 4-04 included artworks collected over two years. The exhibition showcased artworks of the highest quality that usually would appear in major commercial galleries in Sydney or...
Melbourne. But, significantly, the exhibition was held at the art centre at the edge of the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts.

The incentive to stage Balgo 4-04 was the funding crisis created by the withdrawal by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) of operational funding from Warlayirti Artists in 2002. The exhibition (which was eighteen months in the planning) was viewed as an opportunity to inject funds directly into the art centre. Arts advisors Samantha Togni and Stephen Williamson commented that it was:

A fundraising event, a sort of one off thing for Warlayirti Artists Aboriginal Corporation (WAAC) moving into a new time in its development as a self-funding art centre. This was a special event to generate some funds for the organization and to have a reserve to ensure its sustainability (Togni & Williamson 2004).

Balgo 4-04 was also an opportunity to showcase the breadth of artistic talent at WAAC by displaying the well-known artists alongside emerging artists in the country in which the art was produced. This event provided a moment of reconciliation that allowed buyers, collectors and visitors to experience the country and meet the artists in their own environment. The promotion of the event had been three-pronged: direct mailing of an invitation to attend to valued collectors and dealers; placing of details of the event on the Warlayirti Artists website and advertisements in art magazines such as Art and Australia.

People attending Balgo 4-04 were required to register. There were two reasons for this approach. Firstly there was a perceived need to control numbers if the event was to be manageable and, secondly and more significantly, the arts advisors wanted to prevent unethical dealers attending. The registration pack sent to potential visitors included information on the way the event would be coordinated, mentioning travel, accommodation and eating arrangements. There was also information on the options for buying works at Balgo 4-04. The approaches for attracting participants made the event open to all who could afford the time and transport costs. In fact no applications...
for registration were rejected. All who applied attended. This gave dealers, major
collectors and other interested parties equal access to the event.

A key piece of information in the information pack was that there would be no preview
of works, although there were some exceptions. Eight reserved works were available
for purchase by silent tender – a process of confidential bidding. The works offered
through silent tender could be viewed on the website prior to the exhibition opening.
They were by the best known Balgo artists: Tjumpy Tjapanangka, Sam Tjampitjin (now
deceased), Boxer Milner, Eubena Nampilijn, Napanangka Yukenbarri (deceased),
Elizabeth Nyumi, Helicopter Tjungurrayi and Kathleen Paddoon. The deadline for silent
tenders (bids for the works) was 3.00 pm on Easter Saturday. The artworks were then
offered to the highest tenders if they met the reserve prices for the paintings.

Another opportunity to contribute funds to the community was a Fundraising Raffle for a
work by Tjumpy Tjapanangka. Proceeds of the raffle were to be used to take artists
back to their traditional lands. Raffle tickets could be purchased when registering to
attend the exhibition, on the website, or on the day of the exhibition. The raffle was
limited to 100 tickets, priced at $200 each. The raffle also enabled people not attending
Balgo 4-04 to contribute. The registration information also requested donations for the
art centre. The raffle and the opportunity to donate funds meant fundraising initiatives
were combined with a major commercial sale of art works.

Such an event was not possible without external resources and expertise. Nonie Wales,
a consultant located in Sydney and a specialist in event organisation, was employed to
assist with the organisation of the event. There were also logistical benefits to her
location. The Sydney location meant easy access to printing and postal services for the
creation and distribution of the information packs not easily accessible in Balgo. As
well, ten volunteers from outside the community worked in Balgo in the two weeks
leading up to the event. The art centre was physically changed. Temporary walls were
erected to cover existing louvred windows and shelves filled with pots of paints thus
creating more walls to install the art. The centre was transformed from a place of
intense artistic activity and casual disorder to a pristine series of white gallery spaces.
The decision to convert the art centre into an exhibition space through the use of
temporary walls was to enable as many works as possible to be displayed. The art
centre had become a commercial gallery space.

Volunteers were crucial in the logistics of catering for the visitors. They compiled folders
of paperwork that explained the protocol of visiting the community and most importantly
the procedures for purchasing the art. On arrival, visitors were taken to the registration
desk where tents and bedding and the crucial buyer’s number were allocated. They
also received the Balgo show bag (which was bright yellow, reflecting the bold colour of
the art) which included a folder, lunch pack and a bottle of water (Figure 2).

The contents of the folder were
essential for participation in the
event. They included forms for
the silent tender, applications
for permission to take
photographs and protocols for
staying in the community, as
well as information about the
art centre. There were details
of the art centre committee
members and their
photographs so visitors could
recognise them. The
community members and
artists were not directly
involved in the physical
preparation for the event.

Figure 2 Buyers number and other items in information pack.
Photographed by J. Healy. Courtesy of Warlayirti Artists.
External resources were used for these purposes rather than the local people. This reflected the nature of the exhibition, which was the creation of an urban art gallery environment that required streamlined administrative operations.

The cultural significance of **Balgo 4-04**

Speeches given by the President and Vice-President of the WAAC committee, Philomena Baadjo and Wumali Joan Nagomara, articulated the significance of the event to the artists and the community. Philomena Baadjo explained the purpose of the exhibition:

> We are having this exhibition at Easter at our art centre, Warlayirti Artists. The old people are painting about their old Tjukurpa (dreaming). When the old people paint they sing. The young people sit with them and the old people tell them stories about their old stories and they do it their style. Warlayirti Artists is important for the people in the Kutjungka region because we can keep our painting and culture strong (Baadjo 2004).

Then, Wumali Joan Nagomara commented on the cultural significance of the event:

> In early days it was very important for the people to get their boomerangs and clap sticks together from different places and have a big fire and start singing and dancing. All tribes would come in and they would tell each other stories from Tjukurpa and share their cultures together and share gifts. That’s the right way. They did it and it is what we are doing here today. We are welcoming different cultures and sharing our learning (Nagomara 2004).

The President and Vice-President of the art centre committee are leaders. They expressed the cultural value to the community of the art centre as a vehicle to share knowledge and stories across generations. Senior people who were born in their traditional country and who have experienced the traditional Indigenous way of life in...
the bush are committed to teaching their cultural belief systems to younger
generations. The senior artists painting in the art centre teach their skills and stories to
younger people through painting. These comments challenge the more critical views of
art centres that they undermine Indigenous culture through commercialisation. Both
Philomena Baadjo and Wumali Joan Nagomara believe that the cultural and
commercial role of art centres may successfully co-exist. In fact, the purpose of
Wumali Joan Nagomara’s speech was to invite the visitors to share in celebration of
the culture of her people, not just the art.

The exhibition itself

There was no access to the exhibition prior to the opening. Visitors sat along the
verandah, shuffling through their papers in nervous anticipation as the time of the
opening drew near. Then the artists and their families emerged just before 1.00 pm,
gathering around the art centre, along with the ubiquitous camp dogs, for the opening
celebrations. Artists had come in from the other communities in the area – Yagga
Yagga, Billiluna and Mulan. Due to monsoonal activity in the north, recent rains had
made the Sturt Creek rise to near impassable levels. A half-submerged BMW four-
wheel drive bore testimony to the fate of the foolhardy. One of the artists, Elizabeth
Nyumi, travelled across the creek by boat with a cluster of her simmering pink
canvases packed behind her to attend the opening of the exhibition. The late wet
season also meant supplies for the event were brought by road by the arts advisor,
Stephen Williamson, from Alice Springs rather than Halls Creek. This trip takes fifteen
hours one way by road, compared to a three-hour return trip.

After the speeches the
artists led the stream of
visitors into the art centre.
The visitors clambered to
see some works on their
way to the sales point.
There was no time to bask
in the remarkable range of
artwork on display. It was
first in, first served. There
were no limitations placed
on the number of works
purchased, so a place in the
queue was crucial to
successfully secure a work.
Senior artists Ningie
Nangala, Bai Bai Napangarti
and Eubena Nampitjin sat in
the gallery together under
one of Eubena’s works,
talking and greeting all who
approached them. Another
of Balgo’s most prominent artists, Tjumpo Tjapanangka, took visitors to see his work
and told his stories. Known artist Boxer Milner calmly watched the crowd while Sam
Tjampitjin and Fred Tjakamarra wandered in for a short time to observe the event.
Many other artists and members of the community watched with interest the visitors
queuing to buy their works and talking to collectors about their art.

For a day the art world descended on Balgo. Commercial galleries were represented
from throughout Australia, including galleries from Gallery Gondwana (Alice Springs),
Short Street Gallery (Broome), Thornquest Gallery (the Gold Coast), Alcaston Gallery
(Melbourne), Grantpirrie Gallery (Sydney) and Artmob (Hobart). Martin Wardrop, the
owner of Aboriginal Art on Line, also attended. Stephanie Hawkins represented ANKAAA (Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists) and Warlukurlangu Art Centre; Yuendumu representatives were arts advisors Gloria Alfonso and Cecilia Morales. Helen Read of Didgeri Air Art Tours brought in eleven collectors and stayed for three days. Nicolas Rothwell of *The Australian* and Sue Neales of *The Financial Review* formed the press presence. Judith Ryan, Curator of Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Victoria, was the only representative from a public art gallery. Scott Livesey, previously of Sotheby's and now running his own gallery in Melbourne, arrived ten days before the exhibition as a volunteer to assist with the installation of the exhibition and also assisted with the organisation of the photography. He described the show as ‘a landmark exhibition’. Other major collectors present included Colin and Liz Laverty (who have the most comprehensive private collection of art from this area) and Ann Lewis, a National Gallery of Australia Council member and renowned art collector.

The visitors attracted to this event all had in common some knowledge of Balgo art. Stephen Williamson, WAAC’s Arts Advisor, commented:

> There were more people at the event who were collectors of Aboriginal Art rather than dealers; there were significant dealers but more collectors. We wanted a broad range of people. We didn’t want all dealers because dealers would buy to resell it (Togni and Williamson 2004).

However, there were some dealers who had stayed away due to the pricing policy of no dealer discounts. There was also some resentment from dealers that major works had been held back that could have been sent to them for major shows of these artists’ works in their galleries. As a business venture, to not respect long-standing relationships with commercial galleries was a high-risk strategy.

### The Balgo 4-04 artwork

The exhibition was a celebration of the art of Balgo. It was an ambitious display that no single commercial art gallery would have attempted. There were 135 works in the exhibition collected over a two-year period, including significant works by major and emerging artists. Arts Advisor Stephen Williamson curated the exhibition. It was a *salon hang*: works were displayed covering every wall space available in tightly organised groups. Eubena Nampitjin’s work was well-represented with over thirty works celebrating her diverse and proficient style, including a major piece in rich tones of crimson and white (1500 x 1000mm) which surpassed her entry in the 2003 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) exhibition in Darwin, in composition and energetic delivery of brushstroke. A group of works by Eubena consisting of thirty 400 x 300mm canvases filled a wall. It revealed the many variations of her style and each work enhanced the others (see Figure 5). Boxer Milner’s work was represented by four major works including one that departed dramatically from his signature style because of the absence of texture and a lime green palette. Innovative works represented artists such as Bai Bai Napangarti, Pauline Sunfly, Kathleen Paddoon, Nora Wompi and Ningie Nangala. Senior men such as Fred Tjakamarra, Sam Tjamptijin and Brandy Tjungurrayi were represented by a significant piece each. Works by emerging artists were exhibited alongside these works.
Balgo 4-04 as a commercial event

The commercial results of Balgo 4-04 were impressive. There were 135 works in the exhibition and more than 90% sold. The sales results were double the expectations of the art centre. All the works that sold through silent tender reached from 50% to 200% above the reserve price and set record prices. The major work by Eubena Nampitjin sold for $40,000 and a large work by Tjumpo for $25,000, creating new benchmarks for prices of works by these artists. This reflected the intense market interest in the works and that these prices were readily achievable for works of the highest quality.

Notably, art centres have always played a significant role in providing visitors with an opportunity to buy Indigenous art directly from where it is painted for the tourist and wholesale market (art dealers). Balgo 4-04 built on that trend of collectors independently visiting art centres and buying art directly. But predominantly, it was a response to financial insecurity caused by the sudden withdrawal of government subsidy in 2001. In fact, due to the reputation of Balgo art an event like Balgo 4-04 was not required to sell the work in the exhibition. There were waiting lists for all the major artists and several of the emerging artists. Most works were purchased as soon as they were painted or sent on consignment to major commercial galleries in capital cities. The exhibition was not commemorating a special community event such as the opening of the culture centre or a festival. The art exhibition was the event. The best of Balgo work over the past two years had been kept for the exhibition that celebrated the great artistic and cultural strength of the community, but most importantly to obtain the maximum financial return. The works sold at Balgo 4-04 were all sold at premium prices. The galleries and valued collectors alike did not receive their usual discounts. The primary focus of the exhibition was to raise as much revenue as possible from every aspect of the event. That alone made the approach unsustainable because dealers and collectors alike would not forsake their discounts on a regular basis.
Balgo 4-04 as a cultural event

There was another aspect of Balgo 4-04 – a by-product of the main event. It was a desire to reclaim control of the marketing of the art. The exhibition enabled the artists to share with their family and friends the phenomenon of an art exhibition as held in art galleries in capital cities, even though the major artists frequently travelled down south for openings. It was usually not possible to take a group of people from the community to openings. Balgo 4-04 was a chance for literally everyone in the community to experience a major exhibition and see first hand the intense interest of collectors in the Balgo work (Figure 6).

![Image](https://example.com/image1)

Figure 6 Philomena Baadjo and her family in the exhibition. Helicopter Tjungurrayi in the background. Photographed by Kim Lawler. Courtesy of Warlayirti Artists.

From a community development perspective the exhibition also provided inspiration for many of the emerging artists as well as the older artists to produce their best work. There was a flurry of artistic activity in the lead-up to the exhibition. In a community where most locals’ interaction with white people related to problems concerning unemployment, substance abuse or health, Balgo 4-04 was an extremely positive event that acknowledged the community’s achievements. Importantly, it provided insights into the workings of the Indigenous art industry to the Balgo community generally.

Some visitors asked whether the presence of a price list created friction in the community because it revealed the differentiation in prices of artworks for senior and emerging artists and the art centre commission. This was not an issue in Balgo, although it has caused friction in some other communities. A great deal of effort had been made to ensure that the art centre committee and artists understood the payment systems and pricing policies administered by the art centre. As Samantha Togni, Director of Warlayirti Artists, explained:

*The experience of Balgo 4-04 is building on this kind of strategy and the development of the committee and artists…particularly the committee members and younger artists in terms of their growth in confidence, level of commitment and excitement about the fact they see a future as the next Helicopter or the next Eubena* (Togni & Williamson 2004).

Art centres usually distribute works to be exhibited through commercial galleries. Rarely do they have the opportunity to curate the exhibition and determine the contents of the
catalogue. *Balgo 4-04* was the art centre reclaiming control of the presentation and selection of the work. The arts advisor who works with artists on a daily basis chose the works to be included. From a marketing perspective the arts advisor and artists' committee were ensuring that their priorities and perspectives were communicated. They had again taken control of their image.

The *Balgo 4-04* catalogue provided current visual material on Balgo art. The catalogue shared the major works in the exhibition with a larger audience. This was important because access to the exhibition was limited. The essay in the catalogue by George Alexander, Public Programs Co-ordinator at the Art Gallery of NSW, placed the art works firmly in a contemporary art context and signalled the significance of many of Balgo’s top artists. Through fifty-two illustrations, the catalogue documented the major pieces of Balgo art produced between 2002 and 2004, particularly paying tribute to Eubena Nampitjin, Elizabeth Nyumi and Boxer Milner. The catalogue provided current material on the art from Balgo. A comparison between the images in Cowan’s *Wirrimanu, Aboriginal Art from Balgo Hills* (1994) and *Balgo New Directions* (1999) and the *Balgo 4-04* catalogue indicates the development of the work of many of these artists. This development reveals shifts to the simpler forms, brighter palettes and more sweeping brush strokes that have transformed Balgo art over the last decade. There are also significant artists not included in the earlier publications by Cowan namely Pauline Sunfly whose work derives from that of her father Sunfly Tjampitjin, Kathleen Paddoon and Boxer Milner who are all established artists. Most significant are the inclusion of the emerging artists of the next generation represented in the catalogue: Thomas Butler, Geraldine and Ann (Frances) Nowee, Raymond Olodoodi, Christine Yukenbarri and John Lee. Funds for the catalogue were obtained through a government grant from the Western Australian Government. The arts advisors felt that the catalogue could generate interest and commitment from a major public art gallery to hold a retrospective of Balgo art to reflect on nearly twenty years of innovative and highly individual artistic practice.

**The role of galleries, dealers and collectors**

Art centres face many challenges in marketing art from remote areas. Their remoteness restricts their ability to maintain client relations. It is also difficult to raise the profile of the art and to interest galleries in emerging artists at such distances from major markets. In recent years technology has dramatically changed aspects of these relationships through email and the development of websites. Most art centres have websites that provide details of their location, cultural background and images of the art or craft produced. These websites are linked to the websites of the key advocacy bodies such as Desart (The Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres) and ANKAAA (Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists). There are also websites that sell artwork on behalf of art centres such as Aboriginal Art on Line. Art centres are able to send collectors images of works by email and to regularly update their websites. These tools have brought art centres closer to their clients. However, the immediacy of issues in community-based art centres such as dealing with artists on a day-to-day basis, logistical problems, and low staffing numbers, make client development and maintenance fraught with the limitations of time restraints and lack of proximity. These elements underline the significance of the art centres’ relationships with the commercial gallery sector. Emily Rohr, Director from Short Street Gallery (Broome), commented:

> I am a firm believer in the gallery system as a good one and I don’t think this kind of thing [Balgo 4-04] necessarily excludes the gallery system. A one off event that is really good for bolstering spirit within the community... My biggest thing is [that] the people are happy and that is all I care about really. This is the bottom line so long as the Aboriginal people are being served through exhibiting their best art and getting the maximum money (Rohr 2004).
There was much speculation at the exhibition about whether the art centre was moving into the retail realm occupied by commercial galleries. Dealers were suspicious that the long-term strategy was to reduce involvement with commercial galleries and sell directly to collectors. Many of the dealers at Balgo 4-04 were anxious about this possibility and felt uncomfortable about aspects of the initiative. They resented the stockpiling of major and high quality work for the exhibition that otherwise might have been available for exhibitions at their galleries and they were perplexed by the direct access minor collectors gained to buy major works by attending the event. It was not commercially attractive for dealers to buy through Balgo 4-04 unless they were buying for their own collection. Works were offered at only 10% less than retail whereas dealers usually purchased works for 40% less than the retail price.

The procedures for buying the paintings also created some dissatisfaction among the private collectors. Some collectors felt harassed and impatient due to the lack of preview time and the fact of a long queue. When art works are competitively sought after, the scenario of queuing and little time to contemplate the works are not unusual phenomena. The annual Desart Mob Show at Araluen in Alice Springs attracts large crowds. Keen buyers attend the exhibition in pairs so one may select the works while the other stands in the queue. At the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) in Darwin, works are for sale but collectors have to buy the works through the art centre or dealer. However, the context of the art centre elicited a particular response. People had travelled a long way to attend the exhibition and were paying above market value for many of the works and yet had no opportunity to calmly view the exhibition.

Conclusion

The distinctiveness of the Balgo 4-04 exhibition was that the art centre expressed the confidence and professional skill base to engage with the marketplace in retail rather than wholesale mode. Balgo 4-04 represented a significant change in the culture of art centres on several levels – in expressing the confidence to directly engage in marketing their art to major collectors without the conduit of commercial galleries; asserting their right to present major works in the context of their own choosing and enabling artists to engage with the art market in their own environment.

However, Balgo 4-04 in essence has to be a one-off event or an event held every three or five years because of the very factors that made it a success. WAAC does not have the resources to undertake such an event on a regular basis. Collectors will only make the effort to attend if the works are exceptional. The legacies of Balgo 4-04 were the marketing benefits to WAAC created by setting record prices for several Balgo artists and producing a catalogue that shared a major body of artwork with a broader art community.

WAAC will be dependent on commercial galleries in the future and it is not possible for art centres to duplicate the role of commercial galleries or gain a more sustainable return on their activities. It is their location and the lack of resources that make such a plan impossible. Balgo 4-04 enabled an injection of funds from the sale of art works at a greater than market value due to a specifically engineered event.

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