

National identity and the future of branding the arts

Abstract

Learning from the past is used to assist agencies to move towards a desired future in order to build better practices. We assess 48 years of annual reports of the Australia Council for the Arts, the government's arts funding and advisory agency, in order to understand how Australian national identity has been crafted through branding the arts, identifying opportunities for improved future branding. We find that the agency's branding reflects cultural, consumer and corporate perspectives with their endeavour to develop a 'market' for the arts. Although the agency succeeded in creating internationally recognised arts as a brand they failed to develop nuanced understanding of the brand reflecting community values, norms and cultural practices. Branding could be a mediator across the cultural divide bridging polarisations in society resulting from a colonial past, thus influencing future branding practices. Future approaches need to take account of broader social, cultural, and theoretical concerns of branding the arts in postcolonial Australia. The study makes recommendations for the agency to move away from the brand-consumer dyad to brand understanding which reflects *critical* perspectives. It recommends a balanced centricity perspective for future branding of the arts, taking account of complex framing of national identity in Australia.

Key words: brand; government agency; longitudinal content analysis; desired futures

Introduction

Australia has two histories, a short settler history of around 250 years and a long Aboriginal peoples' history of over 65,000 years. Using a social constructivist approach (Boyatzis, 1998) the topic of this paper relates to understanding Australian national identity and branding amidst tensions between Aboriginal and settler Australian peoples and identities in relation to desired future states. We do so by assessing the past to determine future positions on branding by calling for the embracing of all the collective identities of Australia through socially constructed networks, previously used to assist agencies to move towards a desired state (Davies & Sarpong, 2013; Ghazinoory, Malekifar, Nasri, & Kousari, 2021; Rhisiart, 2013). The Australia Council for the Arts (ACA), the federal government's arts funding and advisory body, plays an important role in shaping national identity as well as increasing accessibility and visibility of Australia's arts and culture nationally and internationally through its brand. Like agencies elsewhere, it faces choices about its future in order to maintain relevance. Since the inception of the ACA in 1972, national identity has been at the forefront of their institutional response to the portrayal and shaping of the arts, often using both settler arts and Aboriginal arts as the medium (Rentschler, Subramaniam & Martin, 2019; Stevenson, 2007). Branding came later. Together, national identity and branding provide part of institutional foresight (Fergnani & Song, 2020) and leader insight that jointly and separately ensure that a forward-looking institution has a sustainable future, by critically reviewing past approaches to problem-solving when changing conditions deem it necessary. Within this context, we explore future implications of the effects of a polarizing corporate environment on organisation branding and identity, examining its dynamic social framework and the resultant business implications. Our study is related to managing colonial and post-colonial cultures and norms, specifically those tensions between Aboriginal

and settler identities on organisation branding and identity. We do so by focusing on the ACA, supporting Australian arts and artists, as they seek to develop national identity and branding over a 48-year period, examined through annual reports. The use of longitudinal data from the past to assess better future positions on branding is novel and can be used to improve policy and planning about the future of branding in Australia, as well as potentially in other countries (e.g., Irvine & Fortune, 2016; Rentschler, Subramaniam, & Martin, 2019; Tinker & Niemark, 1988).

We do so by drawing on the critical branding literature, including its future practice (e.g., Gidley, 2010; Heilbrunn, 2015; Holt, 2004) and the broader futures literature (e.g., Costanza et al., 2015; Chambers et al., 2019; Degand, 2022). Whitelock and Fastoso (2007) evaluate future branding practice from an international perspective, something that ACA needs to consider as it competes for talent, funding and other resources in the post-pandemic world. We apply Schroder's (2017) conceptual four brand archetypes: *cultural*; *consumer*; *corporate*; and *critical perspectives*, elaborating on underlying themes. The *cultural perspective* considers brand as part of culture rather than a management tool. It emphasizes the importance of culture and history as part of brand context, interacting with consumers, filling a space often missing between strategic concepts of brand identity and consumer interpretations of brand; and brand heritage, history and legacy, and their relation to meaning, value and associations. Schroeder (2009) defines brand culture as 'the cultural code of brands—history, images, myths, art and theatre—that influences brand meaning and value in the marketplace.' This brand culture is socially constructed by the stakeholders involved as interested consumers interact with corporate brands in seeking to give more meaning to their own lives. Similarly, Aboriginal and other artists make use of their own identities as artists to raise the level of recognition of their work as their careers develop. Aboriginal artists align their work to their historical cultural past, while non-Aboriginal artists

seek to advance their own artistic standing within the artistic marketplace. The task for ACA should therefore be to develop a meaningful collective brand identity which appeals to all Australian artists. Holt (2004) deals with ‘identity myths’, and the communication of authenticity, rather than through the usual branding mechanism of promoting features and benefits via segmentation, targeting, positioning, brand equity and loyalty approaches. The demand for myths produces myth markets, usually as the result of consumer demand. A brand can be viewed as a cultural resource (Holt, 2002; Arvidsson, 2005), becoming iconic through its symbolic value, playing a part in everyday life (Belk et al., 1989; Holt, 2003, 2004). Importantly, iconicity is seen as:

the person or thing [that] is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important. (Holt, 2004, p. 1)

Of importance to our paper is that brand culture ‘focuses on how brands share stories, build community and solve problems,’ reflecting people’s ideologies, lifestyles, and cultural values (Palmer & Burton, 2019; Schroeder, 2017, p. 1526). The *consumer perspective* shifts attention from the corporate to the consumer and their everyday lives in order to understand brand roles. We utilize the consumer perspective to concern artists as both producers and consumers of their and others work (Meamber, 2000). Brand consumption and production is an aesthetic process involving acceptance, or otherwise of the images being utilized to convey the brand.

Key concepts include brand relationships (how consumers form attachments to brands and communities and tribes, i.e., groups of followers of brand who together celebrate it due to shared ideals, rituals and routines). A key visual aspect is consumer self-generated content which competes for attention with corporate expressions of identity. This signals a shift from corporate-generated (Whiston, 1991) to consumer-generated strategic visual imagery, as it invokes

authentic imagery as testimonial. This illustrates the changes in the brand from sources of information, persuasion and representation to emblems of social currency (Schroeder, 2017). The *corporate perspective* focuses on brand from a strategic point of view, given that a key concept is the corporate brand (Balmer, 1995; Schroeder, 2017; Stevenson, 2007). The corporate perspective is linked to brand identity, also reflecting a visual turn in branding. The *critical perspective* provides a reflective point of view, illustrating how brands function as ethical, ideological and political objects. It can reflect people's dislike of brand, especially pronounced on social media. This sees brands expand into institutions such as hospitals, nations, politics, universities and personal lives (Schroeder, 2017).

Viewing reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Fuller & Loogma, 2009; Potter & Rentschler, 1996), and supported by historical documents, we find that ACA branding for the last five decades reflects *cultural*, *consumer* and *corporate* perspectives with their endeavour to develop a 'market' for the arts. Aboriginal identity is both socially and historically constructed over time, while other Australian identities are also shaped by social forces through shared beliefs and behaviours. This approach enabled us to analyse the process in which change occurs by examining phenomena such as visual data (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in annual reports. Hence, our research questions are: *What do annual reports of an arts agency reveal about the effects of a polarizing environment on managing Aboriginal and settler identities? How does an arts agency attempt to encompass all people into a branded, national identity as part of its future?*

The contribution of this study is that it confirms the four archetypes proposed but provides a more nuanced, rich, critical and transformational assessment of their operation in a government arts agency responsible for artists and the arts. The study examines branding as a

mediator across the cultural divide, bridging present polarizations in society resulting from a colonial past. In short, this means that on the one hand, the branding environment is progressing towards openness, empowerment and liberation (Gidley, 2010), whilst on the other hand, brand as a mediator seems to point in the direction of conservatism and traditionalism. Branding could unify society rather than divide it, if the appropriate approach is taken in introducing it, by limiting agency power, its sources and manifestations, in the medium to long-term future. Tackling such issues may require a radical departure from branding-as-usual that requires changing the framing of brand practice. The future needs to take account of broader social, cultural and theoretical concerns of branding the arts in postcolonial Australia. The study makes recommendations for the agency to move away from the brand-consumer dyad to brand understanding which reflects the *critical* perspectives we uncover.

The rest of this article is structured as follows: first, we examine Aboriginal peoples in Australia, positioning their story against the story of white settlement, followed by over-viewing post-colonialism and national identity; we then examine branding and national identity, including brand criticality as a means of understanding brand power relations linked to post-colonialism. Next, we outline the socially constructed research approach taken in this longitudinal study. Then we present the findings of how brand was linked to national identity building but which went awry over time, followed by the discussion. Finally, we present our conclusions and recommendations for the medium to long-term future, including how branding could be a mediator across the cultural divide bridging present polarizations in society resulting from a colonial past.

Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal peoples and the arts in Australia

Aboriginal culture remains central to Australian national identity. Given Australia's colonial history, however, Australian national identity is paradoxical, reflecting tensions between colonial past, postcolonial present and uncertain future (Camilleri, 2007; Short, 2012). There are existing tensions in the postcolonial present regarding: (1) cultural prominence and commercial importance of Aboriginal arts, but with many Aboriginal peoples remaining marginalised in society (Altman, 2005) and the traditional support for non-Aboriginal arts; (2) economic interest of Aboriginal arts where income and employment from it commodify the arts, threatening authentic creativity, underlying spirituality and intrinsic value of the collective culture of the Dreaming stories which are sacred (Short, 2012); and (3) development of the art market led by the ACA to create international recognition and demand, yet unequal exchanges between artists—especially but not only Aboriginal artists—with savvy art collectors and commercial gallerists (Short, 2012) sometimes exploiting artistic naivety. Australia's precolonial history has etched a continuing legacy for national identity, especially of Aboriginal peoples in the postcolonial context, yet settler Australian and Aboriginal Australian relationships remain problematic.

This brief history does not do justice to the complexity, tensions, inequality, discrimination, and cultural disconnection of the two worlds in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples live in Australia. Their lives span the Australian experience since settler 'discovery' or 'invasion' in 1770 and settlement in 1788. Aboriginal peoples comprise 3.3% of the Australian population of 26 million people, with one third of Aboriginals living in cities and the rest in regional, rural, and remote locations. They live with complex disadvantages: about half young Aboriginal peoples in detention on any night of the year; with lower education; shorter life expectancy; higher child

mortality; and poorer employment outcomes than the rest of the population (Anderson, 2007). Since white settlement, Aboriginal peoples have had their population decimated through disease and oppressive policies (e.g., government policies of assimilation; forced relocation; forcible removal of children from their homes). There is a gap between the lives of settler Australians and Aboriginal Australians, leading to numerous policies seeking to overcome it. The most recent Closing the Gap report (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020) illustrates the significant work that still needs to be done to equalize opportunities between Aboriginal Australians and settler Australians.

In 1967, Aboriginal peoples were recognised in a referendum as citizens of Australia, demonstrating the slow change that would occur over the following decades in white perceptions of Aboriginal peoples. Furthermore, the 1970s was a decade of change, with the establishment of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975; the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. The Aboriginal flag was designed in the 1970s; it slowly became accepted and flies alongside the Australian flag in most ceremonial locations (e.g., government house; local government town halls). Change continued over the following decades. Of note, for example, for this paper are: Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody (1991), the overturning of the ‘terra nullius’ fiction that the land was uninhabited when Europeans arrived (1992), and the National Apology to the Stolen Generations (2008), that examined the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents.

The establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board was a key plank in the ACA from its foundation in 1972. Coincidentally, 1972 was the year when the contemporary Aboriginal arts movement was established, starting the long shift from gazing at Aboriginal art as ethnographic rather than ‘high art’ (Myers, 2002). The establishment of the ACA and the Aboriginal Arts

Board played a leading role in that shift and the gradual recognition that Aboriginal arts were no longer ‘anthropological objects’ but ‘art’ (Rentschler et al., 2020; Venbrux, 2002). Non-Aboriginal arts are a different matter. Derived originally from the traditional English settler heritage of Australia, they emerged in the mid-19th century (e.g., museums; galleries), to the mid-20th century (e.g., performing arts). Over time, with a strong migration program, with 40 percent of people born overseas or with one parent born overseas, the arts diversified to include representation of migrant individuals and groups (e.g., waves of Italians and Greeks after the second world war; Vietnamese after the Vietnam war; and more diverse groups after crises or international conflict in countries such as Africa, South America or China). The various art forms that emerged are mostly supported by the ACA, through its funding programs. Nonetheless, historical ACA support for traditional art forms, such as opera, ballet or theatre, continue to attract the lion’s share of agency funding, while the narrative presented in stories of national identity and brand focus on Aboriginal arts (Rentschler, Subramaniam, & Martin, 2019).

The postcolonial notion deals with ‘a range of social, cultural, political, ethical and philosophical questions that recognise the salience of the colonial experience and its persisting aftermath’ (Jack et al., 2011, p. 277), the complexity of which affects the future due to colonisation. Further, there are differences in power relations between Western and non-Western subjects, where the former proactive entity dominates over the latter passive entity (Jack & Westwood, 2006). The former has been described as superior, civilised, developed, moral, scientific and the latter in terms such as inferior, uncivilised, backward, immoral and superstitious (Said, 1978). Young (2016) evaluates the development of postcolonialism as a response to the concept of empire, imperialism and colonialism, illustrating his discussion with

insight from the actions of postcolonial leaders across the world. Adopting a postcolonial mindset infers a willingness to decolonize Western theory of the non-West (Scott, 1999).

In sum, this section highlights the research problem of Aboriginality being central to national identity, complicated by a settler nation with a long first people's history. This problem is relevant as a postcolonial interpretation of Aboriginal art should entail promoting the need to protect the art and its identity and culture, despite its use in corporate communication literature and other outputs (Coleman, 2017; Whiston, 1991). We address this problem in our study by problematising the impact of colonialism's bias on Australian Aboriginal peoples (Morseu-Diop et al., 2021), from a branding perspective. Ashcroft (2015) asks how we are to understand aesthetic engagement in postcolonial cultural production terms. This is particularly relevant here when the Aboriginal images and narratives in the Australia Council for the Arts annual reports (ACA ARs). Many of the later images can be described as trans-cultural in that they have evolved into entities which embrace both precolonial and postcolonial design aesthetics. McLean (2003) refers to this as symbolic traffic between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art.

Branding and National Identity

The need to build a future collective national identity is a high priority for the Australian federal government. By telling stories, iconic brands are seen to represent the 'collective anxieties and desires of a nation' (Holt, 2004, p. 6) but this position becomes complicated when several identities and 'nations' exist, as in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia (Myers, 2002). The iconicity of the cultural brand in this context has become diluted due to the lack of buy-in from all the parties concerned. The brand story as it stands does not effectively convey the intended narrative of the collective Australian nation. However, this literature does help to understand intricate networks of connections in local cultures (Appadurai, 1990), focusing on

understanding changing traditions through fragmented, multi-meaning complexities (Hannerz, 1992). Policy makers have employed arts and culture as a tool to help unite communities with diverse cultural backgrounds around a collective identity. Rhisiart (2013) calls for changes in the way future artistic and cultural practices are developed through a form of prototyping which engages with art consumers, producers and distributors where creativity is the common denominator. Selwood (2007) examines the future contemporary arts vision of Arts Council England, given its relationship with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and that other, business and political interests may impact to the detriment of artistic integrity. Over the last 70 years, four core drivers have shaped cultural policy in Australia which are to: (1) build a unified identity; (2) build reputation with internal or external stakeholders; (3) improve social outcomes; and (4) contribute to the economy (Trembath & Fielding, 2020b). Contemporary art has been associated with creativity and innovation (Schroder & Borgerson, 2002), as the way of the future in thinking and acting in relation to contemporary society, of which Aboriginal art forms a part, providing a way forward in contested debates about national identity. This is important, since Aboriginal peoples believe that their art is part of their identity (Coleman, 2017; Findlay, 2007).

When Australian Aboriginal art moves from its origins in the Aboriginal art community, through to commercial galleries (Belk & Groves, 1999), the notion of the brand evolves as the art gains wider recognition within an extended audience, moving from a precolonial to a postcolonial platform. Meanings and associations relating to the art becoming commoditised and aestheticized from non-Aboriginal perspectives. This results in both positive and negative implications for art and artist. When Belk and Groves wrote their paper, they noted how it was still often the case that art from traditional societies was housed in ethnographic museums (where it retained its original essence) or in art museums with their aesthetic aura (Sloggett,

2015). With the latter, the art becomes decontextualised from culture. The setting, then, and its audience, influence brand interpretation. Historically, it was the case that traditional art tended to be ‘exoticized and frozen in a timeless image of the primitive’ (Belk & Groves, 1999, p. 20). This scenario is changing, with much Aboriginal art having reached high status and legitimacy, despite contestations about location in museum or art gallery. In addition, reproductions of Aboriginal art by local artisans mean that work is being sold to tourists as craft rather than art (Metcalf, 1997). Hence, in an art marketplace, notions of authenticity and sacredness become blurred or lost (Acker, 2016). This impact is extended further as corporations expand their own art collections in order to reflect corporate identity, image and reputation in local, national and international markets, including communicating values and identity of businesses in visual terms (Kottasz et al., 2008; Williams & Biggemann, 2020).

Branding, then, is not a unified, grand theory and approach but rather, a way of grouping theoretical perspectives on the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. It offers reflexive treatments of power relations by being linked to post-colonialism (Arnould, 1989), providing heterogeneous rather than homogenous meanings:

consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets. (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869)

Consumers challenge and overcome control through their micro-emancipatory practices within a diverse, heterogeneous and uncontrollable market, eroding marketers' dominant position (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Hence, it teases out interconnections between commercially-

produced images, texts, and objects so that common practices and identities are understood collectively as giving meaning to group experiences (Kozinets, 2001).

In sum, brand dominance by organisations produces a cultural authority approach which promotes the belief that consumer culture is obedient towards the cultural authority of marketers and their brands (Ewen, 1988; Ritzer, 1995). Ideally, all parties communicate in an unrestricted way through a shared platform which is unencumbered, comprehensible, sincere, legitimate and truthful (Habermas, 1985), with which marketing theory and practice align, with no conflict between organisation and consumers, creating identity myths. When myths are strong, they can spread over other aspects of the brand via cultural halo effects (Holt, 2004). However, this process is also subject to cultural disruption as the myth becomes unstable or inappropriate. The issue in the context of this paper is whether or not Australia can have a harmonious, sustainable national ideology, given its colonial past and its chequered history with its Aboriginal peoples. As Findlay (2007) notes, it may necessitate radical systemic change. With cultural branding in this context, in order to be effective, it needs to have a central consistent story which shapes the brand's identity value and ultimately, brand reputation.

Method

This study examined complex stories in annual reports about national identity and branding the arts, situating the study within a web connecting it to the past, relating it to the present and projecting its meaning for the future (Palmer & Burton, 2019). The study utilised methodological creativity in informing broader creative industries research (Fuller, Warren, & Norman, 2016; Ghazinoory, Malekifar, Nasri, & Kousari, 2021), through the examination of a unique data set of ARs of the national peak body for the arts in Australia, the ACA. This is salient, since the creative industries in Australia contribute A\$117b to the economy annually (Trembath &

Fielding, 2020a). If this significant contribution to the economy is to continue and grow, then understanding the importance of a shared brand future for ACA is crucial; otherwise, the connection will diminish. We both critique the longitudinal approach to branding as its creativity becomes stilted and corporatised but also provide creativity and innovation as a research team in interpreting the data. It thus provides better understanding of how national identity and future branding are intertwined and can better develop.

Study Setting

The ACA (founded 1972)—a statutory authority, was modelled on the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Canada Council (Johanson & Rentschler, 2002). From its inception, the ACA's mission was not only to promote excellence in Australian arts but to also help develop a 'distinctly Australian' artistic identity (ACA AR, 1973). ACA's role was seen as paramount in building legitimacy with its artists, supported by branding to make ACA more visible, lauded and appreciated. Governed by the Australia Council Act 2013, the ACA is funded by the Federal government. Two principles guide operations: (i) the arm's length principle provides that the Minister must not give direction in relation to the making of a decision by the Council; and (ii) the peer assessment principle, whereby decisions on grants are made following assessments by artists, individuals closely associated with the arts, and community representatives who are peers of those being assessed (ACA AR, 2014-15). Nonetheless, the ACA Chair of the Board, called the Council, reports to the elected Minister for the Arts, illustrating a political dimension to an arts council that does cause additional tensions from time to time (Rentschler, Lee, & Subramaniam, 2021).

Data Analysis

- Annual report analysis

We examined 6,578 pages of content of ARs of the ACA, over 48 years (from 1972 to 2019-20). Over this time period, the ACA was affected by tumultuous change in strategy and structure, including a shift to a corporate mode of operation that questioned institutional legitimacy (Gardiner-Garden, 1994; Neuendorf, 2016). We adopted a decolonised and postcolonial mindset (Jani, 2001), as ARs tell stories about the past, rather than being objective and overt (Martin, 2013, 2015; Rentschler, Subramaniam, & Martin, 2019) that point to branding Aboriginal arts (Fergnani & Song, 2020). Our approach was interpretive, following a social constructivist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998; Denzin, 1979; Potter & Rentschler, 1996; Veracini, 2007), using imagery juxtaposed against para-text, narrative and socio-politico-economic events, as previous studies by Irvine and Fortune (2016), Rentschler, Subramaniam and Martin (2019) and Tinker and Niemark (1988) demonstrate. The reason for the choice of annual reports is that they provide a unique data set over time that enables lessons learnt from the past to be used as a basis for foreseeing future needs.

Burr (1995) acknowledges the major influence of Berger and Luckmann (1966) in developing a social constructivist approach. In turn they acknowledge the influence of Mead, Marx, Schutz and Durkheim on their thinking. Their writing therefore constitutes a synthesis of these influences. The origins of social constructionism can be traced in part to an interpretivist approach to thinking. Mead, one of the originators of symbolic interactionism, is the common link.

Evaluating how settler colonial forms evolved throughout the second half of the 20th century (Veracini, 2007) helps assess ‘settler colonialism’ which is resistant to ‘regime change’

(Wolfe, 2006, p. 402). At issue, however, is the particular nature of Australian settler colonialism (Moran, 2002). Colonialism can be interpreted politically (Veracini, 2007), shaped by the domestic and economic chaos left behind in the search for opportunities. Veracini (2021) cites the Australian Aboriginal activist Charles Pearson as an authoritative source (Pearson, 1913) based on the rationale behind settler colonialism in that ‘Australia might be an appropriate locale to experiment against global degeneration’ (Veracini, 2021, p. 213). Drawing on Alfred Deakin, one of the founders of Australian Federation, he states that settlers help contribute towards shaping a virtuous society with little in common with the ‘Old World.’ However, his plans for land irrigation resulted in Aboriginal peoples being displaced psychologically and physically.

We analysed the entire range of annual reports available, in one longitudinal study. The rationale for selecting a population as data is to support our medium and long-term future recommendations by the dataset that history allowed us to investigate as the best way to predict the future is to study the past (Fergnani & Song, 2020). In the context of this paper, we were interested in utilising it to interrogate inter-relationships in theoretical and practical terms of branding and identity within an arts and cultural setting..

Our analytical procedure was undertaken in three steps. First, we proceeded to identify key data to analyse, such as that found in the Chair’s report, CEO’s report, and arts board reports, such as Aboriginal Arts Board report. That was followed by setting up an Excel spreadsheet for both the thematic and longitudinal analysis of data gathered from the ARs. We also gathered historical institutional data, such as art form boards benefiting from the ACA grants from the overall institutional budget. Second, in order to identify all terms associated with branding the arts, we conducted a word search, using terms such as ‘brand,’ ‘brand image,’ ‘logo,’ ‘promotion,’ and ‘marketing.’ Third, we identified images and para-text that accorded

with the brand image proposed in the text analysed. Para-text, which is the text that explicates images, was independently analysed by each research team member over time. Images and para-text were coded, enabling themes to emerge from the data in the context of the annual report as it changed over time. We undertook additional steps to ensure consistency in coding (Lincoln, 1995), to check discrepancies in interpretation, boosting data trustworthiness. For example, a pilot cross-checking workshop was undertaken using the 1982-1983 AR where data were examined several times by two coders (Guthrie et al., 2004). Following Fergnani and Song (2020, p. 5), the steps were iterative rather than sequential.

Ethics

We note that this is not an Aboriginal study; the primary focus of the paper is about the arts agency branding rather than Aboriginality or Aboriginal peoples. The paper examines the matter of brand, national identity, and the arts council with the setting examining Aboriginal arts in a multicultural society. Nonetheless, Aboriginal arts is an important part of our study as Aboriginal identities are at stake. We recognise the contestation of the term. We chose to use the term ‘Aboriginal’, and use it in a variety of ways, recognising that other terms exist and have been used interchangeably, reflecting the evolving politics of identification (Short, 2012). Some form of brokerage or mediation is required between Aboriginal people in relation to cultural products and their engagement with the marketplace in helping to shape their brand (identity) among wider audiences. The same can be said for ACA and their relationships with Aboriginal artists. It entails ‘values and expectations of both the local community and the varying defined “outside,”’ government and market and here ACA, so that ‘conflicting regimes of value’ are recognised and incorporated in future mediated relationships within an intercultural space. Also, in terms of identity, before what Myers (2002) terms Euro-Australian settlement, there was no

notion of being Aboriginal. This has been externally imposed on Aboriginal peoples of Australia and can be deemed to be a colonial intervention.

A further complication is that Aboriginal art, being traded in art markets and supported by ACA, could be deemed ‘a product of non-Aboriginal culture’, with connoisseurship incorporated in marketplace activity through the differentiation of fine art from tourist art (Myers, 2002, p.315). In examining the apparent (non)relationship between Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal audiences:

The struggle for self-representation before a predominantly non-Aboriginal audience...is not a move in the self-fascinated games of the art world....it is a deliberate move on that world, to interpolate the voice of the ‘Other’ into the ethnocentric discourse of the dominant culture, subverting it from within....The authenticity of Aboriginal art persists notwithstanding the all-too-obvious consequences of insertion into a western art context. The artists themselves steadfastly decline the mantle of Otherness held out to them as some sort of protected status. The political and social imperatives which underpin the whole enterprise are far too urgent for that. (Johnson, 1987, pp. 2-4)

Over the time period of this study, understanding of Aboriginality changed radically from the early 1970s, the starting point of this study, to today, when it has gained recognition and appreciation as it was elevated higher status (Belk & Groves, 1999). However, this change was not without contestation, as this study illustrates. We identified tensions in national identity formation between Aboriginality of 65,000 years and Western settlement of 250 years and branding the arts. We recognise that these tensions as revealed in many issues of marginalisation, inequality and otherness may challenge and provoke researchers (Short, 2012).

Findings

In answering our first research question— What do annual reports of an arts agency reveal about the effects of a polarizing environment on managing Aboriginal and settler identities?—we examine the data from the ARs in this section. We discuss the data around the four key

Schroeder (2017) archetypes, in addition to informing the findings around the broader critical branding literature

Cultural perspectives: 1970s

The first explicit national cultural policy was announced by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1972, which was designed to help establish and express an Australian identity through the arts; promote a standard of excellence in the arts as well as widen access to, and the understanding and application of, the arts in the community, to generally promote international awareness of Australian culture (Williams, 2019). Since then, cultural activities have been tailored to be more specific to different communities or subcultures (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007; Kumar & Kumar, 2020). The role of the arts in creating a national identity was prominent in the ACA foundation decade of the 1970s. For example, in the 1975-76

ACA AR:

Australian playwriting and choreography is [sic] increasingly performed, in keeping with the Board’s objectives of encouraging creativity and the development of an Australian identity through theatre. (p. 41)

Not surprisingly, brand was not discussed in the decade of the 1970s, or if it were raised, it was derided, as the illustration shows (Illustration 1 from ACA AR, 1973, p. 25).

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 1

National identity and brand are implicit in the early ACA ARs. For example, Illustration 2, a cover story, in particular, shows Western art motifs, such as kite flying and Asian dancers, with Aboriginal images of the crocodile, shadows and on the sand as part of national identity. The cover title has no logo or brand but simply states the government agency name as an implicit rather than explicit means of branding: ‘Australia Council Annual Report 1976-77.’

ILLUSTRATION 2 ABOUT HERE

But the importance of culture and history as part of the context were emphasised. Identity was interwoven in narrative and images throughout this decade (Wakholi & Wright, 2012; Kapferer, 2020). For example, in the Council report 'Ten years in the Arts,' the importance of national identity was again associated with performing arts:

National identity in music requires many decades, if not centuries, of 'trial and error' for a firm basis to be established. Consequently, the most important thrust for music in Australia and for the emergence of music, which is characteristically Australian is the increasing concentration on music in education ... (ACA AR, 1976-77, p. 3)

In the same AR, Aboriginal art is identified with national identity in the same year, with the statement:

The art of the Aboriginal is the only part of our cultural heritage that is uniquely Australian. European settlement largely ignored it at best and sought to eradicate it at worst. Now that we are belatedly fascinated by Aboriginal culture, its revival is no straightforward task ... It is not simply a matter of...marketing and promotion... (ACA AR, 1976-77, pp. 7-8)

Heritage, history and legacy, and their relation to meaning, value and associations, as defined by Schroeder (2009) influence brand meaning and value in the marketplace. They are important to our paper in that brand 'focuses on how brands share stories, build community and solve problems,' reflecting people's ideologies, lifestyles and cultural values (Palmer & Burton, 2019; Schroeder, 2017, p. 1526).

During the 1970s, tensions between cultural policy which aimed at social improvement, and building either reputation or collective identity emerged (Trembath & Fielding, 2020b). These tensions impacted national identity building and branding the arts, in a decade of change, protest and the beginnings of the Aboriginal rights movement. This is illustrated in the annual

reports of images of Aboriginal artists drawing ‘on country’ and children in contemporary art classes (e.g., see ACA AR, 1973, p. 23; 1974, p. 35).

Consumer perspectives: 1980s

In the 1980s multicultural policies became more prominently embedded in cultural policy based on underpinning drivers for building collective identity and social improvement. Although cultural diversity was celebrated throughout different policies, the impact of colonialism on Australia’s Aboriginal people was barely acknowledged (Trembath & Fielding, 2020b) and the quest to develop a national cultural identity was mainly led by the settler-colonial history. Arts and culture played an important role in highlighting the loss and damages brought about through colonisation. The decade opened with the claim that national identity and brand were intertwined with the development of the nation as one of migration from different countries in waves after the Second World War (e.g., Greeks, Italians, Poles) and the Vietnam War (e.g., Vietnamese):

The role of the Australia Council is to foster the artistic life of the nation. Artistic life reflects a diversity of cultural backgrounds, unique demographic and geographic conditions and the daily concerns of individuals, groups and communities. (ACA AR 1980-81, p. 4)

By 1982-83, these claims coalesced into the first logo that branded the ACA, being used in parallel with the developing national identity. The cover of the ACA AR illustrated the new ACA brand, which understood the consumer (Illustration 3). The cover story shows visual elements that represent contemporary arts (e.g., a leaping dancer); Asian arts (e.g., the use of red colour for good luck with abstract symbols) and Aboriginal arts (e.g., coloured hands with spread out fingers). Furthermore, the logo contained the iconic kangaroo, with a red sun above and arches beneath suggesting support, that represent the cradling of culture provided by the ACA. It was designed to be close to its consumers, the artists, and other stakeholders whose support is essential for an arts agency to survive. Further, this was the decade when the consumer was

recognised, through audience development, marketing and promotion becoming part of organisational structure and leadership. For example, branding, marketing, promotion and audience development foci through the establishment of grants to arts organisations and independent marketing companies, such as Aboriginal Arts and Craft Pty Ltd, funded projects to support the employment of marketing staff in arts organisations and the development of brand working parties, all had a consumer focus (e.g., see ACA AR, 1982-83, p. 31).

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 3 ABOUT HERE

By 1986-87, the argument about artists forming national identity as growing stronger, with statement such as the following gracing the ACA AR:

It is our artists who are providing us with new theories of identity...reacting to the present and searching for the new forms of the future ... providing us with new measures of national achievement. ... [this was a] Year of Change: ... (1986-87, p. 11)

By the year of the bi-centenary of white settlement, 1988, the commentary was becoming bolder, and it was linked to the development of Aboriginal art both domestically and internationally:

While reinforcing our national identity, the arts also create significant financial benefits through employment, export and tourism opportunities. ...During 1988 there was an upsurge of interest in Aboriginal art ... [and] there has been an upsurge of interest [in Aboriginal arts] from overseas (p. 23) (ACA AR, 1988-89, pp. 11, 21 & 23)

These markets had been built by nurturing the growth of the Aboriginal art market as well as by promoting and branding it. These developments had led to the 're-orient[ing of] programs to reflect the multicultural nature of the Australian society' (ACA AR, 1988-89, p. 4). The reason for such re-orientation was that 'many programs related to Aboriginal arts had reached a stage of development and complexity' (p. 4) that they warranted full-scale policy review of arts support. Policy review entailed boosting the consumer focus, through branding, marketing and promotion on a scale that saw it embedded in the organisation structure at a senior level. For example,

creating national identity generated ‘significant financial benefits, through employment, export, and tourism opportunities (ACA AR, 1988-89, p. 11).

Corporate perspectives: 1990s to 2020

Cultural policy in the 1990s focused heavily on the role of the arts in cultural diplomacy and reputation-building as well as economic contribution of the arts with plans for artists and arts organisations to better monetize their work and push them into overseas markets. The emphasis on economic contribution of the arts and culture at the federal level prompted even greater shifts towards a more comprehensive creative industries approach in some states and local regions which is a trend that endured into the 21st century (Trembath & Fielding, 2020b). The 1990s opened with the ACA ‘presenting Australia as a nation with a vital and unique culture’ which benefited ‘tourism’ significantly (ACA AR, 1990-91, p. 3), illustrating the dual roles of national identity building and the development of brand (Elder, 2020). Illustration 4 shows the integration of Aboriginal art in the black brush strokes that frame the left-hand side of the page of the ACA objective, finished with the ACA logo at the bottom of the page. Note that the logo is now hard-edge, stylised, losing its links to multicultural Australia, suggesting a corporate approach to image, while the words promote ‘nurtur[ing] a culturally diverse national identity,’ suggesting a tension between messages in image and text (ACA AR, 1991-92, p. 1).

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 4 ABOUT HERE

This development recognised the ‘importance’ of arts—and especially Aboriginal arts—to national identity ‘through the general cultural development of the nation’ (ACA AR, 1993-94, p. 27) as it sees art contribut[ing] substantially to the economy’ (p. 7). In short, branding the arts,

especially Aboriginal arts, is part of national identity building of the ACA, ‘fundamental to the country’s intellectual and cultural life’ (ACA AR, 1995-96, p. 5), but it was being communicated with a corporate thrust.

For example, our findings confirm that appointment of a new chair of the board aligns with a different strategic thrust in the ACA ARs. The board oversees and approves the final version of the AR, ensuring it meets strategic and legislative requirements (Rentschler & Geursen, 1999), so it is not surprising that its design and content are influenced by the Chair of the board. In the 2019-20 ACA AR, the corporate perspective is strengthened once more, after a hiatus under the previous Chair, Mr Rupert Myer and CEO MR Tony Grabowski (Illustrations 5 and 6), whose interest in the arts were paramount and the artistic beauty of the images resonated with them. Illustration 5 shows the corporate thrust with financial statements having prominence, but the image is glorious and metaphorical in intent, showing the importance of money to the arts as a puzzle to be unpicked as an acrobat works their way up a wall, thus linking corporate and artistic aims.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 5 ABOUT HERE

Illustration 6 shows the internationalisation of the arts (Henze, 2018), with Australia presenting at the Venice Biennale in 2014-15, where Aboriginal arts are juxtaposed against Western arts in the front and back cover images presented. The front cover is dominated by an artistic Aboriginal duo on stage at the Venice Biennale with Western art encircled in the background. The back cover is focused on a contemporary Western female artist’s work. Thus, both front and back covers represent ‘the old and the new’ (Rentschler et al., 2020) where Aboriginal arts have been staged in Western settings, with settler arts in the sphere in the background and on the back cover (ACA AR, 2014-15). On the one hand, there is intersection

between the old and the new; on the other hand, there is tension between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal arts in these images (Fisher, 2012).

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 6 ABOUT HERE

The 2019-20 AR—with a new Chair of the Board, Mr. Sam Walsh, with a corporate background in the mining industry—has only nine images, a significant reduction over previous years.

However, as Illustration 7 shows, one Aboriginal image is repeated 37 times, at the beginning of each section of the AR, with the Australian government logo and the ACA logo appearing on the left-hand side of the image. The image is of Aboriginal musicians playing to an audience at night in an outdoor venue. It shows the importance of Aboriginal arts to national identity that it was chosen over other potential artistic images. But the image is dominated by the logos, demonstrating the corporatisation of branding the arts.

INSERT ILLUSTRATION 7 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

In answering our second research question—How does an arts agency attempt to encompass all people into a branded, national identity as part of its future?—we link our longitudinal findings to medium and long-term future needs of branding in complex organisations, where identity is problematized. We seek to inform decision-making in policy and practice by exploring and evaluating those futures (Costanza et al., 2015; Chambers et al., 2019). We do so by providing scenarios for the future of branding the arts in Australia (see Table 1). As Table 1 illustrates, a key to the change in mindset regarding branding the arts is recognising that the cultural and creative industries can act as change agents to the national economy, as has occurred in the United Kingdom, Ireland and elsewhere, for example, in terms of positive impacts on equality,

diversity and inclusion (O'Connor, 2015; Lee, 2020; Cortez, McKoy, & Lizaragga, 2022; O'Brien & Arnold, 2022). Policy support recognising their worth to the nation can lead to a new imagined future, while ignoring them will continue the status quo of an under-performing industry sector.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

As Table 1 illustrates, the complexity of developing national identity from a postcolonial context has been portrayed in this paper following the evolution of the ACA branding which provided us with the opportunity to redefine a role of branding fit for the future. Branding represents the collective desires and anxieties of a nation as it dreams of its possible futures (Fisher, 2012; Holt, 2004). While Aboriginal arts is argued to be the only Australian art form, given it is derived from Australia's Aboriginal peoples, and it is certainly prominent in developing national identity, Aboriginal arts and settlers' arts have gradually become important in shaping ACA's branding, based on our analysis. The ACA, however, struggled to merge the intertwined histories of Aboriginal peoples and settlers in Australia in their branding as it became more corporatized, losing touch with local indigenous cultures (Appadurai, 1990).

As a cultural form, the ACA brand evolved reflecting historical changes in social, political, and economic contexts as well as the organisational ideologies and cultural values (Heilbrunn, 2015), of developing national identity (Findlay, 2007), with creativity a common denominator (Selwood, 2007). Upon its establishment in the 1970s, the ACA embraced the *cultural* perspectives in their branding focusing on sharing stories, building community, and solving problems by carefully and sensitively moving from a precolonial to a postcolonial

platform. Since the 1980s, the ACA has responded strategically in developing markets for the Australian arts nationally and internationally and its brand became a management tool with its increased visibility of tangible attributes in their *consumer* and *corporate* perspectives while threatening its intangible brand attributes.

We argue that the ACA needs to take account of broader social, cultural, and theoretical concerns of national identity and branding the arts in postcolonial Australia. In order to do so, the ACA needs to move away from the brand-consumer dyad (O'Guinn & Muniz, 2009) to brand understanding from multiple stakeholder perspectives (e.g., artists, audiences and policy makers) emphasising the importance of their interactions and interpretations in relation to meaning, value and associations linked to place and culture (Schroeder, 2017; Balmer & Chen, 2015). For the future, we recommend scholars examine contemporary literature on brand activism (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sibai, Mimoun, & Boukis, 2021), which allows for the development of a multi-stakeholder cultural perspective which moves beyond the company-consumer dyad. Here, societal and political issues and constituents are considered alongside ethical dimensions of brand citizenship and how this interacts with participatory culture. In order for the ACA's brand to function as an ethical, ideological and political object in the future (Schroeder, 2009), the ACA needs to adopt *critical* perspectives which provide an important reflective point of view in cultural discourse.

Based on underlying tensions identified in building national identity through celebrating both settler arts and Aboriginal arts, we make the following three recommendations for the future. First, the ACA brand should reflect art-led productions by Aboriginal artists rather than being market-led, taking into account the necessity for systemic change (Findlay, 2007). Tensions often exist between the intrinsic values and practices of the artist and the market-

oriented priorities of the gallery, dealer and collector (Hirschman, 1983; Selwood, 2007). Market engaging practices are also often seen in negative terms by artists, such as branding and other forms of marketing, as they conflict with artist values. The personal norms and values of the artist often dominate over any commercial interests (Myers, 2002). In terms of the motivations behind making the art, artists tend to veer more towards the former stance, although some embrace the market from the outset (Hirschman, 1983; Fillis, 2006; 2010). From a creativity and innovation perspective, avoiding the market can be much more beneficial for the artist in terms of not being influenced by external forces, while remaining intrinsically shaped as a means of uniting diverse communities (Berthon, Hulbert, & Pitt, 2004; Rhisiart, 2013).

Second, the ACA brand should reflect community values, norms, and cultural practices of all Australian peoples. Corporatized branding and national identity may operate as another form of colonisation if there is no attempt to include all people in a branded national identity. Hence, we recommend that an arts council undertake brand “sociopolitical activism” (Bhagwat et al., 2020). The socio-political activism of brands advocated by the literature typically refers to acts of citizenship in which brands take a stand on socio-political issues of cogent debates (i.e., environment, gender equality, inclusivity, LGBTQ+ rights, racism, women’s empowerment). However, the connection in our paper relates specifically to a multi-stakeholder perspective. Brand political activism is seen as public speech or actions which concentrates on partisan issues associated with an organisation, through its corporate brand name (Moorman, 2020). With Aboriginal art, the artists naturally have a tendency to preserve their culture through the marks, colours, visual narratives and myths contained within and around their work. Nonetheless, this art can have a market value within a wider market setting. In doing so, the meanings surrounding the art itself evolve and change as new stakeholders enter the stage. Many pieces of Aboriginal

art today are seen as high art (Myers, 2002), but this then causes further tension between the original intension of the work and the commercial art market.

Third, Australian national identity needs to be embedded in the wider cultural environment. Thus, engagement with branding by the artist can have a number of outcomes. Intrinsic art making can unintentionally raise the level of recognition of the artist and the art as peer recognition grows and the artist enters a network of growing artistic influence which may or may not be noticed by interested commercial stakeholders. On the other hand, the artist may have an intuitive instinct for self-branding (Shepherd, 2005) through an innate recognition of the need for self-identity in a crowded marketplace. This also raises accusations of brand and cultural appropriation by institutions as they promote and communicate the work. Brand authenticity will not occur, so that customers remain disengaged as long as the brand has not been faithful to its purpose (Becker, Wiegand, & Reinartz, 2019). With Aboriginal work, the art is more about *their* identity than brand. As market forces impact, the identity changes and the original intent is diluted. Artists tend to create in order to express their subjective interpretations of beauty and aesthetics (Becker, 1978; Holbrook & Zirlin, 1983), but Aboriginal artists remain faithful to their cultural traditions and values. These issues must be acknowledged by institutions as they seek to promote and utilise Aboriginal art in their corporate communication literature, websites, social media, etc. Rather than philosophical tensions between art for art's sake and art for business sake (Fillis, 2004), Aboriginal art in the marketplace raises other tensions in terms of cultural dissonance. Values are still involved, but they are more culturally embedded than in other circumstances. What is perhaps needed is the communication by the institution of a sense of a balanced centricity (Gummesson, 2008), seen through a meaningful brand identity and corporate image. In short, in this empirical study, we have suggested that in order to move

forward successfully, the ACA needs to acknowledge the past from both Aboriginal *and* postcolonial perspectives in order to set out a future pathway unhindered by unacknowledged histories. Holt (2002) notes how brands can act as powerful social actors that express important societal ideas and meanings, which is our recommendation for the future practice. By adopting a political mission perspective, the organisation's focus on social change is maintained. Hence, the balanced centrality perspective is the one we recommend for future branding which takes into account the complex framing of national identity in Australia.

Our recommendations for the future are relevant in the trans-cultural context illuminating the various gradients of culture built by different ways that social groups create and distribute their meanings, as well as interacting and experiencing tensions recognised in postcolonial contemporary Australia (Lewis, 2002). Our recommendations are set out in order to enhance future branding for arts councils, but also lead to the importance of wider branding institutional practice to consider the multifaceted complexity of cultural context where its various actors operate beyond the traditional corporate-consumer dyad. In the branding domain, including cultural branding theory, this complexity has already been understood. However, we move beyond this by introducing additional factors that are not shaped by the marketplace by recognising the need to understand individual and collective identities as part of ACA constituent cultures in shaping its brand for the future.

Conclusion

By following historical changes portrayed in their visual and textual dimensions of ARs over the five decades, we witnessed how the ACA's brand perspectives have changed in building national identity over time through branding the arts. The ACA's branding articulated, embodied and embraced cultural contradictions that existed in postcolonial Australia and evolved over time

reflecting *cultural*, *consumer* and *corporate* perspectives. Schroeder (2017) argues that brands, brand meanings and brand values should be understood as cultural, political, and ideological forms, and one must develop multiple perspectives to understand brands as a fundamental aspect of contemporary consumer culture. In this paper, we make recommendations for the future of the ACA brand to reflect *critical* perspectives and make recommendations that the future of branding the Australian arts needs to be (1) art-led rather than market-led, especially for Aboriginal arts; (2) reflecting community values, norms, and cultural practices of all Australian peoples; and (3) embedded in the wider cultural environment as part of the Australian national identity. We warn of the dangers of corporatising the brand that alienates the artistic community as the meanings and associations relating to the Aboriginal arts change through the commoditisation process and when aestheticized from non-Aboriginal perspectives. Future branding practice in the sector needs to acknowledge constituent interests in deriving an acceptable interpretation of brand since Aboriginal peoples believe that their art is also part of their identity (Coleman, 2017).

We conducted our study on the Australian national arts and cultural advisory body and suggest that similar research elsewhere with a colonial past could be undertaken in the future, as a comparative study.

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ILLUSTRATION 1 Mocking Image of the ACA Brand (ACA AR, 1973 p. 25)



ILLUSTRATION 2 ACA AR 1976-77 Cover Image without Brand

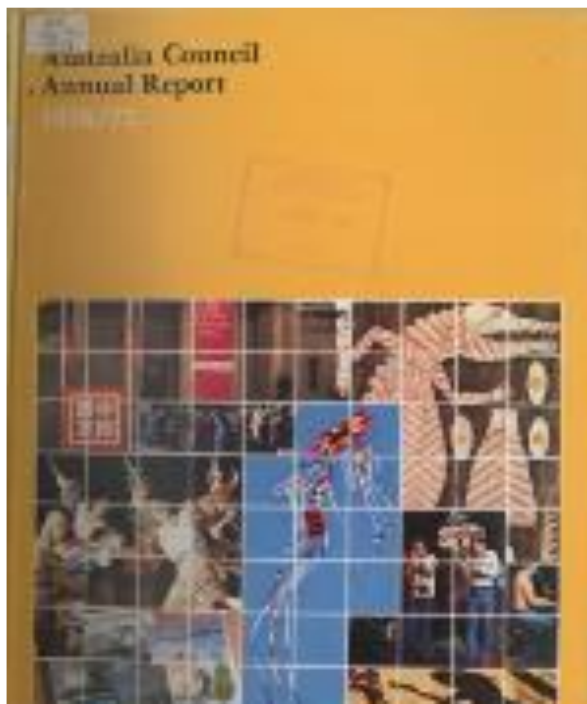


ILLUSTRATION 3 The First Logo of ACA (ACA AR, 1982-83 Cover Image)

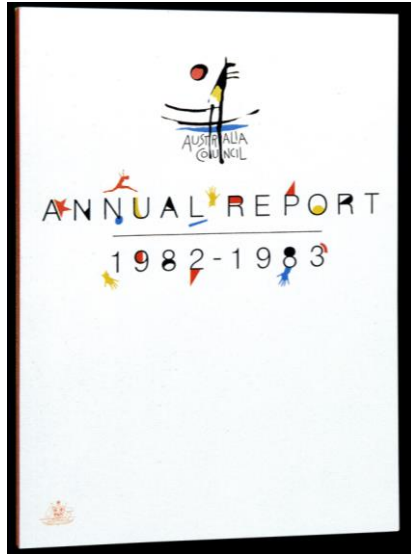


ILLUSTRATION 4 ACA Corporatized Logo in the 90s

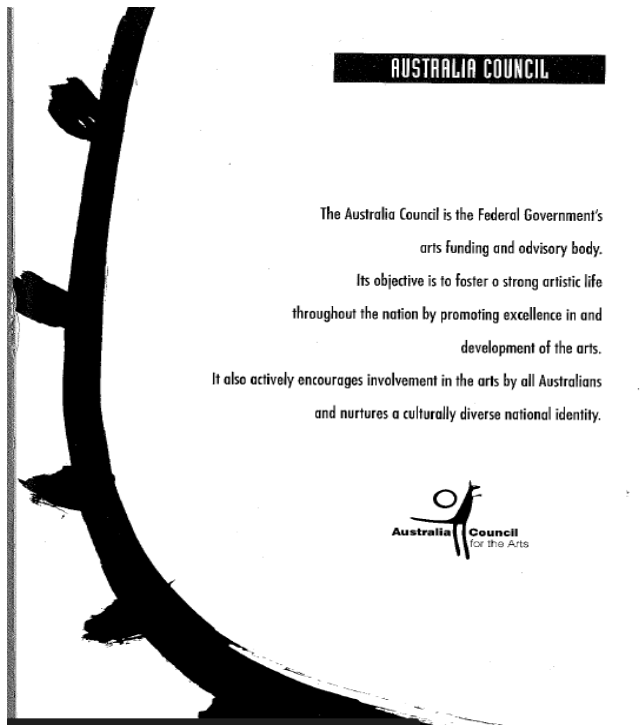


ILLUSTRATION 5 ACA AR 2014-2015 Corporate thrust with financial statements



ILLUSTRATION 6 ACA AR 2014-2015 Cover Image presenting the Venice Biennale



ILLUSTRATION 7 Aboriginal musicians with Australian government and ACA logo



TABLE 1 Future scenarios for branding the arts in Australia

Scenarios	Critical uncertainties	Relevant archetypes	Systemic change
National identity	Critical consumer vs corporate perspectives	Program review Critical perspectives	Top down, bottom up, inside-out and outside-in
Branding Australia through the arts	High investment vs low investment in community values, norms and cultural practices	Policy reform Market forces Fortress Australia	Multiple directions
Embed in wider cultural environment	High commitment vs low commitment to new ways of working in the cultural and creative industries	Program review Critical perspectives	Ubiquitous branding Learning from trusted and untrusted sources