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Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

Ann McGrath (interviewer)
with Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft

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This interview took place in a back room of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-op, Abercrombie St, Sydney, on the 10th February, 1995, surrounded by easels and half-complete works of art, the paint smell bringing back all the fond memories of working with paint. The first time I visited Boomalli was to choose a work for the cover of a forthcoming book on Aboriginal history. Hetti told me this was the room the artist, Harry Wedge, used for a studio. Hetti, who I had first met as an undergraduate student at the University of New South Wales some years ago, was now about a month off having her third child. I had not met Brenda before, but had heard of her as a key figure in the NSW art world.

Ann: First of all I'd like to ask some general questions about yourselves and your role with the Boomalli Artist Co-op and then I'd like to go on to some questions about Aboriginal art workers, their position as workers, their experiences, what sort of problems they face. First of all, Brenda, would you please introduce yourself and explain what your position is at the Co-op.

Brenda: OK, well my name is Brenda Croft and I work here as co-ordinator of Boomalli and I've been doing that mainly full-time with a couple of little breaks here and there since early 1990 and before that I was one of the ten founding members that set the place up in late '87.

Ann: OK, thanks and you Hetti?

Hetti: I'm Hetti Perkins and I'm the Curator. I've been here since, when?

Brenda: '92, like about mid-year.

Hetti: Mid-year '92 and I'm not an artist, I'm just the curator.

Brenda: But you do a lot of our design work which I think's important, like in terms of designing catalogues and invitations.

Hetti: Mmm, yes I do that sort of thing but I'm not like an artist member.

Ann: And Brenda you said that you had a lot to do with the actual setting up of the Co-op?

Brenda: Yeh, in kind of an oblique way I got asked to make up the numbers I think ... there was a group of people of the founding



The Bostock gals! Eupemia and Tracey (right),
in Bronwyn Bancroft's installation, 'Wiyana/Perisferia (Periphery),
Boomalli exhibition, January 1993.
Photo courtesy of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

members who met quite regularly and they knew each other prior to my coming to Sydney because I moved here from Canberra in 1985 and some of the other founding members of Boomalli had exhibited together in exhibitions like in '84, '86 but we knew of each other through the art colleges that are up here and I just got asked if I wanted to be a member which was great, so I said yep.

Ann: So, why were people getting together to form a Co-op?

Brenda: The climate at that time, like if you happened to be an Aboriginal student, particularly at art school I think, there wasn't any reference point for yourself, particularly as an Aboriginal person based in the city. I remember - this is ten years ago - but they had one course on Aboriginal culture at the Sydney College of Arts where I was and it was slides from like 1950s or 60s you know and it was from traditional communities which I couldn't really relate to in terms of my own experience of growing up and a lot of us had had significant difficulty in getting our work accepted under the banner of being Aboriginal Art.

I did a photographic piece on a rally on Black Deaths in Custody and handed that in in mixed media and one of my lecturers just pooh-poohed it, 'I just don't see why this has any relevance to what you're doing and you know, you can't relate to that'. And then other hushed tones from one of the other lecturers, 'but she's Aboriginal'.

So, it's just like this weird environment all the time. I was quite lucky in that some people I had as lecturers were quite supportive but some of the other students encountered quite stiff opposition to their work and were openly denigrated for what they were doing and told to get on with it and stop trying to fiddle around with something that had no meaning or substance. So, out of that came the decision to set up a space that was going to be mainly a studio space and like a supportive environment to all work together in.

We launched it with an exhibition of all our work and so that just was so successful that that's what we ended up doing - mainly putting on exhibitions. Not just of our work but other artists work around the place because we got approached by lots of people after that one. Can you put a show on for us and artists who'd had a lot of trouble getting into the mainstream gallery system? Or people weren't interested in their work apart from being a kind of novelty thing, you know. We've had the urban artshow, so we don't have to do another one and that's why we started showing other people's work as well. I mean there were things like print workshops but to be honest, they

were few and far between because we were mainly putting on exhibitions and so we had to learn all the 'admin' side of it and everything as well which was flying by the seat of your pants a lot of the time, learning how to approach funding bodies, making a few mistakes along the way.

I remember once we received this piddly little government grant, it must have been like \$3,000, from which we were supposed to produce this series of posters but the person who originally applied for the money, finished up because we only had enough money to pay them part-time. So we didn't know what we were supposed to spend it on and we spent in on something else, so then we had to find some money to make these posters and we left the Ministry logo off it and they came in and hit the roof and then we had to reprint them and stick them and so it was learning all those kind of things. That Department is one of our biggest supporters now but in the early days, it was a different story.



Hetti Perkins with Mike Stewart, Office of Aboriginal Affairs
and Kev Carmody at opening of exhibition,
'Postcards from the Bay', artists in jail, 1993.
Photo courtesy of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

Ann: So you didn't have any instant credibility.

Brenda: I think a lot of people were expecting us to fall flat on our faces and just waiting for that and there was also a great deal of support from various quarters and people used to say they liked coming to Boomalli cause you never knew what you were going to see and that could be positive or negative. Because there weren't really any boundaries or blueprint for what we were supposed to be doing, that was quite exciting because you could sort of set your own rules as you went, not so much in terms of managing money but the kind of things you were doing there. The credibility took a while, I think that's the same for any fledgling organisation, you have to do your apprenticeship and people see that you are capable of coming up with the goods and ... I mean we have a lot of credibility now.

Hetti: Mmm, I think we do but I think there is a lot of excitement too.

Ann: So how many years have you been going now?

Brenda: Late '87 we started so this will be out eighth year.

Hetti: I wasn't involved ... when Boomalli was established, or started up ...

Brenda: Were you at the first show?

Hetti: Yeh, I was working at Kent Street then, in '87, at the Aboriginal Artist Gallery there, which was part of the Government's marketing agency and yeh, I was very excited by the works which were there to be seen and that it was an artist run initiative. I think it was a bit rough and everything but that was what everybody liked, people liked it to be rough and the works weren't very expensive and there was such a diversity of work too which was really good and of course there was a huge response and that's why Boomalli managed to stay up, because of the will of the artists involved and then people in the community that also needed it to keep going as a resource.

Ann: So how many artists are involved in the Co-op?

Brenda: Oh, it's kind of weird, there's about 25, but there's a smaller group of people that you tend to see a lot of. Some people join as members and we continue to send them information but you mightn't see them as much as say like Harry Wedge, Elaine and Kylie Russell, Gordon Hooky and Rea and Brook Andrew. I'm not mentioning everybody; there's more people than that. So and like last year our exhibition program catered for nearly 200 artists and they weren't all our members, they were just from all different areas, depending on what the show was that was on at that particular time.

Ann: You seemed to have reached an international audience too?

Hetti: In 1994 we toured an exhibition to Britain called True Colours - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists Raise the Flag which was funded by INIVA, the Institute of New International Visual Arts in London which is a London Arts Board initiative but Eddy Chambers had a franchise, they gave out three franchises to Afro-Asian, I can never remember.

Brenda: Yeh, anything other than Anglo.

Hetti: It was black people based in Britain basically and Eddy Chambers was one of those people and he'd organised an exhibition called Black People and the British Flag which we'd hoped to bring out here, but we were unsuccessful in getting funding. So we did, I think he suggested it, or did you suggest it or ...

Brenda: We were talking about it, I'd met up with him in 1990 when I went there and I did the rounds of as many black and Asian arts organisations as I could. I can't remember how long I was there for. I dropped off catalogues and information and just told them who I was and continued to write and then when I went back again, kept in touch with them and Eddy, we talked about maybe trying to do some kind of collaboration and that's something that really interested me particularly and that Boomalli hasn't ever been really big on. There's been a lot of exhibitions that have been like Australian and Aboriginal artists collaborating and I really just think that that's been done and I also think that those kind of exhibitions tend to give the Australian artists more credibility than when they do the Aboriginal artists and we just weren't that interested in that kind of work, we wanted to work with other ethnic groups, like whether it was Latin-American artists or other indigenous artists or black artists from different places. So, thinking on how Aboriginal art was portrayed overseas as well, the exhibitions that went overseas, who they ended up being seen by tended to be white audiences rather than other people like us and so I wanted to try an bypass that and Eddy had that exhibition that Hetti mentioned and then he managed to secure the funding from that end for True Colours which was great. We didn't get any, we got hardly any funding support from this end, except from the British Council in Australia and ATSIC [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council] gave us some money.

Hetti: At the twelfth hour and just an air fare, an air fare so we could send one of the artists over, we didn't have any money to send anybody over with the show, which is very unfortunate ... we put in two rounds to two different Government Boards ...

Ann: Have you ever approached corporate sponsors?



Boomalli gang with visiting native American artist Hehb and
Central Australian artist Pansy Napangardi.
Brenda Croft near centre, 5th from left.
Photo courtesy of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

- Hetti: No, we were laughing about approaching them for this show, like Qantas because ...
- Ann: Yes, yes the airfare you instantly think of Qantas.
- Hetti: Yeh, but the images in the exhibition because they are very confrontational works, um, we know that conservative institutions and artists and exhibitions have a lot of trouble attracting decent sponsorship.
- Brenda: But that's why it was interesting that the British Council sponsored it.
- Hetti: But that's because of the Director, they've got a wonderful Director, Jim Potts, he thinks things are hilarious, like we were saying. There's one of this guy sort of lying face down, spread-eagled on a flag, that you can only see from his waist down, naked on a flag, on the British, on the Union Jack and we were sort of thinking of like your name here, trying to approach corporate sponsors for that - 'Fly Qantas' or 'The British Council'. So, I mean really, we have a lot of work to do and very limited staff resources and so, chasing sponsorship is ...

Brenda: It's a full-time job, you have to be out there constantly, you have to have the material to promote yourself, we don't have the funds, it's not from lack of trying, we tried to get a marketing thing together but you need your nice little glossy brochure because they want to see what they're going to get for their corporate dollar and it's not just goodwill. So, we talked about maybe trying to pursue that a bit more this year if we get funding for another position for a person who really concentrates on things like that and getting our face out there rather than being like in here but at the moment it's just too hard.

Hetti: At the moment it's enough effort getting money off funding bodies that are meant to be funding us.

Ann: Like the Australia Council?

Hetti: Yeh.

Ann: Because I mean you sort of read their brochures and it looks like they've especially organised themselves to give quite a lot of money to Aboriginal artists.

Hetti: They support a lot of artists in this country. But, at the same time, they've got a number of demands on their limited resources. I was on the mainstream, the Visual Arts and Crafts Boards committee as opposed to the Aboriginal Arts, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Arts Units committee and even on that committee ... you just cannot fund everything. It becomes another case of who's worthy, like who's more worthy or there's all sorts of different criteria that you have to base your judgment on ... We understand that we are in this competitive environment and we hopefully compete; but we would have thought the True Colours was certainly worthy of funding since it's an Aboriginal initiative to go international, to, if you like, subvert the centre and to go back to Britain where it all started and say, well you know 'Right, this is what we think, 200 years later, back in your face sort of thing'. Usually it is more fruitful to pursue funding with Government Agencies.

Brenda: I think it is really unfortunate for the Australia Council that they didn't take the opportunity to fund this exhibition, not just because I'm obviously involved with it but the fact that it's generated so much interest in mainstream media, electronic and print media, cause it's just finished in Perth hasn't it? And it's coming over here

Ann: Where's it going to be here?

Brenda: It's going to be at Boomalli and the Performance Space in April/May. I think that's unfortunate and I mean sometimes you just can't understand the reasoning behind why one thing is approved and another thing isn't.

Hetti: The catalogue actually sold out over in the UK.

Brenda: Yep, and we've been asked, the essay that mainly Hetti wrote and I added a little bit to, the Board of Studies wants us to edit that to put into school kits. So I mean that's fantastic, that they see that side of it because we deliberately made the essay very informal, a brief history, or a concise history of what happened here but deliberately political, rather than like going into what the art work was about - that spoke for itself.

Hetti: To develop for a foreign audience the context in which the artists, in which the work that the artists we represent is made. Obviously the works are quite diverse, the artists themselves are from quite diverse backgrounds and of diverse interests and the themes, the issues that they deal with in their work are similarly diverse ... we did this catalogue to say yes, okay, everybody's different, they're all doing different things, but we do share this common, socio-cultural, eco-political background or something.

Ann: I can imagine with any sort of gallery that might be more Western in its orientation, rather than more sensitive to indigenous peoples or third-world peoples or whatever, that they might want you to present something which is quite against what you believe in. Like, for example, I can imagine that the big Dreamings exhibition in New York, might well have appealed to the people looking for the sort of primitivist truth and spiritual reality that Westerners were looking for which is sort of somewhat of a mythical cultural ideal.

Hetti: Certainly. A good example of that was when we were in England; I managed to get the fare as I said from British Council to go there and Rea, one of the artists was funded by ATSIC at like the twelfth hour to go and she, Rea, did workshops over there with children and school groups and what they do is they usually have a teacher's preview. The teachers come along and see what the show's about, develop how they are going to teach the class or whatever, but no-one turned up for the teachers' preview, even though they had all these classes booked in but no-one, they didn't bother turning up because they just thought it was Aboriginal art ... they just thought it was going to be all I think dots and barks and that the education program would probably take the form of you know, probably animal tracks and things like that. So, there were problems when they did turn up and see what the work was about and hear what Rea had to say and Rea wasn't like, overly, well she wasn't confrontational at all in fact.

Brenda: She was great, she was very level ...

Hetti: She was just saying what happened in Australia you know from her point of view and things like 'well, they obviously didn't kill us all, because I'm still here' and things like that, so it was quite good. Yeh, so as you say I think they were expecting this quite safe exhibition that would have sort of, satisfied this desire for primitivism.

Brenda: Well, it's that crap you know, it's like the unchartered, the unknown ...

Ann: The lost tribe ...

Brenda: Which is what bloody British explorers always been on about anyway, it's like Dr Livingstone and all that, finally from down south, the last untouched nomads are going to come up here and show us how to get back to grips with our spirituality. Then you come there and you just throw it back in their face and this is what's happened and like Australians don't even understand this history, let alone you guys. Wasn't one Australian teacher there?

Hetti: She was from Perth, yeh.

Brenda: And she really took offence at what was being said.

Hetti: Yeh, complained to the Headmaster and carried on and all of that sort of stuff. It was funny because she thought that she was in a position where she had to defend Australia or something. Whereas it seemed the British teacher was a lot more willing to accept that this, that what Rea was saying was in fact accurate and she wasn't trying to be, you know trying to blackwash history, if you like. Whereas all Rea was trying to do was to try and counter the whitewash of history that we know is all pervasive in this country. And so, yeh, it was interesting that the Australian teacher was the one that felt that she was able to go up to the headmaster ...

Brenda: But the kids really related to it, particularly the black kids, African, Asian kids, because it was in South London. The exhibition also went to Liverpool and Leicestershire. But where it was in South London was very near Brixton and places like that so that the classes were predominantly made up of black kids and they really enjoyed it apparently, found Rea's line of questioning very interesting about identity, 'Where are you from?' you know, and they'd say, 'From Britain', 'Where are your parents from?', 'Jamaica.' 'So are they Jamaican or are they British?' and she'd ask them questions like that. And they'd be like 'Oh, well they're sort of Jamaican I suppose', you know and then she'd say 'Well, if they're Jamaican, how come you're British?' and just, not in a confrontational way, but just to bring up the issues of identity and how it's not set and how it changes

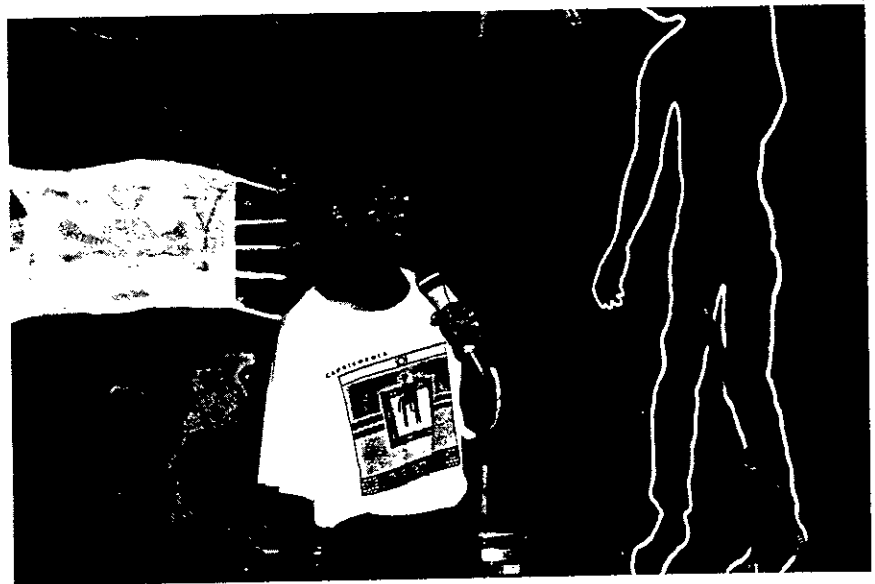
- it's a fluid thing - and then to interpret that visually. Like children would lie down and draw outlines of themselves and then they'd, you know, she'd say 'draw a symbol that means you, how would you symbolise yourself?', and things like that and it was very challenging for them. They got a lot out of it apparently.

Ann: It seems that the identity issue and political issues are really central to a lot of urban Aboriginal art, do you resist that description or not?

Hetti: I think that there was a while, particularly in the late '80s and early '90s, an undertone to things like, always about identity, but that was sort of phrased as if the artist had an identity crisis. That was totally incorrect, it wasn't about trying to 'find yourselves' ...

Ann: Between two worlds or something like that?

Hetti: Yes, it was about asserting identity in this very assimilationist society and that, so in that way I think you know it is quite valid that the work is about that but there was a sort of reaction as I said in that period where people were saying, oh it's always just bangin' on about identity.



Bradley Byquar reciting Eva Johnson's 'Letter to My Mother' on the opening night of the 'Wiyana/Perisferia (Periphery)', Boomalli exhibition, January 1993.
Photo courtesy of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

- Brenda: It's a stupid notion, like there has to be this constant turnover of what is the current issue in contemporary art. Okay we've done gender, we've done race, we've done all the rest of it, like let's move on. Yet, how about the people who are dealing with that still and the notions of that carry over into society? You've still got people saying things like 'But we've given them benefits for twenty years and they still can't do anything, you know, they haven't bettered themselves', as if things are going to be changed overnight. And it's also that thing of there always has to be something new, all the time regardless - so that real Western sense of the new. You know as if people are just going to step out of who they are and say 'Okay, I've finished with that, I've expressed all that', and also some people's work, I mean you talk about overtly dealing with identity and politics, but there's a lot of work that doesn't have to necessarily fit into that neat little category. Yet where it comes from, the source of that still deals with people's identity ...
- Hetti: You could say that just being an Aboriginal person making art in Australia today, regardless of what it looks like, makes your work political just by where it is made, you know, it's provenance.
- Brenda: Regardless of what the finished image or creation or whatever is.
- Hetti: ... it doesn't have to have a big flag in the middle and say 'GO BACK' or something, it could be something that's quite abstract or landscape or anything like that. It really doesn't have to be overtly political to be political I would say that's why some artists have also picked up on this phrase of being called 'cultural activists' rather than artists, so they see their role in that way. Which is quite interesting, we use that word a fair bit, we use it in True Colours to describe the artists, to make that point to the British public.
- Ann: My parents, for example, had the attitude that art was not really a valid pursuit in terms of career. A lot of people have that negative attitude to art but perhaps, from what you're saying, your families might understand a bit more what you're doing because of that interest in looking at what happened to them and how you fit into that story?
- Brenda: No it took my mum a long time to ...
- Hetti: I wanted to go to Art School, I had to go to Uni.
- Ann: Yeh, that happened to me, I wanted to leave school at 15, that was one of the big attractions too.
- Brenda: Dad was always interested in what I was doing but he always got muddled up which medium I was working in and it's only

been in the last couple of years that my mother has really taken seriously this is what I do for a living and also the other members of the family, it's when is the real job coming along, why did you leave the public service?

Hetti: I think the same stigma applies.

Brenda: Cause there is that fear, you know insecure future and whatever else, they don't realise that you love it.

I do find it hard, though, to find time and energy to continue as an artist and to also work long hours at Boomalli. I do manage it, nonetheless as it's too important to me.



From 'Wiyana/Perisferia (Periphery)' Boomalli exhibition, January 1993
Photo courtesy of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative

Hetti: I think Aboriginal people do get a great deal of pride out of seeing what our artists can do, seeing wonderful exhibitions and dynamic and strong messages, strong imagery. It really does give people a real sense of pride. They'll say they'd seen an exhibition or liked some of the exhibitions we've had here ...

I think that as we were saying before, that whereas I'm not sure that Aboriginal parents would necessarily encourage their children more to go into the visual arts more or less, I don't really know, I wasn't. I do think however, that Aboriginal

communities do get a strong sense of pride and satisfaction out of the visual arts, seeing the finished product and seeing it up on walls and how much respect the visual arts have. I think in terms of non-Aboriginal people the visual arts have been a real tool for understanding Aboriginal communities a lot more and respecting Aboriginal people a lot more, whether it be respecting our traditions, or our religions, or whether it be respecting our strong political stance if you like, in this decade. And particularly overseas. That is what's changed a lot of the way in which Aboriginal people are perceived in this country. It's the international recognition of our visual arts, it's made people think: 'Oh this is all in our backyard, what have we been missing all this time?' And so in that way visual arts is very important too as a source of pride for Aboriginal communities and also it certainly does command respect on a national and international level.