ESSAY

NAMATJIRA PROJECT: WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE NOT SEEING?

Scott Rankin

Late in 2017, just weeks after successfully negotiating the return of Albert's copyright to the Namatjira family, helping to set up the Namatjira Trust and bringing Big hART's eight-year Namatjira Project to a conclusion, producer Sophia Marinos and I found ourselves in tears as we penned an obituary for our dear friend Kumantjai L Namatjira,* who had been so instrumental to the campaign. It began with these words:

> It is with great sadness that we share the passing of Kumantjai L Namatjira Lankin. Born in 1951 in the lovely country of Raggatt's Well near Glen Helen in the West MacDonnell Ranges, the fifth of twelve children of Oscar Namatjira, granddaughter of Albert and Rubina Namatjira. Kumantjai was the beloved mother of Theo, Melissa, Trevor and Kumantjai G Namatjira. Grandmother and great grandmother to many and matriarch of the Namatjira family. Kumantjai was well known as a leading light for the Hermannsburg Watercolour Movement, yet this was just the beginning of her lifelong contribution to her family, her community and her nation.
>
> Kumantjai grew up amongst her Western Aranda community in Ntaria (Hermannsburg), 107 kilometres west of Alice Springs. As a little girl she learned to paint from her enigmatic grandfather Albert, through the 1950s, when he was at the height of his fame and creative powers. Sitting with him under a tree, watching over his shoulder, inspired by those translucent colours as they flowed like magic across the white parchment …
>
> And now she has left us. Like so many traditional owners, she has gone without being given the honour she so deserves for her tenacious efforts to strengthen and embolden her people culturally, as well as generously sharing her art with others beyond her Western Aranda country. Artist, entrepreneur, teacher, provider, cultural ambassador, gone.

Big hART's Namatjira Project has been hugely successful on many levels. A box office hit, taught in schools and universities, the subject of a documentary. Yet, in the shadow of her passing, it prompts the question, what was achieved? How did it contribute to the

* Kumantjai is used in place of a name, out of respect for those who have passed.

Kumantjai L Namatjira, on country painting trip, Finke River, NT, photo courtesy Big hART, 2011

flow of change over the last ten generations since we Europeans bludgeoned this continent under the lie of terra nullius? Is this successful project riddled with the mistakes and the moral compromise inevitable in this context? Yes, it has all the hallmarks of a profoundly successful project, yet, to quote Churchill, 'success is never final, failure is never fatal'. Success does not call for a pat on the back, or replication, or evaluation and metrics for potential roll out—the new tools of the 'secular salvationists'. Success calls for the opposite—self-examination and the naming of the inevitable compromise that comes with success in these vexed intercultural settings.

Big hART's long-term intercultural projects are informed by those that have come before—other projects, dedicated work in the field, best attempts—and take place in communities experiencing deep trauma such as Roebourne in the Pilbara, the APY Lands and the far north-west of Tasmania.

For Big hART, after decades in the field, optimistically delivering outcomes, trying to contribute, our baseline has become more circumspect: to complete a project and at the very least 'do no harm.' After the last two centuries of dysfunctional policy, disguised slow genocide, and well-intentioned endeavours, to 'do no harm' is not as easy as it seems. The consequences of profound lateral and generational trauma, coupled with the shadowy expectations of paternalism, mean that best attempts often do a great deal of harm, even when the KPIs are being reached and the relevant boxes are being ticked. Occasionally, however, a community will grapple with the opportunity of a well-designed project and real change will come. At least for a while Namatjira was one such project.

Namatjira Project beginnings

The Namatjira Project received a lot of publicity, and for those who heard about its success, it seemed a simple task. The family of Albert Namatjira didn't own the copyright in his pictures, which restricted the chance for them to benefit economically from his

work. It was shameful and something needed to change. The media highlighted the problem. A generous philanthropist, Dick Smith, made a phone call and contributed a sizable donation, job done.

However, for the Namatjira family it was a very different story. Amid the daily issues of survival, they had been trying for 30 years to alert successive governments to their plight, with almost no interest despite Albert's iconic status. The general public remained oblivious to this hidden issue.

Big hART is a campaigning arts company, whose aim is to make hidden stories of injustice known. The Namatjira Project took eight years of layered strategy, heartbreak, failure and criticism to achieve its goal. This was no clicktivist campaign. It grew from the grassroots in the Ntaria community and required the building of community trust, listening, working with the family, against negativity, racism and criticism of Big hART as an organisation.

In 2008, intercultural collaboration was a vexed issue. The language of governments towards remote Indigenous Australia came from the lexicon of war: 'target groups, interventions, troops on the ground, real results', the disguised language of contemporary paternalism. Subtle approaches, such as intercultural exchanges, tackling an apparently 'soft' issue such as copyright—as opposed to 'real jobs, real education' and 'participating in the real economy': in other words 'making you more like us'—were dismissed by policy wonks and chatterati alike.

In 2008, Big hART was touring a show created with the Ernabella community called Ngapartji Ngapartji. In the cast was a shy 13-year-old artist, Elton Wirri, a kin-grandson of Albert Namatjira. Each evening during the bows, the actor Trevor Jamieson would introduce Elton and the audience would gasp in nostalgic recognition. We wondered about this forgotten Namatjira story. The year 2009 would be the fiftieth anniversary of Albert's passing, and, sensing its significance, we made contact with the Namatjira family to ask whether there was something that could be done in his memory that would benefit the family.

So began what felt like a simple project, creating a theatre work telling Albert's story. A year into our community discussions, and having approached Belvoir Street Theatre about mounting a co-production, it was becoming clear that this was far more than a simple subscription-season show. The community process indicated the issues were complex and the needs in the community intense. Also, the nature of Namatjira's national contribution was so rich, it was clear we may be able create something to speak deeply and in generous ways to the Australian public through an intercultural work.

What emerged was a layered project involving community workshops, touring exhibitions, school engagement, government lobbying, the quest for ongoing funding, a theatre show touring to cities and the bush, media messaging, building 'Friends of the Namatjira Family', fulfilling requests from the Namatjiras such as to ask the Queen (whom Albert had met) for help, staging the show in London, securing audiences with the Queen and Prince Phillip, meeting Charles and Camilla, making a watercolour app, exhibitions in Parliament House, lobbying ministers, running conferences and master classes, public speaking, making a documentary and establishing the Namatjira Legacy Trust. All happening at a pace suitable for the Namatjira family beset with illness and family issues.

This complex 'community dramaturgy' underpinned the more visible campaign to return the copyright. And so, after eight years, the media campaign snowballed and Dick Smith with his generous financial contribution and the exceptional pro bono work from law firm Arnold Bloch Leibler (ABL), the copyright was returned and

Albert Namatjira with family, photo by Pastor S O Gross c 1955, courtesy of Strehlow Research Centre

the Namatjira Legacy Trust set up. It was a seemingly simple, neat conclusion, Western, binary and uncomplicated. So many neat boxes ticked for funding bodies. Actually, no. A few weeks later the great lady, this warrior for her people, was dead.

Obituary continued …

> It is a reflection on our whole country that this great woman died with so much less recognition than she deserved. No offer of a State funeral for this cultural leader. No Traditional Owner Hall of Fame. No monument in Canberra alongside others who have fallen fighting for their country. Instead she died in poverty—despite her prolific output and its art collector value—died while supporting her family against the ravages of brutal policy neglect. Gone, worn down by the enormous task she carried on her shoulders all those years to help keep the Namatjira traditions alive, keep the debilitating poverty at bay, and to keep fighting for the copyright return. All this on her shoulders, while dealing with the loss of children, family and community. All this while patiently waiting for us as Australians to acknowledge the significance of the Namatjira tradition and to see the way we first heralded him, then exploited him, then trashed his name, wrongfully imprisoning him, took his copyright, and exploited it further.

The word 'shame' rarely rings as true as it does at this moment, right now. It rings like a bell tolling for the lack of support for this woman of courage, and Aboriginal women like her, this indomitable spirit, who passed away with the ink still wet on the legal documents returning their copyright. What have we done, Australia? Why do we keep doing this? And let's refrain from the self-satisfied tut-tutting

about terrible things 'done in the past'. Let us instead have ears and eyes for our own responsibility, for our own negligence now, this year, on our watch. Let's own up.

The box seat of power

Securing the copyright was a collective effort, but it is important to keep this collaboration in perspective. The most courageous contribution came from the Namatjira family themselves, for decades, when all hope was lost, when no-one would listen and nobody cared. When the hungry media and story hunters came knocking, only to steal their story for short-term gain, they hung on. They were the ones with the most at stake and the most vulnerable to exploitation in this cross-cultural project working with Big hART.

They may not have had the law degrees or the patience for Western strategy, but theirs was the act of courage, not ours. Ours was a privilege—an opportunity to take a stand with them, to make mistakes and to learn from the community.

Dick Smith, ABL and Colin Golvan, who all helped, are people of high learning and they need to be congratulated, and Big hART is a stubborn and quiet campaigning force to be reckoned with. However, we all sit in the comfortable box seat of power, on the cushioned comfort of privilege as we fight for issues of cultural rights such as this. To ensure we 'do no harm' we must diligently focus on what we don't know, not what we do. We must proceed with tentative steps in this intercultural work, like an ethical toddler asking for guidance. We must remain wary of praise and accolades … asking each time, 'Fine, but what is it that I am not seeing now?'

I made many mistakes on this project, as an artist and as a strategist. I was often a dullard when it came to self-perception regarding power. However, one mistake I didn't make was hiding from the demands

Namatjira Legacy Trust Board of Directors, photo courtesy Namatjira Legacy Trust, 2018

of the moment. Communities such as the Namatjira family needed our courage to both bring our skills and to make mistakes. They didn't have time for white fella false humility, false deference or the overly reverent timidity that is the shadow of awakening out of paternalism.

Hands need to get dirty. It takes courage to do your best and make mistakes. It is what lends real meaning to success because it is not about helping to 'bring change to people', it is about us changing. These are mostly non-Indigenous problems, manifesting in Indigenous communities. This is the truth of it: in offering time and resources to assist in fixing the problem, we will be part of the problem. This always hurts. This contradiction burns people out. It is part of the joy and the sorrow of intercultural reciprocity—the Ngapartji Ngapartji. (It is also the target of much self-righteous inner-city tut-tutting as the chatterati look up from checking their real estate prices and cast quick judgement via their Twitter feed on some Central Australian 'problem' they know little about and will never see.)

Obituary continued …

> Kumantjai, our dear friend, was fun, she could catch a rabbit in her bare hands, she was cheeky and welcoming, inviting us into her family and into the safe public dimensions of her deep and multifaceted cultural world, teaching us stories and language, caring for our children as if her own. She was genuine and grateful for the exchange that cut through the false barriers of difference, preferring instead to embrace hearts of goodwill and stumble together down paths new and unmapped.
>
> Kumantjai was a practical woman of serious intent; she was on the board of her Art Centre. As a tireless public speaker on behalf of her community and fellow artists, she generously spoke in English rather than her first language, overcoming shyness and the discomfort of the curious audience stare to achieve her goals, and she knew how to stand with us while we learned more.

Our own negligence

Albert Namatjira walked out of the bush as a toddler and into Hermannsburg mission at the same moment our nation was born, at Federation. His life tracked our country's progress. As a young painter, he and his teacher Rex Battarbee began what would become the Aboriginal Art Centre movement. We use contemporary Indigenous art to sell Australia as a tourist destination to the world to help build our economy. Indigenous art is often the corporate gift given to overseas CEOs visiting to cut another deal (perhaps from mining Indigenous land). Contemporary Indigenous art is mostly generated through a network of about a 100 remote art centres scattered across Australia.

These centres are more than just painting workshops, they are community hubs, centres of wellbeing, health and support. They are the lifeblood of many communities, run and administered as an intercultural exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Even though the images they produce generate untold value in public recognition and tourism for Australia, these art centres remain chronically underfunded, drip-fed by government. Policy failure and negligence combine to allow this incremental cultural genocide to continue. And we, the general public, manage to remain blissfully unaware.

This is not a story about a deficit in Indigenous Australia, it is about a deficit in the heart of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and our centres of power. We don't see it, but we are in the same position as previous generations, whom we are quick to criticise and who through neglect assigned Albert Namatjira to prison and death.

We may regret the way 'those people back then' treated him, yet we are deeply complicit in our moral laziness today. We might no longer try to extinguish Indigenous culture and language with guns, fists and fences, yet our neglect is clear in insidious policy failure and our complicit, comfortable silence … it is our ignorance: 'but I didn't know'. Throughout history, genocide always elicits that response.

However, it is not a story solely of despair, it is an opportunity to relish, because it is not a case of having to 'fix them'; it is an issue to fix in us. It is a matter of making the story known—not by the cheap candy of momentary news and more content, but rather by the deep nourishment that comes from intercultural collaboration with communities. Australians are on the whole generous. But we can't change what we can't see. And at the heart of change is the telling of uncomfortable stories in ways that bring us together, a new narrative to create a continual renewing of the nation—incremental nourishment. Big hART is a campaigning arts company. Our passion is cultural rights … 'the right of those on the margins to be part of this nourishing narrative'.

When groups in our society are forced out of the narrative, they become invisible and lack protection. It causes genocide in increments. The general public don't really notice, and it is not until they do, and begin to demand change, that change can occur. In other words, narrative is essential as a protector. Big hART's passion is to campaign through story so that those who are pushed out of the narrative can be heard. This is what happened with the Namatjira family. They were assisted to tell their story, at their pace, alongside virtuosic artists such as Genevieve Lacey, in an intercultural space, and once people knew their story, a groundswell built and change came. History continually hands each generation the baton and demands we do better.

Obituary continued …

> Perhaps the return of this odd 'copyright thing', this strange quirk of white law, was her parting gift. With uncanny timing, as she lay sick in hospital, the news came through. Blinking away some of the last tears of her life, she grasped the significance of what had been achieved, and knowing there were others with the strength to build on her work, others who would seek justice and compensation, Kumantjai allowed herself some rest and quietly slipped away.
>
> The Namatjira play ended with four simple words capturing Albert's last moments, 'gone, into the blue …' And now another grand life has finished, not in the defeat some saw in her grandfather, but with determination, with grit, after creating the chance for many more Namatjira canvases to flow from new generations. Kumantjai Namatjira, we thank you, we cherish you for the life you lived, with all its flaws and all its fullness as you fought to ensure a brighter future for your Western Aranda community … for enduring all those seemingly fruitless moments that finally paid off … so as to let you find some rest … 'gone, into the blue'. ●

Scott Rankin is creative director of arts for social change organisation Big hART, celebrating its twenty-fifth year, and has enjoyed projects in all national festivals, as well as touring internationally, winning more than 30 arts, business, global awards. He lives in far north-west Tasmania.