

# INDIGENOUS ARCHIVES

---

THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF  
ABORIGINAL ART

---

EDITED BY DARREN  
JORGENSEN AND IAN  
MCLEAN

---

**U W**  
**A P**  
SCHOLARLY

First published in 2015 by  
UWA Publishing  
Crawley, Western Australia 6009  
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Copyright © Clare Rhoden 2015

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Rhoden, Clare, 1955- author.

Title: The Purpose of Futility : Writing  
Clare Rhoden. Australian Style /

ISBN: 9781742586625 (hbk)

Notes: Includes references.

Subjects: World War, 1914-1918—Campaigns—Turkey—Gallipoli Peninsula.  
World War, 1914-1918—Personal narratives—Australian.  
World War, 1914-1918—Political aspects—Australia.  
World War, 1914-1918—Social aspects—Australia.  
War and civilisation—Australia.

Dewey Number: 940.426

Supported by a grant from the University of Melbourne School of Culture and  
Communication

Illustrations from the collection of the Australian War Memorial are courtesy of the  
AWM

Typeset in Bembo by J&M Typesetting  
Printed by Lightning Source

WUKUN WANAMBI'S NHINA, NHÄMA, GA NGÄMA  
(SIT, LOOK, AND, LISTEN)

*Robert Lazarus Lane*

Introduction

All the infrastructure involved in circulating Wukun's archival art – the warehouses of servers, the bulbs of electronic displays, the vaults of museums, the media of recording devices – become mechanisms for generating the trajectories of ceremony's archival project. When discussing this publication with Wukun Wanambi, I asked him what was driving his archival art? He answered: 'using the archive in my art is a way for people to understand Yolngu cultural practices'. Which cultural practices specifically, I enquired, he replied: 'archiving...on the ceremonial ground'.<sup>1</sup>

Wukun<sup>2</sup> is a contemporary artist and ceremonial leader producing archival art by reconstructing ceremonial archives from deconstructed documentary archives. Working with documentary archives as cultural materials using post-production is not a means by which to stage recordings of intangible heritage, or hide cultural loss in romanticised antiquity, instead his work is visualising the ceremonial archive.

Archives made up of artistic media underlie every ceremonial performance. During ceremony the archive is used to sequence songlines, images and choreography within a clans domain-specific collection. Archiving using an ensemble of media relies on information being carried in a range of containers, including performer's bodies. Dancers perpetuating archives follow the steps

of what they believe others, or themselves, have performed on previous occasions as instances of ancestral action.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Yolngu from Arnhem Land on the northern coast of Australia have developed practices in which artistic media produces an actual network composed of archivists who document a ceremonial system. Indeed, any choreography that appears to originate fully from the dancer, and not from the archive, is not ceremonial, because it's outside the archival process.

All the affiliations between people, place, and all the associations fostering growth and exchange circulate through archiving on ceremonial grounds. And it is the capacity of ceremonial archives to integrate activities passed down from generation to generation and actualise new mechanisms to enrich that inheritance as a process of succession which enables Wukun's archival art of ceremonial documentation. My analysis of Wukun's time-based media will picture archiving networks of different durations and dynamics both present in the work, and circulating around it, as part of an archival chain. This layered engagement is an attempt to link with the artist's scholarly practice of connecting multiple archiving processes.

Today art centres such as Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, who host audiovisual media archives featuring ceremonial documentaries made by, or with, its members, are key sites for inventive procedures that are directly impacting on continuous cultural processes. By supporting ceremony, art production and audiovisual archives as part of art centre business, senior artists can make and maintain their connections between cultural practices. In this respect Indigenous owned and operated art centres can be considered local examples of the archival turn seen in contemporary art practices since the 1990s. A key work in this field is Wukun's *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma (Sit, Look, And, Listen)* (2014),<sup>4</sup> a

media installation using audiovisual archives, editing software and multichannel displays to document a succession of acts linking ceremonial trajectories with archival turns.



Figure 10.1: *Wukun Wanambi, Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma (Sit, Look, And, Listen)*, video still, 2014, 10 min 21 sec.

In *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma*, Wukun's production process starts and ends with the archive. First, he captures dance scenes from the network of ceremonial grounds onto his editing timeline. The central motivation is to index rather than cut, to loop instead of narrate, creating six scenes from the archive referencing different repertoire and variable velocities simultaneously. Wukun presents multiple events at the same time, not to synchronise, but to bring together documents into a bounded screen space. He is applying normal rules of ceremony, whereby clan groups perform sequences of song and dance alongside one another generating autonomous arrangements on shared ground.

Wukun's postproduction is displayed as a six-channel ceremonial media installation, which divides, shifts and multiplies in a variety of dancers, generating archival art that extends a performance network across generations. In split screening images

and layering song using archival film of six performances between the 1920s to the 2010s, Wukun creates his own multiplication of archival events – the graphical interface as magnification of the network in action.

In our convergent world, artists increasingly move between diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives. Using archival art, Wukun is operating between regional contexts and wider settings, dealing with the qualities of duration, place, affiliation and affect arising out of contemporary conditions, and exhibiting networks, interfaces, performances, transmissions within the documentary material itself. Wukun conveys today's local and non-local processes by declaring: 'Now I have been recognised by the old people and the art galleries as a ceremony man'.<sup>5</sup> How Wukun moves between art galleries and ceremonial grounds will be developed by the following assumptions: ceremonies use artistic media as documentation, which produces an archive; documentary of ceremony's artistic media produces an archive of an archive; a ceremonial leader using documentary as artistic media produces archival art; archival art retrieves the ceremonial archive inscribed in the documentation.<sup>6</sup>

### Ceremonies Use Artistic Media as Documentation, which Produces an Archive

Wukun began painting to fulfil a complete geographic catalogue of the exhibition Saltwater Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country (1997). His first work won best bark at the Fifteenth National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 1995. Wukun's paintings of underwater scenes depict swarms of tightly painted mullet circulating through changing currents and turbulent tides, creating swirling patterns. In the Saltwater project his barks adjoined paintings by forty-seven artists from

neighbouring sites. As the landowner of Gurka'wuy, a coastal estate, his painting of Trial Bay's physical and intellectual properties was envisaged as an index of coastal country, documenting defining features rather than mapping borders. Taken together the artist's works in Saltwater articulated Yolngu sea rights. The funds raised from selling the collection to the Australian Maritime Museum were used to extend Buku-Larrnggay Mulka into an audiovisual archive and video production house, under the title of The Mulka Project.<sup>7</sup>

In Yirkala, a former missionary town where the art centre's archive is housed, repatriated archival records bring together the struggles of the surrounding homeland estates. A century of documentary work by ethnographers, missionaries and government has produced an extensive archive of the region and the fifteen clan groups. This archive has become embedded in – or is mutually constitutive of – the places and identities bound together by the network of ceremonial grounds that comprise the overarching Yolngu identity of the clans. Like the development of the word 'Yolngu',<sup>8</sup> the Mulka archive performs network-oriented strategies of localisation. The desire to create such a network was manifested in 1998 when artists from competing clans collectively invested their individual artist fees towards the establishment of The Mulka Project. According to Wukun, the will behind the artists' investment is 'To show people how Yolngu law is connected to our art practice. The Mulka Project can bring together all our stories in a public ceremony'.<sup>9</sup>

The application of culturally relevant protocols and workflows over local documents composes archival functions according to Yolngu law. The Board governing procedures and policies of the art centre comprises ceremonial archivists, artists and leaders acting in concert. Applying rules governing the shared ground

between clans to the archive, means ‘bringing together all our stories’ because connectivity produces powerful programs that execute specific and successive Yolngu legal frameworks between landowners. The capacity to circulate documents between clans is derived from linkages within the file structure. Governing the archive is not organising discrete media objects, rather all archival procedures explicitly support a Yolngu network across three sites communicating shared ground – Northeast Arnhem Land, its art centre, and its archive. This is not simply about the Western European ideologies Jacques Derrida applies when he writes about how ‘effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation’.<sup>10</sup> Before participation comes the site to gather participants. Yolngu use Mulka as residence for the archive. Controlling relational datasets, which are already predicated on existing social structures, holds and protects documents that bind and bound participation. Creating archives to exist within an art centre that represents a region and its landowners has produced expressions of Yolngu law as archival evidence in legal proceedings and archival art for gallery events.

The Mulka Project of establishing an audiovisual archive of work originating in and located on Northeast Arnhem Land was envisaged as a vital step in resisting the marginalisation of people and place in the larger politics of the nation state, and asserting a political intent to maintain control over one’s image and intellectual property. The archive – such as the ethnographic films featured in Wukun’s archival art – is a means of applying not just ceremonial language from the past but a sense of historical development that connected past, present and future Yolngu cultural practices. The ethnographers of Western modernity catalogued documentation systems of song, sculpture, dance and painting



using the static one-dimensional methodology of object-based archives, which had descended from library catalogues. Here recordings become buried spreadsheets like rows of file names in cemeteries. However, the repatriated recordings imported into the Mulka Project are a means of accumulating cultural capital upon which contemporary Yolngu ceremonial leaders can draw, breathing new life into Yolngu cultural practices. At the centre of the Mulka Project's conception is a belief that the archivist is an artist – a notion that goes well beyond Hal Foster's diagnosis of an archival turn in contemporary art.<sup>11</sup>



*Figure 10.2: Wukun Wanambi (left) and Yumuŋjin Wunungmurra in the Australian Museum storage collection area, 2010. Photo: Robert Lazarus Lane.*

Using the analogy of painting, Wukun states: 'the first layer is recording in camera. The second layer is art in gallery'.<sup>12</sup> The pursuit of a gallery interface for the artwork suggests the task for *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma* is not a nostalgic journey into a cultural memory damaged by massive social upheavals, but excavates cultural history previously made invisible by endless bureaucratic glitches and ongoing political acts of exclusion in delocalised

archival systems. Archival art turns restoration into something more than simply retrieving the past; it applies programmatic procedures to the material, producing a successive process.

Media archives attending to local users dismantle the abstract coordinates of time and space in centralised archives.<sup>13</sup> The reassertion of local authorship using the archive as a network of connected people and places bypasses centralised castles dictating what deserves a place, and what should be cut from the cultural record. Wukun restores some measure of symmetry, determining what is to be properly filed, what is to be muted, and what is to be amplified from existing archives in the sound design of *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma*. Reconfiguring operations occur with the inclusion of virtual waves that rise and fall as oppositional rhythms nest beneath muted song. Ceremonial dance, underscored by white noise, recalls the changing tides of twentieth-century encounters.

This move to switch between ‘excavation sites’ and ‘construction sites’ shifts the emphasis away from a culture of loss to one of orchestrating archives for future remix.<sup>14</sup> Reparticipation in local documentation systems requires interventions into the material itself. The archive contains random edits of performance traditions for the sake of distant analysis, artefacts of cinematic confusion and evidence of colonial propaganda. Reconstruction must find a way to reframe documentary conventions, which not only assumed a dramatic loss of cultural diversity due to the encroachment of modernity but also assured it by using the assassin’s knife of voiceovers and cutaways – and that is before the archival cataloguing of ethnographic museums further eroded Yolngu epistemology.

### Documentary of Ceremony's Artistic Media Produces an Archive of an Archive

Ceremony has been captured on recording devices for nearly a century in Northeast Arnhem Land. Western ethnographers introduced these archival technologies without understanding that the Indigenous ceremonial events of their recordings were themselves archiving processes using artistic media. The desire to document using the fidelity of the new photographic documentary technologies drew anthropologists to the visual aspects of ceremony that otherwise were difficult to render. Ceremonial leaders were drawn to these new technologies of visual documentation, now able to combine duration with mobility.



*Figure 10.3: Wukun Wanambi filming ceremonial performance at Garma Festival, 2010. Photo: Robert Lazarus Lane.*

This is not to say that ceremony needed cameras whirling for it to occur. Rather new photographic and sonic recording devices were absorbed into the porous logic of ceremony, as another activity within its documentation system. Ceremonial orchestrations produce a resistance to documentation approaches not operating as part of its matrix of mediums. Consequently, anthropologists who could film were of use to Indigenous ceremonial leaders because they provided another means to archive the specific expressions inherent in ceremonial activity. As an exchange process, ceremony's documentary modes and documentary's ceremonial modes served dual interests.

The Western desire to reconstitute ceremony's enduring qualities was insatiable from the moment the cine-camera was invented in 1895. In 1898 A. C. Haddons was 600 kilometres away from Yirrkala, on Murray Island in Torres Strait, recording ceremonial dance.<sup>15</sup> The intent behind Haddon's early cinema, according to A. Grimshaw, was to produce 'documentation of a "dying" culture'. What Haddon did not entirely comprehend from within his nineteenth-century paradigm, but perhaps his Murray Island actors could foresee, was that the moving film of the Lumiere cinematographe did much more than trace gestural traces from the past, its visual technologies made evident a coherent performance of a continuous cultural process.<sup>16</sup> Documentation made to move enters a network to be mobilised not stilled, becoming progressively subjected to variable material states as it migrates between formats, which in turn exposes cultural processes to different velocities as it enters new archives.

In a time of memory cards and cloud storage, the complex scenography of Indigenous performance still creates a 'certain cognitive indecipherability'<sup>17</sup> in the minds of dehydrated and sun-burnt film makers, who pass through places like Torres Strait and

Arnhem Land with an ever-increasing frequency. Interestingly, the archive of contemporary recordings still demonstrates how long-duration performances, with intense physical acts and multiple scenes occurring simultaneously remain too advanced for most recording apparatuses. However, when Wukun archives, ethnography captures ceremony's complex uniting of gestures, images, props and sounds as more of a database cinema, as opposed to a documentary film approach.

Through our journey Yolngu law was passed on to outsiders with their cameras and microphones who wanted to understand the way we live and survived. Now we're still passing on our law through cameras and microphones, but instead we got the facilities on our country, to share our law with our people and the world.<sup>18</sup>

Using documentation alongside performance, art centre leaders, who are experienced choreographers, composers, archivists and performers, reject claims that the artistic media of ceremonial production is being cannibalised by new media recordings. The idea that new media documentation replaces the thing itself is premised on media being tools for memory, as if it destroys the memorised procedures of dancers, songmen and others. What in fact is happening, of course, is quite the opposite: the world of new media is now just one part of ceremonial production in general.<sup>19</sup>

Wukun is best known as a painter and sculptor, but has been working as a video artist since 2008. He has tethered his media and painting studio practice, which sees him moving between editing software and earth pigments, sometimes on a daily basis. It's commonplace to discuss assembling video files in multi-track timelines while he patiently layers detailed patterns across memorial poles.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps it is due to growing up around film crews recording his family members or perhaps it is due to the Yolngu notion of temporality, but Wukun is not burdened by Western perceptions of difference between traditional and new media. Instead of a binary trap, leaders of Wukun's Marrakulu clan in Gurrkawuy showed him how cinema can be thought about alongside ceremony as a cultural transmission if you 'open your mind for the future, and don't be trapped, because culture has always been flowing'.<sup>21</sup>

### Ceremonial Leader Using Documentary Material as Artistic Media Produces Archival Art

Wukun's artworks are not about archiving film history but projecting Yolngu relational databases of agency and personhood. There is no opening scene, nor centre, and no particular image that grounds the artist's position. As a site of exchange, records are evenly drawn from a database, and arranged as a picture of ceremonial worlds.

Wukun's use of archival films on the ceremonial ground continues a political agenda to develop affiliations between traditional and new media, between past and present, and between cultures. Howard Morphy, a long time anthropologist and collaborator with Yolngu artists, notes how global forces, 'are not restricted to any one context but move back and forward across contexts creating a dialogical relationship between Yolngu society and the encompassing world'.<sup>22</sup>

Ceremonial media is not a tool for memory, but another way in which Yolngu 'recognises and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked'.<sup>23</sup> Rather than block ethnographers or denigrate films capacities, ceremonial leaders recognise and exploit documentary power in creative and progressive ways.

In *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma*, Wukun strips back 100 years of documentary filmmaking using post-production to retain that to which his senses have, through ceremony, been attuned. In this way archival film becomes a means of extending 'the work expended on material documentation' by predecessors to reconstruct 'within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations'.<sup>24</sup> Deconstructing documentary to reconstruct ceremony produces exchanges between generations of performers. Wukun's archival art becomes part of a ceremonial continuum to bind local networks in the face of counterforces, through the installation of multiple streams, channels and screens in the gallery space.

The moves made by Wukun are neither static readings of past events drawn from archives, nor improvised chants trying to infill bare remains. His work is a passage through ceremonies that is orchestrated by interlocking mediums, montaging of methods and spectrums of channels. The postproduction processes used by Wukun, a ceremonial leader who places emphasis on being always connected to mobile networks and contactable via an array of media, reveals an artist as facilitator of multiple modes of transmission.<sup>25</sup> Multiple in his functions, he performs as a clan member, an artist, an archivist, an editor, a recorder, a diver, a counsellor, a translator, an editor. Generating multiple identities, supporting connectivity is a way of being: in the medium of the ceremonial ground; present in multi-sited social networks; neo-traditional in the art world.<sup>26</sup>

Standing in front of *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma*, one can sense Dziga Vertov's celebration of photographic and urban mechanisms in Wukun's ambition to intensify movement using framing devices. Unlike many works coming from art centres, the clans, locations, authors and narratives featured within the work are not framing its display. Wukun's archival art is not using ceremonial

recordings to provide evidence of authenticity. Rather, he is using the archive to make evident innovative ceremonial practices. Using cinematic apparatus to celebrate dynamism embraces how ceremonial practice channels adaptation, alteration, malleability, diversity, versatility, variability and development.

The calibration of new media into existing documentation systems – of which digitisation is now but one – situates the performances archived in Wukun's film as the grounding events from which documentary development is then determined by or through. The transformations in *Nhina*, *Nhāma*, *Ga Ngāma* of ceremonial ground becoming film becoming newsreel becoming ethnography becoming file becoming installation, is an indexical series of appropriations in which the reiterations remain grounded. But the digitisation of appropriations frees ceremonial documents from devices and objects to what counts on the ceremonial ground: exchanging currencies, connecting channels, overlapping currents. This all points to the mediating role of ceremonial grounds as 'spaces of contemporaneity' in the literal sense of being places where connections between different temporalities are facets or perhaps nodal points linking production, circulation and use in a meshing of multiple temporalities. In this sense *Nhina*, *Nhāma*, *Ga Ngāma* is a documentation platform, that in 'transforming simultaneously past, present, and future' is 'a system for recreating a whole economy of the temporal'.<sup>27</sup>

### Archival Art Retrieves the Ceremonial Archive Inscribed in the Documentation

The key idea behind redocumentation, in regards to how Wukun uses archives today, is the reversibility of archival processes without changing its fundamental properties. On entering the installation one views a frame symmetrically arranged into six vertical panels.



Each pole-shaped panel is filled with one continuous dance scene. The arrangement of archival films is not linear either spatially or temporally. Further, then dancing is not interrupted and remains on screen throughout the work: Wukun is thinking through movement and space, not words and dates.<sup>28</sup> Using Gilles Deleuze's intellectual suite of tools from movement-image, a viewer can see how Wukun is not using postproduction to intercut various scenes of dance to produce a montage, but is showing recordings as they occurred because 'movement is indivisible, or cannot be divided without changing qualitatively each time it is divided'.<sup>29</sup> Retaining the flows of dance and the choreographed moves of ceremony as a system in itself, serves the interests of performance, rather than interpreting the literary arcs of Western teleology.



Figure 10.4: *Djapu performance in Yirrkala during Wamut Dhapi, 2010. Photo: Robert Lazarus Lane.*

Local networks visualised in Wukun's *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma* produce a program of dance. Having grown up as a performer, then a choreographer, now editor of dance, Wukun is redoubling imagery, retrieving historical performances producing

a different way of setting up and passing on history. It recalls Lepecki's idea of porousness within the dance archive, in which, 'the body as archive re-places and diverts notions of archive away from a documental deposit or a bureaucratic agency dedicated to the (mis)management of "the past"'.<sup>30</sup> The dancers' bodies do not depict history, they perform cultural lineage as media carriers. As a choreographer of movement and editor of timelines, Wukun splices together dancing media carrier bodies into a 'lineage machine'.<sup>31</sup>

Redocumenting the archive reorganises events previously separated by independent and private space into an affective fabric of interconnected acts. The ten-minute arrangement of overlapping percussion clashes events that have been previously synchronised autonomously. Off-screen voices and the overwhelming build-up of different acoustic events becomes one stereo sound. This is less about using media for the retrieval of memory and more a push to bring media together into one soundtrack as layered seams of a database. The complexity of cross-affiliation, as opposed to a managed model of identity, produces interwoven forces that merge dates, sites and bodies into a ceremonial assemblage, documenting networks of affect. Wukun's archival art is a network in form by using reframing and reiterating procedures on content designed to capture and document connections between linked performances. The artwork becomes not merely a way to document something but is itself another iteration of that which it is documenting.<sup>32</sup>

*Nhina, Nhāma, Ga Ngāma* is a six-channel video installation in which the artist has stacked, rather than sequenced archival records, and movement is used to establish lineage as a dynamic procession of dance dynasties. This approach to real dance movements and abstract split screens produces two effects: looping dance clips as they happened invites viewers to find succession;

arranging events into six cells, crops and divides space into one whole choreographic pattern. Wukun's affectual composition is not archiving 'the body' but endeavouring to reconfigure a body's archive.<sup>33</sup>

Wukun's project becomes a library and museum of ceremony, because its media is produced in the self-conscious relationship to earlier media,<sup>34</sup> archiving how every dance finds synchronisation and each song cycle becomes harmonised when no longer separated by individual histories and archived as autonomous movements. Thus the different historical scenes are made to 'belong to a single, identical, homogeneous space, while the movements are heterogeneous, irreducible among themselves'.<sup>35</sup>

By redocumenting a performance legacy on Northeast Arnhem Land's network of ceremonial grounds, Wukun projects a genealogy of dynamic mechanisms for aggregating documentation. The filmmaker's intent is not privileged as the archival nature of the art traces the genealogies of moving image work in ceremonial performance. Wukun's strategy is to build on the role of the dancer as director. By not being interviewed and not being organised by narrative arcs that exist outside of ceremony itself, the dancer is in control. Wukun's editing emphasises the dance film as mutually constituted.<sup>36</sup>

What matters is the system, the choreography regulated by a formula, the archiving of a move or a step. Applying Deleuze, one can suggest *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma* is the editing of affect more than representation, projecting a system of choreographed actions and impacting forces rather than a system naming images to archive in a regime of signs.<sup>37</sup> While Wukun's approach to affect may appear like he is documenting archival fragmentations and degradations, this is not the case if one's modes of inquiry begin with networked movement rather than static states, with a

focus on translation processes rather than what position to take.<sup>38</sup> Approaches to works made from performance and media can oversimplify analysis by mapping the relations of subjects and objects in a historical period, or collecting narrative statements to reveal artist intent. This mental analysis can overlook how editing dance is primarily a musical effort to generate intensity.

So despite symmetry-breaking events via different recording devices, changing media carriers and destructive editing techniques, the ceremonial dance documented over decades in *Nhina*, *Nhäma*, *Ga Ngäma* fully coexist with one another, revealing how components interface and can be exported out of one event, inserted into another, and produce a rhythmic coherence as a virtual archive functioning as parts of a whole. The resuscitation of archival materials through the mobilising effect of reconnecting generations through a shared dance enables the genesis of small differences to be tracked, traced and used in their own right. Here Wukun indexes movements through calculating factors such as stability, growth and adjustments. Documenting gradual variation and slippages, he exhibits video streams as a collective wave, showing succession, where ‘imitation is the propagation of a flow’.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

*Nhina*, *Nhäma*, *Ga Ngäma* is an intensive audiovisual retrospective ruminating on the multiple incarnations of ceremonial dance archived on film in Northeast Arnhem Land, its vital intersections with twentieth-century ceremonies when recording devices documented dancers, and twenty-first century events when dancers redocumented recordings. Repeating and multiplying a historical idea is predicated on a drive to produce documentation. My proposition is this drive in Wukun’s work is fuelled by performing

ceremony – a document generating machine. Access to new media technologies make it possible for Wukun to modify and recirculate media content in powerful new ways, but the image of an Indigenous person holding a camera is not the recognition this essay seeks. Beyond filming, archiving and editing tools, we need to recognise the origin of Wukun's archival art is in its subject: the skills and knowledge coming from ceremonial practice, driving Wukun to deploy media apparatus toward production processes.

After half a century of film projects, Yolngu leader Roy Dadaynga Marika, in 1970, declared an ongoing Yolngu drive to produce documentation: 'This is our chance to record our history for our children, for our children and our grandchildren'. With cameras and dancers looking on he continued: 'We should do this while we are still alive. Before we die we should make a true picture...our own Yolngu picture, that will teach our children our dances and law and everything – our singing, our own Yolngu culture'.<sup>40</sup>

The production of ceremony enables recording acts, induces documentation actions, inscribes actor's memory and ultimately reproduces itself by unfurling these durational spools of tape conserving past events until the recorders from which they flow cover the ground, awaiting to be rewound differently.<sup>41</sup> By inscribing new combinations onto existing components, archives reinvent the present in the past by reperforming the new upon the substrate of the old and vice versa. Yet, as Henri Bergson says, 'no two moments are identical in a conscious being'.<sup>42</sup> Rewinding the tape implies a replaying the past but does not imply that the viewers watching Wukun's archival art experience the same past in the modern moment. Different montages from Wukun's past are not interpreted, rather a newer scene is combined with an older one, and thus, when another scene occurs, it is added onto

all the other old ones plus new ones from before. The filters and variations, qualities and relations composing worlds Bergson calls the mobility of temporal progress.<sup>43</sup> Never motionless, Wukun's archival activity is a creative relay process produced by persistent pasts and enduring connections. In many respects the circulation is what matters, not the particular forms that it causes to emerge. The event is not the thing, nor is the recording process, but amid the continuity of progress what is passed on – what is redocumented in real time. Mario Perniola argues the recognition of reality 'is not what appears at any moment, but what is conserved'.<sup>44</sup>

To think about Wukun's multi-screen realisation of ceremony's virtual archives, one can quote Vertov's brother and director of photography, Mikhail Kaufman. He is discussing Vertov's editing method as a way of world picturing that is 'infused with the particular thought that he is actually seeing the world for other people'. 'Like a kind of scholar', says Kaufman, 'he is able to gather empirical observations in one place and then in another. And that is actually the way in which the world has come to be understood'.<sup>45</sup>

Wukun's scholarship captures the archive as the nodal point of intellectual property and its performance, through a postproduction process reframing dance to capture ceremonial documents on digital interfaces. Artists using the archive to retrieve documentary recordings of performance histories, and reiterating events in the gallery connect legacy and progress. This marks the media connections occurring in his body of work and presents a ceremonial leader developing practices in which artistic media and virtual archives network to expand Yolngu intellectual mobility. Wukun's scholarly reframing of audiovisual archives through a postproduction process continues ceremonial intellectual practices using ensembles of cultural techniques and transmission formats.

In effect, ceremonial leaders making archival art like Wukun document how ceremony works, or perhaps more accurately, how ceremony archives itself.

## Notes

- 1 Private communication with Wukun Wanambi, 2015.
- 2 I refer to the artist by his first name because there are many Wanambi artists generating artwork in northeast Arnhem Land.
- 3 H. Morphy, 'Art as a Mode of Action: Some Problems with Gell's Art and Agency', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, March 2009, pp. 5–27.
- 4 Exhibited in 135th Meridian-East 2014, The Australian Experimental Art Foundation and Unsettled, National Museum Australia 2015.
- 5 Artist Statement, viewed 20 October 2015, <<http://www.waterfront.nt.gov.au/darwin-waterfront-precinct/parklands/public-art/>>.
- 6 These ideas are expanded in my forthcoming thesis.
- 7 Investment in multiple manifestations of ceremonies manifold forms continues at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, with the recent extension of The Mulka Project with the addition of a sound studio and performance space.
- 8 Word meaning 'person' now used for inhabitants of Eastern Arnhem Land to affiliate members from different clans under an umbrella term. It's rare for people from Northeast Arnhem Land to refer to themselves as Indigenous or Aboriginal. Most people refer to themselves as Yolngu when talking to non-Yolngu and continue to refer to themselves by clan when talking to other clan members.
- 9 R. Lane, 'To Hold and Protect: Mulka at Yirrkala', *Artlink*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2011, pp. 82–3 at 82.
- 10 J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p. 4.
- 11 H. Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in J. Fisher (ed), *Global Visions: Towards a new internationalism in the visual arts*, Kala Press in association with The Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1994, pp. 12–17.
- 12 Private communication with Wukun Wanambi, 2015.
- 13 J. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the city*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 158.
- 14 Thomas Hirschhorn quoted in H. Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, no. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 3–22 at 22.
- 15 Viewed 20 October 2015, <<http://aso.gov.au/titles/historical/torres-strait-islanders/clip1/>>.
- 16 A. Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology*,

- Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 24.
- 17 A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 96.
  - 18 R. Lane, 'To Hold and Protect', p. 83
  - 19 Suppose a writer who does not play soccer tells the richest football club – Real Madrid – that media coverage will impact their players' memory. All the techniques developed in their bodies and the tactics built up across generations of performances will be dismantled once they start watching tape of games. What has occurred in sport is the inverse scenario: everything on the pitch is recorded and analysed down to the smallest pixel of interaction, yet crucially, practice on the training ground still means everything.
  - 20 In the same period, Wukun produced a Larrakitj installation showing the processual layering of six ceremonial poles, and his six panel vertically cropped video work – *Nhina, Nhäma, Ga Ngäma*.
  - 21 Private communication with Wukun Wanambi, 2015.
  - 22 H. Morphy, 'Art as a Mode of Action', p. 20.
  - 23 M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. S. Smith, Pantheon Books, New York, 1972, p. 7.
  - 24 *ibid.*, p. 7.
  - 25 N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du réel, Paris, 2002.
  - 26 T. Spear, 2003, 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa', *The Journal of African History*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 3–17 at 4.
  - 27 M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, quoted in A. Lepecki, 'The Body as Archive: Will to Reenact and the Lives of Dances', *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2010, pp. 28–48 at 30.
  - 28 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell Publishing, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, p. 406.
  - 29 G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the movement-image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 1.
  - 30 A. Lepecki, 'The Body as Archive', p. 34.
  - 31 R. Schneider, quoted in J. Blocker, 'Repetition: A Skill which Unravels', in A. Jones & A. Heathfield (eds), *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, Intellect, Bristol, 2012, *ebook*.
  - 32 R. Rappaport, 'The Obvious Aspects of Ritual', *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California. 1979, pp. 173–221 at 177.
  - 33 Spinoza quoted in M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in M. Gregg & S. J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, pp. 1–25 at p. 3.



- 34 M. Foucault, 'Fantasia on the Library', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, D. F. Bouchard (ed), trans. D. F. Bouchard & S. Simon, Cornell University Press, Ithica, 1967, pp. 78–110 at 92–3.
- 35 G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 1.
- 36 A. Escobar, 'Culture sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization', *Political Geography*, no. 20, 2001, pp. 139–74 at p. 146.
- 37 G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Charles Stivale, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990.
- 38 B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- 39 G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 219.
- 40 This sequence was included in a film called *Pain for this Land* (1995) which serves as a general introduction to the *Yirrkala Film Project*, a collection of twenty-two documentary films made over a period of thirty years by Ian Dunlop, from which one panel in Wukun's work originates: *Marrakulu funeral – Yirrkala 1974*.
- 41 Hardwired for musical inscriptions, brains keep 'singing' long after a song has ended. Haunted, we repeat the song over and over in our mind. The more you repeat the more you inscribe, eventually you're stuck in an unending song cycle. The memory system recording song is called the phonological loop, ceremonial song cycles use this 'short loop of recording tape that continuously stores a small amount of auditory information' to structure musical scores.
- 42 H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. L. Andison, The Citadel Press, New York, 1992, p. 164.
- 43 L. Lawlor & V. M. Leonard, 'Henri Bergson', in E. N. Zalta (ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 20 November 2015, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/bergson/>>.
- 44 M. Perniola, *Enigmas*, trans. C. Woodall, Verso, London, 1995, pp. 65–6.
- 45 M. Kaufman quoted in L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, Boston, 2001, p. 240.