Art as Currency:
The social, spiritual and fiscal bitcoin of the Yolgnu

Masterclass by Greg Downing with The Mulka Project at Buku-Larrnggay-Mulka in Yirrkala, North East Arnhem Land. Presented by Ideas on Design June 2017
The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre is the heart of the Yirrkala homeland community in North East Arnhem Land. It is a remarkable story of enterprise, community building and collaboration between white fella and black fella ways.

“The Art Centre was created in 1976 when government policy shifted, and self-determination came to communities in Arnhem Land. The local artists saw the creation of a community controlled art centre as critical to furthering their economic independence, cultural security over sacred designs, and to maintain political and intellectual sovereignty.” http://yirrkala.com/

The art and craft of Buku-Larrnggay-Mulka come from the artists of Yirrkala and the approximately 25 homeland centres within a radius of 200km where the Yolgnu people live in their clan groups. Yolngu people are all capable and entitled to express their sacred identity through art, and they have done so as a continuous culture for tens of thousands of years.

Art here is a way of life.

Buku-Larrnggay-Mulka is now one of the most successful indigenous community art centres in Australia. Works from here have found their way to private collections and museums around the world, including the Louvre in Paris. The centre houses a commercial gallery, museum, auditorium and the most recent addition The Mulka Project.

Mulka is a digital studio with sound and picture facilities. It is Mulka that brings us to Arnhem Land. With the support of The Collie Print Trust and the US Consulate, The Design Foundation under the Ideas on Design programs presented a masterclass with LA-based computer graphics artist Greg Downing. A masterclass that continues our curation and creative production of programs that will enhance design excellence in creative communities.

Drawing on over 20 years of experience as a digital artist Greg introduced the Mulka team and the Yirrkala community to the world of VR, sharing tips and techniques in advanced computer graphics to build environments and assets for VR experiences.
Greg developed his expertise on projects like Hollywood blockbusters such as Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and Spiderman 3. He describes how eventually after months and months of rebuilding NYC in CG for the second time, to only blow it up, he also wanted to apply his talents to new areas that would have more lasting meaning for him. So he co-founded xRez with Eric Hansen.

The Studio has worked on projects that have included photo mapping Yosemite National Park for search and rescue purposes and park management; provided digital terrain capture for Bjork’s special venue film, ‘Black Lake’; and the experimental immersive film based on the 2014 collaboration of renowned Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei and Navajo artist Bert Benally’s ephemeral land art performance in rural New Mexico.

xRez is skilled in spherical panoramic work, photogrammetry techniques, full dome production and high-end environmental visual effects. Greg’s skills are particularly well positioned for VR, and he is forging new ground in this area, which he shared with The Mulka team.
The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre has an open door policy. Everyone is welcome - tourists, visitors, community, young and old. Yolngu children wander through the centre playing hide and seek amongst the artwork (including in the auditorium during Greg’s introductory presentation). Sometimes they help themselves to Yidaki (Digeridoo) in the gallery dragging them out to the covered courtyard to experiment amongst the old women who are painting and making jewellery.

Nyapanyapa Yunupingu one of the most celebrated of the living artists at the centre also regularly paints there. She appears to have a permanent studio space in the Museum itself, evident by the ochre stains of her work on the museum floor and the scattering of her implements and uncompleted work that are strewn about even in her absence. She speaks little if any English but her irreverent spirit is evident all the same as she signs to me, cheekily dismissing the young men as they bring her a large panel of bark for new commissions, yet continues her work on paper. Through sign language, we laugh knowingly together on more than one occasion. She is funny. Although she does not speak English it is likely she speaks more than one of the local languages all more prominent than English in this part of Australia.

The Centre is active and alive.

It is this community building aspect of the centre that the present co-coordinator Will Stubbs believes is its real success.

“Yes, we are buying and commissioning more than $2 million of art each year, sold around the world. More importantly, we have a place to bring artists together, to share the knowledge that underpins the visual language of the Yolngu people, and to keep it alive for the generations who come after them. Black and white.”

Will Stubbs describes his place amongst the Yolngu as a love story. He started his working life as a criminal lawyer cutting his teeth on the “Underbelly” of Sydney’s corrupt and dangerous legal milieu of the 1990’s. After five years, feeling used and despondent, he ceremoniously burnt his suit (its flammability indicative of his meagre stipend) and escaped to Darwin.

There he met, “the most beautiful and powerful woman he had ever come across”, Merkiyawuy Ganambarr. She is now Principal of Yirrkala School, author, academic and Yothu Yindi backing singer. He was mesmerised and pursued his infatuation until marrying her and moving to Yirrkala, her homeland. Since then he has fallen in love with not only the woman but also her people and their ways. He is very humble about his role at the Centre over the past 20 years.

He makes it very clear. “The Yolngu own the art centre and only that which is approved by the board of directors, made up of Yolngu elders, is enacted here”.

I suspect he has had a far more significant impact than he is prepared to divulge. Perhaps this is an appropriate response by someone who is attempting to bridge tens of thousands of years of knowledge and spirituality with the rest of the world. His effusive presence is significant none-the-less.

Jeremy Cloake added further insight into the importance of the community development aspects of the art centre. Jeremy has also been a coordinator and returns seasonally to Yirrkala with his partner to work on ongoing projects. He is a musician, music teacher and producer and has expertise in the Yidaki having toured with Yolngu musicians over the years.

He describes the negative impacts that can occur particularly for young men when there is disconnect with traditional ways without new pathways.

Jeremy explains that prior to colonization, the majority of young men’s time would have been taken up with hunting fish and game, providing protein for the family.

“Today with supermarkets, this is not essential, potentially rendering this important male role redundant. The art centre has provided a commercial outlet for the men’s artwork also. Producing artworks for the commercial art market provides a means of contribution and self value can be maintained. Those who embrace this can earn an income and provide in their communities; a male role within a contemporary context. Importantly the power that comes from expressing kinship and ancestral rights through creative practice evokes feelings of pride, belonging and contribution.”
A connection explained by Andrew Blake, another past co-ordinator, who also returns regularly to visit his adopted family and work on projects within the Centre with his wife, Dianne. Both again have had a significant impact on the evolution of this Art Centre and the profound implications on the community.

With a voice made for radio, Andrew provides visitors, sometimes bus-loads of them, with stories that underpin the works in both the museum and commercial gallery. He has a deep and respectful understanding of the visual language of the art. Like the key on a map, Andrew explains how the artwork provides visual cues to the complex kinship relationships and spiritual connection to ancestors and creation stories. Also mnemonically they assist in recalling practical knowledge and sustainable hunting practices that have allowed the Yolngu people to survive in isolated and dangerous landscapes for thousands of years. People connect and learn through detailed knowledge, of an encyclopaedic scale, handed down through generations, via songlines, dance and paintings in a non-written culture. As a result of this system of knowledge sharing, they have a culture and ecosystem still intact. Arnhem Land has some of the most well-preserved ecosystems in the world.
The art has also served as legal evidence of land ownership in the long battle for land rights that started with the bark petition in 1963, and eventually resulted in successful land right claims and rightful ownership by the Yolngu people.

The Saltwater bark painting collection coordinated through Buku-Larrnggay Mulka formed the basis of evidence to close the loop in this land rights struggle with successful sea rights claims around their land. It is the detailed depictions of connections to land and sea that convinced the Courts to acknowledge rightful ownership and the sacred business of custodianship by Yolngu people across North East Arnhem Land.

The Yolngu approach to their despair at the disrespect by white people towards their land and culture has mainly been an intellectual one. They have approached reconciliation by sharing their knowledge, attempting to educate outsiders in the hope that they will gain respect and thus protection for their ways.

The Art Centre and its coordinators have played a significant role in this endeavour.

As Will Stubbs states in the Saltwater bark painting catalogue; "In the tradition of the Yirrkala Church Panels, the Yirrkala Bark petition and the Barunga Statement, the Saltwater Collection sees Yolngu employ paintbrushes not bomb vests to resist the victory of might over right."

Yolngu bark paintings set the precedent for art to be the basis of confounding evidence in Commonwealth Courts.

I have been involved in the world of design for over 25 years and seen how it can change lives. But never to this extent where art and design are so integrated into the social fabric and have such currency.
Andrew Blake was keen to reinforce that despite the significance of traditional art, present art practice is not however static or only replicating ancient imagery. While artists draw on their traditional clan-based designs, the new works are individual interpretations and evolve with time. Buku-Larrnggay Mulka is, he states, a contemporary art gallery.

This is definitely apparent with The Mulka Project, bringing the newest forms of recording to the sharing of culture and knowledge. The Mulka Project has archived photos, film, video and audio recordings and welcomes those interested in supporting this process.

Mulka filmmakers such as Ishmael Marika and Patrina Mununggurr with the support and guidance of Joseph Brady and his wife Bec Charlesworth have contributed to tourism videos, documentaries, tvc’s and personal projects that continue the sharing of their people’s stories in contemporary forms of art practice and provide meaningful employment for emerging creative practitioners.

Arian Pearson, a young musician, is a new addition to the Mulka team. He is now the Sound Engineer and a Mulka Project Coordinator. He is also a member of the East Journey band that has toured globally, won music awards and had success on radio charts.

In a similar way to the artworks in the gallery, the recording of songs at Mulka offer new interpretations of traditional songlines, incorporating old and new, black fella and white fella ways. Arian is presently producing “The Brolga”, a mix of his brother’s (Rowun Maymuru) interpretation of a clan song with the traditional version sung by one of his elders Galu Ganambarr.

Brolga is the story about how at the end of one life his people fly onto the next with the help of the Brolga as a guide. Arian tells me how in Yolngu ways people are the land and return to it when they die. The land does not have a tongue, and Yolngu were created to give the land a voice. They take this responsibility very seriously, and destruction of the environment is felt as destruction of themselves and their ancestors.

Greg Downing, armed with his ‘Alienware and HTC Vive, introduced this impressive Mulka team to the possibilities of 3D for VR. With techniques in photogrammetry, they built 3d models of Yidaki and bark paintings, made a 3d model of the Island at East Woody point, bringing them together in Unity with recordings of the Yidaki. “Photogrammetry is the process of turning photos into 3D models so that you have the realism of a photograph but can move around the object like a physical model” Greg Downing.

Greg was masterful at ensuring that the producers and artists at Mulka had valuable tips and techniques to be able to continue developing this work without him. Joseph Brady, the director of Mulka, was an impressively fast learner with a geekish passion for the technology and all its idiosyncrasies. Thank goodness.

“It has been really great to introduce authoring of full 6 DOF (degrees of freedom) Virtual Reality at the Mulka Project. We had lots of great discussions about how photogrammetry can not only be used for storytelling in VR but can also be used to document and potentially conserve the precious heritage that they are caring for and creating. It is exciting that that the 3d creation tools and VR playback machines are now portable enough that it is reasonable to take them on a trip like this. I think it will be exciting to see what they make from this. I am expecting vibrant new perspectives!” Greg Downing

Joseph Brady explains how the hands-on mentor model has been an effective approach to learning advanced computer graphics techniques for the Mulka Project. The team has been really inspired to develop content further in immersive interactive technology.

The mentor model is an ideal learning environment because as Joseph Brady explains it replicates the familiar teaching and learning traditions of the Yolgnu
people and is the dominant model for ongoing training requirements at Mulka.

“It is what is called Nhāma ga Ngāma here. Look and listen”. Novices learn by sitting with masters, watching and then doing. This is how they learn their songlines, how to paint traditional clan designs and many of the hunting and gathering practices past down from their elders. Taking notes and asking lots of questions is not identified as an indicator of studious learning. Sitting quietly and modeling the behavior of experts is though.”

According to Joseph, it is all the more relevant because for many Yolgnu people including The Mulka team, English is at least a second language and for many it may even be their fifth. English language barriers, coupled with the complex technical language of computer graphics makes the hands-on watching and doing model of learning the most effective way for people to stay engaged and to get good learning outcomes.

“What Greg has helped us do here is to break through the technical barrier which can initially seem insurmountable and planted the seed. We have already done a lot since he left. We have started to recreate Mangroves in Speed Tree to add to the model in Unity. We are all excited about taking the project further and ideally creating a game that will engage people to learn about Yolgnu culture through immersive and interactive media.”
Greg patiently negotiated the constant interruptions that come with a studio deeply embedded in the social context of the community it ultimately serves.

Some of the meandering children came through, and Greg teleported them to the Smithsonian Museum, into Egyptian tombs, wild landscapes of Iceland and let them play with tilt brush.

All things at Yirkalla are community experiences, sometimes amusingly. Only one person at a time could be transported to other lands through the HTC Vive but those waiting entertained themselves with a game of blind man’s bluff, prodding the blinded wearer of the headset, jumping in and around their VR experience.
We even ventured into the forbidden sea; the home of the saltwater crocodile. Visitors are advised not to swim in any of the waterways in Arnhem Land. Simon, who accompanied us on the trip, and I, are both Islanders. It is hard to avoid the allure of some of the most amazing beaches I have ever seen. We started with shallow dips in clear water. We were eventually emboldened to dive a little deeper by young Yolngu children who lured us into the breakwater, “no crocodiles in ere” they said “they live in the cweek”. Only two local people have been taken by crocodiles in the past five years. But considering the small population, and you almost never see them in the water, I am not sure the statistics were really in our favour. We were not reassured on our return, seeing in the Herald a photo of ‘The Dominator’ a 6 metre crocodile who leapt at a tourist boat in the Adelaide River. Admittedly it was in the ‘cweek’ and a lot further West.

We only dipped our toe into the Yolngu ways but Greg’s masterclass was just the beginning of a whole new world that may allow those who can’t make it to the far away place of the Yolngu people, to experience their special way of seeing the world through immersive technology. And it provided new opportunities for Yolngu creative practitioners to explore their art.
Thank you to Greg Downing and Joseph Brady for working with us to bring together an effective master class. To our supporters Collie Print Trust and Gabrielle Connellan at the US Consulate in Melbourne, for making the project possible. To Ishmael Marika and Arian Pearson for the freshly caught crayfish and fish lunches.

We were lucky to be accompanied by Simon Taylor, a landartist, landscape architect, and botanist. His keen eye for detail and ability to understand geology and landscape provided us with the perfect location scout to explore a little of the surrounds in the short time we had.

Thank you to Alex Alvarez for his continued curatorial support of our programs and introducing us to Greg Downing and most importantly to the little Yolngu children who kept us safe from the Cwocs!

Kristin McCourtie
Director
Design Foundation

Our charter is to curate programs that support the development of design excellence by enhancing design capability from an industry perspective. As a creative producer, The Design Foundation through our Ideas on Design programs presents conferences, master classes, exhibitions and workshops and awards travelling scholarships.

We identify design potential within communities and develop mentoring programs that share the experience, skills and knowledge of design practitioners, business leaders and researchers who are experts across design disciplines and industry sectors.

The Ideas on Design programs draw on the experiences and connections built over 26 years presenting the agIdeas International Design Conferences in Melbourne Australia and more recently Foshan, China. Founded by Ken Cato AO in 1991, agIdeas is one of the longest running and most well-respected design programs in the world.

Over this time we have created live events to share the ideas, strategies and projects of over 630 of the world’s most innovative creative practitioners, with design professionals and students, businesses, schools and the general community.

We have provided more than 60 scholarships to emerging practitioners to gain experience at internationally renowned studios and events.

Ideas on Design continues to create and develop a range of large scale and niche events that assist in supporting the ongoing development of design excellence in our region.

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Front Cover: Clay cliffs. Photo: Simon Taylor
Page 2: Lagoon, Yirrakala. Photo: Simon Taylor
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Page 4: Buku Larrnggay Mulka, Miwatj Map belongs to BLM.
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Page 6: Buku Larrnggay Mulka
Page 7: Andrew Blake, with work by Nonggaringa Marawili, other artworks clockwise , Yinimala Gumana, Gurrundul Marika, Watjinbuy Marawili. Photos of Yirrkala and surrounds. Photos: Simon Taylor
Page 11: Photogrammetry in progress. Screen shots
Page 14: Yirrkala and East Woody Point. Photos: Simon Taylor