

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PETITIONS OF THE YIRRKALA PEOPLE

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## CHAPTER 4

### THE PETITIONS OF THE YIRRKALA PEOPLE

On 28 August we presented a petition to the Australian Parliament. It was not an ordinary petition; it was presented as a bark painting and showed the clan designs of all the areas that were threatened by the mining. It showed, in ways a coloured piece of bunting could never do, the ancient rights and responsibilities we have to our country. It showed that we were not people who could be painted out of the picture, or left at the edges of history.

Galarwuy Yunupingu<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction: "Not an ordinary Petition"<sup>2</sup>

In 1963, two highly unconventional petitions, each consisting of a painted stringy-bark panel, were presented to the Australian government.<sup>3</sup> The petitions were created by the Yolngu people of the Yirrkala district of North East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, to protest the government's announcement that it would grant extensive leases to mine bauxite within the Arnhem Aboriginal Reserve on the Gove Peninsula (Figure 4.1).<sup>4</sup> The leases threatened to excise traditional Yolngu hunting grounds, to destroy sacred sites and spiritual connections to the ground, and to change, irrevocably, a largely traditional indigenous culture that has occupied the Peninsula area for thousands of years.<sup>5</sup> The painted bark panels from Yirrkala were presented by the Yolngu as evidence of their ownership of the land.

The first Bark Petition (Figure 4.2) is dated 14 August, 1963, and the second (Figure 4.3) is dated 28 August, 1963.<sup>6</sup> The Petitions bear the signatures of members of local clans of both Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties.<sup>7</sup> These moieties are the structural principles by which the Yolngu people, the associated Spirit Beings, areas of land, and plant and animal species are related.<sup>8</sup> Pasted to the centre of each bark panel is a sheet of typewritten text that, like any other petition to Parliament, presents an appeal for change followed by a list of signatures. The written text on the two panels is identical and is typed in English followed by a translation in Gumatj, a dialect used in the Yirrkala region.<sup>9</sup> The sequence of signatures on both is



Figure 4.1  
strip mining bauxite  
Nhulunbuy, North East Arnhem Land, NT, 1998





the same: Milirrpum, Djalalingba, Daymbalipu, Dhayila, Dundiwuy, Dhuygala, Raiyin, Larrakan, Wulanybuma, Wawunymarra, and Nyabilingu. The text on each panel is embraced on all four sides - north, south, east, and west - by iconographic motifs painted in pipe clay, charcoal, and ochre colours. The painting was executed by Yolngu clan leaders and high-profile clan members and represents clan designs that, amongst other things, function as icons of personal identity and as title deeds to tracts of land.<sup>10</sup> Through the juxtaposition of Yolngu visual "text" (as painted designs) and European-style text (in Roman script) the Bark Petitions were an attempt to mediate between the different systems of law (Yolngu and Anglo-Australian), by bringing into focus different concepts of law and of land ownership.<sup>11</sup>

Five years later, in 1968, an additional painted bark panel, with text on the reverse side (Figure 4.4), was presented as the third Bark Petition to Parliament. It was painted by Dundiwuy Wanambi of the Marrakulu clan of the Dhuwa moiety. This Petition was signed by: Mungurrawuy, Dundiwuy, Birrikitj, Mau, Matjidi, Munyu, Nanyin, Wandjuk, Djaljingpa, Gawirrin, Mr J.G. Yunupingu, Yinitjin, Mathaman, Djiriny, Guyuyuma, Djayila, and Roy Dadynga Marika. All three panels are currently on display at New Parliament House, Canberra.

Considering their prestigious location, and thus implied national significance, it is somewhat surprising that so little attention has been directed to the Bark Petitions as political art.<sup>12</sup> Part of the problem is that, away from Yirrkala, they have been read primarily as written petitions; their painted iconography has been dismissed as a decorative framework for the typed text.<sup>13</sup> In other words, their full artistic and political significance is under-estimated.<sup>14</sup> I argue, however, that to regard them as unusual works of art enables a significant re-conception of the complex function of Aboriginal "art" in cross-cultural communications.

The Petitions' hybrid construction and complex layers of meaning present a challenge to Western viewers to decipher. It is my contention that the paintings on the Petitions are petitions in their own right but that they were

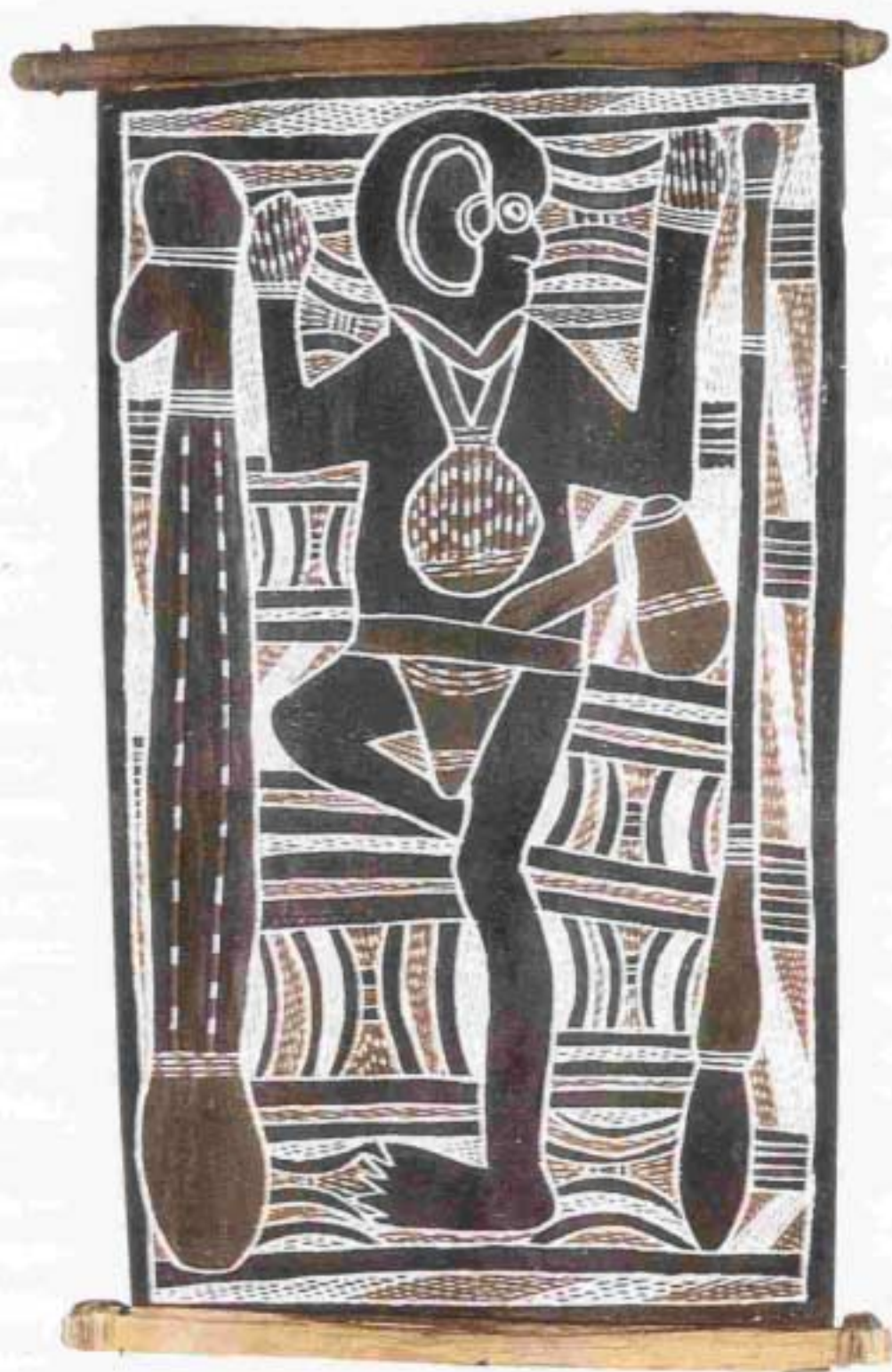


Figure 4.4  
The Bark Petition of 1968  
**Durndiwuy Wanambi**  
From the Parliament House Art Collection, Joint House Department, Canberra

presented simultaneously with a written translation so that the messages contained within would be better understood by non-Yolngu, or *Balanda*.<sup>15</sup> While the juxtaposition of pictorial and verbal text in one document has been largely overlooked, it constitutes also a significant disruption to Western and Anglo-Australian concepts of communication between centre and periphery. The Petitions ask viewers to negotiate and respect cultural differences and attain a better understanding of Yolngu relations to land by challenging viewers to formulate dialectical relationships between themselves and the Yolngu, the territory encompassed by the Arnhem Land Reserve, and Parliament House. In this chapter, I demonstrate, on the one hand, that as paintings the Petitions are Aboriginal land claims rooted in *ancestral connections* while, on the other, they are also highly significant works of contemporary (political) art.<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to undertake a reading of the Petitions which takes into account the role and significance of the artists, images, text, viewer, and the multiple sites of reference of these works. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I argue that an understanding of the Bark Petitions is inseparable from an understanding of Yolngu relations to land. In Yolngu culture, the painting of designs is regarded as constructing an interface between the ground, its spiritual essence, and specific groups of people. The designs on the Petitions are inseparable from these associations, in particular from the geographic locations at which they originated during Creation or *wangarr*. Putting the Petitions' clan designs in a Yolngu cultural context reveals their strong artistic and political links to the Yolngu people and their land. With mounting pressures on land use from outsiders, Yolngu people have disclosed their designs (and inferred connections to land) through the context of art and art exhibitions as a political means of laying claim to their country which is under threat by bauxite mining. I present the Petitions as part of a larger history of Aboriginal people negotiating for land rights and cultural recognition through the production and presentation of painted barks and other objects of spiritual significance. Future detailed iconographic analysis of the painted designs on the Petitions will help to

unravel the meaning and significance of the images in relation to their geographic sites of origin.<sup>17</sup> I contend that the painted motifs on the Bark Petitions merit interpretation as land claims and that, by extension, the paintings are a form of petition.

In the second section, I examine the relationship of painted text to written text. I argue that the traditional role of painting as a didactic medium becomes increasingly important because of its role in stemming the flow of colonial overprinting on Yolngu culture. This is readily apparent when the Petitions are examined within the broader socio-political context of the Yirrkala community from which they emanated in response to the influences of the Methodist Overseas Mission church. Painting makes Yolngu culture visible to the world beyond Yolngu lands and, in some instances, this has necessitated the inclusion of written text, especially for a political context, such as a petition to Parliament. I look at the Petitions' juxtaposition of iconography with written or verbal text and how it disrupted colonial power by challenging viewers to confront their ignorance about Aboriginal people and distant places that embody a different world view to their own. As with the art of any other culture, the understanding of image and image-based text is dependent on an understanding of the cultural context in which the work is created. I examine also the manner in which the juxtaposition of pictorial and verbal text in one document set a precedent for subsequent Aboriginal documents to Parliament and how the juxtaposition was not as foreign to western art and politics as it was made out to be. By juxtaposing pictorial text with European petition conventions, and thereby communicating on multiple levels of meaning, the Yolngu attempted to construct bridges between two cultures in order to facilitate a better understanding.<sup>18</sup>

In the third section, the status of the Petitions as land claims and political works of art is examined through an analysis of the Petitions' placement in Parliament House, where they are displayed in the midst of painted portraits of non-Aboriginal politicians, and are diametrically across the room from the Magna Carta and the Australian Constitution. Here, in this highly charged and stately environment, I consider the significance of the Petitions

in relation to their physical surroundings and discuss how their presence can be interpreted as yet another disruption to colonial rule. At the same time, I discuss how the Petitions call for conciliation between two cultures and two places by challenging viewers to construct dialectical relationships between Yolngu territory and Parliament and between Yolngu people and *Balanda*.

My approach to the Bark Petitions has been influenced by recent debates about the interpretation of Aboriginal art and, in particular, an approach that recognises the persistent Eurocentrism of much writing in this area. Roger Benjamin<sup>19</sup> and Tim Bonyhady<sup>20</sup> both reflect on this issue through an analysis of the various interpretations of Emily Kngwarreye's work. Commenting on the tendency to assimilate Kngwarreye's work to the principles of high modernism, Benjamin provides an important caution. He states that to familiarise the unfamiliar, or to compare art by Aboriginal people to art produced by non-Aboriginal people, is "Eurocentric", and a recipe for "cultural (mis)reading."<sup>21</sup> Bonyhady agrees that art by "more 'traditional' Aboriginal artists" is perhaps "best interpreted on its own cultural terms" but adds that it is important also to acknowledge the challenges encountered by artists of Aboriginal descent who are pigeon-holed as "Aboriginal" or "urban Aboriginal" but seek to be regarded as "Australian."<sup>22</sup>

I agree with Benjamin and Bonyhady in relation to the importance of understanding the primacy of Yolngu cultural significance of the work - thus my emphasis on an iconographic reading of the framing motifs for the Petition. However, a problem arises if their philosophy is applied to works with a specific political orientation. Art intended to provoke non-Aboriginal Australians into reflecting upon (and hopefully improving) their poor record of race relations with Aboriginal peoples should, in my opinion, be contextualised in a variety of ways, otherwise many of its intentions or layers of meaning may not be realised.<sup>23</sup> This view is shared by Catherine De Lorenzo, who states that artworks, when placed in different contexts, "acquire extra layers of meaning... [that] affect the readings of individual works", ones "perhaps never envisaged by the artists", but which uncover

more elastic dimensions to a work and help further non-Aboriginal understanding of a work's significance and an increased awareness of Aboriginal art and issues.<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, anthropologist Howard Morphy writes:

"Yolngu art ... has to be placed in a wider context in order to understand it today... [The Yolngu] entered into exchange relations with Europeans partly for economic returns and partly to engage them in a discourse over cultural values. Art was of high value internally, and its use in exchanges with Europeans created a value in a new context."<sup>25</sup>

Morphy's view of Yolngu art as a form of discourse with outsiders is especially applicable to the Bark Petitions. However, because these works were produced in a regional district still associated with a more traditional artistic practice, their unconventional design format, incorporation of mixed media, and intercultural modes of communication has not been adequately contextualised beyond the Yolngu culture that created them.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Yolngu relation to land through painting designs**

...our land is from the Creation, because our land is the mother. The land have many things, power, experience and knowledge. That's what I explain to the government - to show them the land decorations, so they can understand... I was talking and explaining this to them... And that is the history, I have, in Canberra.

Wandjuk Marika<sup>27</sup>

"As a map of clan designs and symbolic references to country, they [paintings on bark] may be interpreted as title deeds to land... It is an expression of intrinsic connection of belonging."

Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997<sup>28</sup>

### *An "intrinsic connection of belonging"*<sup>29</sup>

In order to understand the significance of the Petitions, it is necessary to appreciate the Yolngu relations to land and this connection to land through painting. Yolngu culture is bound so intimately to the land, that Yolngu may express themselves as "belonging to the land rather than the land belonging to them" or even that they "are the land".<sup>30</sup> This strong sense of

interconnectedness between the ground and the people stems in part from the ancestral past known as 'Creation Time', *Wangarr* Time, or more colloquially as the Dreaming, when spirit beings or ancestral figures travelled across Arnhem Land. The Yolngu believe that these ancestors physically shaped or reshaped the ground through their movements while simultaneously investing it with the essence of their powers and with various life forms, including their descendants, the Yolngu.<sup>31</sup> Certain topographical features including sand hills, rivers, rocks, trees, and islands are therefore associated with the activities of ancestral beings affiliated with that area of land. A clan's land was bestowed on it by one or more of the spirit beings who travelled through particular areas of the land during *Wangarr* Time and through a being's travels, the clans are connected in some way. According to Ronald Berndt, "The whole territory of any given Aboriginal group was a network of tracks of mythical beings, pinpointed in sacred sites - sacred relics, to which its members were linked by deeply religious ties."<sup>32</sup>

To ensure that the land they had created would be well cared for after their departure, the beings presented the Yolngu with songs, dances, objects, and designs, that collectively dictated codes of behaviour and relationships, still observed today, between people, their land, and the ancestral beings.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, geographic sites and corresponding ancestral events intersect closely with what we call the visual and performing arts and form the focal points of Yolngu culture.<sup>34</sup>

Nancy Williams states that "for the Yolngu, rights in land established through sacred endowment must be validated by the regular and faithful performance of ritual."<sup>35</sup> These cultural forms are a means of "recreating the ancestral past, of bringing it into the present" and may be expressed through "designs [that] are both representations of the ancestral beings, the events they participated in, and manifestations of beings themselves."<sup>36</sup> Howard Morphy writes "they were the designs the ancestors painted on their own bodies... and [when painted today] enable the ancestral beings to intervene in the world on behalf of their spiritual descendants..."<sup>37</sup> In other words, the painting of designs is seen as a means through which Yolngu are

able to create “a source of ancestral power” that enables Yolngu law to be validated and connections to be strengthened between ancestors, land, and people.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, paintings, such as those on the Bark Petitions, can be regarded as a kind of conceptual interface linking simultaneously the design, and the owners and custodians of that design, to the geographic site, to the ancestral event that occurred there and its implications for contemporary social behaviour. Morphy describes painting as a means through which “the interdependence of human life and the Dreaming is established.”<sup>39</sup> An example of this is Durndiwuy Wanambi’s depiction of Wuyal the Honey Ancestor standing on his sacred hill Nhulun (Figure 4.4), which was partially destroyed by mining activities. It was in response to this destruction, and the subsequent construction of a mining town at its base, that this Petition was created to request that the township of Gove be renamed Nhulunbuy in order to commemorate the ancestral home of Wuyal.

The importance of paintings as an affirmation of the relation between people and place is heightened further through their significance as maps. The designs are highly conceptualised maps that identify each clan and the clan’s land.<sup>40</sup> Morphy states:

“The design is a sign of a particular being’s presence in a painting, and wherever that being journeyed, he or she left paintings with related designs. The whole of North East Arnhem Land is, in effect, cloaked with a tartan of geometric designs that represent the clans which own the land and the ancestral beings who created it.”<sup>41</sup>

At the core of Yolngu art is the use of geometric background patterns that identify different places and correspond to specific clans with intrinsic ties to particular tracts of ground.<sup>42</sup> Commonly, the subdivisions of geometric paintings represent locations where different events occurred; the painting as a whole may represent a map of an area of clan land.<sup>43</sup> Galarrwuy Yunupingu has said ‘the land is the art’ and the art denotes clan identity because a Yolngu person’s use of a design is an indication to which clan and country the individual belongs.<sup>44</sup>

Thus geometric patterns appear to be abstract, but actually encode many layers of meaning. To assist less well versed audiences in reading the paintings (when it is deemed appropriate), figurative motifs, referred to by Morphy as “projections” from geometric art, are added to the painting.<sup>45</sup> The large singular depiction of Wuyal on the third Petition (Fig 4.4) is an excellent example of this. The meaning of a motif is based in part on its placement within the geometric background and the degree to which the viewer is initiated into reading and understanding the relationship between them. Motifs within the background encode totemic animals that are associated with a geographic site or with a mythological event that took place there.<sup>46</sup> An example of a totemic animal is the possum on the second 1963 Petition (Figure 4.3), which Morphy attributes to Narritjin Maymuru based on the style of execution and because of the artist’s capacity for depicting this particular possum based on his ancestral inheritance.<sup>47</sup>

The designs, whether abstract or figurative, are the ultimate reference point in any Yolngu relationship concerning land or people.<sup>48</sup> They are the property of particular clan members through birthright and are protected from other clan members (and non-clan people) by the equivalent of copyright laws.<sup>49</sup> I speculate that the inclusion of such highly guarded and symbolic designs on the Bark Petitions indicates which areas, clans, and individuals were most affected by the proposed mining operations.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, the paintings act as title deeds to the affected areas. By extension, it can be construed that paintings presented to *Balanda* that relate to areas of land under threat by encroaching development are not just a claim to land but also a form of petitioning on behalf of the owners and custodians of the designs.<sup>51</sup>

Designs in Yolngu society have long played a didactic role. Galarwuy Yunupingu maintains that paintings depict graphically “the ancient rights and responsibilities we have to our country.”<sup>52</sup> He wrote:

“the aim of their expression is to tell, through painting, the importance of the land. We are artists. We go to a ceremony and sing about land. We teach our children the meaning of paintings about different pieces of land in our ancestral country.”<sup>53</sup>

Prior to continuous contact with Europeans, painting was a much more ephemeral matter. Some forms of painting, such as ceremonial painting on bodies, were fleeting and not intended as objects of public admiration. The advent of painting on bark, as we know it today, coincided with the introduction of outside influences, including missionaries, anthropologists, art collectors, the military, government officials, and mining personnel.<sup>54</sup> In response to 20th century influences, the Yolngu, since the 1920s, have used painting as another form of interface, as a means of communication with outsiders, and this has materialised into a much more widespread and permanent concern, sometimes harbouring very strong didactic intentions.<sup>55</sup>

Precedents for the Yolngu using painting as a means to establish political authority and discourse with outsiders include the 1959 Elcho Island disclosure, in which sacred *rangga* were selectively revealed to particular outsiders in order to emphasise ancient hereditary ties to land, and, in 1963, the painting of the Yolngu Creation narratives for public display in the Yirrkala Church (analysed later in this chapter).<sup>56</sup>

Another subsequent work, which adopts the format of the Petitions, is the *Barunga Statement* (Figure 4.5), delivered to Parliament in 1988 to protest the bicentennial celebration of 200 years of colonial rule in Australia.<sup>57</sup> The concept for this work began with the Yolngu and, like the Petitions before it, is composed of painted designs (as title deeds) enclosing typed text on all four sides. It is displayed at Parliament House in a small passageway in the vicinity of the Bark Petitions. The *Aboriginal Memorial*, also from 1988, now housed at the National Gallery of Australia, was conceived as a commemoration to Aboriginal people who died defending their country during 200 years of colonial rule.<sup>58</sup> A more recent example of using painting as a public interface through which *Balanda* can be educated about ancestral and contemporary Yolngu connections to land is *The Wagilag Sisters Story, 1937-1997*. At this exhibition, held at the National Gallery of Australia, Yolngu artists from several different clans co-curated a large collection of their art that was suitable for public viewing.<sup>59</sup> According to Nigel Lendon, at the opening of the exhibition, Dula Ngurruwutthun, senior ritual leader of the Yirritja in East Arnhem Land, revealed in his speech that “their

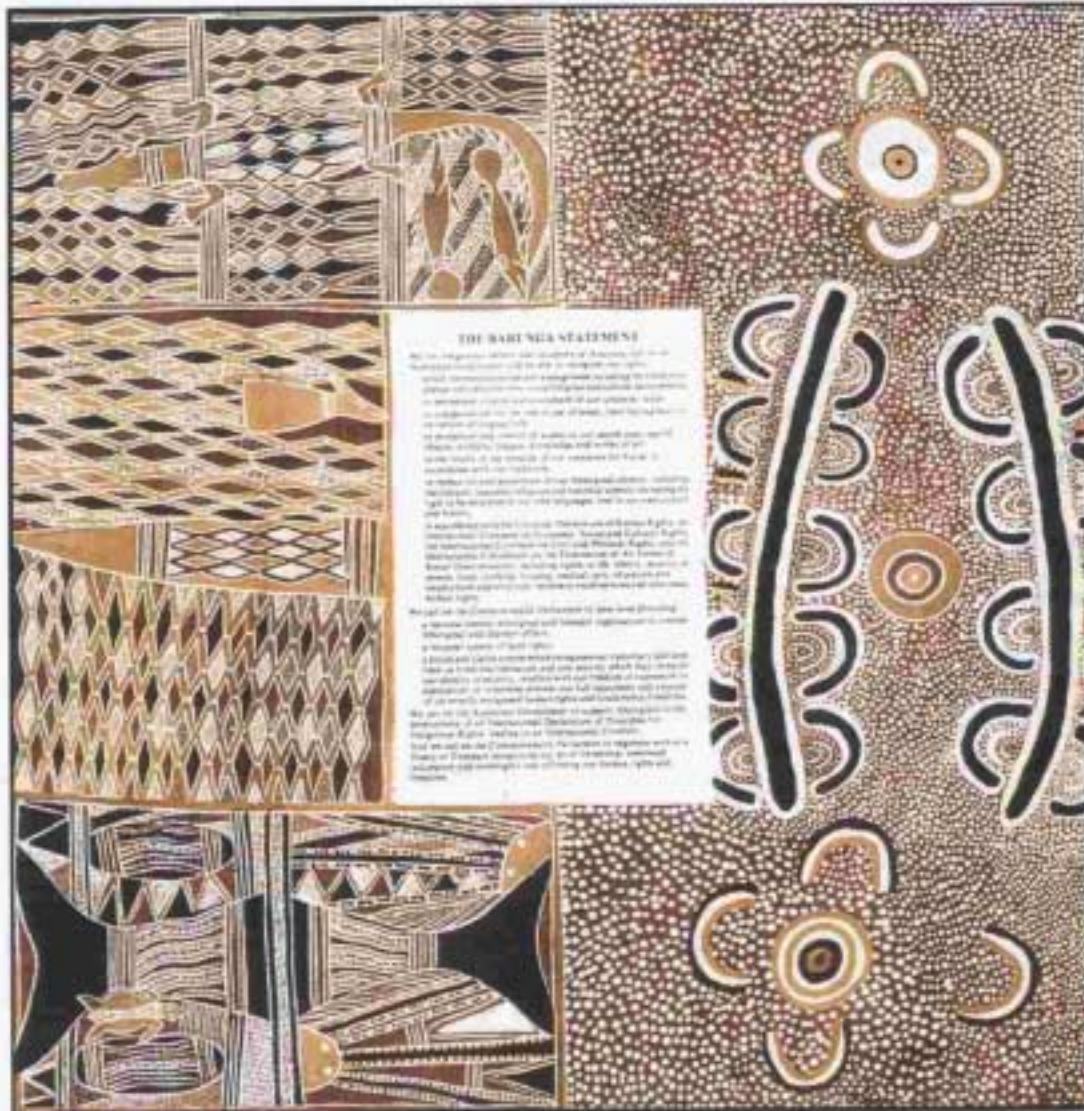


Figure 4.5

*The Barunga Statement*, 1988

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Djiwing Ngurruwuthun, Wenten Rubuntja, Lindsay Turner Jampijinpa, Bakulangay Marawilli, Marrirra Marawilli, Terry Marawilli, and Dennis Williams Japanangka

From the Parliament House Art Collection, Joint House Department, Canberra

display of ritual responsibilities was a demonstration of their expectation of reciprocity, and of a changing perception of the potential of such interactions between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. For Yolngu, responsibility lies on both sides."<sup>60</sup> A translation of Dula's speech into English reads:

"We appreciate this opportunity to be able to share our culture with you, for this will only strengthen and empower us all. So there should be no misunderstanding between us Yolngu people and you Balanda. But work together to have a better understanding, and not to push each other aside."<sup>61</sup>

Another exhibition that promoted Yolngu connections and authority to land was the 1997 Museum of Contemporary Art's *Native Title: Yirrkala Bark Paintings*. The Museum's brochure reflected aptly the political agenda of the exhibition by stating explicitly that its purpose was to instill in European minds that Yolngu connections to land go back to *Wangarr* (Creation) Time and that, in this sense, the paintings constitute a "medium of communication between cultures."<sup>62</sup> The museum listed several "historic instances," including the Bark Petition, in which Yirrkala artists have used "their art as 'title deeds' to their country." The Museum stated that this sharing of Yolngu knowledge is done in the belief that it will result in "mutual understanding and [that] respect for the Yolngu law will be advanced... it is in this spirit that the paintings in this exhibition are offered to all Australians, and to the world at large." In an advertising supplement, the museum stated also that these "recent works express a renewed hope and confidence in the High Court's findings on native title."<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, these words were expressed too soon. Prime Minister John Howard's Ten Point Plan instilled a renewed sense of concern that culminated in the presentation to Howard, during his February, 1998, visit to Yirrkala, of a "new bark petition".<sup>64</sup> According to Mark Baker, a correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald, "the Prime Minister was handed two bark panels carrying an appeal to Federal Parliament for recognition of traditional Aboriginal law and the ownership of land enshrined in it." According to Andrew Blake, Art Coordinator for the Buku Larrngay Mulka Arts Centre in Yirrkala, the paintings depict the laws of the

people of North East Arnhem Land. He writes, "Again the law [Customary Law] of the people of North East Arnhem Land was painted on bark that was to carry the petition that was taken back to Canberra by Mr Howard."<sup>65</sup>

In August, 1998, Blake announced a forthcoming exhibition of bark paintings based on the theme of Yolngu connections to salt water districts in North East Arnhem Land. Blake explains "The *miny'tji* or sacred clan designs that imbue these paintings for the Yolngu is indisputable proof of ownership of country." The Salt Water exhibition, he states:

"...is the intent of the artists to show the people of Australia, by exhibiting their paintings that illustrate the law that binds these people to look after country, their relationship to it... We do not wish these paintings to be seen as politically overt although there is obviously something on this agenda - the bid for recognition of sea rights. These are paintings that can be upheld in a Yolgnu court of law (and could well be used as evidence in any ensuing court cases) to be shown within the walls of the institution where the seeds of Australian Law are sown."<sup>66</sup>

The exhibition will be featured at the Australian National University's Drill Hall Gallery in mid-1999.

With the increasing numbers of exhibitions of paintings organised by Yolngu people themselves and with accompanying speeches and texts announcing Yolngu spiritual connections and political claims to land, it could be argued in a broad sense that all Yolngu paintings presented to *Balanda* audiences are a form of claim. The distinction I make between "petition" and "claim" is that what is construed as a petition has been shown as evidence as part of a legal bid-process whereas a claim has not been presented to an external political process.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, whose father was one of the creators of the 1963 Petitions, encapsulates the political and didactic links between painting, land, and audiences:

"When we paint - whether it is on our bodies for ceremony or on bark or canvas for the market - we are not just painting for fun or profit. We are painting, as we always have done, to demonstrate our continuing link with our country and the rights and responsibilities we have to it. We paint to show the rest of the world that we own this country and that the land owns us. Our painting is a political act."<sup>67</sup>

## The problem of iconographic analysis

"It was not an ordinary petition: it was presented as a bark painting."

Galarwuy Yunupingu<sup>68</sup>

This section documents a preliminary attempt to employ an iconographic analysis to connect the designs on the 1963 Petitions with people and places. The primary aims are to determine whether it is possible to correlate designs with specific geographic sites under threat by mining, and to examine how the Petitions were thus based simultaneously in different sites, including Parliament.

I have based the analysis on an examination of previously published material and a comparison of the 1963 Petitions with other paintings of that period that contain similar totemic designs and stylistic features. I have compared the Petitions' designs in relation to all images in the texts listed in the bibliography and grouped my findings according to animal motif, distinctive patterns, possible artists and their clan affiliation. This analysis, although not fully conclusive without field work to substantiate possible links between motifs, individuals, and places, is a necessary first step toward understanding Yolngu culture and politics.<sup>69</sup>

In an effort to link my preliminary findings to specific sites under threat by mining, I endeavoured to draw correlations with Ronald Berndt's *The Gove Dispute: The Question of Australian Aboriginal Land and the Preservation of Sacred Sites*. This article includes maps of North East Arnhem Land drawn by Yolngu men in 1964. The artists also provided a list of accounts that mentions some of the ancestral events that occurred at particular sites. Unfortunately, the descriptions were too sparse, without further contextualisation or an in-depth knowledge of the culture, to permit meaningful correlation of the Petitions' motifs with the men's descriptions of the sites. Despite these difficulties, the comparison of the 1963 Petitions with other works has unearthed an unexpectedly rich and very complex

history which I have begun to pursue but which unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Because Yolngu artists are entitled to paint only the country and icons with which they are inherently associated through birthright or initiation, knowing the painters' identities would facilitate correlation between motifs and geographic sites. The identities of the painters, however, are unknown, and this has necessitated a comparative analysis of not only the designs but of stylistic characteristics as well.<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, the individuals who signed the Petitions did not necessarily include the painters. Edgar Wells, Yirrkala's Methodist Missionary Superintendent in 1963, stated that senior artists did the painting on the boards, but because the "young people in Aboriginal society joined hands with the traditional elders in this particular frame of reference...those who were able to write their names could quite properly represent the older, non-literate sections of the community."<sup>71</sup> Wells (now deceased) made no further mention of who the artists were.<sup>72</sup>

The signatories on both panels are identical and include both Dhuwa and Yirritja people, yet visually, the painted designs on the bark panels read as one Yirritja panel and one Dhuwa. Therefore, both Dhuwa and Yirritja people signed the paper version of the petitions and copies of these were affixed to the two paintings which appear to be moiety-based. Morphy is certain that Yolngu themselves would refer to the August 14 panel as Dhuwa (Figure 4.2) and the August 28 panel as Yirritja (Figure 4.3) because the clan designs, such as the triangles on the latter bark, are a strong indication of this.<sup>73</sup>

A possibility for crossover between artist and moiety does exist. A Yirritja man, such as Narritjin Maymuru, was entitled to paint his mother's country, and thus could have painted on the Dhuwa panel, thereby making it more difficult to narrow the field of possible painters to the Petitions' respective moiety. Whether the Petitions are strictly moiety-based is open to interpretation as well. According to Morphy, "artists do not combine motifs from both moieties in the same painting...they do occasionally paint two

paintings, one from one moiety one from the other, on the same sheet of bark" especially if they are large paintings.<sup>74</sup> Although the Petitions are quite small in comparison to many other Yolngu paintings, it may be possible that this occurred considering that the Petitions had to be posted to Parliament and had to be small. On the other hand, the animal projections and the background designs seem to be very well integrated.

Classifying the barks according to moiety and possible artists is problematic in other ways as well. Referring to the two 1963 Petitions, Jeremy Long, a consultant hired by Parliament in 1988, states in his report to Parliament that "this painting was done by and under the supervision of leading members of the Gumatj clan (Yirritja moiety)... includ[ing] Watjung, his brother Yama, and Munggarawuy, father of James Galarrwuy Yunupingu."<sup>75</sup> Certainly, the bark dated 28 August (Figure 4.3) has a geometric background pattern consisting of triangles which is associated usually with the Yirritja moiety clans and the dugong appears most commonly in paintings by the Gumatj clan to which Munggarawuy Yunupingu belonged. Long, however, makes no reference to Dhuwa artists. It appears unlikely that Dhuwa artists were not involved given that much of the mining was slated at that point to occur on Rirratjingu land in the Melville Bay district. The first Petition (Figure 4.2) I feel is characteristically Dhuwa with its geometric background patterning of row upon row of finely cross-hatched parallel lines and because the goanna is portrayed commonly by artists from the Rirratjingu clan of the Dhuwa moiety. Also, Wells refers to Wandjuk Marika, a Dhuwa man, as having assisted with the first Petition, although he does not say in what capacity.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, Wells does state that Djalalingba, one of the signatories of the Petitions, informed Parliament (upon the request of an MP to identify the painters) that the painting on the Petitions "was done by four 'old men' all over thirty," but Wells does not elaborate on their identities.<sup>77</sup>

Possibly preceding the Petitions by only a few months, Wells received a letter typed by Wandjuk and signed by Mawalan, Mangarawuy, Jurriny, and Narritjin, collectively stating that all *Balanda* were "to keep out of Melville Bay, Cape Arnhem, Caledon Bay and Bremer Island" and that "Notices will be placed at all these places proclaiming the area as belonging to Aboriginal

people.”<sup>78</sup> I wondered if these four men had painted the Petitions and hoped that the iconographic analysis would help determine whether this was so.

*The Petition of 14 August, 1963*

The perimeter of the first Petition (Figure 4.2) contains a geometric background of finely-painted, cross-hatched diagonal bands of colour in which are placed alternating images of red bandicoots that Long referred to as *nyik-nyik* or *mudjindji* (with mouths outlined in yellow) and yellow goannas as *djarrawuywuy* (mouths outlined in red). At the bottom edge are two deep red-coloured snakes that Long referred to as “giant snakes” or *gunundar*, and black-stemmed yellow-leaved yam plants he referred to as *yukuwa*.<sup>79</sup>

The double-outlined, undulating black scallop shapes that border the left and right sides of the painting occur most frequently in the paintings of Wandjuk Marika, particularly in relation to goannas and the sand dunes at Yalangbara (Port Bradshaw), a very special site for Rirratjingu people. The undulating black scallop shapes could be sand dunes or thunder clouds.<sup>80</sup> The scallop design is similar to a portion of the Yirrkala Church Panels (described later in this chapter), of which Ann Wells has written that Wandjuk painted *Jambawal* the Thunderman with storm clouds above his head pointing the way to yam country.<sup>81</sup> The travels of the Djan’kawu (Djanggawul) ancestors is an epic tale that forms the backbone of many Dhuwa paintings most particularly from the Rirratjingu clan. The tale deals with the arrival of the Djan’kawu brother and his two sisters at Yalangbara and recounts the creation of the surrounding landscape throughout the major part of eastern Arnhem Land.<sup>82</sup> The paintings of Mawalan Marika and his son Wandjuk Marika, both senior leaders (now deceased) of the Rirratjingu clan, depict key sites and landscape details of the creative movements of the ancestral beings. Symbolic and figurative imagery of these sites and events, such as the *Djanda* the sacred goanna, occurs frequently.<sup>83</sup>

Goannas appear most consistently in the paintings of Wandjuk Marika and Larrtjanga Ganambarr. The almond-shaped eyes, banding of neck and tail, thick tails and necks, the shape of the mouth and clearly delineated joints are characteristics similar to Wandjuk's style (Figure 4.6), although his goannas appeared exclusively in black.<sup>84</sup> The goannas by Larrtjanga, also a Dhuwa man, although numerous, are not similar in appearance to those on the Petition and are not considered further.

Wandjuk's goannas all appear to relate in some way to Yalangbara, but whether this was one of the sites affected by the proposed mining leases in 1963 is unclear, but if so, the goannas on the Petition would be a clear link of protest emanating from the owners and custodians of Yalangbara to Parliament. It would represent also the sacred nature of the site and of Wandjuk Marika's Rirratjingu title to that land. In response to this analysis, Morphy has said it is very difficult to determine for sure whether the animals are moiety based, but that "the goannas were I am sure painted by Wandjuk."<sup>85</sup>

Wells has stated that Point Dundas was a site of particular importance to Wandjuk and that on the other side of the mining lease boundary is land "required" by Narritjin.<sup>86</sup> This is interesting to note as Morphy believes that some of the motifs on the Dhuwa Petition can be attributed to Narritjin, but whether or not Wandjuk's goannas can be attributed to Point Dundas is unclear.<sup>87</sup>

Another possible connection between Wandjuk and Narritjin, which would demonstrate that men from different moieties painted on the same bark (except that one is painting his mother's country thus making the motifs consistent with one moiety) is the scallop pattern and the yam motif. Wandjuk's Jambawal the Thunderman, with storm clouds in the scallop patterns, points the way to yam country. The yam motif at the base of the Petition is seldom seen in other works, but according to Morphy, is associated also with Narritjin. Narritjin also painted a similar scallop-like design in the image on the inside cover of Morphy's *Manggalili Art*.<sup>88</sup> It is possible that the two men were referring to Point Dundas, a site near the



Figure 4.6  
Wandjuk Marika  
goannas and bustards, 1982  
W. Marika, *Wandjuk Marika*, University of Queensland Press, 1982, p. 26

harbour used by the mining companies to ship in supplies. Munggerawui paints a similar scallop design, but in yellow, and relates each peak or mound to a particular site symbolising sacred hills of the *bunggul* country (place of ceremonies) near Yirrkala and not too distant from Point Dundas.<sup>89</sup> Whether these sites, however, were threatened by mining and whether the hills are connected to the Petition is unknown.

Stylistically, the bandicoots, or what Long refers to as *nyik-nyik*, but which according to Morphy means marsupial mouse, appear to have been painted by the same person that painted the goannas. However, I have not found any artist who combines goannas and bandicoots in a single image or who may be entitled to paint both these animals. Bandicoots in general appear to be painted by Narritjin or his brother Nanyin.<sup>90</sup> According to Morphy, despite these connections between Wandjuk and goannas and Narritjin and *nyik-nyik*, motifs from two moieties in one painting field is probably not conceivable.<sup>91</sup> Morphy has added that Mungerrawuy also painted these motifs, I have found no link between them and this artist.

#### *The Petition of 28 August, 1963*

In this Petition, there are two snakes, each of which faces "a hole where it lives" and other holes are located at the top of the bark.<sup>92</sup> According to Morphy, Munggarawuy Yunupingu painted these "wet season snakes" in association with wet season clouds depicted by the triangular design around the perimeter of the bark.<sup>93</sup> Narritjin also painted the triangular designs as sandhills.<sup>94</sup> Recently, several artists have painted similar looking designs in relation to the Sea Claim paintings exhibition proposed by Andrew Blake. It would be interesting to connect these artists to former owners or custodians of the design in order to determine the artists of the Petitions.

The possum is most frequently painted by Narritjin Maymuru. Morphy has stated that, in this Petition, "the figurative nature of this possum is very like Narritjin's work."<sup>95</sup> The *guwak*, or night bird, that Long described is associated with Narritjin's possum and the tree of life, but I am unable to connect these motifs to a particular site. The snakes too are not unlike a painting of Narritjin's mother's country in which he painted a number of

animals present in the Petition.<sup>96</sup> At the time of the Petition, dugongs were being painted by either Mungerrawuy or Watjung, both artists mentioned by Long.<sup>97</sup>

Based on the above analysis, I suggest that Wandjuk, Mawalan, Mangarawuy, Jurriny, and Narritjin, who created the letter to Wells regarding their concern of trespassers in Melville Bay, Cape Arnhem, Caledon Bay and Bremer Island, are the artists of the Petitions and that the places they mention in the letter to Wells may also be referred to in the motifs on the Petitions.<sup>98</sup>

### *The 1968 Petition*

The painting on the 1968 Petition was executed by Durndiwuy Wanambi and depicts the spirit being Wuyal, who according to Ryan, belongs to five Dhuwa clans and is a "major Ancestral Being".<sup>99</sup> He is also known as the Honey Man and his large ears are one indication of his non-human status. The Nhulunbuy area is Rirratjingu land although Mawalan and Mathaman, the leaders of the Rirratjingu, asked Dundiwy Wanambi of the Marakulu clan to paint the bark and demonstrate the antiquity of the name and the authority for it because Wuyal passes through this region on his travels towards the Marrakulu clan territory at Trial Bay.<sup>100</sup>

According to Judith Ryan, the mining operations have intersected Wuyal's ancestral path and several sacred sites. Wuyal came from a sacred place (where the Telecom tower now stands at Nhulunbuy) and climbed the hill he named Nhulun (Mount Saunders) while searching for "Dhuwa sugarbag". Ryan states: "From the top of Nhulun, Wuyal pointed his spear in three directions. The first area (his previous land) has been supplanted by the Telecom tower (at Nhulunbuy); the second (the east Woody) is near a golf course; the last area (where his sacred dilly bag turned into an enormous granite rock) has been fenced in." On the summit of Nhulun there once stood "five mounds of rock," but three of them were destroyed in order to erect a water tank.<sup>101</sup>

Ryan recounts how, from Nhulun, Wuyal saw and named other places. He threw his boomerang to Galuru (East Woody Island) and Lumbuy (Crocodile

Creek). He then climbed back down the hill, his body covered with stringybark leaves from the tree where Dhuwa honey is found. His body, made with sacred leaves, represents the land that belongs to the five Dhuwa clans. He left his spear at Birritjimi (Wallaby Beach) where sacred posts that he saw turned into Casuarina trees. The trees have since been cleared by contractors.<sup>102</sup> According to Long, the "pattern of the rocks around the summit of Nhulunbuy and elsewhere on his journey" is represented in the painting by the "parallel curved lines".

In the 1968 Petition, because the painter has been identified and Wuyal is represented figuratively, connections between the motif and places associated with Wuyal are more easily identified. Furthermore, the Petition itself is known publicly to have been made as a direct response to mining incursions near Mount Saunders and Nhulunbuy. Ryan's detailed account of sacred sites affected by the mining activities and their relation to Wuyal's ancestral home, his activities, and his depiction on the 1968 Petition to Parliament, is a clear indication that the Yolgnu sought to proclaim title to their land that was excised for the construction of the mining town. The design therefore serves to link the sites of Arnhem Land and Parliament (although few words of text are provided to explain the connection to *Balanda*). Extending this idea to the iconography of the 1963 Petitions, I suggest that their motifs were intended also as a form of Petition to Parliament regarding the ownership of several sites.

### The significance of relations between visual and written “texts”

“We tried to speak to non-Aboriginal people about what they were trying to do, but who would listen? Very few white people have ever tried to learn our language, and English is incapable of describing our relationship to the land of our ancestors. We decided then to try and do it in a way we hoped non-Aboriginal people would understand; through pictures. If they wouldn’t listen to our words, they might try and understand our paintings.”

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Yirritja moiety<sup>103</sup>

“Paintings are not simply works of art. They may be compared to sacred *scripts* - documents which detail the spiritual origins of mankind, the creatures of the earth and the physical form of nature.” [italics are my emphasis]

Wandjuk Marika, Dhuwa moiety<sup>104</sup>

A threat of dispossession is not just physical. It takes place on another level as expressed through images and words. Consistent with outside influences encroaching on Yolngu territory and associated cultural values, the juxtaposition of painted iconographic designs on bark with Roman text typed on paper produced a coherent inter-cultural form of communication. For Yolngu to express themselves in English, followed with a translation in Gumatj, as well as in traditional Yolngu law, indicates their recognition of the level of impact from the outside world and the necessity of incorporating its effects in the form of painting.

In the previous section, some of the meanings inherent to the Petitions’ designs and their connections to specific places were examined. Noted also was that the visual arts in Yolngu culture has a strong didactic orientation: it is used internally as a bridge for communication between ancestral beings, the land, and the Yolngu, as well as between Yolngu themselves. Increasingly, the didactic role of Yolngu art is being applied externally as a means to build new bridges to improve understanding between Yolngu and *Balanda* culture. In this section, I analyse how the Yolngu have taken the notion of bridging gaps through artistic expression a step further by juxtaposing the traditional Yolngu mode of visual communication through

painting (with all its cosmological and political connotations) with traditional *Balanda* emphasis on printed text. It is my contention that the material, visual, and conceptual hybridity of the Petitions stemmed, in part, from Yolngu peoples' increased exposure to cross-cultural integration of image, text, and spirituality. This occurred with the creation of a Methodist mission station at Yirrkala and in the context of increasing political and economic pressures on the traditional Yolngu way of life.

One strategy to facilitate communication between Yolngu and *Balanda* cultures could well have been to conceive of analogies between text and imagery as expressions of spiritual beliefs. The analogy Wandjuk Marika draws between Yolngu paintings and sacred script is appropriate given that, in the first instance, the designs "read" as sacred text and, in the second instance, Yirrkala was created as a Methodist mission where some mission staff gained an insight into the sacred earth-bound associations of Yolngu ideology and iconography.<sup>105</sup> It is likely that Yolngu people would have explained their spiritual connections to the land by drawing analogies between their designs and Christian scripts in the context of the Mission's educational brief. The resultant growing literacy amongst the Yolngu was expressed explicitly in the creation of the Petitions.

Both Wilbur Chaseling and Edgar Wells understood the sacred connection between designs and land and sought to communicate the sacred nature of Yolngu visual text by promoting the production of paintings for sale.<sup>106</sup> Wells in particular tried to emphasise Yolngu occupation and ownership of land to the world beyond the mission by encouraging Yolngu artists to include traditional totemic forms, including the ancestral associations of important geographical sites, on as many artefacts as possible.<sup>107</sup> Paintings for sale, according to Morphy, functioned "partly as religious texts to help outsiders understand something of Yolngu religion."<sup>108</sup> In this capacity, the designs operate as visual signifiers of a belief system connected to land and are a form of visual spiritual address to both the Yolngu community and beyond.

A link between Yolngu painting and sacred western imagery was expressed very well within the Yirrkala mission church itself. Early in 1963, two large panels that recounted Yolngu Creation stories, one Dhuwa and one Yirritja, were painted to frame the altar area in the mission church.<sup>109</sup> According to Kim Beazley Sr, referring to his 1963 official visit to Yirrkala, the mission church was decorated also with images of Christian themes that were painted by Aboriginal people.<sup>110</sup> The juxtaposition, under one roof, of these two forms of sacred imagery, both harbouring strong didactic and narrative qualities, can be considered both a disruption to colonial imposition, while also a desire to bridge cultures. In the latter context, the hanging of both Yolngu and Christian imagery did not reflect what we would call an analogous kind of relationship between two differing world views, but instead, and more importantly, it reflected an effort on the part of two cultures to bridge gaps in understanding which was based on mutual respect for difference. Nancy Williams writes:

"There is surely no logical barrier for one group of people whose religious symbolism encompasses burning bushes, pillars of salt, laws miraculously engraved on stone, virgin birth, and transubstantiation, to comprehend the symbolism of another in which spirits assume the form of snakes and speak, and other spirits enter trees and rocks."<sup>111</sup>

Wandjuk Marika wrote: "Djankawu and Wawilak is our law, similar to missionary laws."<sup>112</sup> He further recounts the sentiments of his father, Mawalan Marika, who, upon the arrival of the Methodist church stated: "I'm not going to be Christian but I come as a Christian to the missionary to learn about the Bible, because your story fit into our story, but my story is Law and is Christian before you arrive."<sup>113</sup> Jennifer Issacs, editor of Wandjuk's book, states: "...Wandjuk perceived many Judaeo-Christian values to be the same as those of Yolgnu but he felt that Yolgnu culture had already contained the basic precepts of Christian teaching... well before the Christians found out about them."<sup>114</sup>

On another level, the acceptance of these large panels (12' x 4') of Yolngu iconography into the house of the Christian God may have been an affirmation of Yolngu faith in God, and vice versa. It was also, importantly, a *Balanda* affirmation of the Yolngu's spiritual and ancestral connection to

the land on which the church was situated. Acceptance of the Panels in church asserted publicly several aspects of Yolngu authority, ideology, and spirituality in the context of an important colonial institution, much like the Petitions were to do a few months later.<sup>115</sup> It is interesting to note in retrospect that the geographic areas depicted on the church panels depicted areas of land later claimed by the mining company.<sup>116</sup>

Another analogy can be drawn between the church and the painted Yolngu Church Panels through the voices of law and authority: the ancestral voices emanating from the ground on which the church was built and the voice of the Christian God bearing down from heaven above. In this respect, the church demarcated physically an intermediate zone, or a place of physical and conceptual interface, between two world views - the *Balanda's* above ground and the Yolngu's below ground. To further this connection, the painted Church Panels occupied a place of distinction just behind the altar from which the voice of God would have promulgated. It is consistent with Yolngu belief that the placement of these panels framing the crucifix, behind or underneath the surface on which it was fixed, signifies the priority of Yolngu cosmology. Thus another strong voice emanating from this area of the church would have been the ancestral voices from the ground speaking through the painted panels. Narritjin Maymuru explains: "the land owns us" and "the paintings come out of the land and speak their messages on behalf of the people who live there."<sup>117</sup> The very sites from which mineral pigments for paintings are obtained are considered sacred. In the "Report from the Select Committee on Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963", the connection is made between the painted Church Panels and a hill regarded as sacred by Wandjuk's people.<sup>118</sup>

At the site of the church, it would appear that a bridging of two world views resulted in a higher form of truth and knowledge based on tolerance for difference and the furthering of mutual interests, each enriching the meaning of the other and enhancing visually the church for the two cultures present. I argue that this dialectical reception of Yolngu painting in a *Balanda* institution of such distinction provided the precedent for taking this experience to Parliament in the form of the Petitions.

Morphy has said that Yolngu art is a two way process because it is able to incorporate outside influences without losing integrity in Yolngu cultural terms.<sup>119</sup> Earlier outside influences, such as the Macassan trepang fishermen who came to Arnhem Land from Indonesia, were incorporated into the Yolngu's ancestral past. The Macassan presence is still evident today in Yolngu narratives and designs. For this to have happened, the Yolngu and the Macassans would appear to have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship.<sup>120</sup> But the Yolngu's relationship with the miners could never be as integrated or unified as it had been with the Macassan outsiders. That the threat posed to sacred sites and hunting grounds by mining activities had such profoundly negative repercussions on Yolngu culture is evident in the Bark Petitions of 1963 and 1968, and is substantiated in other contemporary works, notably in Mutitjupuy Mununggur's 1968 bark painting titled "The Feared Effects of Mining", in which everything in the land is depicted as dead (Figure 4.7).<sup>121</sup>

It is interesting to contrast the Yolngu's positive relationship with the Macassans and its subsequent innovation and integration into Yolngu art, with the juxtaposition of the Yolngu painted motifs and European verbal text of the Bark Petitions. That the two forms of text in the latter remain distinct (or polarised) could be read as an expression, through language, of a colonial culture in which the Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal dichotomy represents two separate worlds.<sup>122</sup> The influence of Europeans has remained largely outside Yolngu imagery. Morphy states, "Rather than incorporating Europeans in the ancestral past, Yolngu artists over the years have tried to educate them about it, a process that carries on into the present"<sup>123</sup> and, in the case of the Petitions, includes the introduction of written texts with visual imagery.

The English and Gumatj texts incorporated in the Petitions is derived from the impact of the Mission school and the European emphasis on printed text as the format through which official information is disseminated, whether from Government or God. The Yolngu's decision to create a petition that incorporated both Yolngu painted designs as visual text and to juxtapose them with the authoritative European convention of typewritten verbal

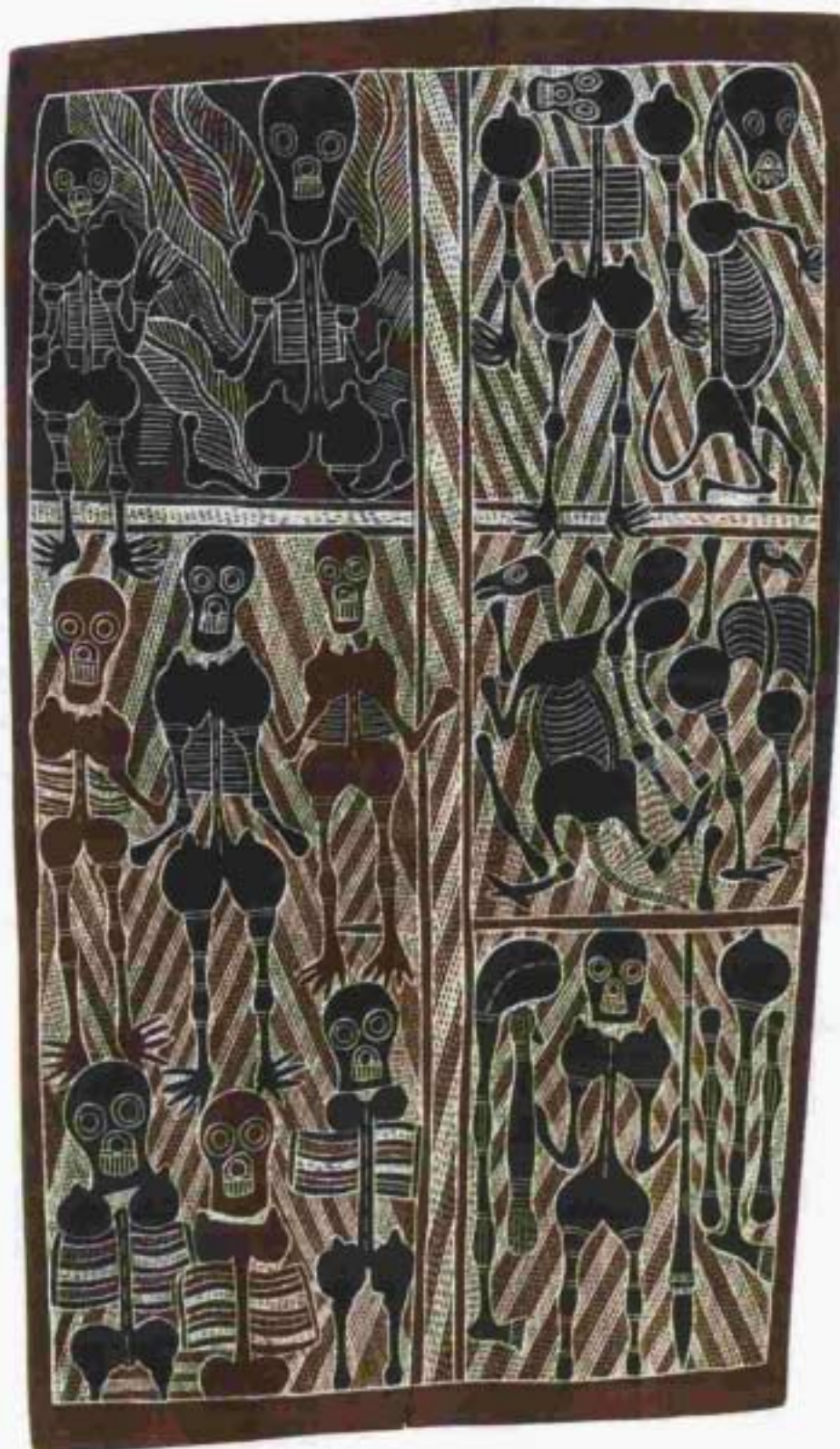


Figure 4.7

**Mutitpuy Mununggur**

*The Feared Effects of Mining*, 1968

R. Berndt, C. Berndt and J. Stanton, *Aboriginal Australian Art: A Visual Perspective*, 1982, pl. 134

texts, complete with translation and accompanying signatures, is consistent in the context of the profound cultural changes experienced by the Yolngu in the preceding decades. Whereas the emphasis on cross-cultural communication was not new, the incorporation of written text into the field of Yolngu painting was a powerful innovation in the Yolngu's attempts to engage with *Balanda* law and culture.<sup>124</sup> The Yolngu were seeking means by which their communications would be regarded on equal footing with those that followed European conventions. Benjamin Buchloch and others have often advocated the "dialectical potential of montage" and this, arguably, can be extended to the contrast of the painted bark and the superimposed typed form of the petition.<sup>125</sup>

It should be noted here that a precedent for making a public statement in English text to *Balanda* authorities (but without an accompanying painted petition) was established in Arnhem Land in 1916. Ryko (Edward Reichenbach), a traveller in the region, translated a statement as a form of "petition" on behalf of Aboriginal elders who had met "in council" with him to proclaim their defence in the murder of two brutal Malay trepang fishermen.<sup>126</sup> In their statement, the elders spoke of "the indignity" expressed toward them and that because they could speak no English in their defence, they were placed at risk of annihilation. The old men asked:

"Why can't strangers coming to our shores give us a square deal? We have enough sense to discriminate between fair play and foul play. Where can we lodge complaints against such unscrupulous invaders and abolitionists of our race?"<sup>127</sup>

Roslyn Poignant describes the elder's statement and Ryko's transcription as a predecessor to the Bark Petitions that, forty-seven years later, adroitly addresses "Australian authorities."<sup>128</sup>

The presentation of painted motifs as visual texts was completely unconventional by European standards and had never before been presented to Parliament as a means of legal discourse.<sup>129</sup> Peter Mason, Director of the Table, House of Representatives, was astonished to read in the 1963 *Hansard* that the Petitions travelled beyond the "Strong Room" and were literally presented to the Prime Minister in the House.<sup>130</sup> The

Honourable Kim Beazley Sr, former leader of the Opposition during Prime Minister Robert Menzies' term in office, noted that the presentation of the Petitions to Parliament was a highly unconventional event at the time and aroused much conjecture.<sup>131</sup>

But the 1963 Petitions were painted in a spirit of reconciliation; aspects of Yolngu culture and knowledge were delivered to Parliament with the expectation that non-Aboriginal people would come to better understand Yolngu relationships to land and would reciprocate with respect by calling a halt to the mining. The Petitions call upon Parliament to mediate between mining interests and Yolngu people. More than three decades later, the Yolngu are still waiting, and, in the interim, their spiritual world view has been on a continuous collision course with the market-driven world view of non-Aboriginal Australians.

The form of the 1963 Petitions poses ambiguities for interpretation. The structural relation between the Yolngu imagery and the typed text may appear quite different when viewed from Yolngu and *Balanda* perspectives. In a *Balanda* reading, the traditional pictorial-based text is relegated or subordinated to the periphery of the panels (and thus rendered to the European mind as a decorative frame) whereas the typewritten English and Gumatj texts are featured in the centre of the bark panels. Interestingly, the figure of Wuyal in the 1968 Petition occupies the centre of one entire side of the bark and the typed text is pasted to the centre of the other side of the bark panel. In *Balanda* descriptions of the Petition, the painted side is often referred to as backing the Petition, whereas I would be surprised if Durndiwuy Wanambi, the artist, would have perceived this to be the case.<sup>132</sup> Another ambiguity in interpretation is that the written texts of 1963 were signed and certified by Mr Beazley as correct translations, but the pictorial images were not considered in this light because there was no one at Parliament who could interpret them.<sup>133</sup> The position of the Gumatj text in relation to the English text is worth noting as well. Here is the written voice of the "Other" speaking through a number of translations, including culture to culture, and from spoken to written, but it is relegated to the bottom of the page. From a Yolngu perspective, however, the framing or enclosing

structure of the Yolngu imagery might possibly be conceived quite differently (for example, as a form of priority, in the case of the location of the Yirrkala Church Panels).

The segregation of pictorial and linguistic text can be read as the Yolngu asserting their cultural differences and political power yet, at the same time, expressing a willingness and ability to reconcile differences in order to construct a higher level of understanding for everyone involved. In this sense, the juxtaposition of pictorial text and written text in one document can be considered to reflect a desire to provide a dialectical construct; a visual and conceptual synthesis between seemingly polarised points of view regarding land use and legal connections to land. The emphasis is on us, the viewers, to negotiate the conceptual spaces between the two forms of text; the Yolngu have already done their part through several translations.

The verbal text turns the reader's attention outwards toward Yolngu territory, to the surrounding landscape depicted in the paintings. For example, the Petitions read: "...the land in question has been *hunting* and *food gathering* land for the Yirrkala tribes from time immemorial: we were all born *here* [italics my emphasis]."<sup>134</sup> Using the word 'here' effectively points the viewer to the Yirrkala district and narrows considerably that ambiguous unrealised space between a dominant culture and an overlooked minority people. In conjunction with the designs in an indirect way referring to local Yirrkala bush tucker, the text and image together make explicit the intimate connections between Yolngu people and land, connections that are foreign to viewers who do not relate to native Australian flora and fauna as embodying timeless spiritual connections simultaneously to the past, present and future and on which the survival of the culture is dependant.

Bodily sustenance is one kind of survival, but spiritual sustenance in relation to land is emphasised in the iconographic images which seem likely to include references to Melville Bay as outlined in Point five of the Petitions:

"5. That places sacred to the Yirrkala people, as well as vital to their livelihood are in the excised land, especially Melville Bay."

The text functions also as a trigger or vehicle for self-reflection with respect to the "Other" and that in turn may reveal a viewers' prejudices and ignorance regarding Aboriginal connections to land as made quite explicit in the Petitions which read:

"6. That the people of this area fear that their needs and interests will be completely ignored as they have been ignored in the past, and they fear that the fate which has overtaken the Larrakeah tribe will overtake them."

The text asks the viewers to reconsider their position in relation to other people and places and not to repeatedly put their own interests before those of Aboriginal peoples.

Employing postmodern and post-colonial discourses, it is possible to gain multiple readings of the Petitions and a far better appreciation of the nuances in the work. As a compelling disruption to colonial conventions that calls for a process of dialectical consideration between the pictorial images and the linguistic text, the Petitions stand as the paradigmatic icon in the Yolngu's struggle to be heard.

The presentation of the Yolngu's Petitions in 1963 presented a conundrum to Parliament; it challenged the colonial hierarchy of the day by calling for a reassessment of government activities on a number of fronts. The material hybridity of the Petitions and layers of meaning according to context threw into question the government's ability to rule a land it thought it had conquered. Here was proof that it had invaded; the voice of the "Other" from the periphery, with totemic titles of ownership of land, had penetrated to the colonial political centre of the country.<sup>135</sup> The boldness of the painted designs as two painted panels asserting the collaboration of the two moieties, and the authoritative tone of the typed English text translated into Gumatj (or vice versa), all served to indicate that Yolngu people and their traditional connections to land were not passive, voiceless, and to be relegated to the periphery of *Balanda* agendas as the painting in a decorative context might perhaps at first suggest. The painted designs, in conjunction with the typed text that served to interpret the terms of the painting, established that

written text cannot be considered the only valid form of communicating or of establishing law and history in this country.

Whether the painted designs and typed text on the 1963 Petitions are equivalent in meaning, or in other words, whether they can be construed as direct translations, is possible given that there are direct parallels between word and image in the *Barunga Statement*, 1988. Galarwuy Yunupingu, one of the painters of the *Statement* gives a forthright explanation of the relationship between the painted designs of the *Barunga Statement* and the typed text:

"The painting surrounds the words of the statement, showing that our painting for the land and the words that express it in English speak equally. They cannot be differentiated. Our form of writing, writing for land, is in the form of a painting whereas in the modern sense, in English terms, it's words on a piece of paper."<sup>136</sup>

If the painting and the text can be construed as equivalent in intention, then Yunupingu's statement that follows is an example of how painting may be understood as a form of petitioning that parallels the Yolngu's political struggles to retain their rights to land. Yunupingu states:

"The importance of painting to Aboriginal people has not diminished over the years since 1788. Indeed, painting has become central to the expression of the conflict that has existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people since that time and in recent times, in many ways, has paralleled our political struggles to maintain our culture and our rights to land."<sup>137</sup>

Clearly the principles behind the construction of both the Petitions and the *Barunga Statement* are didactic in their intention. If so, it can be deduced that the *Statement* and the Bark Petitions seek to redefine written text in relation to visual text and endeavour to mediate between different systems of law by bringing into focus different concepts of law and land.<sup>138</sup> The juxtaposition of painted motifs and typed text, with each reinforcing the information contained within the other, was done in the spirit of intercultural exchange, with the intention that everybody (Yolngu, other Aboriginal groups, and *Balanda* alike) could understand the meaning of the *Statement*. Stated in regard to the multiple visual languages expressed by the various artists in the *Barunga Statement*, Yunupingu writes: "Aboriginal people of different countries, speaking different languages, can

unite in the same struggle."<sup>139</sup> This is the spirit of bridging gaps in communication and understanding and could equally well be applied with respect to the Aboriginal and English forms of the text contained within the *Barunga Statement* and the Petitions.

Another reason to consider the paintings as a form of bridging between cultures is that even though the structural format of the Petition has been altered so that the centre of the bark is reserved for an introduced text, the integrity of the painting and its meaning has not been compromised because its intended audience has been carefully considered beforehand and it is therefore permissible to allow the text to occupy the central position in the work.<sup>140</sup> The painted motifs and geometric backgrounds are intended for public scrutiny, yet the level of coding and the context of the motifs in relation to written text require a considerable knowledge of Yolngu culture in order to understand fully the meanings behind the painting. The juxtaposition of these highly symbolic, culturally specific Yolngu designs with typed English text is an invitation to acknowledge and respect differences.

The integration of English verbal text with Yolngu visual text in the Petitions did not diminish the integrity or symbolic significance of Yolngu artistic expression nor its status as Aboriginal art. On the contrary, the Petitions are a clear indication of how a group of innovative designers, like artists anywhere, have found it in their best interests to adjust their accustomed mode of visual communication so that an important (political) message in an artwork is communicable to a broader audience. This is readily apparent in post-modern protest art in which the artwork may be infused with text in order to convey its message. For instance, activist Hans Haacke uses text to convey complex non-visual issues, often social or political in nature, in order to deconstruct histories of oppression emanating from Western centres of prosperity.<sup>141</sup> Ultimately, the juxtaposition of the geographically-rooted iconography with written verbal text in one work should be viewed as a poetic interface through which viewers are encouraged to foster links or dialectical relationships between two widely divergent geographic sites and associated peoples.

Some removed, yet not so removed, parallels

The presentation of painted text to Parliament was not as foreign as it first appeared. European mapping exercises, funded by the rulers of the state, are a traditional form of political interplay between designs as visual text and written text in which one informs the other. Symbols and other abstractions are integrated closely with textual descriptions, either in the form of place names and details printed within the boundaries of the map, or as accompanying information in the form of a key or legend. In the case of the Petitions, the Yolngu typed out a list of clan names, possibly assuming that viewers would have the knowledge to link them to their corresponding geographic sites of association and origin as depicted in the painted maps that border the Petitions.<sup>142</sup> Whether it was understood by *Balanda* is not the point, because if it can be construed that the written text and the verbal text are essentially the same in intention, then the typed clan names can be considered as a type of index or legend to the painted designs. Together, the visual forms and verbal text address the Western viewer and, in this case, this kind of reading may facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between the two modes of text.

If it can be argued that, in Yolngu culture, the production of visual imagery is always grounded within a cosmological "map", then it is interesting to note that it was not so long ago, in Western culture, that artists and map makers were one and the same.<sup>143</sup> Representational motifs of mythological beings, specific to tracts of land or sea, grace the edges and borders of many European maps. The use of geometric patterns and designs in Yolngu map making, can be compared loosely, on a visual level, to our manner of abstracting geological knowledge onto maps. Only those who understand the language of the land in relation to the coded systems of knowledge in the sciences are able to comprehend Western-styled mapping abstractions. This analogy should be remembered in the context of the Yolngu paintings housed in the Yirrkala church and demonstrate that a cultural or contextual system of knowledge of any image is crucial in order to comprehend fully its intended meaning. It should be noted as well that, in Yolngu culture,

painting was intended to be viewed alongside song and dance and that these ephemeral performances were keys to understanding painted designs.

In Medieval manuscript painting and stained glass religious cycles, the visual rendition of a narrative cycle through motifs and designs was integral to the whole concept of what we term "illumination" - to bring visual light or an enlightened understanding to an event, person or place. In this context, image and text sit side by side and form a comfortable interplay - each illuminating the other. The Petitions submitted by the Yolngu to Parliament registered a material and conceptual manifestation of Aboriginal people's desires to communicate cross-culturally their title to land and to be registered through a dialectical construct between visual and verbal texts, much like an illustrated narrative.

The cross-fertilisation of differing modes of communication (visual and verbal) was intended to be understood by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike.<sup>144</sup> The conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth has commented that text or language as a form of dialogue with an artwork is useful in order to see the work, and to find out its relationship with the world. Looking won't do it - just working with form - but language informs in a way art does not by "redirecting or reorganising the forms of meaning...".<sup>145</sup> Because ideas, information, and subjects are not easily contained within a single object, such as the Petitions, the addition of words may help emphasise layers of meaning through layers of different texts. Using language as a tool, the artist can bring some aspect of life into focus in the viewer's mind.

But the frustration of communicating effectively cross-culturally is well expressed by Durndiwuy Wanambi, the sole painter of the third Bark Petition in 1968:

But I should say this strongly, please... you can see and understand which is Yolngu culture and Aborigine culture and background; and you must be able to learn, and you must be able to learn my culture, and therefore, I might learn in your culture a bit.

But the thing is that you're not very understanding, and you find very difficult [that] which is Aborigine, but something like that because we not taught you everything; and the same thing to me, that I cannot see clearly in

your culture, because I didn't know, I haven't been in school. Well that's why I see your culture very hard.<sup>146</sup>

Despite the juxtaposition of text and imagery, Yunupingu summarises the conceptual dilemma faced by these works: "In the end, even pictures were inadequate to explain to a people whose visual language is essentially two-dimensional the relationship we have to our land."<sup>147</sup> And as Nancy Williams writes: "the equivalence of concepts in English and Aboriginal languages can only be found by using an intermediary process that involves analysing symbols. That can only happen, of course, if the outsiders wish it."<sup>148</sup>

### **Pride of place? site as context**

"But I do ask that you recognise that the paintings are not just beautiful pictures. They are about Aboriginal law and Aboriginal life. They are also about our resistance since the invasion of Australia and our refusal to forget the land of our Ancestors. They are about our cultural, social and political survival. You can't get any clearer statement than that!"

Galarrwuy Yunupingu<sup>149</sup>

A quick tour of Parliament House attests to the substantiation of Australia's national identity and political might through art. The building is designed and decorated to reflect Australian historical and contemporary artistic talent and, to this end, public areas are lined with the well known icons of Australian landscape painting (Fred Williams, Arthur Boyd, and Sidney Nolan) and architectural details employ native woods and stone. Also on public display are significant documents, symbols of authority relating to Australia's political history. In the vicinity of the cabinets housing the Magna Carta and the Australian Constitution, and in the midst of portraits of political leaders, we find a dimly lit, glass-topped display case housing the three painted stringy-bark panels.

Most visitors who chance upon the display fail to realise that Aboriginal identities, law, and politics are defined through art and that inseparable connections exist between designs, people, and geographical sites. On a very basic level, these connections are not made because Aboriginal culture is

generally not part of a non-indigenous education.<sup>150</sup> Although the multiple histories of Australia are being rewritten with more insight and sensitivity, there is still a deeply rooted lack of understanding of Aboriginal connections to land. Indications of the severity of this problem are the actions and policies of Prime Minister Howard who, according to Mark Barker, correspondent to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, made his first venture into an Aboriginal community two years after beginning office.<sup>151</sup> This first visit was to Yirrkala and ironically coincided with a visit to Nhulunbuy to meet with mining executives of Nabalco, the bauxite mining company operating on excised Yolngu land. It was during his visit to Yirrkala that Howard was presented with two paintings depicting Yolngu Customary Law as described earlier in this chapter.<sup>152</sup> As part of his visit to Arnhem Land, Howard was invited also to attend a Yolngu men's ceremony at nearby Elcho Island. He emerged saying "I deeply appreciate the honour that was paid to me and I certainly gained from the ceremony an understanding of how much that ritual and that culture and those thousands of years of history mean to the indigenous communities."<sup>153</sup> In light of this current level of political interaction, how might we read the Petitions as political works of art in relation to their position at Parliament and what can be deduced about the kinds of relationships that exist between Parliament as a political centre and its periphery?

The Bark Petitions are classified as political documents because they were presented to the House of Representatives and are therefore considered to be assets of the House.<sup>154</sup> Representing a Yolngu system of law and authority they are situated in the vicinity of other House of Representative documents such as the renowned Magna Carta and Australian Constitution, both of which are legal documents that decree British and Australian law in relation to land and also represent a system of law and authority. Here then, within one space, we find both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sets of laws for an area of land claimed by both parties but each containing radically different concepts of land and ownership. Important questions to ask are: why are the Petitions on display and what does it mean to place them in the same

general space as some of the most powerful testaments of non-Aboriginal authority? I give a neo-colonial and post-colonial reading.

Within a neo-colonial perspective, the physical setting and placement of the Bark Petitions in relation to other works can be construed as a metaphorical example of the way Aboriginal people continue to be overshadowed within the larger Australian community; their land is appropriated and exploited for economic purposes and material desires. Perhaps the placement of the Petitions in relation to the Magna Carta and the Constitution serve as a reminder of colonial-style political force and the Petitions within this space constitute a kind of trophy regarding the invincibility of colonial might. For instance, the walls of the space surrounding the display of the Petitions are hung with heavily gilded frames displaying painted portraits of past politicians. The long rows of portraits define the vast architectural space and all face outward, like a military battle line. With such a procession the visitor is made to feel smaller. There is a distinct air of domination. The procession of gilt can be read as another kind of document: a testament to how Aboriginal affiliations to the continent have been dominated politically by white authority and, literally, painted out of the Australian political picture.

Interestingly, there is no visual imagery of land in this space; the dominating spirit of *Balanda* has been separated from images of nature. The images of nature and land are placed closer to the front of the building - as tourist attractions, for the purposes of constructing a national identity, and to create an aesthetically pleasing welcome to an otherwise impersonal environment. Although land is at the heart of politics, the geographical sites depicted in non-Aboriginal art are not what is important. The European tradition of reaping the land and then moving on when resources are depleted renders no sites sacred except with respect to possible economic gain.<sup>155</sup> Anything obstructing the path to national gain is at risk of being swept aside in this room of political might. These points are not lost on the Yolngu and so the dissemination of spiritually and politically oriented art keeps making its way to Canberra in order to help non-indigenous Australians learn about intrinsic Aboriginal connections to the land. Only

in the small bark panels of the Petitions is there any pictorial reference to land - Yolngu land - but its ancient narratives in relation to Yolngu places are lost in this sea of visual political oppression and lack of contextualisation.

The lack of contextualisation between Aboriginal people, place, and painting is particularly evident in the plaque that accompanies the display of the Petitions. It omits any reference to the political intent of the paintings or their spiritual connections to land. In chronological order, the plaque recounts the sequence of events from the excising of land from the Arnhem Land Reserve in 1960 to Parliament's passing of the Land Right (Northern Territory) Act in 1976. Nowhere does it suggest the names of the artists of the first two Petitions, the status of the artists as senior leaders of particular clans, the significance of the painted designs in relation to land title or the specific areas affected by mining as represented by the designs. Yet, to many Yolngu viewers, this kind of information could be read through the painting. Without the means to interpret the paintings it is very difficult for viewers to create an informed and critical response to the Petitions and this can only happen by rediscovering and reassessing the history of the petitions and in doing so re-evaluating the present and the connections between two geographically separated sites.

*Balanda* must work harder to see the Petitions' connections to land. Readily visible, but frequently overlooked, are the raw materials used in their construction. Obtained directly from Arnhem Land, the pigment and stringy-bark are material proof of Yolngu connections to land and land use, and ought not to be overlooked as an integral part of the Petitions. The sites from which the pigments were derived have been used for countless generations and are considered highly sacred.<sup>156</sup> In this sense, not only do the Yolngu speak on behalf of the land as Narritjin has said, but the relocation of sacred pigment to Parliament creates a powerful common denominator or physical bond between two geographically separated sites - a kind of material bridge. In this sense, the work can be considered to exist in two places simultaneously. The petition, in the form of pigment, bark, and totemic designs in association with printed text, that was presented to

Australian authorities was the culmination of a collective voice, that began with Ryko's translated "petition" of 1916, seeking to be considered as equal citizens of this island-continent.

In 1968, with the presentation of the third Petition to Parliament, three Yolngu leaders prepared to take the Commonwealth Government and Nabalco, the giant mining conglomerate, to court.<sup>157</sup> It was in hearing this case that a Supreme Court judge delivered the verdict of *Terra Nullius*; a ludicrous ruling declaring that Aborigines never owned land, but only used it or passed through it!<sup>158</sup> Galarrwuy Yunupingu comments:

"What the judge refused to recognise was that the bark petition we presented to parliament [in 1963] was not just a series of pictures, but represented the title to our country under our law. The designs we produced were given to us thousands of years before white judges came to this country to tell us we never really existed."<sup>159</sup>

The plaques that accompany the Petitions contain no Aboriginal voices and conceal the fact that the mining to this day continues to threaten areas of spiritual significance and threatens to disrupt further Yolngu culture.<sup>160</sup> Although the text does describe some of the details of Wuyal's equipment, such as the spear, spear thrower, and axe, it makes no mention of how these tools are connected to the naming and shaping of the land and the land affected by mining activities. Not acknowledging these points pacifies the important relationship of the viewer as consumer of aluminium products in relation to the site of bauxite extraction on Yolngu land. The viewer's ability to construct true dialectical relationships between Arnhem Land and Parliament, based on the achievement of a higher ideal than its individual parts can attain on their own, is jeopardised because of this lack of contextualisation and possibilities for interpretation. Such a small part of the story is presented that it is virtually impossible for *Balanda* to see the paintings as anything other than as decorative framework.

The decoration of the room in which the Petitions are displayed emphasises the level of political and cultural opposition with which Aboriginal people have historically been confronted. For me the placement of the Petitions in this space is a reminder of how far we are from solving issues of Native

Title, or Treaty. It serves as a reminder of the extent to which race relations and equal opportunity in this country are still very much polarised and this, I believe, is reflected in the lack of contextualisation of the Petitions. In this respect, the Petitions serve as a national symbol of numerous institutional failures. As a national institution of power and economic wealth, the Commonwealth Government has yet to learn that meaning is socially, not institutionally, determined. Until *Balanda*, beginning with the leaders of this nation, learn more about Aboriginal culture in general, equality will not be realised.

A post-colonial reading, however, interprets the position of the Petitions as a major disruption to the imperial presence of colonising rule grounded in its British heritage. The Petitions' diametrical placement in relation to non-Aboriginal law of the land and in the midst of the procession of guilt can be recontextualised in another way: as a guilty *Balanda* conscience and the strength of Yolngu culture in the face of oppression. In this light, the Petitions explore Australian colonial history and interrogate Aboriginal-colonial relations.

By painting their own way into Parliament, the Yolngu protested valiantly against this kind of exclusion, this act of erasure or political "whitewashing" of the land (validated through portraiture, "official" text, signatures, stamps, and seals). In this sense, the Petitions can be regarded as a form of "resistance" to more than two centuries of colonial rule. The Petitions challenge the Magna Carta and the Constitution as responses to imperialism by taking re-possession of Yolngu land using multiple forms of language. The placement of the Petitions in relation to the Magna Carta and the Constitution can be perceived as a kind of stand-off, an attempt to be considered on an equal level. In this sense, the Petitions can be viewed as an intersection between a political document, art, and activist sentiments.

The Petitions, in relation to their physical environment, disrupt previously authoritative assumptions by reflecting differing social hierarchies based on race. They function as contemporary icons of Yolngu peoples' ongoing struggle to persuade the government of Australia to respect Aboriginal law

and native title to land while functioning simultaneously as a public (national and international) appeal to acknowledge that Yolngu land is the embodiment of Yolngu as land is to all Aboriginal cultures in Australia.<sup>161</sup>

For the Yolngu, Canberra's disregard for their spiritual connections to land, as exemplified by the rejection of the Bark Petitions and the subsequent loss of the court case was devastating. The Bark Petitions, however, set in motion a process that led to the Special Committee Parliamentary Inquiry (1963) and the inaugural court case that led to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act of 1976 and later the High Court's Mabo Judgement.<sup>162</sup> With respect to the threat of contemporary policies to eliminate the possibility of sharing land jointly between pastoralists and Aboriginal people, the painted Petitions in their display case serve as an acute reminder that *Balanda* have no equivalent painting tradition through which they can claim spiritual and ancestral ties to the land.<sup>163</sup>

The Petitions signify simultaneously both an achievement and a failure that many Australians have yet to realise and understand. The achievement belongs to the people of Yirrkala in their challenge to the Commonwealth Government to acknowledge indigenous peoples of Australia as the traditional and rightful owners of this country. The failure is Australia's inability or unwillingness to foster better relations with its indigenous inhabitants. The isolated position of the Petitions at Parliament and the manner in which they simultaneously draw on Aboriginal and *Balanda* traditions expresses visually the discomfort felt by both groups. The painted Petitions are a testimony to a generation of Yolngu clan leaders, now deceased, whose descendants still work so hard to gain the respect of non-Aboriginal Australians by endeavouring to assist them in understanding the fundamental importance of maintaining Aboriginal connection to law and land through painting. The Petitions are a passionate response to appropriation of land, denial of land rights, and to *Balanda* denial and destruction. In this paper, it has been my goal to interpret these images not simply as reflections of social and political circumstance, but as an expression of a fundamental political force and an effort to bridge the gaps between the cultures. As Roger Benjamin has argued, it is important to

confront such “political freight” for the very reason that it is a “cultural irritant.”<sup>164</sup>

Perhaps Parliament’s gesture of sharing its space with the Petitions, of allowing the historical Other, the Aborigines, to speak for themselves, can be construed as a more enlightened view on race relations. It is my hope that the *Barunga Statement* and all other forms of art presented to Parliament can be displayed also within this space as a recognition of dual rights and responsibilities in the effort to bridge cultural gaps by listening to, and respecting, difference.

### Conclusion

The presentation or sale of highly symbolic Aboriginal designs to Euro-Australian (colonial) institutions of power and ideology, especially Parliament, necessitates a close examination of the works’ originating geographical, historical, and cultural context. But it is equally important, if not more so, to address “post-colonial” readings, by which it becomes evident that artworks such as the Bark Petitions have the effect of disrupting colonial hierarchies. Such disruptions become evident through an approach that recognises material hybridity as a more inter-cultural approach to communication and to exploring contemporary Aboriginal identity in relation to colonial impositions and rule, both past and present.

The challenge here has been to re-evaluate the bark petitions in terms of how they are now perceived as art within a broader art historical context and to elevate the status of the Yirrkala Bark Petitions in the (art) world beyond the Aboriginal community that created them. The Bark Petitions are a remarkable example of how art has been used as a vehicle to help preserve Yolngu culture in the face of encroaching change. Here, in one work, we find key aspects of Yolngu material culture (mineral pigments and bark), Yolngu spirituality (animal motifs and geometric designs as maps of sacred areas associated with Creation Narratives), and law (as defined in the figurative, abstract field of the painting). The combination is uniquely Yolngu; it cannot be attributed to any other group in the world. Like any

other Yolngu painting it is a powerful testament of identity and of Yolngu "rights and responsibilities" to land. The juxtaposition of the designs with aspects of Anglo-Australia (paper and ink, the Christian deity, and written text) serves to reinforce the meanings inherent in the painted designs. The two forms of text in one work are intentionally contrasting and visually arresting. They express difference and are highly confrontational in the sense that Euro-Australian concepts of land and law had never before been challenged by what we would define as an integrated inter-cultural work of art.

Considering these points of view, I have, wherever possible, featured Aboriginal voices and have refrained from making "potentially imperialising propositions" by applying perspectives that are more in tune with Aboriginal cultural values.<sup>165</sup> There are a few instances, however, where I have drawn analogies with the visual strategies in European works of art. I have constructed also a European post-colonial reading of the Petitions because I feel this helps to expand the significance of the work to a broader audience, while not at the expense of the work or the artists. Otherwise, I feel the more traditional-style of Yolngu painting on the Petitions will continue to be viewed as merely decorative, as ethnographic, traditional, unchanging, or unchallenging. To draw out intercultural facets of political works, it is healthy to note innovation and adaptation where it has suited Aboriginal people's needs for cross-cultural expression, to make the work more meaningful in the context of non-Aboriginal time and place. By investigating and drawing parallels to what is known, we may better recognise what we don't know and also, in some cases, engender respect for what we, as non-Yolngu, are not entitled to know.

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<sup>1</sup> Galarrwuy Yunupingu, "Indigenous Art in the Olympic Age", in Art and Australia, vol. 35 No.1, 1997, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> The species of stringy-bark is *Eucalyptus tetradonta*.

<sup>4</sup> An "Agreement to Mine" was ratified on 18 February, 1963, when Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced the granting of mineral rights to the P  chiney Company of France. For a sequence of events see Edgar Wells, Reward and Punishment in Arnhem Land 1962-1963, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1982.

Bauxite is the main ore of aluminium; a modern and highly prevalent metal valued for its strength, light weight, and resistance to oxidation. Australia contains approximately one-third of the Earth's known reserves. Strip mining bauxite entails stripping the land surface of all vegetation and soil thereby altering completely the aspect of extensive tracts of land.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Morphy, lecture, Centre for Cross Cultural Research (CCCR), Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, 20 May, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Another petition, but not painted on bark, consists of 35 thumb prints printed in red ink on sheets of paper. It is dated 23 August, 1963, and falls between the dates of the two painted bark panels. According to Wells, the list of thumb prints were sent as reinforcement after the signatures on the petition of 14 August were discounted by a member of the House of Representatives (see Wells, 1982, p. 108). To my knowledge the thumb prints have never been displayed and their exact whereabouts at Parliament was unknown prior to my research.

The number of petitions actually created in 1963 is confusing. Reverend Wells, Superintendent of the Yirrkala Mission, who has recounted his time in Arnhem Land in Reward and Punishment in Arnhem Land 1962-1963, speaks of "Five major copies were to be completed" (Wells, 1982, 81). It appears, however, that only two were painted and the remaining petitions are typed copies held in the Parliamentary archives. In most literary accounts, however, only the image of the second painted panel stamped 28 August, 1963, is reproduced and it is commonly referred to as "The Petition" or "The first petition", thereby confusing the status of the first panel, stamped 14 August, 1963, as a petition in its own right. (See Wandjuk Marika: life story as told to Jennifer Issacs, University of Queensland Press, 1995, p. 103). It seems that the existence of the first panel, the so-called Dhuwa panel, has become obscured, and I have found only two published images of it one in Bernard Lüthi, Aratjara. Art of the First Australians, Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1993, and the other in Edgar Wells, "Some Events at Yirrkala during 1962 and 1963" in Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, No. 15, March, 1981, Figure 1. Perhaps for this reason the second panel has come to be known as "The Bark Petition". It should be noted as well that Wandjuk refers to the 1968 Petition as the "second bark petition" thus suggesting that the two 1963 panels are indeed one work (see Marika, p. 105). On the other hand, Parliament refers to the three panels (two from 1963 and one from 1968) as "three bark petitions." Because my research has been based largely on Parliamentary archives, I have decided to conform to Parliament's version of three bark petitions.

<sup>7</sup> I have considered that the painted panels are moiety based (one Dhuwa and one Yirritja) and that the two 1963 panels could be two equal parts of a single Petition; in effect a kind of diptych. (If the thumb prints are considered as well, the Petitions of 1963 could possibly be construed as a kind of triptych). In instances where the two painted panels have been reproduced together, the two panels have been referred to as "The Petition" thereby implying that the two panels form one work and suggests that they are moiety based (see Edgar Wells, 1981, Figure 1). For a continuation of this discussion refer to the section in this chapter entitled *The problem of iconographic analysis*.

<sup>8</sup> Everything in the Yolngu universe belongs to one of these two categories. See Nancy Williams, The Yolngu and Their Land: A system of land tenure and the fight for its recognition, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986, and Howard Morphy, Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge, London/Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991. Both these anthropologists provide excellent accounts of the interrelationships that exist between moieties.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Morphy, personal communication, 1997. Ronald Berndt "The Gove Dispute: The question of Australian Aboriginal Land and the Preservation of Sacred Sites," Anthropological Forum, University of Western Australia, 1964, p. 261, stated that the language is Gupapuyngu.

<sup>10</sup> References to painting as title to land are included in: Howard Morphy, "Title to their Land," in Quadrant, XXII (9) 1978, p. 36-39, and "Now You Understand"; an analysis of the way Yolngu have used sacred knowledge to retain their autonomy" in Nicolas Peterson and

Marcia Langton, Aborigines, Land and Land Rights, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983, p. 116, Morphy wrote "there is no doubt that Yolngu believe that in their painting they possess objects that are broadly equivalent to the European concept of title deeds"; Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65, in which he wrote "the bark petition... represented the title to our country under our law." Also, Mundine, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> I refer to the word "text" as visual and pictorial writing using graphic substances whether ink, paint, wax, wood, stone, or instruments such as nib or brush. Reference in Docker, Postmodernism and post structuralism, p. 136. See Morphy, 1991, for a detailed account of the Yolngu's efforts to mediate different concepts of law through art. Also described in greater detail in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> The Petitions are discussed as art in Lüthi, 1993; Jennifer Phipps, "Reflections on Aboriginal art, assimilation and land rights" in Art Monthly, Oct. 1998, p. 22-25; Judith Ryan, Spirit in Land: bark paintings from Arnhem Land in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne: NGV, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> According to Wells, The Honourable Mr Kim Beazley Sr, Labour MP, during his visit to Yirrkala in 1963, suggested that "A petition [to Parliament] surrounded with an Aboriginal painting will be irresistible" (Wells, 1982, p. 80). Wells often credits Beazley with the impetus for the creation of the Petitions and their resultant impact on Parliament and on the nation. Beazley himself, however, indicated that he was unaware of the spiritual and totemic importance of the painted designs (personal communication, 1998).

In Times Cutting Book July 1962-Aug 1964, the Petition is described as "written on a piece of bark about 2 square feet in size. It was decorated in traditional manner with yellow, white and ochre painted turtles, fish, goannas, and bandicoots". Again, the significance of the designs is overlooked and described simply as a "traditional" kind of decoration.

<sup>14</sup> The most comprehensive historical documentation of the Bark Petitions is by Edgar Wells, 1982 and "The Bark Petitions and Edgar Almond," Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society (Victoria), Vol 3. No. 2, 1996, published posthumously. A Yolngu perspective is recounted by Wandjuk Marika (1995), who told about his involvement in creating the Dhuwa panel in 1963. Wandjuk's text quotes specific details from Wells, 1982. The three panels of text that accompany the Petitions at Parliament provide only a brief chronological overview of the reception of the Petitions to Parliament. There is no comprehensive account that describes the historical, cultural, and political significance of the Bark Petitions.

<sup>15</sup> *Balanda* is the Arnhem Land term "for people of any other race." See Tim Bonyhady, "Colour Separation", The Australian's Review of Books, 1998, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Here I adopt the title of Howard Morphy's book Ancestral Connections, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> I intend to pursue a detailed iconographic analysis as part of a post-doctoral research project planned for late 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Andy Waytjuku in Wally Caruana and Nigel Lendon The Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story 1937-1997, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1997, p. 130, makes a reference to Mandawuy Yunupingu, the lead singer of the band Yothu Yindi and ceremonial leader, as "bridging" and "building the bridges... bridging this reconciliation. To both worlds, Aboriginal society taking it up into white society...". The importance of Yothu Yindi and lead singer Mandawuy Yunupingu as a "cultural ambassador" (singer's own words), is discussed in Matthew Ricketson, "Signs of a Treaty: Yothu Yindi, the band from the bush, is leading the way in bridging the gap between black and white Australia" Time Australia, v. 6, no. 43, 28 Oct., 1991, p. 68-69. Patrick Dodson, "Cycles of Survival for Indigenous Australians", in ANU Reporter, vol. 29, No. 18, p. 12, in closing wrote about the necessity for "bridging that gap" between Aboriginal Australia, non-aboriginal Australia, and the government "to make into a reality the dreams of Nugget Coombs for a reconciled Australia."

<sup>19</sup> Roger Benjamin, "The Modernist Hero," in Emily Kngwarreye: Alhalkere: paintings from Utopia, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Bonyhady, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, Epilogue, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Bonyhady, p. 13. The potential for constructing conciliatory or dialectical relationships, a furthering of understanding between different people and places, is in jeopardy unless non-Aboriginal people in Australia learn more about their Aboriginal counterparts. Although Kngwarreye's art may be easier to digest because of its non-representational and seemingly non-traditional style (Roger Benjamin, Canberra School of Art (CSA) Art Forum Lecture, 21 Oct, 1998), its contextualisation in Eurocentric terms has opened an arena for debate and has raised unmistakably the profile of Aboriginal connections to land and the importance of land to Aboriginal people as expressed through the titles of her works.

<sup>23</sup> Even, in my opinion, if that means temporarily appropriating Kngwarreye as a modernist hero (See Terry Smith, "Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter" in Emily Kngwarreye: paintings, Sydney: Craftman House, 1998, p. 24-42). Perhaps her rapid art historical canonisation does stem from guilt, or from superficial mass cultural communion instead of reconciling with Aboriginal people (Benjamin, October 21, 1998). The fact remains, however, that she identified herself unmistakably as Aboriginal, female, and connected intimately to her land and to her community. Whatever the outcome for now, until history is written and rewritten several more times (and hopefully by Aboriginal voices), her painting has greatly increased the profile of contemporary Aboriginal art as highly conceptual in its connection to land, innovative in its interpretation of land, and meaningful to our time when groups of people around the world are trying to better understand. Kngwarreye created a continuous stream of dialogue between her world view and an appreciative audience, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. These are not mere footnotes in her biography.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine De Lorenzo, A Changing Relationship: Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art c. 1939-1988, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Morphy, 1991, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> The Petitions are discussed briefly in: Lüthi (1993), Phipps (1998); Ryan (1991).

<sup>27</sup> Wandjuk Marika, 1995, p. 108 - 109.

<sup>28</sup> Mundine (1997) MCA brochure

<sup>29</sup> Mundine, 1997.

<sup>30</sup> Caruana, 1989, p. 9, and Gillian Hutcherson, Djalkiri Wanga: The land is my foundation. The University of Western Australia, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, Occasional Paper No. 4, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> See Berndt, 1964. For the Yolngu people, the ground is a vast network of interconnected sacred sites, many of which are represented by specific geographical features, such as waterholes, sand dunes, caves, promontories, hills, and beaches. The Yolngu are deeply spiritual people and are connected intimately to land in ways which are difficult for non-Aboriginal people to fathom. The supernatural beings included: the Wagilag or Wawilak Sisters, the Rainbow Serpent, Barama and the Djan'kawu Sisters.

<sup>32</sup> Berndt, 1964, p. 265.

<sup>33</sup> Morphy, 1991, p. 103.

<sup>34</sup> Caruana, 1988, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, 1986, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Howard Morphy, "North East Arnhem Land" in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 102.

<sup>39</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 103.

- <sup>40</sup> Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993, p. 59.
- <sup>41</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 103.
- <sup>42</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 103.
- <sup>43</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 103.
- <sup>44</sup> Ryan, 22.
- <sup>45</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 103.
- <sup>46</sup> Morphy, in Caruana (ed.), 1989, p. 103.
- <sup>47</sup> Morphy, personal communication, July, 1987.
- <sup>48</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 17.
- <sup>49</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 67. Banduk Marika in the film documentary film *Copyrites* gives an excellent account of these laws.
- <sup>50</sup> This is a line of inquiry yet to be substantiated by fieldwork contact with the appropriate Yolngu authorities.
- <sup>51</sup> Paintings presented to Howard.
- <sup>52</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65.
- <sup>53</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 66.
- <sup>54</sup> See Wells, 1982 and Introduction to Morphy, 1991, p. 21.
- <sup>55</sup> Caruana and Lendon, 1997, p. 13, and Yunupingu, 1997, p. 67.
- <sup>56</sup> For information on the Elcho Island disclosure, see Morphy, 1991, p. 19.
- <sup>57</sup> See Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65.
- <sup>58</sup> The *Aboriginal Memorial* consisting of two hundred hollow-log coffins painted with clan designs was created by a group of Yolngu artists from Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land in protest of injustices to Aboriginal people and as a symbol of Aboriginal resilience. Caruana wrote "the *Memorial* signifies the important role of art in expressing Aboriginal values and perspectives to a world which, in many cases, continues to be hostile to Aboriginal aspirations." (Caruana, 1993, p. 206). The clan designs can be read as signatures that endorse the project and the poles are placed within the gallery in a manner sensitive to the geographic position of the clans in relation to one another.
- <sup>59</sup> Curated by Wally Caruana, Senior Curator, National Gallery of Australia, Nigel Lendon, Reader in Visual Arts, Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, and Djon Mundine, Senior Curator of Aboriginal Art, National Museum of Australia.
- <sup>60</sup> Lendon, 1998, p. 4.
- <sup>61</sup> Nigel Lendon, "Authorship, Authority and the production of Public Knowledge," in *Humanities Research*, 2, 1998, p. 9.
- <sup>62</sup> Mundine, 1997.
- <sup>63</sup> Mundine, 1997.
- <sup>64</sup> Mark Baker, "Howard Hears the Cries of the Sons of Yirrkala." *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 28 February, 1998, p. 1, 6.
- <sup>65</sup> Andrew Blake, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Art Coordinator, exhibition proposal of Salt Water paintings to Mark Bayly, Curator of Art, Parliament House Collection, 7 August, 1998. The status and intention of these later paintings is somewhat clouded, and ambiguities will need to be clarified by future fieldwork.
- <sup>66</sup> Blake, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> Yunupingu, "The Black/White Conflict" in Caruana, *Windows on the Dreaming*, (Op. cit.), 1989, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> Yunupingu, 1989, p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> At the outset of this project I had proposed to undertake field research in East Arnhem Land in order to investigate more closely the iconography of the Bark Petitions by meeting with the owners and custodians of the designs. The field work could not take place and my collaboration with Yolngu people has been postponed. In hindsight, I believe it would have been disrespectful to enter the community without a significant understanding of the history of the Petitions. And, despite my previous studies of indigenous cultures of the Americas, it has been necessary for me to first learn about Yolngu culture, which is very different, and to cultivate contacts with other researchers who have been willing to assist me to prepare for more meaningful fieldwork than I otherwise would have been able to undertake a year ago. Much of my research transpired at Parliament where I conducted a significant paper chase to unearth documents that had not been viewed in 30 years, such as the thumb print Petition mentioned earlier.

Although a detailed iconographic analysis is beyond the scope of this work, I have resolved to carry through with the project as a postdoctoral researcher.

<sup>70</sup> It is documented that the paintings were created by senior clan leaders and that these were all distinguished artists. Two of the artists implied were Wandjuk Marika and Mungarrawuy Yunupingu. In January, 1998, I wrote to Banduk Marika, sister to Wandjuk Marika and daughter of Mawalan, and to Mandawuy Yunupingu, son of Mungerrawuy Yunupingu, to ask to what extent their respective family members were involved. I hope to obtain clarification as part of future field work and consultation.

By conducting a combined iconographic and stylistic analysis, I have considered more than fifteen artists as being possibly connected to the painting of the petitions in some way. However, stylistically the works of several artists are similar, particularly between teacher and student, thus complicating the identification.

This kind of linking between motif and site without knowing the identity of the artist was perceived by Morphy as difficult. It should be noted as well that an existing design may take on new associations not previously documented. A purely speculative example is that the undulating scallop patterning on the 14 August Petition could conceivably over time come to represent mounds of dirt created by mining activities.

<sup>71</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 81.

<sup>72</sup> A typewritten letter, hand dated July, 1963, written to The Leader of the Opposition, Mr Calwell, reads as a petition except that the word "petition" is not included. It does not appear to have been associated with any painting but is signed by the same men and women and in essentially the same sequence as the subsequent Petitions, thus further isolating the possibility that the painters are necessarily included amongst the signatories. Letter held in Parliamentary Archives.

<sup>73</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1999.

<sup>74</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Mandiwuy Yunupingu confirms father's participation in Bark Petition during Yothu Yindi concert at Old Parliament House, Canberra, January, 1998.

<sup>76</sup> Marika, 1995, p. 100.

<sup>77</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 84.

<sup>78</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 84.

<sup>79</sup> Jeremy Long, unpublished Report to Parliament, 1988, housed with the Parliamentary Art Collection.

<sup>80</sup> Morphy, personal communication, July, 1997.

- <sup>81</sup> Ann Wells, This Their Dreaming, University of Queensland Press, 1971, p. 13.
- <sup>82</sup> See Berndt, 1952.
- <sup>83</sup> See Marika, 1995, p. 16.
- <sup>84</sup> Marika, 1995, plates on pages 16, 26, 111, 116, 176.
- <sup>85</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1999.
- <sup>86</sup> Report from the Select Committee on Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963, paragraph 637.
- <sup>87</sup> Morphy explains: "Narritjin occasionally painted the designs of his mother's clan and it is significant that this painting on the Dhuwa side almost certainly is a combination of Riratjingu and Djambarrpuynu elements (with possible Galpu) and Narritjin's mother came from the Djambarrpuynu clan associated with Dhambalia and the mining lease."<sup>87</sup> Morphy's analysis of the Petitions suggests that although the panel looks Dhuwa, technically a Yirritja man such as Narritjin could have painted large parts of it by painting his mother's country. Morphy, personal communication, 1999.
- <sup>88</sup> Howard Morphy, Manggalili Art, 1978, p. 1.
- <sup>89</sup> Helen Gröger-Wurm, Australian Aboriginal Bark Paintings and Their Mythological Interpretation, vol. 1 Eastern Arnhem Land, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies No. 30, 1973, Plate 192.
- <sup>90</sup> Gröger-Wurm, Plate 191 and Gillian Hutcherson, Djalkiri Wänga: The Land is My Foundation, University of Western Australia: Berndt Museum of Anthropology, Occasional Paper No. 4, 1995, p. 29.
- <sup>91</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1999.
- <sup>92</sup> Long, 1988.
- <sup>93</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1997.
- <sup>94</sup> Morphy, 1978, Plate 6 and Caruana, 1989, No. 58.
- <sup>95</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1997.
- <sup>96</sup> Caruana, 1989, Plate 72
- <sup>97</sup> See Wells, 1971, image of Church Panels.
- <sup>98</sup> On the other hand, it could well be other important sites that are referred to through the motifs. In 1963, Narritjin testified at the Special Committee Hearings in Darwin, that a sacred lagoon known as a ceremony ground was of particular concern. The site was described as being a knoll within the mission lease located south of Mount Dundas and on the coast itself. This is an area that has almost certainly been altered by mining activities as it is situated halfway between Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy. Narritjin describes also the head of Dalywoi Bay at the northern bank and the tidal inlet, a mountain that lies in the watershed system, and along the southwest bank of the Latram River. Other witnesses describes several key sites in the vicinity of Crocodile Creek and Galuru. Paragraphs 778, 780, 788, 794.
- <sup>99</sup> Ryan, 1991, p. 13.
- <sup>100</sup> Judith Ryan, 1991, p. 13, and in Long, 1998.
- <sup>101</sup> Ryan, 1991, p. 13 and Marika, 1995, p. 106
- <sup>102</sup> Ryan, 1991, p. 13 and in Marika, 1995, p. 105 refer to a "big banyan" a "special Tree" at Wallaby Beach which was Wuyal's tree and which was knocked down.
- <sup>103</sup> Yunupingu, 1989, p. 13.
- <sup>104</sup> Marika, 1995, p. 110.

<sup>105</sup> The Yirrkala people were fortunate to have two sympathetic reverends, Wilbur Chaseling and Edgar Wells, both of whom encouraged the production and sale of paintings. In the 1920s and '30s, a number of murders occurred in North east Arnhem Land. They occurred as a result of Yolngu defending their people from the incursions of outsiders. The Federal government endorsed a punitive expedition, but the anthropologist Donald Thomson and the Methodist Overseas Mission interceded by bringing peace to the area and establishing a mission station and kind of sanctuary. Accordingly, the Yirrkala Mission was established with the assistance of Reverend Wilbur Chaseling in, 1934, and in 1935, the Arnhem Land Reserve was created.

<sup>106</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 18-19.

<sup>107</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> Morphy, 1989, p. 103.

<sup>109</sup> Wells, 1971, recounts the respective creation stories and the involvement of the various artists who partook in the church panel painting.

<sup>110</sup> Reverend Wells sent telegrams denouncing proposed mining on the Arnhem Aboriginal Reserve which attracted the attention of the media and the Opposition Labour Party. This resulted in a visit to Yirrkala of Mr Kim Beazley Sr and Gordon Bryant in July, 1963. Beazley was sympathetic to the plight of the Yolngu losing their land as a result of the proposed bauxite operations. According to Wells, he was purportedly "entranced" by the Dhuwa and Yirritja painted panels in the church. Wells wrote "Beazley had the inspiration to conjoin bark paintings, embodying links to the hereditary lands, with a formal petition in the proper parliamentary style in both English and Australian Matha" in Wells, 1996, p. 20. In personal conversation with Beazley, however, he had no recollection of seeing the Yolngu church panels, but he did recall Christian biblical themes gracing the walls of the church and it was those that he was taken by.

<sup>111</sup> Williams, 1986, p. 22.

<sup>112</sup> Marika, 1995, p. 77.

<sup>113</sup> Marika, 1995, p. 77.

<sup>114</sup> Marika, 1995, p. 75

<sup>115</sup> Edgar Wells recounts "The most senior of the respective clan artists worked in harmony to place symbols of their personal ancestors in a pattern mutually agreed upon as being the correct relationship to one another", 1982, p. 59. A similar kind of procedure would have been followed in order to create the Bark Petitions. Morphy, 1991, p. 19.

<sup>116</sup> Wells, 1982, p. 86

<sup>117</sup> Howard Morphy, "Geology in Ochre", *Hemisphere* 23, 1979, p. 127.

<sup>118</sup> Wandjuk Marika quoted by an interpreter in the Report from the Select Committee on Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, Part II, Minutes and Evidence, 1963, paragraphs 703, 708. With respect to the mining of their sacred land Wandjuk was interpreted as saying "We do not want that dug up at all. They [we] would like to be consulted before any area is dug, so that they [we] can see whether it has the sacred features, because it is from those sacred parts of the ground that they get most of their colour that is used in bark paintings such as the paintings in the Church."

<sup>119</sup> In "Engaging the Other: Art and the Survival of Aboriginal Society" (an unpublished chapter of a forthcoming book), Morphy has written: "Incorporation of the Macassans into the Dreamtime creation, far from signalling a conservative ideology that took no account of change, was a means of adjusting to changing circumstances while at the same time ensuring that new information about the world was incorporated within traditional frameworks of knowledge. Change was accommodated in such a way that it did not disrupt the core relationship between people and land."

<sup>120</sup> Berndt Museum of Anthropology, explanatory text that accompanies displays, and Morphy, 1989, p. 104.

<sup>121</sup> Ronald Berndt, Catherine Berndt and John Stanton, Aboriginal Australian Art: a visual perspective, 1982, pl. 134.

<sup>122</sup> Howard Morphy recently provided me with an interesting perspective of the typed petition in relation to the bark. He explained how large Yolngu paintings incorporate a series of different paintings of different countries or perspectives on countries in the same frame, and that perhaps the sheet of paper can be thought of as another addition. (unpublished correspondence 22 January, 1999.

<sup>123</sup> Morphy, 1989, p. 105.

<sup>124</sup> Wonggu, the influential Djapu clan leader from the preceding generation, after much confrontation with Euro-Australians, had eventually come to harbour an ideology based on establishing friendly relations of exchange between Yolngu and Europeans. In his day, Wonggu had collaborated extensively with European's, such as the anthropologist Donald Thomson and the Methodist missionary, Reverend Chaseling. It was during Wonggu's lifetime that painting on bark gained an increasingly "didactic role", both within Yolngu society and as a form of communication with the world beyond North East Arnhem Land. It was in the 1920s that bark painting began to be used as a means of addressing "multiple audiences, both Yolngu and Balanda, near and far." Caruana and Lendon, 1997, p. 24.

According to Morphy, the men of Wonggu's generation got on together well and in this manner the petitions, because they were painted by the most senior men, could be executed, but not without undue care and negotiation (Morphy, personal communication, 1997). According to Wells, these were artists at leadership level class (Wells, 1982, p. 10). Narritjin, a slightly younger man and a likely painter of the Yirritja panel, was married to Wonggu's eldest granddaughter and so would also have been supportive of the idea to educate Europeans (Morphy, personal communication, 1997).

<sup>125</sup> Benjamin Buchloch, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art, in Gabriele Guercio (ed.) Rooted Rhetoric, Naples: Guida, 1986, p. 98

<sup>126</sup> Poignant, Roslyn, "Ryko's photographs of the 'Fort Dundas Riot': the story so far." Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 2, 1996, p. 31.

<sup>127</sup> Poignant, 1996, p. 31

<sup>128</sup> Poignant, 1996, p. 32. In unpublished correspondence with Nigel Lendon, dated 3 June, 1998, Poignant states that this transcription by Ryko is an "oral petition". She adds that the linguistic structure of Dula's speech, seems to be related to this "history of 'oral petitions'.

<sup>129</sup> Morphy, 1991, p. 18. In 1983 Morphy wrote: The genius of the bark petition was that it introduce an Aboriginal symbol into Parliamentary discourse, making it harder for Europeans to respond in terms of their own cultural precedents... Petitions framed with bark paintings add a new element." Morphy, 1983, p. 115.

<sup>130</sup> Peter Mason, personal communication, 1998.

<sup>131</sup> The Honourable Kim Beazley Sr, personal communication, 1998,

<sup>132</sup> The Parliamentary plaque that accompanies the 1968 Petition reads "a complete bark painting backed the petition."

<sup>133</sup> Beazley certified the translation of English and Gumatj as correct, but did not possess the skills to actually confirm a correct translation (personal communication, 1998). The Berndts had offered their services but were not called upon.

<sup>134</sup> See Wells, 1996, or House of Representatives Report on Grievances, 1963..

<sup>135</sup> Beazley stressed to me the real difference here and the context of the Petitions and land claims in relation to the continent being conquered or invaded. If not a conquered county then in his view land claims should be upheld.

- <sup>136</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65.
- <sup>137</sup> Yunupingu, 1989, p. 13.
- <sup>138</sup> Morphy, 1991, p. 18.
- <sup>139</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65.
- <sup>140</sup> Morphy, personal communication, 1999.
- <sup>141</sup> Hans Haacke and criticism of Alcan Aluminium's poor human rights record in South Africa using the death of activist Steven Biko as an example, while in Montreal the company sponsored an opera staged in Montreal, Canada.
- <sup>142</sup> This petition was presented by "members of the Balamuma, Narrkala, Gapiny, Miliwurrwurr people and Djapu, Mangalili, Madarrpa, Magarrwanalmirri, Djambarrpuynu, Gumaitji, Marrakulu, Galpu, Dhaluangu, Wangurri, Warramirri, Naymil, Rirritjingu tribes."
- <sup>143</sup> For details see: Peter Whitfield, The Image of the World: 20 centuries of world maps. London: The British Library, 1994; and Svetlana Alpers, "The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art" in Woodward, David (ed.), Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays. University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 54.
- <sup>144</sup> Yunupingu, 1989, p. 14.
- <sup>145</sup> Joseph Kosuth, in Rooted Rhetoric, 1986, p. 112.
- <sup>146</sup> Caruana and Lendon, p. 159.
- <sup>147</sup> Yunupingu, 1989, p. 14.
- <sup>148</sup> Williams, p. 22.
- <sup>149</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 67.
- <sup>150</sup> I think high schools and universities in particular should have core courses or sections of courses devoted to the teaching of Aboriginal culture - in the sciences, the arts, and linguistics.
- <sup>151</sup> Baker, 1998, p. 1, 6.
- <sup>152</sup> Blake, 1998.
- <sup>153</sup> Baker, 1998, p. 6.
- <sup>154</sup> Dalma Dixon (Sergeant-at-Arms, House of Representatives, Parliament House), personal communication, 1998.
- <sup>155</sup> The Aboriginal perspective is that Europeans are "nomads on a global scale" because they do not account for the history of the land, are reliant on extractable resources, and abandon the land when the resources are depleted. Morphy, public lecture, Centre for Cross Cultural Research, 20 May, 1998.
- <sup>156</sup> Ryan, p. 24. Only particular men with authority are allowed to mine the ground for pigment and these men are associated with particular colours which are then exchanged with others for purposes of painting.
- <sup>157</sup> See Berndt, "A Long View: some personal comments on land right" AIAS Newsletter, No. 16, 1981. In 1968, three Yirrkala men, on behalf of the particular social units, sued Nabalco Mining Company and the Commonwealth government. They claimed damages, an injunction to restrain Nabalco from continuing mining activities, and acknowledgment of their right as Aborigines to occupy the land free from interference. This was a direct claim for land rights recognition. The case was heard in Darwin early in 1969.
- <sup>158</sup> See Williams, 1986, for an excellent rendition of this court case.
- <sup>159</sup> Yunupingu, 1997, p. 14.

<sup>160</sup> The construction of the mining town and the influx of alcohol has affected severely many families in the nearby community of Yirrkala. According to a visitor to the region, Yolngu camp at the perimeter of the leases to ensure that boundaries are observed.

<sup>161</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral*, p. 18.

<sup>162</sup> Refer to Williams, 1983. Yunupingu cites how the judge of the Supreme Court cited a doctrine called *Terra Nullius*, thus finding/concluding that Aboriginal people were "an uncivilised people with no recognisable system of law" that they had no "proprietary interest in land" and therefore did not own the land on which they lived" Yunupingu, 1989, p. 14.

<sup>163</sup> Yunupingu said that the Barunga Statement in effect says "This is our painting, where is yours?" In Yunupingu, 1997, p. 65.

<sup>164</sup> Roger Benjamin, lecture, 1998.

<sup>165</sup> Benjamin, 1998, p. 53.

## CHAPTER 5

### SYNTHESIS

The artists Robert Smithson, Alfredo Jaar, and the Yolngu painters of the Bark Petitions have produced works of art which articulate a relationship between viewers in large urban centres with sites of mineral extraction. To accomplish this, the artists have employed various visual and conceptual strategies intended to decentre both the work and the viewer in order address the ways in which both centres and peripheries isolate each other and to forge links with mining sites and associated activities. Common to all the works discussed is a dichotomous construct intended to activate the role of viewers in relation to the work by challenging them to construct dialectical relationships between two geographically separated sites and to question their own position relative to the two sites.

In the 1960s, Smithson sought actively to re-define the boundaries of centre and periphery by making art in response to the broader context of things rather than appreciating art in a purely esthetic manner. His Non-sites were intended to "disperse thinking" by forcing viewers to expand their vision and to consider how systems are structured and interconnected. These works had a particular emphasis on marginalised tracts of ground. His displacement and relocation of elements pertaining to mine sites through representational devices and conceptual strategies, such as maps, photographs, bins of earth samples and mirror displacements, served to provide viewers with the means to journey imaginatively between two geographically separated sites. This activating of space between two sites is what Smithson referred to as "the dialectic of place."

Similarly, Alfredo Jaar aspired to make more visible existing links between privileged consumers in the "First World" and "Third World" producers, the latter typified by indigent gold miners at Serra Pelada in Brazil. Jaar, like Smithson, was intent on providing viewers with an enhanced awareness of marginalised people and places. In his artworks he employed material traces of the geographic sites to which the works refer. In this manner the works were grounded materially in two geographically separated sites and connected through a material dialogue or common denominator, with the material at each site acting as an index of the other. The works of Jaar, like those of Smithson, stemmed from the artist's concern with non-perception and the tendency for places to be overlooked because they are not

understood in the context of global issues and events. The two artists used reflective surfaces both physically, to immerse viewers within their installations, and metaphorically, as a vehicle for self-reflection in relation to distant mine sites.

Self-reflection was prompted also by the Bark Petitions of the Yolgnu people of Yirrkala, works which employed strategies for cross-cultural communication. Incorporated into the physical structure and make-up of the Petitions, through the use of sacred pigments and stringy-bark, were expressions of the Yolngu's intrinsic connections to their land. In a sense, therefore, the Petitions employ surprisingly similar concepts to the material dialogue between geographically separated sites utilised by Smithson and Jaar.

I argue that, despite the perceived marginalised position of the "totemic" icons outside Arnhem Land, the Bark Petitions are complex and innovative works of (political) art that deserve greater attention in national and international contexts. Their combination of visual and verbal texts is highly conceptual, in that the painted designs can be read as a complementary "text" to the written text, as "bi-textual" objects. The juxtaposition of the texts was intended by the Yolngu as a form of cross-cultural communication. The strategy was intended to break down any hierarchical relation between the centre of the work and its margin or border that represents metaphorically the Yolngu's desire to bridge gaps through mutual respect for difference. That it was necessary in the first place for the Yolgnu to send the Petitions to Parliament, and the context of their display there, in relation to the Constitution and the Magna Carta, is a vivid reminder of the Eurocentric arrogance that underlies common assumption and non-perception.

It is interesting to compare the Petitions with Smithson's illustrated essay "Quasi Infinities and the Waning of Space" (1966) of the same decade and Jaar's installation *The Booth*. A common thread to these works is their use of visual boundaries to effect a transgression of conceptual boundaries. They emphasise links and differences between the margins and the centre of the work in order to facilitate dialogue between two dichotomous zones.

In conclusion, Smithson, Jaar, and the Yolngu artists have used methods of representation that encourage viewers to reposition themselves conceptually within the site, or to reposition the site within the context of the gallery. They have presented ways of seeing, perceiving, and

understanding a peripheral or unfamiliar mine site in relation to a centrally-located viewer/consumer. The works discussed here are not unified or self-contained objects, rather each is a fragment of a much broader context that ultimately forms the content of each work. The artists remind us that major centres are not self-contained, but are heavily reliant on so-called peripheral area for supplies of mineral resources. It is my contention that in their work, to use the words of Michel Foucault, "instead of finding reassurances... one is forced to advance beyond familiar territory, far from the certainties to which one is accustomed."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, New York: Pantheon, 1972, p. 37.