



Special Collection 'Rock Art Biographies', guest-edited by Sally K. May and Joakim Goldhahn

Mardabay Ngarribimkerrngehme: Rock Art as Life Project

Alexander Ressel and Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

Abstract. This paper examines the motivations underpinning contemporary rock art practices in western Arnhem Land, offering insights into their cultural, social, and personal significance. Co-author Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo, a Traditional Owner for Country surrounding Mandilbareng, provides a unique Indigenous perspective grounded in lived experience. In 2020, Warandja and members of his family renewed a fading rock art gallery at a site in the Mardabay area of his Country. Adopting a biographical approach, the paper presents multiple levels of analysis to explore how the creation and renewal of rock art continue to hold meaning and relevance for an Indigenous Australian in the present day. It argues that contemporary rock art practices not only reaffirm customary responsibilities and obligations to Country but also serve to support Warandja's aspirations toward the autonomous development of his outstation.

Keywords: Rock art, Painting, Renewal, Repainting, Life project, Contemporary, Arnhem Land

'When I came back here, I had a dream that the Old People said to me "It is good that you come back here and remember us." This is why we are repainting these animals on the rock, because they're fading away. So, we can bring all these animals and fish back to where they belong. Our Ancestors and the First People will be happy to see these paintings bright again.'
Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

Introduction

This paper is based on a trip to Mardabay rock art site in western Arnhem Land in October 2020, where co-author, Traditional Owner Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo (henceforth Warandja), led the renewal of a rock art gallery (Figure 1). The process was documented and edited into a film, which is available here: <https://vimeo.com/user15173532/mardabay>.

Usually, when researchers describe rock art, they

do so within the context of art history or archaeology, using the past tense. The art and, occasionally, the artist are then pictured as part of bygone days, belonging to colonial history or even Prehistory. In contrast, in this article, we situate the rock art within present-day experience, as part of the future, as one element in the artist's—that is, Warandja's—life project. In doing so, we aim to move beyond viewing rock art from an outsider's perspective and instead place it within the



Figure 1. From left to right, Philemon Wanambi, Thadius Nabegeyo, Sprotin Bangarr and Warandja Nabegeyo, standing in front of the renewed rock art gallery at Mardabay on 4 October 2020 (photograph by Alexander Ressel).

context of an ongoing Indigenous lifeworld, where it plays a meaningful role in contemporary lives.

This paper positively speaks to questions raised by Taçon and Brady (2016: 5), such as, *"Can rock art be considered as something more than an artifact largely thought of as being reflective of past activities or lifeways?"* Rozwadowski and Hampson (2021: 2) discuss uses of rock art by contemporary artists around the world. They use the term 're-use' to describe contemporary artists reproducing pre-existing rock art motifs to inspire new paintings, usually on portable media. Papers within the anthology report on the contemporary relevance of rock art to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and focus on issues around representation, appropriation, identity and rights. The book argues for the contemporary relevance of rock art to many; however, it does not directly address rock art being made in the present day by Indigenous people.

Rock art, renewal or conservation

Painting and renewal of rock art have been the subject of lively debate in Australia, largely due to cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on the issue of rock art management. This was publicly demonstrated in the discussion around the 1987 Ngarinyin Cultural Continuity Project, where Elders supervised young Ngarinyin men and women in restoring rock art shelters in remote parts of the Kimberley. The project was the cause of disquiet among local non-Aboriginal landowners, and certain Aboriginal people and heritage experts (e.g., Mowaljarlai and Peck 1987: 73; Bowdler 1988; O'Connor, Barham, and Woolgoodja 2008). Elders regarded the rock art as a living cultural heritage and embodied in practices that they aimed to impart to young Ngarinyin men and women. Whereas others held that rock art is a national patrimony and should be protected from change (see McNiven and Russell 2005 for a more comprehensive presentation).

The aforementioned project precipitated an Australian Rock Art Association (AURA) congress in 1988 in Darwin, during which researchers and Traditional Owners presented papers that often took contrasting views. Arising from the congress, a paper by George Chaloupka (1992) fervently argued against contemporary rock art practices on three main grounds. Firstly, rock art was not customarily repainted in the Kakadu western Arnhem Land region (Chaloupka 1992: 13). Secondly, contemporary Indigenous people who were practising rock art, such as Bobby Barrdjaray Nganjmirra and Bill Neidjie, did not have the cultural licence or knowledge required to do so (Chaloupka 1992: 13). And thirdly, that recent rock art repainting events were all at the request of non-Aboriginal people and therefore non-ritualistic and inauthentic (Chaloupka 1992: 12).

There are some significant complications in Chaloupka's presentation. Firstly, by reading more of the transcript and sources Chaloupka referenced,

it becomes clear that Bill Neidjie was referring to a specific set of rock art images, those made by *Karrkanj* (Brown falcon) Creation Ancestor: 'Nobody can draw again where the painting is. If you draw something, you might ruin something too, so we can't touch it. You can see that. That's all Karrkanj' (Justice Toohey 1981). Furthermore, *Karrkanj* is an important yirridj-dja moiety totem in the *lorrkkon* (hollow log) burial ceremony (Garde et al. 2009: 145). For instance, due to restrictions on painting sacred subjects (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 116), *Karrkanj* Creation Ancestor has never been depicted in a painting by a contemporary artist at Injalak Arts (Injalak Arts and Crafts 2025). In the section quoted by Chaloupka, Neidjie was referring only to rock art images made by the sacred *Karrkanj* Creation Ancestor. Neidjie regarded images made by humans (and other less restricted Creation Ancestors) as being suitable subjects for renewal practices, as mentioned in Chaloupka (1992: 14). There are other examples of renewal in the region, such as Bardayal Nadjamerrek's repainting of a horse (discussed by Garde 2004: 88-89; Munro 2010, see also Morphy 2012, 295; Brady et al. 2021).

Secondly, Chaloupka's position was informed by conversations he had with 'accomplished artists' whom he did not name. They may have stated that rock art in the western Arnhem Land region should no longer be practised, but it is more likely that they are speaking for their own responsibilities to their own specific Country. Relationships to rock art are highly complex and produced out of a great number of factors (Brady et al. 2019: 2), making it highly unusual for a Traditional Owner of one clan estate to speak on behalf of another Country. Chaloupka's request for them to paint on an artificial rock surface for the AURA Congress in Darwin 1988 (Chaloupka 1992: 13) may have been denied for a great number of reasons, such as the exhibition taking place on Larrakia Country, that of another language group. The social relations of rock art practice in western Arnhem Land typically require the participation of Traditional Owner and Djungkayi (cultural custodian) for the specific place (see Methodology section below for a more extensive description). Chaloupka was dismissive of rock art by Bobby Barrdjaray Nganjmirra, both within and outside his clan estate. Certainly, there are some places where rock art is not to be made, but this is patently not a universal prohibition. Nayombolmi, for instance, has been found to have painted prolifically over 6 clan estates in the western Arnhem Land region up to the late 1960s (Goldhahn et al. 2022: 159). Chaloupka's unsupported claim is insufficient to maintain that contemporary Bininj do not possess the cultural licence to make rock art; instead, a kinship network of relations is most often required to undertake the practice.

Thirdly, the authenticity of instigation is not a question if a broader understanding of how rock art functions in western Arnhem Land society is adopted. When considered as part of a living culture,

Heritage	Outsider	Insider
Owned by	Nation and/or all of humankind	Family/Clan/Language group
Nature of	Static, once made and canonised, it should be preserved and conserved	Living, embodied and practised as an essential element of everyday life
Responsible for	Nation, State/Territory and international laws, authorities and organisations	Family/Clan and kinship relations, such as Traditional Owner and Djungkayi
Authenticity derived from	Experts	Society/practitioners
Monetisable	Through tourism	Through tourism

Table 1. Differences between conceptions of heritage for wider population vs. people from western Arnhem Land as viewed by the authors.

obligations to Country and family can be fulfilled simultaneously by working with and demonstrating rock art practices to non-Indigenous people, as shown by Mandarrk's collaboration with the Czechoslovak Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1969 (i.e., Brandl 1982: 38). The 1992 article by Chaloupka, acts to disengage rock art practices from living culture and situate them in the past.

There are similarities and differences in how rock art practice, as a form of heritage, is considered by non-Aboriginal outsiders and local Aboriginal insiders (a generalisation of viewpoints is presented in Table 1). For example, many Aboriginal Traditional Owners in Arnhem Land see cultural tourism as a means of supporting autonomous livelihoods on their clan estates, while national and regional governments see tourism as supporting income.

There is also a conceptual challenge to consider. Terms such as retouching, repainting, redrawing, recarving, restoring, conserving, preserving, superimposing and modifying have all been used by outsiders to describe iterative rock art practices. Katherine Sale (1995) suggested iterative rock art practices in the Australian context should rather be described as 're-marking'. Here, we like to adopt an emic perspective and understanding from the artist himself. The term used by Warandja and other Aboriginal artists at Mardabay is '*bimkerrngehme*'. As this paper presents and aligns with a biographical level analysis, this Kunwinjku word can be used to describe the practice. There is a profound distinction between *bimkerrngehme* and what outsiders describe as re-marking, restoration and conservation.

Kerrngehme is a Kunwinjku word which translates 'renew, make new, grow again, make a new version of', the prefix *bim* means 'painting, drawing, image, picture, or written letters, words or characters' (Nganjmirra 2024). *Kerrngehme* has associations with increase and maintenance ceremonies performed at specific sites to encourage the proliferation of certain foodstuffs in the environment (Mountford 1956: 254). As such, *Kerrngehme* is a concept distinct from many non-Indigenous notions of conservation, whose etymological origins lie in the idea of protection from

change.

Renewal and its Latin basis, *renovare*, 'again making new', is a more fitting word to describe the practice of rock art care and maintenance undertaken by Warandja and his family. The term underscores how many Indigenous people value living cultural practices as well as heritage material.

The difference between outsiders' and insiders' views of conservation and renewal (see Table 1) suggests variances in approach to heritage management that, in many ways, recapture the debate surrounding the Ngarinyin Cultural Continuity Project and Chaloupka's 1992 article. Understanding these differences could facilitate insights into how Indigenous cultural heritage management can be better supported (Rademacher et al. 2024: 134) and prevent, or at least, provide grounds for the resolution of possible cross-cultural misunderstandings that occur when words from different languages, which have different meanings, are used to describe an expected set of actions. Languages in other regions of Australia are likely to have words that may describe the practice in ways more accurate to their contexts, too.

Setting up the Mardabay project

Co-author Ressel was employed at Injalak Arts in a role that involved helping artists undertake projects they wished to explore that might fall outside regular operations. One such project was funded by a Creative Australia grant called 'Living Museums on Country.' The aim of which was for Bininj artists to visit rock art galleries on their homelands to gather inspiration and make new artworks. It would involve trips into remote parts of Arnhem Land. We would take painting materials for the artists to work '*en plein air*' directly in front of the rock art. We would also take tents and provisions for the trip. The first location decided on was Mardabay, on the Djalama clan estate (Figure 2).

'There are two ways of doing heritage, but one road. Bininj [Indigenous people] and balanda [non-Indigenous people] are walking together, learning.'

Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

In setting up the Mardabay project, we utilised an

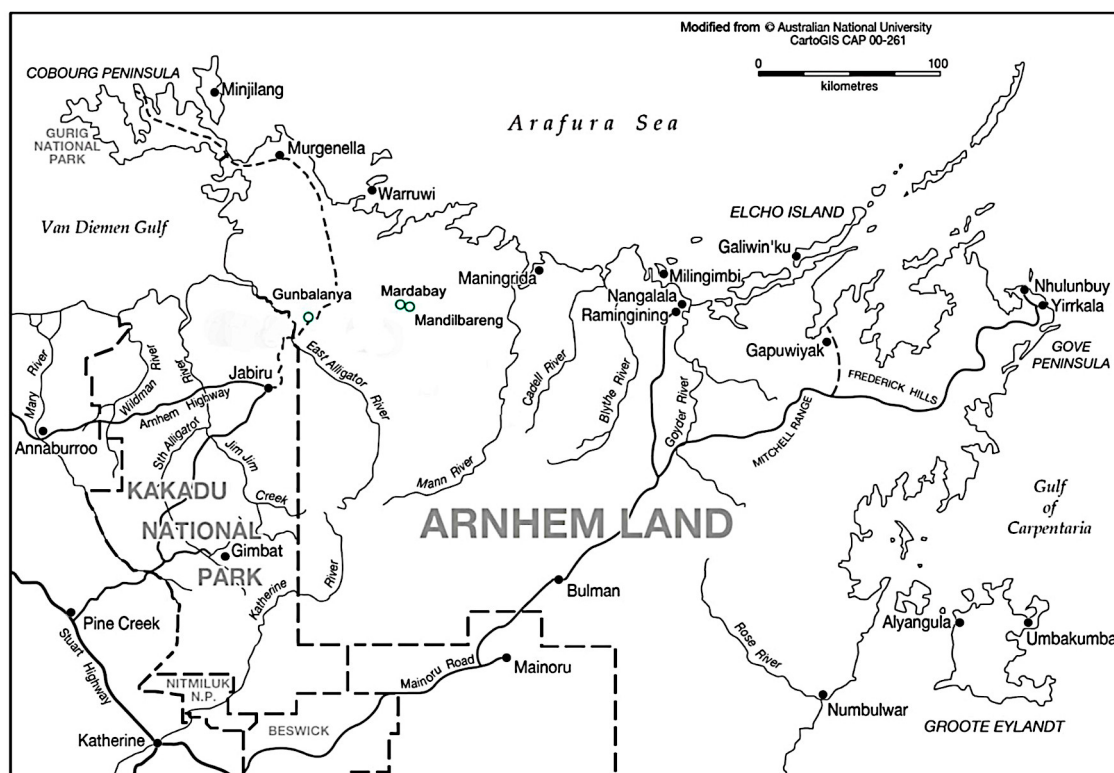


Figure 2. The location of the region within the Northern Territory, and the approximate location of Mardabay within Arnhem Land. Map by the authors, modified from ANU CartoGIS 00-261.

Indigenous media methodology. A key benefit of this approach is the creation of an emic, informed interpretation of rock art directly from practitioners. It also developed insights into the personal connections that artists have with rock art and Country.

Many artists were enthusiastic for this project, as accessing Country is a core obligation for Traditional Owners, many of whom wish to spend more time on their Country, but live away from their customary clan estates. Accessing Country is also expensive and difficult and the art centre would support the logistics. Country is very important for many artists who work at Injalak. Gunbalanya is a community of around 1,400 people which has an art centre, school, shop, health clinic, aged care and social club. Many Aboriginal people who live there do so to access services or make an income, but belong to clans whose lands lie elsewhere in the region. The project helped artists from family groups whose ancestral estates are not as readily accessible as the Traditional Owners of the community of Gunbalanya. Outcomes aimed to help artists develop a body of work that could be exhibited later. The Injalak Arts Media Unit, a group of Bininj who were trained in production work, would come to document the process.

The people who went on the trip to Mardabay were; Thadius Nabegeyo, Bruce Nabegeyo, Sprotin Bangarr, Philemon Wanambi and co-authors Warandja and Ressel. Thadius Nabegeyo is another member of the Nabegeyo family of the Djalama clan. Wanambi was identified by Sally May (2022: 228) as coming from

Gapuwiyak (eastern Arnhem Land, see Figure 2). Wanambi told us that his father was from eastern Arnhem Land and his mother from western Arnhem Land, that he grew up in the Djalama clan, and that he resided at Mamadawerre outstation. Wanambi informed us that he is *Djungkayi* [cultural custodian] for the rock art site (Ressel and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 30 mins 53 seconds – 31 mins 31 seconds). This role has been described by anthropologist Luke Taylor (1996: 60) in the following way: 'Djungkay[i] have the right to visit the most sacred sites, learn the Ancestral stories, and produce the ritual objects and paintings of an owning clan, even though they are distinguished from being spiritually identical with these things.' Djungkayi and Traditional Owners operate in a reciprocal way to manage Country. A Djungkayi will refer to the Country in question as 'Mother country', as it is their mother's clan estate, and their role is inherited through her. Wanambi is Nabangardi skin name subsection. Bruce Nabegeyo is Warandja's son and Nawamud skin name subsection. The three other participants on the trip are all of the Bulanj/Nakangila skin name subsection and call each other *ngadburrung* (brother).

The social organisation was significant. The assembled parties had kinship responsibilities towards Country, which meant they had the licence to practice rock art and work together. The painting episode was conducted in the customary owner/manager system of western Arnhem Land as Warandja had the Djungkayi for the Country with him. Furthermore, other kinship dynamics were at play, as there were apprentices



Figure 3. L-R Philemon Wanambi, Sprotin Bangarr, Warandja and his son Bruce, taking painting materials to Mardabay rock art site (photograph taken by Alexander Ressel, 4 October 2020).

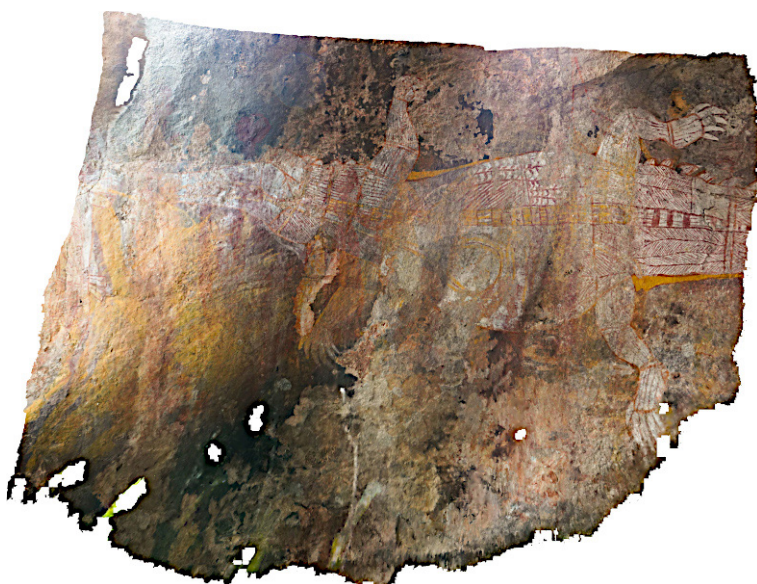


Figure 4. Orthomosaic projection showing crocodile panel at Mardabay (made by Alexander Ressel from photographs taken on 4 October 2020).



Figure 5. Mardabay rock art gallery in 1990, with less exfoliation of rock art images than at the time of the project (photograph by Ben Gunn 1990, published with his permission).

present who were developing their relationships to rock art (for an outline of this process in the Yanyuwa context, see Brady et al. 2019: 17).

We drove as close to Mardabay as we could and carried the canvas, paints, paintbrushes as well as water and snacks to the rock art site (Figure 3). When we arrived, Warandja observed that the painting was in a poor state of repair and at risk of fading completely (Figures 4, 5): *'I came and saw this rock art was getting old, I'm going to make it new again'* (Ressel and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 15 seconds).

Results

'Rock art is part of my ancestors' legacy, it's what they left behind for us. They wanted us to continue painting. Renewing rock art helps me and my family show our culture to tourists and other mob.'

Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

Ethnoarchaeologist Julien Monney and ethnologist Leïla Baracchini (2017: 6) explored the use of ethnographic data for rock art research. Their paper is a useful starting point as it demonstrates the limits of ethnography and the potential of biography as a rock art research methodology. Monney and Baracchini (2017: 6) outlined emic information about rock art in a hierarchy where 'The making or retouching of rock art' is placed where the most significant amount of information may be obtained. A table filled with information from Mardabay, which follows a model proposed by Monney and Baracchini (2017: 9), is presented in Table 2. In the discussion section, it will be seen that for Warandja, rock art today functions as one element in the fabric of his Country, and that when customarily cared for, it has the potential to support aspirations for increased autonomy and develop an income stream to support Warandja's family continuing their life on Country.

Following Bruno Latour (1993), Monney and Baracchini (2017: 16) suggested that a full understanding of rock art could be developed from ethnographic records when evaluated in two ways: firstly, as sources of data about rock art and secondly, 'as instances of discourse to be investigated from an epistemological and ontological perspective.' Examples of researchers who develop informed ap-

proaches to Indigenous Australians' engagement with cultural heritage that examine these perspectives are Brady, Bradley, and Kearney (2019). The authors proposed relationality, specifically that presented in the kinship system, to be the primary structure through which Yanyuwa (an Indigenous language group from northern Australia's southwest Gulf country) engage with rock art (Brady et al. 2019: 17). Even though it appears that rock art is no longer regularly practiced in the region, the authors argue that it remains vital to contemporary Yanyuwa due to the relational nature of interpretation (Brady, Bradley, and Kearney 2019: 20 of 26). Elsewhere, Brady and Bradley (2016: 84) stated that, for Yanyuwa, contemporary meanings of rock art are "...derived from the intimate and complex relationships involving people, country, spirits, and the Dreaming." Taçon and Brady (2016: 5) argue for rock art to be regarded not only through archaeology, but also to be operating in the present and as forming "contemporary relationships between people places and identity". This paper builds on this valuable research by presenting an account of the role and uses of rock art in contemporary life, as lived by Warandja. A detailed survey of contemporary relational or kinship interpretations of rock art or possible intended meanings of rock art images which were renewed is outside the scope of this paper.

The renewal of rock art at Mardabay

The process of renewing rock art at Mardabay was recorded by Ressel and the Injalak Media Unit (see Figures 6–9). The film follows the process of renewing the rock art site, from the first brushstroke to the last. The film starts with a digitally animated journey alongside the face of the rock gallery, which has been renewed. The animation was constructed out of a photogrammetry model of the rock art gallery made after renewal. The background vision shows Warandja, Thadius Nabegeyo and family performing a *kun-borrk*, traditional song cycle, from western Arnhem Land. This song cycle, called *Karrbarda*, was inherited by Warandja and his family from his grandfather (Garde 2005: 69). The song is about the 'long yam' (*Dioscorea transversa*) (Garde 2005: 70) and has been described by ethnomusicologist Reuben Brown (2014: 171–172, 179). Brown (2014: 181) suggested that the languages of *kun-borrk* songs are often highly endangered today, but were commonly spoken by clans before Kunwinjku became the lingua franca of the region. Brown thought that singing in these endangered languages helps to link people today to the ancestral spirits of Country who would have spoken these languages. Calling out to the Ancestors was also done before the painting commenced (Ressel and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 51 seconds), as a way of informing them of the intentions of the group, which demonstrates the vital role of kinship relations to present-day rock

Ascription of rock art creation to an author	Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo, Philemon Wanambi, Thadius Nabegeyo, Sprotin Bangarr.
Motivations/ intentions of rock art creation	An aspect of Warandja's life project, renewal of existing images which were deteriorating, wanting to demonstrate to family members it is a responsibility, "Our ancestors had feelings when they were painting, they wanted this art to be seen" - Warandja 10 minutes 51 seconds (Ressel 2021b).
Sociocultural context of rock art creation	Educational, familial, developing an art project and a life project, spiritual and ancestral
Temporality/ time of creation	4-5 October 2020.
Sociocultural context of visit/ use of rock art site	To gain inspiration from rock art paintings for contemporary mobile artwork, an Injalak Arts project.
Sociocultural context of rock art use	Tradition of rock art practice, responsibility to Country, familial
Rock art creation techniques	Paint brushes, ochre, fixative, stencil using mouth-blown pigment
Naming and identification of the subjects depicted	Kinga (Estuarine Crocodile), Namarnkol (Barramundi), Ngalberd-jenj (Freshwater spirit/ mermaid), Dunbuhmanj (Black bream), Kunbid bok (Hand stencils)
Social signification of the subject depicted	Ancestors wanted to demonstrate crocodiles are dangerous animals, they painted them to show their children why they can't go swimming, and to warn people from other areas, to tell others what animals make healthy food sources, expressive of identity and connection to Clan lands, as well as stories
Connection with pictorial or graphic practices on other media	Yes, though Injalak Arts and predecessors. There is a living tradition of bark and paper painting, fabric printing, fibre art, which contributes to local economy

Table 2. Emic information for Mardabay rock art site, after Monney and Baracchini (2017: 9).



Figure 6. Orthomosaic projection showing crocodile panel at Mardabay (made by Alexander Ressel from photographs taken on 5 October 2020).

art practices.

The film continues with Warandja speaking to the camera while he paints at Mardabay. Warandja speaks in a quiet, low register, suggesting reverence, as he states: 'Today I feel like I am painting for the Ancestors.' This suggests that the Ancestors who have passed away and returned to the clan estate are an intended audience for the renewal. A secondary burial of human remains can be found on a nearby rock ledge, facing the artists and the rock art gallery as they undertook the renewal. Following cultural protocols for depictions of the deceased, the secondary burial was not filmed and is not depicted in the film.

Warandja said his great-grandfather made these paintings (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 4 minutes 14 seconds). Taylor (1996: 57) reported 'Kunwinjku do not usually remember actual genealogical connections beyond their grandparental generation.' Nonetheless, this suggests that although the first authors of the paintings in question at Mardabay are not known, the location of the paintings adjacent to a burial, his clan's ties to Country and the cyclical nature of kinship mean that Warandja can make a connection of kin to them. Warandja explains how he understands the primary authors of the rock art to share the same skin name as him:

*'You call your father's grandfather brother,
he is the same skin as you.'*

Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

Warandja stated that the Old People (previous generations of clan members) used to stay at Mardabay and they painted these images (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 1 minute 14 seconds). He attributed the paintings to humans and stated that they are not made by Creation Ancestors, or Mimih spirit beings. This has been described as a specific category of rock art painting in western Arnhem Land by Chaloupka (1999: 87), who reported Aboriginal people

identified rock art in a number of different categories, the relevant one being *bim banjmen*, [*bim kohbanjmen*], old paintings.

Warandja stated 'The crocodile is dangerous, the Ancestors painted it to tell us that. All rock art will teach you something' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 2 minutes 30 seconds). Warandja here interprets the rock art as depicting food animals; it performs an educative function, intentionally made to inform its audience about what will make them healthy and which animals are dangerous.

Warandja stated 'I have to make this in the same way as the ancestors painted it' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 27 seconds). Contemporary portable art from western Arnhem Land often employs cross-hatched *rarrk* (Perkins 2004: 19). Yet here, Warandja explains that he must follow a different style when restoring the painting. This style has been called 'Mimih way' by Bobby Barrdjaray Nganjmirra (Taylor 1996: 43), as Mimih spirit Beings taught Aboriginal people how to paint on rocks. This is in contrast to 'Bininj way', the term Bobby Barrdjaray Nganjmirra used for cross-hatched *rarrk*. Taylor (1996: 43) suggested that the increasing tendency for Kunwinjku artists to use cross-hatching is due to the art market paying more money for paintings which have a 'story' and the association of cross-hatching with Creation Ancestors. However, when renewing past rock art, Warandja painted in the same style as the Ancestors. Taylor (1996: 8) described strict rules around artistic representation on bark paintings in western Arnhem Land, and these apply to rock art renewal practices too. There have been few recently made original rock art paintings, as opposed to renewals of preexisting rock art, in this area. So, it remains to be seen whether contemporary artists will adopt recent or older styles. If new work were to be made, it may suggest differences and similarities between

how certain artists consider painting on the rock and painting on mobile substrates.

The feeling of responsibility that Warandja has towards Country can be seen in several moments of the film, where he addresses the Aboriginal audience to renew rock art on their Country: 'I am sharing this with you, so some of you staying on Country might renew rock art paintings too. It's our turn to make art' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 3 minutes 6 seconds). Warandja also states 'Maybe the next people who come here will see it and renew it once more' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 4 minutes 30 seconds), indicating that renewal is an ongoing practice. He demonstrates that each generation has responsibilities to their Country.

For Warandja, being on Country at Mardabay brings his grandfather and previous Ancestors into the present, through feelings and memories, and this then extends into the future towards subsequent generations of rock art practitioners. The renewal is undertaken for both of these audiences, as Warandja states '*kadjalbimdi munghymunghy* when we renew this painting it will stay there forever' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 58 seconds), implying the imperative for future generations to undertake rock art practices. To suggest the expansion of past and future into the present for the audience of the film, there is a montage time-lapse interlude where the group of artists can be seen to be working together on the panel from 4 minutes and 39 seconds.

At the end of the film, Warandja is shown renewing a painting of a black bream and speaking, 'When I came back here, I had a dream that the Old People said to me, "It is good that you came here and remember us". Our Ancestors and the First People will be happy to see these paintings bright again' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 5 minutes 6 seconds). Warandja reflects on a dream he had the night before. The Ancestors' emotions are also mentioned, which suggests the importance of affect for contemporary rock art practitioners.

At 5 minutes 12 seconds, the vision cuts to an animation of the rock art gallery at Mardabay, showing close-up details of the renewed estuarine crocodile painting, and the sound of a *Karrbarda* kun-borrk song rises. The gallery fades, showing the song men sitting at night in Mandilbareng outstation, and credits roll, with family members living at Mardabay saying their names to the camera the next morning.

'It's very important to keep our rock art painting there for future generations. When I see what we did at Mardabay and my family, too, we were there together, renewing, it makes me proud. It also makes me proud of what my ancestors did.'
Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

Discussion: Rock art renewal and biography

Even though Kunwinjku artists working today

primarily create in formally different styles to those of their predecessors, Warandja and his family regard it as important that the renewal of rock art follows the styles of previous generations. Taçon (1989a: 236) suggested that art objects 'express aspects of economics, philosophy, social relations, cosmology, and world-view,' and held that cultural relationships between people and environment can be elucidated through the study of forms of artistic expression. The approach taken by this group of Aboriginal artists in renewing the painting at Mardabay indicates that, in terms of rock art, they share many of the same cultural connections to Country as the original creators of the rock art and aim to keep the styles of those ancestors visible.

Warandja states 'We have to paint because our ancestors had feelings when they were painting, they wanted this art to be seen' (Ressel, Nabegeyo, and Injalak Media Unit 2021: 3 minutes 29 seconds). Bunitj Elder, Bill Neidjie (1989: 19) described how *feelings* are central to Aboriginal ways of remembering stories and connecting with Ancestors and Country. Similarly, feelings are a significant means by which Warandja pays attention to his Ancestors. Described by Liam Brady (2016: 6) as one of the 'contemporary social properties of rock art', he argued that appreciating the emotional response elicited by rock art sites for contemporary Indigenous people could help archaeologists understand the significance of these places.

By bringing his son, Bruce, to Mardabay and making a hand stencil with him (Figure 7), Warandja was renewing not only the paintings but also the feelings that connect his family to this place. In this sense, the renewal undertaken at Mardabay was an intergenerational practice of renewal of experiences and emotions,



Figure 7. Newly placed hand stencils of Warandja and Bruce at Mardabay on 5 October 2020. Warandja created the hand stencils with mouth-blown pigment, he then outlined it with red ochre using a paintbrush. The hand stencil above is likely to be Warandja's paternal grand uncle Billiigo's hand stencil (photograph by Alexander Ressel).



Figure 8. Detail of head of estuarine crocodile after renewal, from photogrammetry model by Alexander Ressel.

as much as it was a practice of materiality. Brady et al. (2022: 15) discussed the creation of painted hand stencils adjacent to pre-existing hand stencils in western Arnhem Land rock art sites, suggesting how memory can function relationally, through stencilled indexes of visits by people connected to the place.

Warandja and his life project

The manifold natures of contemporary rock art practice in western Arnhem Land can be interpreted using the term 'life projects' as proposed by Bruno Barras, a Paraguayan Yshiro-Ebitoso leader. Bruno Barras (2004: 51) defined life projects in opposition to externally devised development projects:

I call it [life projects] because our plans and projects are oriented to achieving autonomy in deciding our own future... We want to advance our own projects so that what is done in the communities has continuity and so that the knowledge and skills brought by the technicians we hire will be transmitted to our youth... We are trying to recover the way of our ancestors in organising our communities.

The term was described in detail by anthropologist Mario Blaser (2004: 28). He stated that life projects are determined by socio-cultural principles internal to situated Indigenous groups. Blaser (2004: 29) conceptualises place as constituted by connections between specific histories (identities, traditions) and natures (Country, animals, plants), which simultaneously differentiate it from, and situate it in relation to, other

places. Blaser considers Indigenous notions of place to incorporate both historical and spatial connections, whereas non-Indigenous notions treat them separately. He argues that, in terms of development projects, this has the effect of agencies pursuing universalist goals which are often not relevant to the specific places and peoples they purport to assist (Blaser 2004: 27).

The life projects term helps to develop an understanding of Country which is not only based on tradition and spirituality but also tangible political aims and futures. Life projects are enacted in the present, they are the political horizon for many Indigenous people and are the reason why many Indigenous movements seek autonomy. The Outstation Movement which began in Australia in the 1970s is expressive of many similar aims.

Life projects and outstations

In the Australian context, the life projects model has been used to understand the Outstation Movement. The movement was described by Myers and Peterson (2016: 2-3) as the contemporary aims of Indigenous people to develop emplaced traditional knowledge and practices and make autonomous decisions, independently from the state and market. Myers and Peterson (2016: 2 footnote) described how outstations are clearly identifiable life projects for many Aboriginal Australians.

Economist-anthropologist Jon Altman (2011) considered extractive industries as detrimental to the environment and wrote an article calling for alternative developmental pathways to be considered for Indigenous Australians. In areas which operate under Native Title law, such as western Arnhem Land, Altman (2011: 5) proposed that development can proceed through self-provisioning, tourism, the arts and conservation, rather than the usual drivers of development such as extracting minerals or water. Such development is closely positioned to rock art practices and the life projects model outlined above.

Life Projects as windows to interpret contemporary rock art practices

This paper explores a contemporary rock art practice in western Arnhem Land and proposes that the life projects model can help develop understandings of motivations for the renewal and creation of rock art. There are other examples of contemporary rock art being made throughout the world, such as Marianne Nicholson around the Kingcome Inlet in Canada, the Auwum community at Apuranga shelter in East Sepik, Papua New Guinea and Matahi Brightwell in Lake Taupō, New Zealand. These could also be interpreted as examples of rock art conducted as life projects.

In this view, rock art practices are undertaken in a variety of contexts and support diverse life project aims, including being on and managing Country on their own terms. These contexts could include an art project produced by an Indigenous Art Centre, an intergenerational protest against salmon farming on Indigenous waters, a conservation project conducted by an Indigenous Ranger Group at the request of a photographer/film production company or some other reason that facilitates travel and logistical support on Country and has the result of demonstrating Indigenous people's rights to land.

As Morphy and Morphy (2013) suggested, the interaction between many Indigenous people and mainstream Australian societies has not fundamentally changed Aboriginal viewpoints. Altman (2001) identified many Aboriginal people as working within the three functional sectors of Indigenous economies, the state, the market and the customary, with the aim of achieving their life project goals. Life projects help to describe how Aboriginal people can strategically use organisations, such as art centres, ranger groups, content producers, universities and so on, to reinforce their intentions, rather than reacting to the whim of external developmental agendas.

Understanding contemporary rock art practices in terms of life projects helps to develop perceptions of these practices as not residual, conservative or purely aesthetic, but also as future-oriented with aims of supporting family groups and expressly political. Howard Morphy (2012: 296) wrote:

Anthropologists have largely neglected to study rock art as a contemporary phenomenon, as an integral part of people's worlds. In the anthropologists' case, this has been, in part, because rock art itself in most places was only a minor component of the overall aesthetic practices of the community, which comprise a rich body of song, dance, and visual art forms that ranged from sand sculptures and body paintings to elaborate ritual objects. What from an archaeological perspective seems to be a major potential source of data about past lives, from an anthropological perspective seems to be merely incidental. After all, rock art only occurs in certain regions of Australia, and in most areas of Australia hardly exists as a present practice.

Rock art, when considered from a life projects perspective, is more than an incidental component of people's worlds; it can play a central role in helping to define an individual's identity as well as that of their children and other family members, and help to develop the family's life on Country.

Collaborative Archaeology interpreted in terms of Life Projects

In many cases where Indigenous communities have collaborated with archaeologists on research, communities have often been guided by life project aims of establishing greater autonomy for their group. For example, in Brady (2009: 48), Kaurareg collaborated with archaeologists in order to create collective



Figure 9. Orthomosaic projection showing detail of barramundi and freshwater spirit within the Crocodile panel at Mardabay (made by Alexander Ressel from photographs taken on 4 October 2020).

benefits for their people. Another example is found in Atalay et al. (2014: 7-8), where the aim was to interpret Indigenous cultures outside of Western frameworks, more abstractly, to 'undiscipline archaeology' by aiming to "...produce knowledge for the benefit of Indigenous people, communities and sovereignty" (Schneider and Hayes 2020: 132).

Interpreting Warandja's rock art practice in terms of life projects

The motivation for the renewal of the rock art panel was multifaceted for Warandja. As he states in the film *Mardabay* (2021), it makes the Ancestors happy to have Aboriginal people on Country caring for rock art, therefore there are spiritual reasons. Brady, Gunn, and Goldhahn (2021: 9 of 26) report that re-marking rock art images made by Ancestral Beings could be viewed as a ritual with aspects that are part-celebration, part-commemoration and part-social obligation. The Mardabay repainting demonstrates that even the

bimkerrngehme of rock art, which was understood to have been made by direct human ancestors, can have similar aspects of celebration, commemoration and social obligation. Secondly, as material heritage, restoring rock art helps to keep it visible and available for subsequent generations. Thirdly, it is a living heritage with an educational function, as Warandja demonstrates to his children, his peers and broader audiences through the film how to renew rock art, when and why it should be undertaken and what discursive content it holds. Fourthly, restoring rock art helps to increase the economic potential of his Country, Mandilbareng, as a site for a family-run tourism business, so it also has developmental and economic reasons. Interpretations of Warandja's rock art practice can be deepened beneficially from the perspective of life projects.

Since the project at Mardabay, Warandja and Ressel have been communicating regularly about Warandja's life project of improving his outstation, Mandilbareng. During this time, Warandja has worked at Injalak Arts, Demed Rangers, Team Health and been on the Board of Directors for essential institutions such as the Northern Land Council. Various of these organisations have supported his aims by providing him an income or salary, lending him a grader to improve access to Mandilbareng and build a work shed at the outstation with solar panels and battery storage to provide clean year-round power. He undertook an NT Aboriginal Tourism Business Accelerator course in 2024–2025 to develop a tourism business, Kunwardde Djang "Rock Dreaming" Cultural Tours to his homeland. He developed a website and investor-targeted presentation. In 2025, he received an Indigenous Business Australia grant to start the company. All while speaking English as a second language, working from a very remote location, suffering the bereavement of his wife, and under the pressures of raising a family in a community.

The dedication Warandja has demonstrated to his life project is exceptional. Warandja strategically employs different organisations, such as the Northern Land Council, Indigenous Business Australia, the Northern Territory Government, Injalak Arts and researchers to work for his life project goals. Through his rock art practice, Warandja demonstrates, in a term described by Morphy and Morphy (2017: 177), as relative autonomy. In this instance, painting rock art not only continues his clan's traditions but also signals that today cultural authority remains with local custodians and is not vested in any of the organisations commissioned by him. Similarly, David et al. (1990: 83) proposed that, in the contact era, Wardaman Country rock art was being used as a territorial marker to identify people with the land visually. Comparably, McNiven and Russell (2002: 37) argued that post-contact rock art should be understood as ritualistic attempts to regain control over land and resources.

The Mardabay rock art renewal is an invitation for others to come to Warandja's homeland and appreciate

Djalama clan life and traditions. The rock art practice and film were also an encouragement for Aboriginal audiences to reflect on their relationships to Country and the rock art they may have on it.

'Rock art is part of my Ancestor's legacy, it's what they left behind for us and want us to continue. My Ancestors were sharing their culture with my generation through rock art. Rock art helps me to show tourists and other mob what my ancestors left, their legacy. I want to see my homeland up and running, my family will have jobs, living on Country. This project will help me longer term, with my family and generations to come. If we get this project running, the Ancestors will be happy for us to be there and protecting and monitoring our rock art all the time.' Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

In this example, rock art has been used by Warandja as part of his life project. Warandja's goal is to develop his outstation and enhance the autonomy of his clan; his rock art practice is a key part of his vision.

Conclusion

Biographical methods can help reveal insights into the interconnectedness between a person's life and rock art. When an individual's actions are situated in the context of their milieu, aspirations and experience, a greater depth of meaning can be shared. Actions do not exist in isolation, and this report of motivations behind a contemporary rock art renewal event helps to provide an account of how and why the rock art practice occurred and suggests ways that cultural heritage can be cared for in other contexts.

Table 2 provided foundational facts for understanding this example of a rock art renewal event. However, when contemplated on the biographical scale, that of the lives of the people involved, the Mardabay renewal comprised only a few days out of thousands. Many factors contributed to the aetiology of the event. The discussion helped to demonstrate the motivations of rock art practices and how it operates within a contemporary biography. The life projects model, where individual, situated, Indigenous aspirations that seek autonomy over their futures and independence from externally determined development interventions (Blaser 2004: 28), helped to enrich understandings of how rock art functions in the contemporary world. It is hoped that the life projects model facilitates an understanding of Bininj artists, such as Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo, as sharing many of the same motivations as the readers of this paper might have, such as autonomy over decisions, being able to make a living for oneself and support a family. Contemporary rock art practices can support these aims, which are an authentic expression of an individual within their sociocultural milieu.

For Warandja, the political is not distinct from customary practices. To practise rock art is a political

act, demonstrating responsibility towards Country and establishing situated generational relationships through actions and a way of communing with the ancestors and descendants through feeling. This paper has hoped to demonstrate that rock art is not only a worthy object of archaeological study or a subject for anthropological investigations, but it can be seen as a form of living cultural heritage that is put to use by contemporary Indigenous people to further their political aims. This is not to say all rock art can be reduced to this reading. Like other forms of expression, it can carry many meanings, purposes and motivations.

'In my future, I will continue to show people bim (rock art), and protect the rock art. I am looking forward to further developing my homeland and build a strong future for my families, generations to come. I want to protect the homeland, with my family, and for this rock art to stay forever. This painting will show others on their own homelands to renew rock art, so they get that power and emotion too. I am looking forward with my family to be on my homeland, to develop infrastructure, like the airstrip and road and a house. And my family will have work on this project and on the rock art. I plan to make a new rock art painting of kinga (estuarine crocodile). I want to share my grandfather's legacy, painting of kinga at Mardabay, with my family.' Timothy Warandja Nabegeyo

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