

DEVELOPING A UNIQUE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA ARTS CULTURE

INTRODUCTION: WRITER

Introducing myself, I am Christine Peacock. I am descendant of the village of Isem on Erub in the eastern islands of the Torres Strait. I was born in Mareeba on Kuka Yalanji-Djabuganji countries and have lived on the mainland all my life, having grown up in Ningy country at Redcliffe near Brisbane. My home is at Wolvi, east of Gympie, in Gubbi Gubbi country which is the paternal country of my children. Like many Indigenous people, I have never lived in the country of my origins, with my countrymen, due to the many and varied circumstances created by the onslaught of colonisation. Nevertheless, we are the Indigenous/sovereign people of this area of the Asia Pacific region and, consequently, regard ourselves as sharing the responsibility of continuing sustainable development across countries.

I worked in community theatre in the 1970s, performing and directing, mostly in the U.K. When I returned I took up a Producer traineeship with A.B.C. Television in 1983. In April 1985 I graduated from the ABC Television Producer's Course and was invited by the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency to co-ordinate the Black Women's Film Group in West End. The ABC supported this development until December 1985, after which we were independent.

Which brings me to describe our "DEVELOPMENT": to unfold; to reveal or be revealed; to bring, or to come, from a latent, to an active or visible state; to make or become known; to make or become fuller; to make more elaborate, systematic or bigger; to convert to new use so as to realise its potentialities. I think the opposite of development would be to imitate - to reproduce, to make a copy of and to settle for a counterfeit, in the context of cultural development, is to reach a stalemate.

DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT

Murriimage Community Video & Film Service

In 1985 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Agency had purchased VHS camera and recorder to support the development of Indigenous television and film media. The Black Women's Film Group was abandoned after eight months when it became apparent that we could not secure funds for permanent wages. *Murriimage* was created to carry on television and film production development. Gradually, those who had permanent employment carried on in the places they were already employed, others found paid

employment and some went to work with Murri Radio. Carl Fisher, the father of my children, a Birri-Gubba and Gubbi-Gubbi/Kabi Kabi man, was coerced into camera and sound operations, at this stage, in between taxi driving.

We operated from home (wherever that may have been) and financed our activities from production fees and program sales. We weren't career motivated, but picked up skills on-the-job by providing a community video service, videoing concerts, meetings, exhibitions, protests, cultural events etc on VHS, and selling the programs (edited in the camera) where we could. When in 1987 as trainee attachments to Film Australia in Sydney we learned about production on 16mm film.

We then won an overseas study award, and toured other Indigenous film and television developments in Brazil, Cuba, Canada and Diasporas communities in the UK, recording interviews, shot on Super 8 film. We continued to shoot developments around Australia in 1988. We completed the shoot on 16mm recording local Indigenous people, and edited all on 16mm film in our own facility. In this way we produced "Makin Tracks" the first film documentary on international Indigenous relations and politics, by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people in an Indigenous facility. It was funded over an eight year period, through D.E.E.T., the Aboriginal Arts Board and Cultural, Film Development and Marketing branches of the Australian Film Commission.

Makin Tracks, a 58 min, 16mm film documentary, represented a vital and steep learning curve in our development of Murriimage production. It was first exhibited at an International Documentary Conference in Melbourne in November 1995 where it was best received by Japanese guest documentary producers. Due to its politically challenging content it was never broadcast on public television, exhibited only locally, and used primarily for educational purposes by Indigenous teachers.

In 1988 we rented space in the Jagera Arts Centre South Brisbane with Kamaga Arts. We had managed to borrow some money for a bit more equipment and were loaned a TV set, with which we made slightly more refined programs. We also began to receive more support - one example, Jeanie Bell through the ATSI Unit at UQ, paid us to cover public lectures by prominent Murries. We have a lot of excellent community archival material dating back to 1985.

In 1989 and 1990 we had nine people in training and four others on the payroll due to training scheme funding availability. This was a very productive time but it was too much,

too soon, too fast and after the training-funds-policy was changed, we were back to three people. A very expensive Feasibility Study was funded, to prove our small business viability but the recommendations to fund that viability went under the carpet that was rolled out for a new political structure, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

During that fervent period of activity, however, we had managed to attract capital funding from the Dept Aboriginal Affairs and Australian Film Commission, to equip a production facility with off-line editing and broadcast quality recording, so it was business as usual. Now we were able to take commissions and tender for producing corporate videos on health issues etc, as well as produce short documentaries and cover community events. We earned enough to keep up with rent, telephone and our travel costs.

At this time we incorporated the Indigenous Information Service Association Inc. (IIS) as an umbrella organisation with the intention of developing more media activities, so consolidating the community cultural development model created in the 1980s by Mary Graham at the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency in West End/Woolloongabba. It was intended that IIS be a support base for community people, encouraging self-determination by sustainment and progression of project development.

As part of our development plan, Murriimage, in 1996, finished a three year funding period with the Australian Film Commission and Film Queensland (then managed by Richard Stewart) where those organisations provided subsidies for the operations costs of our community service. Operations subsidies from ATSIC through the Indigenous Information Service assisted operations costs for a community media consultation service and production funding paid wages and all other costs. In this way we continued to produce information videos and media information as part of the IIS as well as focusing on other IIS development activities.

THE DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

I would now like to offer you, some words to conjure up images that, by association, reveal the context in which we continued to develop an Indigenous screen culture. CONQUISTADORS are/were to INCAS , what COWBOYS are/were to INDIANS, and, what SETTLERS are/were to ABORIGINALS.

The propaganda machine for Western ideology, mass/popular communications media - television, cinema, radio, print - manufactured history and legitimised it through popular

modern legends told in an industrialised, dominating form of entertainment. Consequently, this communications environment was in itself, inhibitive to stories being told in any other way by people from any other cultures, and to reaching a wide audience.

This had far reaching implications, described by Mpoya-Buata, writing about the works of film-makers Sembene Ousmane ("Ceddo") and Med Hondo ("West Indies")

The problem posed is that of our origins. Now our origins have been dried up at their source, by which I mean that they have been denied. Put another way, we have been denied all possibility of history. This deception hid nothing less than the straightforward presumption of our lack of humanity. (Film and Politics in the Third World, edited by John D.H. Downing (a prominent member of the international organization Ourmedia.)

From the outset, developing an Indigenous Screen Culture, meant taking on a mammoth task, embarking on a complicated journey through a maze of production technology, techniques, values and methodologies; broadcaster networks and market and distribution monopolies. We were immediately placed in unfair competition with media organisations (both national and international) that had been established for many years, in the business of making profit. As Sembene Ousmane, a film-maker from Senegal in Africa comments:

We are no longer in a period when industry was born. We are in a period of monopolies, trusts, multi-national corporations.

And from Indian film-maker Ketan Mehta:-

Everyone was at the mercy of the speculative commercial distributor and it was in their interests not to let these films be distributed at all because they posed an alternative to the commercial product.

At the same time that the Hollywood machine is expanding its tentacles to appropriate new product, its commercial interests are protected by control of what is marketed and distributed for popular consumption. (Academy Award nominations to Australian actors and filmmakers aspiring to be part of the Hollywood machine, demonstrate the colonisation of the Australian film and television industry and its locations.)

SUSTAINING DEVELOPMENT

Back in 1985 there were several community development projects supported by the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency. There was the Black Women's Film Group, Murri-Time radio began broadcasting on FM Radio 4ZZZ, the Link-up organisation was bringing families back together, the Murri Independent School started up in a couple of rooms on Highgate Hill and there was the Youth Scheme. It was an exciting time around Woolloongabba then, because of the significant, active presence of a lot of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander organisations along Stanley Street; which is the original Aboriginal pathway through that area of Jagera country. Now, Murri time radio is Radio Station 98.9fm with its own building located in West End, Link-up Queensland is part of a national network, the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community School is fully functional at Acacia Ridge in its own buildings, and Youth Scheme has become First Contact which runs many successful cultural programs.

Out of the Black Women's Film Group came Uniikup Productions Ltd. (formerly Murriimage Community Video and Film Service), set up for the production of documentary, drama, and now live-media-art; the Indigenous Information Service was taken over by Cyberdreaming which specialised in ground breaking multi-media projects, assisting language and various cultural revival programs, as well as newspaper publishing. Most importantly, these developments, (and there are many to which other people have the histories) have had consistent input from their founders: people like Mary Graham, Ross Watson, Bev Johnson, Carl Fisher, the late John Newfong, Bob Anderson, Jeannie Bell, Andrew Dunstone, Glenyse Barney, Michael Mace, Di Vogan, Tiga Bayles, Brett Leavy.

Consistency has sustained development, unfolding potentialities. By creating these spheres of interaction, between Indigenous people we have unleashed the potential of development, expanding growth and opportunity. In this way Aboriginal art and screen culture contribute to putting Australia on the international cultural map. Also important, the continuous growth of Indigenous culture impacts subconsciously on the attitudes of the wider population and the colonial society in general, in that its great longevity proves there exists and has always existed, a successful way for all to live in the Southern Hemisphere.

SOME FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT

Firstly, sustaining the effort and the vision and to keep revealing it, elaborating on it and never losing sight of our potential. Secondly and more difficult, realising that the essence of development is founded on aspects peculiar to the place, the group and the activity, which take time and discretion to identify and practice, and that can't be replicated. Thirdly, by sustaining development, we give substance to the arguments for regionalised film, television and media art production.

True development is often curtailed or damaged by the drive for outcome, measured and regulated by performance indicators and strategic type planning, enforced by Government funding agencies. Often their funding guidelines and conditions conflict with development

because they come from very different agendas based on very different experiences and expectations. Moumen Smihi, a film-maker from Morocco puts it this way:

Personally I am convinced that the ideology of capitalism, to be sure both private and of the state, is primarily interested in cultural linearity and monolithicity (novelistic or cinematic) to the extent that it sees menace in diversity, in multiplicity, in haziness ... The third world, itself a world of explosion and the exploded, has to be interested in this problem.

In the experience of Uniikup two main approaches have emerged, that have created our tracks: One has been that our independence is maintained by taking responsibility for our own development - that is, determining what it should be, how it should be done, time frames, adapting what we get from the mainstream to the needs of our own unique development, and, consistently reappraising our progress and knowledge. The other approach is that unless we have the means to produce we are not able to control what we produce.

We had foregone the funds for consistent wages or short term production, in favour of securing ownership of equipment; creating an environment in which we facilitate production and generate wages. Purchases are researched to ensure that we equip according to our practical needs at any given time, and are not just chasing technology. Being driven by production, means we are furthering development of our own authentic styles, methods, critiques, networks, plans - culture. Mrinal Sen, a film-maker from India, advises:-

What we have to do - and this is a prescription not just for us in India - is to make films at a very low cost. We have to show the monopolises, who claim that film-making is a capital intensive business, and their monopoly, that film-making is everybody's business and nobody's monopoly. We have to think in terms of economics getting the minority spectator who is interested in such films and then building a larger audience base.

Upgrades of equipment in 1995-96 to broadcast quality non-linear video editing equipment, and in 2004 to digital, allowed production to take place entirely in-house. We continued to seek production financing for Indigenous producers and how and where to market and distribute Indigenous product for television broadcast and education outlets. As well, we further developed financing skills, for higher budget production.

We developed a policy of training on-the-job (i.e. project based), participating in mainstream training to adapt it to our needs, and keeping up to date with industry business and changes. This way, we could constantly upgrade and increase our skills to further production capability and quality. Consequently, we only took trainee attachments when we had production work and funds for wages. Experience taught us, after the failure of so many training programs to increase the numbers of Indigenous people working in the industry, that, because

employment is not regular, is highly skilled and carries a great deal of responsibility and a high level of creative motivation, successful recruitment and training is a slow process of trial, error and encouragement.

THE PRESENT SITUATION AND THE FUTURE

It has been many years since we joined that Aboriginal pathway on Stanley Street. This slow, discreet and focused cultural development means we have specific cultural knowledge and practice to apply to production of community, corporate and television broadcast programs, documentaries and features for national and international cinema; as well as live-media-art events and exhibitions.

We now stage the screen culture based Colourise Festival event, as part of the NAIDOC gathering season in July each year. Colourise has a complex program to encourage, present and promote the production of video, film, media and live art by Queensland Indigenous filmmakers/artists and is inclusive of national and international Indigenous filmmakers/artists and their work. Enhanced by the collaboration and work of various local Indigenous artists - musicians, visual artists, dancers, performers, writers, story tellers - philosophers and activists, Colourise imports the vital contribution of communities and the exciting potential of film making as hybrid performance art form. (Refer www.colourise.com.au events tag for details.) Uniikup/Murriimage also offers consultancies and advice specifically on the development of Indigenous screen culture.

Colourise, a screen culture based creative consultancy service, for existing cultural and educational organisations, events and festivals is also part of the functions of Uniikup. This service is a cultural catalyst acting to **Colourise** venues and events, with unique ideas and philosophy, processes, and practices that live within the oldest cultures on earth (refer www.colourise.com.au for details).

I worked part-time as Associate Lecturer, Indigenous Perspectives with the Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Faculty, delivering the Indigenous Creative Industries unit KKB004 in 2005-06. In 2009 I was awarded a Masters by Research Degree for my practice-lead research creative project, a website concept, *Site\Sight\Cite* (refer tab at www.colourise.com.au) and exegesis, *A Novella of Ideas, How interactive new media art can effectively communicate an Indigenous philosophical concept*. I am currently a PhD practice-lead research candidate at QUT with the research topic *SIGHT \ SITE \ CITE* Digitising philosophy: the dynamics of representation. The creative project for the research is the

2013 Colourise Festival which is piloting a live-media-art event on the streets of Brisbane as part of the NAIDOC gathering season.

We are optimistic about the future direction and development of Indigenous screen culture/media art and its valuable contribution to Australia as a reinforcement of the national identity. Lastly statements from film-makers Med Hondo, from Mauritania, in North West Africa and Moumen Smihi of Morocco, signalling that we were not alone in our attempts to develop Indigenous films and television that impact on screen culture:

Let us keep our diversity; let us be suspicious of the concept of universalism, which is a dangerous thing. I think we do not have to copy one another, whether amongst Africans or by continent. Above all, let us avoid copying the European and American cinema. We all have our specificity.

And:

The cultural universality of American and Hollywood-style cinema results from a historical violence. Isn't it appropriate today, by way of rejecting this homogenising universality, to research specific modes of expression?

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