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## Transforming Representations of Marine Pollution. For a New Understanding of the Artistic Qualities and Social Values of Ghost Nets

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# Transforming Representations of Marine Pollution. For a New Understanding of the Artistic Qualities and Social Values of Ghost Nets

Géraldine Le Roux

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- An increasing number of non-governmental organisations work on marine pollution, such as Washed Ashore, Sea Shepherd, Tangaroa Blue, and WWF; one of them, GhostNets Australia, focuses on the destruction caused by discarded fishing gear. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (2005), marine debris “is any persistent, manufactured or processed solid material discarded, disposed or abandoned in the marine and coastal environment”. The expression “ghost nets” specifically refers to abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear.<sup>1</sup> The nets dramatically impact on the environment, trapping fish, crabs and endangered species such as turtles and sharks; they also kill corals and mangroves (Kiessling 2003; Gregory 2009). Under the guidance of Riki Gunn, a former prawn trawler skipper, a group of researchers, Australian Indigenous rangers, volunteers and artists, formed an alliance in 2004 to address this environmental issue.<sup>2</sup> Under the name of Carpentaria Ghost Nets Programme – later changed to GhostNets Australia - GNA (2008-2012) – they acted to reduce nets entering the marine ecosystem. In a few years GNA grew from “a small grassroots approach to a multi-faceted project that has gained international recognition” (Gunn 2010: 5). What I am particularly interested in for this issue on visual anthropology is that GNA has supported a wide range

of activities in the fields of art and craft. The visual productions that have been independently or collaboratively produced by or with GNA – documentary, animation films, puppet show, fashion parades and artworks – differ from the negative representations that usually go with marine pollution.

- 2 GNA's newsletters, as well as the press articles published on their actions have often described the dramatic impact of ghost nets on the marine life. But they have also opened a more sociological perspective telling the story of the removal of thousands of nets, a successful action largely due to the collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups and between scientists, fishermen, rangers and artists. In the article "A Value Chain Analysis of Ghost Nets in the Arafura Sea: Identifying Trans-boundary Stakeholders, Intervention Points and Livelihood Trade-offs", Butler et al. reveal "the complexity of the ghost net issue" (2013: 21). They describe and analyse the values of a net at the different moments of its life, from "the manufacture of webbing in South Korea, fishing and loss by an Indonesian vessel, retrieval as ghost net on the northern Australian coastline by Indigenous rangers, and disposal or re-cycling as 'GhostNet Art' by Indigenous artists" (2013: 14). Although they mention ghostnet art, the authors have not addressed the particularities of the artistic movement and they do not show how artists specifically collect, use and speak about ghost nets.
- 3 The development of Australian ghostnet art, from the first workshops conducted in remote Indigenous communities (Ryan 2010) to its recognition by the Australian art market (Ryan 2012a; Glenn 2012; Sardaki-Clarke 2015; Mitchell 2015) and the international art world (Le Roux 2016), is described in several short articles published in art magazines and exhibition catalogues. In an academic paper (2010), the Australian art historian Sally Butler also briefly mentioned the ghostnet art practice in relation to Indigenous weaving techniques in the community of Aurukun.
- 4 This article will highlight how artists are using ghost nets to tell their own stories, stepping away from the sole ecological perspective. The artistic appropriation of discarded nets reveals the intimate connections that Indigenous people have built with their environment and the economic, cultural and diplomatic strategies they have developed to protect it. This study also contributes to the recent anthropological discussion on recycling as well as on the economisation and marketisation of environmental issues, and in particular "the convergence [and confrontation] of economic values with cultural values" (Norris 2012a: 129).
- 5 After a short presentation of my methodology, I will focus on GNA's actions, in particular one of their short films. The reader will see marine pollution through Torres Strait Islanders' points of view that have been contextualized to emphasize how a local community is addressing the issue. I will then show how artistic interventions can generate positive feelings and constructive attitudes. The third part will discuss the translocal identity of the ghostnet art movement, in particular regarding the trade system.

## Methodology

- 6 Recently I was asked to write an essay on ghostnet art for the catalogue of the exhibition "Taba Naba. Australie, Océanie, arts des peuples de la mer" held at the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco. The museum was hosting this temporary art exhibition dedicated to

the protection of the oceans, and ghostnet objects were part of the Australian Indigenous art component. It was the largest ghostnet art installation ever presented overseas. As an anthropologist and an art curator I had been in regular contact with ghostnets artists since 2012 when I first selected two ghostnet artworks for an exhibition at the Musée du Montparnasse, Paris. The *Garden Lady* from Florence Gutchen (Erub Island) and the *Gecko* coiling sculpture made during a series of collective workshops with the Northern Peninsula Area Family and Community Services at Bamaga were the first ghostnet works ever shown overseas. In the following years I kept a strong interest in the already growing movement and stayed in touch with the artists through emails, social media and cultural events. When I was asked to write the catalogue essay for Monaco, I decided to conduct two months of fieldwork. I studied the history of the movement through GhostNets Australia's photographic archives and I conducted formal and informal interviews in several places in North Queensland.<sup>3</sup> I also spent 16 days on Erub (Darnley) Island in the outer Eastern Torres Strait to attend a two-week workshop organised by the local art centre.

- 7 The request for the Monaco article stated it had to be a general article made for a wide audience, mostly for Europeans who did not know much about Aboriginal and Torres Strait art, culture and history. Therefore, new fieldwork was not necessary. I could have written the article from the information I had gathered through the years. But discussing the content of the article with the people involved, looking at the work in progress hour after hour and observing the artists' interactions were important steps to follow to understand the objects beyond their sole aesthetic dimension. Cutting, stitching and coiling nets with the artists also gave me a better appreciation of ghostnet techniques and philosophy. Both the *Anthrovision* and the Monaco articles (Le Roux 2016) were informed by this participant observation.
- 8 In relation to this volume's issue my particular position impacted on the writing process. I was both an anthropologist, author, independent curator as well as the person who knew the two parties involved (the general project manager of the Monaco exhibition and the Australian artists). As an author I felt I had to reassure people that I was not going to write on every aspect I observed while living with them in their home and/or in their community. Some artists seemed to have appreciated our on-going dialogue and also that I committed myself to send a preliminary version of my article before submitting it.<sup>4</sup> Before and during the fieldwork, I was also an independent curator in the process of organising a photographic exhibition in Brest, a project conducted with my students as part of their Masters course on applied anthropology. Last but not least, I was French and the international and intercultural dimensions of the Monaco project were a source of some kind of misunderstanding. Both parties sometimes asked me to explain what was at stake between them and the *other* party involved. Eventually my methodology became multi-sites and multi-sited.<sup>5</sup>
- 9 I eventually decided not to analyse the Monaco exhibition despite the fact that it would have been an interesting case study for this volume. Knowing the backstage of this project, I could have interrogated the understanding of cultural protocols from an international point of view, the blurred relationships between public display and commercial strategies and the collaborative process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. For example, Erub artists decided to create several objects including a double outrigger canoe, which is an important and historical object in their culture (Haddon 1912). But due to the limited time-frame they were subject to, they could not go

through the entire consultation process that they wanted to follow. Therefore, they eventually decided to give and make a “modern interpretation” of the canoe.<sup>6</sup> For ethical reasons I decided not to tackle the aforementioned questions in this paper. I felt that due to my own time constraints I would have lacked some reflexive dimension and I wanted to be careful about the potential impact of revealing the strategies undertaken by the different partners involved in the project. What I see as important in that particular case study will be discussed in the future, in articulation with the public reception and the media coverage of the Monaco event.<sup>7</sup> This current article focuses on the dialogic relationship between images and texts with regard to the representations of ghost nets.

- 10 As Korom (1996), Lavolette (2006) and Norris (2010) have demonstrated, people who reuse elements do it for various reasons, not only for economic or ecological concerns. This publication being the first academic paper dedicated to ghostnet art, I included significant quotes from the interviews I conducted with the artists to reflect the plurality of the voices of the people involved in the development of ghostnet art. Following that logic, I am also starting the article with extracts from a short documentary made by GNA, *The Making-of The Young Man and the Ghost Net*.

## Visual representations of the ghost nets

### Stepping away from the dramatization of the marine pollution

#### Ghostnet art workshop



**CAIRNS INDIGENOUS ART FAIR, CAIRNS, 2014**

PHOTO BY GÉRALDINE LE ROUX

- 11 Over the years, GNA liaised with and presented the work of Indigenous rangers from more than 40 linguistic groups, covering a total surface of 3,000 kilometers and removing more than 13,000 nets. GNA’s website explains in detail the process of collecting nets and emphasizes the difficulty of the process due to the remoteness of the areas and the

arduousness of the work.<sup>8</sup> The success of the first four years of activities of GNA led to large amounts of ghost nets collected. To imagine alternative actions to the landfill, the Carpentaria GhostNets Programme organised a national competition called *Design for a Sea Change* “where entrants were challenged to design products that could be made of ghost nets and that would be capable of being manufactured in the Indigenous communities where nets were collected”.<sup>9</sup> While they expected to receive potential industrial products, it was eventually mainly artists who proposed works.<sup>10</sup> “GNA was ahead of its time as since then a high tech solution has been developed in Europe that turns nylon nets into yarn for industrial carpets, clothing and socks.”<sup>11</sup> Amongst bags, hammocks and kitchen ware, the guitar strap made by Chantal Cordey was selected by the jury.

- 12 The award the artist received was flights for four people to travel to the Northern Territory. Not comfortable with the idea of being a tourist, she asked whether she could workshop her techniques.<sup>12</sup> The first two workshops were held in Yirrkala in the Northern Territory and on Hammond Island in the Torres Strait. The success of that event confirmed GNA’s hunch to push the creative process involved in making ghostnets objects. GNA engaged visual artist and former Cape York Indigenous art centre coordinator Sue Ryan to undertake a Scoping Study. Ryan’s visits to a dozen communities on the west coast of Cape York and in the Torres Strait testified to the creative potential of ghost nets and revealed strong interest on the part of artists, who were already aware of the destructive effects of ghost nets on the marine environment. In 2009 Ryan was hired by GNA to implement the recommendations of her Scoping Study Report (Ryan 2010).
- 13 Over the years, workshops and public events were organised in cities, spreading both the ecological message and demonstrating the artistic value of ghostnet artworks (Ryan 2012b). At the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, where ghostnet works have been shown since 2010, visitors are invited to participate in free workshops by either collaborating on a large-scale piece or working on their own piece. In allowing people to bring back home a small item, GNA members knew that “visitors will bring back the story with them”.<sup>13</sup> In encouraging people to do something with the ghost nets, GNA subtly moved the position of the visitors into the one of “spect’actor”, encouraging them to become agents of change. This dynamic and relational methodology differs from the negative and disempowering feelings and attitudes that are often seen around environmental issues.
- 14 GNA facilitated workshops, production of films and art initiatives to educate people on the complex issue of ghost nets. The short documentary on the Puppet show received a great level of attention worldwide. It was translated in four languages – English, French, Chinese and Korean – and toured in exhibitions and film festivals as far away as South Korea, Hong Kong, Hawaii, Brazil, Saint Martin (in the Caribbean), France, the USA, Alaska and all over Australia. The poetic and almost phantasmagorical Puppet show is different to the still images of garbage and mutilated turtles that are commonly associated with marine pollution. This positive perception is often acknowledged by viewers and visitors.

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## The Puppet show. The Young Man and the Ghost Net

### A collaborative piece



PHOTO BY KAREN HETHEY AND ILKA WHITE © GHOSTNETS AUSTRALIA

- 15 In 2010 GNA organised a workshop on Moa Islands in Central Torres Strait, under the mentorship of two Australian artists, Ilka White and Karen Hethey. GNA's team proposed "to team them up"<sup>15</sup> for the two-week workshop because they could see how their expertise in sculpture, costume, theatre settings and fibre creations could inspire Torres Strait artists. White had lived on Moa Island when she was a teenager and she wanted to go back. After a few days on Moa Island, the two artists decided to stay two weeks longer in order to organise a puppet show. Their proposal to expand the time frame and to do it without being paid for that additional time reveals their enthusiasm, a dynamic that is common to many ghostnet art lovers.
- 16 Materials were locally collected and items woven and stitched together in community workshops with the art centre, primary school, churches and the wider community, "all contributing significantly".<sup>16</sup> They created fish and corals out of plastic bottles, nets and fine paper glued over cane and organised a puppet show for the community. A choir of 65 musicians and singers and puppeteers of all ages joined them to tell the story of *The Young Man and the Ghost Net*. This was the first puppet show on the island and it was presented as the first Australian theatre show ever made out of ghost nets and marine debris. It showcased the journey of discarded nets floating in the water, killing sea animals and negatively impacting on human activities.

- 17 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/2221>

<https://vimeo.com/173032293>

- 18 Many coastline people from Northern Australia seem to estimate that the ghost nets issue started to impact them around the mid-1990's.<sup>17</sup> The artistic director of Erub Art Centre, Lynnette Griffiths, has vivid memories of marine pollution:
- 19 *"I grew up on the water, along the East coast of Australia. The first time Geoff [her husband] and I went to Weipa, on the West coast of Cape York, it was around 1985; there were no nets, absolutely no net. When I moved to Bamaga in 1991, it was still quite rare to see nets. Then, on Thursday Island we lived there and still, down the Cape York or out toward the western side of Prince of Wales it was still rare, you didn't see them much in that early 1990's. And then it became a phenomenon in the late 90's, 2000's. Then going backward and forward, because we lived on Darnley then, we could see that there were much more nets."*<sup>18</sup>
- 20 In *The Making-of The Young Man and the Ghost Net*, the viewer hears several interviewees and while the film goes on, it becomes clear that the Puppet show's story also reflects a negative experience that is shared by most Islanders and sailors. Both the show and the film express the sorrow of Saltwater people when they see animals trapped in discarded nets (GNA 2010: 03:45-06:17). These feelings echo the ones of many Indigenous people, both from Torres Strait and from Cape York. They acknowledge that the sea is part of their life and animals should be respected as living beings. The film stresses the urgency to deal with the issue but does not victimise people. As Levi says: "If we don't take care of it who will?" The short documentary highlights the agency of the people living on the coast. A 15 seconds sequence also lightly responds to some misrepresentations about contemporary Indigenous land management. When an old man regrets that "they say we kill too much turtles, but it's not us, it's the nets", the spectator starts to understand the effect of collaborations between artists, researchers and community members: it is useful not only to document the origins of the nets and to encourage their removal, but also to reveal the intricacy of ecological, economic, cultural and symbolic dimensions of this global issue. It is in this logic of raising consciousness about inter-cultural relationships that some artists decided to take part in the Monaco exhibition. They wanted to speak about the ecological challenge they are facing but also to attract attention on the specificities of their own culture (Le Roux 2016).

### Removing the ghost nets



**THE REMOVAL OF NETS REQUIRES MACHINERY AND EQUIPMENT THAT ARE EXPENSIVE TO FREIGHT TO REMOTE COMMUNITIES.**

PHOTO BY PORMPURA AW RANGERS © GHOSTNETS AUSTRALIA

- 21 Islanders from areas other than Central Torres Strait express feelings similar to the ones we hear in *The Making-of The Young Man and the Ghost Net*. In her artist's statement for the Gab Titui catalogue, Maria Ware (2013: 43) wrote "I feel sorry for these sea creatures who suffer because of the nets". All the artists I interviewed on Erub had witnessed nets either caught on a reef, buried under the sand, matted in mangroves or wrapped around logs as well as ropes floating on the surface. After a few weeks in the field, I found a diversity of representations that I did not initially see after first watching and reading GNA's documents. Maybe it was because I had been myself caught by the extraordinary story of the big and old nets. "For years it [a net] can travel across different oceans carried by currents, waves and wind. Frayed by the giant washing machine sea, encrusted in barnacles and seaweed, within it entangled bleached bones and living things, Taiwanese toothbrushes, the odd children's toy, lures, floats and driftwood, it heads for the coast" (Ryan 2012b: 5). GNA has documented the removal of some very big and old nets like the one collected at Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory. It weighed one ton and was 12 metres deep, so dense that a person could sit on it. Artists have embraced that type of discourse like the Pormpuraaw art coordinator who wrote in a short paper that some nets have been in the water for such a long time that they "come with compressed sand chunks like loose concrete attached. We think that these nets must have been stuck on the sea floor for a long time in order for this to happen" (Jakubowski 2015: 12).
- 22 Conversely to these large nets, the plastics that circulate under the surface and disintegrate into micro-particles (Reisser et al. 2013; Pham et al. 2014) are difficult to represent visually. Small pieces of nets, like the ones that have been washed up on the reef, are visually less impressive than the large ghost nets, but they are still a danger for the marine life. Jan Cattoni is one of the rare filmmakers who have filmed small pieces of

nets (*Erub Ghost Nets* 2013).<sup>19</sup> Most artistic directors film the largest nets, because they catch spectators' attention. It even seems that some image makers have consciously placed one big net on the beach for the shooting of their documentary. However, in the numerous visuals widely promoted by the ghostnet network, humour as well as joy are clearly perceptible and express the richness of the collective experience as well as the complexities of marine pollution and its removal. In the following part, we will see how artists have found unique way to introduce people to these multiple layers of realities<sup>20</sup>.

## Magic nets

- 23 “There is something incredible with ghost nets, when you turn them into something different. If you can capture the spirit and the character of the animal, it’s like magic.”<sup>21</sup>

### A sense of familiarity



Bruce and Nemo, Erub Island, 2015.

**PHOTO BY MARION GAEMERS', 2015**

- 24 One day, a European art dealer asked me to explain why ghostnet art was so fine and beautiful whereas the ecological dimension of the phenomenon was so dramatic. He felt it was a “paradox” that artworks did not literally represent the danger of nets. Ghostnet artists seek inspiration from Indigenous myths and legends, ecological knowledge and everyday lifestyle. The first ghostnet works produced between 2009 and 2011 were mostly baskets and jewelry. Later, with the evolution of the techniques and under the guidance of several non-Indigenous mentors new objects appeared, with more complex shape and bigger size (Le Roux 2016). Many objects depicted reveal totemic affiliations, or are related to important stories such as the Crocodile Sorcerer and Water Spirits.

- 25 Amongst the hundreds of ghostnet artworks that have been produced since the first workshop, only a few objects literally represent the dramatic impact of ghost nets on the environment. For the Monaco installation, Pormpuraaw artists decided to make a sawfish and a shovelnose ray to make a strong comment on the evolution of the ecosystem and the necessary evolution of their society. Faced with the disappearance of sawfish, the shovelnose ray has taken on a more important role in Wik society, especially in period of mourning (Mitchell 2015). A few years ago, Florence Gutchen from Erub drew a sketch representing a turtle caught in a net. Angela “Mahnah” Torenbeek from Moa Island produced a ghostnet turtle trapped in a net. Ceferino Sabatino from Hammond Island also made a series of three works, *Clinging for Life*, which directly discuss the problem. It won the Gab Titui “People’s Choice” Indigenous Art Award in 2014. A collective work made in Erub, entitled *Giant Weres*, also addressed the problem of overfishing by supersize trawlers. At the 2015 Gab Titui award, Tony Harry from Warraber Island presented a mixed media work. On a canvas he painted a turtle trapped in a net, using a real rope. It was entitled *Waru Pingerr Ya Alali (Turtle caught up in a net)*. Even if not many ghostnet works represent the animals trapped by discarded nets, they express a strong connection to the sea environment. Talking about his work, Sabatino explained that “it’s my way of contributing as a visual artist in caring for country”.<sup>22</sup> Ghostnet art explores this relationship between art and nature – something that the Monaco installation also reveals. This knowledge is represented by Erub artists through fine details; with their works, “it’s the environment and the culture that come together”.<sup>23</sup> For example, the turtle made for Monaco by these artists is extraordinarily realistic and her shell was made to reflect the sun and the corals. The multiple layers of nets on the shark were also ingeniously selected to evoke the colours of the skin through the water. Even the lay out and the mounting of the whole installation was initially planned to evoke the animals’ movements during a hunting scene.
- 26 There is also a strong comic dimension in ghostnet art. Artists from Erub enjoy creating very colourful fish and they love making fun with them. During the time of the fabrication process, the fish were called with nicknames and the shark became Bruce, as a reference for the *Finding Nemo* film (2003). This sense of familiarity can also be seen in the way people play with the nets. During workshops, people smile and laugh when they are making things out of the nets. Participants do not only stitch, unravel and cut nets; they also play with the forms they have just created.<sup>24</sup> Materials are used either as body ornament or as cloth: a piece of green gillnet becomes a scarf; a delicate black thin net is worn as a veil; and a big coiling piece is transformed into a hat. Some people will even try to fit in the large basket they have just finished. The Erub art centre pushed that idea further by dedicating one of their annual fashion parades to ghostnets. As part of their 2014 Christmas party, they ran a friendly competition with artists and community members who had 15 minutes to dress up from a heap of nets and ropes. The result is stunning: the originality of the dresses and hats is enhanced by the natural beauty of the materials. Artists have transformed themselves for a temporary time as models, demonstrating once again the extraordinary potentialities of plastic nets if they are no longer seen as waste.

**Modeling (with) the nets**



**PHOTO BY LYNNETTE GRIFFITHS, 2014**

**Playing with the nets**



**PHOTO BY LYNNETTE GRIFFITHS, 2014**

- 27 So, is there a disconnect between the discourse and the practice like the art dealer suggested? It seems that ghostnet artists celebrate the beauty of their environment, their relation to the sea and the land, transmitting the principles of the *caring for country's* concept<sup>25</sup>. This is how I understand Maria Ware's words, when she says that she "feel[s] sorry for these sea creatures who suffer because of the nets. I am now creating baskets and objects to raise awareness of the dangers of ghost net. I enjoy doing it. It makes me very happy" (2013: 43). The proximity of the feelings of sadness and happiness in one sentence may seem a bit paradoxical. But the ghostnet art practice expresses the close relationship that people have with their land. In exploring it artistically they both embody their environment and reveal it to a global audience, encouraging people to "do something about it"<sup>26</sup>. Artists give another perspective on marine pollution, in showing the beauty of the environment, in explaining the complexity of the issue – articulating the ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions – and in revealing the aesthetic quality of the ghost nets. In the following part, we will see how artists are now considering ghost nets as art materials and no longer and solely as marine debris.

## The artistic life of the ghost nets

- 28 When they first saw ghostnet artworks my French students were surprised by the diversity of the materials. Living on the Atlantic coast side, they frequently see black and green nets and white ropes amongst plastic bottles, thongs and natural marine debris. But looking at the Australian ghostnet artworks, they found that they were made out of a large variety of materials with a broad array of colours and textures. Students asked the very question that I was asking myself: how do Australian artists get so many nets with such a diversity of colours and shapes?<sup>27</sup> The next part will show how art centres and independent artists are dealing with the increasing interest in ghostnet art, and how they are now "looking for more nets".<sup>28</sup> As the Erub art centre manager Diann Lui noted: "We use so much net, we need to get more nets!"<sup>29</sup>

## Flux and origins of the ghost nets

- 29 Studies show that the Gulf of Carpentaria – the Australian most affected region by ghost nets – is a place of intense fishing activities, with numerous vessels from various countries such as China, Thailand, South Korea and Vietnam (Wilcox 2015). Commonly, each country would have its own fishing net factories. The mesh size of the net, the length of the niche, how the knots are made, if it is twisted or braided, etc. can differ according to the country of origins of the net and the fish targeted. Marine debris found on shores reflects human activity, both locally and internationally as tides and currents carry debris on miles.
- 30 90% of the ghost nets that impact Australia are found in the northern half of the Gulf of Carpentaria; within that region some areas are less impacted than others. In northwest Cape York, Aurukun, Old Mapoon, Injinoo and Bamaga are the most affected communities. Some like Pormpuraaw will mostly get nets after cyclones.<sup>30</sup> In the Northern Territory, Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala and Mornington Island are regularly affected by marine pollution. Due to its geological situation, with hundreds of islands and reefs, the Torres Strait has exceptional hydrographic conditions and a highly complex system of tides (Johannes and MacFarlane 1991). Consequently, the ecological problem of

ghost nets does not impact identically in the Torres Strait. Around Western and Central Torres Strait, there are a lot of nets and various fishing debris. Firstly because trawlers are very active in that area; secondly because the currents hit the Western coast of Cape York and generate a circular circulation of marine debris, the “washing machine” as some people call it. The outer islands are less affected by ghost nets. This brief description of marine waste’s circulation reveals that the Australian Indigenous communities which are now the most renowned for ghostnet art – Erub and Pormpuraaw – are not the most affected by marine pollution. How do artists and art centres get the nets?

## Trading nets

- 31 “[...] our nets come from somewhere else and we use a large variety of sources.”<sup>31</sup>
- 32 Under the guidance of GNA, art centres used discarded fishing gears from rangers (Gunn 2010). With the recent development of the art and the increasing number of commissions, art centres and independent artists have had to get them from a wider range of people and places: rangers, freight companies, fishermen, relatives and independent people. Nets can be collected on the shore, in the dumping zone and some community art centres even order and pay for bags of nets to be transported from another community. Artists and art coordinators try to get the right material, either when they look for it on the shore, when they buy them or if they exchange material with their peers. The rarity of the material as well as the thickness and the colour can be sought. With the recent recognition from the art market, artists are getting more concerned by the quality of the material and would choose one over another, making sure the plastic does not fall apart.
- 33 Artists living in remote communities also access nets from their own networks.
- 34 “Here, on the beach there is no ghost net. In deep water there are some. On York Island, they get nets. It’s not far away from here. It depends on the motor boat; it can take about 30 minutes. My brother stays there. He stays with my husband’s sister. No, I don’t buy it from them, they are my in-laws. Sometimes I give them the things I have created. Like the bowl I bring yesterday. Things like that. I do it with their nets. Not with the materials provided by the art centre. It’s my own pocket money.”<sup>32</sup>
- 35 On Erub, where I conducted most of my interviews, artists acknowledge that they get nets both from the art centre and from relatives. Even if modern Torres Strait life has been shaped by liberal economy, practices of exchange and gift-giving with in-laws and neighboring countries (Papua New Guinea, Cape York) are still practiced. Exchanges also used to be intensive between Torres Strait Islander groups and Aboriginal groups from Cape York. Even if these relations were drastically altered by the development of western marine activities – the pearl and the beche-de-mer industries – as well as mission time and assimilation policy, exchange and trade are still important to people. Modern ghost nets have been integrated into a traditional system of collecting and exchanging: “On the shores, we got lots of trees from PNG that we use for building our houses. We also get sago. We collect seeds from the beach. Foreign plants grow on our shore. We also collect timbers that fell down from the ships. We even get some dinghy and canoes all away from PNG. All good things come from the sea. Now we collect nets.”<sup>33</sup> When people find nets they will also report it to their relatives. The numerous necklaces and body ornaments that artists make out of ghost nets are a source of income and a practice that recalls how people used to collect things from the sea.

- 36 *“My family [...]collect[s] nets and shells for me. They know I am an artist. Some of my things are from home and it’s important because here I’m making things and people say ‘it’s beautiful’ and I say ‘it’s from my home’. I don’t stay there anymore, here it’s my home. It remembers me where I am from.”*<sup>34</sup> Like Florence Gutchen, artists enjoy using material that is meaningful to them. Lynnette Griffiths also acknowledges her personal story, coming from a Manchester family of rope makers and having grown up on a boat. Like Lavolette (2006: 72) who stated that Cornish recycled art can be seen as “an allegory for the regeneration of culture, history and heritage”, we can say that ghostnet art is both inscribed in a contemporary and worldwide issue and portrays the strength of Indigenous values, depicting the core elements of family, land and sea, history, identity and culture. It is in that perspective that one artist told me how she was hoping that the Monaco exhibition will establish new opportunities for Torres Strait Islanders who are, indeed, less visible on the art market than Aboriginal artists. This use of the Western taste for art to highlight political and cultural agendas is a common practice in Australian Indigenous communities (Langton 1993; Morphy 2008; Le Roux 2010).

#### A clean and a dusty piece of a ghostnet art



Detail of a work by Marion Gaemers' and the Townsville community. The Reef exhibition. Townsville Regional Art Gallery, 2015

Photo by Géraldine Le Roux

## Conclusion

- 37 Artists invite us to see ghost nets as an important source of marine pollution that can be both visually impressive – the global circulation of massive pieces of nets – and an almost invisible phenomenon – the decomposition of the nets into micro-particles. Their artistic intervention transforms the representation of ghost nets from “old”, “dirty”, anonymous

and “non-desirable” “rubbish” into a potential art material which can be collected on the shores, purchased or acquired through trade and gift-giving processes. An innovative recycling process dedicated to ghost nets is currently emerging under the influence of a few sparse initiatives. For example, Adidas, in partnership with Parley for the Oceans, created shoes made of recycled plastic and ghost nets. Two Dutch engineers have imagined a process of recycling plastic to build lightweight, prefabricated roads (Rinaldi 2015). But conversely to the recycling industry which strips away “personal associations” (Gregson and Crewe 2003 in Norris 2012a: 130), artists recognize and highlight the “social life” (Appadurai 1996) of the nets. The broad range of colours and textures of ghost nets is due to the diversity of the fishing industry in the Arafura Sea. It is also linked to the history of the net itself. If the ghost net has laid in the water or under the sun for a long time it fades and might be full of dust and oil. Some artists will specifically choose new or old pieces of nets according to their aesthetic plan and the message they want to pass on. In doing so, they not only represent the evolution of the fishing activities worldwide but also create spaces of encounters between people who are not often connected: artists, fishermen and art lovers; Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental activists, etc. Many artists have developed their own expertise about ghost nets and informal discussions are often about the technical qualities of a piece of net and the type of fishery it was used for. The slowness of the gesture, similar to weaving techniques, allows people to connect to others, to transmit stories about the land, the sea and the culture, both locally and internationally. The beauty and the realistic details of the ghostnet artworks reflect the many ways people care for country.

- 38 Ghostnet art is a transgenerational and transcultural practice. The numerous grants collected by GNA for the projects run between 2004 and 2012, the large amount of donations obtained for the Monaco ghostnet installation as well as the practice of gifting nets done at an interpersonal level all show how this new art practice resonates with people. Ghostnet art reflects the articulation of Western and Indigenous knowledges, two systems of thought and action that are united to solve ecological, economic and cultural issues. With the label and the marketing of ghostnet art, one may wonder if the values around the picking and recycling of ghost nets will change. It would therefore be fruitful to conduct further study to better grasp how the representations of ghost nets in Indigenous communities and the motivations of the donors who financially support ghostnet art compare. For example, with their annual gala and charity event, the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco and the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation collected €1.4 million<sup>35</sup>. This amount will be allocated to the construction of a turtle rehabilitation centre in the city of Monaco. How did the ghostnet art installation contribute to this fundraising? More globally, will the messages of the artists continue to be linked to environmental issues? To art? To Indigenous welfare?

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## Films

Cattoni, Jan, dir. 2013. *Erub Ghost Nets*. Tropics (production). 3 min.

GhostNets Australia, 2010. *The Making-of The Young Man and the Ghost Net*. Visual Obsession (production). 20:53 min.

Stanton, Andrew, dir. 2003. *Finding Nemo*. Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney (production). 100 min.

## NOTES

1. To emphasize the difference between the ghost net as marine pollution and the ghostnet art as an artistic operation, I write the former in two words and the latter in one word: ghost nets and ghostnet art. The association GhostNets Australia has formalized another spelling, writing it in capitals and plural form.
2. Due to colonial history, Australia commonly uses two distinct terms for Indigenous peoples: Aboriginal for those on the mainland and Torres Strait Islanders for those living in the Torres Strait.
3. The fieldwork took place in November-December 2015. I was generously invited to stay in the homes of Marion Gaemer's, Lynnette Griffiths and Sue Ryan, three of the leading non-Indigenous ghostnet artists who have actively contributed to the emergence and development of the movement. I am also grateful to Diann and Walter Lui for their hospitality on Erub. I also visited Jan Cattoni, a filmmaker who has done several films in the Torres Strait and Cape York, the two areas from whence the ghostnet art movement spreads.
4. All formal semi-directive interviews were transcribed and shown to the interviewees while I was on the field. Interviewees were invited to review them. Preliminary versions of the articles have also been discussed collectively and the final version of this article was sent to interviewees for consultation.
5. I developed this methodology for my PhD dedicated to the production, reception and circulation of contemporary Australian Indigenous art. I took up the term of George Marcus to explore and express two ideas: the circulation of the artworks from their local site of production to their international scene (multi-sites); the impact of the double position of anthropologist and curator on the production of knowledge (multi-sited) (Le Roux 2010).
6. Interview with Jimmy Thaiday, Erub Island, November 30, 2015.
7. One month before the Monaco opening, the Australian journalist Matthew Westwood (2016) published an article in *The Australian*. It questioned the equity of the new distribution of Federal grants and asked if a project run by two private art dealers should get \$500,000, an amount "that could have supported the annual program of two key arts organisations for a whole year of operation". I will discuss this question amongst others in the Monaco Exhibition Review that will be published in the forthcoming 2016 issue of *Journal de la Société des Océanistes (JSO)*, a double issue on the Reinvention of Cultural Performances in Oceania.
8. <http://www.ghostnets.com.au/ranger-activities/> (accessed 31 December, 2016).
9. <http://ghostnets.com.au/the-problem/waste-not/design-for-a-sea-change/> (accessed 31 December, 2016).
10. Interview with Riki Gunn, Ravenshoe, November 19, 2015.
11. Riki Gunn, e-mail message to author, February 28, 2016.
12. Interview with Riki Gunn, Ravenshoe, November 19, 2015.
13. Interview with Riki Gunn and Sue Ryan, Ravenshoe, November 19, 2015.

14. Such as the visitors to the exhibition, “Ghostnets. Des filets-fantômes, un art et des hommes dans le nord de l’Australie” organised by a group of Masters students from Université de Brest Occidentale (UBO), under my supervision. It opened in January 2016 (Océanopolis and UBO in Brest) and since then it has toured in several places both in France and overseas (Saint-Martin in the Caribbean in May 2016; Festival Interceltique in Lorient in August 2016, etc.).
  15. Interview with Riki Gunn, Ravenshoe, November 19, 2015.
  16. Extract from the foreword of *The Making-of The Young Man and the Ghost Net*, GNA.
  17. Interview with Riki Gunn, Karumba, November 19, 2015.
  18. Interview with Lynnette Griffiths, Cairns, December 17, 2015.
  19. Personal conversation with Jan Cattoni, Townsville, December 15, 2015.
  20. Several non-Indigenous artists have experienced and formalized innovative techniques to create original ghostnet works; this article mainly focuses on Indigenous practices and relations to material and immaterial heritage.
  21. Interview with Sue Ryan, Ravenshoe, November 18, 2015.
  22. Sabatino quoted in a post written by the Torres Strait Regional Authority, May 28, 2014, on Facebook.
  23. Interview with Diann Lui, Erub Island, November 29, 2015.
  24. These are the results of ethnographic work conducted through an analysis of GNA’s photographs and my own participation at various workshops, mainly at the CIAF 2012, 2014 and at the Erub workshop (2015).
  25. “People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country. [...] Country is multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, air.” (Rose 1996: 7; 8).
  26. Interview with Racy Oui-Pitt, Erub, November 30, 2015.
  27. The research on ghostnets art in Brittany that I have started seems to indicate that this common representation does not reflect the reality: ghost nets in that area can be very diverse, if people carefully look at them.
  28. Interview with Diann Lui, Erub Island, November 29, 2015.
  29. Interview with Diann Lui, Erub Island, November 29, 2015.
  30. Phone Interview with Paul Jakubowski, December 4, 2015.
  31. Interview with Diann Lui, Erub Island, November 29, 2015.
  32. Interview with Nancy Naawi, Erub Island, November 27, 2015.
  33. Interview with Florence Gutchen, Erub Island, November 28, 2015.
  34. Interview with Florence Gutchen, Erub Island, November 28, 2015.
  35. Officially announced by Museum director Robert Calcagno during the press conference. 30 March, 2016, Monaco.
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## ABSTRACTS

In the last few years, an increasing number of texts published in environmental journals and in art magazines have addressed the “ghostnet” issue and referenced how artists in Northern Australia use discarded or abandoned nets to create art and craft items. By analysing the artistic life of the ghost nets, from the creative process to trade networks, this article provides a new

perspective on marine pollution and highlights Australian Indigenous peoples' agency toward this environmental and global issue. It presents ghostnet art as a transgenerational and transcultural practice that reflects the articulation of Indigenous and Western knowledges, two systems of thought and action that are united to solve ecological, economic and cultural issues.

Depuis plusieurs années, un nombre croissant d'articles publiés dans des revues d'études environnementales et dans des magazines d'art traitent du problème des filets-fantômes et évoquent la façon dont en Australie du nord des artistes utilisent des filets perdus ou abandonnés pour créer des objets d'art et d'artisanat. En analysant la vie artistique des filets-fantômes, du processus créatif aux réseaux d'échange, cet article ouvre une autre perspective sur la pollution marine, en mettant en valeur l'agentivité des populations autochtones australiennes face à ce défi environnemental mondial. L'article présente l'art des ghostnets comme une pratique transgénérationnelle et transculturelle qui reflète l'articulation de savoirs autochtones et occidentaux, deux systèmes de pensée et d'action réunis pour résoudre des enjeux écologiques, économiques, et culturels.

En los últimos años, un número creciente de textos publicados en revistas sobre medio ambiente y en cuadernos de arte han abordado la cuestión de las “redes Fantasma” (*Ghost Nets*), estudiando cómo los artistas del noreste de Australia utilizan redes descartadas o abandonadas para crear arte y artesanía. Analizando la vida artística de las “redes fantasma”, desde el proceso creativo hasta el intercambio, este artículo aporta una nueva perspectiva sobre la polución marina y subraya la iniciativa de los pueblos aborígenes australianos en relación a esta cuestión, con implicaciones medioambientales de carácter global. Presenta el arte de las “redes fantasma” como una práctica transgeneracional y transcultural, y refleja la articulación de los saberes indígenas y occidentales, dos sistemas de pensamiento y acción que están unidos para solventar problemas ecológicos, económicos y culturales.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Australie, Cap York, Torres Strait, art aborigène, déchets marins, filets fantômes, anthropologie des déchets

**Keywords:** Australia, Cape York, Torres Strait, Aboriginal art, marine debris, ghost nets, anthropology of waste

**Palabras claves:** Australia, Cabo York, Estrecho de Torres, Arte Aborigen, Desechos Marinos, Redes Fantasma, Antropología del residuo

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