

Belonging and Unbelonging: Indigenous forms of Curation as Expressions of Sovereignty

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The University of Sydney
2020

Statement of Originality and Ethical Conduct

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

I have obtained Human Ethics approval from the University of Sydney's Research Integrity and Ethics Committee: Indigenising Museums: Project number 2019/519.

Stephen Gilchrist

29 September 2019

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Abstract

Indigenous art has been one of the most important vehicles for promoting intercultural understanding in Australia. It visualises Indigenous ways of seeing, knowing and experiencing the world. Indigenous forms of curation have been instrumental in creating these profound moments of intercultural connection, and in doing so, they have contributed to new theorisations of Indigenous art. This research project seeks to identify an Indigenous critical framework with which to apprehend the complexity of Indigenous art exhibitions. Through detailed case-studies of six exhibitionary projects by Indigenous curators, running from the *Aboriginal Memorial* of 1988 to *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* in 2016, I demonstrate that Indigenous curation is not only an important political act of recognition and visibility, it is also deeply indebted to Indigenous cultural practices and philosophies. The projects chosen are situated within sites of high national and international value, including the National Gallery of Australia (Canberra); the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale; the Harvard Art Museums (Cambridge, Mass); the British Museum (London); the National Museum of Australia (Canberra) and the Kaldor Public Art Projects in the Royal Botanic Garden (Sydney). Through these case studies I chart a curatorial manoeuvre that I describe as ‘unbelonging’.

Unbelonging is not a position of statelessness, but a deliberative model of both subversively unsettling and detaching from the imposition of statehood. In many instances, it uses the resources of leading institutions, but agitates to create self-determined spaces within them. Through a process of unbelonging to the state, to the institution, to disciplines and to history, Indigenous curators are rewriting their own ways of belonging. In this way, I understand Indigenous curation as not politically reactive to colonisation as is often presumed, but emerging from Indigenous political formations of governance and sovereignty, value and heritage, consensus and relation. This is caring for country, caring for culture and caring for community in practice. By creating new and broadening complacent formulations of art and social history, identity, museological practice and temporality, Indigenous curators have reshaped institutional and disciplinary cultures and have contributed to the strengthening of Indigenous art and culture.

Acknowledgements

Firstly I want to acknowledge that this thesis was written on the lands of the Gadigal and Wampanoag and I pay my respect to their ancestors.

In this thesis I write about curation as an expression of care and I would like to thank the many people who have taken care of me during this process. I would like to thank Professor Roger Benjamin, who has been my principal supervisor on this wonderfully exhausting research project. I am very grateful for his patience, guidance and confidence in my abilities. He has been a thoughtful and attentive reader who has always motivated me to find my own critical voice. I also warmly thank Dr Catriona Moore, who was my auxiliary supervisor and when she was Chair of department, she worked her magic with timetabling so that I could try to work mine.

Thank you to my Art History squad of Dr Chiara O'Reilly, Dr Yvonne Low and Dr Anna Lawrenson for all their motivational and practical advice to keep me focused with such compassion and understanding. It is great to have colleagues like you and I thank you for your willingness to read and discuss my chapters at whatever stage they were at. I thank Dr Mark De Vitis for his generous reading of chapter five and his sincere encouragement; Professor Mark Ledbury for his wonderful delicacy and consistency in asking how my thesis was progressing. I particularly want to thank Lucy Baird for her friendship and for always reminding me about what is important. I want to also thank my other departmental colleagues who have always made me feel that I deserve to be in the department despite my student status.

I am thankful for the Wingara Mura fellowship at the University of Sydney which facilitated my appointment in the department. I hope that these fellowships can continue. This fellowship has introduced me to some incredible Indigenous colleagues, and I am particularly grateful for the friendship of Dr Mariko Smith and her suggestions on the south-east and Dr Leah Lui-Chivizhe and Dr Chantelle Gibson for their cultural leadership on campus. I'd also like to thank curator Matt Poll for his incredible knowledge and patience.

I would like to thank the library staff at the University of Sydney particularly Anthony Green and Nicholas Keyzer in the Schaeffer Library. I would also like to thank Rena McGrogan for all her referencing advice with endnote. The librarians at the Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library at

the Art Gallery of New South Wales have been incredibly helpful in helping me locate sources within the archives.

I want to thank Debra Shulkes for her sensitive and speedy copy-editing and proofreading of this thesis. I am very grateful for her sharp eye and mind. I am also grateful for Susan Jenkins and her comments on chapter one and for teaching me so much about Indigenous art when we shared more than an office at the National Gallery of Australia. I have benefitted from discussions and interviews with Jennifer Biddle, Fred Myers, Henry Skerritt, Pato Hebert, Léuli Eshraghi and Marina Tyquiengco who have helped crystallised some of my thinking around these issues. I appreciate their intellectual generosity and consistent encouragement.

I would like to thank my family of Indigenous curators who have been so encouraging and forgiving. I have learnt so much from their practices. I've told the story that is in me to tell but I know there are countless others that need to be shared. I particularly want to thank Carly Lane and Brenda L Croft who know the difficulties of being a PhD student and have always been willing to listen and offer advice.

I want to thank the curators whose exhibitions I have investigated. I have learnt so much through this process and I thank you for your understanding through my missteps and misinterpretations. You have been so generous with your ideas and I hope that I have represented them adequately.

I would like to thank my mother Dawn for showing me that I belong to an incredible legacy. I want to also thank my sister Lianne for her encouragement and understanding throughout this process. I would also like to thank my in-laws Minnie and Mannie Boltin for their ongoing support. We are all glad that I got this far. I would like to thank Eva for always asking how the PhD was going and asking me how I want to spend my first weekend off from writing. Thank you to Liv for all her cuddles. I look forward to when she sleeps through the night so we can have more fun together during the day.

Lastly, I want to thank Kylie Boltin who never stopped believing in me and never stopped telling me to believe in myself. She has been incredibly generous and forgiving when I've had thesis tunnel-vision. She has told me to take deep breaths with myself and with my writing. And she has patiently looked at each chapter and provided thoughtful suggestions. She has looked after me and the kids and I couldn't have started, finished or persisted with this project without her encouragement. I can't thank her enough for her love and support.

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curated by Jonathan Jones

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List of Abbreviations

AAB: Aboriginal Arts Board
AAANZ: Art Association of Australia and New Zealand
ABC: Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACT: Australian Capital Territory
AGNSW: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
AIATSIS: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra
AIF: Australian Imperial Force
AM: Australian Museum, Sydney
ARC: Australian Research Council
ANU: Australian National University, Canberra
ASSI: Australian South Sea Islander
BM: British Museum, London
HAM: Harvard Art Museums
KPAP: Kaldor Public Art Projects
KHT: Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne
LPLALC: La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council
MV: Museum Victoria, Melbourne
NALP: National Aboriginal Language Project
NAVA: National Association for the Visual Arts
NGA: National Gallery Australia, Canberra
NGV: National Gallery Victoria, Melbourne
NLA: National Library of Australia, Canberra
NMA: National Museum of Australia, Canberra
NPY: Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
NSW: New South Wales
PMEA: Peabody Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology
PRM: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford
SLNSW: State Library of New South Wales, Sydney
SLV: State Library of Victoria, Melbourne
TAFE: Technical and Further Education
TSI: Torres Strait Islands
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNSW: University of New South Wales, Sydney
UTS: University of Technology Sydney
USA: United States of America
VAB: Visual Arts Board

Authorship attribution statement

This thesis contains ideas published in Stephen Gilchrist, 'Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia', *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, pp18-31. I draw on the framework of that exhibition, but the present chapter is significantly different from the catalogue essay.

Notes to the reader

All Indigenous language words mentioned in the following pages are spelt according to the respective community or artist's standard language orthography. Archaic spelling and terminology, some examples of which are considered unacceptable, remain in quoted texts drawn from historical sources.

Language groups and biographical information are included after the initial mention of the names of Indigenous artists and historical figures. Language groups are included (where known) for Indigenous writers, curators, theorists, historians and cultural leaders, present and historical.

For figure captions, measurements are in centimetres; height precedes width.

I use the latest version of MLA which dispenses with the place of publication in its citational formatting for publications after 1900.

Warning

Members of Indigenous communities are respectfully advised that several people mentioned in writing or depicted in imagery in this thesis have passed away.

Introduction: Unbelonging

The 'centre' or the 'mainstream' often seems to orbit in the belief that all things are attracted to it, will gravitate toward it, become subsumed by it and eventually reflect it... [A]uthors/activists, and many others, have long argued that there are in fact many centres, operating alongside each other, independent of one another, with crosscurrents enabling them to shift into and out of the various positions.¹

Brenda L Croft

It has often been said that there is no Indigenous word for art, a claim that seems to imply that Indigenous peoples do not linguistically or aesthetically recognise expressive cultural material. But for Indigenous people, art is not something removed and separate from everyday life; it is enfolded within it. The production of art gives meaning, beauty and function to life. Even a cursory understanding of the multi-modality of Indigenous art suggests that art-making is not merely illustration but can often be real-time communion with ancestral subjectivity. The English word 'art', thus, falls short and presents us with an insufficient means of registering the poetic surplus and extra-discursive significations of Indigenous art and culture-making.

This thesis is interested in the space between the failure of intercultural recognition and that which has not been named in the English language. This is the space of Indigenous curation or the act of Indigenising museums and art galleries. My methodology involves an attentiveness to Indigenous forms of curation that encompasses both a close reading of selected seminal examples of Indigenous curation, as practised over the last thirty years, as well as to the complex cultural knowledge systems that are necessarily employed in the act of Indigenous forms of curation. In this way, I identify a critical framework with which to appreciate the full complexity of Indigenous art. Many of these curated exhibitions have been interpreted through a western lens which often reflect its own ideology and definitional limitations. These interpretations often position Indigenous people as victims, or responds to these exhibitions through the narcissism of guilt. I seek to demonstrate that Indigenous curation is not only an important political act of recognition and visibility, it is also deeply indebted to Indigenous cultural practices.

¹ Brenda L Croft. 'What About the Dots and Circles?! The Children Need Them!', *Making a Noise!: Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community*, edited by Lee-Ann Martin, Banff International Curatorial Institute, 2004, p112.

By presenting a theory of Indigenisation, I consider the cultural framework that undermines six key exhibitions, located both locally and globally, and explore their curatorial depth. It is by being alert to the cultural schema at play that the significance of these exhibitions is recalibrated. This in turn allows for a new sensitivity by which to understand the distinct act of Indigenous curation.

Curators are not given a space; they create a space. In looking at a range of exhibitions, I chart a curatorial manoeuvre that I describe as 'unbelonging'. This is the animating idea of the thesis which borrows from both Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'unhomely'² and Aileen Moreton Robinson's work on the contradictions and contractive modes of Indigenous belonging in the Australian context.³

Unbelonging is not as a position of statelessness, but a deliberative model of both subversively unsettling and detaching from the imposition of statehood. In many instances, it uses the resources of leading institutions, but agitates to create a self-determined space within them. Through a process of unbelonging to the state, to the institution, to the disciplines and to history, Indigenous curators are rewriting their own ways of belonging, being, seeing and knowing. In this way I understand Indigenous curation as not politically reactive to colonisation as is often presumed, but emerging from Indigenous political formations of governance and sovereignty, value and heritage, consensus and relation. This is caring for country, caring for culture and caring for community in practice.

0.1 Toward a theory of Unbelonging

As a young curator, I never doubted that Indigenous art and culture belonged in art galleries and social history museums, but I never fully appreciated the underlying tensions of belonging, given the existing and historical structures of these institutions. Many of these institutions never imagined Indigenous people in them and our presence can sometimes feel like not just an accommodation, but a threat. It was once radical for Indigenous art to be within institutions. Perhaps it is now radical to imagine Indigenous art outside them. Nevertheless, Indigenous art and the exhibitions that they are curated into have been an important part in changing the field of art in Australia and transforming the ways in which the land is understood from an Indigenous perspective. Anthropologist Fred Myers recently observed about the celebrated and necessary role of Indigenous curators in changing this field of art:

One widely agreed value within the contemporary Indigenous art field is that it is desirable and necessary that there be Indigenous voices mediating the exhibition and

² Homi Bhabha. 'The World and the Home', *Social Text*, no. 31/32, 1992, pp141-153.

³ Aileen Moreton-Robinson. 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a Postcolonizing Society', *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp3-18.

understanding of Indigenous art, bringing their (decolonial) perspective to the way work is selected and shown. The development of Indigenous curation has been a significant and much welcomed change in the visual art sectors.⁴

The inclusion of Indigenous art and Indigenous curators within this sector should not be underestimated and I note this trajectory in the thesis. Inclusion within these sites has clearly been important for the recognition of Indigenous art and given space for Indigenous perspectives. But we cannot give too much determinative value to these institutions nor their systems of valuation. Indigenous art is already self-possessed of its own value and it is necessary to apprehend it on its own cultural terms. Indigenous curation is grounded in the intellectual, cultural and political genealogies of Indigenous people and logically exists outside the jurisdiction of the colonial state. Writing on Māori art in New Zealand, anthropologist Nicholas Thomas describes it in the following paradoxical way: 'it appears as a disturbing interruption in the modern colonial nation, but is not encompassed by that nation's homogeneous, linear modern time.'⁵ This is the radical political potential of Indigenisation. It can be simultaneously within and without. It can produce modes of unbelonging while creating its own conditions of belonging.

0.2 Critical Frameworks

This thesis explores six exhibitionary projects by six Indigenous curators. There are, as the curators demonstrate, many ways of being Indigenous and by extension many ways to curate Indigenous exhibitions. Part one of this thesis, considers the radical potentialities of the institutionalisation of Indigenous art. Part two considers whether or not this institutionalisation has achieved enough and explores projects that are less reliant on the determinative power of institutions.

Curation, as many others have observed, is a type of care.⁶ It is about caring for and caring enough. For all curators, this care should be extended to artists, to objects, to histories and to audiences. Indigenous cultures, too, contain curatorial-like practices though they are seldom discussed as such. Indigenous reverence and care for sacred objects, sacred stories and sacred places are obvious points of comparison. This thesis attempts to name these practices as an extension of Indigenous modes of

⁴ Fred Myers. 'Recalibrating the Visual Field: Indigenous Curators and Contemporary Art', *Difference Identity Makes: Indigenous Cultural Capital in Australian Cultural Fields*, edited by Lawrence Bamblett, Fred Myers and Timothy Rowse, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2019, p68.

⁵ Nicholas Thomas. 'Beginnings', *Possessions: Indigenous Art, Colonial Culture*, Thames & Hudson, 1999, p17.

⁶ Kate Fowles. 'Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today', *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, edited by Steven Rand and Heather Kouris, apexart, 2007, p26.

caring. Contemporary Indigenous curation is anchored to and is an extension of these specific Indigenous philosophies of critical care and value.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, one of the most celebrated curators working today, gives an overview of the etymological roots of 'curation' and the role of the practice both now and historically:

It's worth thinking about the etymology of curating. It comes from the Latin word *curare*, meaning to take care. In Roman times, it meant to take care of the bath houses. In medieval times, it designated the priest who cared for souls. Later, in the 18th century, it meant looking after collections of art and artefacts... Today, curating as a profession means at least four things. It means to preserve, in the sense of safeguarding the heritage of art. It means to be the selector of new work. It means to connect to art history. And it means displaying or arranging the work. But it's more than that. Before 1800, few people went to exhibitions. Now hundreds of millions of people visit them every year. It's a mass medium and a ritual. The curator sets it up so that it becomes an extraordinary experience and not just illustrations or spatialised books.⁷

I argue that Indigenous forms of curation share associations with this historical and contemporary definition. It is about care, but it is also about safeguarding, connecting, experiencing and ritualising. Furthermore, with its connotations of caring, healing and curing, curating seems particularly resonant for Indigenous people. Curation is a mode of caring for and healing from. This is not to suggest an alignment to the discourse of reconciliation. Indigenous exhibitions are often unfairly tasked with reconciling the nation, as well as healing communities and remediating museums. In my use, I mean that the deployment of Indigenous values, principles, metaphors, practices and analogies can potentially restore and respirit the people who enact them and the cultures that inspire them. In this way I am focused in this thesis on the ways in which curation produces forms of cultural renewal, activation and pride.

While writing about curation has flourished over the last decade, attention to Indigenous forms of curation in Australia has been far more limited. As Jens Hoffman, who describes himself as an exhibition-maker rather than a curator, has observed, the exhibition is an important cultural form.⁸

⁷ Hans Ulrich Obrist. 'Hans Ulrich Obrist: the art of curation', *The Guardian*, 24 March 2014, accessed 19 July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/23/hans-ulrich-obrist-art-curator>

⁸ Jens Hoffmann. 'Ten Fundamental Answers', *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, Mousse Publishing, 2013, p9.

Indigenous curation is an important cultural form but an overview of its manifestations has yet to be written. While this thesis does not represent the entire history of Indigenous curation in the Australian context (though producing such an account was my original aim), it does map the institutional spaces, theories, practices and methodologies that many Indigenous curators have drawn on.

In contrast with the situation in Australia, the international context has given rise to more writing on Indigenous exhibitions and curatorial practices. Ruth Phillips's *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenisation of Canadian Museums* (2011) explores the profound changes in museum practices that have been enacted by Indigenous curators, exhibitions and artists in Canada. Bringing together Phillips's writing about Indigenous exhibitions over forty years, this volume is remarkably attentive to the small and large changes that have reshaped the national museum landscape. The result is, as museum and heritage specialist Conal McCarthy writes, 'a history of Canadian museums, an autoethnography of a life in museums, and a meditation on key contemporary issues'.⁹ Transforming this approach to the Australian context has been a guiding principle of my own research project. Significantly, Phillips's subtitle rests on the preposition 'toward', a word choice that hints at Indigenisation as an optimistic, perhaps reconciliatory, and process-oriented transformation of museums, museology and the Canadian nation.

In November 2003, the *Making a Noise!* conference was held at the Banff Centre for Continuing Education in Banff, Canada which I could not attend. The resulting publication, *Making a Noise!: Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing, and Community* (2004) was my first encounter with writing by Indigenous curators about their own curatorial practices.¹⁰ The book was a revelation to me and has been a source of wisdom over many years. I have since discovered that it is rare for curators to reflect on their own curatorial projects and revisit their significance. Though no equivalent book has been produced about Australia, the recent publication *Sovereign Worlds: Indigenous Art, Curation and Criticism* (2019), edited by Katya García-Antón, contains a number of essays by Indigenous artists and curators that present a broad and rich portrait of Indigenous curation globally. Unlike *Making a Noise*, this volume is not centred on anglophone countries and its emphasis on curatorial sovereignty aligns with my own conceptualisation of Indigenous curation. In my view, such curation is a political and cultural tool that does not simply gesture 'toward' Indigenisation, as Phillips's title suggests. Rather, it already *is* Indigenisation.

⁹ Conal McCarthy. 'Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums', *Museum Worlds*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp 246-248.

¹⁰ Lee-Ann Martin, editor. *Making a Noise!: Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community*, Banff International Curatorial Institute, 2004.

It is also worth noting the rich historical study of Indigenous exhibitions, collections and curators at the Art Gallery of New South Wales that was produced by Dr Vanessa Russ (Ngarinyin/Gija, born 1975), academic and director of the Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia, Perth. Her analysis demonstrates just how important the historic and continued institutionalisation of Indigenous art was and is for its legitimisation.¹¹ This work details the importance of Djon Mundine (Bundjalung, born 1951) whose appointment to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1984 as 'Curator in-the-field' was a progressive intervention.¹² Similarly, Daphne Wallace (Gamilaroi/Ullaroi-Yuwaaliaay, born 1964) who became the first permanent curator of Indigenous art at a state gallery in 1993 is another historic appointment.¹³ Russ's thesis details the careers of Hetti Perkins (Arrernte, Kalkadoon, born 1965), Djon Mundine (Bundjalung, born 1951) and others. While I don't disagree with Russ's institutionalisation focus, which is established by her evidence and endorsed by my own thesis, I would support one concession she makes: inclusion does not create equity. Rather, as Russ observes, this relationship is a 'complicated parallel existence in which Aboriginal art is always under Australian art but never in Australian art'.¹⁴ This tension of being within and without and the question of who can determine inclusion and value is a key matter of consideration for this thesis.

The titles of individual chapter of my thesis – Lingering, Insisting, Refusing, Voicing and Resurfacing – are informed by 'Twenty-Five Research Projects', a book chapter by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (Ngāti Awa/Ngāti Porou), which emerged from Indigenous practices, social science methodologies and interdisciplinary research approaches.¹⁵ This section of her seminal *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) is meant to give tools to Indigenous scholars to use methodologies that matter to them. Approaches that she refers to include 'Returning', 'Reframing', 'Remembering' 'Revitalizing' and 'Indigenising'.¹⁶ Many of these methodologies and research programmes are intended to intersect and overlap in productive ways. Similarly, this thesis attempts to create a bricolage of approaches to Indigenous curation that are both theoretical and praxiological.

¹¹ Vanessa Russ. *A Study of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Australian Aboriginal Art: Aboriginal Perspectives and Representations in State Art Galleries*, PhD, Unpublished thesis, University of Western Australia, Perth, 2013.

¹² Ian McLean. *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: an anthology of writing on Aboriginal art 1980-2006*, Power Publications, 2011, p57.

¹³ Terence Maloon. 'The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection', *Yiribana: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Gallery*, edited by Margo Neale, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1994, p16.

¹⁴ Vanessa Russ. *Study of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Australian Aboriginal Art*, 2013, p242.

¹⁵ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. 'Twenty-Five Research Projects', *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, 1999, pp142-161.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp142-161.

Australian art historian Terry Smith argues that curation is not just a type of doing but a type of thinking.¹⁷ This has challenged me to wrestle with the theory of Indigenisation as both a theory and practice. Indigenous-authored exhibitions have in many ways both created art historical and museological discourse and have conceived the conditions for critical discourse. Unfortunately, Indigenous curators are not generally recognised as theoreticians which does not deny Indigenous curators capability to theorise, but rather more problematically, this permits the dismissal or devaluation of Indigenous systems of theorisation. As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson and academic Andrea Smith acknowledge in their justification for a theorisation of Native Studies: 'racialized and colonial Others become marked as those who can be theorized about, but not those who can theorize.'¹⁸ Throughout this thesis I draw heavily on the writing of Indigenous curators to demonstrate that their work is both theory and practice.

0.3 Decolonisation and Indigenisation

Decolonisation is a political process that is usually premised on a retreat or withdrawal by the coloniser. This is one of the most important political ways for Indigenous peoples globally to achieve liberation. This model is unlikely to be realised in Australia. At the same time, this thesis remains deeply invested in the political realities of Indigenous people and takes seriously the influential statement of Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K Wayne Yang that '[d]ecolonisation is not a metaphor.'¹⁹ Decolonisation is vital and urgent work. Displacing the inevitability of colonial rule, decolonisation opens up thresholds of and for Indigenous political alterity. This thesis is an endorsement of this strategy, but it also explores political alternatives in the likely absence of a formal retreat. While I appreciate that decolonisation is not a metaphor, I want to suggest that Indigenisation is far more than a metaphor.

In this vein, I mark a distinction between curatorial practices that are indexed to decolonisation and those based on Indigenisation. Although both approaches are necessary and productive, I contend that the former are political acts of recuperation while the latter are a form of cultural action. As Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith have argued in the North American context, decolonisation is essentially a problem of recognition.²⁰ Decolonisation can only be a coherent strategy when based on a premise of ongoing capitulation to colonialism. Interrogating this premise, Glen S Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene),

¹⁷ Terry Smith. *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, Independent Curators International, 2012, pp253-254.

¹⁸ Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith. 'Introduction', *Theorizing Native Studies*, edited by Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, Duke University Press, 2014, p7.

¹⁹ Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang. 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp1-40.

²⁰ Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith. 'Introduction', *Theorizing Native Studies*, edited by Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, Duke University Press, 2014, pp1-30.

Associate Professor in the First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program at the University of British Columbia, discerns correctly that recognition is not the same thing as self-determination.²¹ If decolonisation is essentially the creation of self-governing nation-states, then I would suggest that Indigenisation is something else, something in-between: a self-determined and self-determining practice using Indigenous forms of recognition and value. Curators are not given a space and they must therefore create one. The exhibitionary spaces that are created and which I describe in this thesis are culturally self-determined.

Art historian Ian McLean argues, coloniality frames Indigenous art's every move, making it in effect its essence.²² While colonialism has been creative as well as destructive for Indigenous people, I reject these totalising assumptions and attempt to demonstrate that Indigenous art exists not merely as a tool for colonial condemnation, but as one of cultural revelation, teaching and identity. Chiricahua Apache academic and curator Nancy Mithlo cautions that reacting to false constructions is 'not engaging in a proactive stance of self-determination or legitimacy'.²³ Indigenous people must not be defined by colonisation or be distracted by its falsehoods. We must attempt to imagine beyond it, by drawing on what came before it.

Métis scholar and artist David Garneau writes of the possibility of creating a space of internationalised connection that unites Indigenous peoples around the world. This global discourse can create points of connection outside the historical structures of the western canon. Indebted to Homi Bhabha's pioneering 'third space' formulation, he describes the Indigenous art world as a potential 'third space' outside dominant regimes.²⁴ Here Indigenous people could:

participate in an Indigenous discourse that includes their local Aboriginal cultures but is not confined by them. Similarly, while Indigenous exhibitions are part of the dominant artworld they are not fully contained by it. The Indigenous art world is a third space, a current between and among Aboriginal and mainstream art worlds.²⁵

²¹ Glen S Coulthard. 'Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada', *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2007, pp437-460.

²² Ian McLean. 'What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?', *The World Is Not a Foreign Land*, edited by Quentin Sprague, Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2014, p54.

²³ Nancy Marie Mithlo. 'We Have All Been Colonized': Subordination and Resistance on a Global Arts Stage', *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 3-4, 2004, p231.

²⁴ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994. Kevin Bruyneel also draws on this formulation for his discussion of political sovereignty. Kevin Bruyneel. *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S. Indigenous Relations*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007

²⁵ David Garneau. 'Toward Indigenous Criticism: The Ah Kee paradox', *Artlink*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2013, pp46-51.

I argue that curatorial expressions informed by practices of Indigenisation can create this non-colonial future in the here and now. In fact, this has been happening already for more than thirty years. If decolonisation is the goal, then Indigenisation must be one of its methods. Art is a symbolic universe which is accessible through imaginative and creative processes. Through its performative register, it carves out an immediate space of and for Indigeneity. In his ground-breaking book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o provokes readers to express themselves in languages other than English. This thesis attempts a reading and framing of those languages.

What, then, distinguishes Indigenous curatorial strategies? What does a curatorial language sound like? To begin this line of questioning it is useful to examine the terms of reference. The *Oxford English Dictionary* assigns the following definition to Indigenous: 'originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native.'²⁶ The geographical register of this definition stands in stark contrast with the temporal and colonial emphasis of the same dictionary's entry for 'Aboriginal': 'inhabiting or existing in a land from the earliest times or from before the arrival of colonists.'²⁷ Without over-valuing English language definitions, we can gather something from the etymology of 'Indigenous'. From the Latin root '*indu*' meaning 'within' and '*gignere*' meaning 'to beget', the word is associated with the idea of creation and production from within. These associations seemed apposite for my working definition of Indigenisation. Curation is, after all, a creative, spatial and often subversive exercise. Exhibitions entail the occupation of physical and representational space. In this way, Indigenising becomes an emphatic process of territorialisation. Infiltrating the representative spaces of institutions, projects of Indigenisation can bring forth new modes of being, seeing and knowing. Moreover, although these projects grapple with institutional power, I would suggest that they do not concede to it. They bring us closer to Indigenous experiences, aspirations and knowledge of value.

Indigenisation is both a theoretical and practical project and, as such, it disrupts 'divisive theory-versus-practice dichotomies' that have been built around Indigenous Studies.²⁸ Scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that Indigenising 'centres a politics of Indigenous identity and indigenous cultural action.'²⁹ This thesis pays attention to the active and activating power of curatorial projects within a framework of Indigenisation. In my working definition of Indigenisation, I therefore propose that it be understood variously as a form of declaration, protest, continuation, maintenance, renewal and memorial.

²⁶ Angus Stevenson, editor. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, online, Oxford University Press, 2011.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith. 'Introduction', 2014, p2.

²⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1999, p146.

Again I would emphasise that while I foreground Indigenisation, I do not dispense with the work of decolonisation. These strategies intersect and overlap. Cree scholar Winona Wheeler states that:

Decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degree to which we have internalized colonialism ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage. Decolonization is about empowerment - a belief that situations can be transformed, a belief and trust in our own peoples' values and abilities and a willingness to make change. It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities.³⁰

This detailed definition concentrates on Indigenous people ourselves and calls for an internal reprogramming of our lives. Such is the impact of colonisation. This labour is, of course, focused on un-learning and the burden is placed on Indigenous people rather than the systems in which they are inscribed. Indigenisation in contrast is a methodology of relearning. It does not suggest that Indigenous people innately know certain things, but that they are often looking for the clues to return to what existed before. Paul Ricoeur has described cultural practice in a way that captures its immersive and ritualised character: '[O]ur heritage is not a sealed package we pass from hand to hand without ever opening, but rather a treasure from which we draw by the handful and which by this act is replenished'.³¹ Indigenisation is a reiterative practice that aims to restore and respirit. It is not merely fixated on practices of the past, but is interested in the future of precedent. It is not merely focused on the preservation of culture, but how it is activated and carried into the future.

David Garneau here sheds light on the generational shifts surrounding Indigenisation: 'The coming generation of indigenous scholars, curators and artists,' he writes, 'is more interested in sharing than being accommodated.'³² The discernible difference between these individuals and their predecessors is

³⁰ Winona Wheeler quoted in Waziyatawin Angela Wilson. 'Reclaiming Our Humanity: Decolonization and the Recovery of Indigenous Knowledge', *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, edited by Devon A. Mihesuah and Angela Wilson Waziyatawin, University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p71.

³¹ Paul Ricoeur. 'Structure and Hermeneutics', *The conflict of interpretations*, Northwestern University Press, 1974, p27.

³² David Garneau. 'From artefact necropolis to living rooms: Indigenous and at home in non-colonial museums', *New Encounters: communities, collections and museums*, National Museum of Australia, 18 March 2016, unpaginated, accessed 17 June 2019.

<https://www.nma.gov.au/audio/new-encounters-communities-collections-and-museums-conference/transcripts/new-encounters-david-garneau>

one of emphasis and degree rather than any singular ideology. He describes the new generations of curators as follows:

They're reluctant to replicate settler mentors and methods when they conflict with aboriginal ways of knowing and being, and with territorial and creative sovereignties. They're more excited about learning, embodying, performing, producing and presenting aboriginal ways than they are about deconstructing dominant cultures, false, inadequate and humiliating misrepresentations.³³

Such an approach is difficult, indeed often impossible outside of art, but it must be attempted. In my discussions of Indigenous curatorial practice throughout this thesis, I explore ways of unbelonging to the state, to the disciplines, to institutions and to history. These modes of what I call productive unbelonging are also articulations of, and claims to, Indigenous sovereignty. The provocation here is to imagine Indigeneity beyond 'containment and dispossession'.³⁴ Even with the agentive power of Indigenous curators and the generous participation of Indigenous communities, it is clear that museums still hold the terms of reference. The bind is one that Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak once captured in a vital question and answer: 'What does it mean to be at once contained and dispossessed by the state?'³⁵

0.4 Unbelonging to the State: Irreconcilable Differences

Any discussion about Indigenous curation must begin with the vexed question of Indigenous identity and its broad and particular significations. While all of the curators in this thesis self-identify as Indigenous, they also choose to describe themselves in terms of their own cultural inheritance. They are not just Indigenous curators; they are Bundjalung, Arrernte/Kalkadoon, Gurindji/Malgnin/Mudpurra, Yamatji, Palawa, Warumunga/Luritja and Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi curators with additional syncretic identities that are outside the scope of this study.

It is important to note that none of us are born Indigenous, Aboriginal or Native. This is, as I elaborate in chapter two, an identity of crisis, projected by and through a colonial lens. These definitional projections distort how we are conditioned to think of ourselves and how the world sees us. While these spurious collectivities flatten and debase cultural particularity, Indigenous curators understand the power of a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Judith Butler. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, edited by Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Seagull Books, 2007, p5.

³⁵ Ibid., p5.

pan-Indigenous identity and deploy it purposefully. For these curators, forms of political power must be built collectively, but togetherness should not be conflated with cultural sameness. Though invoking a pan-Indigenous identity, Indigenous curators also foreground their own cultural identities to inscribe this specificity into generalised understandings of Indigeneity. Both domestically and internationally, this pan-Indigenous identification is an important component of Indigenist political discourse, as academics Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi recognise. In discussing the identity of artist Gordon Bennett (1955–2014), the two acknowledge that the concept of the ‘Aborigine (sic) is a Western construct and yet is an important component of Aboriginalist discourse.’³⁶ Indigenous curators at once attend to these definitions and through their exhibitionary projects, they critique, redirect and mobilise them. In this way, they better represent emergent and credible forms of Indigeneity.

In this context, it is helpful to consider several historical definitions of Indigeneity and Aboriginality and their ideological origins and contemporary elaborations. Lawyer and Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University Michael Dodson (Yawuru) writes about the heavy legacy of these identity constructions, which are entrenched in the Australian Constitution, legal discourse, institutional practices and the national consciousness. Despite the abundance of definitions that purport to describe Indigenous people, he suggests that we do not need to accept them:

The moment the question is asked, ‘Who or what is Aboriginal?’, an historical landscape is entered, full of absolute and timeless truths, which have been set in place by self-professed experts and authorities all too ready to tell us, and the world, the meaning of Aboriginality...Nearly suffocated with imposed labels and structures, Aboriginal people have had no other choice than to insist on our right to speak back, to do as the old man said: to build and represent our own world of meaning and significance.³⁷

Referring to an identity that is at once historical and emerging, projected and inherited, Dodson highlights an essential process of rejection and self-designation. Indigenous identity cannot simply (or ever) be divorced from historical assumptions and interpretations, but it must offer alternatives to expose the discrepancy between assigned and embodied identity.

³⁶ Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi. ‘(Re)Membering, (Dis)Membering: ‘Aboriginality’ and the Art of Gordon Bennett’, *Third Text*, vol. 8, no. 26, 1994, p75.

³⁷ Michael Dodson. ‘The End in the Beginning: Re(De)Finding Aboriginality’, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1, 1994, p4.

After the arrival of Lieutenant James Cook in 1770, invisibility and non-personhood were the preconditions for an Indigeneity that was achieved through the invocation of *terra nullius* (nobody's land).³⁸ Nevertheless Indigenous people could not be completely ignored or rendered invisible, and as a consequence, they became ensnared over time in an increasingly aggressive system of bureaucratic control that was informed by eugenicist ideologies and assimilationist ambitions. The definitional turns from the 1830s to the 1950s are summarised by social historian John Gardiner-Garden:

Although in the first decades of settlement Aboriginal people were grouped by reference to their place of habitation, in subsequent years, as settlement resulted in more dispossession and intermixing, a raft of other definitions came into use. The most common involved reference to 'Blood-quotum'. 'Blood-quotum' classifications entered the legislation of New South Wales in 1839, South Australia in 1844, Victoria in 1864, Queensland in 1865, Western Australia in 1874 and Tasmania in 1912. Thereafter till the late 1950s States regularly legislated all forms of inclusion and exclusion (to and from benefits, rights, places etc.) by reference to degrees of Aboriginal blood.³⁹

However offensive these definitions are, they are significant, and as Michelle Harris, Bronwyn Carlson and Evan Poata-Smith observe, they have featured in arguments about citizenship rights, broader political recognition and the apportioning of resources and services.⁴⁰ These definitions and their application are, thus, clearly about power and control. In an analysis of over 700 pieces of legislation, legal historian John McCorquodale compiled no less than sixty-seven classifications and descriptions that have been used in Australian law to determine who exactly is an Indigenous person.⁴¹ Many of these designations of Indigeneity were born from racist theories of blood quantum which both legitimised and justified the relentless control of Indigenous people, many as wards of the state.⁴² The construction of elaborate phenotypic/genetic models reinforced a regressive conceptualisation of race that was complicit with the distribution and clustering of power. The inherent fear of Indigenous people is both expressed and abated through this terminological excess.

³⁸ Henry Reynolds. 'Postscript: Mabo Remakes the Law of the Land', *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, 1992, p187.

³⁹ John Gardiner-Garden. *Defining Aboriginality in Australia*. Department of the Parliamentary Library, Information and Research Services, 2003, p1.

⁴⁰ Bronwyn Carlson, Michelle Harris and Evan S Poata-Smith. 'Indigenous Identities and the Politics of Authenticity', *The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity*, edited by Michelle Harris, Martin N Nakata and Bronwyn Carlson, 2013, p1.

⁴¹ John McCorquodale. 'The Legal Classification of Race in Australia', *Aboriginal History Journal*, vol. 10, 1986, pp7-24.

⁴² Marcia Langton. "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...": an essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things, Australian Film Commission, Sydney NSW, 1993, p28.

Bidjara anthropologist Marcia Langton has proposed a definition of Indigeneity which was conceived, albeit begrudgingly, with this indexical relationship to colonialism in mind. She states that Aboriginality is 'a field of intersubjectivity that is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representations and interpretation'.⁴³ Her definition contains both the primitivist assumptions and stereotypical constructions of non-Indigenous people and the generalised qualities that Indigenous people attribute to themselves.⁴⁴ The duality of this definition echoes Bronwyn Carlson, Michelle Harris and Evan Poata-Smith's point that 'all social identities are reflexively produced in interaction with others.'⁴⁵

In the late 1960s and early 1970s these fractional identities eventually became obsolete and were replaced with a generic racialised category. The latter was similarly unsupported by science but embraced by global social movements to petition for greater rights for historically marginalised groups. Over time, these racial descriptors would be replaced with a social construction of Indigeneity.

The contemporary definition of an Indigenous person is someone who identifies as Indigenous and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives. This tripartite definition includes descent, self-identification and recognition by the community and was introduced by The Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the 1981 *Report on a Review of the Administration of the Working Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders*. According to the report:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives.⁴⁶

This definition moves away from racial categories (although they are implicit in the word 'descent') and instead embraces a social complex of interconnected relationalities and contextual constructions. Many people have championed this definition because it is socialised and administered by communities and gestures towards unbelonging to the state. But it is nonetheless a mechanism of governmental recognition. Moreover, it simply attempts to hide the imposition of the state through the conceit of

⁴³ Marcia Langton. 'Well, I heard It on the radio and I saw it on the television...': An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and About Aboriginal People and Things, Australian Film Commission, 1993, p33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p33.

⁴⁵ Bronwyn Carlson, Michelle Harris and Evan S Poata-Smith. 'Indigenous Identities', 2013, p3.

⁴⁶ Department of Aboriginal Affairs Australia. *Report on a Review of the Administration of the Working Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander*, 1981.

Indigenous empowerment. It is not my remit to adjudicate the difficulties of substantiating these criteria for any Indigenous person or to suggest how each criterion should be appraised (individually or collectively and with what emphasis). I would only signal the inherent problem of proving one's heritage through, for and because of the state. Through this instrument, as detached as it might appear, Indigenous people at once disappear into the state and are domesticated by it.⁴⁷ To counter this process, we need to imagine new political modalities.

Occupying the multivalent significations of Indigeneity, Indigenous people are conscious of the need to configure new and customary definitions that unfix, unstory and unsettle. Like our shape-shifting ancestors, Indigenous peoples have the ability to self-fashion and recognise other forms of Indigeneity. To undermine the power of prescribed designations, it is necessary to rewrite them.⁴⁸ Sociologist Nick Stevenson has similarly observed an 'intersubjective dimension' of identity.⁴⁹ 'To have an identity,' he argues, 'means the ability to be able to tell a story about the self and related communities. An identity is like a narrative that has to be constantly retold and reformulated in the light of new circumstances.'⁵⁰ It is important to negotiate and deploy differently configured identities that reflect the heritage and diverse experiences of socialisation and acculturation of Indigenous people. In this way, our lived experiences can be unfixed from assigned designations that have been used in punitive ways.

Identity is one point of negotiation and renegotiation for many of the projects discussed in this thesis. Existing western/Indigenous binaries prove insufficient and the curators and artists in this project complicate existing subject positions by imagining themselves not merely in opposition to the west, but in relation to one another. As Nancy Mithlo has observed: 'The danger in characterizing the perceived minority as oppositional is that alternative ideologies are overlooked.'⁵¹ Similarly, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write of the productive nature of repositioning one's identity in relation to others and the potential for dialogue within and between communities:

Attempting to avoid both falling into essentialist traps and being politically paralysed by deconstructionist formulations, we would argue that it is precisely the overlapping of

⁴⁷ Elizabeth A Povinelli. *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, Duke University Press, 2002.

⁴⁸ Michael Dodson. 'The End in the Beginning', 1994, pp2-13.

⁴⁹ Nick Stevenson. 'Identity', *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, edited by Bryan S. Turner, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p277.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p278.

⁵¹ Nancy Marie Mithlo. 'Red Man's Burden': The Politics of Inclusion in Museum Settings', *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3-4, 2004, p754.

these circles that makes possible intercommunal coalitions based on historically shaped affinities. Rather than asking who can speak, then we should ask how to speak together, and more importantly, about how to move the plurilog forward. How might we interweave our voices, whether in chorus, in antiphony, in call and response or in polyphony. While it is dangerous to imagine that one can speak for others (that is, paradigmatically replace them), it is something else again to speak with or alongside others in the sense of forming alliances.⁵²

This thesis details a number of these negotiations which are invested in Indigenous coalitions rather than colonial formulations. For example, in chapter one, I discuss the Yolngu specificity of the *Aboriginal Memorial* which is generously bestowed on all Indigenous people who lost their lives defending their own lands. In chapter two, I explore the exhibition *fluent* which features a 'remote, urban and regional' artist. Rather than endorsing western typologies of identity, the exhibition insists on their cultural connectivity. And in chapter five, I detail how the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) exhibition mobilised south-east communities by paying homage to their material and linguistic diversity. These projects acknowledge the subject positions that have been created for Aboriginal people, but they refuse to assume them. Instead, these curatorial stances privilege and centre Indigenous identity and relation.

0.5 Unbelonging to the Disciplines: Disciplinary Reformulations

In Griselda Pollock's seminal publication, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1988), she exposes the hegemonic nature of the canon of art history and highlights the gendered exclusions the canon has allowed. At the same time, Pollock cautions against adopting a strategy of simple revisionism because 'such revision does not grapple with the terms that created that neglect'.⁵³ In the case of Indigenous art and curation, the thesis dissects the historic reasons for this 'neglect'. At the same time, however, it aspires to go further than just presenting a history of inclusion, even though significant milestones are celebrated. Art historian Henry F Skeritt has observed of these inclusionary acts:

⁵² Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, 1994, p346.

⁵³ Griselda Pollock. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, Routledge, 1999, p24.

[T]hese types of interventions can achieve only so much if the aim is merely to expand the parameters of Western discourse, as opposed to providing space for the persistence of competing and possibly incommensurate ways of being.⁵⁴

My approach is not to valorise the west for these accommodations but to draw out the Indigenous strategies that have proven to be illegible to many non-Indigenous critics. I seek to develop a framework of curatorial practice through an examination of its cultural instantiations over time and around the globe.

While in no way oblivious to colonialism's ongoing structural consequences in Australia (or what Aileen Moreton-Robinson has described as a 'postcolonising' reality),⁵⁵ I am interested in the cultural, critical and imaginative ways that Indigenous curators structure their own exhibitions and installations. Fred Myers understands the 'discursive space' that Indigenous curators work within and writes that 'we need to consider it as part of an Indigenous art field, a range of institutions and practices that structure the condition of production, exhibition recognition, collection and critical reception of Indigenous art.'⁵⁶ This thesis aims to highlight the curators who populate, innovate and organise this expansive field, both pushing at the limits of this discursive space and creating new such spaces.

Despite these curatorial, theoretical and critical innovations, many of the exhibitions featured in this thesis have been interpreted through the very same lens that the curators were trying to unfix. This would seem to support Vernon Ah Kee's assertion that there is a 'dearth of criticism' around Indigenous art:⁵⁷

The lack, or absence, of a constructive critique has seen a growth in Aboriginal art really in terms of quantity only. Although the last 30 years has seen the presence of Aboriginal art reach into most of the major institutional collections the dearth of criticism has stymied much potential for critical and creative growth. Rather than expanding the way we see ourselves, the dominant frameworks and language for describing Aboriginal art has resulted in artists describing and performing a romantic

⁵⁴ Henry Skerritt. 'A Stitch in Time: How Aboriginal Australian Artists are Reweaving Our World', *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p36.

⁵⁵ Aileen Moreton-Robinson. 'I Still Call Australia Home', 2015, pp3-18.

⁵⁶ Fred Myers. 'Recalibrating the Visual Field', 2019, p64.

⁵⁷ Vernon Ah Kee and Daniel Browning. 'Let's Be Polite About Aboriginal Art', *Artlink*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2013, p43.

image of ourselves as a people that conforms to an ever-narrowing ideal. An ideal that has been prescribed for us.⁵⁸

My project emerges from a wish to understand and reflect on the deep cultural and theoretical underpinnings of Indigenous curation and demonstrate that in many ways, this critical framework already exists. Making sense of these frameworks is especially crucial since, as Jessica Morgan observes, the curatorial voice has replaced the critical one.⁵⁹ The goal here is not merely to correct or deconstruct existing structures. Rather I am inspired by Fred Myers's comments on the interventionist potential of Indigenous curation: 'This challenge to the Australian art fields implies, it seems to me, that an Indigenous vision can be articulated without being defined by its relationships to the dominant institutions, or that these relationships would be negotiated from a new position.'⁶⁰ This thesis seeks, thus, to demonstrate the productive unbelonging of Indigenous exhibitions and curators to institutional and disciplinary cultures. Moreover I want to highlight their active assertions of sovereignty through the articulation of Indigenous theories and practices.

Elaine Showalter has pointed out that 'the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanising, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems.'⁶¹ In this respect, my own thinking has been shaped by the work of scholar Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri), whose work as an 'Indigenist' scholar is itself indebted to feminist critical theory.⁶² Rigney calls for the privileging of Indigenous ways of doing which in turn produces a liberation from existing methodologies. Along the same lines, scholar and artist Ali Gumillya Baker (Mirning) implores us to create and claim our own theoretical ground rather than reacting to the positions of others:

While we need to understand, and stand opposed to oppressive acts of colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and violence and global devastation of our bodies and lands, we cannot live within and endlessly perpetuate this violence of representation, we cannot dwell inside these abject theoretical prisons in order to educate our oppressors. But sometimes we do. We also seek what is outside and beyond, and we

⁵⁸ Ibid., p43.

⁵⁹ Jessica Morgan. 'What Is a Curator?' *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, edited by Jens Hoffmann, Mousse Publishing, 2013, p26.

⁶⁰ Fred Myers. 'Recalibrating the Visual Field', 2019, p73.

⁶¹ Elaine Showalter. 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1981, p183.

⁶² Lester-Irabinna Rigney. 'Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies: A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and its Principles', *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1999, pp109-121.

respond to the call of our ancestors, as Natalie Harkin states in our collective work, 'we are compelled to respond.' 'The silence is waiting. The silence is waiting.'⁶³

For most of their histories, art galleries and museums have contributed to and (re)produced this silence. When Indigenous curators and artists began emerging in the 1980s, such silence could no longer be tolerated. In the 1980s, new theories of Indigenous art, often championed by Indigenous curators, suggested that art history and art museums were the ideal discipline and space in which to understand Indigenous art. These realms were presumed to be innocent of a primitivising agenda. Historically the largest repositories of Indigenous material culture from Australia existed in natural history museums rather than in art galleries. The journey to recognising Indigenous art within the fine art and later contemporary art arena, thus, involved a disciplinary disruption in concert with a locational incursion into art galleries. The difference between art museums and natural history museums has largely rested on the different weight they attach to the form and function of objects. Putting aside more complex genealogies and methodologies, an art historical approach could broadly be described as one that privileges the formal qualities of a work of art while an anthropological approach is one that situates the work within a localised cultural and social context. Still, Fred Myers reminds us that: '[Art] criticism has significant parallels with anthropology as an interpretive activity which has culture as its object'.⁶⁴ Similarly, Nicholas Thomas suggests the possibility of doing 'anthropological art history'.⁶⁵ Appreciation of these similarities between the disciplines is much rarer than identification of the differences. Every chapter in this thesis points to the limits of this disciplinary binary and each one also recognises the important interplay between Indigenous art and culture. The generative value of curatorial practice lies in the fact that in its contemporary manifestation it is intentionally multidisciplinary: it does not and should not align to any single framework.

0.6 Unbelonging to the Institution: Locational Disturbances

When I began this thesis, I was mainly interested in chronicling the shift away from presenting Indigenous art in museums and its redirection towards state and national art galleries. I wanted to study the exhibitions curated within these newly territorialised spaces.⁶⁶ While this shift is important, museums and galleries are both institutions, and the move has, thus, had institutionalising and nationalising implications. Nevertheless this movement is reflected and celebrated across many of the

⁶³ Ali Gumillya Baker. 'Camping in the Shadow of the Racist Text', *Artlink*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2018, p19.

⁶⁴ Fred Myers. 'Beyond the Intentional Fallacy: Art Criticism and the Ethnography of Aboriginal Acrylic Painting', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1994, p11.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Thomas. 'Beginnings', 1999, p17.

⁶⁶ Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby. 'Introduction', *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, edited by Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby, Melbourne University Press, 2008, p6.

chapters. I soon discovered that only focusing on institutional forms of curation would produce a contextually meaningful but ultimately reductive narrative of Indigenous typologies of curation. This analytical narrowness would have led to an inadequate account of the multiple locational incursions and disruptions that Indigenous art and Indigenous curators have helped engineer.

To better represent the innovations of Indigenous curation, I decided to explore different sites, platforms and spaces including those that would be considered 'institutional'.⁶⁷ I reasoned that exhibitionary projects within each site would require different modes of curation, thus creating a richer and less homogenous picture of curation. This is not to suggest that Indigenous curators should not work within institutions or that such work is less significant. It is rather to demonstrate the success that Indigenous curators have had in working within many sites and platforms and to chart the dynamism of Indigenous forms of curation through this multi-sited articulation.

This thesis pays attention to the particular curatorial strategies that have been employed by every curator or curatorium for each selected project. This has involved an interrogation of the representative space of each site and documentation of the immediate and lasting legacies of these interventions. The major sites of cultural production under investigation have included the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale; the Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University, Cambridge; the British Museum, London; the National Museum of Australia, Canberra and the Kaldor Public Art Projects in the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney.

These different sites have given rise to different types of exhibitions: In chapter one and chapter two, I present case studies, from the 1988 Sydney and 1997 Venice Biennales respectively. These exhibitions explore different expressions of nationalism and artistic value from an Indigenous perspective. The *Everywhen* (2016) exhibition, which is discussed in chapter three, was a survey exhibition of 'contemporary' art within the university art museum at Harvard University that also drew on its archaeology- and ethnology-focused collection. As such, it had to contend with the disciplinary monopolies within each context. Chapter four considers two exhibitions: *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisations* (2015), a mostly collection exhibition at the British Museum which relied on and critiqued the world's oldest national museum, and *Unsettled: Stories Within* (2015-16), a show located in one of the world's newest national social history museums, the National Museum of Australia. This second exhibition responded to the British Museum's collection and explored its museological legacies and the

⁶⁷ Nicholas Thomas. 'Beginnings', 1999, p14.

potential for reconfiguring relationships based on Indigenous priorities. Finally, in chapter five, I consider the model of artist as curator through Jonathan Jones's *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* exhibition (2016). This was an ephemeral, site-specific outdoor installation that deployed a particular Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi methodology to invite meditation on loss and renewal.

As I have argued here, my analysis doesn't ignore the importance of institutional or collection-oriented curation, as chapter four particularly bears out. But at the same time, I do not shy away from the punishing ideologies at work in such institutions.⁶⁸ I am interested in exploring these crises of institutionalisation. Moreover, I seek to create the broadest panorama for an Indigenised curatorial framework which explores the limits, responsibilities and creative options for addressing institutionalisation within each contextual setting. In the context of institutional power, confrontation, redirection and refusal are significant registers of Indigenous unbelonging.

Part of my reluctance to embrace institutional curation was strengthened by the resignation of Brenda L Croft from the National Gallery of Australia in 2009. Croft called this an 'act of resistance'⁶⁹ and it was followed by the more widely reported resignation of Hetti Perkins from the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2011. The resignations of these leading curators signalled to me not just a problem of institutional curation but one of institutionalisation itself.⁷⁰ This position is backed by my own experiences of feeling more curatorially empowered through guest-curated exhibitions. After five years at the National Gallery of Victoria (2005–2010) and two-and-a-half years at the National Gallery of Australia, (2003–2005), I felt institutionally bruised, exhausted and subdued. I wanted to explore projects that at least gestured towards a degree of curatorial autonomy. Djon Mundine arguably occupied this radical autonomy in his designation as 'Curator-in-the-field' at the AGNSW. I was also keen to revisit projects that communicated a sense of their own unbelonging, or what has been widely described by Homi Bhabha, Kevin Bruyneel and David Garneau as a third space. This third space does not rely on the dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion or assimilation/integration.

0.7 Overview of the Study: Chapter Outlines

I begin my discussion of Indigenous curation in this thesis with one of the most significant works of art in Australia. The *Aboriginal Memorial* was conceived and curated by Djon Mundine to mark the Australian Bicentenary in 1988 and the work is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

⁶⁸ Ashleigh Wilson. 'Hetti Perkins quits NSW state gallery position and calls for national indigenous art space', *The Australian*, 20 September 2011, pp1-2.

⁶⁹ Brenda L Croft. 'Interview with the author', 20 September 2019.

⁷⁰ Ashleigh Wilson. 'Hetti Perkins quits', 20 September 2011, pp1-2.

The work consists of 200 *dupun* (hollow log coffins) representing the lives that were lost since colonisation. It is a powerful memorial statement and one that embodies the profound contradiction of Indigenous art existing within nationalising intuitions while agitating for radically different political alterities. Although the success of Indigenous curation arguably lies in its implication within 'shared' sites of high visibility, Indigenous people and national ideologies exist in what Nicholas Thomas describes as an unresolved 'antagonistic intimacy'.⁷¹ Understanding this intervention through a frame of unbelonging, thus, helps to bring out the predicaments of sharing space, and we see that this is not quite inclusion, not quite acceptance.

Mobilising versions of what historian Bain Atwood terms 'new history', the *Aboriginal Memorial* contributed to a growing awareness of historical narrative that included Indigenous perspectives.⁷² But it also insisted on the need for Indigenous people to be the historians of our own oral narratives. By expressing these histories, the *Aboriginal Memorial* becomes a curatorial performance of both grief and haunting. Using Yolngu practices of ritual mourning, it enfolds audiences within these invocations of the ceremonial to collectively mourn those Aboriginal people who died defending their lands. At the same time it is enacted, this performance can never be completed. I use the trope of 'Lingering' to disable the interpretive framework that identifies colonial trauma and then quickly creates a comfort zone to accommodate it via the rhetoric of reconciliation. Healing cannot begin while we are still grieving.

In this chapter, I outline the connections between performative culture and material culture that the curation of Djon Mundine made manifest. The *dupun* are not just static objects. There are spirits lingering within and around these works of art connected to the symbolic order that created them. Art is a way to archive and objectify knowledge and Indigenous forms of curation enable the activation of these embodied moments of archiving. I concur here with anthropologist Christina Kreps, who argues that Indigenous curation is not merely an instrument to activate culture. It is, she argues, its own form of intangible cultural heritage that needs preservation and activation through theorisation and praxis.⁷³

In chapter two, I examine the only exhibition that has been curated by Indigenous people in the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Curated by Brenda L Croft and Hetti Perkins in 1997, the

⁷¹ Nicholas Thomas. 'Beginnings', 1999, p10.

⁷² Bain Atwood. 'The Past as Future: Aborigines, Australia and the (Dis)Course of History', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 1, April 1996, unpaginated. This 'new history' is one that includes Indigenous histories.

⁷³ Christina Kreps. 'Indigenous Curation, Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage', *Intangible Heritage*, edited by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, Routledge, 2009, p193.

exhibition *fluent* featured the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Anmatyerre, 1910–96), Yvonne Koolmatrie, (Ngarrindjeri, born 1945) and Judy Watson (Waanyi, born 1959). This exhibition fought for the recognition of Indigenous art and it has stood the test of time. In this chapter, I discuss the identities that these three artists represented and examine how these generalised identifications are troubled and unsettled.

Within this high-prestige Venice venue of contemporary art, *fluent* carefully marked out a space where Indigenous art could be both within and without. It demonstrated the quality of this art while at the same time offering new modes of qualitative understanding. The exhibition, thus, created a framework for Indigenous excellence which positioned the artists on their own terms. Furthermore, my discussion in this chapter details the inherent protocols of Indigenous forms of curation and how they function as an extension of Indigenous critical care.

In chapter three, I draw on my own curatorial practice to present a different iteration of Indigenous curation. In 2016, I curated an exhibition called *Everywhen: The eternal present in Indigenous art from Australia* at the Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University in the USA. Within this exhibition, I drew on the Australian anthropologist William Stanner's model of the 'everywhen', which attempts to conceptualise Indigenous understandings of temporality. The use of this model aimed to present a much broader worldview that was not defined by colonisation. This exhibition was not just about time; it was also about the power to claim time. It challenged not just the limits of western temporality, but also those of western disciplinarity and governmentality.

To this end, I identified temporal constructs applied to Indigenous objects along three lines: the conceits of anthropological fieldwork understood through the 'ethnographic present', the historicisation of Indigenous museum objects and the category of the contemporary as an interpretive tool. The outlining of these constructs was not done merely to critique them. Instead I sought to offer alternative theories of Indigenous art and culture that are not determined by colonisation.

Chapter three also attends to the disciplinary binary of art history and anthropology. *Everywhen* intentionally provoked a temporal and disciplinary displacement since it used and critiqued the representative space of both the art museum and the anthropology museum at Harvard University. Unbelonging to these disciplines is not about dispensing with them, but about demonstrating that this 'choice' is one that is structured by colonialism and is not representative of the integrated ways in which Indigenous art and culture interrelate. The separation of art from culture, which is implied in the anthropology and art binary, makes no sense to Indigenous people, but it has nonetheless fuelled

intensely hostile debates around the best ways to understand the totality and complexity of Indigenous art. I used objects from an anthropological collection within the representative space of an art museum, to suggest how these disciplines might be reconfigured to tease out potentially richer cultural biographies of objects and to better represent Indigenous methodologies. The fixed binary model is a blunt instrument that determines difference as a singular Other. In contrast, a model based on relatedness can find new registers of meaning within broader points of difference. I take for granted that Indigenous art history is already anthropologically informed and embrace the interconnections that suit Indigenous practices but do not reify disciplinary monopolisations.

Finally, in this chapter, I draw on the work of scholar Audra Simpson, including her use of the analytical tool of refusal. She argues that this stance directed towards settler states, is not just one of disengagement but it structures and generates new possibilities. The *Everywhen* exhibition applied a stance of refusal at one of the most prestigious places of western knowledge. At the same time, Harvard University was also identified as a site of ongoing Indigeneity, a point I explained in my deliberations. This discussion leads me also to consider how these stances of refusal and recognition relate to issues of sovereignty in Australia and in the USA. I am conscious particularly of how intra-Indigenous modes of recognition might operate.

In chapter four, I turn to two exhibitions which were largely focused on objects from the British Museum's collection or works created in response to that collection. *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* was curated by Dr Gaye Sculthorpe (Palawa) and held at the British Museum. Contrasting sharply with all the other Indigenous curatorial arrangements under discussion, Sculthorpe was a full-time employee of the British Museum. I do not concede that this automatically constrains her agency but demonstrate that the project of Indigenisation is far more difficult within this loaded site of British imperialism. The second exhibition, *Unsettled: Stories Within*, was curated by Kelli Cole (Wurumunga and Luritja, born 1973) at the National Museum of Australia. This show featured five Indigenous artists who were invited to spend time with objects in the British Museum's collection and respond creatively to this experience. Kelli Cole was the consultant curator for this exhibition, and I highlight what is at stake for Indigenous curators and artists when they work with historic collections.

Chapter four also explores the idea of 'voice' across a number of registers. Firstly, it takes for granted the 'voicings' that are embedded within Indigenous objects and which destabilise traditional object/subject dichotomies. As Ruth B Phillips observes:

From Indigenous perspectives, more accurate renderings of concepts of sacrality may have to do with apprehensions of spiritual presence in varying degrees, or of qualities of personhood, or of deeply felt ancestral resonance. These ‘things’ may thus be thought of as beings or ‘grandfathers,’ rather than specimens, objects, artifacts, or works of art.⁷⁴

Troubling long-standing assumptions about objecthood, the idea of voice helps elicit the ‘qualities of personhood’ that are registered by Indigenous curators. The concept also animates discussions of repatriation as this applies to both human remains and cultural objects. While I am highly conscious of the real people whose remains are held within museum collections, I focus here on the mounting pressure that is building on and around the repatriation of cultural objects, and which is articulated by the two curators in different ways. These case studies highlight different strategies of curatorial and artistic repatriation, which may be literal, as in the request for the return of the Gweagal shield,⁷⁵ or symbolic and ephemeral as in the ‘bittersweet reunion’ that trawlwoolway artist Julie Gough had with an historic kelp water container in the British Museum’s collection.⁷⁶ Against this background, the chapter asks bigger questions about the ethics of representation and the role of curators and museums in the voicing of Indigenous objects, a challenge that summons Gyatri Spivak’s question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’⁷⁷ In the same vein, I ask whose stories should be told and in what register they can be heard.

I conclude this thesis with a discussion of *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*), an installation by artist, curator and public programmer Jonathan Jones that took place through the Kaldor Public Art Projects in 2016. Listening and speaking are at the heart of Jones’s project but he also demonstrates an abiding confidence in the processes of remaking intangible aspects of Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi culture. These processes are dormant within the land and within Indigenous people themselves. They need to be resurfaced and activated through cultural modalities of which curation is but one. This project memorialises the Garden Palace, which was built for the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition and burnt down in 1882. The fire destroyed a huge collection of Indigenous cultural material from Australia’s south-east, including men’s shields. Drawing on an understanding of fire as an element that is both

⁷⁴ Ruth B Phillips. ‘Exclusions and Inclusions Authenticity, Sacrality and Possession’, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011, p93

⁷⁵ Nicholas Thomas. ‘A Case of Identity: The Artefacts of the 1770 Kamay (Botany Bay) Encounter’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2018, p7.

⁷⁶ Julie Gough. ‘Julie Gough’, *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, 2015, accessed 14 June 2019. <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/julie-gough>

⁷⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Rosalind C. Morris, editors. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, Columbia University Press, 2010.

creative and destructive, Jones curated an enormous installation that grappled with the question of what from the south-east can be recovered, renewed and respirited. Indigenisation is particularly attuned to what has been retained rather than what has been lost. Calling on human memory, museum archive and the land itself, Jones demonstrated what can be repaired and restored. The exhibition was not built around an Indigenous methodology but rather an explicitly Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi one. This specificity should be one the aims of projects of Indigenisation.

This chapter may appear to be the least concerned with statehood, but this does not mean that it is uninterested in sovereignty. In fact, the reclamation of language and cultural practices in Jones's installation suggests an intentional move to demonstrate and embrace cultural particularity, and this is done in part by unbelonging to western history, the English language and museological narratives. Jones does not dismiss the importance of museum spaces but rather he challenges the historical narratives that the museum codified. By attending closely to one cultural object of the south-east, the shield, and presenting 15,000 of them in his installation, he demonstrates how standard museological meanings have been complicit in colonisation's agenda and a new reckoning must take place. He also suggests that there are another kinds of museums that contain knowledge. For those who know where and how to look, the land is an important archive of knowledge. Indigenous people must activate this knowledge.

0.8 Cultural Positioning: An Indigenous Research Methodology

In 2003, I began a three-year curatorial traineeship in the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. I worked with Brenda L Croft (Gurindji, Malignin and Mudpurra), who was then Senior Curator and Susan Jenkins who was Curator. This experience changed my life and I have been working as a curator and lecturer in Indigenous art ever since. I have been active in the field of Indigenous art where I have built up professional and personal relationships with many curators, artists and academics.

I outline this as a way to mark my critical participation within this field that predates but also informs my research project. My physical and professional immersion could not be quarantined from the temporal boundedness of this research project. This put me at odds with the University's inflexible instruments for determining ethical relations. I have been a participant observer in the field called Indigenous art for many years. In this thesis, I engage with different parts of the field and suggest that conceptual separation is not possible. Methodologically, I am not outside this field and in many ways, I have been part of its ongoing constitution.

I do not claim that my involvement as an Indigenous curator demands an exemption from ethical considerations or conversely that it presents any 'natural' advantages. In this respect, I draw on Torres Strait Islander Professor Martin Nakata's definition of Indigenous Standpoint Theory, which does not rely on any inherent experiential qualities attached to being an Indigenous person. Rather, Nakata insists that an Indigenous standpoint rests on a commitment to critical ethical relations:

An Indigenous standpoint, therefore, has to be produced. It is not a simple reflection of experience and it does not pre-exist in the everyday waiting to be brought to light. It is not any sort of hidden wisdom that Indigenous people possess. It is a distinct form of analysis and is itself both a discursive construction and an intellectual device to persuade others and elevate what might not have been a focus of attention by others. It is not deterministic of any truth, but it lays open a basis from which to launch a range of possible arguments for a range of possible purposes. These arguments still need to be rational and reasoned; they need to answer to the logic and assumptions on which they are built. Arguments from this position cannot assert a claim to truth that is beyond the scrutiny of others on the basis that, as a member of the Indigenous community, what I say counts.⁷⁸

I take this articulation of standpoint as both a caution and an opportunity. From an Indigenous perspective, I cannot conduct research in a way that dehumanises my interlocutors. I cannot refer to them as a 'sample' or even a 'research subject', or even make uncritical use of terms like 'informant', with all of the historical asymmetries that that word implies. At times, I found it difficult both to exploit my existing intimacy with many of the curators and to separate myself from it. Rather than camouflage these contradictions, I chose to speak openly about them with the curators. I do not claim to have resolved this conflict between distancing and interaction, but simply acknowledge that it doesn't go away. This tension of unbelonging lies at the conceptual core of this project in many different guises and is not just a theoretical provocation. Despite this difficulty, I aspired to enact a research practice that was, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, 'grounded in a real sense of, and sensitivity towards, what is means to be an indigenous person.'⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Martin N Nakata. 'An Indigenous Standpoint Theory', *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007, p348.

⁷⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1999p, 138.

This thesis attempts to embed qualitative writing strategies that endorse the importance of Indigenous agency and perspectives and are well-suited for building theoretical claims. Belonging to the Yamatji people of Western Australia on my mother's side, I foreground my own identity as an important part of my methodology as a researcher and as a curator. When referring to Indigenous peoples and/or curators, I often use the personal, possessive and intensive pronouns of 'we', 'us', 'our' and 'ourselves' to articulate my own cultural, personal and professional stake in these matters. But I am also Australian on my father's side, and I try to see others as I see myself: as a multifaceted social and cultural being. Although I was dealing with a professionally homogeneous group of people, there were many aspects of each person's identity that have not been addressed. In this way, I was conscious of both the burdens and demands of essentialisation.

Although each case study is unique, I have applied a similar methodology to each exhibition project and this format can be replicated by other scholars. Once again, I am indebted to Ruth B Phillips whose book *Museum Pieces toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, has provided a conceptual framework for this thesis. Her argument that case studies provide 'historical perspectives and a site for theoretical analysis and models of innovation practices' has structured this thesis.⁸⁰ Within these analytical case studies, I attempt to foreground the curatorial premise of the given exhibition or installation in order to demonstrate the theoretical depth of Indigenous forms of curation. These exhibitions do not exist in a vacuum and I seek to understand their interventionist meaning through an examination of each institutional context and history. Many of these exhibitions and projects were the first project of their kind, which points in itself to the significance of my selections. As a consequence, I consider the 'friction' that has been produced by the exhibitions within each institutional context. This term is one put forward by anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing,⁸¹ and I was introduced to it in the writing of Fred Myers.⁸² I attempt to mark these frictions in the contemporaneous critical reception of each curatorial project. I am interested in these active encounters with friction within, without, between and beyond institutional and infrastructural forces. In this model, formulations of cross-cultural encounter can be understood not as clashes or collisions but as constitutive elements generating strategic forms of resistance, production and transformation. In the older examples set out in Part One, this friction is more evident. As such longer discussions about the legacies of these exhibitions were required, particularly in terms of their institutional and structural consequences.

⁸⁰ Ruth B Phillips. *Museum Pieces*, 2011, p21.

⁸¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

⁸² Fred Myers. 'Disturbances in the Field: Exhibiting Aboriginal Art in the US', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 2-3, 2013, p151.

My methodology included drawing on the primary texts of each curator that were written specifically for the exhibition or installation. In the case of the earlier exhibitions in Part One, there was a significant body of literature around these shows and their importance. My decision to focus on institutional spaces of national or international importance also meant that the reception of these exhibitions had often attracted more critical writing. I used these critical reviews to signal the difference between my own theoretical framework and prevailing western interpretive regimes. I also tried to incorporate retrospective recollections of these exhibitions based on interviews and email exchanges with the curators when primary texts were unavailable.

As a curator and art historian, I have tried to include visual analyses of many of the works in the exhibitions. This is in order to identify how these works marshalled important aspects of the given show's premise. Each chapter reflects a curatorial and art historical commitment to these objects as art and also more-than-art. It must be said that this approach is anthropologically informed, and I demonstrate the many ways that Indigenous works of art can be apprehended through these disciplinary mutualities and an Indigenous expansiveness. While all of the case studies are unique, they have been chosen deliberately for their potential to emphasise different modes of curatorial production. Within these discussions, I have tried to amplify the voices of the curators as well as the artists themselves. Nevertheless, it is my own interpretive bias that is ultimately brought to bear on all of the exhibitions.

Joshua W Clegg and Brent D Slife remind us that 'every research activity is an exercise in research ethics, every research question is a moral dilemma, and every research decision is an instantiation of values.'⁸³ I attempt to reflect Indigenous values of critical care in all that I do in this thesis, and I structure the study using Indigenous practices, metaphors and analogies to create an Indigenous critical framework. This is built upon a commitment to the Indigenist methodology proposed by Lester-Irabinna Rigney, who insists on its liberatory potential.⁸⁴ It is in this spirit of openness to the possibilities of liberation that I begin this work.

⁸³ Joshua W Clegg and Brent D Slife. 'Research Ethics in the Postmodern Context', *The Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, edited by Donna Mertens and Pauline Ginsberg, SAGE Publications, 2009, p23.

⁸⁴ Lester-Irabinna Rigney. 'Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique', 1999, pp109-121.

Chapter One: Lingering The *Aboriginal Memorial* curated by Djon Mundine

These events and what lies behind them are burned into our minds. They are never forgotten. Such things are remembered. Like the scar that marked the exit of the bullet from my father's body.¹

Galarwuy Yunupingu

In many ways, memorials are not for the dead but for those who are left behind. Memorials can provide a place to gather and remember; where private words and actions fail, public ritual takes over, taming profound grief. The impulse to memorialise those who have died is shared across cultures, but it can be expressed in entirely different ways. While practices for mourning individuals are intrinsic to community life, public memorials of mass deaths through wars and catastrophes demand a different social engagement. Despite the widespread use of the memorial forms of the cenotaph, obelisk, flagpole, cairn and statue to commemorate uniformed soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in post-war Australia, in 1988 there had never been a memorial devoted to the lives of Indigenous people who had died defending their homelands.² And it is only in recent years that there have been a number of significant public memorials dedicated to these servicemen and women including *YININMADYEMI Thou didst let fall* (2015) by Tony Albert (Girramay, born 1981) in Hyde Park, Sydney and the recent commission by Daniel Boyd (Kudjila/Gangalu, born 1982) *For our Country* (2019) at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The absence in 1988 precipitated the development of the *Aboriginal Memorial* (1987–88) (87.2240.1-200), which was conceived by Bundjalung curator Djon Mundine (born 1951). The *Aboriginal Memorial* was first exhibited as part of the Biennale of Sydney as an intentional foil to the triumphalism of Australia's Bicentenary in 1988. The work is now housed in the National Gallery of Australia, (NGA) Canberra where its presence for over thirty years has taught visitors much about Indigenous aesthetic, political, spiritual and cultural values.³ Furthermore, it is an important creation story in the history of Indigenous curation.

¹ Galarwuy Yunupingu. 'Rom Watangu: The Law of the Land', *The Monthly: Australian Politics, Society & Culture*, no. 124, July 2016, p20.

² Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', *1988 Australian Biennale: from the Southern Cross: a view of world art c. 1940-88*, edited by Nick Waterlow, Biennale of Sydney, 1988, p230.

³ For consistency, I use the designation 'National Gallery of Australia' and or NGA although at the time of the acquisition of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, this institution was known as the Australian National Gallery. The name was changed on 24 October 1992 under the directorship of Betty Churcher. See Laura Fisher. 'Emergence of Aboriginal Art in the 1980s', *Aboriginal Art and Australian Society: Hope and Disenchantment*, Anthem Press, 2016, p75.

As a provocation to complacent attitudes to Australian history, Mundine deliberately positioned the *Aboriginal Memorial* against historically established forms of war memorial in Australia. This was to unsettle the idea that there was little or no frontier violence in Australia's history. While some responses (for example, the claim that the work cannot be considered a war memorial as it does not relate to uniformed soldiers) are clearly cynical and disingenuous, the *Aboriginal Memorial* creates a space to work through unacknowledged histories of violence between opposing sides. Where frontier violence has been erased or minimised through a language of 'skirmishes', 'dispersals', 'encounters' and 'disputes', there is no room for euphemism with the use of the word 'war'. The lens of war is central to understanding the *Aboriginal Memorial*, but there are also parallels with international memorials of genocide that emerged following World War Two. The comparison to civilian casualties of genocide is robust in historical, conceptual and architectural terms. Contemporary scholarship around genocide and its memorial vernacular has identified the void or 'negative form' as both an architectural, artistic and metaphorical means of articulating loss.⁴ The hollow logs of the *Aboriginal Memorial* are an obvious 'negative form' and the installation was designed to highlight a void of history and emotion, offering a language to speak into and about the void. This void or absence becomes a space of reckoning and a site of lingering.

Before 1969, it was largely illegal to bury Indigenous people in most cemeteries in Australia.⁵ The installation therefore forces a public and national reckoning with the histories of colonial violence, erasure and marginalisation. If, as I contend in the Introduction, Indigenous curatorial projects can be characterised by a methodological shift from cultural preservation to activation, we must be alert to both explicit and subtle articulations of praxis that position works of art not only within Indigenous frames of reference but against them. The concept of the *Aboriginal Memorial* can be understood across diverse cultural registers, and Djon Mundine harnessed these expansive notions of memorial forms to create an affective experience *through, between and across* cultural subjectivities.

This chapter considers how the *Aboriginal Memorial* embodies the instrumental role of Indigenous forms of curation across multiple levels: as a platform for social and cultural practice, art historical re-imagining and political activism. Through its conceptualisation, interpretation and installation, the

⁴ James E Young, 'The Memorial's Vernacular Arc Between Berlin's Denkmal and New York City's 9/11 Memorial', *Entangled memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a global age*, edited by Marius Henderson and Julia Lange, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017, p21.

⁵ Prue Vines, 'Resting in peace? A Comparison of the Legal Control of Bodily Remains in Cemeteries and Aboriginal Burial Grounds in Australia', *The Sydney Law Review*, vol. 20, no.1, 1998, pp78-107.



FIGURE 1.1

Current site-specific installation at the National Gallery of Australia.

The Aboriginal Memorial, 1987–88

Djardie Ashley, Joe Patrick Birriwanga, David Blanas, Roy Burmyla, Mick Daypurrun 2, Tony Dhanyula, Paddy Dhatangu, Johnny Dhurrikayu, Jimmy Djelminy, Tony Djikululu, Dorothy Djukulul, Tom Djumburpur, Robyn Djunginy, Charlie Djurritjini, Elisabeth Djuttara, Billy Black Durrumba, Gela Nga-Mirraltja Fordham, Toby Gabalga, Daisy Ganyila 2, Philip Gudthaykudthay, Neville Gulaygulay, Don Gundinga, George Jangawanga, David Malangi Daymirringu, Jimmy Mamalunhawuy, Terry Mangapal, Agnes Marrawurr, Andrew Marrgululu, Clara Matjandatipi (Wubukwubuk), John Mawurndjul AM, Dick Smith Mewirri, George Milpurrruru Malibirr, Peter Minygululu, Jack Mirritji 2, Jimmy Moduk, Neville Nanyjawuy, Victor Pamkal, Roy Riwa, Frances Rrikili, William Watiri, Jimmy Wululu, Wurraki 2, Yambal Durrurringa. Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, sculptures, installation, earth pigments on wood. Purchased with the assistance of funds from National Gallery admission charges and commissioned in 1987. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 87.2240.1-200

Aboriginal Memorial encodes Indigenous methodologies and practices such as presencing the ancestral, surfacing alternative histories, spatialising the deep local and enfolding audiences in invocations of the ceremonial. This curatorial and community offering is indexed to the memory and politics of place and celebrates the fact that Indigenous knowledge is spatial and safeguarded through cartographic articulations. It must be said that the *Aboriginal Memorial* emerges not from a positional defensiveness about what Aboriginal art isn't, but from an expansive and expanding understanding of what it could be. In this way, it is deeply invested in producing modes of unbelonging to the state, to the institution, to disciplines and to history.

1.1 The Aboriginal Memorial (1987-88)

The *Aboriginal Memorial* consists of 200 *Dupun* (hollow log coffins) that are customarily used as part of secondary mourning ceremonies practiced by Yolngu people in Arnhem Land (Figure 1.1). When a person dies, their body is washed, painted with totemic designs, sung over and buried. After the

requisite period of ritual mourning, which could be years, the *Dupun* ceremony is held and the bones of the deceased are placed inside logs that have been naturally hollowed out by termites. The *Dupun* is similarly painted with the totemic associations of the deceased. After the sequences of songs and dances are performed in a special camp, the log is carried into the main public camp where finally it is positioned upright in the deceased's ancestral lands. Conceptually echoing the dematerialisation of the body, the *Dupun* is left in the open to be weathered down by the elements. Many of the *Dupun* from central Arnhem Land have circles cut out where the soul can look out onto country and linger between and beyond sensorial worlds.⁶ This ceremony marks the journey of the soul into the afterlife, but it is understood that the soul of the deceased continues to linger indefinitely within the *Dupun*.⁷

Mundine's conceptualisation of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was a direct response to the Australian Bicentenary in 1988 and each *Dupun* represented a year since colonisation, commemorating the 'several hundred thousand Aboriginal people who have died' fighting for their lands since colonisation.⁸ Despite the Yolngu cultural specificity of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, it is conceptually dedicated to all Aboriginal people who never received culturally appropriate burials. The emphasis is on the loss of life. At the same time, as Djardie Ashley (Ritharrngu, 1950 – 2007), former Chair of Bula'bula Arts, the artists' cooperative at Ramingining and a contributor to the *Aboriginal Memorial*, acknowledges the work's purpose is also to grieve for the loss of social and cultural practices through a shared – or rather generously gifted – performative language:

The *Memorial* commemorates the thousands of people who lost their lives defending their lands, and for those for whom appropriate funeral rites were not possible; symbolically reclaiming the dead and burying them.⁹

The *Aboriginal Memorial* represents a crucial moment in the institutional acceptance of Indigenous art and by extension, Indigenous curation. In this vein, it highlights the accelerating ways in which Indigenous methodologies are being deployed and affirmed. While it has been at the centre of Indigenous artistic histories, thirty-one years after its first public appearance, it is timely to re-examine its curatorial influence.

⁶ Susan Jenkins. 'Introduction', *It's a Power: An Interpretation of the Aboriginal Memorial in its Ethnographic, Museological, Art Historical and Political Contexts*, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010, p125.

⁷ National Gallery of Australia. 'Dupun: The hollow log ceremony,' *The Memorial: A Masterpiece of Aboriginal Art*, edited by National Gallery of Australia and Musée Olympique, 1999, p30.

⁸ Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

⁹ Djardie Ashley. 'Foreword', *The Memorial: A Masterpiece of Aboriginal Art*, edited by National Gallery of Australia and Musée Olympique, 1999, p15.

The complex beginnings of the *Aboriginal Memorial* are often reduced to its 'commission' by the National Gallery of Australia, but there were many more people and organisations involved in realising this work of art. Firstly, it was Nick Waterlow (1941–2009), Artistic Director of the Sydney Biennale who met with Mundine to discuss the project, immediately accepting it into the Sydney Biennale. Mundine also met with the then recently formed Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, which was led by Charles 'Chicka' Dixon and Gary Foley. They were both unflinching in their financial support for the *Aboriginal Memorial*.¹⁰ Darwin-based journalist Chips Mackinolty suggested to Mundine that he contact founding Director of the National Gallery of Australia James Mollison as the artists were struggling to finish and transport the work to Sydney for the Biennale. Maltese-Australian Wally Caruana, who was Curator of Aboriginal Art at the time, brokered a meeting with Mundine and Mollison, who immediately agreed to fund the acquisition of the *Aboriginal Memorial* for the National Gallery of Australia.

The concept of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was discussed with other national institutions including the new Parliament House and the Australian War Memorial although former Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the National Gallery of Australia (1995–2005) Susan Jenkins could find no paper record of these conversations, which is indicative of their tentative status.¹¹ Pragmatically, Djon Mundine understood that national institutions might have the financial resources to acquire the work. More than that, however, he appreciated how the 'national' armature of these institutions pushed at the work's conceptual contradictions. Situating the *Aboriginal Memorial* within a national institution made its political registers more potent and discomfiting. In the original text of the *1988 Australian Biennale* catalogue, Mundine is cognisant of these tensions that were only heightened by the Australian Bicentenary:

During the Bicentennial year in 1988 most Aboriginal organisations and many white ones are boycotting the celebrations. Many white artists have withdrawn their works from Bicentennial shows. As a commercial enterprise set up to ensure returns to artists, (Bula'bula Arts) it was realised that any boycott decisions would have strong economic consequences. The bind was to present Aboriginal culture without celebrating – to make a true statement.¹²

¹⁰ Djon Mundine. 'Forest of Memories, Forest of hope: A personal account of the making of The Aboriginal Memorial', *The Memorial: A Masterpiece of Aboriginal Art*, edited by National Gallery of Australia and Musée Olympique, 1999, p50.

¹¹ Susan Jenkins. 'The *Aboriginal Memorial* in the Gallery', *It's a Power*, 2010, p118.

¹² Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

Despite its enthusiastic financial and political support for the *Aboriginal Memorial*, the National Gallery of Australia endorsed – and continues to support – the idea of a single nation. As a work in this space, the *Aboriginal Memorial* must negotiate this discomfort of belonging and unbelonging. The *Aboriginal Memorial* moves audiences emotionally but also transports them physically across multiple Indigenous borders that are the oldest political boundaries in Australia. I will return to these boundaries in section 1.10 of this chapter.

1.2 Djon Mundine's Curatorial Methodology

Métis artist and academic David Garneau writes about the categorical possibilities of Indigenous art which are open to Indigenous artists and curators. While these categories engage and confront historic notions of Indigeneity, they also posit new expressive languages that can be outside the jurisdiction of the state. This refusal to be wholly defined by the mainstream is an important component of Indigenous cultural and political values. Garneau writes:

while Indigenous exhibitions are part of the dominant artworld they are not fully contained by it. The Indigenous art world is a third space, a current between and among Aboriginal and mainstream art worlds.¹³

The *Aboriginal Memorial* participates in this third space, but it is also a work of purposeful excess. In Terry Smith's essay 'Public Art between Cultures: The *Aboriginal Memorial*, Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia', he comprehensively examines the *Aboriginal Memorial* against various categories. In arguing for its special status, he notes that the work cannot be deaccessioned and that this 'unique treatment again implies that the *Aboriginal Memorial* exceeds a category into which it might seem to have fallen'.¹⁴ He writes:

[It] is a work of art and is more than a work of art. And it is more than a museal object in the sense that, while being subject to the museum's memorializing processes, it has already transcended them.¹⁵

¹³ David Garneau. 'Toward Indigenous Criticism: The Ah Kee paradox', *Artlink*, vol.33, no.2, June 2013, p48.

¹⁴ Terry Smith. 'Public Art between Cultures: The *Aboriginal Memorial*, Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia'. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2001, p646.

¹⁵ Ibid., p646

The *Aboriginal Memorial* exceeds the overlapping and perhaps staid categories put forward by Smith. More crucially, he argues that Indigenous art exceeds the category of Indigenous art itself.¹⁶ In this way, Smith anticipates the key role of Indigenous art in his own widening theorisation of the category of the 'contemporary', an important concept that I will sketch out in chapter three.

Put succinctly, painting is more than painting; sculpture is more the sculpture; music is more than music; performance is more than performance. In this context, Djon Mundine's role as the conceptual producer of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was to suggest similarly that in its expanded Indigenous form, curation is and can be much more than curation. Speaking in an interview with Terry Smith, Nigerian curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor (1963– 2019) highlights some of the contemporary difficulties and urgencies of curation:

To me the fundamental challenges that a curator faces today are how to provoke an engaged confrontation with works of art, how to make that experience legible, and how to use it to open up forms of engagement with the world. Exhibitions in this sense stage the surplus value of art. They create value of many kinds, simply because each time artworks are exhibited they accrue new meaning, new force, and open out new possibilities, while not necessarily changing or shifting their shape. In turn, art changes the perceptions of those it engages, — so, to make an exhibition is to theorize the place of art not only in institutions but also in public spaces, and, if you will, in the world.¹⁷

These reflections by one of the world's most influential curators substantiate Mundine's belief in, and commitment to, the power of Indigenous art and curation to 'convert the white community and make real statements'.¹⁸ Indigenous curatorial creativity can be a productive catalyst for meaningful change on individual, systemic or institutional levels. The essential and ongoing process of the viewer's self-involvement in both embodied and conceptual ways, through and within the installation of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, opens this new 'engagement with the world'.¹⁹ Linger in this complexity is the pressing responsibility and gift of the *Aboriginal Memorial*.

¹⁶ Ibid., p646.

¹⁷ Okwui Enwezor. 'World Platforms, Exhibition Adjacency, and the Surplus Value of Art', *Talking Contemporary Curating*, edited by Terry Smith, Independent Curators International, 2015, p86.

¹⁸ Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

¹⁹ Okwui Enwezor. 'World Platforms', 2015, p86.

1.3 Djon Mundine and the Indigenous Curatorial Field

Belonging to the Bundjalung people of northern New South Wales, Djon Mundine, OAM is a curator, writer, artist and activist. His Bundjalung identity is constituted through and governed by an interconnectedness to this specific place, Bundjalung country. Between 1979 and 1995, he was Art Advisor at Milingimbi and Ramingining in the Northern Territory at the other end of the country, working with artists to promote Indigenous art and to build new audiences.²⁰ During his tenure, Djon was described as *balanda*, the Yolngu designation for a non-Indigenous person and non-local person. But despite this recognition of his cultural connections outside Arnhem Land, he was given the authority to speak on behalf of Yolngu artists and to co-author and co-curate exhibitions. All this was based on his embeddedness in these communities in Arnhem Land over a long period of time.

While this authority might be described as a methodological approach grounded in ethnographic fieldwork histories, such a view privileges and presupposes an objective distancing that is at odds with Indigenous curatorial mediation. These sixteen years of embeddedness or relationship-building within the community are an important aspect of not only Indigenous curation but other forms of ethical research with Indigenous people. In *Engaging: A Guide to Interacting Respectfully and Reciprocally with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and Their Arts Practices and Intellectual Property*, the first piece of advice for students and potential researchers is to establish trust.²¹ The process of this relational-building practice is essential to Indigenous forms of curation.

During his tenure in central Arnhem Land, Mundine created important working relationships with local communities. He was also tasked by the community with developing working relationships with art galleries and museums, which led to ad hoc and formalised consultative arrangements and the beginning of his institutional curatorial appointments. He was the first Indigenous curator to be employed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1984 but this arrangement did not require him to be based in Sydney. His job title was 'Curator in-the-field' and he could sustain his connections in Arnhem Land.²²

²⁰ In 1993, Djon Mundine took time off from his position to tour with the exhibition *Arajara: art of the first Australians: traditional and contemporary works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists*.

²¹ Ghil'ad Zuckermann. *Engaging: A Guide to Interacting Respectfully and Reciprocally with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and Their Arts Practices and Intellectual Property*, Indigenous Culture Support, 2015, p2. See also Doreen Mellor and Terri Janke. *Valuing Art, Respecting Culture: Protocols for Working with the Australian Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector*, National Association for the Visual Arts, 2001.

²² Ian McLean. *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: an anthology of writing on Aboriginal art 1980-2006*, Power Publications, 2011, p57.

Since Mundine's historic appointment into the Australian field of art, there has been an almost three-decade-long struggle to employ Indigenous curators through identified positions and affirmative action programs that continues to this day.²³ These developments are in line with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal postcolonial model of 'strategic essentialism' that has underpinned the exigencies of representational and identitarian politics.²⁴ While this thesis argues for the necessity of Indigenous curatorial mediation with and between Indigenous artists and objects, Ella Shoat and Robert Stam describe this paradox of postcolonial theory and practice as a situation 'where theory deconstructs totalizing myths, while activism nourishes them'.²⁵

Though these intellectual contradictions are equally worthy of investigation, the 2008 curatorial appointment of Nici Cumpston (Barkindji) at the Art Gallery of South Australia, two weeks after the Apology to Australia's Indigenous People, was in itself a milestone. This appointment meant that Indigenous people were finally, albeit temporarily, represented in every state and territory art gallery.²⁶ Indigenous curators across Australia, understood to have discursive and multiple identities, unanimously celebrated this deputation as an unqualified signifier of post-colonial success and localised resistance. As Ho-Chunk Scholar Amy Lontree writes:

Native involvement in the museum world did not happen because of academic epiphanies by non-Native academics or curators, but as result of prolonged and committed activism.²⁷

The curatorial achievement of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was, thus, twofold: it produced one of the most important works of art in Australia, and it was integral to the creation story of institutional Indigenous curation. The *Aboriginal Memorial* transformed an institutional mandate and its repercussions were felt – and crucially, reproduced – in many other galleries and sites of art around the country.

²³ See the Indigenous Arts Leadership Program at the National Gallery of Australia supported by Wesfarmers Arts.

²⁴ The term 'strategic essentialism' was coined in the 1980s but by the early 1990s, Spivak had distanced herself from its oversimplifications. Nevertheless, I think it is still apt here both as a theoretical principle and a concept oversimplified in practice. In a 1993 interview, Spivak said she was 'much more interested in seeing the differences among these so-called essences in various cultural inscriptions', p36. See Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 'An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp24-50.

²⁵ Ella Shoat and Robert Stam. 'Multiculturalism in the Postmodern Age', *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, 1994, p342.

²⁶ On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology on behalf of the Parliament of Australia to 'Australia's Indigenous peoples'. The apology was largely for the government policy of forced removals of Indigenous children.

²⁷ Amy Lontree. 'Introduction', *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, University of North Carolina Press, 2012, p18.

1.4 The Bicentennial and the Biennale of Sydney

While many Indigenous organisations deliberately boycotted Bicentennial-associated events, the year was also one in which Indigenous exhibitions received considerable funding and attention. The exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (1988), which toured internationally to much critical acclaim, is but one example of this trend.²⁸

The *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* exhibition was a huge success and travelled extensively throughout Australia and the United States. Many Indigenous people, predominantly artists, assisted and their names are listed in the 'Acknowledgements' section on the second to last page of the catalogue.²⁹ Despite these significant contributions by Indigenous people, including a thirty-minute documentary by the Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi photographer and filmmaker Michael Riley (1960–2004), there was no recognition of Indigenous curatorial input. Indeed, the 'Introduction' written by Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson suggests ambivalence around the idea that the 'control of the Aboriginal heritage and its interpretation should lie exclusively with Aborigines'³⁰ (sic).

Against this background, the *Aboriginal Memorial* drew on an entirely different exhibitionary premise and was a distinct intervention into the curatorial landscape. While the work's realisation was the result of much intercultural contact, the intellectual and conceptual framing was mediated through Djon Mundine (Figure 1.2). The *Aboriginal Memorial* was created by forty-three artists including six women. Though it began in Ramingining, it grew to include over nine clan groups across Arnhem Land.³¹ The

²⁸ The exhibition opened at the Asia Society Galleries, New York and was initiated by the South Australian Museum, which has one of the largest collections of Indigenous cultural material from Australia in the world. The exhibition dates and locations were as follows; Asia Society Galleries, New York, 6 October – 31 December 1988; David and Alfred Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, 26 January – 19 March 1989; Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, 13 May – 5 August 1989; Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, September – December 1989; South Australian Museum, Adelaide, February – April 1990.

²⁹ Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson. 'Acknowledgements', *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, edited by Peter Sutton, Viking in association with the Asia Society Galleries, 1988, p265.

³⁰ Ibid., 'Introduction', p3.

³¹ The *Aboriginal Memorial* is attributed to forty-three artists, including six women, but only twelve of the original artists were listed in the Biennale catalogue. This omission was presumably for reasons of space though since the *Aboriginal Memorial* is represented with more than twice the amount of images of other art works in the catalogue, this reasoning does not entirely hold. The artists are generally but incorrectly referred to as the 'Ramingining Artists' since the majority were from the Ramingining community and this is how the item was originally accessioned. As Djon Mundine said at *The Aboriginal Memorial 30th Anniversary Symposium*, 12 – 13 October 2018, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, the *Dupun* themselves have further become objects of memorial as more than thirty of the contributing artists have passed away.

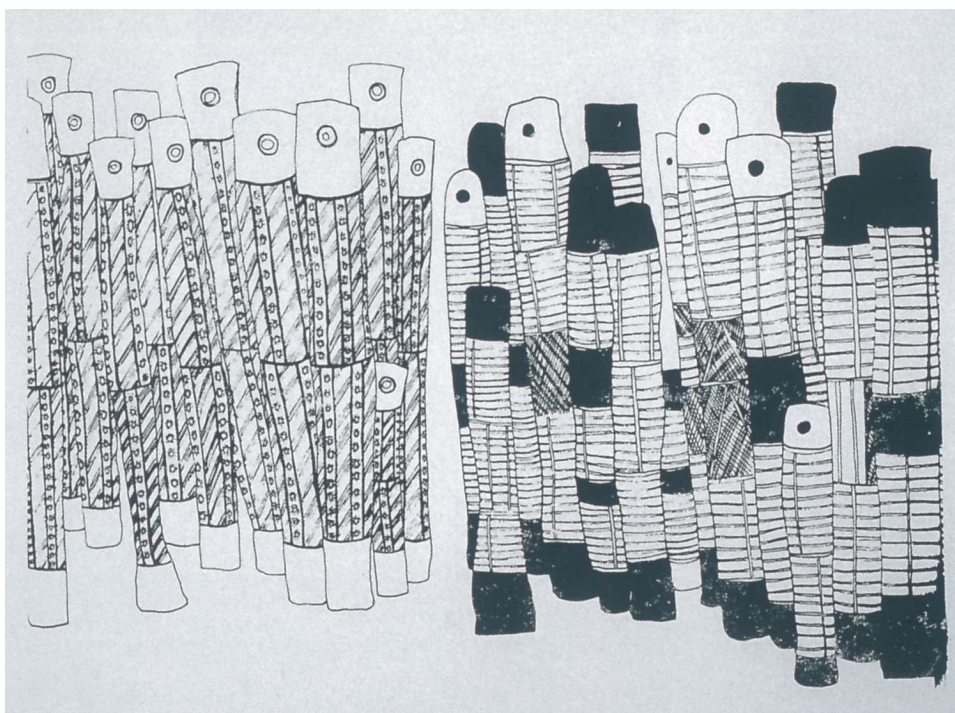


FIGURE 1.2

Preliminary drawing for the *Aboriginal Memorial* by Djon Mundine which suggests his thinking about the flying fox *dupun* of George Milpururru and the *Minytji* landscape *dupun* of Phillip Gudthaykudthay. Courtesy of Djon Mundine.

work was first exhibited in the Biennale of Sydney in association with the Australian Bicentennial Authority.³² Indeed, for 1988, the Biennale of Sydney was temporarily renamed the Australian Biennale. It was, thus, the central contradiction of participating in this emphatically 'Australian' iteration of the Biennale that enabled the full impact of the alternative and oppositional politics of the *Aboriginal Memorial* to be realised.

The Biennale of Sydney was established in 1973, and it has since expanded the definitional regimes in which Indigenous art was and is positioned. In 1979, Nick Waterlow was Artistic Director of the Biennale of Sydney, having arrived in Australia only two years previously. His exhibition was titled *European Dialogue* (14 May – 27 May 1979), but it aimed to destabilise art historical 'standards that derive from one source'.³³ The inclusion of three paintings on bark by John Bunguwuy, David Malangi Daymirringu and George Milpururru Malibirr was, thus, a strategic decentring and a significant

³² The Biennale was held from 18 May – 3 July and then was exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 4 August – 18 September. The *Aboriginal Memorial* however did not travel.

³³ Nick Waterlow. 'European Dialogue', *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney*, edited by Biennale of Sydney, Playbill Australia, 1979, unpaginated.



Figure 1.3
Nick Waterlow with artists in front of the Art Gallery of New South Wales on the occasion of the Third Biennale of Sydney (1979), 'European Dialogue'. Left to right: John Bunguwuy; David Malangi Daymiringu; George Milpururru Malibirr; assistant Charlie Djota (rear); Nick Waterlow.
Photograph courtesy of Penny Tweedie and the Biennale of Sydney.

milestone in the reception of Indigenous art and its framing alongside contemporary art.³⁴ (Figure 1.3) Interestingly, David Malangi Daymiringu and George Milpururru Malibirr would both be contributors to the *Aboriginal Memorial*.

In 1982, Australian curator William Wright curated the 1982 Biennale of Sydney - *Vision in Disbelief*, (7 April – 23 May 1982). In this context, he commissioned Lajamanu artists under the direction of Maurice Japurrula Luther to create a sand painting and performance. This was an attempt to align Indigenous

³⁴ Laura Fisher. 'Emergence of Aboriginal Art in the 1980s', *Aboriginal Art and Australian Society: Hope and Disenchantment*. Anthem Press, 2016, p78.

art with exemplars of 'conceptual and performance art' which could 'extend the context in which both the objects and processes of art are now considered'.³⁵

In 1986, Waterlow was Artistic Director of the Biennale of Sydney for the second time and his curatorial offering, *Origins Originality + Beyond* (16 May – 6 July 1986) featured three paintings by Michael Nelson Tjakamarra.³⁶ One of those paintings, *Possum Dreaming* (1985) would become the cover image of the 1988 exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. The inclusion of a single representative artist rather than various works from a community was a significant step in the process of individuating Indigenous works. Nevertheless it was framed in a decidedly anthropological context. In addition, the Biennale of Sydney showcased two bark paintings by George Milpururru Malibirr and Bobby Bunungurr. The ten-member Ramingining Performance group also created a sand sculpture and Djon Mundine wrote for the catalogue.³⁷

As we have seen, Nick Waterlow was the curator of the 1988 Australian Biennale *From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c.1940–1988* (18 May–3 July). In his introductory essay to the catalogue, he remarked that the *Aboriginal Memorial* was the single most important statement in the Biennale.³⁸ Broadly, the Biennale explored European influences in Australian art history. Given the size and significance of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, it is unsurprising that it was the only Indigenous work in the Biennale. The work was exhibited in Pier 2/3 in Walsh Bay a few kilometres from the mythologised site of 'first contact'. *The Aboriginal Memorial* is an Indigenous response to the fatal consequences of a history that has euphemistically been called 'contact' and 'encounter'.

At the other end of the Pier, the 'blood paintings' of the controversial artist Hermann Nitsch, a member of the Austrian 'Aktionismus' group from Vienna were shown. The installation depicted the traces of an 'action' performed on the opening day of the Biennale and was juxtaposed against the *Aboriginal Memorial*. Nitsch 'created a room halfway between church and abattoir, with the walls coated in action paintings made from animal blood and red house paint, piles of offal gathered on a central table and four videos of gory, previous performances running simultaneously.'³⁹ With its orgiastic display of

³⁵ Biennale of Sydney. 'Australian Aboriginal Art: An overview', *Vision in Disbelief: The Fourth Biennale of Sydney*, edited by Biennale of Sydney, Biennale Committee, 1982, p14.

³⁶ Biennale of Sydney. 'Michael Nelson Tjakamarra', *Origins, Originality + Beyond: The Sixth Biennale of Sydney*, edited by the Biennale of Sydney, The Biennale of Sydney Limited, 1986, pp272-273.

³⁷ Biennale of Sydney. 'Ramingining Performance Group', *Origins, Originality + Beyond: The Sixth Biennale of Sydney*, edited by the Biennale of Sydney, The Biennale of Sydney Limited, 1986, pp236-237.

³⁸ Nick Waterlow. 'A View of World Art c.1940-88', *1988 Australian Biennale: from the Southern Cross: a view of world art c.1940-88*, edited by Nick Waterlow, Biennale of Sydney, 1988, p11.

³⁹ John McDonald. 'Gravity amid the offal', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May 1988, p82.

animal blood and red paint, the work had an aesthetic intensity that was tempered by the stillness of the 200 *Dupun*, which Mundine eloquently characterised as a forest of souls.⁴⁰

Accompanied by a picture of the artist Johnny Dhurrikayu, the headline of the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* read 'After 200 years, a silent memorial'.⁴¹ If Nitsch's installation was about the value of human life and the corporeal traces of its end, the *Aboriginal Memorial* was about its spiritual aftermath. In a characteristic move by Waterlow as curatorial engineer for the Biennale, European and Australian artists were placed in conversation to explore the legacies of influence. This curatorial contrivance set up Indigenous people's encounter with Europe as bloody and violent. In this juxtaposition, the perpetrators were neither invisible nor inseparable from this place of mythologised 'encounter'.

The confrontational nature of the Nitsch work prompted a visit from the Sydney Vice Squad, the second such visit in the history of the Biennale of Sydney.⁴² Politically, the *Aboriginal Memorial* is arguably a more radical work, but it provoked a much slower response. Despite Nick Waterlow's bold curatorial claims about its artistic significance and making the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Aboriginal Memorial* did not feature in many reviews. A notable exception is Julie Ewington's piece, 'Two Poles: The Ramingining Community Memorial and Hermann Nitsch'.⁴³ Lingering for a long time within the *Aboriginal Memorial* is both a curatorial contrivance and an interpretive necessity. The Biennale of Sydney closed in July and then the *Aboriginal Memorial* made its way to its new home at the National Gallery of Australia where it would be remade as an icon of the collection.

1.5 UnAustralian art at the National Gallery of Australia

As mentioned earlier, the director of the National Gallery of Australia, James Mollison was ultimately responsible for acquiring the *Aboriginal Memorial* although there were many people involved beforehand. Furthermore, it is significant that Mollison had only come to appreciate Indigenous art in the early 1980s but would become a vocal advocate. Curator Wally Caruana details Mollison's 'epiphany' during a visit to the Northern Territory for an Australian Gallery Director's Council meeting.

⁴⁰ Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

⁴¹ Unattributed. 'After 200 years, a silent memorial', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 1988, p1.

⁴² The first visit related to the banning and removal of Juan Davila's photographic mural *Stupid as a Painter* (1981) for pornographic content in the 1982 Biennale of Sydney under the artistic directorship of William Wright, (7 April 1982 – 23 May 1982). See Roger Benjamin. 'The mesh of images', *Juan Davila*, edited by Roger Benjamin, Brett Guy and Juan Davila, Miegunyah Press, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006, pp40-41. See also Biennale of Sydney. *Vision in Disbelief: The Fourth Biennale of Sydney*, Biennale Committee, 1982, p44.

⁴³ Julie Ewington. 'Two Poles: The Ramingining Community Memorial and Hermann Nitsch', *Art & Text*, vol. 29, 1988, pp95-98.

On viewing rock art with the other directors in western Arnhem Land and rock art expert George Chaloupka, Mollison came to understand Indigenous art as one of the 'great art traditions of the world'.⁴⁴ On hearing about the conceptual framework of the *Aboriginal Memorial* project through Curator of Aboriginal Art Wally Caruana, Mollison gave his immediate support and secured its realisation. The work was unanimously accepted by the Council under the chairmanship of former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1987–1990).⁴⁵

The *Aboriginal Memorial* was acquired by the National Gallery of Australia to fill an increasingly obvious void. This was more than a gap in the collection; it was a gap in art and social history. The *Aboriginal Memorial* was devised in opposition to national narratives, but it was also designed to be in conversation with them. Art historian Rex Butler urges us to be attentive to the specificities of Aboriginal art by distinguishing it correctly as art from 'Papunya, Yuendumu, Utopia'.⁴⁶ He further describes the geographical situatedness of Aboriginal art by characterising it as 'the greatest of all UnAustralian art – the art least concerned with national identity'.⁴⁷ The placement of the *Aboriginal Memorial* within this national and nationalising institution in 1988 offers a meaningful case study of its 'unAustralianness'. The Australian Bicentenary provided not just an opportunity to productively intervene in the totalising construction of Australian nationalist values, particularly the supposed date of the nation's commencement, but equally an opportunity to mobilise alternative formations of polity and sovereignty. The micro-politics of the museum space, however, hints at the difficulties of refusing and complicating these nationalising inscriptions or creating an equivalence even in administrative terms. This incompatibility is tacitly understood and reinforced by organisational structures. Director of the Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia Vanessa Russ (Ngarinyin/Gija, born 1975) succinctly articulates this predicament as a 'complicated parallel existence in which Aboriginal art is always under Australian art but never in Australian art'.⁴⁸ Through its disjunctive political aspirations, the *Aboriginal Memorial* creates a productive state of unbelonging against impositions of Australian nationhood. Lingering in this space of disaggregation, the work forces a renewed investigation of many of these dominant understandings of Australian statehood, institutional representation and art history.

⁴⁴ Wally Caruana. 'The collection of Indigenous Australian art: Beginnings and some highlights', *Building the Collection*, edited by Pauline Green, National Gallery of Australia, 2003, p194.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p201.

⁴⁶ Rex Butler. 'A Short Introduction to UnAustralian Art', *Contemporary Visual Art + Culture: Broadsheet*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2003, p17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p17.

⁴⁸ Vanessa Russ. 'Part Two: Exhibitions of Aboriginal Art and Mainstreaming: Hetti Perkins', *A Study of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Australian Aboriginal Art: Aboriginal Perspectives and Representations in State Art Galleries*, PhD, Unpublished thesis, University of Western Australia, Perth, 2013, p242.

1.6 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection at the National Gallery of Australia

Before the acquisition of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, the National Gallery of Australia had inherited a number of Commonwealth collections that predominantly included art from Arnhem Land and Hermannsburg. The gallery was initially, and continues to be, concerned with addressing a lack of historical depth in its Indigenous collection that many older institutions took and take for granted. The need to catch up with these older collections was also due to a governmental prohibition which sought to minimise the apparent overlap with the collection in the (Australian) Institute of Aboriginal Studies.⁴⁹ In the 1976 publication *Genesis of a Gallery*, James Mollison writes: 'Although Aboriginal art is now collected on a national basis by the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the Gallery has bought in this field to acquire examples of high artistic merit. We would hope to borrow from the Institute when necessary, to represent this aspect of our art'.⁵⁰ The ability to collect Indigenous art rested on an understanding of contemporary art as being made by living Indigenous artists.⁵¹ This set a precedent that contrasted with the policies of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies and freed the National Gallery of Australia from these governmental prohibitions.

In the inaugural publication *Australian National Gallery: An Introduction*, Ruth McNicoll is described as the Curator of the Arts of Oceania, Black Africa, Pre-Columbian America and Aboriginal Art.⁵² She contributed a chapter on the developing collection of Indigenous Art from Australia, which was almost exclusively from the Northern Territory. The first acquisition of Aboriginal art by the National Gallery of Australia was in 1972 and this series of eight Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the 1950s were by Thomas Nandjiwarra (1926–89) and Bill Namiyangwa (1923–68). This was followed by the acquisition of 139 bark paintings by Yirawala (Kuninju 1903–1976) in 1976 from his patron Sandra Le Brun Holmes.⁵³ The National Gallery of Australia subsequently acquired an important collection of 137 bark paintings and sculptures from the 1950s and 1960s from Czech artist and collector Karel Kupka (1918–1993). This collection represented Northern Territory communities from Yirrkala, Milingimbi and Wadeye. However, not all these significant acquisitions of the time were from the Northern Territory. Other acquisitions included William Barak's *Corroboree from Melbourne* as well as a Murray River

⁴⁹ James Mollison. 'James Mollison in conversation with Anne Gray, Head of Australian Art', *Building the Collection*, edited by Pauline Green, National Gallery of Australia, 2003, p29.

⁵⁰ Australian National Gallery. 'Introduction', *Genesis of a Gallery: The collection of the Australian National Gallery*, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976, unpaginated.

⁵¹ James Mollison. 'James Mollison in conversation with Anne Gray', p29.

⁵² Australian National Gallery. 'Biographical Notes' *Genesis of a Gallery*, 1976, p281.

⁵³ Wally Caruana. 'National Gallery of Australia', *Aboriginal Art Collections: Highlights from Australia's Public Museums and Galleries*, edited by Susan Cochrane, Craftsman House, 2001, p13.

shield. Moreover, in 1985, the gallery acquired a Torres Strait Islander shield point that was a part of the so-called Tribal Art collection of Surrealist artist Max Ernst (1891–1976).⁵⁴

When the National Gallery of Australia was opened by Queen Elizabeth II on 12 October 1982, the first hang featured only two works by named Indigenous artists. George Garrawun's *Freshwater fish* c.1979 (80.3588) and Jimmy Njiminjuma's *Rainbow serpent with buffalo head and horns* c1980 (81.1621) were exhibited in a showcase at the entrance to the Victor and Loti Smorgon Gallery, known as Gallery 1. This is the first gallery that visitors encountered. (Figure 1.4) Two years later in 1984,⁵⁵ the Aboriginal Art Department was founded with Wally Caruana being appointed curator, taking over from Ruth McNicol in anticipation of a growing departmental specialisation.⁵⁶ Although significant works on canvas by Warlpiri artists based at Yuendumu were acquired by Wally Caruana, the collecting focus of the newly formed Aboriginal Art Department in the 1980s was clearly on important historical material by recognised artists who merited representation in the national collection. Indigenous forms of art, both historic and urban, were included by inference in the category of fine art but their status within definitions of contemporary art practice was far from stable. Thus, in many ways, the National Gallery of Australia was readying itself for a significant acquisition that both challenged and accorded with emerging notions of contemporary art.

1.7 Aboriginal forms of memorial art

Since the *Aboriginal Memorial's* acquisition in 1988, every director of the National Gallery of Australia has unambiguously championed it as one of the most significant works in the collection. Even so, James Mollison, the gallery's first director, merits particular consideration.⁵⁷ Mollison was aware and appreciative of the seventeen *Tutuni* (Pukumani grave posts) that are part of Tiwi mortuary productions derived from the Pukumani ceremony and are in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Sydney. (Figure 1.5) These had been commissioned by Dr Stuart Scougall and Deputy Director Tony Tuckson from senior Tiwi artists at Milikapiti (Snake Bay) on Melville Island in 1958.⁵⁸ This first major

⁵⁴ Wally Caruana. 'The collection of Indigenous Australian art: Beginnings and some highlights', *Building the national collection of art*, edited by Pauline Green, National Gallery of Australia, 2003, p193-209.

⁵⁵ The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne also began its Indigenous Art Department in 1984-85.

⁵⁶ Wally Caruana. 'The collection of Indigenous Australian art' 2003, p194.

⁵⁷ The terms of the directors of the National Gallery of Australia have been as follows: James Mollison (1977–1990) Betty Churcher (1990–1997); Dr Brian Kennedy (1997–2004); Ron Radford (2005–2014); Dr Gerard Vaughan (2014–2018); Nick Mitzevich (2018–present)

⁵⁸ Steven Miller. 'Cultural capital: Key moments in the collecting of Australian Indigenous art', *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, edited by Hetti Perkins and Margie West, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, p34.



FIGURE 1.4
Gallery 1, Victor and Loti Smorgon Gallery, The Opening hang at the National Gallery of Australia, 1982
Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

commission of Aboriginal work by a state gallery broke new ground, establishing Aboriginal culture within a fine art context and not that of 'ethnological curiosities'.⁵⁹ Carved from dense ironwood, these funerary poles are customarily created for the Pukumani ceremony, which is the culmination of a series of mortuary rituals enacted many months after the burial of a loved one. The shape of the *Tutini* is said to represent the abstracted human form, and they are made to honour and placate the spirits of the dead.⁶⁰ The first Pukumani ceremony was led by Tiwi ancestor Purrukuparli for his baby Jinani, who was the first person to die. The infidelity of Purrukuparli's wife Bima with her brother-in-law Tapparra inadvertently caused the death of Jinani.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Douglas Stewart quoted in A John Tuckson. 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', *Australian Aboriginal Art*, edited by Ronald Berndt, Ure Smith, 1964, p3.

⁶⁰ Margie West. 'It Belongs to No One Else: The Dynamic Art of the Tiwi', *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, edited by Hetti Perkins and Margie West, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, p125.

⁶¹ Pedro Wonaeamirri. 'Pedro Wonaeamirri: In Conversation', *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal art in Australia*, edited by Hetti Perkins and Margie West, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007, pp134-135.



FIGURE 1.5

Pukumani grave posts,

1958, earth pigments on iron wood

Laurie Nelson Mungatopi (Tiwi, c.192 –); Bob One Apuatimi (Tiwi, 1925 - 18 Apr 1976); Jack Yarunga (Tiwi, c.1910–1973);

Don Burakmadjua (Tiwi, 1925 – 1995); Charlie Quiet Kwangdini (Tiwi, c.1905 –);

Unknown Tiwi artist.

Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, IA1.1959.a-q

To ward off the *mapurtiti* (bad spirits of the dead) from entering their bodies, participants in the Pukumani ceremony are disguised in *jilamara* (designs) that are painted on their skin with ochres. The gestural application of paint on the *Tutini* signals the physicality and percussive rhythm of this important ritual. Songs and dances are performed around *Tutini* erected at a burial site, and when the last wailing notes of the *amburu* (death song) have faded away, the grave is deserted and the *Tutini* are left exposed to the elements and it eventually returns to the earth. The Pukumani ceremony is both a remembrance and surrender, and the completion of the ceremony signifies the end of the deceased's existence in the living world and their crossover into the spiritual realm.

These memorial forms of sculptural art arguably created a receptiveness to the *Aboriginal Memorial* as a legitimate inclusion within art gallery spaces. Equally, by producing *Tutini* with ironwood, rather than the customary blackwood that was reserved for ceremonies, Tiwi artists demonstrated a willingness to reconceptualise art across cultural boundaries, not through transgression but through a culturally conscious strategy.⁶² Moving towards an appreciation of Aboriginal art unhooked from its ceremonial significance, the *Tutini* were acquired to create a categorical distance between the spiritual and the aesthetic. Despite this claim, and its importance within collection histories of Indigenous art, a certain

⁶² Ibid., p133.

ceremonial aura would have been an affective consequence of the *Tutini*, particularly in the late 1950s. In stark contrast to these claims of ceremonial distancing, the aspiration of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was to bring these aesthetic and spiritual modes together into a unitary experience inflected with a highly charged postcolonial signification.

1.8 Grief cannot be hurried, trauma cannot be forgotten: Reconciliation and the politics of 'healing'

The *Aboriginal Memorial* dwells powerfully on the poetics of wound and repair in cultural, national and spiritual terms. It creates a physical space of and for transition and regeneration, operating as an endlessly deferred gesture of healing. Each generation, Indigenous and non-Indigenous must spend physical, intellectual and emotional time with these eulogies in ochre, to be reconciled with and to the memory of place. Like the spirits bound in time and place, the *Aboriginal Memorial* induces a promissory moment of reconciliation, that can never be realised. As Nicholas Thomas writes: '[T]he intimate connection between the foundations of settler societies and the dispossession of prior occupants makes any larger resolution elusive and intractable'.⁶³ Lingering in the space of discomfort is both the process and the purpose of the *Aboriginal Memorial*.⁶⁴

The interconnected but distinct cultural policies of Reconciliation and Multiculturalism are the political and foundational ideologies on which Australia currently understands and models its past, present and future. As a national aspiration, reconciliation gives a name to Australia's anxieties about historical Aboriginal displacement and contemporary inequalities and proposes a symbolic and practical paradigm to address them. The Apology to Australia's Indigenous People on 13 February 2008 by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was a watershed moment in Australian history. The bipartisan Apology marked the beginning of a 'new chapter' and gestured towards the governmental rhetoric of 'national healing' invoked by Rudd.

Since the early 1990s, the *Aboriginal Memorial* has often been invoked as a work of reconciliation or at least reconciliatory potential. Although the process of conversion of the 'white community' is part of the explicit remit of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, the word 'reconciliation' does not appear in either the 1988 Biennale publication or the initial brochure produced for its unveiling in Canberra.⁶⁵ While the rhetoric of reconciliation began in the 1980s, it became part of government policy with the establishment of the Reconciliation Council in 1991. Interestingly, the word is used in Wally Caruana's engrossing account

⁶³ Nicholas Thomas. 'Beginnings', *Possessions: Indigenous Art, Colonial Culture*, Thames & Hudson, 1999, p11.

⁶⁴ Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 230.

of the unorthodox way in which the *Aboriginal Memorial* was commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia.⁶⁶ While not going as far as Caruana, Terry Smith describes the *Aboriginal Memorial* as 'an extraordinary yet entirely accessible template for reconciliation'.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, Mundine has repeatedly and consistently denied this characterisation of the work.⁶⁸ Its overriding motivation was, as Mundine articulates, '(g)etting people to realise that there had been a 'Black War'.⁶⁹ The *Aboriginal Memorial* is not a curatorial gesture of reconciliation; it is an act of despair borne of frustration. These histories continue to be an affront to generations of Australians who have been conditioned to believe that Australia is a place that was notably free from conflict.⁷⁰ The *Aboriginal Memorial* is an invitation to spend time with these histories, not to reduce the work's complex social production to a gesture of reconciliation. In a 2005 interview with Rex Butler, Mundine affirmed the work's Indigenous context:

The other thing is that it was really for Aboriginal people. It was not in fact so much for white people. Generally white people see it as a reconciliation statement. As absolution. I don't necessarily see it that way. It was more to allow Aboriginal people to feel something for all those people who were the 'unknown soldiers', as it were, who were killed in these wars.⁷¹

This painful process of reckoning was arguably more important than any preemptive reconciliation. Although reconciliation can and should remain an ideal, the function of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was to bring this process to the surface, not to ensure its resolution. The *Aboriginal Memorial* does not and cannot forgive.

The strength of the *Aboriginal Memorial* lies in its creation of a space for individuated lingering *within* and *beyond* this thick residue of colonisation. While guilt may be an expected corollary of this engagement with colonial history, it is necessary to be sensitive to an embrace of guilt, shame and 'bad feeling'. As the reasoning of Sarah Ahmed makes abundantly clear, we should resist the spectatorial pitfalls of collective declarations of national shame, which can be self-serving and narcissistic:

⁶⁶ Wally Caruana. 'The Collection of Indigenous Australian Art', 2003, p203.

⁶⁷ Terry Smith. 'II The Transnational Transition: Australia', *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, Laurence King, 2011, p212.

⁶⁸ Djon Mundine. 'Interview with Djon Mundine', *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, edited by Rex Butler, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2005, p88.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p88.

⁷⁰ Henry Reynolds. *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History*, Viking, 1999.

⁷¹ Djon Mundine. *Radical Revisionism*, p88.

What is striking is how shame becomes not only a mode of recognition of injustices committed against others, but also a form of nation building. It is shame that allows us 'to assert our identity as a nation'. Recognition works to restore the nation or reconcile the nation to itself by 'coming to terms with' its own past in the expressions of 'bad feeling'. But in allowing us to feel bad, does shame also allow the nation to feel better? What is the desire to feel better and the declaration of bad feeling?⁷²

For the complicated reasons highlighted above by Ahmed, the *Aboriginal Memorial* is not concerned with being a perfunctory mechanism of national reconciliation. It operates far better as an individual tool of contemplation or, as Mundine would put it, conversion.

1.9 Alternative histories and The Culture Wars

This process of individual conversion is predicated on the uncovering of accounts of colonial conflict and is crucial not just for the process of reconciliation but for the processing of Australia's self-identity. In 1969, Australian anthropologist William Stanner coined the term the 'Great Australian Silence' observing:

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines (sic) that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.⁷³

This process of systematic 'disremembering' is embedded into the Australian consciousness. Denial is not a shield against Australian history, but a constitutive feature of it. However, the recognition of Indigenous people and of their perspectives within historical narratives has increasingly emerged within the disciplines of art and social history. In *The Spectre of Truganini* (1980), Bernard Smith grappled with the dispossession of Indigenous people that the Australian nation state cannot abide. In a highly Freudian turn, he contended that:

⁷² Sara Ahmed. 'The Politics of Bad Feeling', *Australasian Journal of Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, vol. no. 1, 2005, p72.

⁷³ William Stanner. 'The Great Australian Silence', *After the Dreaming*, 1968 Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969/1974, pp24-25.

[F]or most white Australians, it is a nightmare to be thrust out of mind. Yet like the traumatic experiences of childhood it continues to haunt our dreams. And as with childhood so with the childhood of a nation. As Freud has put it: 'It is universally admitted that in the origin of the traditions and folklore of a people, care must be taken to eliminate from the memory such motive as would be painful to the national feeling.'⁷⁴

The repression of these painful feelings and these national traumas would become decidedly more difficult with the publication of *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European invasion of Australia* by the historian Henry Reynolds. This volume was first published in 1981 by the History Department at James Cook University under the guidance of BJ Dalton before its success led to the decision by Penguin Books to republish in 1982, profoundly changing Australian historiography. The importance of Henry Reynolds's pioneering work cannot be underestimated and ever since, many people have created more and more detailed and localised analyses of the expanding colonial frontier. Although Reynolds had reservations about not including Indigenous voices within his historical methodology, John Terry wrote in the *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*:

Reynolds' book presents important concepts in Australian history. It is an appreciation that the convicts, squatters, explorers, diggers, ticket-of-leave men and the like did not step onto a continent that was barren and uninhabited, but into a rich and complex world of another people who resisted the invasion, fought for their land, struggled to survive - and who continue to struggle for due recognition. These ideas have been familiar for some time of course, and attempts have been made to document them, but this is the first serious production by a competent historian.⁷⁵

Despite the importance of these seminal publications, it would be the documentary *The Secret Country: The First Australians Fight Back* (1985) by Australian journalist and filmmaker John Pilger which most forcefully fueled the conceptual development of the *Aboriginal Memorial* and gained the most traction within the Ramingining community.⁷⁶ A copy of the film was passed to Djon Mundine by an elder artist whose son had recently died. The son had been a member of the Northern Land Council Executive and before his death he had been given some 'political tapes'.⁷⁷ In the opening sequences of the

⁷⁴ Bernard Smith. 'The Mechanisms of Forgetfulness', *The Spectre of Truganini*, 1980 Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1980, p17.

⁷⁵ John Terry. 'Book Review - The Other Side of the Frontier: An Interpretation of the Aboriginal Response to the Invasion and Settlement of Australia', *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*, no. 4, June 1982, p16.

⁷⁶ Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p230.

documentary, Pilger narrates the decimation of the Dharug people on the Hawkesbury River 'who died to the last man, woman and child defending their country'.⁷⁸ Pilger observed that there was no memorial to Aboriginal people who had been defending their lands and argued persuasively that there was considerable evidence to justify one.

The evidence surrounding these debates continues to be scrutinised by historians across the political spectrum. Historians of the Australian colonial frontier including Inga Clendinnen, Stephen Gapps and Bain Attwood along with historians of Tasmania like Lyndall Ryan, Lloyd Robson and Henry Reynolds have all attempted to examine the violence of the colonisation of Australia and to make public this historical knowledge. Against this, historians such as Keith Windschuttle have criticised and dismissed the work of the 'orthodox school' as ideologically motivated exaggerations.⁷⁹

While it could be argued that the *Aboriginal Memorial* is 'ideologically motivated', it is not an exercise in the production of historical methodology and nor is it an ahistorical enterprise. For Rex Butler, the shift from detailed historical specificity to more 'general, non-specific loss' describes the 'aesthetics' of the *Aboriginal Memorial*.⁸⁰ In this way, specific trauma is not stripped of meaning but recast across a more general emotional register. Despite the absence of explicit historical documentation associated with the *Aboriginal Memorial*, the installation nevertheless produced, reflected and contributed to a growing body of literature that began to appreciate the perspectives of Indigenous people whom history had relegated to the position of passive victims of colonial expansion. The work offered a corrective to versions of history that dismissed or distorted Aboriginal claims about the defence of their customary lands, and it achieved this through a culturally specific Aboriginal methodology. It could be argued that the *Aboriginal Memorial* is impervious to the 'standards of proof, accuracy and rigour' that Windschuttle found absent in current practitioners of Aboriginal history, simply because it is not interested in these standards.⁸¹ The *Aboriginal Memorial* bears the burden of excruciating loss, not the burden of proof.

Susan Jenkins, former Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the NGA, draws our attention to both the profound symbolism and austere reality of Australian memorial practices involving

⁷⁸ John Pilger. *The Secret Country: The First Australians Fight Back*, produced by John Pilger and Central Independent Television, United Kingdom, 1985

⁷⁹ Keith Windschuttle. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, Macleay Press, 2002.

⁸⁰ Rex Butler. *Radical Revisionism*, 2005, p89.

⁸¹ Keith Windschuttle. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Macleay Press, 2002, p166.

the entombment of an unknown soldier. On this basis, we can begin to identify what is *not* at play in the *Aboriginal Memorial*. Of the conventions around unknown soldier memorials, Jenkins writes:

Indeed the aura of the real is what contributed to the success of this symbol; the pure physicality of an actual body, laid horizontally as if in a grave, goes beyond representing such a death with countless others in an upright empty column. The legitimising factor, the element of closure in the return of the soldier, was surely the bones. The bones were the living proof, the tangible evidence, the connection with the physicality (and fragility) yet endurance of the human form. When all else has disintegrated, all flesh decayed, bones endure. Western belief about bones is that they provide the key to many things, physically, mentally, psychically and spiritually.⁸²

This revealing passage alerts us to the extent to which the *Aboriginal Memorial* is not interested in evidentiary facts. If bones are evidence, the *Aboriginal Memorial* is intentionally bereft of this evidence. Jenkins insightfully observes the ‘element of closure’ that accompanies an encounter with the bones of the deceased. In contrast, the *Aboriginal Memorial* seeks not to achieve closure but rather the public recognition of inconsolable grief. The obsession with forensically enumerating the number of the dead, which characterised the Prime Ministership of John Howard is misplaced and academic, lawyer and novelist Larissa Behrendt (Eualeyai/Kamilaroi) describes this objective as the ‘semantics of genocide’.⁸³ Indeed, this approach betrays an underlying suspicion which is antithetical to the surrender to Indigenous ways of doing that is crucial to the signification of the *Aboriginal Memorial*. To grieve *with* Aboriginal people is to believe them. The point of the installation is not to tally the numbers of the dead, but to collectively share in the grief of losing them. The ‘aesthetics’ that Butler identifies is precisely this feeling: the apprehension and appreciation of beauty, pain and compassion. Remembering Mundine’s original appeal, the *Aboriginal Memorial* is configured to facilitate exactly these promised moments that can ‘convert the white community and make real statements’.⁸⁴

This entreaty to grieve seeks to reckon with both the loss of individual life and the loss of ways of living. And yet the *Aboriginal Memorial* insists on these ways of living (and mourning) that have been derided and disbelieved, and in so doing, demonstrates their inherent value. The culturally mediated experience

⁸² Susan Jenkins. ‘The unknown Australian soldier’, *It’s a Power*, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010, pp194-195.

⁸³ Larissa Behrendt. ‘The Semantics of Genocide’, *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*, edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, The University of Arizona Press, 2016, pp138-156.

⁸⁴ Djon Mundine. ‘Ramingining Artists Community’, 1988, p 230.

of moving through the *Aboriginal Memorial* gives visitors the cultural tools to grieve alongside Aboriginal people. Ultimately these are also tools to better share the world of the living.

1.10 Spatialising the National and the Deep Local: Yolngu, Ngunnawal and Ngambri Lands

The *Aboriginal Memorial* is a lamentation for the loss of life from frontier violence where land was the trophy for these assaults. Artist Julie Gough (Trawlwoolway, born 1965) succinctly expresses the colonial methodology as one where ‘people are taken from place, and place is taken from people’.⁸⁵ The frustration of the complicated legacies of these historical thefts must be worked through by contemporary Indigenous people.

The *Aboriginal Memorial* is an emphatic and purposeful occupation of physical space within the representative space of the museum. The large base that gave the *Aboriginal Memorial* its geographical resonance would often measure around 200 square metres and it forced a physical and conceptual institutional accommodation.⁸⁶ As German installation artist Katharina Grosse has observed about her own practice: ‘Scale is the psychological aspect of the work, whereas size refers to its measurable appearance.’⁸⁷ In crucial ways, the scale of the *Aboriginal Memorial* dwarfs our physicality and tests our emotional limits while also having the capacity to heighten our senses.

The *Aboriginal Memorial* is also spatially configured to represent and invoke the connections between localised places in Arnhem Land. It is similarly an intervention into the specific place of Canberra, which happens to be the site of deep ‘intra-community contestations’ about the identity of the place’s custodians.⁸⁸ Social anthropologist Melinda Hinkson has described this situation of Indigenous territorial conflict in Canberra in the following way: ‘Colonial encounters have structuring consequences well beyond their own time.’⁸⁹

Mundine is similarly concerned with the place and value of Indigenous art in institutions, but he is also sensitive to the value of place in its ancestral, political and relational significations. Alert to these multiple registers of and claims to place, the *Aboriginal Memorial* grapples with the negotiation of these tonalities of difference. This ‘contestations’ about belonging to place in the nation’s capital is emblematic

⁸⁵ Julie Gough. ‘Interview with the artist’, Video Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2014, accessed 23 July 2018.

⁸⁶ Susan Jenkins. ‘A History of the *Aboriginal Memorial* in the Gallery’ *It’s a Power*, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010, p117.

⁸⁷ Katharina Grosse. ‘Katharina Grosse in conversation with Ati Maier’, *Bomb*, April 1, Spring 2011.

⁸⁸ Melinda Hinkson. ‘Unsettling Encounters’ *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 23, no. 9, 2017, p879.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p879.

of the wider issues of the *Aboriginal Memorial*. As Gordon Bull observes about Djon Mundine's methodology:

The overriding aim for Mundine was to bring into focus the interests and concerns of artists in the community, and to cast them as interests shared by Aboriginal people everywhere.⁹⁰

The *Aboriginal Memorial* attempts to confront and conceptually dissolve these totalising signifiers of the nation state and reimagine it as a different kind of polity, perhaps one based on Indigenous sovereign practices and values. The work acknowledges that the National Gallery of Australia is firstly on country and therefore implicated within an existing although highly contested Aboriginal framework. The *Aboriginal Memorial* must negotiate local politics while deploying a pan-Aboriginalising approach and nationalising critique.

Articulating cultural borders, the *Aboriginal Memorial* conceptually maps the relative location and proximity of many of the artists. The visualisation of Indigenous spatial knowledge and relational responsibilities is an important component of the installation. (Figure 1.6) The *Aboriginal Memorial* is configured along the course of the Glyde River, which drains onto the Guruwilling (Arafura Swamp) and then into the Arafura Sea at Castlereagh Bay. (Figures 1.7 and 1.8) During the Biennale of Sydney, red sand was used to make this act of territorialisation and occupation much more explicit and palpable. (Figure 1.9) Spatially mapping the relationships that different clans have to the river and its ten tributaries, the *Dupun* visually chronicle the changing riverscape and landscape. For those attentive enough to look, flora and fauna shift almost imperceptibly from inland animals, to mangroves to the open sea. This spatial knowledge is based on close contact and connections and the river becomes an analogy of flow, exchange and cyclical renewal.

⁹⁰ Gordon Bull, 'Curating in the Field', Inter-discipline: Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Annual Conference 2013, Victoria, Australia.

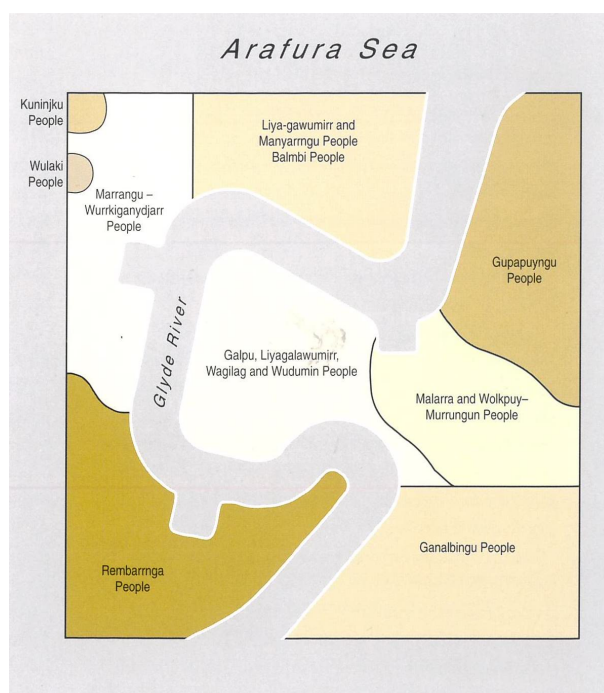


FIGURE 1.6

Visualisation of the clan groups and their respective geographic relationship to the Glyde River. 'The installation of the Aboriginal Memorial', *Memorial: a masterpiece of Aboriginal Art*, edited by Djarrie Ashley, Wally, Caruana, Susan Jenkins, Djon Mundine and Avril Quail. National Gallery of Australia and Musée Olympique, 1999, p70.

Through its own website, publications, CD rom and room brochures, the National Gallery of Australia has tried to make this relational aspect of the *Aboriginal Memorial* more prominent. Detailed maps and profiles of the different language groups reveal the complex ancestral associations of the sites that are represented iconographically. One of Mundine's motivations for the *Aboriginal Memorial* was to uncover the secret history of colonial violence, but he also sought to affirm the secret wealth of knowledge that underpinned social relations. As George Milpurrrru Malibirr explains about this intra-indigenous interactivity;

We Yolngu belong to different *barpurru* (clan groups) and each *barpurru* paints things differently; it depends if you come from the *gulunbuy* (mangroves) or *diltjipuy* (forests) or *rangipuy* (beach) ... It's important to know the difference and we need to teach the young people to paint in this way because they don't know. I teach them by painting a picture so they learn to see the difference.⁹¹

⁹¹ George Malibirr Milpurrrru. *Ramingining Artists: The Aboriginal Memorial 1987-88*, Room Brochure, edited by Susan Jenkins, National Gallery of Australia, 1998, unpaginated.



FIGURE 1.7.
Glyde River, Central Arnhem Land
Photograph courtesy of Susan Jenkins.



FIGURE 1.8
Installation of the *Aboriginal Memorial* in Gallery 1 c.2000, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Australia.



FIGURE 1.9 Installation view of the *Aboriginal Memorial* in the Biennale of Sydney, 18 May – 3 July 1988
Photograph courtesy of the Biennale of Sydney.

1.11 Singing-in and Opening Up: Intangible Cultural Heritage and Thresholds of the Sacred

The opening of the *Aboriginal Memorial* at both the Biennale of Sydney and the National Gallery of Australia in 1988 occasioned opportunities to demonstrate and partake of the intrinsic integration of art and cultural practices of song, music and performance. The insistence on – and potential of – ritual practices made manifest through the *Aboriginal Memorial* disrupted long-standing assumptions about museological objecthood as static and disconnected. Historically objects have been preserved from ‘source communities’ rather than being activated by what I term ‘communities of practice’. Under the curatorial eye of Mundine, these objects became part of the inwardness of ritual practice and knowledge production and, thus, were reconstituted in new social relations and new futures.

When the *Aboriginal Memorial* was first exhibited at the National Gallery of Australia on 3 September 1988, it was placed in the International Sculpture Court on the lower level, which is also known as Gallery 9. The soaring ceilings and greater availability of natural light made it an ideal place to situate the *Aboriginal Memorial*. Though the Ramingining Artists had expressed a preference that the *Aboriginal Memorial* be ‘independent from other displays’, it was shown alongside *Stripes from the*

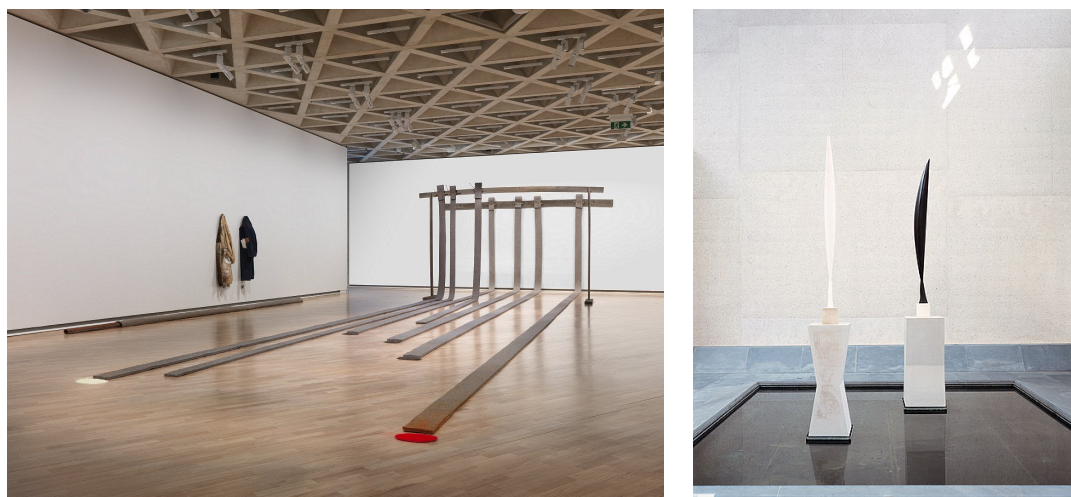


FIGURE 1.10 (left)

Joseph Beuys, Germany 1921 – 1986

Stripes from the house of the shaman 1964-72

1980, felt, wood, coats, animal skin, rubber tube, pamphlets, copper, quartz and ground minerals, pigment, overall 340.0 h x 655.0 w x 1530.0 d cm

Purchased 1981, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 81.2110.A-K

FIGURE 1.11 (right)

Constantin Brancusi, Romania 1876 – France 1957

L'Oiseau dans l'espace [Bird in space], c.1931-36

white marble, limestone 'collar', sandstone base, overall 318.1 h x 42.5 w x 42.5 d cm

Purchased 1973, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 73.960

house of the shaman 1964-72 (1980) (Figure 1.10) by Joseph Beuys and *L'oiseau dans l'espace* (Birds in Space) (c.1931 –1936) (Figure 1.11) by Constantin Brancusi.⁹²

Like the *Aboriginal Memorial*, the Brancusi sculpture is associated with water and it was installed within a small rectangular pool.⁹³ The *Aboriginal Memorial* was installed on square-shaped plinths positioned low to the ground that reflected, in a geometric way, the configuration of the Glyde River. The white plinth reflected light back on to the *Dupun* and provided a stark contrast to the dark quarry-split slate floors. In later iterations, the edges of the plinth would be softened and raised.

The *Aboriginal Memorial* was accorded a rarefied status alongside these iconic works by celebrated European artists. Nevertheless, while this positioning made for a compelling claim around ideas of contemporaneity and prestige, Susan Jenkins argues that there was a cost: the work's memorial

⁹² Mundine requested that the *Aboriginal Memorial* be on permanent display for future generations of Australians. This request was formalised in the acquisition's submission as follows: 'The community has expressed a preference for the work to be displayed permanently (depending on conservation requirements) and in such a way to be independent from other displays. It will be possible to arrange this in the new wing when it is built.' Wally Caruana quoted in Susan Jenkins, 'The *Aboriginal Memorial* in the Gallery', *It's a Power*, 2010, p218.

⁹³ Nathan Stollow. 'Brancusi's Birds in Space A Conservation Installation Project', *The International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1985, pp345-358.

function was respected but to some degree diminished through its visual contextualisation as minimalist 'international contemporary installation art'.⁹⁴ Unlike the violent associations implicit in the juxtaposition with Nitsch's 'blood paintings' at the Biennale of Sydney, this curatorial contrivance was premised on an openness to spiritual instantiations which was sympathetic to the work's meditative interiority. Like the early modern sculptors Amedeo Modigliani and Jacob Epstein, Brancusi had long had ambitions for his sculptures to be housed within an architectural temple in order to emphasise their spiritual associations. The Maharaja of Indore, who sold the works to the National Gallery of Australia, was also interested in following this plan although it would be unrealised.⁹⁵ The Beuys installation offered similar ideas of transformation through encounters with other realms, and in many ways, his shamanistic aspirations were bolstered through the juxtaposition with the *Aboriginal Memorial*.

In Nick Waterlow's introductory essay to the 1988 Biennale of Sydney catalogue, he notes the exhibition's interest in the 'extended present'. He continues, 'Art opens our eyes to dimensions of human consciousness previously unexplored, dimensions that are timeless and which make art a crucial ingredient of the humanist tradition'.⁹⁶ Waterlow is, thus, concerned less with the business of categorising art than with the 'sensory experience' of place that informs Australian artistic practice. Reflecting on the importance of spiritual practices to Aboriginal people, he writes:

Where does Australian art come from? This is a vexing question since, placed in the context of my own feelings, I see the single most important statement in this Biennale as being the *Aboriginal Memorial* of two hundred burial poles, one for each of the two hundred years of white culture. Aborigines (sic) have always been more concerned with spirit than matter, and it says much about the materialist, possession-based nature of our own society that for so long it was almost blind to a culture intangible but so crucially present.⁹⁷

While not diminishing the political import of the *Aboriginal Memorial* at all, Waterlow registers the spiritual practices that are embedded within the work and are key to its workings. More problematically, however, he insinuates a craving for 'the Aboriginal presence that nourishes our spirit' and 'stradd(les)

⁹⁴ Susan Jenkins. 'The *Aboriginal Memorial* in the Gallery', *It's a Power*, 2010, p220.

⁹⁵ Unattributed. 'Constantin Brancusi, *Collection highlights: National Gallery of Australia*, edited by Ron Radford, National Gallery of Australia, 2008, p214.

⁹⁶ Nick Waterlow. 'A View of World Art c.1940-88', *1988 Australian Biennale: from the Southern Cross: a view of world art c.1940-88*, edited by Nick Waterlow, Biennale of Sydney, 1988, p10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp11-12.

a consciousness of two worlds'. It is, of course, important to note that Indigenous systems of knowledge are based not on what can be known but on who can know certain things and at what juncture. Unlike the universal knowledge of the 'humanist tradition' Waterlow invokes, Indigenous information cannot be shared equally, not even within a wholly Indigenous context. Creating space for Indigenous practices is not always congruent with partaking of them. Indigenous curatorial mediation ensures that the requisite protocols are both applied and respected.

At the opening of the Biennale of Sydney, David Malangi Daymirringu, his son Johnny Dhurrikayu, Paddy Lilipiyana and Paddy Fordham Wainburranga sang to consecrate the *Aboriginal Memorial* into its temporary home. (Figure 1.12) Even in the art world context of the Biennale, the reaffirmation of the cultural context of the *Aboriginal Memorial* was a priority for Djon Mundine and the artists. This singing-in was also performed when the *Aboriginal Memorial* was unveiled in its permanent home in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia on 3 September 1988. (Figure 1.13) Painted up for a ceremonial production, David Malangi Daymirringu, George Milpururru Malibirr and Roy Burrnyila performed this intercultural ritual accompanied by the *Yidaki* and clap sticks. The audience was enfolded into the ceremony though positioned behind physical barriers.

At the opening of the new entrance and the unveiling of the Indigenous galleries at the NGA in October 2010, the then director Ron Radford 'emphasised that these new galleries celebrated Indigenous creativity through the lens of art, not anthropology'.⁹⁸ The day after the new wing of the Indigenous galleries was opened, there was only a small impromptu singing-in by Richard Birrinbirrin and Djon Mundine himself, but according to Nigel Lendon, there was no 'institutional reciprocity'.⁹⁹ The *Aboriginal Memorial* is not simply a work of art, but its rich complexity is being eroded in the current display. Susan Jenkins has written of the new configuration: 'the life has been sapped away' and 'the work no longer sings'.¹⁰⁰ The website for the *Aboriginal Memorial* has not been updated in many years and contradicts Mundine's mantra that 'caring for an artwork is to actually show and tell people about it'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Melinda Hinkson. 'For Love and Money, Aboriginal art in 2010: a different way of seeing', *Arena magazine*, No.109, 2010, p17.

⁹⁹ Nigel Lendon. 'a mnemonic device', *Iconophilia*, 6 November 2010, accessed 23 August 2018. <http://www.iconophilia.net/a-mnemonic-device-that-triggers-our-memory/>

¹⁰⁰ Susan Jenkins. 'The NGA's Indigenous Galleries', *Art and Australia*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2011, p544.

¹⁰¹ Djon Mundine. 'Marking the test of time: Nick Waterlow and *The Aboriginal Memorial*', *Art and Australia*, vol. 47 no. 4, 2010, p643.



FIGURE.1.12

Artists David Malangi Daymirringu, George Milpururru Malibirr and Paddy Fordham Wainburranga and Johnny Dhurrikayu singing-in the *Aboriginal Memorial* at the Biennale of Sydney, May 1988.

Photograph Jon Lewis, courtesy of National Gallery of Australia

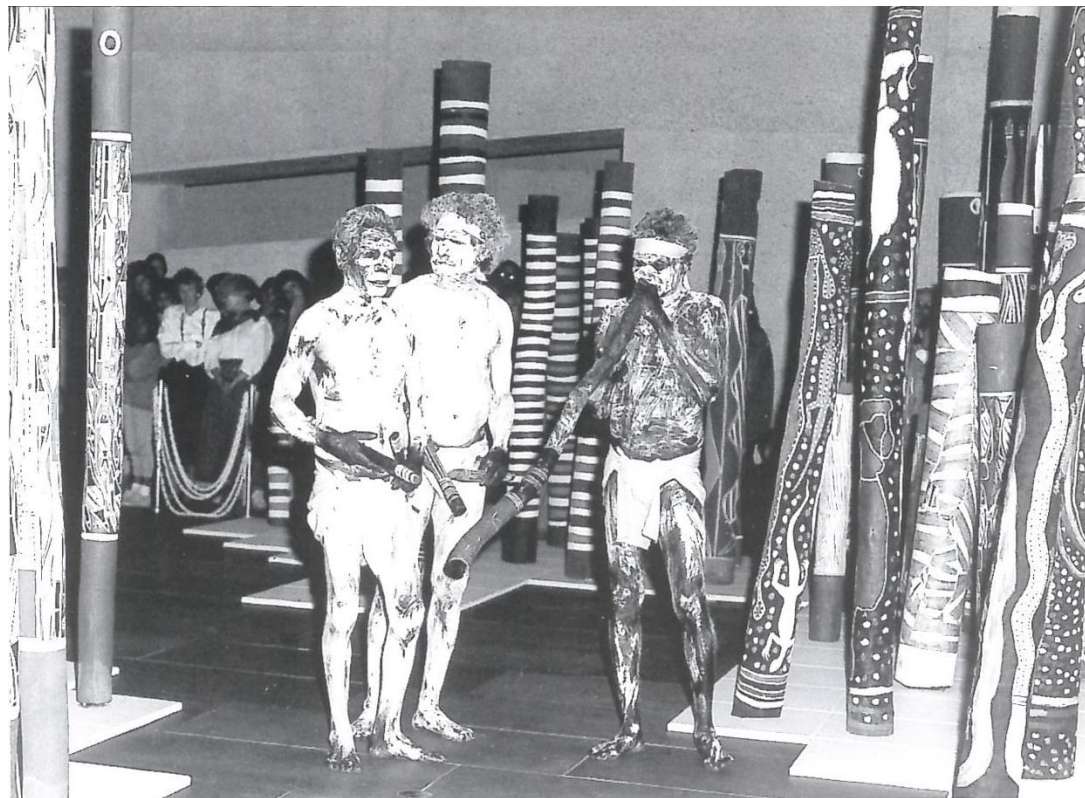


FIGURE.1.13

Artists David Malangi Daymirringu, George Milpururru Malibirr and Roy Burrnyila singing-in the *Aboriginal Memorial*, 3 September 1988.

Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Australia

The insistence on the *Aboriginal Memorial* as a contemporary work of art reflects wider social forces. Arguably this emphasis on the contemporaneity of Aboriginal art and diminishing of its anthropological context, are still the pattern in the Australian art world, and while many Indigenous art curators have endorsed this view, it presumes a narrow definition of both art and culture and reinforces a certain disciplinary incompatibility. To apprehend the totality and complexity of Indigenous art, we should be open to multiple and multiplying methodological approaches and Indigenous interests that bypass or reimagine western disciplinary monopolisations and that empower the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) practices which will be explored below.

In her seminal study of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, Susan Jenkins writes about Yolngu accounts of the work's significance. In an interview with Jenkins, Trevor Djarrakaykay suggests that the work's definitive purpose is in its supporting the respiration of cultural practices and objects. He also underscores the importance of the interplay between cultural practices and museological custodianship. This is not about the choice between art and culture but about ensuring responsibility to cultural practice within productions of art. Djarrakaykay says that the *Aboriginal Memorial* is principally '[f]or my kids and for my kids' kids - future eh? So that the hollow log ceremony *dhumbaliga* always live.'¹⁰²

The *Aboriginal Memorial* is more than art. It is an instrument for objectifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Museums and art galleries are now cognisant of the role that they play in not just collecting objects but ensuring that the social practices embedded within these objects continue into the future. Author, artist and activist Kevin Gilbert also understood this when he wrote to James Mollison:

As you are aware the *Memorial* is living art. It consists of 200 Pukumani Poles: one for every year of deaths and sorrow since white people have been here.¹⁰³

This recognition of the cultural resonance of objects changes both the archive itself and the process of archiving. The complexities of this archiving are elaborated by Vladimir Hafstein, who writes: 'making sure that people keep singing their songs tomorrow is a task of a very different order from that of archiving the songs they sing today.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Susan Jenkins. 'The Yolngu, The Aboriginal Memorial and memorialisation', *It's a Power*, 2010, p203.

¹⁰³ Kevin Gilbert. Letter to James Mollison File 87/463: Aboriginal Hollow Log/ Bone Coffin Memorial: folio 130

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Hafstein quoted in Joana Breidenbach, 'Protecting 'Indigenous Culture'', *Seeing Culture Everywhere from Genocide to Consumer Habits*, University of Washington Press, 2009, pp230-231.

The acknowledgement of the need for an international instrument to safeguard these instances of intangible cultural heritage has given rise to a new museological paradigm. The United Nations ratification of the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) provides a framework for understanding the importance of museums in not just safeguarding cultural practices but activating them. For the purposes of the Convention, Article 2.1 defines 'intangible cultural heritage' to mean:

... the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.¹⁰⁵

The underlying motivations of this legislative model are explained by museum director, scholar and curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who describes its holistic approach and therefore its value to Indigenous people:

there has been an important shift in the concept of intangible heritage to include not only the masterpieces, but also the masters...The most recent model seeks to sustain a living, if endangered, tradition by supporting the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction. This means according value to the 'carriers' and 'transmitters' of traditions, as well as to their habitus and habitat. Whereas like tangible heritage, intangible heritage is culture, like natural heritage, it is alive. The task, then, is to sustain the whole system as a living entity and not just to collect 'intangible artefacts'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Marilena Alivizatou. 'The Paradoxes of Intangible Cultural Heritage', *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, edited by Michelle Stefano, Peter Davis, and Gerard Corsane, Boydell & Brewer, 2012, p13.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. 'Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production', *Museum International*, vol. 56, no. 1-2, 2004, p53.

Unfortunately, Australia is still not a signatory to the convention and appears increasingly uninterested in its ratification.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the materiality of culture continues to be performed, contributing to the activation of people, places and practices. At the *Aboriginal Memorial 30th Anniversary Symposium* at the National Gallery of Australia in October 2018, the official commemorations began with a welcome to country by Ngambri representative Paul House and an outside smoking ceremony by Bobby Bununggurr and Roy Burrnyila. Burrnyila had also performed thirty years earlier at the singing-in of the *Aboriginal Memorial* in Canberra. In 2018, attendees were encouraged to bathe themselves in the smoke of a small fire and then led inside and through the *Aboriginal Memorial*. In this way, the space was cleansed before the conference that would discuss the painful histories of massacres and violence.

1.12 Conclusion

Curators like Djon Mundine have been instrumental in creating the praxiological and theoretical possibilities for Indigenous curation. The intervention into the Biennale of Sydney and then to the National Gallery of Australia provided a platform on which to project Indigenous political, cultural and spiritual values to the wider world, and this, in turn, expanded understandings of what Indigenous art could be and do. The *Aboriginal Memorial* was the sculptural 'tour de force' that Djon Mundine had conceived for the Australian field of art, but more importantly it represented an opportunity to use the medium of curation to bring audiences into a closer experiential and emotional encounter with Indigenous art and culture.¹⁰⁸

The *Aboriginal Memorial* represents a critique of the expanding frontier which is premised on the accelerating loss of Indigenous life and land. At the same time, it conceives of a new frontier in relation to the historic and emerging categorisations of Indigenous art and the new possibilities for curatorial practices. Twenty-five years after the public unveiling of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, Ian McLean described how the work resonated with developing notions of expanded art production:

The *Aboriginal Memorial* met all the criteria of relational and contemporary art more generally: social-political content, disjunctive temporality, the re-fashioning of local traditions to global contexts (in this case the history of colonisation in Australia), installation format, collectivist and intercultural production and postconceptual form.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Lynn Leader-Elliott and Daniella Trimboli. 'Government and Intangible Heritage in Australia', *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, edited by Michelle Stefano, Peter Davis, and Gerard Corsane, Boydell & Brewer, 2012, pp111-124.

¹⁰⁸ Djon Mundine. 'Ramingining Artists Community', 1988, p230.

¹⁰⁹ Ian McLean. 'Surviving 'The Contemporary': What Indigenous artists want, and how to get it', *Contemporary Visual Art + Culture: Broadsheet*, vol. 42 no. 3, 2013, p170.

While these retrospective categorisations have the imprimatur of contemporaneity, which was clearly a motivation for Mundine, it is more crucial that they are alert to Indigenous ways of doing and being. In facilitating a new curatorial language, this work – and the other exhibitionary projects that will be discussed in this thesis – have created new conditions for discursive elaboration.

Looking back at this curatorial project, it is easy to launch a pre-emptive celebration of the acceptance of Indigenous art within institutional contexts, but it is more useful to be sensitive to the ways in which Indigenous art and Indigenous curators have been working to unsettle and unbelong to historically fixed categories. In the late 1980s, Indigenous art was not yet securely in the category of fine art, let alone contemporary art, and so there were only so many legible ways in which the categories of curatorial experimentation could unfold. Despite these limitations, Mundine orchestrated a profound sculptural and curatorial statement which destabilised social and art histories by insisting on different modalities of artistic and cultural practice. While steeped in a continuing tradition, it dared to imagine that this tradition could be otherwise.

The permanent visibility of the *Aboriginal Memorial* within the representative space of the National Gallery of Australia was a crucial intervention. One of the principal achievements of Djon Mundine, along with other first wave curators of Indigenous art, has been to contribute to the heightened visibility of that art. The *Aboriginal Memorial* was first installed in the Victor and Loti Smorgon Gallery known as Gallery 1, where it would remain, albeit in various configurations, for seven years.¹¹⁰ Curator Daniel Thomas would later write of the work's prominence in the gallery: 'Australia became the world's only National Gallery to introduce an international collection with her indigenous people's art, and to acknowledge their dead'.¹¹¹ Similarly, Virginia Spate recognised the significance of this relocation in 1991 when she devoted the National Gallery of Australia's ninth anniversary lecture to the *Aboriginal Memorial*, a talk which Susan Jenkins described as the first 'serious independent reflection' on this significant work of art.¹¹² Spate observed:

The new location forces reinterpretation, I think, of every other work of art in the building. One we've passed through this forest of coffins, once we've absorbed

¹¹⁰ Susan Jenkins. 'The *Aboriginal Memorial*'s mobility within the gallery and beyond', *It's a Power*, 2010, p220.

¹¹¹ In the same article, Daniel Thomas argues that the import of the *Aboriginal Memorial* is diminished when it was relocated to Gallery 3, despite having no other works alongside it. See Daniel Thomas. 'A Place for the Display of a National Collection of Art', *Art Monthly Australia*, 109, May, p8.

¹¹² Susan Jenkins. 'The *Aboriginal Memorial* in the Gallery', *It's a Power*, 2010, p220.

ourselves in them, consciousness of their multiple meaning cannot be emptied from our minds as we look at other works.¹¹³

The Australian Bicentenary provided the optimal conditions to catalyse a political protest that resisted the conceit of the nationalist enterprise. But it also offered a space for the *presencing* of Indigenous cultural practices and political claims that empowered rather than objectified communities. Within this representative space, Indigenous people could be seen, believed, valued and mourned.

The permanence of the *Aboriginal Memorial* installation has much in common with existing examples of war memorials in Australia. Perhaps it is also because of this permanence that it has often been suggested that the *Aboriginal Memorial* should be relocated outside, which would be a more 'fitting' site for an Indigenous memorial. But the National Gallery of Australia already has an outside memorial, which is inflected with a different emotional and political register. This memorial, the Tiwi memorial, in the Sculpture Garden is respected as an ephemeral work, and since 1982 when they were first installed, the *Tutini* have faded and some have almost fallen over. (Figures 1.14 and 1.15) Djon Mundine has argued against this outside and held fast to his belief that the 'forgotten war' and its crimes would too easily be 'disremembered' by the Australian public if the *Aboriginal Memorial* was situated elsewhere.¹¹⁴ The work's eventual disintegration would not preclude it from functioning as a site of continued cultural practice, but it would not perform the temporal arrest nor invite such crucial lingering if it was to dematerialise outside.

In customary practices, the *Dupun* return to the elements, a process that echoes both the transformation of the physical body to the spiritual realm and the way grief yields to release. The *Dupun* ceremony marks the journey of the soul into the afterlife, but it is understood that the soul of the deceased continues to linger indefinitely within the *Dupun*.

In its material and immaterial forms, the eternal Indigenous body is symbolically and subversively laid out within the representative space of the National Gallery of Australia. It is an installation that shows, but does not recover from, the 'magnitude of the cumulative loss'.¹¹⁵ This confrontation with permanent and inconsolable grief should not give way to any easy reconciliation.

¹¹³ Virginia Spate. 'Remembering the future: The *Aboriginal Memorial*', The National Gallery of Australia's Ninth Anniversary Lecture, Unpublished Lecture, National Gallery of Australia Research Library, Canberra, October 1991.

¹¹⁴ Djon Mundine. 'The Aboriginal Memorial to Australia's Forgotten War', *Artlink*, vol.35, no.1, 2015, p32.

¹¹⁵ Susan Jenkins. 'Memorialisation', *It's a Power*, 2010, p204.



FIGURE 1.14

Pukumani tutini (funerary posts) in Sculpture Garden, National Gallery of Australia, 1982

Boniface Alimankinni, Tiwi, 1954–; Kevin Mukwakinni, Tiwi, 1925–1989; Tommy Mungatopi; Tiwi, 1925–1985; Alan Papaloura Papajua, Tiwi, 1912–1985; Aloysius J. Puantulura, Tiwi, 1914–1992; John Baptiste Pupangamirri, Tiwi, 1951–; Mickey Geranium Warlapinni, Tiwi 1905–1985; Bede Tungutalum, Tiwi 1952–; earth pigments on ironwood, 1979 and 1984, Founding Donors' Fund 1984, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 79.2764-79.2773 and 84.808-813.

Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Australia.



FIGURE 1.15

Pukumani tutini (funerary posts) in Sculpture Garden, National Gallery of Australia, 2019.

Details as above.

Photograph courtesy of Tina Baum

The *Aboriginal Memorial* at once marks, holds and accumulates time. Although there is a periodising register to the installation, it crucially does not suppose or impose any historical closure on these acts of violence. Instead the work operates as an endlessly deferred gesture of 'healing'. Opening up thresholds of the sacred, new political possibilities and cartographic affirmations, the *Aboriginal Memorial* is a work that reveals its inner curatorial workings. Working with forty-three artists, Djon Mundine created a spiritual, intellectual and political space that is self-determined and self-determining. Securing Indigenous *unbelonging* conceptually outside the jurisdiction of the state, Mundine claimed not just a site *of* Indigeneity, but a space *for* it.

Chapter Two: Insisting *fluent* curated by Hetti Perkins and Brenda L Croft

The Australian contribution to the 47th Venice Biennale (15 June – 9 November 1997) was a significant milestone in the history of Indigenous curation. Entitled *fluent*, this exhibition in the Australian Pavilion was curated by Hetti Perkins (Arnernte, Kalkadoon, born 1965) and Brenda L Croft (Gurindji, Malignin and Mudpurra, born 1964) and supported by the non-Indigenous curator Victoria Lynn, who served as exhibition manager.¹ *fluent* brought together the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Anmatyerre, 1910–96), Yvonne Koolmatrie, (Ngarrindjeri, born 1945) and Judy Watson (Waanyi, born 1959).² Sensitively responding to and interacting with the distinct and complementary practices of these three artists, the curatorium valorised Indigenous ontologies and inscribed them into the world. Throughout this chapter, I draw on formative statements about the exhibition as well as retrospective recollections to understand the aspirations of *fluent* and its radical structural consequences.

Biennales are, in the words of Argentinian curator Carlos Basualdo, ‘enormous mechanisms of visibility’³, and Indigenous participation in these transnational events of contemporary art is clearly an intervention into histories of exclusion and invisibility. The Venice Biennale was founded in 1895 and as the world’s oldest biennial art exhibition, it is often recognised as one of the most important and prestigious platforms for the presentation of ‘global’ contemporary art. Drawing on a nineteenth-century international exhibition model, participating nations host exhibitions in spaces inside the public gardens known as the Giardini, while many more countries exhibit outside it. A distinguishing feature of the Venice Biennale is in its national Pavilion format, which harks back to its nineteenth-century origins. In early iterations of the Venice Biennale, each nation would curate an exhibition in a Pavilion ‘to embody the national character of their country’ although there is increasing scepticism and dissatisfaction with this outdated representative model.⁴

¹ The Commissioner for Australia was Michael Lynch and the Deputy Commissioner for the Australian Pavilion was Dr Sue-Anne Wallace, the Director of Audience Development and Advocacy at the Australia Council for the Arts.

² Although current orthography suggests changing Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s name, for consistency, I use the same orthography that appeared in the *fluent* catalogue.

³ Carlos Basualdo. ‘The Unstable Institution’, *MJ – Manifesta Journal, Journal of Contemporary Curatorship*, no. 2, Winter/Spring, 2003-2004, p50.

⁴ Felicity Fenner. ‘As we face pressing global issues, the pavilions of Venice Biennale are a 21st century anomaly’, *The Conversation*, 17 May 2019, accessed 18 June 2019.

<https://theconversation.com/as-we-face-pressing-global-issues-the-pavilions-of-venice-biennale-are-a-21st-century-anomaly-117078>

The *fluent* exhibition revealed a commitment to troubling the inherent nationalist conceit of the Australian Pavilion by claiming a sovereignty and/or asserting sovereigntist practices that were between and beyond state recognition as understood by Kevin Bruyneel.⁵ Although these particular claims are often illegible or irrelevant in the west, the insistence on methods that contribute to the respiration of people, practices and places is a constitutive element of Indigenous curation. The late Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor observed the westernising tendency to configure non-western art as not only antithetical, but conflictual.⁶ Indigenous forms of curation and the artists they represent are often explored in this oppositional style. Hetti Perkins and Brenda L Croft, however, resisted such formulaic, essentialist and cosmopolitan approaches. Instead they invoked a cultural universe that was not only much larger but more interconnected. Uninterested in resisting coercive expectations to reset the national narrative, they opted to create conditions to build up Indigenous nations and their extra-discursive methodologies. Through its embodiment of relation-building, its articulation of the knowledge of place and its refusal to engage with reactionary responses, a methodology of unbelonging can be persuasively identified.

This chapter will focus on how the curation of this important exhibitionary project foregrounded 'indigenous specificity' and opened up thresholds of difference to better represent and apprehend the complexity of the world.⁷ Within this internationalised space of rethinking and differencing the canon, to invoke Griselda Pollock's generative phrase, the curators productively intervened into existing methodologies and more significantly returned to and created new Indigenous paradigms.⁸ It is crucial for Indigenous people to interrogate and rehabilitate their own historical misrepresentation, but it is also important to create new and less familiar representations that are faithful to the communities they depict. The methodological repertory used by the curators included a deep responsiveness to place, a recalibration of definitional regimes, relational and ethical modes of engagement, embodied interpretive strategies and the affirmation of a distinct Indigenous polity that is not merely reactive to colonisation but impervious to it. The audience of this international exhibition may have been primarily non-Indigenous, but in many ways, Indigenous audiences were understood to be the primary audience.

⁵ Kevin Bruyneel. *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S. Indigenous Relations*, 2007.

⁶ Okwui Enwezor. 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition', *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee, Duke University Press, 2008, p223.

⁷ Hetti Perkins. *fluent: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatie, Judy Watson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, p9.

⁸ Griselda Pollock. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, Routledge, 1999.

2.1 History of Australian representation at the Venice Biennale

Despite the curatorial singularity of the *fluent* exhibition, it can nevertheless be positioned within a longer history of Australian representation at the Venice Biennale. Australia's involvement with the Venice Biennale began with an invitation to participate in the 1920s, but the first official presentation as an independent participating nation was not until 1958. In 1954 when the artists William Dobell, Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale were invited to present their work in the Centra Palazzo, it was at the behest of the British Arts Council, which illustrates the extent of the Australian–British connection.⁹ In 1956, Albert Tucker was a resident in Rome and he exhibited a series of paintings in Venice based on Sidney Nolan's photographs of animals killed in Australian droughts. Although these two presentations have retrospectively become part of Australian art history, they do not meet the criteria of official national selection. In 1958, Arthur Streeton (1867–1942) and Arthur Boyd (1920–1999) exhibited at the Venice Biennale but intense disagreements between modernists and conservatives incited a twenty-year dispute during which Australia declined invitations to participate.¹⁰ However, since 1978, there have been regular presentations from Australia every two years largely due to the involvement of the Australia Council, the principal arts funding and advisory body of the Australian Government. The 1978 iteration featured John Davis (1936–1999), Robert Owen (born 1937) and Ken Unsworth (born 1931), who all worked in mixed media, sculpture, installation and performance. With the selection of three Indigenous artists, the 1997 exhibition inverted the all-male line-ups of both the 1954 presentation and the Australian Government's 1978 recommitment to the Venice Biennale.¹¹ (Figure 2.1)

In the 1997 exhibition, Emily Kame Kngwarreye was represented with eight paintings on canvas. Unfortunately, she would pass away the year before the opening of *fluent*, which had significant repercussions for the exhibition. Yvonne Koolmatrie was represented with two fibre objects and Judy Watson with seven paintings and an installation of bronze stones. Only six Indigenous artists have exhibited in the Australian Pavilion, including the historic inclusion of Rover Thomas (Kukatja/Wangkatjungka, c.1926–1998) and Trevor Nickolls (Ngarrindjeri, 1949–2012) in 1990. In 2017, Tracey Moffatt (born 1960) was the first Indigenous artist to be represented with a solo exhibition at the

⁹ For an account of the lead-up to the disastrous 1958 presentation and the intense disagreements which led to a twenty-year gap in Australia's official involvement, see Sarah Scott's 'Imaging a Nation: Australia's Representation at the Venice Biennale, 1958', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 79, 2003, pp51-63.

¹⁰ Stephen Naylor also describes this event in more detail in his essay 'Australian Spaces from the Outside in: Australia's Representation at the Venice Biennale 1954-2005', *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Spaces*, edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway, UWA Publishing, 2010, pp320-332.

¹¹ The 45th edition of the Venice Biennale was postponed until 1993 so the 1995 edition would coincide with the centenary of the Venice Biennale. This accounts for the move from even to odd years.

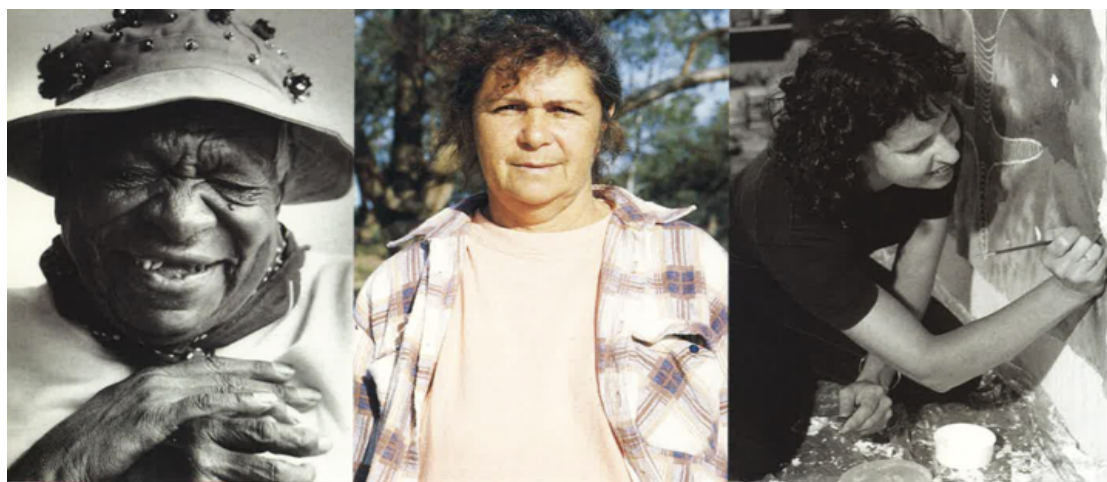


FIGURE 2.1
(Left to right) The artists of *fluent*: Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Anmatyerre, 1910–1996), Yvonne Koolmatrie, (Ngarrindjeri, 1945) and Judy Watson (Waanyi, 1959)
Photograph courtesy of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Venice Biennale in the Australian Pavilion. Moffatt has spent much of her career distancing herself, not as some would suggest from her Indigeneity, but from the narrowing criticality that accompanies an Indigenous self-identification.¹²

In 2015, Fiona Hall represented Australia with the exhibition *Fiona Hall: Wrong Way Time*. The Tjanpi Weavers from the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council in the Central and Western Deserts were exhibited alongside Hall in the Australian Pavilion. The artists who worked with Fiona Hall were Roma Butler (Pitjantjatjara, 1959), Yangi Yangi Fox (Pitjantjatjara, 1959), Rene Kulitja (Pitjantjatjara, 1958), Niningka Lewis (Pitjantjatjara, 1945), Yvonne Lewis (Ngaanyatjarra, 1947), Molly Miller (Pitjantjatjara, c.1969–), Angkaliya Nelson (Pitjantjatjara, 1969), Mary Katatjuku Pan (Pitjantjatjara, 1944), Sandra Peterman (Pitjantjatjara, c.1965), Tjawina Roberts (Pitjantjatjara, c.1940), and Nyanu Watson (Pitjantjatjara, 1951).¹³ Surprisingly, the eleven artists were not individually named when the exhibition opened.¹⁴ Despite the inclusion of the Tjanpi Weavers, they were not recognised as official exhibiting artists in the catalogue.¹⁵

¹² Ian McLean. 'Post-Identity: Urban Indigenous Art, 1987-2015', *Rattling Spears: a History of Indigenous Australian Art*, Reaktion Books, 2016, pp224-226.

¹³ Tjanpi Desert Weavers, Jo Foster and Linda Rive. 'Tjanpi Desert Weavers', *Fiona Hall: Wrong Way Time*, edited by Linda Michael, Piper Press, 2015, p49.

¹⁴ Fiona Hall. 'Fiona Hall at the Venice Biennale', Interview with Daniel Browning, *Books and Arts*, Radio National, 11 May 2015, accessed 14 May 2019.

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/fiona-hall-at-the-venice-biennale/6456038>

¹⁵ *Fiona Hall: Wrong Way Time*, edited by Linda Michael, Piper Press, 2015.

Since half of all artists in Australia are Indigenous, one would expect the level of representation in the Venice Biennale to be higher, particularly since the 1990s.¹⁶ Before the official announcement of Moffatt's solo exhibition, John Kelly noted this underrepresentation, observing incredulously that 'during the past 18 years no Aboriginal artists have shown in the pavilion and this is during one of the greatest flowerings of cultural creativity in Australian history.'¹⁷ Academic Stephen Naylor has researched the history of Australian representation in Venice and has not found meaningful qualitative criteria in the vetting process. He writes:

The selection policies set up by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council (VAB) have never been clearly articulated beyond wanting to put the 'best' Australian artists on show in Venice. However, it must be noted that the selection policies have by default sanctioned a view of Australian art that reveals much of the way we wish to project our social space to those in the international community.¹⁸

The narrow and largely monocultural ways in which Australia represents itself internationally result in a defensive articulation of identity that is indicative of a prevailing anxiety around Indigeneity in all its complexities. While Indigenous artists are severely underrepresented, there have been even fewer Indigenous curators, with only Hetti Perkins and Brenda L Croft curating the official Australian Pavilion. An acknowledgement, however, of the need for Indigenous curatorial mediation resulted in the appointment of Indigenous curator Hannah Presley (born 1983), who served as curatorial assistant, First Nations, working with Natalie King, the curator of *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*. (2017)

It should be mentioned that in parallel to the Australian Pavilion, Indigenous artists have been included in the central Italian exhibition, which is generally curated by an internationally renowned figure. In 2005 Okwui Enwezor curated *All the World's Futures* at the 56th Venice Biennale, which featured Daniel Boyd (Kudjla/Gangalu, born 1982) with two large diptychs *Untitled (T11)* and *Untitled (T12)* (2015) and Emily Kame Kngwarreye's *Earth's Creation* (1994). A number of Indigenous artists have been exhibited in official Venice Biennale events and many more have been curated into *later* exhibitions meaning their work is featured alongside but not inside the officiating armature of the Venice Biennale.

¹⁶ John Kelly. 'The 2015 Venice Biennale and the myopia of Australia's Arts Leaders', *Daily Review*, 6 May 2015, accessed 24 March 2019.

<http://dailyreview.com.au/the-2015-venice-biennale-and-the-myopia-of-australias-arts-leaders/23465/>

¹⁷ Ibid., unpaginated.

¹⁸ Stephen Naylor. 'Australian Space from the Outside In', *Proceedings of the ARCRNSISS Methodology, Tools and Techniques and Spatial Theory Paradigm Forums Workshop*, edited by William Mitchell, 15–17 June 2005, RMIT Publishing, 2007, p202.

In 1997, Tracey Moffatt was included in the *Aperto* exhibition in the Corderie, a sixteenth-century former rope factory. The exhibition was conceived for the presentation of emerging artists and Moffatt presented her body of work *Scarred for Life* (1994), which had previously been shown in *Australian Perspecta* (1995) at the AGNSW.¹⁹ The exhibitions organised with support from the Australia Council are listed on their informative Venice Biennale timeline but they fall outside the scope of this study, which is concerned with Indigenous curation and specifically observes the Australian Pavilion as an instrument of nationalist representation.²⁰ While a dedicated study of Indigenous artists from Australia at the Venice Biennale and its satellite programs is not conducted in this thesis, each inclusion is still a significant milestone of Indigenous representation and therefore demands greater investigation.

It is clearly important for Indigenous curators to be part of the representative machinery of the Venice Biennale. Australian art historian Bernard Smith affirmed the significance of the Venice Biennale in 1951 when he described it as ‘the most important international exhibition in the world. It gathers an audience of informed critical opinion and is reviewed in art and literary publications the world over’.²¹ Similarly and more energetically, Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø claim that biennales have become:

*the medium through which most contemporary art comes to be known. And this is undeniably the case, no matter what one’s position on or opinion about it may be. Indeed, biennials have become, in the span of just a few decades, one of the most vital and visible sites for the production, distribution, and generation of public discourse around contemporary art.*²²

The importance of the textual legacy of these exhibitionary projects is clear to all these commentators despite the almost sixty years separating the two quotes. The Venice Biennale is only open for a few months every two years, but it lives on through the discourse it generates. The appearance of Indigenous art and its attendant forms of curation within the physical and social spaces of the Venice Biennale is a powerful but ultimately ephemeral exercise. Unfortunately, Indigenous curators are rarely recognised as theoreticians although this is a prejudice that this thesis seeks to challenge. This

¹⁹ Stephen Naylor. ‘Australian Spaces from the Outside in: Australia’s Representation at the Venice Biennale 1954-2005’, 2010, p327.

²⁰ Australia Council for the Arts. ‘Australian Representation at The Venice Biennale since 1954’, accessed 24 March 2019. <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/venice-biennale-timeline/>

²¹ Bernard Smith. ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 January 1951, p2.

²² Emphasis in original. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, ‘Biennialogy’, *The Biennial Reader*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010, p15.

assumption does not deny Indigenous curators' capability to theorise, but rather more problematically, it dismisses or devalues Indigenous systems of theorisation. The heightened visibility of the Venice Biennale allows, at least in part, for these theories and practices of Indigenous curation to be taken more seriously by and within these centres of power.

Power and its hierarchical determinations are part of the past and present of the Venice Biennale. There are only thirty Pavilions within the Giardini and many more participating countries have Pavilions all around Venice. This dichotomous relationship between insiderdom and outsiderdom is but one of the many geopolitical contestations of the Venice Biennale. The art historian Jane Chin Davidson has posited:

The Venice Biennale began during the 'age of empire' as the period of imperialism which Lenin once distinguished as having 'economic roots in a specific new phase of capitalism' that led to, among other things, 'the territorial division of the world among the great superpowers'. Something like the custodial relic-ruin, the geography of the Venice Biennale still reflects the old imperialism – frozen in time as the mapping of the nineteenth-century economic supremacy of European and North American nations.²³

Australia is not innocent of these imperialist and capitalist associations. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Australia's first showings at Venice were at the behest of the British authorities. The Italian-born Australian businessman, art patron and founder of the Biennale of Sydney in 1973 Franco Belgiorno-Nettis was responsible for securing a site for Australia in the Giardini after many years of advocacy. In August 1987, the mayor of the Comune di Venezia, Nereo Laroni, arrived in Australia to formally support the agreement to build an Australian national Pavilion in Venice. An official Australian presence in the Giardini was considered by Belgiorno-Nettis as 'the best possible vehicle for promoting Australia's highly developed visual arts culture to the world.'²⁴

Beating out sixteen other countries, Australia was granted one of the last available spaces in the Giardini. The official insiderdom of the Australian Pavilion creates greater import for Indigenous curation

²³ Jane Chin Davidson. 'The Global Art Fair and the Dialectical Image', *Third Text*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2010, p719.

²⁴ Ross Wolfe. 'Franco Belgiorno-Nettis and the summer of 1985: A memoir.' *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 270, June 2014, p39.



FIGURE 2.2

The original Philip Cox designed Australian Pavilion which was used from 1988–2014.

within this platform.²⁵ Situated picturesquely on the *Rio del Giardini*, the current and former Australian Pavilion lies behind the triangulated configuration of the imposing neoclassical Pavilions of Britain, France and Germany (whose Pavilion was re-designed during the Nazi era). The original Australian Pavilion was designed by Phillip Cox and its prefabrication in Australia meant it could be assembled quickly in the eleven days prior to the 1988 Venice Biennale. While it was intended to be temporary, it remained on site for twenty-six years. It was built in the relaxed informality of the Australian architectural vernacular with a curved corrugated iron roof and a verandah that opens to and invites in the elements. A mature tree grew up through the verandah and through the vaulted roof. (Figure 2.2) With two long rectangular shapes at two different levels, curators would have to work with and not against these architectural impositions.

In 2015, the new and permanent Australian Pavilion opened. It was designed by the Melbourne architectural firm Denton Corker Marshall, which responded to the brief to create a more versatile white cube space.²⁶ This white cube gallery is encased in dark South Australian granite, a more symbolically permanent and traditional building material, with a number of panels that can be opened up as necessary. The Australian Pavilion, the only national Pavilion built in the twenty-first century, is now much larger and arguably more attuned to the scale desired by many artists. (Figure 2.3)

²⁵ Jeremy Eccles. 'In Praise of Talent', *Financial Times*, 14 December 2013, p18.

²⁶ Michael Fitzgerald. 'A Room of One's Own: Australia's New Pavilion in Venice', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 279, May 2015, p20.



FIGURE 2.3

The new Australian Pavilion designed by architectural firm Denton Corker Marshall which opened in 2015.

2.2 Indigenous Representations in the Australian Pavilion

In 1990, the Australian curator of Indigenous and Oceanic art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Michael O’Ferrall (non-Indigenous, active 1984–1995) presented the work of two Indigenous artists, Rover Thomas (Kukatja/Wangkatjungka, c.1926–1998) and Trevor Nickolls (Ngarrindjeri, 1949–2012) in the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale to much critical acclaim.²⁷ These events broke ground for the representation of Indigenous artists and blazed a trail for others to follow. This thesis distinguishes, however, between the curating of Indigenous artists and the foregrounding of Indigenous curatorial voices. My focus is, thus, on the *fluent* contribution, which pushed diversity and Indigenous visibility further.

Croft and Perkins were assisted by Victoria Lynn, who was then Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and had worked there since 1987. Lynn’s involvement offered a strategic institutional partnership with the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and ‘her extensive knowledge of the international contemporary art world, invaluable for the Venice Biennale’ was seen to be integral for the curatorium.²⁸ In addition, Lynn had worked with Hetti Perkins on the *Aboriginal Women’s Exhibition* (1991) and *Australian Perspecta* (1993), both at the AGNSW and they would refine many of these ideas and transpose them into a tight internationalised curatorial premise. Perkins’s association with the AGNSW began in 1990, but it was not until 1998 that she was employed full-time by the gallery.

²⁷ Michael O’Ferrall was Curator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth from 1984–1995.

²⁸ Brenda L Croft. ‘Where ancient waterways and dreams intertwine’, *Periphery*, Autumn, no. 34, 1998, p13.

Croft and Perkins had worked together at Boomalli Aboriginal Arts Cooperative so the curatorial team was experienced in collaborative processes. Perkins and Croft are the daughters of well-known activists Charles Perkins (Arrernte and Kalkadoon, 1936–2000) and Joe Croft (Gurindji, Malignin and Mudpurra, c.1926–1996). In 1981, Charles Perkins became the Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and was the first Indigenous person to become a head of a federal government department. Joe Croft (Gurindji, Malignin and Mudpurra, c.1926–1996), was a Cultural Adviser in the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs from the mid-1970s and worked tirelessly to improve Indigenous lives in political and cultural ways. Hetti Perkins and Brenda L Croft had forged solid curatorial careers in the 1980s and 1990s and Croft had also become well-known for her innovative lens-based artistic practice. Although they were urban-based, they always identified as belonging to their respective nations.

In late 1995, the Australia Council solicited exhibition proposals for Indigenous women artists, preferably from Indigenous curators for the Australian Pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale.²⁹ This exhibition would therefore coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of *The Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) 1967*, known colloquially as the 1967 Referendum, but this association was not taken up by the curatorium as a point of either celebration or repudiation. The 1967 Referendum recognised Indigenous people 'in the reckoning of the census' and the *fluent* exhibition was a moment for Indigenous curation to be included in the reckoning of contemporary art.³⁰ As Sibyl Fisher observes, 'the terms set out in the brief were clearly in response to the impetus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation, especially of and by women.'³¹ The Australia Council's decision to reinforce an agenda of social inclusivity and feminist leadership by yielding the representative space of the nation to Indigenous artists is significant, as is the appointment of Indigenous curators. The media release prepared by the Australia Council highlighted the racialised and gendered 'firstness' of the curatorium and the artists they represented.³² This was subsequently reported in most of the media of the time and it appears that this pioneering curatorium was politically threatening to the status quo, a point I will return to in more detail. While the appointment of Indigenous curators can and should be lauded, there is a more complex curatorial process beyond identitarian politics that I would suggest is enacted in *fluent*. I argue that the curatorial mediation that occurs within this cultural context of Indigeneity

²⁹ Ibid., p9.

³⁰ Marcia Langton. 'Reading the Constitution out Loud', *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2011, p20.

³¹ Sibyl Fisher. 'Fluent in Venice: Curating Australian Aboriginal Art Beyond the 'Urban/Desert' Paradigm', *Interventions*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2015, p806.

³² Australia Council for the Arts, News Release, 6 May 1997, *fluent* archives, Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, accessed 8 May 2019.

changes both how the viewer experiences and understands an exhibitionary event and how that event itself is produced and organised.

In their detailed work regarding the history of international Indigenous exhibitions, scholars Gay MacDonald and Laura Fisher have described the 'significant structural adjustments'³³ that occurred within the field of art in Australia from the 1970s with the formation of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) in 1973.³⁴ Similarly they highlight the moves towards self-representation through Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative and the radical politics that refused to be co-opted into the hegemonic renderings of the Australian Bicentenary.³⁵ They argue that the inclusion of Indigenous art within the Australian art field was due to significant infrastructural support, which yielded space to and supported the careers of these relatively young curators. But this was not a linear journey to recognition and acceptance. Christopher Allen's 1997 survey book *Art in Australia* mentions Indigenous art only twice, and the first time is in relation to non-Indigenous artist Margaret Preston.³⁶ The second reference occurs in the final few pages when he gives a cursory nod to art from Papunya.³⁷ Allen's approach would prove to be out of sync with the upward trajectory of Indigenous art and indeed, as art historian Joanna Mendelssohn points out, it was untenable:

Last week's launch of *fluent* – the Australian contribution to the 1997 Venice Biennale – is the latest demonstration that the cultural establishment is recognising the need for Aboriginal people to speak for their own culture. It is not possible anymore to mount a significant Aboriginal cultural event without Aboriginal involvement and, increasingly Aboriginal control.³⁸

While we can attribute this granting of access to the elevated status of Indigenous art in the mid-1990s, it is also worth acknowledging the growing anxiety that surrounded the international attention that would come from the staging of the 2000 Summer Olympics Games in Sydney and the resulting scrutiny of Australia's human rights record. The Venice Biennale is often likened to an Art Olympics and it is enmeshed in the brokering of cultural diplomatic relations that are essentially nation-building, or more

³³ Laura Fisher and Gay McDonald. 'From Fluent to Culture Warriors: Curatorial Trajectories for Indigenous Australian Art Overseas', *Media International Australia*, vol. 158, no. 1, 2016, p73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p73.

³⁶ Christopher Allen. *Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, 1997, p106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p214.

³⁸ Joanna Mendelssohn 'Indigenous art for Venice a self-defining choice, *The Australian*, 7 May 1997, p11.

precisely, remediating projects.³⁹ This process of remediation places a burden on Indigenous curators who are answerable not just to representative institutions but to their communities as well. It is not a risk-free proposition to participate in dominant fields of art, but it can contribute to the reshaping of institutional cultures. Deepening this argument, Sibyl Fisher writes of the *fluent* exhibition:

The risks involved with participation in the Venice Biennale – whether surrender to total commoditization and attend to the processes of neocolonialism in the form of high capitalism, or comply with older formulations of historical imperialism – were anticipated prior to the organization of the exhibition, and at some point established as more beneficial to the expression of culture than destructive, perhaps even open to negotiation.⁴⁰

Indigenous curation must take risks. And to take risks is to value the possibility of change. The interventionist potential of *fluent* lay in this capacity to shift entrenched attitudes, practices and histories and offer alternative paradigms. Following the appointment of these curators in 1996, the conservative backlash was immediate; the decision was derided as politically correct and tokenistic. John McDonald reminded readers about this when he reviewed the exhibition on its first Australian showing following the Venice Biennale at the Art Gallery of New South Wales:

From the beginning, the noises were not promising. The Australia Council had let it be known it was looking for proposals featuring Aboriginal women artists. This provoked the predictable howls about political correctness, and the suspicion that Australia was thinking about the Biennale in terms of its own conscience, rather than more objective criteria.⁴¹

The highly politicised reception of Perkins and Croft's appointment is still apparent, not least because it has not been repeated. Change is not just slow; it is often resisted. During a radio interview with Bundjalung journalist Daniel Browning, Croft recalled the reaction to her appointment: 'Of course there

³⁹ In an interview with *The Bulletin*, Perkins was acutely aware of this tension. In the year after the exhibition, she recalled: 'When we were in Venice, we kept getting daily news bulletins about the stolen generations and native title...Sometimes we felt it was hypocritical that Australia was representing itself internationally with Aboriginal art at the same time as it was attempting to legislatively sever those connections that Aboriginal people do have with their country'. Perkins quoted in Bronwyn Watson, 'Kith, Kin and Country', *The Bulletin with Newsweek*, vol. 117, no. 6108, 1998, p62.

⁴⁰ Sibyl Fisher, 'Fluent in Venice: Curating Australian Aboriginal Art Beyond the 'Urban/Desert' Paradigm', *Interventions*, vol.17, no.6, 2015, p812.

⁴¹ John McDonald, 'The Dream Weavers', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 January 1998, p14S.

were a few hackles raised, which got reflected in the early press of the time...It would be much more rampant now – but it was quite negative and dismissive, which we expected.’⁴² While the mere presence of Indigenous art and Indigenous curators is not inherently politically disruptive, it does demonstrate that Indigeneity was (and is) assumed to be outside of and oppositional to dominant Australian tropes, particularly in the nationalist space of the Australian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Nevertheless, *fluent* is remembered as a persuasive yet not politically forceful exhibition. In his review, John McDonald wrote: ‘Despite all predictions of gloom and doom, the Australian pavilion was well presented and the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Judy Watson and Yvonne Koolmatrie drew generally favourable responses.’⁴³ In the *Wall Street Journal Europe*, Frederika Randall admired the Australian Pavilion for the liveliness of the work which didn’t suffer from ‘art jet-set’ fatigue.⁴⁴ British Art critic William Packer wrote that the:

Australian Pavilion shows three artists of Aboriginal origin achieving authentic personal solutions...the paintings of the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, with her stripes of rich, lush paint, dancing together in a natural energy and intuitive accord, leaves us the most immediately engaging paintings in the entire Biennale.⁴⁵

In fact, because of the exhibition’s beauty, those attending to its formalist curatorial approach and reception all too easily overlooked its curatorial radicalism and subversion. As I will argue, however, these elements were inscribed in its insistent curatorial methodology.

2.3 Curatorial Methodology

Perkins’s curatorial essay is replete with methodological provocations and insights that are sketched out in its opening paragraphs. The exhibition concept gestured at fluidity: movement between, beyond and through territorial, linguistic, political and categorical boundaries. The watery canals of Venice were used as a metaphor of passage and the ‘motif of the stripe’ as a visual analogy of flow and possibility.⁴⁶ The exhibition revealed a commitment to troubling the limits of critical language and exceeding the category of Indigenous art as it was largely understood and positioned at the time. The catalogue essay mobilises much of the expansive thinking of the curatorium. It appreciates that Indigenous art is in tacit

⁴² Brenda L Croft. ‘Tracey Moffatt defies labels but adds to the story of Aboriginal art in the Venice Biennale’, Interview with Daniel Browning, *Away!*, Radio National, 3 April 2017, accessed 15 August 2018.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-01/tracey-moffatt-to-feature-at-the-venice-biennale/8400048>

⁴³ John McDonald. ‘Crossdressers amid the chaos’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 June 1997, p13.

⁴⁴ Frederika Randall. ‘World Art: The Same New Story’, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 20 June 1997, p11

⁴⁵ William Packer. ‘Pavilioned in Splendour’, *The British Financial Times*, 24 June 1997.

⁴⁶ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p9.

dialogue with dominant approaches to categorisation while at the same time attempting to reduce this determinative power.

It is telling that by the fourth paragraph of the catalogue, Perkins asserts that the artists will 'test the parameters of western and Indigenous art traditions'. In fact, this intentional boundary-riding is integral to the contestation that takes place in the exhibition.⁴⁷ Perkins writes in the catalogue:

The subtle connections between their works are suggestive of being part of a continuous ebb and flow, looking to traditions and precedents outside conventional western sources of inspiration.⁴⁸

This eloquent sentence serves to affirm an Indigenous framework and restructure a western one. It also suggests an expansive temporality which liberates rather than confines. For centuries, Indigenous art and Indigenous peoples have been understood as imprisoned in historical time. In 1929, R.W Puleine described Indigenous people prior to European colonisation in 1788 as an '[u]nchanging people in an unchanging land'.⁴⁹ These associations with fixity have been perpetuated by museums and the disciplines that inform them. While Indigenous people have come to be seen as dehistoricised and atemporal, Perkins makes a case for positioning Indigenous people not in a mythical time that is divorced from history, but in deep time, as active keepers and couriers of history. Judy Watson offers an insight into her own process of accessing these temporal layers of history through embodied and affective encounters with place:

I listen and hear those words a hundred years away
That is my Grandmother's Mother's Country
it seeps down through blood and memory and soaks
into the ground.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., p11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p12.

⁴⁹ Robert Puleine quoted in D J Mulvaney. 'History and Explanation', *The prehistory of Australia*, Penguin Books, 1975, p121.

⁵⁰ Judy Watson quoted in Hetti Perkins. *fluent: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatie, Judy Watson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, p14.

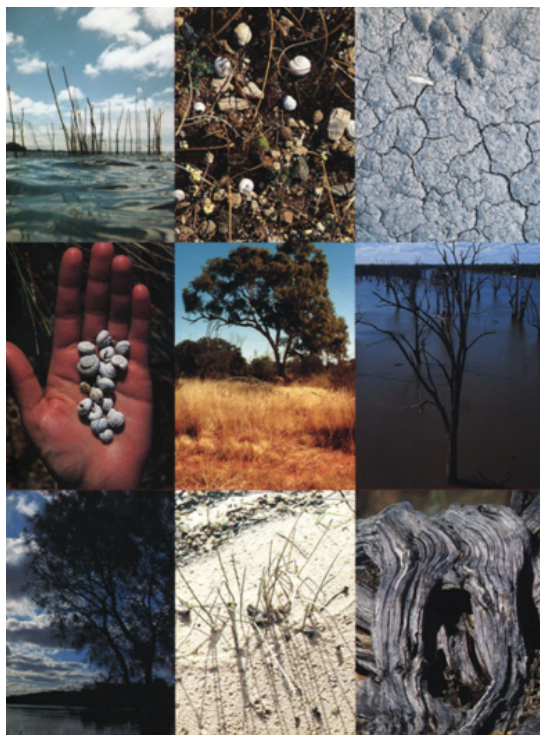


FIGURE 2.4

fluent exhibition catalogue, page 8. Except the top left photograph of fish traps in Samoa, which was taken by Judy Watson, all photographs were taken by Brenda L Croft in the River Murray Region on a research trip. Photographs courtesy of Judy Watson and Brenda L Croft.

This portrait of intergenerational connection that is mediated through touch, memory and place reiterates and accents this 'continuous ebb and flow'.⁵¹ The phrase 'ebb and flow' is used not just for its deliberate associations of Venetian tidal rhythms but for its properties of interanimation, perhaps between generations.⁵² The past, present and future do not operate in opposition but in relation to one another. Recalibrating conceptions of time as abiding and expansive, Perkins situates Indigenous art within a much larger, longer and wider temporal context. To perceive this temporal reconfiguration allows us to better accommodate the positioning of Indigenous art within a register of 'contemporaneity'. The first paragraph of Perkins's essay places Indigenous art within the categories of 'excellence' and 'contemporaneity' but it would be simplistic to see this as an exercise in recuperation. Rather, this framing manoeuvre helps dissolve the divisional structures of past, present and future and echoes the paradox put forward by Terry Smith that 'in contemporaneity periodisation is impossible'.⁵³

⁵¹ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p12.

⁵³ Terry Smith. 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2006, pp703-704.

Time is also closely attended to in the photography of the exhibition catalogue. Biological markers of time are implied in the growth-rings of a weathered tree, the river at high tide, shadows cast from the sun at its highest, green shoots emerging through rocky soil, desiccated snail shells. These photographs support Perkins's argument regarding the dynamic interrelationships between the past, present and future. Australia is an ancient continent, as all continents are, but in its quickness to reimagine and assert an identity, the culture of the Australian nation-state has evacuated not just the antiquity of place, but its wisdom.

The photographs in the prize-winning catalogue are predominantly focused on small parcels of land and accentuate the intangible poetry and knowledge of place.⁵⁴ In contrast to the typical expansive and aerial panoramas that are often standard in Indigenous catalogues,⁵⁵ the photography privileges a low-angled vantage point and/or tight cropping, which pulls the viewer into a closer physical encounter with place and reinforces what scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes as an omnipresent ontological belonging to land.⁵⁶ This embodied and haptic connection to the land is visually signalled by Perkins's hand seen cradling dried shells. (Figure 2.4)

In the catalogue, Perkins insists on the richness of the cultural formations that were produced outside the jurisdiction of the west and outside western measures of time. Locating this richness within Indigenous genealogies of symbolic order at the very moment it is subject to western determinations of value, she reiterates the intrinsic worth of Indigenous art by highlighting the 'excellence' of Indigenous 'art traditions and precedents'.⁵⁷ Venice is understood to be the pinnacle of contemporary art and inclusion in the proceedings is synonymous with excellence. But excellence is an intensely subjective term and one must question who is measuring this excellence and by what criteria it is being judged.

Despite the thoughtful articulation of Indigenous excellence in the catalogue essay by Perkins, Indigenous art is nevertheless subjected to external modes of value and appreciation. Only months before the *fluent* opening, pioneering gallerist Gabrielle Pizzi (1940–2004) had unsuccessfully put forward a proposal to exhibit Indigenous art at Art Basel. Hostility to Indigenous art was still very much

⁵⁴ *fluent* was awarded the Best Design Award by Museums Australia in 1997. Brenda L Croft. 'Where ancient waterways and dreams intertwine' *Periphery*, Autumn, no. 34, 1998, p10.

⁵⁵ *Painting the Land Story*, edited by Luke Taylor, National Museum of Australia, 1999, begins almost every chapter with an aerial photograph of country; this was true even of the 'urban' chapter. Similarly, *Araljara: Art of the First Australians: Traditional and Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists*, edited by Gary Lee and Bernhard Lüthi, DuMont, 1993.

⁵⁶ Aileen Moreton-Robinson. 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonising Society', *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, edited by Sara Ahmed, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003, p24.

⁵⁷ Hetti Perkins. 1997, p12.

alive and her bid was rejected. Tracey Moffatt was, however, included in Art Basel. Later in 1997, David Throsby reported this incident in *Art Monthly Australia*:

Despite the success of the Tracey Moffatts, (sic) the attitude to Australian Aboriginal art is distinctly cool there. When I spoke to the General Manager of the Fair Lorenzo Rudolph, earlier this year, he told me his selection committee felt that letting in recognisably indigenous work from Australia would open the floodgates to 'primitive', 'tribal' and 'folk' art from all around the world. Not only does this view trivialise the work of indigenous artists from other countries, it suggests that the Basel selectors place all Australian Aboriginal art into the category of objects sold in souvenir shops and at airports.⁵⁸

While all this was unexpected and retrograde, it signalled the residual determinative power of Euro-American genealogies of art. David Garneau writes of parallel issues in the Canadian context: 'Exhibitions of Aboriginal art shown within a dominant culture space are always in-formed (sic) by the world views of those who manage the resources and the site/sights'.⁵⁹ Because of these asymmetries of power, it is necessary to create a space that is not just of but *for* Indigeneity by harnessing and redirecting the agentive power of curation. Seen cumulatively, these invocations of Indigenous excellence and contemporaneity read not merely as a buttress against reactive arguments of undeserved merit but a framework to understand the singularity and specificity of Indigenous art. Even so, while *fluent* celebrated the specificity of women's practices, there was a conspicuous absence of feminist conceptual markers that would connect with international trends. This would have been surprising if the curatorium had not been committed to lifeways and lifeworlds 'outside western sources'.⁶⁰ Never retreating from the challenge of representing Indigenous women's knowledge and art production, both Perkins and Croft had curated women's exhibitions at both the AGNSW and Boomalli, the curators refused to inscribe it within discourses of western feminism. Nevertheless, for those sensitive to the nuances, the works were indebted to gendered forms of knowledge, practice and inspiration and the exhibition opened up thresholds of the 'sensual and the feminine' that were beyond the reach of language.⁶¹

⁵⁸ David Throsby. 'But is it art?', *Art Monthly Australia*, no.105, November 1997, p32.

⁵⁹ David Garneau. 'Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation', *West Coast Line*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2012, p37.

⁶⁰ Hetti Perkins. c1997. p12.

⁶¹ Brenda L Croft. 'Where ancient waterways and dreams intertwine', 1998, p9.

Perkins refuses any simplistic binaries in her essay. She teases out the distinctions and interactions between abstraction and narrative abstraction, art and craft, colonial dislocation and ancestral connection. In this way Perkins unpacks knowledge derived from both Indigenous and western genealogies and demonstrates what can be resisted and what should be privileged. This activation of 'indigenous specificity' opened up a superordinate space for the existing and emergent Indigenous curatorial practices which were deployed throughout the exhibition.⁶² Perkins's text understood the historic definitional regimes in which the 'Indigenous' was situated, but it also expressed an urgent need to reimagine binding and lasting judgments. As Sibyl Fisher writes of the exhibition's provocations:

The curatorial themes of fluency imply an ability to translate from one language, practice or knowledge system to another, without invalidating either, or requiring either to change for the sake of making things legible. The curatorial theme of fluidity subtly questions fixity and oppositionality in art historical categories, spatial tropes, geographical and material certainties and temporal locations. Together, fluency and fluidity can be seen strategically to avoid and even undermine the basis on which national pavilions can be 'representative' of nations and nationhood.⁶³

This acute awareness of both local Indigenous and global international modes of representation gave the exhibition its scopic breadth and curatorial focus. The premise of *fluent* immediately deprioritised modernist binaries and dualities and instead brought itself closer to formulations of the contemporary – formulations that are outlined by Ian McLean and Terry Smith and will be explored in more detail in chapter three.⁶⁴ These associations of interconnectedness, coequality and multiplicity were reflected in the curatorial process and through selected works of art, anticipating shifts in constructions of the global. Those shifts would soon overshadow the insistent manoeuvres of the postcolonial turn that was premised on the importance of political agitations.

Croft similarly saw the need for new interpretive frameworks and suggested the great rewards that could follow from a model informed by aspirations of intercultural understanding. In an approach framed in highly ocular terms, she upheld the merits of a deep and sustained looking that was receptive to narratives of the ancestral, the interconnected, the participatory and the educational. Croft had written a

⁶² Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p9.

⁶³ Sibyl Fisher. 'Fluent in Venice', 2015, p812.

⁶⁴ For a more detailed discussion of definitional ideas about the contemporary, see Ian McLean, 'How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art' in *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art*, Power Publications, 2011, pp333-342; and Terry Smith, 'Australia' in *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, Laurence King, 2011, pp203-213.

'politically attuned' text for the exhibition but it was not published in the *fluent* catalogue, and instead adapted for the *Periphery* journal almost a year later.⁶⁵ Croft's published essay also featured passages from Perkins's original text from the *fluent* catalogue, which highlights the polyvocal aspirations of the exhibition and Croft's connection to it. Despite this estrangement from the *fluent* catalogue, the *Periphery* piece should be considered an equivalent catalogue essay which underscored many of Croft's curatorial concerns and subsequent reflections:

The willingness of an international audience, and many non-indigenous Australians, to learn more, to work with, and alongside us, and gain an insight through viewing the works of artists such as Kngwarreye, seeing their interwoven stories, ancestral prescience, individual and cumulative vision will assist us in understanding each other's culture.⁶⁶

Elsewhere in the same essay, Croft described the benefits of a sensorial openness to the exhibited works that was not theoretical but deeply human. These embodied interpretations that she calls 'Intuition' are legitimate responses to these works of art.⁶⁷ Though she might insist that Koolmatrie's woven eel traps 'work purely on their own as sculptural forms', Croft also evocatively described how the traps activate an affective and sensorial experience and are themselves responsive to elemental forces.⁶⁸ She observed that 'wet weather seemed to heighten the scent of Yvonne's eel traps, woven from sedge grasses, which gave off a uniquely Australian fragrance.'⁶⁹ With their tactile materiality and 'unique fragrance', these traps immersed the audience immediately in the sensate worlds of the Ngarrindjeri. As John Kean reiterated in an essay on Koolmatrie published almost twenty years later: '[T]he scent of green rushes, the feel of the weave, the hum of shared stories and the infinite extension of a simple stitch to become form – weaving touches all senses.'⁷⁰

2.4 Political Disturbances and Elisions

Laura Fisher and Gay McDonald suggest that the curatorium was under pressure to elide the political dimension of Indigenous art and minimise the political agenda of the exhibition. The art-friendly Labor Government, led by Prime Minister Paul Keating, had been replaced in mid-1996 by a Liberal

⁶⁵ Laura Fisher and Gay McDonald. 'From Fluent to Culture Warriors', 2016, p74.

⁶⁶ Brenda L Croft. 'Where ancient waterways and dreams intertwine', 1998, p13.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p10.

⁶⁸ Brenda L Croft quoted in Russell Storer. 'a fluent career', *Tharunka*, vol. 43, no. 7, June 1997, p30.

⁶⁹ Brenda L Croft. 'Where ancient waterways and dreams intertwine', 1998, p10.

⁷⁰ John Kean. 'The Beautiful Aroma of the Sedge', *Riverland: Yvonne Koolmatrie*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2015, p123.

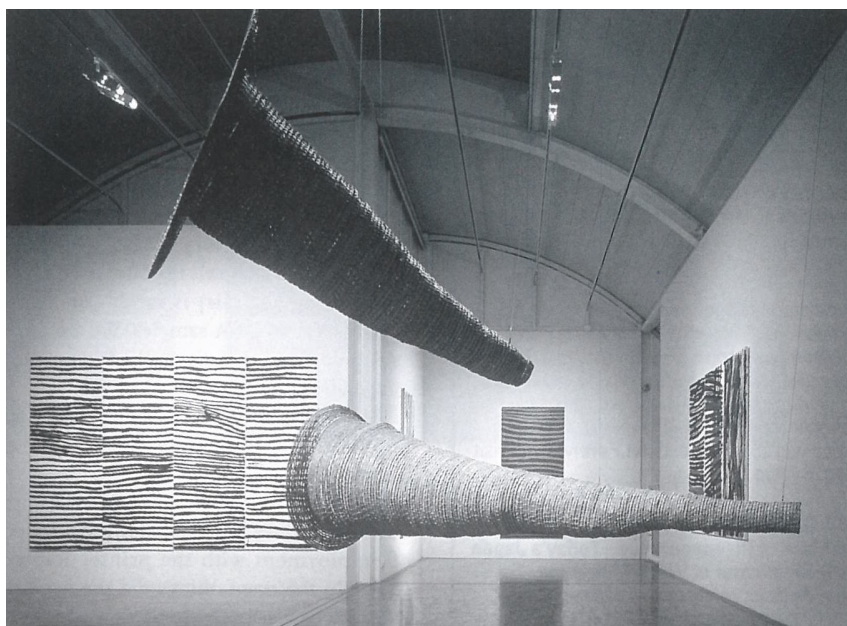


FIGURE 2.5

Installation view of *fluent* featuring four of Emily Kame Kngwarreye paintings, and the two fibre works by Yvonne Koolmatrie. Photograph courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Government, headed by John Howard, whose conservative Prime Ministership would be characterised by his refusal to offer an apology to Indigenous people for past injustices. A collective decision was made by the curatorium to avoid a political orientation and to encourage engagement as 'international contemporary art'.⁷¹ But as African-American conceptual artist Adrian Piper (born 1948), who is thanked in the catalogue acknowledgements, affirms: 'The demand to keep politics out of art is really a demand to keep art out of real life. But if art isn't allowed to address and transform the conditions of real life, I don't see the point of it.'⁷²

Croft's 'politically attuned' text that, as we have seen, was not published in the *fluent* catalogue but adapted the following year for *Periphery*, included insightful comments about the physical installation of the exhibition, its critical reception and potential modes of engagement.⁷³ As Fisher and McDonald conclude: '[T]he decision to withdraw Croft's political text was a pragmatic move on the part of the curatorium that signalled their awareness of the systematic limitations of the field.'⁷⁴ Croft's essay included some important political observations but it also abstained from the tendency to spectacularise Indigenous trauma.

⁷¹ Laura Fisher and Gay McDonald. 'From Fluent to Culture Warriors', 2016, p74.

⁷² Adrian Piper and Maurice Berger. 'The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview with Adrian Piper', *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, edited by Adrian Piper, Maurice Berger, and Jean Fisher, University of Maryland, 1999, p82.

⁷³ Laura Fisher and Gay McDonald. 'From Fluent to Culture Warriors', 2016, p74.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p74.

It should be highlighted that these curators' awareness of the field's limitations was not a coded defence of the status quo. On the contrary, it suggested the need to expand the political imagination beyond its suspect white supremacist foundations and to continue to raise Indigenous consciousness. I would argue that these 'systematic limitations of the field' were also opportunities for productive interventions. The latter were built upon and complemented by what anthropologist Fred Myers would describe as 'disturbances'.⁷⁵

Although Perkins's essay made a number of powerful textual and visual claims about surviving empire, including references to massacres and ethnocide, the political substance of the show was not in its adversarial or discomforting statements. Rather, it lay in the insistence on and demonstration of an Indigenous cultural framework. It is important to apprehend Indigenous curation not merely through a lens of transgression, resistance or antagonism. Although this lens is certainly deployed in curatorial responses to colonisation, it is not its teleological purpose. An interpretation of Indigenous curation as only ever being politically reactive, reifies the meta-narrative of colonial devastation, diminishes the primacy of Indigenous knowledge systems and hollows out their cultural significations. As Chiricahua Apache academic and curator Nancy Mithlo would put it, this methodological approach is 'reacting to the ignorance of others, not engaging in a proactive stance of self-determination'.⁷⁶ The creation of an Indigenous polity that responds to Indigenous modes of being, knowing and becoming is a powerful and necessary process but it is much less legible to the west. Unable to mask his astonishment at the beauty of the *fluent* exhibition, critic John McDonald wrote:

If the original idea of showing three Aboriginal women artists ran the risk of projecting our own political priorities into an uncaring international showcase, the realisation was far better than expected. Next to the strident exhibitionism of the American pavilion, one hardly noticed the political agenda in the Australian selection. On the contrary, it came across as a self-contained, aesthetically complete experience.⁷⁷

McDonald notes, or rather tolerates, the 'political agenda' of *fluent* because of its curatorial artistry. In contrast, he disparages the American Pavilion due to its highly political paintings by African-American

⁷⁵ Fred Myers. 'Disturbances in the Field: Exhibiting Aboriginal Art in the US', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 2-3, 2013, pp151-172.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p231.

⁷⁷ John McDonald. 'Hidden Shallows', Spectrum Arts, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1997, p14S.

artist Robert Colescott, a one-time student of Fernand Léger.⁷⁸ Colescott's figurative painting practice is distinguished by its subversive insertions of the black body into celebrated paintings of art history. He was the first African-American artist to represent the United States of America and as the Venice Supplement to *The Art Newspaper* stated, 'the choice is clearly a political one'.⁷⁹ In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Colescott speculated on his selection for the Venice Biennale, dryly noting: 'Maybe I've just gotten so old I'm no longer a threat.'⁸⁰

Clearly, indictments of the racism of art history are still deeply threatening to the status quo, not least because they demand that the powerful give up some of their power. Rather than embracing more representative versions of art history, it is easier to criticise those who call for them. In *Art Monthly Australia*, John Slavin dismissed Colecutt's paintings as 'the work of an angry old man' but never explored the root cause of this anger.⁸¹ The pressure to create representations of 'palatable otherness', to use film theorist Katarzyna Marciniak's concept, is shared by many minoritarian peoples around the world.⁸² As highlighted by the criticism of the American Pavilion, it is clear that one should not be too angry, too sad, too visible or too political.

However, the inclusion of an abstracted and blurred Indigenous flag in the catalogue suggested a refusal to be apolitical, in line with Piper's argument. Furthermore, it demonstrated an understanding of the subversion and crypsis that are sometimes necessary for Indigenous forms of curation. The designer of the flag, Harold Thomas, was acknowledged, as was the 1971 date of its creation, a date which heralded a new pan-Aboriginal consciousness. The two-line explication of the symbolism of the flag reads:

In the three colours of the flag, black symbolises our people – past, present and future; yellow represents the sun, giver of life, and red represents the earth, red ochre and our spiritual relationship to the land.⁸³

⁷⁸ Miriam Roberts. 'Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings', *Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings*, edited by Miriam Roberts, 1997, p18.

⁷⁹ The Art Newspaper. 'Foreign Pavilions in the Giardini. We all need roots', *The Art Newspaper*, Venice Supplement, June 1997, unpaginated.

⁸⁰ Kristine McKenna. 'A Sense of Color: At Age 71, Artist Robert Colescott Is Breaking Color Barriers - in More Ways Than One - at the Venice Biennale', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 1997, pC18.

⁸¹ John Slavin. 'Notes towards the end of time: The Venice Biennale', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 102, August 1997, p12.

⁸² Katarzyna Marciniak. 'Palatable Foreignness', *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, edited by Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre and Áine O'Healy, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p194.

⁸³ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p52.

The inclusion of an official but alternative flag of Australia was also a potent signifier, underscoring many of the themes of unbelonging and refusal that were brought out in the exhibition. In particular, it undermined the falsely unifying impulses of colonisation and instead celebrated the diversity inferred under a deliberately pan-Aboriginal symbol. While the Aboriginal flag has been an important way to strategically mobilise affirmations of togetherness, it does not conflate this togetherness with sameness. It denotes the plurality of Indigenous group identification and embraces a social complex of interconnected relationalities.

Much writing on Indigenous art is concerned with interconnections and forging correspondences, both conceptual and stylistic with western forms of art. It is obvious that accreditation from and by the institutions of the art world is and has been important for Indigenous art. Unfortunately, this seems to naturalise the ideas that first, only these institutions have the power to institutionalise and second, their legitimising power is necessary for and to Indigenous art. But it would be misleading to suggest that belonging to or at least competing alongside artists from historical centres of power was of limited use to Indigenous artists and curators, particularly given the high prestige of the Venice Biennale. Sporadic presentations of Indigenous art within high-level Australian and international settings have made a significant contribution to the currency of Indigenous art both through these showings and the discourse, both positive and negative, that they have produced. Nevertheless, as Katarzyna Marciniak cautions, it is crucial to avoid:

reinforcing first-world whiteness as the governing diegetic principle that, in a benevolent gesture, may accept foreignness as long as the dominance of this particular whiteness is not upset and as long as foreignness is treated like a 'colorful bonus.'⁸⁴

It must be said that Indigenous art is self-possessed of its own differential value and it is capable of determining its own distinct valuations. The efforts to maintain cultural integrity through Indigenous forms of curation should not be seen as a reductive exercise in cultural policing although this unfortunately is part of the 'cultural labour' of Indigenous curators in the creative industries. This important work needs to be resourced and respected as ancestrally charged mediation between 'incommensurable regimes of value'.⁸⁵ Through its responsiveness to and accommodation of cultural needs, the exhibitionary format can be Indigenised through curatorial expressions. The 'striped'

⁸⁴ Katarzyna Marciniak. 'Palatable Foreignness', 2007, p194.

⁸⁵ Fred Myers. 'Disturbances in the Field', 2013, p170.

paintings of Kngwarreye are associated with the 'sorry scars of mourning rituals' and with her untimely death, the *fluent* exhibition became a ritually inflected site and occasion of profound memorialisation, and like the *Aboriginal Memorial*, it does this in culturally appropriate ways.⁸⁶

2.5 Cultural Protocols: Disturbances and Continuations

Fred Myers has written extensively of the exhibition histories of Indigenous art from Australia in North America and has grappled with 'the complexities that emerge when incommensurable regimes of value – Aboriginal cultural values and those of the fine art world – come together.'⁸⁷ While focusing on the cultural art productions of artists from the Western Desert, Myers suggests that these works of art are embedded in the mediation of 'complex social relations of reciprocity and debt, as well as knowledge of the "revelatory regimes" that are central to the paintings' cosmological significance.'⁸⁸ While in many ways, Indigenous artists accept and corroborate the terms of value and exchange in the art world, risks and liabilities abound. Consultative curatorial practices must be built up around these systems of exchange in order to broker these 'incommensurable regimes of value'.

The importance of this curatorial (which should also be understood to be cultural) brokerage was apparent in the *fluent* exhibition. The convention in Venice is to present the work of a living artist, so the death of Emily Kame Kngwarreye in September 1996 necessitated a different approach, which began with extensive consultations to seek special permission to show her work and to use both her name and her image in the official catalogue.⁸⁹ Although this was not the first time a deceased artist was represented at the Australian Pavilion in Venice (Arthur Streeton had died fifteen years before the 1956 presentation), it was still highly unusual. For Indigenous artists, a period of mourning would customarily exclude their participation and would often require the suppression of names, images and sites.

In July 1996, the Australia Council issued its first media release announcing *fluent*. This release named Kngwarreye but following her death, her mourning name *Kwementyai* was used in all releases. At the official launch at the Art Gallery of New South Wales on May 6 1997, these mourning conventions were taken further and a protocol sheet with pronunciation guide was included. The information sheet detailed that:

⁸⁶ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p16.

⁸⁷ Fred Myers. 'Disturbances in the Field', 2013, p170.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p170.

⁸⁹ Pollyanna Sutton. 'Getting more than just deserts', *The Age*, 6 May 1997, pC5.

[i]n accordance with Aboriginal custom, the full name of the artists should not be spoken out of respect for the deceased and their family. The substitute *Kwementyai* (meaning 'no name') and the artist's skin name, Kngwarreye should be used.⁹⁰

Highlighting the importance of Indigenous protocols and the seriousness with which they need to be followed is part of the Indigenous curator's remit. Similarly, as a mark of their importance, these protocols are textually inscribed into the catalogue. Within such a highly visible arena, Indigenous curation is changing systems of representation and modelling its unwavering support for cultural sensitivities. In fact, the first words to appear in the inside cover were a notice to advise the relatives of Emily Kame Kngwarreye that there was a photograph included within the catalogue that might cause distress. This is a routine cultural protocol that had already been enacted in such seminal publications as *Dreamings: Art of Aboriginal Australia* (1988).⁹¹ Its primacy within the bilingual catalogue demonstrates the importance of cultural protocols though the sentence was not translated into Italian.

Indigenous protocols following death are some of the most visible, a situation that is paradoxically due to their censorial nature. The philosophy of these consultative arrangements acknowledges the different symbolic order in which Indigenous artists, and by extension, Indigenous curators are immersed. It reiterates that artistic practices derived from cultural practices must be mediated through a cultural framework. In addition, this process ensures that the cultural authority resides with the Indigenous people born into this symbolic order in its encounter with the public sphere.

In writing of the difficulties of locating Western Desert painting practices within existing canonical configurations, Fred Myers describes an encounter with 'a kind of radical difference'.⁹² Attending to this 'radical difference' requires gesturing towards an Indigenous complex of social relations, which involves the privileging of Indigenous ethics, customs and forms of consensus-building. Returning cultural authority to Indigenous people within dominant cultural fields activates Indigenous agency. Through these relational and consultative arrangements, Indigenous agency is both honoured and replenished.

The cultural and ethical dimensions of intercultural production are codified in a number of important resources. *Valuing Art, Respecting Culture: Protocols for Working with the Australian Indigenous Visual*

⁹⁰ Australia Council for the Arts, News Release, 6 May 1997, *fluent* archives, Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, accessed 8 May 2019.

⁹¹ Peter Sutton, editor. *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. Viking in association with the Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1988, piv.

⁹² Fred Myers. 'Disturbances in the Field', 2013, p159.

Arts and Craft Sector was published in 2001 by the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) and it covers the law, regulations, protocols and their interconnections.⁹³ Compiled by Indigenous copyright lawyer Terri Janke (Meriam and Wuthathi) and curator and arts worker Doreen Mellor (Ngadjan), this seminal document signalled the necessity for guidelines and these have become an important resource for non-Indigenous researchers and collaborators. Inscribing Indigenous protocols into dominant fields of art is not just an intervention into conventional modes of practice but a vivification of Indigenous cultural modalities. To represent these artists within exhibitionary projects is to enter into a relational bond and it is necessary to shoulder the ethical responsibilities that issue from this cultural and curatorial representation. As part of this curatorial responsibility, it is crucial to respect not just the lifeworlds of the artists but also their self-ascribed identities and histories of socialisation, biculturality and geographical situatedness. These matters are discussed in the following section.

2.6 Typological Identities: Remote, Urban and Regional

Bidjara academic Marcia Langton describes Aboriginality as 'a field of intersubjectivity that is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representations and interpretation'.⁹⁴ Like Orientalism, Aboriginality is a product of Eurocentrism which has occasioned a crisis of representation and a crisis of identity.⁹⁵ To be clear, Aboriginality is an identity of crisis. To be Aboriginal is to be renamed, reconfigured and reanimated through a colonial register. The colonial imagination is highly active against contrivances of Aboriginal identity, but its hold and reach is considerably weakened against the cultural inheritances of Waanyi, Anmatyerr and Ngarrindjeri peoples. These subject positions that are rendered visible by the curatorium at the Venice Biennale, refuse homogenisation and insist on their ontological and epistemological specificity.

The expectation to participate in identity politics is coercive, often punitive and utterly exhausting. While it is necessary to both understand and deprioritise these projections of Aboriginal identity which are only visible through traumatic historical distortions, it is more important to mobilise new or rather cultural representations that may be less familiar to non-Indigenous people but are more resonant and uplifting for Indigenous peoples. Articulating a cultural belonging that is not subservient or even intelligible to the

⁹³ Doreen Mellor and Terri Janke. *Valuing Art, Respecting Culture: Protocols for Working with the Australian Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector*, National Association for the Visual Arts, 2001.

⁹⁴ Marcia Langton. 'Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television': *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and About Aboriginal People and Things*, Australian Film Commission, 1993, p33.

⁹⁵ Edward W Said. *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, 1994.

nation state offers a promissory moment of cultural instantiation, of which colonial liberation is an inevitable by-product.

The prevailing Aboriginality that had been embraced by Australians in the 1970s was an Aboriginality that was distant, remote and 'traditional.' This identity was structured by and through its relationship to place and to ancient ancestral referents. These associations would become a highly and problematically prized signifier of authenticity. The emphasis on ancestral subjectivity often served to place Indigenous people and their concerns into the past. By extension, Indigenous people are conceptually filtered out of the experiences and features of the modern world. This interpretive framework has depoliticising consequences as the historical legacies of colonisation could be conveniently ignored. New expressive forms of Aboriginality that deviated from these reductive representations would be curtailed under the umbrella category of 'Urban art'. The producers of this 'urban art', were in closer geographical proximity to centres of colonial power, they were biracial or bicultural, they were political agitators and were conversant in western contemporary life. This Aboriginality was harder to recognise, to legitimise and to accept.

In his 1990 Venice Biennale essay on Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls, *Australian Aboriginal Art - Convergence and Divergence*, Michael O'Ferrall similarly tries to create complexity in these all-embracing categories of Aboriginality. He touches on the recurrent 'dichotomies of town-bush, Aboriginal-European, Traditional-Contemporary, and in more recent times Australian-European-Asian.'⁹⁶ While the urban/remote binary of Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls was intentionally deployed, by the curator as much as Nickolls himself, it invariably tethered the artists to these narrow identitarian typologies. In *Australian Perspectives* (1993) Victoria Lynn and Hetti Perkins revealed their relationship to these terms by conceding that the curatorial selection 'has been made with a healthy disregard to suspect dichotomies contemporary/traditional and or in/authentic.'⁹⁷ The Indigenous curatorial perspective that Lynn and Perkins offer here, operates to resist and destabilise such binary categorisations, as often Indigenous artists and curators have been punished by them.

This approach is advanced even more with *fluent*. The curatorium insisted on nuancing these terminological formations which would not eliminate them, but reinscribe them. Riddling these significations with ambiguity and contradiction, they restructured the divisional and oppositional premise

⁹⁶ Michael O'Ferrall. 'Australian Aboriginal Art - Convergence and Divergence', *1990 Venice Biennale, Australia: Artists, Rover Thomas, Trevor Nickolls*, edited by Michael O'Ferrall, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1990, p8.

⁹⁷ Hetti Perkins. 'Seeing and Seaming: Contemporary Aboriginal Art', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 66, December–February 1993-94, p25.

of these representations in favour of a 'spectrum of indigenous experience'.⁹⁸ In the interview with Russell Storer, Croft elaborates on the categories of Remote, Urban and Regional in their expanded form, but her reasoning suggests neither indifference nor hostility towards these labels. Rather she works to set up an equivalence between the categories. Furthermore, she insists that these categories are self-legitimising, in and of themselves. She argues:

If you really want to try and touch bases – which we weren't trying to do – but: a woman from a traditional community, Kngwarreye, absolutely steeped in traditional law and culture and yet probably the leading contemporary artist in this country, let alone indigenous contemporary artist; then you have Judy, who's gone through tertiary training and taken overseas residencies everywhere, and brings her work back into her own personal family history; and you've got Yvonne, who's from a regional area. It isn't about political correctness, it's about three artists whose work absolutely works together and is of the standing to be shown over in Venice.⁹⁹

While Croft is at pains to move away from an exhibition premised on a typological schema, the three artists selected nevertheless inhabit these diverse subject positions. Her frustration is not with these categories *per se*, but with their relentless policing. Shapeshifting and transformation are part of Indigenous cosmologies and an inevitable component of cultural practice. Sibyl Fisher articulates a widely shared frustration with the definitional inelasticity of the culture industries. She concedes that: 'There is no space for the concept of hybridity, no understanding that culturally specific knowledge can adapt and survive the processes of modernization.'¹⁰⁰

In the Venice Biennale Supplement to the *Art Newspaper*, *fluent* was discussed under the headline, 'We all need roots.'¹⁰¹ Kngwarreye and Koolmatrie were discussed unproblematically as Indigenous artists. Judy Watson however was given a different treatment and with her 'western name' was assumed to be non-Indigenous, effectively erasing her Waanyi identity.¹⁰² Negotiating these racial, cultural, social and political complexities is a burden for artists, but not for the system they are implicated within. Enacting a graceful assault, Watson insists on her Waanyi inheritance, the legitimacy of her socialisation and her artistic and ideological commitment to non-essentialist identity

⁹⁸ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p11.

⁹⁹ Brenda L Croft quoted in Russell Storer. 'a fluent career', 1997, p30.

¹⁰⁰ Sibyl Fisher. 'Fluent in Venice', 2015, p812.

¹⁰¹ The Art Newspaper. 'Foreign Pavilions in the Giardini. We all need roots', *The Art Newspaper*, Venice Supplement, June 1997, unpaginated.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, unpaginated.

constructions. In remembering an anecdote, Watson reveals much about homogenising art histories, institutions and narratives. She recalls:

A few years ago an Auction house wanted to know in which category I wanted myself and my work to be featured: Aboriginal or Contemporary. I said both. The categorisation is their issue not mine. It's like the Blues Brothers film in which they are told there are only two types of music: Country and Western. My work is both Country and Western.¹⁰³

The question itself reveals the tendency of Australian and global art histories to dichotomise difference. In contrast, Watson's answer reinforces the easy fluency (for some) of embodying a biracial, bicultural or diasporic Indigenous identity. But because of these reductive categories and the presuppositions of essentialist identities, many Indigenous artists have refused to be labelled 'Indigenous', insisting on the purported non-racialised category of 'Contemporary Artist' which promises a racial neutrality or ambiguity.¹⁰⁴ As mentioned earlier Tracey Moffatt is one such artist who has distanced herself from Indigenous exhibitions although the Australia Council seemed to foreground her Indigeneity in much of the promotional material in her solo exhibition at the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017, in contrast to long-standing opposition to the 'simplistic categorisation' of her work.¹⁰⁵ Similarly Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) argued against a racialised interpretive framework for his practice.¹⁰⁶ Fortunately, a credible challenge to this system would soon intervene into the cultural fields of art and cultural difference would not just be tolerated, but it would be celebrated, at least within the confines of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative. Ian McLean contends that:

Boomalli spearheaded a militant identity discourse, most evident in its desire to promote an exclusively Indigenous voice to both secure its own boundaries and counter the hegemony of the white art world. It has been most successful in the curatorial arena, in part because of the influence of Croft and Hetti Perkins, who began their careers at Boomalli and would become influential curators in state galleries.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Judy Watson. 'Country and Western', Jillian Bradshaw Memorial Lecture, Curtin University of Technology, Perth 23 September 2003.

¹⁰⁴ See Marianne Riphagen for a contemporary discussion of these issues. 'Contested Categories: Brook Andrew, Christian Thompson and the Framing of Contemporary Australian Art', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 55, 2013, pp93-118.

¹⁰⁵ Clare Williamson and Tracey Moffatt. 'Fax Exchange with Tracey Moffatt: Who do you take me for?', *Eyeline*, vol. 18, Autumn, 1992, p6.

¹⁰⁶ For longer discussions about these issues, see Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi. '(Re)Membering. (Dis)Membering: 'Aboriginality' and the Art of Gordon Bennett', *Third Text*, vol. 8, no. 26, 1994, pp75-89.

¹⁰⁷ Ian McLean. 'Post-Identity: Urban Indigenous Art, 1987-2015', 2016, p209.



FIGURE 2.6
Founding members of Boomalli in 1987. (left to right): Michael Riley, Bronwyn Bancroft, Euphemia Bostock, Arone Raymond Meeks, Fiona Foley, Brenda L Croft, Jeffrey Samuels, Tracey Moffatt, Avril Quail, Fernanda Martins.
Photograph by Margaret Olah, courtesy Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative.

Boomalli would become an important site of cultural and artistic practice which would be formative to both Croft and Perkins individually and collaboratively in establishing and refining their curatorial processes and careers.

2.7 Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative and Institutional Curation

It is impossible to discuss erasure, marginalisation and vexed questions of Indigenous identity without mentioning Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative (initially Ko-operative), which was established in late 1987 in Sydney by a group of ten young Indigenous artists including Croft.¹⁰⁸ The ten founding artists were Brenda L Croft, Bronwyn Bancroft (Bundjalung, 1958); Euphemia Bostock (Bundjalung, 1936); Fiona Foley (Badtjala, 1964); Fernanda Martins (Meriam, born 1955) Arone Raymond Meeks (Kokomidiji, 1957); Tracey Moffatt (Queensland, born 1960); Avril Quail (Noonuccal, 1987); Michael Riley (Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi, 1960–2004) and Jeffrey Samuels (Ngemba, 1956).

Boomalli created not just a physical studio and exhibition space but a critical vocabulary to reckon with the new forms of Indigenous art that pushed at and through the limits of existing categorisations. The artists of Boomalli sought to represent a multi-dimensional panorama of Aboriginality for which

¹⁰⁸ For a first-hand account of this history, see Brenda L Croft. 'Boomalli: From little things big things grow', *Painting the Land Story*, edited by Luke Taylor, National Museum of Australia, 1999, pp95-118.

differences of political affiliation and practice, specificities of gender and sexuality, religion and history could be taken into account. As Croft writes: 'The ten founding members were determined to create and exhibit their work on their own terms in order to counter the prevailing social indifference towards the new movement that they represented.'¹⁰⁹ These developments predated the *Aboriginal Memorial* and anticipated the important shifts in stances of self-determination that are reflected in the instrumentality of Indigenous curation. Lin Onus, one of the most celebrated artists of the south-east, described Boomallis as '[p]erhaps the most exciting initiative to develop during the 1980s... A seemingly eclectic group of young Aboriginal people; they were nevertheless united in the political struggle.'¹¹⁰ (Figure 2.6)

Spurred on by the emerging postcolonial field of the 1980s and 1990s, these young Indigenous artists were hungry for artistic, cultural and political recognition.¹¹¹ This constellation of intersecting and not competing concerns is important to remember, as Boomalli has come to stand primarily for a cooperative movement anchored in political contestation. Lamenting monolithic modes of engagement and the lack of a critical vocabulary, Perkins wrote in the catalogue of *Australian Perspectives* (1993) that a serious appraisal of Indigenous Art 'seems to elude the most perceptive of local scholars' and 'finding the theoretical and aesthetic grounds for understanding of it is yet to come.'¹¹²

Having been a founding member of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative, Croft would become its General Manager from 1990 until 1996. This was the period where the international reputation of Boomalli arguably peaked. Anthropologist Marianne Riphagen writes that Croft and Perkins were 'the driving forces behind the cooperative's achievements'.¹¹³ (Figure 2.7) At Boomalli, Croft and Perkins developed their skills and curatorial style, which leaned towards artist-led, culturally-informed projects that would find later expression in the sensitive curation of *fluent*. On their departure from Boomalli, Riphagen asserts that 'new staff turned Boomalli from a thriving internationally oriented arts initiative back to a community-based art space with a focus on local artists.'¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p106.

¹¹⁰ Lin Onus. 'Southwest, Southeast Australia and Tasmania', *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians: Traditional and Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists*, edited by Bernhard Lüthi and Gary Lee, DuMont, 1993, p292.

¹¹¹ Ian McLean. 'Post-Identity: Urban Indigenous Art, 1987-2015', *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, Reaktion Books, 2016, p210.

¹¹² Victoria Lynn and Hetti Perkins. 'Blak Artists, Cultural Activists', *Australia Perspectives 1993*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993, pxi.

¹¹³ Marianne Riphagen. 'Contested Categories', 2013, p97.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p97.



FIGURE 2.7
Brenda L Croft and Hetti Perkins working at the Boomalli premises at 27 Abercrombie Street, Chippendale. Boomalli occupied this space between mid-1993 and late 1997. Photograph by Jonathan Claburn.

Following her involvement at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative, Croft was appointed the first Indigenous curator of the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia where she curated the highly influential exhibition *Beyond the Pale* which opened in 2000. While working on this exhibition, in 1999, she became the first Indigenous Curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, a role she carried out until her 2002 appointment at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, as the first Indigenous Senior Curator of Indigenous Art in the country.¹¹⁵ This high-profile appointment was demonstrative of the growing recognition and need for Indigenous curation within art institutions in Australia.

Hetti Perkins worked as Exhibitions Coordinator and Curator at Boomalli from 1992 until 1996, but she was also involved in exhibitions throughout the 1990s at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.¹¹⁶ The gallery had previously employed Djon Mundine (see chapter one) along with Tess Allas, Daphne Wallace (Gamilaroi/Ullaroi-Yuwaaliaay, born 1964) and Ken Watson. Although Perkins was not its first Indigenous curator, her thirteen-year tenure was highly influential and would shape the Indigenous collection into one of the preeminent collections of its kind in the world.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Joanna Mendelssohn, Alison Inglis, Catherine De Lorenzo, Catherine Speck, *Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening Our Eyes*, Thames & Hudson, 2018, p389.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p393.

¹¹⁷ For a detailed history of Indigenous representation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, see Vanessa Russ. *A Study of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Australian Aboriginal Art: Aboriginal Perspectives and Representations in State Art Galleries*, PhD, Unpublished thesis, University of Western Australia, Perth, 2013.

These appointments in the late 1990s signalled a new phase in Indigenous curation that would become the template within most if not all state and national galleries.¹¹⁸ Looking at their respective careers, it is clear that both Croft and Perkins understood how to navigate and reimagine institutional mandates. Equally, they appreciated the importance of employing other Indigenous people in these institutions and their careers have been characterised by an insistence on collaboration and succession planning. Croft has been active in securing funding to create multi-year Curatorial Traineeships at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and at the National Gallery of Australia, of which I was a beneficiary.¹¹⁹ She was also involved in an emerging curator program at the Venice Biennale in 2005. As Wardandi Noongar curator and activist Clothilde Bullen writes:

I believe we need to recall what is core to succession planning – in our way. In our cultural ways, Elders were expected to provide teaching, mentorships and a way into cultural knowledge that was shielded from outsiders. There's been a dynamic shift in this idea from a singular and direct transmission of knowledge, to this knowledge being shared in multiple ways - between and amongst knowledge sharers.¹²⁰

While employing and training young Indigenous people as curators was always an important component of the careers of Croft and Perkins, Bullen continues to argue that this responsibility 'cannot be laid solely at the feet of Indigenous art professionals. Institutions themselves need to understand the importance of succession planning and how it may benefit them also.'¹²¹

A commitment from institutions to the potentialities of Indigenisation through recruitment (as one mode of engagement) is crucial in creating conditions of employment for Indigenous arts workers and facilitating their new museological formations. Working within these institutions addresses the histories of exclusion, but this institutional representation should not delimit cultural expression. In September 2011, Hetti Perkins resigned from the Art Gallery of New South Wales, citing the lack of Indigenous autonomy within the institution and arguing that the 'mainstreaming of Aboriginal art and culture has largely failed us.'¹²² Her resignation was front-page news on three occasions in two of Australia's

¹¹⁸ Ian McLean. 'Post-Identity: Urban Indigenous Art, 1987-2015', 2016, p209.

¹¹⁹ From February 2003-July 2005, I was Trainee Assistant Curator and Acting Assistant Curator at the NGA. After my departure, Croft managed to secure more funding for another Traineeship which was taken up by Simona Barkus (Kala Lagaw Ya and Meriam Mer).

¹²⁰ Clothilde Bullen. 'A Call to Arms', *Blak Wave*, edited by Tahjee Moar and Emily Sexton, Next Wave Festival, 2014, p42.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p42.

¹²² Hetti Perkins quoted in Ashleigh Wilson. 'Hetti Perkins quits state NSW gallery position, calls for national indigenous art space', *The Australian*, 20 September 2011, pp1-2.



FIGURE 2.8
Yvonne Koolmatrie, Ngarrindjeri, born 1945
Eel trap, 1997, sedge rushes (*Lepidosperma canescens*) 168.0 x 59.0 x 59.0 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Mollie Gowing Acquisition Fund for Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1999, 97.1999
Photograph courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

highest circulating newspapers and this public show of no confidence in the gallery demonstrated the limitations of Indigenisation within these institutions.¹²³

2.8 The Insistent Artist: The Artists of *fluent*

Yvonne Koolmatrie

Returning to the *fluent* exhibition, it is important to look at its artists both individually and in relation to one another. The work of Judy Watson and Emily Kame Kngwarreye partakes of the formal language of modernist painting traditions, both deliberately and incidentally. On the other hand, Yvonne Koolmatrie's work sits less securely in historical formations of the canon of fine art, let alone contemporary art. The curators included the work of Koolmatrie not because of its associations with craft and the related stigma, but in spite of these things, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to productively blur the apparent conventions of the Venice Biennale. Learning the customary coiled bundle weaving technique from Ngarrindjeri elder Dorothy Kartinyeri in the early 1980s, Koolmatrie initially created faithful renditions of functional cultural objects such as eel traps, burial mats and food-collecting vessels. (Figure 2.8) Excited by the sculptural potential of woven sedge grass (*Lepidosperma canescens*), Koolmatrie freed her imagination to breathe life into the fantastical woven articulations that are now her trademark. As I argued in 2010: 'With her inventive and whimsical sculptural forms in fibre,

¹²³ These articles were Joyce Morgan. 'Letter reveals frustration that forced Perkins to quit gallery', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 2011, p1; Joyce Morgan. 'Perkins takes parting shot: stop sidelining indigenous art', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 2011, p1; and Ashleigh Wilson. 'Hetti Perkins quits state gallery position, calls for national indigenous art space', *The Australian*, 20 September 2011, pp1-2.

Yvonne Koolmatrie has almost single-handedly rewritten the language of weaving and broadened its aesthetic possibilities.¹²⁴

In his review of the Biennale, John McDonald said of Koolmatrie's fibre objects that 'here they looked out of place.'¹²⁵ Within the Venice Biennale, where newness and innovation are highly prized, the decision to highlight references to historic Ngarrindjeri basketry rather than the radical departures, suggests a considered curatorial calculation. Despite the risks, the curatorium refused to be subservient to the western canon, choosing instead to question western canonicity itself and offering and insisting on alternative modes of value and engagement.

As Perkins and Lynn wrote in *Australian Perspecta* (1993) regarding Koolmatrie's work: 'To merely perceive it as a functional object negates its aesthetic sensibilities.'¹²⁶ Resisting interpretive banalities, the Venice curatorium demonstrated the importance of multiple, not singular points of access into these works so that audiences could apprehend the totality or at least the complexity of objects that partake simultaneously of the political, the cultural, the ceremonial, the spiritual and the sensate world.

The curatorial decision to problematise 'the highly contentious boundaries of art and craft practice' can be seen as an intentional provocation to these boundaries.¹²⁷ Croft elaborates on this curatorial position in an interview with Russell Storer and hints at the limited use of these historical but arbitrary categories for Indigenous people and artists:

I've always had problems with the notion of craft/art and anyone who works in those areas of craft will tell you how frustrating it is for them to be seen as lesser than high art. It's such a western notion.¹²⁸

Koolmatrie's experimental and exploratory works in local grasses awakened an interest in a vanishing cultural practice, and as a teacher and practitioner she has played a pivotal role in the revitalising weaving and securing its position as contemporary art.

¹²⁴ Stephen Gilchrist. 'Yvonne Koolmatrie', *Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art: Collection Highlights, National Gallery of Australia*, edited by Franchesca Cubillo and Wally Caruana, National Gallery of Australia, 2010, p215.

¹²⁵ John McDonald. 21 June 1997, p14S.

¹²⁶ Victoria Lynn and Hetti Perkins. 'Blak Artists, Cultural Activists', 1993, pxi.

¹²⁷ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p12.

¹²⁸ Brenda L Croft quoted in Russell Storer. 'a fluent career', 1997, p31.



FIGURE 2.9
Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Anmatyerr, 1916–1996
Untitled (Awelye), 1994, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 6 panels, each 190.0 x 56.7cm
Private Collection
Photograph courtesy of Utopia Art Sydney.

2.9 Emily Kame Kngwarreye

Emily Kame Kngwarreye was represented in the Venice Biennale with her so-called ‘stripe paintings’, which began to appear in 1993. These were a revolutionary departure from her earlier paintings on canvas, which had been layered in fields of dense dotting.¹²⁹ Layering is also an important conceptual part of Kngwarreye’s artistic and cultural practice. What can be seen is only half the world; the ancestral layers beneath the ground give meaning to what is above. It is the surfacing of these unseen forces, latent in the ground, moving through the body and onto the canvas that gives the work its cultural signification.

While the dot has become an icon of Indigenous painting known throughout the world, this geographically situated painting form has also come to represent the entire field of Indigenous art production. Determined to show that Indigenous art was not just ‘dot and bark paintings’, the curatorium were drawn to the stripe as it is ‘globally occurring’.¹³⁰ However, art historian Rex Butler observes that it was precisely because Kngwarreye’s work ‘did look so similar to the kinds of works with which critics were familiar – (it) seemed to licence a new language when talking about Aboriginal art.’¹³¹ Within this familiar visual language, the curators could underwrite the work’s ‘indigenous specificity.’

¹²⁹ Rex Butler. ‘Aboriginal Art Out Of Context’, *Eyeline*, vol. 55, Spring, 2004, p28.

¹³⁰ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p9.

¹³¹ Rex Butler. ‘Aboriginal Art Out Of Context’, 2004, p27.

The artist's name Kame refers to the wild yam seed and flower and in real and symbolic ways, she represents the potential of this bush food to germinate, to proliferate, to nourish.¹³² These yam offerings from the earth are modest dietary staples but they signify the power of ceremony, song and interconnection. Indigenous peoples see themselves not as separate from the natural world but as a necessary part of its continuing seasonal rhythms. When these yams are ready to be harvested, they cause small cracks to appear in the earth. These cracks on the surface of the earth, open up thresholds of the sacred and are, as Hetti Perkins observes, 'like fluid rivers of spiritual power that sustain and nurture Aboriginal people and the land.'¹³³ By inscribing these tuberous designs onto bodies, canvas or paper, Kngwarreye becomes enmeshed in an expansive system of belonging, participating in and realising the promise of the ancestors.

The mark making in Kngwarreye's stripe paintings is akin to the *arlkeny* (striped body designs) that are painted onto women's bodies for *awelye* (women's ceremonial performances). (Figure 2.9) The works acutely understand the relationship between the land, the ancestors and those who live within their horizons, and as Perkins intimates, their gestural physicality invokes the rhythm of ceremony. She writes: 'The mesmerising effect of tidal motion, described by Watson, is echoed in the repetition of Kngwarreye's strokes, a rhythm found in the song cycles of *awelye* – women's ceremonies.'¹³⁴

Perkins articulates a genealogy outside and beyond the inherited language of western art histories. In observing the work of Kngwarreye and Watson, she writes:

By extending conventional interpretation of abstraction, both women contribute to new discourse between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural disciplines. Theirs is a form of narrative abstraction that uses a discrete visual language to describe a country where Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds co-exist.¹³⁵

At the same time, she speculates that the 'works may be interpreted as metaphors for the diverse and often imperceptible spiritual interconnectedness between Indigenous people and their country.'¹³⁶ It seems that what reflects visual abstraction here, is not freedom from objective context but a way to

¹³² Stephen Gilchrist. 'The Presence and Promise of the Ancestors', *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*, edited by Leesa Fanning, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2018, p142.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp14-16.

¹³⁴ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p14.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p11.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p11.

invoke intangible ways of being. The non-representative paintings are, thus, representative of the lifecycles, lifeways and lifeworlds of those who belong to them.

2.10 Judy Watson

These lifeways and lifeworlds are also at the crux of Judy Watson's practice. Her mood-soaked canvases possess an exquisitely calibrated surface texture and by intuitively working washes of pigment and stains of ochre into her paintings, she reveals much about her spiritual and intellectual engagement with the world. Belonging to the Waanyi people, Watson is one of Australia's most respected artists and her appearance at the Venice Biennale was one of her career highlights.

If Kngwarreye's work gave the exhibition its dominant motif, Watson's work exemplified and amplified an Indigenous responsiveness to place that highlighted the curatorial premise of *fluent*. Many of Watson's works for *fluent* responded to the city of Venice, which cannot be separated from its waterways or from water itself. These works teased out the connective and disconnective properties of watery expanses to pose questions about territoriality, political ecology, embodied learning and the responsibilities of global citizenship. *canyon* (1997), which is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, was made specifically for the Venice Biennale.¹³⁷ (Figure 2.10)

This large painting, which is almost six metres long, refers to an experience that the artist had while floating through a water-filled canyon and observing the patterns of compressed geologic time on the walls of the limestone cliffs. On her way home, Watson noticed white fungus on the trees that seemed to glow like torches under the moonlight to lead her back to her car. She was reminded about the life force that exists in the land and which can be a guide for those who apprehend it. The painting itself is a dream-like aggregation of cultural memory and personal subjectivity and embodies Watson's commitment to 'learning from the ground up'.¹³⁸ This alertness to place is similarly manifest in *red tides* (1997), which was also in the exhibition and is now in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. On seeing the reports of red algae blooms that appear when there is too much nitrogen in Sydney Harbour, Watson was reminded about the history of whaling and Aboriginal massacres 'where the water turned red with blood.'¹³⁹ She connects this watery visual episode to the auditory experience of being in Venice, saying the 'sound of the water is everywhere, especially at high tide, you can hear

¹³⁷ *canyon* (1997) was made after the catalogue was sent to the printers so it does not appear in the catalogue.

¹³⁸ Hetti Perkins. 'Judy Watson', *Identities: Art from Australia: Contemporary Australian Art to Taiwan*, edited by Deborah Hart, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1993, p153.

¹³⁹ Peter Emmett. 'Harbour', *Sydney: Metropolis, Suburb, Harbour*, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 2000, p142.



FIGURE 2.10
Judy Watson, Waanyi, born 1959
canyon, 1997, pigment, pastel and ink on canvas, 588.0 cm x 176.7cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2003.254
Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

the waves against the buildings, licking history away'.¹⁴⁰ Remembering historical vulnerabilities, she affirms the importance of holding onto memories. Often the body itself is the site of this archive. Antonio Carver writes:

Watson's process of excavation, of immersing herself in her subject, has a depth that translates to her work so vividly at times that the paintings seem to be imbued with an otherworldly presence. The objects, lives and mythologies that populate the land appear to inhabit the paintings; the built-up layers of pigment and trails and flecks of colour on the undulating surface of the canvas evoke the archaeologist's method of delicately revealing, and later concealing, shrouds of history.¹⁴¹

As part of the *vernissage*, Russell Page (1968–2002), choreographer, dancer, musician and actor from the Nunukl people and Munaldjali clan of the Yugambah people and principal dancer at Bangarra Aboriginal Dance Theatre, was commissioned to interpret the themes of *fluent*. (Figure 2.11) Sometimes he would play the didgeridoo and at other times the performances would be silent. The press release announced the performances in the following way: 'In the tradition of the Carnivale, Russell weaves his way through the streets and alleys of Venice like an elusive spirit figure.'¹⁴² Painted up by Judy Watson in the same iconography as her paintings, he proceeded to move through the streets of Venice, becoming the 'anthropomorphic presence' which Carver infers and imagines. His performance didn't bring the paintings to life, but rather demonstrated their inherent liveliness.

Exquisite memories of place are evoked through the individual practices of the three artists in *fluent*. While these territorial claims are subtle and poetic, they infer a prior relationship to place before the aegis of the state. At its core, *fluent* was insistently local despite its interpellation of the global. Although these works have a real stake in an internationalised dialogue, it is clear particularly in the environmental works of Judy Watson that these artists and curators are less concerned with the globe and more interested in the earth. Their commitment to maintaining the sacredness and vitality of the earth through regimens of artistic, cultural and curatorial care underscore the earth-centred practices and earth-centred knowledge at the heart of the exhibition.

¹⁴⁰ Judy Watson quoted in Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p13.

¹⁴¹ Antonia Carver. 'Judy Watson', *Beyond the Pale: Contemporary Indigenous Art: Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, edited by Brenda L Croft, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000, p90.

¹⁴² Australia Council for the Arts, News Release, 6 May 1997, *fluent* archives, Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, accessed 8 May 2019.



FIGURE 2.11
Performer Russell Page painted by Judy Watson for the Venice Biennale. He is standing in front of the work by Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Details of painting on p107.
Photography courtesy of Getty Images.

2.11 Conclusion

The *fluent* exhibition was described disdainfully by Australian art critic Susan McCulloch as a 'polite little show'.¹⁴³ Not only did she fail to recognise the cultural, environmental, socio-ceremonial and political registers of the exhibition, but she decried the separatist nature of the Australian Pavilion, arguing that she would have preferred to have seen an Indigenous artist shown alongside an Australian artist as this would have been more representative of contemporary Australian art as a whole: 'Putting one leading Aboriginal artist with a non-Aboriginal artist would have made this statement – and also solved the problem of the display space.'¹⁴⁴

Following the Venice Biennale, the exhibition went on a national tour, sponsored by Visions Australia.¹⁴⁵ In his review of the post-Venice Biennale iteration at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in

¹⁴³ Susan McCulloch. 'A nation's dearth in Venice, *The Weekend Australian*, 21 June 1997, p13.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p13.

¹⁴⁵ From December 1997, *fluent* toured across Australia. The exhibition venues and dates were as follows: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 20 December 1997–15 February 1998; Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra 13 March 1998–3 May 1998; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne 5 June 1998–5 July 1998; Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart 17 July 1998–6 August 1998; Tandanya, Adelaide 26 Aug 1998–08 November 1998; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth 20 November 1998–31 January 1999.

1998, John McDonald identified the 'comforting family ties to modernism' that he claimed the curatorium had embraced in formalist terms.¹⁴⁶ Art historian Roger Benjamin has argued persuasively that the identification of modernist tropes in Indigenous art is ultimately a Eurocentric projection.¹⁴⁷ These facile comparative readings tend to be exercises in Eurocentrism that traffic difference into sameness and contribute to the deadening of the world's multiplicity. As Benjamin puts it, we must devise 'a criticism more attuned to Aboriginal cultural values.'¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Andrew MacNamara picks up on Vivien Johnson's caution against the acceptance of works as 'contemporary art at the expense of countervailing indigenous cultural imperatives.'¹⁴⁹

In fact, the insistent cultural significations located within the exhibition catalogue and the exhibition space itself, counterbalanced these threats of compromise and erasure. The curatorium demonstrated that while Indigenous art must not defer to western systems of value, it need not recoil from them. In an active self-legitimising gesture, Perkins wrote in the closing paragraph of the *fluent* catalogue:

The work of artists like Kngwarreye, Koolmatrie and Watson challenge the self-reflexivity of western art traditions that for so long excluded, denigrated and appropriated Aboriginal art. The possibilities of Aboriginal art practice are infinite and can have relevance and resonance outside their immediate cultural context while maintaining the integrity of speaking from within that context. We belong to this country, always have, always will.¹⁵⁰

In light of the fact that no other Indigenous-led curatorial teams have followed in the wake of this exhibition at the Venice Biennale, the show can be seen as radical both now and for its time. If, as I have claimed, the power of the exhibition lay in its commitment to Indigenous modes of being, knowing and becoming, it is significant that its single biggest impact has been in inspiring a whole suite of Native American art exhibitions. Both ahead of its time and strategically out of western time, the exhibition produced ripples that would eventually start a wave. In 2019, Chiricahua Apache academic and curator Nancy Mithlo will publish a new volume titled *A/Part of This World: Indigenous Curation at the Venice*

¹⁴⁶ John McDonald. 'The Dream Weavers', 1998, p14S. This review compared the staging of *fluent* that McDonald had seen at the Venice Biennale and in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

¹⁴⁷ Roger Benjamin. 'A New Modernist Hero', *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere, paintings from Utopia*, edited by Margo Neale, Queensland Art Gallery, 1998, p53.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p53.

¹⁴⁹ Andrew MacNamara. 'No two ways about it: On the Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri retrospective, *Eyeline*, vol. 56, Summer 2004-2005, p14.

¹⁵⁰ Hetti Perkins. *fluent*, 1997, p19.

Biennale that will discuss the seminal importance of *fluent* for her commitment to representing Native North American artists at the Venice Biennale.¹⁵¹ The historical curatorial project of *fluent*, thus, continues to produce influential cultural flows. In 2012, Mithlo recalled the ‘influence of the strong Indigenous women’ who brought her to the platform of Venice Biennale.¹⁵² She wrote:

Brenda’s presence in Venice resulted in my inhabiting the space of the Biennale as an Indigenous representative, first as a guest and later as a curator and collaborator with Venetian colleagues. Since my first initial visit in 1999, I have returned numerous times staging six exhibitions of American Indian/First Nations art on this prestigious global stage. Dozens of Native and First Nations artists have participated in these initiatives that are jointly produced with our Italian collaborators. Over the years, the regional/global divide has transformed in local-to-local relationships that are defined by long-term, collective, mutually meaningful exchanges informed by mentorship. This is the *enactment* of Indigenous curatorial methodologies.¹⁵³

With its insistent testimonies of resilience, witness, interconnectedness and transformation, this twenty-year project could not have happened without *fluent*. The validation and valorising of Indigenous forms of curation contributes to a global gathering of Indigenous voices, practices, languages, histories and futures. To secure this non-colonial future, to gesture towards modes of unbelonging, it is vital to do more than forget dominant colonial tropes. There is a need to remember Indigenous precedents, to encourage Indigenous innovations, to insist on geographically situated art practices and to actively courier this knowledge to the generations yet to come.

¹⁵¹ Nancy Marie Mithlo. *A/Part of This World: Indigenous Curation at the Venice Biennale*, State University of New York Press, forthcoming 2019.

¹⁵² Tressa Berman and Nancy Mithlo. ‘The Way Things Are’: Curating Place as Feminist Practice in American Indian Women’s Art’, *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, the Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists*, edited by Jill Fields, Routledge, 2012, pp275-276.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp275-276, (emphasis in original).

Chapter Three: Refusing Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia curated by Stephen Gilchrist

*Indigenous peoples are reminders, sometimes indecipherable announcements
of other orders, other authorities, and an earlier time that has not fully passed.*¹

Audra Simpson

In Part One of this thesis, I used the historical case studies of Djon Mundine's curation of the *Aboriginal Memorial* and Brenda L Croft and Hetti Perkins's curation of *fluent* to demonstrate how Indigenous curation was both practised and received in the late 1980s and 1990s within the armature of national and nationalising platforms. In my discussion of the curatorial rigour and cultural dimensions of those projects, I have tried to demonstrate how both these curatorial stances gesture to Indigenous lifeways outside this national and nationalising space. This creates culturally and politically resonant modes of unassimilation and unbelonging that asserts Indigenous sovereignty. Furthermore, these curatorial projects have been instrumental in the broadening application, experimentation and radicalisation of Indigenous curatorial theories and practices. From the year 2000, there was a consolidation of Indigenous curation within institutions, as exemplified by the appointment of Indigenous curators within all state art galleries by February 2008. Only three years later, in September 2011, Hetti Perkins resigned from the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, citing the lack of Indigenous autonomy within the institution and arguing that the 'mainstreaming of Aboriginal art and culture has largely failed us.'² This was front-page news in national newspapers. In 2009, Brenda L Croft also resigned from her position as Senior Curator at the National Gallery of Australia. I believe that both resignations were public shows of no confidence in these institutions and in the institutionalisation of Indigenous art. Fred Myers suggests that this 'dissatisfaction seems constituted by the very structuring qualities of the mainstream art field.'³ This refusal to participate is significant.

¹ Audra Simpson. 'The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal': Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2017, p22.

² Hetti Perkins quoted in Ashleigh Wilson. 'Hetti Perkins quits NSW state gallery position and calls for national indigenous art space', *The Australian*, 20 September 2011, pp1-2.

³ Fred Myers. 'Recalibrating the Visual Field: Indigenous Curators and Contemporary Art', *Difference Identity Makes: Indigenous Cultural Capital in Australian Cultural Fields*, edited by Lawrence Bamblett, Fred Myers and Timothy Rowse. Aboriginal Studies Press, 2019, p71.

Part Two of this thesis examines three exhibitionary projects that are not outside major institutions but are interested in the reconfiguration of institutional relationships. I argue that guest-curated exhibitions offer a way to be more culturally autonomous while making the most of institutional resources. This position is surely possible because of the pioneering exhibitions by Indigenous curators in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Their exhibitions contributed to the growing popularity of Indigenous art which created the conditions for more curatorial opportunities for Indigenous curators within and without institutions. If the period of the 1980s and 1990s can be characterised as foregrounding the visibility of Indigenous art and culture and forcing institutional accommodations, then the years since have seen a new generation of Indigenous curators begin to position Indigenous art and culture in ways that partake more explicitly of the inwardness and values of cultural practice. These exhibitions are attentive to Indigenous needs that reflect both the urgent cultural agenda of revitalisation and the need to deflect the constant affronts to Indigenous ways of being by and through governmental policy. Fred Myers identifies this conundrum as follows:

This challenge to the Australian art fields implies, it seems to me, that an Indigenous vision can be articulated without being defined by its relationships to the dominant institutions, or that these relationships would be negotiated from a new position.⁴

Such curatorial manoeuvres echo the tentative but courageous associations that Mundine, Perkins and Croft had to their respective exhibiting platforms, but twenty years after *fluent*, Indigenous art is now more securely positioned within the field of art. While this success has created jobs for a small number of Indigenous curators, there are still limitations to Indigenisation within these institutions. This thesis is concerned, however, not with these limitations, but with how to circumvent them through an empowered approach with independent curation. While it is arguably harder to sustain the institutional commitment to Indigenisation within this model, it dispenses with many of the persistent problems that occur within institutional careers that Myers has recently observed.⁵

I had personally experienced some of the problems of isolation, disempowerment and exhaustion as Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, a position I held from July 2005 to August 2010.⁶ I decided to take a year without pay to pursue further studies at New York University. Like many curators, I was disillusioned with the institutional emphasis on creating spaces *of* and not *for*

⁴ Ibid., p73.

⁵ Ibid., pp77-78.

⁶ Ibid., pp77-78.

Indigeneity. During my year away, two opportunities presented themselves to undertake work supported by well-funded institutions while remaining necessarily apart from them. In 2012, I curated an exhibition at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, which was drawn from the large gifted collection of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner, two American collectors. The second opportunity, which is the focus of this chapter, concerned the curating of an exhibition at the Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University. This show was titled *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art From Australia*.⁷ As curator, I attempted to put some of the ideas of unbelonging, unassimilation and refusal that I had absorbed from both the *Aboriginal Memorial* and *fluent*, into practice using the concept of temporality as a means of both conveying different ways of knowing and constituting Indigenous perspectives. In this section, I draw on the work of Audra Simpson, particularly her discussion of the anatomy of refusal and the ruse of consent.⁸ While the *Aboriginal Memorial* facilitated a lingering within the trauma of colonisation, *fluent* asserted the value of Indigenous modes of being, doing and knowing. The insistence on Indigenous modes of curatorial inquiry as valid and valorising demonstrates not just a growing and intentional independence from Euro-American museological paradigms, but the immanence of Indigenous forms of curation. In the *Everywhen* exhibition, I aspired to disentangle Indigenous modes of temporality from a flattening coloniality, to refuse complicity within false reproductions of the world and to open up more complex worldviews that better represent Indigenous art and culture.

3.1 Curatorial Methodology

In December 2010, along with a number of other curators and academics, I was invited to submit a proposal for two exhibitions of Indigenous Art to be held simultaneously at the Harvard Art Museums (HAM) and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PMAE) at Harvard University.⁹ The Harvard Art Museums (the plural is intentional) was undergoing a \$350 million renovation,¹⁰ which would consolidate and reimagine the disparate identities of three of its collections; the Fogg (which was focused on Western European and North American art), the Busch-Reisinger (art from German-speaking Europe) and the Arthur M. Sackler (Asian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Byzantine art). The architect Renzo Piano had proven unafraid to confront the old with the new, and the central courtyard exemplifies this approach. (Figure 1.1) The Harvard Art Museums was also recommitting itself to a more inclusive strategy of 'World Visuality' and an internal committee was formed to address

⁷ The exhibition is predominantly referred to here as *Everywhen*.

⁸ Audra Simpson. 'The Ruse of Consent', 2017, pp18-33.

⁹ I will refer to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PMAE) from here on as The Peabody Museum.

¹⁰ Jason Farago. 'Renzo Piano reboot of Harvard art museums largely triumphs', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2014, accessed 19 May 2019.
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/nov/14/renzo-piano-reboot-of-harvard-art-museums-largely-triumphs>



FIGURE 3.1
The central courtyard of Harvard Art Museums designed by Renzo Piano.
Photograph courtesy of Harvard Art Museums.

‘societies and their artistic traditions that (had) previously been underrepresented at Harvard.’¹¹ The Harvard Art Museums was therefore readying itself for a significant exhibition of ‘non-western’ art.

The Committee for Australian Studies at Harvard University, which administers the annual Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser Chair in Australian Studies, approached the Harvard Art Museums to gauge their interest in hosting an exhibition of Indigenous art from Australia. The Committee for Australian Studies was established through a gift of the Australian Government to Harvard University, in recognition of the American Bicentennial in 1976. Its aims are to further the understanding of Australia in the United States.¹² The bulk of the funding for the exhibition came principally from the Committee for Australian Studies although there was additional funding through the Australian Consulate-General and private donors.¹³

Over the next few months, I worked on two separate proposals which were united by an overarching interest in time. In my conception, time is used to signal the longevity of Indigenous claims to Australia, but time is also used punitively to distance Indigenous peoples from the social and artistic capital of the

¹¹ Harvard Art Museums. ‘Mary Schneider Enriquez Appointed as Harvard Art Museum’s Houghton Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art’, Press Release, 2 April 2010, accessed 15 May 2019.
https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.harvardartmuseums.org/production/file_uploads/PressRelease/pdfs/000/000/028/original/29368.pdf

¹² David Haig. ‘Preface’, *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p7.

¹³ Fred Myers. ‘Recalibrating the Visual Field’, 2019, pp80-81.

contemporary. Following an interview process at Harvard University in November 2011, I was informed that my proposals were selected. However, with the protracted building programme, the ambition of two exhibitions would have to be revised and it was soon decided that there would be time and space for only one exhibition. The Peabody Museum would celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2016, the revised year of the proposed exhibition, and thus, it could no longer be the site of an Indigenous exhibition. While the Peabody Museum was a partner and the largest lender to the exhibition, it had a somewhat fraught relationship with the Harvard Art Museums and collaboration was often difficult. The Peabody Museum, however, was a necessary partner, not just for the objects that I borrowed, but for the history that it represented. (Figure 3.2) In addition, it offered an opportunity to work with an underutilised collection.

On the reopening of the Harvard Art Museums in November 2014, Holland Cotter, a prominent art critic for *The New York Times* observed that:

Unlike the Yale University Art Gallery, the Harvard Art Museums don't add up to an encyclopedic collection. There's almost no pre-Columbian art from South America, or Native American art, or art from Africa outside of Egypt in the permanent galleries. (A fascinating installation of African material assembled by Kristina Van Dyke for the reopening is in a gallery for temporary exhibitions.) For all of that you must go to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology down the street, where such art wasn't, at one time, art at all and was segregated from high art in a way that mirrored American racial politics.¹⁴

The exhibition was immediately implicated into these racial, definitional, institutional and disciplinary politics that Cotter alludes to. Throughout the development of the exhibition, I wanted to reference these histories of collections but also to reinscribe these collections with an Indigenous consciousness. I began by conceptualising the museum's archive not as a site of temporal collapse but of temporal possibility where registers of the past, present and future could become active and activated. The resulting methodology was one that can be described as moving from preserving culture to reactivating it.

¹⁴ Holland Cotter. 'When Three Into One Equals More', *The New York Times*, 20 November 2014, accessed 20 May 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/arts/design/harvard-art-museums-revamped-and-reopened.html>



FIGURE 3.2
The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University.

In *The Dreaming* (1953), Australian anthropologist William Stanner wrote: ‘One cannot ‘fix’ the Dreaming in time; it was, and is, everywhen.’¹⁵ This poetic neologism was not necessarily offered to suggest a synonym for the Dreaming, but rather to endow that concept with nuance. Nonetheless, the term captures something elusive about the Dreaming’s approach to time — its singularity, sequentiality, and connectivity. I was drawn to Stanner’s coinage of ‘the everywhen’ when trying to imagine an exhibition that would be about dialogue across time and how it is folded into Indigenous artistic, social, historical, ecological and philosophical life. For this reason, the elastic paradigm of ‘the everywhen’ was used in this exhibition to explore the ways that Indigenous people conceptualise, mark, dramatise and sensationalise time. Christopher Williams-Wynn would later write of *Everywhen*:

the exhibition argues that temporality operates as a flux, rather than a linear flow, within Indigenous conceptions of the world. Such temporality is then both epistemology and ontology, knowledge and constitution of the world.¹⁶

¹⁵ William Stanner. ‘The Dreaming’, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938-1973*, Australian National University Press, 1979, p24.

¹⁶ Christopher Williams-Wynn. ‘From a Postconceptual to an Aporetic Conception of the Contemporary’ *Third Text*, vol. 30, 2016, accessed 8 April 2019. <http://thirdtext.org/williams-wynn-everywhen>

The four intermediary themes that began to emerge and to structure the show were: Seasonality, Transformation, Performance and Remembrance. But like time itself, these themes were overlapping and interactive.

3.2 Renaming, Reclaiming and Returning at The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Despite significant achievements in new museological formations that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it remains no easy task to reactivate culture within historical museums informed by archaeological and ethnological methodologies. Susan Applegate Krouse describes the new museology as one that seeks 'to be more inclusive, more democratic, more representative of diverse communities'.¹⁷ Lainie Schultz, who was working at the Peabody Museum during the *Everywhen* exhibition, has written of the responsibilities of the museum, which:

must be an agent of empowerment for marginalized communities by providing them access to resources and it must serve as intermediary between local groups and mainstream society by acting as a point of contact and by disseminating information.¹⁸

With funding from the Committee for Australian Studies, the Peabody hosted a number of visiting scholars under the Indigenous Australia Curatorial Fellowships (IACF) that were established to improve the documentation of the Indigenous Australian collections, which numbered almost 1200 objects. These three-year Fellowships were concurrently awarded to Shawn Rowlands, Louise Hamby and Anne Best, who were each tasked with disseminating much of this information to communities and putting into practice the methodological aspiration described above.¹⁹ Louise Hamby appeared to engage most closely with Indigenous communities by bringing Indigenous people to the collection and providing community members with collection information. As the curator, I met with all three of these scholars during their appointments, and this helped me understand what was in the Peabody's collection.

¹⁷ Susan Applegate Krouse. 'Anthropology and the New Museology', *Reviews in Anthropology*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2006, p170.

¹⁸ Lainie Schultz. 'Collaborative Museology and the Visitor', *Museum Anthropology*, vol.34, no.1, 2011, p1.

¹⁹ I commissioned Shawn Rowlands to write for the *Everywhen* catalogue. His Fellowship research was used for his essay, 'Interlocked: Aboriginal Australian exchange patterns and incised pearl shells', *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, pp60-67.

It was interdisciplinary scholar James Clifford who first popularised the idea of museums as 'contact zones', but it was literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt who first described this speculative notion. For Pratt, a contact zone refers to:

the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographical or historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term 'contact', I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquests and domination. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees', not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings of practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.²⁰

The 'contact zone' of the museum is not a frictionless place; indeed it anticipates friction. Chapter Four describes this historical friction in greater detail. Here, I want to emphasise the co-production modelled within the contact zone. Indigenous agency is cast as a matter of mediation, not entitlement. We historically do not belong in these places. As scholar Glen S Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) observes, 'when delegated exchanges of recognition occur in real world contexts of domination the terms of accommodation usually end up being determined by and in the interests of the hegemonic partner in the relationship.'²¹ A methodology of unbelonging seeks to trouble this power dynamic by refusing its totalising consequences. Instead it aims to create a culturally determined and sovereigntist space of reclamation, return and renaming.

Eventually I selected thirteen objects from the Peabody Museum with a two-fold goal: I wanted to reference the history of museum collections and collecting practices but also to stand as an intervention into that history. The intervention was largely enfolded into the theme of Transformation. Museums need to transform how they respond to their urgent indexical responsibilities to the objects of which they are custodians. I thought it was necessary to include historic objects to extend the idea of the elasticity of time but also to break down the disciplinary monopolisation of knowledge that was endorsed by the separation of 'art' from 'artefact'. This will be explored shortly.

²⁰ Mary Louise Pratt. 'Introduction: Criticism in the contact zone', *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, 1992, p6.

²¹ Glen Sean Coulthard. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p17.

Touch and connection also became important conceptual components of the exhibition, particularly with the works borrowed from the Peabody Museum. The exhibition featured four coolamons, two woven baskets and one fibre skirt, six pearl shells, one drum and three *larrakitj* (hollow log coffins). The objects were indicative of a life lived (and mourned) through objects from the cradle to the grave. Such objects became socially and culturally implicated within the life cycles, lifespans and lifeways of Indigenous women, children and men. For example, functionally the coolamons can be used to cradle babies and the *larrakitj* can contain the bones of the deceased. Conceptually, these representative objects intersect with important cultural milestones and trigger sequences of ritually determined social practices that are often poised at temporal thresholds. Embedded within these liminal states of the physical and the spiritual, the secular and the ceremonial, these intermediary objects were and are cradled, worn, woven and held close.

Jacki Thompson Rand (citizen, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) has argued that Indigenous self-representations within the contact zone of the museum are premised on the reversal of invisibility, the education of others about ancestral connections and the insistence on Indigenous humanity.²² Admittedly, this is a fairly low bar. The project of humanising Indigenous people seems particularly humiliating. To dignify it with a response is to be reminded of the violence done in its name. Despite the potential of Indigenous self-actualisation, to enter into this hostile field of vision is to be subject to its limitations. Indigenous peoples around the world share similar experiences of this dehumanisation through museological practices of reproducing the 'ethnographic present', a concept which I discuss in more detail in the next section. The *Everywhen* exhibition was an opportunity to challenge these fraudulent temporal and racial propositions, by reclaiming, renaming and 'returning' the objects according to methodologies of Indigenous critical care.

On my first visit to Harvard University in November 2011 during the interview process, I was given a quick tour of the collection storage at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology but I didn't have a clear idea of what I wanted to see. Curator Jilda Andrews (Yuwaalaraay) describes with precision the feelings that Indigenous peoples often experience within the museum stores. She writes 'Those rooms are overwhelming, confusing, profound and confronting. They are time capsules placing anyone within one degree of separation to moments of intensity we as Australians are yet to fully grasp collectively.'²³ As Andrews demonstrates, Indigenous curation is inflected with a relational proximity

²²Jacki Thompson Rand. 'Museums and Indigenous Perspectives on Curatorial Practice', *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*, edited by Susan Sleeper-Smith, University of Nebraska Press, 2009, p129.

²³ Jilda Andrews. 'Indigenous perspectives on museum collections', *Artlink*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2017, p88.



FIGURE 3.3
Unidentified artist, Aboriginal groups of the northwest Kimberley Coast
Riji (engraved pearl shell) and shell belt, 1896-1931, shell, plant fibre, hair, 127.0 x 9.4 x 0.5 cm
Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 32-68-70/D3986.
Photograph courtesy of Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

which demands a certain responsibility. These stores contain not just objects but ancestral vitality and colonial trauma.

The museum is a site of ancestral and colonial restlessness. Curation is not a matter of calming the spirits but honouring their ancestral presence and being attentive to their locational and temporal displacements. It is a privilege to work with these ancestral objects, but this privilege is complicated by the reality of the conditions of their assembly, which are often described euphemistically as 'collecting'. This neutralising word obscures asymmetrical power dynamics and occludes the problematic of consent. With these thoughts in mind, I was taken through the stores by former Collections Manager Christina Hodge. I pulled out drawers - looking, smelling and listening to which objects spoke to me. One of the first groups of objects that I saw were the beautiful *riji* (engraved pearl shells) from the Kimberley region in Western Australia. Their exquisite lustre is hard to resist, but I was drawn to one broken pearl shell with incised geometric designs, infilled and rubbed with ochre. (Figure 3.3) What interested me was that it represented a fragment of cultural material that was thousands and thousands

of kilometres from where it came. Museums do represent loss for Indigenous peoples and this object literalised these histories of brokenness and incompleteness. But through its power it also voiced a promise of reconnection. Including this work in the exhibition was, thus, an attempt to begin a process of 'returning' the objects to the communities from which they came, in real and symbolic ways. I conceptualised the objects as part of a diasporic constellation. The objects are far removed from their homelands and symbolically constitute a different kind of a stolen generation. The Stolen Generations refers to the generations of Indigenous children who were forcefully removed from their families as a result of Australian government policies. As the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report makes clear: 'One principal effect of the forcible removal policies was the destruction of cultural links. This was of course their declared aim.'²⁴

Although I did not want to speak for communities and their wishes to initiate repatriation procedures, I was sensitive to the 'homing desire' of these objects.²⁵ As is standard practice for Australian but not North American museums, I wrote to the Kimberley Land Council to begin the process of gaining permission to exhibit the objects. Due to cancelled and delayed council meetings, the procedure was slightly protracted. But to respect the process is part of the process. After its tabling at the regular council meetings, Chad Creighton, the former Region Manager of the West Kimberley at the Kimberley Land Council, set up a phone call with Council Members, and I was given permission to exhibit the pearl shells, along with instructions regarding who could touch these objects. As the *riji* belonged to men's initiation rituals, the men refused to allow them to be handled by women. Touch is conditional, relational and contingent. As discussed in the previous chapter, the following of cultural protocols is part of a commitment to Indigenisation within institutions and redirects the terms of engagement that are empowering for and uplifting to Indigenous communities.

The appearance of these objects within museum collections, with consent or under duress, represents a significant geographical displacement. Provenance research is a way to track these displacements, but it does not undo them. Indigenous objects, whether they are created on country or in diaspora are bound to and governed by specific places. Returning objects to these places, through differing typologies of repatriation, is an important function of Indigenous curation. These typologies will be

²⁴ Ronald Darling Wilson. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p202.

²⁵ Avtar Brah. 'Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities', *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Routledge, 1996, p177.



FIGURES 3.4 and 3.5

Unidentified artist, Central Australia

Coolamon, 1951, wood, pigment, 26.0 x 18.0 x 13.0cm

Collected by Dr. Joseph B. Birdsell, 1951, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Peabody Museum South Australian Expedition, 1951, 51-32-70/3501.

Photograph courtesy of Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

discussed in further detail in chapter four. An important strategy within this project of 'return' is to contribute to the renewing of connections between ancestral objects and contemporary peoples. The unorthodox ways in which historic museum collections are assembled (through exchange, acquisition or donation) mean that it is a difficult task for communities to find out exactly where their objects are located. Before repatriation can potentially be initiated by communities, this locational research must be communicated to them. The process of gaining permission mobilises a restorative process of knowledge recovery. It returns the objects to the keepers of community knowledge but only symbolically puts those objects in their hands. The politics of repatriation will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

Once these objects enter collections, a second displacement takes place. Temporal displacements through interpretive containment, both historicise and dehistoricise Indigenous people. Removed from history and erased from the present, Indigenous people simply cease to be, leaving only their artefacts behind. When Indigenous historical objects are converted into museum 'artefacts', they are also suspended in time. The South Australian Museum in Adelaide houses one of the foremost collections of Indigenous Australian material culture, yet its Indigenous displays went unchanged from 1914 until 1986.²⁶ For too long, Indigenous art and culture have been imprisoned by historicising texts and lifeless museum exhibitions that have propagated the false narrative of an unchanging and unchangeable Indigenous worldview. This narrative of stasis is an invention and tool of the coloniser and is at odds

²⁶ Likewise, displays in the Queensland Museum, Brisbane, were unchanged from 1911 until 1986. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby, 'Introduction', *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, edited by Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby, Melbourne University Press, 2008, p4.

with the innovative and adaptive practices that have long been key to Indigenous survival, both pre- and post-European contact.

Grappling with these temporal and geographic displacements, the insistence on the adherence to Indigenous protocols is not just a straightforward cultural courtesy but a recasting of museological claims of current and historic ownership, a critique of temporalising contractions and an intensification of Indigenous cultural control. The inventory numbers that were painted directly onto objects like the coolamons in the Peabody's collection impose Victorian-era ideas of ownership and categorisation, and these practices continue today. It could be argued that this practice attempts to supersede the expanded cultural biography of the object itself. (Figures 3.4 and 3.5)

To enable an authentic cultural biography through a curatorial philosophy of 'return' and 'control', it is necessary to reclaim and rename objects that have become disconnected from their cultural, linguistic and individual specificity. In many ethnographic collections, it is the collector's name that is recorded but not the language or cultural or people group related to the object. Furthermore, if geographical information is provided, it is invariably inscribed within European cartographic traditions. In the 2018 exhibition catalogue for *Colony: Australia 1770-1861: Frontier Wars*, Indigenous curator Myles Russell Cook discusses this process of erasure and reveals the hierarchical biases of museums which result in this intentional anonymisation. He writes:

rather than reading 'Artist Unknown' ahistorically – merely as a placeholder designation for future attributions – we need to see this investigation into authorship as a way of exposing the historicity of collections, and of a time when the name of a maker was not regarded as important enough to record; when the zeitgeist suggested that European fine art had authors but most Aboriginal or Indigenous art was simply 'made'.²⁷

In the *Everywhen* exhibition, these collector details had to appear on every object label in accordance with most museum guidelines regarding credit lines. In contrast, there was often no artist name recorded and sometimes there was no attributed cultural group. When visitors encounter these objects, they experience them as objects without a people. But for Indigenous visitors, researchers and curators, this experience highlights people without objects. It is necessary to make these histories of erasure legible. To address this erasure, I opted for 'unidentified artist' on the labels instead of

²⁷ Myles Russell-Cook. 'Once Known', *Colony: Australia 1770-1861: Frontier Wars*, edited by Cathy Leahy and Judith Ryan, National Gallery of Victoria, 2018, p227.

‘unknown maker’ because someone might have known the artist’s identity; it is simply unrecorded. For a beautiful fibre *Batjparra* (skirt), the accompanying label stated:

There is no maker’s name attached to this triangular skirt; however, its owner was known to American anthropologist William Lloyd Warner, who collected the work during his stay at Milingimbi in the late 1920s. Warner photographed this woman carrying the skirt and her child on her shoulders.²⁸

Through Indigenous curatorial visitations into collections, we can fill up that which has been hollowed out of the archive. To use Russell-Cook’s apt descriptor, this woman was ‘once known’ and her erasure is a form of colonial violence. Russell-Cook probes the meaning of this informational deficit:

The conundrum posed by the term ‘Artist Unknown’ leads me to ask: was the artist always unknown? And unknown by whom? Was the artist ever known by the people who first collected or acquired the work, or by her or his community and artistic collaborators? At what point did the artist become unknown, and why? In its neutrality and passivity, the term ‘Artist Unknown’ refuses to ask these questions, or to engage with the historical circumstances by which a work is stripped of authorship. One could say that the term ‘Artist Unknown’ enacts an erasure of a history of erasure, because the unknown artist is, in fact, a once-known artist.²⁹

As a minimum, it was necessary to attribute a cultural grouping to the selected works and this was part of my own curatorial research but also the work of the Indigenous Australia Curatorial Fellows. These small restorative gestures are an extension of the critical care that underwrites Indigenous curation. It serves not just to right an historical wrong, but to restore a cultural particularity. Louise Hamby’s research with Joe Gumbula enabled the renaming of men’s Yolngu baskets as *bathi mindirr* and *bathi mindjalpi*. Other research yielded an Indigenous vocabulary that was used to rename and reclaim objects. The pearl shells, thus, became *riji* and the Torres Strait Islander drum became *Warup*.

²⁸ Stephen Gilchrist. ‘Everywhen label’, Information supplied by Louise Hamby. Warner’s print from Coloured Lantern is in the Field Museum, Chicago S29405 and the Macleay Museum, Sydney. The exhibition label read as follows; Unidentified artist, Northeast Arnhem Land, *Batjparra* (skirt), c. 1928, Plant fiber (leaf), hair, Collected by William Lloyd Warner, 1929–30, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Museum purchase, Association Fund, 1930, 30-54-70/D3463.1, TL41483.3.

²⁹ Myles Russell-Cook. ‘Once Known’, 2018, p227.



FIGURE 3.6
Installation view of the section titled 'Performance' in the *Everywhen* exhibition.
Unidentified artist, Torres Strait Islands
Warup (drum), mid-19th–early 20th century
wood, reptile skin, nuts, feathers, fibre,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972, 1978.412.711
Photograph courtesy of Harvard Art Museums.

(Figure 3.6) In an interview with Australian art historian Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, I explained the significance of the *warup*;

This is a beautiful nineteenth-century *warup* drum from the Torres Strait Islands and obviously it had to be behind glass. It was the last work we installed, but it was also the anchor work to this section which is all about performance and about rhythm – rhythm as a marker of time and as a marker of cultural value. This object has been outside Australia for a really long time, and it represents the performances that never were, and the performances that never could be because these objects were in these collections. But they still resonate with the rhythm of the ancestors, the musicality and the performativity of where they came from.³⁰

³⁰ Stephen Gilchrist quoted in Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll. 'Everywhen There Is Time for Aboriginal Art in America: An Interview with Stephen Gilchrist', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 292, 2016, p48.



FIGURE 3.7

Installation view of the section titled 'Transformation' in the *Everywhen* exhibition.

Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, *Two Women Dreaming*, 1990, 150.2 x 182.4 cm (centre of wall display) in conversation with installation of coolamons.

Photograph courtesy of Harvard Art Museums.

The *warup*, which was borrowed from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York demonstrates the expanded responsibilities of curators working with Indigenous collections. Their role is to ensure that objects are not only cared for materially but are reconstituted culturally and spiritually. If art museums are to preserve the living cultures that they exhibit and reconcile the ever-present tension this entails, they must facilitate a way to relate to objects that mirrors Indigenous protocols of guardianship, ontological structures and cultural purpose.

Similarly, within the Transformation section, I included four coolamons, which all showed wear with accretions and staining (probably from food or other uses) in their longitudinal grooves. I wanted to draw attention to the high degree of skill required to make these coolamons but also to the indelible human touch associated with these objects that had now been removed from real life. The blackened exterior of one coolamon reveals how its maker curved and shaped it over a fire. The interior is also stained with food substances attesting to its quotidian use. While it is a functional object, a determined aesthetic preoccupation is evident.

The coolamons were 'in conversation' with a painting by Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, one of the youngest founding artists of the Papunya collective.³¹ (Figure 3.7) The painting concerns two ancestral women who placed their coolamons on the ground. The coolamon transformed into freshwater soakages (bodies of rainwater that have seeped into the sandy ground). In places often thought to be without water, Indigenous people know where to locate permanent water sources. As evidenced by *Two Women Dreaming* (1990), this knowledge is a gift from the ancestors. Water is essential for physical life, as is ancestral presence and knowledge. With its four concentric rectangular forms, the painting portrays the infinite recursion of the Everywhen. The contraction and expansion of these four motifs echo the pulsing vitality of the land and celebrate the ancestral and human potential of transformation and creation. In this curatorial conversation, the coolamons are not just functional objects or 'artefacts' suspended in museological time. They become reanimated with an unending ancestral signification of the past that gestures emphatically towards the future.

3.3 Indigenous Temporality: The 'Ethnographic Present', the 'Eternal Present' and Contemporaneity

The fight to secure Indigenous futures has formed part of the cultural labour of Indigenous people ever since it became apparent that the British had no intentions of leaving. But more than that, safeguarding futurity through an engagement with ancestral precedent has long been part of Indigenous phenomenology. As Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers have identified, the assertion of 'Indigenous Futures' has been 'continually transforming as Indigenous people in Australia have become progressively more self-conscious and insistent on authoring the narratives that objectify their place in their communities, in the nation, and on the world stage'.³²

The refusal to be placed wholly within the past and the refusal to be denied a future are important philosophical couplets of Indigenous curation. This can be identified by tracking the history of Indigenous curation. As I have argued in the Introduction, when Indigenous curators began contributing to the fields of art in the 1980s, they were predominantly interested in positioning Indigenous art within new definitional regimes such as transitional art, hybrid art, non-traditional and fine art.³³ Much later, the category of the contemporary would be sought. This meaningful, intentional and ongoing shift *towards* new intermediary categories must be seen as a defection *from* the discipline of anthropology, its much

³¹ Chapter four in this thesis, further explores the idea of the 'Voicings' of Indigenous objects.

³² Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers. 'A History of Indigenous Futures: Accounting for Indigenous Art and Media', *Aboriginal History Journal*, vol. 30, 2011, p95.

³³ Suzanne Spunner. 'Neither dots nor bark: Positioning the urban artist' *Urban Representations: Cultural expression, identity and politics*, edited by Sylvia Kleinert and Grace Koch, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2013, p93.

larger body of literature and its legacy of temporal deceptions. Djon Mundine dramatises these disciplinary orientations as tournaments taken up between the imperial Houses of Anthropology and Art History.³⁴

The historical predicament of fixity within anthropological knowledge production was identified and understood through the term the 'ethnographic present,' which was first put forward by Johannes Fabian in his 1983 publication *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*.³⁵ As sociologist Charlotte Aull Davies explains:

The most common interpretation of the ethnographic present is undoubtedly the practice of developing analyses and generalisations from ethnographic research as if they represent a timeless description of the people being studied. Clearly such an approach implicitly denies the historicity of these people. The data on which such analyses are based are acquired in an historically located encounter between an ethnographer and some individuals from among the people so described. Yet, whereas the ethnographer moves on, temporally, spatially and developmentally, the people he or she studied are presented as if suspended in an unchanging and virtually timeless state, as if the ethnographer's description provides all that it is important, or possible, to know about their past and future.³⁶

The term 'ethnographic present' is derived from an epistemological interrogation of the discipline of anthropology and its temporalising methodologies. Time is part of ethnography. And fieldwork is a temporal experience. As Johannes Fabian argued more than thirty years ago, the discipline of anthropology was itself founded on the contradiction of denying the coequality of its objects of study even as it relied on direct interaction with contemporaneous people.³⁷ In this way, people, groups and ways of life under study became displaced from the present through textual productions. If anthropology epitomised fixity for many Indigenous curators, art history by contrast offered futurity. For Indigenous people, it was clearly advantageous to choose the future.

³⁴ Djon Mundine. 'Djon Mundine on 21 years of Aboriginal art' *Away!*, *Radio National*, accessed 18 April 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/djon-mundine-21-years-of-aboriginal-art/4881588>

³⁵ Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, 1983/2014

³⁶ Charlotte Aull Davies. 'Expanding the ethnographic present: Documents, life history, narrative, longitudinal studies', *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, Routledge, 1999, p195.

³⁷ Johannes Fabian. 'Time and Writing About the Other', *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, 1983/2014, p71.

As I understand it, the 'ethnographic present' is essentially a critique of a literary contrivance that through the use of the present tense, freezes cultures into unchanging and unchangeable sociocultural conditions. It is not a critique of ethnography itself. As I argued in the Introduction, ethnography is an immersive methodology that is often conflated with an interpretive regime of stasis. What its critics are concerned about is the 'conceptual violence inherent in fieldwork', that is, the violence of speaking on behalf of someone else.³⁸ Fieldwork is not the exclusive terrain of ethnography. Indigenous curation is also a type of fieldwork. The 'eternal present' of *Everywhen's* exhibition's title is similarly a temporal conceit. It endorses the original critique but also avows a debt to fieldwork methodologies through arts centre brokerage. Although the quality and quantity of this information is often inconsistent, this important dialogue is an invaluable resource for Indigenous curation. The 'eternal present' was, thus, not an argument for a never-ending temporal moment of the present. Rather it was a suggestion that Indigenous people have always been contemporary, have never been out of time and, in contrast to the fieldwork implications of the dissolution of subject and object, have always been present to their own ways of constituting the world. The exhibition was therefore an attempt to restore Indigenous people not just to the present, but to the power of determining the present. By this logic, Indigenous people have always been their own ethnographers who have made possible the diffusion of cultural information. They have safeguarded these ethnographies not through text but through extra-discursive elaborations of visual art and performance.

Fieldwork is a type of immersive surrender to the Other. As Kirsten Hastrup has written of this methodology: 'The concept of becoming implies that one gives in to an alien reality and allows oneself to change in the process. One is not completely absorbed into the other world, but one is also no longer the same.'³⁹ In my concluding remarks in the catalogue essay, I suggested that 'the exhibition is an invitation for us all to become synchronous with the everywhen, if only momentarily'.⁴⁰ In this way, I aimed to configure the exhibition as a kind of fieldwork encounter which enfold the visitor into 'bodily, environmental, narrative and mnemonic modes of experiencing time.'⁴¹

While the *Everywhen* exhibition expressed a modest reproach to the temporalising conceits of anthropology, it did not automatically accept or corroborate the category of the contemporary. The

³⁸ Kirsten Hastrup. 'Writing Ethnography: State of the Art', *Anthropology and Autobiography*, edited by Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, Routledge, 1992, p121.

³⁹ Kirsten Hastrup. 'The Ethnographic Present: A Reinvention', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1990, p50.

⁴⁰ Stephen Gilchrist. 'Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia', *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p30.

⁴¹ Christopher Williams-Wynn. 'From a Postconceptual to an Aporetic Conception of the Contemporary', 2016.

literature is crowded with denunciations of anthropology by Indigenous curators. I have also participated in this practice of critiquing the primitivist conceit of anthropology. At the same time, however, I am aware that Indigenous curation must be eternally vigilant towards its inclusion in art history.⁴² Although the period of art historical engagement with Indigenous art is much shorter, it has proven to be no less insensitive. Elsewhere, in a critique of both anthropology and art history, I have argued that:

the conceit of both disciplines is that they could never apprehend the totality of Indigenous knowledge, experience, or power, through any one methodology. By contrast, the generative value of curatorial practice is that it is intentionally multidisciplinary; it does not and should not align to one single framework.

Indigenous curation is its own discipline that can wrestle with the legacies and methodologies of both anthropology and art history. Despite an awareness of these disciplinary monopolisations, my curatorial training within art galleries and art museums has produced a strong focus on aesthetic experience which seems to privilege an art historical object-based, artist-led engagement. Although *Everywhen* featured predominantly post-1970s work, only a facile definition of the contemporary would guarantee an interpretive alignment with the goals of the 'contemporary' as it has recently been theorised.⁴³ While I did explicitly position and argue for the exhibition in the category of the contemporary, the internal logic of the exhibition suggested both a nuancing of and disinterest in this very same category. As Henry Skeritt cautions about the practice of positioning Indigenous art within new forms of categorisation:

these types of interventions can achieve only so much if the aim is merely to expand the parameters of Western discourse, as opposed to providing space for the persistence of competing and possibly incommensurate ways of being.⁴⁴

The exhibition attempted to invite, elaborate and critique some of the ways in which Indigenous art is positioned within these discursive formations of the contemporary. In her in-depth review of the *Everywhen* exhibition, the US-based Australian art historian Morgan Thomas wrote: 'The point is not

⁴² Stephen Gilchrist. 'Indigenising curatorial practice', *The World Is Not a Foreign Land*, edited by Quentin Sprague, Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2014, p58.

⁴³ Ian McLean has been at the forefront of these theorisations. See his following works: 'How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art', *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: An Anthology of Writing on Aboriginal Art 1980-2006*, Power Publications, 2011, pp333-342; 'What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?', *The World Is Not a Foreign Land*, edited by Quentin Sprague, Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2014, pp49-54 and 'Theories', *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, edited by Ian McLean, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, pp31-42.

⁴⁴ Henry Skeritt. 'A Stitch in Time: How Aboriginal Australian Artists are Reweaving Our World', *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p36.

simply to assert the contemporaneity of Indigenous art, but to show how it might alter our notions of what contemporaneity is.⁴⁵

In his essay 'What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?', art historian Ian McLean claims provocatively that the 'badge' of the contemporary 'was not a battle won but a gift miraculously given' to Aboriginal art.⁴⁶ If this is so, then it is necessary to understand the content of what this gift offered, the conditions under which it was given and from whom and where it emerged. To elaborate a definition of the contemporary, Ian McLean looks to Indigenous curators for their broadest possible interpretation. This perhaps anticipates an understanding of the contemporary as not just a category but a condition.⁴⁷ He writes:

For this reason, the definition of what comprises Indigenous contemporary art is still wide open, especially since curators of Indigenous art (who generally are Indigenous) tend to define any Indigenous art as contemporary. In defense of these curators the discourse of contemporary art is one that challenges the limited parameters and genres that have generally been inherited from modernism: thus its post-western character.⁴⁸

Privileging the collective critical voices of Indigenous curators (while at the same time correcting them), McLean draws our attention to the frictions impeding the free movement of Indigenous art within definitional regimes. Indigenous art has historically had to force this expansion of the definitional regimes in which it is positioned and the institutional spaces that it takes up. This, in turn, demonstrates the smallness of the conceptual, racial and aesthetic categories which Indigenous art and artists have been and are now permitted to occupy. But even in 2016, thirty years after the *Aboriginal Memorial* and nineteen years after *fluent*, this smallness persists to some degree. McLean argues that '[t]he contemporary has not banished primitivism, but it has milked its poison.'⁴⁹ This statement recognises the residual effects of primitivism and cautions that contemporary Indigenous art might still be enmeshed in similar though differently named dichotomies of value.

⁴⁵ Morgan Thomas. 'Everywhen, elsewhere', *Art and Australia*, online, 2017, accessed 13 May 2019. <http://www.artandaustralia.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/online/distance/everywhen-elsewhere>

⁴⁶ Ian McLean. 'What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?', *The World Is Not a Foreign Land*, edited by Quentin Sprague, Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2014, p49.

⁴⁷ See Margaret Farmer, Brenda L Croft, Stephen Gilchrist, Bruce McLean, Keith Munro. 'Points of Convergence: Indigenous Curators Explore the Question of Contemporary within Aboriginal Art', *Art and Australia*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2008, pp550-556.

⁴⁸ Ian McLean quoted in Marina Tyquiengco. 'Decoding Double Desire: A Conversation with Ian McLean.' *Contemporaneity*, vol. 4, 2015, p210.

⁴⁹ Ian McLean. 'What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?', 2014, p49.

The evolutionary histories of these dichotomies can be observed in Rex Butler's short preview of the *Everywhen* exhibition in *Artforum*. He wrote:

Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia, held at the Asia Society in New York in 1988, was a key exhibition in demonstrating that Aboriginal art was not 'primitive' but modern. This show goes one step further in arguing that Aboriginal art is not modern but contemporary.⁵⁰

This exhibition preview communicates the crisis of hierarchical and ever-evolving definitions that has long characterised the critical reception of Indigenous art. We must have faith, as Terry Smith does, that the contemporary is 'more than the latest chapter in the centuries-long History of Art'.⁵¹

The decision to use time as a structuring and emancipating device of the exhibition sought to grapple with these histories of who gets to claim time, history, place and the canon. Scaling up or pushing at Indigenous temporality was logically a refusal to engage with the smallness of colonial time, which has fought to deflect from this smallness by eradicating all other epistemological formations. While this refusal to be subject to colonial temporal impositions was an important conceptual component of the exhibition, I also wanted to radicalise the category of the contemporary, looking specifically at its inclusivity. As I said in a published interview with Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll in *Art Monthly Australia*, many of the curatorial choices were made in order to 'trigger these questions about the definitional categories of Indigenous contemporary art and the regimes of value in which they are positioned'.⁵²

Indigenous art is about far more than the opportunity to challenge or invigorate the western art canon. These readings of opposition or inspiration demonstrably centre the west. The contemporary is, of course, international but it cannot only be western. The *Everywhen* exhibition was an opportunity to advance an internationalised dialogue about Indigenous art from Australia although this debate is far from over. As McLean notes in his 2014 publication *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*: 'A theory of Indigenous contemporary art remains elusive. This is reflected in its failure, outside a few countries that are peripheral to the main game, to make a sustaining impression

⁵⁰ Rex Butler. 'Previews: Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia', *Artforum*, vol. 54, no. 5, January 2016, p133.

⁵¹ Terry Smith. 'Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art', *World Art*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2011, pp171-188.

⁵² Stephen Gilchrist quoted in Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll. 'Everywhen There Is Time for Aboriginal Art', 2016, p46.

on the main body of artworld discourse.⁵³ Although the category of the contemporary rejects modernist binaries, the binaries of centre and periphery are revived here.

Clearly, the category of the contemporary is not a conflict-free space, as is evident in the relentless Eurocentrism of Peter Osborne's postulation of the contemporary.⁵⁴ But significantly, it does present an opportunity to encounter the multiplicity and difference of the world. To their credit, Australian art historians have been grappling with the limits of canonicity through a serious engagement with Indigenous art since the 1980s. The eruption of Indigenous art into the fields of Australian art has forced a reckoning with the inherited language of art history and its categorical and teleological failings.

These contestations by and on behalf of Indigenous people have arguably created expansionary movement in these categories, sometimes to the point of collapse. Terry Smith presents the following contextualisation of these intercultural encounters which have produced a redistribution of power, at least in theory. He observes:

As European and US-centric perspectives decline in dominance, and awareness of the agency of others penetrates even the cultural citadels of what used to be known as the First World, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain the presumption that art is in essence universal, its objects timeless and the experiences that it offers transcendental — in other words, that it is fundamentally *unworldly*. There will continue to be situations in which these terms make useful sense, but, in contemporary circumstances, such sense will be very specific to the actually existing relativities of time, place and power. To the greatly reduced extent that it remains *unworldly*, today's art is, as I will show, deeply embedded in new, contemporary kinds of worldliness, a condition in which the contemporaneity of many different kinds of world has become the definitive experience of our times.⁵⁵

This decidedly worldly definition of contemporaneity is self-reflexive about historical configurations of power. It is also sensitive to Indigenous agency, open to alternative temporalities and attentive to mutualities of difference beyond the false narrative of the universal. In contrast to the binaries of modernism and primitivism, the contemporary opens up and creates passages across new modes of

⁵³ Ian McLean. 'Theories', *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p31.

⁵⁴ Peter Osborne. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, 2013.

⁵⁵ Terry Smith. 'Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art', 2011, p174.

temporality and being that are meaningfully interconnective. While it could be argued that this is yet another prescriptive positioning of Indigenous art into a globalised rubric of flattening universality, I contend that it is precisely the global scale and decentred scope of the category that makes its local specificities appreciably manifest.

Apprehending these local specificities is still, however, the challenge of Indigenous art and many of these translational challenges are pushed to the surface by American critics. Art critic Lee Lawrence has described the difficulty of interpreting intercultural productions of Indigenous art. In her review of *Everywhen* in *The Wall Street Journal*, she wrote:

‘Garak IV,’ the label states, is tied to rituals and morality tales involving the movement of stars, but, as occurs throughout the show, it doesn’t tell us how to tease out the narrative. We are thus asked to regard paintings as more than abstract forms while denied the tools to decode their meaning. Honoring indigenous perspectives may inevitably entail this kind of frustration. Aboriginal artists do not share a single symbolic language we can translate.⁵⁶

Indigenous curation is an enterprise of translation, but as Henry Skeritt remarks, ‘[t]he artworks themselves are already acts of translation.’⁵⁷ I understood the need to create points of access into the works of art and so ensured the presence of an extended label for every work as well as video interviews with a number of artists, which were shown in the gallery space. Harvard Art Museums is a teaching museum, and thus, this volume of didactic material was not just tolerated but encouraged. Anticipating the problem of translation, however, Skeritt wrote in his essay for the *Everywhen* exhibition:

The obvious answer is to listen to what the artists are telling us, to pay close attention to the ways in which Aboriginal artists value and discuss their work in order to develop more culturally attuned frameworks for interpretation. There is an urgent need for such research. At the same time, these types of interventions can achieve only so much if the aim is merely to expand the parameters of Western discourse, as opposed to

⁵⁶ Lee Lawrence. ‘Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art From Australia’ Review, *The Wall St Journal*, 15 February 2016, accessed 26 April 2019.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/everywhen-the-eternal-present-in-indigenous-art-from-australia-review-1455570925>

⁵⁷ Henry Skeritt. ‘A Stitch in Time: How Aboriginal Australian Artists are Reweaving Our World’, *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p36.

providing space for the persistence of competing and possibly incommensurate ways of being. Put differently, if the aim of such research is to produce better translations, then it cannot simply perform the function of 'transmitting information', which Benjamin cites as the hallmark of 'bad translations.' Rather, translation should aim to produce an echo of the original, a reverberation in an alien tongue.⁵⁸

While Lawrence had difficulty in understanding the works through a culturally resonant register, she responded not with an 'alien tongue' but with sensorial surrender. She noted: 'As cerebral as the notion of everywhen appears, the pathway to it is visceral.'⁵⁹ Morgan Thomas similarly described the points of aesthetic and sensorial revelation in the exhibition:

With its unusual combination of breadth, elusiveness, and sheer ambition, *Everywhen* implicitly bypasses currently prevailing categorizations of Indigenous Australian art. In their place, it assembles a poetry of intense repetitions, alterations, and ungraspable differences. At the same time, it invites a rethinking of contemporary art—and contemporary life too—that does not forget its debt to sensations of temporal recurrence, history, simultaneity, and becoming.⁶⁰

According to Terry Smith, many of these notions of 'presentness', 'immediacy' and 'direct experience of multiplicitous complexity' are essential components that define the contemporary.⁶¹ He suggests that contemporaneity is not merely temporalised in the present but in a neverending dialogue with futurity. The state of becoming that is implied by this relationship inevitably leads, he writes, to the following conclusion:

The present may become, perversely 'eternal'. Not, however, in a state of wrought transfiguration, as Baudelaire had hoped, but as a kind of incessant incipience, of the kind theorized by Jacques Derrida as *à venir* - perpetual advent, that which is, while impossible to foresee or predict, always to come.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid., p36.

⁵⁹ Lee Lawrence. 'Everywhen' Review, 15 February 2016.

⁶⁰ Morgan Thomas. 'Everywhen, CAA Reviews', *A Publication of the College Art Association*, 24 August 2017, accessed 24 April 2019.

<http://caareviews.org/reviews/2875#.XMPT3RMzYW8>

⁶¹ Terry Smith. 'Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question', *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, Duke University Press, 2008, p8.

⁶² Ibid., p9.

In this theoretical construal, the contemporary becomes synchronous with the expectancy of the Everywhen. For Indigenous people, the Dreaming does not merely preserve the past. Rather, it speaks of eternal becoming. It is the totality of Indigenous knowledge and its future potential made alive through both its immediate and continuing transmission. Gesturing insistently toward the future, the Dreaming pushes ancestral memory into the present. This is simultaneously the promise of the contemporary and the promise of the Everywhen.

3.4 Reciprocal Recognitions: Indigenous Sovereignty and Visibility

Another meaningful point of connection was sought with the deep local histories of place that have been and are manifested by Native Peoples. The potential dialogue created between Indigenous peoples of Australia and the United States of America through *fluent* provided a helpful starting point for *Everywhen*. Unlike *fluent*, *Everywhen* was to occur on Indigenous lands at an institution almost 150 years older than the United States itself. In this way, the exhibition pushed at the technical limits and conceptual understandings of Indigenous sovereignty. Thomas highlights both this history and its constitutive consequences for Indigenous peoples:

[Harvard University's] founding in 1636 precedes that of the United States as an independent and sovereign state – and the British occupation of Indigenous lands – by a long margin. Its academic prestige likewise situates it as a cosmopolitan institution whose establishment precedes any assertion of national sovereignty. In practical terms, it also functions as a king-making instrument that is paradigmatically global in reach. As is regularly noted, Harvard's vast endowment is comparable to the gross domestic product of national economies outside the United States, somewhere in the middle of the global scale. If there is a political force in this real-time, real-world recognition – artistic and political – between the art of Indigenous people in Australia and the quasi-sovereign world of Harvard, perhaps it stems from the disjunctive singularity of this liaison of real and still problematic or unacknowledged forms of authority and sovereignty.

The exhibition was an exercise in sovereigntist agitation on both political and conceptual levels. The provocation lay in an exertion of autonomy that went beyond the jurisdiction of coloniality. I was interested in the 'quasi-sovereign world of Harvard' but equally I was drawn to the little known history of Harvard University's Indian College, which opened in the 1640s, a few years after the founding.⁶³ The

⁶³ Drew Lopenzina. *Red Ink: Native Americans picking up the pen in the colonial period*, SUNY Press, 2012.

publication of *Caleb's Crossing* (2001), a work by Pulitzer prize-winning Australian author Geraldine Brooks about Caleb Cheeshahteumuck (est. 1644–1666), the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College arguably did much to popularise this important historical figure despite its literary fictionalisations.⁶⁴ For me and other Indigenous people, Harvard University was already an important articulated site of Indigeneity. This was in itself derived from an Indigenous consciousness of the memory of place. It must be said, however, that this history is not shared by many. Indeed, as Cedric Cromwell, chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian tribe of Cape Cod said in 2015: “‘Native American’ calls to mind the Southwest and the Great Plains region, not Boston’.”⁶⁵ The *Everywhen* exhibition was determined to grapple with Indigenous visibility and provoked an attentiveness to the aspirations and degradations of Indigenous sovereignty globally.

One of the most conspicuous differences between Indigenous peoples of North America and Australia is in the ways they are respectively afforded forms of sovereignty, understood to include both land and self-governance, within a singular nationalist polity. There are currently 573 Native American tribes that are officially identified as ‘Indian Entities Recognized and Eligible To Receive Services From the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs’ and many more are petitioning for this federal recognition.⁶⁶ By contrast, Australia has no instrument for recognising Indigenous sovereignty due in large part to its historical and contemporary reluctance to enter into treaty negotiations with Indigenous people. The first major Australian case to discuss sovereignty was *Coe v the Commonwealth*, which was heard by the High Court in 1979. With a myopic denial of different instruments of recognition, Justice Gibbs condemned Indigenous people for their inability to demonstrate their sovereignty in ways that are already legible to the state and assumed that Australian sovereignty is total and unbiased in its application to all citizens. This was, of course, a condescending gesture of equity that in practice consolidated rhetorical and structural injustice. At the same time, it was clear that even if Indigenous instruments had been recognisable, they would necessarily have been deemed inconsequential. This was not the logic of reason but that of racism. Justice Gibbs argued that Indigenous people have:

no legislative, executive or judicial organs by which sovereignty might be exercised. If such organs existed, they would have no powers, except such as the law of the Commonwealth, or of a State or Territory, might confer upon them. The contention that

⁶⁴ Geraldine Brooks. *Caleb's Crossing*, Fourth Estate, 2001.

⁶⁵ Cedric Cromwell quoted in Sean P Murphy. ‘Boston forum raises stature, pride of Wampanoag tribes’, *The Boston Globe*, 14 September 2015, accessed 14 May 2019.

⁶⁶ *Federal Register*, vol. 83, no. 141, 23 July 2018, accessed 14 April 2019.
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2018-07-23/pdf/2018-15679.pdf>

there is in Australia an aboriginal (sic) nation exercising sovereignty, even of a limited kind, is quite impossible in law to maintain.⁶⁷

This impossibility was defended beyond the temporalised moment of invasion and upheld through the elevation of the Crown as the arbiter of recognition. Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson describes this manoeuvre as ‘statecraft: the fiction of temporal and cultural superiority and monopoly over these constructs’.⁶⁸ Colonisation is not the singular event of a mythologised encounter but a recursive process of ideological control which embeds itself within social structures, burrows itself into reductive national identities and insinuates itself within individual psyches. Recognising only the consequences of this moment of history and subordinating all that came before it are acts of epistemic violence that mark the start of Australian sovereignty and end of Indigenous sovereignty. The *Everywhen* exhibition attempted to expose this temporal conceit. In this way, I tried to do what Simpson would describe as ‘point[ing] continuously to the contradictions of colonial rule and to the arbitrariness of time as an instrument of that rule’.⁶⁹

Australia is the only country in the British Commonwealth not to have a treaty with Indigenous people.⁷⁰ Despite the instructions given to Lieutenant James Cook to enter into ‘consent’ with Indigenous people,⁷¹ the reasons for ignoring this directive are still being debated and are currently unexplained and unjustified.⁷² The refusal to recognise the sovereignty of Indigenous people, both historically and to this day, must be met with an Indigenous stance of refusal that echoes the 1770 defiance initiated by Gweagal people. The latter will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

It would, however, be misleading to depict an unrelenting hegemony, as there have been bursts of concentrated and often sincere interest in a treaty with Indigenous people. George Arthur, who was

⁶⁷ *Coe v the Commonwealth*, 1979. 5 April 1979, accessed 5 May 2019.
<http://www7.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCA/1979/68.html>

⁶⁸ Audra Simpson. ‘Under the Sign of Sovereignty: Certainty, Ambivalence, and Law in Native North America and Indigenous Australia’, *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, p111.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p110.

⁷⁰ George Williams. ‘Does True Reconciliation Require a Treaty?’, *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 10, 2014, p3.

⁷¹ The instructions given to Lieutenant James Cook are recorded as: ‘You are also with the Consent of the natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain; or, if you find the Country uninhabited take possession for His Majesty by setting up proper marks and inscriptions, as first discoverers and possessors.’ Quoted in Garth Nettheim, ‘The Influence of Canadian and International Law on the Evolution of Australian Aboriginal Title’, *Let Right Be Done: Aboriginal Title, the Calder Case, and the Future of Indigenous Rights*, edited by Hamar Foster, Jeremy H A Webber and Heather Raven, UBC Press, 2007, p178.

⁷² Sean Brennan, Brenda Gunn and George Williams. ‘Sovereignty’ and its Relevance to Treaty-Making between Indigenous Peoples and Australian Governments.’ *The Sydney Law Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2004, pp307-352.

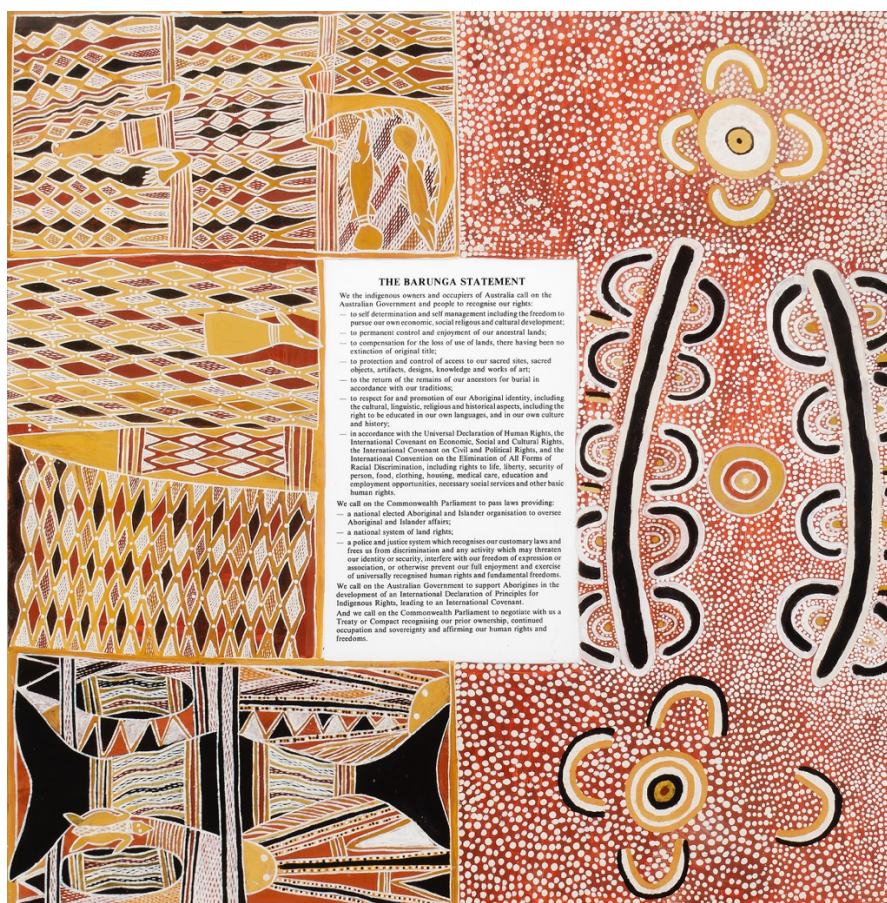


FIGURE 3.8

Barunga statement, 1988, earth pigments on composition board with attached printed text on paper
 Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Gumatj, born 1948; Bakulangay Marawili, Madarrpa, 1944–2002; Djambawa Marawili, Madarrpa born 1953; Marirra Marawili, Madarrpa, c.1937–2018; Djewiny Ngurruwuthun, Munyuku, c.1940–2001; Wenten Rubuntja, Arrernte c.1926–2005; Lindsay Jampijinpa, Warlpiri, 1951–2009; D. Williams Japanangka, Warlpiri, 1948–2013; Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra.
 Photograph courtesy of Parliament House, Canberra

Governor of Van Diemen's Land during the Black War, said that it was 'a fatal error...that a treaty was not entered into with the Aboriginal people of that island.'⁷³ More recently, the Aboriginal Treaty Committee was established in 1979. In 1980, its chair, H.C Coombs, argued persuasively for the need to support relevant legislative amendments:⁷⁴

In brief, we occupy this land as the result of territorial conquest justified or excused by a doctrine unilaterally determined and even then inapplicable to the true circumstances. Even now it is highly doubtful whether its validity would be sustained by an international tribunal acceptable to the nations and peoples of the world.⁷⁵

⁷³ George Arthur. Letter from George Arthur to R Hay, September 1832', stored at the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, file no CO280/35.

⁷⁴ H.C Coombs. 'Signing An Australian Peace Treaty', *Social Alternatives*, vol.1, no. 6/7, 1980, p63.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p63.

Despite this impassioned plea for a treaty, broader support was not forthcoming, and the Committee was disbanded in 1983. In 1988, the Barunga Statement was issued to Prime Minister Bob Hawke, by Galarrwuy Yunupingu AM and Wenten Rubuntja AM, who were chairs of the Northern and Central Land Councils at the Barunga Festival.⁷⁶ (Figure 3.8) The final line of this statement contained a sincere request:

And we call on the Commonwealth Parliament to negotiate with us a treaty recognising our prior ownership, continued occupation and sovereignty and affirming our human rights and freedom.⁷⁷

Following this, the Hawke Labor Government officially and enthusiastically adopted support for a treaty and argued that it was an emblem of and mechanism for ending injustice.⁷⁸ In December 1988, Hawke himself wrote:

The Government is committed to a real and lasting reconciliation, achieved through full consultation and honest negotiation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens of this nation, leading to an agreement with the Aboriginal people — a treaty, a compact, call it what you will. Without this overall approach, without a proper settlement and proper recognition, there can be no real lasting improvement for the Aboriginal and Islander people.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, the ‘compact’ or treaty was indefinitely forestalled, and ‘reconciliation’ emerged as a political compromise. In 2000, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation called for a treaty and urged that ‘the Commonwealth Parliament enact legislation...to put in place a process which will unite all Australians by way of an agreement, or treaty, through which unresolved issues of reconciliation can be resolved’.⁸⁰ This too was hamstrung and Prime Minister John Howard deployed the peculiarities of ‘statecraft’ to declare that ‘[a] nation ... does not make a treaty with itself.’⁸¹

⁷⁶ Marcia Langton. ‘Dominion and Dishonour: A Treaty Between Our Nations?’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2001, p23.

⁷⁷ The Barunga Statement has been on permanent display at Parliament House, Canberra since 1991.

⁷⁸ Bob Hawke. ‘A time for Reconciliation’, *A Treaty With The Aborigines?*, edited by Ken Baker, Institute of Public Affairs, 1988, p4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p5.

⁸⁰ Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. *Reconciliation: Australia’s challenge: final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament*, 2000, Recommendation 6, p106.

⁸¹ John Howard quoted in Sean Brennan, Brenda Gunn and George Williams. ‘Sovereignty’, 2004, p308.

In 2006, Galarrwuy Yunupingu AM came to the painful conclusion that: '[s]overeignty became treaty, treaty became reconciliation and reconciliation became nothing'.⁸² While Bob Hawke's final act as Prime Minister was to oversee the hanging of the Barunga Statement in Parliament House, Canberra, by 2007, Yunupingu was calling for its removal, saying:

The Barunga Statement is a foundational document and starting point for this current debate. I am pleased that it still hangs in Parliament. But I had come to feel that its words had been so ignored that the best thing to do would be to get it out of the Parliament and take it home and bury it in a bark coffin.⁸³

The denial of Indigenous sovereignty continues to offend and harm Indigenous people. Despite its importance to Indigenous people, it is, as Yunupingu infers, constantly being reshaped into an ideology that is more tolerable to the state. The Constitutional Recognition campaign known as 'Recognise' began in 2012 and sought to raise awareness of Indigenous people's omission within the Constitution. The campaign was funded until 2017, not unproblematically, by the Federal Government. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* in May 2017 essentially rejected these symbolic and minimal changes to the Constitution and instead proposed a 'First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution'⁸⁴ and sought 'a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history'.⁸⁵ Again the process was almost immediately rejected by the Prime Minister of the time, Malcolm Turnbull.⁸⁶

Professor Megan Davis, a Cobble Cobble woman from the Barrungam nation, describes this process as 'reform inertia'.⁸⁷ In more recent times, however, there have been renewed calls for treaties, but these have invariably been state-based discussions led by Victoria and South Australia. Furthermore,

⁸² Galarrwuy Yunupingu quoted in Bob Gosford. 'Essential documents from Aboriginal Australia: 2 – the 1998 Barunga Statement' *Crikey*, 4 June 2017, accessed 15 May 2019.
<https://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2017/06/04/backgrounder-four-statements-aboriginal-australia-part-two-1998-barunga-statement/>

⁸³ Galarrwuy Yunupingu. *Serious Business*, Lecture University of Melbourne, Law School, 26 October 2007.

⁸⁴ Referendum Council. *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, May 2017.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Helen Davidson. 'Indigenous recognition: Turnbull refuses to commit to referendum council's proposal', *The Guardian*, 5 August 2017, accessed 5 April 2019.
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/aug/05/indigenous-recognition-turnbull-and-shorten-accused-of-empty-platitudes-at-garma>

⁸⁷ Megan Davis quoted in Helen Davidson. 5 August 2017.

the historic Noongar settlement by the Western Australian Government has been called Australia's first Treaty.⁸⁸

Of course, treaties are only valuable if they are honoured and upheld and yet because of their elusiveness for Indigenous peoples of Australia, they have a particular hold over our political imaginations. Many legal scholars have concluded that 'as a matter of public law the concept of sovereignty need not be an impediment to treaty-making in Australia.'⁸⁹ Thus, treaties and their inherent claims of Indigenous sovereignty, are not unfathomable political concepts but unspeakable political conclusions. Audra Simpson further complicates our understanding of the nuances of the power imbalances inherent in the treaty process in the North American context by observing that:

treaties are central to contractual thinking in Native history and politics, regardless of the fact that there was profound difference of interpretation of these treaties by Indigenous peoples and settler governments; most treaties were for land cessions, and many were signed under duress. These conditions were sometimes so forceful that had they been conditions of equal standing they probably would not have been signed in the first place, yet they represent legal forms of incontrovertible rights to land, to resources and to jurisdiction.⁹⁰

While the *Everywhen* exhibition aimed to foster a recognition of local and global Indigeneity, I was aware of what 'recognition' through the treaty process means and does to Indigenous people. My thinking on these issues was animated by the concept of 'counter sovereignty,' which has been proposed by Americanist Manu Vimalassery to make legible the preexisting territorial rights that are conferred on Indigenous peoples but often held in abeyance.⁹¹ Vimalassery describes his theory as follows:

As counter-sovereignty, US sovereignty is in perpetual reaction to the prior and primary claims of Native peoples on the territories that the United States claims as its own. Seen in this light, US sovereignty will always be an unfinished project in perpetual crisis of unraveling.⁹²

⁸⁸ For a more recent discussion and argument for this first treaty status, see Harry Hobbs and George Williams. 'The Noongar Settlement: Australia's First Treaty.' *The Sydney Law Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2018, pp1-38.

⁸⁹ Sean Brennan, Brenda Gunn and George Williams. 'Sovereignty', 2004, p307.

⁹⁰ Audra Simpson. 'The Ruse of Consent', 2017, pp 26-27.

⁹¹ Manu Vimalassery. 'Counter-sovereignty.' *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, vol. 2 no. 1, 2014, pp142-148.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p142.

This concept can similarly be applied to the Australian context and deepens the premise of *Everywhen*, which calls attention to the systems of knowing that existed before and after colonisation. The invocation of a reactive ‘counter sovereignty’ foregrounds and restores the legitimacy of Indigenous forms of sovereignty that have historically been constrained. Nevertheless, however correct this semantic modelling might be, in practice there is a meaningful distance between what is correct and just and what is legal and codified. Audra Simpson describes sovereignty by saying that it ‘is a matter of the material element of land, elaborated as a territorial space and an entity to be governed.’⁹³ Land is the basis and prize of sovereignty.

At the official opening of *Everywhen* on 4 February 2016, I offered an Acknowledgment of Country to the Mashpee Wampanoag, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), the Nipmuc Nation and the Massachusetts people, on behalf of the Harvard Art Museums, on whose land it stands. A Welcome to Country was also offered by Jim Peters, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs and a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe and Vonnie Brown of the Wôpanâak (Wampanoag) Language Reclamation Project. Brown also performed a customary prayer in language, and everyone who could stood up for this important cultural protocol even in the spillover space outside the auditorium. This was the first time that these land-based welcomes and acknowledgements had occurred at the reopened Harvard Art Museums. It was also a public acknowledgement of a profound reorientation towards my own methodologies of Indigenisation that underscored the exhibition and the institution’s commitment to ‘world visibility’.⁹⁴ Although this institutional gesture was significant and arguably reputationally beneficial, I was personally and curatorially interested in affirming the intra-Indigenous aspects of enacting this protocol. These gestures to and of country recognise an Indigenous sovereignty understood and reciprocated by Indigenous people.

This protocol was mediated through Shelly Lowe, (Navajo), the Executive Director of Harvard University’s Native American Program, who had brokered this coming together. Over many years, we had built up a relationship as I was mindful of not being complicit in perpetuating Native invisibility. On the contrary, contributing to both local and global Indigenous visibility, was an important pedagogical component of the exhibition. As I said in an interview with Harvard Art Museums *Index Magazine*:

⁹³ Audra Simpson. ‘Under the Sign of Sovereignty’, 2010, p112.

⁹⁴ Harvard Art Museums. ‘Mary Schneider Enriquez Appointed as Harvard Art Museum’s Houghton Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art’, Press Release, 2 April 2010, accessed 15 May 2019.

In the context of this exhibition, it's vital to make connections with other Indigenous peoples and to support each other to confront this historic and contemporary invisibility...In terms of *Everywhen* being an exhibition of Indigenous art from Australia, we're guests in this country. We have to acknowledge and honor the people who came before us.⁹⁵

For non-Indigenous people, the acknowledgement of and welcome to country have low political stakes, which makes them a defensible form of Indigenous sovereignty, necessarily subdued, that ultimately protects settler dominion. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes: 'The majority of Indigenous people do not have land rights, nor do they have legal ownership of their sacred sites.'⁹⁶ The reclamation of space at the beginning of public engagements is merely a symbolic and temporary gesture. In her critique of the transactional nature of Acknowledgement of Welcome to Country, Kristina Everett further observes that the 'public recognition of Aboriginality does not equate to public recognition of land.'⁹⁷ While these enactments are in principle an invitation to share space, they do not confront the fullness of the predicaments of sharing that space. Despite the importance of these gestures and the 'symbolic performativity' they encode to Indigenous people, they are, thus, often perceived as an exercise in colonial hypocrisy and Indigenous futility.⁹⁸ They speak to the failure of imagining political alterities. And while they can sometimes be moving, they ultimately mask a deep crisis of political purchase.

In her keynote address at the Revealed Symposium in Perth in April 2015, Franchesca Cubillo (Larrakia), Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, alluded to this crisis of political capital:

As Indigenous people of this nation we are a sovereign people, standing strong in our culture and remaining true to our heritage. We stand strong in our art; we stand strong in our culture and we stand strong on our country. Our ancestors, communities and families have welcomed many non-Indigenous peoples into this country, and today we see the continuity of our shared culture, history and traditions. I see Aboriginal art and culture at the very forefront of Australian identity and celebrated in such a way that

⁹⁵ Stephen Gilchrist in Katie Aberbach. 'Acknowledging Indigeneity,' *Index Magazine*, Harvard Art Museums, 20 April 2016, accessed 1 April 2019.

<https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/article/acknowledging-indigeneity>

⁹⁶ Aileen Moreton-Robinson. 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a Postcolonizing Society', *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p10.

⁹⁷ Kristina Everett. 'Welcome to Country ... Not', *Oceania*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2009, p64.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p64.

previous generations would not have imagined. Despite these remarkable achievements, we as Aboriginal people in this country have been continually bombarded by waves of dispossession, racism, marginalisation and genocide. I am both angered and frustrated that we continue to sustain the impact of colonisation on a daily basis some 226 years after invasion. We are not recognised as a sovereign people, we continue to be governed by a nation that does not recognise us as equals.⁹⁹

Moving from cultural autonomy to cultural oppression, this statement conveys the double-hinged significations of Indigenous sovereignty and 'counter sovereignty'. Cubillo expresses the urgency of this bifurcated sovereignty that moves within, around and through the indeterminacy of recognition. She laments both the inherent though wounded sovereignty of Indigenous people in Australia and the totalising achievement of structurally inscribing Indigenous people into the nation state. While she demonstrates that both positions are at once true, in practice their respective truthfulness is premised on a rejection of this simultaneity. Politically and juridically speaking, it is impossible for Indigenous people to enact their sovereignty in and under current political conditions of Australian 'counter sovereignty.'

As things stand, the only instrument to recognise the sovereignty of Indigenous people from Australia is the very same instrument that codified and legalised Indigenous people's dispossession. Therefore, to enshrine Indigenous sovereignty within the state is in effect a consolidation of state hegemony. Indigenous people must be suspicious of these instruments of recognition, their determinative power and their answerability to the subordination of Indigenous lifeways. If applied, this hegemonic interpretation of sovereignty centres a juridical framing of Australian law and confers a totalising monopolisation of power over Indigenous people. It fails to capture the nuances and possibilities of unbelonging, multiple polities and political alterities.

Audra Simpson is aware of the political limitations of Indigenous sovereignty as defined by and through the state. The only way out of this double bind, she suggests, is to insist on a politics of refusal rather than resistance. The latter she condemns as a 'repetitive stance' that 'overinscribe(s) the state with its

⁹⁹ Franchesca Cubillo. 'Revealed: We are a sovereign people', *Artlink*, vol. 36, no. 2, June 2016, p14.

power to determine what matter(s)'.¹⁰⁰ A strategy of refusal is, thus, deployed to offset what Simpson calls 'the ruse of consent'.¹⁰¹

Given these historic and current asymmetries of power, it follows that the sovereigntist implications of a welcome and acknowledgement to country are exaggerated for two critical reasons: to place pressure on the precariousness of Australian 'counter sovereignty' and to withstand the humiliation of living under it. The past and continuing enunciation of Indigenous sovereignty, thus, expresses both a refusal to be included within the political instruments of colonisation and an unmasking of the criminality of colonisation itself. Simpson captures the value of this positioning by demonstrating that Indigenous 'demands are tied to refusals to disappear or acquiesce to state legitimacy and power. They push up against the desire of the liberal state to consider its governance just.'¹⁰²

If the state flattens and delimits our sovereignty and our access to lands through the mechanisms of the law, then it is necessary to speak, enact and perform our sovereignty in the only ways that we can. A forestalled sovereignty is not the same as a forfeited one. These reciprocal welcomes and acknowledgements are, thus, important for reconstituting the distributive power of self-recognition to and for other Indigenous peoples. The Mashpee Wampanoag and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head had endured a three-decade long struggle for 'Federal Recognition' but the artists in *Everywhen* acknowledged them immediately.¹⁰³ These reciprocal recognitions are not merely a disruption to Australian 'counter sovereignty'. They represent a continuation of our own sovereignty and a constitution of intra-Indigenous recognitions. In complete and calculated opposition to legal determinations, our sovereignty resides in our own instruments of recognition. In the self-legitimising way that characterises Indigenous curatorial strategies that were elaborated in the Introduction, I spoke of the importance of these gestures to people and place by saying they are 'an acknowledgment of place, of history, of culture, and it declares that our lands, our words, and our bodies are still sovereign.'¹⁰⁴ This sovereignty resides not within the armature of the state but within ourselves. It can't be otherwise.

¹⁰⁰ Audra Simpson. 'The Ruse of Consent', 2017, p23.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp18-33.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p22.

¹⁰³ Stephen Gilchrist. 'Acknowledgements' *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*. Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p12. The catalogue contains an acknowledgement which reads: 'On behalf of the artists, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Wampanoag people, on whose land this exhibition is respectfully mounted.'

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Gilchrist in Katie Aberbach. 'Acknowledging Indigeneity,' 2016.

3.5 Remembrance and Performance as Refusal: Lena Nyadbi

My own curatorial stance of self-legitimation was inspired by the *Aboriginal Memorial* and *fluent* and also the individual artists of *Everywhen*. In the section on 'Remembrance', I explored the nature of time, the resonance of cultural memory and the impact of historical events on the present. Many of these creative excursions into the past demonstrate a determination to remember and a devoted struggle to bear witness. Outside of art, it is often difficult to acknowledge and confront the intergenerational trauma rooted in silenced histories. By exploring personal, institutional and national memory, the artists confront what we choose to remember and what (and who) we are forced to forget. Remembrance becomes a mode of refusal that disavows the amnesia of Australia's historical narrative.

The ceremonies that punctuate Indigenous social and cultural life are used by Indigenous artists as the source iconography for many current works of art and they are often invoked, in part, by those same artists while they are painting. While many ceremonies are performed less and less frequently in their totality, artists often recall parts of them while painting: song cycles are sung, dances are gestured and the rhythm of ceremony is expressed through the movement of the brush. Artists will often paint for as long as the ceremonial performance would have lasted. Mark-making becomes the mechanism for honoring ceremonial time, and the act of painting brings the ancestral narratives into being, safeguarding them for the future. The intense repetition evokes both the rhythm and mindfulness of ceremonial performance. The painting should therefore not be read as mere illustration but as real-time communion with ancestors, their sacred geographies and the practices that sustain them. In this way, performance becomes an immersive cultural practice that is also a significant mode of refusal.

Within the 'Performance' section, I included the work of Lena Nyadbi (Gija, born 1936) whose paintings reveal her deep commitment to reconstituting the materiality of her own cultural practices. In the East Kimberley where Nyadbi grew up, extractive and pastoral industries have damaged the land in irreparable ways.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, customary practices have also been fractured by a barrage of interventionist government policies and acquisitive pastoral interests. And yet, despite and because of these disruptions, Nyadbi is determined to make aspects of her Gija culture known around the world.

¹⁰⁵ Marcia Langton. 'Hungry Ghosts: Landscape and Memory', *Blood on the Spinifex*, edited by Tony Oliver, Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002, p12.



FIGURE 3.9
Lena Nyadbi, Gija, c.1936
Hideout, 2002, natural pigments on linen, 150.0 x 180.0 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 409.2003,
Photograph courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Unravelling Australian attempts to hide the country's history, complicity and amnesia, Nyadbi's painting destabilises the resoluteness and validity of official Australian propaganda, which presents the colonisation of Australia as largely conflict-free. In this painting, the artist references the uneasy intercultural dynamic of the early twentieth century in the 'frontier zone' of the East Kimberley. (Figure 3.9) The short vertical lines in the top right-hand section reference the practice of scarification that was performed by Gija people but was forbidden by the pastoralists who owned New Lissadell Station, where Lena Nyadbi grew up. At a place known as Jimbala, Gija people would collect different-coloured stones that would be flaked and attached to *karlumnun* (spears) used for scarification.¹⁰⁶

This painting is an attempt not only to symbolically recapture this cultural practice but to multiply its application. The work also alludes to the markings on the body of a barramundi fish named Daiwul. His *lilmim* (scales) are represented by the inverted u-shapes on the top left. In the *Ngarranggarni* (Ancestral Period), Daiwul was chased by a group of old women and found shelter in a cave. Unfortunately, there

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Kimberley. 'Lena Nyadbi', *Beyond the Pale: Contemporary Indigenous Art: 2000 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, edited by Brenda L Croft, Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 2000, p62.

was no way out and he was forced to return to the entrance of the cave where the women were poised with their fishing nets. In order to escape, Daiwul jumped over the women's traps and through the gap in the mountain range. In the process, he shed his scales, which became the diamonds that are embedded within the landscape. Nyadbi chronicles this ancestrally created site before it was destroyed by a mine, the Argyle Diamond Mine operated by Rio Tinto, that was until recently, the world's largest producer of diamonds. Her customary lands were flooded by the Ord River Irrigation Scheme and the artist can only return via her painting practice.

The importance of keeping culture strong is underscored by an additional meaning of this painting. *Hideout* also refers to the time when Nyadbi's family were hunted and had to hide from pastoralists in the network of caves in the region, which is seen in the lower half of the canvas. When these hunting parties pursued them, Nyadbi's family hid in the warren of caves and would escape through a hidden exit to the other side of the ridge where they watched the pastoralists shoot into the spinifex grass in the hope of catching them. Eighty years later, Nyadbi refuses to hide. Underwritten by her deep cultural commitment and the strength of her political convictions, she confronts Australian history and resists any notions of cultural suppression. She also demonstrates art's restorative power to speak across time and space and to give a voice to those whom history has hunted and silenced.

3.6 Yhonnie Scarce

In the 'Remembrance' gallery, which was populated by predominantly black-and-white works, I included the work of Yhonnie Scarce (Kokatha/Nukunu, born 1973). Working predominantly in glass, she highlights the materiality of glass to reflect and refract historical narratives. (Figure 3.10) Scarce's work explores the violence of colonisation, teasing out its clinical and scientific connotations and the ways that violence is often concealed within archives. In *the silence of others (series of six)* N2360, N2409, N2357, N2394, N1858, N2358 (2014), she discloses the methodologies and consequences of colonial, anthropological and medical practices that have been visited upon generations of Indigenous people.¹⁰⁷ Here she refers specifically to the joint Harvard-Adelaide Universities' Anthropological Expedition of 1938–39, which was led by Australian anthropologist, archaeologist, entomologist and ethnologist Norman Tindale.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Norman Barnett Tindale. *Results of the Harvard-Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition, 1938-1939: Distribution of Australian Aboriginal Tribes: A Field Survey*, 1940, p141.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p140.

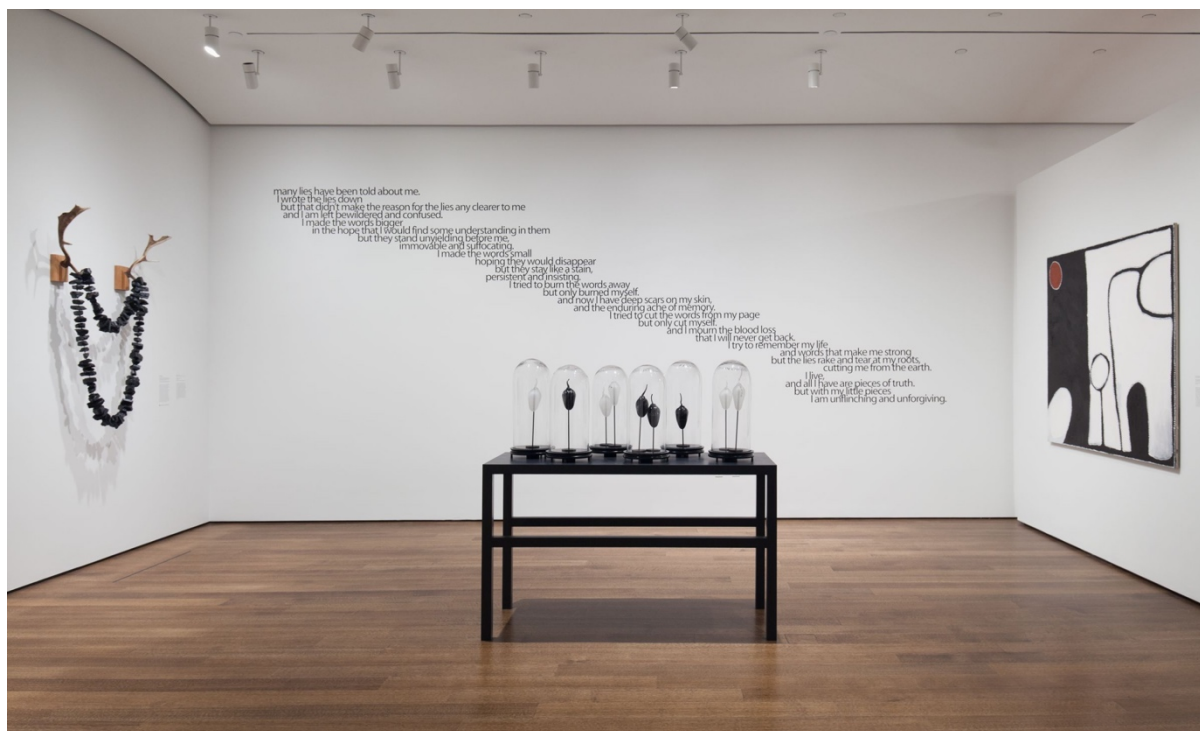


FIGURE 3.10

Installation view of the section titled 'Remembrance' in the *Everywhen* exhibition.

Yhonnie Scarce installation in foreground and Vernon Ah Kee installation on back wall.

Photograph courtesy of Harvard Art Museums.

The installation references Tindale's vast archive, which includes sensitive information about the artist's family, but by extension it invokes many other repositories.¹⁰⁹ Tindale's own report reveals matter-of-factly that 2,450 people were 'subjected to anthropometric examination'.¹¹⁰ The examinations that his expedition conducted were purported to be of scientific value, but the results were often deployed to defend and propagate racist and spurious ideologies.

The installation depicts Indigenous bush foods, represented in exquisite blown-glass forms and displayed as taxonomic specimens, confined in and under glass domes. Each food item is etched with archival numbers corresponding to Scarce's grandfather, great-grandfather and great-grandmother, who endured degrading measurements of their skulls and even tongues. (Figures 3.11 and 3.12)

¹⁰⁹ Yhonnie Scarce quoted in Katie Aberbach, 'Remembrance and Activism', *Index Magazine*, Harvard Art Museums, 11 March 2016, accessed 17 May 2019.

<https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/article/remembrance-and-activism>

¹¹⁰ Norman Barnett Tindale, *Results of the Harvard-Adelaide Expedition*, 1940, p141.



FIGURES 3.11 and 3.12

Yhonnie Scarce, Kokatha/Nukunu, born 1973

The silence of others (series of six) N2360, N2409, N2357, N2394, N1858, N2358, 2014

blown glass, glass domes, steel, acrylic paint, wood

Private collection.

Photograph courtesy of the artist.

In an interview with the Harvard Art Museums in-house magazine, *Index*, Scarce said of the work:

I wanted to reference how [my relatives] were seen as just objects for testing, and how they were disrespected as human beings. You will often find documents relating to this research where there are only numbers stipulating who these people were rather than their names.¹¹¹

Scarce's recuperative methodology dares to name the perpetrators of this violence. While she reproduces the reductive numbering of her family members, these degrading details are enfolded within gestures of Indigenous critical care. Interrogating the archive, she refuses to participate in the suppression of these institutional and disciplinary histories and demonstrates the importance of truth-telling. Scarce's works were borrowed from a private collector in Melbourne and the glass forms were

¹¹¹ Yhonnie Scarce quoted in Katie Aberbach. 'Remembrance and Activism', 11 March 2016.



FIGURE 3.13
Glass Flowers: The Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants
The Harvard Museum of Natural History, Harvard University
Photograph courtesy of Harvard Museum of Natural History.

each presented within a found nineteenth-century glass dome cloche. Unfortunately, it was decided that these cloches were too fragile to travel to Cambridge, Massachusetts, so we contacted the Museum of Comparative Zoology and the Scientific Instruments Collection at Harvard University to find a way to make this historical accessory more pronounced.¹¹²

The exhibition designer Justin Lee attempted to locate a number of these glass domes within Harvard's own archives, but in the end and with the artist's permission, it was decided to source contemporary commercial domes that would be conservationally sound, visually coherent and free from contaminants.¹¹³ While I was disappointed by the absence of this material implication, I could speak about this in the student and public tours that I regularly conducted. Similarly, I drew visitors' attention to the material correspondence with the glass flowers at the Natural History Museum by nineteenth-century glass artisans, Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, who were father and son.¹¹⁴ (Figure 3.13)

¹¹² Jessica Hong. 'Email to Author', 29 September 2015.

¹¹³ Yhonnie Scarce, 'Email to Author', 24 November 2015.

¹¹⁴ Botanical Museum of Harvard University. *The Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants in the Botanical Museum of Harvard University*, Botanical Museum of Harvard University, 1943.

Although the Natural History Museum where the glass flowers are housed was not a participating partner of the *Everywhen* exhibition, the Natural History shares a building with The Peabody Museum. Scarce's installation evokes the hierarchical classificatory systems of race and biology that have been used interactively to dehumanise Indigenous people. It records how Scarce's family were ensnared in the web of colonisation and became anatomised specimens who were defined, confined and silenced. While the artist is deeply critical of western hierarchical classificatory systems of race and biology, she refuses to grant them any totalising signification and hints at the importance of remembering and strengthening the affinities that Indigenous people have with the natural world. These Indigenous bush foods fight against their taxonomic register and are instead reinstalled with the physical and spiritual power to nourish communities, now and into the future.

3.7 Vernon Ah Kee

Also in the 'Remembrance' gallery was an installation by Vernon Ah Kee, who came to speak at the opening of *Everywhen*. Cascading from corner to corner like a stream of consciousness, Ah Kee's text-based work *many lies* (2004) deconstructs the fabrications of Australian history and lays bare its violent practices. In many of his works, the artist has played with removing the kerning, the space between characters, with the result that the text is difficult to read. In this installation, however, legibility was crucial in order to intervene momentarily into the cultural narratives, spaces and texts of the place now termed Australia. The resulting bruising monologue addressed the reiterative messaging of colonial mythologies that have now come to stand as uncontested truth.

The written word is implicated as a tool of this violence and the speaker articulates the internalised pain of these textual falsehoods. (Figures 3.10 and 3.14) As Vernon Ah Kee said about this work:

many lies (2004) is quite simply about the level of denial that Australia perpetuates, what people say about you that is not true. It is about establishing a false mythology or ersatz history. Underpinning that is the idea that there is a level of denial so deeply embedded in this nation's culture that we are unable to have a rational conversation about it. Many lies have to be told to establish an ideal history, the kind of history that is comfortable. For this comfortable history to endure, there must be a firmly established practice of denial, a practice deeply embedded in the national psyche for it to be maintained. This is what the social dynamic of this country is built on. People talk

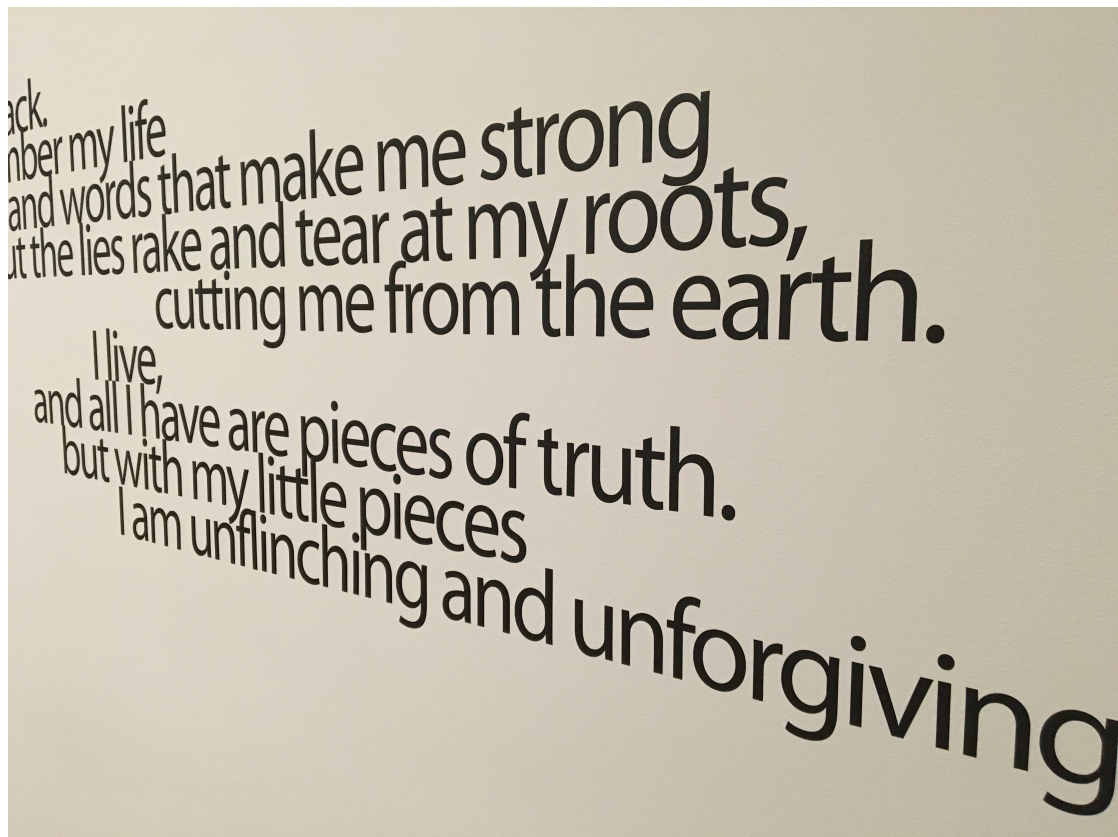


FIGURE 3.14
Vernon Ah Kee, Kuku Yalandji, Waanyi, Yidindji, and Gugu Yimithirr, born 1967
many lies, 2004, vinyl cut text, dimensions variable
Collection of the artist; courtesy of Milani Gallery, Brisbane,
Photograph courtesy of the author (detail)

about the landscape of Australia and how beautiful it is, but it only looks beautiful when you clear the land of all the Blacks.¹¹⁵

The work is both a refusal to uphold colonial fabrications and a refusal by Australians to acknowledge how they benefit from them. But without confronting these histories, we can never repair them. The final lines of the lone speaker undermine the politics of reconciliation and healing that have been a national aspiration for almost two decades. (Figure 3.14) They read:

I live,
and all I have are pieces of truth.
but with my little pieces
I am unflinching and unforgiving.

¹¹⁵ Vernon Ah Kee. 'Artist Statement', 2015, provided by Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Forgiveness and letting go have been an important part of the reconciliation movement, especially as for many people the National Apology also implied a symbolic pardon. But for Ah Kee, the ethics of witness and remembrance are paramount, and in the cool emotional register of someone who has nothing more to lose, forgiveness is necessarily forsaken.

3.8 Conclusion

The provocation of the exhibition, *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia* was to imagine the world otherwise. This was a call to think through, between and beyond dominant narratives of Indigenous art and culture and to spend intellectual and physical time immersed within Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. This is in effect, the core of unbelonging and unassimilation. Colonisation, as I often have to restate, is not the meta-narrative of Indigenous art and culture, and it is therefore necessary to recalibrate our understanding of much larger Indigenous worldviews. Such worldviews are outside the jurisdiction of the state, are separate from the Euro-American regimes of art history and anthropological discourse and can contribute to processes of un-assimilation. This is not merely a curatorial strategy but a necessary Indigenous response to incessant colonial imposition that is also incorporated into Indigenous artistic practices.

Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes the intact project of colonisation as an ongoing operation. She writes insightfully that '[i]t may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing with the associations of ongoing process, which that implies.'¹¹⁶ This 'postcolonizing' condition in which Indigenous peoples are immersed, must not simply be resisted, it must be repeatedly refused.¹¹⁷

The different framings of temporality, sovereignty, contemporaneity, citizenship and museology that have been discussed in the chapter cumulatively interact to produce a curatorial methodology that is less corrective of colonial formulations and is more declarative of Indigenous ways of doing, being and seeing. To refuse the smallness of colonial time, to refuse the myopia of colonial histories, to refuse to be disenfranchised from cultural material, to refuse to forgive, is to refuse to be a victim. This is an uplifting strategy of empowerment that energises Indigenous people, theories and practices.

¹¹⁶ Aileen Moreton-Robinson. 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a Postcolonizing Society', *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p11.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p11.

In the foreword to *Everywhen*, former Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard Art Museums Thomas W Lentz (2003–2015) wrote of the urgent need for greater representation of art traditions that have historically been marginalised in institutions. He observed that ‘this exhibition speaks more broadly to how art museums can commit intelligently and sensitively to multicultural work—a critical challenge for museums.’¹¹⁸

A commitment from institutions to the potentialities of Indigenisation is crucial for creating the conditions of new museological formations. In working across two museums, I registered the difference between an institution that flinches at such a prospect and one that embraces it. These challenges must be met with institutional courage, which, in risk-averse times, is often difficult to find. One possibility to mitigate these institutional problems is to embrace a strategy of curatorial autonomy through guest-curation. In this way, institutional politics are subordinated to the political content of exhibition.

Art historian Ian McLean argues that the colonial divide within Indigenous art ‘frames its every move’, so that it is effectively this art’s essence.¹¹⁹ He also suggests that this is the preferred thematic which Indigenous curators choose to explore. Although I don’t agree with this, I concede that it is difficult to get away from this framing. But whether or not we agree with this proposition or whether we even consider it a choice, it echoes Toni Morrison’s insights on the function of racism. She writes:

The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary.¹²⁰

The relentless production of Indigeneity through a colonial lens forces Indigenous people to react. But this takes Indigenous people away from the very serious business of respiritising our communities and safeguarding our own ways of knowing. While we cannot undo what has been done, we must demonstrate the value of what existed, what still exists and what will continue to exist into the future.

¹¹⁸ Thomas W. Lentz. ‘Foreword’, *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, edited by Stephen Gilchrist, Harvard Art Museums, 2016, p9.

¹¹⁹ Ian McLean. ‘What’s contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?’, 2014, p52.

¹²⁰ Toni Morrison. ‘A Humanist View’, Public Speakers Collection: Black Studies Center Public Dialogue, Portland State University, Oregon, 30 May 1975.

We must keep lingering in the space of discomfort, insisting on our own systems of value and refusing that which is damaging to our cultural materiality.

Chapter Four: Voicing *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* curated by Gaye Sculthorpe and *Unsettled: Stories Within* curated by Kelli Cole

*The baskets are not empty. They are full of makers, their stories, their thoughts while making. The baskets are never empty. All of the thoughts jump out of the baskets onto all of us.*¹

Verna Nichols (Tasmanian Aboriginal/Bunurong, born 1947)

Indigenous writers on museological practices embrace anthropomorphic metaphors that insist on the cultural subjectivity and ancestral materiality of museum objects. In the words of trawlwoolway artist Julie Gough, 'objects are resonant with the intentions and language of their makers, and the places in which there were used.'² This foundational recognition of the vitality of cultural objects and the respect they command underlies contemporary approaches to Indigenous curation. The museum is not merely a contact zone which infers colonial co-implication.³ It is, as I describe a, 'contract-zone' of call and response that is underwritten by Indigenous cultural values. Indigenous curators must mediate what Senior Curator of South Eastern Aboriginal Collections at Museum Victoria, Melbourne Kimberley Moulton (Yorta Yorta, born 1985) describes as the 'echoes' and 'energies' of objects, in ways that are culturally respectful and appropriate.⁴ This call and response is not just an extension of Indigenous knowledge systems; it is also an enactment of Indigenous systems of knowledge management.⁵ Working with either historic collections or contemporary objects demands a commitment to the unvoiced dimensions of works of art, their cultural signification, biographical elements and political potency. Indigenous curation is premised on this cultural mandate to speak with and listen to the objects. This keen attention to the voicing of objects is vital to Indigenous curation, but the latter is no mere act of ventriloquism; it is an important platform for raising one's own voice and claiming space as a speaking subject. In this way, Indigenous exhibitions are polyvocal and dialogical productions that communicate a chorus of amplified voices and register Indigenous cultural, political and emotional convictions.

¹ Verna Nichols quoted in Lissant Bolton. *Baskets & Belonging: Indigenous Australian Histories*, British Museum, 2011, p7.

² Julie Gough. 'Being Collected and Keeping It Real', *Keeping Culture: Aboriginal Tasmania*, edited by Amanda Reynolds, National Museum of Australia, 2006, p12.

³ Mary Louise Pratt. 'Introduction: Criticism in the contact zone', *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, 1992, p6.

⁴ Kimberley Moulton. 'I Can Still Hear Them Calling: Echoes of My Ancestors', *Sovereign Words: Indigenous Art, Curation and Criticism*, edited by Katya García-Antón, Office for Contemporary Art Norway and Valiz, 2018, pp197-214.

⁵ Ruth B Phillips. 'Community Collaboration in Exhibitions: Introduction', *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, edited by Laura L. Peers and Alison K. Brown, Routledge, 2003, pp159-160.

The mere presence of Indigenous curators within institutions that have historically devised their exclusion makes an important territorial and political claim. But an Indigenous mode of curation that is founded on unbelonging, is deeply interested in privileging the specific territorial and ancestral connections of objects housed in these institutions. Curatorial gestures that are attentive to the voicing of objects, point beyond the jurisdiction of the institution and assert Indigenous expressions of sovereignty that are geographically and culturally determined. Though the curatorial strategies that will be discussed below, these objects become not only reunited with Indigenous lifeforces and lifeways, they become symbolically unbounded from institutional histories.

Two recent exhibitions that engaged in these practices came out of a three-way partnership between the British Museum (BM), the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and the Australian National University. (ANU) This historic partnership, in fact, produced three exhibitions that drew principally on the BM's collections either physically or conceptually. In this chapter, I focus on the two shows curated by Indigenous curators: 1) *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, curated by Gaye Sculthorpe (Palawa, born 1956), held at the British Museum from 23 April to 2 August 2015, which drew on the Indigenous collections of the BM and NMA and 2) *Unsettled: Stories Within*, curated by Kelli Cole (Warumunga and Luritja, born 1973), which featured five Indigenous artists who were commissioned to respond to the BM collection.⁶ The third and largest of the three shows, *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum*, was curated predominantly by Ian Coates and Jay Arthur from the NMA. It featured 149 works from the BM's collections, 27 communities and 138 contemporary works of art that were made in dialogue with the historic cultural material.⁷ *Unsettled* and *Encounters* were held concurrently at the NMA from 27 November 2015 to 28 March 2016.

This chapter explores *Enduring Civilisation* and *Unsettled* but makes mention of *Encounters* where necessary to reflect on issues of voice, agency and access. *Enduring Civilisation* and *Unsettled* took place respectively at one of the oldest and one of the newest national museums in the world. Their different contexts, in turn, produced different inflections of Indigenous curation. So far this thesis has privileged exhibitionary projects by curators unaffiliated with the venue

⁶ Cole was employed as Consultant Curator for the exhibition. Her main role at the time was Assistant Curator at the National Gallery of Australia. She had taken 12 months leave from the NGA to work at Canberra Glassworks which enabled her to curate *Unsettled: Voices Within*. She is now Curator of Special Projects at the NGA.

⁷ Throughout this chapter, the full titles of these three exhibitions are respectively shortened to *Enduring Civilisation*, *Unsettled* and *Encounters*.



FIGURE 4.1

Installation view of the section titled 'Yidinji' in the exhibition *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum*. 27 November 2015–28 March 2016, National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

Contemporary Indigenous artworks displayed alongside objects from the British Museum's collection.

Front (left) Vernon Ah Kee, Kuku Yalandji, Waanyi, Yidinji, Gugu Yimithirr, born 1967, *cantchant*, 2015, shield sculpture 180.0 x 12.5 x 47.0 cm. Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. National Museum of Australia, *Shield*, Yidinji people, collected in the Cairns region by Derwent Vallance before 1903, 89.5 x 33 x 9 cm. Oc1933,0403.5, British Museum. Paul Bong, Yidinji, *Crossroads*, 2014, etching, 120.0 x 53.0 cm, National Museum of Australia.

Photograph courtesy of National Museum of Australia.

or platform they are working within; my goal has been to better apprehend the possibilities of Indigenous curation in the absence of institutional co-implication. The institutional affiliation of Gaye Sculthorpe to the British Museum cannot be ignored but it also cannot be assumed that her agency is automatically constrained. I therefore analyse her curatorial goals, which help demonstrate her active and arguably more difficult agenda of Indigenisation and Unbelonging.

Enduring Civilisation and *Unsettled* each concentrated on oral stories, attending to different registers of voice from whispers of intracultural communication to screams of protest and histories of silencing. Curators have a responsibility to activate these voices, stories and ways of knowing so that they can be better heard and understood not just by the public but also by contemporary descendants of the makers. Congruent with this strategy is a methodology of devoicing certain historical narratives and protagonists.

The Canadian art historian and curator Ruth B Phillips describes community-inflected curation as the 'decentring of objects in favor of narratives, stories and performances.'⁸ This characterisation applies equally to these two Indigenous-authored exhibitions, which presented objects as repositories of cultural memory used as tools for postcolonial critique, cultural obligation and ancestral connectivity. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sculthorpe said of *Enduring Civilisation*: '[O]ne of the important parts of the exhibition is the Indigenous voices that come through.'⁹ Similarly, Cole demonstrated her commitment to listening to people, places, histories and objects by framing *Unsettled* as an intentional exercise in 'visual repatriation that inspires, reanimates and encourages new contemplations of these precious objects.'¹⁰

While *Encounters* is not this chapter's focus, the inclusion and dialogue of Indigenous voices, both ancestral and contemporaneous, were important to that exhibition's logic. In his review, curator Philip Jones said:

If the contemporary voices often appear to overwhelm the delicate, fragile voices of the ancient objects, it is worth noting that the sense of pride in those contemporary voices, and their almost unanimous endorsement of the project... That said, there might have been just a little more space granted to the old, original objects, and a little more space for the curatorial voice itself.¹¹

Though not uninterested in the non-Indigenous curatorial voice of *Encounters*, I set out to amplify the Indigenous curatorial voices of Cole and Sculthorpe. For both these curators, but particularly for Sculthorpe, to work with these objects is to understand who is disenfranchised from them. The task is not only to speak for the objects in a new curatorial language but to reach out to those who speak the language of these objects.

⁸ Ruth B Phillips. 'Community Collaboration in Exhibitions: Introduction', *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, edited by Laura L. Peers and Alison K. Brown, Routledge, 2003, p163.

⁹ Gaye Sculthorpe quoted in Stephanie Bunbury. 'British Museum curator hits back at criticism of Indigenous Australia exhibition', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 April 2015, accessed 4 June 2019.
<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/british-museum-curator-hits-back-at-criticism-of-indigenous-australia-exhibition-20150423-1mrqwn.html>

¹⁰ Kelli Cole. 'About the exhibition', *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, 2015, accessed 27 April 2019.
<https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/unsettled/about>

¹¹ Philip Jones. 'Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum', *reCollections*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, unpaginated.

4.1 Gaye Sculthorpe and The British Museum

Dr. Gaye Sculthorpe is one of the pioneers of Indigenous curation. The first Indigenous curator in an Australian Museum, she has worked as a curator since the 1980s though active predominantly in museums rather than art galleries. For sixteen years, she was Head of Indigenous Cultures at Museum Victoria where she was responsible for a number of significant exhibitions and projects including the development of Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, a space that ‘presents, interprets and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, philosophies and issues, with a focus on south-eastern Australia’.¹² Following this trailblazing career, which included the completion of a doctorate at Latrobe University’s Department of Anthropology on the *punu* (wooden artefacts) of the region around Mutijulu in Central Australia, she shifted gears and from 2000 until early 2013, was a member of the National Native Title Tribunal, mediating native title applications and facilitating Indigenous land use agreements throughout Australia. Then, in March 2013, Sculthorpe joined the British Museum as a curator in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas and Section Head of Oceania.

Sculthorpe was immediately tasked with curating an exhibition that would draw on the more than 6,000 objects in the BM’s Indigenous collections. This would be one of the most visible material outputs of a four-year research project called ‘Engaging objects: Indigenous communities, museum collections and the representations of Indigenous histories’, which was funded chiefly by the Australian Research Council (ARC).¹³ That project had developed through an earlier curatorial exchange between the British Museum and the National Museum of Australia, and it centred on reconnecting the BM’s collection to contemporary communities ‘to understand more about what that collection can mean’.¹⁴ When Sculthorpe commenced at the British Museum, the decision to mount an Indigenous exhibition from the collection had already been made; her achievement was to curate the show and produce its substantial scholarly catalogue in just over two years.¹⁵ The resulting exhibition, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, was heralded for many reasons as a ‘landmark event.’¹⁶

The ARC research project was led by eminent anthropologist Howard Morphy (ANU) and the team included curators Lissant Bolton (BM) and Ian Coates and Michael Pickering (NMA) as well as historian

¹² Museum Victoria. *Bunjilaka: The Aboriginal Centre at Melbourne Museum*. Museum Victoria, 2000, p8.

¹³ Gaye Sculthorpe. ‘Same Objects, Different Stories: Exhibiting Indigenous Australia’, *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, vol. 30, no. March, 2017, p82.

¹⁴ Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates. ‘Introduction’, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, British Museum, 2015, p14.

¹⁵ Maria Nugent. ‘Forty millennia of Indigenous history at the British Museum’, *Inside Story*, 8 May 2015, accessed 20 April 2019, unpaginated.

<https://insidestory.org.au/forty-millennia-of-indigenous-history-at-the-british-museum/>

¹⁶ Christine Hansen. ‘Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation’, *reCollections*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, unpaginated.

Maria Nugent (ANU). John Carty, current Head of Humanities at the South Australian Museum and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Adelaide, was engaged as an anthropologist to document and write an ethnography of the process. As part of this research, a number of Creative Fellowships were also given to Indigenous artists. The latter were Julie Gough (trawlwoolway, born 1965); Elma Kris (Wagadagam, Kaurareg, Sipingur, Gebbara, Kai Dangal Buai of the Western and Central Islands of the Torres Strait, born 1972); Judy Watson (Waanyi, born 1959); Jonathan Jones (Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi, born 1978); Wukun Wanambi (Marrakulu, born 1962) and Ishmael Marika (Rirratjinju, born 1991). With the exception of Marika, their creative works would also be shown in the exhibition *Unsettled* to be curated by Kelli Cole, which is explored later in this chapter.

4.2 Dja Dja Wurrung: Unheard Requests

While all Indigenous curatorial appointments are and should be celebrated, Sculthorpe's represented a significant international intervention into an institution that had largely been hostile to Indigenous cultural values. For many years, the British Museum has rejected many, though not all, Indigenous requests for repatriation and this position has fostered widespread resentment. In 2004, the Dja Dja Wurrung people of Victoria applied for an emergency injunction under subsection 21C of the Commonwealth Government's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act*, 1984 (Cwth) 1984, over two bark etchings from western Victoria that had been lent by the British Museum to Museum Victoria and had not been exhibited for 150 years.¹⁷ The injunction, which was rejected, sought to prevent the works from being returned to Britain, and this event generated international coverage, which was largely sympathetic to the Dja Dja Wurrung.¹⁸ As Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta Elder Rodney Carter said: '[T]hese objects mean so much to me and to Dja Dja Wurrung people that we were willing to go to the wall for them – and we did'.¹⁹ After six months of negotiations, the barks were eventually returned to the British Museum. Elizabeth Willis, who was working at Museum Victoria, Melbourne at the time and the curator of the exhibition *Etched on Bark 1854: Kulin barks from Northern Victoria*, has suggested that this episode marked an important shift in the making of repatriation requests. These now applied not only to human remains but also to cultural objects:²⁰

¹⁷ Maria Nugent. 'Encounters in Country', *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, edited by Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates, British Museum, 2015, p208.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Willis. 'History, Strong Stories and New Traditions: The Case of 'Etched on Bark 1854'', *History Australia*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp13.6.

¹⁹ Rodney Carter quoted in Susan Lowish. 'Collecting and Exhibiting: The Dawn of 'Primitive Art'', *Rethinking Australia's Art History: The Challenge of Aboriginal Art*, Taylor and Francis, 2018, p159.

²⁰ Elizabeth Willis. 2007, pp13.1-13.11.

In Victoria, large claims for repatriation were suddenly being made. Until then, discussions of repatriation had largely focused on Human Remains and secret/sacred artefacts. Now, the stakes were raised to include *all* Indigenous artefacts.²¹

For the British Museum and the international museum sector, the consequences of this shift have been significant although they could hardly be considered unexpected. In 2004, the British Museum made its position clear: 'It is in the interests of everyone concerned that objects of cultural and artistic significance continue to be able to move around the world and be seen by many different peoples.'²² Objects enter collections in different ways, however, which include not just trade, gifts and friendship but violence and theft. The BM's hard-line position took no account of the critical difference between consent and plunder, or between ancestral connection and worldly appreciation. It is obvious whose interests were being served by these justifications.

The desire to secure museums' legally unfettered (although not uncontested) access to this cultural material prompted the ratification of the *Protection of Cultural Objects on Loan Act*, 2013 (Cwth).²³ The 2013 Act was introduced to 'prohibit repatriation requests of Indigenous items' and to ensure that the *Encounters* exhibition 'would not draw the same level of community activism that surrounded the loan of the Dja Dja Wurrung barks to Museum Victoria, Melbourne by the British Museum that sparked numerous debates'.²⁴

Given this context, it is hardly surprising that calls for repatriation were raised not just around these three exhibitions but often within the shows themselves. Visitors to *Encounters* were encouraged to press a button to hear a recording of Dja Dja Wurrung Elder Gary Murray saying: 'We beg the British museum to return our cultural materials.'²⁵ In her review of the exhibition, anthropologist Eve Vincent questioned how these voices were being expressed and denied:

What happens when critique is brought inside? Is it captured and, to an extent, nullified in the process? Surely the politics of 'giving voice to Indigenous points of view' and of

²¹ Ibid., p13.4.

²² Brian Simpson and Cheryl Simpson. 'The Exalted Cultural Tourist: Gazing on Culture', *From Heritage to Terrorism: Regulating Tourism in an Age of Uncertainty*, edited by Brian Simpson and Cheryl Simpson, Routledge, 2011, p99.

²³ Matt Poll. 'Is Cultural Democracy Possible in a Museum?', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 23, no. 9, 2017, p896. See also, 'Protection of Cultural Objects on Loan Act 2013, accessed 5 September 2019. <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013A00012>

²⁴ Ibid., p896.

²⁵ Eve Vincent. 'Strange Encounters', *Overland Literary Journal*, 21 March 2016, accessed 14 June 2019, unpaginated. <https://overland.org.au/2016/03/encounters-with-the-silent-villain/>

'listening to Aboriginal people speak' has exhausted itself in the moment we press that button to hear Murray insist the etchings be repatriated, and have the British Museum in reply say ... nothing.²⁶

For many Indigenous people, repatriation is not merely an issue for debate but a benchmark of cross-cultural respect. Wiradjuri academic Sandy O'Sullivan alludes to the minimum standards of respect that museums must demonstrate to communities:

In order to recast our identities within the museum space, communities must be assured that we are heard when we make the most basic of requests around repatriation of our ancestors and the return of sacred objects.²⁷

The British Museum Act 1963 states that '[o]bjects vested in the Trustees as part of the collections of the Museum shall not be disposed of by them otherwise than under section 5 or 9 of this Act (or section 6 of the Museums and Galleries Act 1992).'²⁸ Despite the largely inflexible interpretations of this legislation, there have been meaningful examples of repatriation that are, in fact, sensitively, if briefly, described in the *Enduring Civilisation* exhibition catalogue.²⁹ These examples signal the importance of Indigenous curatorial activism in effecting institutional and legislative change. Michael Pickering echoes the point: 'Early returns of remains were, thus, primarily an outcome of, and response to, Indigenous political activism rather than any philosophical or intellectual shifts on the part of the humanities and sciences institutions.'³⁰

It is against this background that we return to the cultural significance of the appointment of Sculthorpe. The decision of the British Museum to return cultural authority through an Indigenous curatorial appointment marked a seismic shift in the international museum landscape, and Sculthorpe's recruitment was a momentous achievement in the history of Indigenous curation. This truly cannot be overestimated. Without the scrutiny of local communities, the political pressure around Indigenous curatorial appointments may seem less fraught in international contexts, but in many ways, they have more political purchase as the stakes and obstacles are perceived to be much higher. However, as

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sandy O'Sullivan. 'Recasting Identities: Intercultural Understandings of First Peoples in the National Museum Space', *The Routledge International Handbook of Intercultural Arts Research*, edited by Pamela Burnard et al., Routledge, 2016, p35.

²⁸ British Museum. 'British Museum Act 1963', Trustees of the British Museum, accessed 22 July 2019.
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/BM1963Act.pdf>

²⁹ Gaye Sculthorpe. 'Out of Country', *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, edited by Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates, British Museum, 2015, pp227-229.

³⁰ Michael Pickering. 'Where Are the Stories?', *The Public Historian*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2010, p80.

much as these appointments satisfy an Indigenous need to be seen, heard, valued and respected, employing Indigenous people should not be considered radical, or even uncommon. This was as true in 2013 as it is today. These appointments should be the standard practice in the now established field of Indigenous art and curation. Sculthorpe's appointment was a meaningful advance in supporting the need for Indigenous curatorial mediation although such appointments are never an institutional panacea. As I have written elsewhere, Indigenous curators often find themselves:

marginalised within their institutions, where, perhaps afflicted with a form of Stockholm syndrome, they forget the power they once had. Conversely, this power may never have been legitimate, as Indigenous museum curators become enmeshed in a system that traffics culture as a commodity.³¹

Curators can also become commodified within this system and Sculthorpe's role remedied the conspicuous absence of Indigenous voices at the curatorial level. These appointments, which I argue are overdue, can place unfair added stress on a curator who is expected to both redeem and condemn the institution, often at the same time. This is clearly an impossible position to occupy, but it is this contradiction that Indigenous curators must attempt to both face and resolve.

Sculthorpe's appointment was also premised on its interventionist potential into the exhibition programme. There had been smaller exhibitions in recent years at the British Museum, most notably *Baskets and belonging: Indigenous Australian histories*, which ran from 26 May to September 2011 and was curated by Australian anthropologist Lissant Bolton, who has worked at the British Museum since 1999. In 2012, she became the Keeper (department head) of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. *Enduring Civilisation* was the largest exhibition of its kind since *Australian Aborigines* at the Museum of Mankind (1972–1982).³² The latter exhibition was deeply problematic, particularly in its representations of the south-east. Its catalogue stated inaccurately that 'in some of the settled parts of east, south-east, south and south-west Australia, the aboriginal (sic) culture has been extinct for more than a century... The assimilation of the aborigines (sic) into white society is proceeding, but with varying degrees of success.'³³

³¹ Stephen Gilchrist. 'Indigenising curatorial practice', *The World Is Not a Foreign Land*, edited by Quentin Sprague, Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2014, p56.

³² The Department of Ethnography was housed and exhibited at the Museum of Mankind from the 1960s to the early 2000s when it was relocated to the British Museum in Bloomsbury.

³³ B. A. L. Cranstone. *The Australian Aborigines*, The Trustees of the British Museum, 1973, p12.

In 1982, the British Museum showcased Indigenous art as ‘art’ though under the rather possessive title of *Australian Art of the Western Desert* (6 March 1982 – 2 May 1982). Given the BM’s institutional history of ignoring, silencing and misrepresenting Indigenous people, it is little wonder that an enormous amount of antagonism preceded the opening of the BM’s *Enduring Civilisation* in London and *Encounters* in Canberra.³⁴ Museological legacies like this are enduring and the British Museum had not kept pace with the changing paradigms of museology and curatorial inclusivity.

Curation of *Enduring Civilisation* marked an opportunity to critique and break away from the British Museum’s museological practices and the sociocultural histories that it had propagated. It was also a chance to offer alternative paradigms that were informed by curatorial expertise and an Indigenous consciousness. Despite the exhibition’s many powerful self-reflexive interventions influenced by a methodology of Indigenisation, it was deemed by many to be overwhelmed by the burden of its institutional history.

The British Museum was founded in 1753 and is the oldest public museum in the world. Howard Morphy, himself of British origin, an ANU-trained museum anthropologist who served early in his career as Curator of the Pitt-Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, observes that these types of museums ‘cannot easily escape their indexical link with the past.’³⁵ The British Museum began collecting before there were museums in Australia and this longer history has created obvious entrenched curatorial practices that, in turn, entrench audience expectations. At the time of *Enduring Civilisation*, scholar Christine Hansen urged people to respond in ways commensurate with the show’s ambition and proportional to its scope. It is necessary, she argued, to engage with the institutional context of the exhibition, but this should not be at the expense of its content:

For an organisation so aligned in the popular imagination with the material legacy of the colonial past, this temporary exhibition signals a welcome trajectory that works against the awkward reminders of darker histories of British intellectual discourse housed in other galleries of the museum. Critiques of the wider museum and indeed Britain’s entire colonial history have inevitably been conflated with critiques of *Enduring*

³⁴ Zoe Pilger, the daughter of John Pilger, wrote an impassioned article calling for the repatriation of objects. This appeared before *Enduring Civilisation* had even opened. ‘Indigenous Australia at the British Museum: It’s time to give the Aboriginal art back’, *The Independent*, 21 April 2015, accessed 17 July 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/indigenous-australia-at-the-british-museum-its-time-to-give-the-aboriginal-art-back-10190132.html>

³⁵ Howard Morphy. ‘Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation: A Personal Reflection’, *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, p7.

Civilisation, a mix that is not unpredictable: the institution that contains the material footprint of the colonial past is understandably seen as complicit in maintaining that history's unexamined legacy through the still apparent logic of what decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo calls 'coloniality'. Unpicking this logic exposes the pervasive tendrils of power and exclusion along lines of race, noticing how institutions that generate knowledge collude in maintaining the status quo of privilege. But the simple folding together of these multiple and conflicting positions is a lazy response. Clearly the museum carries a heavy cultural weight, including the legacy of its own governance structures, yet its deeply intelligent approach to this exhibition signals a generational shift is in train.³⁶

Outlining these complex histories, Hansen suggested that the exhibition was not paradigmatic of an Indigenising project, but rather of an unhurried and inevitable reorientation towards one. A single exhibition cannot undo centuries of erasure and marginalisation although it can and should raise these valid grievances. This might account for the commentary from many Australian critics who described the show in terms like 'unduly timid'.³⁷ Arguably, they would have been more receptive to – and were impatient for – a tougher political agenda. Hansen called attention to the exhibition's two registers:

In this wider context, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* can clearly be seen as a teaching exhibition, directed at British audiences, who have had little exposure to either Aboriginal history or, more shockingly, the truth of their own colonial past. If it were shown in Australia as is, it would look constrained and slightly unsophisticated in the more complex world of local race politics. As it stands it has hit its mark perfectly, widely acclaimed by critics and the public, with visitor numbers far exceeding expectations.³⁸

As Perkins and Croft demonstrated at the Venice Biennale, Indigenous political values are often illegible or ignored by the west. *Enduring Civilisation* appears to have been much more institutionally constrained than the other exhibitions discussed in this thesis, but Sculthorpe nevertheless attempted to reimagine and redefine the terms of colonial dominance. At issue here was the question Quentin

³⁶ Christine Hansen. 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation', 2015, unpaginated.

³⁷ Christine Nicholls. 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation is a challenge to review', *The Conversation*, 27 April 2015, accessed 15 July 2019.

<https://theconversation.com/indigenous-australia-enduring-civilisation-is-a-challenge-to-review-40461>

³⁸ Christine Hansen. 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation', 2015, unpaginated.

Sprague asks: 'If an institution like the BM once played a central role in legitimising colonialism's master narrative, how might its role now change?'³⁹ *Enduring Civilisation* was the museum's attempt to embrace a new institutional direction that gestured to contemporary forms of museology including Indigenous curation. In this way, the British Museum unlocked a door that had been closed for generations, and Sculthorpe managed to force it open, keep it ajar and contend with all the restless and unquiet spirits.

4.3 Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation: The Curatorial Methodology

The double-hinged title of *Enduring Civilisation* gestured cannily at the multiple and opposing ways that the exhibition could be interpreted. In this context, 'enduring' may refer to something that both survives and continues. These positive associations together suggest the strength and durability of Indigenous culture. At the same time, these meanings were juxtaposed against the loaded word 'civilisation', which seemingly includes both western and Indigenous societies. This word is institutionally significant and linked 'thematically to the BM's trope of blockbuster exhibitions that explore great civilisations'.⁴⁰ The title, thus, deliberately located Indigenous civilisations within understandings of greatness, innovation, sophistication and adaptivity. These associations are crucial and have been monopolised by the west in its self-descriptions. As Howard Morphy elaborates, the title *Enduring Civilisation* was:

in step with a value-creating process that has been moving Western thought towards an appreciation of the complexity and richness of other ways of living, and that do not involve placing cultures in evolutionary hierarchies. It signified the continuing contemporary existence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of a changing world. We wanted to emphasise 'the never entirely lost' but with a very different emphasis. And because of the entanglement of the canon of western fine art with the development of European civilization, the very title provided a challenge to the ways in which the art of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had been seen. The exhibition was not an art exhibition but included works that in other contexts are beginning to occupy the privileged viewing spaces provided by the art museums.⁴¹

While this rationale is certainly helpful and conducive to new ways of appreciating Indigenous cultures, I would argue that its premise remained rigidly indexed to western definitional regimes of civilisation, and

³⁹ Quentin Sprague. 'Bringing Them Home', *The Monthly: Australian Politics, Society & Culture*, no. 118, December 2015, p73.

⁴⁰ Alison Clark. 'Indigenous Histories in Metropole and Periphery', *History Australia*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2016, p175.

⁴¹ Howard Morphy. 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation', 2015, p9.

the separation of art and artefact. Such a referent for 'civilisation' belongs to the vocabulary of the west and upholds rather than disavows the colonialist implications of the word. Sharing the word with Indigenous cultures gestures towards equity, but the move presupposes that such cultures are not already self-possessed of their own distinctive value and, thus, need to be reified through western modes of value and recognition. This presupposition might be 'in step with' expanding the western imagination, but it takes for granted and monopolises its role in constituting these qualitative and categorical determinations of worthiness.

Projects of Indigenisation must attempt to look outside the western imaginary and locate themselves within Indigenous terms of reference to assert alternative systems of value. This contributes to the formulation of new canonical regimes that are informed by and understood through an Indigenous consciousness. The introduction to the *Enduring Civilisation* catalogue offered an insight into its exhibitionary logic:

Ethnographic collections are often seen either as a record of a past way of life of people before colonisation or as a record of the colonial projects itself – material objects brought back as trophies from the frontier. Both perspectives run the risk of creating an absolute divide between the past and the present, denying continuities in people's lives and their ongoing connection to a deep past. Indigenous people survived the encounter and continue to build their lives into the future, and the colonists themselves have changed through the process of history. Museum collections are a resource for a much more subtle understanding of the past that contains the seeds of a new history.⁴²

Minimising what artist and scholar Ali Gumillya Baker (Mirning, born 1975) would term 'colonial enclosures', Sculthorpe and her co-authors, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates, called for the reconfiguring of fixed histories and complacent models.⁴³ Their provocation was simple: to bear witness to Indigenous success and adaptivity. This should not be confused with apologist strategies that erase colonial devastation. Rather it forces our attention to Indigenous resilience and anticipating histories yet to come.

⁴² Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates. 'Introduction', 2015, p18.

⁴³ Ali Gumillya Baker. 'Camping in the Shadow of the Racist Text', *Artlink*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2018, p19.

While strategies of de-emphasis and re-inscription rely on the indexicality of the west, Sculthorpe insisted on an unambiguous framing of the exhibition that was indebted to an Indigenous understanding of both rights and responsibilities. Using an Indigenous focus on 'country' as an analytical, political and conceptual device, she infused new power into Indigenous political and cultural formations. At the British Museum, the exhibition space featured a large reproduction of the Indigenous language map which was first developed for David Horton's *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*.⁴⁴ This alternative visualisation of the Australian continent defamiliarises visitors' understandings of place and necessarily subordinates state and territory demarcations that evolved and were perpetuated through colonial incursions.

Referring to culturally inherited tracts of land as 'country' is a colloquialism of Aboriginal English, which speaks paradoxically to the politics of dispossession and self-determination. *Enduring Civilisation* was structurally underpinned by Indigenous understandings of country that were expansive and played out within the exhibition itself. Its four themes were: 'Understanding Country', 'Encounters in Country', 'Out of Country' and 'Drawing on Country'.⁴⁵ These four thematic areas also structure the four chapters of the exhibition catalogue.⁴⁶ 'Understanding Country' was largely ahistorical and 'Encounters with Country' was mostly chronological.⁴⁷ The two final and smaller sections, 'Out of Country', and 'Drawing on 'County' explored the ways collections are formed and how descendant communities respond to these collections.⁴⁸ The artists who received Creative Fellowships were curated into the 'Drawing on Country' section.⁴⁹

Sculthorpe justified these structuring elements as not only being culturally resonant for Indigenous people but representing a meaningful break from the familiar and conventional approaches that have historically shaped the understanding of the British Museum's Indigenous collection. Although it can be hard to divest people of their stereotypes, the knowledge gap also offers an opportunity to reshape audience perceptions. Curating Indigenous exhibitions internationally assumes the loss of some

⁴⁴ David Horton. *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History, Society and Culture*, Aboriginal Studies Press for Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994. This map is today widely available as a poster in museum shops.

⁴⁵ Arjmand Aziz. 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation: British Museum, London', *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, vol. 3, 2015, p178.

⁴⁶ Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates, editors. *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, British Museum, 2015.

⁴⁷ The structure of the exhibition is outlined in further detail in the following article. Gaye Sculthorpe. 'Same Objects, Different Stories: Exhibiting Indigenous Australia', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, vol. 30, March 2017, pp79-103.

⁴⁸ Arjmand Aziz. 'Indigenous Australia', 2015, p178.

⁴⁹ Gaye Sculthorpe. 'Same Objects, Different Stories', March 2017, pp79-103.

nuance, so each compromise must be a considered calculation. Sculthorpe was aware of the risks of her curatorial premise but was unwavering in her resolve. She observed that:

In institutions devoted largely to art historical and archaeological approaches, and with an audience used to seeing societies being organised through chronological frameworks, understanding societies which emphasise complex social relationships, reciprocity, seasonality, and religious beliefs based on connection with the land and sea is not easy to grasp.⁵⁰

The foregrounding of country and highly complex social relations that this implies, reinforce the words of Cornell University's Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora), who advocates curatorial strategies that can produce an 'intervention on continued colonial framings'.⁵¹ But despite this substantive centring of country as a foundational element within each section of the exhibition, *Enduring Civilisation* was criticised for its colonial emphasis. Writing in the London newspaper *The Telegraph*, Alastair Smart flinched at the exhibition's apparent fixation with colonisation:

To focus so much on the colonial, though, has obvious drawbacks: it gives undue weight to nine generations of Australians, at the expense of the 2,800 generations before them, and props up the hoary notion that the fundamental moment of Australian history was Cook's arrival.⁵²

This is an important point and Smart would have been right to make it if this approach had been sustained or indeed invoked throughout *Enduring Civilisation*. What he failed to register, however, were the exhibition's Indigenous terms of reference and the rich intercultural histories that gave ancillary meaning to many of the objects. The exhibition did not merely 'prop up the hoary notion' of Cook's arrival but explicitly problematised it through Indigenous refractions of 'first contact'. That temporalised construct was invoked with the now iconic Gweagal shield. As we will see, this shield is not just deeply embedded in the discourse of repatriation but an emblem of first contact and ongoing colonial

⁵⁰ Gaye Sculthorpe quoted in Penny Edmonds. 'Indigenous Australia exhibition at the British Museum is insider activism at its best', *The Conversation*, 22 April 2015, accessed 26 July 2019.

<https://theconversation.com/indigenous-australia-exhibition-at-the-british-museum-is-insider-activism-at-its-best-39098>

⁵¹ Jolene Rickard. 'Absorbing or Obscuring the Absence of a Critical Space in the Americas for Indigeneity: The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 52, 2007, p87.

⁵² Alastair Smart. 'Indigenous Australia, British Museum, Review: 'all too familiar'', *The Telegraph*, 21 April 2015, accessed 3 June 2019.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/11542972/Indigenous-Australia-British-Museum-review-all-too-familiar.html>

injustice.⁵³ In *Enduring Civilisation*, Sculthorpe made a careful decision to surround it with a chorus of other Indigenous voices.

4.4 Voices from History

Held at the British Museum, the extraordinary Gweagal shield represents the historic intercultural meeting between Gweagal people and Lieutenant James Cook's party in April 1770. In the words of historian Tom Griffiths, it 'embodies conflict, collection, dispossession, resistance – and now reconciliation.'⁵⁴ Gaye Sculthorpe and historian Maria Nugent similarly argue for expansive interpretations of the object, and three years after the *Enduring Civilisation* exhibition, they offered the following assessment:

[T]he shield might best be understood, in Sara Ahmed's terms, as 'sticky' – as an object to which attention is directed and drawn, and to which ideas, values, and feelings, attach. And it's this quality that commends it as an object – and subject – for a contribution to a forum on Australian history and heritage.⁵⁵

The shield has become an emblem of Indigenous resistance against Lieutenant James Cook though its provenance is as, Nicholas Thomas argues, imperfect.⁵⁶ On that count, Sculthorpe and Nugent concede that the object's connection to Cook is now securely fastened in the public imagination and it is 'probably impossible for that link to ever be severed completely, even though the evidence for such a connection was – and remains – relatively scant.'⁵⁷

Nevertheless, convincing circumstantial evidence has been marshalled to suggest that it is the same shield that was recorded by Cook in April 1770 at the landing at Kamay (Botany Bay). Cook wrote:

⁵³ Maria Nugent and Gaye Sculthorpe. 'A Shield Loaded with History: Encounters, Objects and Exhibitions', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2018, pp28-43.

⁵⁴ Tom Griffiths. 'Epilogue', *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft*, Black Inc, 2016, p200.

⁵⁵ Maria Nugent and Gaye Sculthorpe. 'A Shield Loaded with History', 2018, p30.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Thomas. 'A Case of Identity: The Artefacts of the 1770 Kamay (Botany Bay) Encounter', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2018, pp4-27.

⁵⁷ Maria Nugent and Gaye Sculthorpe. 'A Shield Loaded with History', 2018, p31.



FIGURE 4.2
Unidentified maker
The Gweagal shield likely collected at
Botany Bay in April 1770.
Shield
c.1770, red mangrove bark (*Rhizophora stylosa*),
90.0 x 2.9 cm
Oc1978,Q.839 British Museum, London
Photograph courtesy Trustees of the British Museum

as soon as we put the boat in they again came to oppose us upon which I fired a musket between the two which had no other effect than to make them retire back where bundles of thier (sic) darts lay, and one of them took up a stone and threw at us which caused my firing a second Musquet load with small shott, and altho some of the shott struck the man yet it had no other effect than to make him lay hold of a Shield or target to defend himself.⁵⁸

This narrative fits the description of the shield in the British Museum, which has become freighted with the cumulative injustices of colonial invasion. (Figure 4.2) Despite Sculthorpe and Hansen's reservations about securing an 'uncertain connection between object and event into an article of faith',

⁵⁸ James Cook. 'The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery', *The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771*, vol. 1, edited by J. C. Beaglehole, Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1955, p305.



FIGURE 4.3
The Enlightenment Gallery, British Museum, which opened in 2003.
Photograph courtesy Trustees of the British Museum

they also acknowledge ‘how perfectly formed that shield was – and is – as a support for storytelling about what that encounter came to represent’.⁵⁹

Fidelity to the socio-cultural and historic dimension of objects is clearly important to Sculthorpe, but she also suggests an openness to more speculative accounts and multiple significations of objects. Along the same lines, Ian McLean observed at the exhibition: ‘[A]rguments about historical veracity miss the object’s contemporary value – a value clearly demonstrated in the curatorial strategy of *Enduring Civilisation*’.⁶⁰ As part of that strategy, the cultural and social memories of objects were imaginatively alchemised with specific biographical narrative to create symbolically charged objects. These translated and encoded Indigenous cultural values, privileged Indigenous perspectives and unlocked unvoiced alternative histories.

⁵⁹ Maria Nugent and Gaye Sculthorpe. ‘A Shield Loaded with History’, 2018, pp31-32.

⁶⁰ Ian McLean. ‘Enduring Civilisation, Entangled Histories’, *Contemporary Visual Art + Culture: Broadsheet*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2015, p7.

After its 'collection', the shield was said to be gifted to the British Museum by English naturalist and botanist, Joseph Banks (1743–1820) who accompanied Cook's first voyage. It was then lost until 1978 when it was 'rediscovered', an ironic colonial implication, and formally accessioned. The Q number denotes that the item had been missing for years and that the original accession information had been lost. The accession number itself reveals that it was (re)registered in 1978.⁶¹

In 2003, the 250th anniversary of the British Museum, the shield began to be displayed as part of the 'Enlightenment Gallery'. This exhibition was located in a recreation of the Kings Library and spoke to British understandings of the Enlightenment and the world at the time. (Figure 4.3) As Assistant Curator at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, Matt Poll (Torres Strait Islander and ASSI) keenly notes: '[T]he shield was held up to ward against the world of the Enlightenment.'⁶² In the style of a Wunderkammer, it was boxed within a glass case, along with other objects from the Pacific. These cultural objects were included in the 'Trade and discovery' section, and in this contrived space of anachronisms, they were essentially reduced to mere trophies of colonisation. It was in front of this case in 2019, in this gallery, that Rodney Kelly, (Dharawal and Yuin) insisted on the repatriation of this shield that had 'belonged to his great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Cooman'.⁶³

Sculthorpe disrupted this problematic colonial installation and instead chose to heroicise the shield by placing it in conversation with other Indigenous voices. The effect was to represent the protagonists of 'first contact' differently. (Figure 4.4) In *Enduring Civilisation*, the shield is juxtaposed against the photograph *Undiscovered #4* (2010) by Michael Cook (Bidjara, born 1968), the painting *James Cook – with the declaration* (2014) by Vincent Namatjira (Pitjantjatjara, born 1983) and a watercolour titled *People in canoe at Botany Bay (1770)* by Tahitian man Tupaia (Ra'iātea, c.1725–1770). The vignette also includes a chart of Botany Bay that was created by Cook.

Within this inverted curatorial contrivance, Cook is both physically and conceptually diminished. Michael Cook's *Undiscovered* series undermines the 'discovery' of Australia and those who are spuriously celebrated for it. Vincent Namatjira, grandson of Albert Namatjira (Arrernte 1902–1959), takes a

⁶¹ As Nugent and Sculthorpe mention in their footnotes, the shield was not registered into the collection until 1978. Maria Nugent and Gaye Sculthorpe. 2018, pp28–43.

⁶² Matt Poll. 'Is Cultural Democracy Possible in a Museum?', 2017, p897.

⁶³ Nick Miller. 'The Gripping Story of the Gweagal Shield', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 May 2019, accessed 19 September 2019.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/the-gripping-story-of-the-gweagal-shield-20190511-p51mbe.html>



FIGURE 4.4

Installation view of the section titled 'Encounters in Country' in the exhibition *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, (from left) Unidentified maker, *Shield*, details in figure 4.2; Michael Cook, Bidjara, born 1968, *Undiscovered #4*, 2010, inkjet on paper, 135.7 x 118.0 cm, National Museum of Australia; Tupaia (Ra'iātea, c.1725–1770), *People in canoe at Botany Bay*, 1770, pencil and watercolour on paper, 26.3 x 36.2cm, British Library, London. James Cook, *Chart of Botany Bay*, after July 1771, ink on paper, 310.0 x 43.0 cm, British Library, London; Vincent Namatjira, Pitjantjatjara, born 1983, *James Cook – with the declaration*, 2014, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 101.0 x 76.0 cm, 2014, 2007.1, British Museum, London. Photograph courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.

different perspective. He acknowledges the importance of Cook, but his painting demonstrates the absurdity of his 'declaration', imagined here as a legal document. The declaration that purports to confer possession of Indigenous lands to Cook is authorised by Cook himself. This 'logic' is exposed for its duplicity and reduced to caricature. The third work is a watercolour by Tupaia, a navigator, priest and artist who assisted Cook and Banks on the HMS Endeavour. Cook said of Tupaia:

for by means of Tupia, supposeing he did not accompany you himself, you would always get people to direct you from Island to Island and would be sure of meeting with a friendly reseption and refreshments at every Island you came to.⁶⁴

While Cook used Tupaia to coerce collaboration, this vignette shows Indigenous solidarity. The significance of this installation lies in the importance it attaches to looking at history through Indigenous perspectives. This is emblematic of Sculthorpe's project of emphasising multiple Indigenous points of

⁶⁴ James Cook. 'The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery', 1955, p291.



FIGURE 4.5
Unidentified maker
Torres Strait Islander
Hoe
19th century (before 1889), wood, cymbium shell, 19.0 x 11.5 x 3.6cm
Oc,89+.214.a-b, British Museum, London
Photograph courtesy Trustees of the British Museum

view. At work here is a curatorial agenda of subversive rewriting that aims to de-emphasise and frustrate colonial perspectives and redirect and foreground Indigenous ones.

Recognising Indigenous agency rather than catering to western tastes, was one of the guiding principles of *Enduring Civilisation*. In an article in *The Australian Financial Review*, Sculthorpe began by invoking one instance of Indigenous political action (albeit in severely abbreviated form),:

The island of Mer in the Torres Strait has become famous in Australian legal history through the High Court's 'Mabo' land rights decision of 1992. Less well known is the unique culture of Torres Strait Islanders and the richness of their cultural heritage, past and present.⁶⁵

By leading with this challenge to Australian law, Sculthorpe demonstrated her commitment to issues of Native Title and land rights. Meanwhile, in *Enduring Civilisation*, she highlighted the contribution of

⁶⁵ Gaye Sculthorpe. 'Eyes On Indigenous Art: Exhibition', *The Australian Financial Review*, 2 May 2015, p48.

Eddie 'Koiki' Mabo (Meriam, 1936–1992) by alluding to his personal biography with the inclusion of a garden hoe from the Torres Strait Islands. (Figure 4.5)

This functional composite object assumes greater significance when it is purposefully assigned an intense political signification and a specific biographical connotation. When Mabo was a gardener at James Cook University, he met historians Noel Loos and Henry Reynolds and these encounters, which would turn into a friendship, would change Australian legal history. Reynolds recalls the meeting which precipitated one of the most important legal cases in Australian history:

I still vividly remember the occasion when a colleague and I explained to Eddie that, regardless of his customary rights, the whole of Murray Island was considered to be Crown Land and that, as Queensland's Solicitor-General was later to tell the High Court, he and his fellow-islanders were technically trespassers who could any moment be legitimately driven off the Island. On hearing this for the first time, Eddie stared at us for a long while in silence with a look combining horror and incredulity. How could anything so obvious as his property rights be disregarded by the white man's law?'⁶⁶

Mabo's insistence on his own ongoing and incontrovertible right to land and his refusal of the Crown's possession of it would be used to challenge and subsequently defeat the spurious fiction of *terra nullius*. The inclusion of this Torres Strait hoe was, then, intentionally charged with a cultural and political potency that belied its modest functionality. As Henry Reynolds would write in 1987: '[L]egally the Murray Islanders would have a stronger case in the courts (than Aboriginal people) because they used the land for gardening'.⁶⁷ This point was reiterated by historian Maria Nugent in the catalogue: 'The ownership and cultivation of gardens was important evidence during the *Mabo* case, for recognition of native title rights to land.'⁶⁸ Using a strategy I would later take up in the *Everywhen* exhibition, Sculthorpe sought to give a humanising context to these objects through an imaginative process of conflation. This strategy fuses historical biographies with an object's physical and material elements and so transforms them into traces of Indigenous aspirations, histories, epistemologies and ontologies.

⁶⁶ Henry Reynolds. 'Postscript: Mabo Remakes the Law of the Land', *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, 1992, pp185-186.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p186.

⁶⁸ Maria Nugent. 'Encounters in Country', 2015, p200.



FIGURE 4.6

We want land rights. When. Right Now.

Land rights placard from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, about 1972.

c.1972, paint on Masonite board, 48.5 x 81.5 x 3.0 cm

Donated by Charles Perkins, 1987.0090.0001, National Museum of Australia, Canberra

Photograph courtesy of National Museum of Australia

The idea of a collective voice and the risks of raising it, were also explored in *Enduring Civilisation* through the inclusion of a scuffed Masonite placard donated to the NMA by activist Charles Perkins.⁶⁹ (Figure 4.6) This placard was used at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on 26 January (Australia Day) in 1972 in an action which began with four men, Billy Craigie, Bert Williams, Michael Anderson and Tony Coorey, and swiftly grew. The object demonstrated not only the power of collective voices but ‘the resilience of Indigenous sovereignty and its ability to disturb ontologically the performativity of white possession’.⁷⁰ The establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy highlighted the multiplicity of Indigenous nations and exposed their suppression under the Australian Government. This precipitated

the Land Rights movement, which brought legislative changes at federal and state levels. It is important to note that this object was only shown in *Enduring Civilisation*, and it did not appear in *Encounters*. Omissions of this kind are revealing and I will return to them later in this chapter.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p195.

⁷⁰ Aileen Moreton-Robinson. ‘Bodies that Matter on the Beach’, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p46.



FIGURE 4.7
 Queenie McKenzie, Gija, c.1930–1998
Mistake Creek Massacre, 1997, earth pigments on canvas, 121.0 x 91.0 x 2.8 cm
 2005.0102.0001, National Museum of Australia, Canberra
 Photograph courtesy of National Museum of Australia

4.5 Oral testimonies

While some voices are heard, Sculthorpe has also been attuned to those that are censored. And she has used her own curatorial position as a speaking subject to ensure that voices under attack did not disappear. In 2005, the National Museum of Australia acquired a painting by Gija artist Queenie McKenzie (c.1915–1998) titled *Mistake Creek Massacre* (1997). It depicts, in the east Kimberley idiom, a scene of bloodshed in Australia's frontier period. The work became embroiled in the Culture Wars, which characterised the period of John Howard's Prime Ministership (1996–2007).⁷¹ The NMA was one of the contested sites of the competing ideologies of the Culture Wars. As historian Graeme Davison would write presciently: '[O]n no topic is the heat greater than on the history of colonisation and conquest itself'.⁷²

⁷¹ Kylie Message. 'Culture, Citizenship and Australian Multiculturalism: The Contest over Identity Formation at the National Museum of Australia', *Humanities Research*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2009, pp23–48.

⁷² Graeme Davison. 'National Museums in a Global Age: Observations Abroad and Reflections at Home', *National Museums: Negotiating Histories*, edited by Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner, National Museum of Australia, 2001, p13.

As soon as it was acquired, *Mistake Creek Massacre* provoked intense disagreement among historians over whether the massacre depicted had actually occurred. The doubts that they stoked prevented the work's inclusion in the National Historical Collection, which contains the museum's core collection of Australian history. It was not until 2012 that NMA curators were able to review the collection and advocate successfully for the painting's incorporation into the National Historical Collection. Defending the value of the work's uncertainty rather than its veracity, the curators argued that:

The National Historical Collection includes a range of material reflecting interpretations of sacred and secular histories that may not be demonstrable in fact. Objects are collected to record the beliefs of different cultures and artworks provide insights into how individuals and communities interpret and respond to their social and historical conditions, including particular historical events. The criteria for assessing the significance of such collections relate not to whether representations are historically accurate but rather whether they reflect and illuminate Australian cultural practices . . . *Mistake Creek Massacre* records well-established Indigenous beliefs about the history of settler violence on the Australian frontier and illuminates ongoing processes of historical debate and understanding that relate to a core theme in Australian society.⁷³

Despite its eventual acceptance into this collection, there was continued tension around the work. While seventy percent of objects were displayed in both the *Enduring Civilisation* and *Encounters* exhibition, only Sculthorpe selected this painting. Its inclusion in *Enduring Civilisation* is therefore a significant curatorial gesture. The painting was not used to court gratuitous controversy but to champion Indigenous oral accounts as a legitimate mode of historical documentary. Indigenous-authored histories and realities need to be seen and heard whether or not they are sanctioned, credible or disturbing. The voicing of narratives that disrupt the mono-story of colonisation is critical to represent the complexity and polyvocality of history. Michael Pickering, former Director of the Repatriation Program at the NMA and current Head of the NMA's Research Centre, framed this controversy in 2010 as a crisis of voice, or rather a crisis around a single voice. The latter, he claimed, had managed to challenge and silence professional expertise and Indigenous oral accounts:

In short, one man, untutored in the history of the work, was sufficiently empowered by the incumbent government to contradict and override the advice of a group of

⁷³ Paul Daley. 'What became of the Mistake Creek massacre?', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2013, accessed 26 July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jul/04/mistake-creek-massacre-indigenous-painting>

professional historians on the basis of personal opinion only. What chance do historians have to address histories honestly when even today the questions remain over whose stories shall be told? ⁷⁴

Pickering's question goes to the core of institutional directives as space is limited and collections are often immense. To understand whom the man at the centre of his account was, we need to consider some of the history of the National Museum of Australia. Dawn Casey (Tagalaka, born 1950), the first (and so far the only) Indigenous director of the NMA (1999–2003) presided over its opening in 2001. During her directorship, she wrote that '[w]e intend the Museum to speak with many voices, listen and respond to all, and promote debate and discussion about questions of diversity and identity'.⁷⁵ Despite these professed aspirations of inclusivity, however, when the National Museum of Australia opened, it had already been embroiled in government-sanctioned censorship. Days before the opening, it was revealed that giant braille notations had been pressed into the anodised aluminium cladding of the building. These spelled out various phrases ranging from the polemical ('Forgive us our genocide', 'Sorry, mate') to the seemingly more innocuous ('She'll be right', 'Who is my neighbour?')⁷⁶ This deliberate political reproach to the Howard Government by architectural firm Ashton Raggatt McDougall set the NMA up as a symbol of a left-leaning agenda which was seemingly overly sympathetic to Indigenous histories and values. This apparent bias triggered a 2003 government review of the museum led by sociologist John Carroll, who was tasked with scrutinising the historical accuracy of the exhibits.⁷⁷ Michael Pickering spells out what is at stake in the suppression of these disruptive stories:

Over time, the stories disappear. The horror and pain are lost to us. We do not hear the screams, or smell the odours, of the asylum; we do not hear the gunshots, the cries of the families. The people are transformed into objects. Even the history becomes a commodity to be used by governments and commentators to suit political agendas. However, the impacts of these events persist. For the descendants of the victims, the scars remain. At numerous repatriation funerals I have attended, the desire

⁷⁴ Michael Pickering. 'Where Are the Stories?', *The Public Historian*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2010, p94.

⁷⁵ Dawn Casey. 'The National Museum of Australia: Exploring the past, illuminating the present and imagining the future', *National Museums: Negotiating Histories*, edited by Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner, National Museum of Australia, 2001, p6.

⁷⁶ Miranda Devine. 'Disclosed at last, the embedded messages that adorn museum', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April 2006, accessed 6 June 2019.

<https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/disclosed-at-last-the-embedded-messages-that-adorn-museum-20060402-gdnaec.html>

⁷⁷ John Carroll et al. *Review of the National Museum of Australia, its exhibitions and public programs: A Report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia*, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Canberra, 2003.

to know what happened is strong, the tears and emotions, real. The events of the past resonate to the present. We have a responsibility to document these stories, in all of their manifestations, oral and written, tangible and intangible, objective and subjective, before the experiences are lost.⁷⁸

4.6 Kelli Cole: Curatorial Autonomy

Unsettled: Stories within was curated by Kelli Cole (Warumunga and Luritja, born 1973), whose role at the time was Assistant Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Australia, a position she has held since 2007. The exhibition consisted of works by five of the six artists selected for ARC Creative Fellowships. These artists had reservations about the exhibition being staged 'without a lead Indigenous curator' and so petitioned for the NMA to appoint Cole as 'Consultant Curator' for the exhibition.⁷⁹ The work to bring about this appointment was, in the words of Jonathan Jones, 'a struggle'⁸⁰:

After a lengthy and distracting campaign to prove our worth at all levels, the National Museum of Australia finally, and rightly, appointed Warumunga and Luritja curator Kelli Cole to guide *Unsettled*. The right to self-determination was back on the table, yet I was still left wondering why we always have to prove ourselves. The idea of governing and determining ourselves and our cultural expressions is not new or particularly radical, and as *Unsettled* was a response to *Encounters* and the museum, it would have seemed a no-brainer. So why was employing an Indigenous curator such a struggle?⁸¹

Enduring Civilisation and *Encounters* were 'characterised by an in-depth consultation process that began in 2009, developed over six years and involved the 27 communities from the regions represented in the exhibitions.'⁸² Cole was only appointed in July 2015 which meant she only had four months to work with the artists. While all three exhibitions engaged with the fraught nature of classifications, it would be *Unsettled* which contained the most searing institutional critique. The consultant curator and five freelance artists dared to say and do more about the politics of repatriation,

⁷⁸ Michael Pickering. 'Where Are the Stories?', 2010, pp94-95.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Jones. 'Reflections from a Panel of Indigenous Speakers at the New Encounters Conference', *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, vol.4, no.1, 2016, p200.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p201.

⁸¹ Ibid., p200-201.

⁸² Alison Clark. 'Indigenous Histories in Metropole and Periphery', 2016, p174.

or what Cole named 'visual repatriation'.⁸³ In my discussions with Kelli Cole she said that the use of quotations served two purposes. Firstly it was an expression of the artists' voices, experiences and feelings on the project. Secondly, it was a way for representatives of the institution to distance themselves from the artists words.⁸⁴ The artists were asked to respond creatively to the British Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural material collected during the early years of European colonisation, and on this topic they had much to say about the difficulty of working with historic objects in historic collections.

Unsettled was an art exhibition in a social history museum borne out of a research project that sought to link objects from the British Museum with descendant contemporary Indigenous communities. Unusually for someone in a curatorial role, Cole was not involved in the selection of the artists who had received their Creative Fellowships many years earlier in the project.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, she saw her role as that of representing and advocating for the artists. This attentiveness to the voicing of artists was reflected in her curatorial methodology, which relied heavily on lengthy quotes from the artists both within the exhibition space and on the linked website. Her way of working with and for artists is a defining characteristic of her curatorial practice.

The *Encounters* exhibition was extensive with a beautifully produced catalogue and similarly *Enduring Civilisation* offered a scholarly catalogue. Unfortunately there was not enough time for an exhibition catalogue for *Unsettled*. In many other ways, the exhibition was diminished. There was only one public programme for *Unsettled* which took place on 26 January and the media coverage was not evenly shared with *Encounters*.⁸⁶ There is, however, a small but informative exhibition website, which contains individual pages with high-resolution images dedicated to the work of each artist.⁸⁷ These artists had the chance to have real physical encounters with works in the British Museum's collection in London and then respond creatively to these objects and narratives. The discussion below draws on the works and words of Julie Gough and Jonathan Jones to explore the range of ideas included in *Unsettled* as

⁸³ Kelli Cole. 'About the exhibition', *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, 2015, accessed 27 April 2019.

⁸⁴ Kelli Cole. Interview with Kelli Cole. 17 September 2019.

⁸⁵ Helena Robinson. 'Is Cultural Democracy Possible in a Museum?' Critical Reflections on Indigenous Engagement in the Development of the Exhibition Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 23, no. 9, 2017, p864. Although there is no information about how the artists were selected, the *Unsettled* website includes the following statement. 'The five artists visited the British Museum as 'Indigenous Artist Fellows' with the Engaging Objects research project, which was a key part of the Encounters project. Engaging Objects was a collaboration between the National Museum of Australia, the British Museum and the Australian National University, with the support of the Australian Research Council.'

⁸⁶ Kelli Cole. Interview with Kelli Cole. 17 September 2019.

⁸⁷ Kelli Cole. *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, accessed 27 April 2019.
<https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled>



FIGURE 4.7
Unidentified artist, Tasmanian Aboriginal
Kelp water container
c.1850, wood (tea tree) kelp, fibre, 15.5 x 11.3 x 6.0
Oc1851,1122.2, British Museum, London
Photograph courtesy Trustees of the British Museum

well as the responsibilities that descendant communities have to museum collections. These artists articulate their own personal experiences but their perspectives are anchored in broader community and museological concerns.

4.7 Julie Gough: With and Without

As part of her Creative Fellowship, trawlwoolway artist Julie Gough chose to respond to a kelp water container that was first exhibited in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and then donated to the British Museum by Scottish doctor Joseph Milligan (1807–1884). Milligan was the superintendent and medical officer of Oyster Cove, now putalina, who was in charge from 1843 to 1855.⁸⁸ This container is presumed to be the world's only extant example from the nineteenth century. (Figure 4.7) It is, as Sculthorpe has written, a 'key reference for contemporary Tasmanians', but it was not until 2008 that many Tasmanian Aboriginal people knew of the existence of this 1850 kelp water container.⁸⁹ Since the

⁸⁸ Howard Morphy. 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation', 2015, p11.

⁸⁹ Gaye Sculthorpe. 'Drawing on Country', *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, edited by Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates, British Museum, 2015, p244.

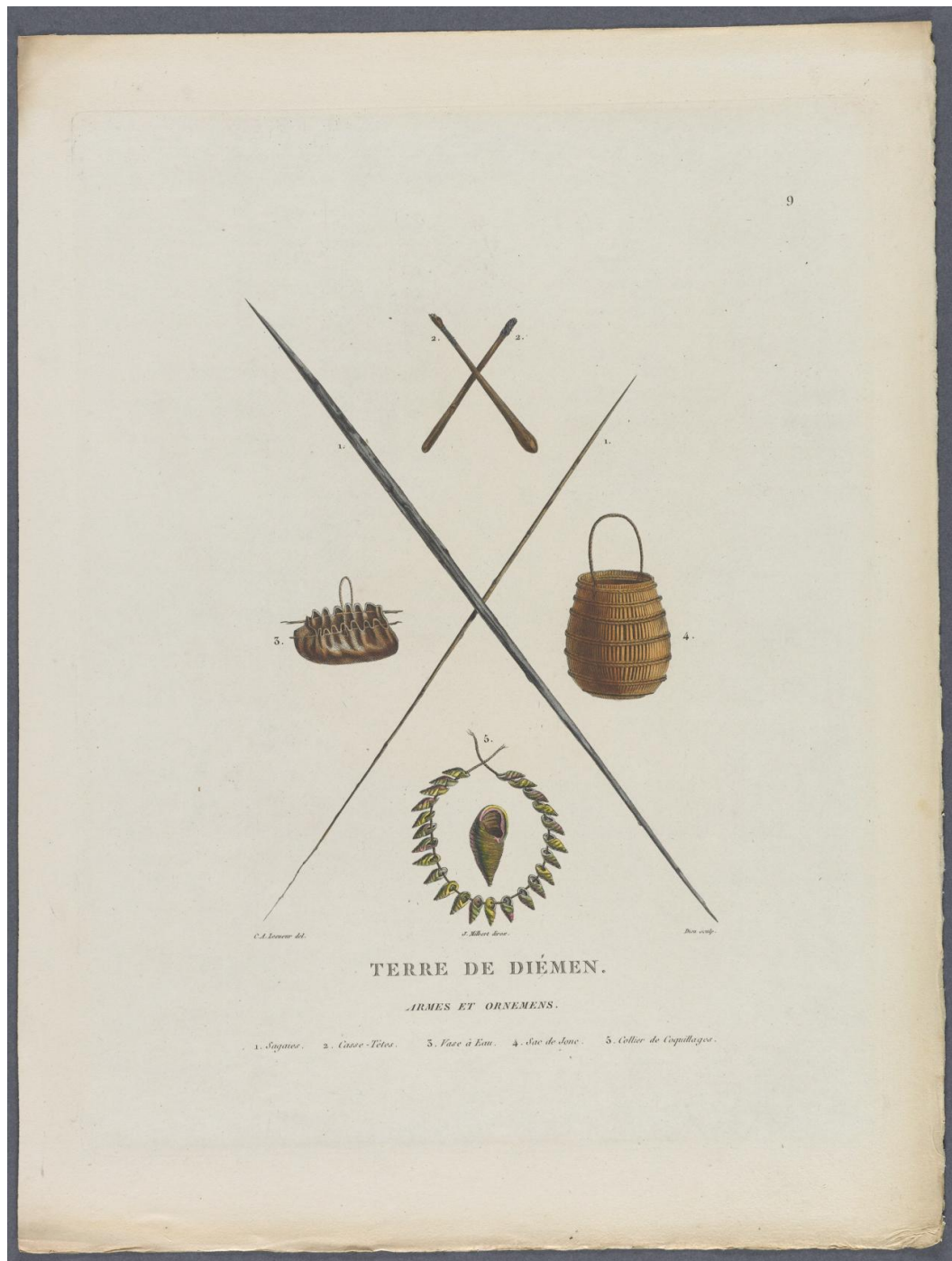


FIGURE 4.8.
 Charles Alexander Lesueur. French, 1778–1846 (after)
 Claude-Marie-François Dien (engraver)
Terre de Diemen: Armes et ornemens (Weapons and Ornaments), 1824, plate 9 in the *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes (Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands)* atlas. Arthus Bertrand, Paris, 1824, 2nd edition
 engraving, hand-coloured with watercolour and metallic paint
 32.4 × 24.1 cm (plate) 36.7 × 27.7 cm (sheet)
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Joe White Bequest, 2010, 2010.96.10
 Photograph courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria.

object's appearance on the British Museum's website, it has become an even more important resource for contemporary practitioners of cultural revitalisation. Although these objects have been made and used for thousands of years, colonisation disrupted this cultural inheritance. French naturalist, artist and explorer Charles-Alexandre Lesueur (1778–1846) documented these containers in some of his engravings from the early nineteenth century, and before the reappearance of the 1850 object, they were the main visual source of inspiration. (Figure 4.8)

These vessels, unique to Tasmania, are made from bull kelp (*Durvillaea potatorum*), which is collected when washed up on beaches in the Furneaux Islands on Tasmania's north-east coast. The kelp hardens quickly and takes on a leather-like texture and appearance but before this can happen, the containers are filled with sand to achieve and maintain the desired shape. To reinforce the design, they are threaded with skewers made of tea tree and fibre handles are attached. When they are finished, they are used to carry fresh water.

Gough's response was to make a sister object that could be in dialogue with the 1850 container and demonstrate the radically different conditions under which the two works were made and exhibited. (Figure 4.9) Gough has argued that the remaking of objects for museums 'in a fresh spirit of proper transaction' can help regenerate both Indigenous futures and museum collections.⁹⁰ Acknowledging the 'unlikelihood of the object's repatriation', Gough also created her sister object titled *Time Keeper* (2015) with the goal of replenishing both cultural practices and museum collections.⁹¹ With a material, locational and cultural specificity, she harvested kelp, string and sticks from what were likely the same sources as the 1850 container. The 2015 work encodes the cultural and material knowledge that is embedded in the 1850 object and defies the historical suppositions of collecting institutions which were premised on both the contrived disappearance of people and the knowledge that they held. When the carrier was on display in 1851, a London journalist marvelled at the ingenuity of Tasmanian cultural objects and despaired that the installation was 'a melancholy tribute paid in the Van Diemen's Land Department to its now extinct Aborigines' who 'ought not to have been hunted down.'⁹² But *Time Keeper* does not merely reflect skill or even survival; it also marks time spent away and apart from descendant communities. Inside a glass case, Gough's kelp water carrier is suspended in space. For her, this signifies how historic objects are held 'away from use, without the air from our lungs, the touch

⁹⁰ Julie Gough. 'Being Collected and Keeping It Real', 2006, p13.

⁹¹ Julie Gough. 'Julie Gough', *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, 2015, accessed 14 June 2019. <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/julie-gough>

⁹² Elizabeth Willis. 'Exhibiting Aboriginal Industry: A Story Behind a 'Re-Discovered' Bark Drawing from Victoria', *Aboriginal History Journal*, vol. 27, 2011, p39-58.



FIGURE 4.9
 Installation view of 'Julie Gough' section in *Unsettled: Stories Within* at the National Museum of Australia
 Julie Gough, trawlwoolway, born 1965
Time Keeper, 2015, kelp, plant leaves, wood, sand, 8.0 x 17.0 x 12.5cm
Tomalah (Long Way), 2015, film projection, 4:50m
 Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

of our skin, to keep them real. They have been borne, across the seas and straits, to museums of disquiet to perform functions unintended by their makers.'⁹³ In this way, the 1850 kelp water container is exiled from its homeland, people and purpose.

Gough calculates that the object has spent more than 60,000 days away from its homeland. While sand usually shapes these containers, in Gough's version, it trickles down through a hole, creating a conical pile that reflects this passage of time. This accumulation speaks to the longing that this and other cultural objects in museum collections inspire. It is a longing that is inescapable and seeps into the past and future, as Gough acknowledges:

⁹³ Julie Gough. 'Being Collected and Keeping It Real', 2006, p10.

That terrible longing with that kelp carrier – that it should be housed in Tasmania – can't be turned off. That feeling is constant. I think every time I see kelp, forevermore, around this island, I will just be thinking about the kelp carrier.

Time Keeper was installed alongside Gough's short film *Tomalah* (2015), whose title means 'long way'. The film shows the artist opening the accessioned storage box in the British Museum's East London storage facility that houses the 1850 kelp water container. As soon as she opens it, we begin to hear the sounds of waves crashing on the shore. Wearing purple latex gloves, the artist holds, studies and takes in the object. These scenes are interspersed with footage of the ebb and flow of the beach and close-ups of the endangered kelp beds in the ocean before they wash up on the shore. The film gestures powerfully to the world beyond the jurisdiction of the museum: this is the world that created the object and the world that awaits its return. Even when the 1850 carrier was back on display in Australia, it did not travel to Tasmania. It could only absorb these stirring filmic sounds of the homeland. This kelp water carrier was exhibited in 1851 as a signifier of far-flung otherness, but this installation attempted to reinscribe it within a cultural moment of togetherness, however artificial and fugitive.

On seeing kelp water containers and baskets in the British Museum's collection, scholar and artist Patsy Cameron (Tasmanian Aboriginal, born 1947) said: '[W]hen they made them they would have been all talking together.'⁹⁴ Gough's work in bringing the vessel together with its sister in time and place, restarts this conversation and restores these temporal and geographical displacements. Gough had the chance to spend time with this and other objects in the BM collection but she concedes that these kinds of 'encounters' are always a 'bittersweet reunion'.⁹⁵ Even in Australia, the 1850 kelp water carrier was displayed in the *Encounters* exhibition and not in *Unsettled*. Both the reunion and the return were endlessly deferred.

Gough has previously said that before she engages with museum collections, she must 'ensure that past actions of capture and erasure are not repeated and that (she is) not entering or contributing to a place of deep unrest.'⁹⁶ The artist describes the experience of being with the object as being ancestrally

⁹⁴ Gaye Sculthorpe. 'Drawing on Country', *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, edited by Gaye Sculthorpe, Lissant Bolton and Ian Coates, British Museum, 2015, p244.

⁹⁵ Julie Gough. 'Julie Gough', *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, 2015, accessed 14 June 2019. http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/julie_gough

⁹⁶ Julie Gough. 'Being Collected and Keeping It Real', *Keeping Culture: Aboriginal Tasmania*, edited by Amanda Reynolds, National Museum of Australia, 2006, p12.

and emotionally charged, which points to the ongoing responsibility that descendant communities have to these objects:

There was a sense of urgency to communicate with the objects before our time was up. I had to let them know we are still out here, waiting for them, remembering them; that they weren't forgotten.⁹⁷

This quote, which was reproduced on the *Unsettled* website as well as in large vinyl lettering within the space, hints at a humiliating experience that has been described by Métis academic and artist David Garneau. This refers to the moment when objects are briefly placed in front of Indigenous descendants and then quickly placed under foreign lock and key.⁹⁸ Garneau has written:

A further loss of dignity comes when you're expected to be publicly grateful for these embroidered exhibitions of power. Museums or sites of colonisation when they engender in Aboriginal subjects, a sense of submission and cultural humiliation rather than agency. On the other hand to be able to contemplate and celebrate your cultural legacy in a home you truly share with others is humbling.⁹⁹

Gough's account of her emotional resonances with the objects and the brevity of her communication with them underscores their institutional possession. She suggests that there are questions around this ownership which must be raised. These are the questions that institutions cannot abide, but they are also the ones that Indigenous curators, artists and communities must keep voicing.

4.8 Jonathan Jones: Determined and Indeterminate

Jonathan Jones's *mugugalurra (conceal)* (2015) re-presents a selection of south-east objects from the National Museum of Australia's collection which are wrapped in the pages of the seminal 1878 text *The Aborigines of Victoria: With Notes Relating to the Habits of the Natives of other Parts of Australia and Tasmania* by Robert Brough Smyth (1830–1889). These wrapped ancestral objects are displayed in historical cases sourced from the now defunct Institute of Anatomy in Canberra.

⁹⁷ Julie Gough. 2015

⁹⁸ David Garneau. 'From artefact necropolis to living rooms: Indigenous and at home in non-colonial museums', *New Encounters: communities, collections and museums*, National Museum of Australia, 18 March 2016, unpaginated, accessed 17 June 2019.

<https://www.nma.gov.au/audio/new-encounters-communities-collections-and-museums-conference/transcripts/new-encounters-david-garneau>

⁹⁹ Ibid., unpaginated.



FIGURE 4.10
Installation view of 'Jonathan Jones' section in *Unsettled: Stories Within* at the National Museum of Australia (detail)
Jonathan Jones, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi, born 1978
mugugalurgarra (conceal) with south-east objects sourced from the National Museum of Australia
2015, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist
Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Australia, Canberra

Implicating historical narrative, redundant museology and monopolising disciplinary practices, Jones critiques these biased mediations and representations of Indigenous art and culture. Furthermore, he must contend with the reality that navigating this literature requires 'countering the common absence of Aboriginal voices in academic discourse.'¹⁰⁰ While Jones's installation is culturally focused on the south-east through the objects that are concealed and the text that is used, the concerns it raises are emblematic of wider museological issues of voice and access. (Figure 4.10)

¹⁰⁰ Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll. 'Introduction', *Art in the Time of Colony*, Ashgate, 2016, p13.

Many people have presumed to speak on behalf of Indigenous people, and this has created confusion around what is authentic and what is fabricated. Ironically, the repetition of fabrications has led them to come to stand as a kind of truth. Academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa/Ngāti Porou) has described how amateur ‘researchers’ were largely responsible for retailing myths about Indigenous people which became fixed in the international imaginary:

Many of the earliest local researchers were not formally ‘trained’ and were hobbyist researchers and adventurers. The significance of travellers’ tales and adventurers’ adventures is that they represented the Other to a general audience back in Europe, which became fixed in the milieu of cultural ideas.¹⁰¹

The writings of amateur anthropologists like Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908) and Robert Brough Smyth have served as definitive texts about Indigenous people of the south-east. These records have contributed to lasting and binding assumptions about cultural identity, practices and models of interpretation that are difficult to dislodge or even contest. These texts should, however, be read with caution. Smyth may, for example, have endorsed Aboriginal art as fine art, but it is not his approval or even his disfavour that matters in this instance.¹⁰² It is the fact that he is revered as an arbiter of value who is known for his opinions and his commentary. In a useful discussion about the politics of citation, sociologist and African American studies scholar Victor Ray argues:

Inequality is reflected through a veneration of the classics. In the social sciences and humanities, many of these works were written during a period when racial and gender exclusion was simply expected and taken for granted. What counts as canonical is shaped by who had access to existing knowledge and the tools and institutional resources to produce new knowledge.¹⁰³

Although these historical conditions have changed dramatically, there is still scepticism around ‘new knowledge’, particularly where it threatens complacent histories or respected scholars. Jones is particularly motivated to rewrite the associations with men’s objects within museum collections. Shields and boomerangs were once collected as the purported evidence of the savagery of Indigenous people,

¹⁰¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. ‘Introduction’, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, 1999, 0

¹⁰² Ian McLean. ‘Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation and Unsettled Encounters’, *Museums Australia Magazine*, vol. 24, no. 3, Autumn, 2016, pp10-17.p17.

¹⁰³ Victor Ray. ‘The Racial Politics of Citation’, *Inside Higher Ed*, 27 April 2018, accessed 25 June 2019, unpaginated. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/04/27/racial-exclusions-scholarly-citations-opinion>

but these objects had both functional and ceremonial uses. Jones is careful to wrap up cultural objects, not just in homage to a '1960s and 70s post-formalist conceptualism', as McLean infers, but as a gesture of protection and reverence.¹⁰⁴ Wrapping these objects 'un-stories' them from totalising narratives of war; instead it enfolds them within the inwardness of ceremonial performance. As a defender of the objects, Jones refuses to play the role of an Indigenous informant. He therefore restricts visual access; they are not for public consumption. Sometimes it is necessary to rewrite object biographies and sometimes it is appropriate to withhold them.

The traumas that museums and archives often inflict on and sustain for Indigenous people do not mean that they cannot also offer catalytic moments of cultural understanding, renewal and healing. Jones says of Indigenous collections: 'Shields and other objects in collections are gifts; gifts from our ancestors left to aid us on our new journeys and to become the springboard for many contemporary practices and understandings.'¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, it is often difficult for these 'gifts' to be accepted with either gratitude or confidence as many objects in museum collections are undocumented, unprovenanced and often unknown to descendant communities. Moreover, these objects may have been inappropriately interpreted or be physically inaccessible in overseas collections. As Jones writes:

Throughout the process of colonisation, south-east communities have faced a number of obstacles in connecting to our ancestral objects housed within museums, including those within the British Museum and the National Museum of Australia. Anthropology has played a complex role, often impeding and disenfranchising south-east communities and causing untold harm.¹⁰⁶

These types of concealments can be the cruellest of all. Still we must strive to find these clues, these voices and histories. Reclaiming these objects and the social, cultural and artistic practices that they encode can, in the words of Worimi archivist Kirsten Thorpe, 'support creative practices, language transmission and a reframing of stories from our colonial era.'¹⁰⁷ Although museums aspire to be universal spaces, their collections must be culturally constituted with access mediated through Indigenous systems of cultural protocol and permission. By foregrounding community involvement, collections can become a 'living archive' that 'provides a space in which voice and self-representation

¹⁰⁴ Ian McLean. 'Indigenous Australia', 2016, p16.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Jones. 'Jonathan Jones', *Unsettled: Stories Within*, National Museum of Australia, accessed 28 June 2019. <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/jonathan-jones>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., unpaginated.

¹⁰⁷ Kirsten Thorpe. 'Speaking Back to Colonial Collections: Building Living Aboriginal Archives', *Artlink*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2019, p42.

can be given to the experiences of Aboriginal people.¹⁰⁸ The museum must be reconfigured to ensure greater but culturally differentiated access to these objects.¹⁰⁹ Thorpe says:

We need to change the systems of access to fully consider Indigenous peoples' rights to the colonial archives, including enabling a right of reply to records that are incomplete or simply incorrect.¹¹⁰

4.9 Dialogue and Dissonance: New Encounters

This right of reply was granted at an Australian conference organised to accompany the *Encounters* and *Unsettled* exhibitions. Titled *New Encounters: communities, collections and museums*, this event was held at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra from 16 to 18 March 2016, ten days before the exhibitions were due to close. This three-day conference was a partnership between the NMA, the ANU and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). The conference model, which as Julie Gough notes, is 'carefully managed',¹¹¹ can often provide a way to reflect on what has been learned from an exhibition as well as what was missing from the catalogue. Often the long lead time for printing excludes many crucial pieces of information that are subsequently shared in conference proceedings. In fact, the *New Encounters* conference became an important platform for exposing matters that had been missing from the exhibition, the catalogue and the discourse that they generated. At the same time, for many of its Indigenous attendees, the conference space turned into a theatre of silencing. The 'new encounter' was merely a re-enactment of an old familiar one. As Cole, Gough and Jones recall:

Over the course of the conference a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt frustrated at not being able to speak out during what seemed like discussions that were endorsed by the institution.¹¹²

To combat this situation, Cole, Gough and Jones, who were scheduled to reflect as a panel on their respective involvements as consultant curator and Creative Fellowship recipients, forfeited their appointed times. Instead they opened the panel up to a group of nine Indigenous art workers including

¹⁰⁸ Kirsten Thorpe. 'Aboriginal Community Archives: A Case Study in Ethical Community Research', *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, edited by Anne J. Gililand et al., Monash University Publishing, 2017, p903.

¹⁰⁹ Christopher Anderson. 'Aboriginal People and Museums: Restricting Access to Increase it', *Artlink*, vol. 12, Autumn 1992, pp11-12.

¹¹⁰ Kirsten Thorpe. 'Speaking Back to Colonial Collections', 2019, p46.

¹¹¹ Julie Gough. 'Reflections from a Panel of Indigenous Speakers at the *New Encounters* Conference', *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, vol.4, no.1, 2016, p199.

¹¹² Kelli Cole, Julie Gough and Jonathan Jones. *Ibid.*, p196.

Clive Freeman (Eora/Yuin/Dharawal/ Wiradjuri), Sophia Nampitjimpa Sambono (Jingili), Glenn Iseger-Pilkington (Nhanda/Wadjarri/Nyoongar/Dutch/Scottish), Kimberley Moulton (Yorta Yorta), Shari Lett (Aboriginal/Irish) and Emma Loban (Kulkalgal/Meriam/Wuthathi). The group offered comments but refused to take questions as a way to protect themselves from feeling even more vulnerable. Arts worker Shari Lett put it: '[W]hen we cannot even create a safe space within a conference in a museum, will we ever make museums safe for our communities?'¹¹³

Although uncomfortable with the word 'intervention' since the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (commonly referred to as The Intervention), Cole insisted that this was a purposeful disruptive strategy.¹¹⁴ It was not only a challenge to those who presumed to speak on behalf of and over Indigenous people but a way to empower a collective chorus of mostly young Indigenous voices. Cole, Gough and Jones describe the event:

This spontaneous political act created a space where there was none, reinstating our voice, and, importantly, providing a way to process and publicly acknowledge the pain in the room. As young people we felt it was our responsibility to stand up and support our elders who work tirelessly in this area – in particular Aunty Julie Freeman and Aunty Henrietta Fourmile Marrie, who were both present at the conference – to uphold the integrity of our material and communities.¹¹⁵

Many of the curators and arts workers involved said they understood the professional risks of standing up publicly. And yet they were compelled by the obligation to support those who came before them and those who would follow. In a powerful statement about the ongoing responsibilities that contemporary Indigenous people have to historic objects, Jonathan Jones said:

As direct inheritors of our objects we have responsibilities and obligations that sit well beyond the role and understanding of museums and exhibitions such as *Encounters*. As direct inheritors of our objects we need to ensure that they can hear our voices – not only the voices of others speaking on their behalf. Nothing would upset our objects and ancestors more than to hear our voices silenced or sidelined or to see us play Jacky Jacky (an Aboriginal sellout).¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Shari Lett. *Ibid.*, p197.

¹¹⁴ Kelli Cole. *Ibid.*, p198.

¹¹⁵ Kelli Cole, Julie Gough and Jonathan Jones. *Ibid.*, p196.

¹¹⁶ Jonathan Jones. *Ibid.*, p201.

Caring for objects means caring for the interplay of culture, community, country and collections. It requires both listening to and speaking out. This impromptu gathering demonstrated both the need for Indigenous agency and the extent to which it is institutionally constrained. Despite the ever-increasing cohort of Indigenous curators and arts workers, there are rarely more than one or two Indigenous people employed within any institution at the curatorial level. Collective voices are a threat. Glenn-Iseger Pilkington reflects on the isolation and constraint facing institutional employees:

Working within museum and gallery spaces as sometimes the only Aboriginal person on staff comes with huge levels of self-applied, institutionally applied, and community-applied expectations. These expectations have the capacity to create momentum, excitement, enthusiasm, and commitment, but equally they have the capacity to be destructive, confusing, overwhelming, and counterproductive. These expectations are often also contradictory – your personal needs and aspirations do not always align with those of your community, and your community's desires are often at odds with those of your organization. This is not easy terrain to navigate, and these journeys need be shared by teams of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, sometimes walking side by side with non-Aboriginal people in spaces and on tracks that are culturally safe and that respect our cultures, histories, and realities.¹¹⁷

This 'intervention' was, in effect, the creation of a safe place despite it happening under the scrutinising and potentially punitive gaze of the museum sector.¹¹⁸ It was a signal to the Elders within the room that they were heard and respected. It was also a signal to the objects that they had not been forgotten. And it was a signal to the group of Indigenous arts workers that their pain would be met with compassion. These shared expressions of the difficulties of museum work should not, however, be seen in any way as vulnerabilities. In fact, they are a demonstration of the profound critical care that Indigenous curators extend to the objects enmeshed in cross-cultural encounters and to the people who choose to be stewards for them.

4.10 Conclusion

Stewarding Indigenous collections is an enormous pleasure and immense responsibility but, as this chapter has highlighted, it is not without its difficulties. Working with a museum can offer moments of

¹¹⁷ Glenn Iseger-Pilkington. *Ibid.*, p201.

¹¹⁸ Julie Gough. *Ibid.*, p199.

cultural knowing and healing, but if one is too critical or too vocal about the cultural need for repatriation, it can jeopardise those very goals. Responding to the voices of museum objects often demands a finely negotiated calibration of one's own curatorial voice.

While Indigenous peoples are attuned to the voicing of objects, it seems that museums are acutely attuned to the voices of Indigenous people within them. There is clearly some degree to which those voices are caught up within a politics of respectability. Reflecting on Sculthorpe's curation, Gina Fairley observed: 'Clearly, at some expense, this exhibition has chosen to be rigidly diplomatic.'¹¹⁹ On the artists in Cole's *Unsettled* exhibition, Ian McLean wrote: '[A]s would be expected, some of the artists took a militant position towards the modern museum.'¹²⁰ Although there seems to be critical judgement around these subjective stances, neither position, i.e. diplomacy or militancy, is inherently wrong or right. Curation is after all, 'always an exercise in subjective judgement'.¹²¹ What these critical reviews demonstrate, however, is the extent to which an Indigenous curatorial tone is perceived as either threatening or conciliatory. This is an attempt to police Indigenous agency, punishing or rewarding it for its subservience to or deviation from the status quo. In response, interdisciplinary scholars Stefano Harney and Fred Moten offer a way of out of this political antagonism. Such an exit route embraces the liberatory potential of self-legitimation to escape institutional limits. The two write matter-of-factly: 'We don't want to be correct and we won't be corrected.'¹²²

Although *Encounters* has not been the focus of this chapter, it is worth considering the comments of museum and heritage academic Helena Robinson about that exhibition's participatory scope. These insights, I would suggest, tap into the core issues:

It appears that some Indigenous representatives were willing to adopt a compromise position in return for maintaining discussions with the BM, but – as with the exhibition strategies used in the *Encounters* exhibition – their generosity resulted in the maintenance of the status quo (for the time being, anyway). Others have simply lost patience with the diplomatic path and demand the return of the objects. This discord reveals the complexity and rawness of the repatriation debate within Indigenous

¹¹⁹ Gina Fairley, 'Is the British Museum reviving our reputation, or conflating it?', *Arts Hub*, 1 May 2015, accessed 14 June 2019.

<https://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/museums/gina-fairley/is-the-british-museum-reviving-our-reputation-or-conflating-it-247900>

¹²⁰ Ian McLean. 'Indigenous Australia', 2016, p16.

¹²¹ Helena Robinson. 'Is Cultural Democracy Possible in a Museum?', 2017, p867.

¹²² Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. 'Politics Surrounded', *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Minor Compositions, 2013, p20.

communities, but perhaps also functioned to allow the NMA and BM to regulate Indigenous engagement in the project.¹²³

Museums that must confront these issues often conclude that it is too hard to do anything. But for Indigenous people, it is impossible to just do nothing. In 1987, academic and activist Henrietta Fourmile Marrie reflected on what might underlie Indigenous curatorial strategies of diplomacy and militancy. At root, she found were profound problems of loss and lack within communities:

I and most Aboriginal people acknowledge that if it were not for museums and other such institutions even less of our cultural property would exist in Australia today. For that we are grateful, but the fact remains that this property was collected when Aboriginal people were under extreme duress with governments and missions committed to methodic and systematic destruction of our cultures and traditions under the extreme policies of colonisation.¹²⁴

Gratitude and aversion are both expressions of what is at stake in this engagement. To return to the exhibitions by Sculthorpe and Cole, neither of their positions reflect a unified voice of museological endorsement or critique. Instead we are presented with expressions of a profound and often dangerously exposing ambivalence which reinforces the difficulties of institutional 'belonging' and the necessity of curatorial strategies of 'Unbelonging'. David Garneau reminds us that '[c]ontemporary museums and universities do not simply reflect state ideology but produce it. They also articulate the state's discontents and figure its remedies, one of which is indigenous.'¹²⁵ Indigenous forms of curation are expected to demonstrate cultural and political agency, respirit communities and rehabilitate the museum, often all at the same time.

In thinking about these pressures, it is worth also noting the power asymmetries that, as Helena Robinson writes, surrounded the curation of both *Encounters* and *Unsettled* at the National Museum of Australia:

In terms of Indigenous contributions to the project, the 138 contemporary Indigenous artworks and objects included in *Encounters* together with the presentation of filmed interviews – as well as the contemporary art that comprised the *Unsettled* exhibition –

¹²³ Helena Robinson. 'Is Cultural Democracy Possible in a Museum?', 2017, p869.

¹²⁴ Henrietta Fourmile. 'Museums and Aborigines: A Case Study in Contemporary Scientific Colonialism', *Praxis*, vol. 17, 1987, p10.

¹²⁵ David Garneau. 'From artefact necropolis to living rooms', 2016, unpaginated.

all position members of Indigenous communities as responders to pre-selected artefacts and the Museums' agenda, rather than as equal partners in museological practice.¹²⁶

Even with the agentive power of Indigenous curators and the generous participation of Indigenous communities, it is obvious that museums still control the terms of reference. In a discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler captures the bind of Indigenous participants by asking a larger question: 'What does it mean to be at once contained and dispossessed by the state?'¹²⁷ The museum, too, is a site of containment and dispossession. The only way for us to hear the voicing of objects is to be near them. The only way to be near them is to work with those who have them. The stakes for Aboriginal people are not just high; they are everything. And if sovereignty, in all its political cultural and historical complexities is to remain a serious Indigenous aspiration, then Indigenous peoples must push to enact their own models of unbelonging.

¹²⁶ Helena Robinson. 'Is Cultural Democracy Possible in a Museum?', 2017, p867.

¹²⁷ Judith Butler. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull Books, edited by Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 2007, p5.

Chapter Five: Resurfacing *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* Project 32, Kaldor Public Art Projects, curated by Jonathan Jones

Culture was damaged but not destroyed. Our fires have not gone out, they are still burning. Sometimes just embers mixed with memories, but with the guidance of our elders and the enthusiasm of many, the fires are being stoked and the south-east is alight.¹

Jonathan Jones

As part of Project 32 for the Kaldor Public Art Projects, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones (born 1978) invoked the destruction of the Garden Palace, which had been built in the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney. On the morning of 22 September 1882, at approximately 5:40am, fire broke out and reduced the entire Garden Palace to ruins in about forty minutes. Built to house the Sydney International Exhibition, which opened in September 1879, this architectural triumph had stood for only three years. The building contained thousands of Indigenous objects from Australia and the South Pacific as well as convict records and government archives.² The installation *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* set out to recreate the Garden Palace by demarcating the footprint of the building with 15,000 shields. This was a moving memorialising statement on the magnitude of this loss. (Figure 5.1) The shield is not only a potent symbol of one particular kind of object that was lost in the fire but a powerful icon of the south-east. In the symbolic ashes of this building, Jones considered what might be recovered, renewed and restored from the cultural region known as the south-east of Australia.

Gathering the past into the present, *barrangal dyara* which translates into skin and bones, explored narratives of cross-cultural loss and the limits of personal and collective memory. Fire can be destructive, but it can also be a regenerative tool of Aboriginal land management. Similarly, in this installation, fire was used as a metaphor for reigniting, rekindling and renewing south-east cultural practices. The ambition of the project was to wake up language, restore the memory of place and remake cultural materials. Jones asserted alternative narratives of the south-east and in doing so, he demonstrated that the people of the region are not bereft of cultural practices. They are motivated to

¹ Jonathan Jones quoted in Emma Pike. 'barrangal dyara (skin and bones)', *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p31.

² Ilaria Vanni Accarigi. 'The Ethnological Court at the Garden Palace', *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p133.

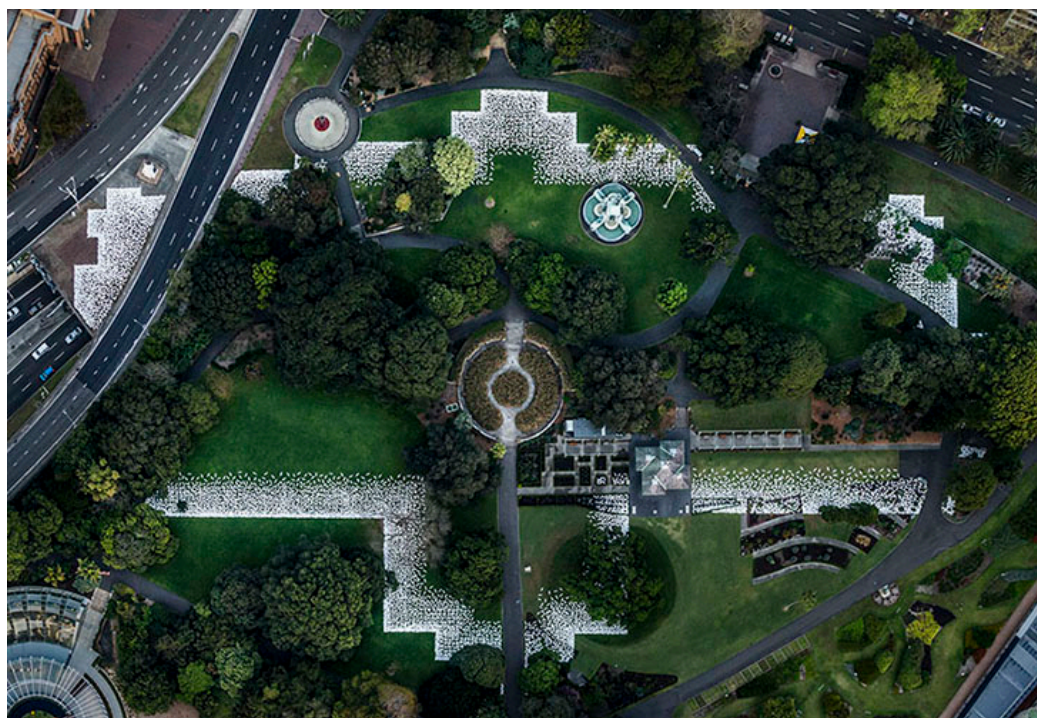


FIGURE 5.1

Installation view of Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* The shields mark out the footprint of the Garden Palace, 17 September – 3 October 2016, Kaldor Public Art Project 32, Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney
Photograph Peter Greig, courtesy of the artist and Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney.

contribute to the resurfacing of the knowledge systems that are embedded in place, even if they are not visible to colonial instruments.

The project was distinguished not merely by its critique of Eurocentric museological paradigms that emerged and were refined in the industrial era, but by the elaboration of alternative modes of participatory museology and strategies of focalisation. These were informed by a highly specialised Wiradjuri methodology that was developed during Jones's doctoral studies. This methodology, *Dhulu-ya-rrabu wudha-gar-bin-ya-bu yindyamal-dhuray-bu* (talking straight, listening deeply and acting respectfully), underwrites Jones's curatorial and artistic research practice.³ Through this approach, the project asserts its own mode of cultural sovereignty and embodies the profound politics of Unbelonging.

As an intercultural production, Indigenous art for the public domain registers the processes of colonisation but should not be entirely defined by them. In all of its manifestations, art-making can gesture towards an experience outside of colonisation, assimilation, impositions of sovereignty and other oppressive forms of governmentality. Howard Morphy identifies this constitutive contradiction of Indigenous art, which is often created in response to colonial history while trying to defy it:

³ Jonathan Jones. 'Methodology', *Murruwaygu: following in the footsteps of our ancestors*, University of Technology Sydney, Unpublished doctoral thesis, 2018, p68.

[T]he recent history of Aboriginal art has been a dialogue with colonial history, in which what came before—an Aboriginal history of Australia with its emphasis on affective social and spiritual relationships to the land—is continually asserting itself over what exists in the present. Aboriginal people are continually trying to insert, as precedents for action, values and beliefs in the world that have their genesis in pre-colonial times.⁴

For Indigenous curators and artists, there is a need to recuperate both colonial and Aboriginal histories of the place now termed Australia and to locate oneself in a position that is within, without, between and beyond these histories. For Jones, this recuperative practice is at the heart of both his curation of *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* and his cultural way of being and becoming. The title of the exhibition was suggestive of the intuitive visceral register of the project. Skin and bones are physiologically and idiomatically understood to be sensory receptors. As Christine Watson writes: 'Information inscribed in or received from touch may also embody or reawaken dormant memories.'⁵ The scars on skin and the brokenness of bones become allusive symbolic elements that invoke colonial pain and Indigenous resilience. A scar is both evidence of a wound and a manifestation of healing. In this way, Jones framed the installation as a meditation on healing from within.

The south-east is comprised of more than sixty language groups and Jones understands it to include most parts of New South Wales, parts of South Australia and southern Queensland and all of Victoria and the ACT.⁶ Despite the parallel histories, Tasmania is typically understood to be separate from this collective identity of the south-east. Making up around fifteen percent of the continent, the south-east is a geographically, historically and politically significant cultural bloc. Despite their proximity to the large metropolitan centres, south-east cultures are often the least understood and arguably the least visible. Although the majority of Indigenous people live on the eastern seaboard, they are not all culturally from the south-east.⁷ This area experienced British colonisation long before other parts of the continent and

⁴ Howard Morphy. 'Introduction', *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, p4.

⁵ Christine Watson. 'Touching the Land: Towards an Aesthetic of Balgo Contemporary Painting', *Art from the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art*, edited by Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles, University of Virginia, 1999, p164.

⁶ Jonathan Jones. 'Introduction', *Murruwaygu: following in the footsteps of our ancestors*, University of Technology Sydney, Unpublished doctoral thesis, 2018, p7.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population, 2016 Census Data, Summary*, accessed 30 May, 2019.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Population%20Data%20Summary~10>

is described by Jonathan Jones as 'ground zero within Aboriginal colonial history'.⁸ This language of detonation and disaster graphically anticipates the decimation of cultural practices that accompanied colonisation. As diverse as south-east communities are, they are united by similar experiences of a colonisation which was swift and often violent. South-east cultures have largely been outside the national consciousness, playing into a false narrative about their complete annihilation or cultural impoverishment. But to punish people for not having access to the full materiality of their cultural inheritance is to participate in a game of blaming the victim. Assistant Curator at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, Matt Poll (Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander) recalls a conversation he had with Penangke curator Shaun Angeles about the profundity of the loss for south-east cultures and the potency of the shield as a south-east icon. Angeles expressed a poignant gratitude to south-east cultures for shouldering this loss long before other Indigenous groups were affected:

Shaun Angeles, a Penangke man from Ayampe country and Artwe-kenhe (Men's) Collection Researcher at the Museum of Central Australia once described to me how as a Central Australian man, he sometimes thought of the Sydney Aboriginal people as 'shield people', having shielded communities in other parts of the country from the initial onslaught.⁹

Indigenous people from all across Australia are indebted to these 'shield people', and more Australians should take time to understand the heroism of holding onto country, community and culture. While the narratives of loss that attended colonisation are significant, Jones is at pains to suggest that they are not absolute. Instead, his curatorial and artistic achievement lies in the subtle nuancing of the difference between loss and total lack. As an example, Jones remembers an experience of visiting the Australian Museum over twenty years ago when he was searching for aspects of his cultural inheritance:

I first went looking for cultural material from where my family is from and found out that much of this material was lost in the Garden Palace fire. Ever since, I've been struck with the loss of our cultural material, what that loss means for our communities and how you can move forward as a culture when you can't point to your cultural heritage.¹⁰

⁸ Jonathan Jones. 'Lighting the Fire and the return of the boomerang: Cultural renaissance in the south-east.' *Artlink*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2014, p35.

⁹ Matt Poll. 'Songlines, Museology and Contemporary Aboriginal Art', *Artlink*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2018, p40.

¹⁰ Jonathan Jones quoted in Emma Pike. 2016, p31.



FIGURE 5.2

Aboriginal stone fish traps across the Barwon River, New South Wales, c1892
 Photograph courtesy of National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj153482139.

While many museums have perpetuated totalising narratives of loss and disappearance, Indigenous people are mediating new forms of Indigenous culture that contribute to the resurfacing of customary ways of being. Similarly, archaeological evidence provides a contrast with the narratives of (total) loss and lack that have characterised the south-east. While Indigenous people from the south-east have been associated with lastness and deficit, Jones asserts alternative narratives that reflect the pioneering firstness and abundance of their cultures. (Figure 5.2) The depth and scope of south-east intellectual achievement and ceremonial practice are now being celebrated on a national and international level. Most recently, the Gunditjmara people of western Victoria were acknowledged as custodians of Budj Bim, an extraordinary aquaculture system created 6600 years ago that was added to UNESCO's World Heritage Site list in 2019. Jones reiterates:

South-east communities have some of the longest ancestral connections in the world, including the world's oldest burial site, located at Lake Mungo in the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Site; the world's oldest ceremonial object at Cuddie Springs, NSW; at the same location the world's oldest grindstone for making bread; and potentially the world's oldest human-made structure in the Brewarrina fish traps. The region contains countless Aboriginal sites, including camps and fire hearths, middens, stone quarries, burial sites, stone arrangements and rock art. These sites speak to the

deep traditions that developed within the region and continue to define and inform local cultural practices.¹¹

The installation *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* was in conversation with many of these achievements, and was itself another accomplishment of the south-east. If Indigenous curation is about raising Indigenous consciousness, then Jones's project was an important model for building this public recognition for the south-east. It embodied the philosophies that underpin the cultural region.

5.1 Jonathan Jones: Artist and Curator

Jonathan Jones is an artist, curator, researcher and programmer whose work is distinguished by its creative excursions into the past, demonstrating a determination to remember and to bear witness. In exploring the psychology of loss, Jones often reconstitutes mourned objects and uses them to pose further questions about historical configurations of power. By creating these works of art that resonate with cultural memory, he at once reflects critically on history and intervenes in it productively.

While Jonathan Jones is inarguably first and foremost the artist behind *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, I would suggest that he was also at the fore of the project's curation. In a paper presented at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) conference in Perth 2017, Joanna Mendelssohn also noted the curation of the project:

In a description that may best be described as confusing, Emma Pike was named as the exhibition's curator – but her position was more accurately described as exhibition manager.¹²

Emily McDaniel (Kalari Clan of the Wiradjuri nation) was also named curatorial assistant for the project and she is credited with creating a safe cultural space for Jonathan Jones.¹³ Jones was certainly ably supported by these two curators, but the resulting exhibition reflects a model of artist as curator. This is not a new model, but artists and curators have historically had more clearly separated and demarcated roles. The blurring of boundaries, thus, reflects wider shifts towards the development of curation as an interdisciplinary and self-reflective practice. Curator Tyler Stallings has observed that the contemporary

¹¹ Jonathan Jones. 2018, p9.

¹² Joanna Mendelssohn. 'The artist as curator: Jonathan Jones and *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*', *AAANZ Annual Conference*, Perth December, 2017, paper emailed to the author 9 December 2017, p1.

¹³ Upasana Papadopoulos. 'barrangal dyara (skin and bones) and Four Thousand Fish', *Articulated Through Materiality: A Reclamation of the Feminine in Aboriginal Artistic and Cultural Practice*, University of Sydney, Unpublished MA thesis, 2018, p19.

curator is 'both (...) a custodian of artworks and (...) a cultural producer who facilitates projects. This approach obviously blurs a fine line as the curator in a way also becomes an artist'.¹⁴ While there is an artistic dimension to curation, this thesis has been concerned with its intellectual, cultural and political properties, which have the potential to remake existing paradigms. Jones's thoughtful intellectual and cultural framing of the exhibition is, then, a purposeful curatorial engagement.

Robert Storr reminds us that 'good exhibitions have a definite but not definitive point of view that invites serious analysis and critique, not only of the art but of the particular weights and measures used in the evaluation by the exhibition-maker.'¹⁵ In coming to understand not just a project's art but its curatorial ambitions, the challenge is to remain alert to the internal structuring devices of the exhibition. Such devices reveal both its Indigenous methodology and its philosophical armature.

5.2 The Kaldor Public Art Projects

barrangal dyara (skin and bones) by Jonathan Jones ran from 17 September to 3 October 2016 and was sequentially numbered Project 32, marking its association with the Kaldor Public Art Projects. Those projects began presenting bold and ephemeral site-specific exhibitionary projects in 1969.¹⁶ The Kaldor Public Art Projects are known not just for their cutting-edge status but for their critical role in developing the category of the contemporary in Australia.¹⁷ Despite his scepticism of defining moments, former Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Sydney Edmund Capon wrote in the foreword to a publication for the Kaldor Public Art Projects' fortieth anniversary: 'If, however, there was ever such a moment in the story of modern and contemporary art in Australia, it surely was the first Kaldor Project: Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast - One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney Australia 1968-1969*.'¹⁸ (Figure 5.3) Rebecca Coates also underscores the public profile and value that the Kaldor Public Art Projects have accrued. They have, she writes, become 'canonised within the history

¹⁴ Tyler Stallings. 'An interview with Tyler Stallings, the Chief Curator at the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach, California', *Art Papers*, September/October 2005, vol. 29 no. 5, p35.

¹⁵ Robert Storr. 'Show and Tell', *What makes a great exhibition?*, edited by Paula Marincola, Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006, p14.

¹⁶ Rebecca Coates. 'The Origins of Kaldor Public Art Projects', *Electronic Melbourne Art Journal*, 7, 2013, p1.

¹⁷ Ibid., p1. Rebecca Coates writes: 'The foundation has undergone a number of name changes. It is now known as Kaldor Public Art Projects. From the first project in 1969 to 2004, it was known as John Kaldor Art Projects. In 2004, the Foundation changed its name to Kaldor Public Art Projects. This reflected a shift in legal status as the not-for-profit organisation was added to the Commonwealth's Register of Cultural Organisations, entitling it to receive tax deductible donations, both from Kaldor and the public. For details of the Commonwealth's Register of Cultural Organisations, see Register of Cultural Organisations, 1991', accessed April 2018.

<https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/cultural-heritage/register-cultural-organisations>

¹⁸ Edmund Capon. 'Foreword', *40 Years Kaldor Public Art Projects*, edited by Sophie Forbat, Kaldor Public Art Projects, 2009, p18.



FIGURE 5.3

Installation view of First Kaldor Public Art Project.

Wrapped Coast - One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968-69.

Christo Bulgaria, United States of America, born 1935

Jeanne-Claude, France, United States of America, 1935-2009

Photograph Harry Shunk, courtesy of the artists and Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney.

of contemporary art in Australia'¹⁹ and played 'a key role in the evolution of the artistic landscape in Australia'.²⁰ This evolution reveals in the new and the now.

The selection of an Indigenous artist for Project 32 was decisive, if belated, recognition of the contemporary status of Indigenous art in Australia and internationally. This selection also signalled a shift in the project's conventions, which typically involve inviting an international avant-garde artist to Sydney to respond to the city or the New South Wales landscape as an outsider. Jonathan Jones trained his artistic and curatorial eye similarly on the locale of Sydney though he imagined a way of seeing the archaeological and temporal layers *before it was a city*. In this way, he reimagined and reconfigured the world of the exhibition and brought to life another world that came long before it. This was a localised Sydney narrative, but one that deployed a globally resonant critique of the imperialist dynamic that has underpinned historic museology and its contemporary iterations. If Kaldor's first project was about wrapping and concealing the coast, this newest edition was about revelation, visibility and the resurfacing of history, place, knowledge and language.

¹⁹ Rebecca Coates. 2013, p1.

²⁰ Ibid., p1.

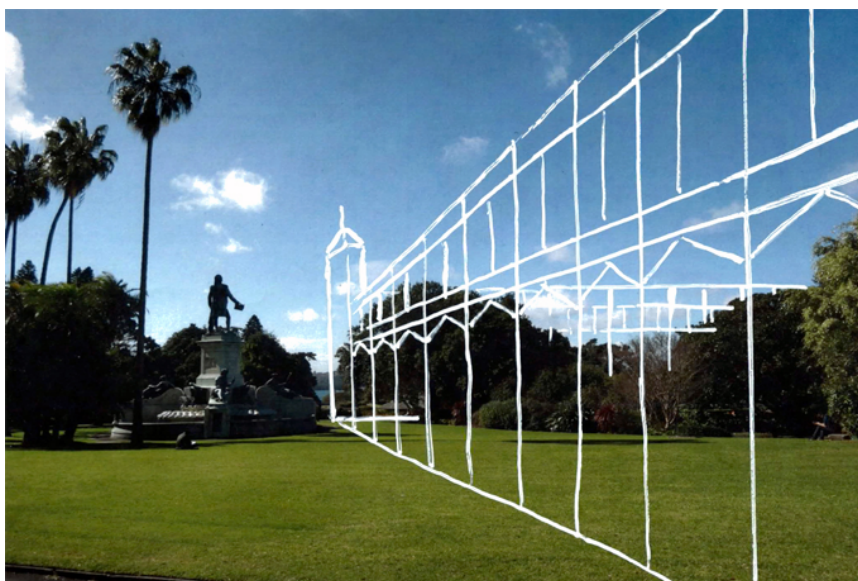


FIGURE 5.4
Proposed sketch for *YOUR VERY BIG IDEA* in 2014 which would become *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*.

For its forty-fifth anniversary, the Kaldor Public Art Projects put out an open invitation to Australian artists called *YOUR VERY GOOD IDEA*. The invitation sought 'innovative, site-specific concepts which would manifest as a temporary art project in Sydney.' Kaldor was looking particularly for 'ideas which [would] appear in unexpected spaces, or in landmark sites reimagined, ideas which would inspire the local public and our friends and followers both in Australia and around the world.'²¹ One hundred and sixty entries were received and Jonathan Jones's proposal was selected.²² (Figure 5.4) Nicholas Baume, Director and Chief Curator of Public Art Fund, New York, who was on the selection committee, said of the idea:

This will be a breakthrough work for Jones, already one of the most interesting artists of his generation in Australia. The work has the potential to animate a part of our shared cultural history from a contemporary perspective that enables us to think about the legacy of this lost structure and the values and ideas it embodied.²³

²¹ The panel for *YOUR VERY GOOD IDEA* included Jessica Morgan (Daskalopoulos Curator of International Art, Tate Modern, London and Artistic Director of the 10th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea), Nicholas Baume (Director and Chief Curator of Public Art Fund, New York), Alexie Glass-Kantor (Executive Director of Artspace, Sydney), James Lingwood (Co-Director, Art Angel, London), Nick Mitzevich (then Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide) and John Kaldor, (Director of Kaldor Public Art Projects), accessed 5 January 2019.

<http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/your-very-good-idea>

²² Andrew Taylor. 'Jonathan Jones wins Kaldor Public Art Project competition with 'ghost' of Garden Palace', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 2014, accessed 5 January 2019.
<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/jonathan-jones-wins-kaldor-public-art-project-competition-with-ghost-of-garden-palace-20140911-10f5ef.html>

²³ Ibid.

Over a period of two years, this proposal was developed into *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*). The title of the installation refers to the seminal response of Waanyi artist Judy Watson to working with and against the British Museum's collection.²⁴ In 1997, Watson sketched Waanyi objects in this collection in order to make these materials visible and forge personal connections to them. She created a body of work called *our bones in your collection, our skin in your collections, our hair in your collections*.

With its intentional lower-case styling, Jones's work aligned itself with Watson's project. This was also a subtle assertion of a growing independence from or indifference to English language conventions, as inspired by local and international movements of bla(c)kness and postcolonial identities that developed in the 1980s and 1990s. At a conceptual level, the two artists were drawn to represent moments (events) that echo across the past, present and future. In the British Museum collection, Watson imagined the objects belonging to members of her own family and questioned the ethics of foreign museums holding and withholding them. (Figure 5.5) :

I looked at the hair colour and thought: 'That's almost my colour. That could be my grandmother's mother's family, entwined through there.' The old people in our area used to say that they know where you came from when they touched your hair.²⁵

Watson describes the Waanyi collections of objects with a sensitivity to the evidentiary traces left behind by their makers and the potential to unlock cultural information through touch. As such, she reinforces an Indigenous understanding of cultural objects as always imbued with individual and ancestral subjectivities. Attuned to the 'resonance of hair, the way that it's almost like DNA, family bloodlines', she conceptualises the objects as important familial offerings:

These hair-string skirts are so delicate and beautiful. You can just imagine them being danced with or rolled with ochre on the legs. They have been rolled across skin, so they've taken those body oils with them. Then they have been worn against the skin and so it's like that person is there.²⁶

²⁴ Emma Pike. 2016, p32.

²⁵ Judy Watson. 'Interview with Hetti Perkins', *Art + Soul*, Melbourne, 2010, p68.

²⁶ Ibid.



FIGURE 5.5

Judy Watson, Waanyi born 1959

(left to right) *our bones in your collections, our hair in your collections, our skin in your collection*, 1997

etching and chine collé, 40.0 x 27.2cm (sheet)

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Mollie Gowing Acquisition Fund for Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1998, 242.1998; 243.1998; 244.1998

This human quality that Watson evokes is different to the one that has been contested in issues around the repatriation of human remains. But it does demonstrate the more expansive and intimate way in which Indigenous people relate to museum collections as was discussed in greater detail in chapter four. It was the dialogue around repatriation raised by Indigenous people and their allies around the world that arguably contributed to the introduction of the Human Tissue Act of 2004 (UK), which provides legal means to repatriate human remains from the British Museums collection.²⁷

In her essay 'Judy Watson: Our skeletons in your closets', Hetti Perkins likens Watson's process of accessing material in the collection at the British Museum to 'an archaeological dig in the bowels of the museum.'²⁸ Watson herself has described this probing work as follows: 'My work is often veiled with objects encoded and hidden, slowly coming to the surface.'²⁹ I would suggest that a similar methodology drives Jones's work, which is also deliberative and process-driven in its attempts to 'resurface' history, place, knowledge and language. Here the act of uncovering conditions of knowledge describes something more than metaphor; it relies on a literal reconnection with objects by touching their surfaces to unlock cultural information. Touch is an important component of this methodology as

²⁷ Tiffany Jenkins. 'Who are we to decide?' Internal challenges to cultural authority in the contestation over human remains in British museums', *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp455-470.

²⁸ Hetti Perkins. 'Judy Watson: Our skeletons in your closets', *In place(Out of time): contemporary art in Australia*, edited by Rebecca Coates, David Elliot and Howard Morphy, Museum of Modern Art, 1997, p17.

²⁹ Judy Watson. 'epilogue', *Judy Watson: Blood Language*, edited by Judy Watson and Louise Martin-Chew, Miegunyah Press, 2009, p223.

are its broader implications for access and reconnection. In Indigenous terms, touch is conditional, relational and powerful and requires the mediation of either a curator or artist in this context.

To better understand the methodological import and curatorial consequences of *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*), we need to reflect separately on all its constitutive elements. In this way, the work's specific historical and place-bound associations can be grasped both in isolation and in conversation, and we can absorb their profound interdependence. Although this approach momentarily disrupts the subtlety and coherence of the overall curatorial affect, it permits a deeper analysis of the significations of each linguistic, botanical, historical and material component. The installation can, thus, be apprehended cumulatively in all its symphonic complexity.

5.3 The Royal Botanic Garden

The Royal Botanic Garden opened in 1816 and celebrated its 200th birthday in 2016.³⁰ Few institutions are older in Australia, which underscores the Garden's high value and priority to the settlers of the new colony. The *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) project played an important part in revealing both the colonial beginnings of this important scientific and public space and its different uses which predate the last two hundred years. The Garden occupies around thirty hectares, and curves around Woccanmagully (Farm Cove). Before its establishment, in the early days of the colony, Governor Arthur Phillip ordered the clearing of the dense Angophora forests to create the first farm and 'by July of 1788, there were nine acres under corn'.³¹

The subsequent failure of this farm was widely attributed to the 'poor choice of season, low quality soil and predation by rats'.³² The failure of this experiment in food cultivation is especially crucial for Jones's purposes since it alerts us to the full symbolic weight of his intervention into this space that was first collective and then governmental and then public. Gardens and gardening are typically seen as antithetical to Indigenous belief and practice, but the pioneering work of scholars such as Bill Gammage, Bruce Pascoe, Rupert Gerritsen and Deborah Bird Rose quotes the observations of early

³⁰ The epithet 'Royal' was added to the Garden's name in 1959, five years after the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, who stepped ashore at Farm Cove at the Fleet Steps. 'Introduction', *The Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney: a History 1816-1985*, edited by Lionel Gilbert, Oxford University Press, 1986, p3.

³¹ Colleen Morris. 'History and Evolution', *The Royal Botanic Garden Sydney: The First 200 Years*, edited by Jennie Churchill, Halstead Press, 2015, p27.

³² Botanic Gardens and Centennial Parklands, 'Sydney's Garden: then and now', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed 5 January 2016.
<https://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2016/botanicgardens/>

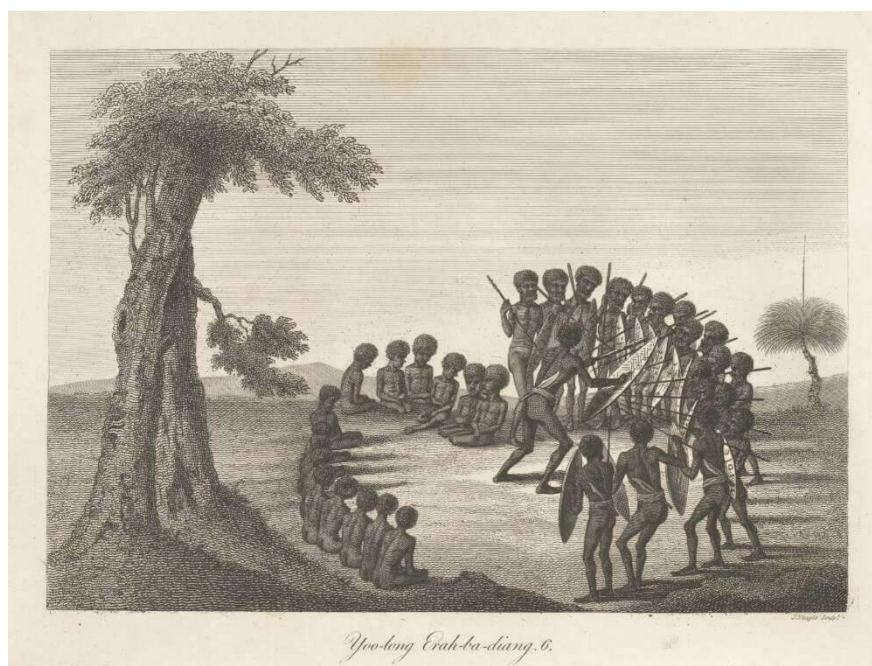


FIGURE 5.6
Yoo-long erah-ba-diang 6, a ceremony at Farm Cove, 1798, possibly by Thomas Watling, engraved by James Neagle. Engraving, from the book *An Account of the English colony in New South Wales*, 1798, David Collins, State Library of New South Wales, Q79/60.
Photograph courtesy of State Library of New South Wales.

settlers and explorers themselves, who describe the colony of New South Wales as being park-like and deliberately cultivated by Indigenous people for surplus food production.³³ This history of Indigenous land cultivation is poetically underscored in the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) installation through the inclusion of kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*) that Bruce Pascoe argues has been used by Indigenous people to make bread.³⁴ That grass is a vital element, and I will return to it later in this chapter

While the land is important for physical nourishment, it is also a place of spiritual and ceremonial activity. In February 1795, Judge-Advocate David Collins was ‘invited’ to witness a ceremonial event on what is now the Royal Botanic Garden. (Figure 5.6) Collins locates the site of the large ceremony precisely: ‘The place selected for this extraordinary exhibition was at the head of Farm Cove, where a

³³ See Bill Gammage. *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2011; Bruce Pascoe. *Dark Emu: black seeds: agriculture or accident?* Magabala Books, 2014; Rupert Gerritsen, *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture*, Archaeopress, 2008; Deborah Bird Rose. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, 1996.

³⁴ Bruce Pascoe. ‘The palace and the hearth’, *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O’Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, pp88-89.



FIGURE 5.7
Opening night of *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, Tyrel Dulvarie from the Bangarra Dance Theatre Company
Photograph Peter Greig, courtesy of Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney.

space had been for some days prepared by clearing it off grass, stumps, etc.; (sic) it was an oval figure, the dimensions of it were 27 feet by 18, and was named Yoo-lahng.³⁵ The ceremony involved the removal of teeth and Collins procured three of these teeth with much 'secrecy and great dread of being observed, and with an injunction that I should never let it be known that they had made me such a present, as the Cam-mer-ray tribe, to whom they were to be given, would not fail to punish them for it.'³⁶ This was a site, then, not just of a ceremony but of transgressive 'collecting' practices. These ceremonial gatherings in what is now the Royal Botanic Garden, continued for the nine years after the European disruption, demonstrating a commitment to holding onto cultural ways despite the considerable obstacles.

This location is, thus, suffused with ceremonial import, and Jones reanimates this symbolic register of place. The *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* installation formally opened with a performance by Bangarra Dance Theatre Company. Using shields from the installation, the dancers emerged from layers of misty smoke and enfolded the audience in a profoundly moving ceremonial event. The Royal Botanic Garden became not just a place of imagination but a culturally (re)activated site of ritual, experiential learning and re-emergence. As mentioned earlier, fire is not just destructive; it can be cleansing. The Bangarra performance may be understood to have cleared the site temporarily of its traumatic history. This could, in turn, allow for a new reckoning and resurfacing of history, places, knowledge and language. (Figure 5.7)

³⁵ David Collins. 'Customs and Manners: Appendix vi', *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, vol. 1, originally published in 1798, edited by Brian H Fletcher, Royal Australian Historical Society, 1975, p467.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p483.



FIGURE 5.8
Construction of the Garden Palace, Sydney
1879 Photograph courtesy of State Records
NSW, Sydney, NRS4481, SH1168.



FIGURE 5.9
The Garden Palace Gate at Macquarie Street entrance to the
Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney.

5.4 The Garden Palace and International Exhibitions

The Garden Palace was a feat of Victorian excess measuring 250 metres long, 150 metres wide and 64 metres high. It was commissioned by Henry Parkes and designed by colonial architect James Barnet. The imposing dome at the centre was the largest in the southern hemisphere at the time and would have been one of the first things people saw as they arrived in Sydney Harbour. (Figure 5.8) This was a symbol of colonial ambition and achievement. The Palace's only extant remains are the carved commemorative sandstone gate posts and wrought iron gates now located at the Macquarie Street entrance to the Royal Botanic Garden.³⁷ These items were relocated after the Cahill Expressway split the Gardens and The Domain in two.³⁸ On each of the four columns are replicas of the ornamental coverings which adorned the four towers of the original building. Meanwhile the central gate highlights the dome of the former Garden Palace. Subtly pointing to both the fragility and falsifying potential of historical records, these columns are also not in their original location.³⁹ (Figure 5.9)

The era of International Exhibitions began in London in 1851 and reflected the nineteenth-century interest in colonial expansion and propagandising the achievements of the Industrial Revolution. Known as the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, or The Great Exhibition (or colloquially as the Crystal Palace Exhibition), this model of flaunting economic success through tales of civilisation

³⁷ David Latta. *Lost Glories: A Memorial to Forgotten Australian Buildings*, Angus & Robertson, 1986, p138.

³⁸ The gates were removed from the Shakespeare Place entry to the Royal Botanic Garden during the construction of the Cahill Expressway, which opened in 1958. They were reinstalled in 1962 as an entrance opposite 139 Macquarie St, Sydney. See Colleen Morris. 'History and Evolution', *The Royal Botanic Garden Sydney: The First 200 Years*, edited by Jennie Churchill, Halstead Press, 2015, p46.

³⁹ David Latta. 1986, p138.



FIGURE 5.10
Photographic print of the Garden Palace (1879–1882) facing Macquarie Street.
Photograph courtesy of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.

and progress was replicated at successive International Exhibitions.⁴⁰ Like the Garden Palace, London's Crystal Palace was also destroyed by fire; this occurred in 1936, after the building had fallen into disrepair. These ruins of colonialism are invoked explicitly and obliquely by Jones and are crucial to his curatorial premise. Within this international tournament of colonial power and industrial sophistication, it was necessary to demonstrate superiority in each category. Evelyn Cobley describes the tone of self-glorification surrounding the British Exhibitions:

In the self-understanding of the nineteenth century, advances in the material conditions of existence were thought to be the prerequisite for advances in social arrangements and cultural accomplishments. Science and art would combine to ensure the material and spiritual emancipation of all humankind.⁴¹

The Sydney International Exhibition (17 September 1879 – 20 April 1880) marked the first time the International Exhibition had been held in the southern hemisphere and it offered a similar opportunity to showcase Australia's successes and consolidate its position as the 'jewel in the crown' of the Mother

⁴⁰ Jeanine Leane. 'A paradise restored' *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p97.

⁴¹ Evelyn Cobley. 'Efficiency and the Great Exhibition of 1851: Elation and Doubt', *Modernism and the Culture of Efficiency: Ideology and Fiction*, University of Toronto Press, 2009, p27.

Country.⁴² (Figure 5.10) Because of its agricultural focus, the Sydney International Exhibition has not been recognised by the Bureau International des Expositions, the officiating body of International Exhibitions. Nevertheless, the Sydney Exhibition was instrumental in establishing many of the city's important institutions including the Australian Museum, which was Australia's first museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Powerhouse Museum and the Mitchell Library.⁴³ The Melbourne International Exhibition (1 October 1880 – 30 April 1881) began after the Sydney event had closed in order to facilitate transport of the same exhibitions during the winter of 1880. The Melbourne event was, however, an official Exhibition and the building where it was held is now classified as a World Heritage Site since it is the last remaining major nineteenth-century exhibition building.

As we have seen, the three international exhibitions in 1851, 1879 and 1880 each happened at the height of the industrial age, which was characterised by an emphasis on trade, progress and technology. In contrast, Indigeneity was assumed to belong to a fixed past and said to be antithetical to these concepts of industrialisation. Despite this polarisation, or rather because of it, the inclusion of Indigeneity was essential to highlight the extent of British progress, civilisation and superiority. As Carol Cooper writes, the International Exhibitions have always played an important role in the circulation of Indigenous cultural material:

[The] means by which a substantial amount of early ethnographica reached Europe was by way of International Exhibitions, which were regularly held in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Normally each Australian colony exhibited its own 'court', and although the main aim of such displays, in keeping with the whole ethos behind the Great Exhibitions, was to extol the technological progress of the western world, Aboriginal manufacturers were liberally represented, either by way of decoration or contrast. At the close of an exhibition, the policy of the colonies was to distribute the Aboriginal material as presents, or to exchange it for exotic pieces from other 'primitive' cultures.⁴⁴

⁴² Jeanine Leane. 'A paradise restored' *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*. edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p97.

⁴³ Peter Proudfoot. 'The International Exhibition Phenomenon', *Colonial City, Global City: Sydney's International Exhibition 1879*, edited by Peter Proudfoot, Roslyn Maguire, Robert Freestone, Crossing Press, 2000, pxii.

⁴⁴ Carol Cooper. 'Art of Temperate Southeast Australia', *Aboriginal Australia*, edited by Carol Cooper, Australian Gallery Directors Council, 1981, p31.



FIGURE 5.11
The Ethnological Court at the Garden Palace, Sydney, 1879–80
Photographic print
Photograph courtesy of Australian Museum Archives, Sydney, AMS351/V11460

These International Exhibitions were, thus, instrumental in implementing an approach to the display and interpretation of Indigenous cultural material. It is this exhibition model which is interrogated, with Jones's characteristic verve, in the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) installation.

5.5 Ethnological Court

The word ethnology derives from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning people, folk or nation. Ethnology is a comparative tool used by branches of anthropology to understand the differences between cultural groups. In an upstairs gallery at the Garden Palace, the Ethnological Court showcased the cultural material of Indigenous people from Australia and the South Pacific. It is the collection of south-east material that was exhibited within this court that is of most interest to Jonathan Jones. The Ethnological Court perpetuated a narrative about Indigeneity that served two purposes: firstly, it suspended Indigenous people in time and imbricated them in stereotypical representations of the savage and the primitive. In nineteenth-century Australia, Indigenous people were expected to disappear. Indigenous objects of the era were, thus, often collected as trophies of an evanescent people. To see Indigenous people as a dying species was to explain this situation through spurious theories of biological determinism rather than as the product of a specific brutalising history.

Secondly, the Ethnological Court demonstrated and cultivated a gap between the spectacle of progress and this construction of savagery. While other exhibitions showcased technological advances, social

progress and the economic accumulations of the west, the shields and other cultural objects of Indigenous people were presented in an unchanged and unchangeable cultural context. (Figure 5.11) This dangerous practice of dehistoricisation has underwritten countless museum displays around Australia and the world. The Ethnological Court promoted not just a fraudulently atemporal Indigenous past, but the inevitable failure of an Indigenous future. The presentation of Indigenous culture as 'prehistory' served to reify the moment of British colonisation, relegating 60,000 years of residence to a mere footnote to Euro-American formations of history. As exemplars of 'prehistory', Indigenous objects were intentionally divorced from their contemporary connections.

Stripped of their original meanings, these objects were then re-inscribed with alternative meanings. The devalorisation of Indigenous cultural knowledge has been both systematic and systemic. The inferiority of Indigenous epistemologies is a western invention with long historical roots. Museums are consciously or unconsciously perpetrators of these deeply racist narratives. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have observed:

Racism invokes a double movement of aggression and narcissism; the insult to the accused is doubled by a compliment to the accuser. Racist thinking is tautological and circular; we are powerful because we are right, and we are right because we are powerful. It is also essentializing, ahistorical and metaphysical, projecting difference across time: 'They are all that way, and they will always be that way.'⁴⁵

For an example of an institution that has reproduced these racist and totalising narratives, we need only look to the South Australian Museum, which holds one of the foremost repositories of Indigenous Australian material culture in the world. Its Indigenous displays were unchanged from 1914 to 1986.⁴⁶ Indigenous art and culture have been imprisoned in historical texts and devitalising museological exhibits which have endorsed a narrative of this unchanged and unchangeable worldview. Jeanine Leane puts it eloquently:

Taken out of context, and placed artificially in someone else's scheme, these Aboriginal objects, the tools, accessories, artefacts and personal effects that hold

⁴⁵ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. 'From Eurocentrism to Polycentrism', *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, 1994, p19.

⁴⁶ Similarly, the Indigenous display at Queensland Museum, Brisbane, was unchanged from 1911 to 1986. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby. 'Introduction', *The makers and making of Indigenous Australian Museum collections*, edited by Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby, Melbourne University Press, 2008, p4.

special value are devoid of story. They become silenced prisoners incarcerated in someone else's story - the story of empire, defeat, extermination, surrender and domestication.⁴⁷

The challenge and achievement of the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) installation was to push against these inert colonial legacies and offer a corrective narrative for audiences who might resist educational propositions. By offering an intercultural or multicultural narrative, this work aspired to decolonise not just historical representations but also 'the power relations between communities'.⁴⁸ The little known history of the Garden Palace building was emblematic of a national imperative of forgetting. Jones's free open-air installation was an opportunity to resurface multiple histories that intersect and compete. It brought audiences to confront this history and allowed Jones to construct a meaningful future.

5.6 Shields

Community relations are an important aspect of the installation of plaster cast shields, which on first viewing, look to be identical. The broad shields used are based on four archetypes that are particular to the south-east of Australia and these formal differences reveal the depth, complexity and specificity of art and cultural production from the region. The diverse communities of the south-east historically used two kinds of shields which could be incised, painted or left undecorated.⁴⁹ The first type was broad and often fashioned from a single piece of hardwood or from the inner bark of a tree. Often a handle was carved into the concave undersurface of the shield, which left the convex outer face free to feature particular designs. (Figure 5.12) Shields crafted from the inner bark tend to have a handle, which would have been flexed into a rigid shape during the creation of the object and secured through a hole in the outer face of the shield. In the Wiradjuri language, the broad shields are referred to as *girran.girran*.⁵⁰ As Jonathan Jones explains in his doctoral dissertation, the second type was designed to parry the forceful blows of clubs usually in individual combat and was therefore termed a parrying shield. In the Wiradjuri language, it is referred to as *marga*.⁵¹ (Figure 5.13) These parrying shields are further subdivided into three or four-sided variants though these do not appear in the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and*

⁴⁷ Jeanine Leane. 'A paradise restored' *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p99.

⁴⁸ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. 'Introduction', *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, 1994, p5.

⁴⁹ Carol Cooper. 'More than Meets the Eye: shields from Aboriginal south-east Australia', *Colony: Australia 1770-1861, Colony: Frontier Wars*, edited by Cathy Leahy and Judith Ryan, National Gallery of Victoria, 2018, p206.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Jones. 2018, p39.

⁵¹ Ibid.

bones) installation.⁵² Both types were typically incised with stone or other tools such as possum teeth and jaws, and they were painted with earth pigments such as ochre, black charcoal, pipe clay and gypsum, which often had the purpose of physically inscribing them into the land from which they came.⁵³ Along with these nuances of shape, south-east shields generally display a far greater range of non-figurative motifs and all-over designs than shields from other geographical regions.

The graphic elements which constitute the recognisable south-east style include repeated forms of incised or painted cross-hatched, herringbone, zig-zag, chevron, interlocking diamond, rhombic, parallel line and meander forms. Such designs were painted on cave walls or on the body for ceremony, incised and ochred on shields, clubs, spear throwers and possum-skin cloaks or carved into trees.⁵⁴

Often the work of master carvers, these shields are now accorded high fiscal value in specialist art auctions and their status is being reconsidered by institutional collections for their aesthetic value and historical connections. One of the leading scholars of shields of the south-east is Carol Cooper, who has contributed to the understanding of these objects for over thirty years. In the collection handbook of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Cooper describes the recently acquired collection of shields, which include a number of rare south-east shields. This collection was acquired as part of the 150th anniversary of the National Gallery of Victoria and was funded through the Felton Bequest, which is generally recognised as the fund for 'masterpieces'. Cooper's reflections show a rare attention to the aesthetic qualities of the shields, and she notes that 'such highly skilled techniques were practiced by expert makers and the resulting, individually embellished shields are witness to an extraordinary wood carving tradition.'⁵⁵

Despite the beauty of these objects, one of the most convenient dismissals of Indigenous art – and one that has been recast in various ways since the colonial period – insists that they are not art at all. By choosing an object that has historically been termed 'material culture', 'artefact' or 'weapon' and which is closely aligned with the discipline of anthropology, Jones seeks to strategically expand the forms of Indigenous art that are recognisable to, and valorised, by the western canon. Although cognisant of these exclusionary definitions and their histories, Jones does not permit their reductive power to insinuate itself into his curatorial and artistic rationale.

⁵² Ibid., 'Mumala: Girran.Girran and Marga', p142.

⁵³ Chris Keller and Vicki Couzens. *Meereng- An: Here is my Country, The Story of Aboriginal Victoria told through Art*, edited by Chris Keeler, Koorie Heritage Trust, 2010, pp3-4.

⁵⁴ Carol Cooper. 'Art of Temperate Southeast Australia', 1981, p34.

⁵⁵ Carol Cooper. 'Unknown: South-eastern Australian broad shields', *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art: In the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*, edited by Judith Ryan, National Gallery of Victoria, 2015, p16.



FIGURE 5.12

(left) Unknown Victorian Aboriginal maker, *Broad shield*, early 19th century-mid 19th century, earth pigments on wood, cane, pipeclay, 91.3 x 19.5 x 9.5cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 2011, 2011.122. Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria

FIGURE 5.13

(right) Unknown Victorian Aboriginal maker, *Parrying shield*, 19th century, earth pigments on wood, 71.1 x 4.0 x 10.2cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 2011, 2011.131. Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria

Throughout the public programming during the installation of the work, Jones used the term 'cultural material' to describe the shields rather than the more objectifying term 'material culture'. Although it is now used in many disciplines, material culture is a term derived from ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological discourse, and Jones's slight semantic readjustment ensures that culture defines the specific discourse around these objects. The rejection of an ethnographic term is the rejection of a methodology that prizes external objectivity. It is the embrace of the full potential of speaking within and through cultural knowledge.

As discussed throughout this thesis, the gradual decoupling of Indigenous art from anthropological discourse that occurred in the 1980s, both in Australia and internationally, was widely seen as an emancipatory exercise and loosely based on unquestioned taxonomies of art and artefact. Art history was thought to be a superior and more flexible category in which to be situated, but it too, was never innocent of the primitivising residue developed through modernist tropes. Subtly interrogating these external disciplinary monopolies and biases, Jones invites us not to defend or reproach either methodology but to look at and listen to the existing genealogies of knowledge. These are part of the making and remaking of these objects themselves. This was not a rejection of categorisation but a purposeful redirection to encourage a valuable and productive breaching of these categories.

Even so, existing categorisations remain notoriously hard to dislodge, as was evidenced by John McDonald's review of *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*). In a characteristic but ultimately unimaginative provocation, the critic challenged the definitional regimes in which the show operated:

By now you may be thinking that *Barrangal Dyara* (sic) sounds like a social history extravaganza, but is it art? It's a distinction that's increasingly difficult to make, as the de-definition of 'art' at the end of the Modernist era has left the term open to interpretation. Some believe that anything may be art if an artist says it is. Others prefer Andy Warhol's notorious formula: 'Art is what you can get away with'.⁵⁶

Demonstrating an insensitivity to Indigenous methodologies and a desensitisation to the monopolies of modernism, McDonald reproduced the very regimes of definitional power that Jones was trying to disrupt. Revisiting Jones's own Wiradjuri methodology, which is informed by 'talking straight, listening deeply and acting respectfully', we can see the disconnect between Indigenous qualitative measures and existing critical taxonomies.⁵⁷

Most of the 15,000 handmade gypsum plaster shields that were created for the project were destroyed following the installation. However, 4,000 of them were gifted to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney by John Kaldor and Jonathan Jones.⁵⁸ Gypsum has been used for thousands of years by

⁵⁶ John McDonald. 'Jonathan Jones heads one of the most ambitious art projects Sydney has seen', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 2016, accessed 22 February 2019.

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/jonathan-jones-20160920-grk3vf.html>

⁵⁷ Jonathan Jones. 2018, p68.

⁵⁸ Four thousand shields were accepted by the AGNSW following the exhibition based on a gift by John Kaldor and the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program in 2017, accessed 30 May 2019.
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/334.2017/>

people in the Murray-Darling and south-east regions, including by the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi, to make ceremonial mourning objects. The use of gypsum gestures materially towards these important rituals in which loss and grief yield to release. In the pristine white surfaces of the shields created for the exhibition, they represent both the erasure of cultural material and knowledge and the possibilities of a new beginning. It is these shields that mark out the footprint of the building and came to symbolise all that was lost: the ceremonies that never were, the ceremonies that could never be. These shields represent the bones and the skeletal structure of the Garden Palace and they implore us not just to remember but to 'resurface'.

At the demand of the Ethnological Court, Indigenous shields were displayed as weapons of war. It was necessary to exaggerate the inherent violence of Indigenous people in order to elide and deflect the violence that often accompanied 'collecting' practices. This violence began with the 1770 landing at Kamay (Botany Bay), now known as Kurnell. Sydney Parkinson (c.1745–1771), a draughtsman to Sir Joseph Banks, described the tense encounter between Captain Cook's party and Gweagal men in the following way: 'On our approaching the shore, two men with different kinds of weapons, came out and made toward us. Their countenance bespoke displeasure; they threatened us, and discovered hostile intentions, often crying to us, "Warra warra wai"'"⁵⁹ Defending their camp, the Gweagal men threw spears and were subsequently fired on. The spears and shields that were 'acquired' in the aftermath of this violent incursion, made their way into formative museum collections.

The reductive and biased narrative of savagery that is reproduced here from Parkinson has since been repackaged as fact and has slowly been insinuated into the fields of science as well as the disciplines of natural history and anthropology. This was a deliberate strategy and served a number of purposes. As Jones insightfully observes: 'Collecting objects in the midst of frontier violence had a dual effect; it both disarmed Aboriginal communities and portrayed Aboriginal culture as violent.'⁶⁰

These biases would eventually become enshrined in museological practices, and debunking these theories of race is a large component of strategies of decolonisation and Indigenisation. Charlotte Townsend-Gault reiterates the importance of Indigenous people reclaiming a history that has been

⁵⁹ Sydney Parkinson. *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas in His Majesty's Ship the Endeavour*, Printed for Charles Dilly in the poultry and James Phillips, 1784, reprinted Caliban Books, 1984, p134.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Jones. 2018, p129.

saturated with falsehoods: 'Reclaiming meaning involves, among other strategies, struggling with stereotypes - one-dimensional prototypes projected by European mythologizing.'⁶¹

Jonathan Jones is motivated to extricate the shields from their mythologised status as objects of violence made by a savage people. His doctoral research looked at historic collections of south-east shields in Australia and internationally and identified very little damage to the surfaces of shields even among those that were collected well over 100 years ago. This observation accords with my own research into the south-east collection of shields held at the British Museum, and all this calls for rethinking of the status of the shields and the people who made them.⁶² As Jones writes:

This re-reading of the 'shield' is supported by the fact that very few shields in collections show any sign of damage, making it hard to justify the western characterisation of these objects as weapons. After conducting the full survey of shields within the listed collections, I noticed that only a very small number showed signs of damage, whether from a spear or club. This demonstrates that shields may have performed other roles within community.⁶³

Arguably more important than the shields' association with warfare is their connection with ceremonial and ritual practice. This is clearly evidenced by the colour palette and textured surface of the objects. Richard Broome observes that 'inter-tribal violence witnessed by settlers was often not war but law; judicial proceedings between groups carried out in a traditionally controlled fashion.'⁶⁴ Equally, extant nineteenth-century imagery by artists William Barak (Wurundjeri, c.1824-1903), Mickey of Ulladulla (Dhurga, 1820-1891) and Tommy McRae (Kwatkwat, c.1835-1901) that features shields, show highly orchestrated compositions with participants choreographed into linear formations. (Figures 5.14 and 5.15)

The Wurundjeri artist William Barak was an informant to Alfred William Howitt, who described the tacit rules of engagement for marriage disputes. Those rules reflect an elaborate choreography. In his seminal 1904 publication *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, Howitt recounts one such dispute:

⁶¹ Charlotte Townsend-Gault. 'Kinds of Knowing', *Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, edited by Morgan Perkins and Howard Morphy, 2006, p531.

⁶² During a two-month British Council Fellowship in 2008, I looked at the British Museum's collection of shields from Victoria and New South Wales, photographing, measuring and describing each shield as part of the documentation.

⁶³ Jonathan Jones. 2018, p173.

⁶⁴ Richard Broome. *Aboriginal Australians: a History Since 1788*, Allen & Unwin, 2010, p75.



FIGURE 5.14 (left)
Tommy McRae, Kwatkwat, 1830s -1901
Two men with shields and clubs duelling, (drawing 5 from *Sketchbook*)
c. 1891, pen and blue ink on paper, 24.4 x 31.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2001.838.
Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria

FIGURE 5.15 (right)
Tommy McRae, Kwatkwat, 1830s -1901
Ceremony (drawing 7 from *Sketchbook*) c.1891
Pen and blue ink on paper, 24.4 x 31.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2001.838.
Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria

[T]hey fought with club and shield, and when one of them had been wounded so that blood was drawn, to the satisfaction of the old men, they interfered to stop the fight, saying, as Berak put it, 'You have both got blood; it is enough; now make friends'.⁶⁵

Under the watchful eyes of the Elders, these highly ritualised displays of 'warfare' could never become a blood sport. They were regulated exercises in socialising expectations of group behaviour. In contrast to these observations of south-east culture mediated through Indigenous people, early watercolours by Anglo-Australians artists represented shields prominently. This reflected a nineteenth-century interest in Aboriginal weaponry and posited different significations. In this early colonial period, these shields functioned both to inspire fear and to contain it. Turning now to photographic representations of Indigenous people of the same period, Margaret Maynard describes how an ideologically driven narrative of Indigenous savagery was reinforced by the deliberate inclusion of broad and parrying shields, spears, boomerangs clubs, animal skins and scarification.⁶⁶ These cultural artefacts became embroiled in a white imaginary, with Indigenous people cast as unequal but

⁶⁵ Alfred William Howitt. 'Marriage Rules', *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, Macmillan, 1904, pp254-255.

⁶⁶ Margaret Maynard. 'Staging Masculinity: Late Nineteenth Century Photographs of Indigenous Men.' *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 66, 2000, pp129-137.



FIGURE 5.16
Archetypal gypsum shields being created in Melbourne, Victoria in 2016
Photograph courtesy of Zan Wimberely.

nevertheless worthy antagonists in the battle between the races. Aboriginal people were represented in painting and photography as armed and dangerous, but they were disarmed by the superiority of Europeans. According to the logic of these primitivising depictions, even if Indigenous defeat was natural and inevitable, it had to be shown that Australians were deserving of victory in moral and technological terms.

The differing shapes and sizes of the shields both condense and convey their regional affiliations which are highlighted in the photograph above. (Figure 5.16) This included the Sydney region, western New South Wales, Victoria and the Lower Murray in South Australia. Even in the absence of inscribed designs, these shields denote identity, clan group and country. More than representing a narrow typological schema, the variations reflect a process of sociocultural differentiation through which belonging and connection are made manifest.

Gunnai artist Ray Thomas (born 1960) describes the powerful sense of belonging that can emerge through encounters with iconography and cultural material. He recalls an experience of looking at the shields in the Museum Victoria collection that are from the Gippsland region where he comes from. The designs on these shields spoke to who he was, where he came from and to whom he belonged. It was a revelatory moment:

I went in there and spent the whole day there, had access to all these shields from Gippsland. I sketched them into my sketchbook and from that day on it was like switching the light on you know. Because I thought, well, this is traditional from my area. They were absolutely stunning designs you know, the lineal work – fine etched line work into the wood. That day when I was in the Museum with these shields, well that just completely changed my thinking about my art and myself as an artist and from that day on I never painted dots again and the cross-hatching style, because I'd found something which was mine. Part of my culture, my identity and who I am and from my area.⁶⁷

It can be a powerful experience to resurface intangible cultural connections through material encounters, even when these encounters are mediated by the museum. Outside the museum's jurisdiction, however, trying to evidence and honour the fullness of one's identity can be a frustrating project since the means of production are often legally off limits. As Jonathan Jones says:

Most of the trees we traditionally use are today marked as protected species, and as Aboriginal people we don't have traditional rights to harvest those materials. So, that in itself has caused a huge disruption in how we're able to maintain our cultural practices and this is a huge problem for our people.⁶⁸

In many ways, Indigenous people are disenfranchised from the conditions of practising culture; they are made to negotiate the in-betweenness of a history that was not of their making. But revitalisation projects continue to work through these obstacles. Yuin academic Mariko Smith elaborates on this south-east resilience and how it is necessarily bound up with country, culture and community:

[It] confirms the adaptive capacity of Aboriginal peoples to this present-day in the south-eastern, coastal region of Australia, and their determination to continue strong, enduring connections with Country, Culture, and Community despite the highly

⁶⁷ Ray Thomas. 'A Strong and Good Eye: Weapons and Tools', *Meerrenge- An: Here is my Country, The Story of Aboriginal Victoria told through Art*, edited by Chris Keeler, Koorie Heritage Trust, 2010, p162.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Jones quoted in Ellie Griffiths. 'Resurrecting Indigenous Artefacts: An Interview with Jonathan Jones', *Culture Trip*, 27 September 2016, accessed 14 December 2018.
<https://theculturetrip.com/pacific/australia/articles/resurrecting-indigenous-artefacts-an-interview-with-jonathan-jones/>



FIGURE 5.17

Photographic print, mounted in album, interior view, the north nave from the dome in the 1879 Sydney Exhibition 'Garden Palace' building, paper / albumen / silver, photographed by Messrs Richards and Company for the International Exhibition Commissioners, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 1879-1880, 14.7cm 20.0 cm
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, 91/1323-16.

colonised and urbanised circumstances. This is Indigenous resilience in action, considered through the lens of the current Indigenous cultural resurgence movement influencing cultural and knowledge production practices around the world.⁶⁹

This resilience of people and place is echoed conceptually in the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) installation through the centrality of kangaroo grasses. As we will see, Jones draws poetically on the metaphor of biological dormancy to resurface a connection to and with place.

5.7 Kangaroo Grass: Knowledge and Dormancy

As part of *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*), the Royal Botanic Garden was transformed most noticeably by the presence of the 15,000 gypsum shields that demarcated the Garden Palace's footprint. But the strategic inclusion of kangaroo grass at the very centre of the reconstructed Palace was also a crucial symbolic, botanical and temporal intervention. This inclusion occasioned a radical rethinking of compact histories. These cultivated grasses were planted within the Pioneer Memorial Garden that was designed for the 150th anniversary of Australia, and they were located at the exact site where a large statue of Queen Victoria had stood during the 1879 International Exhibition as a

⁶⁹ Mariko Smith. 'Reflections on the Research Journey', *Vessels of Culture, Identity, and Knowledge: Aboriginal Tied-Bark Canoe Making as a Phenomenon of Indigenous Resilience through Cultural Resurgence in Contemporary South-Eastern Australia*, PhD, Unpublished thesis, University of Sydney, 2018, p319.

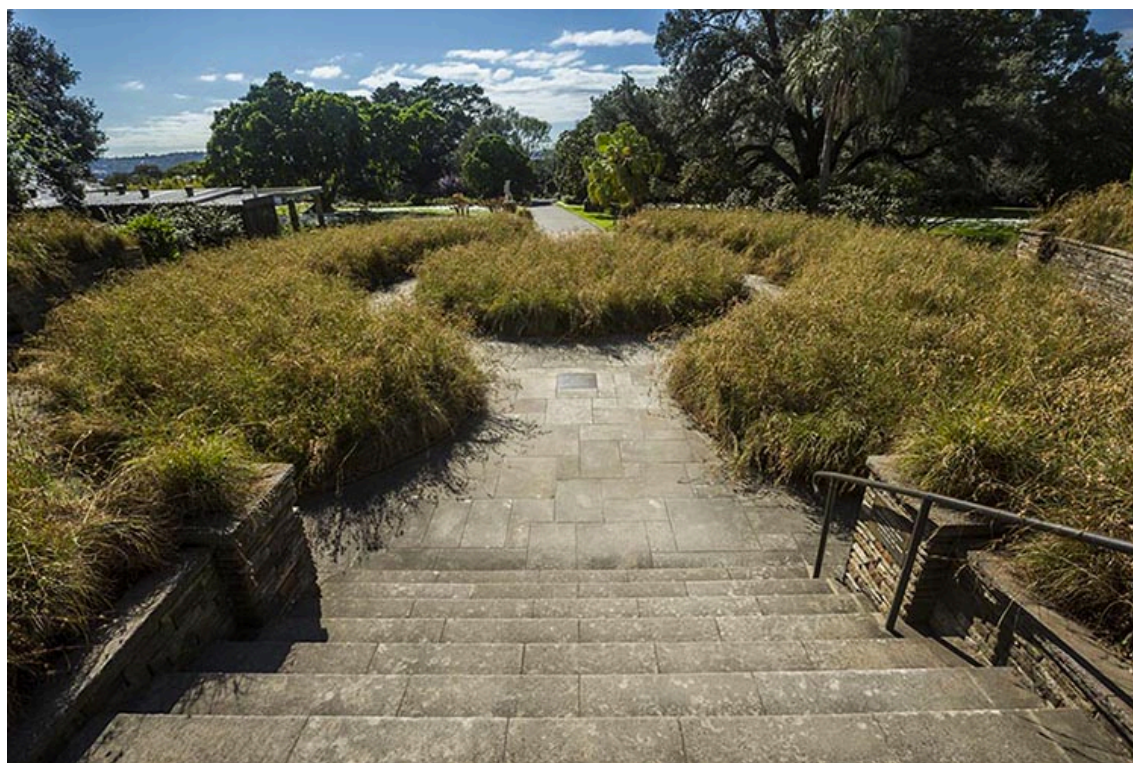


FIGURE 5.18
The kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*) at the centre of the *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) installation in the Pioneer Garden, Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney
Photograph Peter Greig, courtesy of Kaldor Public Art Projects.

central symbol of imperial ambition and achievement. (Figure 5.17) Within this peaceful and partially walled garden, there is a fountain, and above it, a figure of a Cupid created by the celebrated British sculptor Paul Montford (1868–1938), who is best known for his neoclassical commemorative sculpture commission at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. On its unveiling, the Memorial Garden was described by *The Age* as ‘a growing thing, and as such ... a fitting memorial to the pioneers, who had transformed this vast land into a prosperous country.’⁷⁰

In this symbolic space committed to remembering, Jones suggests not only what had been forgotten but who and what over time had created the conditions of forgetting. This site is charged with temporal layers of cultural memory and Jones invites the viewer to consider the biases of this memory and its subjective periodising logic. In the standard chronological construction of the intersecting but sequential histories of Britain and Australia, time is unbendable, linear and long. The inclusion of the kangaroo

⁷⁰ *The Age*, 4 February 1938.

grasses disrupts this historical trajectory by positing a much older claim to the memory of place and the people who are connected to it. Indigenous conceptions of time are long, but they are also wide and in this site of expansive temporality, the multiple histories of place can be resurfaced.

The British colonisation of Australia and its reimagining by pioneers is but one story of place. The Garden Palace is another. Jones invites us to imagine the lifeways and life cycles that came before and during these historical narratives, and he memorialises those practices that were not allowed to survive. While Jones is in many ways indebted to the historical archive, he suggests that there are alternative ways to access this history. The land itself is an archive of memory and despite an inability or rather an unwillingness of white Australia to engage with the past, an earth-centric methodology is fundamental to this process. It is significant that the focal point of the installation is not a monument to a person but a monumental statement to people. The kangaroo grasses replace the statue of Queen Victoria that melted in the fire and the doctrine of royal and political legitimacy that she represented. For Indigenous people, it is the interconnections to a living system that are important and not the hierarchical separation of a sovereign monarch from her subjects. As Deborah Bird Rose writes, Aboriginal relationships to land link people to and between ecosystems 'rather than giving them dominion over' them.⁷¹

While Indigenous people do not aspire to dominate the land, Jones draws our attention to the kangaroo grasses that once dominated the south-east, and he delves into a little-known history of balance and abundance maintained through specialised land management techniques. These rustling grasses whisper a much older story of Indigenous ingenuity and proprietary interest, and they demonstrate the horticulturally altered landscape. As Bruce Pascoe argues in *Dark emu, black seeds: agriculture or accident?* (2014), the wide dispersal of perennial kangaroo grasses is evidence of Aboriginal agricultural practices that have sustained human and animal life for thousands of years.⁷² Pascoe refutes the reductive hunter and gatherer archetype that for ideological reasons has been cultivated and retailed exhaustively as truth. (Figure 5.18) While this agricultural history is slowly being spoken about understood by the wider public, academics have long been publishing on this topic although perhaps none so persuasively as Pascoe, whose 2014 publication struck a chord with the Australian public, particularly young people.⁷³ Journalist Richard Guilliat speculates: '[Pascoe's] optimistic vision

⁷¹ Deborah Bird Rose. 1996, pp10-11.

⁷² Bruce Pascoe. 2014.

⁷³ Richard Guilliat. 'Turning history on its head', *The Australian*, accessed 20 July 2019.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/weekend-australian-magazine/bruce-pascoe-the-man-behind-dark-emu/news-story/231cefabce2f0103de26b6402fef0e3f>

of indigenous culture as a balm for a world beset by ecological and political calamity has found a receptive audience among younger readers.⁷⁴

The narrative that was often taught to school-age children, was that Aboriginal people were nomadic hunters and gatherers. Pascoe suggests an alternative view that is evidenced by the early explorers' diaries, which chronicle their experiences of chancing upon miles and miles of parkland. Deliberately using the same texts that many Australians deem to be beyond reproach, Pascoe reveals the Aboriginal land management techniques that resulted in vast surpluses, sophisticated irrigation systems and seed propagation. He thus suggests that the unproductive use of the land was a narrative deliberately used to justify and enable the logic of *terra nullius*. The doctrine of *terra nullius* was dependent not just on the land belonging to no one but on it being owned by no one. On this basis, British property law could be invoked.

The early settlers were, however, largely oblivious to Indigenous people's labour and knowledge of the land. Deborah Bird Rose writes that '[n]ot seeing the signs of ownership and property to which they were accustomed, many settlers assumed that there was no ownership and property, and that the landscapes were natural'.⁷⁵ This cultural myopia was catastrophic for Indigenous people in that it fuelled and naturalised the falsehood of *terra nullius*. Jonathan Jones has been quoted as saying that *terra nullius* is 'the whole underpinning of our legal system; it's the whole reason Australia is in existence'.⁷⁶ The truth of Indigenous productivity disrupts the lie of colonisation, but it doesn't diminish its devastation.

Despite the dominance of the colonial narrative, there are chinks in this fabrication of history that was written by the colonists themselves. This is the core of Pascoe's argument. Sir Thomas Mitchell provides a number of accounts of native grass being cultivated into a monoculture, including along the Narran River of northern New South Wales in 1839:

The Narran was full of water everywhere, and with this abundance of water there was also plenty of most excellent grass ... a grass whereof the seed is made by the natives

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Deborah Bird Rose. 1996, p17.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Jones quoted in Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore. 'Jonathan Jones unites Indigenous and settler history in massive public artwork in Sydney', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2016, accessed 5 January 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/30/lost-in-the-flames-sydneys-garden-palace-resurrected-through-indigenous-eyes>

into a kind of paste or bread. Dry heaps of this grass, that had been pulled expressly for the purpose of gathering the seed, lay along our path for many miles.⁷⁷

The historical record is forensically mined by Pascoe, who finds evidence of intensive land management systems in Western Australia and terraced fields for yam production outside of Melbourne. This evidence again comes directly from explorers:

Charles Sturt and his party were saved from starvation by people who were harvesting grain from a crop they'd planted in the moist ephemeral riverbed of the Warburton River in Australia's 'dead heart'. The settler Isaac Batey, was surprised that the land around Melbourne had been terraced for the cultivation of murnong (yam daisy, *Microseris lanceolata*) on the hillsides and Edwards Curr's wagon wheels turned up bushels of the plant as he rode across Aboriginal gardens in his quest to take the land from its true owners... Peter Beveridge, while searching for land to 'settle' in the Swan Hill district, was bemused to discover massive tracts of land devoted to cumbungi (bulrush, *Typha*) ovens steaming away in the process of starch extraction that the Wemba Wemba used to make flour.⁷⁸

One of Pascoe's most controversial claims, corroborated by these explorers' eyewitness accounts, is that Indigenous people cultivated the kangaroo grass to become the first bread makers in the world.⁷⁹ Seeds were separated from their husks and were then ground into flour on large grinding stones. In evidence of this argument, a grinding stone dish found at Cuddie Springs in northern New South Wales has been found to date back around 30,000 years.⁸⁰ These Indigenous people were the original pioneers of the south-east, but their achievements are not just ignored but denied.

Deriding and denying Indigenous systems of knowledge is part of the colonial project. But Indigenous knowledge which is 'local, detailed, tested through time' is now the foci of many environmental remediation projects including in the Australian Botanic Garden in Mount Annan, New South Wales.⁸¹ In the mid-1980s, kangaroo grass was reintroduced on the Cumberland Plains in the Sydney Basin to

⁷⁷ Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, *Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia, in Search of a Route from Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria*, London, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848, pp89-90.

⁷⁸ Bruce Pascoe. 'The palace and the hearth', *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, pp88-89.

⁷⁹ Bruce Pascoe. *Dark Emu: Black Seeds Agriculture or Accident?*, Magabala Books, 2014, p30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p30.

⁸¹ Deborah Bird Rose. 1996

create a 'window on the past' and to restore an unhealthy ecosystem.⁸² Although they are still vulnerable to introduced species, these grasses that have sustained life over generations are back where they belong. They are known for 'bringing back the resilience' to the earth and for being the 'great healers of the landscape'.⁸³

Within the kangaroo grasses was the soundscape of a Wiradjuri conversation, which was recorded against the crackling of a fire. The kangaroo grasses are maintained by fire, or more precisely by controlled burns. This can regenerate the land, but it also crucially breaks the dormancy of the kangaroo grass seed. Jones associates the temporal promise of dormancy with the potential for revitalisation endeavours. Knowledge is not lost but forever safeguarded in place. Wiradjuri Elder Dr Stan Grant Senior AM notes how the Wiradjuri word '*wiiny*' translates to 'fire' while '*wiinya*' translates to 'enlightening'.⁸⁴ These connections suggest the importance both of fire management and of 'firing up' people to ensure that culture is not just remembered but shared and practised. Although endangered, it too has the potential to heal place and people.

5.8 Awakening Languages

Safeguarding Indigenous languages through educational programmes and exhibitionary projects is becoming an important part of Indigenous curation, as *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) evidences. The installation featured eight soundscapes from eight different language groups of the south-east who aspired to contribute to the strengthening of language practices. These languages are located within the footprint of the Garden Palace, but more importantly, they are conceptually embedded in country. Language belongs to and in the land. Even if you don't remember language, your ancestral language can remember you. The eight sound installations, which were spoken or sung predominantly by children, were derived from eight languages of the south-east: Gamilaraay, Gumbaynggirr, Gunditjimarra, Ngarrindjeri, Wiradjuri, Woiwurrung, Paakantji and the Sydney Language.⁸⁵ Representatives of these eight languages were recorded remembering lost objects, bringing them into existence through these speech acts. This was not an exercise in the recitation of words by rote; it was a chance for the speaker to engender a connection to their own cultural materiality. To speak a language is to hold its knowledge. As Dr Stan Grant Senior AM says:

⁸² Peter Cuneo. 'Resilience in the landscape', *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p106.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore 'Jonathan Jones unites Indigenous and settler history in massive public artwork in Sydney' *The Guardian*, 30 September 2016, accessed 28 January 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/30/lost-in-the-flames-sydneys-garden-palace-resurrected-through-indigenous-eyes>

⁸⁵ Emma Pike. 2016, p34.

[L]anguage underpins our culture, our thoughts, our ability to communicate, develop and implement our land and gives us a deep and firm sense of pride in who we are.⁸⁶

The ubiquitous diffusion of English in Australia is one of the most pervasive remnants of the British colonial disruption. The imposition of English as the only official language of Australia has radically transformed the continent from one of the most linguistically diverse places on earth to a sobering wasteland of ever-increasing language obsolescence. Wade Davis writes:

A language, of course, is not merely a set of grammatical rules or a vocabulary. It is a flash of the human spirit, the vehicle by which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities.⁸⁷

Many Indigenous languages have been archived in books, recordings and diaries but they tend to be described as either vulnerable, endangered, dying or dead. Despite the acknowledged gravity of this situation, UNESCO cautions that more languages will continue to be 'lost' every year.⁸⁸ In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly took the advice of the Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues and adopted a resolution to proclaim 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The Forum declared that:

40 percent of the estimated 6,700 languages spoken around the world were in danger of disappearing. The fact that most of these are indigenous languages puts the cultures and knowledge systems to which they belong at risk.⁸⁹

An understanding of the interdependence of language and knowledge production lies at the heart of *barrangal dyara*. While language programmes of revitalisation funded through global UN-type initiatives

⁸⁶ Dr Stan Grant Senior AM. 'Speaking out with Larissa Behrendt 2017, radio program, ABC Radio, Sydney, 26 February 2017, accessed 28 January 2019.

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/speakingout/speaking-out/8284770>

⁸⁷ Wade Davis. 'Season of the brown hyena', *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*, UWA Publishing, 2010, p3.

⁸⁸ Marleen Haboud. 'An epidemic is threatening indigenous languages', *The UNESCO Courier*, accessed 23 July 2019.

<https://en.unesco.org/courier/numero-especial-octubre-2009/epidemic-threatening-indigenous-languages>

⁸⁹ Department of Communication and the Arts, Australian Government. '2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages' accessed 29 January 2019.

<https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/indigenous-arts-and-languages/2019-international-year-indigenous-languages>

are important for the world's patrimony, they do reinforce similar saviour narratives to those that appeared in the mania of salvage anthropology. Despite its claims to protect and apply universality, the United Nations is unequivocally an apparatus of the west. The irony of using the west to undo the legacies of the west is not lost on Indigenous peoples.

The domination of English is not happenstance. It was mandated at educational institutions and was part of official government policies that began in the eighteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. The separation of children from their mothers also served to remove children from their mother tongue. Moreover, many Indigenous people have reported the threats and violence used against them to discourage speaking in language.⁹⁰ Such responses are not limited to Indigenous language speakers. On arriving in Australia in 1949, John Kaldor remembers being told off for speaking Hungarian in public.⁹¹ The punitive practices targeted at Indigenous communities have, however, contributed to the large-scale loss which linguists Felicity Meakins and Carmel O'Shannessy reported in 2016: 'of the approximately 250 languages which were spoken at first contact, only around 18 remain strong.'⁹²

Strategic policies to address linguistic endangerment have also been attempted by the Australian Government. In 1987, it recommended developing the National Aboriginal Languages Project (NALP) to fund Indigenous language education programmes and projects. The main outcome of this policy was the provision of funding to community-based Indigenous language programmes.⁹³ Despite this and other policies, the Government is still committed to English-only language instruction, and bilingual programmes at primary and secondary school remain at the mercy of inconsistent policy implementation. Unsurprisingly this has produced inconsistent results.⁹⁴ It is argued that fluency in English is a fundamental skill that all Australians, including Indigenous people, must have in order to maximise their learning opportunities and life chances, the current approach diminishes the value of Indigenous languages within the education system. Indigenous people are sutured into a pedagogical model that denigrates their history and its attendant forms of cultural knowledge.

⁹⁰ Christine Nicholls. 'Death by a Thousand Cuts: Indigenous Language Bilingual Education Programmes in the Northern Territory of Australia, 1972–1998', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 8, no. 2-3, 2005, pp 160-177.

⁹¹ Conversation with Jonathan Jones, September 2016.

⁹² Carmel O'Shannessy and Felicity Meakins. 'Australian Language Contact in Historical and Synchronic Perspective', *Loss and Renewal Australian Languages Since Colonisation*, De Gruyter Mouton, 2016, p7.

⁹³ Joseph Lo Bianco. *National Policy on Languages*, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987, p195-196.

⁹⁴ Christine Nicholls. 'Death by a Thousand Cuts: Indigenous Language Bilingual Education Programmes in the Northern Territory of Australia, 1972–1998', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 8, no. 2-3, 2005, pp160-177.

Cultural incongruencies between school and home are but one of the foundational problems that affect the academic outcomes of young Aboriginal children in the education system. From the outset, schools begin correcting the Aboriginal English spoken by many young Aboriginal children, which creates a dissonance with language and by extension the school system, engendering feelings of inferiority.⁹⁵ To overcome the learning discrepancies, many schools revise their curriculum to include primary texts written by Aboriginal people in the hope that this will improve student performance. While this is commendable at the level of intellectual and cultural diversity, it is the discordant pedagogy that limits scholastic growth. The education system is failing Aboriginal people by design and alternatives need to be found.

Indigenous languages have been under threat since colonisation and the relatively small numbers of speakers in discrete language groups and dialects has exacerbated their vulnerability.⁹⁶ Language obsolescence is, however, a recent phenomenon and complex linguistic repertoires were the norm for many Indigenous peoples. Linguists have chronicled the importance of mutual bilingualism as a way of increasing 'alliance, exchange and exogamy', particularly though not exclusively in pre-contact times.⁹⁷ Ceremonial events were often large intercultural gatherings and shared linguistic patterns were most common in Aboriginal groups where interaction was most frequent.

The title *barrangal dyara*, is in the Sydney language (also known as Gadigal, Eora or Darug) and demonstrates Jones's linguistic homage to the project site. His work on country honours the country by speaking directly to its ancestors and recognising its specificity. As Carmel O'Shannessy and Felicity Meakins have said: 'In many areas when people travel through lands, they speak the language belonging to the land they are on.'⁹⁸ The adherence to this Indigenous relational strategy is a significant cultural manoeuvre which invites the audience into Indigenous linguistic protocols. Creating the conditions for community bilingualism is therefore a significant symbolic and concrete achievement of the project.

Pronouncements of linguistic death are common, even by Indigenous writers. But these totalising and absolute assertions fail to capture the abiding nature of language within Indigenous understandings.

⁹⁵ Rosemary Cahill and Glenys Collard. 'Deadly Ways to Learn'...A Yarn About Some Learning We Did Together', *Comparative Education*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2003, p205.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p5.

⁹⁷ Nicolas Evans and Patrick McConvell. 'The enigma of Pama-Nyungan expansion in Australia', *Archaeology and Language II*, edited by Roger Blench and Mathew Spriggs, Routledge, 1998, p184.

⁹⁸ Carmel O'Shannessy and Felicity Meakins. 'Australian Language Contact in Historical and Synchronic Perspective', *Loss and Renewal Australian Languages Since Colonisation*, De Gruyter Mouton, 2016, p7.

Language is sentient and is inscribed into circular lifeways of birth, death and rebirth. Language is also understood as embedded in the land itself. The term ‘awakening’ has been a useful descriptor of these projects of language and cultural revitalisation. Languages cannot be dead or extinct. They are eternal and dormant. Through programmes of revitalisation, these sleeping languages can be reactivated and awakened.⁹⁹

The *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) project necessitated wide community consultation, with each community deciding how it wanted to be represented. In Tamworth, a group of kindergarten kids spoke in Kamilaroi. For the Gunditjmara language, songs were written and sung. Similarly under one of large Moreton Bay Fig Tree, visitors heard a soundscape conversation that was overseen by Uncle Charles ‘Chicka’ Madden and produced by his granddaughters, Lille, Madeline Miah, and Ruby Madden in the Sydney language. As Matt Poll has observed: ‘[T]he great assemblages of language words, especially in Eora Country (Sydney), which provide the platform for so many of the amazing cultural regeneration and revitalisation projects today, all relied on the intellectual generosity of Eora women.’¹⁰⁰ These three contemporary Eora women are the rightful beneficiaries of this intellectual heritage and they reclaim it with a profound gratitude. This is not just a transformative activation of the archive but a strategic renewal of cultural processes of archiving and knowledge transfer. Lille Madden, one of the participants, describes the sense of reconnection that was kindled with her role in the Kaldor Public Art Projects. Her words convey the power of activating a latent language and the emotionally restorative effect:

You feel when you say those words that you were always meant to say those words. It is a good feeling to be able to speak the language and to be standing on Gadigal land at the same time – it makes me feel more connected to people past and present.¹⁰¹

As Doug Marmion, Kazuko Obata and Jakelin Troy observe: ‘Preserving and strengthening languages is not simply about language as a means of communication, but also relates to its role in supporting a strong sense of identity, an ongoing connection to traditional culture, and improved wellbeing.’¹⁰²

⁹⁹ For a case study of this process, please see Geoff Anderson. ‘Introducing Wiradjuri language in Parkes’, *Re-Awakening Languages: Theory and Practice in the Revitalisation of Australia’s Indigenous Languages*, edited by John Robert Hobson, Kevin Lowe, Susan Poetsch and Michael Walsh, 2010, pp67-74.

¹⁰⁰ Matt Poll. 2018, p39.

¹⁰¹ Lille Madden quoted in Peter Munro. ‘Sydney Festival’s reawakening of the Sydney language is ‘music to the ears’’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 January 2017, accessed 24 February 2019.
<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/sydney-festivals-reawakening-of-the-sydney-language-is-music-to-the-ears-20161221-gtg1ns.html>

¹⁰² Doug Marmion, Kazuko Obata, Jakelin Troy. *Community, Identity, Wellbeing: The Report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey*, 2014, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, p53.

Similarly, Ngarigu Professor Jakelin Troy writes movingly about the first time she spoke her language publicly. This speaking brought home an awareness of both of the magnitude of her cultural and identity loss and the possibilities of recovery:

Speaking my language was a visceral experience that left me weeping for something I couldn't articulate. A loss so deep it was breathtaking. I have seen many Aboriginal people have the same reaction as they begin the journey back to speaking in their own language.¹⁰³

The language component of *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) was underpinned by a shared strategy of relearning that was modelled by important cultural leaders like Dr Stan Grant Senior AM. Growing up, Grant was taught in secret by his grandfather in spite of the considerable risks that this posed.¹⁰⁴ For thirteen years, he worked on the first Wiradjuri dictionary with linguist Dr John Rudder, and he understood that language refers not just to an inventory of words but to a community of speakers.¹⁰⁵ Grant has been instrumental in teaching generations of Wiradjuri language speakers and the language is now taught in a number of schools in central New South Wales. The importance of language education for contemporary Wiradjuri people lies in its ability to restore a sense of identity and unlock cultural ways of being, knowing and becoming. As Grant says:

Language gives you a different way of thinking. It's a different world. It's your world. You're not looking at a world that belongs to someone else; you're looking at a world that belongs to you. And it's who you are...Language is what you are, it's what you eat, it's what you do, it's how you live, it's how you breathe, it's how you show yourself. Without language, without the knowledge of language, we have nothing.¹⁰⁶

At Parkes High School, in New South Wales, Wiradjuri is now taught as part of the Higher School Certificate. At the time of the project, five out of the six schools in the town of Parkes teach Wiradjuri to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children; this affects approximately 1000 children a year or 10% of the

¹⁰³ Jakelin Troy. 'The first time I spoke in my own language I broke down and wept', *The Guardian*, 1 December, 2015, accessed 7 January 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/01/the-first-time-i-spoke-in-my-own-language-i-broke-down-and-wept>

¹⁰⁴ Dr Stan Grant Senior AM. 'The language, it has always been part of me', *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, edited by Ross Gibson, Jonathan Jones, and Genevieve O'Callaghan, Kaldor Public Arts Project, 2016, p84.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p84.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p85.

population.¹⁰⁷ This highly successful programme fosters a deeper sense of connection for Aboriginal people and allows non-Aboriginal people to have a greater understanding of people, place and history.

The installation underscored the value not just of Indigenous languages but also that of orality. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue:

Eurocentric thinking tends to equate the non-literate with the *illiterate*. It values literacy over orality, and assigns the prerogative of interpreting history to the literate European.¹⁰⁸ (emphasis in original)

Although small brochures were produced and apps created for mobile devices as part of *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*), there was little didactic material distributed within the Royal Botanic Garden. This approach was meant as a reproach to the longstanding historic biases of written archives. More significantly, however, the installation created the conditions for conversations that might ensure the realising of Indigenous methodologies. Paid invigilators spoke to visitors, defending the project's content and its wider implications; these individuals, half of them Koori, were tasked with engaging people through face-to-face conversations. Attentive to the dialogical function of Indigenous storytelling, invigilators fostered potential interanimation between listener and narrator. The public programming was also intentionally heavy on public lunchtime discussions, which highlighted Jones's methodology of *Dhulu-ya-rrabu wudha-gar-bin-ya-bu yindyamal-dhuray-bu* (talking straight, listening deeply and acting respectably). This Indigenous model of yielding space to knowledge keepers was incorporated into the exhibitionary logic of the project.

5.9 Conclusion

Jonathan Jones's curation is derived from a highly developed methodology that also underpins his academic research and his artistic practice. It is therefore aligned not to disciplinary allegiances, but to cultural ones. With and through this cultural materiality, Jones speaks into the archive and recalibrates archival practices. When colonisation attempts to destroy cultural practices, Indigenisation reconfigures them. He demonstrates the benefit of a synergistic relationship to community that connects and supports the renewal of cultural practices. Remaking cultural objects is important but reawakening cultural modes of being is the ultimate purpose of Indigenisation. Jones's curation activates and

¹⁰⁷ Suzi Taylor. *Our Mother Tongue: Wiradjuri*, ABC: OPEN, 8 June, 2012, accessed 30 January 2019 <https://open.abc.net.au/explore/22207>

¹⁰⁸ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. 'Esthetics of Resistance', *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, 1994, p298.

endorses important lifeways that are essential for the cultural wellbeing of communities of artistic practice. Incessant attacks on cultural practice can weaken whole communities. More subtle than violence, the inability to engage completely with the sacredness and fullness of their cultural material renders many communities sick. Art-making provides one platform to access and enact cultural obligations that are embedded in the land. Through this revitalisation of cultural practices, places are re-energised, people are fortified and communities are respirited. The *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* project embodies and contributes to this process.

A shield is made by carving away part of a tree, which leaves behind what is known as a scar tree. A scar is a site of wounding but also repair. Like the scar made from carving a shield from the tree, Jones's practice exposes processes of grief and renewal. Indigenous people need to reclaim their cultural practices confidently in order to enact personal and cultural healing.

The sensitive curation of *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* is grounded in an unwavering belief in and commitment to cultural ways of being. It is premised on the foresight of past generations who left behind traces of their cultural material to be found and reclaimed eventually by their descendants. This patient reawakening is alluded to by Jones, who knows what it means to experience the world in terms of loss and lack. In a symbolic call to arms, he writes:

It reminds us that our culture is like a boomerang that has been crafted and thrown into the future by our ancestors, returning to us now from the past. In Wiradjuri the return flight of the boomerang is known as '*darribal*', and this remarkable action is akin to the deep and indescribable connection you feel when you can speak your language and craft the objects of your ancestors, holding strong to their knowledge, asserting a voice that was once denied, taking pride in your culture, and, in doing so, taking it forward for the next generation, just as we have done for countless generations.¹⁰⁹

Jonathan Jones embraces the potential for intercultural learning by showcasing not just Wiradjuri but the languages of seven other cultural groups. This mobilisation of the south-east does not conflate togetherness with sameness but instead enunciates cultural and linguistic specificity. While not an expert in the languages that are not his own, Jones demonstrates the rich potential for intercultural learning through his own role in documenting and presenting these enlivened languages. The

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Jones. 'Lighting the Fire and the return of the boomerang', 2014, p38.

insistence on individual Indigenous languages and, by extension, individual Indigenous epistemologies, is at the core of this project. The ultimate aim of Indigenisation, with its reliance on English, is to be replaced. Projects of Indigenisation create pathways to recover ways of naming, speaking and understanding value, that derive from Indigenous languages themselves. We should not be strangers to ourselves. It is through this methodology, that Indigenous people can unbelong to colonial histories and write, speak and enact our own.

The faithful remaking of cultural objects has been one of the strongest expressions of the cultural renaissance and reconfiguration of the south-east. Charlotte Townsend-Gault notes that the revival of customary practices in all its tonalities and complexities has an explicit political agenda.¹¹⁰ But to partake of one's cultural inheritance, particularly one that has been repressed for generations, can be personally transformative. One of the most poignant expressions of cultural revival is in the speaking of the language of one's ancestors, which can be both profoundly painful and a release from the hurt of unbelonging.

¹¹⁰ Charlotte Townsend-Gault. 'Kinds of Knowing', *Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, edited by Morgan Perkins and Howard Morphy, 2006, p536.

Conclusion: Belonging

*In response to the rejection of the use of the term sovereignty at NMAI, as a decolonizing strategy I argued that any colonial-settler nation can define the terms of Indigenous sovereignty within its own legal system, but that does not mean that Indigenous nations must accept those interpretations.*¹

Jolene Rickard

Increasing the visibility of Indigenous people and by extension, Indigenous art and culture has been a vital motivation for many Indigenous curators. It is for this reason that many of them have chosen to work within sites of significant cultural capital. As anthropologist Nicholas Thomas suggests, ‘the affirmation of Indigenous culture, which is displayed in many contexts for tourists and shown in prestigious national cultural institutions, unavoidably translates into recognition of native people, if in a partial and uncertain way’.² Clearly, positioning Indigenous art and culture within dominant institutions can facilitate the widest possible exposure.³ Furthermore, exhibiting Indigenous art inside institutions with diverse collections, but indifferent or hostile histories simultaneously calls out these exclusionary and marginalising narratives and intervenes usefully into them.

Moreover, positioning Indigenous art alongside historically canonised world art traditions can arguably accord Indigenous art an equivalent status. Though often well intended, these approaches may imply that Indigenous art must rely on the canonising framework of the western institution to validate its cultural worth. Within these juxtapositions, Indigenous art is not seen as self-possessed of its own culturally productive and aesthetic value. Indeed, the suppositions of this argument are prejudicial and reinforce rather than dislodge the centrality of these institutions, reifying their definitional and categorical power. Rather than conceding to this hierarchical system of value, it is important for Indigenous exhibitions and Indigenous curators to create what Fred Myers calls ‘disturbances’ within these systems; this means seeking change within them, breaking them down and creating new forms of Indigenous systemisation.⁴ The power of Indigenous curation is predicated on its powers to reformulate

¹ Jolene Rickard. ‘Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors.’ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 2, Duke University Press etc, 2011, pp465–86.

² Nicholas Thomas. ‘Beginnings’, *Possessions: Indigenous Art*, Thames & Hudson, 1999, p14.

³ Jennifer Barrett. ‘Introduction’, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, John Wiley & Sons, 2010, p1.

⁴ Fred Myers. ‘Disturbances in the Field: Exhibiting Aboriginal Art in the US’, *Journal of Sociology* vol. 49, no.2-3, 2013, p170.

in unique and complex ways. James Clifford has reflected on how this transformation occurred through an Indigenous mode of curation observing that: 'in other crucial aspects they are not museums at all: they are continuations of indigenous traditions of storytelling, collecting and display.'⁵

As discussed in this thesis, Indigenous curators are not oblivious to the historic dynamics of power that are present within dominant institutions, but it is vital that we do not give too much determinative power to these institutions and the regimes they represent. When it comes to Indigenous art, the interpretive struggle is to recognise that not only does it have a different value to western art, but it has to be valued differently. As I have written elsewhere: 'The lesson of Indigenous art is not that it behaves differently from contemporary art, but rather that contemporary art can no longer be considered a singular entity. Like the other myriad alternate forms of contemporary art practice current today, Indigenous art must be evaluated on its own terms.'⁶ By extension, Indigenous exhibitions need to be understood on their own terms, and this thesis has demonstrated a framework for Indigenous curatorial strategies from the 1980s and 1990s up to the present day. These identified strategies are grounded in Indigenous beliefs, practices and histories but they are often not intelligible to non-Indigenous critics and audiences.

In 1988, Indigenous art needed the validation of the Biennale of Sydney and the National Gallery of Australia to foster aesthetic recognition for the emerging category of contemporary Indigenous art. Only nine years later, some of the best artists in Australia including Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Anmatyerre, 1910–96), Yvonne Koolmatrie, (Ngarrindjeri, born 1945) and Judy Watson (Waanyi, born 1959), were represented at the Venice Biennale, arguably one of the most prestigious exhibitions of contemporary art in the world. Clearly these forms of institutional recognition have played an enormously important role in securing the position that Indigenous art now enjoys in Australia. But this narrative, which rewards both the institution and the beneficiaries of institutionalisation, assumes that only these institutions have the power to recognise and bestow value.

As mentioned in the introduction, in 2011, the resignation of Hetti Perkins from the Art Gallery of New South Wales created a broader discussion about the value of institutions to Indigenous art and culture when it is typically structured within and under Australian and or International art.⁷ As Hetti Perkins said

⁵ James Clifford. 'Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections', *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990, p215.

⁶ Stephen Gilchrist. 'Am I a Good Painter or Not?', *No Boundaries: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary Abstract Painting: From the Debra and Dennis Scholl Collection*, edited by Henry F Skerrett, Nevada Museum of Art and Prestel, 2014, p48.

⁷ Vanessa Russ. 'Part Two: Exhibitions of Aboriginal Art and Mainstreaming: Hetti Perkins', *A Study of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Australian Aboriginal Art: Aboriginal Perspectives and Representations in State Art Galleries*, PhD, Unpublished thesis, University of Western Australia, Perth, 2013, p242.

about Indigenous people and the art practices they represent, while working within these institutions: 'we are always the bridesmaids, never the brides'.⁸ The fault, however, is not with Indigenous people, art or culture but with a discordant and hierarchical regime that is not attuned to Indigenous difference and value. Within this environment, it is difficult, if not impossible for Indigenous art to be equal to other forms of art. As a response to this realisation and the limits of the 'bark ceiling', Perkins suggested that a new national Indigenous art space should be built to accommodate an 'Indigenous vision' of art and culture.⁹

The politics of Indigenous curation should not be simplistically reduced to an impossible choice of independence and or assimilation. This is a false binary which undermines intercultural realities of agency. I do not wish to diminish the contributions that pioneering Indigenous curators have made to institutions in Australia and internationally. These important exhibitions have radically changed the Australian and international fields of art. Instead I focused on the theoretical and praxiological ways in which these exhibitions can be within the representative space of these institutions but not be entirely defined by them. I have considered collection-oriented curation through a discussion of the British Museum's Indigenous collection, but in all other cases, I have privileged forms of guest-curation to elaborate this concept.

While I have not investigated what a new national space would or could look like in this thesis, I have wanted to explore ways of focusing Indigenous registers of value within these institutions through a methodology of unbelonging. Unbelonging is a reiterative process of self-determination. It is not to disappear within the state, but to trouble and to refuse the state's very real histories of 'dispossession and containment'.¹⁰ To unbelong is to create and reflect other modes of being, seeing and knowing. This curatorial manoeuvre of conceptual detachment creates a self-determined space that is useful for the production and reception of Indigenous cultural forms. It is within this space that I have demonstrated the ways in which Indigenous curators offer Indigenous forms of value.

The deconstructionist and corrective agenda within Indigenous curated exhibition is often easier to identity. But this thesis has privileged and brought to light, the performative and declarative modes of

⁸ Hetti Perkins quoted in Fred Myers. 'Recalibrating the Visual Field: Indigenous Curators and Contemporary Art', *Difference Identity Makes: Indigenous Cultural Capital in Australian Cultural Fields*, edited by Lawrence Bamblett, Fred Myers and Tim Rowse, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2019, p69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p73.

¹⁰ Judith Butler. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, edited by Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Seagull Books, 2007, p5.

Indigenisation. This thesis has attempted to capture these modes through the very terms of its structuring. Lingering, Insisting, Refusing, Voicing and Resurfacing. These modalities gesture towards the ceremonial and the sensorial. They are empowered and legitimising. Despite centuries of subjugation, it is still possible to be Indigenous, to Indigenise and to enact profound instantiations of Indigenisation. These embodied and declarative acts responsibly courier the preciousness of Indigenous art, culture and people into the future. As Scholar Linda Tuhiwi-Smith (Ngāti Awa/Ngāti Porou) writes:

While non-Indigenous research has been intent on documenting the demise and cultural assimilation of Indigenous peoples, celebrating survival accentuates not so much our demise but the degree to which Indigenous peoples and communities have successfully retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity.¹¹

Through its in-depth analysis of six exhibitions curated by Indigenous curators, this thesis has shown how Indigenous forms of value and authenticity are mobilised in the public sphere. This thesis has offered an Indigenous lens of critical thinking and looking, to demonstrate the coordinated and concerted efforts of Indigenous curators to articulate alternative codes of value and forms of belonging to people, place and history.

In chapter one of this thesis, I noted that the curation of the *Aboriginal Memorial* (1987-88) by Djon Mundine was an opportunity to demonstrate the aesthetic, political and spiritual concerns of Indigenous people. It mobilised alternative histories of place and performed a local Yolngu ritual to enact a national reckoning within the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. It asserted the importance of the interplay between cultural objects and the practices that they encode. Indigenous art is multi-modal, and this is a crucial element of its vitality. Indigenous works of art are not just for looking, they must be enacted.

The *fluent* (1997) exhibition at the Venice Biennale in the Australian Pavilion didn't just demonstrate the significance of Indigenous art, it insisted on its own terms of significance. To signify the beauty and depth of Indigenous art, the curatorial team of Brenda L Croft and Hetti Perkins created expansionary movement within the canon of contemporary art. But they didn't just test the limits of the canon, they pushed at the very idea of canonicity and offered new interpretive models that are based on relationships to people and place. Within the high-stakes environment of the Venice Biennale, they

¹¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, 1999, p145.

insisted on Indigenous modes of value that included an appreciation of and respect for the deep local which nourishes Indigenous people in physical and spiritual ways.

At the Harvard Art Museums, I curated the exhibition, *Everywhen: the Eternal Present from Indigenous art from Australia* (2016). This was a provocation to imagine the world otherwise and to experience it through Indigenous terms of reference. The exhibition demonstrated how Indigenous people are inscribed into temporal, disciplinary and historical systems not of their making. It is often necessary to refuse this process of inscription which flattens and contains the Indigenous experience through the lens of the west. In this space of refusal, we can better focus on the negotiation of Indigenous precedents and Indigenous futures.

The exhibition *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* (2015) curated by Dr Gaye Sculthorpe demonstrated not only Indigenous value systems, but how they have survived over time. Her curation was attentive to listening to the memory of place and to the memory of objects. Despite the shadow of repatriation that looms large over the British Museum, Sculthorpe's curation attempted to free the 'Voicings' of Indigenous people that are embedded within and associated with many of the objects in the British Museum's collection. In this way, the exhibition revealed the history of Indigenous agency despite the histories of oppression.

Kelli Cole's curation of *Unsettled: Voices Within* (2015-2016) at the National Museum of Australia responded to the longing that is often associated with historic and rare objects in overseas collections. With the artists, she engaged in a process of listening. *Unsettled* enacted a visual repatriation that was deeply cultural and severely critical of historical museum practices. Cole took for granted the proposition that objects are subjects and her sensitive curation allowed the many subjective voices to speak and be heard.

The 2016 installation *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* by artist and curator Jonathon Jones demonstrated both the fragility and the resilience of the south-east. The installation invoked the devastation of cultural loss and showed audiences how it is being recovered, renewed and restored. Through the extraordinary commitment of Indigenous people to the histories and knowledge embedded in place and within objects, new and old ways of being can be resurfaced and reconstituted.

It is clear that the aims of Indigenous curation are both political and cultural. While political agitation is at least part of the project, it is important to understand Indigenous curation not merely through a lens

of transgression, resistance or antagonism. Although this stance is certainly deployed in curatorial responses to colonisation, I argue that it is not wholly its purpose. It cannot just be about taking power away from colonial definitional structuring, but about renewing and contributing to Indigenous knowledge systems. It is about our own power and creating our own forms of belonging.

Our brokenness is who we are, but it is not all that we are. The ancestors fought knowing that they might lose. But to risk something is to value it. Despite our losses, we need to value them not to pardon those who contributed to the losses, but to remember those who risked the profundity of loss. We have to carry the pain of this loss, but we do not have to carry its shame. Indigenisation is a way to attend to this brokenness, defy this brokenness and to repair this brokenness.

Indigenisation is memorial and it is renewal. It is lingering in the space of discomfort and remembering those who risked their lives in order for us to live ours. It is resurfacing the embedded traces the ancestors left for us and because of us and transforming them into meaningful manifestations of cultural materiality. It is refusing the totalising colonial narratives that we have been inscribed into and forging our own cultural and critical narratives. It is voicing our own ways of doing things by listening attentively to ancestral echoes. It is in the voicing of the truth and authenticity of our own stories and our own values. This process returns us to who we are and guides us towards who we will be. For as long as there are Indigenous people drawing on and building up Indigenous communities, artists and practices, the colonial project is not just incomplete, it is incompletable.

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