



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE Contemporaneity

Vol 5, No 1 "Agency in Motion" (2016) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI
10.5195/contemp.2016.183
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

Awakening Objects and Indigenizing the Museum Stephen Gilchrist in Conversation with Henry F. Skerritt

Abstract

Curated by Stephen Gilchrist, *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia* was held at Harvard Art Museums from February 5, 2016–September 18, 2016. The exhibition was a survey of contemporary Indigenous art from Australia, exploring the ways in which time is embedded within Indigenous artistic, social, historical, and philosophical life. The exhibition included more than seventy works drawn from public and private collections in Australia and the United States, and featured many works that have never been seen outside Australia. *Everywhen* is Gilchrist's second major exhibition in the United States, following *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art* in 2012. Conducted on April 22, 2016, this conversation considers the position of Indigenous art in the museum, and the active ways in which curators and institutions can work to "indigenize" their institutions. Gilchrist discusses the evolution of *Everywhen*, along with the curatorial strategies employed to change the status of object-viewer relations in the exhibition. The transcription has been edited for clarity.

About the Authors

Belonging to the Yamatji people of northwest Western Australia, **Stephen Gilchrist** is Associate Lecturer of Indigenous Art at the University of Sydney. He was the Australian Studies Visiting Curator at the Harvard Art Museums where he curated *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*.

Henry F. Skerritt is curator of Indigenous art of Australia at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, University of Virginia. Skerritt is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh.

Awakening Objects and Indigenizing the Museum

Stephen Gilchrist in Conversation with
Henry F. Skerritt

Henry F. Skerritt (HS): I'd like to start by discussing your evolution as a curator, and in particular, how it shapes the thinking behind *Everywhen*.

Stephen Gilchrist (SG): Well, my work as a curator can be characterized by un-belonging and belonging—working within institutions and without—and the pros and cons that come with both of those opportunities. As a curator I want to

keep trying new things by working with different artists, different collections, and different spaces. I've worked with Australian state and national collections and at university art museums in North America. For what it's worth, I consider myself to be a curator of contemporary art and so the *Everywhen* show was an opportunity for me to work more explicitly with historic objects. The invitation for this show was to think about those ideas that I bring about the contemporary, of presentness, of nowness, and to place them in conversation with the history of collections. Within this framework, I was hopeful that the show could also be an intervention into those collections.

HS: That's interesting because you've already brought up the idea of the historical. At the same time, *Everywhen* to me is a very conceptual exhibition. It's quite different to any surveys of its kind staged before. What were you trying to do with that show in particular, and what were the particular challenges that it brought up?

SG: For me, the provocation of the show is really to imagine the world otherwise: to think through, between, and beyond, what we've been presented as the dominant narratives of Indigenous art and culture. Colonization isn't the meta-narrative of Indigeneity, but people often think that it is, so in this show I wanted to explore other ways of being in time; the rhythms of seasonal time, the shape-shifting of ancestral time, the measures of ceremonial time in addition to colonial and post-colonial time. I wanted people to engage not just with the 228 years since colonization, but also with the 40,000 plus years of Indigenous residence on the place now termed Australia. The invitation for visitors is to become synchronous with the *Everywhen*, even if only momentarily, and by doing so they could lessen the burden of the colonial register in this exhibition. Of course colonization is there, it's never going away, but you can try to blunt it somehow.

And to me this methodological approach endorses the potential of Indigenization within museums. It is a process of un-assimilation. By making the frames of reference to be wholly Indigenous, as much as we can, we are not just decolonizing the space, we are in fact Indigenizing it.

HS: Can you just tease out the distinction there? It strikes me that part of that distinction is one of intersubjectivity. You're trying to get away from this dialectic that frames the colonizer and the colonized in this kind of mutually dependent power relationship, is that right?



Figure 1

Installation view of "Seasonality" module from *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, curated by Stephen Gilchrist. Works left to right: Gulumbu Yunupingu, *Garak IV (The Universe)*, 2004; Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Syaw (Fish Net)*, 2008; Yumutjin Wunungmurra, *Gangan to Baraltja (Iarrakitj)*, 2005; Djirrirra Wunungmurra, *Dhalwangu (Iarrakitj)*, 2005; Djambawa Marawili, *Dhakandjali—Dhupundji (Iarrakitj)*, 2006; Djirrirra Wunungmurra, *Yukuwa*, 2010; and Judy Watson, *Bunya*, 2011. Image Courtesy Harvard Art Museums, © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

SG: Exactly. The exhibition isn't merely about time, it is also about power and who gets to claim time, history, place, and cultural memory. The essential question for me is not why are we excluded from cultural texts and institutions, art histories, and formations of nationhood, but why are we part of these systems to begin with. The norm is a disruption for Indigenous people, so how can we disrupt this historical violence that has become normative? For me, one possible strategy is to return to the foundational narratives of place, people and practice and to weave those into the internal logic of the exhibition.

Even though both strategies are necessary and productive, I feel that there is a different inflection between a curatorial practice that privileges philosophies of decolonization over Indigenization. For me at least, the former is about undoing something that invariably feels like you are forever playing catch up. Indigenization for me is about doing; manifesting, instantiating, and running our own race on our own terms. I am reluctant to say the distinction is between "undoing" and "being" as I don't want to reproduce unhelpful essentialist tropes, but I think there is something crucial about openness and creating openings to Indigenous ways of seeing, knowing, and being.

HS: And how is that being received in the USA?

SG: It's so hard to be objective.

HS: Well you don't have to be objective.

SG: Well, there is actually a lot of freedom in doing a show for North American audiences, because many of the signposts that are used and are useful for Australian audiences don't register here. Conceptually, I needed to disrespect chronology, to disrespect these colonial geographies, and to disrespect these distinctions between the urban, the remote and the rural, but they were also practical considerations too. I want people to understand the breadth, sophistication, beauty, and politics of Indigenous art and I hope that most visitors get a sense of that. It would be great if visitors could spend time with these unfamiliar ideas that can potentially recalibrate their understanding of Indigeneity.

HS: Let's get down to more practical questions. Can we talk a bit about the show's evolution? I'm thinking here very much in the practical sense, the way you went through thinking about the collections at Harvard, and but also of the other collections that you drew from. What do the practicalities of putting a show like this together look like?

SG: My very first visit to Harvard University included a tour of the collection storage at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, but at that stage I didn't really have a clear idea of what I wanted to see, as I didn't really know what was there. With the Collections Manager, I was pulling out drawers, looking, seeing, listening to which objects spoke to me and which objects were of interest. One of the first groups of objects that I saw were the beautiful *riji* (engraved pearl shells) that we have in the exhibition. One in particular was a broken pearl shell, with incised geometric designs that were infilled and rubbed with ochre. What interested me was that it represented a fragment of material culture that was thousands and thousands of miles from where it came from. But it also voiced this promissory moment of reconnection. I wanted the objects to go through this process of somehow returning to the communities from which they came.

Museums do represent loss for Indigenous peoples, so this object literalized these ideas of brokenness and of being incomplete. I wanted the objects to represent both the ceremonies that never were, the ceremonies that never could be, but also be a conduit of reconnection. Sometimes, the information that we have as museum professionals and as Indigenous people is not just incomplete, but incompletable. But this process of falling into the unknown brings us closer to who we were, who we are, and who we will be.

An important component of this idea of reconnection was touch. And so I chose objects from the Peabody's collection that were and are cradled, woven, worn, held close, performed, struck. In this exhibition we have *coolamons* (vessels), basketry, mats, pearl shells, drums, and three *larrakitj* (hollow log coffins) to demonstrate a life lived through objects and how the abstracted Indigenous body becomes reconstituted.

Interestingly, we received instructions from a community about who exactly could touch their objects. And it was a great reminder that touch is conditional, relational and it is also a gift. The objects are like the notation but when they come into contact with communities in real and symbolic ways, this notation becomes music.

HS: I think that's a segue to talk about objects, because one of the things that strikes me about this show, *Everywhen*, and *Crossing Cultures* and some of the other shows that you've done, is that you seem very interested in allowing the objects to speak and allowing them to speak in relation to other objects.¹ Often there seems to be a feeling with Aboriginal art exhibitions that, in order to provide adequate "context," the exhibitions must include mountains of text, video, audio, and other supplementary material. How do you deal with objects whose meanings are often ambiguous or alien to viewers, particularly in America, and how can objects in museums speak without the curator speaking for them?

SG: I think that is one of the most difficult tasks as a curator. I actually think that we do have a lot of text, almost every object has its own extended label of about 150 words, we do have video interviews with artists in the space and we do have regular guided tours. As a teaching museum, the exhibition had to fulfill certain pedagogical takeaways and I had to give people enough points of access, in multiple platforms for them to respond to the visual, auditory, temporal, and scholarly information in the space. These are fairly traditional ways of communicating information but they don't by themselves do the work that needs to be done by the visitor or even the object.

HS: Can you expand on what you mean by that? Because I think there is something about your curating that is very respectful to honoring the works and their creators, and their cultures. So what do you mean when you say that it is a really traditional manner? Because, I think that term has slightly different connotations in the American and Australian contexts.

1 See Stephen Gilchrist, ed., *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2012).



Figure 2

Installation view of "Transformation" module from *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, curated by Stephen Gilchrist. Works background, left to right: Walter Tjamlitjinpa, *Rainbow and Water Story*, 1972; Mick Namararri Tjapaltjarri, *Big Cave Dreaming with Ceremonial Object*, 1972; Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, *Two Women Dreaming*, 1990; and Gunybi Ganambarr, *Buyku*, 2011. Foreground, left to right: Unidentified artist, *Coolamon*, c.1896-1931; Unidentified artist, *Coolamon*, c.1896-1931; Unidentified artist, *Coolamon*, c.1951; and Unidentified artist, *Coolamon*, c.1951. Image Courtesy Harvard Art Museums, © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

SG: Yes, we are talking about two overlapping sets of traditions. As a curator or art historian you can't be closed to what the object is trying to say to you or to audiences. Indigenous people sometimes describe it as "waking up objects," so the first point of departure is being open to these awakenings with objects. And that means having a reverence and a respect for these objects, recognizing that you can unlock this cultural information through these encounters, sometimes through touch, but, also through the other senses as well: looking, smelling, listening, touching. I think that is a traditional Indigenous way.

I think art museums produce particular ways of thinking and behaving. You read a label that has an authoritative, omniscient voice that is based on the assumption that we're all children of the Enlightenment, and that we want to have these rational, scientific labels. I'm not suggesting that there is no reason or intellectualism in Indigenous culture, but I am much more interested in different philosophies of perception. There are ways of understanding these objects that aren't necessarily cognitive.

HS: I think this comes back to the idea you'd spoke of earlier about Indigenizing the museum. You've written about shifting the role of the ethnographic museum to allow for the reaffirmation and reinterpretation of objects for Indigenous peoples. How do you think museums can take an alternative role for Indigenous peoples, to allow them to get in touch with their pasts and identities? Is that possible in a show like *Everywhen* that is so far from the geographic point of origin of the works? And does it require museums to completely rethink that kind of Enlightenment way of doing things as well, and to open themselves up to alternative ways of experiencing objects?

SG: Two of the works in the show are cylindrical-shaped ochred baskets that had become flattened and misaligned over the years. I chose them because they had these great abrasions from the wearer's shoulders showing the body imprinted on the object. Louise Hamby who had a Visiting Fellowship at the Peabody Museum invited an important Elder from Milngimbi to look at these works. When we selected them for display, Peabody conservators reversed the damage and by putting them on display, the works were awakened. It was through these active and generative encounters with those objects on a cultural but also a material level. Even though they are far from home, these objects become renewed through these active encounters.

HS: One of the things that strikes me is your emphasis on praxis, and on the active process of *Indigenizing* over the essentialized idea of Indigenous curating. I know you've spoken about striking a balance between Indigeneity as a strategically essentialist mode and a form of active being in the world. I'd like to try and tease out what this looks like in practice in the context of curating. What are the things that institutions might do to move forward in Indigenizing their institutions?

SG: Well, I think it's about recalibrating their relationship to the objects away from preservation into activation. It is about activating relationships and not defining them. Objects become fully realized through active encounters with their community. The cultural memory of objects resides with the community, and institutions need to be mindful of this. From the beginning, the objects for me weren't objects at all. They were subjects, and the challenge was how to deploy this subjective status for the viewer and for the institution.

At the opening of the show, I spoke about openness and being open. Institutions have to be open, and not closed to entering into dialogues about the memory of these cultural objects

and the custodianship of these objects. I think that is the first step. It's not necessarily about having Indigenous curators or, curators who have an Indigenist approach. The museum itself has to be open to this process of Indigenization.

HS: When you talk about that it sounds like a lot of it operates outside of the exhibition itself. Where do exhibitions fit into this? I think of how someone like Jens Hoffmann has started to refer to himself as an "exhibition maker" as opposed to a curator, in order to draw a distinction between these two practices. But it seems to me, when you talk about curating, you are speaking about it as a much broader activity.

SG: Like painting is more than painting, curating is more than curating. It is a social practice and a form of activism, and those modalities are engaged within the space, but also, as you say, outside the exhibition space.

For me, an exhibition is about "presencing." It is about being in and with the presence of the ancestors, but it is also about bringing things into view, into focus, into relief. Sometimes it is less about the accomplishment of that goal and more about the effort.

I'm particularly thinking about the objects whose original names have been erased. We engage with the object and with the community to allow for a surfacing of information that can be presented in the space. We changed the labels to read "Unidentified Artist" rather than "Unknown Maker," and for me this was about presencing the humanness of the makers and perhaps the carelessness of the collectors. Within these histories of erasure what can still be presented?

HS: How have the various projects that you've worked on before helped you to develop your ideas on the possibilities and the potentials of an Indigenized practice, and how do you see the state of the field both locally and globally?

SG: Yeah, that is a hard question to answer for all kinds of reasons.

HS: Well, maybe a different way to approach the question is to ask who you would see as mentors, and what you learned from them. But also, how do you think that the challenges are different for an Indigenous curator working today as opposed to your predecessors, such as Hetti Perkins, Brenda Croft, or Djon Mundine?

SG: Yes, they are definitely my curatorial mentors and tormentors and I have learnt so much from them. One lesson is to use the enviable platform that we are given as curators to speak truth to power. But the monopolies of violence over our Indigenous communities are even greater today, and the risks of speaking out are high.

I worry about the state of Indigenous art at the moment. We reached a point, I guess in 2008, where there were Indigenous curators in every single state art gallery in Australia and of course the National Gallery of Australia. Since then, though, we have had a numerical regression with a number of high-profile senior level curators standing down, I think as a vote of no confidence in these institutions. But we have also had these locational regressions, where the space afforded to Indigenous art is shrinking. I guess it comes as no surprise when, as a nation, we have basically been going backwards politically. So I find all this very troubling. However, there is also a growing interest in Indigenous art internationally and I definitely see that continuing.

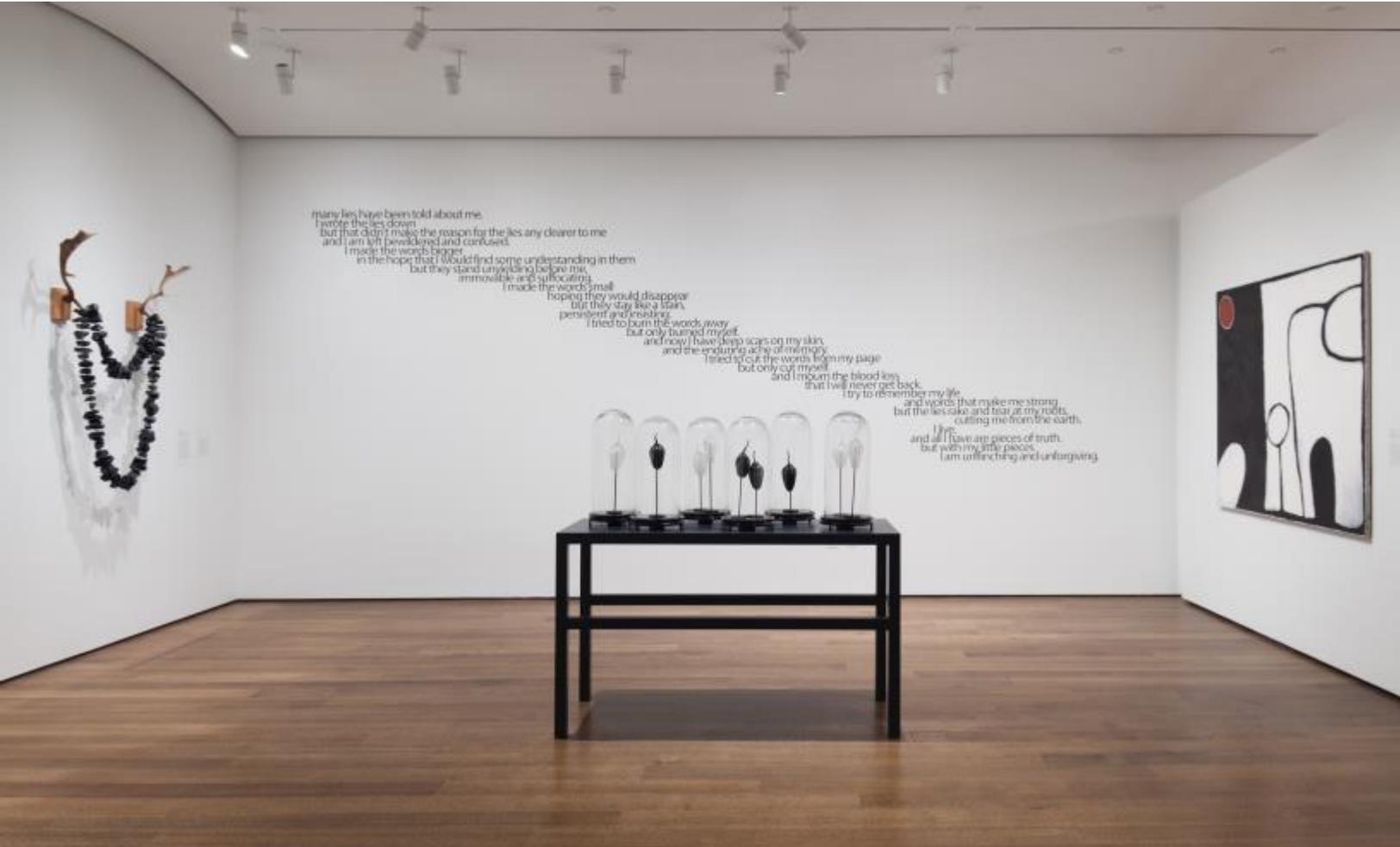


Figure 3

Installation view of "Remembrance" module from *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, curated by Stephen Gilchrist. Works left to right: Julie Gough, *Dark Valley, Van Dieman's Land*, 2008; Vernon Ah Kee, *many lies*, 2004; Yhonnie Scarce, *The silence of others (series of six)* N2360, N2409, N2357, N2394, N1858, N2358; and Paddy Nyukuny Bedford, *Emu Dreaming*, 2003. Image Courtesy Harvard Art Museums, © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

HS: I know it's a difficult question, but why do you think that this regression has happened?

SG: I do think, on one level Indigenous art has been a victim of its own success in Australia. Indigenous art was everywhere for a while. And, maybe audiences in Australia did reach a kind of saturation point and were no longer receptive to what it offered. For me it has been really great working in an international sphere, where Aboriginal art is not the Other to Australian art. It is immediately and necessarily part of an internationalized discussion around the categories of contemporary art and, by virtue of being seen in these new contexts, it creates expansionary movement in our understanding, awareness, and cultural value.

HS: I think that's an interesting question, about the sort of difference between the local to global context. I pulled this quote of yours that I liked a lot, where you said, "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."² I like that quote because it gets to the heart of a lot of the complex challenges that Aboriginal art poses in the contemporary art world context.

SG: I think maybe that the first wave of Indigenous curators were necessarily about visibility. It was about localized resistance to institutions that were refusing to exhibit Indigenous art and even refusing to consider Indigenous art as fine art, let alone contemporary art. I think new generations of Indigenous artists and curators are grappling with not necessarily the politics of exclusion, but the politics of inclusion, as in, how do we position ourselves? Now that we're here, we don't have to defend who we are, we get to define who we are. We don't have to be understood in opposition to the dominant culture, but we can be understood in relation to and with ourselves.

HS: In your essay "Indigenising Curatorial Practice" you make the point, that attempts to position Indigenous art globally often end up implying that Indigenous art needs the validation of the Western art world.³ But it strikes me that you're seeing an opportunity in this globalized space to enliven the world. You conclude your catalogue essay by saying, "[t]he Everywhen can show us that Indigenous art and culture do not merely represent the time before time, but in fact, awaken us to the fullness of it."⁴ I wonder if you can speak then to this question of separatism because it seems to me that separatism as a concept makes a lot more sense in Australia than it does for a curator in the USA. I guess the question is, where your international experience forces you to take different stances in the Australian context than the American context on these ideas.

2 Stephen Gilchrist and Janangoo Butcher Chere, "Am I a Good Painter or Not?" in *No Boundaries*, ed. Henry F. Skerritt (Reno and New York: Nevada Museum of Art and Prestel, 2014), 48.

3 Stephen Gilchrist, "Indigenising Curatorial Practice," in *The World is not a Foreign Land*, ed. Quentin Sprague (Parville: Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2014), 55-59.

4 Stephen Gilchrist, ed. *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2016), 30.

SG: Absolutely. It's not that the stakes are higher or lower, but the stakes are definitely different. Every exhibition is a curatorial exercise in wayfinding, and I think this exhibition has taught me that as I move through the world, relationships are my politics. It is about intellectual, cultural, and political engagement, and who we can bring with us into this collective and often difficult "we."

I felt that I was also using the institutional armature of Harvard University to state something that to me is self-evident. Aboriginal art isn't of the margins. It is something that is self-possessed and deserving of its own value. The work of the viewer is to not just question the canon, but question canonicity itself. The job of the curator is to negotiate the Indigenous systems of value that don't change with those that do.

HS: So, in that sense then, do you see yourself having to take on the role of translator, trying to translate one world into another world?

SG: Translation is definitely part of it but I think it's also about unsettling one world so it can better recognize the other.

HS: Critics like Tony Bennett have made a strong case that the institution of the museum is designed to perpetuate a very modernist and progressive version of time.⁵ *Everywhen* seems very much an attempt to work against the hegemony of progressive time. Returning to the question of Indigenizing the museum, how do you think that Indigenous cultural practices can work within or against the in-built temporal frames of the museum?

SG: When I was initially thinking about this exhibition and even when we were installing it, I did envision the museum as this site of temporal collapse. But it isn't about the disintegration or the flattening of time. It is about the possibilities of activating these registers of the past, present, and future.

The white-rectilinear galleries that I was given to work with have their own histories and significations and the only way I could address it was through configuring the exhibition as this endless figure eight which obviously is about non-linearity. The themes of the show are, like time itself, overlapping, dynamic and interactive and as you move through the space, you move through, between, and beyond these Indigenous temporal frames.

HS: I guess that that is the essence of not fetishizing the museum. I sometimes feel that there is a danger in hardline Foucauldian arguments of reifying the power structures, and then perpetuating their power. But if you don't let those power structures dictate, then there is the possibility of working within them as well against them.

⁵ Tony Bennet, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004).



Figure 4

Installation view of "Performance" module from *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, curated by Stephen Gilchrist. Works left to right: Doreen Reid Nakamarra, *Untitled*, 2007; Unidentified artist, *Warup (Drum)*, mid-19th—early 20th century; and Dorothy Napangardi, *Karntakurlangu Jukurrpa*, 2002. Image Courtesy Harvard Art Museums, © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

SG: Yes, I mean for me it's about redirecting energy and modeling these values within a space of discomfort but also a space of reciprocity. Your question was about museum framing and seeing?

HS: Yeah, that's right, I mean you are still working within a museum context. But it seems to me that *Everywhen* is very successful at working against those frames without necessarily being explicit in the way that it's doing it. It feels like quite a subtle piece of subterfuge.

SG: There's always a little bit of stealth work that is required and I do think it is probably closer to subversion than inversion. But at the same time, I was very up front about what I was doing and why I was doing it and asking why it hadn't been done before.

The Harvard Art Museums didn't want me to be curatorially anonymous and so they encouraged me to use my voice and the voicings of the artists to achieve these aims. With some things like the surfacing of Indigenous words for Indigenous objects, I didn't ask permission, but I also didn't think that I needed to.

HS: How would you respond to Indigenous American artists or curators who might argue that they face the same problems here, that Indigenous Australian curators face in Australia. I guess this a dual question, how do you think what you're doing here might be able to have an impact in Australia? But also, how do you think it might be able to impact what's going on in the local context here with Indigenous practice, which has really, I think, been neglected in a very big way?

SG: Oh, yeah, absolutely. At all the talks and lectures and presentations, and film screenings that we have had at Harvard, we have begun with an acknowledgement of country. And it's been really amazing how this small, but important gesture can really change the way people understand the place we are in. Some people have found it quite profound, and I've been struck by how necessary those things are because of the neglect of the incredible art practices of Native American artists. People have said to me, "you know, this [*Everywhen*] is great, but it'd be great to also see a Native American show here." And I have to say, I completely agree. What we have to do is just to try and show support, and show that we're trying to unpack some of the same things. So it's a case of trying to do two things at one time. I'm asking people to think about what happened in Australia, but also what happened here as well, so hopefully there's two takeaways to the show.

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