REVIEW

DECOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE MUSEUM. JONATHAN JONES'S ART AND THE LIVING ARCHIVE OF COUNTRY

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Jonathan Jones, Untitled (transcriptions of country). Sydney, Australia: Artspace, and Formist, 2023. Hardcover, 520 Pages, 240 × 170 mm (34,05€)

RECLAIMING AND REACTIVATING THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE

Jonathan Jones's *Untitled (transcriptions of country)* is a project that operates across multiple registers: as an exhibition,[1] as a book and as a collaborative, living and embodied archive. More than a catalogue in the conventional sense, the book extends and reactivates the exhibition it accompanies, offering the readers an inclusive and polyphonic experience that foregrounds the intertwined questions of knowledge, truth-telling[2] and the decolonization of the museum collections. Through a careful orchestration of images and voices, Jones and his collaborators propose a powerful rethinking of the archive – one that is not static or extractive, but relational, processual and grounded in artistic practices of care, transmission and collaboration.

The project takes as its historical point of departure the Baudin expedition, commissioned by Napoléon Bonaparte. This expedition, often framed as a scientific enterprise, was part of a broader colonial endeavour that sought to collect, classify and extract knowledge from colonized lands to European centres of power. Thousands of botanical specimens, zoological samples and cultural

objects were removed from the Eora region (Sydney) and incorporated into French collections, where – when not lost – they were recontextualized as objects of scientific enquiry. In this process, Indigenous knowledge systems were rendered invisible or irrelevant.

Jones's work engages critically with this legacy of extraction. Rather than simply reproducing the archival materials associated with the expedition, *Untitled (transcriptions of country)* initiates a process of reactivation and decolonization. It brings these materials into dialogue with contemporary Indigenous Australian artistic practices, thereby unsettling the authority of the colonial archive and opening it to other ways of knowing. This process can be understood as a form of decolonising the archive: not by rejecting it outright, but by transforming its meanings and uses through creative intervention. As Jonathan Jones himself explains:

> Although the collections and materials that were taken may never be returned to us, community still holds the authority over them by uniquely understanding their place in the world. The concept of activating an archive, of sharing our knowledge, making new connections and bringing these plants home became our tools of decolonisation.[3]

This statement encapsulates the project's core principles: the archive is not a fixed repository but a site that can be activated through knowledge-sharing, relationality and community authority.

A POLYPHONIC ECOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGES

Central to this transformation is the Indigenous Australian concept of country. Country is not merely land in the Western sense of territory or property. It is a relational and holistic entity that encompasses people, ancestors, non-human life-forms, and the stories that bind them together. As defined by Deborah Bird Rose:

> Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with. […] Country is a living entity. […] Country is multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air.[4]

Country is alive and it sustains life though reciprocal relationships of care and responsibility. Knowledge, in this framework, is not abstract or detached but embedded in lived practices and intergenerational transmission. Country is an ancestor that must be cared for, and caring for country is both an ethical obligation and a mode of knowledge repository and production. From the outset, the reader is positioned within a relational framework through a "Welcome to Country", performed through a written form by Uncle Charles Madden, thus establishing an ethical orientation rather simply providing contextual information. This ceremonial gesture sets the tone for what follows: an experience that is

not about mastering knowledge but about respectfully entering country, into a network of relationships.

The visual core of the project – both exhibition and book – consists of 308 embroidered panels depicting plant species from Eora Country (Sydney) collected during the Baudin expedition. These works replicate the format of Western botanical plates, yet their materiality – embroideries using only black thread – and collective mode of production fundamentally alter their meaning. Produced by a group of migrant embroiderers, the panels embody a form of knowledge-making that is collaborative rather than individual and process-based rather than extractive. The act of stitching becomes a form of care, a way of engaging with plant life that contrasts sharply with the disembedding logic of scientific collection.

The book not only reproduces these panels but also documents the collaborative processes behind them. Photographs of the artists at work, materials being collected, objects being made, and moments of exchange between participants highlight the importance of transmission and shared knowledge. These images underscore the fact that it is not simply about objects but about relationships – between artists, communities and country. In this sense, the book itself becomes a site of collaboration.

This emphasis on collaboration is further reinforced by the inclusion of texts by a wide range of contributors. Alongside essays by novelists, poets, academics and activists, the book features reflections by the elders and artists directly involved in the project – Aunty Julie Freeman, emu egg carver Uncle Badger Bates, and representative of the Embroiderers Collective Yamane Fayed, just to name a few. These voices are not marginal or supplementary; they are integral to the project's polyphonic structure. By foregrounding different forms of expertise – artistic, cultural, technical – the book challenges hierarchical distinctions between 'art' and 'craft', or between 'theory' and 'practice'.

Such an approach aligns with decolonial theories that advocate for an "ecology of knowledges,"[5] in which diverse epistemologies coexist without being subsumed into a dominant framework. Rather than presenting a unified narrative, the book invites readers to navigate a complex assemblage of perspectives, each contributing to a more holistic understanding of the project.

THE RE-STORYING OF OBJECTS

The title *Untitled (transcriptions of country)* encapsulates many of these concerns. The use of "Untitled" carries a specific historical resonance with museum contexts, where information was missing on labels of objects, often leading to their misattribution and loss. This term also tragically echoes the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the legal fiction that Australia was an empty land, belonging to no one, prior to European settlement, thereby invisibilising Indigenous presence and sovereignty. By adopting the term "Untitled", Jones both references and subverts

these histories. The absence of a fixed title resists the classificatory impulse that underpinned colonial collecting practices. It acknowledges the limits of Western frameworks of understanding, while opening a space for multiple interpretations. By simultaneously alluding to the loss of meaning and cultural identity within extractivist and colonial systems of knowledge and to a renewed potential for the recognition of different ways of knowing–one of these being contemporary art[6] associated to traditional artistic practices in this specific case–"*Untitled*" is already a decolonial statement in itself.

However, this absence of a title is at once rebutted by the addition of "*(transcriptions of country),*" which rewrites this history of erasure into a reclaiming of country as deeply meaningful and multi-faceted. The notion of 'transcription' suggests a process of translation, of rendering something from one form into another. Yet, as the contributions to the book make clear, this process is never neutral. As Wiradjuri poet, academic and activist Jeanine Leane observes, "all colonisation *is* translation,"[7] a process that often involves distortion, erasure and displacement. She argues:

> Archival interventions by First Nations creatives can re-member the dismembered stories of artefacts held hostage. Jones's exhibitions [...] untangle this rare, now-buried moment of embodiment. Jones's work also un-translates the colonial translations and re-stories stolen objects with stories of homelands. Only such dialogues can return and maintain connections and stories of journey, separation and reunion.[8]

Leane's formulation is crucial for understanding the stakes of Jones's project. If colonisation operates through acts of translation that dislocate and reframe knowledge, then decolonising practices must involve forms of "un-translation"–processes that restore and reconnect. The artworks and texts gathered in *Untitled (transcriptions of country)* enact precisely such a process. They do not seek to allude or return to an imagined pre-colonial context, but to reactivate connections that have been disrupted, to re-story objects and images in ways that acknowledge both loss and continuity.

The inclusion of other elements alongside these botanical embroidered panels–reframed portraits, carved emu eggs, boomerangs, replicas of missing objects–further enriches this project. The white replicas of missing objects, for instance, do not claim to replace what was lost; rather, they make absence visible, transforming loss into a site of reflection. All of these works and the texts related to them in the book engage with the question of how knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation, but also from Indigenous to non-Indigenous visitors and readers, and how it can be sustained in the face of disruption. The act of making becomes an act of remembering and re-membering: a way of holding together what has been displaced and disconnected.

The book's design and structure reinforce this emphasis on transmission. Rather than presenting information in a linear and hierarchical manner,[9] it invites

readers to navigate between images, pictures and texts, to engage with the material in a reflective and participatory way, to make new connections. This creates an experience that is both immersive and dialogic, encouraging readers to question their own positionality within these networks of knowledge and responsibility that the book evokes.

Ultimately, *Untitled (transcriptions of Country)* offers a compelling vision of what an archive can become when it is approached as a living, collaborative endeavour. It demonstrates that contemporary artistic practices have the capacity, not only to criticize historical forms of knowledge, but to transform them and open them up to new meanings and possibilities. By foregrounding care, collaboration and the plurality of knowledges, Jones and his collaborators create a work that is at once historically grounded and forward-looking.

This book is not only about the past, but about the ongoing processes through which knowledge is co-created. It is haunted by the histories of extraction and dispossession that it confronts, yet it is also animated by the living presence of country and the communities who care for it. In this sense, it offers not only a critique of colonial archives but a vision of what an archive of livingness might be: a space in which knowledge is not extracted and fixed but shared, practiced, and sustained through relationships of care.

REFERENCES

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1 It was first exhibited in Le Palais de Tokyo, Paris (26/11/2021 to 20/02/2022) and then in Artspace, Sydney (15/12/2023 – 11/02/2024). The carved emu eggs were also displayed in another French exhibition entitled "Malmaison, escale aux terres australes: De l'expédition Baudin à Jonathan Jones" at the Château de Malmaison (12/01/2022 – 18/04/2022).

2 The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria defines truth-telling as "a process of openly sharing historical truths after periods of conflict to allow societies to move forward in a more inclusive way, based on justice and human rights." (First People's Assembly of Victoria. 2021. "Truth-telling.")

3 Jonathan Jones, "Call and Response," in *Untitled (transcriptions of Country),* ed. Genevieve O'Callaghan (Artspace and Formist, 2023), 14.

4 Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 7-8.

5 Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines the "ecology of knowledges" as "the recognition of the copresence of different ways of knowing and the need to study the affinities, divergences, complementarities, and contradictions among them in order to maximize the effectiveness of the struggles of resistance against oppression" (8).

6 This choice also recalls this tendency among contemporary artists to let the work exist *per se* without imposing any preconceived meaning on it through the selection of a specific title.

7 Jeanine Leane, "Un-translating a Colonial Encounter," in *Untitled (transcriptions of country)*, ed. Genevieve O'Callaghan (Artspace and Formist, 2023), 90, original emphasis.

8 Leane, "Un-translating a Colonial Encounter," 90.

9 For instance, one might expect introductory remarks from the curators at Artspace, but this anticipated framing is instead deferred to an afterword.