

Sound of Missing Objects

Background

Sound of Missing Objects is a collaborative text, object and sound installation on the gaps in the history of Aboriginal material culture and the role of exhibitions in creating representations of aboriginality in 19th century. It was commissioned by the gallery Performance Space in 2003 and subsequently invited to tour at the Long Gallery, University of Wollongong in 2005. The work consists in five cabinets containing tissue paper stamped with designs, texts and a sound system and in texts inscriptions on the walls. The exhibition received good critical acclaim and specialised media attention (see portfolio).

Contribution

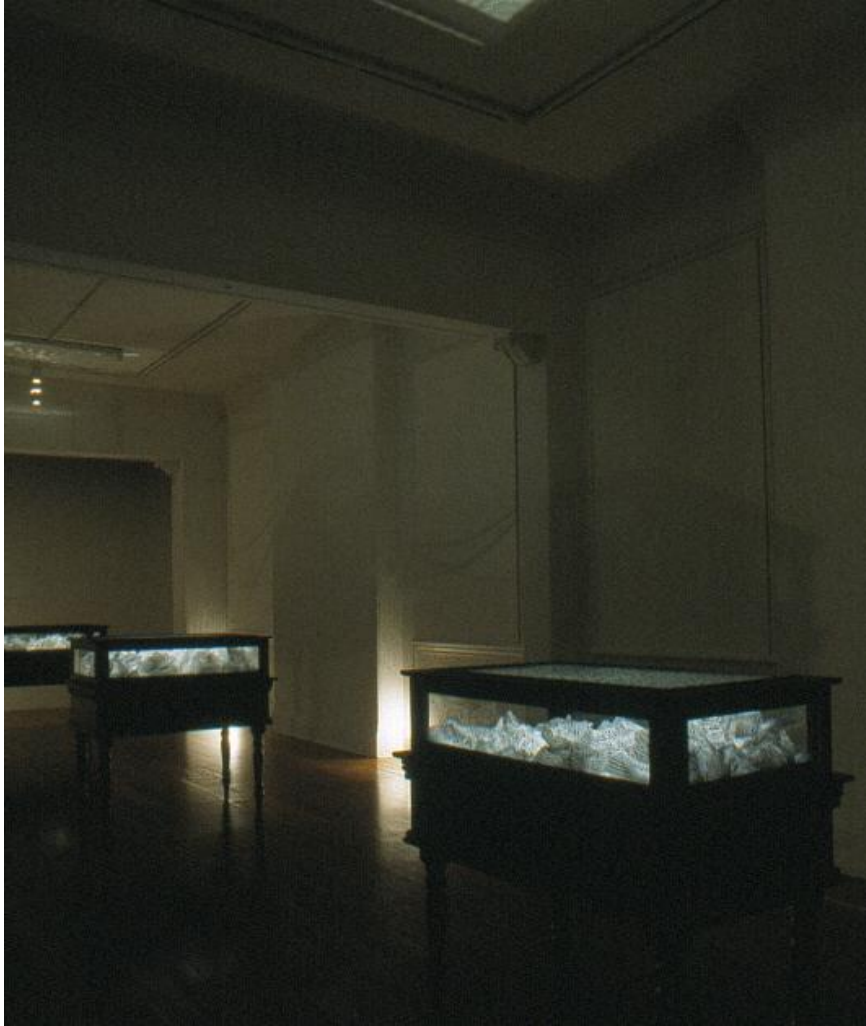
I researched and developed the concept of this installation and invited artists Jonathan Jones and digital composer Panos Couros to be my collaborators. I wrote all the textual elements in the installation; collaborated in the design and realization of the cabinets, stamped designs and sounds; I oversaw the production and installation of the exhibition.

Significance

Although Aboriginal art has an extraordinary critical success very little is known and written about early exhibitions of Aboriginal objects. Sound of Missing Objects is based on the research I carried out in my PhD on Aboriginal objects exhibited in International Exhibitions in Europe and US 19th century. It focuses on the narratives and representations woven in the exhibitions and their relations to contemporary politics. On another level it dwells on the absence of the objects, which were never returned to Australia, investigating the role of museums in producing knowledge and memory gaps.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

IMAGES OF EXHIBITION / WORK

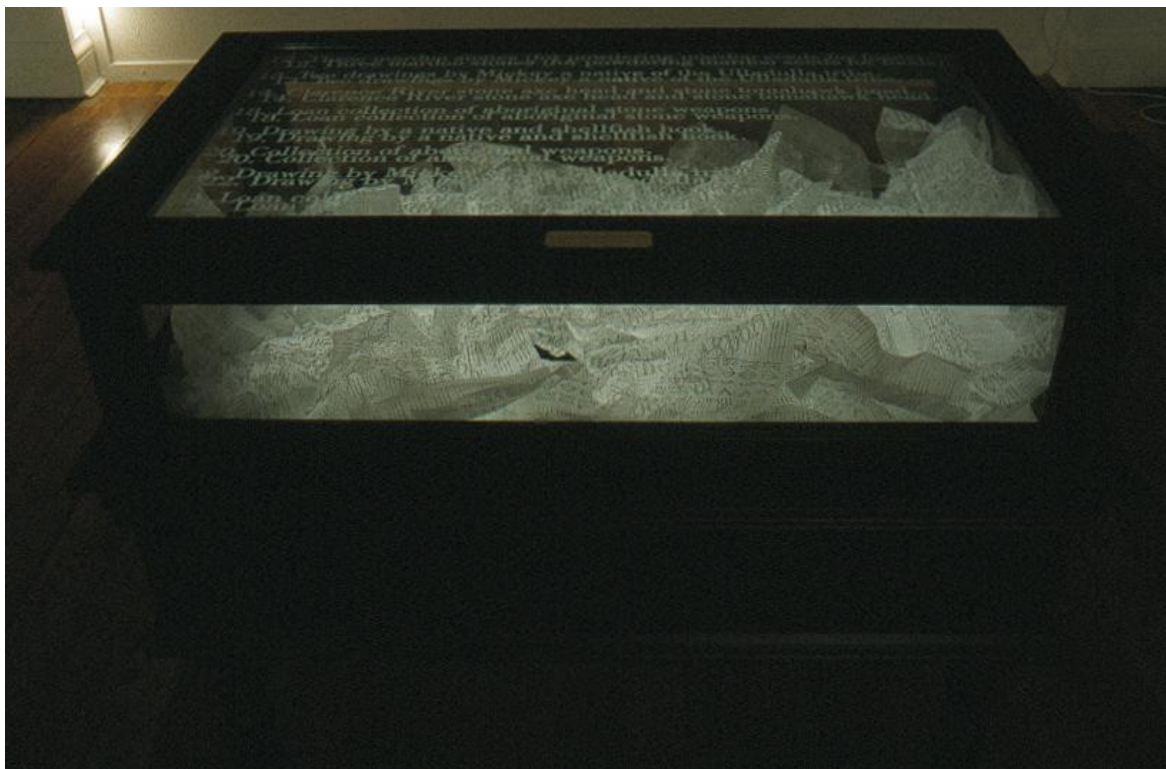


Performance Space, *Sound of Missing Objects*, multimedia installation, Sydney, Performance Space 2003.

Performance Space, *Sound of Missing Objects*, multimedia installation, Sydney, Performance Space



2003.
Performance Space, *Sound of Missing Objects*, multimedia installation, Sydney, Performance Space
2003.



ISOUND OF MISSING OBJECTS

A collaborative object and sound installation by
Panos Couros, Jonathan Jones and Ilaria Vanni

A PERFORMANCE SPACE PROJECT 3 Oct – 1 Nov 2003

Dedicated to the artists and people who created and owned the material and objects that were stolen, collected and exhibited during the international exhibitions of the nineteenth century. These objects and material still resonate today.

ARTISTS' STATEMENT

Based on archival research, *Sound of Missing Objects* explores the tensions between representations of Aboriginality produced in international exhibitions during nineteenth century and the making of an Australian colonial identity. Hundreds of objects were collected, exhibited in international exhibitions and traded in Australia, Europe and United States, spreading like an atomic bomb fall out in virtually every major museum and there remaining unseen and lost to the world.

The installation consists of five cabinets modelled loosely on nineteenth century museum display cabinets, each containing stories relating to particular international exhibitions and each emitting sound, including voice, collectively creating a ten channel soundscape. Much of the sound has been created using a process of granular synthesis. Like the missing objects, granular synthesis breaks sounds into its lowest particles and rearranges them sometimes at random sometimes specifically. The rearrangement can make the original sound lost, reconstructing it as an impression.

Cabinet 1 (Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations, London 1851 and Exposition Universelles, Paris, 1855) recounts

histories of extinction, of Aboriginal people as 'the doomed race', destined to 'die off' in the encounter with civilisation. Alternatively, depictions of Aboriginal people as hunters not cultivating the land, and thus not having any real concept of land ownership (Cabinets 2 and 3) paved the way to the fiction of terra nullius. **Cabinet 2** (Exposition Universelles, Paris 1867) also tells the story of an unknown Aboriginal man, who went to Paris and took part to the show, throwing the boomerang amidst the cluttered cabinets of china and bales of wool. **Cabinet 3** (Sydney International Exhibition 1879) is a Sydney story: the ethnological collection exhibited, and lost in the 1882 fire, at the Garden Palace. Here Aboriginality was used as the backdrop to better set off the progress of white Australia. Similarly, in **Cabinet 4** (The Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886) there is a depiction of a family, which reflects Victorian domesticity: father working (fishing), mother at home (hut) cooking, kid watching. **Cabinet 5** (The World's Columbian Exhibition, Chicago, 1893) narrates a success story, Mickey of Ulladulla's drawings exhibited in Chicago.

The top section of each cabinet consists of a glass panel, gridded and formulated through text. This refers to the conceptual framework through which nineteenth century visitors would have approached Aboriginal objects. The words that form this textual

fog are taken from the official catalogues of the exhibitions and play on repetition and on the desire to classify objects in neat taxonomic and conversely order Aboriginality into a known and manageable space. Each cabinet has a mirrored floor as the missing objects reflected also their contemporaries' perceptions. Scattered within the cabinets is tissue paper like that used to store objects, printed with designs from respective exhibitions referencing the existing traces of objects on paper.

On one level these missing objects constructed Aboriginality as the Other, thus allowing the never changing backdrop for the narrative of progress of Anglo-Australian settlers. On another level they reflected their own cultural climate, offering a glimpse of contemporary policies and scientific opinions, as well as speaking of the power relations of settlers and Indigenous Australians. In the journey from their maker to the collector, to the exhibition hall and finally to the museum a variety of discourses, sounds, voices, texts gathered around these objects. This installation reappropriates these objects, allowing them to speak and tell their stories of encounters, entanglements and inscriptions into other cultural systems. Like the persistent clicking sound of radiation detected after an atomic bomb, the stories of these objects continue to inform Indigenous heritage. These narratives are the sound of missing objects.

Sound of Missing Objects

A collaborative object and sound installation by Panos Couros, Jonathan Jones and Ilaria Vanni

Dedicated to the artists and people who created and owned the material and objects that were stolen, collected and exhibited during the international exhibitions of nineteenth century. These objects and material still resonate today.

Based on archival research, *Sound of Missing Objects* explores the tensions between representations of Aboriginality produced in international exhibitions during nineteenth century and the making of an Australian colonial identity. Hundreds of objects were collected, exhibited in international exhibitions and traded in Australia, Europe and United States, spreading like an atomic bomb fall out in virtually every major museum and there remaining, unseen and lost to the world.

The installation consists of five cabinets modelled loosely on nineteenth century museum display cabinets, each containing stories relating to particular International Exhibitions and each emitting sound including voice, collectively creating a ten channel soundscape. Much of the sound has been created using a process of granular synthesis. Like the missing objects, granular synthesis breaks sounds into its lowest particles and rearranges them sometimes at random sometimes specifically. The rearrangement can make the original sound lost, reconstructing it as an impression.

Cabinet 1 (Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations, London 1851 and Exposition Universelles, Paris, 1855) recounts histories of extinction, of Aboriginal people as 'the doomed race', destined to 'die off' in the encounter with civilisation. Alternatively, depicting Aboriginal people as hunters not cultivating the land, and thus not having any real concept of land ownership (Cabinets 2 and 3) paved the way to the fiction of *terra nullius*. Cabinet 2 (Exposition Universelles, Paris 1867) also tells the story of an unknown Aboriginal man, who went to Paris and took part to the show, throwing the boomerang amidst the cluttered cabinets of china and bales of wool. Cabinet 3 (Sydney International Exhibition 1879) is a Sydney story: the ethnological collection exhibited, and lost in the 1882 fire, at the Garden Palace. Here Aboriginality was used as the backdrop to better set off the progress of white Australia. Similarly, in Cabinet 4 (The Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886) there is a depiction of a family, which reflects Victorian domesticity: father working (fishing) mother at home (hut) cooking, kid watching. Cabinet 5 (The World's Columbian Exhibition, Chicago, 1893) narrates a success story, Mickey of Ulladulla's drawings exhibited in Chicago.

The top section of each cabinet consists of a glass panel, gridded and formulated through text. This refers to the conceptual framework through which nineteenth century visitors would have approached Aboriginal objects. The words that form this textual fog are taken from the official catalogues of the exhibitions. They play on repetition and on the desire to classify objects in neat taxonomies and conversely order Aboriginality into a known and manageable space. Each cabinet also has a mirrored floor as the missing objects reflected also their contemporaries. Scattered within the cabinets is tissue paper like that used to store objects, printed with designs from respective exhibitions referencing the existing traces of objects on paper.

On one level these missing objects constructed Aboriginality as the Other, thus allowing the never changing backdrop for the narrative of progress of Anglo-Australian settlers. On another level they reflected their own cultural climate, offering a glimpse of contemporary policies and scientific opinions, as well as speaking of the power relations of settlers and Indigenous Australians. In the journey from their maker, to the collector, to the exhibition hall and finally to the museum a variety of discourses, sounds, voices, texts gathered around these objects. *Sound of Missing Objects* reappropriates these objects, allowing them to speak and tell their stories of encounters, entanglements and inscriptions into other cultural systems. Like the persistent clicking sound of radiation detected after an atomic bomb, the stories of these objects continue to inform Indigenous heritage. These narratives are the sound of missing objects.

Panos Couros, Jonathan Jones and Ilaria Vanni