

# The Great Unwrapping

**The repatriation of Indigenous remains and artifacts is now so routine that there is even an Australian Government Advisory Committee for Indigenous Repatriation, yet the reverential cultural values underlying the Aboriginal identification with plants and animals can still cause anxiety when they collide with western attitudes to artworks.**

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Every so often an Artwork appears, the very name of which - in a few words - captures the most complex issues of its time.

*The Wrapped Trees Repatriation Project* by Juundaal Strang-Yettica is one of those artworks.

This conceptual project proposes repatriating the two eucalyptus trees, currently in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection, that were wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in 1969. It is a deceptively simple proposal with profound and far-reaching cultural implications.

The project originated in 2019 during *Making Art Public*, the 50th anniversary of Kaldor Public Art Projects at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. One of the commissioned works was an in-house publishing project by Lucas Ihlein working with the Rizzeria printing collective that included a weekly newspaper edited by Ihlein and Ian Milliss. Called *EXTRA!EXTRA!* the newspaper provided historical context to the many Kaldor Public Art Projects. An article by Juundaal Strang-Yettica provided an Indigenous perspective lamenting the "trees in coffins" and proposing their repatriation to Country.

This became the germ of the repatriation project as it now exists: an open-ended series of events, publications and discussions during the lead up to the Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum campaign. It envisages collaborative social engagement processes predicated upon the idea of the trees as a symbolic focus for post colonial reconciliation within the context of extreme environmental crisis.

The artist Juundaal Strang-Yettica is best known for her performance persona Sister GlitterNullius who she describes as "the post-traumatic, personification and representation of the hypocrisy dilemma that is the Anthropocene. Ancient, wise and trashy, an ironic hypocrite, she is an Indigenous nun, imprisoned by her love-hate relationship with plastix, consumerism, capitalism, christianity and post-colonialism. Hypocrisy and identity-fragility are two of her strengths."

Strang-Yettica sees the repatriation as part of her ongoing work: "There are enduring themes of identity and Indigeneity, entangled, complex relationships, fragility and staying with the discomfort. These themes are recontextualised within decolonisation frameworks, calling for revitalisation

of Indigenous culture and responding to environmental crises. The goal is to create works that prioritise non-indigenous and Indigenous collaboration, community engagement and empowerment."

The museum decolonisation that Strang-Yettica proposes taps into one of the most potent movements of our time. The return of cultural artefacts acquired in the process of European colonisation is occurring all around the world as a result of demands for equality by formerly colonised peoples. If the surviving family members of Holocaust victims could demand the return of stolen artworks could others not demand the return of artifacts stolen by European colonisers? In recent times this has seen the return of everything from ancestral human remains to Nigerian Benin bronzes. Even the return of the Elgin marbles to Greece is becoming a serious possibility.

This is occurring as the Indigenous Voice to Parliament Referendum demonstrates that Australian politicians and public are more open about engaging with indigenous Australia to redress colonial history.

John Giblin, Imma Ramos, and Nikki Grout, the authors of *Exhibiting the Experience of Empire: Decolonising Objects, Images, Materials and Words?* reflecting on the British Museum's recent exhibition, *South Africa: The Art of a Nation*, point to four key themes: "the need for 1) curatorial and audience discomfort, 2) inclusion of silenced voices and histories, 3) political curatorial positioning to decentre European paradigms and expose and challenge colonially created subjectivities, and 4) the transparent representation of colonial collecting and display histories."

Although after decades of discussion we may understand these themes, in a settler colonial country away from the centre of Empire the issue is not just the institutions'



collections. The museums' most important role was the continuance of the Empire's cultural values on a settler colonial society, a role they maintain to the present under the banner of internationalism.

This process changed in Australia as the influence of British culture faltered after the Second World War. A wave of European migrant artists brought in an authentic modernism that contrasted strongly with the earlier anodyne British modernism. They were followed by cultural entrepreneurs such as John Kaldor whose public art projects, like the Sydney Biennale initiated by Franco Belgiorio-Nettis, were indicative of the rising influence of multiculturalism. Although still based on the belief that Australia needed cultural education, they shifted cultural power away from the existing institutions.

There can be no doubt that over 50 years John Kaldor's public art projects have raised the bar. Two projects in particular are among the most significant cultural markers of that half century. The first, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast* in 1969, also produced the wrapped trees.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales's *Making Art Public*, 2019, exhibition laid out the development of Kaldor's thinking over five decades. With the exception of *Project 2* in 1971, an exhibition of Australian artists curated by the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, and *Project 8* in 1984, an exhibition of selected Australian artists in New York, the focus of the first thirty-one projects was on bringing overseas art to Australia.

A crucial change of direction occurred in *Project 32* in 2016 where a call for expressions of interest produced a proposal by Indigenous artist Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones). The work interpreted the site of the Garden Palace building in the Sydney Botanical Gardens, which had burned down in 1882, destroying an enormous collection of Aboriginal artifacts collected during the early years of colonisation and stored in the building's basement.



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Jones's work of ghostly shields and plantings can be seen as a memorial to the loss of culture these artifacts embodied, a major cultural marker equal to *Wrapped Coast*. Previous decades had seen the development of a vigorous market in Aboriginal painting mostly focused on Northern Australia but Jonathan Jones was one of a number of younger artists working within urban mainstream contemporary art. This was the first Kaldor project entirely by an Australian Indigenous artist and it signalled a change of understanding that had developed both within the art world and with major art patrons like Kaldor.

The importance of *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones) cannot be overstated. It brought "silenced voices and histories" to life in the heart of Australia's largest city, the truth that colonial Australia existed on stolen land. Strang-Yettica's proposed repatriation of the wrapped trees can be seen in this context as a further step in recognising the priority of Indigenous Australia.

The "colonial collecting and display histories" of the Art Gallery of New South Wales have not gone unchallenged. A number of works in its collection – ranging from European modernist works to a Chinese-bronze figure plundered during the Boxer Rebellion – have been investigated as candidates for repatriation, usually because of incomplete provenance.

Other objects in the collection raise issues of European colonialist exploitation. One of these is an ancient Vietnamese Đông Sơn bronze drum. These drums were objects of veneration until the majority were plundered during the French colonial period. This musical instrument displayed as a silent static object inspired the *RE:SOUND-ING* project by James Nguyen and Victoria Pham, inaugurated in 2020.

01 Juundaal Strang-Yettica as her performance persona Sister GlitterNullius, *The Kandos Dolls House and Repatriation Ceremony: Keeping Gate*, 2022. Cementa 22, photographed by Ian Hobbs





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When Nguyen and Pham acquired a drum their initial reaction was to repatriate it but they quickly discovered changed national borders meant accurate provenance was nearly impossible. Instead they proposed collecting and restoring the sounds of the drums, a form of conceptual repatriation similar to Strang-Yettica's proposal.

As Nguyen and Pham explain: "we came across the term 'rematriation' which relates to the spiritual return of knowledge transcending the physical limits of a physical object. This term resonated with our search and desire to recover the historic social structures of Vietnam which was one of mixed matrilineal and double kinship family structures." They set out to "break the sound-barrier of colonisation and bring forth the voice of these objects in a way where contemporary audiences can engage with them not only as something ancient, but profoundly contemporary and part of our living language as musicians and artists. Listening became our method of rematriating and repatriating this instrument."

They are currently building an archive of sound recordings of the drums, working with more institutions while dreaming "perhaps one day we can start our own pre-colonised orchestras and come together to play the instruments of our ancestors. Hearing each other's knowledge and just jamming to create our own sonic dialogues together."

A different repatriation work, for Cementa 22 by Alison Clouston, and Boyd, involved the exhibition of a tree killed by the Black Summer fire, followed by its rebirth through seedlings. From the beginning the work involved a respectful collaboration with Kandos Dabee Wiradjuri people, Peter Swain and Emma Syme. According to Clouston "Like the symbiotic relationships of mycorrhizal fungi and trees that we had been researching, connections with people began to multiply, from Cementa, the landholder, and on outwards. So we discovered the symbiotic network in a forest could be a meaningful metaphor for human interdependence and mutual support, especially after fire."

The felled tree was installed in Kandos Community Hall where, like the Vietnamese drums, it had a sound component, a song to the tree composed by Boyd. "The words were in Latin, the language of botany and colonialism, and also the language of praise. Some mornings [Boyd] would rise at dawn to record birdsong to build into a soundtrack for our installation. He connected with the Bathurst community choir Eclectica, which began to rehearse his song. In a rock shelter he recorded two Wiradjuri speakers, Emma and Crackers, as they spoke words for country, for forest and funghi, for community, for care."

Wiradjuri Language resounded up the main street of Kandos in a joyful call and response as a procession followed Emma Syme from

the band rotunda in the park to the Hall. "The Choir sang the song "Arboresco ( to become a tree)" in sombre yet hopeful plain-song. Then Emma spontaneously led a cacophony of Wiradjuri Language, in praise of the Tree and its interspecies networks, raising the roof."

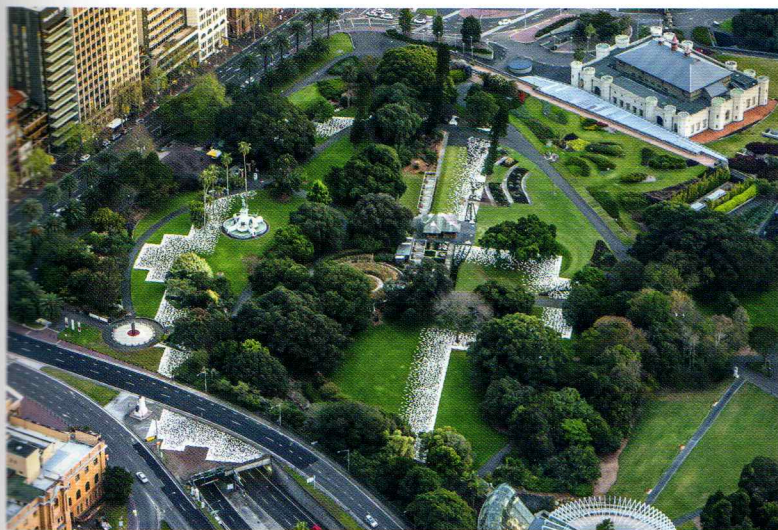
In this case the seedlings will be planted back into their Country.

This work resonates on multiple levels, enacting decolonised collaborative relationships. It required reciprocal trust and respect where the trauma of bushfires symbolised different trauma, to environment, to human relations, to culture.

It seems a major oversight that in 1969 none of the local Aboriginal residents of the Little Bay area, living only a few kilometres away at La Perouse, were consulted about *Wrapped Coast*. But it was an oversight that had no malicious intent. As Penelope Seidler commented, in Samantha Lang's 2019 documentary *It All Started With a Stale Sandwich*, it simply wasn't thought of at the time.

Now, when it is unthinkable to ignore First Nation prior occupancy, *Wrapped Coast* has acquired symbolic meaning that it did not originally have, representing Terra Nullius, a white overlay of the pre-existing landscape – wiping away the previous culture. However, before too long *Wrapped Coast* was completely





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removed and perhaps that is the later positive stage of its symbolism.

Juundaal Strang-Yettica's proposed repatriation of the wrapped trees can be seen in a similar light. The trees also have a symbolic loading that was not apparent at the time. They cannot be returned to original custodians of country because they were grown in a nursery from seed gathered elsewhere. This fact only adds to their poignancy – grown for sale, a forced removal bred and fed and eventually killed for service and profit.

Although Christo and Jeanne Claude's major projects were impermanent and invariably dismantled, it is an entirely different matter to discuss dismantling a smaller scale artwork acquired for a museum collection. Even the discussion of repatriation evokes the idea of destruction of artworks, the embodiment of the "curatorial and audience discomfort" mentioned earlier.

If conceptual art has taught us anything it is that ideas have cultural significance whether or not they are enacted. While Juundaal Strang-Yettica's proposal is a thought experiment, a conceptual work inviting considerations around repatriation, could the destruction of the artwork ever be regarded as a serious proposal?

One of the critical works leading to conceptualism was *Erased de Kooning Drawing* by

Robert Rauschenberg in 1953. Even if every artist seeks to erase the work of previous artists by imposing a new cultural understanding in their place, the actual erasure of an artwork is shocking, exposing rarely examined cultural priorities. Similarly the fear of imagining the destruction of an artwork by repatriating its physical materials exposes the "colonially created subjectivities" that continue to operate even as the artworld pays lip service to decolonisation.

Repatriation presents a challenge to institutional norms. The *Wrapped Trees* works would have to be deaccessioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and although legally it may not require the approval of John Kaldor and the Christo and Jeanne-Claude estate it would certainly be politic to ask for it, and it would probably be refused. But while challenging, it also represents an incredible opportunity for decolonisation in action. The use of organic materials that inevitably decay reveals that the works were always intended to disrupt conventional museum standards. If repatriation is recognised as the consummation of the works' intention, it can be understood as a positive alternative to the works' decay.

As a bastard child of the *Wrapped Coast*, even the purely conceptual proposal will stand as an unofficial Kaldor project strongly supported by a growing network of Indigenous and non-indigenous artists and museum experts. It could be as significant as *Wrapped*

*Coast* and then *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, the final stage of an intergenerational cultural progression that began with a migrant's generosity to his adopted country, moved through a greater understanding of that country's Indigenous heritage and the damage done by colonialism, to a recognition of the need for reconciliation and repair.

This is Australia's cultural trajectory and this work embodies it, stepping firmly towards the right side of history. ■

02 Alison Clouston and Boyd, *DHALAWALA – FOREST COUNTRY*, whole tree, people, seedlings, original soundtrack and sound system, metal, variable sizes (installation in the Kandos Community Centre Hall, Band Rotunda), Cementa 22, photographed by Ian Hobbs

03 *Making art public: 50 years of Kaldor Public Art Projects* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2019, featuring Christo, *Two Wrapped Trees*, 1969, photographed by Jenni Carter

04 Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, 2016, Project 32, Kaldor Public Art Projects, on the site of the nineteenth century Garden Palace in the Sydney Botanical Gardens, photographed by Pedro Greig

Courtesy of the artists, the AGNSW, Cementa 22, and Kaldor Public Art Projects