

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.

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