

Questions of Belonging – Alana Jelinek 2018

I have been working as an artist for about 30 years. What endures in my practice over the years, irrespective of the medium I use, is an approach that could be called *critically interventionist*. For 9 of these years I was privileged to be invited to intervene directly into the context of ethnographic museums (2009-2018), but I also make interventions that are uninvited and in less defined contexts, such as on public streets, in educational settings and on the internet. My work in ethnographic museums is focused on questions of 'race', racism, the legacy of the colonial project and belonging: questions that inhere in that specific context. Yet questions of 'race', racism and the legacy of colonialism also pre-date my work with ethnographic museums. It is, in fact, because of this longer term interest that I was attracted to working with these museums in the first place. The question of belonging, though, has emerged since.

Questions of belonging lie just below the surface of any ethnographic collection. Do these things made elsewhere and in other contexts *belong* here in this particular gilded cage, whichever of the European museum of world cultures? To whom do these things belong – to descendants of the originating culture or descendants of the current host culture? If descendants of the cultures who originally made these things now *belong* here in Europe, here through histories of contact, exchange and movement forged through centuries of Empire, can we say that their things, their material culture, also belong here, even when other descendants want them back? How can the question of repatriation be inappropriate and violent in the case of humans, but caring and responsible in the case of things? Given that things, including those that are also ancestors, in ethnographic museums were sometimes collected violently, and always in the context of violence, do they belong here or should they be with those who have retained special names, particular knowledge and exquisite feelings about them beyond the merely aesthetic? Who and what belong where is a question as subtext playing in the background of any ethnographic museum.

As a person who never felt I belonged in the country to which I was born or within the culture(s) I was raised, the question of belonging felt almost shameful. Inchoate feelings meant the question was too raw or too deep to address in my work as an artist. (Creating good or great art is not born of unreflexive

self-expression or unmediated pain, despite Romantic [mythologizing](#) to the contrary.) Working with ethnographic museums has enabled me to tackle the question of belonging consciously and since being liberated [from feelings of shame](#) to pursue the question [of belonging](#), I realise I already have. [In what follows I want to explore two works where I have explored these issues: the first a work titled 'Europe the Game', which began in 2003 and has been evolving since. The second is a work entitled 'Belonging' and made as my final work for the multi-disciplinary ambitious research project led by Nicholas Thomas, 'Pacific Presences: exploring Oceanic Art in European Museums' \(European Research Council funded 2013-2018\).](#)

I was trained originally as a painter, in the days before 'the post-medium condition', when artists were trained in how to be an artist through specific artistic media, such as painting, sculpture and photography. ['Europe the Game' is a work comprising 54 paintings. This piece is participatory and performative, where participants in 'the game' are encouraged to interact with and handle the 54 oil paintings. I started working on this painting before I knew whether any gallery would show it. The work emerged in response to the idea of 'fortress Europe', a critical concept emergent around the turn of the millennium in reaction to the EU's decision to work on a common immigration policy for Europe in 1999, thereby defining the perimeter of Europe and, by implication, the parameters for European-ness. At the time the work was conceived, I would not have imagined that questioning would have become increasingly relevant, reaching new and more urgent levels in recent years.](#) Questions of who belongs in Europe and what represents 'Europe' remain contested and urgent with each successive crisis and 'Europe the Game' plays out, plays with, the question, interrogating notions of belonging and representation.

There is a cliché that good art produces questions not answers ([in contrast to](#), according to the cliché, [good](#) science). Engaging with 'Europe the Game' produces neither answers nor questions but playing it embodies the tension in questions of belonging. Engaging with the artwork requires participants to instantiate the tensions within the idea of belonging, representation and the signifier, 'Europe'. Given that the artwork is made of oil paint, questions of value may also arise for some participants but that depends on the sensitivities of its players. (Oil paint is associated to this day with high value and high status and, not unrelatedly, [also](#) with the European tradition of painting.) The [54](#) components of

'Europe the Game' are oil painted birds eye views of European 'natural' landscapes. Some are landscapes of stereotypical notions of Europe, including different seasonal views of spring, winter and summer. Others are landscapes not often associated with the European stereotype. But they are all European. It took me a number of years to paint all [54](#) because most, though not all, are taken from sketches from flights over Europe.

For 'Europe the Game', audiences are invited to choose which of the [54](#) landscapes, painted on wooden panels, fit into a frame that can contain a maximum of 36. [The numbers involved, namely the 54 choices for 36 positions that comprise 'Europe', are largely arbitrary except that, when playing 'Europe the Game', 54 feels like a large, but not infinite, number - an important aspect in how the artwork works. And Europe itself, which occupies 3.6m² \(comprised of 36 parts each measuring 60x60cm\) is a substantial enough space to make the choices feel significant. The proportion requires that one third, 18 pieces, must be left outside.](#)

The rules of the game have been refined over time and there is a video of when it was played in Leiden in 2016 on YouTube.com, complete with my own preamble and goading comments for the audience/participants. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFyPXwmZQnY>] The rules of engagement can be summarised. [fig 1 IMG_1878.jpg / photograph credit – Alana Jelinek 2016]

Rules:

- 1) The boundary of Europe is marked
- 2) Each participant chooses one painting they believe should belong.
- 3) Each participant places their piece of Europe inside the boundary.
- 4) Players take turns to fill the marked territory of Europe.
- 5) When Europe is filled, players negotiate as to which pieces belong in Europe and which must come out.
- 6) The game ends when all players agree which belongs.

[fig 2 IMG_1881.jpg / photograph credit – Alana Jelinek 2016]

‘Europe the Game’ can also be played solo and then it tends to be an exploration of what Europe looks like, or what the player imagines as representing Europe. The rules alter slightly with each context, drawing out the different emphases of location and current preoccupations with the idea of Europe. Interpretations of the rules seem to change with each participant every time it’s played. But the pieces do not alter. Nor the general rules, which are stencilled on the side of the 3 transport boxes that contain the game:

54 factorial permutations of Europe with 54/36 factorial exclusions.

Being an artwork, I will not attempt to convey what ‘Europe the Game’ does to/for its audiences. Like any artwork, the ideas, knowledge, questions or impact it carries eschew attempts at translation. Too often artists are required by non-artists to translate their work into other forms of knowledge, to delineate somehow the correct interpretation, to tell audiences what to think or to describe what audiences think, as if this is possible. And very often, perhaps too often artists do comply. But if an artwork works, it does so in its own terms. It needs no translation.

‘Belonging’ (2018) by contrast is a word-based intervention. I have made other word-based artworks, including art-novels, and I also write theory of art about the role and value of art in society. Because I have employed words in both modalities, in theory and in practice (for want of a better descriptor), I feel I understand the differences between the two and can assert their right to difference. ‘Belonging’ uses words as its medium, recorded as sound files and edited together in a series of 12 podcasts. I encourage readers of this text to listen for themselves. [<http://maa.cam.ac.uk/pacific-presences/>, <https://soundcloud.com/alanajlinek>]

It is no accident that ‘Belonging’ was the final [art](#)work made in the context of a 9 year stint working in ethnographic museums. Not only did the context enable me to address the question in myself, but the question of belonging, for me, lay at the heart of the research project, ‘Pacific Presences: Investigating Oceanic Art in European Museums’, which was the culmination of my work in the context of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

Unlike some institutions that hold historical material culture from elsewhere, such as the National Trust [in the UK](#), ethnographic museums in Europe seem to consider [the ethics behind their collection](#), over and above the question of conservation. The question of belonging is ever-present. Demands for repatriation of artefacts in national and university collections by some indigenous people are regularly made. Every museum knows that at least some of their collection was gained through nefarious and violent activity. Yet, they also know their collections are the product of genuine and bilateral exchange between chiefs, [and](#) representatives of the Crown understood locally as chiefs. [Sometimes](#) they were exchanges of symbolic, high status objects on both sides. Some objects in European collections were made for Europeans to take back home and others were [collected once they were](#) discarded, especially with the adoption of Christianity. Discarded, once-precious artefacts were often collected by missionaries, either as trophies of souls converted or as usefully alarming material to inspire greater fund-raising back home. [Missionary collections often](#) subsequently found their way into museums. I did not understand this complexity when I first began working with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 2009. The stereotype of ethnographic museums I entertained was as a trophy cabinet of Empire. My thinking on this was informed by exhibitions such as ‘Trophies of Empire’ in 1993, organised by artist Keith Piper, with Bluecoat Gallery, Arnolfini Gallery, Hull time Based Arts and Liverpool John Moores University, which occurred at a similar time to the internationally renowned intervention by Fred Wilson, ‘Mining the Museum’ at Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore USA.

Their concurrence (with no doubt many further examples) demonstrates a paradigm shift in museums practice in the early 1990s. With scholarly change in approaches to museums in the mid-1980s, collectively known as the ‘New Museology’, artists [began](#) to be invited to engage with historical museum collections in order to draw out their nascent plurivocality, the hitherto unacknowledged coexistence of multiple, divergent and conflicting voices, including the previously absent [‘subaltern’ voice](#). [to use the expression made current by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak](#).¹ Until this point, museums had largely celebrated Empire, colonial rule and either white supremacist beliefs or unexamined assumptions about European ascendancy. [Or](#) they promulgated the benefits of subjugation and exploitation for both the dominant and the dominated.

¹ [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A reader*, ed Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman \(Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993](#)

Since inviting in the voice of the Other through artistic and ‘source community’ interventions [became](#) the norm in any reflexive museums practice, it is perhaps the perfect time to turn our attention to the complexity of the notion of nation (‘race’, ethnicity, culture or any other monolithic term) and the people that comprise them. Many individuals already bring to consciousness the multicultural complexity and intercultural crossings that render it impossible to label any single individual in relation to any single culture, language, ‘race’, nation, place of ‘origin’, as Édouard Glissant describes it.² The artwork ‘Belonging’ aims also to [bring to consciousness such complexity](#).

For ‘Belonging’, the question of whether we can think about things in the diaspora the same way that we think about people living in the diaspora was uppermost in my mind. I knew that some artefacts are ancestors, sometimes literally so, and seeing them as human ancestors stirred me to wonder, if they are indeed human, how can anyone say they don’t belong here? To explore this, I interviewed a range of ethnography curators from Europe and the Pacific, some of whom have mixed and indigenous heritage and most of whom have only European heritage. I also interviewed various people who identify as indigenous from a range of places and backgrounds living in the diaspora. Added to this was the serendipitous recording of Australian Aboriginal repatriation activist of Gweagal descent, Rodney Kelly, and his visit to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 2016 in order to open up dialogue about repatriating the spears and other things taken from his ancestors when they encountered Captain Cook in 1770.

Questions for the curators included, how do you feel about the question of repatriation of things back to place where they were made, how do you prevent your own culture getting in the way of how you understand or engage with the objects from other cultures in your museum, and what is your own cultural background? Questions for indigenous people included what is your cultural background (or *whakapapa*, [a Maori concept of lineage](#)) and where do you live now, how do you feel about objects from your culture being in museums in Europe, and how do you feel about the question of belonging? Because each participant knew the project was called ‘Belonging’, many chose to respond to this concept even when they weren’t directly asked about it.

² [Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* translated from French by Betsy Wing 1990, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997](#)

The art-podcasts were compiled using recordings of Julie Adams, Lilja Kapua Addeman, Susanna Rianna Balai, Liz Bonshek, Insos Ireeuw, Rodney Kelly, Emelihter Kihleng, Oliver Lueb, Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai, Ole Maiava, Sean Mallon, Imelda Miller, Wayne Modest, Pala Molisa, Rick Pa, Pandora Fulimalo Pereira, Jackie Shown, Maria Stanyukovich, Reina Sutton, Kat Szabo, Nina Tonga, Alisa Vavataga, Wonu Veys, Kaetaeta Watson, and Maria Wronska Friend. Snippets of the interviews, which were 10-20 minutes in total, were edited into 15-30 second or minute-long bites. Each of the final art-podcasts is 9-10minutes in length and comprised of the short snippets juxtaposed, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes repeated. I tried to anticipate what would be a sympathetic to hear and what would be challenging or annoying, and I tried to maintain a balance of sympathies both within one podcast and across the complete series. At all times I was mindful of respecting the perspective of the contributor, and never edited anyone against the grain of what I understood they had wanted to say. Each contributor was sent a link to the recording in order to choose to delete any part they might want not to share. None took up this option.

I wanted to start the series with a podcast that encapsulated all the issues at stake in this question, setting the scene for the others that would follow. The final podcast is the least linear, [the least narrative](#), in structure and in between a range of different inputs, perspectives, and editing experiments [are deployed](#). My aim was to try to ensure sympathy for each of the speakers at some point over the series. Even when a person offers challenging or orthodox views at one point, this would be softened by an additional or counterpoint some other [point](#). What I hope is that a listener feels the complexity within the question of belonging and a sympathy for this complexity. Online, each in the series of podcasts is supplemented by a little contextual information and a photo either taken by me, or by Mark Adams whose art practice treads similar ground to my own.

[Belonging is an emotive word, to quote Liz Bonshek of Melbourne Museum from the podcasts. She makes this observation as a criticism of the 'Belonging' project because, she argues, no one speaks about belonging. She, a dual-national, doesn't think about belonging unless someone asks, and none of the indigenous people she knows or works with talk about belonging. But I know otherwise. A sense of belonging is one of those privileges that go overlooked if a person has it. Those without it long for it. It](#)

is one of the many losses subsequent of colonialism, another loss which has not been addressed and which is perceived either as not a problem, or the invention of postcolonial obsessives. On some level this might be true. Once we, all of us, including those who feel they belong and those who feel they don't, decolonise our minds the question of belonging may be settled.