The Importance of Being Anachronistic: Contemporary Aboriginal Art and the Archive
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Eternal, Impossible, Returns: Variations on the Theme of Dislocation

Dacia Viejo-Rose
In 1994, an influential book by Homi Bhabha was published entitled *The Location of Culture*; in it he discussed boundaries, borders, dichotomies and how they had pushed culture into the disoriented ‘beyond,’ neither here nor there but caught in a restless movement, bouncing between a multiplicity of categories that lay claims to identities. He asked: ‘How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings, and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and incommensurable?’

Twenty years on our concerns have shifted, focusing instead on the dislocation of culture, with both objects and people perceived as being ‘out of place.’ This dislocation is directly addressed in Julie Gough’s *The Lost World (Part Two)*, exhibited at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Cambridge (MAA). She refers to the ‘lost limbo’ in which Tasmanian Aboriginal stone and ochre artifacts are caught, and how they have become ‘foreign objects’ both to those who see them in the museum and to the places where they were made and found. This loss of place-relatedness, the disorientation of these exiled
largely led by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) such as the Athens Charter (1931), the Venice Charter (1964), the Burra Charter (1979, revised in 1999, and again in 2013), the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), the Riga Charter (2000), and the Ename Charter (2008). Of these, it was the Burra Charter that initiated a process of expanding ideas about heritage that has continued to this day. Officially titled The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance, as the name suggests, the Charter focused on place and formally introduced the concept of ‘cultural significance.’

Thinking about cultural heritage in its material forms—as objects, buildings, monuments, and sites—often comes accompanied with a sense that there are dangers from which it needs to be protected. These dangers come in the shape of deterioration, decay, destruction, and displacement. Responses to these dangers are posited as parallel reactions: preservation, restoration, conservation, reconstruction, and repatriation. Most of these approaches imply the existence of an original state or place, and with it the possibility of return: by conserving something in its authentic state, restoring it to its initial state, or repatriating it to its place of origin. This raises a number of questions about what is meant by the authentic, initial, or original state and place of being for a heritage site. These are problematic criteria, as is evidenced by the many attempts that have been made to codify them in charters and guidelines

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Over the past fifty years, the concept of cultural heritage has been scrutinised and theorised, and the subject of research and of intense debates in academic and diplomatic spheres. As a result, understandings of what cultural heritage is have evolved significantly. This is evidenced in part in the changing vocabulary used in international conventions and professional protocols. Where key heritage values were once fixed to the physical integrity and authenticity of objects and sites, heritage is now seen as a process of meaning making. What transforms a group of old stones into a collection of artefacts, and from that into a heritage site is a process of interpretation that imbues the material with
a set of values, meanings, stories, memories, and emotions. And to this must be added the socio-political and economic contexts in which cultural heritage exists. My own working definition is that cultural heritage refers to the political uses of the remains of the past. The understanding has a two-part focus. The first is on how something becomes recognised as cultural heritage: what values it is seen to represent, for whom it is a reference in narratives of identity and memory, and what the multiple claims there are to it. The second is on how the selection, uses, and representations of heritage affect people. Both of these approaches have implications for ideas of return and repatriation. And this underlying aspiration for return shapes media narratives, professional choices, policy decisions, and relationships between institutions, peoples, and states. Yet return, it will be argued, is never possible.

Landscape with Photograph:
Loss of Context and Present Absence

From 1996 until 2007, an Illicit Antiquities Research Centre was based at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge; it published a newsletter that came out twice a year called *Culture without Context*. The title of the newsletter always intrigued me, because of what an inversion of the terms suggested: what happens to the context when culturally significant objects and meanings are removed from it, to those ruins of memory and knowledge? And although the first images that come to mind are those of empty museums with bare and smashed cases, or of ravaged archaeological sites where illicit diggers have left behind a lunar landscape of dug-out craters, my concern was with the lost knowledge, the silenced narratives that these displacements left behind in societies.

The anthropologist Angèle Smith has written of landscapes that they are:

made by people that engage with them, and in making landscapes, the people themselves are made: their sense of place, belonging, and their social identity is constructed alongside the construction of the landscape. But the corollary to this is that landscapes are often highly political and contested, as different communities of people try to negotiate different interpretations of the same landscape. These landscapes are also part of the contexts from which objects are removed. Traditionally in archaeology, context was thought of in terms of finds-context, that is to say the physical relatedness and association
understandable and meaningful narrative, in order to make sense of what we see and experience.

In Gough’s work *The Lost World (Part 2)* she used photographs, made for her by the artist Christoph Balzar, of objects found in Tasmania that were collected and are today in the MAA in Cambridge. She then took these photos back to Tasmania, and placed them in the landscapes in which the original objects were found. She documented this act of placement, or re-placement, again through photographs but also through video. The latter allowing her to record the expected gradual decay of these photos of displaced objects, foreign elements themselves. As they decay, the photos also come to embody a further process of displacement. As with the ghostly photographic images of Roland Barthes, so too do these images become the ruins of a presence, thus being a reunion twice removed. Not the object but its image, an image leaving no trace but the dual ghost of the object and its representation. Barthes wrote: ‘Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed, and that it has been there where I see it.”

One element of the exhibition was a live video security camera feed, to the CAST
and environment, a distance that would still be there even if the actual objects were to be returned to the sites where they were found. Returned to the landscape they would gradually disappear into it, be swallowed up by it once again and become invisible until the next ‘discoverer’ stumbles on it.

Topographic silences, and absences, are constituent parts of the atmospheres we move through; they are particularly poignant in the context of landscapes of trauma and fear. For the loss of context can also breed monsters. The title of Gough’s piece, *The Lost World (Part Two)*, brings to mind that dystopian Jurassic Park of novel and film. In the film, nostalgic attempts to bring back a lost past spin out of control as that past refuses to remain in a musealised space. A space that is bounded and limits the observed object to a passive role. Instead, the ‘recovered’ past turns out to be an observing, and dangerously ravenous, subject.

**Fragmentation and Exile**

Fragmentation is part of the dislocation of culture; fragmentation and the reassembling of pieces in order to fill voids and construct expected or desired images. In the exhibition entitled *Discoveries. Art, Science and Exploration* at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Hobart and to the MAA, of one of these photographs weathering outdoors, where it remains still today. The photograph was of the artifact labeled ‘Tasmania’ whose original location was impossible to pinpoint—so the photograph was placed in Gough’s back yard in West Hobart, Tasmania. The live feed shows the shifting environment, daylight hours and light, the coming and going of more or less curious animals. The result is an evocative reflection of the changing relationship between the object and its context, one that the artworks seem to suggest is also in ruins.

The process of ‘returning’ each of the thirty-five photographs of ‘missing’ stone artifacts was filmed with the footage capturing the road trip and the artist’s walking and placing of the photographs in likely locations. In some of these shots we see the artist’s hand just outside the edge of the frame, placing the image in the landscape, delicately situating it so that it will be supported by the blades of grass and pebbles that once accompanied the object. In this fragment, in her fingers, can be perceived all the nostalgic longing and aspirations for repairing the past disturbances and violent separations that underlie so many gestures of return and reunion. The mediating and interfering of both the fingers and the medium of photography speak to the degrees of displacement that now lie between object
knowing that we bring to the past, that is cognitively biased towards the values and desires of the present: in this case the need to represent that iconic image of loss and extinction. As Derek Walcott so poignantly put it in his Nobel lecture of 1992 entitled ‘Fragments of Epic Memory’: ‘Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape.’

Fragments of a dislocated culture can thus come together, be put together, to construct an image of what has been lost, but each of those individual pieces, even on its own can also have substantial evocative power, acting as a talisman and constant connection to home. An illustration of this is an account described by the psychiatrist Vamik Volkan (2013). He has worked for decades facilitating dialogue between leaders of communities confronted in seemingly intractable conflicts and describes one encounter with a Palestinian physician who, like many Palestinians living in Gaza (as it turned out), carried a small stone painted with the Palestinian colours in his pocket. Volkan saw the physician fiddling in his pocket at various points in a particularly difficult negotiation and, after asking him what he was doing, the latter showed Volkan the
context had been lost. Even when the names can be recovered through archival documents, they no longer function as signifiers because the act of dislocation snapped the referential links, those that gave them contextual meaning and purpose.

A further displacement is also captured in these photographs as the objects themselves often have paper labels stuck to them, placed there by their finders, their takers, their cataloguers. The labels read, for instance: ‘Lindisfarne. Jany 1926. Tasmania. AWOP.’ This selection of data reveals a naming practice and categorisation of the finder, the colonial hand that removed the objects and classified them as a certain kind of ‘knowledge,’ discerned by foreign eyes that did not fully see the contextual, the indigenous meanings and place-names. The location is reduced to the vast area in which the object was found; all of the dimensions of knowledge and relatedness of Aboriginal Tasmanians are missing.

In her study of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym proposes that there are two different types: restorative and reflective. ‘Restorative nostalgia,’ she argues, ‘puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in aglia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance.’ As stone explaining: ‘As long as I have this, you cannot take my Palestinian identity from me.’ Sometimes stones and bones are just that, but not always. They can come to represent a homeland, an identity, be mementos of loss, and reminders of names and stories to be recovered.

In one of the pieces that constitutes The Lost World (Part 2), Julie Gough has tied to each object a label with their Aboriginal place names. These hang at the end of a string and below the surface on which the objects themselves lie. When the Aboriginal place names cannot be recovered the labels are left blank. The piece addresses another effect of displacement—when the meaning of context is lost, with the place-names that are forgotten, so is the significance of these names, their cultural, historic, and symbolic referents. The landscape is thus denuded of this layer of meaning that was plucked from it together with these stone artefacts. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Milan Kundera describes how after the end of Communism in Czechoslovakia there was an attempt to restore cities’ street names to what they had been before. While it was possible, through archives, to discover what those names had been and change them accordingly, recovery was not complete because people had forgotten the significance of the original names, their context had been lost.
The specific site for the placement, or replacement, is chosen as a result of a triangulation of the information extractable from the piece itself, its geological data, information recorded by its finders, removers, and collectors, including the foreign place-name allocated to it and the place where it was found, as well as Gough’s own walking of the Tasmanian landscape, searching for the right site to perform the reunion. In some videos we see the artist walking through the landscape, looking, it appears, for the right spot in which to enact the return of the object to its ‘home’ environment. In these videos documenting the walking and the placement, a landscape also appears—one that has been transformed since these tools were found: the walking is truncated at various moments by the encounter with highways, fences, and markers delimiting private land. This landscape, which was neither empty of people nor of meaning when the selective colonising gaze saw only a blank slate, has lost the web of relationality and reference that bound it together into a symbolic Aboriginal environment. The scope of what was lost can be discerned from Christopher Tilley’s *Places, Paths and Monuments: A Phenomenology of Landscape* (1994), where he discusses the ‘three general features of the semantic fields of paths on the island of Belau’ observed by Parmentier

By making visible the layers of distance created by the dislocation of culture, Gough’s work highlights what is lost in the process. It also signifies a partial dislocation of knowledge about topographical names and indigenous understanding of landscape, its deep history and the thick web of references that link it all together and give it meaning, which becomes silenced and invisible from the landscape, going underground, or being closed up inside boxes. The hold of absence and loss on the present is at its most explicit in memorial processes. But, a loss that is not officially memorialised, one that is silenced, can be just as cogent. And some recovery is possible with the voicing of narratives that restore or even reinvent those links, and with the reclaiming of knowledge.

fragile and temporary markers in a territory, *The Lost World (Part 2)* can also be interpreted as a memorial gesture. The use of photography to mark lost memory, and attempts to recover it, is in line with the memorial nature of photography that Roland Barthes highlights in *Camera Lucida* (1980). It also recalls the ephemeral photographic memorial markers that we have seen being used in recent years to indicate a site of loss with photographs of those lost—such as images of the deceased or missing being put up along the fences marking the site of 9/11.

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In Thomas Wolfe’s novel *You Can’t Go Home Again* (2011), the narrator reflects:

Perhaps this is our strange and haunting paradox here in America—that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement. At any rate, that is how it seemed to young George Webber, who was never so assured of his purpose as when he was going somewhere on a train. And he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began.

Gough’s work of placing photographs of these Tasmanian objects housed in Cambridge back into the landscape in which they were found performs an act of reunion at the same time as it reveals the impossibility of that reunion. That it is not the object itself but a photographic representation of it that is placed in the landscape speaks to the layers of meaning and interpretation that now lie between object and landscape. Both have changed since the original separation, as have the ties that bind them. The objects have gained new meanings through their displacement, collection, exhibition, and the various tellings, forgettings, and retellings of their significance—even as their absence from the local context was prolonged. Yet, even as it highlights the distance that lies between object

(1987): ‘The points linked by paths share sets of common elements—sacred stones, trees, artefact depositions, names and titles referred to in myths and stories and linked to the activities of ancestors who stopped on the journey which created the path.”

Recovering those pathways and their elements in today’s Tasmanian landscape needs, to a large extent, the work of the poet and the artist who can recover and re-conjure meaning while doing the work of walking those paths.

It is within these meandering searches that return can be most poignantly found. Here we see both the impossibility and yet eternal desire for return. For it is in the journey of return, the walking, rather than the actual moment of reunion, where the home being returned to and the exiled object returning come together most closely, without the interference of the changes that will inevitably frustrate the completion of return—always just out of reach.

One of the elements that undermines the possibility of return is the fixation on origin as if it was integrally linked to a place, and roots in that place. Whereas those origins and, more importantly, the meanings that link object and landscape lie in the stories and the movement: the routes. It is in the movement, the dance of distancing and rapprochement, that the idea of ‘home’ becomes most concrete and graspable.
and landscape, the photographic reunion also reclaims for the object and for Gough, as she walks the landscape looking for the site of reunion and then filming the process, the embodied, physical, sensory experience that reunites these objects with their contextual and phenomenological significance. Some of the knowledge of context is recovered in the process of facilitating a re-encounter, as Crouch argues: ‘knowledge is constructed through encounters, and space is important in informing this knowledge.’ Understanding historic landscapes is necessarily limited to those who have ‘learned the site’; if the sites are not learned then they are not understood and this exerts a form of dispossession from which it is difficult to recover.

In *The Lost World (Part 2)* we see the attempt of a Tasmanian Aboriginal artist to enact a form of reunion in the face of the impossibility of reuniting the actual stone artefacts and tools with their home country, her home country. The result is a poignant expression of the frustrations inherent in this endeavour and the impossibilities of return. Despite this frustrated attempt, an important element of recovery is attained in that it brings back out into the light and reveals evidence of Aboriginal occupation across historical Tasmania, something that the colonial act of displacement and removal concealed.

In one of Gough’s pieces in the exhibition *The Lost World (Part 2)*, a large flint tool hangs suspended over a map of Tasmania. Like a divining instrument tracing for the lifelines of the territory from which it came, yet its stillness seems to indicate the broken connection between the object and the territory, a distance of time, space and meaning, too vast now for the dialogue to start up again. This silence has an effecting presence, for without the conversation, the references linking objects and places remain dislocated. What does reunion look like when both object and place have changed?

The Impossibility of Return

Cultural heritage is often connected to an effort to simulate that there is an original and authentic state of being or moment in the past that informs the present. Yet the usable past is a shifting landscape of relations between subjects, objects, and places that have been disrupted by acts of violent destruction or separation. A set of relations that determine boundaries of belonging and the appropriation of heritage and which relate to what Irit Rogoff refers to as ‘sets of political insights, memories, subjectivities, projections of fantasmic desires and great long chains of sliding signifiers.’
From the moment in which people and objects are displaced, especially when this is a result of violence, return becomes a nostalgic, and sometimes obsessive desire made manifest and fantasised in a multitude of ways. The impossibility of this eternally imagined reunion is that from the moment in which an object and the site of its creation part ways, the two begin to change. The act of returning does not erase all that has happened in the meantime; furthermore, the reunion of the transformed place and the object with its accumulated capital of meaning is a meaning-making gesture in itself. Turning to John C. Torpey, we are not able to ‘make whole what has been smashed.’ If the politics of the reconstruction and repatriation of heritage aim not at this impossible return but at a more pragmatic recognition and civic equality, there might be a greater chance of achieving what really drives it.

Amidst the increased complexity in thinking about cultural heritage, one thing that has become very clear is that cultural heritage is not simply about the past. Rather, it is a process of meaning making and valuation that draws on the past in order to meet the needs of the present, as well as an instrument for giving directions into the future. Cultural heritage thus has recourse to the past for negotiating socio-political and economic relationships in the present. Claims for the repatriation of artefacts are thus less about recovering a piece of history than about moves to petition for cultural rights, take ownership over representation, and reflect new balances of power. At times they also accompany efforts to redress, at least symbolically, historical injustices or violence.

This essay is not an attempt to argue against claims to repatriate cultural heritage, nor to dismiss actions of reunification, restoration, or any other gestures that have at their core an aspiration of return and repair. Nor is it about the politics of repatriation. Rather, it is an exploration of dislocation and the limitations of attempts to undo it. The argument is not that return should not be attempted, but that it always remains incomplete. Because the aspiration for return is one that invokes both space and time: return of a person or object to a place from whence it came, but also to a moment, a moment of authenticity when it temporarily embodied its essential identity. Neither is fully attainable. Not only does the act of dislocation produce differences in object and environment, it also fundamentally alters the relation between the two.

The aspiration for return, and even more so the act, adds meaning and relationality, but it does not undo either the severance or
the differences caused by the displacement. Nor does it erase the in-between, regardless of whether it is left out of ‘before and after’ images that insistently proclaim continuity.

Gough writes, ‘I am drawn also to shorelines; the places between past and present, day and night, conscious and unconscious. My art making navigates these spaces of evocation in an effort to trigger re-surfacings of cultural memories.’ Return is not possible but the dance of return is a process of continuing to define spatial and temporal belonging and cultural identity. What Julie Gough has done with her work, what she and the exhibition’s curator, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, did with *The Lost World (Part 2)*, was to leap into the dance of return. Although complete return is impossible, the dance keeps the process of continuing to define spatial, temporal, and cultural belonging alive, thus linking back together the fragments of dislocated culture.

1 The author would like to thank Julie Gough for many thought-provoking conversations and for comments on this essay as well as Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll for her feed-back on an early draft of the piece including flagging up the Derek Walcott quote.


4 Exhibited in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) of the University of Cambridge in the autumn of 2013, curated by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll.


7 See for instance the different understandings of heritage as in two separate UNESCO conventions, one adopted in 1972 and the other in 2003. The earlier convention focuses on monumental sites, whereas the latter emphasizes tradition and know-how: Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Paris, 16 November,


Gough has three earlier sculptural pieces exploring the impossibility of return: *Time Capsules (Bitter Pills)* (2001), *Transmitting Device* (2005), and *The Impossible Return* (2011).
