Lives of Exhibitions: Circumscription and Activation

The British Museum exhibition

“*Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*”

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Warning: This dissertation includes names of deceased people that may cause distress to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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[1] In the exhibition *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* and its accompanying book, the heritage of Indigenous people has been acknowledged. I have also done so wherever possible in this dissertation.

Abstract

The British Museum's exhibition *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* was shown in Room 35 between 23rd April and 2nd August 2015 against a background of significant changes in the ways that museums work, especially in their relationships with Indigenous communities. This dissertation applies multiple methodologies to explore the extent of the exhibition. In doing so it draws particularly on Actor-Network Theory approaches as a way of understanding the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions. It concludes that museum exhibitions can usefully be seen as emerging from a dynamic 'field' of associations, and that understanding of this 'field' can be enhanced with reference to the Polynesian concept of 'v*ā*', and the related idea of activation.

"All museums rest on the hope – the belief – that the study of things can lead to a truer understanding of the world. It is what the British Museum was set up to achieve."

British Museum, 2015 Internet

1. Introduction

Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation was shown at the British Museum from 23rd April to 2nd August 2015. It was heralded as the first major exhibition in the UK[2] "devoted to the history and culture of Indigenous Australians" (British Museum, 2015 [internet]) and explored "Indigenous Australia in its own right as well as its engagement with British colonisation from 1788" (Sculthorpe *et al.* 2015: 13). It has been described as "a powerful step by the British Museum" (Oscar, 2015 [internet]) and as "a landmark event" (Nugent, 2015 [internet]). Guardian journalist Jonathan Jones reported that a "tragic story is movingly told in this thought-provoking exhibition" (Jones, 2015 [internet]). The views of the public have ranged from "excellent" (S.24[3]) and "it taught me quite a lot" (S.11), to "it won't do much to initiate the changes that are required" (billzzz, 2015 [internet]). Comments like these from Indigenous Australians, academics, journalists and the public suggest that this exhibition has been an important event.

My aim is to show how we might understand both what this exhibition does as well as what it is, and by looking at the spatial and temporal ranges of what it does through following

[2] An article by Jeremy Eccles refers to a British Museum exhibition in 1973 as a "largely forgotten … totally ethnographic picture of the 'noble savage' Downunder" (Eccles, 2015, Aboriginal Art Directory Website).
[3] I refer to interviews throughout the dissertation by their type (S-short; L-long; and P-professional) and number. So this example refers to short interview 24.

some of its ‘actors’, consider the implications for how we understand the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions.

I start here with an **introduction** to the British Museum, the first national museum, founded by act of parliament over 250 years ago in 1753, as well as some of the contextual factors within which it operates. I then outline two concepts that may be unfamiliar to readers: “*vā*” and “activation” (Webb-Binder, 1999: 27; Gilbert, 2015: 139). In the **literature review** that follows it, I describe some of the developments relevant to this study that have sometimes been grouped together as “new museology” (Vergo, 1989). I will introduce object biographies (Cornish, 2012; Jones, 2007; Kopytoff, 1986) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and their application to museums and exhibitions. In reviewing ANT, I will draw mainly from Latour, (1996; 2000; 2005) and Byrne *et al.* (2011).

My **research questions** are followed by a description of the **methods** I have used, including the “critical visitor” (Lindauer, 2006); the “visitor-exhibition encounter” (Sandell, 2007); and qualitative interviews (Burgess, 2003). The **analysis** section presents some of the data and is followed by a **discussion** of how this analysis facilitates an understanding of “*Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*” before I draw some **conclusions**.

<u>The British Museum</u>

Museums in the UK and beyond are subject to changing and sometimes challenging contexts. These include, but are not limited to, funding. In the late 1990s, national museums in the UK faced a “cash crisis” (Macdonald 2002: 31), when responsibility for maintenance of their buildings was delegated from the Property Services Agency to the museums themselves. For the first time, museums were required to draw up corporate plans and bid

to government for finance. Against this background, they introduced voluntary or compulsory entrance charges, which led to very significant declines in the numbers of visitors, as much as 60% in the case of the National Museum of Science and Industry (*ibid.*: 34). While museum charges have since been dropped, many of the changes that formed part of what Macdonald called a "cultural revolution" continue to have an impact on the way museums operate (*ibid.*: 23). The possibility of the reintroduction of entrance charges, at least for some museums, has been discussed again recently (Youngs, 2015 [internet]). Financing continues to be an important part of the operating context of museums.

Today, the British Museum sees itself as an "Enlightenment ideal … the most comprehensive survey in existence of the material culture of humanity" (British Museum, 2013: 2). It is visited by over six million people a year, from London, the UK and the rest of the world (*ibid.*: 4). The Museum has around 40,000 members (or friends), and a commitment to public engagement programmes and debates, which, it says, "have established the Museum as a place where major issues of the modern world can be explored and discussed in the light of the collection" (*ibid.*).

In its current strategy, it aims to be "The Museum for the Global Citizen … The World's Museum". It works in partnership with institutions in the UK and beyond to ensure that "the collection is seen each year by millions outside London… about two million outside the UK" (*ibid.*: 5). This is being achieved through a programme of long-term loans to museums in the UK and abroad, as well as touring exhibitions.

In financial terms, the Museum is now able to "seek support all over the world" while it recognises that "ongoing government support is critical if the Museum is to remain a world

class institution” (*ibid.*: 9). Government grant-in-aid remains its main source of income, even while earned income has been growing from various sources, including exhibitions, some of which charge entrance fees, support merchandising and are sponsored.

Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation reflected a number of these aims and developments, especially in its partnerships with Australian institutions including the Australian National University. Many of the objects exhibited will be part of a linked *Encounters* exhibition that will open at the National Museum of Australia in November 2015. *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* had an extensive public programme of lectures, debates and activities. There was an entrance charge for non-members and over-16s, and BP sponsored the exhibition.

Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation started by “exploring Indigenous Australia in its own right” (Sculthorpe *et al.*, 2015: 13); indeed around half of Room 35 was dedicated to doing so. The exhibition was also guided by an Indigenous Reference Group, several of whose members were present for the official opening, and consultations about the exhibition were undertaken amongst more than two dozen Indigenous Australian communities. Indigenous Australians have been defining participants in the exhibition and as such, a highly significant part of understanding both what the exhibition is and what it does.

Let us now look more closely at two important terms that may be unfamiliar: the Polynesian concept of *vā* and the idea of activation (Webb-Binder, 1999: 27; Gilbert, 2015: 139). The *vā* is the space between all things “which defines and makes us a part of the unity that is all” (Wendt, 1999). It represents a space in which identity can be mapped. “We each have preferred maps, learned maps—what we believe our cultures, our nations, ourselves were

and are. Our maps may be our neighbour's fictions; we read one another through what we believe, through the mirrors of who and what we are. Those maps and fictions are all in the spiral which composes the story of us in the ever-moving present, in the *vā*" (*ibid.*).

The following two examples introduce this concept and the related one of activation. Indigenous artist Lily Laita, talking about her painting "*Va I Ta*", has explained that "in terms of the way that I paint, I think about every color [*sic*], every form as being a layer and within those layers, they're all telling different stories and sometimes they relate, sometimes they don't. Your life experiences and your family's life experiences, and all the stories that you know and when you're sharing them you're bringing them into the space" (Webb-Binder, 2009: 27).

In *Hands On: Indigenous Artists and European Cultural Institutions*, Helen Gilbert described two artist residencies (Gilbert, 2015). One of these took place at the Berlin Ethnology Museum in 2014 – Pasifikan artist Rosanna Raymond's Acti.VA.tion Day Berlin. It was a performance, a ceremony, an expression; it was many things. When the Acti.VA.tion came to a close, Roasanna Raymond asked "who will come to visit and take care of the objects now that they have been activated?" (*ibid.*: 107) suggesting that for her, activation is a new beginning of something living. As Raymond later reflected "it seemed to me it was the emotional response not the analytical response that allowed some of them [my peers – the 'audience'] to reconsider the unfamiliar surroundings … nothing exotic about a gut reaction, but nothing academic either … so while some were busy thinking, their stomachs took over … this is where *mauli* can be found … in your stomach or your heart … *mauli* … or *mauri* the spark of life, I was interested in activating" (*ibid.*: 109).

2. Literature review

2.1. Post-colonialism, Indigenous communities and museums

The number of Indigenous communities' engagements with museum collections and exhibitions has grown since the 1990s (Boast, 2011). Alongside initiatives to increase empowerment, such as shared curatorship and advisory boards, museums have invited Indigenous communities to encounter objects in storerooms, have supported temporary loans of artefacts to source or creator communities, and have encouraged many and varied artist interventions. Indeed museums have been actively promoting their post-colonial status, although questions have been raised about the extent to which it is justified (*ibid.*: 56). These developments reflect the critical, post-colonial perspectives evident in the study of material culture more broadly (Jackson, 2000: 10). Several studies have described ways in which Indigenous communities' engagements with museums and exhibitions have changed over recent years, and explored their significance for both parties (Peers and Brown, 2003; Krmpotich 2010; Krmpotich and Peers, 2011 and Clifford, 2013). Peers and Brown considered "the dramatic change in the nature of relationships between museums and their source communities [to be] one of the most important developments in the history of museums" (Peers and Brown, 2003: 519).

Many collections were established in colonial contexts where source communities were believed to be dying out, described by some as "salvage anthropology" (Cornish, 2013: 310). The one-way process that this implies, from soon-to-be-extinct source community to museum, has changed or is changing. Clearly, source communities, many of them at least, have survived and have developed new types of relationships with museums: as new audiences, as sources of knowledge and expertise, and as claimants for the repatriation of

museum artefacts. Museums are now more likely to consider how exhibitions are "perceived by and affect source communities" (Peers and Brown, 2003: 520). Members of source communities are recognised "as authorities on their own cultures" (*ibid.*) at the same time as those cultures and communities benefit from transformed access to museum collections (Allen and Hamby, 2011; Herle, 2008; Peers and Brown 2013). The complex issues of repatriation, not least of human remains, often simplified to a divide between "those who argue for their return on cultural-religious grounds and those who argue for their retention on scientific grounds" (Lohman, 2012: 49) are being faced either reactively or proactively by many museums and source communities (see for example Krmpotich, 2010). The ways in which they are dealing with repatriation include important elements of performance. Performance and artists' other interventions in museums are becoming more important, as museums find ways "to diversify their institutional narratives and tackle head-on challenging histories" (Stearn, 2014: 101). Exhibitions have been recognised as fundamentally theatrical "for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create" (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 3). Such relationships between display and performance can be usefully seen in the context of a broad movement that Susan Bennett traced in museum practice "from collection and display to pedagogy and participation" that reflects developments in audience research generally and in museums in particular (2013: 9).

Such changes also reflect aspects of the post-colonialism that is a feature of new museum theory, which "is about decolonising … it embraces many viewpoints" (Marstine, 2006: 5). The ambition to embrace many viewpoints, to use many voices, inevitably challenges the idea of a single coherent exhibition narrative. It opens up the possibility of offering visitors different ways of engaging with an exhibition, to act as "critical consumers" (*ibid.*) and

further, to collaborate in the production of an exhibition and its meanings (Bennett, 2013: 19).

2.2. Object biographies

There are numerous examples of new life being breathed into objects through their renewed contact with "traditional owners" (Peers, 2003; 2013; Herle, 2008). Such examples may often use an object biographical approach, "as a way of understanding the relations between the peoples involved" (Peers, 2003: 75). The idea that objects have a biography has been recognised as an important framework "for the study of material culture during the late twentieth century" (Edwards *et al.* 2006: 13) and has been traced back to an essay by Kopytoff on the "cultural biography of things" (1986: 64). Object biographies address the inherent instability of meanings attached to objects; they "cannot be understood in terms of a single, unchanging identity, (such as 'museum object')" … an object biography traces a "succession of meanings" (Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 169). These meanings derive from relationships with people and other things, (Thomas, 1991). Such relationships are not superficial; Latour has argued for example that "things do not exist without being full of people" (2000: 10). Moreover, objects may extend or replace embodied functions and may, through the values that are attached to them, demand human responses (Dant, 1999; Mitchell, 1996). This approach "posits a fundamentally dynamic understanding of objects that is both linked to and foreshadows the notion of agency" (Edwards *et al*., 2006: 13). Gell (1998) suggested that objects can be seen as social actors, constructing and influencing the field of social action (Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 173). Strathern's studies in Melanesia showed that objects and people can be seen as moving within networks of relations (1988). These ideas in particular, objects as social actors and networks of relations, together with

other aspects of object biographies, have similarities to a number of elements of actor-network theory approaches.

2.3. Actor-Network Theory

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), has come to be seen as an important reference point for anyone who wants to take seriously the role of 'non-humans' in social life (Nimmo, 2011: 108). It is not always considered to be a theory, and even sometimes appears to be anti-theoretical. For example, according to ANT, an observer should not have an *a priori* list of theories in which they try and fit actors' behaviour – the actors must be allowed to make their own way and you have "to follow the actors themselves" (Latour, 2005: 12). ANT is presented as a flat or non-hierarchical way of understanding: its use of the network idea distances it from a conception of society with a top and bottom – macro- and micro-scales that are somehow inherently different from each other. ANT actors have the agency and ability to create relationships irrespective of such definitions of scale. This does not mean that power relationships do not exist, but that they, together with size and complexity are not assumed *a priori*. The difference between micro- and macro-actors "is brought about by power relations and the constructions of networks that will elude analysis if we presume *a priori* that macro-actors are bigger than or superior to micro-actors" (Callon and Latour, 1981: 280). In ANT, the term actor does not refer only to humans, but includes objects and other non-human entities. Callon and Latour explain that, to be classified as an actor, an entity must be able to translate other entities' will through its own form and properties, and it is understood through the strength of the associations that it creates (*ibid.*: 287). It is by following the actors themselves that these associations can be observed. ANT is applied by identifying associations between actors and following their lead. Following the actors is not

easy, but it is only by doing so that the "shape, size, heterogeneity, and combination of associations" can be freed from the constraints of specific social theories and allowed to take their own form (Latour, 2005: 11). ANT also challenges the idea of inside and outside: the only question is "are two elements connected? [therefore] … a network has no outside" (Latour, 1996: 372). These elements drawn from ANT have been selected because they are directly relevant to the arguments I make in the discussion about the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions, and the parallels I will draw with *vā* and activation. I now wish to look at some examples of how ANT has been applied to the study of museums.

Actor-Network Theory in museums and exhibitions

Museums and exhibitions deal with objects, their physical characteristics, aesthetics and social significance. They are also concerned with human relationships and their agency as well as that of the objects. While also true of museum permanent collections, such relationships and associations are perhaps most apparent in the creation of temporary exhibitions. So, how has ANT been applied in these contexts?

Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum, edited by Byrne *et al.* (2011), explored ANT along with theories about agency and materiality in the context of museums. In the introductory chapter, they asserted that the studies in the book "show that museum collections have been and are still active in forming social relations between varied persons and groups, including creator communities, anthropologists, curators, auctioneers and museum administrators, all of whom have also been shaped through interactions with each other and with the material objects" (*ibid.*: 4).

A contribution from this volume that is particularly relevant to this study of *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* was made by Allen and Hamby in their chapter entitled 'Pathways to knowledge'. They showed how collaborations between museums and Aboriginal people in Australia "have created new insights into heritage collections" (Allen and Hamby, 2011: 209). They recognised the contemporary museum environment as both "a contested site where knowledge is negotiated and a field site where both contemporary and historical indigenous agency emerges" (*ibid.*). They described a paradigm shift in power relations that has been formalised in policies that "wrestle with the moral and ethical issues necessary in redressing the injustices of past practices in museums and the post-colonial experience more broadly" (*ibid.*: 210).

Byrne *et al.*'s book includes a "wide range of methodologies and approaches used to analyse the complex networks that create collections, including: databases, auction catalogues, museum accession and registration records, diaries, journals, letters, images, memory work and personal testimonies as well as the material characteristics of objects" (Byrne *et al.* 2011: 5). The authors aimed "to develop a broad set of themes which help us to understand the processes and networks of agency which sit behind the material and social assemblages under discussion" (*ibid.*).

Several of the book's studies highlighted the ongoing associations between the agencies of creator communities and museums, museums and museums, and individuals as diverse as "scholars, agents, local politicians and middle men" (ter Keurs, 2011: 181). Byrne *et al.* concluded that ANT "comfortably accommodates this multiplicity of agents" (2011: 8) and their non-hierarchical associations reflect Latour's suggestion that social practices are flat,

facilitating many starting points and paths through the study of museum collections and exhibitions.

It is worth noting, however, that of the 14 studies in the volume only 3 refer to ANT, including one by Chris Wingfield (2011: 119-140) and another by Susan Byrne (2011: 307-325). Byrne's chapter is of particular interest in that it focused on the agency of Alfred Court Haddon (a significant figure in anthropology generally, and *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* specifically), as well as the objects that he collected. Byrne's approach allied itself with ANT through the idea of objects as traces of agency. "If you mention agency, you have to provide an account of its action, and to do so you need to make more or less explicit which trials have produced which observable traces" (Latour, 2005: 53). She apparently constrained her interest to human agency: "A 'trace', in this context is best conceived as any evidence found within the collection that reflects human agency" (Byrne, 2011: 308). Indeed most of the chapters in this volume focus on human agency: 10 out of the 14. Chris Wingfield's contribution is worthy of attention because it considered how the Pitt Rivers Museum database might be used to measure relationships (2011: 131). He tested one of the ideas of ANT – that an actor can be understood by the strength of its relationships, the degree of influence of its will on other entities. Byrne *et al*. contained a few examples of ANT applied in museum contexts, but the vision in the introductory chapter was not well-developed in the rest of the volume. There is more that can be done.

3. Research Questions

My aim is to show how we might understand both what this exhibition does as well as what it is, and by looking at the spatial and temporal ranges of what it does through following some of its ‘actors’, consider the implications for how we understand the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions.

My research questions are:

A. How can the concepts of ANT contribute to understanding what the exhibition *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* is and what it does?

B. What does such an approach imply for how we understand the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions?

C. How might the concepts of *vā* and activation contribute to our understanding?

4. Methods

This section will introduce the multiple methodologies I used, informed by the critical visitor approach, the visitor-exhibition encounter, and ANT. The steps I took were to:

- describe a model circumscription of the exhibition for comparative purposes;
- identify starting points from which to follow actors in the exhibition;
- follow those actors; and
- set this process against elements of the exhibition's contexts.

To create a simple model circumscription, I applied a critical visitor approach to describe the room, the objects it contained and aspects of their layout and display. I followed this with an examination of the visitor-exhibition encounter through forty short and ten long interviews with visitors to the exhibition, a study of the public programme of events and a review of the British Museum's formative analysis that informed exhibition planning. I used these methods to establish starting points from which to follow exhibition actors that were revealed in the data gathered. I identified three actors and followed them into the networks of associations that they led me to. I then took a step back and set these networks into a broader context by:

- creating a database to explore the objects, individuals and institutions involved in assembling the exhibition through their creation, collection and donation;
- reviewing a sample of the public dialogues generated by media coverage of the exhibition.

While I have identified ANT as a key approach for this dissertation, I have chosen to use other methodologies. As Cornish has noted "a syncretic research methodology [can] give equal weight to a number of elements – practices, objects, and networks. Its perspective shifts between the micro-level which concerns itself with specific objects and spaces, and the macro-level … the broader contexts … Such an approach highlights the multiple agents involved …" (Cornish, 2013: 19-20).

4.1. The critical visitor

Margaret Lindauer has described how to create an exhibition critique. Her reflective approach included pre-visit self-observations of "expectations, hopes and assumptions" and of any "professional baggage" as a museum visitor or professional. The critical visitor should "during every stage of observation, notice what [they] are doing, thinking, and deciding as [they] proceed" (Lindauer, 2006: 204). Her structured approach grouped questions under the headings: museum architecture, display style, written texts and unspoken messages, and beyond the display (gallery guides, journals, monographs, and newspapers). She explained how to transform notes made in such an investigative process into an exhibition critique, in order to encourage "a critical mass of critical museum visitors [that] might develop to become agents of change", to help enact new museum theory in the context of museums that "operate like businesses … satisfying their clientele" (*ibid.*: 223). I also referred to this approach in considering how to conduct my in-depth interviews, by inviting visitors to reflect on their previous museum visiting and experience of the British Museum before seeing the exhibition.

4.2. The visitor-exhibition encounter

One suitable place to start looking for actors to follow is the visitor-exhibition encounter; the conceptual moment of mediated contact between objects and the people for whom they were displayed. The interactions between "what visitors bring to the exhibition and … what exhibitions bring to visitors" can be complex and a challenge to study (Kratz, 2002: 94)". Sandell was particularly interested in how this complexity affects our understanding of the role of museums in influencing visitors, specifically in combating prejudice. She suggested an approach to the visitor-exhibition encounter that "attempts to provide a more nuanced and flexible understanding of the role of museums in enabling visitors to engage with, make sense of and negotiate difference" (2007: 72). Understanding how audiences engage with text can be seen as a continuum between text-dominant and audience-dominant models (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 29). At one end, the emphasis is on the influence of text on audiences, while at the other, audiences are active agents who "are capable of constructing their own meanings" (Sandell, 2007: 76). While audience research has "see-sawed" between these poles (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 29), Sandell noted that there has been "growing support for the Dominant Audience model" (2007: 78). This general 'turn to the audience' is also a feature of the literature specifically on museum audiences, where "current thinking … argues for a constructivist explanation of the ways in which meaning is made within museums" (*ibid.*). "Constructivist exhibitions", she explained, "provide a range of perspectives and viewpoints, facilitate open-ended learning outcomes and offer ways of validating the diverse conclusions that visitors reach" (*ibid.*).

To explore the ways that visitors encountered *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*, I undertook two sets of interviews, which were approached differently. The 40 short interviews were undertaken from Monday 8th and Thursday 11th June 2015 near the exit door from Room 35 where exhibition was displayed, within the Great Court. They were undertaken using a questionnaire that was read to visitors, and this typically took between 5 and 15 minutes. The questionnaire was originally designed by Dr. John Carty of the Australian National University, one of the members of the exhibition team and an author of the exhibition book. He is also a member of the *Encounters* project that lies behind the British Museum's exhibition and the linked *Encounters* exhibition that will be shown at the National Museum of Australia in November. The questionnaire was designed to be used to interview visitors to both exhibitions for comparative purposes. Most visitors asked agreed to be interviewed, with only 15 of the 55 approached declining to do so.

The second set of ten interviews was undertaken over a longer period, from 25th April to the 18th June. I selected these visitors through my social and professional networks. I knew seven of them before I interviewed them; and three were introduced to me by people I already knew. My choices were deliberate, and intended to offer opportunities to elicit responses from visitors on aspects of the exhibition that I was interested in, including display; questions of representation and constructivism, especially through photography; the exhibition's Indigenous focus; and issues of repatriation. Those selected included people both from the UK and elsewhere; all were currently resident in London. Some had visited the British Museum before, others had not; some were long-term, frequent and enthusiastic museum visitors, others rarely visited museums or clearly disliked them. These interviews were undertaken in the grounds of the Museum in two parts. Before seeing the exhibition,

visitors were asked to briefly introduce themselves, and then to say something about their museum visiting experience: previous experience of museum visiting in general, whether they had visited the British Museum and what their experience and impressions of it were, and finally what, if anything, they already knew about *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*. I then accompanied visitors into the exhibition, where they were left alone to visit it as they wished and let me know when they were ready to leave. Visit durations varied from around 25 minutes to almost 2 hours. Immediately afterwards, visitors were interviewed again. This time, I invited them to give me their impressions without questions or prompting first. Some found it difficult to get started, so, if they preferred, I asked a question drawn from the short interview questionnaire. I also used spontaneous questions to prompt further responses if I wanted to explore any comments further, or if the visitors expressed difficulty in organising and expressing their impressions. Interviews lasted from as little as five minutes to over an hour. I developed a protocol to guide these long interviews that included the opportunity to withdraw from the process at any time, and to review the interviews and any quotes I wished to use anonymously in this dissertation.

The intention of combining two forms of interviewing was to identify from the broader survey a range of interests and questions that might serve as potential starting points, and to have opportunities to explore issues of personal interest to me some detail with the longer interviews. Both sets of interviews were recorded using an Olympus LS 12 digital audio recorder, with the visitors' permission.

A number of considerations were made in formulating the interview plans, drawing mainly from Burgess, 2003 and Bryman, 2008. Thought was given to the location of the interviews.

The short interviews were undertaken within the Museum, since it was the most effective way of identifying visitors who had just seen the exhibition. The area near the exit was uncongested compared with most of the Museum, and so offered a degree of privacy. It was however a noisy location, overlooking one of the Museum's cafés, and this did affect the quality of the sound recordings. Because the short interviews were at the Museum, it seemed consistent to also conduct the long ones there too. The opportunity to interview outside meant that the recordings were of better quality. Visitors seemed to benefit from the location in front of the building when reflecting on their impressions of the Museum. It did not appear to prevent them from being critical, and all visitors appeared very relaxed and willing to talk. Due to the choice of these public locations and the timing of them, no safety concerns were identified. Two of the long interviews had to be completed after having left the museum, due to constraints on participants' time combined with transport delays leading to a later start than planned. These were both shorter and less relaxed than the others, which seems to have been due to both the delay and the change of location.

Consent was a key consideration, and a protocol was used for the long interviews. The introduction to the short interviews told participants that they could withdraw at any time. At the end, they were asked to sign a declaration giving their consent for the information to be used anonymously.

The practicalities of coding and analysing the data were also considered in the layout of the short questionnaire, although, since this is also to be used for the Encounters exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, few changes were made.

"Things are what they are. That is their power. They are all the things we think they are, all the things we sense they are, and more. They are themselves. If they meant something they would be less. Whatever you see is your personal wealth and paradise. ... What you see is what you are, or what you will become."

Ben Okri – Astonishing the Gods, p. 11

5. Analysis

In this section, I describe the results of the different methods used, starting with the initial critical visitor approach that I used to create a simple circumscription of the exhibition. As a simple model, it is intended to serve as a contrast for the kind of definition that an ANT approach will later elaborate. I then move on in the context of a visitor-exhibition encounter approach to focus the main part of my analysis on the interviews, before then looking at the public programme of events, and finally at the formative evaluation commissioned by the British Museum. Having identified my starting points, I then follow three of the exhibition's actors: Jandamarra's boomerang, William Dawes' notebook and a Torres Strait Island *dhari* or head ornament. Finally in this analysis section, I take a step back to consider the contexts of these actors and their networks, with a view to describing their significant extent, depth and layered complexity. These analyses are then explored further in relation to my research questions in the next section, the discussion.

5.1. The critical visitor

A basic description of what the exhibition *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* is might start by circumscribing it in Room 35 within the British Museum, London between 23rd April and 2nd August 2015. Within these limits, it can be described by its physical characteristics, including the objects that comprise it as well as the room and furnishings that enable their display. I searched for descriptive information about these physical characteristics, and then, once the exhibition opened, recorded a series of encounters I had with the exhibition within Room 35, including a visual analysis of the layout, lighting, sound and displays of the objects and interpretation of the exhibition.

Room 35 is one of the principal galleries for temporary exhibitions, having been created for that purpose during the redesign and rebuilding of the Great Court, which opened in 2000. It comprises of the order of 180 m^2 set within a curving, crescent moon shape behind the circular Reading Room.

The exhibition is divided into two main sections, with the “fulcrum” being the arrival of Captain Cook in 1770 (P.15). The room contains over 200 individual artefacts. These are displayed in 42 cases, some from British Museum stock and others commissioned specifically for this exhibition. There are five large section panels and fifteen smaller theme panels, together with dozens of smaller object labels and small maps. Two large maps are included, the first of which, showing the diversity and extent of the language groups and some of the peoples of the continent, is, together with one of the large paintings, the largest item in the exhibition. There are four audio visual installations: an introductory video presented on three screens showing scenes from rural and urban Indigenous Australia and

the Torres Strait islands; a small screen showing Aboriginal women digging for and cooking Witchetty Grubs; a scrolling documentary screen setting events in the struggle for Indigenous rights between 1901 and 2015 in the context of world events; and a final single screen showing a short film of master basket weaver Abe Muriata (Girramay) talking about his work. A number of the cases include temperature and humidity monitors, revealing the demands that the objects themselves make upon the exhibition. There are two benches, with pockets housing Braille and large-print copies of the exhibition's interpretive text. The Braille editions also include tactile images of some of the paintings.

Beyond these physical characteristics, the space is also affected by lighting, spaciousness, sound, colours and textures. Lighting, to take one example, is affected by the demands of both the objects and the audiences. More than 180 spotlights of various sizes and brightness are installed on the ceiling and in or on cases, with levels frequently limited to 50 lux to protect some of the objects. At the same time, enough light is needed to be able to see objects, and consideration is given by the Museum to visitors with sensory-impairment. Compromises are sometimes necessary between these two demanding groups of actors.

Within the context of these physical characteristics is the experience of being there, and I summarise some of my notes to give a taste of what it was like for me. On entering the room, the dimmed lighting and the low sound levels provoked a slightly claustrophobic feeling in me, similar to that I have felt in churches, libraries and some other museum spaces. It was an effort to overcome these feelings, to reach out to look at the objects. I felt that I wanted to stay in the space at the start, taking in the mood, and looking at the first large painting, before turning left, down the first line of cases. It was, at the same time, a

peaceful atmosphere, especially on my first visit. Subsequently, as long as the numbers of other visitors in the room was low – perhaps fewer than thirty – it felt pleasantly quiet and relaxed. Over several visits, I noted visitor numbers between 20 and 100, with the room feeling particularly noisy and congested above 70, especially when one or more school groups of children were present. I found it more difficult to engage with the objects on these occasions, my mind felt less free to wander, to explore and to question.

The design and composition of the exhibition precedes the visitor's experience of it. And I gained some details about that process from interviews with a number of professionals involved with it. From these, it is possible to discover some of the factors that affected the layout of the room, the combinations of objects, the display cases, the design and use of colour, the visual impact of case arrangement, the positioning of cases and objects within a narrative and section structure. These reveal the agency of curatorial staff and their priorities, of institutional and professional policies, of visitor advocates amongst the staff, of technology and materials as well as of the objects themselves. For example, the fragmented layout of the cases in the first section reflected an intention to create a more spacious and floating atmosphere in contrast to the chronological and compressed atmosphere of the second section. However it also reflected the agency of visitor services professionals promoting visitor access and circulation in this area, (Interviews P.3 and P.15).

A difference between two plans of the exhibition reveals similar agencies. At least one large painting was intended to be displayed horizontally, but it was felt that this would reduce accessibility and its visibility, especially by visitors using wheelchairs, and so it was mounted vertically (P.15). And in a last-minute change, the *larrikitj* (memorial pole) sculpture

'*Barama/Captain Cook*' by Gawirrin Gumana (b 1935) Dhalwangu clan, Yirritja moiety, Yolngu, was moved from a position where visitors could see it from all sides to stand against a wall where views were more limited.

These statistics and descriptions do tell us something important about the exhibition. The imperatives of clearly defining and managing the creation and installation of the exhibition so that it opens on time and meets the expectations of audiences make such circumscription necessary and valuable, (P.13, P.11 and P.12). However, once this has been achieved, it can exclude much that might be part of what this exhibition is. Consider just a few questions. When, how and by whom were these objects chosen? Who created them and how did they come to be there at that time? How and by whom was the interpretive text developed? Each of these questions can be expanded into many more questions that might help us to understand what the exhibition was and how it came to be created. But to consider what it did, we need to ask other questions, such as 'What effects did it have on visitors?'

5.2. The visitor-exhibition encounter

5.2.1. Interviews

Two groups of interviews were undertaken with the public: a short, administered questionnaire for 40 members of the public as they left the exhibition; and a long interview with 10 invited guests, which included a short first part before entering the exhibition and a longer part immediately after visiting the exhibition.

Short interviews

I will focus on the responses to Question 4: 'Did parts of the exhibition engage you more than others?' In most cases, the responses referred to objects. The second main group of responses to this question referred to the social and political aspects of colonisation. Paintings generally or a specific painting were mentioned most often (12). The specific paintings mentioned were: *James Cook – with the Declaration* by Vincent Namatjira (b.1983) Pitjantjatjara and *Magpie Geese in the Arafura Swamp* by George Milpurrurru (1934-1998) Gurrumba Gurrumba clan, Yirritja moiety, Yolngu. The next most common objects mentioned were those relating to personal stories and the broader social story of the social and political impacts of colonisation (10). These include repatriation, the rights of Indigenous Australians, the artists' approach to colonisation, the conviction of Albert Namatjira and the stolen generations. Baskets (6) and masks (4) were also mentioned several times. The shields and spear heads were also mentioned (2). Why did these things engage people more than others?

Where the paintings are mentioned, visitors rarely commented on what it was about them that they found more engaging. Where they did, they are often simple comments such as "the paintings were beautiful" (S.32), and "Always the art" (S.23). Overall, however, their comments reveal the importance of familiarity and context. For example "… the very large paintings. I suppose I've seen more of those in the past and they strike me as very, very beautiful" (S.25); and "the paintings and dreamtime things that I've seen on programmes before on television, that was something that caught my attention" (S.4). The fact that the paintings were exhibited in the context of this exhibition engaged one visitor who commented that "I think this exhibit put this art in context more than any other exhibit I've

seen of Aboriginal art, so I really appreciated this exhibit. The paintings were in context with the culture" (S.31).

Responses to the baskets and masks reveal longer and more enthusiastic comments. For example, "I love the baskets. I thought they were absolutely amazing. The ones that were turned up at the ends, they were astonishing" (S.1). "Some of those baskets were of far more value than I was anticipating. Which I was actually quite pleased about" (S.8). "The basket making was wonderful" (S.12). "The masks were outstanding" (S.5). "I loved the masks" (S.21).

More specific interests were also mentioned by visitors as factors that affected their engagement. "I loved the masks, because masks are my thing. I make masks" (S.21). "What I was particularly pleased about was that there was a significant amount of stuff from the Torres Strait. … I was actually there about a month ago" (S.10).

However the most detailed and emotive comments were associated with the shock of discovering the social and political impact of colonisation, and particularly the recency of some of the issues that were raised. "I was also quite shocked at how recent, I mean 1967, I was already born in 1967, and I don't know, I don't really remember that, and I should remember that. So I found it actually quite shocking" (S.9b). "Not knowing the history, I was struck by how very recent it was" (S.35).

"There was a contemporary interpretation of some of the feelings of the aboriginal people, which was interesting because some of the stories I hear are very old, and it's still a current issue. It was interesting" (S.7).

Again the importance of visitors' interests in what they engaged most with is revealed in their comments about this social and political content: "Definitely more about the colonialism and the rights of the people. I think that was more exciting for me because of our interests really" (S.9).

"Of course I read about the culture, and I was surprised. We're going through a process in Canada called reconciliation, where the Aboriginals of Canada were sent to schools exactly the same way as the Aboriginals of Australia were, in order to extract them from their families and to give them a more Christian upbringing that resulted in a disaster and I see this in what's happened there. It has a very strong feeling for me …" (S.33).

Some of the comments specifically address how the exhibition expressed some of the contentious issues. For example "I'm also interested in the politics of what was being said. I found it really interesting. I wasn't expecting it to be so political; I was expecting it to focus more on the objects that were in there. I found it really annoyed me and I wasn't expecting it to. It seemed to be trying to justify having those objects. While I really appreciate their honesty in trying to do that, by doing that I was thinking you probably shouldn't have them, just give them back" (S.6).

The comments suggest that whether the responses are to the objects or the political stories, people seem to relate them to their own experience. There seems to be a relationship whereby familiarity is one dimension of engagement, and the unknown or shocking is another. Where these two are both present in the visitor-exhibition encounter, the responses seem to be richer. This is also revealed in a different way by the following comment: "there was somehow a lack of interest in some way. Maybe it's that this culture is so far removed from mine … Interestingly enough, as soon as you got to the colonial

elements, with the arrival of … British colonials, that was the part where I went 'Ooh! This part interests me.' Which was interesting again because there's an alienation from the culture itself, but as soon as my culture meets this culture…" (S.26). The longer interviews contain more about this sense of alienation and its impact on engagement with the exhibition, as we shall see below.

Overall, the comments suggest that while objects impressed visitors, and they appreciated their qualities, people engaged most deeply with the personal, social and political stories. In some cases it was the broad narrative of colonisation and the social and political impact of settlement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait society. In others, it was the very personal stories told for example through the videos, especially that featuring Abe Muriata: "what I liked best was the man talking about his craft" (S.3); "the gentleman making his basket, a person talking about their skill; that did engage me" (S.8). The story of Albert Namatjira also made a strong impact on one visitor: "there was one about a chap who was a well-regarded artist … and he gave a friend some alcohol and went to prison for six months and I just think that was pretty awful. So things like that really struck me" (S.13).

<u>Long interviews</u>

The long interviews offered people more time to develop and explore some of their responses, and most did so. A number of interesting points emerge. The first group of comments are those that elaborate on the importance of familiarity and context, and the impact of their absence, on the way visitors engaged with the exhibition. Visitor L.2 for example encountered "things in there that I had never seen before in my life and I could feel like how my brain wasn't able to really see them … it was a blur and then it took me a while

to actually see … the details.” As a result, she felt that she “didn’t really understand most of it.”

The second group of comments gives more detail about the exhibition’s “neutral … and balanced” (MHM, 2014) approach to the issues of appropriation and colonisation. Visitor L.1, an experienced traveller and museum visitor, commented that she felt that that the “heart-wrenching” and “unpalatable” history had been “airbrushed”, and that the text was attempting to persuade her “that it’s alright to sort of rob these people of their belongings.” She would prefer to see such history told by Indigenous Australians in their own country. While recognising that there was “acknowledgement about what’s happened” she was concerned that the message wasn’t expressed in “a strong enough way” and that it was not “going to be taken away by people.”

A complementary view by visitor L.2 suggests that L.1’s concerns may be justified at least in some cases. “It didn’t seem as if it was very bloody … I just think that none of that was really portrayed in the exhibition.” Summarising the impact of British colonisation on the Indigenous peoples, she recognised that it “sounds very painful … it didn’t make sense to me that people would … accept that as it is and just say ‘OK we’ll just go somewhere else.’ But that wasn’t at all portrayed in the exhibition I think.”

The language used was mentioned by a number of visitors in the long interviews. For example, visitor L.3 said: “It was like the museum needed to justify themselves, saying that it’s been acknowledged, which is alright, but it was acknowledged in a really strange way … ‘subject to debate’ was a phrase that was used a lot.” He summarised his comments on the

experience of colonisation and continuing racism in stark terms, noting that “a lot of the quotes … from Aboriginal people were good, those in red. I liked those. They’re still angry, as they should be…” He raised the question of repatriation, suggesting that “there could be a sharing of culture but with permission. They’ve still got bones and stuff … ‘we won’t have spiritual peace until after our ancestors’ remains are brought back.’ Again, subject to debate.”

One visitor, L.5, expressed a less critical view. He considered it a good thing that the acquisition of objects was raised. While acknowledging that “they managed to navigate [colonialism] fairly well” he identified a concern in the use of Victorian photographs: “It’s very tough to look at … now, with a modern lens on it, seeing the power imbalance, with photography being used as a sort of tool to subjugate other civilisations.”

Most comments on the issues of appropriation, colonisation and repatriation however expressed a sense of injustice. Visitor L.6 was very struck by the impact of colonisation, noting “how they [white men] do this everywhere”, that “this was their land, that was where everybody’s been and all of a sudden it’s just taken away … So it was an ill feeling at the end and … it was a bit depressing.” The personal stories had a particular impact on her: “when … it started to get a little personal, that’s when it started hitting you … pictures of people and their families …”

Visitor L.9 also mentioned appropriation and repatriation. He felt strongly about seeing objects that are claimed by others. “That doesn’t leave a very good taste… you walk in and you feel very guilty, more like a voyeur.” He felt that the British Museum “should be

engaging with the original peoples. Objects in here that have a strong connection to other cultures and are claimed by them should be returned. For example the Parthenon marbles …"

Four visitors commented on the Parthenon marbles issue (L.2, L.4, L.7, and L.9). One expressed the view that this will not be resolved because "if the British Museum starts giving things back, they would have to give everything back" (L.2). This is one example of how this exhibition resonates with current issues that are important to its visitors.

Visitor L.5 was surprised that photography was used as a documentary device in the exhibition, even though "we know how constructed it is." This issue about photography was also raised by visitor L.4, who commented extensively on it. She was critical of the idea that "quite often, people try to claim they are sharing information by sharing the photograph", but that "photography … has limited … power to tell you the story of what happened. It can tell you the story of the person who took the picture." She questioned the honesty of the Museum in telling the truth about what happened: "is there any truth?" "I would be happier if I had … a staged movie, honestly staged, declaring it is staged…" and this is why Michael Cook's photograph appealed to her: "this was a very interesting picture from my point of view."

These important responses were expressed alongside a number of comments about the objects in the exhibition. General comments included visitor L.4 who said that she found "interesting objects, nice objects and beautiful objects." She loved "the tools made by

stones – these were so beautiful", and remarked that "the paintings with dots are very, very contemporary."

The paintings had a significant impact on several visitors. L.3 was impressed by their scale. L.2 commented on "those huge paintings … how they … told a story." The paintings "which I didn't actually know much about" made a big impression on visitor L.5: "the fact that these are narrative paintings as opposed to decorative pieces." "The craftsmanship was incredible and that extends into the painting as well." The major point he made was that the relationship to the land was "so central and so important." He was interested in the layering evident in both *Undiscovered #4* by Michael Cook (b. 1968) Bidjara, and *Holes in the Land* by Judy Watson (b.1959) Waanyi, reflecting his impressions of the large paintings.

Visitor L.2 was struck by the idea that Indigenous Australians "think that they're responsible for the maintenance of everything around them." She envies "this sort of deep connection to the earth." She also thought "it was amazing how they adapted to the new materials."

It seems to me that of all the objects, William Dawes notebook seems to have had the biggest impact. Although it was mentioned by only two visitors, (L.6, and L.9), one of them (L.9) said that it significantly changed his opinion of the British colonisation of Indigenous Australia. "Dawes' book was a surprise, because one does expect to have the caricature white colonial officer, brutal and unpleasant, but … I hadn't realised how much effort they did put in to learning language … that surprised me."

As Macdonald noted, it is also interesting to consider what visitors did not say (Macdonald, 2002: 9). During the time that the exhibition was open, one of the issues in public politics in

Australia, at least amongst the Indigenous Australians was the forced closure of remote communities, judging by its visibility online. Facebook for example has several pages and groups that are frequently commenting on these two issues throughout the period that the exhibition was open, the most explicit being “Stop the Forced Closure of Aboriginal Communities”. It may be seen by some to be a continuation of the land rights issues from the 1990s and previously the 1970s that are referred to in the exhibition, tracing their origins back to the declaration of *terra nullius* in the 18th century (Sculthorpe *et al.*, 2015: 17). I expected that this issue might be raised in the interviews, at least by Australian visitors. However it wasn’t, despite recognition by for example visitor S.6 of “how much white Australia really doesn’t understand Aboriginal issues … [and that] … Australia needs to come a long way still in terms of reconciliation.” It was raised in the public dialogues, as we shall see below.

5.2.2. The public programme

In looking for visitor-exhibition encounters beyond the immediate circumscribed limits of the exhibition, I studied the Museum’s public programme for events that were linked or relate to *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation.* The public programme was extensive and included events as varied as introductions and talks by the curator, films, lectures, children’s activities and a one-day conference. The events studied took place between 10th April and 16th July and were published on the British Museum website and elsewhere, such as the Museum’s bi-monthly “What’s On”. The official opening took place on the evening of April 30th and included private views of the exhibition and speeches by: “Sir Charles Lambert, Chairman of the British Museum, The Hon. Alexander Downer, Australian High Commissioner, Dev Sanyal Executive Vice President, Strategy and Regions BP, Neil

MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, June Oscar, Indigenous Australian, and HRH The Prince of Wales, Patron of the Exhibition”[4]. It is worth noting that there were also a number of private meetings and events that took place during the week of the official opening, even though they do not form part of this study.

The children’s activities “Indigenous Australian Adventures” were led by two artists and based on exhibition themes. David Allsop led children in reflecting on and representing their journeys to the British Museum, with the children’s images being assembled in the Great Court to form a collective work. Raksha Patel’s activity involved making a fish-based head-dress, which the children took away with them. These activities were run daily during half term week, 25th to 29th May.

Most of the public programme events took place outside Room 35, some before the exhibition was open. Some visitors to the exhibition were in the audiences for these events, while some of the audience may well not have seen the exhibition at all. For example, the children’s activities were planned on the assumption that participants had not seen it. The more extensive spatial and temporal ranges of this public programme, and its direct links to the exhibition, suggests that my first definition of what the exhibition is excludes some very relevant events. It also potentially limits understanding of what the exhibition does, and when and where it does it. Examination of the programme suggested that many events enabled some things that could not, for various reasons, be said in Room 35 to be said or presented elsewhere.

[4] This list is taken verbatim from the exhibition’s Opening Reception invitation.

The public programme also had a degree of overlap with and links to other events happening in London at the time. Two are particularly relevant: *Australia and New Zealand Festival of Literature and Arts* from 17th to 31st May 2015; and the *Origins Festival* which ran between 9th and 25th June 2015. Both events had an extensive programme, and the overlaps with the British Museum public programme and with each other are clear. *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* Curator Gaye Sculthorpe participated in a discussion with author Melissa Lucashenko entitled 'Who owns culture?' as part of the first of these two festivals. The discussion was introduced in the programme as follows:

"The panel will consider the challenges of exhibiting and presenting other cultures through the arts and the relationships that can exist between humans and objects, where objects can represent both lost people and painful histories" (Australia and New Zealand Festival of Literature and Arts, 2015).

Also as part of this festival, Melissa Lucashenko gave a lecture at the British Museum that was included in its published public events programme. This was called "Black, White and Brindle: Aboriginality in an age of unreason". The introduction explained that "Since 1788, Aboriginal people have been pinned relentlessly beneath the microscope of the European gaze. Today, that same gaze asks: our skin too pale, our English too accomplished and our minds too modern, who are we to claim that we are people of the First Nations?" This is particularly relevant when one considers the comments following online newspaper articles that refer to issues of ownership and repatriation, and question the relationships between modern and historical Indigenous populations.

One of the films, *Mabo – Life of an island Man*, which included a question and answer session with the film's award-winning director, Trevor Graham, linked to objects and a

theme in the exhibition – Indigenous land rights. It weaves the personal life of Eddie Mabo with the land mark court case of 1992, which "deemed an Indigenous system of land ownership, or Native Title to have preceded colonial rule in the Torres Strait." This event on 26th May was organised by The Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at King's College London in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute. An audience of around 30 people, including British Museum exhibition staff, watched the film and took part in the Q&A session.

Other events in these two festivals include discussions with author Kate Grenville, who we will encounter later in relation to her novel inspired by the historical events of William Dawes' life, one of whose notebooks is exhibited in *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*.

5.2.3. Visitor agency: the formative evaluation

While the visitor-exhibition encounter might principally occur once the exhibition is open, it is common practice, at least at the British Museum, to undertake formative evaluation to help understand how visitors might engage with it (P.3). For '*Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation'*, the British Museum commissioned Morris Hargreaves McIntyre to undertake a formative evaluation of the exhibition plans (2014). This work was undertaken in March 2014 and was instrumental in the creation of the exhibition in a number of ways, affecting its title, subtitle and narratives, as well as its tone and messages and through these the text. Staff within the visitor services team of the Museum also contributed their experience to the decision-making. Here, among other factors, issues of visitor capacity and circulation,

visibility of and access to the objects, were considered, influencing the displays and therefore the visitor-exhibition encounter (P.3 and P.15).

The study had three main aims: to establish visitors' level of knowledge and interest; to explore visitors' reactions to the proposed structure of the exhibition and the main themes; to gather data to help inform marketing. The report reveals a broad range of issues, but I will focus on one example: the approach to the appropriation of objects within the devastating impact of colonisation of the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait Island. I will do so because my interviews identified this as an important issue.

The report identified that there "were some concerns expressed in the forum that this exhibition might represent a post-colonial 'guilt-trip'" and recommended that "a neutral proposition and balanced narrative will be essential in allaying these fears" (MHM, 2014: 3). From several quotes in the report on this issue, consider these:

"I don't want to go and pay to have people tell me how awful I was or how poorly my country treated others" (*ibid.* 14).

"I don't want to get involved […] and I don't want to read about it, it's a topic that I just don't want to get involved in. Even though I might share the same views, but I don't want to know their justification over this issue" (*ibid.* 16).

While neutrality was one strategy suggested in the report, another was that "human stories were found to be more attractive than straight historical fact. Telling the human stories of

colonisation and appropriation will be ways of making these topics engaging and relevant to those who fear that contentious subjects may dominate" (*ibid.* 25).

Two issues emerge from these aspects of the report: the resistance to engaging with a post-colonial perspective on Indigenous Australia illustrated by the quotations above; and the persistence of an unreconstructed belief in both the report's text and the focus group participants' quotes that factual objectivity can be achieved. "If this is a museum, it needs to be factual," (participant, *ibid.* 18). "Beware of conjecture at the expense of facts," (report, *ibid.*) A similar view was also expressed by one professional, citing the focus group participants first: "'Just give us the facts.' That's what museums do" (P.13).

5.3. Following the actors

The analysis reveals the range of actors that I could have chosen to follow, including objects, people from both current and historic times, and concepts. I have chosen three. The life and death of Jandamarra, the display of a boomerang attributed to him in the exhibition, and the presence of Bunuba elder June Oscar in London at the official opening together comprise my first example, drawn from my analysis of the public programme of events associated with *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*. My second example, Second Lieutenant William Dawes, his linguistic collaborator Patyegarang and the influence of the work they produced are drawn from the interviews. I have also chosen Zugubal Dancers performance using *dhari*, examples of which are included in the exhibition, based on my experience of one of the public programme events.

Any one of these could have been developed into a dissertation-length study. My intentions in choosing three are twofold. One is to follow the actor as a way of understanding the details of the exhibition; the second is to consider the circumscription of this exhibition, as well as the diversity and range of what it is and what it does.

5.3.1. Jandamarra and the boomerang

In display case 31 in Room 35 a boomerang was displayed alongside a spear with a point of green glass. They are believed to have belonged to Jandamarra, an Aboriginal Australian of the Bunuba people. The boomerang is on loan from Museum Victoria, Melbourne and the spear is from the British Museum's collection. They are together for the first time in over 100 years. Both are believed to have been collected by Police Sub-Inspector C.H. Ord at the end of the 19th century[5].

Before the exhibition opened to the public, curator Gaye Sculthorpe chose the boomerang as one of the ten objects for a Guardian article entitled "*A History of Australia's Indigenous Art in 10 Objects*", published on 10th April 2015. In the article she explained its significance as a symbol of resistance through its association with an Indigenous Australian named Jandamarra: "Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group has its own ancestors and heroes. For the Bunuba people of the Kimberley region, Jandamarra is a resistance hero. … Jandamarra's story is now memorialised through oral traditions, several books, a play and a

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[5] "While the exact provenance of the boomerang is unknown, it is likely to have been abandoned by Jandamarra after a battle at the Two Mile Creek homestead" (Museum Victoria Website, accessed 17/8/15).

composition created especially for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 2014" (Sculthorpe, 2015 [internet]).

The exhibition text in Room 35 described the boomerang and spear, under the theme "Exploration and Indigenous knowledge":

> *1 & 2 Spear and boomerang associated with Jandamarra*
>
> *Initially working as a native policeman, for three years Jandamarra led a guerrilla war in the rugged Kimberley gorges against settlers seeking more land. This spear was collected by Inspector Ord during the hunt for Jandamarra. A note on the boomerang suggests that Jandamarra dropped it during an encounter with the police. He was eventually shot by an Aboriginal tracker in 1897. Someone sent his decapitated head to England where it was displayed in a gun factory to demonstrate the efficacy of the British weapons. Bunuba people are still looking for Jandamarra's skull to return it home to country. Today they revere him as an inspirational resistance fighter. Kimberley region, Western Australia, about 1890*
>
> *British Museum and Museum Victoria, Melbourne*
>
> Expanding frontiers
>
> *'His spirit is carried in the country by people who speak the same language as he did. For as long as we are alive the children will know Jandamarra's story.'*
>
> *June Oscar, Bunuba woman, 2014*

In the exhibition book, Ian Coates explained more of the story of "the most famous of the Kimberly 'outlaws'", known to the colonial authorities as 'Pigeon' (2015: 168). He described the conflict between settlers and Aboriginal people in the Kimberley region, and the response of the Police, especially the role of Sub-Inspector C.H. Ord. Jandamarra was killed by armed police near Tunnel Creek on 1st April 1897 "after a long battle". Coates concluded

by explaining that for "Bunuba people today, such as June Oscar, a Bunuba elder, Jandamara has become the focus around which they view the conflict of the past and inspiration for the future" (Coates in Sculthorpe *et al.* 2015: 168).

On 29th April, June Oscar gave a lecture as part of the exhibition's public programme, in collaboration with the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at King's College London (Oscar, 2015 [internet])[6]. Her talk offered us more of the perspective of the Bunuba people and her personal relationship with Jandamarra, and the boomerang and the spear associated with him. She described how her great-grandfather "stood with Jandamarra and others in the final battle", and how her grandfather Wirrinmarra "was the custodian of the Jandamarra story". She described what it meant to her, today, that the boomerang and spear, the "props" of her family's "living history", were on display in the exhibition. For her, this is not a past that is separate from the present. "Jandamarra's ancestral voice, penetrating our present, … has reinforced our history, ensuring that these objects remain animated. However, as proof to the lasting power of Empire, these objects that are us, reside here. … His voice is still being heard, even without his head. Jandamarra resonates with us today; he is almost tangible, because he is teaching lessons which are yet to be learnt." June Oscar also referred to the forced closure of remote communities, unlike the exhibition's visitors that I interviewed. "Many of those communities" she said "surround the country that Jandamarra defended from colonial occupation." "Of course Jandamarra's story must continue to be told when we must continue to deal with a government making decisions for our future without us." She expressed the relevance for her today:

[6] All the quotations that follow in this section are taken from the transcript of this lecture.

"It is our triumph that in the heart of London, with the seat of government that once upon a time threatened to demolish us just down the road, that our lives and heritages have come to be displayed through our equal consent and involvement. Stories like Jandamarra's prove that we can break the linear confines of history, so our lessons of justice transcend the bounds of time. Death on the frontier was not the end."

Following the boomerang's associations with and within Room 35 where the exhibition was constituted led to the spear, to Ord, to Museum Victoria. It has been associated with Jandamarra and through him with the Bunuba, June Oscar and concepts of resistance. The writing of text for the exhibition, the press and the exhibition book are acts of association – activations – by human actors such as Gaye Sculthorpe and Ian Coates. What this network of associations shows is one way in which one exhibition object within Room 35 in 2015 can lead to other actors in other times and places. The life of Jandamarra amongst the Bunuba did not cease when he was killed and his head was shipped to Birmingham. The life of the boomerang continued as an artefact apparently with Ord and then Museum Victoria. It has been given new life, been activated, through this exhibition, particularly by June Oscar, Gaye Sculthorpe and Ian Coates.

5.3.2. Lieutenant William Dawes' notebook

A yellowed notebook[7] is held open in a display case. The handwriting is difficult to read, and while the label's text said a little about it, it didn't tell us what it said. It did however give us a first association: "This page records a conversation with Patyegarang, a young Aboriginal woman. Dawes' work on the language of the Sydney region ended when he returned to

[7] Dawes, W. SOAS Library Marsden Collection Manuscript 41645b.

Britain in 1791. He later became involved in William Wilberforce's campaign for the abolition of slavery."

The exhibition book explained more about both Dawes and Patyegarang in the context of attempts at communication following the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. "A much admired instance of an attempt at serious knowledge exchange was Lieutenant William Dawes's (1762-1836) lessons with some young Eora, as the Sydney people were known, including a young boy called Nanbarry, a girl named Boorang, her brother Yirinibi, and Patyegarang, a young woman. They were his main informants for the vocabulary and phrases he recorded in a series of notebooks, which also document his struggling efforts to make sense of how the language worked. … They are a testament to the young Eora people's willingness to show the newcomers something of their world" (Nugent in Sculthorpe *et al.* 2015: 130-1).

Much is known about Dawes' notebooks. A website hosts high resolution images of the pages together with typed transcriptions of the entries in them (www.williamdawes.org). This site includes more about the biography of the notebook on display as well as of William Dawes. Without saying how, it is recorded that the notebooks came into the possession of William Marsden soon after Dawes left Australia. Marsden, a linguist, presented his library containing the notebooks to King's College London in 1835. They were subsequently passed as part of the manuscript collection to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1916. In 1972, Phyllis Mander-Jones listed Dawes' notebooks in *Manuscripts in the British Isles relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*, (Mander-Jones, 1972) and they have since attracted the attention of historians and linguists, and members of the Indigenous community. For example in his 1992 paper Troy concludes that:

"The contribution of Dawes to the study of Australian Aboriginal languages has not been widely recognised. … Successive generations of linguists, both amateur and professional, have built upon the research tradition begun with the scholars of the First Fleet. In addition to providing the means with which to rediscover the Sydney language, the notebooks resurrect the personalities of some of the Aboriginal people who were the first to experience extended contact with the colonists from England. The mini-dialogues … record some of the reactions of Aboriginal people to that contact" (Troy, 1992: 167).

The exhibition book refers to two other texts (in note 17): R. Gibson, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91*, Perth 2012 and a recent fictionalised account by K. Grenville, *The Lieutenant*, Sydney 2008. They take different approaches, with Gibson choosing to be "deliberately multi-faceted and contentious [and to] treasure the speculation and inconclusiveness that Dawes represents (Gibson, 2012: vi). Grenville's text is a novel that is explicitly not history but nonetheless inspired by historical events. Of Dawes, she wrote that the "record he left of the language of the indigenous people of the Sydney area is by far the most extensive we have. It contains not only word lists and speculations about the grammatical structure of the language, but conversations between him and the indigenous people, particularly a young girl, Patyegarang. Between the lines of these exchanges is what seems to be a relationship of mutual respect and affection" (Grenville, 2008: 305). Grenville has explained that she drew on Tim Flannery's *The Birth of Sydney* (Flannery, 2000) that includes extracts from Dawes' notebooks. *The Lieutenant* is now studied in some Australian schools (Text Publishing, undated).

The associations that can be followed from Dawes' notebook include some of the people who contributed to its creation, notably Patyegarang. There are links too to those involved

in establishing its importance, such as Mander-Jones, and those who built on her work, like Troy, leading to popular awareness of Dawes. Through its display and interpretation, the exhibition is actively engaging with these associations and creating new ones, such as with visitors who were prepared to challenge their view of the early period of colonisation (L.9). As Grenville's activation has reached children in education n Australia, so the exhibition's activation of Dawes may reach those in London through politics teacher L.9.

5.3.3. Torres Strait Island *dhari*

Having visited *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* several times, and having bought and read much of the accompanying book, I was already aware in some way of all the objects on display. Like the visitors I interviewed, some struck me more than others. One object had not attracted my attention, but on Friday 12th June, that suddenly changed. As several tall and heavily-built men in costume made their way to the stage, they passed immediately in front of me. All were wearing *dhari* that I immediately recognised from what I had seen in Room 35. Their arrival in front of the audience of perhaps 100 people was impressive; their immense presence was visible and invisible, audible and inaudible. With his deep and powerful voice, Alick Tipoti introduced Zugubal Dancers, most of whom are members of his family – his uncle, his brother, his cousin. When the first of the dances began, the first swift movements of the dancers' heads suddenly brought the *dhari* to life. Nothing I had seen or read up to this point, not even the dancers' arrival, came close to conveying what the *dhari* did in performance. The performance expresses, activates, associations with other actors: clothing, drums, song, concepts of ancestors and heritage, as well as the dancers themselves. Since that moment, I have a very different sense of it.

This performance in the Great Court of the British Museum was part of an evening of Indigenous Australian performances in the Origins Festival organised by Border Crossings. "As the British Museum puts its Indigenous Australian treasures on display, Origins will be making its hallowed halls ring with the ancient music of the Zugubal Dancers and the drone of the didgeridoo. Origins – Festival of First Nations … "is about showcasing cultures that are truly different from our own – cultures from which we can learn a great deal," (Walling, 2015). The event was advertised as part of the British Museum's public programme related to the exhibition.

The exhibition book explained that "The *dhari* is a headdress made and worn by men in dance and ceremonies across the Torres Strait. This example uses cockatoo and cassowary feathers, but contemporary *dhari* are made from various materials, from chicken feathers to cardboard. The distinctive form has become a symbol of the Torres Strait and features on the Torres Strait Islander flag". On the flag, designed by his father, Bernard Namok Jnr. has explained that the *dhari* represents the Torres Strait Islander people of Australia (Nugent, 2015: 201). By including bit flag and *dhari*, the exhibition also expresses the relationship between them. Principally however, this example of following an actor highlights the role of performance as activation. The *dhari* would probably have remained in my peripheral awareness had I not witnessed Zugubal Dancers.

Following these actors reveals a number of points. Firstly, following the boomerang suggests that objects and the stories associated with them can be seen to have multiple lives in different places, societies and times concurrently; "death on the frontier was not the end" (Oscar, 2015 [internet]). Secondly, the example of Dawes' notebook suggests that the role

of an object or a person can appear to change retrospectively; one or perhaps all of those people who subsequently discovered it contributed to a reconceptualising of the roles of the notebook and its author as well as of his principal collaborator Patyegarang. Thirdly, in the case of the *dhari*, the agency of Indigenous artists in activating new associations can be seen as a dynamic way of understanding how new associations transcend space and time in surprising ways. Senses of the idea of activation of different actors available in a 'field' are evident in all three examples. I now want to step back from these examples to describe how this idea of a 'field' is related to the exhibition in a broader sense.

5.4. Contexts: a dynamic field

5.4.1. Creation and collection of objects

Data was collated from the exhibition catalogue and the exhibition gallery displays into a database using Excel. There are 218 entries in the database, although some entries include more than one object (for example the spear heads, 29 of which are grouped into one display). Using the database enabled me to characterise the exhibition's objects by grouping them for example by type, materials, age and the people associated with them. Consider firstly the data on age.

Most of the objects in the exhibition have dates associated with them. A small proportion, around 40 are specific years, with around another 40 being identified as circa a specific year; over 80 are identified as before a certain date – which may be for example the date that they were collected; and a further 20 or so are identified with ranges such as 1826-1836 or longer periods such as the late nineteenth century. While there are many twentieth century and some twenty-first century dates, there is a concentration in the nineteenth century

(over 100). Some of the dates that are given as 'before', are associated with more than one object which, as I have noted, may be because of the records indicating when they were collected. In several cases, these examples were collected or donated (or both) by one person. For example, five objects with a date of 'before 1888' and six with 'before 1889' were donated by A. C. Haddon and collected from the Torres Strait Islands. Another example is offered by four objects with a date of 'before 1901', donated by Robert Christison. Three of these objects also have names of their Indigenous creators recorded: two (a message stick and a woman's head band) are attributed to Nowunjunger (Mary) Yirandali, and one (a message stick) to Mickey, Yirandali. The later twentieth century dates (from the 1980s) are mostly associated with paintings.

The dates of objects and collectors encountered by following the actors range from 1790-1 (Dawes' notebook), before 1889 (the *dhari*), and circa 1890s (the boomerang associated with Jandamarra). But these dates do not obviously fix the objects, creators, collectors or donators in time. Dawes' notebooks have other punctuating dates in their lives, not least 1972 when they were 'rediscovered' in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and the dates that they were subsequently discovered by Tim Flannery, Maria Nugent and Kate Grenville, and their unknown date of manufacture. We do not know when the *dhari* was made before it was collected by Haddon, nor the dates of encounter with those people who administered its accession to the British Museum's collection. The date that June Oscar encountered Jandamarra's boomerang may also be significant.

These recorded dates start to reveal associations, such as a common collection moment – or at least year – in history, due to their collection by one person. But this survey of them also

shows that each object may be associated with many other significant dates, some that may be known and others that may not. What they do not do, I believe, is fix in time the lives of the objects or the people with whom they may be associated. What they may do, I suggest, is identify moments of activation.

More than 80 creators can be identified, with the vast majority being associated with one object. Two examples of those associated with more than one object will illustrate that there are many other networks that could be identified by following other actors. Judy Watson (b. 1959) Waanyi, produced two prints entitled *Holes in the Land* that are included in the exhibition. One of her prints uses a *pituri* bag that is also on display in the exhibition (Oc 1897,-.636). The trade in *pituri* bags is featured in the exhibition as an example of the pre-contact relationships Indigenous Australians had across great distances. Correspondence in the archives at Kew gardens suggest the extent to which they were prized by collectors such as Kew director J.D. Hooker[8].

John Skinner Prout (1805-1876), born in Plymouth, produced two paintings that are included in the exhibition: "*Sarah from Cape Portland V.D.L.*" and "*King Tippoo from Hobart Town V.D.L.*". Sarah is identified as the mother of Fanny Cochrane Smith, who made the only recordings of Tasmanian (Lutruwita) Aboriginal songs (Sculthorpe *et al*., 2015: 146). Fanny Cochrane Smith has also been identified as an ancestor of the exhibition's curator, Gaye Sculthorpe (Australia and New Zealand Literary Festival website).

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[8] Bailey, F.M. wrote in an unpublished manuscript letter to Hooker dated 8th March 1882 that he understood Hooker to be "… anxious to have one of the native Pituri bags for the Kew museums… "

Further networks are indicated in the records of donations included in the exhibition. Some 40 different donators can be identified, 17 of whom are associated with more than one object. Those associated with most objects are: Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897) (13), Alfred Court Haddon (1855-1940) (12), Henry Christy (1810-1865) (9) and Florence M. Walker (6). Franks, having worked at the British Museum, is associated with over 30,000 objects in its collections. Haddon is associated with 355 objects there as well as some 1,400 at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University. Walker is identified as the donator of 77 objects to the British Museum, including baskets, bags, shields, spears and ornaments, many collected by her brother Derwent Valance. Franks, Haddon and Christy are all significant figures in the history of anthropology and museum collections in the UK.

Following any one of these people would reveal more networks of actors: objects, people, ideas and technologies, constituting a 'field' of dynamic potential from which the exhibition has drawn. This is one of the key points that I wish to take forward in the discussion. The one other dimension of this 'field' that I wish to introduce now is a sample of the public online dialogues about the exhibition.

5.4.2. Public dialogues

Starting before it opened, internet coverage of the exhibition was captured and recorded, including online press articles and, where available, comments on these by members of the public. Two Guardian articles in particular generated a significant number of comments, and these have been reviewed to understand some aspects of the social and political context of the exhibition in London. The first article by Gaye Sculthorpe "*A History of Australia's*

Indigenous Art in 10 Objects" generated 44 comments (Sculthorpe, 2015 [internet]); the second, by Jonathan Jones, "*Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation Review – A Fabulous Beast*" 175 (Jones, 2015 [internet]). By far the most common subject was a debate about the definitions of civilisation and culture and their relationship to Indigenous Australia, following Jones' article. Next were positive comments about Indigenous Australian art, followed by the repatriation of objects held in British and other Western museums. Diverse other comments included the poor treatment of Indigenous Australians today, current land rights issues and the forced closure of remote communities. Sponsorship by BP was raised in only four comments. Many comments were critical of other commentators and there was a sub-current referring to Western superiority with related accusations of racism. The surprising thing about these comments on the two articles looked at is that both articles and almost all the comments were published online before the exhibition opened.

Two other articles, both by Paul Daley and again published before the exhibition opened, generated a large number of comments. One published on 14th February in the Guardian, "*Indigenous leaders fight for return of relics featuring in major new exhibition*" generated 136 comments (Daley, 2015a [internet]); "*Preservation or plunder? The battle over the British Museum's Indigenous Australian show*", published on 9th April, generated 171 (Daley, 2015b [internet]). The vast majority of comments responded to the repatriation issues raised by the Daley.

Full study of the online press coverage and the debates they generated could form the basis of another dissertation. My reason for introducing these articles and comments here is to make the following points. Even before the exhibition opened, and certainly before the

commentators had an opportunity to see it, some of the concepts included in it were projected into a virtual space of debate. This virtual encounter between central concepts in the exhibition narrative and the public can be seen as a virtual manifestation of the visitor-exhibition encounter. This encounter took place outside my first circumscription of *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*. Secondly, the mediating influence of the authors is evident in the content of the comments generated. This may appear to be a statement of the obvious, but it merits a moment's reflection in the context of this study. What effect did these authors or commentators have on what visitors subsequently brought to the exhibition? In tracing these actors we can see the possibility of specific authors and even commentators having a mediating role on visitors' experience. As such they are part of the network of associations that contribute to understanding the extent of the influence of the exhibition. Their potential impact is another part of understanding what exhibitions are and do.

"Things have a life of their own … it's simply a matter of waking up their souls."

Gabriel García Márquez – One Hundred Years of Solitude, p.2

6. Discussion

I wish to discuss three main points from the analysis that I will call: circumscription; the 'field'; and activation. I will then reflect on the post-colonial background to the exhibition outlined in the literature review.

6.1. Circumscription

The critical visitor approach set the scene with a limited circumscription of the exhibition. This provided a background against which to compare the extended and complex layers of the exhibition brought out in the analysis. *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* was active well beyond the dates it was open to the public and the space in which it was housed. Visitors were engaged virtually with its concepts and some of its objects through the online press before it opened. Public programme events outside Room 35, some outside the Museum, were further projections of the exhibition's actors. The analysis reveals where and when specific objects, people and concepts, and through them the exhibition, had and perhaps still have agency and life. It is clear that the exhibition acted beyond the restricted space and time I defined at the start. The exhibition was permeable, leaky, and extensive, unconstrained in either space or time. This was supported by following three actors through

the ‘field’ of possible associations as well as the brief review of the public dialogues. The constrained circumscription with which I started stands in stark contrast to this. And yet there are imperatives that impose such focused definitions: the exhibition would not have happened without focused project management, clear budgets, fixed deadlines and hard, physical outputs such as display cases and lights, being in the right place at the right time. But in order to approach a fuller understanding of what this exhibition is and what it does, we must go beyond such circumscription.

6.2. The ‘field’

Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation is a complex of associations. Following three actors identified associations and links between them that span great distances, both physical and social, as well as long periods of time. Links between local and global, material and social are evident in these examples through their associations with individuals, objects and concepts in Room 35, in the minds of visitors and in the public programme. They are also evident in the British Museum’s operating contexts for the exhibition suggested by the impact that charging for the exhibition appeared to have in the formative analysis. Tracing such links through this complex ‘field’ again suggests that a different conception from the circumscription with which I started is necessary to fully understand what the exhibition is and what it does. It also suggests that using multiple methodologies facilitates the exploration of the complexity as layers, similar to the way that Laita constructs her paintings, “I think about every color [*sic*], every form as being a layer and within those layers, they’re all telling different stories and sometimes they relate, sometimes they don’t” (Laita, 2001). This layering was also recognised by visitors interviewed as a feature of many

of the paintings in the exhibition, as well as *Undiscovered #4*, the photograph by Michael Cook. Does such the idea of a complex and layered field resemble the concept of *vā*?

The concept of *vā,* – the space between all things, that connects all things – may offer a useful analogy to what I have called the 'field'. Consider that the networks of each of the actors that I have followed, together with all the others that I could have followed, constitute a *vā*-like field. Rather than seeing the networks of associations between all the different types of actor as **occurring in** space and time, a *vā*-like field itself may be understood to **constitute and define** space and time. The innumerable layered associations between actors are not **in** the field but **are** the field. Furthermore, the sense of *vā* evoked by Wendt describes learned and preferred maps that affect our encounters with each other, which resonates with the idea that visitors bring much to their encounter with exhibitions described by Kratz (2002: 94), and appeared in the interviews (S.24).

6.3. Activation

The actors I have followed can be seen to have associations with greater or lesser influence on other actors. The way in which they influence others resembles the concept of activation. The 'rediscovery' of William Dawes' notebooks by Phyllis Mander-Jones in 1972 had significant consequences for their subsequent influence on and relationship to many other actors, including this exhibition and its visitors. The performance by Zugubal Dancers fundamentally changed my sense of what a *dhari* is. Activation in this context is the creation of associations as one actor influences another. Activation sets up ripples and further encounters in the *vā*-like field, which continue to have the potential to affect other actors, or become actors in their own right. They may have unpredictable effects on the past, the

present and the future; in some sense they continue to have life. This suggests that ANT may be a useful, open way of approaching exhibitions like "*Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*", enabling complex, layered associations to be identified through following actors.

The importance of what "the visitor brings to the exhibition" is demonstrated in the analysis of the comments made in interviews and online. Visitors also brought their agency to bear in the formative analysis. The prior extent of what "the exhibition brings to the visitor" has been brought out by the database analysis, illustrating the networks of creators, collectors and donors. The professional interviews, only very briefly drawn on in this dissertation, suggest that it is also possible to trace significant networks of associations and influence that those human and institutional actors brought to the exhibition, and their relationships with the objects and other actors that comprise the database.

Finally, the debate on the extent to which museums and exhibitions can be considered post-colonial is played out in *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*. The public online dialogues explored important arguments, influenced by the journalists as well as the choice of title for the exhibition. The representation of Indigenous voices was raised in the interviews. And constructivist reflections were apparent there and in the formative analysis and public online dialogue, including the mediated nature of display. Perhaps the clearest example was towards the end of the exhibition displays, where the issue of repatriation was most specifically covered. These debates continue to anger some, including some of those I interviewed. The British Museum Trustees, in their most recent published decision regarding the repatriation of human remains, came down on the side of science and

declined to return the objects to the Torres Strait Islanders who had claimed them[9]. *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* recognised the importance of this decision by referring both to it and reactions to it in the interpretive text. Zugubal Dancers used plastic skulls similar to those involved in this case during their performance at the Museum in June, pointing out to children and parents that they were not real. During the same performance, Alick Tipoti made a striking reference to objects from the Torres Strait Islands in the exhibition used for carrying water, and to a plastic water bottle from which he was drinking.

The public programme included events where colonial legacies were the explicit focus and others where they were raised whether on the agenda or not. *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*'s actors – objects, people and concepts – activated a number of post-colonial issues, not least questions of ownership and repatriation.

[9] www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/management/human_remains/repatriation_to_torres_strait.aspx

"I don't think I will ever understand," he said.

"Understanding often leads to ignorance, especially when it comes too soon," replied his guide.

"But if I don't understand, how can I carry on?"

"It's because you don't understand that you carry on."

"But I have to make sense of what I have just experienced."

"When you make sense of something, it tends to disappear. It is only mystery which keeps things alive," his guide said patiently.

Ben Okri – Astonishing the Gods: 30

7. Conclusions

My aim was to show how we might understand both what *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* does as well as what it is, and by looking at the spatial and temporal ranges of what it does through following some of its actors, consider the implications for how we understand the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions.

My research questions were:

A. How can the concepts of ANT contribute to understanding what the exhibition *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* is and what it does?

B. What does such an approach imply for how we understand the circumscription and dynamics of exhibitions?

C. How might the concepts of *vā* and activation contribute to our understanding?

I conclude that concepts drawn from ANT facilitate understanding of what *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* was and what it did by encouraging an extensive identification of relationships that generate and are generated by exhibitions. I refer in particular to the broad definition of human and more-than-human actors, the incitement to follow them without *a priori* theories, and networks of influence. In doing so, ANT facilitates an understanding of the exhibition that goes beyond the focused circumscription that is necessary to produce it. While much of what an exhibition is and does can be understood within the walls and dates where it is shown, there is clearly much that occurs beyond them.

I have also drawn from approaches to object biographies and recognise these as valuable, particularly as they highlight the mutable nature of the status of objects and their relationships to people. I conclude that they are more valuable when considered in the context of ANT, where they can be seen as networks in a field of actors including individuals and groups, objects and associations of objects, institutions, technologies and exhibitions.

Together with the application of the other methodologies here, I conclude that exhibitions are constituted in and from a 'field' of multiple, interrelated temporal and spatial associations. I also conclude that this 'field' can be usefully understood with reference to the Polynesian concept of 'v*ā*', the space between all things, where all previous and future associations are available for activation.

Associations are created by actors, and I conclude that the creation of associations is analogous to the idea of activation. The examples used here include Rosanna Raymond's Acti.VA.tion day in Berlin, Zugubal Dancers' performance with *dhari*, and Phyllis Marston-

Jones’ rediscovery of William Dawes’ notebooks. From these examples, I conclude that activation in exhibitions can be seen to include social scientific and historical research and fictional writing as well as artistic activities such as dancing and painting.

Circumscription appears to be in tension with activation. Circumscription is an act of fixing within limits; activation is an act of energising in a *vā*-like field that is effectively endless. The energy of activation may encounter other activations. Circumscription of activation, whether it be a performance by Zugubal dancers, a work of literary fiction, or an exhibition at the British Museum, has consequences for how we understand what it is and what it does. Circumscription of an exhibition may help in managing budgets and deadlines, but it may also limit understanding and opportunities to following its activations and their impacts.

In little over three months, albeit within a project lasting several years, this exhibition engaged with a profound complexity of object lives, of people and cultures, and of ideas, concepts and issues, across immense historical periods of time. It was the result of activations stretching out from a relatively small space in the British Museum into many other places, communities and times. It was itself a multiplicity of activations that have created new associations reaching into the past and the future. *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* was indeed important.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Short Interview Questionnaire

Audience Survey: British Museum: *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*

Interview Date: Time: Interviewer:

Preamble: Hello, I wanted to ask if you would answer a few questions about the exhibition you've just seen? I am doing research here today and I am talking to visitors about their reactions to Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation. I will record part of the survey if that is ok with you, if it is not I can take notes instead. Please know you can withdraw from the survey at any time and I will not use the information you have provided.

Nationality: UK Citizen/ Australian/ Other ……….………………..

1. Why did you come to the British Museum today?

    - If you came to see this Australian exhibition specifically, can you tell me why?

2. What did you know about Aboriginal Australia before this exhibition?

3. What were you hoping to find in this exhibition?

    - Did you find it?

4. Did parts of the show engage you more than others? [Prompt about objects if none offered.]

5. Where there parts of the show that didn't engage you?

6. Overall, how did it make you feel?

7. What message, if any, will you take away from the exhibition?

8. How does the Australian exhibition compare or contrast with what you expect to see at the British Museum?

9. Why do you think the curators sub-titled the show "enduring civilisation"?

10. Did the exhibition change or influence the way you think about Aboriginal Australia?

11. *For UK Interviewees*: Did the exhibition influence or change the way you think or feel about Britain's role in Australian history?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the exhibition?

A. Male/Female. B. Age: **A** <17, **B** 18-24, **C** 25-34, **D** 35-44, **E** 45-54, **F** 55-64, **G** over 65

C. Resident in London/Tourist

I consent to this information being used anonymously for the purposes of research by the British Museum, Royal Holloway University of London and the Australian National University:

Signed: Print Name: Date:

Appendix 2: Long Interview Protocol

1. This interview is being conducted at my invitation, but it is your process. Whether we complete it, what we talk about, how long it lasts and whether you withdraw at any point are your choices.

2. If I tell you exactly what kind of questions I am interested in my research, I am concerned that it will affect your experience. So I'd like to answer any questions you may have about that at the end.

3. Recording our conversations. This is mainly to help me make a full record and to allow me to listen to you properly. I will type up the recordings and you will have an opportunity to review and comment on them.

4. I may use quotes or conclusions from these recordings or transcripts in my dissertation, and if I do they will be anonymous. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on them.

5. This is how I'd like to proceed today:

A. Are you happy to continue?

B. A brief introductory interview before we go in to the exhibition where I would like you to say something about:

- Yourself – as much or as little as you like;
- Any museum visiting that you've done in the past;
- Any visits, experiences and impressions of the British Museum;
- Anything you are aware of about the exhibition we are about to see and any expectations you may have.

C. Visit the exhibition in the way you wish to. I will have to come in with you, but once in, you are entirely free to do what you like. Just let me know when you are ready to leave.

D. A post-visit interview where I would like you to tell me about your experience of visiting the exhibition.

E. Then I can answer any questions you may have about my research.

F. I will ask you to read a consent form to confirm that you're willing for me to use the recordings and transcripts and ask you to sign it if you're happy with it.

Reminder: you are free to withdraw from the process at any point and any records will be deleted.

Appendix 3: Public Programme Event List

April

10th Gallery talk: Larrakitj: Australian memorial poles by Wukun Wanambi by Lissant Bolton, BM

13th Members' lecture: Indigenous Australia: the inside story by Gaye Sculthorpe, BM

24th Film Mystery Road, BM

27th Members' evening, BM

29th Talk: Encountering Truth by June Oscar, KCL

May

1st Lecture: Reconciling different values in Indigenous collections: Australia and the UK, by Mathew Trinca and Peter Yu, BM

1st Special event 'The art of country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art today': Artists' Forum chaired by Howard Morphy, BM

2nd Conference: Challenging Colonial Legacies Today: Museums and Communities in Australia and East Africa, BM

5th Gallery talk: Wukun Wanambi's memorial poles: the conservation challenges of open display by Adrian Doyle, Philip Kevin and Monique Pullan, BM

7th Lecture: Curator's introduction to *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation,* Gaye Sculthorpe, BM

16th Lecture Curator's introduction to *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*, Gaye Sculthorpe, BM

21st Lecture Indigenous Australia and Captain Cook by Maria Nugent, BM

22nd Talk Black, White and Brindle: Aboriginality in an age of unreason by Melissa Lucashenko, Goorie, BM

23rd Young Friends' sleepover: Indigenous Australia sleepover, BM

25th to 29th Free family activities Adventures in Australia Half-term week: Journey's End led by David Allsop; Australian Fishes led by Raksha Patel, BM

26th Film with Q&A Mabo - Life of an Island Man, with Director Trevor Graham, KCL

June

5th Lecture: Languages of Indigenous Australia by Peter K Austin, SOAS, BM

12th Border Crossings: Origins Festival at the British Museum with: Frances Firebrace, Yorta Yorta, Story-teller; David Millroy, Injibarndi and Palyku, Singer; Heath Bergersen, Didgeridoo player; The Zugubal Dancers, Torres Strait Islands, BM

13th Film: Ten Canoes, introduced by David Milroy and Ian Henderson, BM

15th Members' evening with Project Curator Rachael Murphy, BM

20th Young Friends' sleepover: Indigenous Australia sleepover, BM

25th Lecture Curator's introduction to *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation*, by Gaye Sculthorpe, BM.

July

3rd Lecture: Collecting Indigenous Australian art Discussion chaired By Rebecca Hossack, BM

11th Film: Mad Bastards, with an introduction and Q&A by Lorraine Mortimer, University of Sydney, BM

16th Lecture: Curator's introduction to *Indigenous Australia: enduring civilisation* by Rachael Murphy, BM

Contemporaneous Events

Border Crossings Origins Festival of First Nations

9th to 25th June 2015, Various venues in London (www.originsfestival.com)

Tuesday 9th June 7.30pm Venue: Rich Mix By Invitation

Origin of Origins

Join musicians, performers, artists and thinkers from around the world for an evening of ceremony, art and music, as we open the 2015 Origins Festival. An unmissable evening features blessings from the First Nations, traditional dance from the Torres Strait Islands' Zugubal Dancers, and exciting previews of this year's programme.

Thursday 11th June 7.30pm Venue: Rich Mix £12

The Origins Concert

"the warm sounds of David Milroy from Australia, the virtuoso didgeridoo playing of Heath Bergersen… "

Australia and New Zealand Festival of Literature and Arts

17th to 31st May 2015, Various Venues, London (www.ausnzfestival.com)

Friday 22nd May 7pm

Lecture: Black, White and Brindle: Aboriginality in an age of unreason. By Melissa Lucashenko, BM

Saturday 30th May 1pm

Discussion: Kate Grenville in Conversation, with Kate Grenville, KCL

Sunday 31st May 12pm

Discussion: The Indigenous Voice, With Tony Birch, Kate Grenville, Chaired by Michael Walling, KCL

Sunday 31st May 3pm

Discussion: Who Owns Culture? Gaye Sculthorpe, Melissa Lucashenko, Chaired by Tim Radford, BM