

Tammi Gissell

Response and Responsibility:

First Nations Performance and Public Collections, In Conversation with Juanita Kelly-Mundine

Preamble

The following presents a discussion between two Australian First Nation creatives working closely with collections at public art institutions in Sydney, Australia. Juanita Kelly-Mundine is a West Bundjalung and Yuin Woman and First Nations Collections Coordinator at the National Museum of Australia (former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Conservator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales). Tammi Gissell is a Muruwari and Wiradjuri Woman and Collections Coordinator, First Nations at The Powerhouse Museum (PHM).

Together, they reflect upon the nature of institutional memory, highlighting the significance of performance-based critical encounters with collections amid current political, social and sector sentiments of truth-telling. They discuss growing strides toward safeguarding Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights across the broader arts and culture sector and how this also informs intangible cultural heritages that are simultaneously embodied and shared.

Juanita and Tammi also reflect on the production and presentation of performance works in public gallery spaces and navigating the accountabilities of contemporary arts practice, institutional employment and Indigeneity, which must always be in service of Country, community and culture.

Introduction

The landscape for NSW-based First Nations dance and performance research is evolving to include significant engagement with the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums

(GLAM) sector. Artists are increasingly encouraged to overcome the colonial architectures of Country and consciousness to research, develop and present performance for substantial reasons beyond bums on seats or bucks in the budget. Indeed, there is a rise in the engagement of performers for non-public, culturally significant outcomes in service of collection and community beyond creating performance art for art's sake. Critical encounters between performing artists and collected cultural belongings are a central theme of this discussion (D'Angeli & Gissell 2023, 176).

The sites where Australian First Nations performers present their work are increasingly the places that historically have preferred to replace our living cultures, our living people and practices with materiality such as pictures and papers. The very same Institutions paved paradise, put up parking lots, and played dirty with the truth, exploiting First Nations cultural and intellectual properties along the way.

Now, in going back into the gallery, museum, archive and library, the aim is to reclaim what is ours. What is amazing is that we are allowed and, in fact, asked to do it. Commissioned, programmed, or invited in to spend time with our Ancestors, we recover cultural belongings, documents, footage, photographs and countless other archival records and representations of our people secreted and often skewed in dusty, dim-lit collection stores. We are now at a time when humanity is ready to confront the actual truth of our shared histories and sit with the trouble of it all.

There's never been a time for truth-telling as there is right now. In 2018, the Parliament of Australia's Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples outlined the importance of truth-telling in its final report stating, "Truth-telling is not just about acknowledging the atrocities of the past, but is also an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share their culture and language with their communities" (Joint Select Committee 2018, 160).

Truth-telling is manifesting across the spectrum of contemporary life, and for this article, it is profoundly informing Australian First Nations performance practices.¹ Performers with ancestral ties to various lands are encouraged to reclaim and reaffirm their true histories. A return of this birthright is to know and to hold, and to pass on one's truth as fundamental to why First Nations people perform at all.

We are reuniting with our truths as First People. The responsibility is for us to live in service of our stories. This is paramount to who we are and our way of being. We know that history is written every day and that performers write with and into the wind. First Nations performance presence is the preservation of memory personified; and a powerful means by which we can heal institutions and the memories they hold.

What follows is a conversation between two Australian First Nation creatives working closely with First Nations performance at public art institutions. Their experiences highlight a significant shift in the ways institutions engage with cultural performance across the GLAM sector.

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It's a stunning summer's day here out on Dharug Country. I'm on my back porch in Blacktown watching the sun begin to recline into the afternoon sky. The February breeze strokes my cheek and makes me close my eyes in gratitude. I listen to the wind, like my father always taught me to do before I go into an important yarn. I'm excited to chew the fat of critical encounters with Juanita. She's an extraordinarily accomplished practitioner, deeply insightful and nobody's fool. I know this yarn is a vital one to be having in Australia right now. I take a deep breath, open my eyes and start the call...

Tammi: Yiradhu marang (good day, Wiradjuri Language) Juanita. So great to be able to visit with you today. I'm calling in from Dharug Country out here in Blacktown – where are you today?

Juanita: Jingi walla (good day, Bundjalung Language). I am on Wangal country over in the Inner West in Annandale at the moment.

Tammi: Such lovely country over that way. Thank you so much for meeting today to have this important yarn. We've been circling each other on a few performance-related projects over the last year or so, primarily through the incredible *Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum* project which helped us become aware of each other's work.² I have been deeply moved by your grasp of what it is to be simultaneously a body in creative action and in service of your culture. As a dancer myself I find your reflections deeply insightful, especially those on the institution and First Nations performance archives. So, I'm thrilled to unpack a few of those ideas and let readers know more about you and how your work is resulting in positive shifts for First Nations performers in these spaces.

Juanita: Booglebeh (thankyou, Bundjalung Language) Tammi. I just want to acknowledge my family and Ancestors: I'm a West Bundjalung and Yuin woman. I've grown up split between New South Wales – Tharawal Country, where I was born, Gadigal, Wangal, Gundungura, Dharug, Wiradjuri and Victoria, Wadawurrung, Wurundjeri, Woiwurrung and Bunurong Countries. I moved around growing up and have been really blessed to be grounded here in the south-east, to be nurtured by Country close to where my cultural ties are. I'm very lucky to have been held and supported by each Country that I've lived, grown up, studied and continue to work, learn and grow on.

In terms of my practice, I do really see it as an evolution from when I was quite young. My mum was a practicing artist and so I was raised in her studio. She studied Fine Arts and is a painter, sculptor and photographer. I was always at university with her and got to sit in on her classes and be a part of her art-making world. She studied with other First Nations artists and creatives, and so, I think growing up around creative mob had a massive impact on me and was a pivotal aspect of my early cultural and art education.³

I initially pursued art history followed by my studies in cultural materials conservation. I specialised to be a paintings conservator, and then focused towards the end of my

studies on intangible cultural heritage and Blak performance, which is what I did my thesis on – safeguarding Indigenous performance with a focus on how that operates in an institutional framework.⁴

I think back then I saw a gap when it came to Blak performance and intangible cultural heritage (ICH). I wanted to know, on a very practical level, how galleries and museums were looking after our ICH and implementing policies, protocols and guidelines to engage with performance in a culturally relevant way. Since then, I've just continued to follow my passions and be guided by my family and old people, which has led me to conservation of First Nations collections more broadly.

Tammi: My goodness, you're amazing. We are so blessed to have you doing this work! I feel like your experiences and education have produced exactly the champion that First Nations performing artists truly need institutionally at a time such as this. You understand the history of art. You understand the artistic forms of our people. You know what it is to make art with your own hands. You know what it is to sing it or dance it too. You know how to look after it from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous perspectives. You also recognise that much of the very essence of our culture cannot be collected because it exists only in the breath or the immediacy of the action.

Juanita: Such a funny trajectory. When I actually think about it, it does seem like all these things have led me to this point.

Tammi: Oh, for sure they have! I was listening to your journey, and I was thinking what that must have been like in your childhood making art alongside your mother and mob. How perfect that is, in learning culturally appropriate craftmanship. I think how this beautiful childhood full of making combined with your later education in art history has informed the deep caring so clear in your conservation concerns, which surpasses just what can be produced in the material form. It seems such a natural progression, really, when I think of the evolution from matter to spirit – ‘from the clay to the cosmos’ so to speak. The idea is that there's no material glue available in the conservation lab to stick intangible cultural materials back together. Intangible material requires intangible knowledges to conserve it. Like you, I acknowledge that true concern for the conservation of a cultural object or material must also include allowing it to live out its natural (material) life into decay (return to spirit), if that is the correct process outlined by a people. For me, this lends itself to lots of interesting points when we talk about how dance may exist within or in service of a collection.

Juanita: It definitely shaped me and the future trajectory of my practice. I think what sparked my interest was going through my postgraduate conservation studies; the main focus was on material cultural heritage. First Nations cultural heritage was a component of those studies, and I do appreciate that there were subjects which spoke about community projects and how we could make conservation a more relational profession. But at the same time, I felt as though when you drill down to it, First Nations intangible cultural practice wasn't being discussed in depth. I would say that song, dance, language, story, our knowledge and kinship systems, all those elements that make up our cultures

– I didn't feel that that they were being adequately addressed. And so, for me, ICH became the focus because I felt that that it was being neglected in conservation, and I didn't see what institutions were doing in practice to address the care of First Nations intangible or performance-based practices.

Tammi: It's remarkable that you were looking at safeguarding cultural practices beyond those that produce material outputs even back then. Even though you acknowledge the growth in understanding of these matters since writing your thesis, it's really something for me to see that you were already seeing the 'substance' of the immaterial while training to be a specialist in the material.

I feel perhaps I have come the other way around, having dealt with the intangible as a dancer and theorist my entire career. I began performing in proximity to collected cultural belongings at the Powerhouse Museum in 2016, which set me on this road of discovery, moving into collection care since 2020. I'd be lying if I said my mind hasn't been completely blown in realising this is exactly where I should be if my dancing will mean anything at all. I felt early on that within the dance, or through the dance (I'm still not sure how it should be described), that I was privy to otherwise invisible powers that were intended for much more than the stage. These powers remain familiar and endlessly potent in my practice.

I recall American choreographer Agnes de Mille's remark that 'The truest expression of a people is in its dances and its music. Bodies never lie,' which beautifully explains my instinct in the museum and its collection. I recognise how bodies occupy space and the energies that compel them to do it. I can sense the people behind their objects of memory more often than I cannot. This is especially true for the objects and materials that accompany performance across cultures. That the culmination of my training across a variety of Western dance genres, traditional cultural dances and education in performance theory have led me to look after peoples' memories and guarding the truth seems charmingly obvious when I think of de Mille's words! The bodies of the objects, the staff, the visitors, do not lie. They dance and I dance with them. It is a blessed opportunity to consider dance and performance through the lens of the museum and historical ways of collecting and exhibiting. First Nations Performance in these places requires sensitivity and skill to work in service of what we 'produce.'

I recall as a child how segmented galleries and museums were and what few activities were relevant or available for mob at these places. I always felt like our histories, our art works were an add-on or a separate section, not part of the whole. Much more space was given to the artworks made about us, stolen or appropriated from us. I think the same can be said of my own experiences performing in institutional spaces across Australia over the past two decades. First Nations performers are more a part of the exhibition or the program or the event than we have ever been, in fact we are leading them and that's amazing.

It's quite beautiful to witness the appreciation and respect for Indigenous artists and ICIP grow through the Powerhouse archival records into its current incarnation. It makes

me proud to work in an institution that is willing to acknowledge the trouble of its own past, learn from it, commit to do better and implement it right across the museum as the Powerhouse has done.

I wanted to ask whether you felt an uptake in more meaningful engagement with cultural performance is arriving through a better understanding of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights which include both tangible and intangible materials of culture?

Juanita: My feeling is that there are several factors that have culminated in where we are now in relation to deeper engagement with cultural performance. But it may also be that this is the natural evolution of things – that for whatever reason we are collectively being called forward by practitioners, by the ancestors, to address this now. Maybe it is just the time, and the environment is right to be having this conversation. Obviously, it's not just starting now, it's been ongoing for decades, but I feel as though it has grown in volume. We had the *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003 and then initiatives like the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in 2007. And so, I think these international frameworks have drawn our attention to the necessity to allow self-determination for global indigenous people when it comes to their cultural heritage.

Tammi: This makes sense to me. Surely all of these things must inform upon one another if we consider the institution as reflecting the society that sustains it?

Juanita: I think so. It's also interesting to consider how the international legal scene has also come a long way in terms of introducing legislation around protections for ICH and traditional knowledge in other countries. So, there have been international precedents set. In the local context, here in Australia we've had the incredible work of trailblazers like Dr Terri Janke who has long been informing people about the importance of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights and what it means to meaningfully embed ICIP into institutional structures. She's really laid the groundwork across so many different industries and, in particular, in the arts and cultural sector; working with Creative Australia to develop their protocols and guidelines on ICIP and developing the *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries* (2018) for the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMAGA). Terri has worked with community over decades to understand our communities' needs and aspirations in order to encourage industries to embed respect for ICIP and First Nations art and culture, of which performance is a massive part.

Tammi: Absolutely, as a people and as an industry of artists we really owe Dr Janke so much. What a contribution she has made to our own sense of who we are, what we do and what we know. And what sense she has made for others looking in from the outside, so our cultural and intellectual property rights can be understood, respected and protected. She has allowed for a deeper understanding of the complex inter-relatedness of the elements of our culture and the responsibilities that come with engaging with Indigenous people and practices. Her work affirms that the intangible aspects of our

culture are as valid and deserving of rights as any other cultural object or material. Her ability to articulate these deeply spiritual matters into material form, and in a language that can be understood and adopted by the mainstream, is beyond momentous. Her frameworks for protecting ICIP gave us a leg to stand on and the cultural guts to put our foot down.

Juanita: Definitely. AMAGA, the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), and many other Australian cultural peak bodies and institutions have adopted ICIP frameworks which call for people to respect Indigenous cultural practice and to interact with communities in a more meaningful way. This includes when inviting artists to present their works or to respond to and/or activate collections through song, dance and so on. And the conversation just continues to grow because academic spaces, such as universities, start to pick up on what the international and local conversation is, embedding that research back that into their curriculum. For instance, now you have intellectual property law students who are learning about ICIP as a component of their degree, including what it looks like to embed traditional knowledge protections into legislation or into governance models. So yes, I think it extends beyond the arts and cultural sector but I think that influences the work that we do in the GLAM sector.

Tammi: I think you're right. There's a deepening in care for indigenous people worldwide, I'd say, and it flows off to all sorts of different areas beyond what we do. It's beautiful to see this caring energise people and public places to create new senses of belonging. Just like you said, it's becoming more so a choreography across institutional activity. The value of creating a space of dynamic action is familiar to me as a dancer and as a woman of culture.

I've always enjoyed that the dance can't be taken home by the audience, that it can only be experienced through both of our senses in real time making every performance unique. Though to be fair, it's never bothered me if anyone was watching or not. I have always been able to relish in both the public and private aspects of dancing. The idea that dance exists beyond me yet also cannot exist without me remains complex and fascinating.

So, as far as performance, my understanding is that it's only been the material outputs which have been historically collected – costumery and ceremonial regalia, objects and materials, masks and so on. But the material outputs of performance are just that – the material. For a human, to remain in a state of performance is to have living breath. Once the heartbeat's gone, that's it. So how do we, I don't know if collect is the right word, but perhaps 'hold' performance in a memory institution? Can it be acquired into a collection? If so, what does that look like? And when is that even appropriate? Have you observed a desire to acquire dance or performance?

Juanita: This is something I've seen come up a lot in conversations both in the gallery sector but also in broader performance spaces and academia. I think institutions have been reflecting on this for some time and it certainly isn't new. But I think what's interesting is that there's a lot of speculation, writing and ideation about how to acquire

performance meaningfully and in a work specific manner, as well as if it's even the right method to support performance at all. When I think about the Australian GLAM sector or my particular institution, it's not something that is frequently being practiced.

I also don't think it's something that people expect of performers and dancers – as you say, this is really a conversation that needs to be led by artists. We're not yet at a point where the majority of dance and or performance practitioners necessarily a) have even considered acquisition a viable option for their works, b) have expressed that they want that for their works, or c) have considered, in detail, how acquisition of their performance would work in practice.

I'm not sure that dance practitioners and performance artists, as a preliminary step in their creative process, are thinking about whether or not their work will be acquired. Although, I could be wrong.

That may be different if you are in conversation with an established artist who has had a lot of experience presenting work in gallery and museum spaces, given that they are more likely to be approached by an institution to create work specifically for acquisition. This conversation may be less likely to be had with an emerging dance practitioner who is being commissioned for an exhibition for example.

There are also important questions around whether or not it's ethical or appropriate to acquire certain performance works, for example if it is a culturally grounded work by a First Nations artist. While there are performance works in collections, they themselves exist in different forms. Sometimes they take the shape of a manual that can be used to teach and reproduce a work. Sometimes they present as audio visual iterations of themselves. So even the modes of dance and performance that museums have acquired live in quite disparate ways because no two works are the same. Therefore no one model of acquisition can be applied to performance works – it must always be a unique and tailored process.

I think we're still trying, in some ways, to think of performance in the context of material objects, whereby if we acquire 'this' component of a performance then we will have acquired the work. But I think there will be artists that will create, or perhaps already have created works, for acquisition who if you were to ask them philosophically whether their work, however they define it, has been acquired, they would say 'No.' This is especially relevant with First Nations artists. If you were to ask them whether or not the essence of their work can be acquired, the likely answer would again be 'No.' Because how you could you possibly acquire cultural heritage, songs, story, ancestral knowledge that has been passed down since time immemorial by means of a gallery contract?

Tammi, you know what it is to have an embodied practice and be channelling Country, story, song, etc. I don't believe that you can acquire that in a legal sense, which I think a lot of dance practitioners understand profoundly, whether First Nations or not, because an embodied practice is a very particular thing. And something that becomes sticky in

this conversation around acquisition is when we begin to unpack the idea of possession and ICIP, I mean, it's not something that one person can own, right?

Tammi: That's exactly it. Indigenous intellectual and cultural property has a shared ownership and a shared responsibility to maintain it. Such a different way of thinking about 'property' and 'ownership' rights from how our legal system recognises them. An example of how this can get quite complex was when I was co-commissioned by the 2021 Canberra International Music Festival and Ausdance Canberra to create a choreography to a 1982 composition entitled *The Rainbow Serpent* by Australian composer Brian Howard (see Murdoch 1982). This music had only ever been choreographed and danced to by one other dancer: Australian Ballet star Kelvin Coe. So, it was a loaded situation, coming back to dance an incredibly powerful story for my people. I had been asked to dance to music composed by a non-Indigenous male choreographed by a non-Indigenous male and then danced by another non-Indigenous male. It was heavy stuff, culturally and creatively. I got to meet with the composer Brian Howard and the original choreographer Barry Moreland, and they were beautiful and genuinely caring people and terrific artists. They acknowledged that, in 1982, they were creating at a time when Indigenous ideas, stories and their very ways of being were kind of up for grabs, creatively. Both were thrilled to have me re-imagine and interpret the music from an Indigenous standpoint.

So, I created a work entitled *Mundaguddah* which was performed at the National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra (see Potter 2021).⁵ Like you say, I channelled the energy of the *Mundaguddah*, but by no means was I up there stating that I personally own this story, its symbols, its meanings. My choreography and performance were an expression of my part within its never-ending story and my responsibility to maintain it. The important point is that I wouldn't be getting up there doing that work had I not gone and asked permission in the first place and completed the necessary undertakings as advised by my elders prior to even creating the work. I mean, that's a whole conversation that I think is specific to dance itself within ICIP considerations because then you're starting to dig into shared ownership of embodied knowledge that carries across bodies and across time. It brings up so many questions around authority and responsibility.

Juanita: I completely agree. This is something that in a First Nations context is really obvious and is also why it can be a challenge, because collective ownership over IP is not something that is enabled through our current legal system. Even in non-Indigenous performance, dance or movement practitioners are often drawing from a shared space, a shared body of knowledge, a shared environment or whatever you want to call it. And so, I think that's why I feel that there is a synergy between having conversations with non-Indigenous dance practitioners as it is with First Nations artists because there is a shared understanding of lineage and having an embodied practice. That's something I would love to see there be more conversation around; the similarities between the experience of being from a non-Indigenous, western dance lineage and/or Indigenous dance heritage. Because, as I understand it, the structure of many artistic movements and particularly dance and performance have very defined histories, lineages and origins.

Tammi: You are spot on. I would suggest that lineage is a primary underpinning for dancers everywhere, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Certainly, in Eastern traditional and Western classical dance forms, where you trained and/or who trained you is a vital aspect of how you will be received. Essentially, you are coming in on the authority that the Ancestors and masters of that form have invested in you and which you have earned through your dedication to it. One of my first engagements at the Powerhouse was an 'Art of Seduction' workshop at an UpLate! Program in 2015 which was predicated on my many years' experience as a cabaret showgirl, trained in the Parisian technique of Le Lido and Moulin Rouge by Bruce and Lesley Scott of Dance Encore Productions. So yes, a mixed dance lineage opened doors for me too now that I think of it.

It is not unusual for Western-trained dancers to know what lineage they have come down in terms of the techniques, syllabus, or schools that they have trained in. This is where artistic authority has always been earned – directly from the master to the student. I grew up in a small country town and even there the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) classical ballet syllabus was fervently regarded as the gold standard for all aspiring young dancers. I observed and experienced very clear status play between studios that were offering RAD qualifications to those who did not. Talk about embodying the colony! I was too young then to understand that even Royal Academy membership is a means for dancers to connect with a dance older than ourselves. It's a very primal thing, I think. It all comes back to the ways that dance affirms identity across time and geography.

The direct transmission from one body to the next is fundamental to imparting the techniques required to dance with efficiency, power and ultimately, meaning. So, it makes sense that who comes before and who will follow is of paramount concern to dance practitioners no matter what the form. The protocols that surround how this happens depends very much on the form itself, or probably more importantly, the culture that produces them.

Juanita: It's not to say that they are one in the same by any means: cultural protocol in an Indigenous community is of course specific to that community, that Country, those families. However, I do think that there is a correlation or a comparison that could be drawn, a conversation that could be had around when you're investigating the passing on of choreographic practice. For example, whether some particular dance styles and movements have room for amendment, alteration, evolution of shapes, lines and so on – that is dependent on the protocols and origins of those practices and movements.

Tammi: Oh absolutely. There are very clear lineages from founding dance pioneers in Europe into Australia through the Gertrud Bodenwieser Dance Centre. There is also the lasting influence of Eleo Pomare who produced and blessed us with two matriarchs of modern dance in Australia – Dr Elizabeth Cameron Dalman and Carole Y. Johnson, who have equally carved the luscious landscape of modern dance in Australia with their own bare feet. There are many other Indigenous Australian dancers who have trained abroad and bought these disciplines and techniques and forms back home to interbreed with our own.

And in a real sense this is what makes contemporary performance so exciting – the possibilities are endless with what already exists and what can be created in response or re-imagined in a million different ways. It’s an interesting conflict for me sometimes, what you are saying about choreographies having the potential to be amended, extended, reframed, and so on. And I absolutely agree with you. It speaks back to the malleability of the dance itself, why it’s a slippery little thing to try and hold onto and why rehearsals are vital in any context where there is an expectation of consistent product! The dance can fall away or become incrementally embellished without conscious attention to it. This is especially when you are repeating the same choreography over an extended period but not coupling it with a consideration of why you are doing this – it lacks the reflective aspect so vital to this work. Again, this is a vital intangible aspect of the practice: this is knowledge.

Deviations definitely creep in, and you can get to a point where you don’t recall what the accent of the styling originally was. This is why repetition WITH reflection is paramount to cultural performers. It’s not just the physical action – there is the other side to it – the deep introspection that comes with reflecting on what these movements mean and where they have come from and your responsibility to hold them with care while they are with you. I rely on it personally within my own solo contemporary practice.

I accept that movements will fall away, and that only some will be found. That the entire experience of the performance itself remains elastic is a key underpinning to all my choreographies and performances. I work a lot with structured improvisation so I work hard away from the gaze in rehearsals so that my performance can be less hampered with conscious thought. In private, I forge a framework which is shock resistant. I need to leave room for the public performance because I expect that there will be more and more accumulating with each performance. I can’t imagine how the dance I produce could be held forever anywhere but my own body or a body I have a deep relationship with.

Having said that, I wouldn't reproduce step for step a famous choreography such as Michel Fokine’s “Dying Swan” because of the respect I have for seniority within my field of dance. I also respect the forms of expression of an other people (in this case, I mean classical ballet practitioners), as well as an understanding of intellectual and artistic property rights. I firmly believe an attempt to embody and re-present Fokine’s “Dying Swan” without his direct blessing and/or passing from his body (or through Anna Pavlova’s) to mine, is just stealing: plain and simple. For me at least, I’ve got no business doing that. It can only ever be a cheap knock-off because I don’t have the permission, nor do I have an informed process to correctly embody his vision. Certainly, I can execute classical ballet movements – but I do not carry the artistic authority to do Fokine’s swan justice as Anna Pavlova did. That’s not to say that another classical ballet practitioner should not. I imagine there must be a protocol appropriate for that to happen within the ballet culture. For me however, I accept that my embodied knowledge is not equipped to perform that choreography in the manner that Fokine, as elder, intended. It would be fair to say that I also don’t have a connection to the swan’s story from the inside, like I do for instance the Black Cockatoo, but I have respect for that old swan story and for the

protocols that classical ballet demands. It would not be appropriate for me to don a tutu and perform Fokine's "Dying Swan" in a truly classical context when I am covered in tattoos and have basically no turn out. I accept and respect classical ballet protocols and the techniques and presentation required to enable them. So, it's a 'many ways to the truth' kind of situation I think, respecting the old, through the new, if that makes sense? Knowing how to respectfully engage with and respond to the cultural-creative protocols of other forms.

Juanita: Likewise in First Nations cultural practices there are some traditions which are intended to stay in a particular form and there are some which are encouraged to evolve and change. This might be in order to enable ongoing transmission; to continually teach us the lessons and value of culture in the present moment. That is one reason why I find the conversation around how to care for dance attractive, because the language used to explore how to and preserve performance resonates with me as a practitioner considering how to care for First Nations intangible heritage. I think that the two worlds of dance and Blak cultural practice, which are not mutually exclusive, have the potential to learn from one another.

When we're asking how we can ensure that performance lives on in a gallery or museum, a question which carries with it a lot of institutional anxiety, I like to draw on First Nations cultural dance and performance as a case study and say "there is a model here which demonstrates that it can be done using an understanding of custodianship; through relationships, cultural protocol and so on." First peoples have managed to safeguard cultural practices, dance, and performance for tens of thousands of years, so it can be done.

Tammi: You could not have said it better, Juanita. The system and the way already exist to maintain what needs to be maintained and to relinquish what is no longer relevant. This system is relational and is difficult to codify. I'm reminded of something our inaugural Director of First Nations at Powerhouse, Emily McDaniel, said to us on her first day: "collections should reflect the relationships they hold." At the time I understood this to mean we should be getting back to building up trust and dialogue with the communities and artists whose works we have in our collections. And yes, this is a significant part of it. But I think this would especially apply regarding dance or other performance modes and how they may exist across generations as a living, breathing example of the relationship the institution has with communities.

A lot of colonial architectures were built to keep mob out or lock us up, you know, like it was either one way or the other – stay out or stay here, and nothing in between, which goes against our very nature. It's in our DNA to be connected to Country and to be able to move freely and in tune with our instinct and responsibility to Country. It's a full circle moment to come back into the institution on our own terms and to have our voices seen as valid, relevant, even pivotal to positive change. For us to agree we'll perform and share ourselves on our own terms and in the way that is proper for us is incredible. I think holding firm to the fact that each of us is an animate archive is important; and that whilst an institution might get a video of us or write down the notation, it will be bereft of

meaning, wholly extracted from its breath if the relationship is not kept alive with the people who must ultimately hold it. Maybe that's how this way of thinking is starting to inform those places.

Juanita: I do wonder if some of the conversation around acquiring performance was a reaction to wanting, in good faith, to formalise the bringing of performance and dance into the museum with the tools and understandings that the museum had available to it. I don't know whether or not that is necessarily the reason why this conversation is so prominent at the moment but, I do wonder if that's part of it. Maybe we're reaching a point now where that doesn't need to dominate the conversation and it can transition to a place of, as you were saying, where we are asking not how we can acquire performance into the museum, but how we facilitate performance by any means, not just within the gallery and museum space, but in communities, in situ.

How do these institutions – which have profited off the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands, the removal of cultural belongings from Country and from people – how can these institutional spaces be genuinely committed to reparations through financing these cultural projects? Whether that be performers coming to the gallery in order to showcase their practice, their culture, or providing workshop funding for mob to teach dance in community. How do we be a part of an ecosystem and give back to communities in a way that is not on the museum's terms but completely in the hands of communities? They are the deciders of how performances will or will not be played out, where it will happen, how it will happen, who will be the recipient of those dances. And in some instances, they may choose not to showcase that in a gallery or on the platform with an institution, but rather it may be that it remains a private and intimate experience for a family, a community to teach dance, to teach song, to practice ceremony.

I don't think that there is an end point on the horizon of decolonisation but I do believe that it's been the work of Indigenous arts workers in these institutional spaces who have driven a cultural shift towards Indigenising – creating safer, more meaningful experiences within galleries and museums for First Peoples, as artists, visitors and staff. And to your point, in recent years we have seen probably the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the GLAM sector and that continues to grow.

We have gone from having one to a handful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders employed in these places to where we are now – creating departments dedicated to First Nations arts and culture. And so, it's no wonder, with increased employment and opportunity for mob in the GLAM and arts sector that we are seeing increased collaboration with community. Because those spaces were never safe for us until there were Indigenous people in them. And if we're being perfectly honest, many First Nations practitioners have and continue to put themselves in compromised and culturally unsafe positions in institutions in order to see stronger representation and more opportunities for our communities, as well as to continually carve out a space for future First Nations people. It's like the old saying – once you get in the door you chock it behind you so that more people can walk through. This is what we have seen. Many of the positive changes

for our communities in the GLAM sector has come as a result of the incredibly hard work of First Nations people in programming, curatorial, education, art practice and so on. And that has occurred at all levels, out in community organisations, language trusts, art centres, as well as in small regional galleries, libraries and schools all the way up to the big state and national institutions.

Tammi: It's amazing to think how much has indeed been done and how much the landscape has changed. We have come an incredibly long way. We really do stand on the shoulders of those who walked before us.

Juanita: Absolutely! We have been pushing this for several decades now and, as you say, we've come an incredibly long way. And we know that there is still work to be done. Thinking situationally, where you and I are based here in the wider Sydney region, in the south-east of the continent, there has historically been a vastly different representation of our cultural and artistic practices. Often times, there has been an undermining of our living culture due to the perception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban and metropolitan landscapes lack cultural integrity – that our arts and cultural practices are somehow less valid than those that originate from more remote and/or regional contexts. But there is such an amazing movement towards recognizing that we have a wealth and a richness of Aboriginal culture and artistic practice, including performance, that comes out of this part of the continent as well as from all over. And that's not to disregard the incredible movements of any other mob.

It's also important to consider that a lot of the major institutions where cultural materials that were taken violently or unethically in those early periods of colonisation are in this part of the country. And so, I feel it's vital to engage with local communities from this region and beyond to give them the opportunity to determine the future of these collections as a right of reply to the actions of the past, particularly here in the epicentre of colonisation. It's important that we continue to engage with the history of collecting, including through works that were later acquired through more ethical practices.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales's (AGNSW) acquisition of the *Pukumani Grave Posts* in 1958 comes to mind as a significant milestone in this history as the first major commission of Aboriginal work by a gallery of modern art in this country. When you think about the fact that this was the first time a major gallery approached a community and said, 'we want to commission works from you – what do you want to make? What do you think is significant and needed in our public collection?' This is just one example that has shaped the way institutions engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and artists. It's a powerful shift from preferencing art and cultural practices that institutions deem as valuable to highlighting what communities think is important to showcase, how they want to use their voice and see themselves represented. That's not to say institutions have got this figured out or are always allowing Indigenous people full self-determination in the arts, far from it, but I think it's useful to reflect on the evolution of this space. And we are still on this journey.

Tammi: How forward thinking of the AGNSW. I think this is the core point to all this work we are doing really. Putting authority back to a people to decide what are the most vital stories they want to deposit in this place for broader society to know; and letting those people set out the right ways to look after them. It is putting power back into the hands of the right people to determine the what and the how of their memories and history. It's probably the most important thing of all – letting people speak for themselves from a place of knowing that is not validated by the institution but deeply respected on its own terms. The AGNSW is deadly in all that they are doing to get this right – and since 1958 – they were certainly ahead of the game there.

It's important to mention that much of the dance I personally perform in response to collections is not for the public and is done in service of the Ancestors whose belongings we care for. I dance there every single day. So, there's a very private aspect to ceremony and performance as collection care, as conservation, as critical encounters with your old people. Having First Peoples in to spend time with their Ancestral belongings is what is important, and we have been facilitating critical visitations without expectation for mob over the last few years at the Powerhouse. It's not always about the public side of things even though there are many programs and opportunities for mob to create publicly available art in response to collections as well. It comes back to the tangible and intangible for me – some parts of the whole must always remain concealed, just as we cannot see the whole surface of the moon at once – there is a dark side, a side that sleeps while the other shines. So yes, inviting performance in these places must also recognise that some of it must remain in private. It is the creative act itself that matters, not the recognition of doing it. It's important for artists and institutions to agree on the purpose and expectations of engagement, and importantly that there is free, prior, and informed consent afforded to First Nations artists in all engagements.

Juanita: Of course, and again, it comes down to having a conversation with the artist. It will always be very dependent on the artist and community and what they want and need their work to be. We need to be asking how the architecture, both seen and unseen, of this place engages with the right people to understand the needs of First Nations artists and performers who come into these spaces? Institutions have a lot of resources they can offer; it's just knowing what people want and what people need to enable their works to thrive. Asking these questions has been an ongoing exercise within the performance art working group at the AGNSW and the *Precarious Movements* project. Through various case studies with different artists, we've learnt what was missing in our offerings. Artists have requested things that we wouldn't have previously thought of that now we have the opportunity to provide to future artists that come into the Gallery.

Of course, the work is never done and there's no perfect 100 item list that's going to work for every single artist/performer. The open-endedness is part of what makes working with performance in the museum space really fulfilling and engaging because it is so deeply about adaptation and relationships. Anytime a performance work is commissioned, a dance work enters a collection, or an artist is invited to respond to an archive or collection, whatever it might be, the success of that project is always contingent on the strength of relationships, trust and connection. If you're a First Nations

artist coming to a white colonial institution to vulnerably share some aspect of your practice and culture, there should be an expectation that you be looked after appropriately – just as carefully as we look after fragile ceramic sculptures on display or paintings by white European male artists that conservators labour over for months in order to restore and care for them. That same level of care, if not more, should be given to the living humans that enter the gallery.

Tammi: It's really something to stop and think how bringing First Nations performers and performance into these spaces is such a vital part of memory-keeping for our people. Our memories are not of some long-forgotten past – our cultures are a continuum of memories made every day. There needs to be an openness, a generosity of spirit and an underpinning ethos of recognising that cultural performers carry the weight of history and culture on their shoulders and are bound to history and culture long after the program finishes.

Juanita: It's beautiful and sometimes frustrating to witness these moments of realisation in institutional spaces that have divorced themselves from the people who have created the works and cultural belongings that sit in their collections and archives. Separated from the individuals that have a relationship with them, that shares histories with them, that have use for them as tools in their cultural practice and storytelling.

For some time now people from various indigenous cultures across the globe have been invited into these spaces to commune with these objects and to have an opportunity to meet with these Ancestors. This is a wonderful thing but at the same time, it's one thing to enable access to collections and allow people to be in proximity to these cultural belongings and it's another thing entirely to enable them to then have decision making power over what happens to them. Revisiting one of your earlier points: what does it mean for people who want to activate these objects by handling them? Or by using them, by singing to them, by smoking them or allowing them to return to Country to rest at the end of their life? I think that there isn't currently the institutional appetite or preparedness to allow for that level of self-determination for the people who have the cultural authority to be able to make those decisions. I think this, in part, comes from fear that all communities will want everything back.

The reality is that there are communities that want some of their cultural materials to remain in institutions because they see the value in their capacity to educate future generations, their ability to tell stories to a broader audience and speak to larger issues such as climate change – to advocate for change, or because they want their grandchildren and great grandchildren to see themselves represented in these places well after they are no longer here. At the same time there are mob who rightfully want their belongings back.

We still have a long way to go but this is what feels energising about engaging with performance. It moves us, in my opinion, closer to those conversations by reinvigorating institutions through the inclusion of intangible practice, through performance's unique ability to confront these questions of authority and relationality. A lot of performance or

dance artists bring with them an array of relationships, collaborators and audiences. In a way, it's like some sort of beneficial exposure therapy for museums and institutions to give themselves over to dance and choreographic artists who say "when we come together, it's for the benefit of all. When I come with my community, I bring a wealth of knowledge and of practice. When you make space for the collective, it enriches the experience of audiences who see the work and benefits the culture and structures of the institution that holds it." At the end of the day when we are doing right by artists and communities, engaging with people in a way that is generous, culturally appropriate and heart-centred, that's when we are being of service, which should ultimately be the goal of these institutions. One of the roles of museums and galleries is supposedly to showcase significant local art and culture to the people who predominantly don't work there – to the public. So, if that is the intention of these places then it stands to reason that those same people should be involved in the making of what the identity of that institution looks like. I think this is happening slowly.

Tammi: I will say it again Juanita, we are so blessed to have a mind and heart like yours at the forefront of institutional maturing of attitudes and capabilities to engage with cultural performers and their many varied practices. To close off our visit today, are there any last thoughts that you'd like to leave us with, or anything you feel we haven't touched on that's important moving forward?

Juanita: Yes. I'd like to finish off by saying that a space I'm still learning about, as someone not from a dance background, is the design of performance archives that are developed fit for purpose to represent performance in a way that is authentic and in alignment with the artist and/or community's values and practice. There are many well-known and unique examples out there, particularly when it comes to western, European dance artists and choreographers, Yvonne Rainer's archive springs to mind. This seems to me a generative world to explore and consider how we might apply elements of experimental dance archival practices to Indigenous performance. I have found it eye opening and productive to think about how we might utilize diverse languages, written and not, in inventive ways to describe something that is felt in the body. How do we translate Indigenous performance and dance into words, into imagery, into audio visual modes that feel true to the practice? I'm interested in how we might move from asking "how can I create an archive to document the physical appearance of this dance which took place at this time and in this place for this particular event," to instead questioning "how do I archive this performance as an embodied and expansive practice which reaches out beyond the temporal and spatial confines of its presentation," and "how might the elements that comprise that archive differ if I'm trying to communicate the essence of that performance, dance, artist's practice or piece of choreography versus trying to 'capture' the physical act that has taken place?"

Tammi: Indeed, surely institutional understanding of what it means to preserve an intangible cultural material for future generations without the desire to possess it, to take legal title over it, is the next frontier. I agree this has already been worked out – it has been developed and refined over 60 000 years of continual practice. Body to body, breath to breath, heartbeat to heartbeat, so I'm excited by the possibilities of how this could

occur with the institution as well as within it. I am so grateful to have been able to sit and yarn with you today, Juanita, to better understand how we have arrived at this point in our practice as Indigenous dancers and researchers and to know what's coming next. We owe you a great debt for the safety this provides our practitioners and communities to encounter and engage and express. Mandaang guwu (thankyou, Wiradjuri language).

Juanita: And to you too, Tammi. Booglbeh (thankyou, Bundjalung language).

Conclusion

From this discussion, it is clear that First Nations performance is a powerful means of cultural expression and representation with the capacity to mature the public institution from a place of memory keeping to one of memory making. Enabling lasting connections between collection and the community is what will allow institutional maturation. No longer will First People accept our truths being collected and hung out to dry. Providing opportunities for First Nation performers to be in action, to activate space in service of their objects and materials of memory, is what can instil the relevance of now to the past, and of the past to now. Indigenous ways of being and doing are becoming more and more imbedded within the public arts and culture sector. This inevitably leads to a fairer and more coherent, inclusive, unhurried experience for artists, staff and audiences alike.

There's never been a time for truth-telling as there is right now. From early-stage research, through creative development into full production and touring, the truth re-awoken through First Nations performance is setting its people free.

Notes

1. 'Truth-telling' covers a range of activities that engage with a fuller account of Australia's history and its ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. To be meaningful, truth-telling must aim to achieve change at a personal, local, institutional or national level. See <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/>.
2. For more information about the wider project, see the Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum website: <https://www.unsw.edu.au/arts-design-architecture/our-schools/arts-media/our-research/our-projects/precariou-movements-choreography-museum>.
3. 'Mob' is a colloquial term identifying a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from. Mob can represent your family group, clan group or wider Aboriginal community group. See: <https://deadlystory.com/page/tools/aboriginal-cultural-support-planning/cultural-planning--frequently-asked-questions>.
4. The term 'Blak' is a term used by some Indigenous Australians to reclaim and reaffirm once derogatory uses and stereotypes associated with the word black. Its use can be traced back to artist Destiny Deacon and her 1994 exhibition *Blakness: Blak City Culture*, 1994. See: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/blak-black-blackfulla-language-is-important-but-it-can-be-tricky-20210826-p58lzg.html>.
5. Mundaguddah is the Muruwari language word for The Rainbow Serpent.

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