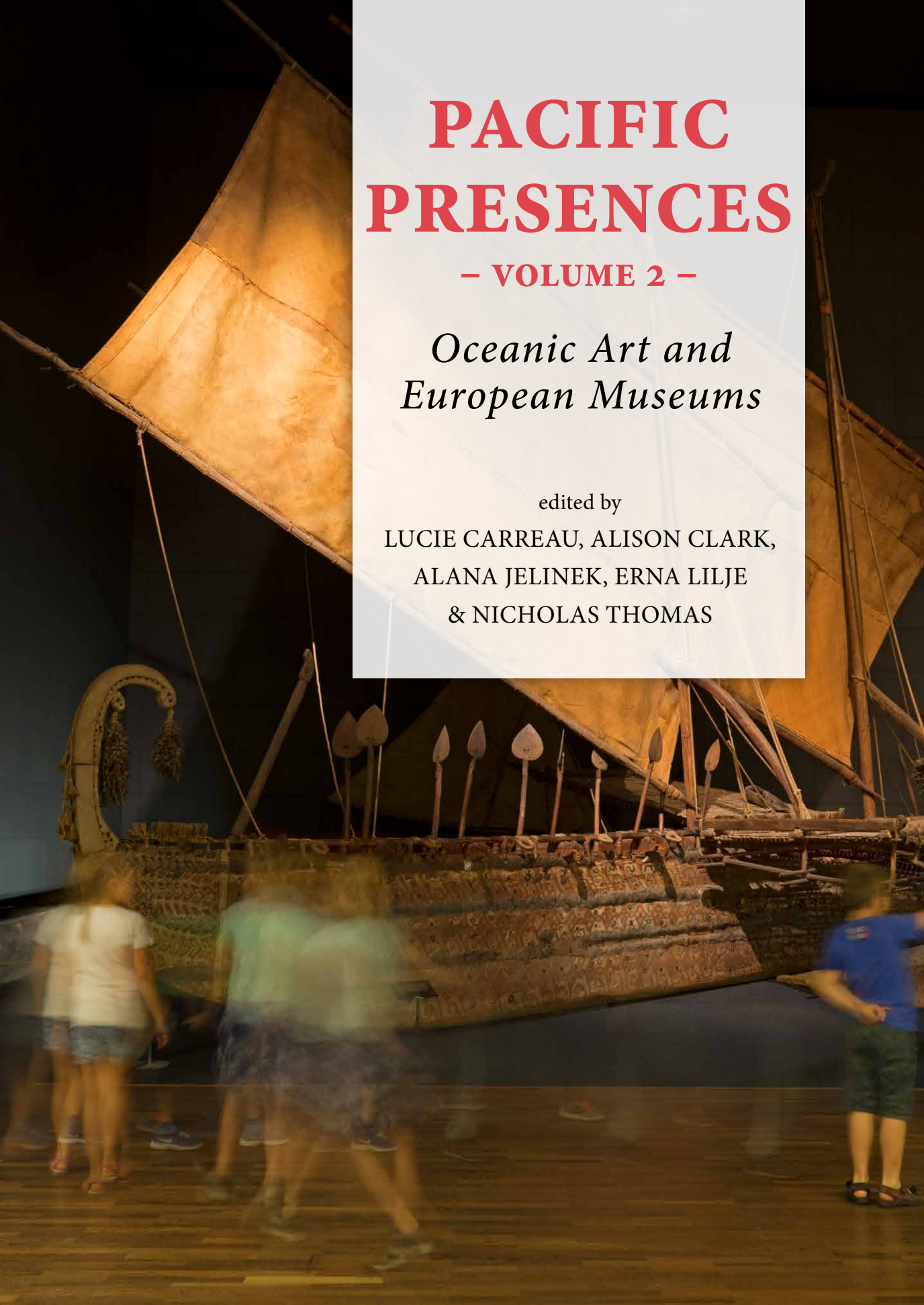

PACIFIC PRESENCES

– VOLUME 2 –

Oceanic Art and European Museums

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Source Reference

Carreau, L., Clark, A., Jelinek, A., Lilje, E. and Thomas, N. (eds.) 2018: *Pacific Presences - Volume 2. Oceanic Art and European Museums*, Leiden: Sidestone Press.

Series: Pacific Presences, volume 4b
General Editor: Nicholas Thomas

Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden
www.sidestone.com

Lay-out & cover design: Sidestone Press
Photograph cover: Interior of the boat hall, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 2015. Photograph by Mark Adams.

ISBN 978-90-8890-626-8 (softcover)
ISBN 978-90-8890-627-5 (hardcover)
ISBN978-90-8890-628-2 (PDF e-book)

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 32

'In Process'

ALANA JELINEK

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There are many ways to describe art, the art world, the relationship between art and audience, and the process of art-making. I have noted elsewhere[817] that many anthropologists focus solely on those contemporary artists whose work is valued by the art market; those who have the highest profile are by definition a tiny percentage of contemporary practising artists. It is notable that anthropologists do not usually operate such pre-selection in attempting to understand a given society or its subsets. It is therefore noteworthy that, in the case of contemporary art, the conventions of ethnographic engagement tend to be informed by art historical bias. A lead is set for anthropologists of art by those art historians who have a disciplinary rationale for selecting a small percentage of artistic practices as exemplars.

It is ironic perhaps that it is through the discipline of art history that we come to understand historical changes in how artists and artworks are perceived. Art world networks, including the biennial circuit, and entanglements with international investment structures have been analysed by art historians, such as Chin-tau Wu[818] and Anthony Gardner,[819] in addition to sociologists, including Pascal Gielen[820] and Olav Velthuis.[821] A history of art historical writing demonstrates that some highly esteemed artists are, over time, re-evaluated or forgotten and, conversely, art movements and artists overlooked by the establishment of their day are valued latterly both in artistic and market terms. This is not to say that, in the end, history is right, just that at any one moment, we cannot assume that high visibility equates with enduring value, or that the market is an arbiter of quality, for a number of reasons that both sociologists of the market and art historians have rehearsed for decades, including Stuart Plattner, Julian Stallabrass and Gregory Shollette.[822] For these reasons I caution anthropologists against taken-for-granted assumptions about value and artistic practice promulgated in the establishment parts of the art world.

While Roger Sansi does an admirable job in describing contemporary art practices and the surrounding art world in *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, nevertheless, the dialogue between him and Marilyn Strathern published in *Hau*,[823] responding to some of the questions raised in *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, demonstrates some of the many areas of ongoing differences in understanding between practising artists and anthropologists (including the definition of art, as Strathern's comments to Sansi

betray, albeit with irony and perhaps knowingly wry). Rather than tackling all the various differences in understanding, here I will focus on the question of process, networks or relations and how these concepts may be understood from the point of view of an artist.

Process, networks and relations are words with deep histories within the thought and theories of anthropology. These concepts, though, have a different set of histories, and therefore a differently nuanced interpretation and meaning for artists with an interest in process philosophy working in the contemporary art world. I will beg the question of what these concepts convey within anthropology, but I will mention in passing that neither Alfred Gell's[824] idea of an art with agency nor the process described by Tim Ingold[825] sit comfortably within these other theoretical conceptions of process.

Key philosophers bringing the three interlinked concepts of process, networks and relations together include Martin Heidegger, with his concept of human understanding as a dimension of the process of being, Deleuze and Guattari,[826] and Erin Manning and Brian Massumi,[827] working through Alfred Whitehead. The process of process philosophers, such as Manning, informs the description of my own process within the *Pacific Presences* project 2013-2018 to follow. While most artists are content to leave theories of art to philosophers, anthropologists and historians, other artists including Coco Fusco, Andrea Fraser and Joseph Kosuth contribute to art theory, as I also do. Like these other artists, I also turn to philosophers, historians and sociologists to inform the theory I write, but I do so from the disciplinary perspective of a practising artist.

The process of process philosophy is a process of becoming, in which reality is continuously going on and coming about. According to Manning, Whitehead's process philosophy is focused around the idea of the actual occasion. For Whitehead, while process is what constitutes the extended continuum of the world, a certain monadicity is absolutely necessary. The emergence (prehension) of actual occasions is synonymous with what we know or experience. Occasions are co-constituted with their worlding, creating 'superjects' (subjects of the event) in their passing. If, as artists, we perceive both obstacles to creation and (artistic) acts, as occasions, we can understand both as waypoints, and neither destination nor termination. Any given outcome or obstacle is always interlinked with other relations and things, so the processes, networks and relations countervail against concepts like 'genius', exemplars and 'masterpieces' or agency located in the individual (person or object). While failure or success may be intrinsic properties of any one artwork (this cannot be ruled out if we believe that either bad art or non-art exists), they are also the consequence of the interplay of processes, beyond the volition of an individual, that is, one acting singularly. Although there may be failures in terms of artistic excellence or disciplinary values, and failures of the network in terms of support or possibility, these are the emergent properties of location, at a moment in time, working within a wider context of possibility.

The text here briefly describes a wider set of networks, processes and relations: the ecology, so to speak, supporting one artist in one location over a period of time. This type of description foregrounds the idea of art as a process of relations, which are often overlooked or taken for granted in the process of commissioning or hosting artists, despite being fundamental.

I began the *Pacific Presences* project while still completing the final year of my post-doctoral research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2009-2014). My research project, called *The Collector's Desire*, investigated the relationship between collections, collectors and the collected, where the collected is understood as both people and things. On starting work with *Pacific Presences*, I understood my contribution to be comparable with the other, non-artist, researchers on the team, and working somewhat in the vein of my previous research project in which artworks, exhibitions and publications are the outputs. There were to be other artists on the project but, as they were commissioned differently, their artistic process and goals were different from my own. The difference between 'creative' or 'practice-based' research and other forms of artistic research for exhibition and artistic production purposes is quite literally academic. I suspect it is a debate with only limited interest outside art and design departments in Higher Education and Research Councils, yet it was uppermost in my own mind when considering my contribution to the *Pacific Presences* project.

I chose to investigate West Papua, at the most western end of the project's research area. I chose the area because I am interested in the legacies of colonialism and, of all the highly contested regions of Melanesia and Micronesia, the original parameters of the project, it seemed to me that West Papua is the most contested, the most politically hot. I wanted to talk about colonialism and its legacy with this project, as I had done in previous work. To do so by working with the specificity of the most flagrant contemporary example felt generative and a productive starting point. The outcome of this decision can be seen in *Knowing* (2015), which is described in Chapter 28 of this volume.

Knowing was a participatory event in the Netherlands with Papuans living in the diaspora, Javanese people, some of whom live in Indonesia, others in the Netherlands, and (white) Dutch people with family or personal connections to the region (Figure 32.1). It was also a film made as an artefact of these encounters. The film was shown in locations in the Netherlands and Britain and has been published online, with links from the *Pacific Presences* website. The *Knowing* project culminated at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, in a day event open to the public called 'Knowing West Papua', which included performances by the Lani Singers, talks by project participants Insos Ireeuw and Benny Wenda, who has been shortlisted for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with the Free West Papua movement, a curators' tour of the exhibition *Sounding Out the Morning Star: Music and West Papua*, and screenings of the film, *Knowing*.

I had intended to follow up *Knowing* with a visit to West Papua, in order to add a layer to the original encounter between people and things, by taking the film and footage to West Papua in order to see what people know at home; to see whether there is a different kind of knowledge inside Papua as compared with outside. This never materialized. I was warned by people with recent experience of West Papua of the dangers of my visit. I was told that white European tourists to the resorts on the peninsula had been shot at random in the past weeks or months, and that there were very few journalists willing or able to work in the region. The area is *that* dangerous, I was told. More importantly, I was warned that, while I may or may not be at risk

Figure 32.1. Filming of Knowing. Photograph by Ulrike Folie.

personally, I would be imperilling the lives of those I meet, those who will offer me their stories, knowledge and hospitality. 'Was my project worth that risk?', I was asked. Of course I knew it wasn't. It wasn't worth the risk in the abstract: what project is worth the lives of others? It wasn't worth the risk specifically either: how could I know whether I would produce a good, or even good enough, work of art? Artists always set out to make good, even great, art but we don't know at the outset whether we will achieve it. We can only hope. And hope is not tangible enough to gamble my own, let alone someone else's, life with. So I didn't pursue it. I decided not to go to West Papua, not even for an international arts festival or to the capital Jayapura. Not that I was devastated. I am not someone at ease in the tropics: too hot, too humid, and too many biting creatures. But the decision left me with the requirement to find a new direction for the next part of the project.

One joyful requirement of the project was to give papers at international conferences and in 2016 this included Auckland, New Zealand and Guam, Mariana Islands, a US territory in Micronesia. These opportunities afforded me the possibility of meeting curators and Indigenous people from across Oceania, which therefore created the possibility of a project encompassing this range of views. Thinking about the potential of these meetings and working within the ethics that I consciously maintain in my practice,[828] as well as the question of representation that Gayatri Spivak addresses,[829] I knew that I would be required to work with the type of media that allows people to represent themselves. This meant that I would have to work in sound and probably with film once again. Never having been trained in audio visual techniques or even in photography beyond high school, I was never comfortable working with lens-based media. Yet I knew I must use it. For the projects where self-representation and self-authorship is the only ethical approach, I am required to use a medium that enables this.

Figure 32.2. Screening of Knowing, The Cera Project, London 2016. Photograph by Juliette Brown.

I worked with film for the first time in my career as an artist in the previous research project, for which I needed to record the voices of people telling facts, myths, knowledge and stories of Fijian cannibal forks in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's collections for the 2010 art film 'Tall Stories: Cannibal Forks'.[830] Because it was part of my earlier post-doctoral research project, *The Collector's Desire*, I had a small budget and I could afford to pay for a camera person and editor of the film, Marianne Holm Hansen. By contrast, the *Pacific Presences* project had no budget for production costs, for professional sound or video recording, but there was a small budget for editing. The up-side of a very low production budget was that it kept the size of the team to small, workable and not-too-intimidating groups, which enabled open conversations between the participants and me. The result (Figure 32.2), edited by Holm Hansen, is a good art film in terms of subject and execution, but one that is too low in quality to be seen at film festivals, cinemas or most art venues.

Originally *Knowing* was to be shown as part of the permanent display in the Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, as it refers to the collection of that museum. In the ebb and flow of museum work, this idea might simply have been left on the backburner. Having curated independently and for small artist-run galleries, as well as working at Tate Modern in its initial years, I understand the types of decisions that go into exhibitions. In short, despite being a good art film, the possibilities for it are extremely limited. This is true because the subject matter is of marginal interest in the context of Britain. West Papua was never a colony of Britain and therefore it lies well outside a general UK audience's awareness. This limits its general interest and because of its low production values and being digital, not film (or analogue), it also has limited exhibition potential in art circles.

I mention this in order to demonstrate the interplay of artistic vision with real world material constraints and the power of networks to nurture and sustain in the

production of an artwork. Every artwork requires a network of sustenance, visible and acknowledged or otherwise, in order to be actualized.

Art historians and anthropologists such as Alfred Gell wrongly imagine that the strength of the networks surrounding an artwork reflect the agency (often understood as artistic merit) of a work. A philosophy of process sees the question differently. Networks and relations create the conditions or processes by which art is made in the first place and, once it is made, the networks and relations for art create the conditions for it to be both shared and valued. Even after an artwork is made, networks and relations sustain and nurture it. Agency is not located in the artwork, but as the emergent property of networks.

The story of my next artwork for *Pacific Presences*, *Belonging* (2016-2018), follows its own path of networks, support and constraint, as all artworks do. In short, a project that began as a film with an exhibition opportunity became, in the face of a loss of exhibition venue, an intervention on a tablet computer as an interactive new media piece. In turn, when faced with a loss of data from a crashed external hard drive and a lack of resources, *Belonging* became in 2017 a series of podcasts to download from various websites, including the *Pacific Presences* website.

Despite the changes to the final incarnation of the artwork as a result of changing resources and expectations, the content and aim of *Belonging* remained consistent from when it was first conceived. For *Belonging*, I interviewed museum curators, Indigenous people who live in the diaspora, outside their home countries, living and working all over Europe and the Pacific, and Indigenous museum curators. I was interested in investigating whether we can understand objects as belonging in the diaspora just as people who live in the diaspora belong. It was from this angle that I wanted to investigate the question of the repatriation of museum artefacts.

Being the type of artist described by Grimshaw and Ravetz, as one for whom a 'critical interrogation of form or medium is central to their approach',[831] I am interested in reflecting on the form an artwork takes, and how the form influences meaning, its interpretation, which needless to say, is not fixed. The interviews are edited and juxtaposed with different bits of other people's interviews. This process of juxtaposition will, as it always does, create new sympathies and meanings. While I will always try to remain true to the original meaning of each interview, it is nevertheless the case that the juxtaposition of one with another will move the listener to feel and understand things differently. So that there is no one single mix of interviews, and no single definitive version or reading of the work, the interviews are juxtaposed differently across the series of podcasts. The artwork lies in the entirety of mixes and juxtapositions across the series.

These two examples of art, made under the auspices of the *Pacific Presences* project, describe indexes of relations and networks; ones that also reveal traces of process. As in any artwork, most of the processes are invisible. One artwork is complete and now exists in the past in that, as far as I understand, it is no longer part of continuing or present networks. No further resources, including attention, are attributed to it. The processes are all past, though of course, through networks, they could be revitalized and become part of future processes, networks and relations. The other artwork will be part of networks in the future when it is shown, or heard, finally. The full extent of these future networks is as yet unknown. The resources and networks are potential.

PACIFIC PRESENCES – VOLUME 2

Hundreds of thousands of works of art and artefacts from many parts of the Pacific are dispersed across European museums. They range from seemingly quotidian things such as fish-hooks and baskets to great sculptures of divinities, architectural forms and canoes. These collections constitute a remarkable resource for understanding history and society across Oceania, cross-cultural encounters since the voyages of Captain Cook, and the colonial transformations that have taken place since. They are also collections of profound importance for Islanders today, who have varied responses to their displaced heritage, and renewed interest in ancestral forms and practices.

This two-volume book enlarges understandings of Oceanic art and enables new reflection upon museums and ways of working in and around them. In dialogue with Islanders' perspectives, It exemplifies a growing commitment on the part of scholars and curators to work collaboratively and responsively.

Volume II illustrates the sheer variety of Pacific artefacts and histories in museums, and similarly the heterogeneity of the issues and opportunities that they raise. Over thirty essays explore materialities, collection histories, legacies of empire, and contemporary projects.

Sidestone Press
ISBN: 978-90-8890-626-8

PACIFIC PRESENCES 4B