

RE:SOUNDING a 2000-Year-Old Vietnamese Dong Son Bronze Drum; Artist-Led Collaborations outside the Museum to Challenge the Impasse of Repatriating and Rematriating Cultural Instruments

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Abstract : RE:SOUNDING is an ongoing research project and artwork seeking to return the sound and knowledge of Dong Son bronze drums back to contemporary musicians. Colonial collections of ethnographic instruments are problematic in how they commit acts of conceptual, cultural, and acoustic silencing. The collection (or more honestly), the plagiarism, and pillaging of these instruments have systemically separated them from living and breathing cultures. This includes diasporic communities, who have come to resettle in close proximity - but still have little access - to the museums and galleries that display their cultural objects. Despite recent attempts to 'open up' and 'recognise' the tensions and violence of these ethnographic collections, many museums continue to structurally organize and reproduce knowledge with the same procedural distance and limitations of imperial condescension. Impatient with the slowness of these museums, our diaspora led collaborations participated in the opaque economy of the auction market to gain access and begin the process of digitally recording and archiving the actual sounds of the ancient Dong Son drum. This self-directed, self-initiated artwork not only acoustically reinvigorated an ancient instrument but redistributed these sonic materials back to contemporary musicians, composers, and their diasporic communities throughout Vietnam, South East Asia, and Australia. Our methodologies not only highlight the persistent inflexibility of museum infrastructures but demand that museums refrain from their paternalistic practice of risk-averse ownership, to seriously engage with new technologies and political formations that require all public institutions to be held accountable for the ethical and intellectual viability of their colonial collections. The integrated and practical resolve of diasporic artists and their communities are more than capable of working with new technologies to reclaim and reinvigorate what is culturally and spiritually theirs. The motivation to rematriate - as opposed to merely repatriate - the acoustic legacies of these instruments to contemporary musicians and artists is a new model for decolonial and restorative practices. Exposing the inadequacies of western scholarship that continues to treat these instruments as discreet, disembodied, and detached artifacts, these collaborative strategies have thus far produced a wealth of new knowledge - new to the west perhaps - but not that new to these, our own communities. This includes the little-acknowledged fact that the Dong Son drum were political instruments of war and technology, rather than their simplistic description in the museum and western academia as agrarian instruments of fertility and harvest. Through the collective and continued sharing of knowledge and sound materials produced from this research, these drums are gaining a contemporary relevance beyond the cultural silencing of the museum display cabinet. Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung of the Kulin Nation and the Gadigal of the Eora Nation where we began this project. We pay our respects to the Peoples, Lands, Traditional Custodians, Practices, and Creator Ancestors of these Great Nations, as well as those First Nations peoples throughout Australia, Vietnam, and Indonesia, where this research continues, and upon whose stolen lands and waterways were never ceded.

Keywords : acoustic archaeology, decolonisation, museum collections, rematriation, repatriation, Dong Son, experimental music, digital recording

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