JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

12/2020

www.thersites-journal.de

Imprint

Universität Potsdam 2021
Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
https://www.thersites-journal.de/

ISSN 2364-7612

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Layout and Typesetting
text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:
Alana Jelinek: Not Praising, Burying (2012). Performance pictures.

Published online at:
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol12

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12/2020 | pp. 95–103

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Interview with Alana Jelinek

Abstract Alana Jelinek is an art historian and artist—"an artist making art, and also writing about art", in her words—, a former European Research Council artist in residence at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, and currently teaching in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Hertfordshire. Her art has revolved mostly around the issues of post- and neocolonialism and their connections with neoliberalism—a more implicit topic in her works from the 1990s on the "tourist gaze" developed into an interest in museums, collecting and ethnography throughout the past two decades. In this interview, she talks to thersites about the role of classical heritage and ancient art in her own work.

Keywords classical archaeology, art history, installation art; classical receptions

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol12.163

Alana Jelinek is originally from Melbourne, Australia, where she studied at Victoria College, Prahran. For her postgraduate studies she then moved to the UK, where she attended Birkbeck College. In 2008 she achieved her PhD in both the fields of Fine Art practice and History of Art at Oxford Brookes University with a thesis on "Art as a democratic act: the interplay of context and content in contemporary art".

Throughout her career, Alana Jelinek has always crossed multiple boundaries: within art, as her work moves across the most various techniques and genres, from painting to performance, from novels to films, but also between art as practice and research and reflection upon art. Between 2009 and 2014, she conducted a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council into the relationship between collections, collectors and the collected (University of Cambridge). This was followed by her second post-doctoral research role with the University of Cambridge between 2013 and 2018 where she was artist in residence for the project "Pacific Presences", funded by the European Research Council. Among her many scholarly publications are the monographs *This is Not Art: Activism and Other 'Not-Art'* (London, 2013) and *Between Discipline and a Hard Place: The Value of Contemporary Art* (London, 2020). To all this, Alana Jelinek also adds an intense activity and a great experience in education, in schools, museums, art galleries, as well as in higher education institutions.

On her homepage, she writes:

> Art, for me, is a philosophical praxis. What I mean by this is that for me art is a philosophical enquiry using materiality to explore, interrogate and enact ideas. All of my work explores mechanisms of power and an individual's relationship to these. This includes the historical colonial past, with its legacies in the present and the present within neoliberalism.[1]

In her work, Alana Jelinek has repeatedly referred to the Classical heritage and to ancient art. We are very glad that she has accepted our invitation to be interviewed on these matters for *thersites.*

1 http://www.alanajelinek.com/about.html.

thersites: *As the title of your PhD thesis reveals, you have worked a lot on the connections between art and democracy. Did this inspire or direct you towards Classical Greece, and more specifically democratic Athens? Is Athens a model for the interplay of democracy and art?*

Alana Jelinek: I discovered Ancient Greece during my time as an undergraduate at art school, at the very beginning of my journey. I remember making a range of artworks that used sculpture to explore the legacy of Classical thought today and also Classicism in architecture across the globe. While studying painting at Art School, I also took modules in philosophy at the University of Melbourne, and so I was exposed to the legacy of Plato and Socrates quite formally. I tried to make sense of what I was discovering about the impact of the past on the present through my art practice. This relationship between theory and practice is an artistic habit I maintain to this day.

In my most recent monograph, *Between Discipline and a Hard Place,* I go to some length to explain how different the definition and understanding of art in ancient Greece (as *technê*) was, and indeed how democracy as we understand it today is not democracy as was understood, or practiced, in ancient Greece. One of the main points of difference is that the idea/ideal of democracy has been predicated on the idea of the equality and freedom of all regardless of birth or belief since the liberal revolution in thought in the Modern period. For me, ancient Greece had neither art nor democracy in the modern senses of these words.

thr: *In your project "the third wing" (2006), a performance about a public consultation for the construction of a "House of Corporations" at Westminster, you used a classical model, the ancient agora, as architectural inspiration. Can you tell us something about the project—and why Classical antiquity was crucial here to its realization?*

AJ: "The Third Wing" was one of the art projects that formed part of my PhD investigating art as a democratic act. It played with the idea of building a new wing on the UK's Houses of Parliament, embodying the rise of corporate influence in political structures. The proposal was to add a House of Corporations to the existing House of Lords and House of Commons. The agora reference alluded to the ancient Greek agora, the place of politics and also the market place, so it played on the idea of markets and their relationship to democracy. Of course, the ancient agora was not a market in the sense of market capitalism or global transnational corporations of the twenty-first century.

As it happens, I worked with an Australian Greek student architect on the blueprints for the House of Corporations and we incorporated an 'agora' into the plans.

thr: *Archaeology generally plays an important role in many of your projects. What is its relevance to your understanding of culture, society, and art?*

AJ: I worked with archaeologists as colleagues for 9 years, from 2009 until 2018, while working with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. This proximity gave me quite a nuanced and fleshed out understanding of the discipline. Because archaeology and anthropology were juxtaposed, I understand archaeology in contradistinction to art, its history, and also in contradistinction to anthropology. So, archaeology is the discipline of understanding past cultures and societies through 'the dig', the excavation and its knowledge is based on exploration of material culture. Social Anthropology seeks to understand living cultures and societies through fieldwork including behaviour, attitudes and practices.

Both disciplines identify art as one aspect of (nearly) all human cultures. To contrast this with art history, as a discipline, art history began in the eighteenth century with Hellenist Johann Winckelmann, who identified the Classical era as the origins of art. In the twentieth century, art was imagined to have been produced by all societies since the beginning of human evolution, so the definition of art moved from Winckelmann's to a more anthropological one.

I, on the other hand, argue that art has only existed since the neologism 'aesthetics' has invented the particularities of Modern thought. Therefore, much that art historians, philosophers, archaeologists (etc.) call art isn't actually art.

thr: *Popular understanding of archaeology is often still stuck in the idea, overcome in scholarship since the second half of the 20th century, that material culture is connected to ethnicity, and that an excavation can thus tell us "who lived there". Is this an element you wish to rediscuss and challenge through your artistic work?*

AJ: One of the major drivers in my art practice is exploring the questions, who belongs and who has the right to determine belonging?

It is interesting and alarming how often the general public use scholarship, including archaeology, as evidence for pre-existing prejudiced views. I am not saying that scholars are without bias, but the whole point of disciplinary schol-

arship is to expose through the peer-review processes those practices and conclusions within the discipline that maintain falsehoods and misunderstanding.

It may be common understanding for over 50 years amongst archaeologists (and also anthropologists) that any given material culture found in a specific location does not signify ethnicity—indeed that both material culture and ideas travel—but it is no surprise that the general public hasn't caught up. I find that we all tend to operate with outdated ideas outside our particular areas of expertise. For example, most people who aren't artists seem to believe that art is concerned with aesthetics, when in fact the equation of art with beauty is a Romantic one, and one we, artists, left behind in the early twentieth century.

thr: *What is your experience with archaeological museums and how can we make them into central institutions for a democratic education or an education to democracy?*

AJ: The archaeology museum I worked with included archaeology from everywhere, including archaeology local to Cambridge. However, the Museum's collections and displays excluded Classical civilizations which were instead housed in the Fitzwilliam Museum, with its emphasis on Art and the 'Great Civilizations'. We can see immediately from this how undemocratic (indeed racist) are the uses to which archaeological collections and museums can be put. I am aware of the debate raging in the ethnological museums of Europe about how to present their collections gained by colonial contact, albeit not always as plunder. They want to present the value of their collections as a physical reminder of the value of all cultures, to serve as an embodiment of multicultural democratic Europe. I have worked in museums education and I write about art (and culture) as guarantor of democracy, so this question is close to my heart. But there is no simple answer.

thr: *There is one project in which you related in a much more systematic way to Classical antiquity—"Not Praising, Burying" (2012). Can you tell us something about the project and how it developed?*

AJ: 'Not Praising, Burying' [Fig. 1–3] was my most recent direct engagement with Classical antiquity, although I am planning a project which takes the ideas explored in that artwork further. One of my colleagues at Cambridge University was Dr Chris Chippindale, an incredibly inspiring, knowledgeable and funny man whose abilities at story-telling meant that even flint could seem interesting.

I was interested in so much of what he had to say that I sought out things he had written. This is how I found the article he and David Gill wrote called 'Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Figures' (*American Journal of Archaeology,* Vol. 97 No. 4, Oct 1993) examining the relationship between scholarship and markets in art and antiquities. This article has been influential in my own writing about the relationship of art to the art market. After that article, I read Vickers and Gill's *Artful Crafts* (1994), which argues that ancient Greek pottery was never intended as the art form art historians of eighteenth and nineteenth century deemed it to be (Winckelmann and Wöfflin, for example). But instead, ancient Greek pottery is grave goods, that stood in for real instances of material wealth or perhaps aspirational wealth. So, I wanted to see whether it was possible to really understand what this would mean by engaging with the proposition through artistically playing with materials and forms. Ancient Greek pottery is so heavy with significance, I felt it is impossible to see it as throw-away or, at least, as less valuable grave goods than the contents found inside the pottery. I wanted to explore the question by using contemporary disposable forms—plastic bottles—and decorating them with contemporary versions of the classical themes, including painted displays of wealth (consumer goods that denote class), sporting prowess, scenes of conviviality and myths. For the project, I invited a range of people to make these 'equivalents' including David Gill and other archaeologists, aesthetics philosophers, artists and curators.

> [On her homepage, Alana Jelinek introduces "not praising, burying" as follows:
> "Performed on 12 November 2012 by an invited group of artists, archaeologists, art educators, philosophers in order to interrogate the idea of Greek pottery as art and the idea of Greek artefacts as the pinnacle or origins of artistic practices as we understand them today.
>
> *The Rules*
>
> 1. Everyday, throw-away, low-value vessels must first be prepared with a ground (surface primer) the colour of clay.
> 2. Low-value, throw-away vessels painted to appear like clay must then be decorated using the colours used by ancient Greek potters.
> 3. Painted decorative elements of the vessels must be in the style of ancient Greek red-figure or black-figure ceramics.
> 4. Representations must be of contemporary life or values.

The Premise

1. Following the ideas presented by Vickers and Gill in Artful Crafts (1994):
   a. that ancient Greek ceramics were not made as high art objects,
   b. ceramicists were a low-status group and not artists in any contemporary understanding of the term,
   c. ancient Greek red-figure and black-figure pots were skeuomorphs (playful pretend versions) of metallic objects (black = oxidised silver; red = gold; deep red = bronze; white = ivory).
2. That equivalents exist in contemporary (Western) cultures of most instances of (existing) ancient Greek material culture.
3. That ancient Greek ceramics depict three types of contemporary subject: everyday life, the gods, and heroes—not a far cry from what is depicted in the tabloids."

(Source: http://alanajelinek.com/participatory.html#NPB)])

thr: *The project revolved around the concepts of "translation" and "equivalent". What is the importance of these two concepts in our cultures and lives?*

AJ: The project was based on distinguishing between what happens when an idea is taken out of its originating context and put into a new one. I called this translation. All the various forms of neo-classicism found all over the world and most markedly in colonial outposts, for example in state and official building from Washington, USA to Kolkata, India, are translations of the vernacular of power used in Classical antiquity. This is contrasted with equivalents, which may co-exist with translations.

Equivalents do not look like that produced within the classical tradition, so equivalents may be misunderstood or undervalued. For example, the impressive displays of power and authority in traditional Abelam (Papua, New Guinea) architecture are an equivalent of the Parthenon.

In 'Not Praising, Burying', I used the idea of equivalence to 'interrogate' and try to get under the skin of the Vickers and Gill thesis in *Artful Crafts.* So invited guests were asked to make equivalents of ancient Greek pottery. We used plastic bottles for our painting—arguably the equivalent of pottery made to throw away, or bury. Early on in the art project's design, I realized I had to avoid the shapes used by ancient potters because today these shapes signify grandeur. They are the shapes for trophies and banqueting. Forms based on ancient pottery cannot shake the connotation of power, authority and gravitas. We needed to use a shape wholly associated with the disposable, so I turned to plastic: and the shapes we only associate only with plastic and the disposable.

thr: *Do you have future projects connected to Classical antiquity?*

AJ: I have long been keen to revisit the concerns I explored in 'Not Praising, Burying'. Having worked with museum collections since 2008, I am particularly drawn to ambiguous objects, namely, objects that are understood historically to be one thing when they may in fact be something else. I wrote an art novel, published by LemonMelon and designed by Marit Munzberg in 2013/14, from the perspective of a 'cannibal fork' in the collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. It's called *The Fork's Tale, as Narrated By Itself* and it explored the various scholarly and fantastical, historical and contemporary, tales told about it. 'Cannibal Forks' from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are part of the collections in ethnological museums all over the world. They are displayed as authentic objects. However, scholars are united in the understanding that none was ever used for flesh, let alone human flesh, and that most were made as part of a trade in curios for gentlemanly tourists and missionaries. I would like to use a similar approach to explore the 'biography' of a piece of ancient Greek pottery, and its current situation as part of a collection.

thr: *In a nutshell, what can classical antiquity teach us today?*

AJ: Whatever we want it to teach us. Classical antiquity is a text that is useful and generative to each succeeding generation. But we do tend to use it in our own image.

thr: *Thank you.*

Suggested citation

Filippo Carlà-Uhink: Interview with Alana Jelinek. In: thersites 12 (2020), pp. 95–103.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol12.163