

Lola Greeno

Katherine Moline, University of New South Wales, Sydney

What Counts as Knowledge: Living Cultures

Keywords: First Nations Art, Aesthetic Theory, Lola Greeno, Data, Design

This paper discusses my work as a senior Palawa artist in terms of its contribution to the recognition of First Nations' practices as living cultures in Tasmania. We propose that my recommendation to "know yourself, the community you come from, and your community's challenges" connects to Bruno Latour's observations of the personal, the collective and knowledge. The paper presents extracts of a paper based on conversations between us (Lola Greeno and Katherine Moline) over a three-year period, as part of our work for *The Data Imaginary: Fears and Fantasies*, a project dedicated to exploring what counts as knowledge, curated for the Griffith University Art Museum in 2021. The paper argues that each generation must renew the exchanges and pacts it deems relevant to social reciprocity and find ways of responding to resistance when changing the racialized and discriminatory status quo. It recommends critical reflection on how serious creative play can disrupt aesthetic norms and support an expanded and inclusive definition of data.

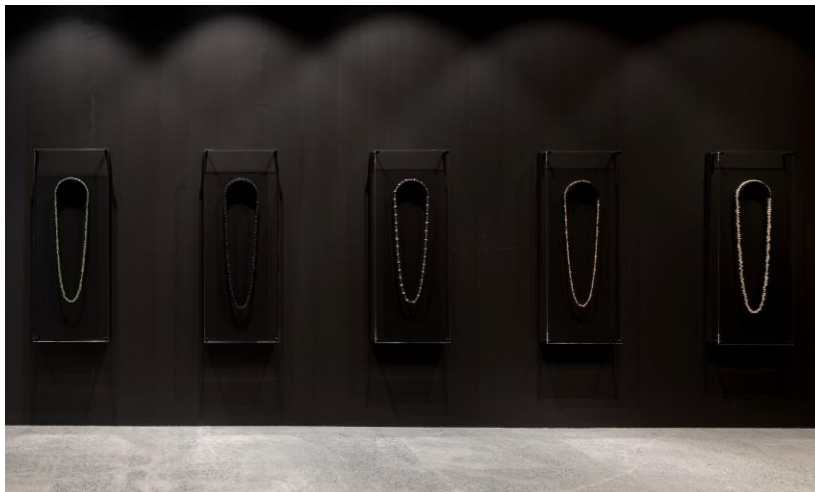


Figure 1. Installation of Lola Greeno's necklaces in the exhibition 'The Data Imaginary: Fears and Fantasies', Griffith University Art Museum, Brisbane, 2021. Photography: Carl Warner.

Lola Greeno: I am a senior Palawa woman born on Cape Barren Island, and I live and work in Launceston, lutruwita (Tasmania). After moving with my family to Flinders Island in 1972 I relocated to Launceston. My shell collection, stringing, patterning, and creation of necklaces connect me to my community and family history.

Katherine Moline: I am an Australian woman from a settler family who lives and works on Bedegal, Gadigal, Dharug, and Gundungurra Country as an artist, designer, curator and writer at UNSW Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture. In 2018 I began discussing with Lola Greeno the possibility of including her work in a project I was developing on creative explorations of data.

The exhibition *The Data Imaginary: Fears and Fantasies* brought together eminent and emerging artists and designers to show how creative explorations of data technology are crucial for a vital, inclusive and sustainable future. This project – which I curated in collaboration with Angela Goddard (Griffith University Art Museum), Amanda Hayman and Troy Casey (Blaklash), and Beck Davis (Australian National University) – comprises an exhibition, workshops, podcasts and publications over several iterations starting in Brisbane in 2021, Adelaide in 2022 and Canberra in 2023. Artists and designers, both through their work and in discussion, invite audiences to engage with climate change, geolocation data and data legacies, and to reflect on what inclusive data might be. The first iteration of the exhibition has just closed at Griffith Museum of Art and its second iteration will open at Flinders University Museum of Art in April 2022.

During the process of working on this project, several themes or issues emerged in our discussions, which we have used to structure this paper. In the discussions Lola Greeno expresses her understanding of how her work belongs and responds to living cultures and practices in her community. Katherine Moline's commentary reflects on Lola's artworks from a perspective framed within theories of aesthetics. These themes include Defining Reciprocity; Balancing Tradition and Contemporaneity / Conservation and Experimentation; Negotiating Social Pacts and Resistance to Change; and Circumventing Pushback and Bridging Cultural Systems with Serious Creative Play.

Defining Reciprocity



Figure 2. Lola Greeno, *Cape Barren Goose Pattern Necklace* 2019.
Photography: Carl Warner.

Lola Greeno: In my book I deliberately included the scientific names for the shells I use, because my granddaughter was asked to speak at assembly at her school in palawa kani, and she didn't know any of the words. When I heard this, I knew I had to do something about it. And doing something about it resulted in the book I published in 2021: *rina-mapali, nimina & kalikina (lots of shells, grasses and seaweeds)*.

Regarding reciprocity and Country, a good example is my design for the Cape Barren Goose pattern that I use in bracelets and necklaces where each shell in the pattern represents a part of the goose. The grey shells represent 90 per cent of the goose's body covered in grey feathers. The black shells in the pattern represent the goose's feet and the black on the wings, and the white shells – oat shells – represent the white under the wing. The beak is actually more of a limey green, but I use penguin shells because although they're not quite the right colour they are close enough to suffice for now. The book includes a family section and I see that as demonstrating the reciprocal structures of living cultures in my family group.

My advice on how to create a sense of reciprocity is that people should gain as much knowledge about themselves, learn about themselves and where they come from, who is family, who is their community, what was involved, and what were the serious issues that affected their community in earlier times. Because

if you know where you come from and you know your story, you know your family, you've then got your background and you've got your knowledge and you've got your strength there, and you can build on that.

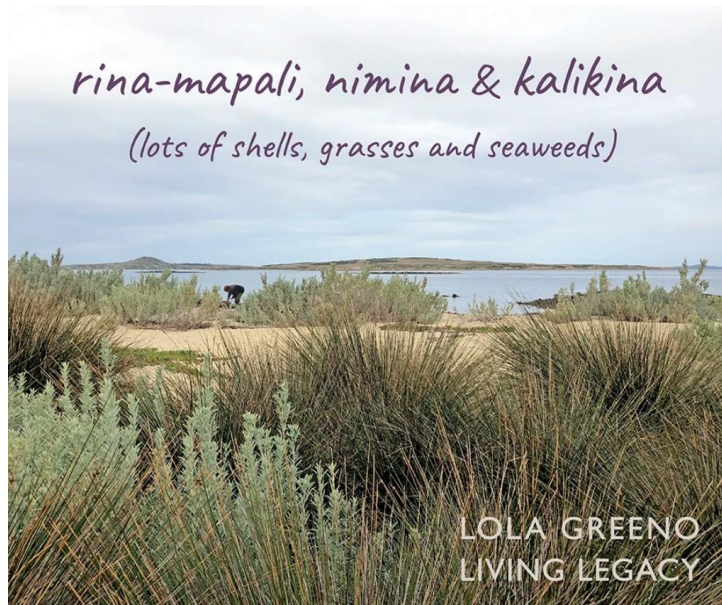


Figure 3. Lola Greeno, Book cover, 2021. Photography: courtesy the author.

Katherine Moline: Reciprocity, then, involves education and creating a shared understanding for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, which a treaty would help create. How cultural knowledge is represented, and shared in books and exhibitions, seems critical here, for example, as socially engaged environmental data in *The Data Imaginary*. Reciprocity as I understand it means understanding and respecting differences between cultural practices. Without reciprocity power structures don't change in my experience so explaining what reciprocity means is important as Australia moves closer to Treaty.

When the two of us look at your necklaces we interpret the meanings of the necklaces differently because we bring our historical traditions to the work and interpret them through distinct cultural frames of reference. The entwinement in your work of art traditions and science, play and data, strongly corresponds with my understanding of aesthetic theories that describe aesthetics as a multilayered response to an experience with heart, mind and body. I also see your emphasis on community as summoning, and advocating for, the importance of local knowledge. This links for me to Latour's entreaty in 2020 to think about how we want to live after COVID-19. When I look at your

sculptures and necklaces, I see them as both embodied data about the environment and objects that produce a strong affect:—an aesthetic response of admiration, appreciation, respect, and gratitude;— in short, feelings that are rarely prompted by data. At the same time the necklaces prompt an agitation – a desire to act – which contradicts a quiet appreciation of the objects as beautiful. It’s an internal aesthetic rupture (Moline 2012; Wallace 2018). A feeling of new understandings ~~that~~ prompts a desire to share with others, while at the same time respect and comprehension of what Treaty could mean in terms of creating reciprocal rights ~~that~~ also recognises the incommensurability of two systems of understanding that many Australians want to be held in balance.

Balancing Tradition and Contemporaneity / Conservation and Experimentation



Figure 4. Lola Greeno, *Green Maireener Necklace*, 2017. Photography: Carl Warner.

Lola Greeno: When my family and I travel to the Flinders Islands to collect our maireener shells, we’re always very careful about planning our trip. We plan the trips with a twelve-month calendar to visit at the times of low tides, they’re usually during autumn, from March and April. We book travel to coincide with when the tide will be out at less than half a metre, or half that again, and when the weather conditions are beneficial for outdoor work. The weather conditions influence where we collect from, as the six or so sites around the islands vary in different weather conditions.

Our way of living culture means that we look at those sites each time we visit to see whether they have been affected by the environment, the climate or global warming. We also limit how many shells we gather from each site so that we don't ruin those collecting beds, because other family and other women coming behind us also need to collect. We abide by the natural sciences and the weather, and they affect how we collect.



Figure 5. Robinson's Cup and inscription, 1835, 'Robinson's Cup'.
Photography: courtesy Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery.

Katherine Moline: Drawing on debates concerning ways of knowing and modes of subjectivity, art theorist Thierry de Duve explores how experimental artists have historically confronted audiences by breaking cultural and social pacts – a strategy for pointing to redundancy or the need for renovation. De Duve's contention is that since the social pact between artists and the aristocracy as patrons was challenged in the Salon exhibitions in Paris of the late nineteenth century, artists have turned away from the subject of an artwork to its medium, as if it represented the alterity of the audience. In other words, modern European artists, from the earliest emergence of experimental practice and avant-gardism, confronted expectations as patrons and audiences of art began shifting and challenged who held social and cultural authority. De Duve (1996a, 64) claims that experimental or avant-garde artists practicing after the

decline of aristocratic or religious patronage “make the conventions (the rules) of their trade into the site for negotiation.”

Your series of necklaces for the *Robinson’s Cup* exhibition in 2011, and what you have referred to as your “unwearable jewellery” (Greeno 2021, 64) for the exhibition *Cultural Jewels* that toured Australia between 2014 and 2019, invoke for me de Duve’s claims (1996a, 251) about challenging established social pacts. The works change ideas about what qualifies as an artwork while also experimenting within a particular convention that is “embedded in a tradition.” While developing *The Data Imaginary* exhibition, the curatorium explored how art-works such as yours challenge the pacts around what counts as data and knowledge. By bringing together works that intervene in the conventions of data collection, visualisation and interpretation to tell new stories about custodianship of cultures and the environment we hoped to show how artists and designers are putting forward new and more inclusive definitions of data and asking what counts as knowledge.

Negotiating Social Pacts and Resistance to Change



Figure 6. Lola Greeno, *Nine Cultural Gifts: umarrah Northern Midlands*, 2012. Photography: John Leeming QVMAG.

Lola Greeno: When I am invited to participate in exhibitions or to develop new bodies of work – in other words to select the projects I want to apportion my

time to – I look at what I think the needs are for First Nations people in my community. My aim with the book project was to leave my knowledge to young people, young Aboriginal girls, young Aboriginal women. It was prompted by my recurrent thinking about what happened with our projects and practices during the pandemic in 2020, and what do we need, how can we resolve that?

My son Dean is now working at the University of Tasmania and the team that he works with are rewriting the arts course and he plans to introduce some of my ideas for a forum that trains the next generation of artists in professional practices. A course that my son is involved with teaching is called *On Country and Connection to Country*, and the students are asked to write about themselves as one of the first assignments. They are invited to introduce themselves via a three-minute video, which is pretty good. When I first did the university bridging course, people were hesitant about writing, including me, but my passion and my interest has pushed me forward to where I am today, I think, and that's what we want!



Figure 7. Lola Greeno, *Nine Cultural Gifts: lowreener, South-West* 2012. Photography: John Leeming QVMAG.

Katherine Moline: I agree that its crucial for students to find their voice early in their studies. Knowing where you come from, as you've said, helps us stay connected to our communities and ourselves as we all confront today's multiple challenges —for instance — climate change and artificial intelligence —

and as we plan for the life we want after COVID-19. As was noted in several forums in 2020, the pandemic is an opportunity to ask important questions about what we want as communities after it ends. In the words of Latour (2020, 1), “we have to fight so that the economic recovery, once the crisis has passed, does not bring back the same former climatic regime against which we were battling, until now somewhat in vain.” Describing the climatic regime as “ongoing, irreversible ecological mutation”, Latour is emphatic that we start now in planning – and in my understanding with a radical imaginary– in his words “protective measures, not just against the virus, but against every element of the mode of production that we don’t want to see coming back” (2020, 3). One approach to examining the COVID-19 debates that Latour has so concisely summarised is to think of these questions in relation to aesthetic experience.

Theorist Jacques Rancière’s interpretation of aesthetics is pertinent here. His account of Immanuel Kant’s ideas about aesthetics and tradition is helpful in explaining how I see your work. To summarise, Kant describes three basic elements of aesthetic experience: firstly, he proposes that the form of any object or practice can be observed through sense perception; secondly, our apprehension of a form typically accords with not only preconceived ideas and categories but also with passions, affects and desires; thirdly, this apprehension produces a doubling of sense (Ranciere, 2009, 1). Form is not simply a matter of sense perception and its apprehension according to established codes or sensations. According to Rancière, understanding art brings together several faculties or capacities: the capacity to perceive a created work, the capacity to understand it, and the faculty to make something out of it. In addition, aesthetic judgement involves a subject declaring it for all others – as in sharing it with all others – and community and politics exists only through this capacity in each of us.

Latour’s recommendation to plan what we want next after the pandemic and Ranciere’s writing on aesthetic responses and politics is connected in your work for me. Your education in visual art and leadership has provided opportunities to create platforms for cultural recognition of First Nations people in Tasmania. For example, your leadership of the *tayanabe* program, in which 35 women were trained in traditional techniques for identifying and selecting plants for basket-weaving in 2009; the *luna tunapri* program, where you ran

regional shell-stringing workshops in 2011; and your continued work developing a large exhibition of Tasmanian Aboriginal art to tour internationally. All play seriously and politically with changing the system and sharing the work of your community. In short, you bring your community with you (Greeno and Gough, 80).

Circumventing Pushback and Bridging Cultural Systems with Serious Creative Play



Figure 8. Lola Greeno: *Nine Cultural Gifts: muwinina, Hobart people* 2013. Photography: John Leeming QVMAG.

Lola Greeno: When planning a workshop, I start with an introduction and slides to explain who I am, so that the students understand where I come from. I start with images of Truganini and Fanny Cochrane Smith and talk about how they made very long necklaces and wore them in several layers around their necks. The necklaces were historically important status markers for women. I can remember my mother saying that she never felt dressed unless she wore a necklace.

When you think about the very early necklaces that were made by Truganini and Fanny Cochrane Smith, they were part of their body adornment. Rather than signifying their status through scarification they wore these necklaces. Truganini was a leading warrior for her group of people, who wore necklaces of shells she had collected. I question some of the old images of Truganini in the libraries because the shells don't look like maireener shells, and yet the maireener is our traditional shell. I take very seriously my research that reveals

those shells to look like stripey shells, which have become known as the silver banded kelp shell. When I've cleaned them, they are a most beautiful silver colour and a luminous shine comes from them. The Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art acquired two or three necklaces from me for the Asia Pacific Triennial. I've always said that I must make one for myself because I fell in love with them. When I've taken these shells out into workshops the girls love putting them on their bracelets.

For the exhibition *Robertson's Cup* at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in 2011 I made an echidna-quill necklace that refers to food — my mother and uncle ate echidna meat as one of the many local foods they enjoyed (Greeno, 2021, 8). I work with a range of different materials that are related to food. When the museum invited artists to respond to the Cup — awarded to G.A. Robertson in 1835 by the people of Bothwell for rounding up the Aboriginal inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land — I reflected on what would I do, whether I would respond to the historical times represented by the Cup, or think about what it could mean today. Rather than be negative, I thought I'll turn a negative into a positive, and provide my people with food or clothes, something to wear. I also stitched possum fur over some cane hoops so you could wear three of those around your neck at the one time.

Katherine Moline: Looking at the necklaces you made for both the *Robertson Cup* and the *Cultural Jewels* exhibitions it seems to me that you connect the distinctive local living culture connected to Country and the horror for First Nations people that is celebrated in the Robertson Cup. It reminds me of the political dimension of aesthetics and debates around the aesthetic effect of art in relation to conflicts between groups. For theorists such as Rancière aesthetics is not about resolving conflict, but a radically different approach to business-as-usual that perturbs the social order. In his words, an aesthetic experience creates another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the distribution of the sensible. Let us call it dissensus. A dissensus is not a conflict; it is a perturbation of the normal relations between sense and sense. (Ranciere, 2009, 3)

One way to approach Latour's recommendation that we protect ourselves from what we don't want to resume after the pandemic — business as usual — is to

take note of the perturbations – the sense of unease –that the pandemic has created and start planning now for *what next*, after COVID-19.

I interpret your approach to making artworks as one way to reflect on what we want. Your work with materials usually associated with food and with knowledge of games and dance adornment are cultural celebrations that through objects both sustain and question what counts as knowledge: they recreate a living culture based on historical traditions. I see another approach to reflecting on what we want in your workshops on serious creative play that are documented in your recent book *rina-mapali, nimina & kalikina*. From experiences in the workshops I lead, where participants work with materials with their hands – while they're talking – creative play comes to the surface with richly textured stories. Participants engage in a playful inquiry that draws on the imagination to develop insight through affective associations. I see it as feeling our way through our stories by working with our hands and in the process creating new insight, in other words knowledge. Your workshops do something similar: they expand creative play because you advocate local community know-how and demonstrate a mode of production that provides a path forward for all, based on reimagining traditions. In addition to your workshops, your historical research – such as the image of a necklace that is attributed to Truganini in the digital archive of a museum in the Netherlands – also unsettles what counts as knowledge. Hopefully we will find out more about this item for your research on repatriation. At the very least the Netherlands museum that holds the item can correct the caption describing Truganini as the last Tasmanian aborigine. Thank you, Lola Greeno!

Acknowledgements

Katherine Moline gratefully acknowledges the award of the Faculty Research Fellowship (2021-2023), Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

References

- DE DUVE, T., 1996a, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press
- DE DUVE, T., 1996b, *Clement Greenberg between the Lines*, trans. Brian Holmes Paris: Editions Dis Voir,
- GREENO, L. and GOUGH, J., 2014, *Lola Greeno, Cultural Jewels, Living Treasures*, Sydney: Object: Australian Design Centre.
- GREENO, L., 2009, *tayenebe: weaving our stories*, in *tayenebe: Tasmania Aboriginal women's fibre work*, Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.
- Tayenebe included a series of workshops coordinated by Greeno as Aboriginal Arts Officer, Arts Tasmania, as part of a collaboration between Arts Tasmania, the National Museum of Australia and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.
<http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/exchange/index.html>
- GREENO, L., 2011, *luna tunapri (women's knowledge)*, A series of workshops that was part of a collaboration between Tasmanian Aboriginal Community and The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), The workshop outcomes were exhibited in *kanalaritja: An Unbroken String* at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 2016-2017 and toured nationally between 2017 and 2019.
<https://kanalaritja.tmag.tas.gov.au/>
- GREENO, L., 2021, *rina-mapali, nimina & kalikina (lots of shells, grasses and seaweed)*, Launceston, QVMag.
- LATOURE, B., 2020, "What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?" trans. Stephen Muecke, AOC (March 29, 2020). <https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/03/29/imaginerles-gestes-barrieres-contre-le-retour-a-la-production-davant-crise/> (accessed 1 August 2021).
- MOLINE, K., 2012, "The Relationship between Experimental Design and the Artistic Avant-Gardes (1998–2007)" (PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales).
- MOLINE, K. GODDARD, A., HAYMAN A., CASEY, T. (Blaklash) and DAVIS, B., 2021, *The Data Imaginary: Fears and Fantasies*, Brisbane, Griffith University Art Museum.
- QUILLIAM, D., 2011, *Robinson's Cup*, Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.
- RANCIERE, J., 2009, The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1, (Autumn).
- RANCIERE, J., 2010, "The Common Place (*Le Lieu Commun*)," in *Sylvie Blocher: What is Missing?* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2010), 31–32.
- WALLACE, G., 2018, "Emancipatory Gestures: Public Art as Dissensus" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Sydney).