



Northern Convergences
Felix Kalmenson | Tanya Lukin Linklater |
Jeneen Frei Njootli | Charles Stankieveh

In 1980, the United States government purchased Alaska from Russia in a deal known as the Alaska Purchase. Far from ending longstanding territorial disputes between Canada and Russia, these two continental nations compete to this day over the rapidly warming Arctic region. *Northern Convergences* brings together four contemporary artists responding to the MacLaren's Arctic Archive, a collection of 23,000 vintage photographs from the Hudson Bay to the USSR. Reworking this collection of photographs as a colonial archive, the exhibition looks at the resonance between Canadian and Russian colonization from 1793 to the present.

For its Alaskan debut, artist and choreographer Tanya Lukin Linklater investigates intergenerational grief and embodied memory in response to colonial, Russian violence of Refuge Rock in the Kotikok archipelago of Alaska, her homeland. Russian-born Canadian artist Felix Kalmenson examines the Jewish Autonomous Republic, a short-lived Soviet project for Jewish settlement, which resulted Soviet Arca Novosibirsk region with archival material depicting the larger Gulag in Northern, whitening self-division. Toronto artist Charles Stankieveh publishes the BARR, DEW Line Cold War. Taken together, these projects demonstrate an uneasy symbiotic relationship between Canadian and Russian colonial projects, dating back to the origins of Canada itself.

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With Interviews by Emily Dundas Oke, Emily McKibbon, Erin Sutherland and Fan Wu

Curated by Emily McKibbon



Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

Reading through Place: Sovfoto at the MacLaren Art Centre

In the late 19th century, Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky (1841-1911) advanced a concept he termed “peaceful colonialism” to describe the “civilizing” reach of Russia eastwards into Eurasia and beyond. In Klyuchevsky’s and many of his colleagues’ analyses, “the trails of Russia’s eastward colonization were blazed by fur hunters, beatified by monks, fortified by soldiers, and cultivated by settlers.”¹ Central to these colonizing missions was fur: “beaver led the Russians to the place where they founded Novgorod; grey squirrel secured them the wealth of Moscow; sable led them to the place that became mapped as Siberia; sea otter brought them to Alaska and California.”² Klyuchevsky was writing at pivotal time in Canadian and Russian imperial history: in 1867, Russia would sell its interests in Alaska to the United States in a deal known then as “Seward’s Folly,” signed only months before Canadian Confederation. The transfer of Rupert’s Land from the Hudson Bay Company in 1870 and the inclusion of British Columbia in Confederation in 1871 quickly followed, signaling a new shift towards settlement in the Canadian colonial project. Klyuchevsky’s lifecycles of Russian movements eastwards in Eurasia and North America—from fur traders, to missions, to soldiers, to settlers—could as easily be applied to Canada and its violent westward expansion.

Since 2001, the MacLaren Art Centre has been custodian to 23,116 vintage Soviet press prints, dating from the late 1930s to 1956. Printed in the Soviet Union, these photographs were distributed by the New York City-based Sovfoto/Eastfoto press agency to media clients in Canada, the United States and Mexico.³ It is one of the largest publicly held collections of Soviet press photography worldwide, and represents a comprehensive, state-sanctioned view of life in the Stalinist period. If we count each individual photograph in this archive as a single object in the MacLaren’s Permanent Collection, Soviet press prints outnumber contemporary Canadian artworks by a factor of roughly five to one. Curating from these holdings within the context of a contemporary Canadian art gallery has been a challenge handled differently and adroitly by several generations of curators here at the Gallery.

The question that has guided my own work with this collection is grounded in the current détente that we now share with Russia in the circumpolar region. I arrived at the MacLaren in late 2013, when those who wanted to exploit Arctic shipping routes and rare earth minerals seemed more powerful than environmental activists who saw in climate change a catastrophe, not opportunity. Canadian ambitions for increased resource extraction in the North have always been at odds with the Russians, who are painted as our adversaries in a scramble to solidify shifting boundaries to our own benefit.⁴ As we moved towards 2017 and Canada’s sesquicentennial events, hard-right factions in Russia faced the 150th anniversary of the Alaska Purchase with little enthusiasm. In 2014, the first instance of Russian bots interfering in American politics were tracked in a petition launched on the White House website; titled “Alaska Back to Russia,” this campaign rapidly drew the support of 30,000 signatories, nearly all from artificial social media accounts.⁵ Commenting on this popular petition, then-Ambassador to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov joked, “should I tell Senator McCain to watch over Alaska? It used to be Russian.”⁶



Unidentified Photographer, *A Nenets from the Mezen district who has arrived in Archangelsk in company with other collective farmers and brought there [sic] fish*, December 1944, gelatin silver print. MacLaren Permanent Collection. Anonymous Gift, 2001.

If our earliest days as a colonial nation reflect some aspect of Russia’s history—from fur trading to settlement in the Russian Far East and later Alaska—and our current state a détente between two circumpolar nations, how are we to read this body of work through the place in which it now resides? For me—a woman of white, settler descent who is tasked with managing this unruly archive in a complicated place now known as Barrie—the answer was most clearly revealed in the chaotic state of “Binder 181—Reindeer Herding.” This slender folio, containing only 36 photographs, is a peculiar selection of images highlighting not only the newly collectivized reindeer herders of Siberia, but also camels and other animals considered exotic or other by the American owners of Sovfoto.⁸ The final photograph, dated December 1944, is smaller than the rest, a portrait of a man in a fur hat next to a reindeer whose harness was picked out and retouched to appear more clearly against its winter-white fur. The caption, typewritten on acidic brown paper and attached to the print verso, reads: “A Nenets from the Mezen district who has arrived in Archangelsk in company with other collective farmers and bought there [sic] fish.” What this photograph represents is evidence of the state collectivization of Indigenous forms of production, only one aspect of Stalin’s ambitions for the North.

While the costs of Stalinist policies in places like Ukraine are well known in Canada, their impact on the Indigenous peoples of the Soviet Union has yet to be fully understood here. This included not only collectivization, but also anti-Shamanistic violence by the League of the Militant Godless and state violence targeting those who expressed “capitalistic opposition” (in truth, any opposition) to collectivization and forced settlement and resettlement.⁹ Considered against Canada’s own Cold War predations against Indigenous nations—including the Inuit High Arctic relocation programs, which buttressed Canadian claims of Arctic sovereignty against the USSR—it is clear that this collection must, at this point, be read not as a Cold War archive, but as a colonial one. And in so doing, moments of convergences in our histories, mirrored in our current states and threatened in our potential futures, emerge. By examining this collection with an eye to shared colonial histories, perhaps we can better understand our current paradigm and see with more clarity the very real danger facing the circumpolar region at this critical moment in ecological and geopolitical history.

This exhibition features works by three contemporary artists—Jeneen Frei Njootli, Tanya Lukin Linklater and Felix Kalmenson—whose lived and learned experiences of Russian colonialism is far deeper and more nuanced than my own. It also includes the Bar-1 DEW Archive, published by Charles Stankieveh and shown here with his permission. In recognition of my own limitations, guest interlocutors Emily Dundas Oke, Erin Sutherland and Fan Wu interview Frei Njootli, Lukin Linklater and Kalmenson. Because my custodial relationship with the Sovfoto Archive is somewhat analogous to Stankieveh’s stewardship of the Bar-1 DEW Archive, which he has maintained on his website since 2009, I took on the role of interviewer in an email conversation with him.

In Jeneen Frei Njootli’s project, we see the artist take on historian Saidiya Hartman’s fundamental question: “Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?”¹⁰ Created during a research fellowship at the D’Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies at the Newberry Library in Chicago, *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions* features both archival and personal photographs. All are incised with language that members of the Gwich’in Nation use to self-describe as well as outsider, ethnographic labels applied to the Gwich’in Nation in the production of colonial knowledge.

Frei Njootli is a member of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation based largely at Old Crow, Yukon while the larger Gwich'in Nation stretches across colonial borders between what is now called Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Two prints—borrowed from the artist—are framed with Shitsuu (or Kokum) scarves below, highlighting the dimensionality of Frei Njootli's mark-making and reflecting a new iteration of this project's shifting presentational modes while honouring matrilineal inheritance. Frei Njootli notes, “when I made the series, one of the tenets of the work was that they would be shifted, they would shift in some way every time that they were displayed as a way to push back against the hegemony of images or knowledge production in institutional spaces.” Their conversation with Emily Dundas Oke, recorded in November on unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territory, communicates both artists' sometimes ambiguous relationship to museum practice, knowledge production and transference, and the urgent imperative to create work that resists the static, authoritarian character of archives.

For *In Memoriam* (2012), Alutiiq artist and choreographer Tanya Lukin Linklater investigates intergenerational grief and embodied memory in response to colonial, Russian violence at Refuge Rock in the Kodiak archipelago of Alaska, her homelands. Filmed in Northern Ontario, this video is Lukin Linklater's and dancer Carla Soto's culminating work looking at specific histories, which Lukin Linklater undertook over the course of four years. In the artist's conversation with Erin Sutherland, Lukin Linklater notes:

Grief is present in quite a lot of my work. As an Alutiiq person I can only speak about our collective history from my perspective... Our strengths include our efforts to revitalize our language, our songs, our dances, our Alutiiq ways of being on the land. Growing up, I participated in subsistence activities: fishing, hunting. My Dad was also a trapper; he was trained as a trapper as a young person by his family. Those skills and those understandings of the tides, of the winds, and our land at home have continued from generation to generation, as our strength as Alutiiq people. However, the brutality of Russian colonization certainly left lasting impacts.

Continuing, Lukin Linklater discusses how she relates and reconstitutes lineage against this history of violence. Looking to the future, she reflects, “I hope that my work is extended by younger artists. I hope that Alutiiq people take up my work, I hope that Alaska Natives folks take up my work. I hope that people from home and from further afield are interested in this work and the future, and that it resonates with them somehow.”

Fan Wu asks Felix Kalmenson in his introductory salvo to an intimate email correspondence to “trace the thick braid that binds you as a flesh-and-blood-feeling person to your historiographic-aesthetic project.” Kalmenson was born in St. Petersburg, a city made rich from the sable trade that led to the colonization of much of Siberia in the 17th century.¹¹ Describing their relationship to the history that informs their multimedia installation *Seekers of Happiness*, Kalmenson states, “This project, its constellation of desires and repulsions, started centuries ago and has found itself another mouthpiece when I was brought into this world. The question is quite simply put, how to live? And more elaborately: when and if to go, where and if to stay?” Describing their family's history as Jewish people who survived “from pogrom to evacuation, to arriving to Israel as stateless people in '89 and fleeing once again as immigrants to Canada in

'93,” *Seekers of Happiness* can thus be seen as an intensely personal multimedia installation that manifests this question of “where to go.” Kalmenson takes as their focus the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, a major resettlement project that saw the Stalinist government attempt to set up a permanent, colonial outpost for the Soviet Jewish population in southeastern Siberia, a supposed “second Alaska”¹² in the contested border region with China.¹³ The title references the 1936 propaganda film of the same title, which purportedly contained a veiled warning about the true nature of the settlement intelligible only to Jewish viewers, when a man playing a clarinet on a Birobidzhan-bound train performs a composition he calls “Israel's Lament on the banks of the Amur River.” The title of the song transposes the Amur River with Babylon—suggesting that the JAO was a place of exile, rather than a utopian paradise. Four framed photographs from the MacLaren's Sovfoto Archive are hung next to the work, over a plinth painted with the JAO flag. The photos are of the Soviet Jewish folksinger Nechama Lifshitz (1927-2017), with printer's marks revealing the editor's choices in framing the subject.

In the introduction for *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) stated, “I think of art, at its most significant, as a DEW line, a Distant Early Warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it.”¹⁴ Committed to this metaphor to the extent that he named his *Dew-Line Newsletter* (1968-1970) after it, McLuhan captures something darkly prophetic in this analogy regarding an artists' role in contemporary society. In *Northern Convergences*, Charles Stankieveh has allowed us to republish photographs from the BAR-1 DEW Line Archive from his website, where he has hosted it since 2009. This body of material originates from the westernmost DEW Line station in Canada, located at Komakuk Beach, Yukon, 225 km north of Frei Njootli's ancestral home, Old Crow. The DEW Line, or Distant Early Warning Line, was a series of circumpolar radar stations that spanned across Alaska, Canada, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland. Operated by NORAD, the stations were intended to detect nuclear missiles launched from the Soviet Union with enough time to allow for US bombers to stop the attack or mitigate its damage. After the end of the Cold War in 1993, the station closed as the DEW Line was transitioned into the North Warning System.¹⁵ DEW Line images dating from 1956 to 1993 are presented next to vintage gelatin silver press prints depicting icebreaker ships and the Otto Schmidt North Pole expeditions from Sovfoto, printed between 1933 and 1956. Depicting an unbroken narrative of exploration and military settlement in the circumpolar region, we see photographs of Soviet and later Canadian workers playing outdoor sports and posing amidst high-tech equipment, dwarfed by the physical infrastructure that supports their outposts. First presented as part of Stankieveh's *Dew Line* exhibition and “fieldwork” project in 2009, Stankieveh's prescient work manifests McLuhan's metaphor about the predictive power of contemporary artists. In our email correspondence, Stankieveh reflects:

What I speculatively called “The Warm War” over a decade ago has gained traction as a way of understanding that global warming is directly connected to military issues (either through territorial dispute, securing resources, logistic support of extreme weather, or other collateral damages). In parallel, with many of the nuclear treaties currently falling apart, along with the rise of China as a global nuclear power, the Arctic's early warning system (now called the North Warning System) has started to reemerge from the shadows as an obsolete and forgotten defence infrastructure back into headlines as part of the game of global security.

As I write this in December 2019, five of the top ten Google news stories for “Canadian Arctic” reference Canadian military and Arctic sovereignty, three discuss climate change and two the Canadian government’s moratorium on exploratory offshore oil drilling in the Arctic Sea. It is clear that, in Canada, our understandings of this region reflect the continuing exigencies of the Canadian colonial project and not the perspectives and experiences of the people who have lived there since time immemorial. Historian Peter Svik has noted that competition for the global South during the Cold War marked a kind of continuity between the colonial period and what he calls global neo-colonialism, forming a historical arc between extractive and exploitative practices: “While I am no prophet and may be mistaken in drawing a connection between European imperialism, Cold War competition for the global South, and what I am calling a global neo-colonialism, I am convinced that the link offers a plausible framework for interpreting and understanding many developments the world has seen over the last one hundred and fifty years,” he writes on the *International History* blog of the London School of Economics.¹⁶ The projects of Jeneen Frei Njootli, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Felix Kalmenson and Charles Stankieveh each illuminate some aspect of this progression in the circumpolar region, allowing us to conceptually bring the Sovfoto Archive home. The questions we ask of this Archive shift every time we approach it; the question that we ask with this exhibition is not what this collection means, but what it means *here*. What the Archive reveals now is not necessarily its own character, but something of ours, something shared and revelatory and instructive as we stand at the brink of climate catastrophe and its collateral upheavals.

—Emily McKibbin

¹ Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonialism: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011): 68

² Ibid, 66. The sable trade in Europe was so successful and so long-lasting in its appeal that one of the very few appropriations of Russian words into the English language is, in fact, sable. See also Etkind, 79.

³ Much of the information we have on the early days of this Archive originate in FBI files requested through a Freedom of Information Act undertaken by the author. An administrative history is forthcoming.

⁴ Ron R. Wallace, “The Arctic is Warming and Turning Red: Implications for Canada and Russia in an Evolving Polar Region,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, January, 2019. Available online: https://www.cgai.ca/the_arctic_is_warming_and_turning_red_implications_for_canada_and_russia_in_an_evolutionary_polar_region. Accessed November 30, 2019

⁵ Sophie Kodner, “Covert Bots: The Cyber-Nuisances Threatening Our Newsfeeds and Our Democracy,” *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy*, 13 (Summer 2017): 24. Available online: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/171004_kodner_covert_bots.pdf?eA60E9te7D5RCi2G3tOqdwhik0wLc4F Accessed November 30, 2019 Sophie Kodner, “Covert Bots: The Cyber-Nuisances Threatening Our Newsfeeds and Our Democracy,” *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy*, 13 (Summer 2017): 24. Available online: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/171004_kodner_covert_bots.pdf?eA60E9te7D5RCi2G3tOqdwhik0wLc4F Accessed November 30, 2019

⁶ Quoted in Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “Not An April Fools’ Joke: Russians Petition To Get Alaska Back,” *Parallels: Many Stories, One World*, National Public Radio Online, April 1, 2014. Available online: <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/04/01/297835873/not-an-april-fools-joke-russians-petition-to-get-alaska-back>. Accessed November 30, 2019

⁷ Reindeer is used in Europe to refer to both wild and domesticated herds of the species *Rangifer tarandus*; in North America, caribou is more often used to describe wild herds, while domesticated caribou are often called reindeer.

⁸ The Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren is organized at the gallery as it was during its days as a working press agency utilizing the fundamental archival tenet *respect des fonds*. *Respect des fonds* is a kind of forensic conceit that allows users of the archive to understand the ways in which archival holdings were accessed and used prior to their entrance into the archive by maintaining the original order of the original users (corporate or individual) of materials entering collections. By maintaining the original order of the Sovfoto Archive, we not only understand what subjects were deemed newsworthy (i.e. atrocity photographs of World War II) but also the gaps in understanding of the original owners of Sovfoto, who reveal their lack of specialist knowledge in their failure to organize specialized binders appropriately. For more information on archival principles of collections care, see “Statement of Principles,” *Canadian Council of Archives*, July 2008. Available online: http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD/RAD_Principles_July2008.pdf. Accessed November 30, 2019.

⁹ Karl Hele, “Native People and the Socialist State: The Native Populations of Siberia and their Experiences as Part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 256. Available online: <http://www3.brandonu.ca/cjns/14.2/hele.pdf> Accessed November 23, 2015

¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, 12:2 (June, 2008): 11

¹¹ Historian Alexander Etkind writes of St. Petersburg: “The abundant columns, the painted brick, and the regularity of streets and squares followed Palladian examples. Everywhere on the four continents of the colonized world, one could find similar porticos, heroic sculptures, coats of arms, Greek columns, lions, eagles, balconies, fountains, meadows. Against the cold, flat terrain, the painted, multicolored facades look irreconcilably alien: a beautiful embodiment of the occult instability of a colonial situation. As in Washington DC, all was big and sublime in St. Petersburg.” Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonialism*, 100.

¹² This phrase, a “Second Alaska,” is taken from a 1937 *Life* magazine feature exploring this “Remote Jewish Haven.” Describing the settlers of Birobidjan as “colonialists,” the authors state that the region is “not only strategic but valuable. Timber, furs, fish, gold, coal and iron make it a second Alaska to replace the one Tsarists Russia sold to the US in 1867. It is wild, however, and gregarious, city-bred Jews have fled it nearly as fast as they have arrived.” “The Camera Overseas: A Russo-Japanese Flareup Lights a Remote Jewish Haven,” *Life* Vol. 3. No. 2 (July 12, 1937): 64-65.

¹³ Kalmenson notes, “The project was settler-colonial in its roots and implementation, creating large-scale permanent settlement in a ‘sparsely populated’ border region with China, in a territory which was coerced into the unequal Treaty of Aigun during the Second Opium War. The oft-repeated phrase ‘sparsely populated’ always makes me suspicious and all the experts in the region with whom I spoke, only a few mention ‘a few hundred’ Cossaks and Nanai (Hezhen) or Evenk, the Indigenous folks of the Amur River Valley who have fished and lived along its banks for at least several hundred years.”

¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964

¹⁵ In contrast to the Distant Early Warning lines, the North Warning System is largely unmanned. It came online in 1993, the year that the final DEW Line stations were decommissioned, and remains operational today. While this transition between DEW and NWS reads smoothly on paper, the reality was far different. Margo Pfeiff writes, “In a vast arc across Arctic Canada, convoys of construction equipment had been driven onto the sea ice and left to plummet into the ocean with the spring thaw. Buildings, radar facilities, generators, and hundreds of thousands of rusting fuel drums were abandoned, soaking the soil with hydrocarbons, lead, mercury, asbestos, antifreeze, and other chemicals, including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).” See Margo Pfeiff, *Everyone Just Left*, 2017, Canadian Centre for Architecture. Excerpt available online: <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/11/nature-reorganized/41922/everyone-just-left>. Accessed December 20, 2019

¹⁶ Peter Svik, “Global Neo-Colonialism (Or on the Cold War and What Came After),” *International History*, London School of Economics blog, May 31, 2019. Available online: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2019/05/31/global-neo-colonialism-or-on-the-cold-war-and-what-came-after/>. Accessed December 24, 2019



Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

Thinking through Transference Interview with Jeneen Frei Njootli by Emily Dundas Oke

Emily Dundas Oke: So maybe we should start by talking about the body of work, *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions*. Do you want to first speak a bit about what those words mean to you?

Jeneen Frei Njootli: Dinjii Zhuh just means people. In a lot of nations the word for their people is just their word, in their language, for people. There've been so many names for our people, for ourselves as a nation, through anthropology and ethnography, and even within the older Gwich'in dialects and the newer Gwich'in dialects. Archdeacon [Robert] Macdonald (1829-1913) came through Old Crow and he learned Gwich'in in two years—which is apparently unheard of. He apparently mastered the Gwich'in language and [he translated] the bible completely into Gwich'in, and I think that our nation was the first to have a bible completely transcribed into our language, or translated into a Native language. The press that printed them was actually in Lac La Biche, [Alberta]. We've had a relationship with written language for quite a long time in our own tongue. I feel weird about that wording, but...

EDO: I was thinking earlier today that I'm not so familiar with the Gwich'in language, but I recognize that having things translated into that form is, for every nation, really specific: why that would be, or why that would come up? Especially in relation to your other work, using a visual form that is often spoken aloud and translating it into image, and how that differs in your work, now knowing that there is an older history of having [the Gwich'in] language written down. What does it mean to visualize something that could be sound into another matter, like a photograph?

JFN: I think that makes a lot of sense as to why I use language, and why language is such a big part of these works. We don't actually have many old photographs of our people; we have some older drawings that this guy, Alexander Mackenzie (1763-1820), did of our people. There's actually the first Gwich'in watercolour painting at the Glenbow Museum; [Mackenzie] was doing paintings of our people, and then I guess a member of our community was like, "yo, I'd like to try that out," and then did a portrait. I think that's the first instance of Gwich'in self-representation through Western art.

EDO: Wow, so it was through a portrait?

JFN: Because he was seeing this person coming through a community and painting our people as a form of documentation. I wonder about other Northern communities whether the weather was a barrier for photography, but also just the sheer distance—right? I've never heard or seen of any tintypes of our people, and so we don't have that. Even with some of those old photographs, I wonder if they're through a western or colonial gaze because of the photographer and how they're depicting our people, our Indigenous culture, but sometimes that's our only access to our material cultures or our histories—but it can be really amazing now to have some of those old photographs just to have an understanding of what our ancestors were doing.

EDO: What their day-to-day looked like.

JFN: Yeah, and even just our regalia and our garments, right? Which, of course, up North are survival tools.

EDO: I think it's tricky to hold something like that and not always know who's behind the lens as well. Maybe someone who's inherited that image or wants to look back at that image, it can confuse how we look upon ourselves, sometimes, if we're unsure of the terms or contexts in which it was taken.

I find that a lot of your work thinks through transference in a certain way, and it's interesting to hear that recording wasn't so [plentiful] through photography, but through other means. Understanding the multiple ways in which we can record, and how each of those are different for people in your community or within the history of your community, do you find you respond to that? Or are you doing what's personally best for you given the current context?

JFN: Emily, what an astute observation; that perspective is something that I'm going to have to think about for a while, that relationship of thinking through transference, and even thinking about my performance art practice, sound practice and then the body of work that's literally called *Knowledge Transference*. Yeah, maybe that is at root for me and my work, or a set of problems that I'm working through. I'm really troubled by representation and how Indigenous peoples are represented, or how we're entangled in this spectacle of history, and whose history, whose narrative we get placed into. Even today it's just so shocking how frequently we're erased.

EDO: Or this spectacle in which we're participating is selected not for us, or not with our determination, as well. I'm curious about—and some of these questions might be personal, in which case I want you to know that everything's just a proposition: it's hard to maintain full agency when you put things out in the world. How [artworks] get broken down into smaller categories of identity or thematics, often emphasized one way or another, and if that's something you struggle with. Representation has often been skewed in terms of power—who has the power to represent themselves—and other people or Indigenous folks. And that still plays out in the sense that work is often curated through an Indigenous silo, or these other kinds of frameworks which may minimize work.

JFN: Do you mean, creating a ghetto?

EDO: I'm not sure

JFN: I've heard that. Actually, you know what's funny—maybe not funny, but I haven't said that word in a long time and I'm trying to remember where I read it about Indigenous art and some really grad-school-y word, like ghettoization of our people. What does it mean for Indigenous art? It's important for there to be a place for it, but what does it mean when there's space set aside for it only when it's specialized? That's part of my skepticism around TRC and in the wake of Canada 150; I'm just wondering how invested people are in us in the long-term, or if it's just something that's quote-unquote “in vogue,” which is a really gross way of thinking about our work. And, you know, the same thing happened in 1992, when every gallery had an “Indian” show because it was the 500 year—I don't even want to say it—the 500 year event after Columbus' landing. You know, in Australia, 2020 will be an event marked from when James

Cook landed there. Right, and so people get really invested in Indigenous communities at these colonial markers but what is the long-term investment, or how committed are people to change? Where's the policy at, you know?

EDO: Yeah, exactly, and in which ways are they willing to give a deep acknowledgement of it, too? I was experiencing this with a friend, earlier, [looking at] the relationship between material culture and a certain practice. Current day audiences or curators want to make that relationship to a certain history that they understand. Maybe if the audience or curator has a limited knowledge of a certain community, using that as a basis through which the work operates, the framework for its understanding and dissemination is then created by those outside of the artist or community's frame of reference.

I think for some folks, because of the “vogue” maybe, or the speed at which folks want to consume Indigenous art, it's a very surface level sort of appreciation, sometimes, because there's not an invested knowledge to understand just how many, and how huge, and how deep, and how old, are the concepts within it. Is that something you think of in your work: going between the risk of being consumed, or having your work consumed, but then also wanting to make work for folks that you really care about? In a backwards-looking sense, looking at archives is a similar feeling: you can recognize that the power relationship here was unfair, and yet it's nice to be able to see something from folks a little while ago, or to maybe have access to this representation of people. And that now, making work for future or other people, a similar thing is happening where you're still operating in a context where the power is shifted or unfair, but still feeling that something needs to be done for these people I care about.

JFN: Yeah, I question who's it for? Who's the work for? Is it for an Indigenous audience? [I was at] a panel discussion with Lindsay Nixon and Dayna Danger and it asked: how do you describe a subjectivity to your auntie?¹⁷

EDO: I haven't heard about that.

JFN: I feel like the language in the text that I wrote that goes along with these works is very inaccessible, but when I went to do this research fellowship, I had not even started my Master's yet. The research fellowship was with folks in their Masters' and PhDs' and the language level was so inaccessible to me that I was just writing down verbatim what people said, and would go back to my room and Google all the words to just try to begin to start understanding what was being said in the rooms. I wasn't as familiar with all the, all the “alities,” right, those huge words like “festishification” or “unintelligibility,” and was just trying to understand what those words meant for me. And then I had never spent time in an archive before. I had seen different contemporary artists engage with archives, and I had some understanding of the violence that museums have played with our people and with taking and making illegal our cultural practices—even for us to gather in public space and practice our ceremony or wear our regalia. You know, it would've been illegal to wear beaded earrings even in public. And so I had known some of that before coming in here, but it was so strange to me to be in Chicago, so far away from home. I actually had a family member pass away while I was there in the residency and it just felt impossibly far. I'm like, “what am I doing here, why am I here, why am I in this library that has images of our ancestors, and of our land, our people, some of it labelled under racial slurs?” I was just trying to understand what it meant to be in Chicago on that side

of the colonial border and finding images of our homelands when I had self-selected to be so far away when there was something really hard that my family was going through. And then going to the Field Museum, where they have a really creepy reputation of having ancestral remains in there, and seeing some of our people’s belongings as well, right?

EDO: From your nation, so far from home.

JFN: Yeah, and so it was really nice to be able to go in there and visit with them while it was my uncle’s funeral, and just kind of feel like I could be there, with them, and maybe tell them what was going on, and just spend time with those belongings.

With *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions*, I was curious about that ownership. We were told that anything we found at the Newberry we have to properly cite and ask permission if it’s going to be printed; you know, you have to give royalties or whatever. I just said “hell no” and refused that because we haven’t really had a consensual relationship with archives and with museums. Even just reading some of the books from anthropologists that have come up through there, and then hearing from community members who’ll say, “oh yeah, that person came, they wrote a book, and then we never saw them again.” How many people make a living off our communities and then don’t have any long-term relationships with us? But they’re able to make their profit or their career, and get to benefit, but how does that work benefit our people? I try to go home, teach workshops at centres, up at the school, contribute in some ways. With this work, I wanted to also have photographs that my aunties have taken up there, or that even I’ve taken in Old Crow, and intermix them with ones that I had found in the archive. Some of them it is more obvious than with others, what era they’re from, but I just wanted a way to reclaim those images and texts in the archive.

EDO: Yeah, and thinking about the processes which the museum or the residency asks of you to follow, and those sorts of rules can be—well, there was never something there that was ever reciprocal, with this idea of taking and using and citing, because all of these images are used from someone else’s lived experiences. Obviously those methods of citations the museum itself isn’t following; they’re not properly citing, they’re not properly or respectfully naming who it is that they’re representing. [This project] uses the tools of the museum against itself in a certain way.

JFN: It’s so frustrating. Yeah, and that you know a lot of people names weren’t ever written down. It was just, “Indian number one,” or something. Or, “two old women.”

EDO: I think we’ve spoken before about how, even geographically, museums confuse things. I think museums and museum processes are really huge machines that I don’t think even understand their own reach, sometimes. One thing that they try to do is place the past as the past, but actually I view a lot of museum practices today as still harmful in the sense that they haven’t actually changed their way of going through things. So I feel it’s tactful for you to insert yourself as a present-day person, and your present-day photographs, within that larger machine as a way to confuse it. I was recently at the British Museum and had a really troubling experience there. One thing that just set the tone for my experience was going in and seeing huge banners, advertising banners for the museum: “the world is yours to discover.” This is the same mentality that five or four hundred years ago led the museums we now have to have to work

towards repatriation; it’s something that many of us know as really violent, really harmful. It was hard for me to enter into that space and see that mentality still very present as something that the museum is proud of, as a slogan, on one of their banners.

JFN: I worry about the danger of reproducing some of these things unintentionally. I would have to think very carefully about working with portraiture again. I’m just really skeptical of images; they’re so powerful and so ubiquitous and so slippery and we do often lose control over them. Or maybe not lose control, but we just aren’t able to maintain agency, as you have said, over them. What does that mean for Indigenous sovereignty and the right to self-representation when we can’t control the gazes that fall upon our work? No matter how much theory or thought gets put into it, it’s quite jarring sometimes what the conversation can fall back into.

I was just thinking about the times that I’ve done public speaking, or been on a panel discussion with other Indigenous artists, having a rad, challenging, interesting, complex discussion about Indigenous art and then someone will stand up in the audience and ask about blood quantum, and it’s so reductive and violent and assimilationist to ask stuff like that.

EDO: Like about your personal...?

JFN: Yeah.

EDO: Oh my gosh.

JFN: Or other people on the panel, that’s happened. Asking for what percentage, or what part.

EDO: I’m so sorry.

JFN: It’s really frustrating when I’m participating in these complex conversations to have that, just to be reduced to this colonial project. Someone asking for evidence of that, in public, is really damaging. Anytime I’m speaking in public, I just find myself having to brace for that. I guess less so recently, but I’ve just been able to be more careful of what publics I’m in, which is mostly just other people in the community now. Or, I don’t know, hopefully people are learning to educate themselves a little bit before asking violent shit like that.

EDO: Yeah.

JFN: Sorry to swear so much.

EDO: All good. That sounds like a horrible experience, and it’s very frustrating that it’s not a singular experience—that these things reoccur, which is very horrible. I’m thinking about representation, and particularly in this body of work where you’ve reinserted something very strongly into the image, and also taken away from the image. I feel like we talk about taking someone’s photograph, when actually you’re producing a photo. I don’t know if you were thinking

about physically removing from that image, by carving into the image, taking once again. I don't know if that crossed your mind.

JFN: I hope the incising into the photographs doesn't feel violent to the images themselves, but I wanted the photographs of our people to be not so static. When I first displayed them at Gallery Connexion in New Brunswick, they were all hung, suspended on alligator clips which were connected to wire and hung from the ceiling. They had quite a bit of movement to them and the way they were lit really highlighted the incisions. You can see in this work that has TAKUDH incised into it, that the image is starting to fall apart a little bit. That to me was important because it was just more in flux, and I wanted to refuse that stasis of the archive and have it come alive and assert its own present a bit more in the space.

EDO: Thinking about the archive and how things live differently when held in that space versus in the community, too. Archives typically want to keep everything static. I don't know if you've had this experience, but when you inherit a photo and the materiality of the photo shows its life, you know you can tell it was in your grandma's cupboard behind another photo, so now it's two shades of different fades—it's able to hold the people who've held it before. The archive really wants things to last forever as they are. That seems very counter to how things should be carried forward, or often are carried forward, when they are personally valued.

JFN: So with this work, when I was showing the photographs, I wanted them to change every time that they were shown. When they were at Gallery Connexion they were suspended, and then when they were at Gallery 44, I had one of the works on an old fur coat that I had jokingly hunted and gathered in downtown Toronto.

EDO: Amazing.

JFN: I had found this furrier who let me go through this bag of scraps, and there was this piece of fur that fit—it was just a bit bigger than the photographs and I was able to cut it to size so the photo rested on the fur and then the ends of the fur poked through and were visible through the incisions in the photograph. When they were shown at the Montreal Indigenous Art Biennial (BACA), they were on a bright red wall. But then one of the pieces was bought by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) and it's now mounted and framed and is functioning more statically than I had intended for this body of work. Initially, when I made the series, one of the tenets of the work was that they would be shifted, they would shift in some way every time that they were displayed as a way to push back against the hegemony of images or knowledge production in institutional spaces. What does that mean now that this work is in the archive of AANDC and is framed and matted in such a way? I'm really happy that Emily McKibbin, from the MacLaren Art Centre, was so open to the other works shown alongside it shifting, which is why we have those Jijuuor or Shitsuu—Jijuuor and Shitsuu means grandma in Gwich'in—so we have those Shitsuu scarves that are going to get dry-mounted to cardstock and then go in behind the images. I'm really excited—they'll still be matted and framed in a similar way to the one that's in the permanent collection of AANDC, but I think it'll be nice to have that difference between them.

EDO: Totally. In response to your performance work, or your sculptural installations that oftentimes includes a performative aspect, there's a huge aesthetic

and material difference here. You're using text, but text that maybe not everyone understands because of the language, and using imagery, which is very associated with truth-making and knowledge production. Both language and image in Western concepts are strong, powerful holders for carrying knowledge forward; it's highly valued as a kind of knowledge space. How do you feel about that in relation to your other work, which takes very different modes of being, which is very much in flux, and incorporates the body and other materials. How do these contrasts work or operate for you?

JFN: With the materiality of this versus the performances? Honestly, this photo series feels very tight to me. I was working so hard to do something specific with these images, that I'm worried that in some ways I was chokeholding the narrative, or trying too hard to control what the work was doing. I find that performance and sound have more entry points for people and the different perceptions they bring to a work, whereas this one I feel like I'm more telling an audience what's happening than letting people's own meaning happen in the work. I was just so invested in the way that I was researching and working with the [material] that I maybe I didn't have room for other people's perception of the work. I was also learning how to work with archives in this, and how to access those systems. When I did this research fellowship, I had gotten my Bachelor's degree from Emily Carr. I had done a couple of residencies at the Banff Centre, did a work-learn position there as well, and had lots of access to education, but even then I found there were lots of barriers to working in the archive, or the logic of it did not feel like it was for me. It was really cool to be there with some other Indigenous folks, and there was this one woman there, Sandy Littletree, who's Navajo and was working on finding ways to make accessing archives and libraries more accessible to Indigenous community members, which is such a rad and important project.

EDO: Yeah, totally. Together we have looked at other projects in your community, in the Gwich'in community, where accessing archives was used for community concepts like garment making where museum workers worked closely with the community, allowing the community to build garments based off the knowledge held there, in service of the community.

JFN: That was the Gwich'in Clothing Project which happened from 2000 to 2003, and people were working closely with Karen Wright-Fraser and different Gwich'in communities in the Northwest Territories. They worked quite a bit with the Canadian Museum of Civilization. It would be incredible to go to Russia and see their collections of Gwich'in garments.

EDO: Are you aware of certain things held there?

JFN: Yeah, when I was doing the research for *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions*, I started learning about where our garments were, or tracing even more about the researchers who were researching us, and figuring out where some of their acquisitions went. My nation, we're bordered people; my Grandma was born on the Canada-US border, and we have communities in what is now the United States as well, which of course was owned by Russia or the USSR before. And I would love to learn more about those relationships.

EDO: Yeah, and how they came to be. We're speaking as well about the scarves that are now being shown with [the photographs]; this is the first iteration

of showing these images with what I call Kokum scarves, but what you’ve said is Shitsuu scarves. I’m just thinking about these relationships, and I think I’ve realized more about beadwork after going to Eastern Europe and seeing how beads are used over there, and how they’ve come here. These sister-material belongings are often so close to home.

JFN: Yeah, it seems really fitting for the exhibition.

EDO: Totally. In the text for the exhibition, Emily McKibbin uses the term “symbiotic relationship” between Canada and Russia to describe it, and I’m just curious if that sparks anything for you?

JFN: I’m going to do a quick grandma Google of what symbiotic means. What do you think it means?

EDO: I often think of it as reciprocal. In an ecological context, it’s like there’s a fungi that lives on a tree; they live closely together. There’s different forms of it such as “mutual,” where they both help each other, and another where the mushroom is getting helped, but not the tree. But it seems closely linked to reciprocity to me, and thinking about our relationship to the USSR, or post-Soviet states, it’s entwined but very differing. I’m just learning more about that, I guess.

JFN: I don’t know if I would call it symbiotic, because it would be similar to interdependent, and we have an interdependent relationship to the caribou, but not an interdependent relationship to Russia.

EDO: I think because the USSR spanned larger than what is now Russia, that certain states—like Lithuania or Estonia—were under USSR occupation, but are now their own independent nations. I’m thinking about tactics that emerge after having your visual culture so controlled and repressed and directed, and now entering a certain form of nationhood, what tactics folks over here can learn from how visual culture is emerging and reasserting agency after occupation. That might be an area for symbiosis or an area for dialogue. But then what is presently now Russia is its own thing, as well.

JFN: And their relationship to their Indigenous people.

EDO: Yeah.

JFN: One thing that I wanted to say is that the text that goes alongside this, and that I wrote while making these images, has been incorporated into my Masters’ thesis and the section at the end, Sisters on Naming, is something that I used in a collaboration with the late, great Granddaddy of Indigenous art, James Luna. This work has gone onto spur quite a few other things for me. Thinking about my relationship to academic research, to scholarship, when I was doing my Master’s Dana Claxton was my grad advisor, and she referred to my work as feral scholarship. I think that this project was maybe one of the first examples of that for myself and my way of working. And I’m really grateful to June Scudeler and Patricia Marroquin Norby who invited me to share my writing around this work for American Indian Culture and Research Journal, in 2015. They invited me to share this work in there, and I don’t think they typically have much imagery in that journal.

EDO: I think it’s really quite an experience to revisit such an intense moment; this work obviously comes out from an intense circumstance in many ways, being in the archives for the first time, at a particular moment in academia, which I think can be really intense, and to think about where it led you and how your scholarship has shifted since then. Would you consider this a certain precipice of working in, or adopting very, academic language? Because I feel like now in conversation and in reading your work, there’s maybe a shifted tone. It holds so much rigour, but perhaps the language around it, or the tone has shifted? Does that ring true?

JFN: The research fellowship was centered around language and wondering what constitutes language or what constitutes writing. One of the quotes is in [my Master’s thesis], but that language is when one person can make an utterance and it’s intelligible by another person. I’m wondering what the Indigenous relationships to language or text are, and refuting the Western standard of text maybe being alphabetized or looking at Mayan Quipu, which is a woven text, or looking at other Indigenous strategies and technologies for recording and communicating information, like birchbark scrolls, dances, garments, song. So that’s the premise our research was under, what we were reading texts around, just to give some more contexts for the work. But you know before going there, I was already interested in doing research in decolonial aesthetics and had helped facilitate round-table discussions at the Hart House, at the University of Toronto, in 2013. But you know, I think all artists are researchers.

EDO: Totally.

JFN: I don’t know if this was the main moment, but it was definitive—the research fellowship gave me an opportunity to develop both work and text to articulate what I was working through at that point in time.

EDO: I totally agree: all artists are researchers. I was thinking more about the relationship to a certain form of language in this one, a kind of academic language. Thank you for sharing your comment about utterance made intelligible, because it highlights how I view a lot of your work—playing with that notion of transference through, and thinking about what it means to be intelligible, and oftentimes withholding intelligibility as a tactic to evade these systems that we’ve just discussed—co-option and otherwise.

JFN: mmhmmm.

EDO: How are you feeling?

JFN: I’m feeling good.

EDO: Do you want more tea?

¹⁷ Panel discussion for *For Whom Masculinities Matter* featuring Lacie Burning and Léuli Eshraghi with asinnajaq and Dayna Danger. Curated by Adrienne Huard and Lindsay Nixon for gijiit. July 13, 2019 at Never Apart, Montreal, QC.



Northern Convergences
 Felix Kalmenson | Tanya Lukin Linklater | Jeneen Frei Njootli | Charles Stankiech

In 1867, the United States government purchased Alaska from Russia in a deal known then as Seward's Folly. Far from ending longstanding territorial disputes between Canada and Russia, these two circumpolar nations compete to this day over the rapidly warming Arctic region. *Northern Convergences* brings together four contemporary artists responding to the MacLaren's Sovfoto Archive, a collection of 23,116 vintage photographs from the Stalinist era in the USSR. Rereading this collection of photographs as a colonial archive, the exhibition looks at the consonance between Canadian and Russian colonialism from 1733 to the present.

For In Memoriam (2012). Alutiiq artist and choreographer Tanya Lukin Linklater investigates intergenerational grief and embodied memory in response to colonial, Russian violence at Refuge Rock in the Kodiak archipelago of Alaska, her homelands. Russian-born Canadian artist Felix Kalmenson examines the Jewish Autonomous Republic, a short-lived Soviet project for Jewish statehood, which resettled Soviet Jews in the southern borderlands of Russia's Far-East. Vuntut Gwitchin artist Jeneen Frei Njootli engages with archival material depicting the larger Gwich'in Nation, utilizing found colonial archival vocabulary alongside words the Dinjii Zhuh use to self-describe. Toronto artist Charles Stankiech publishes the Dinjii Zhuh use to Archive from one of the Distant Early Warning radar stations in operation during the Cold War. Taken together, these projects demonstrate an uneasy symbiotic relationship between Canadian and Russian colonial practices, dating back to the origins of Canada itself.

—EM

Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

Interview with Felix Kalmenson by Fan Wu

Dear Felix,

How does history affect those poor souls who have weak memories? I have exceedingly mediocre recall, or what Proust named “voluntary memory”. **Instead I’m riddled with receptors for involuntary memory, such that a scent on the breeze or the specificity of a sentence can trigger something in me unbidden.** I wonder what your own relationships to registers of memory are, in life and in work both.

I want, perhaps selfishly, over the course of this correspondence for you to trace the thick braid that binds you as a flesh-and-blood-feeling person to your historiographical-aesthetic project. Along the way, I’ll thank you in advance for alleviating some of my accumulated ignorances around this Soviet-Jewish situation.

Let me let us begin with an elemental question, a question of origin before the origin: what’s the constellation of desires that brought you to this project, even and especially the desires that preceded even the project’s conceptualization?

X

I know I promised I would write on the plane, I wanted to but my mind was somewhere between too tired to write and too awake to do anything other than watch Russian films. I watched the sun rising over Siberia and then I slept for almost two days. I’m finally catching up with emails and deadlines, I’ll have more time to think tomorrow I promise.

:*

Dear Fan,

First I will begin with an apology that it took me two weeks to respond, I kept opening and closing the email and somehow even though the words were there somehow floating, I couldn’t bring them out. I watched the first 10 minutes of a documentary on a Portuguese poet when I was in Lisbon a few weeks ago; she said “writing is just a notation for something that precedes it.” I left the cinema in frustration after 20 minutes of images of the sea with poetic voiceovers. I set out to the embankment with the intention of partaking in my own notation. I sat and watched the sky change while children and rats crawled over the rocks and all I could think to write was “what more can be said about the sea and the sky,” or as Daniil Kharms put it, “I wrote nothing today.”

I'm on the train now, from Vladivostok to Birobidzhan (the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast). Two and a half years ago I was going the other direction, concluding a month long train journey across Siberia and the steppe. Yesterday night when I was walking to board the train I told my friend Katerina that I felt like the intervening two years, from my arrival to my departure from Vladivostok, have been one delirious vision, sweated out on the top bunk of the platzkart. In the days leading up to boarding I would catch fugitive sounds of the train ringing out in diverse corners of the city, and with every 'kuh-chunk' of wagon on steel I would fall into reverie. I mostly remember the light, how it flickers and dances with every bend of the track as the sun huddles down close to the earth and combs through the forest, strobe lighting the interior of the restaurant wagon, breaking down every minute progression along this passage into a frame-by-frame study of motion in time.

I guess this is a roundabout way of saying yes, I also have this "involuntary memory" but I would term it something more like "environmental memory" or "contact memory," something that accounts for how something ostensibly independent of and irrelevant to our experience, something from a broader world of things and beings, intervenes or collides with our unsuspecting self and brings all those worlds rushing in through a narrow mnemonic thread into an intimacy with our deep selves. It's a form of time travel and smell is my favourite vessel. Especially the smell of skin and hair and of course the forest.

But I also have the regrettable condition of a more—let's call it "cinematic memory". One where I can play out the film of my life as if flipping channels. To my detriment these saved channels tend to be almost exclusively moments of trauma, violence or humiliation. **Whenever I recall moments of ecstatic joy they don't ever seem to have any of that definition. Instead they appear as floating colour washes, like a fauvist Kandinsky entering for the first time into abstraction.** My mother puts this down to a Jewish sense of suffering and resilience, the kind of thing that gives us the dark circles under our eyes, which she calls 'Jewish Bags.' I wouldn't locate it as only a Jewish phenomenon but there is a lot to be said about how memory functions either to the detriment or in aid of healing and resilience. My mother and I talk a lot about epigenetics and the transmission of intergenerational trauma. She is a specialist in genetics and in our dialogs we oftentimes find common ground and purpose, her bending her science and me bending my embodied listening. And that forms part of what you beautifully called 'the thick braid' which binds my fleshly self to my aesthetic and political project.

This project, its constellation of desires and repulsions, started centuries ago and has found itself another mouthpiece when I was brought into this world. **The question is quite simply put, how to live? And more elaborately; when and if to go, where and if to stay?** This is the thick braid, dragged through mud and destitution which forms a single utterance before the gunfire, the bloodied pipe, the gas... "why us?" And so from pogrom to evacuation, to arriving to Israel as stateless people in '89 and fleeing once again as immigrants to Canada in '93 the question "how to live" kept repeating itself. And the more I looked around the more I realized that it wasn't just "us," that there were multitudes, displaced and perpetually unwelcome. So for me the question became broader: what does it mean to be a people, to be a person, a citizen as a historically landless people; and though the Jewish character of this experience is not unique, it was something that I could explore in an embodied sense. Furthermore, as a former citizen-by-necessity of Israel and as someone critical of Zionism and the historical amnesia and state violence that it requires, I felt the necessity to understand what its alternatives were and are. That's how I came to find myself researching the Bund in Lithuania in 2016.

The Bund were a 'here-ist,' anti-territorialist, anti-Zionist organization that was one of the leading organizers of the Russian Revolution. They began in and spread through 'kruzhoks,' a Russian word for circles. Mainly composed of Jewish factory workers, many of them women, kruzhoks were literacy groups organized secretly after working hours where folks would learn to read primarily through Marxist literature. Many of these kruzhoks went on to form revolutionary cells which actively fought to redefine what a state can be and how one could function as a citizen, as an autonomous body within a broader federation of bodies. They were influenced by thinkers like the Austrian thinker Otto Bauer whose defining text *Social Democracy and the Nationalities Question*, put forward a radical approach to political and social organization not as territorial bodies but through the association of persons, through shared sensibilities. Most importantly for me was his notion that the idea of 'nationality' (the term here is used to describe social, ethnic-linguistic, territorial groupings) is a mutable concept, prone to change. Bauer writes:

*"If we comprehend the national character as a piece of solidified history, we also understand why the science of history is able to refute those who regard the national character as immutable, as constant. **In no one moment is the history of a nation ever completed.**"*

I find this to be the most poignant challenge to the narrow definition of the nation-state, of the citizen-subject. It allows for a more expansive notion of how to define ourselves in relation to others, to territory, to culture and history, to movement and migration.

From this line of research I came to explore other projects and groups who attempted to find so called 'solutions to the Jewish question.' That's how I came across the Jewish Autonomous Republic (now called the Oblast). Perhaps this is enough for one email...

xo

Dear Felix,

Here in Toronto the half-hearted snow falls around the undisintegrated leaves, and front yards look like white chocolate bars speckled with caramel. The future memory of a climate change to come is written in this jammed-together overlapping of seasons; **it's in the smell of the air, that combo of autumn's gravital decay and winter's insulated crispness.**

I'm drawn into resonance with your sense that practice and life run side-by-side; that the urgency of creation is struck into us from across generations. I'm curious about two utterances you used: "I wouldn't locate it as only a Jewish phenomenon" and "though the Jewish character of this experience is not unique." The question of the singular-universal, the singular/universal, the singular vs. universal—however you prefer to figure the relation—has been foremost on my mind. Our thinking must preserve the singularity of what is thought, especially where concerns a people or a culture, or else we risk making history substitutable and fungible instead of unique and essential. Yet we don't want to fall into the trap of essentializing a culture, and thus hermetically sealing it

from any contact with another; we need to leave enough connectivity for a dialogue to take root. How do you navigate this channel between the particular and the universal?

Take us into the meat of your project here in Barrie, Ontario; and even the geography of the exhibition raises the question of universality, in the sense of what a project gains and loses by being carried across space. What does it mean to feature your work on the Oblast at the MacLaren? Does art have the power—and, more pointedly, how do you strive for your art to have the power—to transmit a project’s singular energy outward, toward generality, to touch other histories, or into the public sphere? I want to give you, here, the room to say below what you feel the exigency to say...

x

Dear Fan,

I’m reminded by your musings of one of my favourite lines in Pasternak:

“Autumn. The threading of grey-blue and yellow beads.

Decay. I long for oblivion.”

I’m reading about the mass die-off of fruit bats in Australia from the heat waves. Whenever I remember this inversion of seasons, it’s almost like a reset of my worldview and for a moment the whole thing seems suddenly so new and strange. They found 90 wild horses dead of starvation and dehydration at a dried-up watering hole. I can’t help but have difficulty resetting myself every morning to the task of living knowing that we stand on and have stepped beyond a threshold...

When I make this bridge between the singular-universal in speaking to and about a Jewish history it is to take to task the way our history (namely the notion of the Holocaust as a unique and singular event in history) is being instrumentalized by hegemonic states, namely Israel, to justify their colonial occupations, displacements, and systems of mass surveillance and incarceration. I think the singular is always important but the projection of it into the universal is what allows pathways of empathy and solidarity to form and challenge the very systems which uphold and perpetuate these violences. And I’ve seen this amplifying itself in many other circumstances, where the notion of a unique and singular event of victimhood has created a cover or essentializing condition whereby a people feel themselves incapable of being perpetrators. This happens beyond the collective, in the realm of the interpersonal and how trauma plays itself out. So that’s why I really feel that being able to hold a singular-universal perspective of a history is important and fundamentally transformative and reparative.

I should also mention here that in no way do I believe that history is a static concept. Here in Russia where I’m undertaking my research, the ‘history’ of the Stalinist repressions and system of gulags is actively being rewritten, and more often than not I encounter people who are willing to undermine its severity and justify its ends. Likewise in Lithuania, Ukraine, and other Eastern European states, Nazi-collaborators and known mass-murders of civilians are rehabilitated as national heroes. **History is a living but caged beast and those with the biggest whip get to be its master.**

But to think about this question from the perspective of culture or ‘a people’, so as not to, as you say “seal it from any contact with another,” I think it’s doubly important to take these notions of static or hermetically sealed selves or cultures to task. I think that we are fundamentally dialogical selves and that precluding the other in our self formation or even the multiplicity of selves which constitute who we are is ultimately detrimental to our well-being and the well-being of our societies, because we are then forced to constantly undertake a process of symbolic violence. I want to relate this to the history and present of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Many people have come to write, make films and generally inspect with curiosity what they see as a failed Utopian project to create a secular Jewish state in Siberia, with its small Jewish population being their point of evidence. **Many people who continue to live in the Oblast find this characterization insulting and neither see their home as ‘failed’, nor as necessarily framed merely by a brief moment of hopeful thinking.** I thoroughly agree with them and I think that the formation of such a territorialist autonomy is neither radical nor is it utopian; it is hardly any different than the creation of many other ethno-linguistic regions; its only novelty is that it was instantiated in an orientalized ‘far-east’ and that it’s fairly recent in a historical sense and hasn’t had the time to ‘naturalize’ itself with time and ‘tradition.’ The project was settler-colonial in its roots and implementation, creating large-scale permanent settlement in a ‘sparsely populated’ border region with China, in a territory which was coerced into the unequal Treaty of Aigun during the Second Opium War. The oft-repeated phrase ‘sparsely populated’ always makes me suspicious and all the experts in the region with whom I spoke, only mention ‘a few hundred’ Cossacks and Nanai (Hezhen) or Evenk, the Indigenous folks of the Amur River Valley who have fished and lived along its banks for at least several hundred years. In this sense Birobidzhan and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast is possibly comparable to Barrie and the history of settler colonialism which occurred there and the myth of Terra Nullius which was used to uphold it. Furthermore there were organizations, such as IKOR (Idische Kolonizatsie Organizatsie in Rusland/Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia) and Ambidjan (The American Committee for the Settlement of Jews in Birobidjan) which actively promoted, funded and facilitated settlement to Birobidzhan from North and South America, with over 1000 families making the move.

What more directly links the two places and the reason for bringing this project to MacLaren was the presence of the very large and impressive Sovfoto Collection at the MacLaren, an archive which I’ve had the great pleasure of perusing and have made use of several of its images for the upcoming exhibition. These images constitute the Soviet Union’s self-representation and the images which Emily and the archive team have recovered for me from Birobidzhan, and they represent a cache of propagandistic snapshots of the region from a period largely covering the time after Yiddish culture was already thoroughly suppressed and the region operated as a Jewish Autonomy only in a nominal sense. When I met with local historians in Birobidzhan I showed them images

from the catalog, many of them completely novel to them; these are the same folks who have systematically catalogued all available documentation of the Oblast’s history. I found this to be quite a fascinating moment, myself being a former Soviet and current Canadian bringing back images of self-representation meant for the distant other which now reside in an institution in Barrie. It was a strange collapsing of vectors.

In the work I created for the exhibition, I’ve used several photographs from the archives, ones which show a Yiddish actor Nechama Lifshitz performing various exaggerated expressions, with the photographers’ markings visible in the margins. I love these images for many reasons, for their lightness and for her magnetic presence, but also for the way they reveal the mechanisms of power and mediation which construct the image, an image bound to stand-in for a people invisible behind an iron curtain. Alongside these photographs there is a sculptural work which makes reference to the 1936 propaganda film *Seekers of Happiness* which was created to promote Jewish settlement in the region. Several theories assert that there are coded messages within the film, only legible to those with a knowledge of Jewish history and customs, that attempt to dissuade the prospective migrants (given that the film’s production coincided with the beginnings of political repressions locally and nationwide). **There was a particular moment when a man playing a clarinet on the Birobidzhan-bound train announces the name of the composition as Israel’s Lament on the banks of the Amur River, thus drawing an allusion between Amur and Babylon, and so coding Birobidzhan not as Zion (a place of salvation) but as Babylon (a place of exile).** Through my sculpture the composition can be heard periodically entering the sonic space of the gallery, both referencing the troubled history of Birobidzhan and hopefully also drawing parallels with Barrie and Canada as well.

xo

Felix

Dear Felix,

The cool wind of history passes thru me when you alert me to the fact that Pasternak has had the same sensual experience as I, a whole century (?) or so ago...

Forgive me my silence around questions of *content* in your work; I’m absorbing all this information and besides, you know how to deliver it with a non-didactic elegance.

By way of a conclusion to this infinite conversation, I offer an unraveling: feel free to pick up any or none of these threads, these illuminated fragments...

History is a caged beast and those with the biggest whip get to be its master. Do you think artistic practice or attuned work within the archives can effectuate a changing of the hands of who gets to wield the whip?

It was a strange collapsing of vectors. History is a multi-sided non-Euclidean thing that enfolds (without ever fully encapsulating) the singular, the universal, the personal; and your story, about the coincidences that brought you to this show, traces the geometries of history. Or perhaps they aren’t coincidences at all, but illuminations of the implicit interconnections of modes of history that constellate singularities into a shadow or a presentiment of the universal. Where do you see yourself extending this project so that it might perhaps magnetize further cosmic coincidences?

The Oblast presents an interesting case-study because of how shrouded it is in its romanticization, its capacity to be idealized. The Utopian seems another way to think about fantasy, but elevated to the Political. How do we reckon with its objective, material facticity (as you outlined) even if it’s unignorably in a cacophonous relationship with what other people want it to be? In other words, how do you contend with the aura of myth it gives off that covers over its aura of history?

I’m excited to see the show live at the MacLaren!!

Dear Fan,

Perhaps it’s fitting to also mention that this line from Pasternak was written the August before the October Revolution, when Pasternak escaped to the countryside to mend a broken heart and lost himself in all that breathing and living earth, while the country itself was on the verge of transformation. Today they say koalas are functionally extinct...

Let’s pick up threads:

History is a caged beast and those with the biggest whip get to be its master. Do you think artistic practice or attuned work within the archives can effectuate a changing of the hands of who gets to wield the whip?

Yes absolutely, perhaps not necessarily through the work of the artist but certainly with attuned work with archives. As we can readily see in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, all was revealed in a frank assessment of the archives and documentary evidence. The problem is, however, we cannot rely solely or uncritically on the archive; it contains many blind spots and its biases are well established. The partial release of the archives is likewise problematic, as we see with the MMIWG Inquiry, with the RCMP unwilling to release in entirety documents that most likely implicate them in these cases and cover up the extent of the crisis and complicity of the government and the RCMP. However, the document dump can also act as a distraction or as a form of performative transparency, releasing no damning facts while maintaining a supposed willingness to release thousands of pages of minor offenses, if any.

I had an interesting experience with an archival research project I undertook in several countries in South East Asia, using the UK’s National Archive as a starting point. When I was working in Malaysia I was invited to a meeting by Telekom Malaysia, one of the largest telecom companies in Malaysia. They



Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

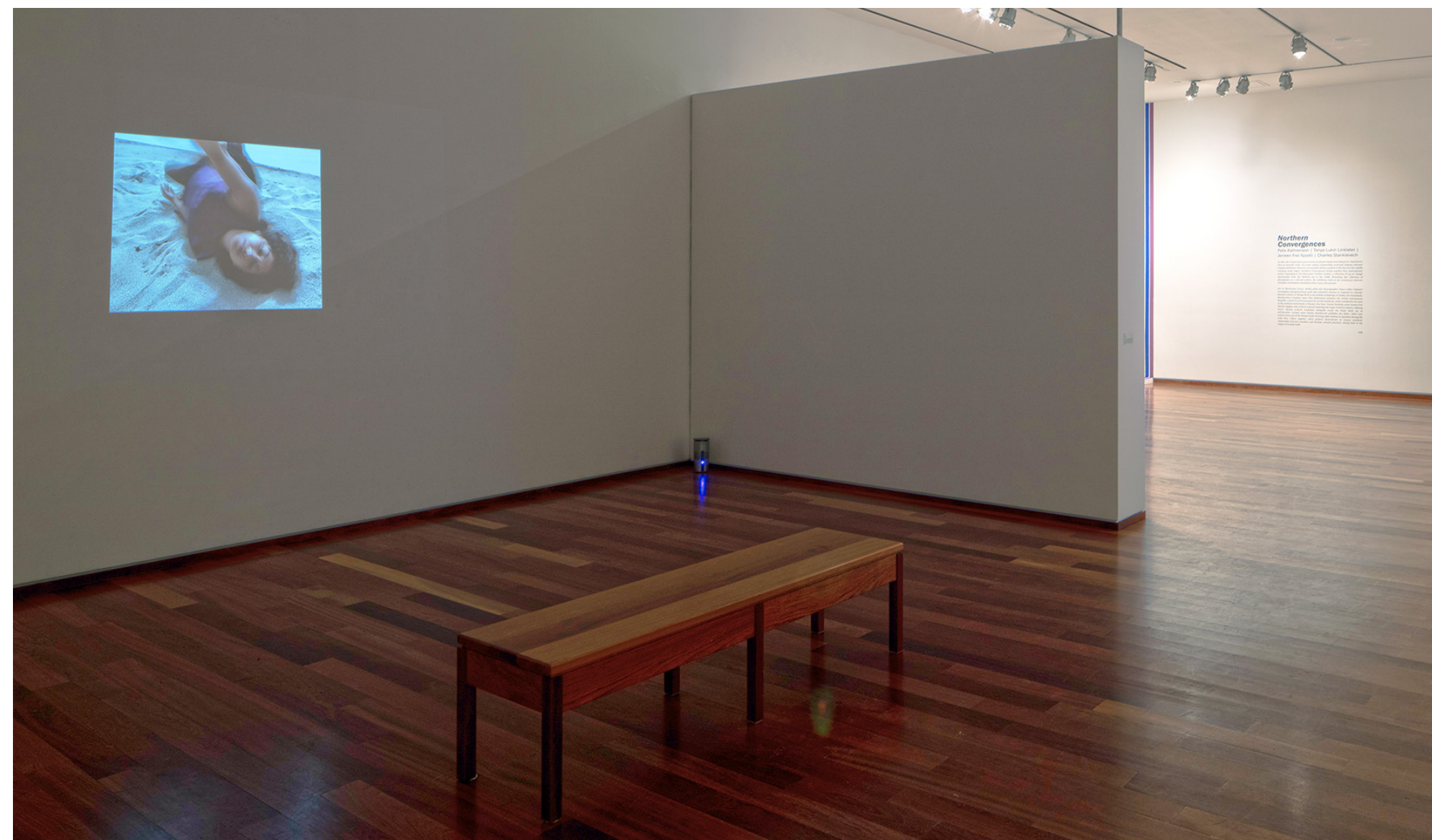
had heard about my research into early telecommunications, specifically the exploitation of the Gutta Percha tree for its thermoplastic resin (used to coat submarine telegraph cables). TM was building a new museum in Taiping which would finally reclaim with certainty Malaysia's definitive role in the history of global telecommunications. As an act of solidarity I shared many of the documents I retrieved from the archives with them, which they used to build the museum and its narrative, one which I supported. I realized later that a lot of the narratives that I was trying to centre were omitted, specifically ones pertaining to the central roles played by Indigenous folks such as the Orang Asli and Orang Sabimba: from the initial 'discovery' and use of the plant, to their coerced labour for its extraction. **These were narratives incongruent or inconvenient to a contemporary neocolonial Malaysian state narrative which continues to oppress and displace these very Indigenous folks. So sometimes the whip gets passed on and remains a whip...**

The Oblast presents an interesting case-study because of how shrouded it is in its romanticization, its capacity to be idealized. The Utopian seems another way to think about fantasy, but elevated to the Political. How do we reckon with its objective, material facticity (as you outlined) even if it's unignorably in a cacophonous relationship with what other people want it to be? In other words, how do you contend with the aura of myth it gives off that covers over its aura of history?

I think what I find most frustrating in the ways Utopias are being picked apart, especially those in the former Soviet Union, is that their supposed failure is used to foreclose the realm of the possible, de-facto placing us within the 'inevitable' and only path of neoliberal capitalism. A similar tactic is used to present Israel as the only and inevitable option for the Jewish people. I think Utopias are a necessary and useful tool for imagining possibilities; the trap, however, is in judging Utopias with the same rubric we use for existing systems. They should be allowed to exist as an amorphous cloud of possibility. We should allow the myth and the history and the present to exist alongside each other.

It was great chatting, Fan!

:)



Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

Interview with Tanya Lukin Linklater by Erin Sutherland

Erin Sutherland (ES): I'm Erin Sutherland, here with Tanya Lukin Linklater to talk about her work, *In Memoriam*, at the MacLaren Art Centre. Thank you very much for making the time to have this conversation, and I'm really looking forward to chatting with you about your work because, as you know, I'm a huge fan. I'm going to start by asking you to just briefly talk about your work *In Memoriam*.

Tanya Lukin Linklater (TLL): In the description that I've provided the MacLaren, I describe the work as an investigation of intergenerational grief and embodied memory in response to colonial Russian violence at Refuge Rock on the Kodiak Archipelago of Alaska, my homelands. I was interested in this particular event, but also the ways in which memory lives in the body, after an event, and I spent four years investigating this particular history through performance, with dancers, myself, through text and photography, and in this video work, one of my first video works. The dancer that is featured is Carla Soto, who I was introduced to in a choreographic workshop in Toronto, and she investigated this particular history with two other dancers the year previous. I invited her to North Bay to shoot this video. This video has been installed in different small museums and galleries since, and I've also installed the text work *In Memoriam* which I later called *Unspokeness*.

ES: My second question is related to my first one. The music in the work is quite interesting, and it captures the listener's attention. It is also interesting how you and Carla relate to that music. I was wondering if you could speak a bit to the music in the work and its creation.

TLL: The musical score came after the shoot, which took place in a small dance studio in downtown North Bay as well as at Nipissing First Nation, at a small beach that was near my home at the time. We shot the video, I edited, and then I worked subsequently with Diego Marulanda on the score. We had originally worked together on a score for live performance with three dancers the year previous, if I recall correctly. That had been a really generative process where we recorded some of my singing, some of my vocalizations. [Diego] presented different sounds, and we would think through the sound together. It was quite hands-on, actually. I was very involved in the process from the recording of my own voice to decisions about instruments. He was really generous, and when I subsequently made this video I asked him to create the score. I didn't travel to visit him for the making of this score but worked from many of the sounds that we had investigated together in the first project. We had a back-and-forth through that process of composition, and since that time I haven't worked with anyone closely in the recording of a composition to accompany my video work. Since then I've worked in live sound. This is a kind of interesting moment in my practice where I had the opportunity to work more closely with someone on the development of the sound or score for the work.

ES: So the music was actually created after the dance, is that correct?

TLL: Yes, it was.

ES: That's really interesting how, when it's put together, you can read it as the dancers actually responding to the music even though they're not.

TLL: Diego was looking at these different moments—a series of scenes in this video—and responding. In some sections it works so well. He creates this otherworldliness at times, and then there are moments that I find are a bit jarring for me as the listener. It’s an interesting process working with someone who makes different choices than I might make. As I reflect back on this video, I would likely edit it, making a series of smaller videos. The scale of this was somewhat ambitious.

ES: You’re talking about an experience that could potentially be seen as collaboration - with the composer, and then with the dancers also. What do you think about the role of collaboration in your work?

TLL: Most of my projects are iterative and they’re many years in length, and I’ll investigate an idea over a series of projects. Sometimes I’ll have conducted research for two years on a specific history, or more recently in relation to specific cultural belongings—within museum collections—or I’ll just have this longer, durational relationship to a set of ideas or questions that I then investigate more fully in one project, which later becomes a different kind of investigation in a subsequent project. Diego is absolutely the composer for this project, but invited me into that process to provide feedback throughout, which was very generous of him. When it comes to the choreography, I’m making decisions throughout the process. I’ll ask a question or propose an idea or investigation—a specific, smaller investigation—to a dancer, who then, through improvisation, develops a series of movements. As an outside eye, I then provide feedback and edit, place movement, spatialize and structure the work. I value all the contributions of the dancers, and the composer, and also in this case the cinematographer, Duane Linklater. These are all contributions that various people make, and I’m making a series of decisions—an accumulations of decisions—throughout the process. I’m cautious about using the term collaboration. Or thinking through more complex and nuanced understandings of what collaboration is. Because the work wouldn’t exist without this desire, on my part, to investigate this particular history, or these particular places at this particular time.

ES: That’s a really good explanation of how your work involves the work of other people, but also how your work is very nuanced and takes place over many years. I think you’re right, in your statement about collaboration, that word is not fitting and that there needs to be a more nuanced word or series of words to explain what you’re actually doing. I appreciate that. My next question is if you could talk about the role of grief in this work.

TLL: Grief is present in quite a lot of my work. As an Alutiiq person I can only speak about our collective history from my perspective. I think that there are a range of understandings of our history. Our strengths include our efforts to revitalize our language, our songs, our dances, our Alutiiq ways of being on the land. Growing up, I participated in subsistence activities: fishing, hunting. My Dad was also a trapper; he was trained as a trapper as a young person by his family. Those skills and those understandings of the tides, of the winds, and our land at home have continued from generation to generation, as our strength as Alutiiq people. However, the brutality of Russian colonization certainly left lasting impacts. In some of the timelines developed by Koniag, our regional Alaska Native corporation, they’ve identified that the last Alutiiq ceremonies were practiced in the 1890s. That’s a very long time for our people to be without that spiritual foundation. That was such a crucial part of who we were for a millennia—or multiple millennia. As I think about what it means to be Alutiiq, I feel grief at those kinds of losses. We are certainly working collectively within our communities to bring back songs, to make new songs, to make new dances, to learn how to sew

our regalias by revisiting old regalias that our ancestors made that are now housed in museums collections—as well as other materials and forms that we visit in museum collections. It’s almost as if our ancestors have left these messages for us. In these materials and forms they’ve left us information and it’s our job to decipher those. My decipherments of those material forms will be different from other folks from home who have different gifts and who have different ways of seeing these messages or understanding them. So on the one hand, I feel a great hope for the future, but I also contend with this very difficult, violent history that our people have endured. It’s very present for me as an Alutiiq person, and likely impacts maybe all of the work that I do. Kari Cwynar described my work in an interview a few years ago as “sparse and melancholic.” I think Billy-Ray Belcourt articulates the reasons why, or the ways in which, we feel melancholic. I deeply appreciate these contributions because sometimes it’s a feeling, it’s an atmosphere, but I don’t understand it. It’s a little bit difficult for me to talk about, actually.

ES: I think you did a really good job of contextualizing your work within the idea of grief, but at the same time I’m grateful to you for being able to keep some of that information to yourself; it’s so personal, so I completely respect that. Thank you. My next question is hopefully a little bit easier to answer. In this work you are present as a dancer, but in more recent works you’re present as a choreographer or a kind of designer of the work; in [later works] you’re still very present, but perhaps not in the same way that you are *In Memoriam*. Can you talk about your role, or your decision, to have your body present in video work or in performances?

TLL: It’s a complex decision that I continue to work through and think through. Part of it has to do with this moment when I made a conscious decision to set down, for a period of years, my investigation of Alutiiq language, songs and dance. I had been committed to using the space of artist-run centres and contemporary art spaces as a space for the study of these urgent questions of reclaiming language, re-invigorating song practices, re-invigorating dance practices, as someone who didn’t grow up with traditional dances in my village (they weren’t practiced in my village at the time). I decided to set that down for a time because I wondered if contemporary art spaces were appropriate for that investigation, and if that instead belonged within our community. I also started to wonder about the ways in which curators or institutions are sometimes tasking Indigenous people with performing their Indigeneity, and I wanted to take some time and step back from these requests so I could think through what made the most sense within these spaces. I continue to consider myself to be the other performer in the work whether or not I’m dancing in the work because I’m always present for the performances. I perform live text readings—poems, event scores and other texts— sometimes alongside dancers and sometimes also alongside video. So I’m present in that way, and I’ve actually started coming back into my video work in the last couple of years. It’s kind of an ongoing question, and it’s a compelling and interesting question.

ES: Thank you. My next question is thinking through this idea that we’ve talked about before, improvisation as methodology, and the idea that your methodology as an artist, curator, choreographer—all of these terms that really just describe what you’re doing—uses improvisation. I was wondering if you could speak to that a little bit.

TLL: There are different ways I think about improvisation, the live event and the kinds of conversations that can happen in the live event which are not anticipated. I invite people to come in—I don’t consider myself a curator, I consider myself an artist—but I invite other artists or filmmakers or folks to come in and speak

alongside one another. I'll usually have a conversation with them in advance in order to prepare for the live event, but the live event is improvisational. It has the constraint of time and space, which certainly allows things to unfold in real time and for ideas and conversation to unfold. Sometimes the conversations are difficult. When you have a question from the audience that re-centers settler subjectivity when the discussion has been around Indigeneity or Indigenous peoples' concerns, that can be difficult. First and foremost I think I consider improvisation in relation to conversation. Those conversations also extend to a personal process that I typically undertake within a museum or gallery space when I'm working on a live performance: unanticipated moments that people can stumble upon or really listen in on, the work of the choreographic process or compositional practice.

There are maybe a couple of other ways I think about [improvisation]: as a methodology for the development of choreography. I will structure a performance with texts or with other kinds of scores, and I will propose a series of questions to dancers asking them to investigate the questions physically. And I'll give them other constraints, such as: "you're along this wall," or "this is your path," or other constraints. They'll present a series of movements or gestures, and through this process of repetition and refinement we arrive at a score. Sometimes the dancers come to set the movement, and often they do.

The last way I think of improvisation is in my live readings. I'll often pair the video works with text works, as I mentioned earlier. The constraints are time. I'll choose a series of texts and videos. I won't know exactly how long the text will be. These are always in different configurations; I don't rehearse in advance. Instead, I set a timer and I read and then the videos play—and I actually can't see the videos while they're playing. What unfolds are these moments where the voice and text meet the image, and they may never meet in that exact way again. And so for me, it's a kind of loop, a repetition, and it's also chance where the audience can experience something that no one else may ever experience.

ES: Thank you. My final question is about the creation of an Indigenous art history within your work. When we talked before you explained that Billy-Ray Belcourt wrote about your work in his essay "The body remembers when the world broke open," and that other scholars and artists have then responded to that text. And you used the phrase, "Indigenous art history moment" the last time we spoke, and I was wondering if you could just speak a little bit to that and how important that is: using multiple medias to respond to your work, and create a conversation that goes beyond your work.

TLL: Generally I am concerned with Indigenous art histories. I've responded to a number of works by Indigenous artists in the past: Beau Dick and Rita Letendre, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Maria Tallchief, to name a few. In that sense, I'm interested in lineage; dance and art historical lineages. I'm also interested in investigating, perhaps, the ways in which my work is in relation to those Indigenous art histories. I would also include within those lineages what is often called craft, Alaska Native and Indigenous women's craft, and I'm certainly influenced by those practices as well.

But I was thinking today that it is really not my place to determine whether or not my work will be remembered. Others have to determine that, and decide if I'll have a place within Indigenous art history. That's where some of the important work happens, when people are writing about it. And not just describing it, because a lot of art writing is description, which is fine, but I'm interesting in writing that contends and is concerned with the work, maybe extending some of the ideas, beginning to make connections with other artists. I was pleasantly surprised when Billy-Ray Belcourt wrote about this work; I didn't know Billy-

Ray at the time, but his work is quite exciting and he's well regarded, well received within our communities. And since then, I've gotten to know him and I think he's incredibly generous.

Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' film took its title from that essay. I haven't seen the film yet. I'm hoping to see it soon. I don't know what the relationship is between this video, *In Memoriam*, Billy-Ray's essay and Elle-Máijá's film. But I'm excited by it. I hope that my work is extended by younger artists. You know, I hope that Alutiiq people take up my work, I hope that Alaska Natives folks take up my work. I hope that people from home and from further afield are interested in this work and the future, and that it resonates with them somehow.

ES: Thank you so much. I think that's a really good way to leave this conversation. I look forward to continuing to have these conversations outside of this interview, but congratulations on the work and the show and thank you for giving your time.


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BAR-1 DEW Line Archive

Introduction Images Blueprints Articles Video Search Credits

Preset Tours:

- Site
- Working
- Exterior
- Construction
- Inuit Life



Visual Index: 01 02 03 04

Browse: ◀ ▶

Source:
Johnson Collection

Index Number:
JJN 19.11

Location:
BAR-1

Year:
1993

Image Description:
Bob Virgin reading temperature at weather station.

Screen capture of Charles Stankieveh, *Bar-1 DEW Line Archive*, available on stankieveh.net. December 2020.

Interview with Charles Stankieveh by Emily McKibbon

Emily McKibbon: First off, I'd like to ask the pragmatic question of how it was you first encountered this material.

Charles Stankieveh: After several projects looking at the history of communication in the Canadian context (such as Emile Berliner's flat record factory and the first cinema—both in Montreal), I wanted to specifically look at such a history in the Canadian Arctic, which due to its vast territory necessitated use of the electromagnetic. At the the time I was living in Dawson City, Yukon helping get the Yukon School of the Visual Arts up and running so the research was, as they say, in my backyard. After learning about the Yukon's role in telegraphy as part of a first attempt at a global network, things started to really become interesting with Marconi's collaboration with the US Military in the region and the eventual Cold War era's *Distant Early Warning* system of radar outposts and communication network across the Arctic. Part of those findings overlapped with more general research into the area, which of course led to conversations with the official Parks Canada Yukon and Western Arctic historian, David Neufeld. He was often a guest at the school and is the original creator of the BAR-1 DEW Archive. The archive existed exclusively as a unique CD-Rom collection of files he made in the late 1990s, collecting, archival photos, blueprints, and other visual documentation. As part of collecting this material he also commissioned Joanne Jackson Johnson to photo document the site.

EM: In terms of the initial public presentation of this archive, how did this tie into the *DEW Project* (2009)?

CS: *The DEW Project* became the prototype for what I ended up calling a "fieldwork" that I first defined in 2009:

"A fieldwork engages with the geographical site but then warps one's perception of the space comparable to a mathematical "strange attractor." Sharing, on the one hand, the history of art installation (which can modulate the encompassing architecture of the viewer's phenomenological perception) and, on the other hand, the history of "site-specific" or earthwork art (which amplifies the place's history or materiality), a fieldwork creates its own temporary architecture within a space or in a landscape. However, such a landscape need not be natural, and the architecture may not always be a traditional shelter or sculpture but can be composed of sonic material, electromagnetic fields, light fluctuations, or relationships. At its core, a fieldwork is dynamic and geospatial."

It was also the first mature project that attempted to span both the affective immersive installation power of art alongside pedagogical and critical discourse that included building a platform for sharing other people's research as raw material. Looking back now on the project, I can retroactively understand this methodology emerged because at the same time I was forming an art school as an experimental education program that encouraged me to blur the boundaries between art production, curating, educating, and public dissemination. Also due to the sensitive nature of working in the Yukon around questions of colonialism, I felt it was important to create platforms to further the conversation and not just a poetic work of art. (For context, I started production of this project in 2007 before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report was even initiated.) Finally, my work is consistently research orientated (usually taking



Troyanovsky, *On the North Pole: N.Fiodorov at work*, 1937 (printed 1938), gelatin silver print. MacLaren Permanent Collection. Anonymous Gift, 2001.

years to conduct), so I always look for ways to share the rich material via publications and programming. In this specific case, it meant online publishing the *BAR-1 Dew Archive* on the contemporary communication form on the internet echoing the first prototype continental communication systems of the DEW line.

EM: *In Magnetic Norths* (2010), which followed shortly after the DEW Project, I note that this exhibition included “a constellation of documents, photographs, sculptures, radio broadcasts, film screenings and installations” which “weave together the overlapping territories of utilitarian artifacts and conceptual artworks.” Would you consider the BAR-1 DEW Archive a utilitarian artifact?

CS: Well, the *BAR-1 Archive* was included in the show along with my *DEW Project* for the reasons I just mentioned, but I was thinking of a variety of works in the show such as the commissioned map I asked the First Nations government Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in to make that compared gold mining land claims versus Indigenous land claims. The Center for Land Use Interpretation also had a couple documents in the exhibition that straddled this border. Artist While it was planned, due to a loan failure at the last moment, I unsuccessfully tried to show a gold rush period fox trap. I was very interested in making the connection between hunting traps and conceptual artwork as mental traps all while trying to avoid easy anthropological divisions. Alongside R. Murray Schafer’s music composition with a Ski-Doo snow machine were radio recordings of spy transmissions. The BAR-1 online archive functioned somewhere along this spectrum presented on a computer where you could browse the visual history of the site.

EM: Why is it that you decided to continue to host the Archive on your website?

CS: The original archive as a CD-Rom only had three copies made and given to military and government organizations. I felt it was important to share Neufeld’s research as access to these sites is limited, resulting in rare source material. While I kept the format the same— a 1990s user interface—when I ported the software from CD-Rom to the Web, I did add a visual index to help people search and browse the whole archive for greater easy. This new format and easy access has been a great resource for other researchers. Everyone from military academic journals to the Canadian Centre for Architecture has contacted me about the Archive for their publishing and exhibition making. Additionally people that have had family members or themselves work on the remote DEW Line have reached out and expressed gratitude for the site’s unique collection and ease of access. I’ve even had a few people try to expand the archive by donating their own material from working on other DEW sites, but I see the Archive as period document with a very precise collection focusing on a single site.

EM: In the ten years you’ve hosted the Archive on your website, has the nature of that interest shifted over time?

CS: I would say the interest in the Archive has been pretty consistently diverse since the start. I will say in the last decade there has been an exponential interest and concern with environmental issues—and what seemed at the time as a radical idea at the core of *The DEW Project*—connecting environmentalism with military concerns—today is more and more taken for granted. What I speculatively called “The Warm War” over a decade ago has gained traction as a

way of understanding that global warming is directly connected to military issues (either through territorial dispute, securing resources, logistic support of extreme weather, or other collateral damages). In parallel, with many of the nuclear treaties currently falling apart, along with the rise of China as a global nuclear power, the Arctic's early warning system (now called the North Warning System) has started to reemerge from the shadows as an obsolete and forgotten defence infrastructure back into headlines as part of the game of global security.

Works in the Exhibition

Jeneen Frei Njootli, *I wish I knew her then*, 2014, archival chromogenic print with matte finish, 76.2 x 101.4 cm. Courtesy of Macaulay & Co., Vancouver

Jeneen Frei Njootli, *80 Miles North Of The Arctic Circle*, 2014, archival chromogenic print with matte finish, 76.2 x 101.4 cm. Courtesy of Macaulay & Co., Vancouver

Jeneen Frei Njootli, *Kaagwadthat Brought Us Here*, 2014, archival chromogenic print with matte finish, 76.2 x 101.4 cm. Courtesy of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada

Felix Kalmenson, *Seekers of Happiness*, 2019, mixed media installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

Tanya Lukin Linklater, *In Memoriam*, 2012, single-channel video, , 12 minutes, 35 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Tanya Lukin Linklater, *In Memoriam*, 2012, vinyl, 86.8 x 73.6 cm.; 185.4 x 73.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Various Photographers, *Sovfoto: Binder # 180 SOVIET UNION - North Pole Expeditions, Otto Schmidt, 1933-1956*, vintage gelatin silver press prints. Collection of the MacLaren Art Centre. Anonymous gift, 2001

Various Photographers, *BAR-1 DEW Line Archive, 1956-1993*. Published by Charles Stankieveh. Available online: <http://www.stankieveh.net/projects/DEW/ BAR-1/>



Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

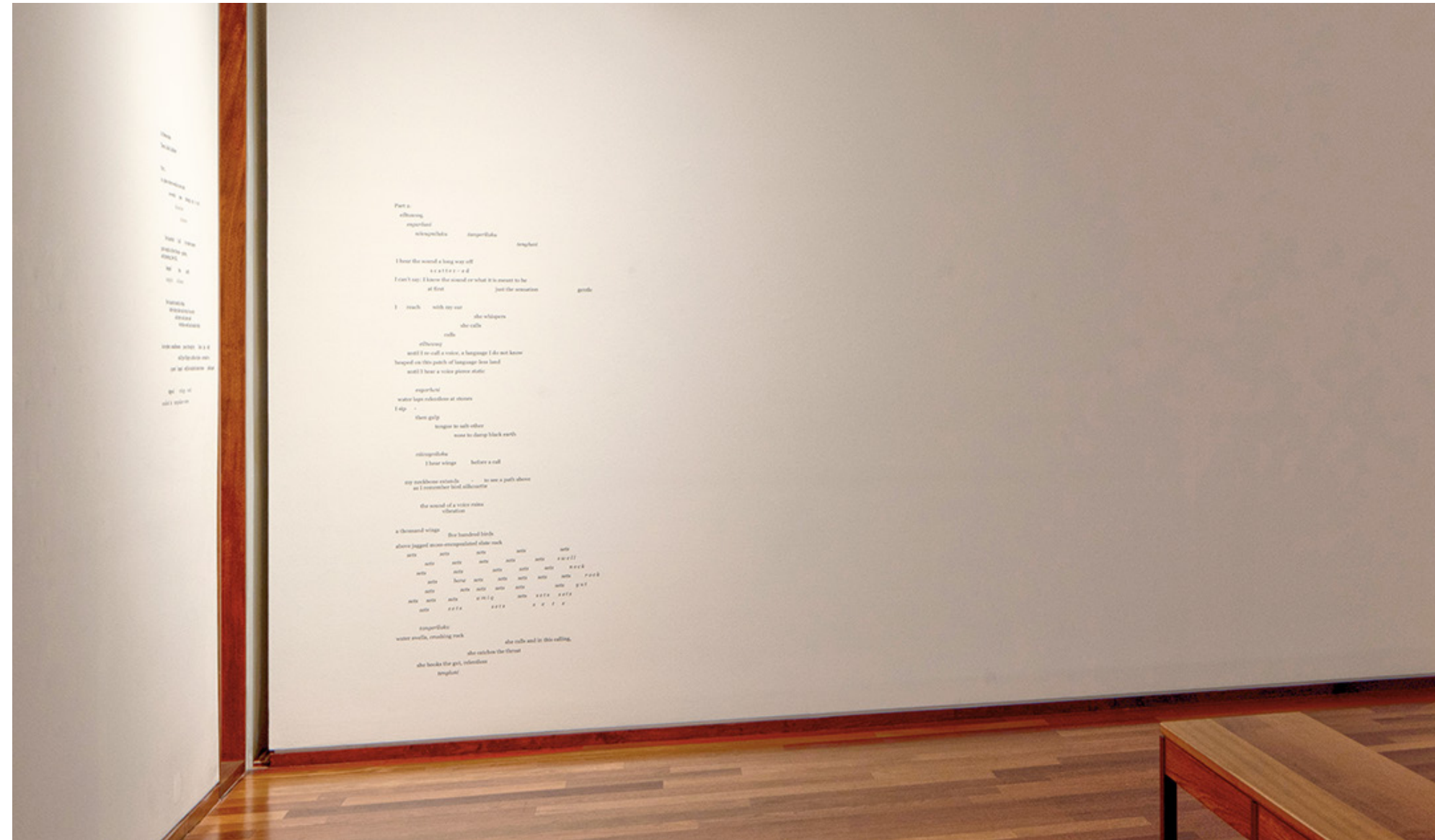
Biographies of the Artists

Jeneen Frei Njootli is a 2SQ Vuntut Gwitchin, Czech and Dutch artist whose work challenges the permanence of capitalist, consumer-driven systems and honours Indigenous labour and cultural knowledge. In their award-winning interdisciplinary practice, they use media such as performance, sound, textiles, collaboration, workshops and feral scholarship. Frei Njootli holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia, a BFA from Emily Carr University and has exhibited internationally. Currently a professor at The University of British Columbia, they have been living and working as an uninvited guest on unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories and are represented by Macaulay & Co Fine Art.

Felix Kalmenson (b. 1987, St Petersburg, Russia) is a ‘rootless cosmopolitan’ whose practice navigates installation, video and performance. Kalmenson’s work variably narrates the liminal space of a researcher’s and artist’s encounter with landscape and archive. By bearing witness to everyday life, and hardening the more fragile vestiges of private and collective histories through their work, Kalmenson gives themselves away to the cadence of a poem, always in flux. (Bio by Maya Tounta)

Tanya Lukin Linklater’s performances in museums, videos, texts and installations have been exhibited in Canada, the United States and abroad. In 2017, as a member of Wood Land School, she participated in *Under the Mango Tree - Sites of Learning*, a gathering for documenta14 in Athens and Kassel. In 2018 she was the inaugural recipient of the Wanda Koop Research Fund administered by Canadian Art. Tanya originates from the Native Villages of Afognak and Port Lions in southwestern Alaska and is based in northern Ontario.

Charles Stankieveh is a Canadian artist whose research has explored issues such as the notion of “fieldwork” in the embedded landscape, the military industrial complex, and the history of technology. His diverse body of work has been shown internationally at the Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; MassMoca, Massachusetts; Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal; Canadian Centre for Architecture; and the Venice Architecture and SITE Santa Fe Biennales. His lectures for Documenta 13 and the 8th Berlin Biennale were as much performance as pedagogy while his writing has been published in academic journals by MIT and Princeton Architectural Press. His idiosyncratic and obsessively researched curatorial projects include *Magnetic Norths* at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University and *CounterIntelligence* at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto. From 2010-2011 (and again currently from 2014-15) he was hired as a private contractor for the Department of National Defence where he conducted independent research in intelligence operations under the rubric of the CFAP. He was a founding faculty member of the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City, Canada and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto. Since 2011, he has been co-director of the art and theory press K. Verlag in Berlin.



Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

Biographies of the Interviewers

Emily Dundas Oke is an emerging curator and interdisciplinary artist. A 2018 graduate of Philosophy and Visual Art (BA) from Thompson Rivers University, she has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards including the Ken Lepin Award of Excellence. She is an alumni of the TRU Indigenous Knowledge Makers program and is currently the organizer and a co-curator of the Indigenous Brilliance reading and performance series. Her philosophical research in epistemology guides her interest in works that deal with the production and retention of embodied knowledge and shared histories. Emily has exhibited nationally and internationally and has been an artist in residence at Access Gallery (Canada), Nida Art Colony (Lithuania), and the Kamloops Printmakers Society (Canada) among others.

Emily McKibbin is the Associate Director/Senior Curator at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ontario; she joined the curatorial staff in 2013. From 2011 to 2013, she was the Howard and Carole Tanenbaum Curatorial Fellow at George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York. She has previously worked in curatorial, collections and research capacities at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto and the National Museum of the Royal New Zealand Navy, Auckland. She has received numerous awards and recognitions, including an Honourable Mention for Best New Magazine Writer at the Canadian National Magazine Awards in 2015 and the Edie Yolles Research Prize from the Ryerson Image Centre in 2020. She is a graduate of the Ryerson University Master of Arts program in Photographic Preservation and Collections Management.

Erin Sutherland is an independent curator and scholar of Indigenous curatorial methodologies, Indigenous performance art and art history and explorations of Indigenous knowledge production/sharing via curating. She is also an Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta, Augustana, and a core member of Ociciwan Contemporary Art Collective. Recent curatorial projects include: *Her Body will Remember* at the Kelowna Art Gallery; *Let's Talk about Sex, bb* (with Carina Magazzeni) at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; *Current Terrain* at A Space Gallery, Toronto with ImagineNative Film Festival; *Arrivals* at dc3 Art Projects, Edmonton, curated with Ociciwan Contemporary Art Collective; *Kihtwâm* at Augustana Library, Camrose; and the performance series, *Talkin' Back to Johnny Mac* that took place across multiple sites in Kingston, Ontario. She is originally from Grand Prairie, Alberta, and is of Métis and settler descent.

Fan Wu is the presentiment of a memory of an abandoned farmstead faintly recalled just now. His practice moves between activating language's capacities and exploring language's beyond. You can find his writing online at *MICE Magazine*, *Aisle 4*, *baest journal*, and Koffler Digital.

Acknowledgements

Publication to accompany the exhibition *Northern Convergences*, held December 5, 2019 to March 8, 2020 at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, curated by Emily McKibbin. © MacLaren Art Centre in collaboration with the individual contributors, 2020. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-987895-27-8

Cover image: Installation view of *Northern Convergences*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2019. Photo: Andre Beneteau

The MacLaren Art Centre gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of its Members, Patrons, Donors, Sponsors, Partners, the City of Barrie, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts, and exhibition sponsor Barriston Law.

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