

Wood Land School: A Brief Report

by Jonah Gray

Over a weekend this past March, a cadre of artists, art historians, critics and curators from across Canada and the US converged at the Or Gallery in Vancouver to consider current “directions in Indigenous contemporary art” from a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. The occasion was a symposium entitled Wood Land School: Critical Anthology organized by artist Duane Linklater, in conjunction with the Or and Simon Fraser University Galleries, in anticipation of a print volume of the same name to be released later this year.¹ Like earlier symposia at artist-run centres in Vancouver that became books, *Vancouver Anthology* (1991) and *Vancouver Art and Economics* (2007), Wood Land School’s proceedings engaged exhibition histories and artistic strategies, and critiqued both material and discursive institutions. While there was no explicitly stated theme beyond Indigenous contemporary art, the notion of refusal proved to be a shared concern across the board, even if it was taken in radically divergent ways. Throughout the presentations, refusal entailed, variously: a rejection of the role of Native informant for an art world structured by Eurocentric/settler desires; a strategic negation of stable meaning to hold open a space for an inclusive aesthetic reflection; and a rejection of prescriptive performances of Indigeneity.

If refusal is taken to encompass, for example, both a call to withdraw certain forms of expression to Indigenous-only spaces and a negation of traditional categories that seeks instead “to find the Indigenous where it is not,” how useful can the term really be?² Perhaps most importantly, it helps situate the oscillatory, responsive context in which the presenters uniformly understand Indigenous contemporary art to function. In particular, it highlights

the uneven power relations among which Indigenous contemporary art emerges and is always imbricated. Because Indigenous contemporary art, like other forms of art identified with minority or subaltern groups, is usually constructed in relation to a Eurocentric mainstream, the decision to refuse is therefore the strongest possible agency the circumstance allows. Faced with an overwhelming force of othering by the simple choice to take part in contemporary art in the first place, refusal – however this takes shape – can be the Indigenous artist and critic’s surest advantage.

During his talk, artist Raymond Boisjoly invoked the Darby English book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007). In the introduction, English argues that David Hammons resists “prefab readings” of his work in terms of black experience by making art about the very existence of “black art” as a discursive category.³ The idea of a prefab reading – that an audience’s assumptions about an artist’s identity overdetermine the reception of their work – gives a temporal scope to the back and forth to which Indigenous art is subject: such assumptions always precede the emergence of the work and artists have little recourse but to respond to this situation. This observation provides an insight into the constant vigilance and anticipation required of those artists who strive to avoid having their work circumscribed in this way. It is to the crux of this situation – where politics, aesthetics, identity and representation intersect – to which the broader Wood Land School project is addressed.

Critical Anthology was the sixth iteration of Wood Land School that Linklater has staged since its inception in 2011, when he first curated a modest group exhibition in his studio



above a store on the Nipissing First Nation in Ontario. Linklater, who is Omaskëko Cree, took the title from the “Woodland School” or “Woodland Style,” a name first given to the work of an older generation of Indigenous artists, including Daphne Odjig and Norval Morrisseau. The first of Linklater’s Wood Land Schools included works by Raymond Boisjoly, David Horvitz, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Walter Scott and the artist himself. While, by his own admission, no one came to see the original show, the project took on a new life when Linklater was invited to lead an Indigenous artist residency at the Banff Centre. That version of the Wood Land School, subtitled *What Colour is the Present?*, took place in 2013 at the height of the Idle No More movement and the hunger strike of Chief Theresa Spence over the living conditions of the Attawapiskat First Nation.⁴ Subsequent iterations have included film screenings and reading groups in various locations across Canada.

Critical Anthology, however, raised this somewhat loose grouping of events and curatorial projects to a new level of institutionalization and undertook a more decisive intervention (in the sense of putting words in print) into the critical discourse around Indigenous contemporary art. There were 10 presentations in total, including those of Linklater, Boisjoly, David Garneau, Candice Hopkins, Amy Kazmerchuk, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Liz Park, Postcommodity, cheyanne turions and Walter Scott, as well as a response from Richard William Hill. What follows is not a comprehensive account of the symposium, a project I will leave to the forthcoming book. Instead, I have sought to draw out some of the broad questions upon which presenters found common ground, overlapped and occasionally disagreed. This thematic approach unfortunately means that I do not address all of the presenters, let alone the full range of ideas, critiques and engagements they shared at the event. It does, however, allow me to present a sense of what I took to be their most pressing concerns.

Three main themes stood out: the notion of simultaneity; the museum and the gallery; and the question of the right to speak. “Simultaneity” was a term used by Linklater and echoed by many others, whether as an extension of discourse around the contemporary, a metaphor of the political and ethical connection of Indigenous artists under the shared circumstance of settler colonialism, or as a kind of injunction against the understanding of Indigenous-themed exhibitions as a stage on the way to assimilation. The anthropology museum was implicated both as a part of the exhibitionary apparatus and for its entanglement with the pseudo-scientific theories of race that have been instrumental in the ongoing stereotyping of Indigenous peoples. Of equal if not greater concern for the context of contemporary art is the gallery, which was identified as a locus for struggles of inclusion and visibility. The gallery was also reimagined outside the confines of the white cube as an experimental space in which Indigenous artists can construct sovereign territories through interventions into the landscape. Finally, the questions of authenticity and the authority to speak subtended many of the event’s discussions. They first arose in the sense of an implied demand for Indigenous artists to demonstrate a connection to land, language and community, and in the notion of preserving Indigenous-only spaces. These same ideas, however, were also critiqued from the standpoint of a radical refusal of authority and through an appeal to an open-ended mode of being and art-making in the face of prescriptive performances of Indigeneity.

In his introductory remarks, Linklater framed the symposium as an effort to achieve a certain kind of simultaneity.⁵ This approach was informed by a view of

history in which chronologically disparate events, people and ideas inform actions in the present. He likened this simultaneity to the mode of existence in pre-contact Indigenous cultures that was attenuated, if never quite destroyed, by European settlers through a genocidal program of territorial, cultural and psychological expropriation. The project of re-establishing simultaneity now, Linklater argued, is hindered by “aggregates” of misrepresentation and grief that have built up over time. Contributing to these aggregates are, among other things, narrative and documentary cinemas, which work to circumscribe Indigenous subjectivities.⁶ *Wood Land School: Critical Anthology* was conceived to excavate this aggregate, performing a critical archaeology of what has become an almost “insurmountable pile,” and bringing to the fore perspectives and artistic strategies with which to engage in the present.

Parallels between Linklater’s framing and recent discussions around the contemporary were brought up numerous times, perhaps most directly in artist and critic David Garneau’s unpacking of the very idea of Indigenous contemporary art. Garneau rejected the notion that contemporary art merely denotes art that is contemporaneous or simultaneous with the now.⁷ Rather, he considers it to be something between a period (i.e. following the modern or postmodern era) and an ideology or worldview that a given artist might adopt. In other words, an Indigenous artist could live now while working entirely in a traditional idiom, just as one might exist within modernity and never identify as a modernist. But Garneau took it further by differentiating between Indigeneity, aboriginality and tribal affiliation. He argued that being aboriginal or belonging to a First Nation does not necessarily enjoin someone to claim Indigeneity, even if that person may be aboriginal and affiliated with a First Nation. For Garneau, who is Métis, identifying as Indigenous involves an implicit acknowledgment of a kind of global solidarity that brings with it a responsibility to community, land and identity. Garneau’s own reckoning with this solidarity meant a growing sense that his role as a critic writing about Indigenous art for a mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience implicated him as a kind of Native informant. As history has amply shown, the Native informant’s words can be used against them and an uneasiness with this fact led Garneau to propose that Indigenous art criticism ought to employ a “critical care,” which may involve the construction and maintenance of spaces for the consideration of art that are exclusively Indigenous.⁸

Crucially, neither Linklater’s simultaneity nor Garneau’s definition of Indigenous contemporary art are as concerned with the present as they are with the future. Both strive to find the right approach with which to anticipate and shape future discourse and modes of existence. Such futurity was also a key consideration in cheyanne turions’ close reading of the artwork *Seraphine, Seraphine* (2014) by Krista Belle Stewart.⁹ The work in question juxtaposes two video projections featuring the artist’s mother, Seraphine Stewart – the first aboriginal public health nurse in British Columbia. On one channel is a 1967 CBC docu-drama that loosely portrays Seraphine’s life leading up to and shortly after her nursing studies. In this video, the artist’s mother plays her younger self in a series of scripted scenes shot in grainy black and white and impressionistically montaged over a jazz soundtrack. On the other channel are a series of video excerpts from the elder Stewart’s personal testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).¹⁰ turions, who is of settler and Indigenous ancestry, argues that the two videos – one in which Stewart’s mother tells her own story and another



where she re-enacts a version of her life according to someone else's script – combine to create a “third work” that intervenes into the discourse of recognition and reconciliation emphasized by the TRC, imagining instead an indeterminate, decolonizing “way things ought to be.” The irresolution of this implied third work is key to turions’ argument that it resists definitive interpretation, staking out a space of decolonized future potentiality by remaining always in excess of meaning.

Curator Candice Hopkins, who is a member of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, brought the foregoing issues of temporality, the contemporary and indeterminacy into sharp focus in relation to the fraught history of Indigenous group exhibitions.¹² The problematic status of the latter phenomenon was crystallized for Hopkins in the words of *Globe and Mail* art critic Sarah Milroy who asked in a 2009 review, “Are we past the age of an aboriginal art show?”¹³ As a curator responsible for some of the most challenging and ambitious recent exhibitions to address Indigenous issues (*Sakabàn*, for example, at the National Gallery of Canada in 2013) Hopkins’ position was clear from the start: *No!* Neither group shows of aboriginal artists nor exhibitions organized around the themes of aboriginal identity and/or politics represent a mere developmental stage to be overcome. At the same time, she remained alert to the potential for exclusion and ghettoization with which even the most well-intentioned Indigenous group exhibitions have been complicit since the earliest efforts to assimilate Indigenous work into Western art discourse. It is very easy, as it turns out, to inadvertently contribute to the aggregate of reduction and misrepresentation to which Linklater alluded. Hopkins proposed that self-reflexivity must become a

methodology for exhibition-making. If the seeming aporia at the heart of such projects is ultimately unresolvable, then curators must strive to acknowledge those contradictions and lay them bare. Simultaneity in this case is a conscious decision not to reconcile, assimilate and move on. It means attending to how past wounds persist in the present and critically scrutinizing not only their effects but also the best-intentioned efforts to ameliorate them.

As Hopkins related, institutional efforts to become more inclusive have often belied the tireless struggle by Indigenous advocates to gain visibility and legitimacy in spaces like the National Gallery of Canada by encouraging the acquisition of works by Indigenous artists. For example, following the precedent of the so-called “Indian Group of Seven,” which included Odjig and Morriceau, the Society for Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) successfully lobbied the National Gallery to begin collecting work by Carl Beam. Even in the context of the aforementioned *Sakabàn*, however, Hopkins noted that one form of inclusion can sometimes reveal or incite other forms of exclusion. Institutional anxieties at the National Gallery over the charged politics of Nadia Myre’s contribution to the exhibition led to the posting of a disclaimer to the effect that the views expressed in the work were not those of the Gallery – an unprecedented action that subtly undermined the work’s very inclusion. Hopkins also lamented that the space in the National Gallery devoted to recent acquisitions of Indigenous art, an effort to remedy earlier exclusions, often has the strange effect of presenting such art as a parallel but separate field in which the artists appear to speak only to one another. While Hopkins said she prefers “tearing down” oppressive structures to the rhetoric of “making space.”



Tania Willard, Peter Morin and Gabrielle Hill, *Staking Claim*, 2015,
Performance documentation
IMAGE COURTESY OF: NEW BC INDIAN ART AND WELFARE SOCIETY COLLECTIVE



Krista Belle Stewart, *Seraphine: Her Own Story*, 2014,
digital two channel video, 38 min 57 sec.
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED; IMAGE COURTESY OF MERCER UNION

Critical inquiry into the ideological structures of the museum and the gallery must be re-opened. Institutional critique is not a finished business. The efforts of Hopkins – who, incidentally, is already deploying her critical acumen on a much larger scale as a curator for the upcoming Documenta – and Park, among many others, are proof to this effect; as are unique Indigenous-initiated projects such as BUSH Gallery, Wood Land School and the recent series of exhibitions *c'asna?əm: the city before the city*. The latter was held at multiple institutions around Vancouver in 2016 with the lofty goal of rearticulating a space beyond the site of the exhibition itself: that of a Musqueam village that occupied part of what is now Vancouver about 5,000 years earlier. The portion of *c'asna?əm*: that took place at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, which was co-curated by Jordan Wilson and Susan Rowley, enacted a complete refusal to display Indigenous belongings stolen from the site of the ancient village. Instead, it focused on first-person accounts of living Musqueam people who voiced their own stories and views regarding their ancestral territory.

While refusal may hint at links between disparate topics and approaches, however, it should not be understood to paper over real differences, especially since it essentially signals a disagreement or withdrawal rather than an implicit consensus. The issues of authority and authenticity are important test cases in this respect. *When does speaking as, with or to Indigeneity or Indigenous issues become appropriative and malicious? How can the needs for sovereignty and self-determination be affirmed at the same time as the artistic freedom to pursue forms of aesthetic autonomy (or at least to comment on the potential for autonomy)?* Through the range of positions and voices it highlighted, the Wood Land School demonstrated that these fraught questions will likely remain in a state of perpetual contestation.

Jonah Gray is an independent curator and writer. Recent projects include "Post-Studio Visit," a podcast of artist interviews, and "Curating the Self," a speaker series, both through Or Gallery, Vancouver. He is currently a PhD student in art history at UC San Diego.

Endnotes

- 1 Full disclosure: I was Curator of Discursive Projects at Or Gallery at the time of the symposium. Although I was not involved in originating the project, I worked in a facilitating role in the leadup to and during the event. This fact, along with my own settler background, positions me as a strange combination of insider and outsider, which made me question how and even if I should write this account. Ultimately, however, I have opted to respond in my own way to the many calls made at the symposium for a broader critical engagement with Indigenous contemporary art, while acknowledging my peculiar vantage point upon the proceedings.
- 2 I return to this quote later. It is from Raymond Boisjoly's "Questions without Answers: Needs, Justifications, Explanations, Meaning" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 12, 2016).
- 3 Boisjoly used the term "pre-tematization" to designate the same kind of "prefab readings" that English argues elide the inherent openness of Hammons' work and belie the ultimately discursive character of racial blackness. Darby English, "Introduction," in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007) 2.
- 4 Idle No More is a grassroots political movement founded in 2012 to advocate for Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous rights and respect for treaties that has used social media and the hashtag #idlenomore to coordinate a series of teach-ins, rallies and protests over the ensuing years. Spence's hunger strike was one of the earliest political actions associated with the movement. On December 11, 2012, she began a liquid diet to call attention to the dire health and housing conditions in Attawapiskat and to First Nations issues more broadly.
- 5 Duane Linklater, "Introductory Remarks" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 11, 2016).
- 6 Linklater cited Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Edward S. Curtis' *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914), and Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* (1961) as key examples of films complicit in the dissemination of such reductive representations.
- 7 David Garneau, "Can I Get a Witness?: Indigenous, Art, Criticism" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 12, 2016).
- 8 This closely mirrors the argument of anthropologist Audra Simpson. Her notion of "ethnographic refusal" situates ethnographic writing as inherently bound up with legal jurisdiction and authority. With leis in mind, she favours resisting the colonizing, disciplinary "need" of anthropology to know everything about its objects of study by refusing to tell all in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 9 While turions specifically addressed the version of this work that was installed at Mercer Union, it has also been shown with different titles in slightly different iterations at Esker Foundation in Calgary and at Artspeak in Vancouver.
- 10 The TRC was established as part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement in 1998 and builds on the model set by a similar commission in South Africa that arose in the aftermath of Apartheid. The TRC has a mandate to find out the truth about what happened at the government-funded, church-run schools, to inform all Canadians about its findings and to initiate a process of healing and reconciliation. Over more than 100 years, more than 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were brought to these schools in an effort to systematically "kill the Indian in the child" by eliminating parental involvement in virtually all aspects of the children's upbringing.
- 11 cheyanne turions, "From Where Do You Speak?: Locating the Possibility of Decolonization in Krista Belle Stewart's 'Seraphine Seraphine'" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 12, 2016).
- 12 Candice Hopkins, "Outside the Margins and inside the Institution" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 13, 2016).
- 13 Sarah Milroy, "Are We Past the Age of an Aboriginal Art Show?," *The Globe and Mail*, April 21, 2009, sec. *Visual Arts Review*, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/aboriginal-art-show-riddled-with-cliches/article4211394/>
- 14 Linklater made this observation in the question period following Candice Hopkins' talk.
- 15 For a more in-depth unpacking of these ideas, see Marcia Crosby, "Lines, Lineage and Lies, or Borders, Boundaries and Bullshit," in *Nations in Urban Landscapes* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1997); and Jimmie Durham, Nikos Papastergiadis, and Laura Turney, *On Becoming Authentic: Interview with Jimmie Durham* (Cambridge, UK: Prickly Pear Press, 1996).
- 16 Linklater.
- 17 "Author Joseph Boyden's Shape-Shifting Indigenous Identity," *APTN National News*, December 23, 2016, <http://sptn.ca/news/2016/12/23/author-joseph-boyden-s-shape-shifting-indigenous-identity/>
- 18 Robert Jago argues that the issue is not Boyden's "blood" but rather that his claims to Indigeneity – which have changed over time – aren't backed up by affiliation with a particular Indigenous community in "The Boyden Controversy Is Not about Bloodline," <http://thewalrus.ca/the-boyden-controversy-is-not-about-bloodline/>; likewise, Richard William Hill has made some relevant comments about the slippery slope of policing identity in "Art by Indigenous Artists, or Art about Indigenous Issues?," *Canadian Art*, <http://canadianart.ca/features/art-by-indigenous-artists-or-art-about-indigenous-issues/>.
- 19 Boisjoly.
- 20 Richard William Hill, "Closing Remarks" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 13, 2016).
- 21 Liz Park identified our present moment as post-9/11, post-2008 crash, post-Occupy, to which I would add post-Idle No More, post-TRC and post-Standing Rock.