



koffler gallery

**RAYMOND BOISJOLY: OVER A  
DISTANCE BETWEEN ONE AND  
MANY**

Guest Curator: Sarah Robayo Sheridan Apr 14 – Jun 5, 2016

On the occasion of his solo exhibition at the Koffler Gallery, Raymond Boisjoly was interviewed by guest curator Sarah Robayo Sheridan in a public conversation that took place on April 17, 2016. The following is an edited excerpt of this live discussion. The full audio recording can be accessed at [www.koffler.digital/koffler-live](http://www.koffler.digital/koffler-live).

**SRS:** This is your first solo exhibition in Toronto but this new body of work exemplifies familiar processes. You are often drawn to existing photographic sources, and here Maya Deren's film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* serves as a point of departure. Various manipulations of the footage are performed using consumer grade equipment to produce abstracted images. Regarding this approach to the media, you mentioned to me the idea of distracted listening. Can you talk about that as a metaphor for your visual strategy?

**RB:** I encountered the idea of distracted listening in Jonathan Sterne's book *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. He talks about the history of radio and the image we have of people gathering around the radio like a fireplace. Sterne claims that distracted listening has always been as common as the more focused form. So I was interested in thinking about an engagement with media that isn't about finding ourselves in front of it, but instead existing proximate to it. A lot of the material I've encountered or used – in this case Maya Deren's film – has been from YouTube, where videos are always tied to other suggested videos. Rather than being a singular entity, a YouTube video exists in this other realm, proximate to all these other media works, sometimes created intentionally and sometimes incidentally. The visual equivalent of distracted listening happens in my work through technological mediation, the ways in which I subject videos to this process, and the extent to which it holds me back from controlling what is captured of the image. Instead, I have to simply deal with the outcome of that process.

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**AS SUCH, THE RESULTING IMAGES ARE NOT ABOUT BECOMING WHAT I WANT OF THEM BUT RATHER BECOMING SOMETHING OF THEIR OWN.**

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**SRS:** I wonder about the contrast between distracted listening as you describe it, versus the intensified form of directed watching that is characteristic of many ethnographic films. How does your strategy of processing the image speak to or counter the dynamics of the source content?

**RB:** Deren was interested in documenting the importance of dance to Vodou spiritual practice in Haiti. I saw an exhibition of Vodou objects in Gatineau at what was then called the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The entire exhibition was prefaced by a Taino object – Taino being the Indigenous people of Haiti. I was struck by the power of these objects within Vodou and the recognition that knowledge of the land and plant life in Haiti was premised on an encounter with the Indigenous people of that land. There's a certain political consequence to thinking about the relation of Indigenous peoples to others who come after. I became interested in Deren's film because she embodied this responsibility about how to represent Vodou practices. She decided to become an initiate, to change herself so as to represent the practices differently, to forego her own artistic intentions in order to realize the importance of the culture. It is the means through which she implicates herself that I was most interested in.

Ethnographic or directed looking is about framing, the means through which things are given significance or deemed important. But I'm drawn to what happens at the periphery. If we disorient our vision, if we seek to misunderstand that which is being viewed or recorded, then another type of understanding can emerge, one that only comes through detour or obstacle. When you don't have direct and immediate access, it ultimately changes your knowledge of the content and how you might proceed to actually speak to others about it. There is a productive character to misrecognition or misunderstanding. People don't work in circumstances of their own making. How can that be redeemed in some way, how can something good come of those circumstances?

**SRS:** Another theme that I've heard you talk about a lot in relation to your work is ambivalence. Can you talk about ambivalence as both an artistic strategy and perhaps even as a political framework?

**RB:** I talk to students a lot about communicating ambivalence about art. It's about art as not being a surrogate for those things we might want to do or accomplish. Art is something in and of itself and we have to be realistic about its potential function in terms of our understanding of our relationships to each other within the world. Art can be situated in a more manageable context to assert "it actually is this thing," as opposed to "this is what it can do." Rather than speaking about art as a positive or simply redemptive category, I see it existing as a social buffer, allowing the means through which we can engage in conversations we might otherwise only wish to be having. We can orient ourselves around it in such a way that we might come to encounter one another differently in changed circumstances. I think we're supposed to believe in the transformative force of art, whereas its transformative force resides perhaps in the communication between people in front of it, rather than in the thing itself. Ambivalence is just about finding ways in which we can manifest that responsibility to one another. The artwork won't do that for us.







**SRS:** This seems to relate also to the particular tenor of the text component of the work – though the words are so big and bold and bright, I find them to be very evanescent. There’s a lot of space there and it seems to link up to this ambivalence. It’s an important and difficult maneuver within language to write in a non-definitive way. Would you describe how those words are generated?

**RB:** I see the texts as having a cryptic character, not fully revealing what may have led to their composition. I don’t write them for themselves, I write them for these works. I write in these particular circumstances. Rather than in a word processing program like Microsoft Word, they’re written in Adobe Photoshop with the emphasis on the way in which they’re visualized. I’m writing not only in response to Deren’s film but also about the changed state of things, historical contingencies in general, the way those manifest in the works of Indigenous artists and others. It really becomes about trying to figure out ways in which the text can maintain some relevance to a wider realm of phenomena, without being restricted or reduced to that one thing. Instead of describing or delimiting their circumstances, they’re cryptic to the extent that people might actually bring to them certain experiences that are totally unforeseen to me. A text might come to resonate in a particular way on a particular day.



**SRS:** Can you describe precedents for the mode of making foregrounded in this exhibition?

**RB:** The images in the exhibition are produced by taking video material and playing it on touch screen technology, an iPhone or an iPad, placed on a flatbed scanner. As the video plays, the



scanner tries to fix it, but it's a futile effort because ultimately there's no capacity to control those circumstances. In a past work *Pat & Lolly Vegas (Interval: 1965/2013) Write Me, Baby 01*, I used a video concerning these two Indigenous musicians who, in the span of a decade, went from wearing sharply tailored suits on a local Los Angeles teen music program to wearing powwow regalia on national television in the band Redbone. I was really interested in the furtive character of their identity in relation to this. The song they're singing is called "Write Me, Baby," and it's about maintaining a romantic relationship via post, writing to someone you love overseas. What that signals to me is a very casual relationship with the written word to the extent that it could engender these feelings between two people. My interest in that was the assumption that Indigenous cultures are orally communicated from person to person, as if Indigenous people don't have the written word now. I understand that the oral basis of Indigenous cultural practice is important but I'm interested in the historical transformations that led to Indigenous peoples being involved in media generally, and their contribution to and participation within modernity. That is a continuing interest of mine.

In this case, the video is being pulled across the surface of the flatbed scanner to create this elongated image and the particular technology of the scanner reads the red, green and blue colours of the image separately. When it's a still image, those colours come to cohere but when it's a moving image, they're registered in a way that separates them. That colour is always there but only visible with the misuse of these technologies.



**SRS:** Can you discuss your selection and use of the coloured type in this exhibition?

**RB:** Marcia Crosby's work as an art historian has been incredibly important for me. In 2013, we held a public talk in relation to an exhibition she curated in 1995 in Vancouver called *Nations and Urban Landscapes*, which was about urban Indigenous peoples and the ways in which Indigenous identity or authenticity concerns a number of criteria – the capacity to speak one's heritage language, whether or not one lives in one's home community, and whether or not one can actually define their relationship to their community. For very good reasons there are a number of Indigenous peoples who can't do this. It was incredibly important for me to think about what it meant to work in a city as so much professional opportunity for Indigenous artists is in cities. We find ourselves in these circumstances because ultimately that's where we go to school and that's where we find work. Marcia was talking about growing up in Prince Rupert and how the colours purple and red were racialized, seen as Indian colours. And so I was really interested in what it might be like to redeem that ugliness, and the idea of these colours having that significance or functionality.

**SRS:** This leads me to a question about positionality. Invocations of the personal aren't automatically visible in your work; instead the texts float in a kind of suspension. At the opening, the artist Duane Linklater reflected that he was curious to know what this voice is and where it comes from.

**RB:** A lot of it is about writing in a particular state where I can step outside of it and feel as though I can engage with it as a reader as well. It doesn't concern me so much. I'm definitely interested in the idea of a positionality that's not premised on somebody embodying a fixed position in relation to what they see as their circumstances, but rather about articulating and re-articulating one's relationship to people and things. I think that question "where is this voice from?" is a very useful one. That uncertainty is a critical question. Does it become a manifestation of authority or deferral of authority? It's undecidability – what it is, what is the place it speaks for, how are these statements possible – I think about it in relation to critiques of authorship. The importance is actually coming to consider the circumstances that lead someone to make such a statement, as opposed to who I am, what my position is and how that might be read into the text itself. The opportunity to reframe ourselves in relation to those things is really crucial.



**PASTS  
STILL TO  
COME**



**STILL TO  
BE FOUND**

**SRS:** Deren's film embodies a number of transmissions across distances. The film's authorship is diffused – it was an unfinished work, only released posthumously by her third husband Teiji Ito and his wife Cheryl Winett some twenty years later. Vodou dance was originally transmitted to Deren by Katherine Dunham, the African-American choreographer who she worked for. These circumstances were the product of the commingling of different diasporas in the context of New York in the 1940s and 50s. These modes of transfer generated across time and place seem to resonate with your own interests in transmission.

**RB:** Transmission – the means through which things move between people and places. I think about it in terms of noise, this idea that all aspects of communication are impacted by noise, which is the space between sender and receiver. As I say something, the means through which it actually arrives to you transforms it. Transmission is about the potential to acknowledge shared circumstances and the potential to relate to one another differently, based on the imprecise ways in which things are communicated.

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*Raymond Boisjoly: Over a distance between one and many* is a Primary Exhibition of the 2016 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

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**Raymond Boisjoly** is an Indigenous artist of Haida descent based in Vancouver, Canada. His practice concerns the deployment of images, objects and materials in and as Indigenous art. A reflexive approach is used to foreground the discourses that frame and delimit the work produced by Indigenous artists. Boisjoly has been included in exhibitions and projects at SITE Santa Fe, Triangle France (Marseille), Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Vancouver Art Gallery, The Power Plant (Toronto) and Presentation House Gallery (North Vancouver). Boisjoly is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studio in the Department of Visual Art + Material Practice at Emily Carr University of Art and Design and is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

**Sarah Robayo Sheridan** is the curator of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Specializing in the presentation and dissemination of contemporary art, she has worked in a variety of non-profit galleries, museums and festivals both in Canada and internationally. In addition to publishing on contemporary art, she also teaches curatorial studies. Her independent research has received recognition from the Canada Council for the Arts. She holds an MA in Curatorial Practice from the California College of the Arts.

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