



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

Erin Sutherland, 'Interview with Tanya Lukin Linklater', *Northern Convergences*, McLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Canada, 2020

# 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.