

Tense: On Tanya Lukin Linklater's *We Wear One Another*



We wear one another, 2019, site-specific performance projected on wood plinth, 48 x 24 x 85 in., 25 minutes 18 seconds. Installation view at *Soundings*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

Several times in the autumn of 2020, I was gathered (there) with nobody on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Musqueam people. A gallery attendant would greet me as I approached her plexi-shielded station to write down my contact tracing information with a pen I'd brought from home, and she would peek in occasionally to wherever I was in the gallery to see if I'd moved on, so that she could disinfect any surfaces I might have touched. Otherwise, I was there by myself.

While submitting my contact tracing info, the audio track to Tanya Lukin Linklater's video installation *We Wear One Another*, performed on electric violin by Laura Ortman, also greeted me. At the exhibition I encountered it in, *Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts*, in its fourth "part" at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, *We Wear One Another* wasn't always the only work that one could hear, but often it was.

As it acoustically inhabited the architecture of the Belkin, *We Wear One Another* put pressure on our experience of time. When visitors to the exhibition reached the work, they had been hearing it for a while. Like many other freely amplified looping video works, it told us that it was there before we were, and that it would still be there after we leave.

*

I'm proceeding with the assumption that a work of art can exist in a tense, the way a poem can. By tense, I mean something like Roland Barthes's theorization of the unique tense of the photographic snapshot in *Camera Lucida*, or the art critic Michael Fried's well-known periodizing differentiation between high modernist art's presentness and the here-and-now presence of minimalist sculpture.¹ I also mean the interpretive impulse behind the art writing convention of always discussing elements internal to a work of art in the present tense, even when they have already happened. (I will follow this convention here.) On the aesthetics of tense, I am guided most directly by the work of Beth Povinelli, who over the last decade has written brilliantly about tense in her studies on Indigenous dispossession and ecological catastrophe — for example, she points out that “the truth-value of the Indigenous–Aboriginal–Native voice [in settler-colonial states] is figured in the past perfect, while the truth-value of the settler is figured in the unmarked present or future anterior,” thereby naturalizing unequal treatment of Indigenous and settler citizens by the law.²

We Wear One Another pursues a tense that the English language can't articulate — perhaps one which it occludes.

At the point of first visual contact with the work, our eyes are directed downward. The video is projected vertically from a ceiling-mounted projector onto a low wooden support. Often, the wood planks that visibly comprise the projection surface rhyme with the wooden rehearsal studio floor depicted in the video. At one of these moments when wood overlaps wood, my awareness that I was looking down crossed paths with my observation of where I was, and of the near total absence of ceremony and gatherings in my life over the preceding six-to-nine months; my thoughts drifted to the land acknowledgment that prefaces every cultural event at UBC: *We are gathered here today as uninvited guests on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Musqueam people.*

A lot can be made of the temporalities of traditional, ancestral, and unceded in the land acknowledgment. In fact, the primer on land acknowledgments on UBC's Student Services website explicitly parses them out for newcomers. The land acknowledgment collectivizes the not neatly compatible epistemologies of first occupation (traditional), genealogy (ancestral), and property law (unceded) by anchoring it “here” and, as implied by the “today” and the present progressive tense of “are gathered,” now. Without having the space now to interrogate every word of that sentence — the grammatical construction of “are gathered” instead of “have gathered” and the casual equation of the pronoun “we” with “uninvited guests” could stand to bear some scrutiny — *We Wear One Another* seems to most profoundly challenge what we mean when we say “here.”

In *We Wear One Another*, the point of view, handheld and guided by videographer Neven Lochhead, is always moving. As such, a neat modernist collapse of the video's depicted wood floor on the wooden projection surface is always partial and, moreover, never still. At the risk of using a loaded term too casually, the point of view never

settles, and seems to insist on this. The studio, in the luxuriously modernist Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts at Queen's University, is highlighted by a curtain wall overlooking Lake Ontario. The stunning seascape, which is almost always partially in view, pulls the viewers' attention from the studio floor, on which the two dancers, Ceinwen Gobert and Danah Rosales, are lying in the first section of the video. At the same time as the installation seems to ask us to acknowledge that we are standing on Musqueam land, the video reminds us that the performance we have gathered there to watch takes place in Kingston, in the territories of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee. Partially, *We Wear One Another* is about displacement, as rehearsed in the superimposition of a gathering at Queen's University — where the performance was developed over a week of open rehearsals in 2019 — onto UBC campus in the fall semester of 2020, when virtually no gatherings were allowed. What it most forcefully offers, however, is a powerful reimagining of our collective relationship to the lands that are currently Canada and the United States with regard to mobility. In another context, the artist David Garneau has written: "We are sovereign by virtue of our motion, our performance of territory. Moving, visiting, migrating, and the powwow circuit are all exercises of domain rather than claims of dominion. When we travel inter-Nationally, we are learners and ambassadors."³

We Wear One Another does not erase the deleterious valences of displacement — which in its view are not limited to land dispossession — but does also pursue, through a series of mobilizations and substitutions, an ethics of stewardship founded on collective and mutual care that moves from cultural belonging to landscape to land. This ethics, the work seems to suggest, founds a grammar that dissolves and reconstitutes the "back" in land back.

*

Soundings is a traveling exhibition curated by Candice Hopkins and Dylan Robinson around the potential of scores to be "a tool or call for decolonization." It opened in the spring of 2019 at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University and is scheduled to conclude its five-part run at the Kamloops Art Gallery this summer. Lukin Linklater's project, which was commissioned for the exhibition, uses an Inuvialuit rain gut parka from the Mackenzie Delta as a score for collective performance. In doing so, it practices the exhibition's titular gerund, sounding — interpreted here as the reanimation of a collected, institutionalized, and presumably now dormant cultural belonging by occasioning new cultural activity from and for it. This participates in critical, Indigenous-led stewardship; the project doesn't so much restore the object to its past uses and life as it helps it continue to live. The first culmination of *We Wear One Another*, as a performance presented by The Ka'tarohkwi Festival of Indigenous Arts near the end of *Soundings*' run at the Agnes, gathered the dancers Gobert and Rosales and the violinist Ortman with the parka to communicate to one another.⁴ An accompanying text by Lukin Linklater, displayed a short walk away at the Agnes, does likewise — "did you know that you and i would meet / were you waiting for me" — ambiguously addressing both the parka and the whale whose intestines it was sewn from.

Soundings was conceived as an accumulating exhibition that “shifts and evolves, gaining new artists and players in each location. Some artworks have multiple parts, others change to their own rhythm as the exhibition grows.”⁵ *Untitled (for a rain gut parka made and worn near the Mackenzie Delta, Northwest Territories, collected by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1924)*, Lukin Linklater’s installation for the exhibition’s inaugural leg at the Agnes, displayed the parka, borrowed from the Manitoba Museum, lying on a wooden support that closely resembles the one the video is projected onto at the Belkin. It was paired with a matching support that held Lukin Linklater’s text, flanked on each side by three packs of American Spirit cigarettes. The performers visited with the parka at the Agnes and developed the performance at the nearby Bader Centre. The project, however, outlived the Agnes exhibition and in its visits to other territories continues to grow after the event of the parka being sounded by the performers — even after it was presumably returned to institutional storage in Winnipeg. It has heretofore culminated in the traveling video installation I am discussing, whose footage documents a rehearsal from the morning of the performance for The Ka’tarohkwi Festival. Added to the performance event are the inspired camerawork of Lochhead and Lukin Linklater’s text, excerpts of which appear in the video to punctuate the ends of the performance’s three sections, as well, crucially, as its new audiences in new locations.



We wear one another (still), 2019, site-specific performance projected on wood plinth, 48 x 24 x 85 in, 25 minutes, 18 seconds.

In a sense, Lake Ontario is also a participant in *We Wear One Another*. But this is a contradictory point in the work, not unlike the ambivalent, perhaps pyrrhic, gesture of the American Spirit cigarette offering laid out for the parka alongside Lukin Linklater’s apostrophic text. It might be more accurate to say that the architecture of the Bader Centre, which simultaneously occupies and frames the landscape, is a co-participant. The performance’s first section opens with the dancers lying on the studio floor in a visual rhyme of the inert parka displayed at the Agnes. The dancers slowly move in ways that at times approach an embrace of the floor before eventually rising to a seated position in movements that articulate the floor’s function as a support. My impulse is

to take the floor as an imperfect, possibly failed, stand in for the landscape on the other side of the windows, where we intermittently see passersby walking on the waterfront promenade. The second section, in which the two dancers reorient themselves from the floor to each other and move in gestures of mutual support, seems to comment on treating the architecture as a compromise for landscape, in turn landscape as a compromise for land, and land for a far more holistic, unmodular sense of what we usually mean by that word. Here, the performance most directly acts out its title.

The parka appears twice in the video: in a brief but slow zoom shot of it on the wooden support in the Agnes to open the video, then again in a longer coda between the first and second sections. In its second appearance, the camera tightly pans across the surface of the parka twice, first along its horizontal stitching, then perpendicular to it. This second panning shot continues past the edge of the parka onto the second wooden support, which is empty. As the camera lingers and comes almost to rest, nearly achieving the ‘perfect’ modernist collapse of depicted wood on wooden projection surface that never coalesces with the studio floor, the wooden support itself unfolds into the competing positivist epistemologies it invokes: those of the sculptural plinth, apparatus for anthropological museum display, archaeological site excavation table, and blank projection screen. Insofar as *We Wear One Another* invokes Michael Snow’s iconic structural film *Wavelength*, whose point of view is also always in motion, albeit in one long continuous zoom that ends fitted to the frame of a seascape photograph tacked to a bit of wall between two pairs of floor-to-ceiling windows, it does so to resist what the film critic Annette Michelson once described as “the movement of the camera as the movement of consciousness.”⁶ Our consciousness, even in the Husserlian sense that Michelson meant it, impedes the tense the work inhabits.

A dotted white line seemingly inspired by the parka’s stitching runs across the curtain wall roughly one quarter of the way from the floor to ceiling. At a number of points, the camera’s movement seems to be in service of trying to line up the white dots with the actual horizon. In an intertitled break between the second and third sections — this is the most *Wavelengthy* part of the video — they just about do line up. But the handheld quality of this image, which is askew to the frame and the support it’s projected on, seems to deny abstract, medium-specific collapse rather than achieve it. Instead, the parka and seascape might be wearing one another here.

*

Conventionally, when musicians, dancers, and artists in the post-Cage/Cunningham/Fluxus tradition use something non-notational as a score, the performers invent or develop a way of ‘reading’ the score as if it were a notation. The open-ended, usually improvisational element in the practice of score reading is supposed to liberate musical time, as conventionally ‘stored’ in notation (to borrow the media theorist Friedrich Kittler’s formulation), through ingenious play.⁷ While I don’t know (and haven’t asked) how Lukin Linklater and the performers ‘read’ the parka, looking at the linear stitching that holds the strips of gutskin together, embellished by serial auklet beak and feather tassels, one can make several educated guesses. What

seems more profound, however, is the work's imaginative registering of the parka's technique, the cultural practices of its making and use, and of the whale who provided its intestines for the garment. As the dancers wear one another, they enact the function of the parka, enabled by its incredibly tight stitching and the intestinal tissue itself, to be a waterproof second skin for hunters; they also pantomime the shaping of the parka by the wearer's body, inverting the use of the garment as merely a tool and suggesting a reciprocal relationship.

As the dance uneasily interacts with the seascape seen through the curtain wall, it is tempting to imagine a sweeping synthesis of performance, architecture, and landscape — perhaps even a hunter sealed into a kayak by the parka, guided by the whale while cutting through the water. But *We Wear One Another* is not so literally interested in making the past present; its temporality isn't that clean. In the climactic third section, Gobert runs back and forth along the length of the curtain wall, using the silhouettes cast by the sun through the windows like an athlete running gym floor lines in sprint training. These exercises, which must also be motivated by the parka's stitch lines, slowly transition into a balletic performance. (Rosales similarly erupts from stretching into dance.) While this is going on, what is going on outside intrudes again: despite the dancers' virtuoso performances at their most spectacular, we find ourselves observing the mundanity of two students on the small terrace immediately outside the window taking lake backdropped photos of each other.

Ortman's swirly electric violin seems to envelop all of this, in the manner of land, water, and the parka. Aided by an array of sustain, delay, echo, reverb, and feedback effects, it sounds a kind of a-linear time that is both recursive and pliable. *We Wear One Another* overlays the temporalities of the parka in its original life, its interment in the ethnographic historical time of the museum, its creative reanimation in performance, the diegetic time of the video on the territories of the Anishinabek Nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the viewers' experience of it in their present on unceded Musqueam land. It also acknowledges but does not dwell on the event of colonial acquisition by the Hudson's Bay Company and the presentness of the students' Instagram feeds. Ultimately, *We Wear One Another* pursues and gives thanks to the animating spirit of the whale that, it suggests, survives these migrations of the parka and exists in its own temporality that we have no linguistic tense to name.

Notes:

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), especially 80–89; and Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 12–23.
2. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “The Governance of the Prior,” in *interventions* 13, no. 1 (2011): 23.
3. David Garneau and Kimberley Moulton, “Sovereign by virtue of our motion,” in *transits & returns*, eds. Tarah Hogue, Sarah Biscarra Dilley, Freja Carmichael, Léuli Eshrāgi, and Lana Lopesi (Vancouver and Brisbane: Vancouver Art Gallery/Institute of Modern Art, 2019), 23–24.
4. The inaugural Ka'tarohkwi Festival of Indigenous Arts took place from February 12 to March 24, 2019 at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts and was also curated by Dylan Robinson. It featured music, film, dance, multimedia, theatre, visual art, and virtual reality stories from Indigenous creators.
5. “Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts,” Independent Curators International, accessed Jan 11, 2021, <https://curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/soundings>.
6. Annette Michelson, “Toward Snow,” in *Artforum* 9, no. 10 (Summer 1971): 32.
7. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). Originally published in 1986.

Images:

1. Tanya Lukin Linklater, *We wear one another*, 2019, site-specific performance projected on wood plinth, 48 x 24 x 85 in. (122 x 61 x 216 cm), 25 minutes, 18 seconds. Installation view, *Soundings*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, 2020. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.
2. Tanya Lukin Linklater, *We wear one another* (still), 2019, site-specific performance projected on wood plinth, 48 x 24 x 85 in. (122 x 61 x 216 cm), 25 minutes, 18 seconds. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

Copy Permalink

Godfre Leung is a critic and curator based in the territory currently known as Vancouver. His writing has appeared in magazines such as *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Art in America*, *C Magazine*, *The Third Rail*, and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, and has been commissioned for publications by a number of institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art and Walker Art Center. As part of his ongoing curatorial project *unstatelily*, he recently organized the exhibition *Pao Houa Her: Emplotment* (Or Gallery, 2020) and commissioned and edited the poetry chapbook *granted to a foreign citizen* by Sun Yung Shin (Artspeak, 2020).