Movement Research
Performance Journal

a wallow is a noun turned inside out and upside down: Tanya Lukin Linklater

Contributor
Katie Brewer Ball

Type
Essay

Release date
20 October 2026

Journal
Dance Studies

When we meet to talk about her recent work *buffalounit for bison bison (dance_hum for dirtbath)* at Dia Chelsea, Tanya Lukin Linklater explains that *bison bison* is a "social formation" and a "dance_hum" is a feeling, "a resonance in our bones." She is an artist who improvises between genres—a choreographer, a poet, a parent, a partner, a scholar, an aspen, a visitor, a storm system, a constellation, a sky. Lukin Linklater's choreographic explorations are texturally and affectively felt. Her work reminds me that art is a conversation and that it can, and maybe should, be a social formation as well. Artworks do not spring out of the blue from the mind of one person; art is an intergenerational dialogue, a place to which we return like a buffalo to its wallow.

buffalounit explores the atmospheric potentials that surround the buffalo's terraformed earth and ecosystems of joy. The work was made in concert with her longtime collaborator and partner, Duane Linklater (Omaskēko Ininiwak from Moose Cree First Nation), for his installation at Dia Chelsea, *Duane Linklater*: 12+2. Taking place over the course of seven consecutive Saturdays between September 13th and October 25th, 2025, the performance of *buffalounit* lasted forty-four minutes and each start time was adjusted slightly to account for daily loss of the autumnal equinox light. Many of Lukin Linklater's recent performance works do not culminate in a final showing, but function as in-process rehearsals, resisting the singularity of a final finish. *buffalounit* stretched into seven fall public performances, each of which lost a musician or dancer progressively during the course of the work until there was one musician and dancer left.



Photo by Don Stahl

The first performance of *buffalounit* on September 20th begins as the dancers—Mekko Harjo (Mvskoke, Shawnee, Seminole and enrolled Quapaw Nation), Talia Dixon (Payómkawichum, Pauma Band of Luiseño), Jonathan González and Sam Aros-Mitchell (Texas Band of Yaqui Indians)—enter a large room outlined by audience members sitting and standing along the edges. Among the audience are four of seven large wallowing buffalo sculptures that live in the two-room gallery space week after week. The dancers lay down in a star-like pattern, heads together and feet pointing towards the edges of the room. Plucking strings and shimmering drumbeats fill up the brutalist gallery space. The dancers begin to lightly tap their chests with their fingers as though they are playing their own body instruments, waking up, or stimming. Their rapid digital movements cross their collarbones, forearms, faces, and ribcages. Like a slant rhyme, they move together in similar gestures meeting before departing again on their own journeys. Tapping soothes the nervous system; a distraction or interruption; it is a kind of presencing. As the dancers start to slow, there is a lull in the music. This is the buffalounit arriving and everyone seems to rest quietly with just our breath at this moment.

On the far end of the room sit musicians Gladstone Butler, Fjóla Evans, and Miguel Gallego. Created by eagleswitheyesclosed (itself a collaboration between Linklater and their son Tobias), and adapted by composer Rahul Nair, the music included temporal parameters set up as meeting points with the dancers. The performance score establishes both structure and room for improvisation between the musicians themselves, as well as between the dancers and musicians. In the creation of the piece, it was only after the choreography had been set that the dancers first heard the music played live on the electric guitar, drums, and cello. The music that resulted

from these collaborative efforts create a sad cello sound that recalls all the films I have seen of emptied out North American prairie life. The cello, however, is broken up with rock and roll guitar and an upbeat dance party drumscape. To say that there is dissonance, is not quite right, but there is a play and movement between different feelings. The relationship between the drum and the choreography is not one to one, by which I mean that the music is not used to predictively propel the dancers. Instead, the sounds and gestures are done in concert without an immediately legible relationship. The dancers reach their arms out and curl them back over their heads. There is something discordant about the drumming alongside their slow movements. Sometimes the guitar notes sound sour, and at other times they sound harmonic and acoustic, as the cello holds its line of thought, producing a steady hum. In fits and starts, the sound and movement tell us that something is begining. Lukin Linklater's choreographic score sets a frame while still allowing ample space for the musicians and dancers to bring themselves to the work.



Photo by Don Stahl

An enrolled member of the Native villages of Afognak and Port Lions in the Kodiak archipelago, Lukin Linklater is herself inspired by customary Alaska Native dance, a movement vocabulary characterized by controlled stationary legs, beats that move the dancers in concert with the wood frame drummers. Lukin Linklater believes in strong hands, in their gestural vocabulary, and in the information they transmit. It is easy to see this in the energetic qualities of the dancer's upper body work in *buffalounit*. They are deliberate with their strong thighs and steady torsos, not delicate or airy (like ballerinas). Each dancer is themself a solid performer, conveying a clear understanding of how movement can be worn in the space.

At one point, the music pauses and I think I can hear the sung hum from the dancer's chests over the honking taxicabs on streets of Mannahatta. The music begins again and the dancers roll slowly over, transforming into creatures with bouldered backbones, *bison bison*; they stretch out into a reverse scooping shape, as though they are waking up their bodies . Laying back down again, the dancers wallow in the dirt, reach out and touch the ground, all comfortable in their sinking terraforming play. They are in their buffalo wallows, compacted dirt and mud indentations formed after a buffalo lays down and rolls on its back. A buffalo wallows when it is feeling happy or playful, when it wants to cool down, to shed its winter coat, or to clean and relieve skin irritations or biting insects. Throughout the forty-four-minute performance dancers wallow and bathe, finding moments of freedom in the earth. They make buffalo formations even as their shapes recall the sky, the stars, and the architecture of Cree ceremonial space outlined by Duane Linklater's deconstructed teepee canvas hanging on the exposed rafters.

Neatly folded piles of tan and navy Pendleton Beaver State blankets sit in the space, blankets often used for celebratory and ceremonial purposes. The dirt bath, one of the most striking images in *buffalounit*, is punctuated by these blankets with their own woolen warmth, and their ability to harbor disease or shield the body from a gaze or a cold breeze. Dixon lays beneath a blanket while González butts another pile of them across the floor; they roll across them in impulsive and erratic movements. To dance with an animal is not to mimic it, but thinking with choreographers Emma Bigé and mayfield brooks, is to come into relation and to learn.[1] Here, dance is a responsibility and an invitation into the ethical relation of presence. The breath and spit of the dancers intermingle with the audience's heat and the dirt from the bottom of their shoes brought in off the city streets.

In the first of the seven showings, Aros-Mitchell is the star of the dirt bath. He looks like a starfish as he bends down with his long hair nearly touching the ground and then stands back up pointing his arms and legs outwards. Alternatingly he makes a wide windy scooping gesture, as though he is carrying an armload of logs. The gallery air is ghosted by the invisible dirt of the wallow. Over time Aros-Mitchell's movements become more frantic and Harjo joins in, creating a more measured swing and rhythmic disturbance of the ghosted earth. As my eyes move back and forth between the dancers in the loud hum of the wallow, I notice González and Dixon have both retreated under their blankets and are moving slowly, even more buffalo-like, with their new woolen hides. Eventually Aros-Mitchell's bath leads him to the newspaper pile. As the cello repeats its resonant scratching, Aros-Mitchell stands in front of the musicians and billows his arms into a rock guitar style strum. The audience is included in the dirt cleansed depression of the prairie wallow.

In a later performance when only González and Dixon are left, González appears to take over the weathering of the dirt bath, a phrase that sounds like a slur, like a shit show. They walk behind the percussionist, looping their long arms as if they are conducting an orchestra in double-time, hands overhead in alternating rounds with the heavy rhythmic drumming until the music slows. Dixon sits on a folded pile of

blankets, bathing herself. It looks as though she is gathering dirt around her thighs, washing them in dust through repeated hands swooshing down the leg and away from her body. Finally, Dixon walks a path around the perimeter as she repeats the phrase, uttered in the first performance by Harjo, "a wallow is a noun turned inside out and upside down." The haptic *swish-swish* of her pants creates a sound of friction. This is how the piece ends. In the last performance Dixon wallows alone, extending her hands up together, crossing her wrists. In the dance's culminating drum-fueled bath she almost floats, gently inviting the dirt up into the atmosphere with the same scooping gesture used by both González and Aros-Mitchell. In her it feels measured, almost reverential, like an ongoing durational practice that could last for months.

Meanwhile Duane Linklater's buffalo sculptures hold the corners of the gallery plotting the opening for movement. These four buffalos are perhaps a herd made up of different sizes and ages, all engaging in the wallow. While the sculptures give the felt sense of the buffalos as their bodies stretch and recline in different shapes, there is also something heavy and earthen about them. The polystyrene foam of their bodies is covered over with synthetic clay-colored stucco. One buffalo has the face of a triangle, one is a calf, and still another appears to be the oldest matriarch among them, carrying blankets on her hump. The sculptures appear at a distance from one another, not interacting, but seemingly at ease.



Photo by Dan Stahl

Buffalo are connected to plains Indigenous People, from the southern plains to the northern boreal forests. Tasha Hubbard (Peepeekisis First Nation) writes that:

> "For some Plains Indigenous peoples, buffalo are known as the first people. […] My own teachings tell me that the buffalo people take care of us and teach us how to live, much like a benevolent grandparent. Many Euro- Western viewpoints disregard this knowledge or relegate it to the category of folk tales.[2]"

In Indigenous epistemology, buffalo are ancestors and kin, they are not animals in the service of man . Yet under a late-nineteenth century settler colonial campaign, buffalos were targeted and genocided. They were killed en masse to starve out the tribal nations. Simultaneously, the buffalo were made into an American icon and placed on the Buffalo Nickel. Hubbard explains that "[b]y 1883 the buffalo were effectively removed from the Great Plains, relegated to remnant herds of orphan calves, a few animals in captivity, and a refugee herd in Yellowstone. Estimates put their numbers as low as a few hundred animals by 1889."[3] The government, army, and hide hunters all contributed to the genocide of the buffalo, following the logic that "a dead buffalo is a dead Indian."[4] Quoting Indigenous psychologist Eduardo Duran, Hubbard argues that the mass slaughter of the buffalo constitutes a soul wound, an earth wound. In other words, the "soul" well-being of the stewards of land (and its animals) is irrevocably connected to the health and well-being of the environment.[5]

It is precisely for this reason that the wallow becomes a location and gathering spot that refutes colonial logics. Wallows create terrestrial microsites, providing rainwater catchments that then provide homes to a range of plants along its edges. A wallow is a place, a multigenerational indentation, a terraformed ecosystem on the prairie. Carrying seeds in their shaggy fur, buffalo deposit them in the mud and dry land, thus creating pockets of worlds that become local microhabitats for species not commonly found in the drier surrounding prairie. To wallow is not a practice of self-pity, but on the contrary, one of relaxation and comfort. The word comes from the Germanic *welw*, meaning to turn or roll. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the wallow as "[o]ften implying sensual enjoyment or indifference to defilement."[6] The wallow suggests a desire to revel in the sensuality of filth. It is a perverse bath, a dirt bath, cooling, protective, and fecund.

Lukin Linklater approaches the wallow through her ongoing research around weathering; weather the body makes, in and with, its surroundings. Weather does the work of breaking institutional barriers, refusing containment, and reminding us that movement is constant. The Alutiiq word for weather, *lla*, exists before and after colonialism; it exists as atmosphere and body. As she explains, "Lla organizes us. We live in relation to lla. We observe lla's ever-changing continuousness. We come to read lla's signals over a lifetime, over many lifetimes, attuned, listening, looking. This is the lla that endures, that is before and will continue beyond." [7] Lla also means "outside, outdoors, universe, world, awareness, consciousness, wits, (common) sense,' as well as sky."[8] Lla describes the meteorological event as an orientation and way of

knowing. Weather is a felt structure, an awareness, a breath, and a thought process.



Photo by Dan Stahl

Lla is also perhaps another way to understand the work of performance. Lukin Linklater knows that "performance does something in the world."[9] Performance has the power to make you think and feel, or following J.L. Austin, it has a perlocutionary effect. One thing that performance offers is new thought, alternative propositions to consider. For Lukin Linklater, performance is a research methodology. As she writes, such "felt structures—the atmospheres that hold us, our People, our ancestors, our belongings, and our homes in relation to a living universe—allow us to see the universe differently."[10] Like weather, felt structures are "embodied, ephemeral, [and] invisible".[11] They rely on breath, shared space, ancestral care, and stewardship. They place a slow and substantial demand on the audience, one that involves attention and cohabitation. Lukin Linklater explains:

> "The work of reaching back to our ancestors is partial, as we cannot recover and restore the full complexity of these felt structures. They existed within a ritual Alutiiq/Sugpiaq universe prior to Russian contact. Yet felt structures may also be enacted as a set of ethics that guide our actions in the present moment, as a kindness toward our ancestors and to the world at large—embodied knowledge practices that hold a future potential. Felt structures frame, inform, are the action of, and are generated by my work.[12]"

Here she articulates felt structures as an Alutiiq/ Sugpiaq ethical relation engaged through embodied knowledge and practice. This is not simply a reproduction of ancestral practices pre-colonial contact. Rather, felt structures are the conversation and collaboration between past and future epistemologies and ontologies.

Through Lukin Linklater's work we are reminded that art is both old and new at once, a repetition of prior forms even as it is generative of new knowledges and feelings. Artistic practice is constantly evolving, its shape and enunciations continually processed and considered even as it references the more customary histories from which it evolves. Yet through the logic of elimination, Indigenous art is often treated as a frozen traditional genre from the past, one that no longer exists. Consequently, within normalizing settler logics, Indigenous art is not popularly imagined as capable of being both truly Native and alive in the present.

Working across poetry, dance, and video, one of the things that strikes me about Lukin Linklater's work is her interest in contemporary art museums and commercial gallery spaces as venues. Performing in gallery spaces means there is often no light plot, no marley floor, no speaker system. This decision aligns her own choreographic work with that of performance artists such as James Luna (Luiseño, Puyukitchum, Ipai) or Yoko Ono. Putting live work in galleries can interrupt museum displays that have a colonial history of showcasing the bodies and animate belongings of Native peoples. Art gallery performance also breaks with the unspoken logic of critical distance that imagines fine art should be "rigorous," flat on the wall, and readable apart from its social or political context. Lukin Linklater articulates the idea of "short form" to describe a moment or snapshot of an artistic practice that tends to be much longer and process-based. "Short form is a visible moment within a practice that is mostly unseen except by those closest to us—those who harvest, process, and sit with us as we make."[13] Short form is a durational practice. She continues, "Short form is marked by staying with ideas, devoted, even when it is difficult. In moments, this persistent and insistent staying with has the potential to become meditative through an ongoing cultivation of one's mind."[14] Considering the "short form" nature of dance or performance usefully marks the way that embodied knowledge involves both spectacular displays as well as the more clumsy, collaborative, quiet, and tedious aspects of the work.



Photo by Dan Stahl

About halfway through the performances, dancers take turns making charcoal rubbings of the teepee holes which orient *Duane Linklater*: 12+2. These cylindrical excavations were each drilled twenty feet into the ground through layers of the smooth concrete floor and even further down into the rock and landfill detritus beneath the gallery. Such boreholes are often used for geothermal measurements, extracting oil, gas, and water, or for mineral exploration. In twelve of the fourteen holes, Linklater placed granite disks from Northern Ontario, igneous rock that sits comfortably in the spaces cut out of the gallery. The remaining two boreholes, placed at the architectural opening of the teepee, are covered with a see-through glass, letting one peer into the rocks and the trash-filled "made land" upon which this part of Chelsea stands. In the first iteration, Harjo unfolds pages from the day's newspaper, placing them flat against the holes to trace the shapes the circular excavations make against the headlines. After the performance these get posted on the far wall of the gallery space in a row. One September 20, 2025, issue with its images covered over in charcoal rubbings reads "'People Are Losing Hope' Inside ICE Detention Centers." As in Linklater's previous works, the icon of the teepee is turned from a central focus into an implied decentered structure, one the viewer cannot grasp in its entirety. At the bottom of two gallery walls lay the detritus from the excavation in long cylindrical rows. The show's title "12+2" speaks to the architecture of the Cree teepee, seven male poles, seven female poles, and has its own cosmological significance. But, instead of the teepee inhabiting the center of the gallery, only its architectural outlines remain. This creates an opening for the arrival of another protagonist. Now the gally is taken up by a wallow with its own microclimate, a dance hum and a buffalounit.

I read Linklater's boreholes as a play on the relationship between Indigenous architecture and Dia Art foundation's own deep investment in land art through the intervening work of artists such as Walter De Maria, Nancy Holt, and Robert Smithson. Indeed, such land art installations often take place on Native land without any recognition or conversation around this fact. Flipping the script on Dia's own Chelsea real estate, critic Aruna D'Souza notes, "The [Dia Art] foundation, moreover, occupies an industrial space built upon layers and layers of history and topography, including Lenape tobacco fields."[15] The boreholes and their accompanying debris remind viewers that land is not an empty canvas for art. There are always first peoples with a relationship to the land. Legal scholar K-Sue Park proposes that land art should itself be thought of in relation to questions of real estate, private property, and dispossession. In this way, "empty" gridded southwestern land art sites such as Dia Art foundation's *The Lightning Field* (1977) by Walter de Maria create even more highly abstracted settler fantasies of wide-open empty land. Park explains that "*[t]he Lightning Field* therefore brings you to a site emblematic of the historical processes of Indigenous land expropriation and distribution of the public lands."[16] Land art can further obscure settler complicity in ongoing state logics that understand land as real estate and private property. As such, land art is implicated in the past and ongoing forms of dispossession wrought through private property. All of this makes Linklater's own intervention into the Dia gallery space that much more compelling. In their meditation on the buffalo wallow, Lukin Linklater and Linklater consider the sort of reciprocity, care, and ethics that should be brought into conversation with such canonical works and fine art forms.

In the early autumn performances of *buffalounit*, there is an airiness to the work. Bright sunlight shines through the skylights casting shadows against the floor and walls. The plucking sound of string instruments—the morose cello upstaged by the electric guitar chattering like a concert that's about to begin. All of this creates a sensation of levity as the sun catches the pale purple-pinks of Linklater's hanging canvas teepee cover. The dwindling away of light and people from the first performance to the last, leaving only blankets and rubbings, has a distilling effect. Like boiling water for purification, with only Dixon and Butler left by October 25th, the work becomes simplified, the gestures increasingly recognizable in their repetition and rotation as they are worn again on different bodies. The buffalo genocide and the possibility for their rematriation becomes more direct through this distillation, as does the imagery of the dirt bath and the wallow. Today buffalo cannot roam freely, they are confined and their herds "protected" in National parks. As Tasha Hubbard writes in the exhibition booklet, "In the colonial way of thinking, buffalo are not meant to have their freedom because that becomes proof it's their territory, just like it's Indigenous territory. And for settler colonialism to thrive, that can't happen."[17] The settler colonial project sought to destroy the buffalo in order to eradicate Indigenous peoples. And if there were no more Indigenous peoples, as in Patrick Wolfe's theory of the "logic of elimination," then the land was "free" and available for the taking.



Photo by Dan Stahl

The weather of the air, the dirt bath, and the earth suggest a different future wherein the wallow stretches out beyond its initial cast into the audience. Each performance ends with a repetition of the line "a wallow is a noun turned inside out and upside down." An inside out and upside noun is perhaps an open container. We might ask, what is the weather of witnessing the buffalo wallow? Or rather, what is the weather of wallowing itself? As curator Matilde Giudelli-Guidi explains, "A pleasurable activity, wallowing makes the animals vulnerable as they let their guard down and expose the most tender areas of their bodies. This is why buffalo do not wallow in captivity, under duress, or in threatening conditions."[18] The question that emerges across both Linklater and Lukin Linklater's work is: how can buffalo be not only protected enough to survive the ongoing effects of settler-colonial-wrought-death, but also feel comfortable, vulnerable and even happy? As the performance of *buffalounit* ends, the audience sits watching as Lukin Linklater enters the space handing out the Pendleton blankets to collaborators and friends. The show began with forty-four blankets, and while some remain on the back of the buffalo for the remainder of the installation, I like to think that most of them found a home in which laying down is not giving up. Where laying down is intergenerational rest, and movement; where it is purposeful and pleasing, where it has the worldmaking potential to create a microhabitat beyond containment.

Footnotes

1. See Emma Bigé “Notes on trans*grievability” *Issue* (October 24, 2024) and mayfield brooks “Whale Fall Performance cycle” https://www.improvisingwhileblack.com/whale-fall-practice ↗

2. Hubbard, Tasha. in Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America, ed. Andrew Woolford, Jedd Bienvenuto, Alexander Laban Hinton, Duke University Press. (2014), p. 294

3. Hubbard, Tasha. “BUFFALO GENOCIDE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NORTH AMERICA: ‘Kill, Skin, and Sell’ in Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America, ed. Andrew Woolford, Jedd Bienvenuto, Alexander Laban Hinton, Duke University Press. (2014), p. 297

4. “Duane Linklater and Tasha Hubbard in Conversation” in Dia Exhibition Booklet for *Duane Linklater*: 12+2, pg.9

5. Hubbard, Tasha. “BUFFALO GENOCIDE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NORTH AMERICA: ‘Kill, Skin, and Sell’ p. 301. See also Eduardo Durand. *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native People.* Teachers College Press (2019).

6. “Wallow, V. [1], Etymology.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, March 2026,

7. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “My Consciousness Heart Breath Are With Lla” in *my mind is with the weather*, 8

8. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “On Felt Structures: Weather and Embodiment. The Generation of Short Form.” *Public (Toronto)* 35.70 (2024), 9

9. Brewer Ball, Katie. Conversation with the Artist. Feb 13, 2026.

10. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “On Felt Structures,” in *Arctic/Amazon: Networks of Global Indigeneity* ed. Gerald McMaster and Nina Vincent, Goose Lane Editions (2023), 174

11. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “On Felt Structures,” 174

12. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “On Felt Structures,” 175.

13. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “On Felt Structures: Weather and Embodiment. The Generation of Short Form.” *Public (Toronto)* 35.70 (2024), 16.

14. Lukin Linklater, Tanya. “On Felt Structures: Weather and Embodiment. The Generation of Short Form.” *Public (Toronto)* 35.70 (2024), 16.

15. D'Souza, Aruna. "For Duane Linklater, It's a Buffalo's World" Hyperallergic (October 12, 2025).

16. Park, K-Sue "The Lightening Field, The Border and Real Estate" in A *Grammar Built with Rocks*, 274

17. "Duane Linklater and Tasha Hubbard in Conversation" in Dia Exhibition Booklet for *Duane Linklater*: 12+2, (2025), 10.

18. Guidelli-Guidi, Matilde. "Duane Linklater: 12 + 2" in Dia Exhibition Booklet for *Duane Linklater*: 12+2, pg.10 (2025), 4.