

§Deserting

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LIKE A BLANKET OF CLOUDS

THE ATMOSPHERE AS A FIELD OF DESERTION IN TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER'S FELT STRUCTURES

A Note on an Oxymoron

While organizing my notes on Tanya Lukin Linklater's work, I came across a phrase I had jotted down among the first few hastily written lines. The phrase "atmospheric body" appeared on the page in a distinctive position relative to the rest of the notes: it concluded the first horizontal, straightforward lines, which served to outline the general framework of the artist's research. Born in 1976 on Kodiak Island off the southern coast of Alaska, she is a descendant of the Alutiiq/ Sugpiaq community that has inhabited that land for more than 7,500 years, a choreographer, writer, performer, and creator of videos, sculptures, and installations that re-enact the practices, knowledge, and symbolic genealogies of her ancestral community.

After these brief initial remarks, "atmospheric body" seemed to me to effectively capture the linguistic porosity of this expanded practice, one made up of shifts and cross-media

translations that move from text to body, then to the voice, then back to the body, always in motion according to dynamics that are different each time, so that the text «becomes a location that is generative and generous [...] in relation to other bodies, to objects, to architecture. In this place of translation, there is transference of ideas between forms, in a state of continuous translation and re-meaning» (Lukin Linklater, 2015). I note that the expression “atmospheric body” had also unconsciously triggered a certain fluctuation of concepts, references, and themes that, in the remaining space of the page, were linked to Lukin Linklater’s work no longer following the linearity of the lines, but as potential elements of future structures of meaning suspended in the white of the page, as if they too were lingering in an atmosphere of ephemeral and vibrant cellulose.

Some of the thematic clouds in this atmospheric sheet were: the geography of Kodiak Island, the atmospheric cosmology of the Sugpiaq people and their incorporation into the contemporary context of the performance; the deliberate defiance of the cognitive expectations of the non-Indigenous museum audience; the practice of non-performance and the eroticism of flight theorized by Fred Moten (2018); the desertion of colonial, linear, and messianic time through artist Kader Attia’s concept of Repair; the deliberate elusiveness of meaning that never crystallizes into closed forms; and above all, the geographical, cultural, political, and aesthetic role of atmosphere and weather as a space to embody «the ground-shaking atmospherics of Indigenous refusal, resistance and relational structures» (Georgeson-Usher, 2025).

What is meant by “atmospheric body”? What are its boundaries? Is it legitimate to speak of it in terms of “current,” “flow,” “escape,” “latency”? A body that exists but cannot be seen, or rather, one that—like the atmosphere—cannot be framed, thus evading the very core of the peripheral dynamics of an extractive and universalizing gaze? Which—as happened with the notebook page—*breaks the lines*, those of an inscribed, “linearized,” and externally imposed subjectivity, denying the very idea of a completed form to instead tend toward elusive relational atmospheres?

To escape, while remaining present. To construct spaces as productive voids stretched between invitation and retreat. Lukin Linklater’s “atmospheric body,” suspended in this particular type of positive inaccessibility, always transcends itself: it is plural, ephemeral, iridescent, at times condensed in the performativity of movements and language, and immediately afterward rarefied in the depth of ancestral space and time, awaiting the reactivation of its structural boundlessness once again.

On the occasion of the retrospective exhibition *inner blades of grass (soft)/inner blades of grass (cured)/inner blades of grass (bruised by the weather)*, held in 2024 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Scottish scholar, writer, and curator Camille Georgeson-Usher, a descendant of the Coast Salish and the Sathu Dene of the Northwest Territories, writes: «To come back to the atmospheric choreographies of Tanya Lukin Linklater, I consider these refusals as critical methods for our kinship systems to be made paramount within how she builds her work. She allows the gaze of the largely non-Indigenous audience, as

the rehearsals are open to the public, but refuses to abide by the many dictations by the museums that surround her work – in choosing not to describe every component of the work to the public, Tanya selects what visitors may take from it, allowing the rest to remain unknown. In this sense, the refusal in Tanya’s open rehearsals lies in the artist choosing to focus on the intimate relational systems / atmospheres between collaborators [...] while not catering to audience expectations. The refusal also comes in her unwillingness to appease colonial legacies that centre settler colonial comforts [...]. Settler colonial comfort in museums falls into the habitual labelling, objectifying and othering of Indigenous peoples and our ancestral belongings [...]» (Georgeson-Usher, 2025).

The atmospheric body becomes the matrix of an elusive grammar for a performance of refusal. Present yet incalculable, it is the short-circuit of colonial visualization: an oxymoron that the non-indigenous gaze cannot conceive because it cannot control; the gap in meaning that Lukin Linklater intensifies as a space of cultural reappropriation and survival.

The artist herself describes these impermanent structures as *felt structures*: «in constant motion; impermanent; shifting; fading; dense moments, dissipated in others like cloud cover... The patterns of their arrivals and departures are encoded. We rely on our other senses in the process of perception discernment, and response to *felt structures* [...] *Felt structures* frame, inform, are the action of, and are generated by my work. *Felt structures* are simultaneously past, present, and future becoming» (Lukin Linklater, 2022). As landing points and meeting places for the artist’s media-driven cross-pollinations, *felt structures* emerge as volatile condensations of a research where the rejection of extractive subjectivities and the reconnection to ancestral space-time work together to dismantle the dynamics of visual domination over the audience, thereby undermining the very “innocent” act of contemplation. Cosmologies and aesthetics of the inhuman themselves become components of a practice of desertion, which displays its own flight, simultaneously emptying and filling the interstice between the visible and the invisible.

Ciqlluaq / barabara

In Lukin Linklater’s practice, this liminal perceptual space constantly reemerges as an extended milieu situated between conceptual polarities that vary from one instance to the next: the aforementioned perceptual tension between the visible and the invisible is reflected in the phenomenological tensions between fullness and emptiness and between presence and absence, as well as in the temporal tension between the present moment and latent time. This constellation of short circuits generates—before, during, and after every gesture by the artist—a deliberate incompleteness: a productive void whose drifts can be intuitively sensed beneath the surface both in the individual performances, poems, architectural works, set designs, videos, and sculptures, and in their environmental

interactions within cultural institutions, transforming the museum space itself into an area of retreat and aesthetic elusiveness for a non-indigenous audience.

The sculpture *Indigenous Geometries* evokes these resonances between emptiness, latency, and possibility. Created in 2019 for the Chicago Architecture Biennial, in collaboration with Métis artist and architect Tiffany Shaw, it is a circular structure composed of laminated ash wood planks, curved using the traditional steam-bending techniques of the Alutiiq community. It is a structure that is both open and closed, its rhythm marked by the intervals between the various planks and the resulting interruptions of the gaze, which pauses in these voids.

I believe that Lukin Linklater's gesture of rejection and the undermining of the labeling tendency inherent in colonial visual everyday life already lie, in potential, within the immediate perceptual encounter with these gaps in contemplation. Tracing the circular trajectory of this lacunar geometry with the eye, one notices that in certain sections the void is deliberately expanded through the removal of certain axes intended to disrupt the organic unity of the structure: it is a conscious choice that regards the void itself as the condition for the survival of this construction's integrity.

To quote Malini Guha, associate professor of Film Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa: «The exhibition text tells us that the artist kept two of the spines in her home in North Bay in order to keep *this* home intact. I understand the withholding of the spines as a gesture of refusal, where a yielding of the entirety of the structure to the space of the museum is resisted.» (Guha, 2022). These words suggest another possible interpretation of the oxymoronic “atmospheric body,” namely its manifestation as a productive lacuna: an elusiveness that withdraws precisely to remain exposed in its autonomy and, paradoxically, to intensify its almost unsettling presence. It is a minimal yet seminal gesture, which can be understood as the metaphorical refusal to respond to the call of an external gaze and its unwarranted projections, preserving the epistemological, cultural, and political integrity of the structure within a space-time external to and distinct from the museum.

The missing planks are kept in the artist's home: Lukin Linklater refers to these elements as “spines”, while *Indigenous Geometries* evokes the traditional semi-subterranean houses of the Kodiak Archipelago, the artist's ancestral homeland. Called *Ciqlluaq* in the Alutiiq language and known today by the Russian name *barabara*, these were plank structures made from driftwood and covered with felt and sod for insulation. Until the early 20th century, these served as ceremonial and communal spaces for cooking, repairing tools, sewing clothes, and hosting visitors, while the grass-turf roof rendered this architecture ambiguous, suspended between an underground shelter and an earthen extension of the island's topography: a space that remained covered while still being on the surface.

The museum's framework and its aesthetic perspectives are fractured within this genealogy of invisible references, reactivated as gaps in the body of this work—a hybrid

of architecture and sculpture: in *Indigenous Geometries*, these branches reemerge as elusive and ethereal, like particles of a cross-cutting effort to reclaim the ancestral Alutiiq/Sugpiaq past. Not only the connection to the geography of Kodiak and its merging with the living space of the *barabara*, but also the reactivation of the deep time of the ancestors, distilled into the open forms and their structural voids within the museum's perimeter, transformed into the setting of a felt structure: «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 the 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 future potential» (Lukin Linklater, 2022).

Molecular Time

It is through this “enclosing” of the future—while simultaneously preserving a past whose original integrity is now unattainable due to colonial trauma—that we can situate the present evoked by *Indigenous Geometries*, as well as by all the *felt structures* choreographed by Lukin Linklater: condensations of an organic and malleable time, which embraces continuous reconfigurations and acts of presence, rejecting the linearity of Western historicism. Atmospheric time, like the body, is circular and dialectical—as evoked, moreover, by the open form of this sculpture. In the wild reappropriation of one's identity, the atmosphere embodies a time of repair. In this regard, I am reminded of the concept of “Repair,” which has guided the work of the Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia since 2012, beginning with his multimedia installation *The Repair: From Occidental to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, presented in Kassel during the 13th edition of dOCUMENTA. Regarding the exhibition *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder*, held in 2013–2014 at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, critic Kim West discusses how this time of repair rejects the messianic aspect of colonial time: «The Repair was precisely not alluding to any such conditions, but to the impure state in between, where the additions, subtractions or rearrangements of surgery and repair are disconnected from the ideal of the origin. A re-appropriation that generated a new object of positive hybridity» (West, 2014).

“Repair”, therefore, suggests a different model of historical time: a time in which development is not understood as decline, evolution, or messianic anticipation, but as a sequence of combinations and reconfigurations, convergences and bifurcations. It is a time that is «non-essentialist, non-eschatological time, which posits no origin and no end [...]». (West, 2014).

West refers to the striking juxtaposition, presented in Kassel, between photographs of the faces of World War I soldiers who underwent reconstructive surgery and a series of artifacts from former African colonies that have undergone processes of recovery: both testimonies of an unfinished time that, like *Indigenous Geometries*, is punctuated by voids

within which to weave a hybrid genealogy of survivals, recompositions, and montages. Lukin Linklater's practice seems to me to be informed by the same gesture of temporal desertion, in which the "void" of each work becomes the matrix of a space-time of welcome, sharing, and reappropriation of one's own community, as evidenced, for example, by the performance *A song, a felt structure: We are putting ourselves back together again* (2019), which unfolds precisely among the thorns and voids of *Indigenous Geometries*, evoking in the movements of the bodies the contrast between the colonial dismantling of indigenous social structures and the ongoing work of recovering ancestral languages, identities, practices, and knowledge.

This molecular time is also expressed, for example, in the 2022 sculpture *Held in the Air I Never Fell (Spring Lightning Sweetgrass Song)*, which revolves around the void between the circular ash wood base and the series of red kohkom scarves, hanging in succession from above, which seem to intensify, suspend, and soften the force of gravity, as if to hold back the fall of an invisible body (as evoked by the title). Some artificial tendons, invisible from a distance, descend until they twist on the floor.

Camille Georgeson-Usher also writes, on the occasion of the exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts: «When I finally arrived in Columbus, I went to the Wexner to meet my friends and colleagues for the last moments of the open rehearsal for the day. As I walked up the long ramp to the bright exhibition space, the hot sun echoed across its walls. Tanya's largescale work of red kohkom scarves suspended in layers from the ceiling, *Held in the air I never fell (spring lightning sweetgrass song)* (2022), slowly came into view as the quiet sounds of movement and discussion gradually grew louder. When I peered into the space, everyone was sitting and talking quietly. Coming to sit alongside them, I felt as though I was wrapped in what I can only describe as this perpendicular undercurrent of love and support [...]. This undercurrent only being possible for me through the gathering of Indigenous beings who surrounded my shaken body with care» (Georgeson-Usher, 2025). One must imagine these sculptures in this way: alongside everything else—the "blazing sun" outside and their ever-changing, potential activations—embodied by worldviews that precede and transcend the museum institution. It is precisely within this institution that *felt structures* manifest "underground currents" of love and care, in contrast to the pervasiveness of what anthropologist Kirsten Simmons calls "colonial atmospheres": «The settler colonial project of U.S. Empire is, after all, to place indigenous nations and bodies into suspension. Treating Indians ad crisis or colonial residue, regulating them [...] suspends the large-scale processes of capitalism, militarism, racism, and colonialism [...] Differently put, suspension is a condition of settler colonialism — it suffuses all places, and keeps in play the contradictions and ambiguities built into the colonial project» (Simmons, 2017).

Lukin Linklater's *felt structures* disrupt this suspensive mechanism from within; a mechanism rooted in the extractive dimension that underlies the representation of indigenous otherness, where the visual, the cognitive, and the epistemological converge to create projections that serve to perpetuate the dominance and paternalism of the

colonial gaze, even after the end of historical colonialism. One could say that Lukin Linklater's atmospheric bodies act within the space, yet symbolically and politically offstage, embodying that "erotics of fugitivity" theorized by Fred Moten regarding blackness and the subversive practice of *nonperformance*, where at stake is «an irreducible relationship between sensuality and representation» (Moten, 2018) in the act of «refusing what is normatively desired and claiming what is normatively disavowed [...]. What it is to enact and to inhabit that repertoire is all but unfathomable. It falls outside the purview of any analytic that has been devised to understand whatever delusions exist under the rubrics of behavior» (ibid.).

Lla

In relation to this subterranean and inappropriable escape, the physical, visual, cognitive, and epistemological boundaries of the museum apparatus can only short-circuit, cracking as they embrace their latent atmospheric dimension which, as we have seen, permeates every level of meaning-making. From the works—centered on productive emptiness and their intimate, deeply rooted ancestral genealogies—to the idea of a time not defined by the linear act of catalogation, passing through the activation of performative spaces never fully accessible: these are all dynamic offshoots of *felt structures*, where atmosphere becomes grammar while the ephemeral unfolds as the syntax of desertion. The very notion of "body" returns, in this context, as an expanded field of unrepresentability that, in addition to its choreographic manifestations embodied by the performers, also involves architecture, images, and language itself. Every element manifests its excess in relation to itself, thereby undermining the very colonial act of labeling that underlies the subjectification/objectification of otherness (Emmelhainz, 2017). On this last point, Fred Moten again: «The experience of subjectivity is the would-be subject's thwarted desire for subjectivity [...] which we have to keep practicing not wanting, as if in endless preparation for a recital that, insofar as it never comes, is always surreally present» (Moten, 2018).

These are words that evoke Lukin Linklater's atmospheric practice, with its forms that are perpetually unfinished, perpetually outside the confines of definition and the descriptive linearity of language. Forms that reach toward something else, in time and space, and in doing so disorient the colonizer's gaze, recalling the words of Nathan Snaza, a professor at the University of Richmond, who, in his review of the book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Studies* by artist and curator Dylan Robinson, writes regarding the listening to Indigenous music, which thematizes and exceeds the orientations of colonizing listeners «pointing toward a temporal and spatial politics of listening as decolonial disorientation» (Snaza, 2023).

Similarly, in the case of Lukin Linklater, it is the very act of visualization itself that is disoriented in its hierarchical, autocratic dimension, manifested in the projection and preemptive control of otherness (Mirzoeff, 2014): that creative visualization which, precisely, creates otherness after having emptied it of its compensatory images

(Emmelhainz, 2017). But the atmosphere envelops without being visible: its time is that of forces rather than forms; of processes rather than concepts. Within it, we are mutually exposed to the currents of otherness, both outside and within ourselves.

In the cosmologies of Kodiak Island, the word used to evoke this ethereal quality is “Ila,” which means «“outside,” “outdoors,” “universe,” “world,” “awareness,” “consciousness,” “wits”, “(common) sense,” and “sky.” These multiple meanings of “Ila” gesture toward an Alutiiq cosmology, unseen but present in the changing nature of the weather [...]. A continuous ephemerality may describe the air in its perpetually moving currents, which are diverse formations that, while patterned, cannot be fixed. The atmosphere is constituted by air that is invisible yet surrounds or envelops us. It moves us in the rise and fall of our chests and bellies, in the quiet expanse of our rib cages with each inhale, and in the suspension and empty pauses between exhales. [...] I come to this moment by looking at times to the sky, to consider the ways that clouds, lit by the sun at dusk and dawn, make visible the air that we sense as ever-changing, the elusive materiality that is of our bodies and of the world simultaneously» (Lukin Linklater, 2022).

These are the artist’s own words, jotted down at the bottom of the notepad, a few lines below the oxymoron “atmospheric body.” Further on, at the very end, I read another hastily written note, which is a mix of genealogy and etymology: *conspirare* —> *conspirare* —> from the Latin “con-” + “spirare” —> literal translation: “To breathe together.”

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