letters

12
from
Ivetta S.Y. Kang
Philip Leonard Ocampo
Tatum Dooley

editorial

14
Body Language
by Jaclyn Bruneau

features

18
“Cells interlinked within cells interlinked”:
On Ambivalent Contamination
by Alex Quicho

26
What Are They Fighting For?
On Oliver Husain, Kerstin Schroedinger,
and the community who embraced DNCB
as an experimental treatment for HIV
by Theodore (ted) Kerr

34
The (Im)possibility of Healing:
On Lauryn Youden
by Lauren Fournier

composition

58
Invocation 1
by Isabel Lewis

one thing

76
Bundles
by Dayna Danger

COVER IMAGE
Oliver Husain and Kerstin Schroedinger, DNCB,
2020–ongoing, digital video still
© OLIVER HUSAIN AND KERSTIN SCHROEDINGER
reviews

60  Three-Thirty: Ebtì Nabag, Aaron Jones, and Kelly Fyffe-Marshall by Huda Hassan
61  Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience: Kent Monkman by Raymond Boisjoly
63  I Confess: Moyra Davey by Greta Hamilton
64  Hands that gather and forget: Ana Luisa Bernárdez Notz and Sebastián Rodríguez y Vasti by Alex Lepianka
66  amiskwaćwāskahikan: Jane Ash Poitras, MJ Belcourt Moses, Lauren Crazybull, Tanya Harnett, George Littlechild, Dwayne Martineau, Conor McNally, Lana Whiskeyjack by Missy LeBlanc

67  the commute: S F Ho, jaye simpson, Helena Krobath by Brynn McNab
68  Picture Cycle: Essays: Masha Tupitsyn by Jesse Cumming
70  Gaawin Ogiibidenaawaasiwaawan / They Did Not Let It Go: Robert Houle by Noor Alé
71  The Gas Imaginary: Rachel O'Reilly by Jonah Gray

artist project

0-5, 80-81
Wanderings
by Anna Binta Diallo
Text by Noor Bhangu

MASTHEAD
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called as... of... wheels/politics/panic

above above above below below

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Dear C Mag,

The season has come again with a cold, sandy wind that disables me from breathing well. I have had mild chronic asthma since I was 21, and the freezing wind in Canada that dries out each of my breaths has worsened the illness. When I cough excessively, I realize I am living matter. Then, my negative spaces hiding in my body and mind are finally revealed and recognized by my pain and the extreme loneliness in the struggle with the shortness of breath. It is bizarre that each confrontation of negative space entails an individual’s agony and solitude.

This is probably why “Evaporative Losses” in your latest issue grasped my eyes. When Jenna Swift brought up an image of the negative space depicted in the text, I breathed in and out, thinking of my negative space lingering in between the outside and myself as a lonely insider, or the insiders and myself as an utterly tongueless outsider. Since I was becoming aware of my own negative space hurt by underlying tints of imperialism and westernization, my inner voice has cried out to share what has hurt my friends and me throughout the consecutive hollers in my work. This holler ignited re-examination on the realistic boundaries and their possible approachability, and more importantly, re-imaginability.

The pandemic has subjugated everyone into confronting their negative spaces. Some lost their jobs, some got respiratory diseases, some felt suffocated while stuck at home, some lost loved ones, and some people died. It may be the time for us to open the doors of our negative spaces and let yours stay in my room and vice versa. These considerate movements for internal and external accessibilities can bring fresh air and ease my—and your—breathing problems, even if we sometimes find “crip hope” in the exchange.

Ivetta S.Y. Kang

Hi C Mag,

As an arts administrator and arts practitioner, I have a conflicted relationship with the word “timely.” Used to describe something that bears significance to a certain moment in time, the term reiterates that the decisions we make are tethered to the world around us, emblematic of the cultural zeitgeist of right now. Moving through the world with a racialized, queer identity, I constantly witness the term’s tokenizing qualities when wielded by those with power. It renders the involvement of marginalized communities as useful and productive rather than valuable and generative, entirely governed by dangerous opportunism. I’ve grown somewhat distrustful after all the times my own involvement in projects has been wielded like this.

Inversely: in my work within arts organizations and collectives, I’m constantly having to reconcile with the paradox of tokenization and holding space, especially when opportunities for emerging artists are scarce, and exist within a sector that basically operates with little to no money. When “space” itself is so precarious. This is the inherent failure: institutions have harmed marginalized people for so long (and still do) that the line between meaningful support and optics may not and cannot be so easily navigated.

I recognize how important C147 is. The theme of “Gather” is glaringly relevant to this pandemic we’re living through, as our ability to gather (at least physically) has been halted by it. As both a collaborator and an organizer, I cannot help but think of the back end considerations that went into composing this issue: the ethics of representation in unprecedented times and the responsibility that comes with providing opportunities to writers and artists on the margins. As a reader, I’m also thinking about how I perceive these editorial decisions versus what voices I want and need to read right now.

Though I won’t congratulate any institution for doing the necessary work, it is edifying to read Su-Ying Lee’s words on the need for image and media literacy in “Reading Images Against Racism,” Mercedes Webb’s in-depth exploration of Christina Battle’s ongoing seed redistribution project, seeds are meant to disperse, in “To Reciprocate All They Freely Offer,” and the many other insightful works that have been brought together in this issue. Though this collection of texts will inevitably be seen as “timely” regardless, I’m grateful to C147 for allowing me the space to ruminate about what this term can really mean.

Philip Leonard Ocampa
Hi C Magazine,

If the “Gather” issue of C Magazine was a party—compiled of its writers and their subjects—I’m happy to note I wouldn’t be out of place, having a few direct or twice-removed connections that I could saddle up to and make conversation with while sipping a soda and snacking on a communal chip bowl. After a year in lockdown, why does the simplest gathering sound illicit?

A magazine issue is a bit like a party. You need a balance of personalities and tones, some to complement each other, others to counter the energy in the room. I’ve been known to throw awful parties for my inability to curate a guest list: I invite everyone I know and let my friends, from vastly different areas of my life, fend for themselves. I tend to leave parties early, even when I’m the one throwing them, retreating to my room and into comfortable clothes.

I guess what I’m saying is I don’t miss parties, I have magazines. And Zoom. And also other places to gather, as articulated by the “Gather” issue of C Magazine: in recipe swaps with my aunt, a monthly library meetup to discuss art, a performance streamed online by Lex Brown, internet rabbit holes and comment sections, taking photos of birds to identify, studio visits where the artist lets me make art alongside them, and in gathering wildflowers from the side of the road. I ordered Anne Boyer’s book after reading Lauren Fournier’s review, the act a kind of cross-medium book club that goes one way—a form of gathering that doesn’t depend on anyone else, but me, doing the work.

Gathering as a form to connect—in spite of difficulties born from either accessibility or circumstance—can be achieved through magazines, especially within the relatively small community of the Canadian art world. No opening party needed.

I guess this turned into a bit of a love letter.

Tatum Dooley

LETTERS

Send your letters to editor@cmagazine.com, with LETTERS in the subject line. An honorarium will be paid for each letter selected for publication.

Letters may be informal, informative, creative, inquisitive, speculative, critical, or any other number of things imaginable in the epistolary form. Letters that engage this issue—its theme, articles, images—and related things beyond the magazine’s pages are eligible for publication in the Summer 2021 issue if received by April 25.

Letters may be edited for length and clarity. For more info, visit submissions.cmagazine.com.
Early in the autumn, we issued a rare call for pitches that didn’t lead with a theme, giving our communities and contributors a chance to have a say in shaping the next issue in a time of such trenchant irresolution. In response, we heard meditations on the rampant shift of the art world’s activities into online space; pained expressions of longing for IRL connection in the forms of exhibitions, openings, residencies, house parties, sex; ruminations on health and non-health of physical, mental, and psychic strains; and reflections on the now dramatically apparent reality that the self is an assemblage of continually unravelling experiences, many of which hinge on the involvement of others. Body language—that mysterious, intuitive social science and gestural repertoire that allows us to send and receive messages without words—in its straight-up definition, and in the more imaginative discursive possibilities it makes space for, seemed a fitting centre for these disparate parts whose tethers are perhaps only discernible in the light of our collective hindsight.

Dovetailing with our previous issue, “Gather,” which offered a multifaceted study on ideas around coming together, this issue brings focus to the idea of the individual as inextricable from the collective, conceiving of identity as accruing meaning, definition, and transformation through relationships, interactions, and impressions with others—in both physical and non-physical ways. While this effect of others on who we are is at once involuntary, in-built, and natural, the contributors to this issue make a strong case for the wilful porosity of the self as a way to shed toxic pasts, make stronger, stranger bonds, access experiential wealth, and, simply: survive.

In “‘Cells interlinked within cells interlinked’: On Ambivalent Contamination,” Alex Quicho reflects on the pandemic’s impact on our conceptions of intimacy and the erotic pulse that shoots through new negotiations of proximity, considering all the while the broader risks of our new-ish requirement (preference?) for distance. Flirting with the fine line between desire and disgust, she vouches for porosity as a methodology for relation—always, but especially in spite of our protracted hermetic conditions and the momentous exacerbation of societal inequities. “[P]orosity felt more grounded, more active, than simply being impressionable; a sponge, after all, is not fundamentally altered by any liquid that soaks it.” Through the work of Anicka Yi, Victoria Sin, Patrick Staff, and others, Quicho assembles a compelling and shape-shifting paradigm for practicing this sensibility. I can’t help but think of Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz’s invocation of Amador Fernández-Savater in her introduction to the “Health” installment of the Whitechapel Gallery’s Documents of Contemporary Art series; she writes that Fernández-Savater “tempts us to transform ourselves, create new logics, populating this ‘exception’ with our thoughts, affects and desires so we don’t merely become spectators or victims of this crisis: to ‘inhabit the exception so we don’t simply return to a normality.’” I think of this as a kind of bone-deep queer opportunism.

Harking to another wet metaphor (fitting in this age of droplets), Preston Pavlis discusses Shikeith’s “embrace of the spill.” Reckoning with his identity as a gay Black man who grew up Christian in America—with all the attendant ghosts in each faction of his being—the artist blurs possibilities for ecstasy, relief, and liberation that are available through them all, even when they might be seen to be at odds with each other. Shikeith convenes not only with the ghosts of his ancestors whose experiences he inherits, but with the whole living group of those possessed by the same osmotic forces. As he says, “To spill is to resist being constrained to boundaries, it is to take up the form of freedom. It is known as a failure or an accident, everything that people think is wrong. […] To spill is to point towards a sort of self-determination and a freewheeling way of being, way of existing.” This concept is in conversation with Anna Binta Diallo’s artist project, guest curated by Noor Bhangu; the collaged figures bookending the issue represent the latest iteration of the artist’s series Wanderings, which aims to tackle some of the shortcomings of identity politics by creating unexpected confluences of artefacts, references, and textures that angle toward more intercultural conversations. As Bhangu writes in her accompanying text, this “work embodies a move toward relationality that is vital for creating pathways to a less divided future. […] There is a clear message that identity is not singular but dispersed.”

Diallo’s rhizomatic and sometimes even speculative triangulation of facets of certain histories, cultures, and belief systems with others—without concretizing the relationships she’s mapping out—primes the viewer for Isabel Lewis’s entry in this issue’s Composition column. Here, the artist and choreographer best known for her “hosted occasions,” which are lushly diffused gatherings that sensuously dismantle hard-coded sociality to see how we might find each other anew under other conditions, offers an invocation of something similar in text. At once a meditation, performance transcription, and reflection on the unique intersubjective exchange inherent between performer and viewer, Lewis makes yet another case for the unbounded self: “The constancy of your movement renders you uncatchable as an image. You are many-headed, many-limbed, and monstrous, desperately attractive to the eye which must engage differently to see you at all. […] This form of seeing is active, almost muscular; it can neither identify with nor plunge into the depth of a single image and so surrenders to immersion. In lieu of the possibility for sharp focus, in the ambiguity of blur, other sensual pleasures emerge.”

Speaking of such pleasures, the artist Dayna Danger, who is perhaps best known for their deployment of Métis and Anishinaabe material practices in creating BDSM implements (think: a handmade, intricately beaded black gimp mask), writes about bundles in our One Thing column. Comprising “precious and sacred medicines” both material and immaterial, a bundle is bookended by the artist’s series Ambivalent Contamination, which aims to tackle some of the shortcomings of identity politics by creating unexpected confluences of artefacts, references, and textures that angle toward more intercultural conversations. As Bhangu writes in her accompanying text, this “work embodies a move toward relationality that is vital for creating pathways to a less divided future. […] There is a clear message that identity is not singular but dispersed.”

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full of ground lavender and weekay, an abalone shell for burning medicine, red brodcloth, a leather-bound goose fan,” as well as numerous kink narratives—illuminating the range of influences that contribute to one’s central support system. Having been taught about bundles from their mother, and acknowledging the significant impact of finding and communing with other kinky BIPOC and Indigiqueer ancestors. Danger’s piece ends with a poetic, erotic offering to inspire the next generation of Two-Spirit folks: perhaps something to add to their bundles.

Lauren Fournier’s feature, “The (Im)possibility of Healing,” engages a long-standing, evolving conversation about healing, intercultural sharing, and inevitably, (mis)appropriation. The focus is on the work of the queer, Crip, Berlin-based, Canadian artist Lauryn Youden, whose most recent exhibition Visionary of Knives at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien brings together a substantial set of materials that she uses to treat her ails. Though the artist had intended to use the exhibition opportunity as a much-needed gathering space for the Sickness Affinity Group (SAG)—a collective of chronically ill and disabled artists, activists, theorists, and their allies who support each other—the pandemic obviously prevented that. And so, Youden’s project of making the space tangibly community-centric and polyvocal was challenged, forcing her to consider how else the multiple influences, sources, and collaborators in her care regime might be represented, thus coming up against some of the challenges of intercultural exchange that Diallo’s project earnestly lays the groundwork for without necessarily plumbing its depths.

Johanna Hedva, the artist, writer, musician, and astrologer, is perhaps best known for their searingly vital essay “Sick Woman Theory,” which articulates the complex paradox of wanting to congregate in the name of social resistance, but because of illness or disability, not being able to IRL, and so thinking about resistance as deeply embodied—sickness and protest as having this ouroboros relationship—and operating from that place. Here, in “Soft Blues,” they offer an autopathography of sorts, drawing thought-provoking parallels between symptoms of mania and those of toxic masculinity. As with many medical conditions, in mania, women and non-binary folks get the short end of the stick—being villainized for embodying the same characteristics that are lauded (or at least permitted) in bodies socially coded as male. In this text, there’s a sharp honouring of the fact that the body speaks for itself, that language arises from its chemistry, afflictions, experiences, and ways of knowing: notably, the text centres around the coinciding of the author’s first period of mania with an especially acute reckoning with their gender identity (italics indicate where the writer temporarily occupies a male subject position). In a non-linear mode, they meticulously stitch the personal into the social, the systemic, and the historical, concretizing that individual health issues are always but a thread in a wider web. Recalling Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of “the flesh of the world” and Karen Barad’s satisfyingly scientific shattering of the nature-culture binary in “Nature’s Queer Performativity” (2011), Hedva seems to ask: what is your body saying to you, and how do cultural norms colour your interpretations of those messages and shape how you act on them?
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REPLENCHER LA FAMILLE :
DE L’UTOPIE AUX NOUVELLES STRATÉGIES
Camila Vasquez

GYRES
AND OTHER DRIFTINGS
Ellie Ga

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“It’s very, ah, porous,” warned my friend A of the house she had just started living in. Rainwater dripped in where the conservatory joined the main rooms, neighbourhood cats entered through a vestigial flap, and a resident fox often intruded to leave offerings: roadkill feathers, a half-eaten Sainsbury’s soup, a used diaper. Embracing the house’s spirit, we ate pizza with the doors flung open to the soaking garden—a bit of luften, airing the virus out. A light storm rippled the atmosphere and spongified the earth. Porousness was both a running joke and a sensibility we embraced, a shorthand for staying open to others’ moods and influence.
by Alex Quicho


PHOTO: JOERG LOHSE; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, AND THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Yet porosity felt more grounded, more active, than simply being impressionable; a sponge, after all, is not fundamentally altered by any liquid that soaks it. I associated it with the sensitivity of certain female narrators, such as Jo of Jenny Hval’s *Paradise Rot*, Anja of Elvia Wilk’s *Oval*, or even Faye of Rachel Cusk’s lauded yet reviled *Outline* trilogy. These women, especially Faye, are frequently described as open vessels for the lives of others, but their fluid demeanours and observational capacities are not to be confused with a lack of agency. Instead, they seem to exist in a flow state, cycling between self-discipline and social surrender. The ability to dissolve as easily as sugar, yet reassure just as easily and at will, seems an indicator of secure personhood, though not so much that any one is impervious to perceived slights. “Maybe it wasn’t the house, but me that was porous,” thinks Jo. “Maybe I had to grow a thicker skin in this town.” The house in question is a poorly renovated warehouse she’d found after moving to rural England from Norway for college. Its paper-thin walls don’t reach all the way to the ceiling; its aluminum siding shudders with every window or door flung open or shut. Jo can hear her lone flatmate’s urine hit the toilet bowl, her teeth breaking flat after it drains. She can hear her lone flatmate’s urine hit the toilet bowl, her teeth breaking flat after it drains. She can hear her lone flatmate’s urine hit the toilet bowl, her teeth breaking flat after it drains. Jo can hear her lone flatmate’s urine hit the toilet bowl, her teeth breaking flat after it drains. Jo can hear her lone flatmate’s urine hit the toilet bowl, her teeth breaking flat after it drains. Yet under the contamination hallucination otherwise known as obsessive-compulsive disorder, I feared bodily breaches as much as I adored permeable subjectivity, envisioning bacteria burrowed deep into food, invisible dirt prickling the palms of my hands. I was at ease with A because she and I were similarly vigilant in the pandemic, wandering around in the faint alcoholic perfume of sanitizer at all times. In Victoria Park, I watched her gently trace the lip of a canned gin and tonic with an anti-bacterial wipe. As weeks turned into months spun into a “new normal,” I kept visualizing plumes of toxic vapor escaping everyone’s mouths, viral particles settling like a fine ash on every surface. It was unbearable to accept that I was physically porous, yet alone that clichéd LSD vision of world and body as one, molecules fizzing energetically between skin and air. In this way, my mental illness was not radical; it very much centred the sufficiency of the individual unit, hard-wired me to recoil from intermingling, from connection, despite that I desired both deeply and with desperation. I saw myself in Hval’s listless, sensitive narrator peering out from the back of a lecture hall, wanting worldly plenitude in theory yet repulsed by it in practice—a feeling intensified by how the pandemic was managed, primarily, through barriers to intimacy. “I couldn’t help but think about the spit bubbles on Lipman’s mouth, this population of tiny drops spreading like little wet seeds across the auditorium,” she writes, comparing Jo’s professor and his wet oration to a mushroom expelling reproductive spores. That the metaphor contained both disgust and desire was not lost on her.

* * *

Weeks before opening a show, scientist-artist Anicka Yi will run Q-tips over fecund surfaces, as she did in *Force Majeure* (2017), gathering samples from door handles in Chinatown and Koreatown; in *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables* (2015), she asked 100 women in power to swab their orifices. The material is then brushed onto huge slabs of laboratory agar, the nourishing jelly derived from algae that comes pressed into the bottom of Petri dishes. Over the course of the show, bacterial colonies will bloom, creating bright graphic spots and painterly streaks that disrupt the minimalism of the framed or floating rectangular slabs. Whether considering female power or the might of diaspora, these works associate certain bodies with immunological fear. From Foucault to Preciado to Roberto Esposito, theorists have long used the body’s immune system as a metaphor for biopolitical power, considering how the patriarchal nation-state sustains its supremacy through purging and excluding alien forms. Such fear is often embodied; in an interview with *W* magazine, Yi recounts how cis men were mostly disgusted by her exhibition: “It smells like feces in here! I’m going to throw up! I need to leave!” Yi often shows her bacterial works alongside edible ones, such as *ALZ/AZN, Maybe She’s Born With It*, and *Lapidary Tea Slave* (all 2015), piling on sensory whiplash. In these shows, the list of materials reads like poetry: tempura-fried flowers, recalled powdered milk, MSG crystals, snail excretions. Fried flowers are piled into dripping pillars as rich and intricate as a coral reef.
which are seated atop plinths, encased in protective bubbles, and uplift by LED panels, giving them the appearance of alien life forms on display. Especially with their feminized, faintly orientalized titles, it’s hard not to consider the fragility of the body and its ideological casing, or vice versa. I think, too, of Bubble Boy (2001), the true story turned Hollywood special of David Vetter, who lived his short life inside a sterilized vesicle because of severe combined immunodeficiency. Yet in Yi’s works, a motorized blower keeps the plastic inflated, disrupting the illusion that these bubbles are hermetic domains. Any connoisseur of food preservation will tell you that exposure to air brings about spoilage. So Yi’s prickly, delicate sculptures, cushioned though they seem from interference by their formidable plastic sheaths, are still subject to the disturbance of decay.

Even in their inflated pouches—which, like the glass separating viewers from the bacterial microomes, also offer viewers a sense that they are protected from the work—they exude a peanut oil stink that clings to the once-neutral gallery atmosphere, as any cooking oil lifts from the frying pan and into one’s clothes. At the heart of Yi’s work is a conviction that scent is a feminist sense, countering the oppressive male gaze or colonial mindset of empirical definition. Scent, after all, is an untameable contaminant—you can’t avoid breathing something in as you can shut out any vision by closing your eyes, or opt out of touch by jerking your hand back from the thorn or the flame. It enters and it floods, bypassing the reasoned wording of understanding, catalyzing powerful desire or violent disgust. “Any intrusive, threatening smell—it really destabilizes people and creates a very hostile, tense environment,” says Yi to Scott Indrisek. “That’s the hardest part: dealing with people’s prejudice and intolerance for what they consider foul odors.”

It is a concentration: of memory, of experience—a single whiff rolling open a cabinet of past sensations—and of a thing itself, if you think of the essences used by perfumiers, 4,000 rose petals distilled into a single drop.

Scent is pre-verbial and indeed anti-linguistic. The animal following its nose piques Yi’s curiosity about non-human intelligence, ways that instinct and sensory fluency can usurp human-centric conceptualizations of the self and world. Immigrant Caucus (2017) presents a trio of insecticide canisters, which are placed inconspicuously on the floor and continuously diffuse an enigmatic scent. Viewers reading the exhibition material learn that this is the essence of both ants and Asian American women, the latter a distillation of sweat samples that took an hour, per specimen, to collect. On the one hand, this feels like a self-own, considering how ants tend to be considered invasive vermin, their traits equated with the immigrant stereotype of hard-working hordes that build and enroach. Yet Yi intends Immigrant Caucus to contain an “ant-human perspective,” appreciating how ants live in entirely matriarchal societies—a model she wishes humans would soon adopt. Finally, the title belies an attitude of gruelling co-operation from within and against all odds. A caucus adopts. Finally, the title belies an attitude of gruelling co-operation from within and against all odds. A caucus adopts.

The advent of the pandemic brought a renewed interest in the machinations of globalization and, indeed, the permeability of borders. How quickly the virus leaped from country to country, its path following that of industry, its decentralized manufacturing, the atomized spray of distribution and sales. In his essay “‘Chinese Virus,’ World Market,” Andrew Liu writes, “It is precisely the unexceptional status of Wuhan as a second-tier Chinese city that is notable. What the global spread of the novel coronavirus from Wuhan suggests is that the culprit here is not the unique circumstances of a particular place, but rather the now-extensive commercial connections that bring ever more of these kinds of places closer and closer together, into a larger and larger whole.”

Along with our entanglement with other species, living and non-living, the virus reiterates the enmeshment of the market and the people that sustain it. It has exposed how humans are not the Earth’s custodians, but its dependents.

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“What comes from us will return to us,” reads the caption of a photograph taken by journalist Jilson Tiu, who rode his bike around the worst-affected boroughs of Manila following Typhoon Ulysses, which struck just hours after my arrival in the city. In the photo, huge masses of plastic are caught on a bridge’s taut cables, like iron filaments furring a magnet. Flash floods brought a deluge of trash, regurgitating what was once disposed of back into our consciousness. That garbage is “taken care of” remains one of our most stubborn illusions. Anyone living in a tropical archipelago will tell you as much. Trash appears without provenance, roiled back up onto our shores with the rainy season. This can be accidental, as with the outfall from villages located beyond waste-disposal infrastructure, or intentional: a few years ago, a brief scandal erupted as barges filled with North American garbage were turned back by the Philippine government, which had previously permitted private businesses in the country to sell waste-processing services to the trash-laden West. Plastic might be proof of the futility of national sovereignty: how easily shiny chip packets, cup noodle containers, dime baggies, twist-ties, bottle caps, and microbeads are churned by ocean tides across the globe, wandering and washing up indiscriminately.

Because of the storm, the power went out. I scrolled in bed. I thought about the intensified restrictions around travel, how it was only through elaborate transnational negotiations and agreements that planes
Anisha Yi. *Maybe She’s Born With It*, 2015, blower, Mylar, plastic, resin, tempura-fried flowers, wax, LED lights, Plexiglas, wood. 1.52 m × 3.05 m; installation view from 7th exhibition of Digital Spit, 2016, Kunsthalle Basel.

PHOTO: PHILIPP HÄNGER; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 47 CANAL, AND KUNSTHALLE BASEL
could continue piercing the high atmosphere above my home country and discharge their diminished cargo into the testing cubicles, immigration queues, and hired cars that ferried us to our various quarantine facilities. These were cavernous hotels which kept their lights shut off to conserve power and made do with a “skeleton staff”—an exceptionally morbid phrase that is now doubly so. I felt small, very small, like a tiny cell travelling up a vessel and into the roomy atrium where I was destined to circulate for a few days, waiting for the all-clear from the testing facility, waiting for lost baggage, waiting for the powerful typhoon to clear the city. Just past midnight, five days into my quarantine, water suddenly began to pour from the smoke alarm and light fixtures. Porousness struck again. It would take some time before I could be moved to another room, so I packed up carefully around the water that leaked onto the carpet, down the walls, and into the centre of my bed. I was reminded of Patrick Staff’s exhibition, On Venus, at London’s Serpentine Galleries—how they’d transformed the former arsenal into a sick and labouring body with a leaky circulatory system of piping that dripped an acidic liquid into silver barrels scattered throughout.

A popular genre of TikTok this summer has been the quarantine food diary: a rapid montage of clips of people in quarantine detainment opening the prepackaged food dropped off at their door by—not quite a ghost but—said “skeleton staff.” Hearty meals at South Korean facilities contrasted with pitiful offerings from NYU dormitories. Before arriving, I worried, primarily, about what I would have to put into my body without my consent while waiting. This should have been the least of my concerns, considering how much material—and how much violence—is smuggled into and out of our bodies unbeknownst to us. I have written about Staff’s molecular sensitivities, their consideration of how biomedical treatments, from chemotherapy to hormone therapies, are often discovered and derived through human and animal trauma. Chemotherapy was fallout from a study into mustard gas, while the most readily available sort of estrogen is usually collected from mares that are forcibly inseminated. While in the world of the healthy, there appears to be a clear binary between “healthy” and “unwell,” anyone who has lived through serious medical intervention knows this is not the case. Health is fundamentally ambivalent, so-called healthy society a careful calibration between damages seen, minimized, or unperceived. In conversation with Taylor Dafoe, Yi summarizes the upside to the virus, on the other side of the gruesome human toll:

What I’ve learned during COVID-19 is that the teachings of this virus are such that it is here to regulate monoculture. It predates life, but it’s technically not living. It really destabilizes what we think about in terms of the living and the nonliving, and its implication of what that means for, let’s say, artificial machine intelligence. The idea that because something is not alive it has a different sort of categorization in terms of consciousness or life. The virus is teaching us that that binary distinction is obsolete now. It doesn’t really matter. The virus is here to promote ecological biodiversity. And the reason why we humans seem to be feeling like we’re being punished is because, in a sense, we are. Viruses punish winners. If one species becomes too greedy, if one species is too dominant, then it actually needs to go dormant for a while. Fundamentally this is good for the planet, because humans are not great for biodiversity. And humans have roughly 8 percent virus in their DNA—we are made of virus.

On the surface, Yi’s assertions ring of “we are The VirUs,” a well-circulated meme which took aim at eco-fascists using the pandemic to push forward racist ideas of depopulation. Yet, to consider how the virus might compel us to renegotiate our relationship with the world around us seems appropriate—and, to be sure, does not pardon the indefensibility of medical and governmental negligence. What the virus has taught me is that there is no simplicity in fear; as with the weaponization of “immunity,” it is the weaponization of the bone-deep instinct, where “blood-black nothingness began to spin / a system of cells interlinked within / cells interlinked within cells interlinked,” that tilts society toward greater harm. The political demands for more hatred, more insularity, and more exclusion can yet be countered by survival strategies of more care, more porosity, more interdependence—not denial of immunity nor fear nor the virus itself. The hardest thing to process has always been that we, on our own, are often also the enemy.
ENDNOTES

3 Hval, *Paradise Rot*.
7 Andrew Liu, “‘Chinese Virus,’ World Market,” *n+1* (March 20, 2020); https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/chinese-virus-world-market/
What Are They Fighting For?

26
On Oliver Husain, Kerstin Schroedinger, and the community who embraced DNCB as an experimental treatment for HIV

by Theodore (ted) Kerr
The first responders to HIV were the people living with the then-unnamed virus. They taught doctors how to care for them, journalists how to cover them, and government officials how to better and more humanely do their jobs—all while creating care protocols, mourning rituals, and culture that continue to circulate and inspire. It is no wonder, then, that over generations the “for us, and by us” approach has been the dominant mode of responding to the epidemic. When no one was looking out for them, communities of people living with HIV not only taught themselves how to live and die with the virus, they also came up with ways to treat it. Before lifesaving medication became available in 1996, a lot of people with HIV had hope in alternative medicine, the ingenuity of their peers, and the idea that maybe, just maybe, the eradication of HIV was hiding in plain sight for them to discover.

Among the most colourful (literally) of these hopes was dinitrochlorobenzene (DNCB): a common chemical used in the processing of colour photography that, starting as early as the mid-'80s, some HIV+ people experimented with to treat the virus—or at least reduce the appearance of lesions caused by Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS), an AIDS-related opportunistic infection. As a fact sheet about DNCB from the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange explains:

DNCB is applied to the skin where it is absorbed and carried to the lymph nodes by immune system cells. Within the lymph node network, DNCB is thought to stimulate several parts of the cell-mediated immune system—specifically the parts that are weakened in HIV disease. DNCB seems to prompt the cell-mediated immune system both to produce chemicals (called cytokines) that regulate the immune system and to increase specific immune cell levels.1

Artists Kerstin Schroedinger and Oliver Husain illustrate the process of applying the chemical in the short film Contact Hypersensitivity (DNCB extract) (2019/2020). Starting amid the depth of a black screen, a soundtrack by artist and DJ Ain Bailey begins, setting the tone with a “dark, deep, warm” club vibe, as Husain describes it. The next thing we see is a spotlight upon a close crop of flesh, pressed into by a finger, its nail replete with polish. Upon its release, the surface of the body rebounds. This shot establishes a fact of our flesh: it resides within the thin protective organ of our skin, a porous layer upon which much can happen.

From there, Schroedinger and Husain explore topical possibilities of skin as it relates to DNCB. Against vibrant, shifting backgrounds of jewel tones and neon, a library of hands equipped with thin brushes and Q-tips paint and swab a gelatinous substance—evocative of DNCB, a powder which was then mixed with Vaseline or the like to be applied—onto a forearm, a back, a thigh. These application sites are often tinted and hued using makeup, sparkles, or body paint. For some, this might suggest a wink and a nod to campy queer culture in the face of AIDS. Others may think of the song “Kaposi’s Koverstick” by the US punk band Transisters, fronted by legendary activist and artist Chloe Dzubilo, a trans woman living with HIV, or Australian queer icon and performance artist Leigh Bowery and his use of polka-dot makeup, which some commentators at the time said was used to cover up KS lesions. As the film progresses, the treated patches are covered by white Band-Aids, sometimes in a single strip, sometimes affixed in an X.

In terms of the science, it is clear that DNCB did have some nominal positive impact for people with HIV; however, the medical regulators at the time were not adopting it as a treatment. For some activists within the AIDS response who were skeptical of authority, the lack of official adoption worked as a seal of approval, positioning DNCB as a treatment worth fighting for. Among its most fervent champions were members of ACT UP/San Francisco (ACT UP/SF), a controversial chapter of the seminal AIDS activist group that defected and became best known for their AIDS denialism. An archived ACT UP/SF website reads, “We dispute HIV as the cause of a growing list of old diseases that have been officially categorized as AIDS.” Their dangerous thesis was that HIV does not lead to AIDS, or that what gets called AIDS is actually a side effect of other things, such as recreational drug use, or of antiretroviral pharmaceutical treatment, such as azidothymidine (AZT). This dangerous line
of thinking impacted how national leaders, such as former South African president Thabo Mbeki, shaped their country’s epidemic response, with devastatingly tragic results, and continues to result in people going off their medications and dying prematurely.

One of the elements of denialism is a rejection of pharmaceuticals. In Mbeki’s case, drugs coming from the West were not to be trusted. Instead, more solutions rooted in Africa were to be engaged. Similarly, in the ’90s, as part of the denialism, ACT UP/SF members like Michael Bellefountaine and David Pasquarelli rejected aligned against drug companies and the AIDS service organizations that supported the use of their products. Instead of medication, ACT UP/SF encouraged “a healthy lifestyle through vegetarianism, medical marijuana, and questioning the medical orthodoxy.” A 1997 SF Weekly article documents the lengths Bellefountaine and Pasquarelli went to in their quest to follow through on challenging that orthodoxy, including dousing pre-eminent AIDS doctors in fake blood at an AIDS convention, dumping 25 pounds of used kitty litter on the director of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, and punching Larry Kramer, the inspiration behind ACT UP, at a benefit dinner.

At the time, their actions were roundly criticized, and for good reason. What they were espousing was causing suffering, division, and death. Looking back, however, one is able to see with more nuance—grace, even. This is what happened to me after watching Contact Hypersensitivity (DNCB extract). Husain and Schroedinger’s aesthetics for me are trippy, their use of colours and music destabilizing. I am invited into an altered state, an otherworldly place, experienced as if in a fever dream in which interiority is explored and expelled: I am sweating out toxins; I am myself, stable, but I am also anything and not just me; I am being cared for, I am doing the caring. This idea of interdependence is illustrated vividly during a moment in the middle of the work where the camera pulls back and we see the shoulders, torso, and arms of two people—flesh made relative to the larger map of bodies. In this scene, a bulbous, shiny plastic pillow is held in place by one person, underneath the treated arm of another. Picture it: the top of an arm, shiny with substance; the bottom of an arm, supported by a held cushion. Now take a minute and ask yourself, which part of this scenario counts as the treatment? The substance on the arm? The pillow? The hand supporting the pillow? None of it? All of it?

Later in the short, the ambiguity of care is explored again. The camera frame is filled by the screening of a 16mm film the duo made—a film within a film. The fever dream continues, more abstractly: everything is scratchy, yellow, and spectral. Across the bottom half of the screen, the dark outline of branches ghost past. A latex-gloved hand, positioned in profile, comes into focus. At this moment, Husain, in a voice-over, asks, “Where is the end of the immune system?” The hand, as if trying to venture a response, begins to point at different areas on the screen, as the artist asks, “Is it here?...” The finger points, over time, in all directions.

Husain and Schroedinger’s work together began with silence. Before Austria-based Schroedinger knew anything of DNCB, she was considering the iconic AIDS poster with the black background and pink triangle that includes the text at the bottom that reads, “Silence = Death.” This led her to research the earliest decade of the AIDS crisis in the US where she found stories of independent guerilla AIDS treatment communities, including that of DNCB. She passed on what she was learning to Toronto-based Husain, who shared her interests. Since 2016, the pair have produced not only the film, but also an ever-expanding body of research: an archival deep dive trip that Schroedinger made to San Francisco, a running list of 20th-century cultural production about the chemical, a suite of interviews with Toronto AIDS activists, as well as a performance. In watching documentation of the latter, at mumok in Vienna, I noted an endearing chemistry between the two artists as they use contemporary dance moves and recite text from the archives. There is an openness and relatability throughout. Afterwards, people from the audience approached the artists privately to share their stories directly or indirectly related to DNCB.

In a Zoom conversation I had with the artists about their work, I was struck by how blurry their line between research and community engagement seems to be. They explained that their short film was informed by the video works of Stuart Marshall, Michael Balser, John Greyson, Richard Fung, Andrew J. Paterson, and other artists who made work about DNCB. These tapes came to light after a conversation with Lisa Steele, one of the founders of VTape, where Husain is a board member. Amid the many tapes there that Husain has watched and touched and read about over the years were these works alive with first-hand experience of the chemical, hiding in plain sight. As their research continued, they came to meet other people in their immediate and extended communities who also had knowledge and experience of DNCB, including the activists they interviewed for their project: Tim McCaskell, Alexander McClelland, Ron Rosenes, and Darien Taylor. As all of the connections accumulated, it became clear that DNCB is not merely a footnote or curiosity but a history unto itself, connecting people and time. I find myself taken by the artists’ process; they are constantly available for more: feedback, information, responses, and connection. It is a type of knowledge production that makes me think less about art, and more about the circulation of information, especially as it relates to HIV.

In 2018–2019, I co-organized a reading/screening series with filmmaker Shanti Avirgan, spearheaded by anthropologist Nicholas D’Avella as part of an AIDS and culture collective we are part of called What Would An HIV Doula Do? Our series was titled Uneasy Medicine: AIDS Pharmaceuticals & Other Ways of Caring, with a goal to engage friends and peers to “consider HIV in relation to the pharmaceutical industry, colonization, and forms of care that fall beyond biomedicine.” At the heart of our series were the following questions: How does the pharmaceutical industry craft profit from illness? What might happen if we honoured, acknowledged, and communicated the fact that drug discovery frequently draws from Indigenous peoples’ botanical knowledge? How are Western medicinal treatments combined and remixed with healing practices different from those recognized as effective by modern science? How can we form political alliances across practices of care to build better worlds together?

The goal was not to find answers. Rather, in our monthly gatherings over bodega snacks, we would engage in what D’Avella called “a collective practice of knowledge sharing”: it was as much about the reading or the screening as it was about how we came together and made sense of what we were processing and how that related to our own understanding of our bodies.
Amid the *Uneasy Medicine* readings was “The Embodied Past. From Paranoid Style to Politics of Memory in South Africa” (2008), in which scholar Didier Fassin explores AIDS, politics, and the role of memory under Mbeki’s rule. Fassin coins the phrase “embodied past,” which he defines as follows:

> the way in which individual trajectories and collective histories are transcribed into individual and collective bodies, in terms of affects and emotion, disease and comfort, mourning and pleasure. In other words, it is the way through which social structures and norms inscribed in the long term of historical changes impose themselves on [people], both in their everyday existence and in the meaning they give to their life and actions.... The first side is objective. It is the physical mark left by history in terms of deterioration, wearing, fatigue, illness, violence.... The second side is subjective. It is the psychic trace left by memory in terms of the interpretation of the social world and its source, in terms of individual and collective narrative reconstructing local truths.

When I go back to read the printout I made back then in early 2019, I find a summative note in the margin of Fassin’s text that gives me pause. I recognize my printing, but am not sure about where the words came from. Did I write them while I was reading? Was it something someone wrote on the shared craft paper that I then copied, or was it something someone said during the discussion that I jotted down? In any case, it underscores yet another connection between *Uneasy Medicine* and Schroeder and Husain’s process: no one can actually know something on their own, even as it relates to one’s own past. Information is not (just) content, it is also the result of collection and assemblage, which, when explored with others, can highlight the multiple stakes undergirding a life, a movement, or even a shared community ethic.

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In a 1987 *New York Times* article about DNCB and other community treatments, Dr. L. Bruce Mills, one of the earliest users of DNCB for HIV, told the paper, “These are desperate acts and they are inevitable in the face of a disease we don’t treat so well.”1 Desperate in the face of death and suffering—who wouldn’t be? In Husain and Schroeder’s interviews, desperation comes up often. McClelland, who has written about anarchy and HIV with activist Zoë Dodd, urges the duo to remember that community-developed HIV treatment was born out of a lack of options, and became a way of life for some people. Taylor, too, in her interview with Husain and Schroeder, talks about desperation and its relation to DNCB: “Because so many people were so desperate, there was this real morality that developed around whether you took it or not. There was a lot of faith and belief of desperate dying people.” Examined across time and in conversation with others, as the duo is doing, desperation has emerged as a way into uncovering some of the community ethics that might have been in play.

Returning to Fassin’s idea of the embodied past, ACT UP/SF members were not just fighting to save their individual bodies against the devastation that the historic and ongoing impact of systemic bias in the face of a deadly virus was having upon them. They were also fighting for a way forward that ensured the communities that were first responding to HIV—who were having to survive amid stigma, discrimination, and criminalization—were centred, and proven victorious for the record.

As ACT UP/SF were fighting for DNCB, the medical and AIDS non-profit establishment was standing up for AZT, which at the time was being prescribed at doses so toxic that it unfortunately provided credence to AIDS denialists’ theories. Whereas AZT was approved by the FDA in the US in 1987, DNCB was vetted by grassroots community voices, including HIV activist Charles Caulfield who wrote about it for his column in the *San Francisco Sentinel*. An endorsement from the trenches, such as that given by Caulfield, who like Bellefountaine and Pasquarelli was living with HIV, was worth more than anything a drug company could say. It was the confirmation of a “for us, and by us” solution. Later, in the introduction of his collected columns, co-authored by Billi Goldberg,12 *The Anarchist AIDS Medical Formulary* (1993), Caulfield provided context to his writing:

> It offers a radical departure from conventionally sanctioned medical approaches to HIV/AIDS which appears to accept the endpoint of death as inevitable. The content of these essays has been drawn from the collected experiences of people living with AIDS, and their successes and failures in combating the progression of the disease in their bodies and their communities. It is clear that what is needed to survive and recover from this illness is easily available and accessible to us right here and now. Those of us who have achieved this goal stand as a testament to the courage and perseverance required to stand up to the enormous pressure of the pharmaceutical industry’s attempts to cajole us into turning our lives over to them and their influence.

Forty years into the AIDS crisis, centring the knowledge of people living with HIV, as Caulfield does above, is a pillar upon which the AIDS response is often placed. We see that in everything from the role that consumer advisory boards are said to play within contemporary AIDS service organizations to the enduring legacy of The Denver Principles (written by men living with HIV in 1983), which stated that, upon diagnosis, people were not AIDS victims but rather people living with HIV.14 With that in mind, it is not that strange that Bellefountaine, Pasquarelli, and Caulfield would be against the forces that they felt had endangered them, nor is it that complicated why they so intensely doubled down on their beliefs. It is a romantic, dangerous, and loyalty-informed kind of stubbornness that seems to toe the line between activist hubris and radical activist faith rooted in something real and true: that people living with HIV have specific and special insights into what is needed for their survival.

Reflecting on the ACT UP/SF brand of denialism, I think it was less about DNCB or any specific treatment per se, and more about who had the right and authority to decide what happens to a body made sick, made marginal. For Bellefountaine, Pasquarelli, Caulfield, and others, it seemed that the question of treatment was as much about what they put on and inside their bodies as where it came from. Maybe it is my own romantic delusions, but I wonder if for them, an undying belief in their positive community was a form of treatment they felt was worth dying for.
Through Husain and Schroedinger, we are provided an opportunity not only to learn about DNCB and its rich histories but to consider and investigate the complex stakes that surrounded its usage. While there is little collateral damage concerning DNCB as an HIV treatment, the calamities around AIDS denialism are deadly, ongoing, and destructive. I used to think that by ignoring AIDS denialism, I was depriving it of fuel. And maybe that is true, although I also wonder what can happen if we look straight into denialism and consider why some people are drawn in. It is easy to judge people's choices, especially from the past. It is harder to sit with the context of the lives of those who made those choices. But by doing so, we invest in nuance, and reveal the traces that animate our ongoing struggles—such as the anti-vaccine and anti-masker beliefs that plague another current pandemic. Looking back through a lens of generosity and with deep belief in interconnectedness, I think, is at the heart of Husain and Schroedinger's exploration.

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A few days after our Zoom chat, Husain emailed me, letting me know that there was more to share, specifically around that moment in the film with the gloved hand against the yellow sky. He wrote: “[The] film was processed with organic, homemade developer replacing the toxic chemicals. We used a recipe based on turmeric. Turmeric because it is yellow—DNCB was used as part of the yellow colour process by Kodak—and because it is a healing plant with anti-inflammatory effect.” With their recipe, Husain and Schroedinger retrace the past, but with less toxicity, both material and social.

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ENDNOTES

2 See the page, archived here: http://davidpasquarelli.com/actupsf_v2/
3 Learn more about his life in this 2007 obit written for the Bay Area Reporter by Liz Highleyman: www.ebar.com/obituaries/247727
4 Learn more about his life in this website created for him after his 2004 death, maintained by his surviving life partner, Steve Huggins: http://davidpasquarelli.com/content/?page_id=12
5 “ACT UP San Francisco” (archived web page), David Pasquarelli; http://davidpasquarelli.com/actupsf_v2/
8 Learn more about the collective at www.hivdoula.work
9 “Public Engagement,” HIV Doula Work; http://hivdoula.work/publicengagement
10 “Public Engagement.”
12 View the project here: https://hivhepcanarchist.tumblr.com/
13 This 2006 memorial text provides insight into an extraordinary and under-reported life: https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/sfgate/obituary.aspx?n=billi-goldberg&pid=20263762
The (Im)possibility of Healing: On Lauryn Youden

by Lauren Fournier
Lauryn Youden, to offer you something, to bring relief, 2020, 378 cm × 100 cm × 32 cm; installation view from Visionary of Knives, 2020, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin
PHOTO: TIMO OHLER; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
Lauryn Youden, to offer you something, to bring relief, 2020, 378 cm × 100 cm × 32 cm; Installation view from Visionary of Knives, 2020, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin
PHOTO: TIMO OHLER, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
Lauryn Youden’s survival and self-care strategies span a range of epistemic modes—be they witchcraft, spirituality and mysticism, medicine and alchemy, art and theory—each enormously loaded with internal pluralism and complex, overlapping histories that have been distorted by such obfuscating forces as colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Some methods are affirmed by Western science and others by some of the many different frameworks and systems of knowledge that exceed it, including tarot, divination runes, and herbalism. Each item on display in her most recent exhibition, Visionary of Knives at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, is selected based on both embodied evidence of what works for Youden and those with whom she is in relation, in a way that is guided by cultural sensitivity. Is there a way to engage with multiple sources of cultural knowledge respectfully, and through that engagement perhaps even dismantle structures of white supremacy? What can a white chronically ill or Crip person in an ableist world adopt to ease their pain and bring healing—without fearing social retribution for looking outside the confines of Western biomedicine? These are fraught questions, but important ones, and ones that this Berlin-based, Canadian artist strives to address.

Acknowledging the integral role of learning and unlearning in community, care, and healing, the exhibition is structured around the sharing of sources—books, herbs, medicines, dried flowers, candles, and ritual-based objects— referencing the discourses, ideas, and practices of a great many others in a consensual, considerate way. While Youden is grounded, ancestrally and geographically, in European traditions, she also includes BIPOC practices, though only when and as they have been introduced to her via her queer family bonds. In the brochure that meticulously documents every object and text in the show, Youden includes a description of each item, as well as who gifted the object to her, where relevant.

Youden’s active involvement with the Sickness Affinity Group (SAG) and the Golden Dome School, among others, informs the grounding of this retrospective exhibition on healing in a close community of ongoing negotiation and trust. Visionary of Knives was first intended to be a place for the queer Crip community in Berlin to physically gather. The SAG is a transnational collective of artists, activists, and theorists who are chronically ill and disabled, as well as their allies. They convene as a monthly support group, with conversational check-ins to see what people need and how they might get it. Before the pandemic hit, the group was getting too big for its current meeting space, and so Youden decided she’d open up the studio she’d have access to throughout her residency at the Künstlerhaus as the new gathering place. The SAG was first intended to be a place for the queer Crip community in Berlin to physically gather. It was a reparative gesture in response to a nihilistic hex that a group of TikTok witches put on the moon earlier in 2020, Youden includes a list of fibromyalgia treatments at the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the language of “droplets,” we’re reminded that the boundary between where my body/microbiome ends and your body/microbiome begins is not so clear.

Mugwort is featured throughout this exhibition, a quintessentially “witchy” plant, as understood from a largely white, Western perspective: stalks of mugwort are clumped into big bouquets. “Mugwort grows like a weed here,” Youden says in conversation with me, of her neighbourhood in Berlin. “You can go to parks and gather it.” She goes on to describe a philosophy of ruderal ecology: “The plants that grow as weeds are the plants we need—they’re growing there for a reason, and are there to be used.” The exhibition is a space to display the alchemical commingling of research and reading with other embodied practices like making and ingesting medicine from plants. If and when people could physically gather together, Youden, who came of age as a performance artist and continues to work in live performance, served mugwort tea while reading an illness narrative/historical essay she wrote on lucid dreaming as a form of addressing trauma and then healing. This move recalls a tendency in work by contemporaneous artists invested in the critical politics of care and transformation, like the Brooklyn-based, Black Canadian new media artist Ashley Jane Lewis, who fed her sourdough starter while reading excerpts of Octavia E. Butler aloud as part of her Bio-Art workshop “Fermenting a Revolution” at Vector Festival in Toronto (2020), or Korean American artist, astrologer, and musician Johanna Hedva’s body of writings that entwine auto-theoretical spoken word readings with other performances and sound in their ongoing This Earth, Our Hospital (2016–present).

Many books are on view, including but not limited to Barbara Ann Brennan’s Hands of Light: A Guide to Healing Through the Human Energy Field (1987), which speculatively invokes the wisdom of body work; books on botany and ecology like The Secret Life of Plants (1973); poetry like Maggie Nelson’s Bluests (2009); books of historical fiction and speculative fiction like Jamaican-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson’s The Salt Roads (2003); and books of feminist theory like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s Care Work (2018) and bell hooks’s The Will to Change (2004). The books, like the other objects on these altars, cannot be touched or read in the space itself. Instead, the books function more as semiotic sculptures, reference points for further reading—this, for COVID safety reasons. An exception is the literature referenced as hand-stitched words on pillows: poetry by CAConrad and fiction by Larissa Lai. The artist’s collection of writings and zines by other Crip queer and allied artists and healers is also on display, including texts by Carolyn Lazar, Clementine Morrigan, and Taranee Fazeli.

In her altar for the moon, which the artist created as a reparative gesture in response to a nihilistic hex that a group of TikTok witches put on the moon earlier in 2020, Youden includes a list of fibromyalgia treatments from the pain centre she attends, such as “progressive muscle exercises, Tai Chi or Yoga, and walking 30 minutes 3 times per week.” In one of our conversations, she said that she finds the list to be laughable—this comically simplified physiotherapist version of the narrative of Western medicine incorporating Eastern influence, familiar to a West Coast kid like Youden.
who was raised as a settler in Vancouver, as well as of the ongoing latent assumptions by doctors that her symptoms are psychosomatic (“Have you tried yoga?”). The history of violence toward BIPOC people and women by Western medicine is another part of the context of this work, with the political, intersectional question of who receives the care that they need and whose embodied word is taken seriously in the face of colonial, patriarchal, structurally racist power and understanding. The work of healing in this exhibition comes from a completely sincere place, yet Youden can find space to laugh—a space for some levity and release.

The artist lives and works where the Malleus Maleficarum, a Catholic treatise against witchcraft from 1487, was written and where, resultantiy, some of the largest witch hunts in history took place. This aspect of the land Youden lives on serves as a haunting presence. Through research, she has come to learn that some of the drive behind witch hunts might have been a fundamental misunderstanding of illness, mental health, and neurodiversity (an argument suggested in the 1922 film Häxan; based on director Benjamin Christensen’s study of the Malleus Maleficarum). The Marxist Italian feminist Silvia Federici’s work is an important contextual marker in Youden’s ongoing art practice, too, which discusses the history of violence against women’s bodies as part and parcel of the development of capitalism, and how the loss of women’s autonomy, beyond reproductive activities, is integral to how their bodies relate to the Western medical industrial complex today (which if you have polycystic ovarian syndrome, like I do, you can attest to, as you’ll only be given a cure or plan of treatment when you decide you “want to get pregnant”). In Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women (2018), Federici makes the case that “[t]he witch was the communist and terrorist of her time, which required a ‘civilizing’ drive to produce the new ‘subjectivity’ and sexual division of labor on which the capitalist work discipline would rely.”

Early on in the quarantine, which coincided with the unprecedented surge of, and mainstream support for, the Black Lives Matter movement, Black and Brown occultist and witch Paulette a.k.a. Bad Mamma Jama (@bad.mamma.jama), whom Youden follows on Instagram, posted a protection spell for Black people. Youden printed out the spell and posted it in her studio—an invocation and a material reminder for anyone who enters, as well as a political statement of her own support of #BLM. Youden posted a reproduction of this spell at the entry to the exhibition too, citing the witch and her original ritual as the source; in the comments section of the witch’s original post, white witches asked whether they could use this spell, to which Paulette responded that it “is for everyone to use.” There is a politics here of widely and indiscriminately invoking a spell for protection of Black lives at risk. In anticipation of including the spell in her exhibition, Youden sent Paulette a DM asking how she could pay her for the use of it; Paulette was pleasantly surprised—this was the first time, apparently, that someone had offered to pay. The act raises the question of who gets paid for their work in the creative fields that intersect with medicine and healing, and what forms of remuneration and exchange are best suited for these times. While the issue of monetary exchange requires a consideration of cultural context around remuneration and gifting, most people have rent to pay, and the urgent politics of precarity and material support adds another key layer to an exhibition that tries to home in on what it means to have transformative, collective healing across communities that are living, and dying, in pain.

On one altar, a serpentine sculpture made of black wood spans the better part of the length, framing an assortment of objects: a six-piece Jugendstil Vallerysthal Toiletry set made of purple pressed glass, with one container holding a smudge stick, a gift from Bri Luna, and two sticks of licorice root from Côte d’Azur. In another container: a pale purple rose; a Kashmiri copper serpent teapot; a black candelabrum with 10 white candles from Coyoacán Market in Mexico City; a bowl made of air-dry clay containing a set of divination runes made from quartz crystal with gold engraving—a gift from the artist’s mother, Cheri Youden; and six books that focus on serpents, spells, and herbs, including Jeremy Narby’s The Cosmic Serpent (1998), gifted to Youden by Jasper Circus, and Sarah Shin and Rebeca Tamás’s Spells: 21st-Century Occult Poetry (2018), a gift from Romily Alice Walden. Above this quite gorgeous arrangement of objects hangs a sovereign bas-relief from the For the Record series by fierce pussy—an art and activist collective comprised of queer women, formed in 1991—produced for Visual AIDS. In bold black text turning to red, it reads, “if she were alive today she’d still be living with AIDS.” As a queer person living with chronic illness, Youden places herself and this work in alignment with queers living with HIV/AIDS and their complex relationships to health and healing. Sandor Katz comes to mind, the famed gay American “fermentation revivalist” who did a deep dive into fermentation traditions from hundreds of traditions around the world when he received his HIV+ diagnosis in the early ’90s, which he continues to learn about, compile, and teach in dialogue with fermenters across cultures; at the beginning of his book Wild Fermentation (2003), he emphasizes the role that fermented food has played in his own journey of staying well with HIV/AIDS, also noting that he is not purporting any curative function, necessarily.

In thinking about Youden’s work, I’m reminded of the Métis artist, curator, and critical writer David Garneau’s nuanced perspectives on cultural appropriation—specifically, his distinguishing of “misappropriation,” as in the misuse and abuse of an object or material, from “appropriation.”6 Garneau posits that one can appropriate in the sense of taking for one’s own use without misappropriating, misusing.7 Close friendship and familial connection play a role throughout the exhibition’s sourcing. This process of receipt could potentially be an approach to address the issue of misappropriation, with the assumption that the artist is not appropriating, but rather, is paying for their work in a reciprocal process of exchange, and that she has been given permission to use these objects in her life and therefore—for the many living artists invested in histories of feminisms and queer ways of working, who concomitantly bridge theory and practice, life and art—it might follow, by certain logics: her art/work.

The larger question remains, though, as to who can and should be able to make use of healing objects and materials in their life and their art. Ought one to have a cultural or ancestral tie to a substance in order to use it for a spiritual or medicinal purpose? Recently, the answer, at least in Canada, seems to be “yes,” and for good reason—the history of cultural appropriation has been violent and disempowering to those for whom colonial structures are most oppressive, including Indigenous and Black communities. However, the question may not be as straightforward as it seems, in this time of mixed ancestry following complex histories of immigration, convoluted and forced assimilation, and intergenerational trauma that leave many artists, both BIPOC and white (and those in-between), estranged from their traditions. That the objects and texts in Visionary of Knives were shared with Youden through ongoing relationships of open dialogue, negotiation, and trust, seems to push at the limits of the conversation. Where do we, as a contemporary art community in Canada, now stand on cultural sharing versus appropriation? Can the appropriate ties be made via friendship? Via family? Via queer family? Is this question always contextual?

Youden acknowledges that without keen attention to community and dialogue, as well as a close consideration of the materials, their origins, and sourcing, the work risks coming across as just about
Lauryn Youden, *to offer you something, to bring relief*, 2020, 378 cm × 100 cm × 32 cm; installation view from *Visionary of Knives*, 2020, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin

PHOTO: TIMO OHLER; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
“witchiness”—especially given her unironic use of language like “altars” to describe her display practices. When her work comes across as some form of “yoga art” or “hippie stoner art”—which might be considered a kind of shorthand for white people’s aestheticized handling of cultures not their own—Youden is, reasonably, concerned. Literacy, context, and citation are her strategies for honouring the sources of these healing traditions in hopes of both avoiding a straightforward “culturally appropriative” read and having a more generative conversation about the relationships between personal and collective healing. While the exhibition marks an exciting development in Youden’s practice, with a level of rigour and thoughtfulness that shows a conceptual maturation for this emerging artist, it does not avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls.

Making the question of cultural sharing, and using gifts in one’s artwork, even more complicated is what happens once the materials are placed on display. Youden’s goal was to find a way of incorporating the key influences of a wide array of people in her life and work, to decenter herself as the author of this knowledge, cognizant however that putting them on display ran the risk of replicating the exploitative, colonial curatorial act of placing materials, practices, and traditions not concomitant with one’s own ancestry in a decontextualized space. And yet, while not her intent, it is one of the results; this gets at the very limitations of anti-hierarchical ways of working, desirable as they may be in theory for some artists invested in the work of anti-oppression. The exhibition title came from the Metamorphic Tarot, a deck created by the painter Ebb Bayley and gifted to Youden at a point when she was struggling with the work: Youden pulled the card “Visionary of Knives,” which describes one who “holds deep wisdom born of pain.” Bayley describes the tarot deck as non-binary and non-hierarchical. But in the so-called absence of hierarchy, what structure or ordering principles result? Who goes first, and who goes last? What book is placed on top of another? What gets a passing glance, and what comes into focus? Which cultural object can or can’t be placed next to another? Who makes decisions in the non-hierarchical collective? And who gets blamed when the decision turns out to be the wrong one? When these questions are considered in-depth, and with historical and cultural context, the impossibility of such speculative negations—rejecting hierarchy outright, without replacing it with something else—is revealed. Since Youden is organizing objects with cultural contexts in space, on the altars, there is a sense of mixing-together that, if read with a view to hierarchization, can come across as lacking care, even if the intent was, paradoxically, to dismantle problematic power through a queer feminist Crip practice of caring. While the work’s display practice is tied to the artist’s philosophy as expressed in collectives like SAG, it is revealed to have its own limitations when, like so many manifestos and theories, it is put into practice. For these reasons, I imagine that people from different subject positions will gauge the exhibition’s success differently.

For an upcoming show at the The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Youden has been making a new body of work in resonance with the life and work of Emma Kunz, a Swiss outsider artist and healer who is part of a constellation of mystic feminist European artists like Hilma af Klint. During the run of Visionary of Knives, Youden visited a grotto in Switzerland that Kunz supposedly discovered and spent a lot of time in. Said to have healing properties, it symbolizes a place between death and life that is tied, for Youden, to the state of being chronically ill. She recorded electromagnetic energy in the grotto, which she will transmit back as sublime, soothing sounds visitors can bask in as they rest—extending the logic of the sound bath, with the effects that vibrational waves have on the body. In May 2021, Youden will return to the grotto to give a live performance on the anniversary of Kunz’s death. One way of respectfully accessing this sacred space is through divination, following from the fact that Kunz found the grotto (which was formerly a quarry) using a pendulum. For accessibility reasons, Youden chose the divination practice of scrying with black ink or mirrors (in her case, due to site protocol, black Plexiglas), a common practice for accessing sacred spaces, and liminal or transitional spaces (sometimes referred to as spaces of “dark water”).

Questions came up for her including whether employing this method without explicitly acknowledging the many related ones, in the work itself, would constitute an act of erasure. The focus of the work is primarily on the specific site of the Kunz grotto and Youden’s experience of chronically-ill embodiment and concomitant brain fog: with that in mind, Youden’s material and ritual-based decisions seem to resonate conceptually, even as questions remain about how best to go about cultural sharing and citation within one’s trans-cultural art-making. As she sees it, a white artist—especially one who is making work about religious practices and sacred places—cannot pretend to exist in a white vacuum, as if BIPOC practices and lives are not integral to histories of medicine, healing, and land. This conviction is continuous with her insistence on featuring objects that refer to the knowledge of many members of her community, and clearly begs another set of questions that reveals cultural borrowing to be the aporia that it is: does it make sense for a white artist, working with the work of another white artist in Switzerland, to incorporate traditions that are not indigenous to that land, and which likely wouldn’t give back to those whose traditions are being referenced? Is incorporation for inclusion’s sake productive to the artist’s aims? Might this conception of “erasure” be overly simplistic, and thus open up new terrain for trouble? Would it be better if practices indigenous solely to that region were used, without attention to the larger, transnational global world?

Youden tests out questions around sharing in present-day communities, asking what is possible for healing and how we might work ethnically around topics as semantically contentious as healing and witchcraft. She asks how we can be in collaboration and solidarity with each other across a range of difference, taking care of ourselves and others in ways that are responsible, reciprocal, and not selfish. The placing of objects and substances on display on the altars is a conceptual attempt at transparency and citation that, due to her structural desire for anti-hierarchism, risks having a decontextualizing and disempowering effect. It’s notable that even one who is aware of potential pitfalls and earnestly attempts to remedy them can come up short. Youden’s work marks one entry, then, toward a possible way forward, where artists who want to actively uphold values of anti-racism, anti-ableism, and anti-sexism might work on disentangling questions around “healing” in a transcultural way. There is much work left to be done.
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ENDNOTES
1 Or “safer,” with some feminist groups adopting language of “safer spaces” as a more realistic alternative to the ideal of “safe space” implementation. Notably, the language of safety is itself fraught and warrants an intersectional approach (what constitutes a boundary for one person might feel like harm to another), but I use it here in a quite fundamental sense. What is experienced as safety for a white person might be very different from what is experienced as safety for someone who is racialized.
2 Mugwort is used for scrying and lucid dreaming. Youden first used it as a remedy for the “demon”—a metaphor for sexual trauma—that she names Nocebo who would visit her in dreams. “Nocebo,” a neurobiology term from the opposite of “placebo”, Through lucid dreaming, she could have agency in facing it once and for all. “It was a bizarre way my body overcame deep sexual trauma,” Youden notes, “a kind of dreamtime exposure therapy.” From Lauryn Youden’s performance You Say I For Me, 2018, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
3 From the artist’s exhibition brochure: “All contents of these altars are subject to removal or re-placement for the duration of the exhibition by Youden when she is using such content in her daily life. For this reason, none of the contents of these altars can be touched or used by anyone other than Youden herself for COVID safety reasons. This restriction will be in place until there is a vaccine/ effective treatment for COVID-19 and it is accessible to all.”
4 Earlier this year, a group of TikTok witches put a hex on the moon in a nihilistic gesture; in response, a bunch of Instagram and TikTok witches were terrified—in particular, those invested in questions around medicine and healing—saying that these TikTokkers were going to anger the parents of the moon, one of whom is the medicine god.
7 As Garneau describes, in email correspondence with the author: “Outright theft is misappropriation. There needs to be some nuance, though, to cover agreements between Indigenous and other folk to cover trade, sharing, and the reception of gifts. These are legitimate/sanctioned taking. Cultural influence is often a grey zone. Sites of inter-cultural mixing will occur and will not always be theft. These cases need to be examined individually to see how power and meaning are negotiated/deployed,” (January 7, 2021).
8 There are a range of sources for scrying practices. Youden references Toltec and Aztec practices of scrying with obsidian mirrors, which she became aware of during her time in Mexico, as well as Eliza Biarn of the Golden Dome School, with whom she studied, who writes “Ancient Egyptians used bowls filled with ink and blood, Ancient Persians used a chalice filled with water, the Celts used darkened brass plates, and many contemporary diviners simply paint a mirror black,” (https://golden-dome.org/2020/03/13/3-15-poems-from-the-deep-scrying-101-on-line/).
Soft Blues

42
The best thing I got from my relationship with Z was his description of Alvarado Street in Los Angeles being like a river, how the traffic just swims down it.

The second best thing I got was that I was finally disabused of the idea that de Kooning was a genius. Z, a straight cis white boy painter from Texas, without one lick of irony or self-awareness at how ironic it made him look, worshipped de Kooning, idolized and wanted to be him, studied him with righteous devotion, hunted every scrap of biographical anecdote; de Kooning did it like this, de Kooning said this, repeating quotes like the rosary, which was all a big yearning, a hope that, in small ways that were accumulating, through will and determination but also osmosis, by soaking himself in the sticky wet of de Kooning’s everything, Z was comporting himself more and more toward de Kooning, and would one day walk in the shadow that would also be the light of the master.

It’s the kind of behaviour that straight cis white boys are born into, the kind propelled by something that commingles faith and delusion, faith in themselves and their god-given right to be front and centre and always on top, and the ability to ignore completely the possibility that everything they believe to be true about themselves is a delusion. True, it’s a delusion that the whole world believes in, but doesn’t that fact only corroborate its being a lie?

The German word Malerschwein literally means “painter pig,” but it is figuratively used to describe an archetypal male artist: chauvinistic; lauded; insecure and emotionally irresponsible; egomaniacal but allowed, even urged, to be that way; misogynistic in his art and life, despite that both of those things could not have happened without the wives, mothers, sisters, and girlfriends who serve him in the capacity of collaborators, advocates, patrons, managers, curators, editors, critics, teachers, therapists, caregivers, mentors, librarians, accountants, assistants, cooks, maids, muses, typists, secretaries, publicists, laundresses, and nurses. No matter his medium, the Malerschwein is a genius of a singular kind, a trailblazer who, in a divinely directed quest à la Moses, ventures to the wild frontier of his craft, spelunks depths that he presumes—and which the world substantiates back to him—have never before been excavated, or if they have, not sufficiently so, not yet by a Genius, for we need a Genius who will show us revolutionary, seminal (from “semen”), ways to understand ourselves and how to live and be.

The Malerschwein is always Great, with a capital G. And he always changes the World, with a capital W. The goddamn canon is made of Malerschwein. Just Google “genius” and have a nice scroll through the History of Civilization.
An old boss of mine, an artist to whom I was a studio assistant, once gave me the de Kooning biography to read. “You should know about him,” he told me, and loaned me his copy, saying, “But I want this back.” This is an apt representation of patriarchy in practice.

When I returned it to him, he did not ask me what I thought, but said, “It’s great, right? He was great, right?” though not said as questions. This is a better representation of patriarchy in practice.

While I was working for this man, I had a miscarriage, with complications, a biblical 40 days of bleeding, which ignited a grief in me so brutal that it almost blinked me out of existence. A small hole yawned open to inhale the entire universe, and everything that had been explicable before was now negated, totally, radically, and I was left in a pool of tears and empty skin and I could not—I was not. I have endometriosis, a disease that I was told, when I was first diagnosed at age 20, meant I would probably never be able to get pregnant, and I am genderqueer and have gender dysphoria, the latter of which is also classified as a disease. The fact that I have a uterus at all feels like a weird mistake, a curse nevertheless borne from my DNA; so, when I say that a small hole yawned open, I’m referring not only to a hole that was the absence of an impossible fetus, but to a hole that existed at the very site of the impossibilities that are my self.

One night, bleeding blood that had turned to black ash, I was crying and could not stop, I was a mad dog trying to tear its way out of my own throat, I thrashed around like the female protagonist in Greek tragedy, a cursed woman who has had everything taken from her, so I cursed everyone I knew, and the most unkind curse I gave to myself, so the father of the baby called the police and had me involuntarily hospitalized in the psych ward.

They took me away in handcuffs and wouldn’t let me bring my shoes. Because I pass as white, I was not shot by the police when they arrived at my home. On the way to the hospital, one of the cops looked over his shoulder through the metal fence that divided the front seat from the back, and said to me in a quiet voice, “My girlfriend is pregnant right now, so I, I understand. I’m so sorry.” I looked at him calmly and in a clear voice said: “You don’t have to take me, you know. I’m just grieving.” “I know,” he said, “but we have to. It’s the law.”

This is not a representation of the patriarchy in practice. This is the practice of it. For a practice to become an institution, it has to be instituted and reinstituted. It’s a doing that has to be done.

My boss, who was also my professor at the time, took it upon himself to be my medical “advocate.” He supported the hospitalization, and introduced the notion that came to dominate the discussion, which was that I “should have gotten over it by now,” hence why hospitalization was necessary. I was hysterical, out of control, a danger to myself and others. He wasn’t wrong. But he left out the part that considered the question of how else, if not this, I should have been. How else, I kept asking, should I behave? What is the right way to grieve? And can it ever be lawful?

A friend, an older woman, upon my release from the hospital, told me, “Remember: Medea may have been hysterical, but she was right.”

I met Z during the summer after I was released from the hospital. I was living alone in Chinatown, on Chung King Court—one block of a clean, spacious lane where cars aren’t allowed to go. It was built in the ’30s, when LA was young, as part of something for tourists called the “New Chinatown,” but which has since been drained of its commerce. In the ’90s, art galleries moved in and flourished for a few years, and I was staying in a studio owned by an artist whose career had had a similar trajectory. The scene was empty but the red paper lanterns strung across the alley were still turned on every night. It looked like the abandoned set of a racist movie: stray cats, people collecting bottles, an old Chinese woman carrying plastic bags of bruised vegetables, a pair of busboys on a smoke break from a Chinese restaurant, squatting at the foot of a crooked staircase.

I would sometimes walk barefoot at night down the lane. The air was warm and my body felt featherweight, capable of lifting into the air and tumbling away. I’d feel as though my life and my self and my world and what I wanted and who I was were my own. This was the only thing I comprehended in the face of many often contradictory facts, untamed and teeming in their disparity. I had to turn away from them; in the face of too many things, I had to make only one thing: me. Nothing, of course, actually belonged to me, not least the entity I’d constructed and who I was not. I told myself it did belong to me, but I did not belong to it. Nothing, of course, actually belonged to me, not least the entity I’d constructed and who I was not. I told myself it did belong to me, but I did not belong to it.

At the hospital, I had been prescribed medication which would turn out to be the wrong medication. I had been misdiagnosed with depression, because they saw in me only one thing in the face of many, because again, that is how the world is structured. Our collective delusion.
I should probably define “delusion,” because it’s hilarious. “Delude” comes from “de” and “ludere” (a form of ludicrous): De, meaning “down, to one’s detriment,” and ludere, from the Latin, meaning “to play.” So, a game you play to your detriment.

Who might lose at such a game? Who might win?

When people with bipolar disorder are given antidepressants, it triggers mania, and this period would ignite in me my first and only true mania, the kind the textbooks and diagnostic codes call “classic.” But I wouldn’t learn that until six months later. For now, the medication was pulling me out of my grief; reborn, I felt pure and unspoiled by all that had happened. The chemicals in my body were cooking hypomania, the early stages of mania, and the charged, fertile wonderfulness of it hadn’t yet turned dangerous. I felt buoyant, overflowing with visions, and untouched by time.

What I mean is that I could not grasp the thought that my actions had consequences, that my body was made of material, and that what I did with it was tethered to reality and its laws. What makes mania feel like mania is the feeling that the force which moves time in one direction has been suspended, making reality a lawless place where everything, past present future, is happening forever and always and right now. It’s a kind of surging that feels both dispersed and radically concentrated, and because it is so extraordinary, the fact that you feel it seems to imply that something about you is extraordinary too.

I’m sympathetic to the notion that time is an illusion, so I’m always frustrated when things that get broken tend to stay broken.

I like to refer to this manic summer as “The Summer of My 12-Inch Cock.”

My cock is 12 inches long and it’s a gun and a Molotov cocktail and a megaphone and a long, perfectly balanced sword and a power drill that can grind through bone and a really big hammer, a hammer that could crush one of Jupiter’s moons, and a flame-thrower longer than my body and a huge punishing stretch of silence and a ghost and a cave and a vase of bleeding hearts and easy sugar and a deep old forest with ancient mosses and a combustion ex nihilo and it stinks like very expensive perfume and when it lands on the face of my enemies it cracks through the air with a thwack that registers at 150 fucking decibels.

During manias, it is difficult to remember things you know are true. Lies are difficult to distinguish from desires, reality is impossible to locate amid what feels like a warm dream. It’s easy to get lost and not feel like you’re lost. Also, how can a person be lost if they went there because they wanted to?

There are many etymologies of the word “lost,” the adjective of “lose,” but my favourite is the transitive sense from the 1200s: “to part with accidentally, be deprived of, miss the possession or knowledge of.” I like that it can be an accident, and I like the double meaning of the word “miss,” that it is both a failure and a yearning.

Who gets to say where the line is between what one wants and what one has been taught to want? And who gets to say if that wanting defines a person as the thing they have failed at, or the thing they have yearned for, and aren’t these somehow the same?

Manias feel great. Doctors don’t want you to know that. Manias are also encouraged in certain kinds of people in certain areas of life, but doctors don’t want you to know that either, because it relies on the premise that sanity is a straw man. A delusion that the whole world believes in.

The DSM-5 criteria for a classic manic episode includes “inflated self-esteem or grandiosity,” “flight of ideas,” and “excessive involvement in pleasurable or risky activities that have a high potential for painful consequences.” Sounds like qualities that are especially encouraged in the Malerschwein, with the exception of the last part—the painful consequences—which sounds like what everyone else will feel upon dealing with him.

You’d think there’d be a definition of “painful” in that diagnostic criteria, because locating the pain, and who will feel it, and why, and how, seems essential to distinguishing how exactly mania is different, and deserving of pathology, than, say, the condition of masculinity at all. But the DSM lets this stay ambiguous.
Men are less often diagnosed with bipolar disorder than women, and when they are, it usually happens when they are in a depressive episode rather than a manic one. When depressed men are given antidepressants, they swing into mania, but since manic men are hard to distinguish from Geniuses who are changing the World, society tends to support their manic behavior until it stops producing a culture that can be capitalized upon. Manic men often appear drunk on their own divinity, or high on endorphins from the gym, all fired up in a legibly masculine way, so there’s nothing to be alarmed about. If they cause too much trouble, manic men get dumped in jail for the night, and the enforcers of race and class take over from there in terms of where they end up.

When Robert Lowell applied for a teaching job at Cambridge University, one of his referrals listed the signs to look out for that would precipitate Lowell needing to be taken “to the bin,” i.e., that he was in a manic episode. First, he would start a sexual relationship with a student, threatening to leave his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, who’d nursed him through many manias and depressions. Second, he’d talk incessantly about Hitler and Napoleon, and start referring to himself as one among them, a great world leader. Third, he’d throw a big party. No big deal, just a heads-up.

When a woman or femme person is manic, on the other hand, she is easily legible as violating the laws of reality: she often fucks a lot and insatiably, spends a lot of money on herself, abandons her duties as a mother or wife or servant of any kind, talks a lot—i.e., “too much”—and usually about herself, all of her potent ideas, the epiphanic discoveries she’s made, and she seems to take great joy in herself, for she believes herself to be important and inspired—i.e., “inflated self-esteem.” And if she’s an artist, she feels as if she’s in the throes of artistic production and worthy of the space and attention that Geniuses deserve. Obviously this is a sign of insanity, because insanity is simply a measure of how one has become untethered to reality and its laws.

“Can a woman be a Malerschwein?!” is another way of asking what happens when inflated grandiosity collides with painful consequences, what happens when flights of ideas are brought down to the ground.

I want the world to allow me all of my delusions about my own importance, to bend over backwards to make my importance be true—not just for me, but for all of you too. I want to snap the jaws of people who get in my way, and have the world applaud this and call it honour. I want to bellow with baseless anger and have the world hear it as a lullaby. I want to whine and mewl when someone wants to take up as much space as I do, and I want the police to shoot them in the back for their gross trespass. I want a secretary and a therapist and a nurse and a maid and a fucktoy in the same body who I never have to pay, and I want to blame everything on my mother, that cunt, I want every evil to be blamed on every mother. When I’m asked to account for myself, I want to be silent, arms folded across my chest, jaw set indomitably, and have this act pull power away from my inquisitors and consolidate it within me. I want to call my inquisitors hysterical crazy bitches, and I want this to become the ideology in the world’s water supply. I want my brittleness to legislate the wretched, but first, I want to declare their wretchedness and to define it recursively, that they are wretched because they don’t look like me. I want my wounds to be the reason we build prisons, guillotines, and guns. I want the world to labour to secure me and I want them to need no other reason to do it other than because I said so. I want this reason to become a universal Truth with a capital T that constructs the World with a capital W. When I break someone else, I want the world to wag its finger not in my face, but in my victim’s, tsk tsk, you should have known better. I want children to be taught not to tempt me, and when they do, I want them to feel for their entire lives the dirty shame of their mistake. I want wealth such that the world has never seen, and then I want my face imprinted on all the coins.

Whose voice is this—is it my own? No, it’s not mine—but then why have I been taught to want it to be? (What happens to this sentence if the “mine” is changed to “ours,” if the “I” is changed to “we”?)

When a person who is assigned female at birth comes to understand that they don’t agree with that assignment, often the first gesture away from it is to wonder if they are in fact a man, a swing toward the antipode. Some find solace there, indeed find themselves there: yes, actually, here I am! Some don’t find themselves at either pole but at some treacherous ineffability between, and the question becomes whether a binary is an accurate framework for gender at all, even though the world insists that it is.

Have you heard of Schrödinger’s cat? The thought experiment of a cat locked in a box with a device that has a 50 percent chance of
Willem de Kooning, Woman I, 1950–1952, oil on canvas, 192.7 cm × 147.3 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York City
© THE WILLEM DE KOONING FOUNDATION/ARS, NEW YORK/SOCA, MONTREAL
My time with Z overlapped with my reading the de Kooning biography, and during that summer I had the sense that, like the Holy Ghost hovering watchfully behind me, I was being followed by his Woman I painting. I felt exposed to her, by her. When people looked at me, I saw that they saw her, my face scowling like hers, teeth bared, my body's outline jagged, threatening to shred into the bodies of others.

I cut my own hair down to the scalp, drove too fast, cranked up the stereo to play the same song 50 times a day. I talked a lot, too much, about myself and my work and my soaring ambitions and I had no hesitation in saying what I wanted and exactly how and when. I was hysterical and grandiose and confident and inspired. I flew high on my great ideas. I indulged in pleasurable and risky activities. Self-doubt and caution evaporated, which is a dream come true for an artist. I made new work every day, and it came whole and alive and sizzling with meaning, as if I'd simply walked to the top of a small hill and found god's word waiting there for me to pick up and hold.

Sometimes I think about how this one experience of mania might never have happened if I hadn't been misdiagnosed, given the wrong medication, and involuntarily hospitalized by a man who thought I was a danger to myself because I was crying too loud over an obvious grief, one that might have been prevented if I hadn't had a uterus, if I'd had gender confirmation surgery, if I'd understood who I was earlier rather than later. But it doesn't matter anymore; the cause and effect are muddled, that line between knowing who you are and knowing who you are not is never a straight one.

It has taken me five years to write this essay. I've had to set it aside for months, I've tried to abandon it, to shove it to the back of the desk—it's as if I drive out into the desert, hours away from the city, and dig a big hole and bury it deep, in the desperate hope that it will finally leave me alone. But it keeps crawling back. It keeps insisting on itself.

Illness is not—despite the world telling you it is—only a personal, individual experience of pain, trauma, and limitation. It happens inside your individual body, and yet, it is an index of the social body. It's the collision of a lawless body against a body of laws. It produces an embodied experience that undoes who you think you are to such an extent that telling other people how this feels seems impossible, and at the same time, it produces a body that is read and deciphered in terms that are historical, systemic, and political. However, the social vector is usually ignored, so that illness becomes an index of one's own individual powerlessness, rather than being seen as the experience of how we are all enmeshed within systems of power, how we are all interdependent, for better or worse, and how such enmeshment and interdependence shapes consequences and potentials, desires and rights, dreams and deaths, worlds and realities.

Just as quickly as I'd fallen into it, one day everything changed and I came out of that summer and all of its mess in a flushed, purifying sweep. One of the comforts of bipolar disorder is that it's a reliable cycle. What goes up will come down.

Gender, for me, often feels like the moment right before opening the box when the cat is a blur of probability of both and therefore neither. Perhaps another way to say this is that during The Summer of My 12-Inch Cock, there was a kind of collapsing of the very binary that I thought I knew, and the site of the collapsing was me.

Z helped break my fever dream. Not long into dating, I'd told him I didn't want to be monogamous and that I wasn't straight and that I wasn't even a woman. Like many straight cis white boys, he understood the first two of my declarations to mean that I wouldn't sufficiently
appreciate and devote myself unto him alone, and he took the last to mean that his suspicions about me were right: I was unmanageable, un-owned, beyond the law. He tried to own me outright, without irony, breaking into my email account, threatening his need, his fragile eyes trembling with vengeance.

The reader might wonder why exactly I was dating a straight cis white boy at all. Good question. Now, when I look back at that summer, this is the one and only bit of evidence that convinces me I was indeed mad at the time. Sometimes I refer to The Summer of My 12-Inch Cock as “The Summer When I Finally Learned My Lesson About the Patriarchy Because Its Theatre of War Played Out in My Bed.” The fact that this summer coincided with my being mad should beg the question of whether or not madness is ever not insurrectionary.

• • •

Am I defined by the house I was born in? Or, can my definition come from how I’ve gotten lost?

• • •

I think it’s that the world simply is the law, the law is the world.

The question is whether you’re willing to break it.

JOHANNA HEDVA is the author of the novel On Hell and Minerva the Miscarriage of the Brain, a collection of poems, performances, and essays, which was published in September 2020. Their new album, Black Moon Lilith in Pisces in the 4th House, a doom metal grief ritual informed by Korean shamanism, came out in January.
Perhaps the first suggestion to the presence of a haunting is the trace of something out of place, unsettled, or unsaid.

Although I can’t say that I’ve ever definitively believed in spirits, other-worldly spiritual forces are a deep part of my family’s lived experience. Spiritual faith has been a life-saving, revelatory vigour for some; an older male relative of mine had an epiphany one morning while walking through the woods that awoke within him a new vision for life: to educate those around him about the all-delivering power of the Lord’s love. As for me—a closeted gay Black boy growing up in Southern California—I felt an internal conflict with notions of the spiritual, particularly the Christian worldview embedded so deeply within my family’s history. The burgeoning question of my sexual identity was mired in a fear of social retribution, owing to an unspoken expectation that I would fit the mould of the man that God had destined me to be.

Many queer Black people have experienced this conflict, and the crushing-ly limited rendering of Black masculinity in the North American imagination is a ghostly legacy with which all Black men therein are forced to contend. By osmosis, we have accumulated centuries worth of psychological harm about our own masculinity through racist and homophobic ideas, institutions, and histories. For me, “ghostly” brings to mind Hollywood horror stories of object- or person-possession; rarely depicted are stories of group posses-sion or the haunting of a society at large. For the American artist Shikeith, real ghosts linger over Black men in North America and have far-reaching implications, despite that they have been exorcised and remedied over a period of generations.
I had the opportunity to speak with him about his research in creating his latest exhibition, *Feeling The Spirit In The Dark* at the Mattress Factory, which—in both name and approach—references E. Patrick Johnson’s 1998 journal article “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community” and Aretha Franklin’s song, and eponymous album, “Spirit in the Dark” (1970). Its four installations offer an expansive reading of the emotional lineage of Black men in the United States, blurring boundaries of the secular and the sacred in bodies that have known chains, the church, and the club. Through his use of what he calls “fugitive” materials, like glass, water, soil, and light, Shikeith unearths the incorporeal forces that seek to damage Black emotional potential. Equally, he aims to “trace the ways in which Black people have been able to generate remedies,” he tells me, “that we’ve used to navigate ourselves toward freedom.”

Witnessing the first installation from my computer screen, I am doused in deep light and deep sound; also titled *Feeling The Spirit In The Dark*, it is a room with curved walls and a wooden walkway that leads over a rippling, reflective, dark pool of water. The walls are painted haint blue, a colour traditionally used by the Gullah people in the Lowcountry regions of the southern US to ward *haints*, or ghosts, away from homes. Emanating from a line of LEDs covering the top of the gallery wall is a shade of midnight blue, with a staining saturation that evokes memories of basement parties. A nine-minute soundtrack composed by collaborators Trapcry, Corey Staggers, and Justen LeRoy echoes the space’s sensual lighting in a mélange of Gospel, R&B, and the Blues. For Shikeith, the Blues in sight and sound are part of the
same pedigree: “The Blues have always been a huge part of Black expression,” he says, “particularly Black queer expression. [I’m] thinking about the different Blues artists who identified as queer, male, and female, and how that was an early way of finding out about their existence.”

*Feeling The Spirit* begins to conjure a variety of collective Black memories affixed to water, ranging from the womb, to the horrors of the Middle Passage, to the sanctifying powers of baptism. Although vacant of bodily presence, *Feeling The Spirit* evokes something similar to an earlier sculpture of Shikeith’s, *Revisions, or standing where the deep waters of everything backed up* (2018), in which a Black male figure’s blue, glass-blown “reflection” runs twice as deep as he is tall. Both works create a strong desire to go deeper through the waters of memorial heritage, the former’s deep-violet blaze and accompanying soundtrack creating a sensuous and protected encounter against immaterial forces of harm along the way.

*Feeling The Spirit* is part of Shikeith’s exploration of “blue space,” which began in previous exhibitions, such as *notes towards becoming a spill*, part of the Long Road Projects residency at Atlanta Contemporary and *The Language Must Not Sweat* at Locust Projects in Miami. Notably, *Feeling The Spirit* harks back to exhibitions by David Hammons in the late ’90s and early 2000s, such as *Blues and the Abstract Truth* at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. Whereas Hammons’s installations were diaphanous and ethereal, the light in *Feeling The Spirit* is nocturnal and, along with the soundtrack, positions the exhibition within an underground setting where queer ecstatic experience is found. Foundational to Shikeith’s working practice is contributing to the formation of a distinctively Black queer vernacular, in the footprints of Black gay artists like Marlon Riggs and Rotimi Fani-Kayode. In his process of creation, he employs a methodology of gumbo which is, in his words, “the mixing and meshing of ideas to create a new language,” which elucidates his acceptance of multiplicity in form and content.

In *Altar (Held After)*, a confessional stall sits within a dark, earthen “chapel,” which is empty, save for piles of dirt in the corners that ground the structure in an unmistakably southern locale. A variety of collected and original images are pinned to the walls: diagrams of slave ships are juxtaposed with photographs of Black men in various expressions of intimacy with one another; there are found images of Black children, and portraits of prominent Black queer figures. The soft light is considerably warmer than the tenebrous blue of the room adjacent; emanating from the enclosure behind the confessionals facade is a glimmering glass sculpture of the artist’s head on a mound of dirt. Here, the conflation of spirituality (as defined by the Christian church) and Black queer identity comes into question. The light escaping from the glass head casts shadows of the cross-patterned gate across the interior of the chapel, signifying the interior fracture that religion causes in the lives of many queer Black men—but the light is also numinous, rooting its definition of faith in an acceptance of one’s own existence.

In front of the gate sits a prayer kneeler with a “glory hole” carved into its base, containing a small three-minute video of filmed and found footage; to view it, one must kneel and move in close. Echoing the aesthetics of collage on the chapel’s walls, the video is a montage of psychic film that blurs barriers between the sacred and the secular. Set against faint audio and footage of ships that once used to transport human beings as cargo across the Atlantic, Black men undergo various articulations of spiritual and sexual reconciliation. In one moment, a sweat-drenched body writhes in bed; in another, a man is baptized in a tub of water; a gay Black couple kiss passionately in the next. The most transfixed of these clips is footage shot by the crumbling ruins of a church; here, the Black male body attains an almost
Shideith, *The Beauty of Recovering What Has Been Lost*, 2020, single-channel video projection, audio recording of “Round Midnight” performed by Corey Staggers (2 min), glass, breath, twine, LED lights, haint-blue paint; installation view from *Feeling the Spirit in the Dark*, 2020, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh

Photo: Tom Little
paranormal agency. Rooting itself in an acceptance of tenderness, *Altar (Held After)* is, according to Shikeith, about “surrendering to a history that is our own,” and works to disinter a buried lineage of emotional potential within Black North American men. Foregrounded here is a politics of emancipation in which the boundaries between secular and sacred dissolve, and Black men are presented with full access to both experiences, as well as the experiences that are produced in their blurring.

To reach the final room of the exhibition, one must go up a flight of stairs, thus encountering the work *Autoeroticism*. The saturated blue light from the first installation bleeds into the stairwell, sustaining the atmosphere, and a steady flow of water runs down the banisters. There is a luminous projection on the ceiling of Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601–1602), viewed most legibly at the top of the stairs. In this markedly queer painting, Jesus guides the hand of Thomas into his open wound, confirming to Thomas his physical existence in the world. Shikeith reimagines Jesus as a Black man and leaves Thomas white, cropping the image into a close focus of Thomas’s doubtful gesture. In this repictorialized act of Thomas “penetrating” the wound of Jesus, Shikeith shows the invasive effects of racism and homophobia on the physical and psychological well-being of Black men in North America. Thomas’s gesture suggests the fear of a continent that has long castigated both queerness and miscegenation. Conversely, Jesus shepherds Thomas’s hand inward, suggesting the need for Thomas to have a visceral reckoning with the spectres that he himself created.

Ascending the stairwell, the soundtrack that echoed across the bottom floor of the exhibition gives way to a pensive rendition of “*‘Round Midnight*” by Corey Staggers. Echoing the lyric of the first three installations, *The Beauty of Recovering What Has Been Lost* rejects the diurnal and instead finds consolation in the low light of the stars. Seven illuminated glass-blown sculptures of penises are suspended from the ceiling with twine in the formation of the Big Dipper. A two-hour durational projection onto the ceiling gradually invades the surrounding darkness with a pale haint blue. As in the first installation, the glass sculptures resurrect past recollections, in this case the physical and sexual violence of lynchings with their customary practice of castration, as well as the promise of liberation found on the Underground Railroad. Shikeith is attracted to the mutability of glass and its refusal to exist in any one state, which complements his meditation on Black manhood: “It can be a liquid, it can be a gas, it can be a solid,” he tells me. “But it holds this fragility. And then, you know it can cut you! This is how I want to exist, in many different ways.” Masculinity, in all of its crushing fragility, has potential for beauty.

For Black queer folks (including myself) raised in environments where institutional traces of religion and racism become entangled with the many things we are, where do we find solace? Central to Shikeith’s work of detangling is his definition and embrace of the “spill.” Speaking to me, he says, “To spill is to resist being constrained to boundaries, it is to take up the form of freedom. It is known as a failure or an accident, everything that people think is wrong. I wanted to take up that language in my work, because in spite of a failure to perform a certain kind of way, as a young Black gay man, I was still self-determined.” He holds: “To spill is to point towards a sort of self-determination and a free-form way of being, way of existing.” I listen.
[prelude]

The following is meant to be read to another—human or other-than-human, perhaps more-than-human—at a distance of approximately 60 cm.

Find this position in relation to them in space. Hold them in your peripheral vision, gently. Attune yourself to their materiality. What volume of space do they displace? What compression or expansion of your own body would be required to fill that volume? Can you sense their weight? What is the timbre of their vibration? Can you transpose this into audible tones? Do you pick up on the smell of them from this distance? Without touching, is there a discernment that can be made about their temperature in relation to your own?

Mind this.

[bodymorphing]

You are moving. Dancing is happening. It’s slow. You’re horizontal to the floor and your limbs seem to move at an even, uninterrupted pace. A continuous effect of fluidity is produced—the fluidity of a viscous material in a steady and constant rate of change.

The body morphs from one shape or suggested image into another in a gradual process of transformation: an arched back, a twisted tree trunk, an animal (perhaps a puma), an ancient Greek statue (perhaps the figure thought to be Dionysus on the east pediment of the Parthenon), and many more strange reorganizations of limbs that continually suggest, but change before fully delivering an image, before concretizing.

You are in quiet concentration, sinking down, receding into the back of your consciousness. You are even slower now in your movements, in your state of being. There are no calculations happening, no verbal constructions sounding in your head. You are awake in another way. You feel the pleasing sensation of both slip and stability at once.

There seems to be very little resistance on the surface of the skin and within what it assembles. The joints give the impression of swimming and the muscles and tendons remain softly pliant, pulled along by the will of the bones. The ground complies as well, allowing an effortless glide over its expanse. This dance changes the surfaces of the body and the surfaces of other things too. The sequence of forms as they emerge and disappear on your body is not the dance; rather, the dance is a conductive medium, a kind of mediating jelly that gathers and connects without binding the elements of the situation. After a while, the flesh of your outer thigh is colder and the ground beneath you slightly warmer.

You find yourself standing. The hips begin to sway, smoothly describing a figure eight in space. The spine writhes snake-like to the boom of a lazy bass beat. Has it been there the entire time? You hadn’t noticed it before but its steadiness belies a beginning or ending point. The dance is like club dancing now but dramatically decelerated—an unambitious and excruciatingly slow striptease, but the eyes are different. Rather than outward-oriented, your gaze is turned inward and the dance carries on without a demand for attention, without a goal, without an end; it just keeps moving, languidly, to the beat of that pervasive bass, dragged out at 60 beats per minute, like the human heart during rest.
Someone or something is watching now and you know it because you experience a combination of kinesthetic pleasure and generative stress that compels your movement. Stopping doesn’t occur to you at all. You are hosting the gaze of another upon your sensate surface and it is energizing, like the slightest touch perambulating over your skin. With your own eyes, you gaze down upon your torso, observing its undulations—an implicit offer to guide the other’s gaze. Offer accepted, it’s warmer there now. You continue.

The orientation of your spine indicates a warm vector of verticality around which your torso and hips wind. Spiralling, curvilinear movements course through you as effortlessly and smoothly as before. Starting from your fingertips, the arms begin to engage as your hands travel over the rolling landscape that your body has become. Here, in perpendicular relation to the floor, your hips find mobility as the legs bend and spread and the dance coils and uncoils, furls and unfurls in infinite inscriptions, double helix after double helix in all directions. The constancy of your movement renders you uncapturable as an image.

You are many-headed, many-limbed, and monstrous, desperately attractive to the eye which must engage differently to see you at all. You welcome the other’s gaze which roves around the entirety of your surface. This form of seeing is active, almost muscular; it can neither identify with nor plunge into the depth of a single image and so surrenders to immersion. In lieu of the possibility for sharp focus, in the ambiguity of blur, other sensual pleasures emerge.

You expose your neck, looking upward toward your hand extended above your head and follow its trajectory down. It lands on your shoulder, then brushes over your chest and belly before coming to rest at the hip. You turn away from your observer and there is an instant of panic for the other, unmoored without your eyes. You experience this proprioceptively, as though your internal organs are for a moment more noticeably pressed upon by the air surrounding you. Your hand takes over as the guide, inviting the focus to drift down the lower back, ass, upper thigh, and side of your leg until you’re crouched down, grazing the gentle bulge of your ankle with your fingertips.

You pause, slowly lifting your eyes to meet the gaze of the other. Something far more nuanced than the usual shock of eye contact happens. You have borne a responsibility as a host, the other has been imprinted by gestural resonances, each of you has sought the other’s trust and risked being deemed unworthy of it. There is a fine-tuning of your mutually mediated corporealities.

ISABEL LEWIS (born 1981, Santo Domingo, DR) is an artist and choreographer who creates spaces of alternative sociality between human and other-than-human agents in the format she’s named the hosted occasion. Lewis’s multi-sensorial occasions and other live artworks have been presented internationally, most recently by Kunsthalle Zürich, Sharjah Biennial, Gropius Bau, Roskilde Festival, Dia Art Foundation, and Tate Modern among others.
It's impossible not to see Ebti Nabag's 24-foot-high portraits when you pass by two schools in the Toronto east-end neighbourhood of Scarborough. The piece, *I'm Listening* (2020), is of two teenaged Black girls sporting Air Jordans and athletic wear, standing side by side as they stare at their phones, displaying no interest in speaking to each other. Taken together, the size and colouring of the piece, as well as the demeanour of the subjects, command you to stop what you're doing, and observe.

When imagining power, some might be compelled to consider external structures and bureaucracies, and how those structures shape or impose themselves on our lives. The exhibition *Three-Thirty*, however, considers the power and autonomy of youths and the ways they enact their presence in the space and cities they live in. Scarborough-born curator and artist Anique Jordan interrogates these questions in the exhibition. The project is a multi-site, map-making exercise that connects different public spaces within Malvern, an east-end neighbourhood that has the highest population of youth in Canada. The exhibition reckons with how geographies are transformed by young people living at the margins of power.

*Three-Thirty* is an ode to the after-school programs accessed primarily by Toronto’s working-class families who need additional care for their children—a pivotal part of Jordan’s upbringing. This multi-site exhibition, co-presented by Jordan as part of the CONTACT Photography Festival, occupies prominent cultural landmarks in the Malvern neighbourhood: local high school Lester B. Pearson Collegiate Institute, the Malvern branch of the Toronto Public Library, and the Doris McCarthy Gallery (at the University of Toronto’s Scarborough campus).

A blown-up copy of a 1969 Ontario Housing Corporation (OHC) document greets visitors at the entrance of the Doris McCarthy Gallery, confirming the state’s interest in Malvern as a housing project to be focused on in the years to come. Although Malvern’s open spaces near its river valleys are a local tourist attraction, in the late ’50s it was largely an industrial and agricultural area. The OHC document outlines the needs for the emerging community: malls, stores, recreation spaces, and housing. It also shares plans and the necessity to develop public transportation access—access that still doesn’t exist 50 years later. This is a common narrative for a city where urban design failed to anticipate the magnitude of Toronto’s expansion. Beside the OHC document is an archival picture of a large expanse of empty land, occupied right in the centre by one building: a small grocery store called FreshLand. The picture evokes narratives told by colonial archives that implicate a place as having a lack of history or presence. Today, that land is the site of Malvern Town Centre, and the grocery store remains open.

By the late ’80s, Malvern had been developed into a multi-ethnic and vibrant neighbourhood that quickly became home to many low-income residents. By the early 2000s, public investment in the community led to the development of the Malvern public library, new parks, stores, and further expansion. But this process also subjected residents to over-policing, surveillance, and criminalization. *Three-Thirty* offers an alternative perspective, providing glimpses into the day-to-day
life of youths in the areas that contribute so much to Toronto culture.

Using archival images, Aaron Jones’s *Seeking Knowledge* (2020) explores knowledge production about Black people in Canada. Presented at the Malvern public library, the work uses images from the Rita Cox Black and Caribbean Heritage Collection. Using the archival photographs in a colourful and vibrant collage format, Jones compels the observer to think through histories of Black diasporas beyond what we might already know. The images used include artists, revolutions, protests, sports, and titles of texts important to the Black radical tradition, such as *We Are the Young Magicians* by Ruth Forman (1993). Jones also includes a bibliography: an archive for the seeker of knowledge to explore further. He leaves one empty citational note called *Unknown Unknowns*—albeit intentionally—as a gesture toward the overlooked and unidentified components of Black archives. Archives allow us to trace the histories, ideas, existence, and contributions of communities. But in Canada, Blackness remains what Rinaldo Walcott calls an absent presence, in that Blackness is foundational to the nation-state but cannot cohere in the national archive. Jones’s engagement with Black Canadian archives, overflowing with detours and complexities, compels his audience to render Blackness anew, and always in continuum.


Kelly Fyffe-Marshall’s three-channel video, *POWER* (2020), produced by Tamar Bird, explores the collective anxieties and strife of Black artists and community members during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the video work, artists and community members discuss what their lives looked like before the pandemic, what they look like now, and the insights that this experience has brought out. Simultaneously displayed on three different screens, the conversation is intergenerational, with subjects reflecting on the meaning of power during a global health and climate crisis that cannot be separated from anti-Black racism. Observing the testimonies is chilling, as Fyffe-Marshall’s project speaks to the urgency of these times.

The purpose of *Three-Thirty*, Jordan explains, is to use art in public spaces to visually and psychologically shift our understanding of who occupies power. She centres Blackness both thematically and geographically, reclaiming the narrative of Toronto culture back to its various points of development. It took two and a half years to develop the exhibition, and the team struggled with funding along the way, relying on limited local resources to transform a part of the city.

Thinking about the recent critical attention on the cultural work and producers of Scarborough—a borough that is often falsely compared to Brooklyn—Jordan is committed to cultivating spaces that reveal the multiplicities of Toronto. *Three-Thirty* uses Scarborough as a backdrop, and Blackness as a lens, to reveal the possibilities, and impossibilities, of power.

*Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* is an exhibition that is connected to local audiences and their histories. For example, an understated monument at the MOA’s entrance signals one of the ways the institution engages with the colonial history of Canada. While much of the programming supported by Canada 150 provided a necessary course correction concerning the under-representation of contemporary Indigenous artistic practices in all realms of Canadian culture, exhibitions which sought to speak to Canadian history in such a broad comprehensive manner, such as *Shame and Prejudice*, gloss over the diversity of Indigenous experiences and histories.

Vancouver, like any part of Canada, is not representative of Canada, and it would be a mistake to reduce it to being merely “Canadian.” The MOA understands the importance of this, and engages in programming that is connected to local audiences and their histories. For example, an understated monument at the MOA’s entrance signals one of the ways the institution engages with the specific location on the traditional and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Musqueam people. In 2015, MOA, in collaboration with the Musqueam First Nation and Museum of Vancouver, presented *כַּשָּׁנוֹת, the city before the city*, an important exhibition concerning the living culture of Musqueam people and Vancouver as an ancient landscape. What feels like a crucial centring of the institution’s complicity in the

**Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience**

**Kent Monkman**

**The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver**

**August 6, 2020—January 3, 2021**

*Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, Kent Monkman’s nationally touring exhibition, began at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto in late 2017 and stopped in every region throughout the country except the Arctic before arriving at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), where it will end its run in early 2021. The exhibition consists of paintings and dioramas from Monkman’s studio alongside historical works and objects borrowed from public and private collections from across Canada, including the moccasins of the Plains Cree Chief Phthokahanapiwiyin; Benjamin West’s painting commemorating the 1759 Battle of Quebec titled *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770); baby carriers from Plains Ojibwa, Sáhaptin, and Iroquois peoples; and antique metalwork and dinnerware. Importantly, the exhibition was conceived after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was active from 2008 to 2015, the purpose of which was to document the history and lasting impacts of the Indian residential school system in Canada on Indigenous peoples. The exhibition was also initiated in observation of the 150th year of Canadian Confederation which saw a tremendous surge of interest from museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions in representing Indigenous

**by RAYMOND BOISJOLY**

**HUDA HASSAN** is a writer and critic from Scarborough. Her work has appeared in many places, including Pitchfork, Quill & Quone, Faster, and BuzzFeed.
ongoing displacement of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories and the ongoing dispossession of their land and resources is lost upon entering Shame and Prejudice, where the exhibition is narrated in French and English, the official languages of the state, along with the Cree language rendered in syllabics in exhibition texts. This effectively centres Monkman’s own cultural and ethnic specificity as a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation, rather than offering a dialogue with the Musqueam people in the spirit of reconciliation. Instead, Cree is presented with the authority typically granted to the languages of the state with all of their colonial power, and therefore made complicit in the linguistic displacement of hən̓q̓̑əmin̓əm̓. The presence of the Cree language seems to only contribute to the exhibition in terms of optics, representing an image of Indigeneity without presenting a reasoning for the presence of this specific language in the exhibition texts. We are led to believe that the importance of this choice should be self-evident, and that representations of Indigeneity—any Indigeneity—can only be good or beneficial. Much of the exhibition feels as though it has been dropped in from above without any effort to find ways to articulate its concerns in relation to the Musqueam people or local historical trajectories. An overly general history of Indigenous life in Canada is thus imposed upon this place without nuance.

This history is narrated by Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman’s genderfluid, time-travelling alter ego. Presented in nine chapters derived from the fictional memoir of Miss Chief, it covers a broad history of Canada including Confederation, Indigenous relations to health and sickness, and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples in urban centres. Monkman’s work makes extensive references to art history, with Monkman stating his aim in the exhibition’s small accompanying publication to “authorize Indigenous experience into the canon of art history.” This claim appears especially strange considering MOA’s recent support of solo exhibitions by both Carl Beam and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, two Indigenous artists that have made significant contributions to the narrative of Canadian art history.

One aspect of Monkman’s engagement with art history is especially troubling: in “Chapter VI: Incarceration,” Monkman portrays Miss Chief as an inmate in a sculptural diorama titled Minimalism (2017). While the entire exhibition offers a broad critique of Canadian history in order to make the figure of a reductive Indigeneity visible, Minimalism is a misguided critique of late modernist art, specifically the work of American artists James Turrell and Donald Judd. The latter’s work is referenced in the furniture of the inmate’s prison cell and the former in the form of a glowing colour-changing screen before which Miss Chief kneels, as if in awe. Miss Chief is presented as a stand-in for imprisoned American Indian activist Leonard Peltier who is referenced in paintings later in the exhibition. The work conflates two types of institutions, the museum and the prison. While plenty of criticism may be offered to implicate western institutions in the limiting of Indigenous knowledge and culture, museums are not prisons. The work is accompanied by drawings and letters to family, friends, and allies from incarcerated Indigenous peoples in the US who are denied a proper place as artists and named subjects within the work or exhibition. The presence of these letters is not addressed in anything but the labels; they are denied a contextualization that would make their inclusion truly meaningful. Framed and presented on the outside of the diorama, they may be missed by inattentive viewers. While Indigenous peoples do face overrepresentation in Canadian penitentiaries, it is entirely distasteful to represent yourself—even via an alter ego playing Leonard Peltier—as the subject of that suffering and struggle.

Shame and Prejudice flattens the complexity of Canadian history and the diversity of Indigenous peoples and nations who live on this land. To use Miss Chief as the protagonist of this historical narrative can only be seen as self-aggrandizing. While Monkman wants to represent all Indigenous peoples, he appears to have only thought to represent himself.

RAYMOND BOISJOLY is an artist and citizen of the Haida Nation.
“Some things are only imaginable in the third person,” Moyra Davey writes, paraphrasing Roland Barthes in her new book, I Confess (2020). She acknowledges that, for both of them, writing in third person is typically “unimaginable.” But throughout her book, Davey refers to herself interchangeably as “I” and “she,” distancing herself from the autobiographical text through third-person narration. I Confess was published alongside Davey’s retrospective exhibition, The Faithful (2020), at the National Gallery of Canada. The book is a monograph of Davey’s new film of the same title; it includes stills from the film, a selection of Davey’s drawings and photographs, as well as the film’s script and two contributor essays.

I Confess is a meditation on Davey’s upbringing in Catholic school in Quebec, on the revolutionary work of James Baldwin and his criticism of the American Dream, on settler-independence formations in Quebec during the ’60s and ’70s, and on the death of her father. In reference to Davey’s formative memories of the October Crisis in 1970, the core thread of I Confess considers Pierre Vallières’s book Nègres blancs d’Amérique (1968), or in the English translation, White N[−]-word[s] of America, which Davey refers to as White Negroes in her text. Vallières, a member of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), was arrested during the October Crisis and wrote Nègres blancs while in jail. Davey recounts her father’s role as an adviser to then prime minister Pierre Trudeau, who aided in coordinating Vallières’s arrest along with other members of the FLQ. In his book, Vallières argues that the francophone Québécois population is a low-class disfavoured people, falsely equating their socio-economic struggle to that of Black people in the United States. In order to create the scaffolding of this autobiographical text that draws on personal anecdote and historical events, Davey weaves between her childhood memories, her father’s connection to the events of the October Crisis, and her memories of visiting Vallières’s commune one summer as a teenager and photographing him.

As a counterpoint to Vallières’s false equation of francophone Québécois struggle with the civil rights–era struggle of Black folks in the United States, Davey introduces writer and thinker James Baldwin as an additional thread throughout the text. Davey draws on Baldwin’s debate with conservative American public intellectual William F. Buckley at Cambridge University in 1965 on the topic “Has the American Dream been achieved at the expense of the American Negro.” Baldwin argues that the people who built the United States, enslaved Africans and their descendants, have not profited and do not profit from American economic or socio-political structures. Davey notes that Baldwin’s naming of Black Americans as a disfavoured class is taken up by Vallières toward the francophone Québécois fight for independence. While Davey uses Baldwin in opposition to Vallières’s appropriation of Black struggle, she does not criticize Vallières for this false equation.

I see Davey grappling with her typical way of working—her citational style, her photographs of everyday life—and questioning whether it resonates with the urgency of the contemporary political moment. Her work often uses distance as a narrative strategy. In her films, she records herself reading the script aloud, then plays the audio back through an iPod, speaking as she listens to her recorded voice. The result is a flat affect in her tone as her embodiment becomes once removed. In her writing, Davey constructs bibliographies through collections of citations, allowing serendipitous connections to form between texts and thinkers as a mode of non-personal narration. I Confess follows suit: Davey distances herself from the scenes depicted in the book by photographing herself in scenarios she has written about in third person. I find this lack of embodiment troubling. This narrative distance, enacted through
Davey’s method of citation, obscures her positionality as a white artist more than it attempts to rectify the potential oversights a white positionality holds. Her typical modes of working fail to properly address this issue, concluding in a book where Davey seems to lack a critical position.

In a later section of *I Confess*, Davey considers a remark a student of hers made regarding her photographic practice: “It is not enough to just point to a problem.” Davey mulls over this comment: both her photography and her writing tend to point to a scenario, a place, a phenomenon, but don’t go so far as to critique the subject at hand. Davey uses citation to distance herself from the subject matter, allowing the cited thinkers to narrate the text on her behalf, effectively sidestepping the work of criticism or a deeper attempt to trouble or problematize the cited thinkers.

In a seeming attempt to reconcile the problem of citing Vallières, the book includes excerpts from correspondence between Davey and Québécois political philosopher Dalie Giroux, inviting her into the text to critique Vallières, among other things. Of their correspondence, Davey notes, “[Vallières] came under harsh critique from Dalie for his appropriation of the [B]lack struggle and his treatment of women. I had read Nègres blancs through the lens of literary and biographical themes, whereas Dalie employed the tools of political theory and philosophy to construct another, at times damning, interpretation of the book.” Davey’s inclusion of her correspondence with Giroux, and her later contributor essay, act as a second leg of *I Confess*—a relational intervention in the text that makes the citational aspect of the book more critical.

Despite this attempt at rectification, there remains for me the troubling effect to Davey’s stylistic distancing. Her choice to obscure herself from the narrative is a strategy of risk mitigation; the lack of embodied writing throughout *I Confess* stifles the possibility for criticism toward her positionality as a white artist. If Davey’s work can be characterized as a practice of citation, I wonder what citation is for? While citation has historically been a perpetrator of exclusion in the creation of a canon, I think of citation as a construction of lineages of writers, artists, and thinkers who have been overlooked by that canon. It is a site of generosity between thinkers and their ideas—an acknowledgement of intellectual indebtedness. I want citation to be enough, but the problematics of this book seem to be proof that citation only begins to lay the groundwork for criticism. I have long fawned over Davey’s photographs. I adore her eroticization of banal domestic scenes and applaud her citational generosity—but I think art has non-negotiable obligations. Images especially need to do more than point a camera or a finger; they are a symbolic language that carry with them a potential for political change.

**GRETA HAMILTON** is a writer and artist working between Toronto and rural British Columbia. They are an editor of *Silverfish Magazine*.

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**Hands that gather and forget: Ana Luisa Bernárdez Notz, Sebastián Rodríguez y Vasti**

*Xpace Cultural Centre, Toronto*

**September 8–October 2, 2020**

I perform a series of manual gestures leaving the gallery: a parting wave, a pump of sanitizer, one curt pull to open the door, another to unmask, and a plunge into my pocket to retrieve my phone. My touches continue as I walk away from Xpace and its artworks, unpausing a podcast or sighting my phone’s camera on the scenes that beckon me home through Toronto’s west end.

This procession of gestures moves me away from *Hands that gather and forget*, an installation work by Ana Luisa Bernárdez Notz and Sebastián Rodríguez y Vasti, which showed at Xpace in the fall of 2020. *Hands* comprises an archive of images selected from a merged collection of photographs taken between 2015 and 2019 during the artists’ annual trips to their family homes in Venezuela. Printed on silk organza, the scenes—embraces, portraits, seascapes, and domestic interiors—hang by their corners, dispersed among a cloudscape of white gauze. The fabrics confront the viewer as a diaphanous mass animated by currents of air, inviting the viewer to enter, brush aside the immensity of the archive’s blanks, and pull an image up by its corner. Even then, the photographs that stand out against the countless absences barely register on the silk whispering in the din of the gauze.

As I walk home, the city’s immodest scenes begin to fray my nascent impression of the work. At some point, my eye catches a thread of white gauze clinging to the breast of my coat. Despite my care while moving through the archive and handling its records, my sense-making was a disturbance into the archive that loosened its weave. Pinching the thread, I begin to appreciate the gravity in the gestures that *Hands* invites. My interaction with *Hands* was part of an unbroken movement of the day’s acts. It existed not only as an archive to be viewed, but as a reality to be lived through, calling on the same kinds of gestures through which I grasped at door handles, tapped my phone, or embraced lovers. In this haptic archive, the act of memory takes on a concreteness, as manual labour. At the same time, this gesture becomes intimately bound up with the unravelling and absence of the world it intends to recall from the archive’s burdened records—an intrusion which the viewer’s self-awareness only intensifies through their act of looking.

At the end of September, I meet with the artists via Zoom to ask about their documentary practice, and the work of materializing the resulting archive in *Hands*’ sculptural form. Bernárdez and Rodríguez speak of a shared compulsion to register their affective experience of place on their yearly visits home. The artists describe how, like memory, their photographs emerge as an unpremeditated gesture that arises with the fullness and impermanence of feeling. As the young artists persistently assert in their growing bodies of work, familial and documentary objects ambivalently measure this fullness, but also the loss, of each vital moment that they register.

As a sensory response to precarity, too, the artists’ documentary practice shoulder the immense uncertainty of Venezuela’s political situation, a crisis whose magnitude is reflected in the vastness of the artists’ archives. The scale of their archive amassing under
these precarious circumstances made for a daunting, melancholic task of sorting through the images, a stationary labour only recently afforded to the artists by the pandemic and its temporality of pause.

Handling the photographs, I sense how these contexts loom over the installation, woven not only through their scenes but in the physical form of the installation itself. Like the ongoing pandemic, Hands’ tissues hang in delicate suspension, demanding that the viewers navigate with a heightened awareness of their intrusion, their touch and presence. Yet, this intensified sensitivity also resonates beyond the pandemic’s epoch, arriving out of a broader sculptural tradition concerned with generative ruptures in ordinary sense-experience.

Originally coined by Carter Ratcliff to describe early installation works in this tradition—notably Bruce Nauman’s corridor pieces of the early ’70s—the notion of an “adversary space” helps account for Hands as a provocation within, but not of, the gallery’s sightly environment. As the viewer-participant moves into the installation, Hands pressures them with a heightened sensitivity which, along with the demand for—or anticipation of—movement, lends the installation sculptural texture. If the gallery or photographic archive is a primarily sight-based situation consisting of diaphanous screens imaging distant times and places, Hands opens itself differently. It registers what it activates: a gesture, a performance of awareness, and a haptics of inspection.

Considering how it dismantles the archival object into a sensuous performance of gestures, Hands also recalls the work of Lygia Clark, who gradually divested her sculptural practice from the production of objects. Midway through her career, Clark self-exiled to France in 1968, during the height of Brazil’s military dictatorship. Having gained proximity to French psychoanalytic milieux, she produced a late body of prepositional works in which she used a variety of objects to provoke bodily sensations in private sessions with participants. However, as the psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik notes in an interview with Lars Bang Larsen, Clark’s mobilization of sense-feeling as the primary artistic and therapeutic medium made documentation of these experimentations difficult. Her sessions were inherently intersubjective, processual, and, in a way, too private to be captured. Nevertheless, Clark did not work in isolation from the gallery or, for that matter, the broader social and political contexts of individual feeling. Within these contexts, Clark asserted her art/therapy hybrid as an intervening poetics of sensation.

Like Clark’s late work, Hands also refashions the documentary object as a means to a sensuous experience, particularly one of memory. In one regard, the diaphanous images deny outright the possibility of a clinical revival of experience from the photographs. Yet, this denial also advocates for sensuous immersion in a fraying archive, even demanding that the viewer perform a labour of remembrance to animate the weave of memory and interstitial absence, regardless of the outcome of these gestures. As Hands shows, remembrance comprises both a holding-to and a holding, as if the two are the same gesture applied with the soft force of the hand.

ALEX LEPANKA (they/he) is a writer practicing in Tkaronto.
amiskwaciwâskahikan/Beaver Hills House/Edmonton is centrally located in the Treaty 6 region and is the traditional home of the Papaschase. From the rolling hills, aspen forests, verdant grasslands, and the flowing life way of kisiskâciwanisîpiy/North Saskatchewan River, the region has been a site of gathering for many Indigenous peoples sharing the land and resources since time immemorial. It is on this land, overlooking kisiskâciwanisîpiy, that the Ociciwan Contemporary Art Centre stands. Ociciwan, translated from nêhiyawêwin to mean “the current comes from there,” references the kisiskâciwanisîpiy, the people it has brought to this region, and the link between the past, present, and future.

Ociciwan Contemporary Art Collective started in 2015 and over the years has undertaken a series of projects—including visual art exhibitions, a large-scale experimental music performance, and producing a double vinyl record—presented in partnership with local and national partners while building capacity to open their own, mostly Indigenous-run, arts centre and community space. After years of hard work and dedication to growing and supporting the Indigenous arts scene in amiskwaciwâskahikan, and six months of delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ociciwan finally welcomed people into the centre on September 30, 2020, with the amiskwaciwâskahikan exhibition. Paying homage to the land that Ociciwan is situated on and its history of gathering and connecting, the exhibition features the works of eight Indigenous artists that have strong ties to or call amiskwaciwâskahikan home.

When I first walked into the new space, my eyes were drawn to Tanya Harnett’s Genocide (2020), a large-scale hand-drawn map that depicts the route of a smallpox epidemic along the Missouri River (in what is now known as the American Midwest) to where Harnett’s ancestors once lived. The Great Plains smallpox epidemic (1836–1840) reached its height in 1837 when the American Fur Company’s St. Peters steamboat travelled up the river along the route depicted in this work, carrying with it infected people and supplies. Reminiscent of the hand-drawn maps created by colonial cartographers and explorers, Genocide, although illustrative of Harnett’s familial history and ancestral kin, is also reflective of the violent histories of loss that many Indigenous people can relate to.

To the left of Genocide are two larger-than-life portraits by Lauren Crazybull of their siblings, Jordan (2019) and Autumn (2019), painted on unstretched canvas. Wearing a jean jacket, head tilted back and eyes closed, Jordan appears to be lying peacefully in a bed of yellow and pink flowers. Autumn, with shadows of tree branches marking their body, stands with arms crossed over their torso in front of bare branches and the sky as a budding tree branch rests on their temple. The way that Crazybull has captured these details—the tattoo on Autumn’s wrist, how the light reflects off of their sibling’s glasses, the light shining on Jordan’s facial hair—brings the paintings to life. They are ever-present in the gallery, watching over the works with care and love—the same care and love that Crazybull imbued into the paintings of their kin.

Reminiscent of a dreamcatcher, MJ Belcourt Moses’s From the Beginning (2018) is a cast of a pregnant person’s torso made using deer parfleche suspended in a red willow–branch frame depicting a nêhiyawêwin syllabic chart painted onto the stomach. The installation alludes to the ancestral knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation. Although living in a colonial society which continues to dismiss this knowledge, it is inside all of us as Indigenous people. Lana Whiskeyjack’s painting, Painting my anger, praying for stolen medicine(s) (2020), depicts a person wearing dentalium earrings and a beaded necklace in the shape of a vulvar strawberry. Painted over the image is the
text “I WILL BE CAREFUL WHO I SHARE MY MEDICINE WITH”—a reference to Whiskeyjack’s beaded strawberry necklace titled Three Generations of nitêh (my heart) (2019), which was stolen from the centre prior to its opening to the public. The statement is bold, succinct, and relatable for many Indigenous people—we must protect ourselves and communities from the harm that colonialism continues to do to us.

In the downstairs Media Gallery, Dwayne Martineau’s backlit film prints hang heavy in the dim lighting. ONE DEAD TREE #2 (2012) and Propagation (2020) are illusory mirrored photographs of a dead tree found in an Edmonton ravine. Martineau’s use of photo manipulation creates an uncanny symmetry which gives the installation a haunting quality. Ghostly pareidolic faces appear among the details of the trees, peering out from between the branches and watching my every move in the gallery. In a corner of the gallery is Conor McNally’s spectral 16mm Ektachrome film nisîmis, or my brother’s dream of a bicycle (2020). McNally’s experimental film, silently looping, provides an ephemeral and fleeting quality to the space. Like a dream floating away, when one grasps on to what little detail is memorable, flowing images of his brother manipulating a bicycle pump move back and forth in a rhythmic pattern overlaid onto an abstract background of ink. Martineau’s and McNally’s ephemeral and ethereal works are in stark contrast to Jane Ash Poitras’s Fort Chip Future (2000) in the same space. Using pop-culture images and her children’s artwork, Poitras’s collage alludes to Indigenous Futurisms—connecting the past, present, and future in non-linearity with hope for what is to come. The undercurrent of this exhibition is connection: connections to kin, connections to the past, and connections to the future. amiskwaciwâskahikan is rooted in family and in land. The shared and collective experience of Indigeneity flowing through each of the works is reflective of the history of amiskwaciwâskahikan. As a gathering place, this exhibition nourishes and enriches the lives of those that come together, like the Beaver Hills and kisiskâciwanisîpiy have since time immemorial.

MISSY LEBLANC is an arts administrator, curator, and writer of Nêhiyaw, Polish descent currently based in Mohkinstsis/Calgary. LeBlanc is currently the Curatorial Resident at TRUCK Contemporary Art in Calgary, AB, and in 2019 she was the winner of the Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators and a runner-up for the Canadian Art Writing Prize.

the commute: S F Ho, jaye simpson, Helena Krobath
Arts Assembly, Vancouver
April 28–August 13, 2020

the commute, a project commissioned by Arts Assembly’s Whitney Brennan long before the events of this year, is a series of three audio works. Originally meant to be listened to on each piece’s corresponding transit line in Vancouver, the works become more expansive than their original premise as the experience of commutes become distant. Listening to the works by S F Ho, jaye simpson, and Helena Krobath creates a double experience of space and time. The listener is in their own body and location, but also elsewhere, moving along distinct routes and timetables of another body.

The commute as a concept is travel structured around labour and falls into a category of peripheral unpaid time. This is what Henri Lefebvre called “constrained time,” which Kristin Ross summarizes as “the time of repeated formalities and obligations that, like the departmental cocktail party, are neither precisely work nor, in any real sense of the term, pleasure.” A shift from the labour body to the contemplative self occurs along familiar routes in these audio pieces. The body is lulled by this familiarity, and the mind takes us elsewhere. The passage is not a smooth transition, but a trading in, a compromise made to facilitate movement. This time, like the time of these audio works, is both ours and not ours.

Ho’s piece, Guts, deals with the commute as a perambulation of one’s own living space, and one’s own body, both of which are evidently compromised. They vocalize a parody of wellness and spirituality by applying the calm tone of inner peace to the lived discomfort of sickness. The cadence in the work is set by a breath, dragged across the soundscape in irregular intervals, distending time. In Guts, Ho directs the listener to attend to the “conditions of the unarticulated present,” through dense layers of simultaneous contradictions. The travel in the work is interior, and they insist that it is not empty. They emphasize a cyclic time that contains—and is contained by—other cycles: “Feel the material of the world move into your body and out again in a continuous circle […] these visceral cycles are a microcosm of the cycles of the universe.” Time in Guts is looped inside the body, but subject to the loops of the external world as well. It becomes that which heals and poisons, and is both interior to and external from the body at once. The work ends with a reversal exemplary of the complexity of the work, with the incantation “a body is a virus, and you are its host.”

simpson’s work, Migrational Memories, details their own experiences and orientation around the roadway Commercial Drive. The work begins with a mysterious gap in the migration of monarch butterflies, a displacement that is a part of their genetic memory. simpson’s voice is measured out by a three-tone piano refrain and breath with the rhythm of walking. The story moves up and down Commercial Drive with the frequency of the No. 20 bus. The narrative of memory is insistent on its gaps, what it avoids, with “open windows and doors,” and creates form from what is necessarily hidden. simpson’s writing knows the violence of replacing one thing with another, echoing the replacement of their name with their case file number. As the stories weave through movements between memories, the concepts of migration and displacement become netted together, necessary for either to be thought. The piece reminds me of another statement by Lefebvre on time, that “life is trapped in an intermediary zone between cyclic and rationalized linear time.” The spectral time of simpson’s ellipses slips out of this trap.

Krobath passes through various forms of complicit engagement in everyday exploitation by envisioning a ghost that inhabits the commuter trains of the West Coast Express. Titled Ghost Story Commute, this piece...
Love has been a central concern of writer, artist, and educator Masha Tupitsyn throughout her career, appearing in the titles of both her 2013 book Love Dog, a Roland Barthes–inspired collection of brief reflections initially published as Tumblr posts, and Love Sounds (2015), an imageless 24-hour-long video in which the black screen serves as a backdrop for an edited audio compilation of movie sequences related to love and romance. It’s unsurprising, then, that one of the most resonant moments in Tupitsyn’s new essay collection, Picture Cycle (2020), involves a discussion of onscreen kisses. “Kisses are always vérité,” she writes, the declaration related to an investigation into the nature of film and authenticity that stretches across several entries; “Does the kiss belong to the fiction of a film or to an actor’s real life?”

The encounter with these works is a layered experience, a passage from specificity of material circumstances to interior contemplation. The audio works generate their own interior space, in a trompe-l’oreille, and any encounters with the world while listening become an arbitrary coincidence. Lines of colonization, capital, and ableism trace over each other repetitively, making them difficult to untangle, but these works begin to tease them apart. Fundamentally, the audio pieces speak about the potential impossibility of an “end” given these conditions, but this conception is approached not with pessimism, but with a move toward a non-linear continuity. The repetition of our circles of life are inscribed more quickly these days, in smaller circles. They must become blurred or more precise, mush or infinite.

BYRIN MCNAB is a writer, curator, and uninvited guest on the unceded territories of the Squamish (Sk̲wx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw), Tsleil-Waututh (səl̓ilwətaʔɬ) and Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm) Nations. She is a PhD candidate at Concordia University, in between the Mathematics and Philosophy departments.

Picture Cycle: Essays: Masha Tupitsyn
Semiotext(e), 2020

by JESSE CUMMING

Love has been a central concern of writer, artist, and educator Masha Tupitsyn throughout her career, appearing in the titles of both her 2013 book Love Dog, a Roland Barthes–inspired collection of brief reflections initially published as Tumblr posts, and Love Sounds (2015), an imageless 24-hour-long video in which the black screen serves as a backdrop for an edited audio compilation of movie sequences related to love and romance. It’s unsurprising, then, that one of the most resonant moments in Tupitsyn’s new essay collection, Picture Cycle (2020), involves a discussion of onscreen kisses. “Kisses are always vérité,” she writes, the declaration related to an investigation into the nature of film and authenticity that stretches across several entries; “Does the kiss belong to the fiction of a film or to an actor’s real life?”

Collecting texts written over the past decade, the book’s contents range from personal memoirs—the most formally experimental inclusions, several of which can be considered prose poems—to more traditional film and cultural criticism, with the majority operating somewhere in the middle. The porous nature of the book’s essays is frequently exploited, with episodes from Tupitsyn’s memories stretching back to her childhood invoked, to elucidate her reading of particular films and stars; for example, a moment of personal heartbreak and writer’s block supports an essay on Ingmar Bergman and The Shining (1980). At the same time, Tupitsyn notes the influence of movies and television on her own life, particularly the point in her youth when ubiquitous mainstream fare like the original Miami Vice inspired thoughts on gender and fashion.

In Tupitsyn’s consideration of the nature of actors and acting, the moment of a celebrity sighting serves as an instant of either elucidation or confusion, one that either confirms or muddles the relationship between the performer, their public persona, and their onscreen roles. These moments occur at multiple points in the book, whether referencing her pre-teen glimpses of Johnny Depp in ‘90s TriBeCa (“You might not look
at him unless you knew you were supposed to”); an early encounter with Ralph Macchio of *The Karate Kid* fame, at one point a figure of infatuation for the young Tupitsyn; or tales from a co-worker about encounters with John Travolta at the Paradise Garage, suggested to be erotic in nature.

*Love Sounds and DECADES* (2017–present), Tupitsyn’s ongoing project tracing the sonic qualities of 20th-century cinema, are proof of Tupitsyn’s indefatigable cinephilia and her maximalist approach to assemblage. These two admirable qualities don’t always work in the context of *Picture Cycle*’s essays, which feature several entries that would benefit from a more condensed and focused style. Rather than a Benjaminian approach in which excerpts and reflections are able to shape a resonant whole, essays centred on topics like ‘80s fashion and pop culture or the relationship between cinematic faces and voices are regularly distracted or derailed by unnecessary shifts in focus and content.

Although it’s true that introducing David Bowie, Mark Zuckerberg, Radiohead’s “Creep,” Luchino Visconti, *American Psycho*, and more alongside each other in a single essay makes it possible for one to draw a connection between these entities, their conceptual linkage doesn’t necessarily serve to support any broader argument or offer any cumulative import. At their worst, the connections can tend toward the facile—as in the book’s predilection for anagrams—or simply thin, like the posited comparison between Bowie’s late-’70s artistic retreat to Berlin with Zuckerberg’s escape into the internet when faced with social alienation at Harvard. The overstuffed nature plagues other essays like “Devil Entendre,” which begins as an examination of horror but flits unsatisfyingly from *Rosemary’s Baby* to *No Country for Old Men* to *Se7en* to Naomi Klein to Rumpelstiltskin, with the connections drawn rarely productive.

The brief chapters are the most interesting for their focus and formal play. They largely abstain from engagement with the cinematic arts in favour of personal memories, employing techniques like second-person perspective or, in an explicit reference to Joe Brainard’s experimental memoir *I Remember* (1975), the use of a repetitive, rhythmic refrain. Technology and the apparatus of media appear on occasion in these entries, sometimes offering resonant moments that consider how such devices trace and mediate our relationships, whereas other entries are reduced to unfortunate similés comparing emotions to green screens.

The benefits in the personal writing of a focused conceptual conceit or container also hold true for the book’s most successful writings on film. Chief among these examples are Tupitsyn’s examinations of Robert Bresson and Catalan artist-filmmaker Albert Serra. Her writing on Bresson, which explores certain motifs across the French filmmaker’s body of work, also examines the kinship between his films and brief book of artistic treatises *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975), and her own past work, noting, “Like Bresson, I use form to work through form, which is how I work through ideas.”

In her writing on Serra, Tupitsyn approaches the work through her trained ear, which introduces a sonic consideration alongside an engagement with the films’ themes, historical influences, and formal emphases on faces and landscapes. As the essay turns to Serra’s *Story of My Death* (2013), where an unconventional and largely imagined portrait of the infamous lover Casanova appears alongside a wholly imagined Dracula, Tupitsyn’s twin interests in love and sound are again reunited. While elements of *Picture Cycle* tend to float freely without coalescing, this essay concludes with a rich bit of fusion, positing sound as a representation of the film’s sinister desire. In a reversal of her projects of sonic separation, Tupitsyn situates sound within the cinematic mise en scène rather than as an entity alone and above it.

JESSE CUMMING is a writer and curator based in Toronto.
The Canadian government’s occupation of Anishinaabe lands in Ipperwash, ON, and its refusal to return these territories to their ancestral keepers, culminates in an uneasy history at the centre of Gaawiin Ogiibagidenaawaasiiwaawan/They Did Not Let It Go, an exhibition at Museum London. The Anishinaabemowin title is a declaration of remembrance that commemorates the 25th anniversary of the Ipperwash Crisis, a major land dispute that catalyzed protests by members of the Stony Point First Nation who fought for the return of their ancestral homelands. It was amid this resistance that Anishinaabe land defender Anthony “Dudley” George was shot and murdered by the Ontario Provincial Police in 1995. Through the history of Ipperwash, Houle, in collaboration with the curators Summer Bressette and Monica Virtue, unravel a broad legacy of broken treaty accords and failed promises to Indigenous peoples.

Informed by a polyphonic approach, Bressette and Virtue collaborated with cultural advisers, translators, and authors from the Chippewas of the Thames, Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point, Poplar Hill, and Aamjiwnaang First Nations, as well George’s siblings, who lent their voices to this exhibition. Outlining a chronology of Anishinaabe assertion of Indigenous Title in the face of colonial land expropriation, this thoughtfully co-authored exhibition includes decolonial maps, Wampum Belts, photographs, individual testimonies, and a single work by artist Robert Houle: Ipperwash (2000–2001), which was prominently hung in the centre of the gallery. This large-scale mixed-media painting of an abstracted landscape in cobalt greens, is flanked by squares of yellow and red, some overlaid with photographs of arrowheads; hung to the left of it is a set of anodized aluminum letters spelling “IPPERWASH.” As an Anishinaabe Saulteaux artist, Houle examines issues relating to colonialism, the loss of ancestral lands, and Indigenous sovereignty.

Standing in front of Houle’s work, a motion-activated speaker played a faint recording of waves meeting the shoreline at the former Ipperwash Provincial Park beach. These soothing sounds were interrupted by foreboding excerpts of a two-way radio transmission sent between Ontario Provincial Police officers on September 6, 1995—the day of George’s murder. Suddenly, Houle’s use of yellow and red seemed doubly alarming, as if signalling danger of other land appropriations ahead. I’m reminded of Robert Houle: Life & Work (2018), in which Shirley Madill traces a relationship between Ipperwash and another land dispute: the Oka Uprising of 1990. During this 78-day standoff with the Quebec police and Canadian Army, Kanyen’keh:ka/Mohawk of Kanesatake protested against the encroachment of a golf course into their traditional territory and burial grounds in Oka, Quebec. To this day, the Canadian government has yet to return Kanesatake lands. By layering these histories of threat to Indigenous Title, Madill sees Houle’s Ipperwash as intimating the cumulative effects of enduring inequities.

Five satellite maps were included, sourced from The Decolonial Atlas, a collection of digital maps authored by volunteer critical cartographers who challenge the objectivity often associated with maps and mapmaking. Unfolding chronologically here, they render visible the centuries of dispossession of Anishinaabe territory by British imperialism, the Canadian government, and the Ontario Provincial Police. Accompanying captions detail coercive tactics employed by the state. Encased in a vitrine in the centre of the gallery, four Wampum Belts—formal pre-Confederation accords between Indigenous Nations, at times extended to European colonizers—spoke to the violation of land treaties by the government. These commissioned replicas were made by Ken Maracle by way of The Wampum Shop, located on the Six Nations of the Grand River. With input from Aamjiwnaang historian David P. Plain, the Covenant Chain, 24 Nations, Two Row, and Dish With One Spoon Wampum were contextualized against the back-
The Gas Imaginary: Rachel O’Reilly
Or Gallery, Vancouver
October 2–December 19, 2020

The signal work of Rachel O’Reilly’s exhibition, The Gas Imaginary at Or Gallery, is the hour-long single-channel documentary video INFRACTIONS (2019), in which the artist interviews Aboriginal anti-fracking activists in the Northern Territory of Australia. Another shorter video, Drawing Rights (2018), combines 3-D renderings and drone footage with voice-over narration that pulls on recent research into the Torrens title-of-property registration pioneered in Australia in the 19th century. Nine inkjet prints of computer-rendered diagrams hang along the back wall echo the surreal, axonometric views of Drawing Rights and interleave a handwritten commentary between the exploded layers of landscape, boats, figures, stacked turtles, and dugongs. Finally, a large drawing—which had yet to be installed when I visited the show—spans the west wall with a timeline and a map of Australia’s mining permits. The works collected here belong to a larger project that gives the exhibition its name. Together they propose to reckon with the “violent dematerialization” at the heart of what O’Reilly calls “settler conceptualism.” These phrases, which O’Reilly coins in the works and which are echoed in the show’s publicity materials, link her po- lemic against the extractive logics of settler colonialism in present-day Australia with a withering, ironic assessment of the history of contemporary art.

INFRACTIONS poses what might be the central question of the entire show: who decides what happens to the land and how? At the outset of the documenta- ry, Irene Watson (Tanganeked, Meintangk Boandik First Nations), a law professor and co-drafter of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, relates how slippery the paradigm of rights can be. Landmark recognition of Aboriginal title in Australian courts through the 1992 Mabo decision, she explains, brought with it the concept of extinguishment, whereby title can also be revoked by the Australian nation-state. Against the backdrop of such legal dis-

simulation, INFRACTIONS follows past and current efforts by Aboriginal activists to determine control over their ancestral homelands. Interviews with Gooreng Gooreng elders Juliri Ingra, Jackie Johnson, and Neola Savage, among others, trace how mining companies ingratiate themselves by retaining influential individuals to acquire Aboriginal community consent for mining, only to shirk responsibility for financial support or en-
vironmental consequences. Fighting this exploitation of the Indigenous rights paradigm, then, is what a younger generation of activists face in their ongoing struggle to preserve and care for their land. As Gadrian Hoosan (Garrawa, Yanyuwa) puts it, “When you hold money in your hand, you’re holding a dead environment and a dead land.” Elder artist Jack Green (Garrawa, Gudanj) points out the fraught relationship between art and mining companies. He explains that the local art centre began to shy away from his paintings explicitly opposed to mining, which led him to stop working with them altogether.

Corporate artwashing is perhaps the most direct, material link O’Reilly makes between the history of extractive industries in Australia and art. One of her tacit theses, however, is that the legal abstractions that have historically been used to legitimize extraction find echoes in the kind of administrative abstractions and logics deployed in post-war art, especially con- ceptualism. The video Drawing Rights, her printed diagrams, and the wall drawing speculate about these more fundamental analogies between extraction and art. The legacy of Conceptual Art is clearly an im-
portant touchstone for O’Reilly because it epitomizes art’s post-war flight from objects to ideas, which she implicitly compares to the flight of global capital from Fordist production into the abstract realm of finance. The entry for the year 1971 on the timeline in her wall drawing reads “dematerialization of art finance.” Drawing Rights, in particular, focuses on the Torrens title system invented in Australia in 1858 and later exported globally, which “simplified” settler land grabs
by removing the legal requirement to show a documented chain of title. In O’Reilly’s timeline, Torrens title (“the first fully fungible capitalist model of landed property in the world,” according to the artist) belongs to the same trajectory as the Mabo decision in a settler-colonial legal framework that constantly strives to subsume increasing amounts of land to value extraction. The concept of registration hastens settler claims to land by substituting a legal-administrative procedure for more material connections to place.

Certain projects by Robert Smithson and the N.E. Thing Co., among others, probably deserve the epithet settler conceptualism. But suggesting that the pernicious legal innovations of 19th-century Australian settlers somehow anticipated Conceptual Art, or that the latter merely mimes the former, is a bold and probably unfair conceit. Still, O’Reilly’s comparison brings out a shared affinity for an administrative sleight of hand. Conceptual Art never shied away from inventing systems or structures to serve as guiding fictions to justify improbable ends. Think of John Baldessari’s *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)* (1973) or Douglas Huebler’s tongue-in-cheek intention to “photographically document the existence of everyone alive” for his *Variable Piece #70* (1971–1988). It is also significant that O’Reilly herself makes liberal use of Conceptual Art’s formal strategies. Her exhibition incorporates works in series, and the administrative aesthetic of diagrams, maps, and charts. The wall drawing, executed by a hired hand according to the artist’s specifications, recalls the method if not the look of a Sol Lewitt. On one hand, O’Reilly invites us to think of the colonist, map-maker, and colonial administrator as “artist.” This aspect of her invocation of the “conceptual” highlights how settler-colonial discourse is constructed around land as a concept that is empty and, by association, “there for the taking.” On the other hand, she repurposes conceptualist strategies to intervene in the very settler imaginary she so deftly calls up. Rather than rejecting it outright, then, she opt to temper her own participation in the history of conceptualism by reflexively conveying the tension between its “good” and “bad” aspects.

There is an argument to be made that resisting the intensifying abstraction of global capitalism must involve returning fire with its own most effective tools. Given the evidence supplied in *The Gas Imaginary*—and the recent history of Contemporary Art—I am not persuaded that a recuperation of conceptualist techniques can be applied with the same efficiency against the forces of capitalist abstraction as they are in the other direction. Another visual technique, ostensibly aligned with surveillance and official state cartography, which is much more impactful and is repurposed to profound effect in *INFRINGEMENTS and Drawing Rights*, is the activist-produced drone footage of fracking wells. As O’Reilly’s narration in the video attests, there is a kind of abstraction in the drone footage itself due to its uncanny smoothing of camera movement and its consequent rendering of space into a kind of Euclidean perfection. It is this material along with O’Reilly’s interviews that does justice to her subject matter more fully than the renderings and diagrams. Whereas the exploded views and pink-and-red digital renderings transport us into the eerie virtual space of the gas imaginary, hearing the testimonials of activists like Que Kenny and Ray “Dimakarri” Dixon combined with the drone footage of the affected areas of the Northern Territory returns us to the connection between land and people that the violent dematerializations of settler conceptualism always threaten to sever.

**JONAH GRAY** is an art historian, curator, and PhD candidate at UC San Diego.
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Our Winter 2021 issue is guest-designed by Saskatoon-based artist Chris Morin. The issue features a national roster of artists, curators, and writers, including Eve Tagny, Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau, Zoe Koke, and Clare Samuel.

Aaniin, Dayna Danger ndizhinikaaz, Métis - Saulteaux ndaa. waabi-mukwa dodem niinda’aw, Wini-nipi ndoonjibaa.

My mother, Debbie, was the first one to teach me about what a bundle is, what its role is in Anishinaabeg and Métis protocols of care, and what it has meant in our family. Each bundle is different, but they all carry deep significance. It’s a gathering of precious and sacred medicines and objects. In mine, you will find one braid of sweetgrass, Redbird matches in a Ziploc, empty pill bottles full of ground lavender and weekakay, an abalone shell for burning medicine, red broadcloth, a leather-bound goose fan, and a red pipestone pipe with an eagle engraving, wrapped in soft blue fabric. My mother taught me to care for my bundle like you would a small child. Without you, they are defenseless. They rely on you to take care of them and activate them when the time is right. When we do, we engage all of ourselves: our emotions, our spirituality, our stories, and our teachings. We give to them, and they give to us. My bundle has taught me how to nurture my relationships to my kin, my spirit, my body, and my ancestors.

When I was 13 years old, I would sneak onto the home computer after dark, when everyone had gone to bed, and start up the 56K dial-up modem. Growing up in the freezing Prairie city of so-called Winnipeg, many complicated feelings about my sexuality arose. Not only did I not have queer elders then to look up to, no one in my world talked openly about sex, let alone queerness. I felt isolated and lonely at times, but my young spirit was mischievous and curious to find others like me. It wasn’t long until I found my favourite online chat room. My intention was not to meet anyone in person; I just needed a small pocket of the internet where a group of role-playing freaks from different parts of the globe could come together and escape our current realities. What I lacked in experience, I certainly made up for with imagination!

I became obsessed with tales of vampires, undead immortal beings, and mythical beasts. In church, I used to sneak Anne Rice’s novels inside the middle crease of the bible during mass; through them, I was introduced to imaginings of romantic relationships beyond the heteronormative binary of man and woman. Rice’s vampires were attracted to each other’s minds; gender and genitalia were inconsequential. As they aged, they lost their ability to procreate as humans, but would seduce their human lovers in order to feast on them. Vampires enjoyed single or multiple partners, both undead and alive, and these relationships were often sexual without physical intercourse, which opened up a whole world of possibility. These stories became a way for me to express myself through characters that, at the time, I could only dream of embodying.

Back in the 2000s, at the old gay stomping grounds, Gio’s, knowledgeable kinksters in the community hosted monthly informative gatherings aimed at providing young, experimenting kinksters proper play techniques and toy usage. I had longed to enter play dungeons and Black and Blue balls hosted by local, well-known kinksters, and wanted to know how to play, while keeping myself and my culture safe. However, I felt uncomfortable right away in these spaces; while BDSM is seen as an alternative to monogamy, heteronormativity, and vanilla sex, it is rife with tired, cis-hetero, binary-affirming dynamics (“male” dominants and “female” submissives). And there was another glaring disparity: there were virtually no QTBIPOC in attendance, who have many hurdles in the BDSM scene to overcome before they even walk in the door including racial violence, triggering dynamics (such as master/slave) without care or consideration, and overt sexualization and fetishism of race and culture, just to name a few.

While colonization has done its best to erase Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer realities through forced performative gender roles and segregation, we push back by defining our own practices and making our existence visible. In my work, Anishinaabeg and Métis culture intersect with BDSM aesthetics materially—such as leather fetish masks adorned completely with black beads, or up-cycled bike tire tubes turned into floggers, with black beaded handles. I carry these handmade items in my bundle, right next to my prairie sage and bootleg tobacco, along with all my multiplicity—being queer as fuck, loud, energetic, kinky, smoked-hide obsessed—and stories, imagined and actualized. Indigiqueer zaagi’iddwin (which translates to mutual love) and kin-making shifts the dominant, normative, Western scientific conception of relationships toward an embrace of reciprocity, fluidity, and possibility.

The community—the Indigenous ancestors seven generations back ’til present day, the matriarchs, the tough-love sweat lodge conductors and elders, waiting for the youth to come knock on their door, the ceremonial people, the fierce auntsies and tattooed uncles, the Indigiqueers and Two-Spirits, the cousins (blood or not), the gookums, kookums, and those who carry and give life—has the responsibility of passing knowledge to the next generation, our children. Indigenous cultures have an intimate way of being given through oral traditions such as storytelling and listening, which requires reciprocity between the giver and receiver, much like in healthy BDSM circles. When I found my Two-Spirit elders, with whom I went to sweat lodges conducted by queer and trans women—gender outlaws sweating and healing together—I felt my heart explode with gratitude and relief. With this in mind, I was compelled to share a scene from my bundle between two Anishinaabe lovers, to inspire the next generation of Indigiqueers.

Bundles
by Dayna Danger
Dayna Danger, Kinky Bundle, 2021, digital photograph
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
how do you say “consent” in Anishinaabemowin?

close your eyes
an expanse of white pine flooring
unravelled prairie bison pelt, golden brown fur facing the sky
lay your body down

slide your belly along the coarse expanse
stretch your limbs like a star,
reaching arms, grasping fingertips, where hooves used to be
press your face, where shoulder blades used to be

I can weave my hands through your sea of hair
clenching strands between fingers
pulling tight to scalp
pushing gently, coaxing down

a mound of musky fur, curling into flared nostrils
breathe in rotten birch turned into smoked magic
penetrated skin
breathe out

little dad, how do you say “can I continue?”

thick, rubbery buffalo sinew—
laid out long and wet
harvested from tawny legs
soaked overnight
I’ve been waiting
—Mashkode-biziki rope
to wrap around your tiny fox wrists
round and round your ankles, too
pulling taut to four directions

we use everything, nothing goes to waste
every last drop

auntie, how do you say “safe word”? 

I’ll scrape your rump with my moose bone tool
like a fresh skinned hide ready to be fleshed

decorating your expanse of flesh
speckles of purple, red bruising
black and blue constellations
connecting to form close bonds
a cycle of the moon

Elder, how do you say “open your mouth”?

a flowery black hanky
baled up and stuffed
silent orifice

a sacred teaching of respect

DAYNA DANGER is a Two-Spirit, Métis/Saulteaux/Polish multidisciplinary artist whose work primarily focuses on their Indigenous cosmologies, kinship, gender, and sexuality. Danger lives and loves in tio’tia:ke, while pursuing a PhD focused on hide tanning practices from their great-grandmother, Madeline, at Concordia University.
Merritt Johnson: Love Song
JAN 5 – APR 22 2021
sfugalleries.ca/lovesong

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JAN 14 – MAR 6 2021
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Elizabeth MacKenzie: Unlikeness
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PUBLICATION RELEASE
WAGING CULTURE:
INTERROGATING THE CANADIAN VISUAL ARTISTS LABOUR FORCE
BY MICHAEL MARANDA

ANALYSIS FROM OUR THIRD SOCIOECONOMIC SURVEY
Twenty-two years ago, Gayatri Spivak largely denounced postcolonial theory, citing its stagnating effect on the work of its celebrated practitioners. Despite its failures, however, she maintained that by using it, we could opt for an ethics of alterity rather than a politics of identity to make our way through the climate of cultural polarization—seeing identity politics as an awkward tool that uses identities to account for histories, and forges multiplicity in the process. An ethics of alterity does not necessarily smooth out identity politics’ shortcomings but instead merges it with the sharing of time, space, and experiences with others; it is on the side of relations and linkages. Since encountering these theoretical positions, I have been consumed by locating this call for an ethics of alterity in the local and global art worlds that are, in many ways, still reeling from rigid identity politics of the late 20th century. More specifically, I am interested in seeing how an ethics of alterity can be used to better reflect composite and overlapping histories.

Anna Binta Diallo is one of many artists in recent years to use the archive to explore how identity has become history, to investigate the relationship between image and knowledge production, and to radically disorient histories that have been falsely presented as complete. In more ways than one, her work embodies a move toward relationality that is vital for creating pathways to a less divided future. Upon encountering Diallo’s work, there is a clear message that identity is not singular but dispersed.

Seeing herself as a devout collector of images, the artist approaches the abundance of the materials using the specific framework of folk tales. Beginning with her experience as a new mother in 2019, folk tales became a curious site in which to examine the oversimplification of race, origins, and meanings. Wanderings is an ongoing series that started by exploring archetypes and folk tales drawn from her own mixed ancestry, including references to West African, Franco-Canadian, and Métis traditions. To be sure, these narratives are only a starting point for Diallo to create visual constellations; the culmination of these exercises remains ambiguous and open for interpretation. The figures are also not limited to these roots but rhizomatically involve other cultures and histories that have shared or could speculatively share space with her own. It is no coincidence, then, that collage is the chosen medium here, through which diverse histories can be brought together to visualize the intimate possibilities, tensions, and mutualities.

In this iteration for *C Magazine*, for instance, Diallo engages with my own South Asian cultural background through the story of the snake charmer—an epitome of the artist’s porousness and sensitivity to the contexts she creates work within. Crystalized in the West on the cover of Edward Said’s canonical book, *Orientalism*, featuring Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painted work *Snake Charmer*, this ancient, heavily orientalized myth is explored amid research into the appearance of the snake in other cultures, such as Meso-American, Egyptian, Chinese, and Hopi traditions. While composing the life stories of these new characters, she reflected on the dialogues we’ve had in the last few months—just as she’s done with other collaborators, curators, and writers in this series. The artist at once honours our collaboration and broadens the possible readings of this myth; these “charming” acts obscure orientalist fantasies to instead focus on relationships between human beings and other species, signalling yet another layer of her commitment to disavowing singular identity in favour of ethical relations.

Despite the specificity of Diallo’s compositional choices, the figures in *Wanderings* are left open to interpretation. Another way of saying this might be that they are shrouded by opacity—which, continuous with an ethics of alterity, abandons identity as the primary political concern. We see the figures in all their detail, but their many intersections—charged, curious, playful—are never fully transparent. I think here of *Prairie Girl*, a body that is reiterated throughout Diallo’s oeuvre and defined by its duality. The bottom of the silhouette is filled with a map of the world and the chest carries a Prairie heart. Like blood vessels, the waterways of the Prairies provide familiar, life-giving texture to the *Prairie Girl* and set her in fluvial relation to the bigger world. *Prairie Girl* carries two stories: one that embodies the artist’s personal relationship to the land, and the second for the viewers to write on their own.

*Wanderings* holds space for the critique of colonialism and its culture of representation from multiple and ever-expanding vantage points: Diallo’s, my own, and all those who have become entwined in this series. In this, the artist is consciously visualizing the process of linking, creating bonds across difference, which might finally allow us to access the power of postcolonial critique, reduced and eventually deserted by the thinkers critiqued by Spivak. It is a difficult task to pursue the rhizome while committing oneself to opacity, yet *Wanderings* takes this on as part of a responsibility, in this contemporary moment, to explore relations beyond one’s own boundaries while protecting our communities from the breach of the colonial gaze, which has been destructive to our ways of life.
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