

November 11th - December 17th 2016

New Ways of Having

Lis Rhodes
Olivia Whetung
The Impressions

Over the summer, Olivia Whetung and I met in her studio to look at some work and talk about this show. I don't know how it came up, but somehow we got on the subject of Ursula K. Le Guin and Olivia brought up her 1986 essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." In it, Le Guin considers the theory that the first tool was not a weapon, but rather a container, or carrier bag, that can gather together food and other items that had been collected throughout the day for later use. A pick is useful to dig up a bunch of potatoes, but if you don't have a container to move those potatoes in, the only useful ones are the ones you can eat right then and there. Where Le Guin only hints at the oppressive nature of agriculture in the text (citing how a gatherer probably would spend about 15 hours a week to sustain themselves, far less than hours toiling away in someone else's field as a labourer), Olivia wondered if the carrier bag could too be a weapon: a vehicle for collecting, for taking, for having.

I was at Olivia's studio that day to pick up her work *saasaakwe* (2016) which is, technically speaking, a bead work, though the form it takes for the gallery is a photograph of the beaded hair piece clipped onto someone's deep red-brown hair. The hair piece is large rectangle of white beads, woven into it in darker beads reads the text: PROTECT ME FROM WHAT YOU WANT. *saasaakwe* is a play on the Jenny Holzer truism: *Protect Me From What I Want*. Dating from the early 1980s, Holzer's one liner was a pithy critique of the excesses of consumerism that were on the rise during Reagan's free market

economy, a plea to save oneself from their own wants and desires. Whetung's work operates as a kind of remake of the Holzer for the late capitalism era. With a subtle shift in pronoun, the implication of Holzer's critique is reframed and clarified: its not so much about my wants and desires as it is the imposition of the wants and desires of the free market economy on me.

For *trapline silver* (2016), Whetung carved a wood block in the shape of a trade silver: metal jewelry and ornaments used by European fur traders that took many shapes and forms—brooches, pendants, bracelets, or rings. In the latter part of the 18th century, pendants were fashioned in the shape of a beaver for monetary exchange with the literal representation of a beaver pelt being used to purchase beaver skins. With *trapline silver*, Whetung has created a variable, unlimited edition of these prints that are nailed to the gallery wall in a line stretching across three walls. Translating the shape of a beaver pendant trade silver into a wood block print, Whetung renders this historic monetary instrument as an artwork. Like trade silver, these prints are meant to circulate, but the process of taking one from the gallery is one of acquisitive violence, as one must tear the paper in order to remove it from the wall.

Lis Rhodes' *Dissonance and Disturbance* (2012) is a remix of three earlier films by the artist: *Cold Draft* (1988), *In the Kettle* (2010) and *Whitehall* (2012). In the overlay of these three films are different narratives: the conditions of economic policies in England in the 1980s, the

destruction of a flour mill in Gaza by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and the kettling of protestors on the streets of London. Providing the voice of these films is the soundtrack from *Cold Draft*, a film that responds to the free market economic systems that were radically reshaping England under Thatcher in the 1980s (an economic policy that of course paralleled Reagan's policies that were at the heart of the Jenny Holzer cited earlier). Rhodes' critique was that these economic policies that professed to be about freedom and the individual only served to concentrate wealth and power. In images and text on screen, Rhodes turns the narrative to Gaza where the IDF shelled a flour mill in an act of indirect state violence, destroying the means of sustenance. In layering these works together, Rhodes is outlining systems of power and the trajectory of their development. She's linking the neoliberal economic policies of Thatcher and Reagan to the occupation and control of Palestinians in Gaza and the increased militarization of police in controlling protesters.

"This is My Country" came up on shuffle on my phone one day this summer. It was in the midst of yet another wave of police shootings in the United States—Keith Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina and Philando Castile in St. Anthony, Minnesota—and it hit me that day with a different relevance. As I thought about the continued stream of police violence, of the systemic racism that plagues the US and Canada and, well, everywhere really, I listened to Curtis Mayfield repeating the refrain, "this is my country." Though the lyrics say "my," I

think they're really suggesting "our" here. Maybe this was Mayfield's suggestion for a new way of having.

Artist Biographies

Lis Rhodes is a major figure in the history of artists' filmmaking in Britain and was a leading member of the influential London Filmmakers' Co-op. In 1979 she co-founded Circles Women's Film and Video Distribution, the first British organization to distribute the work of women film and video artists. She currently lives and works in London, where a survey exhibition of her career, *Lis Rhodes: Dissonance and Disturbance*, was held at the ICA in 2012. Her films are distributed by LUX.

Olivia Whetung is a member of Curve Lake First Nation and a citizen of the Nishnaabeg Nation. She completed her BFA with a minor in Anishinaabemowin at Algoma University in 2013, and is currently pursuing her MFA at UBC Vancouver. Her work explores acts of/active native presence, as well as the challenges of working with/in/through Indigenous languages in an art world dominated by the English language. She is a recipient of a CGS-M Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Award and an Aboriginal Graduate Fellowship.

The Impressions are an American musical group founded in Chicago in 1958 by Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield, Sam Gooden, Arthur Brooks and Richard Brooks. Primarily active between 1958 and 1970, The Impressions' musical style mixed elements of gospel, doo-wop, soul and R&B.

List of Works

1. Lis Rhodes

Dissonance and Disturbance

digital video, 26 min, 2012

2. Olivia Whetung

trapline silver

unlimited edition woodcut, variable
dimensions variable, 2016

3. Olivia Whetung

saasaakwe

10/0 seed beads, 2016

4. The Impressions

“This is My Country”

Vinyl album transferred to WAV file set to
play at the end of Lis Rhodes’ film, 2:48,
1968

