

What Am I Forgetting?

Lindsay Lachance

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On March 16th, 2017, I witnessed a performance by Maria Hupfield and Charlene Vickers at the Western Front on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. I, Lindsay Lachance, of Algonquin Anishinaabe and of 8th generation mixed Canadian ancestry, use the term ‘witnessing’ here to echo the ideas of Kwagiulth scholar, Dr. Sarah Hunt, who describes witnessing as a “part of a larger system of maintaining an oral culture.” She writes, “Witnesses can then be called upon to verify what has taken place, particularly if any act of business or ceremony is called in to question.”¹

The gallery that day was busy with family, friends, and visitors. Adults’ and childrens’ voices filtered over the sound of changing 35mm slides. The exhibition by Maria Hupfield, entitled *John Hupfield’s Woodlands Indian Art + West Coast Indian Art*, was open and ready for all to see. A sense of nostalgia presented itself in the space as the old images projected around me. A white classroom projector screen was set up in the centre of the room with felt cut-out letters drooping over it; a record player and some LPs from the 1960s waited to be played. Felt objects were placed throughout the space—a shovel, glasses, a hammer—illuminating the activeness of

the show's revisited archival material.

Maria Hupfield and Charlene Vickers entered the studio wearing white T-shirts that said *Cool Indian* on the back, and had a circle on the front. I'd seen them wear the *Cool Indian* T-shirts in a collaborative performance once before, in the UBC Belkin Gallery's exhibition *Cutting Copper: Indigenous Resurgent Practice* in 2016. The duo wore black bowler hats with a yellow sash tied around the brim; both wore necklaces. They walked, crouched and swayed through the space holding wooden and brass spoons and cups, at times tapping, banging or rubbing on the floor, walls, and belongings, as if they needed waking up, asking them to be present. Other motions seemed to mirror smudging, as if to cleanse the room and all that was in it. The artists worked around the space and exited at the back of the gallery, still tapping and smudging as they walked. Others around me asked, "Should we follow them?" No one did. Soon they re-entered with seven 10-foot tall wooden poles, a blanket, and some large paper cones tied together by felt. They carried the bundle over their shoulders and set it down on the floor.

They opened the bundle and carefully took the paper cones apart, placing them with intention around the room. Each time they did so they would obscure the light of the slide projector, blurring the lines between past and present. Hupfield and Vick

ers took their time opening the bundle, folding the floral blanket together afterwards as if it were a bed sheet going back into the closet. Each of the wooden poles were then lifted from the floor, held up to touch the ceiling, or at other times, used to suggest weapons or point in the cardinal directions, before being placed to rest against the wall. The performers stood with their backs to the wall, holding the poles in front of their chests while the images projected on top of them.

So far, the women had been silent, communicating only through their bodies and operating in a ceremonial kind of way. They collected the paper cones and cylinders and rubbed them over their bodies, or rolled them along the floor and wall. The children in the room began to laugh as they rolled the cones over their butts and bellies. Maria Hupfield's brother and niece were witnesses as well—her niece, laughing and looking with loving and excited eyes towards her auntie. The cones were used as binoculars, held up to the artists' ears, and rolled on themselves and each other. There was something critical in this repetition.

I began to wonder, *What are we seeing? What are we hearing? Who are they seeing?* Their voices entered the performance as they began to breathe through the cones. At first, their breaths were heard at random, eventually growing into a rhythmic call

and response. Then the calls developed into syllables: “Shh,” “Chhhhhhhh,” “Waaaaa,” “Ya,” “Hey,” “Huh,” as if warming up after not using their voices for a while. The women connected the cones together to form a long tube, and, with one standing at each end of it, finally began to speak to each other.

“I see you.”

“I acknowledge you.”

“I acknowledge the land.”

“I acknowledge the water.”

“I acknowledge the territory.”

“I acknowledge your body.”

“I acknowledge my body.”

“I acknowledge your heart.”

“I acknowledge your spirit.”

“I acknowledge your ancestors.”

Their words travelled back and forth. They spoke with intention and with precision, honouring each other with their words.

Each picked up one of the pieces of wood leaning against the wall, and pointed it around the room while walking through the space. Eventually they pointed the lumber, as if in an armed position, at the projector and stand, above which a large piece of yellow felt hung reading: *ALL PLACES / ALL TIMES / ALWAYS / AND / FOREVER* in partial cut-outs, hanging by a few final threads. The words presented

Indigenous spirituality and worldview, challenging notions of linear time. The women encouraged me to remember how the past influences our present and how we must work together to create our futures.

On a large banner that read, *John Hupfield's Woodlands Indian Art + West Coast Indian Art*, Hupfield got a white paint marker and began to write over top of it: *First Nations, Indigenous, Anishinaabe, and Odawa*. As she continued to write, Vickers manipulated a handheld device creating technical sounds. Over the words *West Coast*, Hupfield wrote *Salish*. Then she turned to ask for input from the people around her, asking them to consider whose territory we were on.

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People called out the names of nations, while she asked, “How do you spell that?” and “Are you sure?”

The floral bedsheet that had been folded at the beginning of the performance was now brought out and placed on the floor. Three other *Cool Indian* T-shirts were placed on the blanket, along with some beads and other belongings used in the performance. The artists used a cone to sweep up around the newly laid bundle, while sharing commentary about the display of art.

“I’d put it on the wall,” one said. “I’d put it on my auntie’s wall...”

“I’d put it under glass...”

The performance mixes humour and protocol in having us consider the terminology used when describing contemporary Indigenous art, as well as our relationships to the lands on which we live and work. Time, land, protocol and relationality are embodied in this performance and provoke us to consider the future, without forgetting the past.

Hupfield and Vickers looked one last time at the bundle of objects on the floor before walking out of the room.

Lindsay Lachance is an Algonquin Anishinaabe PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her areas of interest include performance aesthetics, the physicalization of spirituality in time and space, and the multiple creation processes of Indigenous dramaturgies. Lachance is an active theatre professional, reviewer and scholar and has presented her research at five international conferences. She has participated at events hosted by The National Arts Centre, The PuSh Festival, Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, the Museum of Anthropology, and the Audain Gallery at SFU. Lachance is a member of Full Circle First Nations Performance and the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance.

¹ Sarah Hunt, “Researching Within Relations of Violence: Witnessing as Kwagiulth research methodology”, 2014. In Press. 1.