

March 23rd - May 5th

# These Hands

Jeneen Frei Njootli,  
Gabrielle L'Hirondelle  
Hill, Chandra Melting  
Tallow, Tania Willard,  
Laura Huertas Millán,  
Flora M'mbugu-Schelling,  
Berwick Street Collective

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## These Hands

If you haven't listened to Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" recently, I urge you to do so at your earliest convenience. In particular, I'd recommend this clip on YouTube with Dolly performing live at the Academy Awards, when the song was nominated for best original song in 1981. The segment starts with Dolly singing, center stage and spotlight; she's clad in a sequined black evening gown, and she does what I think of as her signature little prance/shuffle dance move that, despite its bounciness, doesn't ever seem to make her hair move. The chorus kicks in:

*Workin' 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin'  
Barely gettin' by, it's all takin' and no givin'  
They just use your mind and they never  
give you credit  
It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it*

And with that, the camera angle widens and the rest of the stage lights come up. Dolly's backup dancers appear as a cadre of blue collar men working the chain gang—lifting and swinging in unison around her. They slowly break away from their mimed hard labour to strut around Dolly and about halfway through the song, a series of banners drop in the background to spell out U-N-I-T-E.

As much as I love this song, it's hard not to notice the complexities and incongruities in the outlandish staging of its live performance for the Oscars: Parton, donning a fancy gown and performing a song from her 23rd solo album is clearly no longer someone

who is working 9 to 5. The song (and the film it came from) are these emblematic pop cultural anthems of second wave feminism, but the message feels dated and off kilter. The song shakes off the woman in the workplace revenge fantasy of the film to focus more on a general worker rights kind of vibe with its dance troupe of sweaty worker men and those giant U-N-I-T-E banners in the backdrop.

To be clear, I'm not trying to write a takedown of Dolly Parton's class politics here. It's just that I've been thinking about representations of labour in pop culture and it's hard to do that without coming back to these two milestones. As conflicted as some of the messaging here is, "9 to 5" existed during a period I nostalgically remember as a glory era for the visibility and presence of labour and class in pop culture. At the risk of coming off as trying to delegitimize Rhianna or Beyoncé, I feel like it's worth noting that for all the empowerment I hear in their songs, the work has a different outcome: one with Givenchy dresses and six inch heels and Drake and not with the proclamation that Parton makes at the end of her song that, "It's a rich man's game no matter what they call it, And you spend your life puttin' money in his wallet."

This exhibition, *These Hands*, takes its title from the film of the same name by Flora M'bugu-Schelling

that chronicles a day for a group of Mozambican women who are directly working to put money in the man's wallet. The women are a group of refugees working near Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in a quarry. Over the course of the film's 45 minutes, M'mbugu-Schelling documents the dusty, repetitive labour of these women as they swing hammers, smashing up rocks into smaller and smaller pieces, and carry baskets of rock from one area of the quarry to another. The film has no real contextualization for any these scenes: M'mbugu-Schelling largely leaves us, as viewers, to fend for ourselves, until a scrolling text at the end of the film places their labour and its value within a global economic scale. But in the seemingly endless monotony of their days, the women break from the work: they prepare food, tend to their children, and, at a few points in the film, break into song. Though we hear small bits of dialogue as they are working, these songs are the only part of the film that are translated from Kimakonde. They sing about being mothers, reminisce about their homeland in Mozambique, and, in the film's final song, sing a lamentation for one of their co-workers who was killed in a rockslide at the quarry. As crushingly hopeless as their positions as workers seems to be, the film is not explicitly a direct condemnation of the quarry or their labour. While a recognition of the parts these women play in the

brutal machine of global capitalism, the film doesn't diminish them to such meaningless roles. Their lives come through much more on their own terms: yes, as workers, but also as mothers, sisters, women.

Laura Huertas Millán shot her film *La Libertad* with the Navarros, a family in Santo Tomás Jalieza, Oaxaca, Mexico. The Navarros are weavers and, perhaps because of this practice, they are a matriarchal family. Weaving, a traditionally feminine craft, is passed down from grandmothers and mothers and, as we learn in the film, the Navarro women align their roles as weavers as being central to their freedom. Part of that freedom is economic: the textiles they produce on pre-Hispanic backstrap looms provides a sustainable source of income. But the time spent weaving isn't to be confused with work: the Navarros aren't employed as weavers. Unlike the Mozambican women in M'mbugu-Schelling's film, these women are more in control of the terms of their labour. Just as much as it provides an economic freedom, it also supports a personal freedom. Crispina Navarro says, "Weaving is not an employment. It is part of one's life. As I have been living it, I have it as a part of my life. At home, when weaving, it's the quietest moments, and one is fully entertained, even forgetting the day and the hour. (...) Someone told me once that I like to do it, that's why I think in this way. Well,

yes, I really like it, because no one is commanding me, but I'm doing it like this, free." In that way, it is significant that the Navarros, an Indigenous Zapotec family, gain a sense of their freedom, of their sovereignty, through a craft that has transcended through 500 years of colonialism in Central America.

When Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill first outlined the idea behind *Coney Island Baby* to me, I had immediately thought of M'mbugu-Schelling's film, and the complexities of how labour is visualized, particularly the oftentimes invisible labour of women. Hill, along with her collaborators Jeneen Frei Njootli, Chandra Melting Tallow, Tania Willard and cinematographers Amy Kazymierchyk and Aaron Leon, took an excursion to Willard's BUSH Gallery in Secwépemculecw, the territory of the Secwépemc Nation, in December 2016 to trap rabbits. Rabbits, as Hill explained to me, were an everyday meat, a staple of Indigenous communities, and in these communities, rabbits were often procured by women. Rabbit trapping is slow, quiet, and relatively uneventful, yet its spoils are plentiful, sustaining, and a major contributor to food security. This, in contrast to what is often pictured with wild hunted game: a couple of guys running around with rifles hunting a giant moose. While the meat from a moose can go a long way to feeding a community, its representation as a means of securing

food is out of balance with that of the less valorized rabbit trapper. *Coney Island Baby* exists in a world where the rabbit trapper holds as much strength and power as the moose hunter.

Inasmuch as *Coney Island Baby* engages with mythologies and stereotypes around women and rabbits (or "bunnies" as a feminized diminutive name), it also resists that mythologizing. We watch four Indigenous women, full of strength and independence, working together, setting snares under the dark of night and making dinner. Unlike the Navarros in *La Libertad*, the women of *Coney Island Baby* haven't had the tradition of rabbit snaring passed down through matrilineal lines. Contrary to the settler stereotyping of Indigenous people as intrinsically knowing tasks like hunting, the Indigenous women here make no efforts to hide the fact that they aren't the most experienced in these pursuits. The women never actually catch their own rabbit, which is sort of besides the point. When we do finally see Frei Njootli pulling the hide from a rabbit it's on the farm of Don Arnouse, who demonstrates the proper way to kill and dress a rabbit. It's a rabbit from Arnouse's farm that we see being cooked for dinner, and Arnouse also supplies the rabbits that are being cooked into a stew served at the exhibition opening, and every Friday during the exhibition.

While all of these films embed a critique of the means of representation within their structures, nowhere is this critique more apparent, and more enmeshed in the film's content, than in the Berwick Street Collective's *Nightcleaners*. Made over a period of five years, completed in 1975, *Nightcleaners* began as a film about the labour organizing campaign of a group of women in London who cleaned office buildings after hours, when the nine to five work day was done. Berwick Street Collective was an amorphous and ever-shifting group of individuals who were all engaged, in one way or another, working at the intersection of filmmaking and political organizing. During the production of *Nightcleaners*, the collective consisted of Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott, and Humphry Trevelyan. It's worth noting that the time Kelly spent working on this film with the collective overlaps with the period during which she made *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979), her significant work exploring the invisible labour of motherhood.

Over the course of filming with the women workers, the Cleaner's Action Group, and the unions, the filmmakers came to see disconnects between their work as artists and the work of the organizing campaign which was so much more complex than they felt they could ever represent with their film. Eschewing the more

straightforward strategies of radical political cinema, the Collective spent five years making a film that turned inside on itself. The film is intercut with long scenes of black, footage is slowed down, sound is disconnected from its sync source. The resulting film is less a document of the labour campaign, and more a representation of the fraught, complicated nature of what it means to organize and work collectively. In his writing about the film, curator and writer Dan Kidner notes, "*Nightcleaners* can claim to be that rare thing, simultaneously a formal experiment and a political film. It is at once committed to a particular struggle and a reflection on what it means to make an image of struggle."

—Pablo de Ocampo

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWhs0NUSlm4&feature=youtu.be>
2. The film is sometimes referred to as *Nightcleaners Part One*, though a part two was never made. The collective shot material towards that film, but it eventually became the film '36 to '77.
3. From Dan Kidner's program notes for a screening at Light Industry, <http://www.lightindustry.org/nightcleaners>

## Artist Biographies

**Jeneen Frei Njootli** is a Vuntut Gwich'in artist and a founding member of the ReMatriate Collective. In her interdisciplinary practice she uses media such as performance, sound and textiles. Much of her work deconstructs the history of the materials she uses. She investigates their relationship to trade, ceremonial regalia, and the politics of First Nations art. Her work as a contemporary Indigenous artist has been recognized throughout Canada. In 2017, Njootli was longlisted as a nominee for the national Sobey Art Award and shortlisted for the Contemporary Art Society Vancouver Artist Prize. In 2016 she won the William and Meredith Saunderson Prize for Emerging Artists. She has completed multiple residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta. For her recent Media Arts Residency at the Western Front, Vancouver, British Columbia, she hosted a free workshop teaching participants how to create and update Wikipedia pages for Indigenous women artists. In 2017, Jeneen Frei Njootli earned her MFA from University of British Columbia as an uninvited guest on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, Sto:lo and Tsleil-Waututh territories.

**Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill** is a Metis artist and writer from Vancouver, BC, located on unceded Musqueam, Skwxwu7mesh, and Tsleil-Waututh territory. Hill's sculptures and installations perform as both a

material exploration of color and form and an enquiry into concepts of land, property, and economy. Her work has been exhibited at the Polygon Gallery, the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, Sunset Terrace, and Gallery Gachet in Vancouver; SBC galerie d'art contemporain in Montreal; STRIDE gallery in Calgary; SOMArts in San Francisco; and Get This! Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Tania Willard** (Secwepemc Nation) works within the shifting ideas of contemporary and traditional as it relates to cultural arts and production, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard has worked as a curator in residence with grunt gallery and Kamloops Art Gallery. Willard's curatorial work includes *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture*, a national touring exhibition first presented at Vancouver Art Gallery in 2011. Alongside Karen Duffek, she co-curated *Unceded Territories: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* at the Museum of Anthropology. As a practicing artist, Willard's recent project *BUSH* gallery collapses the boundary between artist and curator while creating space for experimental contemporary art practice in a land-based, outdoor environment outside of institutional spaces. *BUSH* gallery hosts an annual rez-idency on Willard's family land on Neskonalith Indian reserve, near Chase, BC, part of Secwepemculecw.

**Chandra Melting Tallow** is an interdisciplinary artist, musician and experimental filmmaker of mixed ancestry from Siksika Nation. They spearhead the music project Mourning Coup and have exhibited and performed across North America and Istanbul.

**Laura Huertas Millán** (1983, Bogotá, Colombia) is an artist and filmmaker living in Paris (France). Her films intertwining documentary and fiction circulate between contemporary art spaces and international cinema festivals, and have screened in venues such as the Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, Musée du Jeu de Paume, the Guggenheim Museum (NY), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Museo de Arte de Medellín (MAMM Colombia) and Instituto de Visión Gallery, among others. They have also been presented at the Toronto Film Festival (Wavelengths), the Film Society of Lincoln Center, the Torino Film Festival, FICUNAM, Curtas Vila do Conde, Winterthur, La Habana and the Flaherty Seminar. Her work has been awarded prizes in events such as the FIDMarseille festival, Doclisboa, Videobrasil, the Fronteira Film Festival, Bogota's Documentary Film Festival (MIDBO), at the Salon de Montrouge in France and Jeune Création Biennale. She holds a practice-based PhD. from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris and Ecole Normale Supérieure rue d'Ulm developed on "ethnographic fictions"; she was also a Sensory Ethnography Lab and a Harvard's Film Study Center fellow between 2014 and 2017.

**Flora M'mbugu-Schelling** is a filmmaker from Tanzania. She attended the Tanzanian School of Journalism in Dar es Salaam, and also studied and trained in Germany and France. Her documentary films include Kumekucha (From Sun Up – 1987), which won a gold medal at the New York International Film Festival, and Shida and Matatizo (1993); These Hands (1992), deriving its title from a poem she wrote, has received many awards, including the Joris Ivers Award and the Perugia Prize in Italy.

The **Berwick Street Film Collective** was formed in 1970, and produced a series of feature documentaries until around 1980. The work of the collective was based on the film making, both individual and collaborative, of its small group of members – Richard Mordaunt, Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, and Humphry Trevelyan. Broadly speaking, these films were seen as being part of the avant garde of British documentary film in the 1970s.

## List of Works

### 1. *(After) The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1991)*

Jeneen Frei Njootli, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Amy Kazymierchyk, Chandra Melting Tallow, Tania Willard

photo credit: Aaron Leon

Polaroid, 2017.

### 2. *untitled*

Jeneen Frei Njootli, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Chandra Melting Tallow, Tania Willard  
felt pen on paper, 2016.

### 3. *Coney Island Baby*

Jeneen Frei Njootli, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Chandra Melting Tallow, Tania Willard  
digital video, 2018.

12 minutes

### 4. *La Libertad*

Laura Huertas Millán  
digital video, 2017.

30 minutes

Screening April 4 and 14 in the  
Grand Luxe Hall

### 5. *These Hands*

Flora M'mbugu-Schelling

16mm film, 1992.

45 minutes

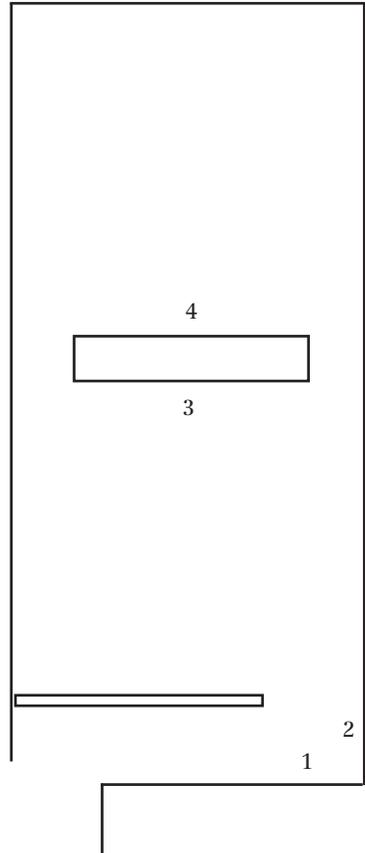
### 6. *Nightcleaners*

Berwick Street Collective

16mm film (transferred to digital video),

1975.

90 minutes



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