

Wood Land School: A Brief Report

by Jonah Gray

Over a weekend this past March, a cadre of artists, art historians, critics and curators from across Canada and the US converged at the Or Gallery in Vancouver to consider current "directions in Indigenous contemporary art" from a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. The occasion was a symposium entitled Wood Land School: Critical Anthology organized by artist Duane Linklater, in conjunction with the Or and Simon Fraser University Galleries, in anticipation of a print volume of the same name to be released later this year.¹ Like earlier symposia at artist-run centres in Vancouver that became books, *Vancouver Anthology* (1991) and *Vancouver Art and Economics* (2007), Wood Land School's proceedings engaged exhibition histories and artistic strategies, and critiqued both material and discursive institutions. While there was no explicitly stated theme beyond Indigenous contemporary art, the notion of refusal proved to be a shared concern across the board, even if it was taken in radically divergent ways. Throughout the presentations, refusal entailed, variously: a rejection of the role of Native informant for an art world structured by Eurocentric/settler desires; a strategic negation of stable meaning to hold open a space for an inclusive aesthetic reflection; and a rejection of prescriptive performances of Indigeneity.

If refusal is taken to encompass, for example, both a call to withdraw certain forms of expression to Indigenous-only spaces and a negation of traditional categories that seeks instead "to find the Indigenous where it is not," how useful can the term really be? Perhaps most importantly, it helps situate the oscillatory, responsive context in which the presenters uniformly understand Indigenous contemporary art to function. In particular, it highlights

the uneven power relations among which Indigenous contemporary art emerges and is always imbricated. Because Indigenous contemporary art, like other forms of art identified with minority or subaltern groups, is usually constructed in relation to a Eurocentric mainstream, the decision to refuse is therefore the strongest possible agency the circumstance allows. Faced with an overwhelming force of othering by the simple choice to take part in contemporary art in the first place, refusal – however this takes shape – can be the Indigenous artist and critic's surest advantage.

During his talk, artist Raymond Boisjoly invoked the Darby English book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007). In the introduction, English argues that David Hammons resists "prefab readings" of his work in terms of black experience by making art about the very existence of "black art" as a discursive category.² The idea of a prefab reading – that an audience's assumptions about an artist's identity overdetermine the reception of their work – gives a temporal scope to the back and forth to which Indigenous art is subject: such assumptions always precede the emergence of the work and artists have little recourse but to respond to this situation. This observation provides an insight into the constant vigilance and anticipation required of those artists who strive to avoid having their work circumscribed in this way. It is to the crux of this situation – where politics, aesthetics, identity and representation intersect – to which the broader Wood Land School project is addressed.

Critical Anthology was the sixth iteration of Wood Land School that Linklater has staged since its inception in 2011, when he first curated a modest group exhibition in his studio

Critical inquiry into the ideological structures of the museum and the gallery must be re-opened. Institutional critique is not a finished business. The efforts of Hopkins — who, incidentally, is already deploying her critical acumen on a much larger scale as a curator for the upcoming Documenta — and Park, among many others, are proof to this effect; as are unique Indigenous-initiated projects such as BUSH Gallery, Wood Land School and the recent series of exhibitions *č̓ama?əm: the city before the city*. The latter was held at multiple institutions around Vancouver in 2016 with the lofty goal of rearticulating a space beyond the site of the exhibition itself: that of a Musqueam village that occupied part of what is now Vancouver about 5,000 years earlier. The portion of *č̓ama?əm* that took place at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, which was curated by Jordan Wilson and Susan Rowley, enacted a complete refusal to display Indigenous belongings stolen from the site of the ancient village. Instead, it focused on first person accounts of living Musqueam people who voiced their own stories and views regarding their ancestral territory.

While refusal may hint at links between disparate topics and approaches, however, it should not be understood to paper over real differences, especially since it essentially signals a disagreement or withdrawal rather than an implicit consensus. The issues of authority and authenticity are important test cases in this respect. *When does speaking as, with or to Indigeneity or Indigenous issues become appropriative and malicious? How can the needs for sovereignty and self-determination be affirmed at the same time as the artistic freedom to pursue forms of aesthetic autonomy (or at least to comment on the potential for autonomy)?* Through the range of positions and voices it highlighted, the Wood Land School demonstrated that these fraught questions will likely remain in a state of perpetual contestation.

Jonah Grey is an independent curator and writer. Recent projects include "Post-Studio Visit," a podcast of artist interviews, and "Curating the Self," a speaker series, both through Or Gallery, Vancouver. He is currently a PhD student in art history at UC San Diego.

Endnotes

- 1 Full disclosure: I was Curator of Discursive Projects at Or Gallery at the time of the symposium. Although I was not involved in originating the project, I worked in a facilitating role in the leadup to and during the event. This fact, along with my own settler background, positions me as a strange combination of insider and outsider, which made me question how and even if I should write this account. Ultimately, however, I have opted to respond in my own way to the many calls made at the symposium for a broader critical engagement with Indigenous contemporary art, while acknowledging my peculiar vantage point upon the proceedings.
- 2 I return to this quote later. It is from Raymond Boisjoly's "Questions without Answers: Needs, Justifications, Explanations, Meaning" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 12, 2016).
- 3 Boisjoly used the term "pre-thermalization" to designate the same kind of "prefab readings" that English argues elide the inherent openness of Harmons' work and belies the ultimately discursive character of racial blackness. Darby English, "Introduction," in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007) 2.
- 4 Idle No More is a grassroots political movement founded in 2012 to advocate for Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous rights and respect for treaties that has used social media and the hashtag #IdleNoMore to coordinate a series of teach-ins, rallies and protests over the ensuing years. Spence's hunger strike was one of the earliest political actions associated with the movement. On December 11, 2012, she began a liquid diet to call attention to the dire health and housing conditions in Attawapisket and to First Nations issues more broadly.
- 5 Duane Linklater, "Introductory Remarks" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 11, 2016).
- 6 Linklater cited Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Edward S. Curtis' *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914), and Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* (1961) as key examples of films complicit in the dissemination of such reductive representations.
- 7 David Garneau, "Can I Get a Witness? Indigenous, Art, Criticism" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 12, 2016).
- 8 This closely mirrors the argument of anthropologist Audra Simpson. Her notion of "ethnographic refusal" situates ethnographic writing as inherently bound up with legal jurisdiction and authority. With this in mind, she favours resisting the colonizing, disciplinary "need" of anthropology to know everything about its objects of study by refusing to tell all in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 9 While turions specifically addressed the version of this work that was installed at Mercer Union, it has also been shown with different titles in slightly different iterations at Esker Foundation in Calgary and at Artspeak in Vancouver.
- 10 The TRC was established as part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement in 1998 and builds on the model set by a similar commission in South Africa that arose in the aftermath of Apartheid. The TRC has a mandate to find out the truth about what happened at the government-funded, church-run schools, to inform all Canadians about its findings and to initiate a process of healing and reconciliation. Over more than 100 years, more than 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were brought to these schools in an effort to systematically "kill the Indian in the child" by eliminating parental involvement in virtually all aspects of the children's upbringing.
- 11 cheyanne turions, "From Where Do You Speak?: Locating the Possibility of Decolonization in Krista Belle Stewart's 'Seraphine Seraphine'" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 12, 2016).
- 12 Candice Hopkins, "Outside the Margins and Inside the Institution" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 13, 2016).
- 13 Sarah Millroy, "Are We Past the Age of an Aboriginal Art Show?," *The Globe and Mail*, April 21, 2009, sec. *Vision Arts Review*, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/aboriginal-art-show-riddled-with-dilemmas/article4211394/>
- 14 Linklater made this observation in the question period following Candice Hopkins' talk.
- 15 For a more in-depth unpacking of these ideas, see Marcia Crosby, "Lines, Lineage and Lies, or Borders, Boundaries and Bullshit," in *Notions in Urban Landscapes* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1997); and Jimmie Durham, Nikos Papastergiadis, and Laura Turney, *On Becoming Authentic: Interview with Jimmie Durham* (Cambridge, UK: Prickly Pear Press, 1996).
- 16 Linklater.
- 17 "Author Joseph Boyden's Shape-Shifting Indigenous Identity," *APTN National News*, December 23, 2016, <http://aptn.ca/news/2016/12/23/author-joseph-boyden-shape-shifting-indigenous-identity/>
- 18 Robert Jago argues that the issue is not Boyden's "blood" but rather that his claims to Indigeneity — which have changed over time — aren't backed up by affiliation with a particular Indigenous community in "The Boyden Controversy Is Not about Bloodline," [https://thewalrus.ca/the-boyden-controversy-is-not-about-bloodline/](http://thewalrus.ca/https://thewalrus.ca/the-boyden-controversy-is-not-about-bloodline/); likewise, Richard William Hill has made some relevant comments about the slippery slope of policing identity in "Art by Indigenous Artists, or Art about Indigenous Issues?," *Canadian Art*, <http://canadianart.ca/features/art-by-indigenous-artists-or-art-about-indigenous-issues/>.
- 19 Boisjoly.
- 20 Richard William Hill, "Closing Remarks" (Talk, Wood Land School: Critical Anthology, Or Gallery, Vancouver, March 13, 2016).
- 21 Liz Perk identified our present moment as post-9/11, post-2008 crash, post-Occupy, to which I would add post-Idle No More, post-TRC and post-Standing Rock.