

#callresponse opening night

Laura Mars

On the 28th of October, 2016, I attended the opening night of the #callresponse exhibit at grunt gallery. The following is my account of the opening evening, which began for me in the late afternoon with a performance by Ursula Johnson.

The sun was out in the tiny triangle park behind the gallery. I found myself here, in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, gazing upward at a maze of condos. From above, residents idly observed us from their balconies, going to and fro, walking their dogs. We gathered in this stretch of park preemptively; the performance was running late. The setting sun and patch of green set a strange tone to the beginning of the night, the miniscule park a temporary oasis from the cemented life of colonial capitalism that raged around us. The rock I sat upon became a close friend, and the trees, our companions, shielded us from the wind and the steadily declining temperature of a fall evening in Vancouver. There were three microphones waiting for three performers: Ursula Johnson, a multidisciplinary Mi'kmaq artist, was the central artist staging the 'call' portion of the #callresponse project. T'uy'tanat-Cease Wyss, of Skwxwu7mesh, Sto:Lo, Hawaiian, and Swiss ancestry was her primary respondent, accompanied by Cassandra Smith, a woman of Tsleil-Waututh and Kwakwaka'wakw descent.

Under the light of the sunset, Ursula told us the story of her project, *Ketapekiaq Maqamikew: The Land Sings*, from its origins in Scotland, where she had spent time doing an artist residency a few years ago. While abroad, she was struck by the lack of wilderness in that part of the world, the absence of animals and trees. Investigating the history of the land, she learned of the Norse and the Picts, people who had lived on that land millennia ago. She described the resulting bare land as a "trauma of human hand," showing the results of colonization as it similarly occurs in alternate times and topographies—land scarred by development and industrialization. The project borne of these observations and conversations with locals was something along the lines of 'Map As Medium'—the topography of the landscape and its rolling hills translated onto a graph. The dots were then connected with lines, resembling a '.wav' file, and made into a song.

Johnson carried this project through in Cape Breton, Toronto, and now with Wyss and Smith on traditional territories and urban landscape. She put forth the notion that the singing of songs can be a gesture to the land, which stuck with me for the remainder of the night as a critical insight and definitive notion of performance that actualizes and enlivens this art form into the theatre of gesture, culture, and protocol. Indeed, Johnson emphasized the importance of protocol in this collaboration, which happened at the intersection of Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories and resulted in an intersection of sound, music, language, and responsibility. The words of the resulting song were not words from one single Indigenous language but combinations of vocables and emotional expression from the various Indigenous languages of the collaborators. The song, introduced by Cease Wyss, was titled "Hummingbird, butterfly, and bee." We listened to it for hours and hours. The performers moved their bodies about, varied their volume and their tone, drumming in the direction of ground, tree, and sky interchangeably. It was cold while we sat. The persistence of the audience and the performers alike was art itself - with many observers joining their song, tapping along with their feet.

After the performance we collected at the gallery for the opening of the exhibit. Cecilia Point from Musqueam introduced a welcome song by the late Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. Point and Wyss then turned to Smith, who led the song. The crowd teetered through the small gallery, wine-in-hand, all of us in conversation with the familiar faces we found in the space. I was mesmerized by what was on display, especially the collaboration between Métis artist Christi Belcourt and Anishnaabe storyteller Isaac Murdoch, *Reconciliation with the Land and Waters*, a painting on buffalo hide strung onto a frame, leant against the wall.

After a little while we migrated west a few blocks in a leisurely fashion. Night had fallen. A fire was waiting at the Native Education College as we sat, among the first to arrive. People filtered in, all of us in anticipation of the legendary throat-singing and performance of Tanya Tagaq. The lights dimmed and together we viewed the ‘call’ piece created for the exhibit, Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory’s film *Timiga Nunalu, Sikulu (My Body, The Land, and The Ice)*. The film was visually stunning, an expansive landscape of ice and land, the clothed and unclothed body of Williamson-Bathory featured as belonging to and of the land itself, defiantly reclined, her face painted in a traditional Greenlandic *uaajeerneg* mask.

The film ended and Tagaq and Williamson-Bathory appeared in front of us. Their comfort, friendship, and love of one another was made tangible in their subsequent banter. Their preamble settled us into the intimate experience of the performance we were about to witness. The experience of the audience was intimate too, wedged against and between each other in an attempt to fit every participant into the room. Propped up against other bodies, I sat in eager observation of the performance—Tagaq’s ‘response’ to the film. Softly at first, Tagaq’s voice filled the room, always with the unfailing intensity that pushed against the boundaries of the room and those within it. The audience’s role was not passive—though maybe it never is. We were called into the performance, our nervousness and anticipation a dominant feature. The intensity built. Tagaq’s vocals framed Williamson-Bathory as she began her masked transformation, the same *uaajeerneg* facepaint that was featured in the video.

The performance’s physicality increased. Williamson-Bathory began moving through the room, enacting the *uaajeerneg* Greenlandic masked dance. It struck me immediately as holding both darkness and humour, specifically in its mobilization of sexuality. Along with Tagaq’s improvised vocals, Williamson-Bathory threw herself into the audience, who were both astonished and amused, as she brought certain viewers into her act at random. I felt the tension in the room rise, some in discomfort and others in hysterics. I was of the latter party but perhaps this is because I narrowly missed being brought into the sexualized interactions she was performing. I was stunned by the intensity and hilarity of the moment—neither stripping the other of its affect but mingling together and shocking us appropriately into an observation of our own socialization and aversion to sexual energy. It felt very much like a decolonization of sexuality, which Christian colonial society so often disappears into the private. Here, sexuality was constructed as visceral, vigorously public, and generally a method of bringing us to laughter. In her interview with the Broken Boxes Podcast, Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory states:

“The physicality of the dance is very much keeping yourself grounded...low to the ground...the connection that you’re wanting to re-emphasize. And it’s a grease-paint mask, so you hide behind this dark and red greasy stuff. It’s a very sweaty experience because you’re crouched down so low and you’re covered in all this grease. And the dancers, we distend our

cheeks with a stick or balls or something like that. And that's to symbolize testicles, actually, streaks of red to symbolize vulva. That distention of the face really does change you into a non-human character because nobody has cheeks like that. It is freeing and alienating and exploratory and purposeful all at the same time" (Broken Boxes Podcast, "Interview with Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory," 7:50).

Due to the legacy of oppressive colonization that exists in many parts of the world, Williamson-Bathory also acknowledges that Indigenous people will only own their stories if "we tell them ourselves" (10:17). This night of performances and ensuing exhibition was an illustration of her point for myself as a settler viewer, an immensely powerful response to the present colonial context that showcases the brilliance, love, passion, anger, and resilience of Indigenous women artists. Without hesitation, the opening night for *#callresponse* was one of the most powerful nights of art and performance I have witnessed in my time in this city. And the ensuing exhibit, too, is a must-see.

References:

Broken Boxes Podcast Episode 46: "Interview with Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory." April 2016.

<http://www.brokenboxespodcast.com/podcast/2016/4/15/episode-46-interview-with-laakkuluk-williamson-bathory>

BIO

Laura Mars is writer interested in women's cultural production, anti-capitalism, diaspora, nostalgia, and readership. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in First Nations and Indigenous Studies and Women's and Gender Studies from the University of British Columbia. Originally from former Yugoslavia, Laura spent most of her life on unceded Coast Salish territory. She currently lives in Serbia.

