

Amplifying Presence

Devora Neumark

Number 127, Winter 2021

Sortir
Come Out

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/95149ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Neumark, D. (2021). Amplifying Presence. *Espace*, (127), 66–75.

AMPLIFYING PRESENCE

Devora Neumark

The COVID-19 pandemic and surge of protests, vigils and healing walks demanding systematic–anti-racist and decolonial–change in the wake police killings of BIPOC has lent an urgency to the question of whose voices are amplified in public art. In a recent keynote address during a public art summit, acclaimed Chinese–Canadian artist and educator Ken Lum expressed how COVID-19 has brought to the surface the racism, injustice, and profound inequity that is currently endemic to our society.

Taking a page from Jan Cohen-Cruz’s introduction to her edited volume *Radical Street Performance*—in which Cohen-Cruz identifies a “pervasive pattern [in] the persistence of street performance in periods of social flux—either leading up to, during or just after a shift in the status quo”,¹ Stimson and Sholette declare:

If we look back historically, collectives tend to emerge during periods of crisis, in moments of social upheaval and political uncertainty. Such crises often force reappraisals of conditions of production, re-evaluation of the nature of artistic work, and a reconfiguration of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social and political institutions.²

Such a crisis-invoked reappraisal and reconfiguration are both currently underway; and Cohen-Cruz’s contention that: “When one needs most to disturb the peace, street performance creates visions of what society might be, and arguments against what it is” (1998: 6) is an appropriate introduction to the conversations I had with Kim Anderson, Melissa Mollen Dupuis, Erik Escobar, Kamissa Ma Koïta, Leslie Komori, Parris Lane, Adriana Miranda and Rodrigo Gontijo, Nadia Myre, and Tiffany Shaw-Collinge between 28 June and 25 July 2020. Given the ways that public space is being reconsidered on account of the COVID-19-related restrictions and the ongoing efforts of thousands upon thousands of people taking to the streets to demand systematic–anti-racist and decolonial–change, what these artists, curators and cultural workers have to say is both timely and cogent. Each conversation began with the following prompt: “How might public art look, sound, and feel like if BIPOC and other racialized artists, curators and cultural workers were equitably represented in public art; and how might this amplification of presence contribute to social justice and an equity-based social transformation?” Several thematic threads emerged including land, symbolism and materiality, the tension between history and innovation, the role of social media, and the importance of non-transactional relationships and collaboration. What follows are very short excerpts from these conversations.

Currently living in Iqaluit, **Devora Neumark**, PhD is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher and educator. She is also a Yale School of Public Health-certified Climate Change Adaptation Practitioner and a founding member of the Nunavut Black History Society’s Black Lives Matter Organizing Committee. Neumark is developing two new bodies of related artwork: one engages wellness and the cultivation of joy as radical practice; the other is focused on environmental trauma and mainstreaming climate justice.

1. Jan Cohen-Cruz (ed.), *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 6.

2. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (eds.), *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 13.



Kim Anderson & Lianne Leddy, Brittany Luby,
Kika'ige Historical Society, "Tabling 150," 2017.
Photo: Tenille Campbell/Sweetmoon Photography.

KIM

– I try and create spaces of radical relationality wherever I am, to give hope and spark to young people. Art is a big part of that process, as are social relations, rematriation, and land-based learning. Kika'ige Historical Society has created three performance pieces to date responding to the Indigenous/settler space issue. So much of colonization is the erasure of indigeneity; with these live events we got to dress up and put ourselves out there, so everyone sees that we are here. As historians, the three of us in the Society are engaging with history and the future through a presencing on the land.

We hope that our new reconciliation project will be more permanent: we have a site in the university's arboretum, where we intend to build a granny's cabin. In addition to that, we'll be putting up a sacred fire. The performances were a way of breaking out of the silo effect that is all too frequent with Indigenous spaces. Sometimes the only place we have on campuses are the Native Students' Centres; we need to have more. This granny's cabin is part of the effort to grow these spaces like an underground vine that engages people in social and environmental justice; a place to honour social relations and the natural world. If we want to actually do decolonizing and transforming, beyond paying lip service to the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it has to involve land somehow and also native self-determined land use. The attitude all too often is that it's too threatening to let Indians be in control of land. So, what would happen if you gave a bunch of Indians some land on the campus, really gave it to them, and let them go about their own healing journey? We have to be allowed to be left alone to do the work; others may not always be invited. With this project we can create a home space for native students, researchers and artists: a place to really nurture them.

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DR. KIM ANDERSON IS METIS PUBLIC ARTIST, WRITER AND SCHOLAR. SHE HOLDS A CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN INDIGENOUS RELATIONSHIPS AND IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY RELATIONS AND APPLIED NUTRITION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH.



Melissa Mollen Dupuis, *Artistic*, 2007. Montréal, QC.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist and DARE-DARE.

MELISSA

– It's only since social media has exploded that Indigenous, Black and other racialized art projects are more widely known. We can now bypass institutions through Pinterest, FB, YouTube and especially Instagram, where there's a new conversation happening. Institutions don't like to be upstaged, but the social media boom has opened new spaces and so BIPOC public art is alive now in innovative and powerful pathways. I would like to see more of this diversity in museums and schools; this all takes money and it's all about power. There's a big problem when the institutions point to Indigenous and BIPOC artwork and say, "Oh, that's already been done." But, that's never said about Eurocentric art. I want to see variety! I want to see whales represented in different ways and not be constrained by the Indigenous label.

The invisibility of Indigenous cultural history means that we don't have the same historical paradigms; art is a way to heal that gap. We can now begin to create common threads as we move forward, but this is not without its challenge. It can be very stressful and frightening for some artists, because by creating a common thread, we risk being absorbed into this commonality. For 500 years, attempts have been made to absorb us; so, we have to avoid even this "friendly" common thread. We can't lose sight of individuality and we need to stay aware of the reparation process that this work entails. This is an exciting time to think about what public art might look like in 20 years: what's coming may be a lot of hybrid projects that could be seen as increasing the fragility of Indigenous history and art or, alternately, as expanding what's possible.

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AS AN INNU FROM EKUANITSHIT, MELISSA MOLLEN DUPUIS HAS CREATED PUBLIC PERFORMANCES ABOUT INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND LAND. SHE IS THE CO-ORGANIZER FOR QUÉBEC'S IDLE NO MORE MOVEMENT, A CHRONICLER WITH RADIO-CANADA, AND RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DAVID SUZUKI FOUNDATION'S BOREAL CAMPAIGN.



Erik Escobar, March, 2020. Helena, MT.
Photo: Stephen Seder.

ERIK

– I think the publicness of comedy is changing. Before, with cable TV and a major comedy club in every town, there was only one type of comedy out there: white, male, and middle class. Now you watch online specials from the Philippines, Mexico, Canada, South Africa, wherever; and the comic may be trans, queer, Black, or all of the above. This is exciting for comics and audiences. We're no longer limited to the same 40-something, white dudes, with the same haircut. The more you diversify the performers, the more you end up diversifying the audience, and that creates a ripple effect. When audiences see people who they identify with, it gives them confidence and a sense of empowerment to speak openly about their experiences; and, when audiences diversify, it challenges comics to develop material that speaks to wider audiences.

There are two sides to the question about how comedy is functioning during the pandemic. When things are going wrong and injustices are happening, stand-up can address these really big issues and has the potential to open minds. Comedy, however, is also about total distraction: you can watch a show and temporarily forget about the fact that the person you are living with is high risk, street protests, or your job loss. With COVID-19, it's easy to think that there's no public comedy happening when cafes and bars are all shut down, but that's only because we think of public as a physical space. I'm curious about the virtual space that comedy is now taking up, like the open Zoom events with upwards of 100 and 200 people. This new virtual public is becoming the norm and this norm is offering a way more diverse performance line up than in the physical-realm public.



STAND-UP COMEDIAN ERIK ESCOBAR CAN BE SEEN ON NBC'S LAST COMIC STANDING AND BUZZFEED. HE RECENTLY RELEASED A TED TALK ON "HOW TO LIVE A MORE FULFILLING LIFE THROUGH HUMOR." ERIK HOLDS AN MFA IN INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS FROM GODDARD COLLEGE AND LIVES IN LOS ANGELES, CA.



Kamissa Ma Koïta, *Dissonance cognitive/Cognitive Dissonance*, 2018. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and DARE-DARE.

KAMISSA

– The representation of more racialized artists would highlight the importance of people who are currently marginalized and would provide new perspectives. In representing a wider array of people, individuals become more human; they get to be seen outside of the tiny boxes that society has put them in. While there are more marginalized people showing in big museums, the institutions are still pretty white and colonial. So, it's not just about continuing to add more diverse artists; the structures have to change as well. What's happening now feels like a new wave of activism, a political movement moving at hyper-speed, through social media and even on the dark net. There's a lot of potential for decolonization in these channels; there's an increased real-time access to information. This can act as a security that we so desperately need, especially if we think about all the recent murders of Black people by people in authority. Access to cameras and uploading the digital files is really important now; it's our protection, at least to some extent.

I get the impression that, as Black and racialized artists, we are confined by the need to constantly denounce racism and systems of oppression: I often feel like a slave to this process. Thinking about what public art would be like if we really achieved equity: it's a fantasy for the end of my career perhaps. I would like to design a park in Montréal North, for all the children, including our inner children as adults; a reprieve—through playfulness—from the experience of daily violence, particularly living in a brown, Black and/or trans body. Playfulness can provide the opportunity to gain more agency and power. It can also help create the conditions for those who have been living with privilege to move beyond guilt and take up social justice and equity action without the inhibition and restraint that usually goes along with that type of change.



KAMISSA MA KOÏTA A.K.A. LADX IS A TRANS-ACTIVIST AND AN AFRO-DESCENDANT OF MALIAN ORIGIN. HE GREW UP IN MONTRÉAL AND HOLDS A BA IN VISUAL AND MEDIA ARTS FROM UQAM (2015). IN 2018-2019, HIS PERFORMATIVE WORK WAS PRESENTED AT DARE-DARE, GALERIE DE L'UQAM, AND VIVA! ART ACTION.



Leslie Komori, *Shot of Scotch Ceilidh*, Russian Hall, Vancouver, March 4, 2018. Photo: Manto Artworks.

LESLIE

– A big part of my art is to process the intergenerational stuff that I inherited from my family’s camp experience. We were essentially put into jail for our ethnicity. I grew up sensing that I had to be very careful and obedient because camp could happen again. Taiko changed my self-silencing: I heal when I play loudly and take up space with my drumming and overcome my fear of being careful when I play. That energy seems to resonate with lots of people.

I’ve performed in well-known venues like the Roy Thomson Hall and the Orpheum Theatre; I’ve toured in Europe and the States, but now it’s the genuine connection to people that I find most important. The other day, I was performing for elders in a long-term care home. With COVID-19, so many elders in long-term care have been trapped and have died. This performance was so powerful and, I think, mutually beneficial. We played loud drums on the lawn and they stood up on their balconies and danced. At around the same time, my Taiko group took part in the Powell Street Festival telethon event to raise money in support of a community care initiative in Downtown Eastside (DTES). The festival simultaneously recognizes the historical significance for the Japanese settler community and the realities of the current residents. Some members of the Japanese community allow their class privilege and internalized colonialism to blind them to these current realities. The Powell Street Festival tries to mitigate that tension in conjunction with front-line organizations in the neighbourhood.

I’ve performed background music for rich white people while they eat dinner at conferences and conventions: being the ethnic fodder for rich white people is not something I want to do anymore. Performing for the seniors during the pandemic and supporting residents of the DTES is a triumph over COVID-19; a genuine and honest connection through music.

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LESLIE KOMORI IS A SANSEI DYKE TAIKO PLAYER WHO HAS PLAYED THE BIG JAPANESE DRUMS SINCE 1982. SHE IS CURRENTLY WITH ONIBANA TAIKO, A TRIO OF VETERAN HAGS WHO PLAY KICK ASS DRUMS EMPLOYING A FEMINIST PUNK AESTHETIC.



Parris Lane, Backyard Party Kings, 2019.
San Francisco, CA.
Photo: Ethan C. Anderson.

PARRIS

– The streets are raw; anything and everything goes. Although I’ve worked in television, radio and stage, going to the streets leaves me wide open; the vulnerability is real and often overwhelming. At the same time, due to the homeless people I meet, it has given me some of my greatest life experiences.

The wealthy see our colour first; then the music wins them over. At first, they question what they’re seeing and hearing. They need to find a reason why we are out on the streets performing, especially when we sound better than the \$400/ticket show they just saw. They often ask: “What are you doing out here?” Sometimes I answer, “because they still won’t hire us” but most of the time I say that we don’t play in bars because children wouldn’t be allowed to hear us. Other than the streets, there are few places where children can hear a live band for free and get to play with great instruments. The assumption that I must not be educated, articulate, or intelligent, or that I haven’t accomplished anything in life, just because of the colour of my skin is sickening. Unfortunately, I don’t believe it will ever change in the States.

I know professionals that wouldn’t be “caught dead” performing on the streets, but singing on the streets paid for my studio time and allowed me to explore my voice without limits in ways that I couldn’t do on stage. The freedom to create originals in the spur of the moment is something that most musicians only dream about. It’s also me exercising my First Amendment right. Performing with the Backyard Party Kings has given me courage and confidence; it’s part of healing and giving back. The early Black musicians took to the streets in New Orleans because white clubs wouldn’t let them play inside. I’m so proud to be part of a tradition of Black performers that has the resilience to survive and continues to manifest resistance to oppression.

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PBS EMMY-NOMINATED ACTRESS AND SINGER, PARRIS LANE HOLDS AN MFA IN INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS FROM GODDARD COLLEGE AND IS THE LEAD FEMALE VOCALIST AND ARCHIVIST FOR THE BACKYARD PARTY KINGS. SHE CREATED AND PRODUCED THE MUSICAL AUDIOBOOK ABELLA, ABOUT AN ENSLAVED GIRL/WOMAN EMBRACING HER UNIQUE VOICE.



Raul Zito, *NO SE VENDE*, 2018. Hybrid of photographic collage and acrylic painting. Central Wall Project, endorsed by UN MX. Central de Abastos - Mexico city. Photo: Raul Zito.

ADRIANA AND RODRIGO

– The worst thing that can happen in Brazil right now is silence. We live in a time of great social inequality, and with COVID-19 hitting so hard the social inequality has become even more evident. So, how can we think about and discuss this within the public art space and what exactly is “public” art given the increasing institutionalization of public space? We’ve invited 21 artists with different backgrounds to take part in the exhibition so that they can contribute different visions of future possibilities based on their understandings and lived experience of how we got here. Their work offers the possibility for the public to see the initiatives of the current right-wing government more clearly. With everyone attentive to COVID-19, Bolsonaro is approving measures to exploit the land at all cost; profiting just a select few. Indigenous peoples and others who live from the land, such as quilombolas and rural landless workers are once again those who suffer the most.

For some participants, such as Walimnai artist Denilson Baniwa, the emphasis is on systemic change: “As long as we occupy spaces that are based on Western thought, there will be no representation of our Indigenous bodies and what we could call our art. Equity in public art is not BIPOC artists performing to the same extent as non-BIPOC artists, but rather a question of power.” Baniwa and the other project participants are part of a Brazil-wide network of artists with whom we’ve worked before. Each part of Brazil has its own social issues; so, this is a chance to see how all these social issues are connected and to strengthen that network.



ADRIANA MIRANDA IS A VERSATILE ARTIST WHO'S WORKED WITH MANY MEDIUMS OVER THE YEARS. TOGETHER WITH INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST AND EDUCATOR RODRIGO GONTIJO, SHE IS CURATING A GROUP EXHIBITION MOTIVATED BY THE BRAZILIAN SOCIAL ISOLATION AND INJUSTICES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19.



Nadia Myre, *untitled (basket)*, 2019.
Photo: City of Ottawa/Ville d'Ottawa.

NADIA

– Reading public policy and action plans is both exhilarating and deeply unnerving. Montréal's 2005–2015 cultural policy brands the city as a cultural metropolis, with the focus on art, tourism, technology, and innovation. There are some inspiring passages about recognizing the value of cultural diversity; perhaps wrongly, I assume diversity to mean BIPOC. This is the tricky thing about policy language. What is apparent is that none of the calls to promote diversity, or make aboriginal presence more visible in the urban landscape, become pledges in Montréal's 2007–2017 Cultural Action Plan, or appear in the 2010 Public Art Policy Framework guide.

According to a September 1, 2020 article published in the *Journal de Montréal*, the Mayor estimated restoring the recently toppled Sir John A. MacDonald statue would cost around \$400,000, and that she's working on establishing a committee to analyze where to relocate, and how to properly contextualize, this controversial monument. In lieu of restoration, the Plante administration could create a temporary public art program that offers living wages for artists to “activate” the now empty space where the effigy stood. The city is missing an opportunity for bold and timely action to address real issues and give money to living artists, especially during the pandemic when projects are scarce and people are hurting for work. If, like me, you wonder why restoration is favoured, the answer lies in the Public Art Policy Framework.

At this time, at least to my knowledge, there are only a few public artworks made by Indigenous artists in the city, and a less-than-representational number of works made by artists of colour, begging several questions about access to and equity in the public commissioning process. Although living artists are highly valued; preserving, restoring, and promoting the existing collection is paramount. Reflecting on the 2019 forum hosted by Culture Montréal, Laurent Vernet poignantly writes about how institutions determine what will be celebrated. More than ever, it is crucial we work to shift the institutional plan.



INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST NADIA MYRE EXPLORES THE POLITICS OF BELONGING WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE. RECIPIENT OF THE 2014 SOBEY ART AWARD AND THE 2019 COMPAGNE DE L'ORDRE DES ARTS ET DES LETTRES DU QUÉBEC; HER WORK IS FOUND IN MANY PROMINENT COLLECTIONS.



Tiffany Shaw-Collinge, *kinistināw looking South West*, 2020. Aluminum and trespaa, variable dimensions. kinistināw Park, Edmonton, AB. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

TIFFANY

– I saw that people were trying to bolster Indigenous representation since the TRC, either because it's there on their "to do list" or because they really want to have a more nuanced conversation about land. Personally, I feel privileged, especially when I think about Black and Asian artists who are so rarely given opportunities. This is one of the reasons why I so loved Salvadorian artist Michelle Campos Castillo's work in which she hung plantains in the Belvedere Transit Station; it was such a contrast of colour within in a Scandinavian-looking structure. I believe people can see themselves in that artwork, which is what it is all about for me: art mirroring the public in all its diversity. I sometimes use Métis beaded work patterns as a way to remind people that they are valued and that this space is also for them. I think this reminder is important to celebrate de-prioritized voices. I also believe that youth don't see themselves in public art and end up thinking that their voices don't matter; but they matter a great deal!

Often, I think about my older brother when creating public artwork. We typically do not know where he is, so if I can create beautiful spaces where he can find rest, I'm hoping they will restore him and give him power and endurance to continue. I want these spaces to give him back his greater sense of purpose.

People are starting to listen to my voice more as a Métis architect and an artist, but truly I think the changes we need are much bigger than one voice, any one person: the spirit of the collective is much stronger. Within the Ociciwan Contemporary Art Collective we focus on building capacity for Indigenous artists in the city. I realize that my voice adds something to the continuum. That's why it matters; if representation is not there, then the collective lift is not there.

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TIFFANY SHAW-COLLINGE IS A MÉTIS ARTIST, CURATOR AND ARCHITECT BASED IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA. AMONG HER PUBLIC ART PROJECTS TIFFANY HAS PRODUCED SEVERAL TRANSITORY ARTWORKS AND IS A CORE MEMBER OF OCICIWAN CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTIVE.