

# Tanya Lukin Linklater

b. 1976, Kodiak, Alaska; lives and works in North Bay, Ontario



In 2017, Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Gwen lahtail, Sassa Linklater, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Lauree Pizzale, Keisha Stone, Iris Sutherland, Karen Sutherland, and Lorraine Sutherland, along with Omaskëko Cree knowledge keeper Jennifer Wabano, gathered in North Bay, Ontario, with the purpose of conversing through orality and movement. Lukin Linklater documented this gathering in footage that would result in her silent film *The treaty is in the body* (2017). The work centers on moments of intimacy and connection among the women and young girls as they converse, listen, dress, and dance.

Intimacy is depicted as a form of strengthening: a subtle transmission of care, knowledge, and solidarity that can occur through a multiplicity of simultaneous gestures between those present and those not. The central question in this gathering had to do with understandings of treaty, a contract that outlines the relationships between Indigenous people, their land, and the government. In Ontario, forty-six treaties and agreements have been put in place since 1781, and the record of honoring them is spotty. This inconsistent and often opaque relationship has been enacted over generations, and understanding it from an Indigenous and embodied perspective is durational. As a choreographer and artist, Lukin Linklater attempts to navigate the densities of these relationships and explores the Indigenous body as a site of transgenerational strength and cultural memory. In this deceptively simple work, the artist emphasizes the corporeal experience of treaty, as indicated through the title—the only linguistic reference to the film's content. As in Lukin Linklater's larger oeuvre, *The treaty is in the body* examines both how structures are embodied and the body's potential to exceed them. Through video, sculpture, and text works, the artist has continued to probe Indigenous women's spaces of knowledge and how they converse with dominant colonial practices.

Lukin Linklater does not insist on the legibility of this experience. What was spoken and felt in the gathering

in North Bay is unknown to anyone who did not participate, as recording of dialogue was not permitted, in accordance with cultural protocols that protect practices of knowledge transmission. The opacity of this gesture is not enacted in reciprocal relation to the colonial gaze; rather, it is an honoring of Indigenous knowledge. The breaks between frames fragment the visibility and temporality of the gathering into vistas. The women are shown conversing and listening to Wabano while burning sage. They look and gesture toward one another. The embodiment of treaty culminates in the film through the bodies of the youth dancers—Aubin-Malo, Sassa Linklater, and Stone—as they learn to express their understandings of treaty through movement. They move in relation to one another: interlocking arms, gesturing around each other's bodies, synchronizing their dancing, and drawing. The silence of the film makes each exchange potent; small, introspective acts such as looking at each other or hair braiding become heavy punctuations, emphasizing the weight of these intimate transmissions.

Through silence Lukin Linklater proposes a methodology of opacity that is both circumstantial and deliberate, in which the body is present but does not describe itself. The artist does not attempt, or intend, to demonstrate how treaty exists in the Indigenous body; rather, she embraces the protocol of silence while questioning the need for translation. When one adheres to colonial structures of knowing and canons of Western art, silence can easily be read as a position of lacking, as it assumes an inability to speak or translate. The colonized "other" is understood as a fixed and completely knowable subject who exists in relation to the West.<sup>1</sup> The assumption of the colonizer's mastery has obvious discursive limits, especially as it is fashioned from a perspective of distance, but as artist and professor David Garneau writes, this mind-set "is characterized by a drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit."<sup>2</sup> Garneau further notes that the



Untitled, 2016 (still). Single-channel video, silent, 11:04 min.

sites of resistance to dominant culture for the marginalized are found in the refusal of complete engagement, translation, and explanation. Keeping this in mind, one could argue that Lukin Linklater does not merely refuse translation but also mobilizes silence to eschew the instrumentalization of Indigenous knowledge in the colonial context.

In *The Aesthetics of Silence*, theorist Susan Sontag writes: "Silence is the furthest extension of [the] reluctance to communicate, that ambivalence about making contact with the audience which is a leading motif of modern art."<sup>1</sup> In addition to the political use of silence, within the Western art canon Sontag positions silence as an artistic refusal in which translatability or explanation is the central qualifier of a work's success. *The treaty is in the body* is twice removed from this sensibility—both in its literal silence (not just the removal of dialogue) and in its avoidance of a didactic presentation that addresses the viewer directly. Lukin Linklater instead distills the dialogue in and between

bodies, creating space for the methodology of silence used in the Cree gathering. Thus the film's opacity not only is protective of something closed and sacred but also enacts an anticolonial praxis.

#### Magdalyn Asimakis

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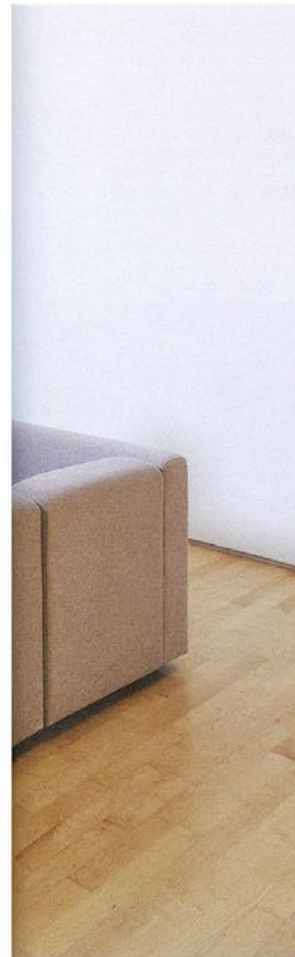
This text is adapted and expanded from an earlier version originally published in *Stay All Day: Tanya Lukin Linklater*, exh. cat. (Toronto: ma ma, 2018).

1. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66–84.
2. David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," *West Coast Line* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 29.
3. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969; repr., New York: Picador, 2002), 6.



Performance stills for *An amplification through many minds*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2019





Above: *The treaty is in the body*, 2017. Right: *Flat vessels made by the hands of our grandmothers that we discern and decipher as potential messages of repair*, 2019. Installation views at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2019