

WNOONDWAAMIN

WE HEAR THEM

wnoondwaamin / we hear them calls for the occupation of sound waves, exploring the capacity of these energies to access knowledge and memory. Together these artworks create a chorus and a conversation about the resonances that sound carries beyond the merely audible.

**AUTUMN CHACON
JENEEN FREI NJOOTLI
MELISSA GENERAL
SUZANNE MORRISSETTE
CURATED BY LISA MYERS**

**WHITE WATER GALLERY
NORTH BAY ON
17 JANUARY TO 04 MARCH 2017**

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CALGARY AB
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WNOONDWAAMIN

The energy of vibrations create sound. Although many frequencies resonate beyond our human aural register, they still flow through and over our bodies and exist silently around us.¹ Mingling and travelling, the route of sound waves we hear occupy spaces by drawing in listeners as active participants into the relational nature of voice, sound and song.² From the lyrics of one Anishinaabe song I learned the word “*noondwaa*.” The translation of this word infers not just hearing as the awareness of sound, but also listening as understanding meaning, which makes me think deeply about the reception and purpose of songs.³

The idea of listening brings to mind the important and iconic artwork by artist Rebecca Belmore, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991, 1992, 1996, 2008, 2014), which was made in response to the Kanien’kéha:ka (Mohawk) resistance to the construction of a golf course onto their land at Kanehsàtà:ke, Quebec in the summer of 1990.⁴ This artwork called for people to address the land by speaking into a handheld microphone to have their voices amplified through a large megaphone speaker. Belmore travelled across the country inviting people to speak through it. Most poignant of these public actions appears in a documentary by Métis filmmaker Marjorie Beaucage, *Speaking To Their Mother: Ayumee-Aawach Oomama-Mowan* (1992). The video documents Belmore with the megaphone for three days standing atop a hill overlooking the clear-cut area of the Wiggins Bay Blockade in Saskatchewan.⁵ People gathered to speak and listen. Elders and young people spoke nêhiyawêwin (Cree). Some played fiddle music to the land and to the clear-cut forest through the megaphone. After her first time speaking into the megaphone, Belmore described a sense of humility as her voice reverberated across the land, yet she also felt strong because, as she explained, “our people have lived here for so long, they’re in the ground.”⁶ Belmore’s work offers a framework for thinking about and discussing the work in this exhibition as we think of the voice as a transmission being received by the land.⁷ The reception of sound does not just reside in or end at the human ear.

wnoondwaamin / *we hear them* calls for the occupation of sound waves in exploring the capacity of these energies to access and be in conversation with human knowledge and memory.⁸ Each of the artists in this exhibition—Autumn Chacon, Jeneen Frei Njootli, Melissa General and Suzanne Morrissette—bring their voices to the transmission and reception of sound in performance, video and radio installation, revealing the nuanced meanings that sound carries.

Using low wattage radio transmission, Autumn Chacon’s in-gallery installation *Between our Mother’s Voice and Our Father’s Ear* (2016) transmits the sounds from the gallery and an audio collage of field recordings collected from divides—naturally occurring land barriers and borders imposed as governed spaces. The sounds that come from these politicized spaces gesture toward the tensions implicit in barriers that are built between nation states. In particular, I am thinking about the state borders administered across North America.

Chacon’s installation includes two radio transmitters and a receiver. A feather affixed with a contact microphone sends an almost silent signal through a power amp and compressor, and then through Chacon’s homemade radio transmitter. She explains that the transmission of vibrations picked up by the feather microphone, including the sound waves created by the other artworks in the exhibition, carries the sound of land before the existence of any city or town. The quiet sound from the feather infers an imagined place where no infrastructure harnesses electromagnetic waves. The second transmitter broadcasts a layered composition of field recordings through an outdoor antenna transmitting the subtle recordings of a white pine tree, a monarch caterpillar eating milkweed, rocks at Niagara Falls and the sound of picking mint. Chacon harvested the sounds by extending her recorder out to these beings, seeking to capture their quiet voices. Chacon also recorded more audible actions, such as her visit with the bison family living in a confined pasture at the High Park Zoo in Toronto, the sound of Niagara Falls, waves of the Pacific Ocean, beads bouncing off of a wooden table and she also incorporated

sound files from other artists in the exhibition. Signals from both transmitters are received in the gallery through the same frequency on the same radio and available to anyone within range who can tune in.

Although radio waves move through both physical and regulated obstructions, Chacon contends with saturated radio frequencies that require fine-tuning to successfully transmit and receive signals in urban centres. Synonymous with densely populated cityscapes, the radio spectrum can also be overloaded with radio broadcasts, Wi-Fi signals, cellular networks and more. The socio-political implications of regulating and selling radio waves, an invisible electromagnetic energy used everyday, can be likened to the division of land as a natural resource.⁹ Chacon’s radio artwork occupies and mobilizes radio waves as Indigenous space. This artistic strategy emerges from her experience with DIY electronics, community television and radio activism. As an installation, the artwork takes up the hardware and infrastructure of an unregulated micro-radio or pirate-radio station outfitted on a kitchen table. Pirate radio practices in Canada include First Nations’ assertions to the right to occupy the electromagnetic airwaves. For example, community members started Neskonlith Secwepmec Radio at 91.1 FM on the Neskonlith Reserve in British Columbia as an expression of their “right to make use of the electromagnetic spectrum to carry on traditions, language and culture.”¹⁰

Chacon’s work in non-commercial radio advocacy is a practice of bringing communities together, which has included working with the Prometheus Project based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. With this work, Chacon helped non-profit groups apply for free, low-wattage radio space. An important part of the work at the Prometheus Project is its potential for community organizing. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she currently lives, Chacon explains that the “[radio] audience will be very close to where content is generated and more able to organize within a close range around close-range issues. Listeners can also be exposed to news info that is relevant in the immediate area. Also, almost anyone can be a DJ.”¹¹ Such broadcasts circumvent and subvert the authoritative voices of

mainstream media.¹² During a conversation with Chacon about her work, she described her personal experience of how radio is a tool that can bring communities together and create opportunities for people to listen to each other.¹³

Indigenous people in Canada and across North America have largely been unheard by mainstream society and authorities of the state in their vociferous appeals to the police—for decades—about violence against Indigenous women, the need to address the ongoing interpersonal and structural repercussions of residential schooling, and racialized violence against Indigenous people. The murder of Colten Boushie, heard as gunshots across the prairies, is one recent example. Whether based in cities or rural communities, the lives of Indigenous people today exist under the spectre of colonization. Only when individual voices are amplified to the level of collective tragedies and atrocities are they heard by the state and the media. Transmission without reception leaves us with sound waves flowing over and through a material world with no landing place. The unreceived intention of words or sound fails to communicate, to create change or build relationships. Geographer Anja Kannigieser contends with the sonic power of the human voice. She explains that, “listeners actively contribute to the spaces that utterances compel.”¹⁴ Her analysis considers the power of voice and sound to create spaces of community, debate, protest and more. Gaining or finding voice creates a presence, be it political and/or social. In any situation, certain people are heard and others are silenced.

Earlier in this essay I posed the idea of entities, besides humans, as receiving sound. Jeneen Frei Njootli’s writing, in conjunction with her audio performance practice, poses similar questions. However, Frei Njootli’s analysis shifts from the human voice being the sounder to belongings, objects and places doing the sounding, questioning “who/what is the sounder and who/what is the receiver? Does there need to be one?”¹⁵ The sounding of a caribou antler, for instance, may reveal the connection, knowledge and sustenance that caribou have provided to her home community of Old Crow, Yukon.

Frei Njootli's performance *Herd* (2016) turns an ear to an installation of caribou antlers, power tools, physical labour, language, song and sounds. The performance takes place on a large backdrop of photo paper mounted on plywood. An amplifier, angle grinder, media player, effects pedal and cables become the tools and props of the performance. She addresses the antler with her voice, speaking words in Gwich'in and English. She applies an angle grinder to the antler's surface where contact microphones pick up sounds and vibrations. Flowing through effects pedals, these altered sounds resonate from an amplifier speaker travelling simultaneously into a listener's ears, the walls, the ceiling and the floor of the gallery. White dust floats in the air almost as a visualization of the sound waves, yet they are vulnerable, as all matter is, to gravity. The powder settles on the black surface of the performance floor. Her use of a sub-woofer speaker enhances audio wave effects and bodily responses, as low frequencies move and vibrate through our bodies. The immersive quality of her performances demand preparation and caution, calling for earplugs and dust masks to be handed out to the audience.

The antlers function as transmitters. Like an antenna emitting sounds, the antlers produce reverberations of caribou moving through the Yukon, across colonial borders and to their calving grounds in Northeastern Alaska. Antlers defend and guard the animal, and a dissonance resounds from the angle grinder touching its surface. Not merely a material, the antler represents a chain of relations. The caribou is a relative and provider for the Gwich'in people. Frei Njootli's work with materials such as antlers shows her knowledge of how to live and thrive in a place, something she calls bush theory.¹⁶

The remnants and traces of her performances relate to her skills and capabilities on the land, as well as in urban centres like Vancouver, where she currently resides. For example, her photographic work *I brought this here for you from home: performance for sarah* (2015) depicts a pile of feathers on a grassy area.¹⁷ Plucked from a duck, this trace of feathers indexes subsistence, knowledge and possibly

foretells someone's supper. This artwork was made for an ongoing collective project called *Bush Gallery* where the bush is a considered part of the audience. During her performances, she can be found wearing a respirator, using power tools, clicking on effects pedals and adjusting the volume of an amplifier, demonstrating her innovative approach to audio manipulation and sound performance, which also act as indicators of survival.

Similar to Frei Njootli's work, Melissa General's performance for video involves labour and endurance to access sounds from materials. Frei Njootli looks to antlers and General looks to bodies of water, where the materials and thus the sounds produced are connected to their home communities. From medicine baths to running rivers, General's water recordings are part of a deep study of her connection to place. During conversations with the artist, she explained that the experiences and memories from her home community at Six Nations of the Grand River, Ontario, has the ever-present sound of the Grand River in the background.

For this exhibition, the soundtrack for her new installation *Kehyá:ra's* (2016) departs from underwater recordings of the river in her previous work and shifts to the underwater sound of medicine baths. These baths involve the infusion of specific plant matter in bath water, emphasizing how land and water merge with bodily absorption. The hydro-recordings of the bath have a sonic quality that is evocative of science fiction space travel. The static sound of her body plunging into the water fades to stillness after which you hear intermittent washes of sustained swishing. Water tempers sound waves, rounding off sharp high-end frequencies. Dulled, slowed, resisted movement and changes in gravity encompass an underwater environment. Testing the limits of auditory perceptibility, subtle sounds emerge from the calm that calls for deep listening and time spent with the work.¹⁸

This aquatic composition creates a sensation of submersion that accompanies the video projection. The video opens with General entering the frame with her back to the camera, facing the flowing Grand River, and accentuating the horizon are

the horizontal bands of overcast sky, green treetops and the greyish rocky shoreline, bringing a visual symmetry and balance to the scene. She purposefully braids her hair and puts on a pair of moccasins before leaning down and picking up a large glass jar and walking into the water. With care, she manoeuvres over the rocky shore and river bottom. Once in the middle of the river she fills the jar with water and makes her way back to shore. Picking up another jar, she repeats these actions until multiple jars are filled and capped. General ends this collecting by precariously balancing all the jars in her arms. Finding her footing, she walks out of the camera frame. With every step on the rocky bottom of the river, where the water resists her movements, her walk increasingly becomes an endurance performance. Compelled and dedicated to this process, sound is the remaining testimony for this work.

The mason jars are from General's mother. Now contained and sealed, the water's appearance continues to change. I am interested in how General's performance and the resulting objects become documents of her connection to place and how knowledge is passed on through her mother and the river water. How does this work signify more than reinforcing Indigenous presence in terms of land use and land claims?

I look to language to provide some answers to these questions. The titles of General's artworks are often Kanyen'kéha (Mohawk) words with no translation. Haudenosaunee curator and scholar Deborah Doxtator describes that the Kanyen'kéha language infers a connection between land and people. For instance, she notes that the Kanyen'kéha word for "clan"—another way to identify oneself in relation to community—is "o'tara", which can translate to both clan and clay or land."¹⁹

The urgency of General's gathering actions in her performance suggest a sense of needing to retain and access personal and social histories based on Haudenosaunee cosmology, such as clan matriarchs and creation stories, which are all related to land and water. In this way, General creates multiple possibilities of transmission and reception in using the

Kanyen'kéha language and the sound of water. Doxtator explains the ever-present dilemma for a Mohawk woman maintaining a sense of cultural connection in a colonial context through what I call a Haudenosaunee matriarchal and feminist lens: "Iroquoian (Rotinonhsyonni) Women grapple with the uneasy question of how to think about a world where another culture's mind has super-imposed its own intellectual constructs on the landscape."²⁰ Implicit in this oppression is patriarchal hegemony, another source of tension between matriarchal societies in the context of colonialism.²¹

In her exhibition and essay "Nations in Urban Landscapes" Tsimshian-Haida art historian, curator and educator Marcia Crosby expands the discussion from the demarcated spaces of reserves into urban spaces. Crosby's approach provides a means of looking at the urban as Indigenous space. She argues, "aboriginal nationhood ... extends beyond the geo-political and economic boundaries drawn by contemporary aboriginal land dispute politics and its cultural corollaries of authenticity, origins and tradition."²² Crosby highlights the complexities of lived urban experiences and histories while interrupting perceptions of Indigenous cultural identities.

Suzanne Morrisette uses sound and imagery from urban wilderness scenes, yet disguises them by zooming in or framing the image to exclude the urban context. Her interactive installation for this exhibition emerged from a video work where Morrisette harvested the sound from the bottom of Lake Superior with DIY underwater contact microphones, which she used as the basis for her video, score for *the bottom of a lake* (2014). She continued this thread of inquiry by finding different ways to harvest sound in creating audio scores.²³ A new work for this exhibition called *one and the same* (2016) was made using MAX MSP software with Kinect hardware that uses small sensors to detect distance and movement. This interactive installation focuses on the subtle and often unnoticed sounds of landscapes, seemingly microcosmic sound and images, to reveal how even subtle human activity and land can intertwine.

Morrisette’s artwork presents two perspectives of an urban environment shrouded in the tenets of nature. One video depicts a close up of dry grass or reeds swaying in the wind. The other video is a long shot of a partially frozen bay on a sunny day, light reflecting off the ripples on the water and shimmering off the crystalline ice surface as accompanied by the sound of moving water. Although both are shot at the Leslie Street Spit in Toronto, east of the downtown waterfront, they both convey a sense of untouched nature so often revered in the grand narratives of Canada through the landscape studies of nineteenth and twentieth century painters. Choosing an urban location to shoot nature highlights how concepts of nature and wilderness are Western constructs. Geographer William Cronon discusses the construction of wilderness, including the early twentieth-century development of the national park services in the United States. He reveals the paradox and injustice of the removal of Indigenous people, having their use of lands deemed illegal, and the move to establish nature reserves and wilderness park lands.²⁴

Transmission and reception takes a different turn in Morrisette’s work as the interactive element makes participants the receiver and transmitter as they view (receive) and manipulate sound and imagery (transmit). Morrisette considers the resulting sound and image through their bodily movements as compositions authored by the participant. A delineated space is marked by a grid on the floor, recalling maps of cities or other kinds of land parceling such as settlements, developments, reserves or park land. As audiences move in front of the videos of nature scenes, their movement changes the speed or volume of the audio and image. Participants influence and control the composition of the artwork and the viewer responds to any changes their movement (input or transmission) creates. The reeds sway in the wind at a tempo that matches a viewers movement within the grid. Movement toward and away from the water scene increases and decreases the volume respectively. In creating these changes in the scene through the audience’s participation, a feedback loop of perception is created. The participant is no longer

distinct from the scene because their engaged body has become an engine for the shifting sound and imagery. In this way, Morrisette’s work highlights the influence we have moving through places and altering networks of relations.

wnoondwaamin | we hear them calls for the transmission and reception of sound waves in occupying the electromagnetic field. Sound reverberates, feeds back, distorts, phases and delays. These artists build up the capacity of sound energies to access community connections, knowledge and memories. Together these sound works create a chorus and a conversation about the resonances that sound carries in and beyond the audible. This exhibition is about listening and being heard, even when there seems to be nothing to hear. These works realize and build on the value of transmission and reception in transferring knowledge through generations, recalling how sound connects different times and spaces.

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Lisa Myers

- ¹ I’m thinking of silence as physically unattainable since sound exists in every context. Silence is subjective and can manifest as a moment of solitude or a shared moment of quiet. Authors on silence and listening include John Cage and Pauline Oliveros.
- ² Here I use sound, song and voice together, though I realize that language has specific implications within a nation state’s oppression of colonized people, and thus their languages. “*wnoondwaamin*” addresses the importance of the utterance and speaking of Anishinaabemowin to emphasize that language is integral to movements of resistance and the vitality of diverse Indigenous cultures.
- ³ Although there are other words in Anishinaabemowin that mean to listen, my understanding of “*noondwaa*” in this specific song also conveys the idea of listening.
- ⁴ See Kristin L. Dowell, *Sovereign Screens* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 12. No doubt the Oka crisis compelled strong voices among Indigenous artists but I argue that the politics and voices were already strong.
- ⁵ Video notes from Vtape, <http://www.vtape.org/video?vi=3131>.
- ⁶ See Marjorie Beaucage, “Speaking to Their Mother” at 13:26 on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/99999913>.
- ⁷ See Richard Hill, “*Speaking into Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*” in *No Visible Horizon*, ed. Peta Rake (Banff, Walter Phillips Gallery, 2016), 21-27. I found Hill’s reflection on speaking through the megaphone helpful to understand the power of words and voice in relation to this artwork.
- ⁸ *Chi miigwech* for a conversation with Anishinaabemowin speaker and teacher B. Jeff Monague of Chimnissing, Beausoleil First Nation, who helped me determine the title for this exhibition as *wnoondwamin | we hear them*.
- ⁹ See Honor Harger and José Luis de Vicente, “There, but Invisible: Exploring the Contours of *Invisible Fields*” in *Invisible Fields: Geography of Radio Waves*, ed. Jose Luis de Vicente (Barcelona, New York: Arts Santa Mònica, 2016), 12.
- ¹⁰ See Andrea Langlois, Ron Sakolsky and Marian van der Zon, *Islands of Resistance, Pirate Radio in Canada* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010), 71.
- ¹¹ Online interview with Autumn Chacon by Maren Tarro, “How to Get a Piece of the FM Dial” from the *Prometheus Radio Project*, <http://www.prometheusradio.org/how-get-piece-fm-dial-new-mexico-compass>.
- ¹² The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) regulates broadcasts and telecommunications in Canada.
- ¹³ Conveyed during a conversation with Autumn Chacon in Vancouver, July 21, 2016.

- ¹⁴ See Anja Kanngieser, “A sonic geography of voice: Towards an affective politics,” in *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 3 (2011), 344. Kanngieser reviews literature on voice, speaking and listening integral to creating relational space. I found Kanngieser’s analysis useful in thinking about transmission (speaking) and listening (reception). This article also thinks about the generative function of voice in activist, community and protest spaces.
- ¹⁵ Jeneen Frei Njootli, “Sovereignty’s Resonance: Singing, Sounding, Listening, Playing,” artist statement.
- ¹⁶ See Tarah Hogue, “pulling through,” in *Slip the Snare* (Belkin Gallery: UBC, 2016), 15. Hogue elaborates on the term “bush theory” used by Frei Njootli to describe the knowledge for survival in one’s ancestral territory. I think this also transfers to survival in urban centres.
- ¹⁷ This work was made for *Bush Gallery* established by a collective of Indigenous artists and curators called the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective.
- ¹⁸ See Douglas Khan, *Earth sound earth signal: Energies and earth magnitude in the arts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University Of California Press, 2013), 174-186. Musician and composer Pauline Oliveros first coined the phrase “deep listening” while improvising with two other musicians in a two-million gallon cistern with a 45-second reverberation time. She also developed the theory of a sonosphere, which takes into consideration energies in her listening and music, including electrical, magnetic, electromagnetic, geomagnetic and acoustical energies.
- ¹⁹ See Deborah Duxtator, “Godi’Nigoha’: The Women’s Mind and Seeing Through the Land” in *Godi’Nigoha’: The Women’s Mind* (Brantford, Ontario: Woodland Cultural Centre: 1997), 34.
- ²⁰ See Deborah Duxtator, “Godi’Nigoha’: The Women’s Mind and Seeing Through the Land.” 29.
- ²¹ There are many examples of how First Nations women are oppressed and silenced by colonial laws and legislation. For example, section 12 (1)(b) of the Indian Act eradicated Indian status of any women who married a non-Indian man, until 1985 when Bill C-31 amended the act to align with gender equity under Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- ²² See Marcia Crosby, “*Nations in Urban Landscapes*,” in *Nations in Urban Landscapes* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1997), 12.
- ²³ Suzanne Morrisette, artist statement, 2016.
- ²⁴ See William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” in *Uncommon Ground Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69-90.

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Herd

Jeneen Frei Njootli
2016

Performance remnants, including antler, subwoofer, plywood, photo-backdrop paper, angle grinder and sound



one and the same
Suzanne Morrissette
2016
Interactive installation with video and audio using MAX MSP software and Kinect hardware



Between our Mother's Voice and Our Father's Ear

Autumn Chacon

2016

Transmitters, feather, MP3 player, radio waves at 89.1 FM, field recordings



- Autumn Chacon's Playlist
89.1 FM
1. Paddy, oh! Sweet oh! Sweet Girl!
 2. Whang Whang
 3. My Heart is a Thousand Miles from Home
 4. Whang Whang
 5. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 6. Whang Whang
 7. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 8. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 9. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 10. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 11. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 12. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 13. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 14. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 15. Whang Whang Whang Whang
 16. Whang Whang Whang Whang



Kehyá:ra's
Melissa General
2016
video, audio
19:15

