

***Collective Acts***. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia. 4 September – 2 December 2018. Curated by Lorna Brown.

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*Collective Acts* is the third in a series of four exhibitions at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery that examines the legacies of 1970s feminism and the artistic and social movements that arose alongside and from it.<sup>1</sup> Like the series' previous two exhibitions, *Glut* and *Radial Change*, both *Collective Acts* and the artworks and projects it comprises were initiated by archival research performed by the curator, Lorna Brown, and the exhibition's participants. In this endeavour, the Belkin continues the archivally minded focus that has characterized its programming over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> *Collective Acts* treats archives as more than just sources to be mined for research. Rather, the exhibition proposes that archival materials that document moments of collective organization are tools to help

1 The exhibition is part of a research project and exhibition series curated by Lorna Brown called *Beginning with the Seventies*.

2 For example, the online archival project *Ruins in Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties*, <http://www.vancouverartinthesixties.com>.



FIGURE 1 Installation view, *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts* (4 September – 2 December 2018), at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. Source: Archival materials courtesy of the Chilliwack Museum and Archives and the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre. Photo: Rachel Topham.

envison collective acts in the present. The exhibition's capacious approach toward archives might productively contribute to current discussions in the field – both those about the archive's ability to effect social justice and those that push the limitations of archival methodology – especially as they relate to the goals of Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization.<sup>3</sup> In several of the projects in the exhibition, archival records, primarily from community archives, act as historical evidence, source material to be artistically modified or cited, or as resources to advance intergenerational knowledge transmission and to inspire

3 For recent discussions on the role of archives in social justice see, for instance, Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace, "Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation," *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 317–48; and Ricardo Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice," *Library Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2016): 25–42. For critical discussions of the limitations of archives and decolonization, see Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd, "Decolonial Sensibilities: Indigenous Research and Engaging with Archives in Contemporary Colonial Canada," in *Decolonising Archives* (n.p.: L'Internationale Books, 2016); and Dallas Hunt, "Nikikiwān: Contesting Settler Colonial Archives through Indigenous Oral History," *Canadian Literature* 230 (2016): 25–42.

and instigate artistic or social action. Other projects apply an archival impulse to materialize intangible “archives” that mainstream archival institutions have failed to collect or recognize.

Curator Jordan Wilson (Musqueam) presents an exhibition-within-an-exhibition about the Salish Weavers Guild comprised entirely of archival materials. This approach privileges the collectivity of the guild over the objects produced by it, notably differing from the emphases of two ambitious Salish weaving-focused exhibitions also recently held in Vancouver, which investigated weaving’s technical and philosophical grounds.<sup>4</sup> It also offers a counterpoint to the exhibition elsewhere in *Collective Acts* of weavings by guild members Adeline Lorenzetto (Shxw’ōwhámél), Anabel Stewart (Skwah), and Mary Peters (Seabird Island), by presenting documentary evidence of the administrative and affective work that went into the guild’s operation as an Indigenous co-operative association. As described in an exhibition didactic, the guild, a collective of individuals – mostly women – from First Nations communities in the Fraser Valley, was active from the 1960s to the early 1990s and was instrumental in revitalizing ancestral Salish wool weaving practices. The guild incorporated in 1971, stating in its constitution its commitment to Indigenous self-governance, specifically its aims to revitalize Salish weaving and to assist and guide other Indigenous people in cultural reclamation through traditional arts. Three vitrines each use textual, photographic, and audio-visual records on loan from the archives of the Chilliwack Museum and Archives, the UBC Museum of Anthropology, and the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre (a Stó:lō cultural centre that was initially the site of a residential school and hospital and was used in the 1970s by the Salish Weavers Guild as its shop and headquarters) to explore a different activity or important moment in the guild’s history. One features legal and organizational records – newsletters, meeting minutes, and a copy of the guild’s constitution – while another includes materials promoting the weavings and the weavers themselves. In the third vitrine, photographs depict Mary Peters at work on a significant weaving commission for Montreal’s Expo 67, as well as the results of this work. These visual materials are paired with a ledger that tracks the wool order for the Expo commission as maintained by Oliver Wells, a settler

4 The exhibitions were *The Fabric of Our Land: Salish Weaving* (gallery exhibition, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, 19 November 2017 – 15 April 2018), curated by Susan Rowley; and *Woven Work from Near Here* (gallery exhibition, grunt gallery, Vancouver, BC, 7 September – 20 October 2018), curated by Emily Hermant and T'ai Smith.



FIGURE 2 *Installation view, Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts (4 September –2 December 2018), at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. Source, left to right: Anabel Stewart Untitled (weaving), n.d., Collection of Marie Weeden; Mary Peters, Untitled (weaving), n.d., Courtesy of the Chilliwack Museum and Archives, 1984.018.001; Mary Peters, Untitled (weaving), n.d., Collection of the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre; Undocumented weaver (Salish Weavers Guild), Untitled (weaving), 1982, Collection of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 929/1; Mary Peters, Untitled (weaving), 1968, Courtesy of the Chilliwack Museum and Archives, 1987.031.001 a–b; and Adeline Lorenzetto, Untitled (weaving), 1950–1970, Courtesy of the Chilliwack Museum and Archives, 2016.070.002. Photo: Rachel Topham.*

farmer in the Fraser Valley, who supplied wool to the weavers and assisted them with promotion and management in the 1960s prior to their incorporation. Wilson's selection of materials shows that the successful cultural revitalization initiated by the guild resulted not only from the technical and cultural practice of weaving itself but also from the administrative activities that supported the economic agency of the co-op.

If the vitrines deploy archival materials fairly straightforwardly for their informational value and to highlight evidence of the guild's operation as an incorporated association, a more evocative organization of archival materials and reproductions, mounted on the gallery's walls, suggests the broader cultural activism



FIGURE 3 *Installation view, Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts (4 September – 2 December 2018), at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. Source, left to right: Dana Claxton in collaboration with Sean Griffin, Muckamuck Strike Then and Now, 2018; and Dana Claxton and Jeneen Frei Njootli, The Sew In, 2018, Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Rachel Topham.*

undertaken by the weavers. On one wall, an arrangement of 32 photographs offers glimpses of the weavings and their uses as well as of the weavers at work at their looms, with their completed weavings, or socializing and working together in their homes. Wilson has organized the photographs in a lattice, visualizing the guild's function as a network that bonds these weavers. The arrangement is also a visual nod to the warp and weft structure of a weaving. On another wall, Wilson displays vastly enlarged reproductions of the guild's constitution documents. The

tight horizontal arrangement of these seven panels along the wall is reminiscent of the display of the guild members' weavings shown elsewhere in the exhibition. Taken together, the archival materials in Wilson's exhibition – many of which were drawn from the Indigenous community archive of the Coqualeetza Cultural Education Centre – bring attention to the guild members' collective work to effect Indigenous cultural revitalization and sovereignty. In employing a display strategy that positions the photographs and constitution as the wool of a weaving, or as weavings themselves, Wilson also hints at the role that these community archival materials might serve: as sources for Indigenous agency and cultural vitality in the present, just as the weavings did in an earlier historical moment.

An installation of solo and collaborative projects by Jeneen Frei Njootli (Vuntut Gwich'in), the ReMatriate Collective (of which Njootli is a member), and their mentor Dana Claxton (Lakota) takes up a similar project of using archival materials to activate the past, present, and future of Indigenous resistance and cultural activist movements. In her photo-mural *Muckamuck Strike Then and Now*, Claxton – the subject of a recent retrospective exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery<sup>5</sup> – modifies a black-and-white photograph drawn from the archives of the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC). Claxton selected the photograph, which depicts the Muckamuck Restaurant strike of 1978,<sup>6</sup> to spotlight a moment of intersectional collective resistance, with both Indigenous workers and non-Indigenous supporters holding protest signs. The mural provides a compelling creative formalization of what Michelle Caswell calls the *archival imaginary*: “the dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively re-envision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past.”<sup>7</sup> Into this photograph and the group it depicts, Claxton has seamlessly edited images of the members of the ReMatriate Collective, an Indigenous online photographic campaign movement invested

5 Dana Claxton: *Fringing the Cube* (gallery exhibition, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, 27 October 2018 – 3 February 2019), curated by Grant Arnold, Audain Curator of British Columbia Art.

6 Indigenous employees of the non-Indigenous-run Northwest Coast Muckamuck restaurant joined the feminist independent union SORWUC and went on strike in an attempt to gain wage increases and the reinstatement of workers who had been fired for union activity. For a discussion of this strike, see Janet Mary Nicol, “‘Unions Aren't Native': The Muckamuck Restaurant Labour Dispute, Vancouver, BC (1978–1983),” *Labour/Le Travail* 40 (1997): 235–51.

7 Michelle Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives,” in *Identity Palimpsests: Ethnic Archiving in the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia S. Levi (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 49–50.

in critical issues relating to Indigenous women – a group it defines broadly to include non-gender-binary and Two Spirit individuals. Claxton's modification of the photograph stages an intervention into the archival material that suggests that these materials not only bear witness to that earlier historical moment but also exist as ongoing collaborators in Indigenous and feminist rights activism in the present and future.

Another kind of archive is signalled through the inclusion of both the Salish Weavers Guild weavings and Claxton's collaborations with Jeneen Frei Njootli and the ReMatriate Collective. These projects rely on what Dallas Hunt (Cree) describes as an "Indigenous archive of memories, including those held by elders and by the land itself, beyond what settler histories allow."<sup>8</sup> In the installation work *The Sew In*, Claxton and Frei Njootli set up within the gallery a provisional sewing workspace for the production of ribbon skirts, a form of Indigenous cultural production that, like Salish weaving, experienced a revitalization in the 1970s. During the exhibition's run, Claxton and Njootli were sometimes present and sewing in the gallery, and Kim Soo Goodtrack, a member of the Lakota Woodmountain reserve in southern Saskatchewan, led a series of workshops on ribbonizing and ribbon skirt-making techniques. *The Sew In* thus stakes out a space in the gallery for face-to-face intergenerational and intersectional Indigenous knowledge exchange and cultural production. The decolonizing impulse of this installation is underscored by two banners, created by the ReMatriate Collective, that adorn the façade of the Belkin: a black banner covering the name of the gallery and a ribbonized banner that replaces the gallery's name with "YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY," a phrase drawn from the protest language used in the Muckamuck strike.

*Collective Acts* treats archives and archival records fundamentally as instigators of artistic practice and social and cultural activism in the past, present, and future. The exhibition's other two projects make this clear. In *Intuition Commons*, Christine D'Onofrio maps a network of individuals, ideas, relationships, influences, and catalyzing moments described to her in interviews by women-identified, trans, and non-binary artists working in Vancouver, visualizing her data as nodes and links in a rhizomatic structure. She calls this project an archive and invites ongoing contributions through an interactive online database.<sup>9</sup> Heather Kai Smith's two

8 Hunt, "Nikikiwân," 26.

9 You can visit the project's website at <http://intuitioncommons.com>.



FIGURE 4 *Installation view, Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts (4 September – 2 December 2018), at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. Source: The ReMatriate Collective, YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY, appliqué banner, 2018, Courtesy of Jeneen Frei Njootli, Tsēmā Igharas, and Denver Lynxleg. Photo: Rachel Topham.*

drawing- and collage-based series are each created from photographs in the archives of feminist, environmental, and anti-war protest movements, such as the Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice. These varied treatments of archival materials embody several threads currently being explored in archival literature, including the expansive values, uses, and activations to which archival records might be put – particularly toward a more just society – and our professional obligation to acknowledge and accommo-



date these activations.<sup>10</sup> *Collective Acts* provides an opportunity for archivists to creatively imagine what these activations might look like and what they can achieve and is especially affecting in proposing this in the service of Indigenous sovereignty and cultural activism.

**10** See for instance, Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, "From the Sidelines to the Center: Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives," *Archival Science* 18, no. 3 (2018): 257–77; and Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "Records and their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 53–75.