



# TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER AND TIFFANY SHAW-COLLINGE

By The Editors

**C**ommonwealth includes only one pre-existing work—the sculpture *Indigenous geometries* (2019) by Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq) and Tiffany Shaw-Collinge (Métis)—which was originally developed for *....and other such stories*, the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial. The sculpture resembles Alutiiq (Alaska Native) domestic architecture, with hand-bent wooden “spines” that are simultaneously integral parts of the sculpture, tools to be activated in research and performance, and reminders of the ongoing work of reassembling Indigenous cultures in the face of settler colonialism. At the artists’ direction, *Indigenous geometries* was shown at the ICA with its opening facing east toward the sunrise, and seven spines were removed from the structure and placed on the gallery floor.

Two spines were also shipped to Canada for Lukin Linklater to use as she produced her Commonwealth commission. Her new performance for camera, *This moment an endurance to the end forever* (2020), is part of an ongoing series related to *Indigenous geometries*.

***Lukin Linklater had initially planned to research and develop this performance through a week-long period of open rehearsal and live performance at the ICA but had to find new spatially-distant methods in response to COVID-19. The final film interweaves scenes of Lukin Linklater working with the spines in her home, dancers on-site at the Salmon River in Ontario, and Lukin Linklater's poetry. She focuses on qualities of atmosphere—both its density and its dissipation—as well as breath, song, and language. During a time in which breath can carry danger, when movement is restricted, when speech can be so charged, what does it mean to breathe alongside one another, to move alongside one another, to speak alongside one another?***

***The following conversation was convened in February 2020 by architect and theorist Beth Weinstein, following her research regarding the relationship between architecture and dance, to unpack the layers of meaning in Indigenous geometries. Interjections from Noah Simblist and Stephanie Smith from November 2020 introduce connections that emerged from the context of Commonwealth and through ongoing conversations with Lukin Linklater and Shaw-Collinge. This section closes with Lukin Linklater's written meditation on This moment an endurance to the end forever (2020).***

**—The Editors**

***A Conversation with Tanya Lukin Linklater and Tiffany Shaw-Collinge (with interjections by Noah Simblist and Stephanie Smith)***

**Tanya:** In our early conversations with Sepake Angiama, cocurator of the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial, I introduced her to work by Indigenous poets Joy Harjo and Susie Silook. Included in the biennial’s catalogue is “Adventures in Chinatown 1958” by Susie Silook, which tells the story of her family’s relocation from a remote Alaskan village to Chinatown in Chicago. The US government moved Indigenous peoples from their homelands to cities across the US, promising education and employment, but mostly the Indigenous people found poverty. The government tried to disperse the people to discourage community-building, but many maintained relationships, including with their homelands. There are now generations of indigenous people who live in cities. They also organized politically in the 1960s.

At a talk in the fall of 2018, I spoke about structures that constrain and limit Indigenous people. A group of Indigenous architects asked me a question afterwards about how I might imagine a space for Indigenous performance. I had never been asked a question about imagining a space outside of domination. Sepake asked me to spend time with this question. I was also reading a series of short texts written by faculty and students at the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1969—their theorization of American Indian theatre’s structure, space, etc. It was a significant time politically, in dance, and in art. All of this was aligning.

I asked Tiffany to join the project. Her experience listening to Indigenous peoples and communities and our shared concerns allowed for abundant conversations. I considered Alutiiq material culture, knowledges, and processes, from aesthetic forms to scale. I wanted to build citations for us from my homelands including

the *ciqlluaq*, our homes in the old days. I chose to paint the inside of the spines of the sculpture because this is where life happens when we are in relation to one another. These painted lines also reference the designs rendered on Alutiiq and Unangan baskets and bags from Alaska. I've always had a kind of sensibility that materials should have relation to the scale of the body, and these markings reinforce that along with the spines of the sculpture that can move independently.

**Tiffany:** When we arrived at the answer, it came quite quickly, which was really beautiful because we had lengthy conversations to set up the dialogue. Among the many goals we sought to achieve, it was also important to root the work in Chicago. Tanya and I talked about how Indigenous people were forcibly removed from their homelands and relocated to Chicago, among other cities, and through the use of local materials we sought to honor that history.

AllKinds Studio, the fabrication team, listened thoughtfully. This was a new concept for me. With male fabricators, they typically bring in their own ideas and reconfigure the design but AllKinds is an all- women fabrication team, and they tried to complement our process and move the idea forward so it could be fabricated exactly as it was drawn out.

**Tanya:** With Tiffany, there's an openness, a way of being with each other that allows sharing towards making something that is situated in Alutiiq art histories but also in relation to the policies of relocation in the 1950s.

In the first section of the performance, A song, a felt structure: *We are putting ourselves back together again*, the dancers embodied

the idea that our objects have their own energetic qualities and that they listen, so that there is care required in our handling of them. While the sculpture is not a spiritual object, I applied some of these concepts or principles in the process.

**Noah:** While Chicago was the city in which the work was first introduced, it was also possible for it to be in relation to *Commonwealth*, a project that is centered around three cities: Richmond, Philadelphia, and San Juan. Furthermore, these cities are really stand-ins for any urban US Indigenous population. The history of urban Indigeneity is one chapter in the history of settler colonialism in the United States, from 1950s relocation to the political organizing of Native peoples in cities in the 1960s. So, one way to read the actions implied in *Indigenous geometries*—the gestures of pulling apart and putting back together again—is in relation to the histories of Indigeneity found in American cities in the second half of the twentieth century.

**Stephanie:** Yes. There were also local connections to deeper pasts and our present moment that bookend those wider, late twentieth-century histories. Before it was a commonwealth, Virginia was one of the first sites of settler colonialism in the US—a site of foundational violence and disruption. That’s part of what made it so moving to experience *Indigenous geometries* this fall with several members of the Richmond Indigenous Society. The group includes people from many places, representing a range of tribes as well as hybrid backgrounds. They shared some of their experiences navigating that complexity—moving across contexts, assembling and reassembling culture and community, and trying to build solidarity with others working toward social justice. They also sang to *Indigenous geometries*. It was a way to honor the sculpture, and Tanya and Tiffany. Building on Tanya’s

thinking about how objects listen, perhaps that sound and energy are now infused into the material: one way that Richmond's varied Indigenous histories/presents will now be part of the sculpture's ongoing life.

**Tiffany:** Tanya's original question about creating space for Indigenous performance is a significant question because we are always attempting to create space for movement, as Indigenous people continue to do, but the build of the bodies and vessels (architecture) are often static whereas the potential is not to be.

Also the connection between indoor and outdoor environments for Indigenous groups is important. Like the threshold, essentially. We talked about that critical difference between the inside and the outside of the tipi. What we were searching for in that expression is not a typical concept. The quality of environment we sought to create was surrounding the threshold between these two spaces and how performance can extend beyond this concept.

**Noah:** Another topic that came up in conversation with the artists in the context of *Commonwealth* is the question around the abstraction of architecture and movement. While rooted in real histories and real politics, the work's abstract forms can be perceived as inaccessible to the uninitiated. But perhaps the use of abstraction has a politics behind it precisely because it resists easy accessibility. We often understand things that we recognize and we recognize things that are firmly established within hegemonic norms. To be confronted with new forms, new abstract configurations, is to be challenged to learn a new language. Abstraction is a language that is accessible but contingent on the unlearning of habits that are formed by the

colonial tongue. In this sense abstraction is a form of resistance.

**Tanya:** Hierarchies of value and power exist in performance and museum systems, but I attempt to work against that. In performance, a kind of community is made with the people you're working alongside. The institution is not built for people; it is built for objects. All of the conversations I have in advance, in the proposal (paying dancers a living wage), the ways in which we orient ourselves to the space and inhabit it for a short duration, our way of being with one another—these are ways I work against the ongoing violence of systems.

In powwow and Alaska Native dance, babies, elders, we dance alongside one another. The viewer is also active within this context. There is an energy moving between the dancers, the sound moving amongst bodies, including those who have gathered, not just the “performers.” That’s how I imagine these spaces.

**Tiffany:** Yes, like Tanya said, the museum is not typically built for people. It’s built for objects. We are talking about repatriation in a way. In prior work I’ve seen Tanya create what appears to be interventions. She creates a container or plinth for the artwork she considers and also creates care in the space that opens up the conversation in the name of community.

**Stephanie:** Creating care in the space is critical and can be challenging—but your approach to collaborative processes grounded in Indigenous ethics opens paths. Along those lines, it was important to meet in Chicago last year, not only to experience the piece and that performance, but also to visit together with all of your collaborators and Andy Clifford, the

ICA's exhibition designer and chief preparator. Looking back almost a year later, in November 2020, that slow and physical experience of being together, breathing together, feels especially precious. In the end we weren't able to host all of you in Richmond for the planned period of open rehearsal, performance, and community connection, but that shared experience still helped lay the foundation to pivot to Tanya's development of This moment an endurance to the end forever as a performance for camera.

Tanya and Tiffany, thank you for opening space for Noah and me to insert these notes. It nods to our spacious conversations about the project, but we recognize that it also disrupts the flow you had established in your original text, which echoes in a small way the larger disruption of Indigenous conversation and culture that you are working to remedy. We appreciate your openness to this experiment. It makes me think of something Tanya shared in a recent online discussion with Catherine Wood (senior curator at Tate Modern)—you spoke of cultivating a mobile practice that is grounded but unbound, not containable within imposed structures or given forms or institutional expectations. A resounding yes to all of that.

**Tanya:** Our peoples, families, and ways of being have been pulled apart by policies and systems that have actively attempted to dismantle our relationship to ourselves, to our ancestors, to one another, to the land. When we put the sculpture together it gestures towards the ongoing activities in our communities of putting our languages, our songs, our dances, our governances, our education, our healthcare, all of this back together so that it's intact.

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## ***This moment an endurance to the end forever***

*We inhale swell heave billow fall. We exhale shiver pulse weep echo. This breath, this life all around us. We yearn for moments that are only ever now with no memory and no end, no density of time in the body. We sense feel discern an endurance an insistence a continuance a history that is ever present and always now. We inhale song, breathe language. We exhale sigh pant gust gasp, sounding. We recall a sigh shared amongst strangers. We reach for a breath repaired. This moment an endurance to the end forever.*

During the early moments and days of my limited mobility due to the worldwide pandemic of the novel coronavirus, I began to consider breath, atmospheres, and clouds. The live news coverage of George Floyd's murder and the response in Black Lives Matter protests as well as ongoing indigenous resistance to state violence became more concentrated for me during this time. I began to consider Indigenous knowledges that teach us about breath and air.

I shot the first part of this work for camera using Super 8 in my living room near two sculptural spines from *Indigenous geometries*. I considered this a potential counter to the US and Canadian federal policies that have worked to dismantle our homes and families as Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. This action in my living room cites the sculpture and the performance that accompanied it in 2019.

In the second part of the work, I began to concentrate on a more-than-human structure, the density of the atmospheres

that surround the earth and are held close to the planet by gravity, then dissipate in all directions forever outward toward and through the cosmos. With dancers Ivanie Aubin-Malo and Ceinwen Gobert, I investigated textures, tones, and other qualities of breath and atmospheres through embodiment. This was balanced with structuring the video through the duration of one day from sunrise to sunset. I also cite ritual time as expressed in a text by a group of faculty and students as they proposed a structure for Indigenous performance at the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1969. I suppose there are many citations that I hope are coalescing or present in some way in the work.

I am left with and continue to wonder, to reach towards repair, to consider what might be possible or potential at this time.

—Tanya Lukin Linklater

*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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