

A Circle in a Sea of Squares

Corinna Wolff

Walking into *Unceded: Voices from the Land*, Canada's official entry into La Biennale Architettura 2018 (presented by Douglas Cardinal and co-curated by Gerald McMaster and David Fortin), I am greeted by an Anishinaabe Grandmother, speaking through a large projection screen. She offers words that evoke many emotions in me including relief, longing, sadness, and the physicality of tears. Her land is here in Venice, and I'm welcomed to stand on it. I want to dig my feet into it, put it in my mouth, fill my ears with it, be encased in it. This greeting is like nothing else on view in the historic Arsenale. Deep within this land I've been so graciously welcomed into, I can hear drums beating and the people singing in the distance, pulling me through the exhibition space which curves like a river bed. Floor to ceiling projections of Turtle Island, its people, its land and Indigenous architectures line the banks. Comfortable circular stools at each bend encourage me to stay and listen. As I sit, a video of a Turtle Island territory plays, not a short glimpse, but a long enough look that my mind quiets and moves into a receptive state. From these land projections appear Indigenous people, one by one, each with a story to offer and each ushered in by the land from which they are speaking. This exhibition is about listening rather than visual immediacy, and for those that will take the time, who are receptive, and who possess fluency in English there is much offered.

Douglas Cardinal's architectural works, including the Canadian Museum of History and the First Nations University, are featured in a survey of his career but not to the exclusion of others. Community members, children, Elders, architects, artists, teachers and students each offer a teaching about the principles of Indigenous architectures. The element of embodiment of Indigenous people and lands that is key to the discussion of Indigenous spaces, and so often missing within colonial institutions, is made possible through the use of digital imagery in this exhibition. A video segment of a girl trapped within a large, dark, video forest expresses, in good humor, that is not a natural or necessarily comfortable way for Indigenous people to present themselves. There is some awkwardness with the sound system which does not offer earphones in a confined exhibition space with multiple sound clips playing simultaneously. In an ideal world, the storytellers would be physically present, but we are not in an ideal world.

At the heart of the circumambulation that is the exhibition space, one is invited to join the circle and be surrounded by drums and singing, the sounds of ceremony, which accompanied us in the background throughout the journey. The inevitable conclusion is that sharing, discussion, and mutual exchange is needed. During my studies at the University of Saskatchewan I often thought that the Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre, designed by Douglas Cardinal, seemed a circle amongst so many squares. I have a similar impression sitting in the circle in the middle of Venice on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, so close to where Lori Blondeau performed the ground-breaking *Grace* over a decade ago, a gesture rich in ceremony translated for the people of Venice in their own visual language.

The theme of this year's Biennale Architettura is *Freespace*, technically the spaces within architectural structures that serve as transitions such as doorways, passageways, the space between floors, or protruding window spaces. Presenters were encouraged to go beyond the technical and conceptualize less tangible spaces, the natural, the community, the contested, and the very current interstitial. Given that the Biennale is a space of international communication, one must ask, what does Indigeneity and colonization mean within this context? Venice itself is a land under constant invasion, historically by foreign empires and currently by throngs of tourists, venture capitalists, and cruise ships combined with an unprecedented influx of refugees of war from the Middle East and North Africa. Mann's postulation from *Death in Venice* that the island is on the verge of collapsing into the sea under the weight of the world remains palatable. The battle for space here is continuously played out in conflicts with tourists and protests by the original inhabitants who demonstrate their unbreakable tie to this land each year through the ancient *Sposalizio del Mare* (marriage to the sea) ceremony. The identification with all things Indigenous is strong here, as demonstrated by the rather bizarre subculture of the Carnevale di Venezia Indians where carnival goers can be seen decked out in full headdresses in a mash up of regalia and sentiment.

The climate of tension exemplified in Venice is felt throughout Italy, ironically a country that witnessed an outmigration of 60-70 million people in the waves of the Italian diaspora, almost double the entire population of present day Canada. The government is in turmoil and the recent election made it clear that immigration is the primary topic. While many have worked selflessly rescuing and helping the steady flow of newcomers, the burden is heavy and others are expressing less than hospitable sentiments. Illegal immigrants have been advised to "pack your bags" by

Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right Northern League, a shockingly glib statement to a population that was lucky to arrive on the Italian shores with their lives. The danger of Indigeneity being appropriated as an argument in favor of the rising tide of nationalism hovering over Europe at present is real. It is not uncommon to hear the term Indigenous in newscasts on Rai 24, France 24 or the BBC in reference to ethnic nationals in Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. If the original inhabitants have primacy of place, then who is left in the nationless liminal spaces and what happens to them?

We supporters of Indigenous rights within our own territories rightfully applaud decisions in international law upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples, but less often talk about the motivation behind this change of heart and policy. While it's true that the history of Turtle Island is unique, it is inextricably interwoven with global pressures. It is a paradox, one that was elucidated in the 2017 Biennale di Venezia by Tracey Moffatt's entry, *My Horizon*, which juxtaposed images of the artist's Indigenous territory, body and memories along with two video clips, *Vigil* and *The White Ghosts Sailed In*, exploring experiences of displacement and colonization.

When confronting this paradox arguments like "there is no need to repeat history" and "two wrongs don't make a right" abound, leading one to question if current events be viewed as justice for past wrongs, the preverbal reversal of the poles? It does give some simple satisfaction to entertain the notion that Europeans invaded the world and now things have come full circle; however, the people who pay the bill will not be those that colonized the world, or even their ancestors. In Italy the primary wealth holders carry the same names of those who stockpiled riches from the New World for hundreds of years, it is an ancient regime society with little upward mobility, far from a circle or even a square, it seems a rectangle with agonizingly steep sides. The upper echelons will likely not be affected by the massive challenges happening on the ground. Nor will those who uphold the oppressive power structures that allow new waves of colonization to swell. Does *Unceded: Voices of the Land* offer hope to this troubled world as is suggested in the project brochure? Certainly, an inspirational message has been given. That of the circle and its teachings. A circle doesn't have vertices or liminal spaces. If we resilient enough and able to forgive, can we co-exist in peace? Are we creative enough to tear things down and rebuild, are we strong enough to form a circle?

Biography

Corinna Wolff is a professional artist, pedestrian, art wanderer, and space maker who has lived a life of displacement and detachment from her ancestral lands and communities. Born in Edmonton, moving often during her childhood, and residing in the Saskatoon inner city during her adolescent years and most of her adult life, Corinna relocated to Italy after completing her MFA at the University of Saskatchewan in 2016, where she lives and creates. Recipient of a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Masters Scholarship, Corinna's graduate work focused on Métis aesthetics in contemporary art and her MFA thesis exhibit, *Water Over the Bridge*, combined large format drawing, printmaking, installation and beading. Her artwork can be seen on the cover of *The Break* by Katherena Vermette and she is represented by the Darrell Bell Gallery in Saskatoon. Corinna's work is numerous public and private collections. Of Métis and Mennonite decent, her current work explores identity, culture and place using beads, natural materials and words.

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