

field notes: July 11, 12, 13 / 2017

collated by: Denise Lawson / Angela Somerset

re: Rita McKeough's *Veins / Listen / Cul-de-sac*

We look in to look out.



Beyond the window is a large clear blue sky. From a distance, set against the horizon we notice animated, unnatural formations – a plunging, mechanical motion, moving up and down. The action is slow and laborious. We approach, trying to make sense of what we are seeing. As we draw closer, there is a moment of recognition – these are oil extracting machines feeding a pipeline. Their motion is similar to that of a bird pulling up worms over and over again, except they are not birds and there are no worms to be found. Large cone shapes propped up on small twig tripods also populate the landscape. At one end these megaphone forms appear to be pressed to the earth. At the other end brightly coloured birds appear to lean in to listen. Nearby, more birds appear to be immersed in the act of saying something. We are close enough now to hear their songs. They seem to be speaking to us.

LISTEN (window gallery): The birds are gathering at the mouths of the megaphones that have emerged from the dirt. They draw closer to listen. There is a pulse, a pumping sound, and a blackness seeps into the dirt and spreads through its veins. The birds are uneasy. They are thoughtful and repeat what they have heard, trying to decipher and translate this complex and urgent message.

– Rita McKeough

In our research, while reading excerpts from Linda Hogan's book *Dwellings*, we are drawn to a chapter entitled "A Different Yield." Here we are given insight into the possibility of communication beyond words:

"Without language, we humans have no way of know what lies beneath the surface of one another. And yet there are communications that take place on a level that goes deeper than our somewhat limited human spoken languages. We read one another via gesture, stance, facial expression, scent. And sometimes this communication is more honest, more comprehensible, than the words we utter.

These inner forms of communication are perhaps the strongest core of ourselves. We have feelings that can't be spoken. That very speechlessness results in poems that try to articulate what can't be said directly, in paintings that bypass the intellectual boundaries of our daily vision, and in the music that goes straight into the body. And there is even more - a deep-moving underground language in us. Its current passes between us and the rest of nature.

What we are really searching for is a language that heals the relationship, one that takes the side of the amazing and fragile life on our life-giving earth."¹

While transcribing this text at the gallery, Rita was preparing the audio component for Veins. We attune ourselves to the sounds that have settled into the space on the other side of the wall – through word of mouth and through our direct encounters, they have quickly become our temporary familiars – drum, snake, pump – inviting a different orientation to the workings of inner and outer worlds. Other sounds emerge – vicious utterances and expressions – that of angry snarls, distressed growls and deep moans. We can only imagine (often the worst).

We are reminded: “Such a common thing, to work for peace. Such a very clear thing, to know that if we injure an animal, ravage the land, that we have caused damage. And yet, we have rampant hunger and do not know, can hardly imagine, peace. And even when animals learn to speak a language, and to communicate their misery, we still deny them their right to an existence free from suffering and pain.”²



VEINS

(contemporary gallery):

a land with pipelines running throughout its whole expanse: a land where the paradox between the natural world and human systems of capitalism, production, consumption may be contemplated.

We enter the gallery and are confronted by a sign that instructs us to remove our shoes and to stay on the road. We pass from light into dark, through heavy white curtains. On the other side we find ourselves in (are surrounded by) a landscape inhabited by creatures, populated with machines and automated animal forms. We mark our entry point. Just in case. With feet bared, we venture forth. There is certainty. There is uncertainty. One foot in front of the other, confined to the black road, framed by a row of sandbags on either side. The road is straight. The lines are not to be crossed.

But there is more to it than that. In this dimly lit shadowland, there is no horizon, no vantage point. We acclimatize. What we heard in the distance becomes clear. The sounds reveal their actions – a repetitious penetration of the earth, the slow beat of beating drums, rhythmic undulations of the snakes, the train that tracks back and forth on rails that lead nowhere, surrounded by large fallen leaves, from a forest no longer here. On the walls there are large animated images of hybrid animals. We gage their differences – Predators? Prey?

Rosi Braidotti recalls the words of Clarice Lispector's text *The Passion according to G.H.* that proposes a kind of receptive wonder for the other, rooted in love ethics:

"Being able to approach any other in full respect of his/her living singularity; respecting the presence and the boundaries, while moving and being moved by an other toward the recognition of our respective and irreducible differences." ³

We are allowed to stay in this place for as long as we want. Our immersion invites us to remember. To rethink. To imagine a possible future. We get to the end of the road. Confined to the road, we retrace our steps.

Over our shoulder our eyes catch the site of a well lit room. We step off the black road to take a different route and are confronted with a proposition. The children are with us now. We go in and quickly shift from being the observers to immersive participants. We become part of the game. For a moment we are all taking it in. We are embodied. The children speed things along. They make us see in different ways. We give up being adults with adult minds. We have an opportunity to have a different kind of comprehension through reception. There is no preconception. There is no history. Our curiosity is palpable. We stand on black pavement marked with white boundaries, definitive white lines organizing traffic. We find ourselves in a subdivision of skeletal houses with thin memories of trees for rooftops. Black telephone receivers lay on each roof, wired into the tree bark. Are they calls waiting to be answered or calls interrupted by a call of another kind? The children pick up the phones pressing them to their ears, their voices urgent; "Hello Hello Hello...there is no one there." Their small hands are quick and frantic as they search for some way to make a connection. None of us know what to do. The line is dead. Or is it? We suggest that the trees may have something to say or that maybe they are waiting to see if we have something to say.

CUL-DE-SAC (George Sawchuk room): The street is a dead end. The trees have gathered in a circle, facing outward, perhaps to defend themselves. Soon a new neighbourhood. The trees will be renovated, framed up, skeletons ready to be inhabited.
– Rita McKeough

It was here that our observations entered our bodies in new ways: In an essay by Nisha Sajjani about the study of improvisation as an arts-based research modality across disciplines, the author proposes that at the core of this methodology “the intrinsic nature of improvisation as temporal and contingent calls attention to the context of discovery.” Sajjani goes on to describe a cross-disciplinary model for collaborative knowledge creation rooted in artistic improvisation, and its implications for social change:

“Improvisation, in short, has much to tell us about the ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and surrounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Improvisation demands shared responsibility for participation in community, an ability to negotiate differences, and a willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency.”⁴



"I learned as a young artist that if things concern you, your voice is important. You can't sit back and be apathetic. My way to express myself is not to convince people about my way of thinking, it's about sharing a moment of thinking about these things. It's more about experiencing this from a different perspective." - Rita McKeough ⁵

"A woman once described a friend of hers as being such a keen listener that even the trees leaned toward her as if they were speaking their inner most secrets into her listening ears." ⁶

Reflections to note. At first it was a distant idea: a creative residency, three site-responsive works (*Veins / Listen / Cul-de-sac*), connecting the the land to the water, prairies to the sea. Then it was an accepted invitation. From there our anticipation built. We began to learn about her work. She came for a short visit. And then she arrived to stay (for a few months). And so it began. She is the messenger. The conduit. We gather. We surround her. She brings with her a deep integrity, a commitment to making things, a generosity of spirit, a willingness to sharing ideas.

The heart is called upon: "It's hard to be that vulnerable without compassion—compassion for others as they venture out into the unknown, and compassion for ourselves as we try something new. Improvisation requires trust that we can be vulnerable together without having to hide behind virtuosity, skill, or feigned indifference, retreating back to the solid ground of what we think we already know." ⁷

She will leave us with her carefully made work for a short while, here in this place where the oil is bound for the sea. When the exhibition ends the outside will mirror the inside. All the leaves will have fallen on the ground.

1 – Hogan, Linda. *Dwellings. July 2017, web.*. Norton & Company Inc, 1995. pg 57.

2 – Hogan, Linda. *Dwellings.* W.H. Norton & Company Inc, 1995. pg 56.

3 – Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects, "The Ethics of Sexual Difference,"* Columbia University Press, 1994. pg 133.

4 – Sajjani, Nisha. "Improvisations and Arts Based Research." *Arts Based Research: Opportunities and Challenges*, edited by Shaun McNiff, University of Chicago Press, 2013. pg 83.

5 – Stanfield, Scott. "A Paradox Between Natural and Human Worlds", *Comox Valley Record*, July 11, 2017. Quote.

6 – Hogan, Linda. *Dwellings.* W.H. Norton & Company Inc, 1995. pg 47.

7 – Hicks, Jeanette. *Deep Listening at the End of the World, web* ¹² <http://improvisationinstitute.ca> July 2017, web.

RITA MCKEOUGH

VEINS / LISTEN / CUL-DE-SAC

EXHIBITION 13 July – 30 September 2017

CONVERGENT EVENTS 13 July 2017

7pm Art Opening + Artist Talk
8:30pm Performance by Birch
7 – 9pm Unmaking Electronics (community project) facilitated by Jen Margetish

CREATIVE RESIDENCY 23 May – 31 July 2017

Opening July 13th, “Veins / Listen / Cul-de-sac” is a three interrelated installations by interdisciplinary artist Rita McKeough. Listen + Cul de Sac were produced during the artist’s creative residency, presented by the Comox Valley Art Gallery. CVAG would like to thank our partnering organizations for supporting CVAG’s summer creative residency program: North Island College Fine Arts Department (studio space, shop facilities, equipment and technical support) and the McLoughlin Gardens Society (accommodation + working space).

Rita McKeough, a Calgary-based audio, media installation and performance artist, has exhibited throughout Canada since the late 1970s. Her work has been featured in *Radio Rethink: Essays on Art, Sound and Transmission* (Banff Centre for the Arts, 1993) and *Caught in the Act: Canadian Women in Performance* (YYZ Books, 2004). (ML) Born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, McKeough studied printmaking and sculpture at the University of Calgary where she received her BFA. She went on to study at the NSCAD University where she was awarded her MFA. Her experience as a radio station disc jockey and drummer for bands led to her introduction of sound elements in her elaborate installations and later to the development of electronic and mechanical objects in interactive environments. She is currently in the band Sleepy Panther with her wonderful friend Richard Brown and teaching at The Alberta College of Art and Design. Rita insists that she has been fortunate to have the support and assistance of her friends and community to produce her work.

Photographs courtesy of Alun Macanulty and Krista McAllister.



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THANK YOU EVERYONE.



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GALLERY TUESDAY TO SATURDAY 10-5
SHOP MONDAY TO SATURDAY 10-5

SUMMER NIGHTS: JULY 14 – SEPT 01 / FRI 10-7

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