

ISSUE 2 (SEPTEMBER 2015): SOCIAL CHANGE AND LABOUR

Silence, Solidarity, and the Spectacu- larization of Protest: Dylan Miner at Martha Street Studio

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While the mainstream media continually portrays social movements as raucous demonstrations, Dylan Miner's recent exhibition *Silence of Sovereignty* explores the contemplative side of collective action. Focusing on decolonial and anticapitalist struggles, he portrays not protesting bodies in the streets, the conventional depiction of protest, but quieter moments spent in places that remain significant for those taking part in these struggles. Miner emphasizes not speaking out, but actively listening; engaging with and paying attention to the places in which political contention exists. Within each movement there is, after all, a network of publics existing within a wide range of social strata. The many communities involved continually reflect on their position within these social dimensions, and this reflection is—while less oriented to the spectacle of protest—no less crucial to the struggle

Entering Martha Street Studio in Winnipeg, where Miner's exhibition *Silence of Sovereignty* appeared most recently, I was initially struck by his large wall work *Giimoodwewe'akokwe (s/he drums secretly)*, an installation of marching band drumheads. The 29 drumheads take up almost the entire gallery wall, with a heavy but quiet presence. Some are slightly battered, while others are clean and seemingly unused, as though between marches. In maintaining any set of drums, there is a long process of changing out old drumheads for new ones, which can offer a quiet period of reflection, a moment of respite between performances.

This is one of the strengths of the installation; it is a reminder of art's

ability to create a space for quiet reflection. The downtime between events, shows, performances or larger collective actions is necessary, even if it is rarely placed at the centre of discussions of events or social movements. *Giimoodwewe'akokwe (s/he drums secretly)*, with its title's emphasis on secret or private drumming, attests to this private act.

But a drum is not a quiet instrument; it is difficult to practice without also performing, without the beat being heard or felt by others. As such, there is a paradox in drumming secretly. Is it secret held by a single person, or is it rather a secret kept by a small circle of individuals. While this invokes a degree of isolation or separation, it must be remembered that larger communities and publics are only the sum of smaller circles, which ripple out into masses or multitudes. Collective action is, after all, not an undifferentiated multitude [1], but an immense network of these smaller circles, of groups acting in concert toward some broadly agreed upon degree of social change.

These circles are present in Miner's project *The Elders Say We Don't Visit Anymore*, hosted by Martha Street Studio in conjunction with *Silence of Sovereignty*. For this work, Miner organized set times when anyone could stop by to share tea with a stranger, with a member of the gallery staff present to discuss the project, pour the tea and initiate conversation. Participatory projects are difficult to organize, as they tend to operate in set circles and within fairly defined communities, but the hope tends to be that some circles will cross or expand, even if ever so slightly. When my partner and I attended a tea time in late July, we were seated with a young print-maker and designer, whose sincerity and honest interest in hearing



Giimoodwewe'akokwe (s/he drums secretly) (2015) and *Biibaagi (s/he calls out)* (2015), Dylan Miner, Installation view, Photo courtesy of Martha Street Studio

about us was, though not a significant interaction, deeply appreciated. Such honest interactions prompted by socially engaged projects are an important compliment to personal works that highlight individual reflection, and emphasize the significance of both the personal and public components of political action.

These personal and public dimensions, though complimentary, are not always mutually considered within discussions of political action, while the spaces in which this action occurs are similarly overlooked. Judith Butler, in a lecture organized in 2011 by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, speaks to this tension and lack of attention when she addresses the ways that political action emerges between bodies. Butler is responding to Hanna Arendt's writing on "the space of appearance", where bodies do not just engage in political action in a given space, but through their engagement in turn construct space. Butler writes that "[n]o one body establishes the space of appearance, but this

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action, this performative exercise happens only ‘between’ bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another’s. In this way, my body does not act alone, when it acts politically” [2].

Political action thus does not exist in a predefined space, but in a space that is socially constructed through action. This action, given its social nature, is necessarily both personal and public, as it arises between individuals. Butler’s nuanced understanding of each actor, which considers the elements of gender, race and class always at play, speaks to the complexity of this political action, and that the spaces it constructs will likewise contain inherent tensions. The table upon which Miner arranged for tea to be served is a space undergoing constant reconstruction; a process that influences how we must reflect on all participatory and socially engaged works. Though writing in the arts has, at least since Roland Barthes’ *Death of the Author*, increasingly come to re-

gard artworks as in a continued state of becoming, conventional discussions of politically contentious spaces have yet to see a similar shift in understanding, with the spaces remaining predefined in advance of any social movement that might tread upon them.

A Politics of Listening

In a recent essay Dylan Miner wrote for the book *Re-Collecting Black Hawk*, he speaks to the need for both thought and action in any project that seeks to reconsider these contentious spaces. He writes: “Since very few live outside the reaches of either colonialism or capitalist, market economics, ongoing coloniality may be challenged by the development of decolonial thought and anticolonial action that transgress the limits of an otherwise violently bounded contemporaneity” [3]. In the face of this violence, which involves the co-dependent forces of colonialism and capitalism—forces which Miner refers to elsewhere as parallel practices that have together “instigated a never-end-



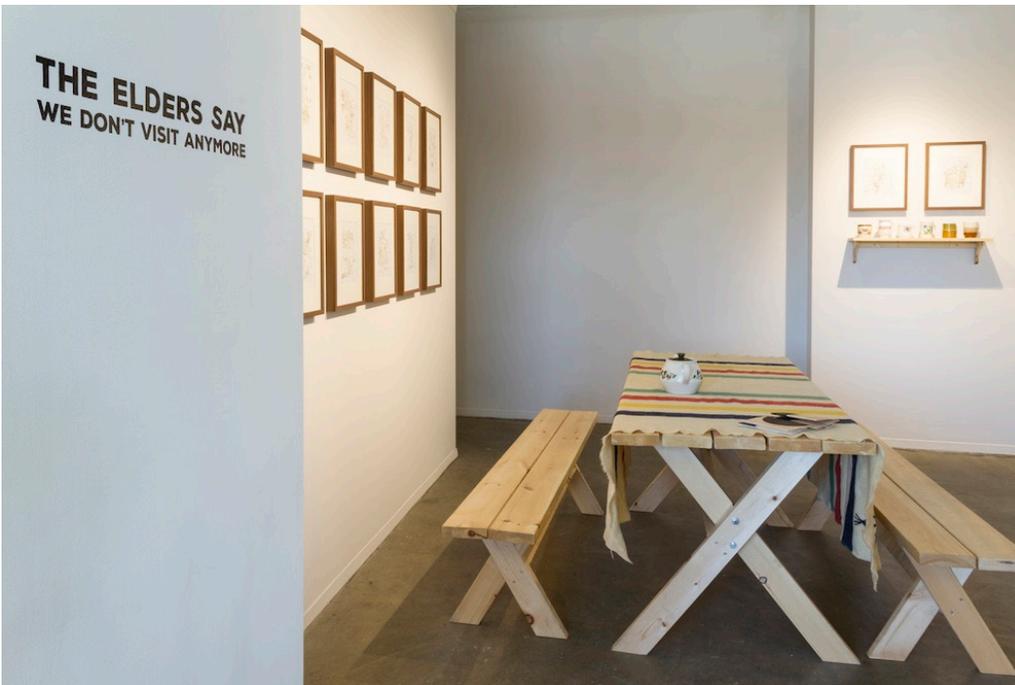
The Elders Say We Don't Visit Anymore (2015), Dylan Miner, Installation view, Photo courtesy of Martha Street Studio

ing process of global market expansion” [4]—decolonial work must be both thoughtful and active, existing within while challenging the limits of these forces.

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Miner argues that what is needed is a greater emphasis on listening; a listening that is thoughtful, open and expansive. *Re-Collecting Black Hawk*, for instance, is a project that seeks to challenge the common practice of adopting native iconography, such as the name or image of the Sauk leader Black Hawk, for stores, schools, parks, etc. in a way that is often ignorant, cultural-

ly insensitive or blatantly racist. While lead by two non-native individuals, Miner commends the authors Nicholas Brown and Sarah Kanouse for listening and collaborating with native authors and artists. He writes: “Sideline their own authorial voices to, quite literally, listen to the perspectives of Indigenous people, Brown and Kanouse model an important part of the self-decolonization process” [5]. While the authors’ own reflection is important, there is likewise a pressing need to include voices from members of the groups that are addressed by their publication.



The Elders Say We Don't Visit Anymore (2015), Dylan Miner, Installation view, Photo courtesy of Martha Street Studio

Miner connects this to a “politics of listening,” for which he makes reference to the writing of Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. In advancing a critical feminist response to police and media tactics that stifle debate, Chun argues that a “politics of listening” must be developed where assumptions do not dictate media action. She discusses the Montreal Massacre of 1989 in particular—an overtly anti-feminist act of violence—where the police stopped releasing information on the details of the events and prematurely closed their investigation. This was said to be motivated by their interest in maintaining public safety, but seemed rather to only close the discussion of patriarchy and systemic misogyny that began to develop in response to the violence. In Chun’s essay “Unbearable Witness: Toward a Politics of Listening” she argues that the aftermath of the Montreal Massacre made it evident that listening, while often

under-theorized and under-valued, is necessary to not stifle a dialogue that can address the violence inherent in patriarchal society.

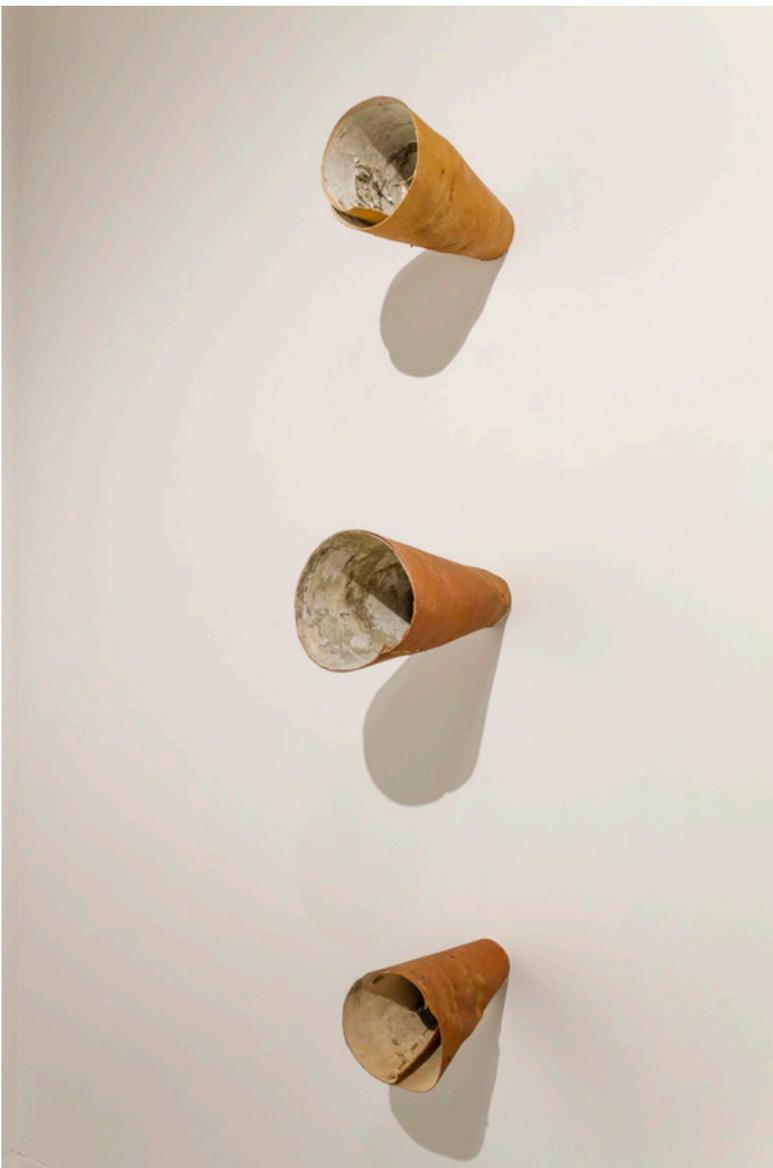
Miner expands on this, relating Chun's "politics of listening" to decolonial thought. He states that this form of listening "also points a way forward for settlers to act in solidarity with Indigenous people" [6]. This solidarity requires both systemic decolonization and self-decolonization, where an open dialogue that can address colonization much as the above example addressed patriarchy is needed. Here, listening is a political act, and much like Butler's notion of politics emerging between bodies, it requires an ongoing engagement that can contribute to broader political action.

This furthers the significance of *The Elders Say We Don't Visit Anymore*, but also adds an interesting inflection to the sound installation *Biibaagi (s/he calls out)*. The work consists of three cones constructed from bark, each containing a small speaker hidden deep inside. The work suggests that we must not only listen to each other, but also to the land, and to the myriad creatures

and objects, animate and inanimate, that it is comprised of. Leaning in to listen, the soft sounds of wind and other ambient noises can be heard, sounds that invoke both urban and rural environments.

The exhibition essay by Jenny Western describes the audio as field recordings drawn from reserves, urban native spaces, and other places that Miner has a kin relationship to. Western emphasizes Miner's interest in listening to the land, with the soundscapes acting as a corollary to the more common landscapes that dominate conventional art canons. This seems to extend Chun's initial conception, asking how a "politics of listening" can be extended to the land.

This extension is not only a constructive but a crucial element of decolonial and anticapitalist action, as there requires a broader space of appearance and interaction than currently exists. Just as political action develops between bodies, it also develops between bodies and land, and this is an important insight that Indigenous struggles have shared with the Western political thought, which Arendt and Butler respond to and build upon. While this tradition has a long history of stressing the importance of bodies and publics, it has all too often remained within a narrowly defined range of communities—with the authoritarian and patriarchal worldviews that Arendt and Butler challenge—to say nothing of its focus on other species. This



Biibaagi (s/he calls out) (2015), Dylan Miner, Installation view, Photo courtesy of Martha Street Studio

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focus is broadening today, and Miner's ability to connect movements and publics is significant. While sharing tea may seem a small act, it is necessary to remember that social movements are primarily an accumulation of small acts, with public demonstrations only punctuating this broader action.

[1] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, through their trilogy beginning with *Empire* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), have contributed to the reemergence of the term multitude in discussions of political theory. While it captures the essence of collective action quite well, it can be somewhat generalizing; a short fall that Hardt and Negri have acknowledged.

[2] Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," lecture presented in *The State of Things*, organized by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 7 September 2011, <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en> (accessed July 27, 2015)

[3] Dylan Miner, "Makataimeshekiakiak, or the Specter of Indigenous Liberation," in *Re-Collecting Black Hawk*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015, 229.

[4] Rozalinda Borcila, Bonnie Fortune and Sarah Ross, eds., *Deep Routes: The Midwest in All Directions*, Wisconsin: White Wire, 2012, 5.

[5] Miner, "Makataimeshekiakiak, or the Specter of Indigenous Liberation," 229.

[6] *Ibid.*, 229.