Engendering Audience Responsibility: The work of Jayce Salloum "in affinity with"

Jayce Salloum is a Vancouver artist best known for photo-based and multimedia works that explore identity, migration, border changes, and territorial shifts in a transnational context. Media theorist Laura U. Marks once described his practice as one that "redefines citizenship, and artistic citizenship in particular,"[1] across the boundaries marked by exhibitions, funding, municipalities, regions, nations, and the international *nowhere* sphere of festivals and biennials. Marks's account stressed Salloum's sense of civic responsibility, wherein art—its making, curation, and dissemination—becomes one of many means of achieving social justice. A photo-based artist best known for his ongoing *untitled* videotapes series, Salloum has also always been engaged with collaborative art-making groups, such as *desmedia*, the Downtown Eastside media collective in Vancouver. While the participants in desmedia include several Aboriginal artists, since 2005 Salloum has been making videotapes and producing collaborative art-making workshops specifically with Aboriginal communities in Interior British Columbia and, most recently, northern Saskatchewan. And although the contents of both the videotapes and the workshops are of vital interest, it is the process of their production and reception that particularly interests me as being of critical relevance to the reconciliation movement in Canada. Unique to both Salloum's *untitled* videotapes and the products of his collaborative art-making workshops are the ways that these works demand that audiences become actively responsible for the co-production of meaning. This engendering of responsibility in the viewer is a step towards a new, or renewed, conception of citizenship that is essential to the reconciliation process.

What does it mean to be a citizen, let alone an *artistic* citizen, in Canada today? In Eurocentric modern sovereignties like Canada, citizenship has generally been framed in terms of political, civil, and social rights of which the former two constitute defences against abuses of power by the state, while the latter requires the active intervention of the state to equalize citizens' opportunities to the first two. The responsibilities of citizens *to each other* (not to the state) are typically underemphasized. Canada, as a so-called 'nation of immigrants,' is of course a colonized territory in which the descendants

BP's leaves, bingo card, west coast inspirations, Berge's colour zones, Oppenheimer Park riffs, Ricky's horns/antlers, Eagle Ed's ovoids/s/u forms filled in based on his specs, and many more.

Collaborative painting from the desmedia workshops (produced at the Carnegie Centre, Oppenheimer Park and other sites) as installed in Pigeon Park Savings, 92 E. Hastings St., Downtown Eastside, Vancouver (2004–2005)

of settlers, immigrants, and Indigenous people share citizenship unequally. Citizenship can be passively enjoyed by those who benefit from the uneven distribution of resources and imbalanced access to political, civil, and social rights. Within this context, it is all too easy for members of the dominant class—which in Canada includes mainly the descendents of settlers and European immigrants—to become complacent or even defensive and protective. Essentially, the position enjoyed by the dominant, largely *white* community blinds it to its own power and privilege, so that this community's own culture becomes a self-invisible norm, and all other cultures and social positions come to be seen as *Other.*[2] The forms of individualism and myopia nurtured in this scenario interfere, in the extreme, with the formation of cross-cultural and cross-class alliances in the service of social justice. In the arts, this has meant a very long history of segregation, wherein the dominant cultural community has remained ignorant of the cultural productions, issues, and ideas of non-European immigrants and, even more so, of Aboriginal artists. Across the country, there are only a few models of creating interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal visual arts communities. (One of the oldest now is TRIBE: A Centre for the Evolving Aboriginal Media, Visual and Performing Arts Inc., based in Saskatoon, conceived by its co-founders in 1995 as a nomadic Aboriginal artist-run organization that would infiltrate mainstream spaces with the work of Aboriginal artists in order to ensure that audiences of Aboriginal art were diverse, and not only Aboriginal or, more precisely, to ensure that members of the dominant culture would engage with the issues and ideas of Aboriginal artists.)

In his work of the past decade, Salloum has been one of a small number of non-Aboriginal Canadian artists to overturn this standard by actively seeking partnerships and collaborations with First Nations individuals and communities in his work. As the grandchild of Lebanese immigrants, he heard stories of the racism experienced by his parents and had first-hand experience of the repressed violence and vagaries of assimilation. Since he began his career as a professional artist in the late 1970s, he has always taken as a primary focus issues of political, social, and cultural representation, with an emphasis in his videotapes, on representations of the transnational in the Middle East and the Western portrayal of Arabs and of Lebanon. But after decades of making work in and about the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the USA, and elsewhere he turned his attentions homeward in 2005—literally, to his hometown of Kelowna, British Columbia, when he was invited by the Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art to produce a videotape for the city's Centenary. Salloum chose as his subject the history and effects of the settlement of Kelowna by Europeans on the local Westbank First Nation.

Jayce Salloum, from *untitled part 1: everything and nothing*
videotape, 40:40, 1999 (2001)

Soha Bechara, former Lebanese secular resistance fighter, weaving between representation and subject, speaking closely of the distance of what was lost, what is left behind, and what remains.

JS: "Here, this is ... your home?"

SB: "My home. It's not easy to define home ... is it where one lives, the house that one was born and grew up in? As Lebanese, the war taught us—and because we changed homes so many times—that every house is a home. It is enough for me to stay a week somewhere to feel a sense of a belonging and a connection with that place. I feel the same thing regarding this room I am living in now.

"I also learned from the civil war that the moment after leaving my home, a place that was lost, destroyed by shelling ... to stop thinking about it. I should think of the future. If I only think and live in the past, I am bound to fail. One should think of what is to come.

"The past is a history, a lesson to learn from in order to proceed into the future. I do feel at home here. I have been here for two months now."

Jayce Salloum, from *untitled part 4: terra ~~in~~cognita* (2005)
videotape, 37:30

Wilfred (Grouse) Barnes retracing/pointing out the linguistic/territorial map of the N'syilxcen speakers, the Syilx (Okanagan) peoples of the valley—at the WFN Community Centre, Westbank, British Columbia: "N'syilxcen nation, see, this is the language we speak in our territory—N'syilxcen, not Okanagan, N'syilxcen, N'syilxcen Nation. So if you ask me where I come from, I'll say N'syilx."

Although this work, *untitled part 4: terra ~~in~~cognita* (2005), involves interviews with many members of the Westbank and Okanagan First Nations, who speak of such things as the community's memory of the creation of the reserve system, the legacy of residential schools, and the lack of access to sacred places located within city boundaries, it is not a documentary in the typical sense. Whereas documentaries create or impose frameworks for representing their subjects, inserting images and text in such a way that the documentary's position appears seamless, Salloum instead deliberately engenders, in this videotape as in others, what he refers to as "productive frustration" in the viewer. The usual subject of the gaze becomes the speaker, but unlike typical documentaries, Salloum's videotapes do not frame the speakers so much as dance with them, around them, and next to them. The presence of the camera operator is almost always perceptible by the way the image shakes or wobbles, or by the sound of Salloum's slightly muffled voice; there are no soundtracks insisting upon a certain mood or sense of drama. Instead, the wind whips voices from microphones, a telephone rings off screen, or there are other audible cues and interruptions alerting us to the contextual nature of the particular video clip; and often spoken words do not align themselves neatly to the images, such as when one speaker recounts the story of his younger brother's death from depression and substance use, but the screen shows only the shadow of a leafy tree blowing gently in the breeze.

In a country where opinions proliferate about the so-called Native situation, yet where few white people—particularly from the middle (and upper) class—have any real acquaintance with Aboriginal people or culture, Salloum's tactics challenge viewers to coordinate their own experiences and assumptions with the presented material to arrive at knowledge. In some cases the diverse realities represented in the videotapes and the prior experience and assumptions of the viewers may on occasion coincide or find agreement, but at other times they may collide or compete with each other, and sometimes the viewer will simply be faced with silence, such as a blackout in the image or an untranslated remark. Yet even these experiences produce a kind of knowledge for viewers, not just about the Westbank First Nation, the artist, or Interior BC, but also about systems of communication and representation, from language itself to tourism promotion to academia to prime-time TV. Viewers are forced to challenge their own preconceptions about what they think they know and what they are able to know (that is, not everything). This self-reflection is as essential and desired an outcome of Salloum's work as any information he may try to communicate or translate about an individual, thing, place, or situation. To put this in other words, *untitled part 4: terra ~~in~~cognita* resists equally: the anthropologist's desire

Roxanne Lindley at the 3 x 3 metre fenced-in area, which is the only sacred Syilx site protected by the city of Kelowna—at a cost to the WFN (Westbank First Nation) of $25,000 ... stalling outright disappearance of "key indicators"; uneasily, ancestors rest here. "We could never come here to have a ceremony. We could never come here and acknowledge the spirit of the land. This is a fishing area, this is a harvesting area, from Mission Creek this way, you know ... and from Mission Creek this way, it didn't matter. The whole integrity of the site has been destroyed."

Jayce Salloum, from *untitled part 4: terra ~~in~~cognita* (2005)
videotape, 37:30

Leonard Raphael at his WFN house recounting residential school survival, confronting foreign brick walls, and meeting his siblings and other children there, the alienation and fear, the repercussions, and the doors and paths: "What had happened, I guess most of the time at nights, you'd recognize the children that missed their parents, or missed their sisters and brothers. They would be … crying. You could hear that. You know the sound of when somebody's missing in a family; the family structure is breaking down. So I guess that would be some of the things that we would hear as we were growing up in the residential school.

The spiritual sense is the one that brought us back, will keep us going mainly because of the strength that has always been there. The belief in Mother Earth and what she's taught us in our lives. How to share and what it means to share these things that are so beautiful that she provides for us freely.

Having to realize that what was in our past was also … like doorways, having to look at doorways, recognizing that there are teachings within each door that will reopen or close, whenever we allowed ourselves to grow up in that kind of environment … it teaches us a lot about what is in front of us yet to come."

Jayce Salloum, from *untitled part 4: terra ~~in~~cognita* (2005)
videotape, 37:30

Elizabeth Lindley Charters, a Syilx elder, in her yard just up from the lake, pointing out how and where the reserve was marked out by runners and sliced off in three successive colonial dispossessions (1856–1861, 1877, and 1912–1914).

"...they picked this one guy and they told him, 'Okay, you go, go down Powers Creek, and then you got Powers Creek, you follow that water right up, right up to the top, follow that creek right up to the top, and then you go north ...' and then they mentioned a mountain, and then you come down to the ... you go by creeks, hey. And that is how big your reserve will be. This guy he went out, and ... he just ... this little area here, well other than a little bit more, that ... we did have all that taken from us anyhow, so what's the difference? We lost some lands, cut off here and there ... he did come ... there's a straightaway I know that ... parts of it ... that are cut off by Westbank ... we just made a little ... and he got back, you know, they ... they packed him up a lunch and said, 'Go, you go that way, you go that way.' Packed him up a few days of lunch, and he comes back when the sun is way down there just getting close to the top of them trees. He came back and the Elders, they said, 'Well, how come you're back?' 'Oh,' he says, 'If I went too far where you wanted me to go, way around...' he says, 'those poor white people would get tired if they have to go around.'"

Jayce Salloum, from *untitled part 4: terra ~~in~~cognita* (2005)
videotape, 37:30

to categorize, label, and consign; the liberal's desire to feel pity and also to be redeemed by the implication of a (different) culprit; the policeman's desire to locate and confine; and even the politician's desire to ignore and dismiss as the product of an artist with a fixed, biased position. In my view, this videotape offers a crucial lesson about how true reconciliation can take place: it is not enough to passively observe the process. Instead, all citizens must actively engage and participate.

Critics on the right have occasionally labelled Salloum's work as "ugly political propaganda,"[3] while some on the left have questioned his engagement with the stories of people who do not fit the artist's own identity profile, particularly his work with First Nations communities. The latter questioning acknowledges the colonial practice of cultural appropriation, but also disengages from active solidarity. In one interview for a large anthology on Canadian film and video makers, Salloum was asked: "Haven't we seen too many Native stories told by others?"[4] The artist replied: "There are many powerful Aboriginal filmmakers and video artists in Canada, such as Alanis Obomsawin, Zacharius Kunuk, Annie Fraziér Henry, Dana Claxton, Loretta Todd, Barb Cranmer, Cease Wyss, to name just a few. I'm not sure how many of them you've interviewed ... For me it [is] not a question of speaking for others (appropriation) versus carving out a space for suppressed voices (emancipation)—it is much more complex than that. I speak in affinity with."[5] (In fact, none of the artists Salloum listed were interviewed.) The fact is, colonialism and the legacies of the residential school system are not an "Aboriginal issue," but an issue that impacts all Canadians, affecting us all, in wildly divergent ways: economically, socially, and psychologically. There is no healing unless we all are healed (and for some, it means being healed of racism and ignorance), and to achieve this we must know each other and work together for change.

Affinity and collaboration are guiding principles not only for Salloum's *untitled* videotape series but also for his collaborative art-making workshops, one of which, the Native Youth Art Workshop (NYAW) in Kamloops, BC, was designed to bring the voices of Aboriginal youth from Kamloops and surrounding regions to the wider Kamloops community. Salloum's project was funded by the Kamloops Art Gallery (KAG), and was co-facilitated by Meeka Morgan, a Secwepemc/Nuu-chah-nulth writer and performer, along with Victoria Morgan and Rob Hall. In a city where Aboriginal parents had recently protested the lack of First Nations cultural education in the city's public school system, the workshops, held monthly or bi-weekly at the KAG and at some reserves in the Thompson-Nicola Regional District, provided a regular outlet for a broad cross-section of Native youths (including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, urban, "rez," traditional, or foster kids in white homes, ranging in age from

Shoshana Wilson sketched the main figures, about a month later her father Barry Wilson dropped in to help, as did (uncle) Henry Venn Robertson. Tara and many others contributed along the way. "This canvas represents first nations and culture, and the many traditions of first nations people around the province. The central whale represents the Wilson's family crest with the sun in the left hand corner that explains their family story. Everything in the whale represents the lifestyle on the coast. This canvas shouts native pride and identity."

Native Youth Art Workshops (NYAW), *whale/history/culture*
collaborative painting, 95" x 59"
Kamloops Art Gallery, 9/14/2008 - 10/2009

Nathan Lynn created the central theme/figures in this work, other participants worked on the peripheral figures/areas. "This piece represents the technologically influenced pull away from one's culture."

Native Youth Art Workshops (NYAW), *wireless*
collaborative painting, 95" x 59", Kamloops Art Gallery, 2/2009-9/2009

Image on following spread: *Workshops were designed in response to the interests of the participants, to focus on sharing their experiences, to articulate and express their concerns, and to gather work done with and accounts shared by local elders. The context of the projects is within the links that exist between community and individual or self, both inextricably connected.*

All the paintings were designed for the large gallery wall facing the street and public library, visible day and night. "Much of this canvas represents our families, community traditions, and how identity changes with the influence of other cultures and environments."

yellow/Bonaparte/Soo Cartoon (Jordan, Robert's central figures)

Native Youth Art Workshops (NYAW)
collaborative painting 95" x 59", Kamloops Art Gallery, 8/9/2007-12/2008


by Kiva
Don't Do Drugs or Alcohol.


Rock on

three to mid-twenties), along with one or two non-Native children, to share experiences, meet with contemporary First Nations artists, come in contact with Aboriginal art history, and express themselves collectively in paint and sound. Importantly, the workshops never focused on the participants' points of origin, except to acknowledge the different kinds of impacts of the residential school system on them and their families; rather, Salloum and Morgan, as facilitators, along with the participants, set themselves the task of identifying and exploring their divergent and shared histories, with the goal of painting their present conditions and mapping out a future together.

Like Salloum's videotapes, the paintings produced in NYAW contain equal mixes of beauty and pain, hope and violence, and voice and silence. More symbolic than narrative, the highly colourful works tend to be largely symbolic, with elements of graffiti and poetry. The multi-hued, at times child-like or crude, style of the NYAW works, speaks openly to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. They don't *mean* anything, at least nothing that can be easily summarized; rather, they are expressive of a great deal of energy, shared conversations and points of reflection, and a common goal. At their first public display, during the opening of Salloum's touring retrospective at the KAG, the paintings were mounted in a long, windowed corridor, visible to passersby on the street, framed by the names (in vinyl lettering) of all the youths involved and of their ethnic origins, as they self-identified. While the majority of participants were Interior Salish, and identified simply as Secwepemc, a huge number claimed hybridized roots, from St'át'imc-Secwepemc to Ojibway-Gwichya Gwich'in-Cree to Gitxsan-Chinese and Blackfoot-Irish. More than particular stories that were embedded in the canvasses, the NYAW works and their installation spoke of the fact of sharing—the sharing of past, present, and future—even if the shared past and present has been ignored by the majority of non-Aboriginal people in Canada until recently, and even if we are still uncertain about our shared future. Confrontation is carried out in these works in subtle and sharp ways that keep spectators not only engaged, but also challenged, which is an integral part of the process of sense-making. The paintings, like the videotapes, and like all of Salloum's work, do not impose a sense of guilt but a sense of recognition that is a powerful tool in any process of reconciliation.

Channelle Edwards, Tara Wilson, Diana Charlie, Cheyenne Chanin, and Chaynoa Chanin working on the "whale" painting

Native Youth Art Workshops (NYAW), Kamloops Art Gallery studio, 3/14/2009

NYAW participants ranged from three-and-a-half to over 60 years old. At first we tried to define "youth" and thought to limit the age from 14 to 24, but soon many outside this age bracket started attending (youth started bringing their own kids and some older parents started hanging around and participating), so we opened it up to be inclusive of other family members and friends (Native and non-Native) participating within the Native youth-focused framework of the workshop. Work on the paintings involved discussion of images, negotiating space, continuity, and skill development. The participants' self-expressions and self-representations are at the heart of this project.

Native Youth Art Workshops (NYAW), Kamloops Art Gallery studio, [Sue Buis photograph], 6/6/2009

The focus of the project was on the development and production of large collaborative works that incorporated aspects of oral histories combined with the youths' experiences of living their own history within the context of the past they carry with them. Nathan is by the "wireless" canvas, Geo (George Ignace) is coming in to work on the music CD, and Henry Venn Robertson, Shoshana Wilson, and Barry Wilson, are working on the "whale" painting

Notes

1 Marks, Laura U. (2003:18). Citizen Salloum. *FUSE magazine* 26(3):18.
2 For more on this subject see: Frankenberg, Ruth (ed.) (1997). *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
3 Dirlik, John (2007:27). Canadian museum decision, reversal angers both Arabs, Jews. *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 21(1):27.
4 Hoolboom, M. (2008:201). *Jayce Salloum: From Lebanon to Kelowna*. In M. Hoolboom (ed.). *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists*. (1st ed.). Toronto, ON: Coach House Books: 185-202.
5 Hoolboom (2008:201).