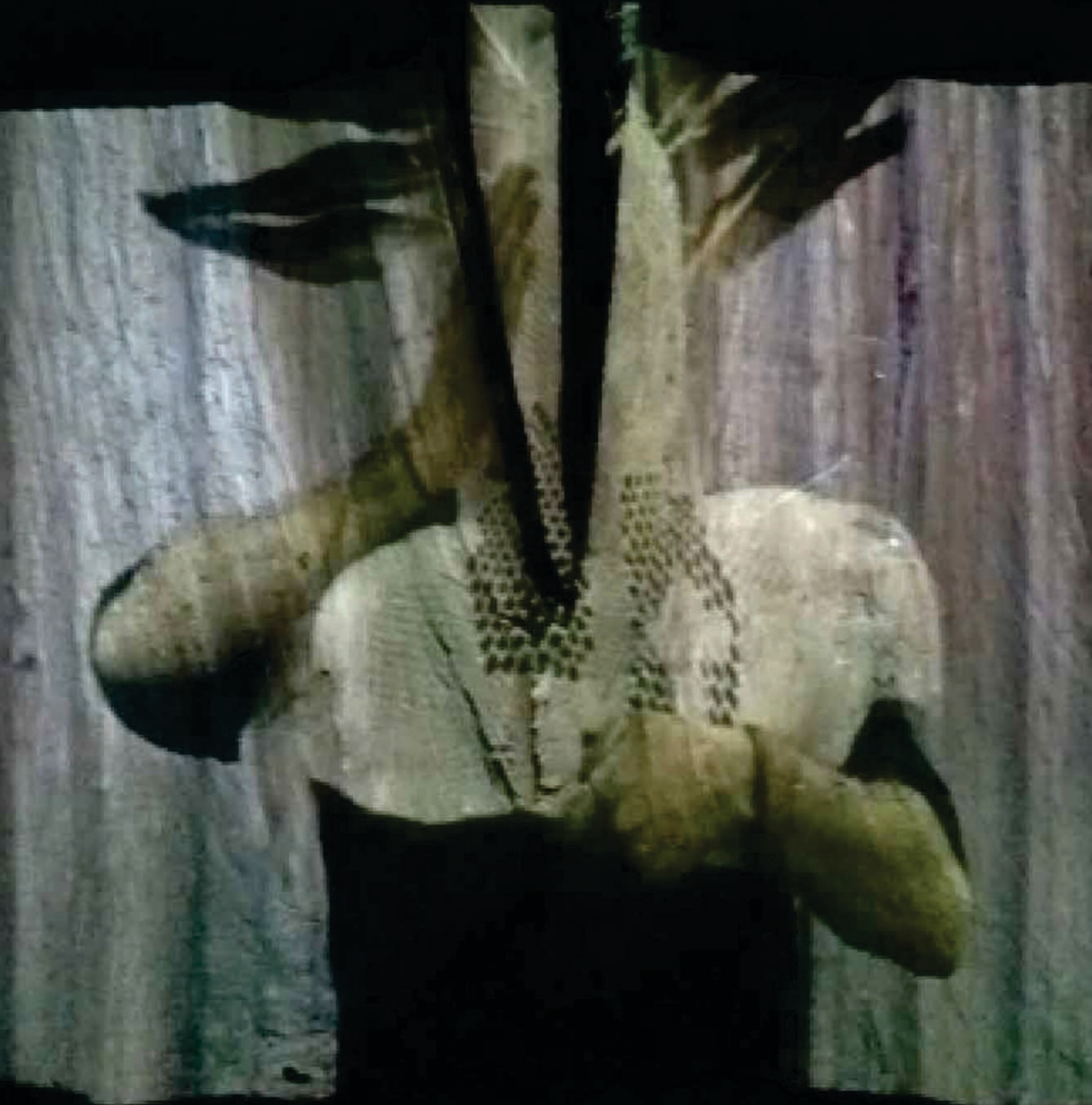


THIRSTING



FOR ART

thirstDays aims to inspire diverse artistic expressions every month for a year

By Brit Bachmann
Photos courtesy of organizers



● Amy Malbeuf, *The Length of Grief* (video still), 2016.

"I think of love as being a necessity to a functioning culture—love, intimacy, and compassion. The idea of trying to work with these abstract notions gets translated into people becoming [more] connected. Not just in terms of tolerating each other, but in terms of accepting, respecting, and having compassion."

This is how Downtown Eastside-based artist Jayce Salloum describes the conception of *thirstDays*, a monthly series of interdisciplinary art programs stretched over one year, hosted by VIVO Media Arts Centre.

Working in photography, video, installation, performance and text, Salloum is prolific. His art has been exhibited in an incredible variety of settings worldwide, from local storefronts and community centres, to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City,

Centre Pompidou in Paris, and many more. In 2014, Salloum won the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in Canada. He has also recently been long-listed for the 2016 Scotiabank Photography Award.

For *thirstDays*, Salloum has invited 25 curators to plan 12 individual programs based around the themes of love, intimacy, and (com)passion—a deliberate modification of the word compassion—within a geopolitical context. The concept is that one program will flow into the next, connecting each instalment of the series, and thus connecting each participant and observer to the project through different topics and points of engagement.

The name *thirstDays* implies a need and longing for something to be quenched. In this particular

instance, the thirst is for culture and inclusivity. The deliberate overlap and interconnectedness of *thirstDays* is intended to counteract an apathy that Salloum has perceived in the city:

"I thought of Vancouver's lack of openness ... We've got natural beauty and wonder, but our culture is lacking a lot of things. This is partly the hangover of the Victorian Period still lurking in all-too-dominant ways, and superimposing itself on immigrant populations, as well."

About the curator-in-residence

Though based in the DTES, Salloum has lived in different cities across Canada, the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. As the grandson of Lebanese immigrants, his time spent in Beirut has been especially

● Aaron Rice, *Two*, 2014, (courtesy of the artist).

influential in shaping his perceptions of identity, ethnicity, and belonging.

Salloum's practice fluctuates between the personal and meditative, and more confrontational and politically motivated works. Speaking to this push and pull, Salloum says, "I can see the value in combining both of those approaches and showing them next to each other, and having the readings play off each other." As a result, this philosophy of combining approaches to social, cultural, and political topics has bled into the format and structure of *thirstDays*.

The curators come from a variety of backgrounds, professions, and interests. For many, this is their first time curating a program. Salloum explains, "[through] combining people from different disciplines and genres—I initially thought [of pairing] a journalist with an artist, or an activist with a writer—people who didn't know each other, [we] bridge as many gaps as possible." The curators reflect a culturally diverse and intergenerational mix of established and emerging artists, activists, academics, and writers.

Each set of curators will interpret the themes of *thirstDays*, and invite between two to 10 artists to perform on the evenings

assigned. They have been given certain parameters to work within—but are by no means limited to them—including the date and time of the events, the writing of curatorial statements and program descriptions, collaboration with several artists, and a thematic overlap with the previous program. This 12-month collaborative effort will result in a publication and a conference in Spring 2017.

Setting a precedent

In the simplest terms, *thirstDays* is considered a curatorial residency at VIVO Media Arts Centre funded through the Canada Council Initiatives Grant for Media Arts Organizations. Salloum and Elisa Ferrari, VIVO's Curator of Events and Exhibitions, applied for this project together, collaborating and sharing the burden of administration.

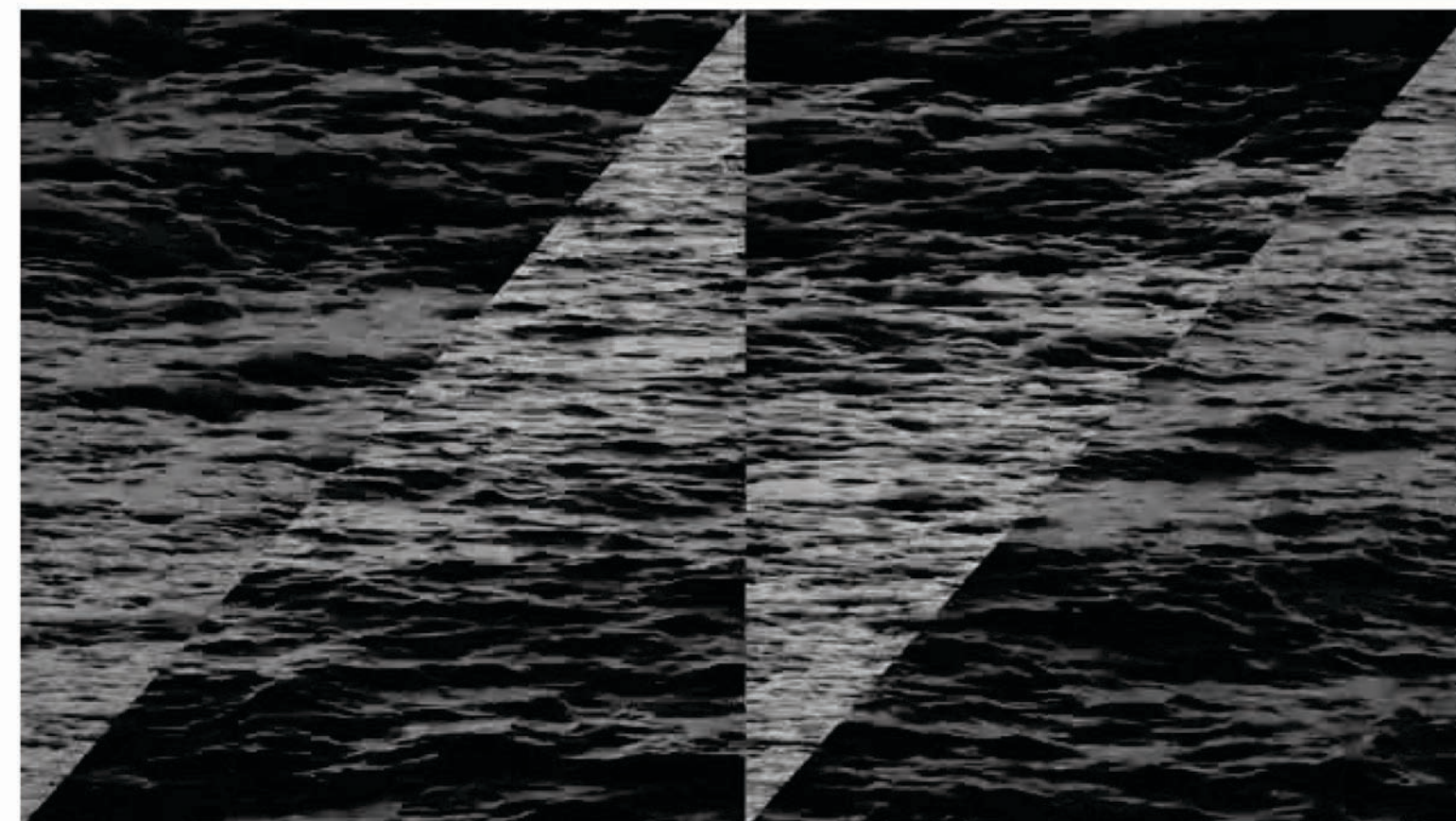
The scope of this project is enormous, though it aims at setting a new precedent for Vancouver arts organizations. Ferrari explains, "It is all about endurance. We'll see how it develops over a year. This [type of project] is something that doesn't happen that often because it requires a lot of energy, and a lot of funds."

thirstDays reciprocates an act of

generosity by Sharon Bradley, a former employee of VIVO who nominated Salloum for the 2014 Governor General Award. When Ferrari approached Salloum about collaborating on a long-term project with VIVO, there was no hesitation. Salloum created a concept to complement the organization: "This type of program could be adapted to other places, but in this instance it was curated with the VIVO space and history in mind, knowing that they aren't afraid of engaging political work."

VIVO is more than just a venue for *thirstDays*. The essence of the organization itself is one of the central influences of the project. VIVO is a non-profit, artist-run centre established in 1973 with a mandate to "directly support artists and independent community-based producers to develop, exchange, and disseminate their skills in a supportive environment." In addition to hosting exhibitions and workshops, distributing all forms of video art, and renting production equipment, it houses Western Canada's largest public reference library and archive of media art, which includes many of Salloum's works.

While administrators manage most artist-run centres in Vancouver, VIVO is collectively run by a group of artists from



◉ Manuel Piña, *Naufragio*, single channel video, 16 minutes, 2015.



◉ Sandra Semchuk, *In Every Tree Breath*, stereoscopic video poem, 2015.

different disciplines and backgrounds, making decisions through consensus. "Everyone else [in Vancouver] has sort of given up that structure for different reasons," says Salloum, "[but] it is admirable in a lot of ways."

Ferrari expands on this idea: "I think VIVO has a history of people gathering and working together towards something they really care about. The fact that VIVO is a collective, with all the problems that can have, is a statement about a certain way of working."

Thus, VIVO's management model of collaboration and seeking consensus through chaos is one of the subtle themes being translated through the lens of *thirstDays*.

"I do think it is an experiment," explains Ferrari. "It's totally unpredictable at this time. That's the exciting part of the program."

"Physical and historical space"

This first instalment of *thirstDays* was a special off-site gathering and ceremonial feast at the Native Education College February 25 titled, "Ceremonial Activism 101: The Gifting Taiontenonhwera:ton (to give thanks)." It was curated and performed by T'uy't'ananat Cease Wyss

and Aaron Rice, and featured Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde and Nicole Mandryk. Incorporating the traditions of several indigenous cultures, it sought to create a foundation of awareness, respect and gratitude for the rest of the *thirstDays* series.

Salloum and Ferrari both place special significance on the beginning and ending of work. The last *thirstDay* will be January 26, 2017, curated by Ferrari and Stacey Ho, and will feature a work by Salloum and others. A conference will follow it in early 2017, which will allow participants and audience members to reflect on *thirstDays* together.

The next *thirstDays* is March 31 at VIVO Media Arts Centre, curated by Jeneen Frei Njootli and Ashok Mathur.

All events in the *thirstDay* series are free, accessible, and open to everyone. Each program will distribute physical documents of curatorial statements and written descriptions that can be assembled as a publication. *thirstDays* are live-streamed online at thirstDays.vivomediaarts.com, which also features a blog by writer-in-residence Tara Hogue.

The abundance of information and documentation shared with the public is a way of actively engaging the audience in the series, making *thirstDays* not

only physically and mentally accessible, but also digitally accessible.

Speaking to the intentions of *thirstDay*, Salloum states, "With this project and working in Vancouver it is very important to work within this physical and historical space in a way that acknowledges its history and past. Not just its violent colonial, oppressive past, but also the previous cultures, and the power of the nature that sustains us here. So we use that as a grounding, and build upon that in the projects that we do, whether they are internal, meditative projects, or have political objectives. I'm hoping [*thirstDays*] will take this form, and continue a trajectory towards acknowledging these different levels, and our responsibility within them." ◉