James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuk's Intimate, Poetic Politics

[2023. *Ithin-eh-wuk-we place ourselves at the center: James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuck*. Timothy Long and Sandra Semchuck, eds. Mackenzie Art Gallery (in collaboration with Museum London). 35-41.]

James Nicholas (1947-2007) and Sandra Semchuk (1948-) were lovers. He was a Rock Cree from rural Manitoba. She is a Ukrainian/Polish-Canadian from rural Saskatchewan. From 1993 until his accidental death in 2007, they nurtured a romantic and creative partnership that did not transcend race and gender, or escape colonization, but worked through this mess and toward something respectful, often beautiful, frequently painful, and always poignant. Theirs was not a blind passion but the wide-awake love of two mature people who find each other in mid-life, sift through each other's' baggage, see things as they are and yet still recognize the possibility of a shared, happy, and productive future.

Sandra and James not only loved each other, they loved life, all life, all lives. They shared an expansive compassion, a generous empathy. Their creative co-productions revel in the beauty of the natural world and the importance of good relations. Their photographs and videos show friendships and stewardship, planting and nurturing, harvesting and ceremony. You can almost feel Prairie sun warm your face, Pacific water cool your toes, sense the distance to the swaying trees, hear a loon cry echo across the lake, but also inhale the indelible stink of a skinned hide while smoke stings your eyes. Their ethics disturb aesthetics. It is as if these artists cannot enjoy the light without also contending with darkness. When they drain colour from some photographs, it seems out of concern that too much optical beauty might distract from contemplating a scene's deeper meanings. The artists also disrupt easy visual pleasure, literally, by floating texts on the surface of some of their landscape pictures. The words bar entrance to territory. They explain natural law, recall dark histories and painful truths known by stewards of those places but that need spelling out for the uninitiated before they can earn access. The couple considers big issues: the aggressive assimilation of Indigenous people (James was an Indian Residential School survivor), Canada's World War One internment camps (Sandra chronicles this in a book[i]), and ecological degradation. Their treatment of these subjects is never academic, objective, distanced. Their art works demonstrate how these forces are etched on the land, manifest in their bodies, minds, and histories, and affect all their relations. Theirs is an intimate, poetic politics.

Eyes closed, imagining Sandra Semchuk.
Picture a pond, serene. Clouds now drift before the sun. Ripples from peripheral or internal sources disturb her surface. Her face is mobile with empathy. How does she move, dress? What sort of body supports that soulful face? At the moment, only weathered attention comes to mind. Sandra's eyes not only watch and record, but her witnessing affects the environment. When talking with her I feel seen and heard, appreciated, yet coaxed toward a more sensitive version of myself.

Wandering numb among the spectacles.

In a crowd of close strangers at the massive Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) event at the PNE grounds in Vancouver, in the fall of 2013, Sandra and I recognize each other. Raised on a stage, amplified by speakers and large screens, human beings, one after the other, disclose their personal lives to a panel of witnesses, a crowd of onlookers, live and online, and for the record. Few describe their abuse. Most catalogue the aftermath: the losses, damages, attempted repairs, relapses, survivor guilt, and intergenerational affects. There are also smaller confessionals; concentric circles of pain: survivors ringed by family, supporters, and then, well, who were we there?

At times, I felt like a trauma tourist.
I was among a delegation of professors[ii] looking to make some sense of the events, to survey the damage for academic or aesthetic opportunity. But as a Métis, as an aspiring real human being, I came to reverberate. The event was too stage-managed, but also too raw, too anguished, too much. There was more meaning here than could ever be recorded, expressed, and comprehended. I was reduced, clarified to a witnessing spirit. I imagined how these folks were as children. I remembered, more than thirty years earlier, the Cree, Dene, and Métis kids in my care at the residential "Home" and camp run by Franciscan nuns. I recalled the story of Métis children, companions of my ancestors at St. Paul des Métis, who addressed their suffering by burning their Indian Residential School to the ground.[iii] I picture my students, friends, and colleagues who struggle to restore themselves while carrying the weight of Canada.

Even before attending the TRC spectacles, I was critical of its preference for individual truths over collective facts, and for reconciliation rather than conciliation.[iv] The truth offered at the live events was selective, a polyphony of individual survivor testimonies, rather than, as in the South African TRC, perpetrator confessions as well. All eyes on the survivors; all weight on their shoulders. Individuals were urged to "share your truth."[v] This encouraged empathetic viewers to focus on damaged individuals rather than consider collective damages and responsibility. Complementary public hearings about the facts—how institutions were designed to assimilate these children and erode Indigenous cultures, identities, and futures, how they managed abuse and protected abusers—would have engendered a different dialogue. These facts are brilliantly covered in subsequent TRC books but was not the focus of the public theater. The choice of the word 'reconciliation' assumes there was a prior conciliation, an agreement that was betrayed and is now in need of re-conciliation. But you need conciliation before you can have re-conciliation. Conciliation is living agreement.

Who was Sandra there? A settler witness. Being present but not centered. One tasked with attention, burdened with a future of sharing what she knows with those who will not. Because of her long relationship with the land, with cameras, with collaborative creation, with James, Sandra knew how to be there, appropriately. She knew how to be with. How to co-exist. How not to colonize the space.

Sandra shone.
Not a moon, not a satellite, not a sympathetic but cool reflector.
She faces the pained, rebounds their lights and darks, but her face also resembles their roiling subterranean contents. Her warm empathy melts reserve and draws emotion to the surface. We embraced, talked, but mostly witnessed. She seemed to allow everything in and register on her

face. Mine felt immobile or wrenched by a trembling grimace. The emotions felt too complex for conveyance. I was embarrassed by my reticence and weak repertoire. Her face was fluid with unworded awareness and unselfconscious response—a countenance incapable of irony.

James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuk's collaborations are attempts to live agreement, to nurture harmony while honouring difference. Their work shows what intercultural living together well in Indigenous territories can look like; not as settlement, but as work, as agency directed toward producing ethical coexistence. Their work offers an intimacy in which both individual and collective truths are revealed but in a manner that resists spectacle and humiliation. In their photo and text installation, "Taking off Skins, Prince Rupert & Vancouver BC" (1994), the couple explores difficult material, negotiates representation, authorship, and space as an act of creative conciliation.

"Taking off Skins" is a photograph and text wall installation consisting of 36 silver (26 x 34 cm) gelatin prints laminated onto acrylic panels. Six of the photographs form a column on the left. They show James skinning a bear. To the right is a grid of thirty photographs arranged six high and five across showing him performing a ceremony at a beach. To the right is a long canvas tarp inscribed with his poem about Indian Residential School and colonization more generally. Michelle LaVallee introduced me to this work and we included it in our exhibition about Indian Residential Schools, Indigenous families, intercultural friendships, conciliation, and reconciliation, *Moving Forward, Never Forgetting* (2015).[vi] I was drawn to the piece and during curatorial tours I lingered over it longest, finding new thoughts and feelings each time. The installation is about recovering oneself through labour for others and ceremony for one's self. It is about adapting traditional ceremony to address new conditions. It is about the difficulty of healing an open wound. It is also the record of a relationship that both embodies and exceeds the script for Indigenous and settler relations.

I tell you that the photographs show a bear skinning and a ceremony, but this is hard to discern from the pictures alone. In the text accompanying the images,[vii] Sandra explains that in the spring of 1994, she and James were at the Friendship Centre in Prince Rupert when that institution's administrator received a call about a bear that had been killed on the road: "Did the elders want to skin it for the hide?" James and a friend offered to do the deed and Sandra photographed the operation. James harvested the claws and later made himself a necklace. "He said the bear salved his urban savage soul." Soon after, the couple went to Kitsilano Beach near downtown Vancouver to conduct and record a ceremony/performance. James, dressed in a suit and tie; "like an Indian who did liaison work between his Band Council and the federal government, a role that he had played for years." As part of the ceremony/performance, James removed these clothes and "put on the bear claw necklace and the red blanket that I handed him. He walked into the ocean, cleansing himself."

Without the written narrative, the visual stories are difficult to read. Both sets are sequential, like film stills, however, the usual cinematic devices for drawing the viewer into the action—establishing, long, and medium shots—are abandoned. Every shot is a close-up: James' face and hands, mostly. The feeling is intimate. The photographic viewer is brought much closer to the action than a live audience member would be permitted. The close-ups are not only an

expression of proximity and care that nearly melts the distance between photographer/audience and James, it is also a strategic adaptation of Indigenous protocol.

All First Nations' prohibit the recording of sacred ceremony. And yet, many contemporary Indigenous artists use something very like ceremony in their art. Making these aspects of their culture public without violating protocol is challenging. For his MFA exhibition, for example, Cree/Saulteaux artist Keith Bird[viii] wanted to make paintings and sculptures about Sundance. He felt called to make art that would be familiar to Indigenous traditionalists, opaque but interesting to the uninitiated. He wanted to intrigue First Nations through this art and inspire them to learn more about their culture from elders and knowledge keepers. The problem is that Plains cultures prohibit representing this ceremony. His Elder, Roy Bison, was interested in the problem and took the proposal to fellow Elders. They agreed that the project was worthy. They figured that representing 10% of ceremony actions or objects would not violate protocol. Interest could be stimulated without giving anything away.

"Talking off Skins'" intimate fragments follow this protocol. Viewers are offered slivers from a sequence, not a full and seamless flow. We are at once drawn into intimacy and prevented from being distant. The hand-held camera tips from side to side, up and down. We cannot pull back from the vertiginous rhythms; cannot retreat to gain our footing and perspective. James and Sandra share just enough to show that something special is happening but not so much as to violate protocol or privacy. But they do come close. I feel discomforted by such nearness to a stranger, to this man's emotions. It took me at least four visits—when the gallery was empty—before I felt able to spend real time with them. James' actions are very like cleansing ceremonies conducted by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh who share Kitsilano Beach. It should not be recorded. However, increasingly, Elders and Knowledge-Keepers share secret stories and sacred teachings with non-Indigenous folks. These are mostly about the land. As I have been told, they are shared because of urgent concerns about environmental degradation. The knowledge comes from that land and all those who live there need to know it. The hope being that the knowing the truth will engender responsible action.

c̓əsnaʔəm, the city before the city, was a brilliant set of exhibitions produced by the Museum of Anthropology, the Musqueam First Nation, and the Museum of Vancouver (Jan. 25, 2015-Jan. 24, 2016) that offered glimpses of the rich cultures that existed before during and after the City of Vancouver was pulled over them. The display at the Museum of Anthropology was particular astonishing in its ability to tell these stories without displaying any of the thousands of items from their collection. Rather than consume old Indigenous belongings,[ix] viewers were invited to read facts, see pictures, and hear accounts by contemporary Musqueam of their lives—including the impact of colonization. The display affirmed enduring Musqueam presence without anchoring their identity at the moment of contact and its immediate aftermath—the time period cherished by settlers (because it includes them). Just as the Musqueam who participated in these exhibitions (especially curator Jordan Wilson) were driven to present the culture without giving away more than is needed, James records the fact of his ceremony without revealing its full meaning. Both *c̓əsnaʔəm* and "Taking off Skins" show that the territory now known as Vancouver was and remains a site of Indigenous ceremony. Two complex realms co-exist. James makes his private public, shares his ceremony because its contents require our urgent attention.

When first looking at “Taking off Skins,” I was tempted to read Sandra as ethnographer, taking the pictures and writing the explanatory text, and James as the Indigenous subject, the “Native” informant. But, as she explains in the exhibition text, and in conversation,[x] they were co-creators. He asked her to go to the beach, to record him, and they worked many hours together to edit the pictures and assemble the display. James was a full agent. A professional actor, he knew not to look into the camera. He knew how to work collaboratively and to perform for an audience. In fact, a tension in the work is the line between performance and authenticity, between being and acting, making and taking. In the photographs, James removes his suit, discards “a role that he had played for years.” He puts on the bear claw necklace, suggesting his authentic self. But is it also a role? The real—the real ceremony, the real people—lie beyond the lens. The images only offers a sense. However, their artfulness has our imaginations oscillate between knowing they are fictions and believing that facts and truths lie through them. The artists’ professional care, the negotiated agency of the players assures that they know what they are doing, that their sharing and my viewing is ethical. Sandra is not *taking* images *of* James under stealth or false pretenses. She is *making* photographs *with* him. This creative tension between witnessing and misappropriation, reverberates throughout their shared work. In, for example, “i am appropriating you” (2007), as the title suggests, seemingly honest transactions, mutual gifting and receiving, including nurturing or erotic offerings and takings, under the shadow of colonization and patriarchy are always inflected by unequal power relations. Even in “the marriage of true minds” the world intrudes. But what makes these collaborations remarkable is that they show their workings, they do not hide these tensions.

Empathy is an “as if” that feels real. And it is real as long as it is not dragged from the realms of art and feeling and into the light of logic and objective explanation. Art is a simile with the force of a metaphor, a comparison or likeness that desires to be accepted as an equivalent. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Sandra and James’ collaborations is that their works are neither windows nor mirrors. They are constructions that do not conceal their craft. Most of the photographs are made rather than taken; performed rather than found.

I never met James Nicholas. I know him only through his words and Sandra’s lens. But there is such care there, such an intense presence. I feel proximity. Aesthetic empathy is the ability to engage others, including absent and even fictional others, through works of art as if they were real and present persons. James lived; Sandra lives. In our rational minds, we know their representations in the gallery are shadows. However, in the space of art as aesthetic empathy, we suspend this distinction and engage them as present beings. The photographs present their stilled lives for our contemplation. We are invited to witness their shared attentions, listening, attempts at mutual understanding, moments of difference, and generous care, but also to enter their circle as vicarious participants. The hope is that their modeling of empathetic participation might influence our feeling, thinking, and action as surely as their com/passionate engagement with each other reshaped them. True collaborations are ventures among equals in which both parties and their methodologies are transformed.

My engagements with James and Sandra’s art are now memories stored alongside re/collections of ‘real’ events and people. James has passed, and, in time, Sandra, me, and everyone we know will also go. Some of our aspects will linger as memories but those, too, will eventually expire along with their hosts. Art can extend a sliver of our passage a little longer into the flesh of the

future. But, to the quick, posterity is a cool and distant stranger. While some works of art—portraiture, for example—are designed as time capsules, most art is addressed to contemporaries. They are objects and processes wrestling with a common current, revealing and shaping a shared time. James and Sandra's collaborations contend with some of the most pressing issues in the territory now known as Canada. While the political and social work of Indigenous/settler conciliation has persisted for generations, Sandra and James are among very few intercultural artistic collaborators who took up the cause before the Truth and Reconciliation era. What makes their art especially prescient is that they engage Indigenous and settler conciliation not by harvesting Indigenous pain, becoming mired in institutional critique, or leaping to utopic solutions, but by showing their intimate, living struggle to know, show, and to be more than their conditions as Indigenous and settler prescribe.

David Garneau

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[i] Sandra Semchuk. *The Stories Were Not Told: Canada's First World War Internment Camps.* The University of Alberta Press: Edmonton, 2018.

[ii] From 2013-18 I was a partner with *Creative Conciliation*, a SSHRC-funded collaboration to research, hold symposia, create texts, art, and curatorial projects about art after Indian Residential Schools: Keavy Martin (Principle, University of Alberta), Ashok Mathur (University of British Columbia), Dylan Robinson (Queens), and Jonathan Dewar (Algoma University).

[iii] Alexandra Olshefsky. "Revisionist History: St. Paul des Métis." https://blogs.mcgill.ca/humanrightsinterns/2013/06/24/revistionist-history-st-paul-des-metis/ Accessed Dec. 30, 2019.

[iv] "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation." *West Coast Line*. #74. Jonathan Dewar and Ayumi Goto, eds. Simon Fraser University: Vancouver, 2012. 28-38.

[v] For example: http://www.trc.ca/statement-gathering.html
http://files.aboriginallink.ca/201201231620370.FINAL_TRC_SYT_Saskatchewan.pdf

[vi] (Mackenzie Art Gallery, 2015).

[vii] This and the next two quotations from Sandra Semchuk, artist statement posted in the exhibition. 2015. https://themedicineproject.com/sandra-semchuk-james-nicholas.html

[viii] 2013. I was Keith Bird's MFA supervisor.

[ix] Musqueam curator and Anthropologist Jordan Wilson uses the phrase 'Indigenous belongings' rather than 'artifacts'. While the cultural objects may be in non-Indigenous collections they remain the belongings of a particular Indigenous community. The belongings belong to them, they belong with the belongings. Jordan Wilson. "Belongings" in "c̓əsnaʔəm: the city before the city." Posted January 27, 2016. https://www.sfu.ca/ipinch/outputs/blog/citybeforecitybelongings/

[x] March 19, 2021.