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Sonic Refusal: Indigenous Belongings without Soundtrack

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For many Indigenous artists, refusal has become a key strategy for avoiding the co-optation by settler colonial audiences and institutions of sensitive or restricted elements of their work. In political and Indigenous studies, refusal often refers to the refusal to acknowledge settler colonial state sovereignty and authority, as well as the methodological refusal to inform on or divulge protected knowledge that throughout history has been expropriated in the service of regimes of power and control (Brown; Simpson, "Ethnographic Refusal"; Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus; McGranahan). In the visual arts, refusal can mean an unwillingness to illustrate, reproduce, demonstrate, or otherwise divulge restricted cultural forms, such as images of deceased ancestors or restricted ceremonial regalia, for outsider viewers. While such acts of refusal are coming to be more understood and respected, far less frequently considered in Indigenous arts and ethnographic records are sonic refusals—the unwillingness to sound or make audible protected or community-owned songs, performances, and aural elements. Contemporary and historic Indigenous cultural production is deeply intermedial in nature and frequently emphasizes multisensory experiences of visual forms alongside dance, song, and performance. It is thus essential to consider how aural as well as visual components in

intermedia practices are being withheld by Indigenous artists from consumption by outsider audiences.

Many significant Indigenous sound artists, musicians, and composers have come to wider attention in recent years, among them Raven Chacon, Laura Ortman, Tanya Tagaq, and Elisa Harkins. The photo-audio installation Fair Warning: A Sacred Place (2019) by Tlingit/Unangax̂ artist Nicholas Galanin offers a case study for intermedia Indigenous practices as a work which visualizes absence while refusing access to Alaska Native cultural soundscapes despite a continuously issuing audio component. The installation consists of a series of photographs that depict empty display cases from the dimly lit Northwest Coast Hall at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York. Galanin took the photographs while the museum was in preparations for the ongoing and long overdue renovation of the hall, first opened in 1899 and organized by the anthropologist Franz Boas into alcoves dedicated to individual cultures and their context rather than universal object types or forms, as was more common museological practice in the late-nineteenth century. This central organizing principle and its emphasis on the uniqueness of cultures has organized the hall since then, with some aesthetic and structural additions in the intervening decades, such as added totem poles and commissioned murals that replaced the windows of the darkened hall.[1] As a result of Galanin's timing, the illuminated display cases are shown emptied of their exhibits: faint discolored silhouettes and mounts are all that remain of the Northwest Coast Native masks, rattles, baskets, and other regalia and belongings that previously filled the gallery. Each photograph is subtitled after the display case it depicts, each of which retains its

[1] The renovations on the Northwest Coast Hall were begun in 2017 with the consultation of two dozen Native and non-Native experts, including Nuu-chah-nulth co-curator Haa'yuups (Ron Hamilton); the anticipated reopening of the hall is currently scheduled for spring 2022.

gallery label: Warfare, Basketry, Supernatural Spirits and Animals, and Prestige and Wealth. The absence of Indigenous material culture leaves only the artifice of museum categorization to focus on, and all its technologies of display.

An audio component accompanies the photographs, sourced from a June 2019 "Native American Art" sale at Bonhams auction house. Over the course of the approximately two-hour fifteen-minute recording, consisting of only a portion of the total auction proceedings, the isolated feed of the auctioneers is heard as they collect bids on a procession of Indigenous art, material culture, and sacred belongings. After announcing the lot numbers and titles, the auctioneers rapidly run through ever-increasing dollar amounts and issue a "fair warning" before dropping the gavel to close the sale with a sharp crack and the seemingly terminal proclamation of "sold." When installed for the exhibition "Speculations on the Infrared" at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York in 2021, four of the photographs surrounded an audio cone positioned above a bench, inviting the viewer to sit and listen to the auction recording while enveloped by the empty display cases (see fig. 1).[2] The pairing of the Northwest Coast Hall's hollow displays and the audible auction transactions within the installation speaks to the theft of ancestral belongings from Indigenous communities by cultural institutions and private collectors alike. In the late nineteenth century, wrongly fearing the disappearance of Indigenous peoples, many institutions engaged in what has been termed "salvage anthropology": widespread efforts to collect and document cultural artifacts for preservation in museums. Such collecting frequently resulted in cultural artifacts being taken

[2] *Fair Warning* has been exhibited twice in person, at the Harbourfront Center, Toronto, September 21 – January 5, 2020 and in "Speculations on the Infrared," curated by the author at the EFA Project Space, New York, January 30 – March 6, 2021. It appears in the Anchorage Museum's ongoing virtual exhibition "Created to Hold Power (Intellectual Property)," where the photo series can be scrolled through while the audio component plays over the visitor's browser: anchoragemuseum.org/created-to-hold-power.

from source communities without clan or tribal permission and the removal of sacred and culturally significant belongings from active use, whether through the looting of graves and seemingly "abandoned" (though in fact seasonal) village sites, or through acquisitions made by private individuals through coerced trade during this period of colonial hardship. Galanin implicates museums and commercial ventures alike in the continued cycle of cultural consumption, particularly as it relates to his own community. Included in the Bonhams sale, for example, was Lot 68, "An Early and Exceptional Tlingit Rattle" in the form of an oystercatcher, formerly from the Harvard Peabody Museum collection and collected from

Fig. 1. Nicholas Galanin, *Fair Warning: A Sacred Place*, 2019, photographic prints and audio, 44 x 64 in. each. Installation view of "Speculations on the Infrared," EFA Project Space, New York, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Exhibition Photography © EFA Project Space/Yann Chashanovski.

Sheet'ká Kwáan (Sitka, Alaska), home to Galanin and his clan, the L'uknax.ádi (Raven/Coho Salmon Clan). The audio and visual components mix public and private systems of cultural display (museum) and transaction (auction house) in a seeming dialectic between public and private ownership. Yet, as the mixing suggests, for Galanin's community and Indigenous peoples more broadly those systems represent present-day instantiations of the same history of salvage and removal.

"Galanin's installation," art historian Ian Bourland recently wrote of the work, is "immediately unsettling in its presentation of absence: 'artifacts' taken from their source communities and freely available for scrutiny in a state museum replaced by inert voids." Galanin takes advantage of the silence implied by the voids of the empty glass cases to heighten this disquieting effect: rather than allowing the viewer to contemplate the absence in silence, Fair Warning's audio imposes the non-diegetic forward march of the auction bids, sharply punctuated by the auction gavel. Yet, despite this manipulation of implied silence, the sonic context of the photographs is in reality quite different. The Northwest Coast Hall remained opened to the public for many months after the majority of the collections were removed, serving as a thoroughfare for visitors noisily passing through to other parts of the museum.

In addition to the bustle of visitors, most impactful for the hall's soundscape was, still at its center, the Digital Totem, a vertical interactive digital interface. Installed in 2016, the Digital Totem is a multimedia installation with two touch-screens from which visitors can navigate close-up views and details of thirty-five objects in the collection, zoom in on regions and landscapes of the Northwest Coast, read interviews with Indigenous collaborators including Tlingit ones, listen to local languages, and, per the museum, "create their own

Fig. 2. Nicholas Galanin, *Fair Warning: A Sacred Place - Basketry*, 2019, photographic print, 44 x 64 in. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

Northwest Coast soundscapes with recordings of natural features, animals, and local instruments." These latter recordings included raven cries, orca calls, waves crashing, and drums beating, among other environmental sounds intended to give context to the material culture and Indigenous lifeways of the Pacific Northwest. The effect while installed was to, through audience interaction, bring a vibrant soundscape into the gallery that had otherwise for over a century been a space of quiet reverence, mysterious and "magical" for many visitors (Jacknis). But rather than reflecting a facsimile soundscape of the Pacific Northwest, as a field recording might, the Digital Totem invited the public to construct an artificial, even fantastical, soundtrack to their experience. Indeed, even after the display cases in the hall were emptied for the renovation, the Digital Totem continued to project sounds and living Indigenous voices

detached from the belongings in the collection. The gallery was thus neither silent nor unoccupied, despite what Galanin's images imply and what some critics have interpreted them to suggest.

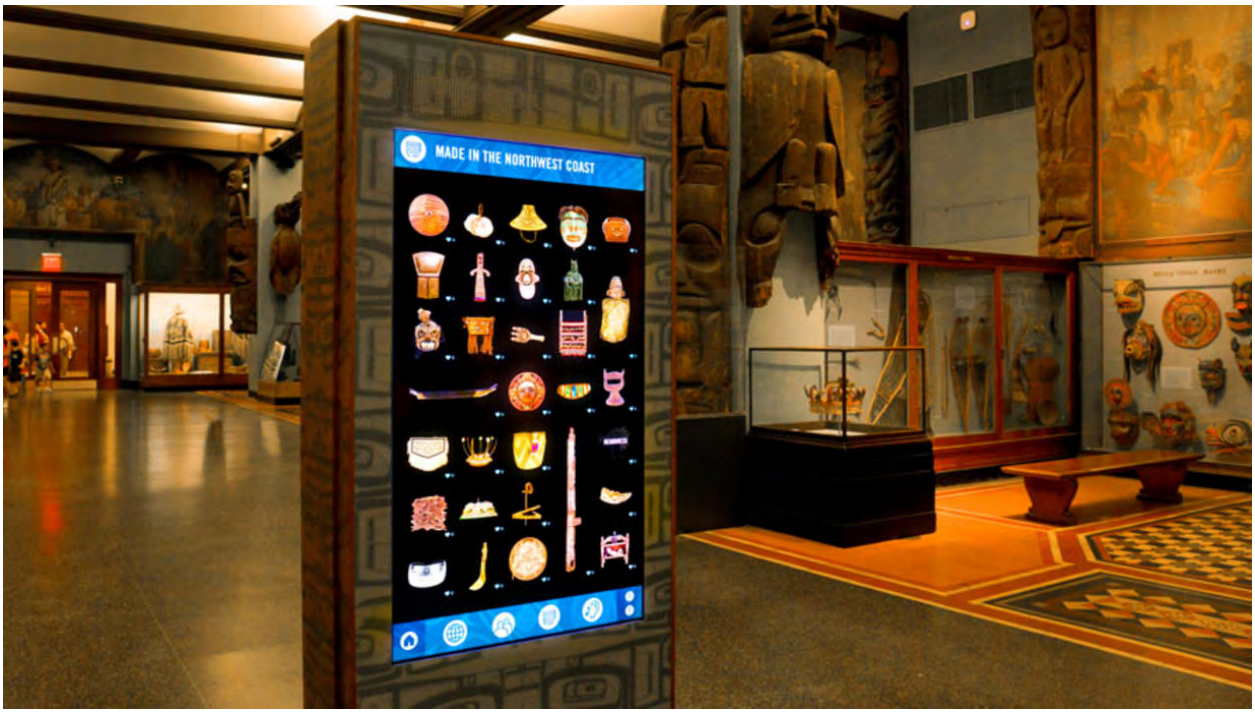

Fig. 3. Northwest Coast Hall with Digital Totem, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 20 Jun. 2017.

With its inclusion of community collaboration and Indigenous voices and testimony, the Digital Totem appears to hold something in common with recent digital repatriation efforts, that is, the return, through digital replication and transmission, of Indigenous knowledge, techniques, and belongings (Hollinger; Isaac). At its best, the Digital Totem is an effort to return some context and Indigenous perspectives to the reception and appreciation of the Northwest Coast Hall collections. But, as the scholars Emily Martin and Susan Harding have appraised, this effort is more of a simulation than a concrete return: "it seems a gesture more

virtual—literally and figuratively—than real" that "makes no gesture at all toward the sense of reparations called for by NAGPRA [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act] and the new kinds of museum-community relations emerging elsewhere" (Martin and Harding 9). Indeed, while the Digital Totem provided context and enlivened the sensorial experience of the Northwest Coast Hall, particularly aurally, the inclusion of Northwest Coast voices and sounds did not attempt to reciprocate in any way back to Indigenous communities as digital repatriations purport to do. Thus, despite their apparent similarities, the Digital Totem is not an example of digital repatriation so much as a digital addendum to the museum and its accompanying technologies of display. Indeed, as anthropologist Heidi Geismar argues, the digital display is not "a simple form of remediation and translation" of Indigenous values to a New York public but rather emblematic of a complex process of "indexicality, mimesis and materiality" that underscores how museum practices, processes, and cultural forms emerge from a social web that exists between communities of origin, physical collections of material belongings, and digital repositories of information (Geismar 20-2). The sounds and media elements of the Digital Totem provided a soundtrack to the Northwest Coast Hall, one produced through community collaboration, but it gave nothing in return to the source communities. Further, when the hall was emptied of its collections, these simulated sounds became an artificial context without even the objects or originals to purportedly contextualize.

The Tlingit scholar, poet, and orator Nora Marks Dauenhauer has described how visually-oriented Western museum display strategies are inappropriate for experiencing Indigenous belongings, many of which must be activated by song and dance. For the Tlingit, "History (the stories of covenants among people, animals, spirits, and the land), song and dance, visual art, and the ritual use of an art object are inseparable" (Dauenhauer, "Tlingit

At.óow" 101). She describes the display of Tlingit visual art without the songs and "ritual process that confirms and reconfirms its mythic and spiritual context" in sonic terms: "Museum displays and books often do injustice to this traditional sense of totality and, therefore, can be disconcerting to Native people. […] Museum display and the description of objects in Western tradition is by nature more static and de-contextualized, at best, like a movie without a soundtrack" (Dauenhauer, "Tlingit At.óow" 101). The Digital Totem overlaid a soundscape in the Northwest Coast Hall that was in practice decontextualizing: the wrong songs, sounds, and voices accompany the belongings.

Many of the Tlingit belongings in the Northwest Coast collection have the status of at.óow: important emblems representing lineage, heritage, and the associated rights of Tlingit clans. The word at.óow means "our belongings" or "something that you own," and Dauenhauer describes it as a "fundamental concept [that] underlies all dimensions of Tlingit social structure, oral literature, iconography, and ceremonial life" (Dauenhauer, "Traditions and Concepts" 29). At.óow can be physical belongings and art objects that represent clan crests in visual forms, such as hats, tunics, regalia, or clan houses, but also include songs, music, dances, stories, names, spirits, and designs. The ritual display of at.óow is accompanied by the performance of appropriate songs and customary rhythmic oratory that acknowledges and welcomes the crests. Songs can themselves be considered at.óow and are strictly owned by clans or hiit (house groups). As an important means for communicating relationships between people, other-than-human beings, and ancestral lands, songs not only provide the "soundtrack" to Tlingit art but also play essential spiritual roles in effecting transitions in ancestral or communal context, such as the ku.éex', or potlatch, when mourning a death or celebrating a (re)birth (Thornton et al.). Song, dance, and material culture interact and form a relational set

of practices that feed and nourish ancestors during ku.éex' and ceremonial feasting, including the gankas'íx'I or "fire dish" ritual and horn spoons intricately carved with clan stories and crest figures (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 53; Victor-Howe). For the Tlingit, then, the Northwest Coast Hall display decontextualizes the interconnection of all aspects of Tlingit life—visual art, song, dance, kinship, material culture, and spirituality—including a sonic rupture of Tlingit laws, ancestral relations, and world views.

Fig. 4. Sealaska Heritage Institute. "Tlingit Sheet'k'a Ḵwáan Dancers (People of Sitka), Celebration 2018 | Sealaska Heritage." YouTube, 16 Jul. 2018, youtube.com/watch?v=_cVkyPguWJc. Accessed 11 Oct. 2021.

Galanin is a keen sound artist and turns the absence of the Tlingit cultural soundtrack into the juxtaposition that is at the heart of Fair Warning. When composing his photos for the installation, he experienced the Northwest Coast Hall emptied of Indigenous belongings yet still full of the sounds of museum visitors and the Digital Totem. As exhibited thus far in public contemporary art settings distant from Lingít Aaní (Tlingit Land), the emptiness of the

photographed display cases is legible to an assumed non-Native art viewer as an absence. But Galanin's audio component critically replaces the ambient Northwest Coast Hall soundscape that is itself absent of the proprietary songs and sounds with which the at.óow and belongings formerly in the cases should be accompanied and fed. Galanin's auction soundtrack is a dubbing, but two steps removed from the Tlingit soundtrack. He excises the simulated sounds of the Digital Totem and acoustically encodes Fair Warning with the language and rhythm of colonial commodification. Rather than the cadence and drumbeat of Tlingit song and oratory, he inserts the measured drone of the auction house and the beat of its gavel.

Fig. 5. Nicholas Galanin, *Fair Warning: A Sacred Place – Prestige and Wealth*, 2019, photographic print, 44 x 64 in. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

Xwélméxw (Stó:lō) scholar Dylan Robinson's concept of "hungry listening" demonstrates how "settler colonial forms of perception" and "unmarked forms of listening" can hide epistemic and perceptual colonial violence from uncritically listening settlers (Robinson 2, 10). Fair Warning counters "hungry listening" by non-Tlingit audiences with a sonic refusal. Acknowledging the absence of a Tlingit soundtrack alongside the absence of the display cases, Galanin refuses to replace it with Tlingit song or simulated soundscapes and instead overwrites it with the capital hunger of the auctioneer. He thus refuses to feed the settler desire to hear an authentic Indigenous performance appropriate for the absent belongings, and simultaneously refutes the artificial soundtrack of the Digital Totem. Rather than feed the absent at.óow, ancestral relations in material form, with song and dance as Robinson notes of performances by some of his contemporaries, Galanin refuses to visualize those belongings and does not reveal any reciprocal act of sustenance for the audience (Robinson 92). The result, instead, is a feedback loop of consumption. Galanin feeds the sounds of consumption back to the hungry listener, forcing them to listen to colonial engorgement as a kind of consumption by proxy. And like a hungry person watching another eat, perhaps one becomes aware of one's own cravings and the hungry listening taking place. By activating the aural senses, Galanin puts the colonial collecting of Indigenous material belongings into conversation with sonic consumption, a relationship that has always existed, according to Robinson, certainly in the case of Tlingit ethnographers (Coray). Galanin replaces the cultural silence implied by the empty display cases with the sounds of capital consumption. But his refusal of hungry listening proposes different futurities for the ongoing lives of Indigenous belongings housed in museums, and the soundtracks that can and will feed them. The striking images of the empty museum hall suggest a potential future in which museum

storage rooms are emptied and the collections returned to Indigenous communities. There, Galanin proposes, the belongings will be sung to and fed anew, existing in communities with "the capacity to see without being seen, and the desire to exist without being fed upon."

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