

FAR AWAY SO CLOSE: PART III

SEPTEMBER 12 – OCTOBER 31, 2015

ALANA BARTOL
MIKE BOURSCHIED
DAVID SEMENIUK

CURATED BY KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

Far Away So Close is a series of exhibitions, publications, and events that explores the idea of distance, considers the bridging of distance as an ultimately quixotic gesture, and investigates the particular relationship of this gesture to art making. Presented over the course of 2014–15, each installment features emergent artists who draw upon a variety of modes, materials, and methodologies, and whose practices are scattered across the globe. Part III of *Far Away So Close* turns its attention to three artists – Alana Bartol, Mike Bourscheid, and David Semeniuk – who examine the elaborate proxies we invent in our attempt to capture, represent or claim an “authentic” natural experience.

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In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus describes the feeling that arises from experiencing the irreconcilable divide between our human need to seek meaning and our existence in a world that itself has no meaning, and which is unbearably indifferent to us. “This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting,” Camus offers, “is properly the feeling of absurdity.”¹ The number of contemporary artists—even in my immediate vicinity—whose work has addressed humankind’s desire for proximity to, communion with, or representations of the natural world, is so great that the focus might be better understood as a cultural fixation.² But it is precisely the incongruity or gap Camus describes, that irresolvable distance *between* the human actor and his or her natural setting—and the resultant longing or feeling of absurdity produced as a result—that might be said to link the practices of the three artists whose works comprise this final episode of *Far Away So Close*.

Mike Bourscheid’s sculpture- and performance-based practice, which often involves his fabrication of ungainly or ridiculous appendages and prosthetics, channels alternate personae as a device for addressing aspects of his own Luxembourgian heritage, as well as notions of masculinity, European pomposity, and patriarchal power. In much of Bourscheid’s work, the actions and accoutrement of these personae are uncomfortably (and thus hilariously) out of step with their environment. Both *CAS; Dominique Baum’s Journey* (2012) and *Der Hammel von Kouver: Introducing Myself to the Canada Geese* (2012) enact misdirected attempts to lay claim to or communicate with their natural surroundings. In *Dominique Baum’s Journey*, slide after slide records a solitary male figure posing with a strangely phallic flag-prosthetic in a variety of rugged mountain settings. As Baum treks from site to site, from mountaintop to rushing river, his claim to space becomes no more convincing, and his actions both invoke and belittle the myth of the heroic wanderer and the entire project of European colonization. In *Der Hammel von Kouver*, Bourscheid offers a musical composition performed on a bespoke set of leather bagpipes. The work parodies the seriousness of bird enthusiasts (“I play it by flapping my arms like this, like a goose,” explained the artist as he demonstrated the mechanics of the instrument to me), the well-meaning missteps of cultural tourists, and the West Coast’s own smug convictions about its closeness to nature.

In David Semeniuk’s site-dependent, durational installation *Mechanical Weathering* (2012 - present), the absurd performance shifts from artist to curator. Concerned with the ways that histories of capital and scientific knowledge have influenced the production of photographic objects, as well with the way meaning is constructed through photographs and their exhibition, Semeniuk here trains his focus on the role of the art institution in the construction of that meaning. Hundreds of 6x4 inch, black & white plotter prints of landscapes³ are affixed to the gallery wall using a temporary adhesive, to produce the illusion of a singular cohesive mountainscape. Two fans are placed in front of the landscape and activated for a pre-determined period of time. As the fans blow, the prints begin to lift off the surface of the wall, drift around in the currents of air, and clutter the floor. Once the initial act of “weathering” is complete, the fans are removed, and the curator selects a set of prints still fixed to the wall to remain for the duration of the exhibition. The rest, bent, curled and trod upon, are removed. The laborious and ultimately sabotaged exercise of installation—painstakingly selecting and fixing hundreds of prints to the wall, only for them to be blown off and swept away—is suggestive of the sheer “thinness” of our engagement with nature through our insatiable desires to make representations of it.

Alana Bartol, in contrast, does not suggest that any of the subjects forming the focus of her work are absurd. Rather, she enacts practices at the periphery of accepted reason, and which may or may not be read as such, particularly given their presentation (or re-presentation) in the context of the gallery. Throughout her work, Bartol investigates ideas of visibility, transformation and survival through our relationships with the non-human world, and with one another, thus exploring alternate epistemologies within and beyond the human body. *Forms of Awareness: Ghillie Suit* (2012 - present) is an ongoing performance series wherein the artist dons a handmade ghillie suit—a type of camouflage designed to resemble heavy foliage—constructed from synthetic fibres and local flora. While snipers, hunters, and nature photographers wear ghillie suits in order to conceal themselves within their environment, Bartol’s ghillie traverses urban and suburban realms, appearing in various green spaces such as parks, naturalized trails, and spaces slated for development. Though the ghillie suit’s precise purpose is to blend in, Bartol’s version is out of step with its environment. In this way, she effectively exposes both how our “communion” with nature is frequently performed for the purpose of inflicting violence and control, as well as the vast distance between our human world and the natural one.

Much of Bartol’s practice aims to make visible that which remains invisible in our own environments. During the winter of 2014-15, while in residence at the Banff Centre, Bartol began to explore dowsing as a creative method and aesthetic practice. Dowsing or “water-witching” is a form of divination that uses “Y” or “L” shaped rods (often a bent coat hanger or found branch) to locate underground water without the use of scientific technology. During a trip to Nova Scotia, Bartol learned that the women in her mother’s family had long been regarded for their “water witching” abilities. While there is no scientific evidence that dowsing is effective or accurate, fascination with this pseudoscience persists. For Bartol, the practice of dowsing might offer a process for shifting perceptions about our relationships with nature. In her wrestling with the absurd—with practices that attempt to close the gap between our own existence and that of the world’s, but are dismissed as

dissonant or out of harmony with majority culture—Bartol enacts a leap of faith.

Camus was not the first to come to the conclusion that “the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” constitutes an absurd existence. But Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Sartre, and other thinkers, he claimed, were too eager to flee “that last crossroad where thought hesitates.”⁴ They had discovered the absurd only to seek refuge or escape by insisting on some absolute truth or value. For Camus, instead, to persist in the condition of the absurd is to make a crucial act of revolt. “The first and only evidence that is supplied me, within the terms of the absurdist experience, is rebellion,” he insists. “Rebellion is born in the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition.”⁵ It is this act of rebellion, I would argue, that sits at the core of Alana Bartol’s, Mike Bourscheid’s, and David Semeniuk’s engagement with that which may be close at hand, yet remains so far away.

WORKS CITED

- ¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 6.
- ² Consider, among many others, Liz Magor’s examinations of seclusion and fugitive psychology, Althea Thauberger’s solitary, forest-bound adolescent (*not afraid to die*, 2001, single channel video projection), Kevin Schmidt’s examinations of the sublime, Karin Bubas’ large-scale photographs of enigmatic, lone female figures, Tim Gardner’s holiday snapshot watercolours and, most recently, the Everything Company’s landscape-viewing apparatus, exhibited at Access in 2013 (*The Everything Company: Three Wrongs Don’t Make a Right*, November 16 - December 28, 2013, Access Gallery).
- ³ In a nod to Semeniuk’s other occupation (he holds a PhD in oceanography), *Mechanical Weathering’s* landscape photographs have been sourced from seven scientists (Elizabeth Asher, Kristina Brown, Joel Byersdorfer, Chris Payne, Nina Schuback, Rebecca Taylor, and Kang Wang), and originate from seven continents.
- ⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 9.
- ⁵ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1956), 10.

BIOGRAPHIES

ALANA BARTOL is an interdisciplinary artist, curator, and educator from Windsor, Ontario, currently based in Calgary, Alberta. Her collaborative and individual works explore concepts of visibility and survival through our relationships with nature and each other. Bartol holds an MFA from Wayne State University (Detroit), where she developed and taught the first Performance Art course in the Department of Art, co-founded the first student-run gallery, and received a Thomas C Rumble Fellowship.

MIKE BOURSCHIED lives and works in Luxembourg and Vancouver. He holds an MFA from the University of Arts Berlin (UdK). In his present body of work, Bourscheid translates his heritage through sculpture, photography, and performance. His work operates to express darker social and political concerns through the device of humour. He was recently nominated for the Robert Schuman Award for Emerging Artists (Luxembourg).

DAVID SEMENIUK is a formally trained scientist and a self-trained artist. His art practice addresses how the histories of capital and the production of scientific knowledge have influenced the production of photographic objects, the construction of meaning in photographic images, and the exhibition of photographic works. He is also interested in using art objects to investigate spatial and temporal scales of environmental changes, how we experience these changes, and ways of representing them. Semeniuk is based in Vancouver.

STEFFANIE LING is a writer, mostly. Her essays, criticism and art writing have been published alongside exhibitions, in-print and online in Canada and the United States. She is the editor of *Bartleby Review*, an occasional pamphlet of criticism and writing in Vancouver, and a curator at CSA Space. Currently, she is writing a book of letters and stories that weigh in on banality, social awkwardness and smoking.

TANYA LUKIN LINKLATER’s practice spans experimental choreography, performance, video, and text. Her work has been performed/exhibited internationally, and her poetry and essays have been published in numerous journals and catalogues. She studied at University of Alberta (M.Ed.) and Stanford University (A.B. Honours). She was awarded the K.M. Hunter Artist Award in Literature in 2013. Linklater is Alutiiq with family from the Native Villages of Port Lions and Afognak in southern Alaska and makes her home in northern Ontario, Canada.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, September 11, 2015, 7:00 PM (in conjunction with SWARM XVI)

IN CONVERSATION: Alana Bartol & David Semeniuk with Kimberly Phillips

Saturday, September 12, 2015, 2:00 PM

Access is committed to encouraging dialogue linking artists of different generations to one another and to the wider community. As part of our ongoing In Conversation series, this informal event will bring Alana Bartol and David Semeniuk, two of the exhibiting artists of *Far Away So Close, Part III* into discussion with Access Director/Curator Kimberly Phillips. Join us as we explore themes of landscapes, distance, longing and absurdity that are evoked by the works on view in the gallery.

PUBLICATION LAUNCH: A Reading and Conversation with Steffanie Ling

With special performance by Der Hammel von Kouver

Thursday, October 29, 2015, 7:00 PM

Access is interested in encouraging the entanglement of visual art and the written word, with the publication of books that sit alongside our exhibitions. Join us for the launch of the publication *Far Away So Close, Part III*, which features written contributions by Tanya Lukin Linklater and Steffanie Ling. We will mark this occasion with an informal reading by Ling, and a special appearance by Der Hammel von Kouver (a.k.a. exhibiting artist Mike Bourscheid), performing the composition “Introducing Myself to the Canada Geese” on bespoke bagpipes.

“WATER WITCHING” WORKSHOP WITH ALANA BARTOL

Saturday, October 31, 2015, 2:00 PM

Far Away So Close, Part III exhibiting artist Alana Bartol will lead an exploration of the history, use, and tools of dowsing or “water-witching” (using “Y” or “L” shaped rods [often a bent coat hanger or found branch] to locate ground water without the use of scientific technology). After a trip to Nova Scotia, Bartol learned that the women in her mother’s family have long been regarded for their “water witching” abilities. Drawing on her family history and traditions of divining, she explores dowsing as a creative method and mode of inquiry investigating ways of knowing within and beyond the human body. While there is no scientific evidence that dowsing is accurate, a fascination with this pseudoscience persists. Prepare for the handling of dowsing rods and the opportunity to test your powers of divination. All are welcome, even the skeptics. Space is limited, so please pre-register at the gallery: access@vaarc.ca or 604 689 2907.

Access Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and BC Gaming, the City of Vancouver, the Burrard Arts Foundation, and our committed donors, members and volunteers.



Access Gallery is a platform committed to emergent and experimental art practices. We enable critical conversations and risk taking through new configurations of audience, artists and community.



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