

Susan Shantz: Flow and Vigilance

Flying Over

Amongst the resonances that stay with me regarding the myriad thoughts, experiences, and feelings offered by Susan Shantz's exhibition, *Confluence*, the sense of a fly-over above an ever-shifting land and waterscape remains. It must be said that this effect is in part associated in my memory with the exhibition on-screen, with Susan herself gently piloting a Zoom device amidst her works, tilting and bobbing between the large format installations, tiny maps, videos, and sculptural works.¹

In the late 1980s I had the opportunity to live in Northern Canada for a two-year period, working as a teacher alongside my wife, Barbara, in a government school in the community of Igluligaarjuk, Nunavut — referred to as Chesterfield Inlet, N.W.T., at the time. Our periodic travels there from southern Canada involved flying in a prop plane small enough to land on the remote airstrips in such settlements that had been imposed upon the region in the 1950s. During those flights, our gazes would be fixed through the windows, cast downward towards a lacework of land and water or variegated ice and snow, depending on the season. Flying above the North the topography captivated us, while sometimes our hearts would be in our mouths as we floated from one community to another (picking up and dropping off passengers), the shadow of our tiny plane persistent upon the ground never far below.

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Susan Shantz's wondrous, *Water Basin I*, which forms a centerpiece to *Confluence*, is a vast cutwork "ceiling," delineating where the river begins at the Saskatchewan glacier in the Rockies of Alberta, then describing its conjunction with other small rivers before becoming the North and South Saskatchewan, and through a diversion at the Gardiner Dam, meandering through the Qu'Appelle Valley. The work is made of a set of 4 giant blue tarpaulins, anchored variously to the walls and ceiling of the gallery, with spotlights raking across the shiny plastic surfaces that stretch and pull, with an occasional water-like tendril slipping away downward towards the floor of the gallery. Light also floods through the brilliant hue of the tarps to produce multi-tonal shadow plays on the floor and walls of the gallery. It is this effect that brings my Northern flight memories to mind.

My screen-based interaction with the work suggested that I was surrounded by and embodied within the work, but it also left me without a body: the impulse to touch was met by being unable to touch. This decentering was by turns troubling and

¹ Owing to the Covid pandemic, it was necessary to view the exhibition remotely, on January 31, 2022, before writing this essay. I am grateful to Susan Shantz, Jennifer McRorie, and the staff of the MJMAG for their facilitation of my tour. I respectfully acknowledge that the exhibition is located on Treaty Four, the traditional lands of the Nêhiyawak (Plains Cree), Ojibwe, Nahkawé (Saulteaux), and Nakota, Lakota and Dakota (Assiniboine) and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

productive. The shadowy layering of the edges of the tarps and their river silhouettes speak to the fraught evidence of colonization that the gridding and mapping of Canadian Prairie land still bears, a system that imputes onto those plains, waters controls and oppressions that remain intact today. Such a program also points to the increasingly deteriorating relationships between the environment and the humans and the more than humans who inhabit those spaces, albeit with differing histories, time signatures, and—for humans—ethical bearings.

Confluences

Susan Shantz's exhibition is largely the result of research investigations, journeys, and creative experiments made alongside colleagues from the School of the Environment at the University of Saskatchewan.² The projects occurred in contexts where her investments as an artist offered alternative responses to curiosity, relative to the work of counting, recording, and carefully observing as a means to knowledge production that scientists regularly embrace. Part collaborator and part visual poet, the artist brings to the river confluences the kinds of probing that acknowledge mystery, complexity, and the importance of unanswered questions and *not knowing* that foregrounds other possibilities.

One of these possibilities is in Shantz's title itself: *Confluence*. I recently had the privilege to work as a co-curator with Indigenous photographer and storyteller Jeff Thomas, whose own cultural and creative commitments centre on *confluences*. Our project, the exhibition *GardenShip and State*,³ has both literally and metaphorically been set at the meeting points of rivers. So that has encouraged me, in writing this piece, to seek to more deeply ponder the questions and inferences that the title of Susan Shantz's exhibition highlights. And, in doing so, I turned to my colleague, Jeff, to ask what confluence means for him:

The word "confluence" is a pillar for my practice, which I use as a place determined by the natural route rivers take, and as a meeting place for ancient Indigenous people. Today, the confluence dynamic is a symbol for building allies among all people, as my ancestors believed and carried out in the 1613 Two Row Treaty.⁴

Maps and Stitches

As one moves through the exhibition, the results of additive, methodical, and creative practices are consistently apparent. The artist relies on the work of the hand as an index of time and careful labor in several artworks, particularly *Confluence II (Bow/Oldman/Red Deer/South Saskatchewan Rivers)*, and *River Wear (for managers)*. The former is delicately stitched and drawn across a span of fabric affixed to rectangular structures that are presented on the gallery wall and continue

² Susan Shantz has been working on collaborative and individual projects related to this exhibition since 2016.

³ Museum London, October 2021 – January 2022.

⁴ Email conversation between Patrick Mahon and Jeff Thomas, February 7, 2022.

somewhat casually downward and onto the floor to undermine the rigidity of the inherited grid to which the format refers. They also echo a smaller unfolding book structure located on an adjacent table, entitled, *Confluence I*. The large work bears the careful buildup of thousands of blue stitches in multiple tones of embroidery floss, intersected with sometimes precise and other times loosely drawn lines referencing badlands formations and numerous other topographical incidents. The combination is a reminder of the meditative commitments of such crafting, including embroidery and drawing, and the ideas and questions that might be inferred from those strategies. One question that comes to mind is whether the artist's heritage, related as it is to Mennonite communities, is alluded to via the attitudes and value systems that intersect with such venerable, domestic practices.

In an earlier text I wrote that related water and artistic expression to activism and critique, I referred to the work of French philosopher Michel Serres; I think that some of those ideas bear repeating here.⁵ Among Serres' writings, the influential book, *Le Contrat Naturel*, pushes for the establishment of a natural contract between humans and the earth that could enable a renewed system of balance and reciprocity. In making his case, Serres observes that as a result of a historically determined need for mere social contracts many have:

abandoned the bond that connects us to the world, the one that binds the time passing and flowing outside, the bond that relates the social sciences to the sciences of the universe, history to geography, law to nature, politics to physics, the bond that allows our language to communicate with mute, passive obscure things . . . [but] we can no longer neglect this bond.⁶

Another section of the book, entitled "The Religious," invokes the manner in which many religious practitioners pray according to the hours of the day and night. Serres reminds us that such acts are not about spending time but sustaining it. Indeed, he says that, like Penelope (in *The Odyssey*) who never left her loom, "religion presses, spins, knots, assembles, gathers, binds, connects, lifts up, reads or sings the elements of time."⁷ And, offering us a picture of the religious as woven within the world through time, he adds, "The term religion expresses exactly this trajectory, this review or prolonging whose opposite is called negligence, the negligence that incessantly loses the memory of these strange actions and words."⁸

In the exhibition Susan Shantz presents a video entitled *River Wear: Current* in which a woman's hand is shown sewing, pulling thread through fabric, in a manner

⁵See Mahon, Patrick. "Pictures, Time, Colour, and Apology: Some Terms of Address Regarding Art about Water." *The Source: Rethinking Water Through Contemporary Art*. Rodman Hall Art Centre, 2017, pp. 16-25

⁶ Serres, Michel. *Le Contrat Naturel*. University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 48.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.47.

reminiscent of water moving through the landscape. The video layers together images of a river's surface so that the sewing appears immersed in water, prolonged and sustained. Set alongside the video, three ironing boards supporting men's shirts with stitched rivers running down their backs are presented. The work entitled *River Wear (for managers)* appears grimly humorous amidst the ruminative subtlety of many of the works, presenting as it does emblems of power as surfaces for other considerations and practices, shown in a manner that makes them prone and vulnerable.

Gazing & Vigilance

From its origins in the Saskatchewan glacier in the Columbia Icefield of the Rocky Mountains, the *kisiskaciwani-sipy* (swift flowing river) flows 1287 km east towards the Alberta-Saskatchewan border and beyond, where it joins the mighty South Saskatchewan River at the Saskatchewan River Forks. Together these watery bodies become the Saskatchewan River, which winds its way across the prairies, flowing into Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba. The waters of Lake Winnipeg eventually flow out into the Hudson's Bay and make their way up into the Arctic Ocean and out into the North Atlantic and rejoin the earth's water cycle. These humble waters that cut across the prairies eventually make their way into broader earth water/hydrogeological systems, making the struggles of unassuming prairie rivers a matter of global concern.⁹

On first entering the space of *Confluence*, viewers encounter a circular aperture set in the wall, where they see a video documenting the changing surface of a lake. It is entitled *Sentinel (Buffalo Pound Lake)*. A forty-nine-minute loop produced from still images made by a trail cam mounted on a buoy in the lake by the Global Institute for Water Security, University of Saskatchewan, the piece is comprised of images taken between dawn and dusk each day, from May to September 2018. To complete the work, Shantz stitched together photo sequences that mark various changes to the water's surface, and that show noteworthy incidences such as the onset of an algae bloom. Resonant with Métis/otipemisiw scholar Zoe Todd's careful description quoted above, which articulates a narrative of the river waters moving across the land, through lake systems and into the ocean, this video acts foremost as a witness. Here the artist's poetics are nuanced by the simple imparting of plain evidence of the daily exigencies and precariousness to which water is subject. The attitude of "non-negligence" that Michel Serres calls for in *Le Contrat Naturel* is thus enacted through the eye of the camera, and the work of the artist. The product of daily recording and of Susan Shantz's subtle choosing and assembling offers us an opportunity for gazing that beckons our vigilance.

⁹ Todd, Zoe. "Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in *amiskwaciwâskahikan* and Treaty Six Territory." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Inquiry*, vol. 43, no 1, 2017, pp. 102-107.

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