

NEW MEDIA REVIEW

A Tradition of Evolution: The Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival

CARLEIGH BAKER

Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival: Vancouver, British Columbia, 25-26 May 2017. The festival featured film and new media presentations, including a “Turtle Island Shorts” program (May 26); VR and augmented reality presentations (May 27); and youth, international, and Indigenous justice screenings (May 28).

nə́caʔmat ct (/Naat-sah-maat/) means “We are one” in the Musqueam language of hə́nqəmínəm. This name was given to the Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival (VIMAF) 2017 by Musqueam knowledge keeper Shane Point to recognize the tradition of bringing communities together in a modern context to share and celebrate arts and culture. Indigenous arts are both rooted in tradition and constantly evolving. The stories shared through generations are not museum pieces – preserved behind glass for perpetuity – but, rather, are able to grow and adapt alongside cultural and societal changes. This makes the field of media arts a challenging and dynamic space for creators. VIMAF organizers Steven Eastman and Dr. June Scudeler assembled a collection of films and presentations that reflected the intersection of digital media and traditional knowledge, celebrating the creative minds of our diverse and multi-talented community.

The festival kicked off at Studio 1398 on 25 May. After cultural knowledge keeper Shane Point generously provided some context on the meaning of nə́caʔmat ct, Musqueam artist Christie Lee Charles (a.k.a. Christy Lee) performed what she called hə́nqəmínəm hip hop – a blend of stories, traditional teachings, and beats. Charles’s approach to music – which is created with permission from elders and adherence to protocols – is a prime example of how modern forms are used to bring cultural teachings to new audiences. Charles opened with a song she wrote for her daughter, and she accompanied herself on the drum. As she

moved into hip hop, rapping in both English and *hən̓d̓əmin̓əm̓*, she used pre-recorded beats, skilfully laid down by DJ O Show. This blending of tradition and innovation would be reflected throughout the weekend's events.

The Turtle Island shorts program on 26 May included filmic explorations of language and cultural resurgence, with work by Elizabeth LaPensée, Gregory Coyes, and Cara Mumford. Coyes's short film *Strutting for Our Sisters* (Good Medicine Media) documents a march conducted in Vancouver by the Warriors Against Violence to raise awareness of violence against women. Coyes, who is of Cree, Mohawk, and mixed European ancestry, is a member of the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance and teaches at Capilano University. The men in the film spoke passionately about intergenerational trauma, reversing patterns of violence, and honouring women. This show of solidarity – with a nod to Indigenous resurgence via the building of strong communities from within – felt particularly appropriate to the idea of *nə́caʔmat ct* since, as the film points out, the men literally walked a mile in high heels. In *Strutting for Our Sisters*, Coyes uses sound to great effect, centring the voices of Indigenous women. In the opening montage, feminine laughter is cut short by an ambulance siren – a nod to the devastating effects of violence. While the interviews are mostly with male participants, the first and last speakers in the documentary are women. At the film's close, an unseen speaker praises the marchers, appealing specifically to their “feminine side”: “These men are not just brave and smart, these men are compassionate. These men have a power and a beauty and a grace that more men need to own.” Coyes's choice to anchor his film with female voices reminds viewers that, although it's entertaining to see men teetering in heels, this was a day of honouring our sisters.

The second day of the festival focused on digital media, featuring two mobile apps currently in development. Adrian Duke, from the Muscowpetung First Nation in Saskatchewan, is building an Indigenous knowledge network through an app called Wikiupedia – a location-based tool for collecting, preserving, and sharing traditional stories and knowledge. Duke sees the app as a way of increasing engagement between youth and elders by creating a digital database of stories to which interested users can gain access through their smart phones. This database includes augmented reality “virtual tours” that, at marked locations, allow users to experience on-site story vignettes on their phones. For those who aren't able to take the tour, the archive will also be available simply by searching online.

Duke recognized the ability of technology both to facilitate and to impede communication, and his company is working with this knowledge. With the idea that elders and youth can get together – the former as storytellers and the latter as digital scribes or “story catchers” – Wikipedia promises to make smart phones a tool for generational connection. Duke also has some well-known story catchers helping to build content for the app, including Gregory Coyes, Ryan McMahon, and Ronnie Dean Harris.

But collecting and sharing traditional knowledge brings many challenges as Indigenous stories come with a significant amount of context and protocol that must be observed and honoured. In his presentation, Duke acknowledged the need for a story authentication process to ensure that the information posted by users is appropriate and relevant. Questions with which app developers might not commonly wrestle – such as “who told you this story?” and “Do you have permission to tell this story?” – need to be translated into an efficient, accurate vetting system. Also, stories change over time and are altered by storytellers to serve specific purposes at specific times, which makes verifying authenticity difficult.

Duke freely admitted that the app is a work in progress, and he is working directly with Indigenous communities to develop it. Users on the Wikipedia website can register as a story catcher (someone with a story to share) or as a cultural guide (someone who can help with authentication). So, for now, good old-fashioned community power is fuelling this digital knowledge network.

Also presenting were Michael and Caroline Running Wolf, who are assembling hundreds of hours of VR 360 film shot at the Dakota Access Pipeline water protector camps, with the goal of creating a narrative that highlights the community building and support networks that occurred during the occupation. They discussed how the scant media attention that the occupation did manage to receive was focused on police and military presence. Although this was vital information for viewers, the Running Wolfs felt that the experience of being in the camps and witnessing the resilience and strength of Indigenous peoples who came together from all across the globe should also have been foregrounded.

All attendees received a free Google Cardboard viewer – which allows users to turn their phones into virtual reality headsets – and access to the app. This resulted in a crowd of thrilled participants creeping around the theatre with arms extended, with the Running Wolfs close by to provide any necessary tweaking. Currently supported by Google and

Mapbox, the Running Wolfs envision an app that, via oculus gear, will eventually take users from Standing Rock to anywhere on the globe.

For scholars, locating Indigenous perspectives in digital space offers unparalleled opportunities to interrogate dominant narratives, unfettered by colonial territorial boundaries. Virtually sharing alternate stories to those provided by mainstream media could potentially allow for Indigenous self-representation on a global scale. However, both the prohibitive cost of oculus gear and the tremendous amount of work required to build VR worlds are still major challenges for the Running Wolfs' project – challenges they appear to be facing with unbridled enthusiasm and a wealth of knowledge.

Concluding with screenings of youth-made and international short films, as well as an Indigenous justice program, the Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival reached wide to bring together a diverse collection of artists and developers both to showcase where we are as a community and to provide an exciting look at what's to come. Holding a mirror up to the communities it represented, VIMAF left the impression that we are rooted in tradition, that we are changing, and, as Elder Point acknowledged with the title of *nóca?mat ct*, that we are one.