

WHEN THE CITY SLEEPS, WE DREAM OF DISRUPTION:

A Review of Lisa Jackson's Transmissions Exhibition

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LISA JACKSON'S EXHIBITION entitled *Transmissions* premiered at the Simon Fraser University's Vancouver campus from 6–28 September 2019. This new body of work weaves interdisciplinary themes regarding society, nature, Indigenous languages, and ecological futures. Lisa Jackson is Anishinaabe from the Aamjiwnaang First Nation and she has an impressive filmmaking practice spanning twenty years. The multimedia format in *Transmissions* makes use of film, media, sculpture, and installation to transport the viewer to a futurist-other state in which we may perceive the world from a perspective beyond the Western-colonial paradigm. The technological undertaking of transforming three distinct segments for this exhibition was years in the making, and its entirety covers over five hundred square metres. Most important, the exhibition provokes a number of questions. For instance, how do we relate to our urban and natural environment? And what relational connections may we discover from the sophisticated organic networks occurring in forests and waters?

Jackson encodes themes of multidimensionality, abstraction, and duality within all of her work. Her messages are nuanced and sometimes require multiple “readings” to understand the complexity of their meaning. In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson talks in depth about how Indigenous artists invoke a particular aesthetic within their work: “Indigenous aesthetics in artistic practice is one mechanism Indigenous creators use to code their work, to ‘disrupt the noise of colonialism,’ to speak to multiple audiences, and to enact affirmative and generative forms of refusal.”¹ These principles and theories emerge through the application

¹ Leanne Simpson, “Embodied Resurgent Practice and Coded Disruption,” in *As We Have Always Done* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 200.



Artist Jeneen Frei Njootli is featured in a video segment named “Unearthed.” *Source:* Electric Company Theatre: Lisa Jackson’s *Transmissions*. Photos by Rachel Topham.

of repetition, duality, multidimensionality, and abstraction – amidst other things. When considering *Transmissions*, it is especially important to acknowledge the strategic use of multidimensionality that Simpson describes as “an organization of time and space that’s different than the colonial world’s – different plans of reality.”² Indeed, the installations in this exhibition produce an other-worldly dream state that asks the viewer to suspend preconceptions of contemporary reality.

On my visit to *Transmissions*, I entered the first installation, which consists of a tunnel that encircles a video projection of an urban city street. It’s worth noting the technological feat of constructing a physical space as a three-dimensional experience. Lisa Jackson spoke at length regarding this at the related Roots of Meaning Symposium held 20 September 2019, and acknowledged the team of people who worked at transfixing projectors to create an experience that feels like virtual reality sans goggles. Flags on posts ripple, small movements infer a breeze, and I begin looking for signifiers of what city this could be: it appears sanitized and orderly like a corporate street in a business district. As time passes, I recognize it as Vancouver’s West Hastings Street, and it becomes pro-

² Simpson, “Embodied Resurgent Practice and Coded Disruption,” 201.

gressively unsettling to stand in an urban space where there is no evidence of any other humans. I had the same disturbing feeling of being in a city during the quietest hours of the morning, either out too late or awake too early, with the intermittent company of bar-closing stragglers or, worse, incredibly ambitious joggers. A city asleep feels lonely, unnatural, and eerily apocalyptic.

Within moments of this reflection, a flash of light washes over the tunnel, and it feels like I am teleported into the centre of a forest. The ground is lush with ferns and moss, and I find myself amidst the warm company of trees. A light wind causes the forest floor to waver; a welcome whisper to the silence. The duality between this scene and its transition to nature appears obvious at first, the viewer can surmise the intentional contrast between city and nature, synthetic and organic. But it's also worth exploring the relational friction of this visual polarization – for instance, in order for a city to be constructed, a forest must be destroyed and erased. Do we take the time to consider the land's living legacy and spirit beneath the skyscrapers, condominiums, and concrete? What causes society's perception of urban environments as permanent and nature as malleable?

When the scene flashes back to the urban street, I leave the tunnel and find myself in a dark room with a large projection on one wall and an installation of a Plexiglass city scape. Light shines through the plexiglass, causing shadows to sprawl across the walls, and when I walk around this piece I notice that my shadow looms over these delicate tracings, blotting out their visual imprint. In conversation with the first segment, this iteration of the city is now reduced to a shadow scape, a ghost of its former self. This installation recalls another project by Lisa Jackson entitled *Biidaaban: First Light*, a virtual reality simulation in which the viewer experiences an eerie yet hopeful dystopian Tkaronto.³ Buildings have deteriorated and society has dissolved while vegetation slowly creeps through the concrete, reclaiming its former state. The work is haunting but anticipatory, and like its title, it infers the quiet before the dawn. Returning to this Plexiglass installation, I note that my shadows grow larger than the ghost city and I wonder how this piece questions the impact and presence of the individual. We do not get to simply look at this piece as outsider or voyeurs: by engaging with it we become a part of its effect.

Opposite of the plexiglass city is a video projection of Vuntut Gwitchin performance artist Janeen Frei Njootli, who embodies a woman dressed in white kneeling on soil and digging a hole with her hands. Throughout

³ Toronto.

this film the digging woman becomes increasingly intent on unearthing something invisible to the viewer's eye, and rain begins to pour, causing the dirt to swell and darken into a muddy consistency. It's only when a light shines from above that the digging woman stops. The brightness of this light is expansive and indicates a full moon, which causes me to wonder about what phase we are transitioning into. The liminality in this moment alludes to the impending change of seasons and lunar cycles, but it also proposes an existential shift. In an era in which media is created to be immediately consumed, this moment with the digging woman asks the viewer to pause and bear witness of this transient reprieve. There is no momentous ending to this film, no offer of a distinct answer, and soon it loops back to the beginning. I reflect on how Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes *repetition* as an aesthetic and basis of Nishnaabeg intelligence: "We hear variations of the same creation story for our entire lives, and we are expected to find meaning in it at every stage of life, whether that meaning is literal (when we are kids), metaphorical, conceptual, or within the constellation of our collective oral traditions or that meaning comes from lived experience ... If we are not continually and collectively engaged in creating and re-creating our way of life, our reality, our distinct unique cultural reality doesn't exist."⁴ And so I stop to watch the digging woman start her work once more, and, as the rain falls, I question how cyclical recurrences in nature can mark periods of growth and reunion.

The final instalment of this exhibition truly felt like another world. This dark space was illuminated by the glitter of bluish-purple light from digitally projected deciduous trees. It reminds me of how bioluminescence appears in the ocean, of how these small micro-organisms gather collectively to generate a bright glow against the darkness of the night. The visual dreamwork of this room works in tandem with the soundscape, which features a digital melody that hums and peaks sporadically. When I first hear this audio piece, I feel it fit powerfully as an aesthetic to communicate other-worldliness. It was during a panel at the Roots of Meaning Symposium that Jackson explained that scientists are discovering the interconnection between moss and fungi networks. She said that they "talk" through a rooted network that expands across and under the soil of the forest floor, which researchers sometimes refer to as the "Wood Wide Web." This was a new concept for me – the idea that the forest had an interconnectedness and communication framework that occurs amidst its roots. It makes me reconsider the purpose of the

⁴ Simpson, "Embodied Resurgent Practice and Coded Disruption," 200.

first segment of *Transmissions* and the moss and ferns covering the sides of trees and carpeting the topsoil, and it makes me curious about what kind of rooted connection the digging woman might be searching for.

Down the path in this third instalment an illuminated dome intercepts the walkway. Inside the dome are a number of stools and headphones that plays a compilation of interviews with Indigenous people who work on language resurgence within their respective communities. These voices speak with aspiration and urgency, emphasizing the work required to revitalize Indigenous languages and the crucial role this plays in cultural resurgence. A shared understanding among these various speakers is that the philosophies and definitions found in many Indigenous words do not rely on a system that perpetuates a Western-colonial paradigm. Instead, many languages are based on how we live in kinship with each other and how this directly affects our imminent futures.

Jackson chooses to leave us with the voices, opinions, and aspirations of diverse Indigenous people working towards language learning. While the exhibition creates several abstract dimensions of place, these voices ground the viewer with a final impression of this work. A separate multimedia room featuring projects of Indigenous language revitalization can be visited upon leaving *Transmissions*. The inclusion of this room in conjunction with the exhibition spotlights the tremendous work happening across various nations on Turtle Island and ensures that visitors understand that language resurgence is happening now and is not something that is simply being wished for.

Transmissions weaves together an incredible number of themes and disciplines to look more closely at issues relating to climate change, Indigenous languages and linguistics, forest biology, urban development, Indigenous theory, and environmentalism. The exhibition enables us to abstract our perception of society's trajectory and see it beside the natural environment, thus illuminating the possibility of seeking different vantage points. A visitor with a science background may find meaning in one aspect of the exhibition while a visitor with Indigenous cultural knowledge may find meaning in another aspect – the realization of the diversity and culmination of these perspectives is the purpose of the work. Jackson does not provide an answer in her message; instead, *Transmissions* activates curiosity and invites the viewer to look further and more deeply at the multitude of meanings that exist between us.