



CARLA TAUNTON / DAINA WARREN

# CLAIMING THE SPACE BY ACTING OUT!

**Kingston is a city of almost 120,000 people**

and deemed a world heritage site by UNESCO. However, the city is highly regarded—not because it was once an important Indigenous trading post or that it is on the traditional territory of the Algonquin, Anishnabe, or Haudenosaune nations—but because it is the final stop along the Rideau Canal's 202-kilometre journey from Ottawa to Kingston. The city is also well-known for its colonial history with Loyalist roots; its housing of star-status inmates such as Russell Williams, Paul Bernardo, and Clifford Olsen; the large campus situated close to the town's centre is Queen's University; and this same location is one of Canada's major military and training bases. How does an Indigenous voice contend with these overarching histories and extreme social conditions that have formed this urban space? This was the curatorial intent behind the *Acting Out, Claiming Space: Aboriginal Performance Art Series*.

TANVA KURIR LAKSHYER PERFORMING LIVE AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, KINGSTON

Queen's

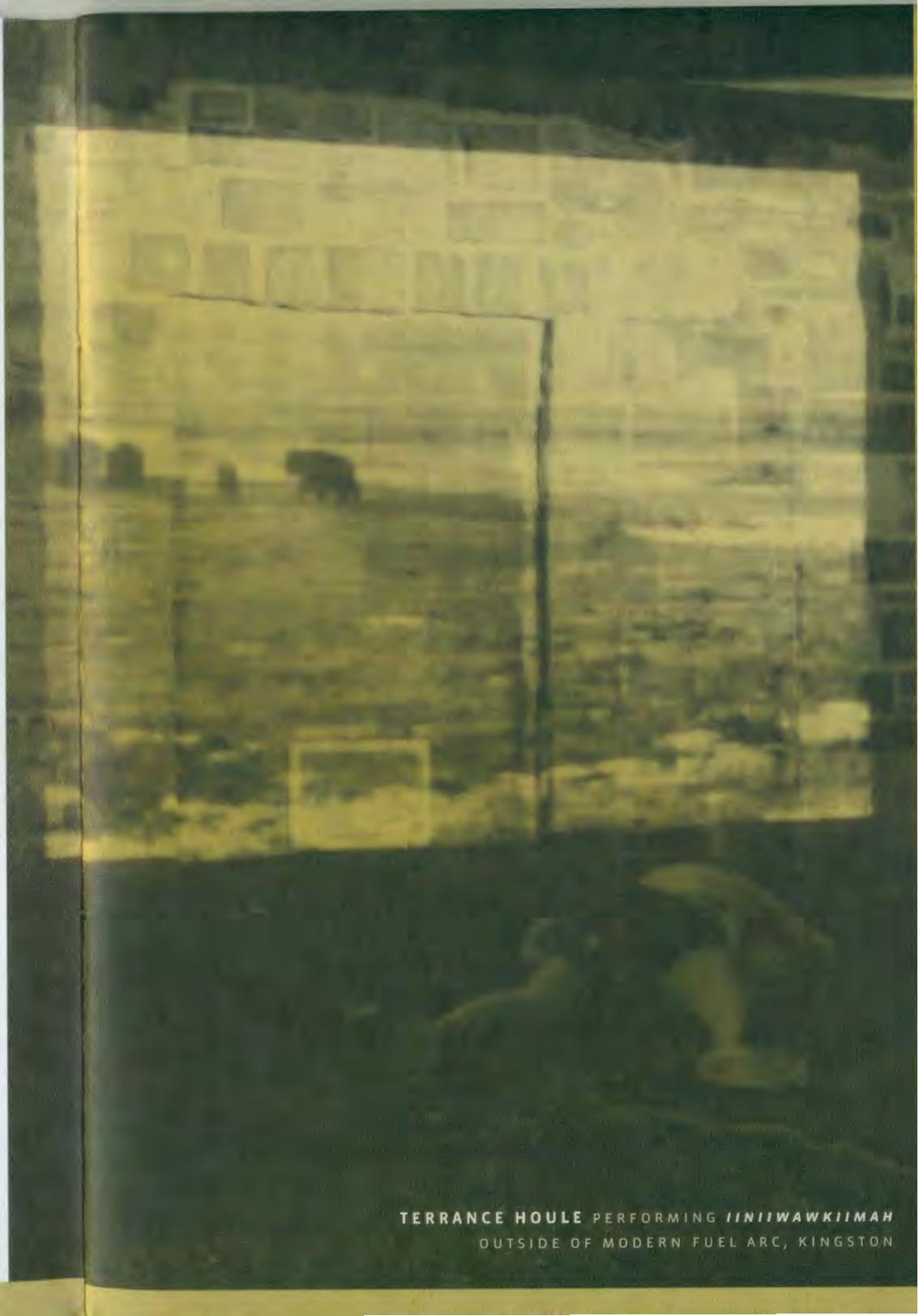
Four artists, **Jordan Bennett**, **Terrance Houle**, **Tanya Lukin Linklater**, and **Skeena Reece**, intervened with Kingston's public and private spaces from March 15th to 19th, 2011.

**Tanya Lukin Linklater's** performance *Give Me an A!* launched the series on the corner of University Avenue and Union Street, on Queen's campus. Dressed in a modified cheerleading costume with fur detailing, the artist incorporated a traditionally-based song she composed in her own Alutiiq language. Through gesture and voice, she abstracted her song piece, slowing the words into brief spoken sounds. This act of deconstructing or displacing her own Aboriginal language and traditional songs was a deliberate strategy alluding to her lived northern experience and connections to Alutiiq territory and her brief southern experience while studying in the lower United States.

*Give Me An A!* included props of a snare drum, two megaphones, and the artist's chosen cheerleading dress, all of which were based from Lukin Linklater's past experiences with national sports games and her awareness of the fanatical mentality that follows these teams in the US. Another added reading of Lukin Linklater's abstraction of Alutiiq language also brings to the surface the loss of Indigenous cultural knowledge due to colonial processes and assimilationist agendas, while significantly asserting the continuance of Aboriginal language despite North American settler-society's impact on many Native nations. However, her performance also occurred on the same day as St. Patrick's Day, the holiday that is now co-opted by Canadians as a free-for-all day of inebriation.

In this aggressive situation there was a collective experience of claiming and protecting the corner for Lukin Linklater's performance. Over 50 audience members assisted in fending off young revelers celebrating St. Patrick's Day who not only tried to walk through the established performance area but also attempted to take her megaphones, play her drum, use her equipment, and drunkenly taunt her from across the street on the library steps. However, this claiming was then shifted back by the artist's own response to the students. In an assertive voice Lukin Linklater used her spoken Alutiiq language to challenge the youth to participate in a more meaningful dialogue with her. Through her megaphone, she turned to them and repeated numerous times in Alutiiq, "This is our land; this is our village; this is our home." The artist not only claimed her immediate space as an Indigenous context but also, in doing so, claimed a space for First Nations students and their experiences on Queen's campus.

On the second night of the series, **Terrance Houle** performed *Iiniwawkiimah*. The audience was asked to meet at Modern Fuel and at dusk was guided to the parking lot behind the gallery. In this vacant area of the lot, the artist had set up a video projection, which presented images of the Plains landscape interspersed with images of buffalo. The video was projected onto a protruding stonewall, which framed Houle's performance space. As the audience procession entered into the area, they encountered the artist on acoustic guitar accompanied by two performance assistants, Chris Trimmer on drums and Jordan Bennett dancing with Powwow bells. The artist and drummer continued to play soft ambient music, while Bennett remained dancing, lasting approximately 10 minutes. As the music built to a crescendo, the images of



TERRANCE HOULE PERFORMING *IINIWAWKIIMAH*  
OUTSIDE OF MODERN FUEL ARC, KINGSTON

buffalo became more prevalent. At that moment, Houle stood up and changed in front of the audience from his black suit, white shirt, and black tie into his red loincloth and beaded breastplate. This transition from his fully clothed body in a suit to half-clothed in a loincloth was arguably a performance strategy to focus the audiences' attention to Houle's Aboriginal presence and identity.

Next, the artist walked to a darkened corner of the alley where he discovered blankets from recent street occupants. By chance, he chose a wool blanket with the iconic coloured stripes of Hudson Bay point blankets. While holding the dirty wet blanket, Houle backed into the crowd shaking it out, at which point, the drummer and dancer ceased their actions. Houle then took a moment to ready himself and charged at the stonewall yelling in Blackfoot and commenced to herd the projected buffalo. After this intense act, the artist threw the blanket and himself onto the gravel, and in chorus the visual representation transitioned to the buffalo running away from him. Houle lay in a heavy silence for several minutes. The audience was then left to consider the absence of his performing body and the presence of his motionless body.

***liniwawkiimah*** revealed the interconnections between Aboriginal identities, histories, and lands. Houle put forward heavily weighted notions around the urban pressures placed on Indigenous peoples by incorporating the cloth remnants from the alley, which was originally from an Aboriginal occupant. In addition to the historic violence experienced by Indigenous peoples and the lack of recognition around Aboriginal issues, Houle brought awareness to the apathy directed towards Indigenous peoples' experiences through his act of heaving his body onto the ground: his intention was to reference a fallen warrior. Houle's work also references a connection between historical remembrances of past losses and the loss experienced in communities today. The image of the buffalo symbolized Houle's honoring of the buffalo, by working two-fold. First, the title is taken from his same Blackfoot name, *liniwawkiimah*, which translated into English means *Buffalo Herder*. Secondly, the images initiated ideas around the decimation of the buffalo and parallels the larger context of colonial violence and resilience of Aboriginal peoples. ***liniwawkiimah*** is an act of resistance, by looking at the ideas of cultural continuance through creating a site of Indigenous self-determination and claiming space for recognition of urban Aboriginal experiences.

**Jordan Bennett** performed during the afternoon of the last day of the performance series. His piece was one of physical endurance and he co-opted and claimed the empty confines of Modern Fuel's gallery space. The artist began a four-hour long action incorporating minimal performance tools, which included a bench, a street sign placed on its side, his skate gear, and speakers. ***Pressure Flips*** began with Bennett pulling objects from his backpack to prepare himself for the performance. During the anticipation of watching the artist emptying his bag, Bennett revealed a white laptop from its contents. He then began the actions of changing his Expo's hat to a Chicago Black Hawks hat, donning a wooden beaded necklace of an iconic Indian Brave profile in headdress, and plugged his red headphones into the computer. At this time, while



**JORDAN BENNETT**  
PERFORMING ***PRESSURE FLIPS***  
AT MODERN FUEL ARC, KINGSTON

the artist was mentally gearing up, the audience was unable to hear his personal musical playlist. He further prepared by changing his watches, and taking off his skate shoes to begin customizing the moccasins that were in his bag, cutting gel shoe inserts for his leather-beaded footwear.

Bennett was then transformed into his performative self. He tested out his customized moccasins by jumping up and down a few times to check their resilience and durability. Next, he prepared and sanded the skateboard deck, which was adorned with a graphic image of an Indian Brave. His actions took the audience to the imagined space of a skate park yet everyone was pulled back into the reality of the gallery space once he took off the headphones and plugged the computer into the speakers to amplify the music for everyone to experience.

Over the course of *Pressure Flips*, the artist ollied, grinded, and kickflipped his way back and forth within the gallery. Throughout the performance, Bennett's fatigue began to build. Witnessing his physically and repetitive laborious actions of skating and falling brought forward an overarching theme of *Pressure Flips*: the interconnections between failure and defeat with resilience and continuance. The artist challenged this defeat of exhaustion by inviting anyone to participate, including: Terrance Houle, Tanya Lukin Linklater and Duane Linklater, Carla Taunton, Daina Warren, the video documenter, and other audience members who dropped by the gallery to watch the performance. At approximately 4:00 pm the artist was physically spent and could no longer perform, mostly due to the unexpected result of his inability to control his skate actions due to the slippery gallery surface.

Bennett then sat down, and reversed all his preparatory actions, changed out of his moccasins to his sneakers, put his original watch back on, took off the necklace, and changed hats. *Pressure Flips* was a site for reclaiming stereotypical cultural identifiers like that of the Indian warriors on his necklace and skateboard. His performance context engaged the audience to consider self-positioned notions of Indigenous identities and to push boundaries in terms of popular understandings of Indigenous spaces beyond the limitations of the reserve to include urban environments or geographies, like the skate park and contemporary art gallery.

The most esoteric work of the series was performed by **Skeena Reece**, titled *Tim Buck Two: Kingston's Free Zone and Meditation Centre*, which concluded the *Acting Out, Claiming Space* series. This performance took place in the outdoor amphitheatre at Kingston's market square. After Bennett's performance, the audience meandered over to the square to come upon Reece and her two assistants, Breanne Oryschak and Erin Milliken, setting out plastic shopping bags full of unidentifiable objects and constructing a seating area for the artist's transformation into the "Red Buddha." A temporary picnic tent was already set up, and from the back of it, a radio was blaring music from Kingston's local university radio station, CFRC. As the audience gradually filed into the cement auditorium, Reece began to take notice of people. Once everyone was settled, she

began to communicate with individual people through minimal hand gestures, nods, and eye contact, while handing out assorted items for each person to hold.

She gave away plastic leaves and flowers, glass candleholders in the shape of lotuses, badminton birdies to be poked with wooden skewers, Q-tips to clean the ears, and shared her bottled drinking water. This went on for about 45 minutes until she had handed everything out, at which point she then began to change from an oversized hoodie and black pants to reveal she was wearing a long dress. She adorned herself with scarves, inserted a "bump-it" to create an up-do with her hair, and made herself up to resemble a Bodhisattva with khol-rimmed eyes. Once she completed her look, she gestured to the audience and her assistants to begin pinning their assorted items onto her tent and to place the candles before her. She settled onto her platform and awaited the final adornments to her space.

The artist turned off the radio, pulled out a microphone, surveyed her audience for several moments, and then began to laugh uncontrollably. She continued to laugh for a couple of minutes, at first the audience laughed with her but then looked puzzled as to whether they were to keep laughing along. She then used her voice to address the audience, inviting them to sit on cushions in front of her and to ask her any pressing questions that were on their minds, which she would then reply with either perplexing or humorous answers. Once the viewer got close enough to sit by the artist, it was evident that she along with her assistants and the audience had attempted to recreate an image from a postcard of the Buddha that was situated in front of the artist. The audiences' questioning went on for several rounds before the artist thanked the audience and she closed her meditation centre down.

If one were to consider what the signifiers of an Indigenous space are in relation to Reece's performance, community would be an angle from which to think about her actions. The performance brings us back to the overarching notion of this small Ontario city's communal space. In relation to *Tim Buck Two: Kingston's Free Zone and Meditation Centre* it is significant to consider the historical facts of this governmental or colonial centre as well as the notoriety Kingston has gained from the presence of its penitentiaries. Reece researched Tim Buck, who was a character from the city's history, and was once imprisoned in the "Kingston Pen" in the 1930s, due to his allegiance with communist idealisms. Although his type of protesting was non-violent, his actions were still viewed as subverting the will of the Canadian government. Reece took her artistic inspiration from this historical event and incorporated his name into the title for her performance. A consideration of the ongoing incarceration of Aboriginal people when certain land claim issues arise between Native and non-Native peoples, thereby disrupting notions about Canada's nationalistic space, reveals a potential reason for the artist's interest and engagement with this historical story of Tim Buck. Reece makes connections between histories of state suppression and apposing political and spiritual belief systems, alluding to the historic oppression of Indigenous cultural knowledge and land rights by government legislation.



SKEENA HEECE • DORRINE JIM BUCK TWO: KINGSTON'S FREE ZONE  
AND MEDITATION CENTRE AT MARKET SQUARE AMPHITHEATRE, KINGSTON

The artist, while preparing for her performance in Kingston, went and visited a Buddhist meditation centre in Kingston. She even had an informal meeting with some of the group members, and explained her performance over tea and snacks. This event is an interesting exchange of ideas and concepts related to the ways in which Indigenous and so called non-Western cultures are viewed. Idealisms exist around Buddhist culture and its spiritual position has been appropriated by many non-Asian cultures and individuals, similar to the ways New Age spiritualism has co-opted, de-contextualized, and appropriated from Indigenous belief systems. The artist thereby uses humour as a strategy to make people consider how and why they are laughing at this constructed, performing "Red Buddha." Her actions create awareness of how Indigenous and spiritual concepts as well as cultural productions are appropriated.

Over the course of *Acting Out, Claiming Space* the artists' performances claimed, negotiated and revealed Kingston as a historic and contemporary Indigenous transnational space. The artists' diverse cultural ancestry from across North America alluded to the geographic region's history as a site for Indigenous gathering. It is significant to acknowledge the fact that Indigenous-nations are diverse nations living within the borders of Nation-states, such as Canada and the United States. Indigenous territories transcend the constructed boundaries of these states and have always already engaged in cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. The powerful and dynamic performances created an opportunity for the sharing of multiple Indigenous perspectives, histories, and identities, which ultimately claimed a space for the recognition of both historic and contemporary Aboriginal issues and the subversion of popular stereotypical narratives and iconic representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures. In this way the performances resisted the erasure of Indigenous presence in Kingston and Indigenous relationships to the surrounding lands in the region through the artists' site-specific works. *Acting Out, Claiming Space* negotiated space for asserting Indigenous cultural, political and land sovereignty by vocalizing through performative strategies Aboriginal self-determination. The artists' claimed spaces by acting out, thereby indigenizing locations throughout the city.

**CARLA TAUNTON** is a PhD Candidate and a Teaching Fellow at Queen's University in the Department of Art. She is an alliance member of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and works as an independent curator. Her current research interests are Indigenous performance art and contemporary Indigenous visual culture; Indigenous resistance, interventions and activism in the arts; and globalization and decolonization theories. Recently, in June 2010, she worked as a statement gatherer at the National TRC Meeting in Winnipeg.

**DAINA WARREN** is of the Montana Cree Nation from Alberta. In 2000, she was awarded the Canada Council for the Arts' Assistance to Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in the Visual Arts program to work at grunt gallery in Vancouver, BC, which then led to a permanent position with the artist-run centre as an associate curator and administrator until 2009. Warren has co-curated such projects as the New Forms Media Arts Festivals in 2004 and 2005 and the Earth Village for the World Urban Forum in 2006. She is also the curator of the online exhibitions "If these walls could talk" and "Contains Animal Byproducts," created for the CODE Screen 2010 Vancouver Olympics project. Warren was recently awarded the Canada Council Aboriginal Curatorial Residency, at the National Gallery in Ottawa.