

Coney Island Baby

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Jeneen Frei Njootli, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill,
Chandra Melting Tallow, Tania Willard
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**A Conversation with Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill,
Amy Kazymierchyk, Chandra Melting Tallow, and
Jeneen Frei Njootli**

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In the winter of 2016, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Chandra Melting Tallow, Jeneen Frei Njootli, Tania Willard, Amy Kazymierchyk and Aaron Leon came together at BUSH gallery to make a film about trapping rabbits. Gabrielle, a previous resident at BUSH and a long-time collaborator of Tania's, had proposed the project the year before, after speaking with Jeneen about her experiences hunting and trapping in Gwich'in territory. Chandra, a sound artist who heads the musical project Mourning Coup, was invited to score the film, as well as to come trapping. Amy, a curator who has made films, was asked to be the Director of Photography and Aaron, a photographer who had also previously worked with BUSH gallery, joined the group as a camera person. In this interview, four of the artists involved discuss what happened that week and the ideas at the heart of *Coney Island Baby*.

Amy Kazymierchyk: Gabe, why don't you start by telling us about where the title for the film came from?

Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill: The title of the work, *Coney Island Baby*, refers to Coney Island in New York, I think it's

Lenape territory, a place that was renamed by colonizers after the wild rabbits that populated that place. “Coney” is an old English word for rabbit and it is also the root word of “cunny,” which leads to the word “cunt,” and is used similarly in a derogatory way. So, for me, the title connects the topic of the film, trapping and raising rabbits – which is a feminized and often diminished kind of labour – to the idea of bunnies as feminized and sexualized, like ski bunnies and Playboy bunnies.

And I also wanted to talk about Indigenous women’s and feminized labour without essentializing or falling back on a gender binary. Without assuming that everybody identifies as a woman, and acknowledging that there are men that trap and raise rabbits too. Which isn’t to say that this labour is not gendered, just that it’s more complex than binary. Maybe the way to put it is that when labour is feminized and racialized, it is also often devalued, no matter who does it.

AK: Your first idea was to shoot the film at Jericho Beach, in the centre of Vancouver, but we ended up shooting at BUSH gallery. What precipitated the change?

GLH: The original idea for this project came from thinking about my Uncle Johnny who used to help a friend run a trapline in Ottawa. I thought that was a really crazy story, that he had a trapline in the city. So, I visited him not too long ago and I asked him about it. He told me the story of running this trapline with a friend, and he taught me



All video stills to follow (unless otherwise noted): Jeneen Frei Njootli, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Chandra Melting Tallow, Tania Willard, *Coney Island Baby*, 2018. Images courtesy of the artists.

how to set a snare, just in his living room. He showed me how you'd tie the wire and how you'd set up a little rabbit run, and he set up objects from his living room, like a pen and a beer bottle, the way you'd set up sticks to guide the rabbits. My original idea was that I wanted to have a trapline in the city too, and one day I was talking with Jeneen and asked her if she'd like to help me.

However, after talking it through with other Indigenous artists, it was pointed out to us that it wasn't really respectful, or being a good guest, to just go and trap rabbits on somebody else's land without their permission. And so, we began the process of getting permission to trap on Musqueam territory, out at Ɂə'ɔlməxʷ, or Jericho. These sorts of things take time to do them right, and so that is something in process.

In the meantime, we went to Secwepemculew, which is the territory of the Secwepemc Nation. We were invited there by Tania Willard, who was already a part of the project, to trap rabbits on her family's land. Aaron Leon, who is from the same territory, and whom we've worked with before, also became a part of the project.

Jeneen Frei Njootli: And you've also had a relationship with BUSH gallery since the beginning, and have shared a long-term conversation with Tania about your practices and politics around land-based art. So, I think that BUSH gallery just seemed like a natural place to return to and continue that conversation. In terms of being respectful or

mindful in one's practice, it feels right to be invited to stay in a good friend's home and to work around their kids and family, while also being able to contribute to the labour of taking care of a family and a home. These aspects are as important to our process as snaring rabbits, and I really like that we made an effort to film all of the work that was happening around the snaring, which are also forms of feminized labour in domestic space.

AK: BUSH gallery was really the ideal place to shoot *Coney Island Baby* because it works at centring artistic production in familial and community life, and pays attention to the economic responsibilities of those entwined relations. Within this complexity, BUSH is still flexible about experimenting and improvising new ways of making art and taking care of each other. In that context, the project could emerge from how we lived together, rather than from a script that was written at a speculative distance. I think the method of the film's production demonstrates the same values as its content. We were simultaneously helping each other live, planning what we were going to shoot and learning to snare rabbits.

Gabe, Jeneen and I had all been to BUSH gallery before, but it was your first time, Chandra. How did you experience it?

Chandra Melting Tallow: I had a very difficult time. It was during a period of my life when I was still reconciling my limitations because of an autoimmune disorder. I've

only been living with it for five years and it's difficult to navigate because it gets better and then worse almost unpredictably. So, going into the shoot, I wasn't really aware of how bad it would be and it coloured my experience in a big way.

I'm constantly reminded of the contrast between my life before I developed this condition and after. And because of that, I was very aware of my inability to participate. I think what was really touching was everyone's encouragement that the contributions I was able to make, like doing dishes, were valid. The perspective that as a disabled person I'm not contributing, of my limitations being the focus of my role in society, very much comes from Eurocentric, capitalist, white society. Intellectually, I know it's not true, but everyone's encouragement made it feel embodied. It reminded me of the values that are Indigenous – that each contribution has value.

GLH: Your experience kind of captures what *Coney Island Baby* is about too, right? How all of the labour that people do for free gets undervalued because it's not monetized. And obviously, you were working really hard on the shoot. Even your contributions to the ideas that form the project are part of an intellectual labour. There are all these people working all the time, not getting credit, and so it was cool to me because your participation added a third level of something that was missing from how I had been thinking about the project.

I had been thinking about how Indigenous economies are operating somehow outside of capitalism, yet subsidizing it, and I was thinking about how labour in the home is working all the time for capitalism, unpaid. But then a third level is that people who have disabilities end up working for free, and working in an unrecognized way.

CMT: Yeah, I think it really brought to light the way that those attitudes, like childcare or domestic labour, are not as valuable, can be internalized. And it's one thing to know intellectually that this isn't true, but it's another to embody this.

AK: I think that autonomous collectives like BUSH gallery have an opportunity to initiate fairer and more flexible economic and professional protocols that acknowledge those different levels of labour. Many contemporary art institutions have very narrow parameters around the forms of work, methods of productivity and outcomes and deliverables that are supported and commended. These parameters are born from value systems, and the problem is that if you live under conditions that preclude you from being able to meet them, you get valued negatively. For example, if you have a difficult time meeting deadlines due to chronic illness, you are undependable, or if you need more material support and assistance, you are needy. In institutions, equality is often upheld as the leveller, but equal is not fair. Fair is creating protocols that are flexible, and working processes that are negotiable, to be able to



meet people's individual conditions. Maybe fair is even too soft a word for it – maybe it's justice.

Chandra, one of the really meaningful contributions you made to the shoot was reminding us to take care of ourselves and care about each other. This is an aspect of collaboration that often gets undermined. You reminded us that we don't need to be uncomfortable, in pain or exhausted in the name of making art. This became a really important part of our working methodology. There were so many times during the shoot when someone asked for filming to be put on pause in order to rest, to eat, to put kids to bed, to go tobogganing or to play cribbage in front of the fire. I'm so happy that we were flexible and responsive to these requests, and that, in many instances, we changed our plans and filmed what people needed to do. It will be interesting to see how this strategy becomes visible in the final edit.

JFN: After working on this project with all of you in December, I ended up doing some work with rabbit hide, just thinking about rabbits and spending time with them. It's kind of like when you hear a word for the first time, and then you hear it everywhere. It was kind of like that – everything was about rabbits.

GLH: Me too. I'm thinking about rabbits all the time. Another thing is that rabbits are associated with poor people, and brown people with large families. The idea is that, you know, we just can't stop breeding...

AK: ...breeding like rabbits.

GLH: Yeah, exactly. And so, I think there's something that's cool about that, in the reference to bunnies, that sees reproduction as something really powerful, instead of ignorant or whatever it's normally associated with.

JFN: It's the fact that rabbits breed so much that they're able to be a sustaining force, right? They're available for people to eat in abundance.

We're talking about care, and what it means to take care of each other, and I think that rabbits have saved a lot of lives and helped a lot of people. But they have a kind of quiet medicine. Their coats are protective and camouflage them, so unless you really pay attention, or are really present and know them, you won't likely get to see them.

This kind of applies to the process of making this film, and expectations around a finished artwork. I think it's really fitting that we didn't catch any rabbits during the shoot. Part of me is really glad. Not catching any is perfect because it's made us talk more about our time together and labour and the land – more than how to respectfully depict the snaring. We're still talking about how we have to be respectful of the rabbits, but it's just taking a different form than if our snares had been full.





L-R Amy Kazzymerchyk, Chandra Melting Tallow, Jeneen Frei Njootli, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Tania Willard, *Coney Island Baby*, production still, 2017. Photo courtesy of Amy Kazzymerchyk and Aaron Leon.

CMT: It was initially about catching rabbits, but then the circumstance of not catching them, and the context of being in Tania's home, allowed the project to take on a life of its own that I don't think we could have fore-seen. I find that really special and I love when that happens with projects, especially when you're working with other people. As for the part about initially wanting to do it at Jericho, considering the implications of being a good guest, and then wanting to go about it in a respectful way... really, we ended up at BUSH gallery by happenstance. I think it's just interesting that it's taken this whole other direction.

JFN: It also makes me think about the idea of success, and what it means to take something home. Gabe, even you saying that you've been encountering rabbits more and thinking about them more, is about you developing a relationship with them. And then that relationship's stronger to move forward with – or not even move forward, but just to live with. It feels really good that I'm sewing with them after spending time with the land.

I'm reading a book right now called *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival* (1993) by Velma Wallis. Have you read it? It's pretty short, but I'm taking a long time to read it because I feel like I'll read a few pages and be like, damn, and then I just need to spend time with it. They talk about their survival and the first things that they eat, which are squirrels and then rabbits.

GLH: I'm so glad you brought that up because it's so true, and it's the other thing that's central to the project for me. I was thinking about people who live off of rabbits – small game hunting – but also about people who raise rabbits in hutches to help make ends meet. That was something we did when I was a little kid; my parents had a rabbit hutch in the backyard. It didn't last for long because we moved to the city and so we ate them all or whatever. But, just like you said, it's this unassuming animal that actually feeds so many people.

And I feel like a lot of Indigenous economies work this way, keeping people alive and keeping people healthy through this crazy network, you know. It's this unacknowledged labour. I mean, hopefully not unacknowledged by us, but it's something that a lot of people don't know about.

My family grew up on K'ómoks territory on Vancouver Island, even though we're not K'ómoks. But because of our relationship with people at K'ómoks, we've always been fed with the fish from that land. Ernie Hardy would bring my grandmother fish every year, and my auntie would can fish with her friend Georgia and would send the fish to us every year. When you're a kid, you just think it's normal that you eat canned fish all year round. But as an adult, looking back, I can see that those people – the fishers – sustained my family. And the salmon sustained my family. So, part of this project is also thinking about these things.

AK: The network of artists, and conversation between artworks, is also a big part of *Coney Island Baby*. We began our shoot at BUSH gallery by watching two movies that we wanted to be in dialogue with while making the film. One was *Modest Livelihood* (2012) by Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater and the other was *Gallup Motel Butchering* (2011) by Postcommodity. They resonated with this project because they're both made by Indigenous collectives, and they both concern Indigenous economies of hunting and harvesting animals.

While we were watching them, we all expressed wanting to portray the process of learning how to snare rabbits. We wanted to be vulnerable about the process of not knowing, and the collective process of coming to know together. There are two scenes that emerged from this conversation that are really important. One is a conversation with Jeneen's dad, Stan Njootli, over speakerphone, during which he shares his strategies for setting traps, and the other, is the day we spent learning to kill, skin and gut rabbits with Don Arnouse, who breeds and sells rabbit meat in Cstalen (Adams Lake).

GLH: I saw Postcommodity speak recently: they gave this really good talk about a work that they did for documenta 14 in Athens called *The Ears Between Worlds are Always Speaking* (2017). They installed it at the site where Socrates used to walk with his pupils as he gave his lessons – he believed in a theory that knowledge was based in movement.



AK: Peripatetic.

GLH: Yes, peripatetic. They talked about how Socrates believed that to be a philosopher, you had to walk. And they said that, because there's 60 million refugees and immigrants moving through the world right now, there's 60 million philosophers that we're not listening to. And so, they recorded the stories of all these different people who were forced to migrate for different reasons, including people who had memories of the stories from the Navajo Long Walk, and they projected those stories into the space where Socrates walked with his students.

And like you said, Jeneen, everything's coming up rabbits. It made me think of how we're making this work through movement, you know, through walking in the bush, through playing with kids, through living. It's a kind of knowledge that is forming. Like you said, a lot of BUSH gallery doesn't make it into a product, you know, it's not product-oriented.

AK: Gabe, when you and I were transferring video files onto your hard drive, you asked me if we had any footage of what Chandra had done. In that moment, my mind raced through all of the experiences we had had together, trying to recall when we were alert and responsive and recorded, and when we hesitated or were tired and didn't. There were a lot of moments that we didn't capture – sometimes consciously, and sometimes unconsciously. This may seem like a tenuous link, but I'm thinking about the routes that

Socrates and his students walked, the paths of 60 million migrants around the world and maybe even rabbit tracks. The traces of their movement are indelible. Riffing off of that, even if something doesn't get filmed, is there a trace of it that persists?

CMT: I see the point of what you're saying in terms of all the different aspects of the project. But the example you used with Gabe is different. She was asking about whether I was being filmed doing the dishes because I had talked to her about how I wasn't sure if it made sense for me to be in the project beyond doing the soundtrack because of my experience of mostly being unable to participate in the main aspects of the film because of my disability. My experience put me in this position of not being sure if I'm really comfortable or know how to navigate my presence in the project, yet also not wanting the experience that I had as a disabled person to be invisible because that's a huge problem in society. In ableist society, disabled people's lives and experiences are invisible and my existence is very much invisible. I spend the majority of my time here [gesturing to their home] because often I can't actually leave. Aside from footage of washing dishes, that specific example is different than talking about not every aspect needing to be documented on film because it's implicated in my experience.

GLH: Yes, me and Chandra talked a bit about how to deal with the fact that I wasn't prepared to make the project really work for Chandra, around ability issues. And we

talked about treating that in a way that didn't make it invisible or pretend that it didn't happen. But also in a way that didn't say, "therefore, Chandra didn't participate." But it takes a presence of mind, being aware of that as a thing that happens, right? And then just keeping that in mind as we go. Which is something I felt like I learned about and am still learning about, and thinking about.

CMT: Yeah, there were other things going on because, as I said at the beginning, this is also very new to me: understanding my limitations and how to communicate them. So, when you're talking about having presence of mind, and how you felt like you could have structured things to make it more accessible, it was also during a time when I was just learning what that even looks like for me. I'm navigating this new reality while unlearning things from living in a society that undermines the value of people with disabilities. Even just recognizing accessibility as an option I am entitled to... What is that? It's a paradigm shift. It's switching from the idea I've internalized, against my will even, that I'm a burden to people. But a conversation is slowly happening, of how to make society more accessible to everyone. I think about it a lot, too, just like moving around through space, taking the bus, running errands. I think about what makes just living my life harder; I think about what would make it easier.

I fantasize about a world that disabled people could freely move through. It always comes back to values in Indigenous societies. You grow up knowing elders



and children eat first, and that's the basis of it. To have society structured in a way so that people who have more difficulty, things are made easier for them. I'm still just learning how to be comfortable asking for what I need because, on one hand, I am still learning what that is, and on the other, I've internalized – to an extent deeper than my comprehension – that I am not entitled to the things that would make my life as livable as it is for able-bodied people.

JFN: I appreciate you sharing what you shared. And it's so important to think about. My friend and I were just talking about how the participation of Indigenous persons as participants or students can look different too. Let's say, in a classroom setting, if you don't contribute or vocalize in a conversation, it's often read as non-participation. But there are so many ways of participating and being deeply engaged and very present that don't always look like "contributing." It often comes down to a question of legibility. Silence in some scenarios is read as non-participation. But sometimes there's a kind of participation going on that has a longer duration, more depth and more strength than what's immediately legible. It's so important to be having discussions about legibility. But particularly this one because a lot of *Coney Island Baby* is about ideas of legibility, like the legibility of Indigenous women, our labour and our forms of relationships. But also our legibility to each other, right? And so, part of our learning has also been about how to present that in the film. ■

Jeneen Frei Njootli is a Vuntut Gwich'in artist and a founding member of the ReMatriate Collective. In her interdisciplinary practice she uses media such as performance, sound and textiles. Much of her work deconstructs the history of the materials she uses. She investigates their relationship to trade, ceremonial regalia, and the politics of First Nations art. Her work as a contemporary Indigenous artist has been recognized throughout Canada. In 2017, Njootli was longlisted as a nominee for the national Sobey Art Award and shortlisted for the Contemporary Art Society Vancouver Artist Prize. In 2016 she won the William and Meredith Saunderson Prize for Emerging Artists. In 2017, Jeneen Frei Njootli earned her MFA from University of British Columbia as an uninvited guest on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, Sto:lo and Tsleil-Waututh territories.

Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill is a Metis artist and writer from Vancouver, BC, located on unceded Musqueam, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and Tsleil-Waututh territory. Hill's sculptures and installations perform as both a material exploration of colour and form and an enquiry into concepts of land, property, and economy. Her work has been exhibited at the Polygon Gallery, the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, Sunset Terrace, and Gallery Gachet in Vancouver; SBC galerie d'art contemporain in Montreal; STRIDE gallery in Calgary; SOMArts in San Francisco; and Get This! Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia.

Amy Kazymerchyk is the curator of the Audain Gallery at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC. She has written an essay on BUSH gallery for the forthcoming *Wood Land School: Critical Anthology*, edited by Duane Linklater and published by Or Gallery and SFU Galleries.

Chandra Melting Tallow is an interdisciplinary artist, filmmaker, and musician of mixed ancestry from the Siksika Nation. Their practice often confronts the ghosts of intergenerational trauma and their relationship to the body, utilizing humour and surrealism to subvert oppressive structures of power. Recent work includes the 2017 film, soundtrack, and accompanying performance *Rapture of Roses for Unsettling Colonial Gender Boundaries* as part of Queer Arts Festival in Vancouver. In addition to composing the original score, they are a co-editor of *Coney Island Baby*.

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