

“Perhaps history is not about the past. At least, not primarily.  
Perhaps it is first of all about the future. This may be exactly what  
makes history political. For whoever owns history owns the future.”  
Jan Verwoert<sup>1</sup>

23     *Trajet:*  
An Interview with  
Dean Baldwin and  
Caroline Monnet

by     Jaclyn Bruneau  
and Aamna  
Muzaffar



In July 2019, artists Dean Baldwin and Caroline (Coco) Monnet circulated invitations to a “performance-not-performance” at Maker Technical Sculpture Services where the first stage in the fabrication of a new public artwork would be witnessed in intimate company. This collaborative project, *Trajet*, memorializes the footsteps found on the floor of Lake Ontario in 1908 that evidenced Indigenous habitation dating to 11,000 BP. Having been cemented over and destroyed—a powerful indication of cultural attitudes of the time—only descriptions and a crude rendering remain in the municipal archives of T:karonto/Toronto.

At its simplest, *Trajet* is the effort of making visible something that had been submerged, both literally and in cultural consciousness. Destined to be installed on the Leslie Spit—a headland off the shoreline comprising materials displaced by the city’s subway construction—the substantial bronze sculpture will facilitate the restoration of memory and the co-creation of future histories. “For Toronto, a city where history is rarely prized and more typically trampled, the Leslie Spit both allegorizes this truth and insists on a preservation,” reads the invitation.

In a twist almost stranger than fiction, shortly after this interview was conducted in October 2019, we were informed that the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority is considering revising the permanent location of the work on Leslie Spit, citing a recent coastal review indicating the rising water levels of Lake Ontario and the interventions needed to avoid inevitable transformational damage to the shoreline.

JACLYN BRUNEAU AND AAMNA MUZAFFAR: How did each of you find your respective ways to this story from 1908, and how did you decide to pursue this story together?

DEAN BALDWIN: Coco and I met about five to six years ago via a mutual friend. We spent a freezing cold day in February serving Montrealers hot mulled wine from a snowbank next to a bus stop on Sherbrooke Street and we’ve been hanging out in snowbanks ever since. I thought of her practice when an occasion arose to make this piece somewhat related to another work I had been focused on.

In 2017, I started a public art commission for the City of Toronto TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] barns at the corner of Lakeshore and Leslie, which function as a gateway to the Leslie Spit and Tommy Thompson Park.

That project will be a large kooky assembly of typical construction materials found on the spit; rusted metal I-beams, rebar and concrete, bricks and cinder blocks—materials the city had in abundance when they dug the tunnels for the subway system in the ’50s. Numerous buildings were razed, and the massive amount of demolition rubble needed to go somewhere. As the city also wanted to create an outer headland to protect the inner harbour, it was decided all this refuse should be dumped into the lake. In an ironic twist, the decades since have seen a natural resurgence in the area, which is now a protected environmental habitat for various migratory waterfowl and such.

Within this public art site, there was a small annex of sidewalk across the street, which was a separate city ward and a percentage of the commission was

to be allocated there. In my research of the TTC—its trajectories of transportation of people around the city, the reclaimed land of the spit and the shifting shoreline of the lake—I came across this story from the *Toronto Telegram*, which is archived on microfiche at York University, where a construction crew had discovered and then destroyed a set of footprints dated to 11,000 years ago in a layer of blue clay when the shoreline of the lake was some distance past the islands due to a glacier changing the outflow of water in the lake. I made the suggestion to the city that because they were responsible for destroying these footprints—early evidence of local habitation—perhaps they should endeavour to put them back. As this story wasn’t mine to tell alone, I called up Caroline to see what she thought.

CAROLINE MONNET: When Dean brought this story to me, it seemed such an important part of history and an important, exciting project that I felt a responsibility to jump on board. I felt that if I didn't say "yes" to this idea, that it would maybe not be done. I wanted to be part of this moment in history. You don't see these kinds of projects come along every day. When they appear, you simply have to do it.

At the time, I was working on a piece for the Toronto Biennial of Art about waterways, and relationships to the water. So, it felt like *Trajet* came at a very particular time, when I was already thinking about the history of the Leslie Spit and my relationship, as an Anishinaabekwe, to the City of Toronto, and how my ancestors had a connection to the place.

DB: I also found 1908 to be personally important, as my earliest ancestor to Toronto—maternal great-grandfather Tow "George" Lew—settled here after taking a boat from Hong Kong in 1913. He, along with the rest of us since, clearly benefitted from the municipal waterworks that were installed otop these footprints, which gives the story two chapters: the presence of the initial inhabitants being part one, and the acts of destruction for the purposes of settlement being part two. The erasure of this history is a trauma that Caroline and I are partners in; perhaps this project was one way to overcome it.

CM: Our first collaboration...

DB: After this, we go back to hot wine in the snowbank. [laughs]

Dean, your practice has long been invested in conviviality, gathering, exuberance, joy and the elaborate assembling of circumstances that might more easily enable or invite those states. Caroline, we're also thinking about your film *Creatura Dada* (2014) in the way it engages these ideas. We're curious to hear both of your reflections on *Trajet* in relation to the art of social assembly.

DB: Often my work seeks to unbalance certain power structures as they present themselves as status symbols. Examples would be the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art project that was a yacht club for people without yachts (*Q.W.Y.C. (Queen West Yacht Club)*, 2015), or a lobster restaurant in a river, which serves an invasive species of crawfish instead (*Restaurant the River*, 2015). I'm always doing these projects, which are posh- or aristocratic-flavoured scenarios, but done down low and on the cheap, unexclusive. I am always

thinking about ways that I can upend such situations and, in this case, we are looking at a history of monuments that are status symbols the municipality puts in place to enforce a mythos of who has influence and power over whom else.

CM: I have always been interested in documenting specific moments in time and marking history. In *Creatura Dada*, I invited a group of Francophone Indigenous women to come together in one space, and documented their meeting as an important moment in history. I've always tried to bring positive images of Indigenous representation out into the world, whether in film or installation works. *Trajet* feels extremely positive from an Indigenous standpoint, especially with regards to monuments in Canada.

Eurocentric traditions of monument-making rely on the specificity of proper names and distinct historical events. In contrast, this public sculpture sustains the suggestive anonymity of the referenced figures while making connection with the living. Can you talk about the process of researching, reaching out to and being in dialogue with the Anishinaabe, Dene and Haudenosaunee descendants whose footsteps animate the work?

DB: One possibility was that we could carve an exact replica of the original drawing [of the footprints] but this felt way wrong. We wanted to find a group of the "closest living relatives" to help carry the weight of this event, to extend invitations to Indigenous Torontonians and see what their responses would be to the possible recreation of these footprints, where we would make them from scratch.

CM: It was clear that we had to work closely with the Indigenous community of Toronto; not being from the city, we had to reach out to people who know the Indigenous communities there and could help us form the appropriate group of walkers. We needed all generations, people from all walks of life that, together, would give a good representation of what a contemporary Indigenous reality is in Toronto. It was important that we asked ourselves who was going to walk. After much thinking, we decided it could not just be one nation; it had to reflect the reality of Toronto now.

DB: Once we had gathered the group of interested walkers, we had a funny... well, the conversation veered immediately toward moccasins, as the note in the newspaper drawing indicated that the original group was wearing moccasins.

So, the question that came back to us from the walkers was: "Do we wear our own moccasins? Will the moccasins get ruined by the process at the foundry?" We reached out to Sage Paul, the director of Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto and a designer with experience in traditional tanning and hides. We shared the story with her and it was like an archeological fashion detective novel, where she responded with a design for an early type of hide-wrap moccasin—very simple, elegant even.

CM: Because it was done on such short notice, the making of the moccasins became a beautiful communal effort with several women helping, which made the community involvement bigger. [It] grew the circle bigger. From the beginning, we were hoping to involve as many people as possible so that the Indigenous community in Toronto would feel that this piece was made for them, by them and with them.

DB: On a logistical level, definitely unique in monument-making, we needed to get the shoe sizes of all of the walkers to the moccasin makers—Dehmin Cleland and Rosary Spence—in order for them to individually custom tailor wrap moccasins for the day of the inscribing... While wearing them, Leslie McCue told me they were "Soooooo comfortable." [laughs]

This project seems to straddle multiple epistemologies of memorialization: that of the bronze-cast medallion affixed by its own weight and permanence to the earth; and, the ephemeral events that bookend the project, which invite a relational mode of knowledge creation through a call to witness. Can you talk about what led you to approach making the work in this way?

CM: We always referred to the participants as walkers and witnesses. We felt we were doing something important, something that came with a sense of responsibility. It became a memorial event, where together we were also working on building a monument. It needed people to bear witness, as a testament to its significance on a much bigger level than ourselves.

DB: It was the only way we could do it. The bronze is a direct reference to the typical vocabulary of municipal sculptures—usually a colossal bronze dude on a horse, elevated and aggrandized—whereas here, relating back to the shoe sizes, the subjects are presented in 1:1 scale, which is human and humble. Neither of us had ever made a bronze sculpture before, let alone one





BOTH IMAGES: Dean Baldwin and Caroline Monnet (with many others),  
*Trajet*, 2019-20; performance-not-performance still from *Maker Technical*  
Sculpture Services, Toronto, 2019  
PHOTO: NADYA KWANDIBENS; PHOTO © RED WORKS PHOTOGRAPHY







Dean Baldwin and Caroline Monnet (with many others), *Trajet*, 2019-20; performance-not-performance still from *Maker Technical Sculpture Services*, Toronto, 2019

PHOTO: NADYA KWANDIBENS; PHOTO © RED WORKS PHOTOGRAPHY

that was almost 1,000 pounds while, at the same time, relinquishing control of the inscription to this group of walkers, who would be doing it in real time, one-time-only, with no do-overs. [laughs] The consequences felt pretty high, but the method felt right.

CM: We knew we were making a piece of history and we didn't want to keep it for ourselves, to do it in the studio by ourselves, so we opened it up to others. We celebrated with food, with drinks, with live music from Lacey Hill; it was a real happening and you just had to be there. There was a great level of responsibility carried by all the walkers and the witnesses alike, not only because it was one-time-only, but because they were carrying the weight of history. They realized the meaning behind it and what it was representing: it's a testament of survival. It means that despite

the chaos of Indigenous erasure, we can bring our history back up. We are saying that we are still present, that we have always been present, that we have been on this land since the glacial period. We are countering some of the scientific research and proving what our elders and ancestors have been saying for centuries. We are validating Indigenous knowledge and history.

The welcome offered by Elder Pauline Shirt for the making of the clay impression set a ceremonial tone that generated the event's resounding affect. How did you envision the role of the host at this event? And, Dean, in what ways is *Trajet* distinct in this register among your other endeavours?

DB: On the surface, distinct, but on point in other ways. I usually employ humour and whimsy to couch specific

aims. But in every situation, there is a large and difficult task to overcome, after which communal celebrations ensue. As for the role of host, I hope guests have some agency; no one really likes a host who forces everyone to have a good time. To that end, we really wanted to hand everything over to Elder Shirt to lead as she felt fit.

CM: [Elder Shirt] took it upon herself to make it ceremonial. I think we were both surprised how quickly that shift of energy happened. We always knew it was something important but she very naturally brought it to the next level, and drew out its significance.

DB: One thing we didn't expect: the scene at *Maker Sculpture* originally had the witnesses gathered in one area with the clay pad opposite, but Elder Shirt immediately cajoled everyone

into a large circle, which implicated everybody in what was going on, and broke down that false wall of audience and performer. We all held shared responsibility to the event.

CM: By following traditional protocols to honour the walkers, Elder Shirt legitimized our process of making the sculpture. The ceremonial aspects of the event solidified our collective feeling of responsibility and inscribed *Trajét* as a monument that stands in direct opposition to all the colonial statues present in Canada.

DB: Yeah, it was heavy. Of course, as we all gathered around this circle, it got lighter, since we were all able to carry it together. Then, afterwards, it became celebratory: there was a sigh of relief, some buffalo yelps, laughter and mingling...

CM: [laughs] Awesome.

Caroline, you encouraged participants to take varied paths across the clay, offering a gentle choreography for their natural gait that kept the inscription from becoming overdetermined. There seems to be something about kinship in this: the creation of a proof of relation with the understanding that any such act is more suggestive than diagrammatic. Can you talk about the creation of trace and how you think about its power of suggestion?

CM: We did a rehearsal beforehand, which the witnesses didn't see, but everyone had the opportunity to feel comfortable in the task they were taking. I gave a few directions about pacing, how to walk, how to avoid overstepping anyone's

footprints while still keeping it as natural as possible, how to clear the mind while doing it, to think positive thoughts and consider what they were bringing into the piece. In rehearsal, we had the walkers dip their feet in water and walk across paper so they could see where their trace would land and what the overall piece would look like. I guided them by giving a few indications here and there. But also, I wanted them to own the piece as much as possible. We never wanted the work to be an exact replica of the drawing from 1908, but more of a lived experience that is rooted in the present, something that is alive and will be carried into future generations.

We were really touched when Skye Paul walked across the clay carrying her baby, Townes, and holding her five-year-old son Lucien's hand. Though the baby is not actually represented as a set of footprints, he and his generation are present in the piece, and I think that is something very poetic and beautiful.

Caroline, you suggested in another interview that collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may be valuable in approaching reconciliatory efforts—saying, “while we need to acknowledge the chaos of our past, it's essential we move on to constructive relationships.” Can you say a bit more about your thinking around these kinds of collaborations, now that this project is nearing its conclusion?

CM: I have always valued the power of collaboration. It's been an essential part of my creative process and often at the root of many projects. I was incredibly touched that Dean would think of me to participate in this colossal sculp-

ture. I stand behind what I said about the need to acknowledge the chaos of our past, but to focus on constructive relationships. Dean is very sensitive to Indigenous issues in the country and has a proper understanding of what is needed to approach Indigenous narratives in the proper way. I think *Trajét* is a clear example that we can work together, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, towards a common goal: restoring proper narratives.

The walkers were: Lacey Hill, Barb Nahwegahbow, Shandra Spears Bombay, David DeLeary, Leslie McCue, Lindy Kinoshameg, Mike Ormsby, Dawn T. Maracle, Oronnia Tekaronhiakanere Maracle, Sage Petahtegoose, Skye Paul, Lucien Baigent.

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**Dean Baldwin** gambols across installation, performance and photographic media. Toronto-born and Montreal-based, he iterates on themes of hospitality, conviviality, performative still-life and the structural discrepancies around which we pivot. Baldwin has exhibited in Rome, Tasmania, London, Mumbai, New York City, Los Angeles and Winnipeg, among others.

**Jaclyn Bruneau** is a writer, and the Editor of *C Magazine*. She is a member of the board of directors at Images Festival, and is currently underway on an inconspicuous, yearlong publishing project in the online classifieds with Natasha Chaykowski and Untitled Art Society called *please, teach me to swim*. [www.jacbruneau.net](http://www.jacbruneau.net)

**Caroline Monnet** is a multidisciplinary artist of Algonquin and French origin from Outaouais, Quebec. She studied sociology and communication at the University of Ottawa (Canada) and the University of Granada (Spain) before pursuing a career in visual arts and film. Her work has been programmed internationally. She is based in Montreal.

**Aamna Muzaffar** is an artist and technologist based in Toronto. She is TD Assistant Curator at Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art, and a member of the board of directors at Art Metropole.

#### ENDNOTES

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Jan Verwoert, “On Future Histories—And the Generational Contract with the No Longer and Not Yet Living And the Pan-Demonium of Irreverent Styles of Nostalgia,” *Questioning History—Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 2008).