

Groundwork

Alana Bartol, Ileana Hernandez Camacho, Tsēmā Igharas

Curated by Valérie Frappier

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Groundwork—A curatorial introduction

Two starting points that shaped the thinking behind the group exhibition *Groundwork* were the influential words of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Laura Levin. Building on Simpson’s definition of extractivism and its alternative, and Levin’s writing on camouflage as a feminist performance practice, *Groundwork* investigates alternatives to an extractive mindset by foregrounding camouflage as a strategy to probe the constructed divide between the human and non-human.

In a 2013 interview with Naomi Klein, Simpson explains that extractivism simultaneously evokes a physical process of resource extraction, specifically on Indigenous lands, as well as a mindset. The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer and scholar defines the concept of extractivism in the following way: “The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is... stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts extraction has on the other living things in that environment.” Later in the interview, she then defines the alternative to an extractive mindset as being “deep reciprocity. It’s respect, it’s relationship, it’s responsibility, and it’s local.”¹ Simpson’s powerful words have come to epitomize my

¹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in “Dancing the World into Being: A Conversation with Idle No More’s Leanne Simpson,” *YES! Magazine*, March 6, 2013, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/dancing-the-world-into-being-a-conversation-with-idle-no-more-leanne-simpson>.

understanding of extractivism as not just a physical act but an entire mindset towards land, humans, and non-human species that directly stems from colonization. Her definition of its alternative guides this exhibition's discussion of site-specific embodied action.

As for the second starting point, I am referencing settler performance scholar Levin's theorizing of camouflage, as discussed in her 2014 book *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In*. Here, Levin writes that this type of feminist camouflage strategy entails the performer locating themselves in time and space to foreground a political perspective, all the while surfacing an awareness of how deeply they are interconnected with their environment. She states that camouflage, used in this way, "is as much about revealing as concealing," as it equally "highlights the non-human site as itself a performing entity, reminding us that the communication between self and setting is rarely unidirectional."² A key component to Levin's theory—one that I find very generative in relation to building alternatives to extractivism—is her expansion of camouflage as a practice to negotiate and build ethical reciprocity with one's surroundings.³ She explains that camouflage, when used self-reflexively, becomes a tool to "work against... binary thinking and illuminate ways in which figure and ground, visible and invisible, are chiasmically linked," which "questions the very utility of figure and ground as separate conceptual categories."⁴

What initially drew me to bringing Bartol's, Hernandez Camacho's, and Tsēmā's works into conversation is the importance that embodied performance plays in their approaches to disrupting an extractive status quo. A connecting thread throughout the works featured in *Groundwork* is the use of camouflage as a strategy, employed by each of the artists as they entered/infiltrated the sites where they were performing. I perceived each of the artists using an infiltrative strategy in order to cultivate relationships with their environments in a profoundly multi-sensorial way. Accompanying this image-based documentation of their performances within the gallery are the garments worn and tools used by the artists, creating dispatches from each of their locations.

Tsēmā's featured works speak to the different approaches to mining and land use in her home territory of the Tahltan Nation in so-called British Columbia, specifically the difference between her ancestors' harvesting of minerals and the colonial-capitalist resource extraction that dominates today's mining industry. The two prints featured from her *(Re)Naturalize* series (2015-16)—*No.1 Brick* and *No. 4 Rebar*—document Tsēmā's performance on the Leslie Spit in Toronto, where she painted her body with iron oxide, the same mineral that tints the mountains of her territory. Here, the artist performs the material connection of her body to her ancestral land while located in the metropole where much of the profits

² Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 97.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

from the Canadian extractive industry accumulate. In *to protect the womb from x-rays and colonization* (2018), Tsēmā adorned a moosehide apron with copper pennies, reclaiming the devalued currency made from one of the minerals extracted from her territory to create an armour against a Western value system that only sees land as something to profit from. Finally, in *apocalypse later* (2018), the artist produced a double-sided sandwich-board sign—with one side reading “THE END IS NEAR,” and the other stating “THIS IS THE END”—to point to the change in mindset that needs to occur to ensure Indigenous futurities.

Hernandez Camacho’s installation presents an ongoing work by the artist titled *Corps roca*, initiated in 2018. Four photographs document one of several performances by the Montreal-based artist where she embodies and gives human voice to a rock. Using humour to critically question humanity’s relationship with the environment, the rock re-narrates the evolution of the planet, citing itself—rather than humans—as the most evolved species on Earth. Hernandez Camacho’s act of camouflage seeks to incite a change in perspective in viewing rocks and the non-human as inanimate and unimportant. Rather, in embodying the rock as a walking and talking being, she questions dominant ways of thinking about land and the non-human as lifeless matter only existing as a backdrop for humanity, and imagines what would shift if humans treated the non-human as its equal. The artist’s rock costume is installed on a ramp and animated by subterranean low-bass frequencies. Audience members are invited to stand on the ramp and feel the vibrations of the rock underfoot—here transformed as the rock’s mode of communication with humanity.

Showcased across the gallery are multidisciplinary works by Bartol, which are part of her larger project known as the *Orphan Well Adoption Agency* (2017-ongoing). Masquerading as a real-life oil and gas agency, the project documents the Calgary-based artist’s use of dowsing—a tool of divination long used to detect water, oil, and minerals underground—throughout abandoned oil well sites across so-called Alberta. Lens-based footage presents Bartol performing as a fictional agency worker at these sites, dressed in a blue jumpsuit and wielding her dowsing rods to “read” the land and assess the levels of contamination of the orphaned wells. As an intuitive practice requiring deep listening, dowsing engages the body’s different senses as the dowser must attune herself to what the ground is conveying. The video *TOTAL FIELD* (2017) documents one such performance by Bartol as the agency’s dowser, where she infiltrates the extractive industry’s mentality and camouflages her senses to build reciprocity with the contaminated soil. Displayed on smaller monitors underneath *TOTAL FIELD*’s projection as a multi-channel installation are two fragments of *reading wild lands* (2018), which show animated drill cuttings imagined as a representation of how contamination seeps into the soil. The dowser’s briefcase of tools and her uniform are installed nearby, temporarily set down until her return.

– Valérie Frappier, curator