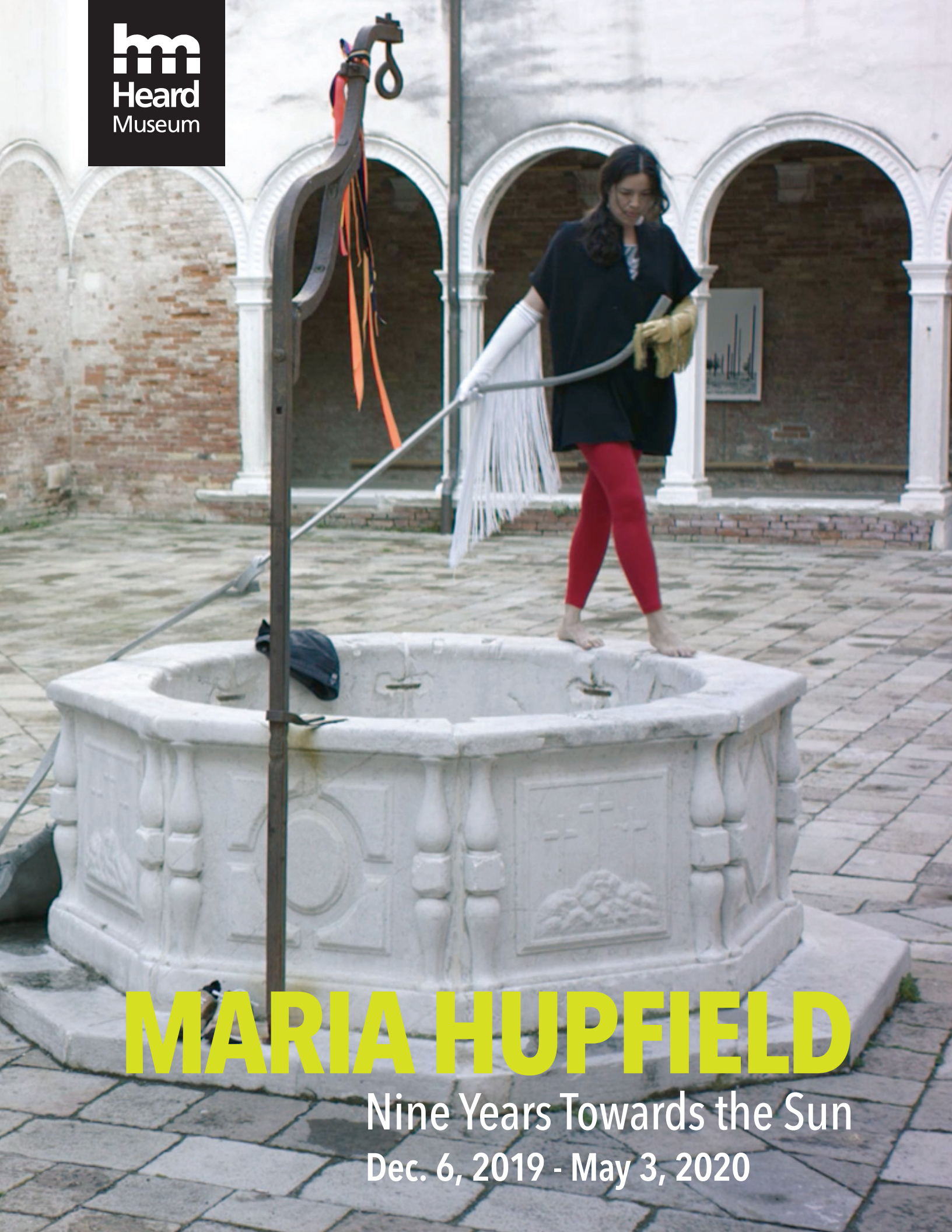
Heard Museum



MARIA HUPFIELD

Nine Years Towards the Sun

Dec. 6, 2019 - May 3, 2020

This exhibition is about Maria Hupfield. This exhibition is an intervention. This exhibition is an action. This exhibition is a performance. This exhibition is an archive. This exhibition is a disruption.

Centered around 2011 to 2019, ***Nine Years Towards the Sun*** references Hupfield's body of work developed while living and working in Brooklyn, New York. In conversations with the artist, the experience of walking through the city streets was expressed as an experience which creates an acute awareness of the smallness of the body in relation to that landscape. The scale and speed of a city in connection to the body prompts the eyes forward while moving through it; the sky is out of sight. With that said, there is a desire to look toward the sky, to search for the sun, to look for the unseen. For the artist, the work in this exhibition is about "a journey towards something outside of myself, something larger, something cosmic." It is an act of trying to make the invisible visible. In that, the action of making the unseen seen is part of the framework for this exhibition.

A transdisciplinary artist, Maria Hupfield (b. 1974) is an Anishinaabe-kwe and member of the Wasauksing First Nation–located near Parry Sound in the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron in Ontario, Canada. She is known for her sculptural work, film installation and activation of objects through performative gestural movement. In her performances, or actions, Hupfield engages with the notion of time as medium. Through these actions Hupfield consciously works to deconstruct and unsettle stereotypical and harmful frameworks surrounding Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States. Hupfield explains this as "expanding conversations on North American Indigenous bodies and viewing Indigeneity as mobile, from multiple positions, to free it from reductive singular readings." For Hupfield this is paramount. It is about "positioning Indigenous arts as technologically advanced and as an active living presence." She dismantles these notions and intervenes with new histories and meanings, paying particular attention to the stories of objects thereby inviting an evolving interpretation not constrained by colonial commodification.

The questioning of commercialism and its relationship to Hupfield's work has some roots in the history of performance art in the 20th century as a rejection of material and an emphasis on process and experience as more tantamount to the meaning of the work. Anti-aesthetic art (which developed pre-World War I, involving artists like Marcel Duchamp) and Dadaism (which developed as a result of World War I) sought to dismantle bourgeoise aestheticism and eschew capitalistic society.

Hupfield works across different mediums primarily engaging with grey industrial felt; a tactile material which neutralizes her work. The felt's industrial history is instrumentalized by Hupfield in a conscious movement that "collapses historical gender-based art binaries to bring together modern art with craft, holistically across sound, movement and the body." The works she produces fight against reductive readings of her practice, the commodification of Nativeness and fetishized exoticism and replace it with a reclamation of agency in representation.

We see this at play in *Jiimaan*, Hupfield's work from 2015 to 2017, which is composed of a single-channel video and grey felt canoe. The installation video documents a performance of Hupfield at We Crociferi Campo dei Gesuiti from May 7-10, 2015 in Venice, Italy. Filmed by Dylan McLaughlin (Diné), the video consists of three scenes in five minutes. Scene one features Hupfield wearing dark grey leggings, a black tunic and a black cap. She approaches a traditional Anishinaabe hunting-style canoe, almost stalking it. She unfolds it on the ground turning it over. The ribs of the canoe are visible from the underside, suggesting the body, in this instance being more reminiscent of the body of an animal. The scene fades to black and reappears with Hupfield now in red leggings and a white opera-length glove with long white fringe and a gold opera-length glove with short gold fringe. Hupfield drags the canoe around the courtyard, the fringe hangs down past her knees, billowing back and

forth as though a white flag of surrender–she has seized her prey. Walking to the baptismal font in the center of the space, a sealed-off water well, Hupfield begins to hoist the canoe up on a post. The scene fades to black before this task is accomplished. Scene three begins with Hupfield emerging from inside the font with a bottle of water and a wine glass. Hupfield pours herself a drink of the water, takes a sip, and walks away with no real resolution to the scene. Having studied the work of boatbuilders Sylvia Plain and John Hupfield, the artist creates a narrative of the nature of the canoe as a container of memory and meaning.

The act of cutting in and out to black at the end of scenes before they are fully satisfied fights against the assumption that performance requires spectacle. Perhaps spectacle is the detritus of art in the postwar (World War II) era, both historically and contemporarily. In a 2014 conversation in *Interview* magazine, American artist Robert Morris (1931-2018) remarked, "I've come to regard the itch for the big and loud required by spectacle as puerile and callow and what the manifestations of spectacle do to the spectator is even more objectionable[1]." Morris, whose minimalist work often included industrial felt as medium, was and remains a major influence on Hupfield's work. On November 28, 2018, the day of Morris's death, Hupfield created the piece *Untitled (after Robert Morris)* as an ode to him as well as an interpretation of his work through an Indigenous femme lens.

Many works in the exhibition draw upon the 20th century art historical trope of found objects. Hupfield selects ready-made/mass-produced items and manipulates, alters or embellishes them to change or subvert their meaning. In *Double Punch* (2011), Hupfield manipulates a pair of red striking gloves. These gloves read as objects of action and sport. The gloves represent a certain feeling of strength, agility and defense against an attack from an opponent. In selecting striking gloves, Hupfield chooses to fight back against phallocratic heritages in an effort to illuminate that "[she] exists in a world that privileges white men and that [she is] not one." The gloves are adorned with gold-tone jingle bells which announce a blow before it occurs–perhaps as an auditory proclamation of her strength and presence.

This idea of announcement of presence to prioritize visibility, as well as serving as warning or a precursor to danger (trauma or violence), is further illustrated in the colors that Hupfield repeatedly uses. Fluorescent yellow and orange and Mylar survival blankets are often associated with emergency services (e.g., caution tape, hardhats, construction vests, etc.). These colors act as visual punctuation as well as creating visibility in that they operate both as conceptual frame and aesthetic choice in Hupfield's work. Another motif that reoccurs frequently in her work is the tin cone jingle.

Untitled (After Robert Morris), 2019. Industrial grey felt wall hanging with cut-out detail. Collection of the artist. Photo: Craig Smith.

Double Punch, 2011. Found striking gloves, assorted gold-tone bells. Collection of the artist. Photo: Craig Smith.

The conical pendant, which historically was constructed from the lids of commercially produced containers like tobacco tins, has been present in the material culture of North American Indigenous peoples as early as the 18th century in applications such as adornment on women's dresses. Immediately adjacent to this exhibition is one of the Heard Museum's signature installations, *HOME: Native People in the Southwest*. Here you can see historic examples of the incorporation of tin cone jingles, such as a Mescalero Apache coming of age skirt and poncho from the early 1900s. The tin jingle can be seen in Hupfield's various works and practice including *Backwards Double Spiral* (2012), a pair of grey felt boots with tin jingles spiraled downward toward the foot.

Another element of Hupfield's practice is the way in which she enters into conversation with postwar art on a frequent basis. She often engages materially, formally and conceptually with the practices of artists like Jimmie Durham (American, b. 1940), Joseph Beuys (German, 1921-1986) and Claes Oldenburg (American, b. 1929). Calling upon the oeuvres of these 20th century art behemoths, Hupfield has stated that she seeks to problematize and participate in the "practices dominated by white and white passing men." She reimagines thematic elements of their work in our present-day postwar environment as an act of space-making.

Oldenburg's soft-sculpture replicas of banal objects come into play as an example of this. When you construct common things out of a material that renders them non-functional or inert, it forces you to consider original meanings of the object and how this non-functioning replica operates in meaning. Oldenburg remarked that his sculptures were "vehicles, structural vehicles for expression[2]." Although Oldenburg maintained the actual colors of the items he was replicating in an attempt to create a faithful proxy of color in the work in soft-sculptural form, Hupfield disregards realistic color representation in favor of a desire to render neutralized monochromatic representations. Hupfield regards this as an action "to focus on function, to move away from a purely aesthetic reading into one that digs deeper than the superficial or surface [to one that] rewards ongoing committed engagement."

Disruption is a major element in the exhibition. Disruption in the form of retooling of the way in which the exhibition space and typical elements of a museum function such as artist designed stanchions that reference police barricades, vitrines with air holes drilled into them so that the works contained within them can breathe, archival material created by the artist and interaction with sculptural objects, like the outdoor benches which are meant to be activated by the viewed. The viewer and their interaction with the work is a functioning part of the meaning and movement of the work. Museums by their very nature are colonial spaces. They historically operate as repositories for the visual and material elements of a culture; more often than not without the involvement of the culture in question. Disrupting those stayed methods through intervention is a radical step toward decolonizing and breaking down those power structures that have traditionally been marginalizing of diverse bodies. When you change the functionality of the space from static and passive to active and engaged, it confronts the colonial constructs of art and object.

Considering natural history or art museums and their collections, specifically their historic Indigenous collections, it is often forgotten that these objects were/are part of living cultures. These objects had/have a life to them, a context to them, which is not always communicated in traditional museum spaces. In this exhibition the choice was made to drill holes into the vitrines that display several works. Though the intention of a vitrine in practical application is to protect or preserve an object for future generations, it creates a barrier, a system of removing meaning and function away from the object. Drilling "air holes" into the vitrines allows the works inside of them to breathe, to speak, to have life.

A major facet of the exhibition is performance. There is an immateriality to a performance; it is ephemeral and impermanent and can never be reproduced exactly the same way twice. Environmental, social and human variables will always alter the result even if an artist follows a precise list of instructions. Hupfield intentionally constructs new scores for each performance she creates, allowing scores to build upon one another; they are not siloed but they are not indexical. In this, the artist participates in a history

of oral traditions and intergenerational storytelling. Though Hupfield's activation of the gallery is a vital aspect to the overall purpose of the show, the exhibition is not vacant of performance in her physical absence. The viewer is integral to the show's performative quality. Simply by being present in the space is a form of activation, viewing and engaging works is a form of activation; it creates a conversation between object and person that is fundamental.

The objects Hupfield constructs–structural elements made from lumber, soft sculpture, garments and textiles–become tools, either silent or auditory, in a score of action she inserts into a space. The immaterial nature of performance collides with the very tactile materiality of her work. There is a level of discomfort and risk in performance art both for the artist and the viewer. There is uncertainty there, a dance between preconceived social norms and the disruption of those codified frameworks of behavior with which we engage in public settings. As the artist states, performance is "to be human and to be witnessed while doing so." To that end, the very presence of Hupfield is a political action. Action which defies 500 years of colonial occupation of Indigenous lands and the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples through boarding and residential school systems in the United States and Canada.

The body plays an integral role in the works on view in this show, however, it is more the suggestion of the corporeal than an actual figural representation. The structures in the center of the gallery support various garment-like works. These structures are another moment where Hupfield references and engages with the work of postwar artists–in this instance Jimmie Durham, who is well known for his rudimentary wooden constructions that suggest both human and animal forms. The structures here all reference the shape of the body, however, there is specificity there; it is not the body in general but the artist's own body. The body is referenced in the form of gloves, boots, a silhouetted self-portrait of the artist and representation in photography and video. Inserting Hupfield's body into the space is an active movement of space-making, space-keeping and survivance. It is a radical expression of liberation, freedom and movement toward "a space of new imagining and possibility."

On level 2 of the gallery you encounter the archive. Archives are traditionally thought of as repositories for historically significant material from a specific time, person or group, amassed by an institution. The archive in this exhibition exists in different planes of time, from past works and histories to a real-time environment of performance and documentation. The political framework of the archive is realized and acknowledged, noting the choreographed nature of history-telling and sharing and the constructed nature of the archive itself. Inserting Maria Hupfield and her work into a space on her terms is an interventionist act. It is in this portion of the show where you encounter *Trophy Case*, a site-specific installation of previous iterations of an ongoing work by Hupfield known as *Trophy Wall* (2015). Conceptually bound by the notion of performance and a desire to create an archival representation of those performances not constrained by institutional frameworks, the installation is composed of detritus of the artist's past performances while also acting as a sort of "thinking" shelf of objects Hupfield creates for future performances–it is a continuum of performance objects in the artist's practice.

Through the works on view, an armature has been constructed for the viewer to enter and explore Hupfield's artwork and practice as an artist, as a woman, as a maker and as Anishinaabe-kwe.

This exhibition is an intervention. This exhibition is an action. This exhibition is a performance. This exhibition is an archive. This exhibition is a disruption. This exhibition is about Maria Hupfield.

- Erin Joyce, Fine Arts Curator

[1] Guyton, W. (2014, February 19). Robert Morris. Retrieved from https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/robert-morris.

[2] Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://walkerart.org/magazine/claes-oldenburg-the-sixties.

Ahn Ahn Ahn Kaa Kaa Kaa, 2013-2017. Untreated lumber structure with acrylic paint, industrial grey felt balaclava with tin jingles, single-channel video with sound (9 minutes, 41 seconds on continuous loop). Collection of Malcolm and Robin Anthony. Photo courtesy of the artist.