



JOHN CUSSANS
THE SKULLCRACKER SUITE Pt.1:
BC Time-Slip (The Empire Never Ended)

REF 2021

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300-WORD STATEMENT

The Skullcracker Suite (June 2016 - October 2020) is an arts research project engaging the process of decolonization in British Columbia from ethnographic and science fictional perspectives. Named after Hox'hok, the giant man-eating crane of Kwakwaka'wakw legend, the project was conceived as a theatrical allegory for the "permanent decolonization of thought" proposed by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

The project engages five related intellectual contexts from an arts research perspective: cultural anthropology, decolonization studies, inter-cultural psychology, Kwakiutl ethnography and science fiction studies. It addresses these questions:

- How might a contemporary art research project contribute to the permanent decolonization of thought?
- How might science-fiction be used as a way to frame and reflect upon this process?
- How has Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch culture informed it?

The first phase of research began as an arts residency in Vancouver investigating the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's visit there in 1972 and his stay at an experimental First Nations rehab community called X-Kalay. Historical and scholarly research was conducted performatively within a research installation staged inside a contemporary art space on unceded First Nations territory. This culminated in a multi-component portfolio of works.

Through a close reading of Dick's writing in relationship to Kwakiutl ethnography and De Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics*, I drew a thematic correlation between Dick's pre-occupation with his deceased twin sister and the motif of the Salmon Twins in Kwakwaka'wakw mythology. This connection was consolidated through the analogy of Dick's Fomelhaut Albemuth diagram and a print design by the Kwakwaka'wakw artist and Indigenous activist Beau Dick. This would lead to my writing a catalogue essay for Beau's posthumous exhibition *Devoured by Consumerism*.

Through Beau I was invited to attend the potlatch of Chief Alan Hunt in September 2016. The entire ceremony was documented and edited sections disseminated via YouTube in 2018.

RESEARCH AIMS, PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

B.C. TIME-SLIP (The Empire Never Ended)

In June 2016 I was awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship to begin the first phase of research. This culminated in BC Time-Slip (The Empire Never Ended), a multi-component portfolio of works investigating the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's visit to Vancouver in 1972 and his stay at an experimental First Nations rehab community called X-Kalay.

BC Time-Slip began as a one-month residency at Dynamo Arts Association in Vancouver investigating Dick's time in the city. The project took its name from Dick's 1964 science fiction novel *Martian Time-Slip* which tells the story of a doomed Mars colonization project from the perspectives of a schizophrenic repairman (Jack Bohlen) and a severely autistic child (Manfred Steiner). Central to the narrative is the creation of a time-distortion chamber that would enable Jack to communicate with Manfred and see into the future.

During the residency I organised and documented group discussions about the politics of decolonization in the region; gave a public lecture about Dick's fictions in relation to De Castro's notion of cannibal metaphysics; curated a program of film screenings; produced a series of 360° videos of myself playing the author in the city; and produced two videos based on my findings. Information about the project was made public through the [BC Time-Slip blog](https://bctimeslip.skullcracker-suite.org/) (<https://bctimeslip.skullcracker-suite.org/>)

The project was designed to draw attention to the continuing influence of colonial structures in the cultural life of British Columbia and to raise questions about decolonization from the perspective of the region's Settler communities. The research strategy of BC Time-Slip reveals how science fiction as a genre has been implicated in the perpetuation of colonial myths about technological progress and cultural superiority while simultaneously exposing and criticizing their catastrophic psychological and environmental consequences.





Myself as Philip K. Dick outside the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, August 2016 (Photo: Stephanie Moran)

During the Dynamo residency the gallery was converted into a research installation investigating Dick's visit to Vancouver in 1972. The Special Investigations Room was open to the general public for the duration of the residency.

Dick's space colonization and time-travel narratives were used as a pre-text to raise questions about the ongoing legacy of British colonialism in the region, the relevance of science fiction for thinking through the actualities of colonialism/decolonization and parallels between Dick's mystical visions and the mythology of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples.

BC TIME-SLIP
THE EMPIRE NEVER ENDED



AUGUST 13TH - SEPTEMBER 3RD

SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS ROOM
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FRI. - SAT. 12.00 - 18.00
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FRI. TALKS 18.00 - 19.30

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I created a series of 360° videos depicting Dick's time in the city, myself playing the author, and conversations with colleagues about the project which were projected in the gallery during the show.

A selection of the video spheres can be found at https://bctimeslip.skullcrackersuite.org/photospheres/BC_Time-Slip_Video_Spheres/main.html.

All the spheres are manipulable and interactive.



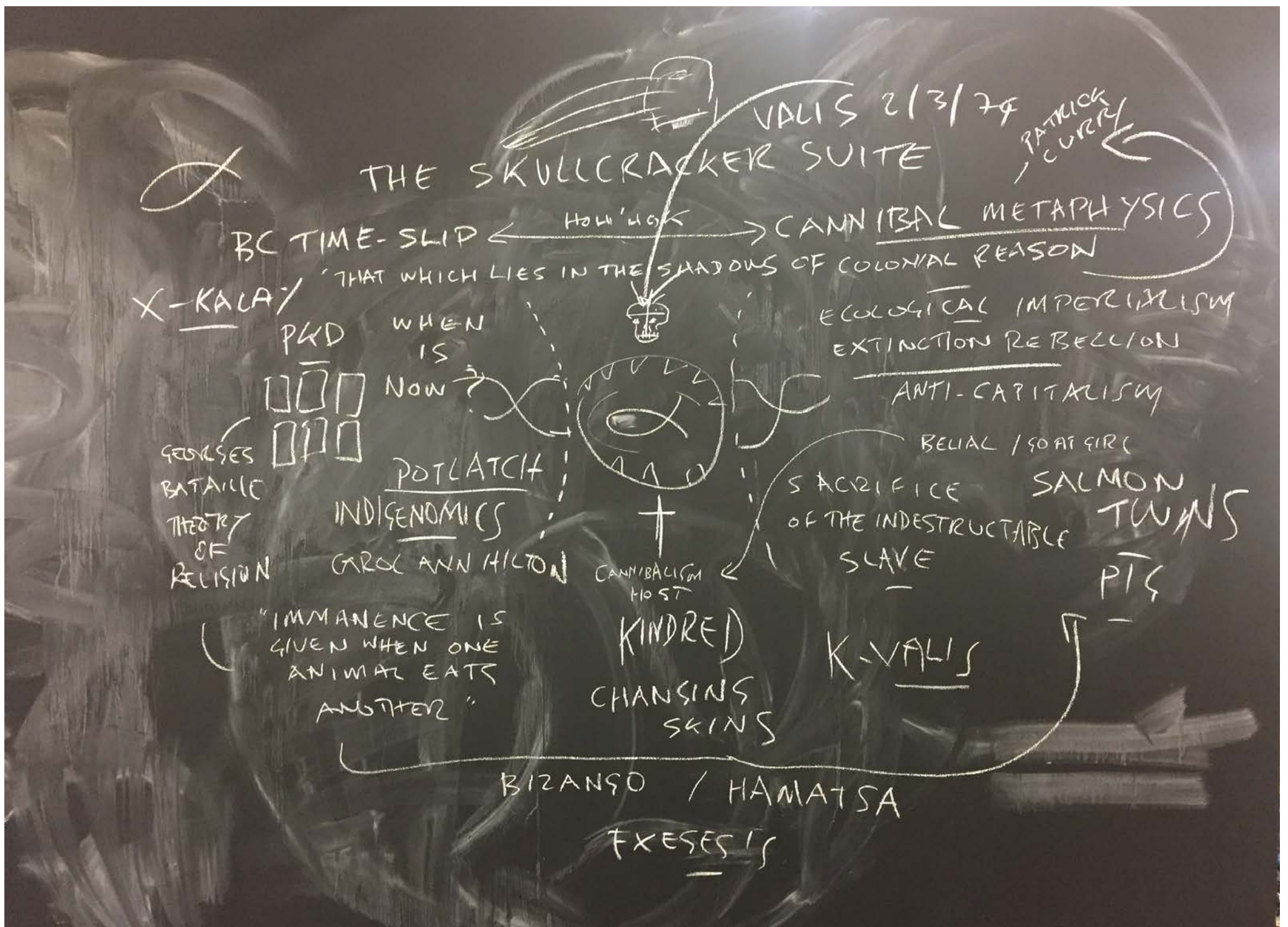
During the residency I hosted a series of public lectures, discussions and film screenings in the gallery and other venues to which a selected public was invited.

You can watch my BC Time-Slip-Cannibal Metaphysics talk at <https://vimeo.com/179698644>.

I documented several group conversations about the the politics of decolonization in British Columbia which were documented and posted online. You can watch a 360° video document of one of those talks at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7OQpwrnkkk>



Stephanie Moran, Jay White, Marina Roy, Barb Atwell, Randy Lee Cutler and Naoko Fukumaru discussing decolonization, Stanley Park, August 2016



Blackboard from BC Time-Slip<>Cannibal Metaphysics Talk

Following my return from British Columbia in 2016 I produced two video works combining material generated during the residency with found footage, images and audio interviews with Philip K. Dick. These works were produced as sketches for a future BC Time-Slip art installation.

In *Sketch 2 for a Time-Slip Installation* the special investigations room doubles for the research laboratory in Dick's 1953 *Colony*, the story of an expedition to the super-fertile, earth-like Planet Blue which is being surveyed for potential human colonization. The mirroring of a contemporary art exhibition made by a British artist, attempting to critically engage the cultural politics of decolonization in British Columbia, and a colonial research laboratory imagined by an Anglo-American science-fiction writer who had visited Vancouver in 1972, was intended to stage the trans-historical continuity of the former in the latter, an ambivalent, deliberately provocative assertion that 'the empire never ended' and that Canadians are still living in its 'Black Iron Prison'.

You can watch the video here: <https://vimeo.com/215502192>



Stills from *Sketch 2 for a Time-Slip Installation* (2016)

Towards the end of the residency at Dynamo Arts I was invited to attend the potlatch ceremony of the Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Alan Hunt at the Tsaxis Big House in Fort Rupert. The Skullcracker team were given permission to document all the dances performed at the event. A selection of the video documentation can be seen on my YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/codeless88/playlists>).

In March 2019 the edited video documentation was given to Alan to use for educational purposes within the Alert Bay and Fort Rupert communities.





Stills from Alan Hunt's potlatch, Tsa-x'is Big House, Fort Rupert, September, 3rd. 2016

In December 2017 I met with David Berner, founder of X-Kalay, the rehab clinic in which Phillip K. Dick had stayed in 1972, and filmed a 50 minute interview with him. In it we discuss the origins of X-Kalay, its transformation from a half-way house for First Nations ex-convicts into an influential drug-recovery program; the politics of decolonization in the organization; his memories Dick's time at the clinic; and his criticism of contemporary drug-rehabilitation policies in Canada.

The full four part interview can be watched at <https://vimeo.com/248872034>.



COME TO X-KALAY'S OPEN HOUSE

BY MARTHA JAN WALLACE

The school teacher was on her way up the walk to Alexandra House one Saturday night when a tow-headed, teenage boy hailed her from a car. "What's happening in there?" he asked, waving at the lighted windows on the main floor. "X-Kalay Open House and everybody's welcome," she replied, continuing on her way. "That's all I want to know. This is the place," she heard the boy say. And he and his friends soon followed her inside.

Sometimes after the concept period there are skits put on by house talent. Vaudeville is alive and doing well at X-Kalay. Other nights the concept is followed by a brief rundown of X-Kalay events by one of the directors.

But always there are refreshments and dancing. Recently the dancing has been stirred up by the "live rock" of the "Twenty-four Hour Debut" whose donated time and talent have been enthusiastically approved by the young and able. Those who prefer their social expression on a verbal basis gather in the now conversationally arranged "concept" room, which is ear-by-mouth to the gym, where the dancing is. When a dancer bursts forth and makes his panting way to the refreshment table, the music bursts with him. All the talkers adjust their voices and cup their ears until someone jumps up to close the door.

X-KALAY MEMBER Henry McBryan at Open House with regular guest Bob Hamilton

Open House attracts a lot of young visitors--and it is not just the band. They like being there. The vibes are good. They'd say, "This X-Kalay bunch is in a good space." "Between numbers they like to sit down and rap. Older guests are drawn by such

the same mystique--even though curiosity first brought them in the door. Here is a minister, there a radio commentator. That woman is "house mother" to a group of Indian students. Those girls are university students. And there's an editor, a professor, an MP, an Indian dancer, a secretary, a parole officer.....

In a large room, X-Kalay members and guests were sitting on a motley assortment of sofa and straight chairs discussing a concept ("Imagination is better than action") that one of the directors had written on a portable blackboard. Anyone could agree, disagree, or extend the idea. Each contribution was listened to thoughtfully. The goal was not mass agreement but provocative exchange and mental stimulation.

It really doesn't matter how diverse the backgrounds are--the common bond is human caring, and the thing that keeps people coming back is human warmth. You have a good time when you go to the X-Kalay Open House.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" "Have a piece of cake." "Let's sit here and talk." "Won't you join us?" "Do come again, and bring your friends!" "It's X-Kalay Open House and everybody's welcome."

The place: ALEXANDRA HOUSE, 1726 West Seventh, between Pine and Burrard, 8 P.M. every Saturday.

The Game

Lively Verbal Interaction Ent To Learn About Themselves

Multi-Mission Man's Busy Life

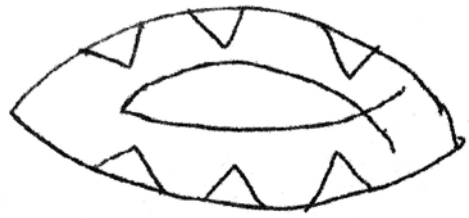
Earl Allard, Director of X-Kalay, wears many hats -- speaking up for a future member in court, handling the legal aspects of zoning, getting involved in real estate, acting as a social worker, or flying off to deal with government officials.

Contributions From Community

X-Kalay has received support from the community in many ways. Local businessmen have shown their enthusiasm by means of generous donations. For example, Tim Pegg of Vancouver Supply Co., Floyd Britton of Canada Starch, and David Yampolsky of Western Food

X-KALAY MEMBERS play a Game at Simon Fraser University. A sociology student, Dorothy Wise, video-taped this Game sequence so that players could see themselves in new light. Players (clockwise from right of microphone) are: Alna Kagis, Ann Kagis, Henry McBryan, Dave Berner, Mervin Fineday, Wayne Allard, Earl Allard, Luis Molino, Marg Caron and Tom Bailey (See story at right)

FOMELHAUT



ALBEMUTH



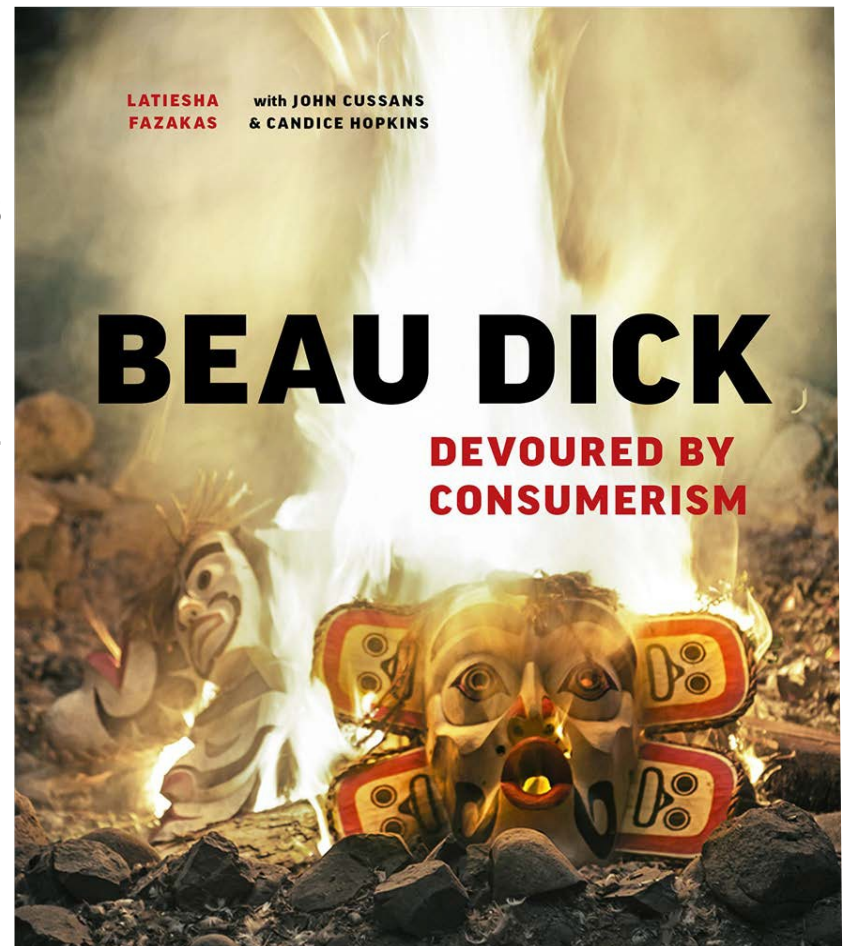
Philip K. Dick Fomelhaut Albemuth graphic, July 8th 1974

Beau Dick *Devoured By Consumerism* print (2016)

While in Vancouver I began a conversation with LaTiesha Fazakas, Beau Dick and Alan Hunt's gallerist, who I had met at Alan's potlatch.

Our conversation was guided initially by the formal similarities between a recently created print by Beau called *Devoured by Consumerism* (2016) and an image drawn by Phillip K. Dick to illustrate what would become known as *The Exegesis*, his attempt to understand a series of mystical visions he had in 1974 after an artificial intelligence he named VALIS (Vast Active Living Intelligence System) communicated with him.

My discussion with LaTiesha led to a planned visit by Beau Dick to the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford in April 2018 and a commission to produce an essay for Beau's posthumous *Devoured by Consumerism* exhibition which took place at White Columns gallery, New York in April 2019. My essay 'In The House of the Man Eater' was published in the exhibition catalogue.



JOHN CUSSANS

IN THE HOUSE OF THE MAN-EATER

THE IMAGE BEAU DICK designed to represent the concept for *Devoured by Consumerism* depicts two human figures in the mouth of a much larger being. That one of these figures has a dollar sign and an X for eyes, the other a monitor for a head with infinite spiralling eyes, suggests the powerful compulsions that prepare modern humans to become prey to a rapaciousness far greater than their own: the hypnotic manipulation of mass media, and the continually stimulated desire for money and material goods. That Beau envisioned this particular man-eater as a sea monster recalls another apocalyptic and all-consuming devourer of humankind, Leviathan, whose jaws, in medieval depictions, opened onto hell.

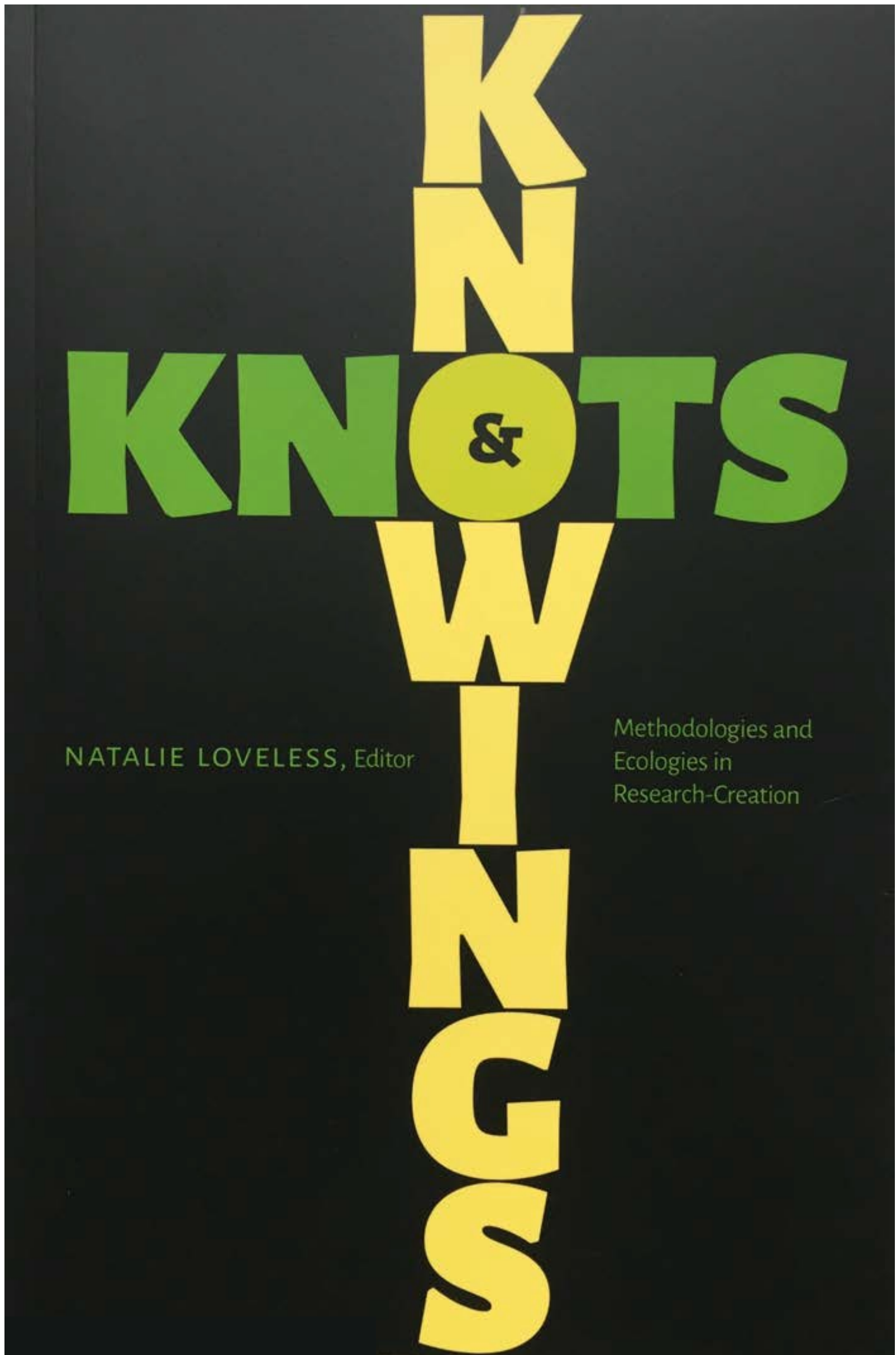
Although modern consumerism is tied to recent shifts in the dynamics of capitalist society, its foundations in the Americas can be found in the earliest encounters with Europeans, whose competitive, self-centred drives to extract maximum profit from the natural resources of the "New World" set the pattern for what continues today. After the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, the British established settlements along



"Hellmouth" miniature from *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, c. 1440

the shores of the Pacific Northwest coast. When the beaver and sea otter had been hunted to near extinction, the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush beginning in 1857 convinced the colonial authorities in London to declare much of what is now the province of B.C. a colony of the British Empire. That *Leviathan* was also the title for Thomas Hobbes's seventeenth-century treatise on the absolute power of the English monarch to secure the nation's "commonwealth" reminds us that the political foundations of

In 2019 I was interviewed by Dr Randy Lee Cutler from Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver about the research methods used in The Skullcracker Suite. The interview 'Special Investigations' was published in *Knowings and Knots: Methodologies and Ecologies in Research Creation*, edited by Natalie Loveless (University of Alberta Press, 2020).



Dialogues

Special Investigations

Randy Lee Cutler in conversation

with John Cussans

This interview between Randy Lee Cutler and John Cussans explores the relationship of research to artistic practice and highlights some of the shared concerns that have arisen in their respective work and geographical contexts.

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RANDY LEE CUTLER: I would like to begin by discussing how you engage with research in your artistic practice, how you understand or describe your artistic practice, which I know is quite nuanced with regard to research and the ways in which it does, or doesn't, align with current funding models in the UK. Let's start by talking about your current work on a Leverhulme-funded artistic research project—The Skullcracker Suite—designed to test Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's notion of "the permanent decolonization of thought" in the context of the contemporary art scene of British Columbia since the 1970s. How does this project take up artistic research?

JOHN CUSSANS: The Skullcracker Suite is a multilayered project that currently involves three interwoven fields of research: the story of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's stay at the X-Kalay Foundation in Vancouver in 1972 (a primarily First Nations rehab centre using radical encounter group therapy); the broad idea of decolonization as enacted in Vancouver since the 1970s (specifically in artistic practices and education); and the survival and resurgence of Indigenous ceremonial and healing practices in the region (primarily the potlatch and Hamatsa traditions of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples). As a general research project, it involves a range of traditional methods: scholarly and archival research, interviews, seminars, and discussion groups. The artistic research strategies are rather more unconventional and obtuse relative to those used in other humanities disciplines. These include restaging scenes from Philip K. Dick's time in Vancouver, the conversion of a gallery space into a "Special Investigations Room," documentation of research events, interviews and discussions, film screenings, and the generation of a number of 360-degree video recordings. The material generated from these recordings is then recomposed into a feasible format for future exhibition.

CUTLER: It is an intriguing project. Given that we did our postgraduate degrees together at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in the UK, I have enjoyed witnessing the evolution of your practice and how you work with new cultural forms. It has been inspiring to have a colleague whose art practice is as hybrid as my own. I often think of my creative interests and formats in terms of emergence especially in relation to the more traditional fine arts. Have you felt challenged or constrained by the existing categories for artistic research and production within both academic and gallery contexts?

CUSSANS: I think our similar approaches may have to do with a shared background in art history. Ever since I read Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay as an undergrad, I've been deeply suspicious of claims that a work can be read and understood in isolation from the networks which frame and give meaning to it. What is written and claimed about a work of art, and where and how it is made public,

In October 2020 my video *Sketch 2 for a Time-Slip Installation* and an accompanying research statement were published in the *International Journal of Creative Media Research Special Issue: Fiction Machines* edited by Charlie Tweed (Bath Spa University), Tony D Sampson (UEL) and Andy Weir (Arts University Bournemouth).

The journal can be found at <https://www.creativemediaresearch.org/issue-5-october-2020>

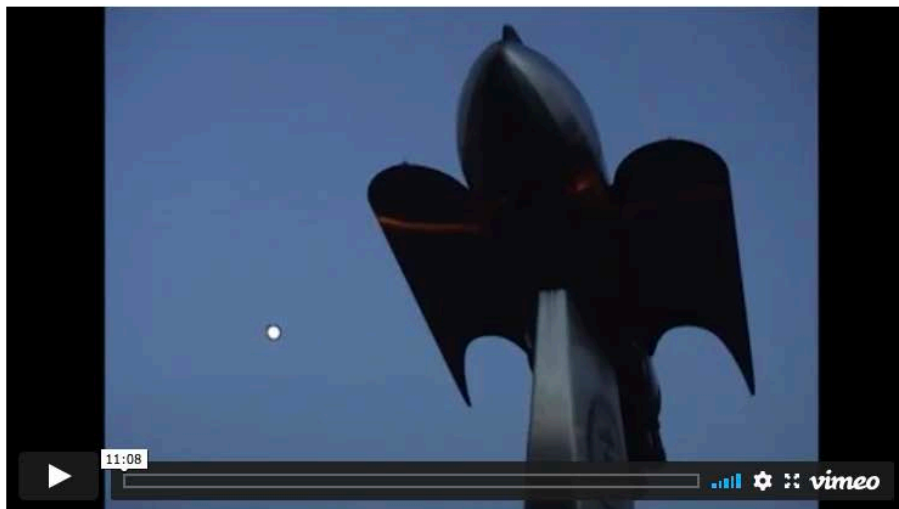
The screenshot shows the homepage of the International Journal of Creative Media Research (IJCMR). The header includes the journal's name, a search bar, and navigation links for JOURNAL, ABOUT, AWARDS, SUBMIT, and CONTACT. The main content area features a 'SPECIAL ISSUE' section titled 'Digital Ecologies: Fiction Machines', guest edited by Dr. Tony D. Sampson, Dr. Andy Weir, and Dr. Charlie Tweed. Below this is a featured article 'Hacking the NAP: Spectrography as Counter-fiction Machine' by Jeffrey Kruth and Dr. Allison Schifani, accompanied by a colorful abstract image. To the right, an 'IN THIS ISSUE' section lists several authors and a 'READ ISSUE 5' button. The footer repeats the navigation menu.

Sketch 2 for a Time-Slip Installation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33008/IJCMR.202024> | Issue 5 | October 2020

John Cussans

University of Worcester

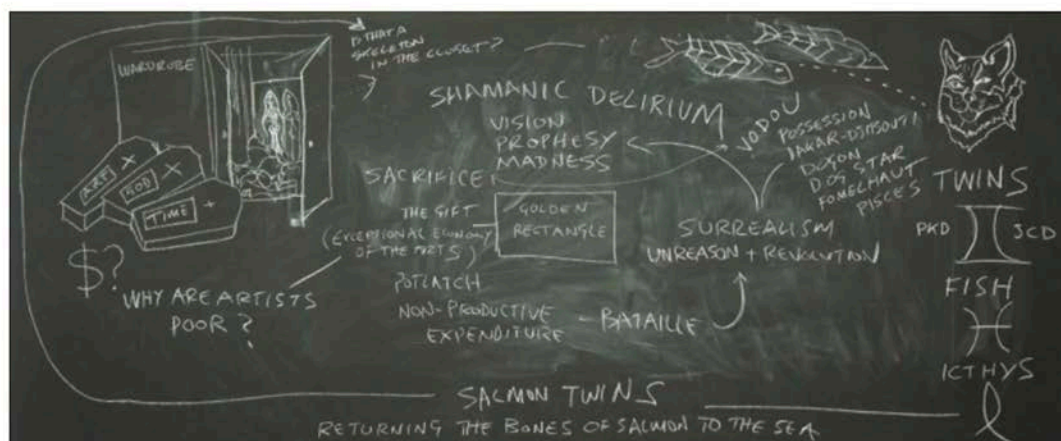


Abstract

Sketch 2 for a Time-Slip Installation was created for a multi-modal artistic research project called *BC Time-Slip (The Empire Never Ended)* which began as a residency at *Dynamo Arts Association (DAA)*, Vancouver in August 2016. *BC Time-Slip* is the first phase of a larger artistic research project exploring the discourse of decolonization in British Columbia from ethnographic, Indigenous and science fictional perspectives called *The Skullcracker Suite*. During the residency the DAA gallery was converted into a *Special Investigations Room* researching Philip K. Dick's visit to Vancouver in 1972 and his stay at an experimental rehab community called *X-Kalay*. During the residency I organised and documented a program of public talks, lectures and screenings, and produced a series of 360° videos depicting Dick's time in the city, myself playing the author. *Sketch 2* takes Dick's short story *Colony* (1953) as a way to draw correlations between the assimilation of life-worlds by alien simulation technology in Dick's fictions and the European colonization of what is now British Columbia. The video is the second of two sketches for an exhibition in the future.



BC Time-Slip
THE EMPIRE NEVER ENDED



FEATURED

Welcome



John Cussans
[Leave a comment](#)

This is the blog for BC Time-Slip (The Empire Never Ended), the first phase of a larger inter-disciplinary artistic research project called The Skullcracker Suite. Drawing on the mythology, dances and art of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples of British Columbia, the project's title is a reference to Hox'hok, one of three giant cannibal birds of Kwakwaka'wakw legend. Hox'hok's skull-cracking and brain-eating powers are imagined as a dramatic theatrical allegory for the interwoven process of colonial violence, indigenous resistance and the metaphysics of predation that bind human and non-human beings in a system of mutual, ecological and entangled co-dependency. The project is underpinned by a metaphysical world-view, drawn from Amerindian ethnology, that recognises non-human beings as persons rather than things, one in which humans have kinship with non-human beings with whom they share environmental and co-operative intelligences. From this perspective, man may be a wolf to man, but a wolf is a person to a wolf. And like Hox'hok, all beings, supernatural or otherwise, compelled to eat their other-kin, are of the cannibal kind.

Conceived as a suite of movements culminating in a multi-media arts event, The Skullcracker Suite appeals to the possibility of collectively and co-operatively imagining 'otherwise' modes of existence-in-common that are reconciliatory and transformative of the traumagenic effects of colonial dominion, territorial dispossession and forced assimilation to Western modes of being, behaving and thinking. Using the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's concepts of 'cannibal metaphysics', 'multi-species perspectivism' and his call for the permanent decolonization of thought, the project works through the theoretical and pragmatic overlaps between models of decolonization motivated by the critical deconstruction of Euro-centric ethnography and those emerging directly from Indigenous knowledge, anti-colonial resistance and non-Western modes of living, thinking and being. [Continue reading](#)

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BC Time-Slip exposition on the Research Catalogue International Data Base for Artistic Research
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=720351>

PUBLIC TALKS ABOUT THE SKULLCRACKER SUITE AND BC TIME-SLIP

Presentation of The Skullcracker Suite and BC Time-Slip as part of the Remote Proximities Fine Art Research Event, Goldsmiths, London, 15 Nov. 2019

Presentation The Potlatch Never Ended at the Etic Lab Annual Seminar, Gregynog Hall, Newtown, Wales, 26 Jul. 2019

Talk BC Time-Slip/Cannibal Metaphysics (Part. 2) for the group show Morphologies of Invisible Agents, Space Studios, London, 4 May 2019

Talk on the The Skullcracker Suite for the FHI Social Practice Lab, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 17 Apr. 2019

Talk Passing for Human at the Alien Encounter Group at The Shaping of a Message event, Goldsmiths, London, 15 May 2018

Presentation of The Skullcracker Suite, Powell River Public Library, Powell River, British Columbia, 19 Dec. 2017

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