

# Transgressing the Exhibition

## Isuma at the 2019 Venice Biennale

Curated by Asinnajaq, Candice Hopkins, Catherine Crowston, Josée Drouin-Brisebois and Barbara Fischer. Exhibited Artist Collective: Isuma (Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak, Pauloosie Qulitalik, and Norman Cohn), May 11–November 24, 2019, Canadian Pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Parallel Online Exhibition: <http://www.isuma.tv/isuma-book> and <http://www.isuma.tv>

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In 2019, the Inuit media collective Isuma (which means “think” or “to have a thought” in Inuktitut), founded by Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak, Pauloosie Qulitalik, and Norman Cohn in 1990, were the first Inuit artists to exhibit in the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, one of the world’s most renowned and oldest recurrent international art exhibitions. Their groundbreaking installation centered Inuit past and contemporary struggles against forced resettlements and resource extraction as well as reflecting on the limitations of the Biennale’s exhibition politics. Instead of limiting the exhibited material to the audience present in Venice, the curatorial team, which consisted of five women—Asinnajaq (Inuk), Candice Hopkins (Tlingit), Catherine Crowston, Josée Drouin-Brisebois, and Barbara Fischer (Burnett 2019)—worked with the media collective on a website through which most of the media displayed during the Biennale continues to be accessible.<sup>1</sup>

New content was uploaded each month during the exhibition, which turned the website into a dynamic and growing archive of material, providing historical context to the exhibition through essays and research, as well as podcasts, additional art works, and images spanning the three decades since Isuma’s founding. Isuma and the curatorial team thus resisted the art-economic tendency to focus on the valued singularity of displayed objects, transgressing the installation space and democratizing media access so that their friends and relatives in Nunavut as well as interested viewers like myself could access this space, conduct research, and/or immerse ourselves in Isuma’s history outside the pavilion (Connolly 2009, 56). Indeed, as I have never been to the Biennale, my own writing is only made possible by this curatorial decision. During these pandemic times in which most artistic and scholarly exchange

has moved online, Isuma's approach can help us explore the democratic potentials of online exhibitions beyond the current feeling of compromise to online formats.

In its in-person form the interventions that Isuma performed at the 2019 Biennale started at the doorstep. The Canadian Pavilion is a red and spiral-formed brick building designed in 1956 in the Giardini della Biennale, the area in which the 30 permanent national pavilions of the up to 90 representatives of the exhibition are located. This was the first time that Inuit artists exhibited in the Venice Biennale since its foundation in 1895, and only two Indigenous artists have held solo exhibitions in the Canadian Pavilion before Isuma, although many more have participated in the off-site program (see Anthes 2009; Igloliorte 2019).

Opposite the pavilion's official "Canada" sign, Isuma displayed their name in Inuktitut and in English right next to the entrance door even though additional signs outside the pavilions are normally not permitted by the Biennale. The sign invited the question: Who does this space, officially associated with the settler-nation-state Canada, actually belong to? The relationship of the Biennale's national ideology to Indigenous contemporary art is, according to Bill Anthes (2009), uneasily situated between the importance of local emplacement in Indigenous art and the increasing globalization of the art market in which it is embedded. Isuma choose to engage with this conflict by questioning the so-called nationality the pavilion is supposed to represent at the Biennale. This tension between the work of Isuma and the settler-nation-state of Canada, whose government-supported national gallery commissioned the exhibition, points toward the colonial past and the struggle with land claims, resource extraction, and disputes over Arctic sovereignty that Inuit communities have fought since the forced resettlements that took place over decades, beginning in the mid-twentieth century (Huhndorf 2009, 79–82; Kardová and Rimella 2019). By doubling the sign in front of the pavilion and claiming the latter as their space in their Inuktitut language and writing, Isuma introduce their exhibition at the pavilion not so much as a symbol for successful reconciliation, but rather as an act of Inuit cultural sovereignty that unsettles the "Canadianness" the pavilion is supposed to represent.

Questions of access and territorial control and self-determination indeed lie at the heart of Isuma's decolonizing film praxis and they form a central part of the exhibition as well (Huhndorf 2009). All of the works in the three-part moving image installation deal with the same land, the region around Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik), and offer diverse practices of visual sovereignty over that land (Ginsburg 1994; Raheja

2007). The centerpiece of the exhibition is Isuma's latest feature film *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019, dir. Zacharias Kunuk), shown subtitled in four different languages on four big screens. The film is a docu-fiction feature about the origin of forced resettlements during the Cold War. Through a series of long shots and close-ups of the protagonists' faces during their long dialogical exchanges, the film carefully and slowly reenacts a 1961 encounter between Inuk leader Noah Piugattuk (played by Apayata Kotierk) and a white Canadian, called Isumataq, (played by Kim Bodnia). Isumataq can be translated as "he thinks for us," and next to the historical persona of a "Northern Service Officer and newly-arrived Area Administrator for Igloodik Mr. A.P. Wight" (Taylor 2019) that he reenacts, he serves as the symbolic "embodiment of 'colonial Canada'" in the film (Kilbourn 2019, 6), carrying out Canadian government orders to move Inuit families, including Noah and his extended family, off the land to the settlement. During the encounter the film clearly aligns the viewer with Noah and centers an Inuit audience, reflected in the choice to only partially subtitle the Inuktitut dialogue in the film. The slow pace of the film and its close attention to materials and the *mise-en-scène* ask for a careful attention of the audience.

Next to this central feature two smaller screens display an earlier film. *My Father's Land/Ataatama Nunanga* (2014, dir. Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk), part of Isuma's Digital Indigenous Democracy project, which was launched in 2012 as a reaction to the Mary River Project and uses the Internet, community radio, local television, and social media to initiate Inuktitut-based dialogue and empower Inuit traditional knowledge about land and a live broadcast titled *Silakut: Live from the Floe Edge* (2019, dir. Zacharias Kunuk) from Pond Inlet. Both the film and the livestream are part of an ongoing production of films and material protesting the iron mining project, the Mary River Mine, conducted by the Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation (Ginsburg 2019, 264–65). While exploring the different pieces in the exhibition on- or offline, one realizes that all three works are centered around the same location, which reveals the continuous and ongoing struggle for land that Inuit face. As art critic Kate Taylor (2019) remarked, "colonial history seems to be repeating itself—right next door to the great powers in their big pavilions"—and, we might add, right inside the pavilion as well.

Next to the moving images several objects that materialized the ongoing political struggle were on display: postcards that people could take as well as a map from *My Father's Land*, and a long list of names of participants and allies titled "Isuma. People Working Together. 1985–2019." Without assigning

names to particular roles and thereby following the conventional division of labor in media production, the list introduces Isuma's modes of collective production that are guided by values of "community, voice and accessibility" (asinnajaq 2019) and which feature work and talent from Igloodik community members into the exhibition space. Their mode of production questions the clear line between on-screen and off-screen realities, instead highlighting the importance of an "embedded aesthetics" that accounts for social relations such as processes of community consultation and respect for traditional knowledge as an integral part of the aesthetics of the finished films and media (Ginsburg 1994).

One could argue that by trying to present an overview of their current work, Isuma simply underestimated "the temporal economy that the visitor brings with him or her" (Pantenburg 2012, 84). How to deal with the range of works and their incredible duration (the three feature films in the exhibition last for more than five hours) as a spectator (Guha 2019)? I would suggest, however, that the conflict produced by the exhibition—between the temporal expectations of the works and the temporal capacities of audiences—is a conscious strategy of subverting the spatial and political limits of the exhibition. Having to accept that it is simply too much to watch we are invited to go to the website, the digital space where all the people who could not come to Venice also access the exhibition. Thus, the viewing experience is democratized and redirected toward the virtual realm. This shift from center to digital periphery accompanies the question of Indigenous land and cultural authority in the films as well, most explicitly in the live broadcast that brings us to the Arctic in real time. As art critic Leah Sandals (2019) has articulated this reorientation, "though the Venice Biennale is often treated as a centre from which culture is broadcast to the world, Isuma is treating Inuit Nunangat as that centre." The digital access "displaces the centrality of Venice" as well as it "decenters Canada" (Guha 2019).

Whereas moving image installation theory tends to focus on the spatial mobility of the spectator as an argument for its politico-aesthetic potential, in this case the temporal challenge faced by the spectator is mobilized, dramatizing the limitations of the institutional space of the Venice Biennale. In *One Day's* slow pace one can almost feel the softness of the fur on the jackets and smell the crunching snow of the landscape in which most of the film is shot. This material presence enables an immersion into the world of the film even when seeing only excerpts of it while also asking the viewer to continue watching outside the pavilion.

In this way, Isuma's installation becomes a reflexive form that simultaneously exhibits a powerful constellation of Indigenous media for visitors to their pavilion, as well as the necessity for its own transgression. The impossibility of watching "all of it" becomes in itself an aesthetic experience, inviting audiences beyond the pavilion to care. In times of online teaching and learning, this invitation not only serves as a unique introduction to Isuma's broad range of work and ideas, but also provides a reflection on the possibilities of online media in relation to physical spaces far beyond urban centers. The cultural politics of this important exhibition provide an ideal starting point to think through the decolonial potentials of moving image installations. At the same time, it draws our attention to the constraints that come with hegemonic art institutions and economies which too often ignore exciting sites of alterity and other regimes of value such as traditional knowledge, community, and participation that Isuma center in their work.

## Note

1. Notably, this was the first time a team curated the exhibition at the Canadian Pavilion, and also wrote collaboratively.

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