

## Paul Walde – Tom Thomson Centennial Swim

There are varying degrees of interaction between artist and environment within site-specific art. Broadly speaking the term “refers to a work of art designed specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location” (Tate.org.uk). This interrelationship can veer into the purview of performance art or land art or other hybridized categories of creative expression, and can exist as stand-alone works and/or documented in a variety of ways (video, audio, photography, et al.). Paul Walde’s approach is both a celebration and commemoration of place, involving complex choreography, sound, score and video documentation. Walde refers to the *Tom Thomson Centennial Swim* as “a site-specific and temporally specific event” and “an opportunity for exploring and understanding this landscape and history through performative experience.” In this case the interrelationship is captured and commemorated through audio and video and revisited and refined through post-production and within the gallery space as an installation. The project therefore is twofold, a very specific centenary event that took place on Canoe Lake on July 8, 2017 commemorating the death of Tom Thomson, and the audio/visual distillation of Paul Walde’s participation and perspective of the events as an artist, musician, swimmer, and curator/creator of both the event and the finished product, which takes on yet another dimension when installed in the gallery space. Paul’s work leaves almost no footprint within the environments he pays homage to but revels in the ephemeral, historical and environmental aspects of specific geographic sites and historical moments. The rise and arch and dive and drag of arms as they navigate dark waters .... the symbolism of movement and component parts (canoe, mandolin) and the echo and evocativeness of sound that carries across the water ... all tell the story of Tom Thomson and the sense of loss and vitality of a creative spirit and the power and importance of the landscape within which the work is created.

Looking at the history of site-specific art there are myriad examples of how artists interact with a specific place, with varying degrees of intention, manipulation and commemoration. Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* or Walter De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* are well known examples of site-specific work that permanently reconfigure the landscape. Conversely, there is the more transitory and sometimes controversial work of Ai Weiwei and/or Christos and Jeanne-Claude that use sites as transitory installation scaffolding. There is an impressive legacy of Canadian artists contributing to this genre, including: Peter von Tiesenhausen, Robert Houle, Aylan Couchie, and, of course, Paul Walde. Walde’s work ranges widely from his home province of Ontario, to Alaska, British Columbia, and other places of interest, and are defined by what John K. Grande calls “unexpected interconnections between landscape, identity and technology” (Art Space Ecology / Two Views – Twenty Interviews, 2019). *Tom Thomson Centennial Swim* is the latest site-specific project that Walde has created and follows such works as *Alaska Variations* and *Requiem for a Glacier*, the latter of which very much ties this artist to the Kootenay region of interior British Columbia.

Having the *Tom Thomson Centennial Swim* piece take place in Ontario is a coming home for Walde on many fronts, and the terrain and subject matter are familiar both geographically and formatively. The work and mystique of the Group of Seven has provided a foundational understanding of what defines

Canadian art and environment for many artists growing up in Canada and the complex legacy of that work is interesting terrain to investigate. As Walde explains in an interview:

*At Canoe Lake, the symbolism is more loaded, at least culturally. Thomson, a close associate of the Group of Seven, perhaps Canada's most-loved artists, died before the group could be formed. But he remains perhaps it's most revered, a status that has made his work both sacrosanct and, in the eyes of many, a symbol of mass-market Canadiana kitsch. While he makes clear the swim is not mere homage — it's "Centennial," not "Memorial," partly for that reason — he's careful not to position it as a satirical project, either. When he was growing up in Sault Ste. Marie, "that was art, period," Walde said, referring to Thomson and the Group. After living in New York in the mid-1990s, he came back to northern Ontario and struggled to conceive how a contemporary artist there could interact with the overpowering presence of the past. (Murray Whyte, *The Star*, 2017)*

---

Walde is not the first, nor will he be the last, to dive deeply into the history, mystique and often sentimentalized view of Canada that has become the narrative of the Group of Seven. Sonny Assu's *Interventions on the Imaginary* series, for example, in which he imposed Indigenous iconography, into the well-known representations of the Canadian landscape created by the Group of Seven was an irreverent intervention, and creative re-claiming of landscape. Seen through such a lens we come to understand that the history of the landscape can never be fully appreciated without an acknowledgement of Indigenous culture and precedent, and that history will always be a matter of perspective and how history is framed, and by whom. Walde speaks to this idea in an interview with John K. Grande in relation to his *Requiem for a Glacier* work "By performing a site-specific work in the landscape it implies in a general sense that the landscape itself is part of the culture. Of course Indigenous cultures have been saying this for millennia, but North American society is late to the game on this concept" (Art Space Ecology / Two Views – Twenty Interviews, 2019). The landscape is both the setting and defining characteristic of/for the stories that artists tell, and *Tom Thomson Centennial Swim*, in many ways exemplifies the classic conflict of man vs. nature that has been the crux of storytelling for time immemorial.

There is a somewhat unsettling quality to having a site-specific piece such as *Tom Thomson Centennial Swim* transported from time and place into the gallery setting. There is a time-travelling or quantum leap quality to the experience of witnessing the orchestration of a complex narrative through a multi-sensory and commiserative art piece. The work allows the viewer the opportunity to consider the story being told, which is a privilege and a refuge in a world that rushes so madly forward.

Arin Fay, Curator