



While the Underground Flickers

Bonnie Devine
Wally Dion
Sandra Lahire

Curated by Caitlin Chaisson
Graphic design by Mariah Meawasige

April 3 - May 30, 2021

Hessel Museum of Art, Center for
Curatorial Studies, Bard College



This exhibition has been realized on the sacred homelands of the Munsee and Muhheaconneok people, who are the original stewards of the land on which the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College sits. Due to violent forced removal, the community now resides in Northeast Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. With humility and gratitude, we acknowledge the enduring and continued presence of past, present, and future generations of the Stockbridge-Munsee in their traditional lands.



While the Underground Flickers is an exhibition of three artworks that address the colonial legacy of radioactive uranium extraction along Serpent River, which flows through Genaabaajing—the ancestral territory and home of the Anishinaabek of Serpent River First Nation—into Lake Huron. The discovery of uraninite-pyrite ore deposits in the 1950s led to a mining boom in Northern Ontario, Canada, fueled by an emergent nuclear weapons program in the United States. As the market cycled through booms and busts in the ensuing years, an extremely fertile period of media-making took shape.

The three artworks in this exhibition speak to the various phases of this industry: from its active period, through to the mine closures, up to and including impacts that continue to this day. Each artist presents a unique perspective on this legacy, but all three indicate a vested interest in the powerful physicality of media. Two films fuse documentary practice with personal cinema. British filmmaker Sandra Lahire traveled to Ontario to make *Uranium Hex* (1987), about the lives of women workers and the consequences of mining and milling. Bonnie Devine, an interdisciplinary artist and member of Serpent River First Nation, recounts the spiritual and secular forces that have transformed her homeland in *Rooster Rock: The Story of Serpent River* (2002), co-directed with Rebecca Garrett. *Sturgeon* (2021) is a large-scale assemblage by Wally Dion, a member of Yellow Quill First Nation. This new work initiates a dialogue with the river and its local inhabitants. As a whole, the exhibition considers the role that art continues to play in mediating this contested territory.



Wally Dion

Sturgeon,
2021

*Recycled circuit
boards, nails,
plywood, acrylic
stain, 36" x 120"*

Courtesy the artist

Serpent River and the expansive watershed of the Great Lakes is the geographic anchor for *Sturgeon*, an artwork created by Wally Dion specifically for this exhibition. This new piece builds upon a decade-long facet of the artist's practice in which he deftly sculpts panel-based compositions out of recycled circuit boards. Dion manipulates the modular hardware using variations of imagery, iconography, and patterns in reference to traditional and contemporary forms of Indigenous communication and social networks.

Although the specter of nuclear holocaust and the proliferation of nuclear industries has abated in the years since the Cold War, uranium continues to be a key component to many of the digital advances of modern technology. Dion's artwork serves as a reminder of the ongoing impacts of uranium extraction, particularly in relation to waterways. The imagery of *Sturgeon*—a fish that has survived the last mass extinction event, often described as a "living fossil"—forges a connection between past and present.

Sandra Lahire

**Uranium Hex,
1987**

*Original format 16mm
film, magnetic sound
11 minutes*

*Courtesy the artist
and LUX, London*

In 1987, Sandra Lahire arrived in Northern Ontario with a plan to descend deep down into the bellies of the uranium mines. Having completed two prior films on nuclear power stations in Europe, *Terminals* (1986) and *Plutonium Blonde* (1987), the artist's later two works, *Uranium Hex* (1987) and *Serpent River* (1989), trained her camera lens on the raw materials of nuclear activity—supplied to the world in enormous quantities by the mines in Elliot Lake.

In her statement on *Uranium Hex*, the artist writes, chillingly, of a penetration between land and body. In both its narration and imagery, the film explores the ways the body is threatened by nuclear industry. Lahire's unconventional use of chemicals, color, and light in processing the film elicit the dangers of various forms of exposure. Despite these more experimental methods, the artist also draws upon a documentary tradition. She appropriates a tone of perceived authority while challenging the genre's claims to objectivity through her personal approach. Picturing her own body and incorporating what looks like home footage, this intimacy is emphasized by the fact the film was originally commissioned for television—destined for the living room screen.

Sandra Lahire

**"Statement on Uranium Hex for C.4.
Illuminations + Arts Council," 1989**

*Text on paper (exhibition copy),
Central Saint Martins, The British Artist's Film and Video
Study Collection*

Artist statement on the film.

Stompin' Tom Connors

The Unpopular Stompin' Tom, 1976

*Audio cassette tape
Private collection*

Canadian singer Stompin' Tom Connors was commissioned to produce a theme song for Pat Crawley's film *Song for a Miner* (1975), which was later included on Connors's album *The Unpopular Stompin' Tom* (1976). Crawley's twenty-minute propagandistic documentary was funded by Rio Algom (an affiliate of Rio Tinto Zinc), one of the largest and longest-operating uranium mining companies in the region.

Connors's song "Damn Good Song for a Miner" is a twangy, gravelly-voiced folk tune with a simple structure and melody that's easy to sing along to—reminiscent of other popular and informal songs to emerge out of the conditions of hard labor. Sandra Lahire excerpts the introductory chorus in *Uranium Hex*, casting it into an expansive sound design that is jarring, pounding, and ear-splitting. In the film, Connors's refrain of "The price of uranium is up and there's money to make" is preceded by the whirring of ambulance sirens and followed by a male broadcaster's voice discussing the proliferation of nuclear warheads, directly contextualizing blue-collar aspirations in the midst of personal and global dangers.

Winona LaDuke

"They Always Come Back"

*in Sinister Wisdom: A Gathering of Spirit,
Beth Brant, Adrienne Rich, and Michelle Cliff, eds.
vols. 22/23, Iowa City: Iowa City Women's Press, 1983
Book
Private collection*



The full issue of
*Sinister Wisdom: A
Gathering of Spirit*
is available to view
and download by
scanning the QR
code.

Engaged in work with Women of All Red Nations (WARN) at the time, political activist Winona LaDuke is credited by Sandra Lahire in *Uranium Hex* as a source of "research and invaluable help." WARN first grew out of the American Indian Movement during a period of intensified Indigenous struggle for the recognition of treaty rights and an end to systemic poverty and police brutality. Officially formed in 1974, WARN was focused on issues pertaining to the health of Native American women, specifically abolishing the medical practice of forced sterilization and commissioning studies on the effects of mining practices and environmental toxins on reproductive health.

It is likely Lahire encountered LaDuke's work and the work of WARN through this special issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, guest edited by Mohawk writer Beth Brant. In this interview, "They Always Come Back," LaDuke describes the contamination of the water tables of reservation lands across the United States due to uranium mining and forefronts the role that racism plays in these processes.

Rosalie Bertell

**No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a
Radioactive Earth**

Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1985

Book

Private collection

Rosalie Bertell was an American environmental epidemiologist highly regarded for her work in the field of ionizing radiation, and a sister of the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart. Known as the “anti-nuclear nun,” she was a sought-after expert witness in legal cases against nuclear militarism. Bertell was first contacted by Serpent River First Nation in 1980 and subsequently hired in 1982 to conduct independent studies on the deteriorating health of residents and ecosystems surrounding the Elliot Lake mines and the Serpent River watershed—impacts that government studies had dismissed for nearly thirty years.

In 1985, Bertell published *No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth* and partook in a number of speaking engagements around the world during her book tour. In April, she arrived at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, a site in rural England where protestors were living and disrupting the operations of a United States air base that housed nuclear weapons and cruise missiles. Sandra Lahire was an active member of the camp, alongside her friend and fellow filmmaker Tina Keane. It is very likely that Lahire first met Bertell at Greenham Common, and that Bertell was the one who started Lahire on her journey to Northern Ontario by alerting her to the struggles of Serpent River First Nation and members of the labor unions against the uranium mines.

Gilbert Oskaboose

"The Serpent Doesn't Live Here Anymore"

Indian News / Indian and Inuit Affairs Program, vol. 18,
no. 5, December 1977

Newspaper (exhibition copy)

Government of Canada. Reproduced with the permission
of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services
Canada (2012)



This entire issue
of *Indian News* is
available to download
and view through
the University of
Winnipeg's digitized
archive by scanning
the QR code.

Writer and journalist Gilbert Oskaboose was a polemical and outspoken critic of the white press, the paternalism of the Canadian government, and the violence of settler colonialism. A member of Serpent River First Nation and a residential school survivor, Oskaboose was a prominent media figure. He served as assistant editor of *Indian News* from 1977 and into the early 1980s before breaking with the publication.

In this article describing his homeland, Oskaboose skillfully navigates abrupt shifts between scientific reportage and narrative storytelling. He describes the experience of a scout on the water, juxtaposing idyllic peacefulness with the brute facts of radioactive effluents. Oskaboose's article offers a historical summary that humanizes abstract data through describing the cultural and personal impacts of the uranium industry on the land and the water.

In addition to his journalistic and narrative writing practice, Oskaboose collaborated with many other artists. He was consulted in the making of Sandra Lahire's film *Serpent River* (1989), appears as an interviewee in Magnus Issacson's documentary film *Uranium* (1990), and is depicted in portraiture by his friend and artist Carl Beam in the multimedia canvas *Time Dissolve* (1992).

Bonnie Devine,
co-directed
with Rebecca
Garrett

**Rooster Rock:
The Story of
Serpent River,
2002**

*SD480p video
(originally Betamax),
color, stereo sound
32 minutes*

*Courtesy the artist
and Vtape, Toronto*

From 1998 to 2003, Bonnie Devine embarked on a sizable body of work that spans drawing, installation, bookmaking, video, and sculpture, all pertaining to her research into radiation. Devine foregrounds the ways that radioactivity has impacted the relationship of land to consciousness in the traditions of the Anishinaabek. In *Rooster Rock: The Story of Serpent River*, the consequences of mining operations are relayed through her own family history and cultural knowledge. The video begins with a vision the artist's uncle experienced as a child, which foretold the disturbance of a deep and powerful Manitou, a heraldic spirit or other-than-human being that can bring prosperity or destruction.

After several decades of industry-driven misinformation about the “safe” levels of radioactive exposure for local life forms, Devine's narrative is unequivocal about the cultural and environmental damages that have been incurred. *Rooster Rock* was made on the heels of a series of permanent mine closures and mass layoffs in the 1990s, a time when many residents of Elliot Lake and the surrounding region believed an old chapter of history was being closed, and a new one was beginning. Devine's decision to take up research into radioactivity at this moment—as the uranium industry was finally being dismantled—is a defiant refusal to accept the assurances the mine closures purported to offer. The containment, surveillance, and upgrading of radioactive waste storage remains a burden forever. As Devine's final title card in the video makes explicit, this is “Not The End.”

Bonnie Devine (b. 1952, Toronto, Canada) is an installation artist, video maker, curator, and writer. A member of the Anishinaabek of Genaabaajing (Serpent River) First Nation, on the north shore of Lake Huron, Devine's work emerges from the storytelling and image-making traditions that are central to Anishinaabe culture. Using cross-disciplinary approaches and iterations of written, visual, and performative practice, Devine explores issues of land, environment, treaty, history, and narrative. Though formally educated in sculpture and installation art at the Ontario College of Art and Design and York University, both in Toronto, Devine's most enduring learning came from her grandparents, who were trappers on the Canadian Shield in Northern Ontario. Devine's installation, video, and curatorial projects have been shown in solo and group exhibitions and at film festivals across Canada and in the U.S., South America, Russia, Europe, and China, including the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Berlin Film Festival; National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.; and Today Art Museum, Beijing. Devine is Associate Professor Emerita and Founding Chair of the Indigenous Visual Culture program at OCAD University, Toronto. In 2021 she received the prestigious Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts. Devine lives and works in Toronto.

Wally Dion (b. 1976, Saskatoon, Canada) is a visual artist living and working in Binghamton, New York. He is a member of Yellow Quill First Nation (Saulteaux). Dion holds a B.F.A. from the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, and an M.F.A. from Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. Throughout much of his career, Dion's work has contributed to a broad conversation in the art world about identity and power, and his practice can be interpreted as part of a much larger pan-American struggle by Indigenous Peoples to be recognized—culturally, economically, and politically—by settler societies. Using large-scale portraiture, found object sculpture, site-specific installation, and kinetic sculpture, Dion has expanded upon this practice to include themes of personal history and spirituality.

He has exhibited extensively throughout Canada and the U.S., participating in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Dion's work can be found in several prominent collections, both private and public.

Sandra Lahire (b. 1950, Kenton, U.K.; d. 2001) studied philosophy at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, fine art film at Saint Martins School of Art and Film in London, and environmental media at the Royal College of Art in London. Lahire was a radical lesbian feminist experimental filmmaker and one of the most prominent and inspiring figures of the London experimental film scene in the 1980s and 1990s. She left behind ten experimental 16mm films that offer a profound filmic commentary on anorexia and are prescient of today's fears of ecological devastation. Her films have been shown nationally and internationally at cinemas and festivals in Créteil, Locarno, Berlin, Montréal, São Paulo, Turin, Jerusalem, and Melbourne, among others. Lahire died in 2001, after a long battle with anorexia.

Designer's Biography

Mariah Meawasige (Makoose) is an Anishinaabe/ settler and creative from the northern shores of Lake Huron. Her practice specializes in graphic design but questions the bounds of communication through illustration, sculpture, video, and performance. She has been freelancing since 2017, creating alongside individuals and teams at various companies and institutions across Canada and the U.S. Through her love of stories and storytelling, Meawasige's body of work aims to explore temporalities and place, map memories, and build relationships.

Thanks

My thanks belong firstly to Bonnie, to Wally, to Sandra, and to Mariah. Each of your practices has profoundly inspired me, and the richness of this exhibition is indebted to the brilliance of your work.

I also extend my gratitude to the ring of individuals who have influenced the realization of this thesis exhibition. Thanks to Marcia Acita, Nana Adusei-Poku, Steven Ball, Amanda Bard, Bronwen Bitetti, Ann Butler, Nyssa Chow, Lauren Cornell, Christian Crouch, Mark DeLura, Tom Eccles, Jane England, Peggy Gale, Ed Halter, Vivian Heller, Harry Jaycox, Alex Kitnick, Dustin Lawrence, Lianne C. Leddy, Amy Linker, Hannah Mandel, Charlotte Procter, Casey Robertson, Ramona Rosenberg, Kerstin Schroedinger, Ian Sullivan, Shea Wert, Evan Calder Williams, Amy Zion, and all my colleagues.

The student-curated exhibitions and projects at CCS Bard are part of the requirements for the master of arts degree, and are made possible with the support from the Rebecca and Martin Eisenberg Student Exhibition Fund; the Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg Family Foundation; the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Charitable Foundation; the Lucky One Foundation; the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation; the Board of Governors of the Center for Curatorial Studies; the CCS Bard Arts Council; and by the Center's Patrons, Supporters, and Friends.

While the Underground Flickers is curated by Caitlin Chaisson as part of the requirements for the master of arts degree at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.



