

**Sonic
Imaginaries:
Sound and
Resonance in
Walas Gwa'yam
Beau Dick's
Masks
and Candice
Hopkins's
Curation at
documenta 14**

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Every place has indigenous sounds; every site has a way of communicating shaped by millennia-long histories of peoples who know the land like a relative.

So, what happens when an outsider, newcomer, or interloper contextualizes a being (a relative) as an object in a forum like a museum? I am tired of seeing regalia alone on a pedestal behind plexiglass, separated from their songs, stories, dances, families, and cultures. When presenting ceremonial regalia formed by languages, cultures, and lands that existed long before colonization, museum curators could use the sounds that shaped these beings to drive a museum presentation's form. Curator Simon Sheikh writes, "If we are not happy with the world we are in, both in terms of the art world and in a broader geopolitical sense, we will have to produce other exhibitions: other subjectivities and other imaginaries."¹ I contend that the sonic is one of these other imaginaries, and that Candice Hopkins built an "other exhibition" at documenta 14. The sonic imaginary presents an alternative way of perceiving and contextualizing the world to the colonial imaginary, which privileges sight—a sense that often severs the physical connection of objects to people. The sonic imaginary rejects the colonial mode of seeing. The sonic imaginary can open cultural institutions and their visitors to a method of knowledge production that embraces the nonvisual lives of the beings in its collections.

Curator Candice Hopkins (Tagish/Carcross) put this methodology into play with Chief Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick by demonstrating how the sonic imaginary can (un)define a space at documenta 14 [fig. 1]. I argue there is something ineffable—embodied—that sound and its properties can teach cultural producers, collections managers, arts professionals, and everything in between. This paper discusses how formline, a style specific to First Nations artists of the Pacific Northwest Coast like Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick, is inherently sonic. I demonstrate how Hopkins's curatorial intervention at documenta 14 amplifies these masks' sonic lives, whereas traditional museum displays that place a mask against a wall behind plexiglass silences them. This paper is also about listening and

¹ Simon Sheikh, "Constitutive Effects: The Techniques of the Curator," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (New York: Open Editions, 2007), 181.



Figure 1. Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick, 'Twenty-two masks from the series "Atlakim"' (1990–2012).



Figure 2. Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick, 'Twenty-two masks from the series "Atlakim"' (1990–2012).

reception. Sonic imaginaries teach us about listening because they can challenge the hegemonic mode of listening that we learn growing up in a colonial state. When we listen with our whole bodies, our entire being, what can we hear? There are voices, songs, and stories sounding from the margins.² We just have to learn to listen.

Formline and the Rhythm Within

Chief Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick uses formline design style, the visual lexicon that defines Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations art. Formline has been around on the Northwest Coast for at least three thousand years, possibly longer, and has metamorphized over its long life as artists experiment(ed) with form and color.³ The various First Nations peoples of the PNWC developed this style through sound, narrative, and a cosmology that defines their specific Nation's relationship to the land. In a single design, there are typically two formlines: one in black, outlining and defining the shape of the being, and one in red, providing detail to the body parts.⁴ Formline swells and sways to create three forms central to Northwest Coast style: ovoids, U-forms, and S-forms. Together, the elements of formline design evoke movement as they dance and flow among each other.

Because formline is a dynamic visual style that evokes movement, the repetitions within a single mask create a rhythm. Dick's Galukw'amhl's [fig. 2] black and white beak protrudes beyond her mouth, punctuated with black U-forms, contrasting against the mask's white base and creating rhythmic movement on the beak alone. Behind the cheek, Dick repeated the U-form in red, like notes in another register. The red U-form behind the cheek is painted on a white surface, repeated in double time above in a split U behind the eye. The forms build off one another, like a percussionist building a beat with full, quarter, and eighth notes. Their connection to sound, not just rhythm, can be seen in the crescendo and decrescendo-ing forms created by each form's tail.

Hopkins provides several ways to see how the masks' rhythms play with each other and the artwork in the rest of the space in documenta 14. For example, in the Atlakim circle, Dick's cycle of Atlakim dance masks face each other. Tsonoqua's lips form an "O," so she "Huuu Huuus" from behind the Atlakim masks, her sound pervading every sightline of the installation. Hopkins approximates where each mask would appear on a potlatch dance floor. It is a simple action but something

² Candice Hopkins, "Sounding the Margins: A Choir of Minor Voices," lecture, Small Projects, Grønnegeta 23, Tromsø and the Norwegian Association of Curators, Tromsø, Norway, June 14, 2016. <https://vimeo.com/178828368>.

³ Marjorie M. Halpin, "Northwest Coast Indigenous Art," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Historica Canada, February 7, 2006, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/northwest-coast-aboriginal-art>.

⁴ Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), 38.

many institutions and curators do not do. Hopkins places the underworld masks near the ground, those of our world at eye level, and those of the supernatural world up high.⁵ This positioning situates viewers in the Kwakwaka'wakw worldview instead of the colonial worldview, which frames the masks as objects in a collection with no life beyond their presentation. Hopkins keeps them in dialogue with one another as they share visual space, indicating to visitors that this display is a part of these masks' lives rather than their whole being.

Hopkins's placement of the masks away from the walls in the gallery's center, where a Big House dance floor would be, reminds visitors that these masks move. A dancer defines and redefines the masks' movements as they play with the lighting and the masks' other moving elements, such as the cedar strips and the snapping jaws. The loudest jaw of the Hamatsa cluster is Gwagkwakwalanuksiwe, characterized by an impossibly long beak [fig. 3]. During its dance, the jaw snaps shut—CLACK. The cedar strips attached under her cheeks swish and sway as the dancer moves, masking their body, emphasizing their animalistic motions. The open triangles around Gwagkwakwalanuksiwe's eyes open and close like a crescendo building into the eye's circle, then fading into a decrescendo. Dick shows formline's harmonics: it creates complex rhythms and chords through an orchestra of shape and relief. The craftsmanship of these shapes, colors, and forms cannot be fully understood under track lights against a white wall. Hopkins's rejection of ocular-centric colonial interpretation in the masks' assembling makes her curatorial intervention progressive.

Visitors also found this true: in her review of the exhibition, Sophie Publig commented on how Western art-historical framing and narratives cannot properly contextualize these masks. By approximating their positions on the dance floor (instead of sticking them behind plexiglass against a wall), Hopkins's presentation decentered the colonial imaginary, giving these masks space to see and hear each other.⁶ Hili Perlson's review of documenta 14 asserted that the masks' display completely overpowered the exhibition space, muting the other artworks whose "presence was unexplained."⁷ It is possible that because a sonic curatorial matrix was employed for these masks and not the other visual works, viewers were dizzied by interpreting purely visual artworks on the other walls through the sonic lens. A sonic imaginary can bring a nonvisual interpretation to these masks' stature that takes stock of its way of being beyond its purely visual qualities—the sonic imaginary also leaks well beyond its designated space, as I will explain later.

5 Candice Hopkins, "Native Economies: From the Pottlatch Ban to the Masks of Beau Dick," lecture, the Serving Library and Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK, July 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niaieNHll5Q>.

6 Sophie Publig, "Shifting Perspectives: Beau Dick's Multi-Layer Strategy of Agency at documenta 14," *All-Over: Magazin für Kunst und Ästhetik* (Spring/Summer 2019): 26.

7 Hili Perlson, 2017, "At documenta 14, Everything's a Strategy-Even Bad Hanging | Artnet News." *Artnet News*, April 10, 2017. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/documenta-14-review-bad-hanging-strategy-919811>.



Figure 3. Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick, 'Twenty-two masks from the series "Atlakim"' (1990–2012).

Listening and other Nonvisual Forms of Interpretation in Indigenous Art

I propose that the sonic is an extra matrix of cultural understanding built upon scholarship by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers who argue for a nonvisual mode of perceiving non-European art. In the essay "Settler-colonial Art History: A Proposition in Two-Parts," Damian Skinner puts forward ten propositions for a settler-colonial frame of understanding art history. One of Skinner's propositions is that "Settler-colonial art history will resist art history's investment in the visual." European-based art history *sees* all objects as images rather than objects that came into being for reasons other than aesthetic or sublime beauty.⁸ Where Skinner proposes a settler-colonial framework of art history to frame art practices informed by settler-colonialism, I am additionally arguing for an extrasensorial interpretation of regalia in a museum or gallery space that can simultaneously hold multiple histories of land and people. A purely visual understanding of such things erases the many lives (a family member, contraband, decorative object) they have lived and the various realms (sonic, visual, haptic) in which they have lived those lives.

⁸ Damian Skinner, "Settler-colonial Art History: A Proposition in Two Parts," *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art Canadien* 35, no. 1 (2014): 158-160.



Figure 4. Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick, "Twenty-two masks from the series "Atlakim" (1990–2012).

However, creating a space with multiple ways of knowing is not straightforward if one's preceptories are not attuned and open to listening beyond colonial, hegemonic sound waves. Stó:lō writer and academic Dylan Robinson coined a term for closed, colonial listening: *xwélalà:m xwelítem*. *xwélalà:m* (Hungry) *xwelítem* (Listening) describes the powers and forces at play (in conflict) that silence a mask whose purpose is to sound. "Hungry Listening" names a visual-centric form of perceiving the world. Rejecting it and actively working on listening "wholly" pushes witnessing into an embodied mode of perceiving where multi-sensory interpretations leak meanings from one realm to another.

xwélalà:m is a form of witnessing, or "attention in which we are attentive not just to sound but to the fullest range of sensory experience that connects us to a place."⁹ Alone, *xwélalà:m* might point to the kind of "whole" listening explained above, but Robinson stipulates that *xwélalà:m* is a form of witnessing specific to Stó:lō positionality, as it developed with their worldview. *xwelítem* translates to "hungry," but it also means settler. The first settlers the Stó:lō saw came for the gold rush—they possessed an unquenchable hunger for resource extraction to achieve the settler dream of wealth and riches.¹⁰ Together, Hungry Listening points to a form of settler-colonial witnessing where all the senses that attach us to the world are filtered through a need to consume and conquer. When witnessing through this desire to devour, consume, deplete, one is never full. Through Hungry Listening, masks become part of an accumulation of riches that one can never

⁹ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 71–72.

¹⁰ Dylan Robinson and Cam Scott, "Send and Receive: Dylan Robinson," Zoom lecture and discussion, Collective Broadcast Co. and McNally Robinson Booksellers, Winnipeg, Manitoba, May 6, 2021.



Figure 5. Walas Gwa'yam Beau Dick, "Twenty-two masks from the series "Atlakim" (1990–2012).

have enough of: they are status symbols in a capitalist system that values infinite growth and wealth. Rejecting hunger as a perceptual mode means moving into a full perceptual mode that allows for true *xwélalà:m*—attention in which we are attentive to the most comprehensive range of sensory experiences that connect us to a place. We do not consume objects but listen to them. Dances are dances instead of jagged, barbaric movements; music is music instead of mere noise.

Boom Boom Bah: Polyrhythms in the Curatorial

When we reject hungry listening, we can witness conversations between the rhythms and expressions on the masks. The Hamatsa birds exchange looks across the gallery [fig. 4]; the Atlakim forest spirits “Hoo” and “hahhh” and “AHHH” in their circle [fig. 5]. As their glances and expressions amplify each mask’s story, visitors cannot interpret these masks non-relationally: each piece sounds off the others, making their presence louder than when alone.

When the masks assemble, the forms’ repetition creates a rhythm between the pieces reminiscent of the drum they dance to on the Big House floor. For example, the long, thick U-forms on the Galukw’amhl’s beak are repeated in light, short white U-forms nearing the back of the Gwaxgwakwalanuysiwe’s head and in an inversed color on a Mugwam’s large curved beak below him.¹¹ Think of the Galukw’amhl’s beak as “Boom Boom Boom,” the Gwaxgwakwalanuysiwe’s U-forms as “tktktktktktktk,” and the U-forms on the mask with many heads as

¹¹ This mask might be a Mugwam, though the documenta 14 label does not clarify, listing the masks as “Raven Masks.” However, based on the multiple heads here and in the Mugwam entry, it is possible. “Living Tradition: The Kwak’waka’wakw potlatch of the North West Coast.” U’mista Cultural Center. https://umistapotlatch.ca/visite_virtuelle-virtual_tour-eng.php#2/o/A3653; Candice Hopkins, “Beau Dick,” documenta 14, accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13689/beau-dick>.

“Buh Buh Buh.” This visual rhythm is an example of Beirut-based artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s “sonic image,” where visual elements behave like a sound by leaking into each other’s space. In Hopkins’s curation, these masks play polyrhythms off each other through repeated and altered forms, meaning one’s form leaks into another’s, just as Tsonoqua’s “Huuu Huuu!” drones over the installation.¹² Each mask is a player bringing a beat or musical phrase to an ensemble, riffing off the other masks. Hopkins was keenly aware of these masks’ sonic power, working with Dick to arrange them so their rhythms and sonic elements amplified each other. By positioning the masks together in their dance formations, Hopkins created a chorus of voices and beats that leaked beyond into the other artworks’ spaces, even if visitors heard nothing aurally.

Sonic Feeding and Family Separation

This sonic leaking mentioned above became literal during the exhibition’s performance program. Cole Speck, a carver and apprentice of Beau Dick, flew to Athens to perform and contextualize Dick’s work on the artist’s behalf, as Dick had passed away in 2017.¹³ Images of Speck beating his drum and singing to the masks echo what leaders of the Git Hayetsk dance group, Mike Dangeli (Nisga’a) and Mique’l Dangeli (T’smsyen), said during a 2016 gathering at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario:

Mique’l Dangeli: I wish we had the opportunity to be fed by and to feed our ancestors—our ceremonial beings—outside of plexiglass. . . like this more often. It is one of the reasons why we sing and dance in museums, regardless of that history, because it is important that they know we acknowledge them and that we still love them. . . it’s just that we’re separated.¹⁴

The dancers were not discussing regalia repatriation but how ceremonial beings cannot thrive while permanently on display. Like the masks Dangeli speaks about, Dick’s masks are Kwakwaka’wakw family members—no being can go without nutrients. Dangeli and Dick address the scopophilic mode of observation these masks are under when Indigenous communities concede masks to a collection for any number of reasons.¹⁵ Because they are beings, they run out of

¹² Lawrence Abu Hamdan, “The Sonic Image,” Zoom lecture at Berkeley Center for New Media, Berkeley, CA, April 5, 2021.

¹³ Sophie Publigh, “Shifting Perspectives,” 26.

¹⁴ Mique’l Dangeli quoted in Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 92.

¹⁵ Especially in the early days following the pottlatch ban, museums would commission dance masks cycles from an individual family. That family could then use the masks they carved for pottlatching when needed, but the masks had to stay at the museum. Considering the risks of floods and fires many dispossessed First Nations communities faced on their reservations, this term didn’t seem sinister. Author interview with John Frisholz, former curator of the Museum at Campbell River, via telephone, June 2020.

energy when on view constantly. A sonic matrix of curating alone cannot mend the wrong of separating masks from their families or draining their energy. However, a sonic imaginary can allow curators and collection managers who are not in the masks' First Nations communities to recognize their agency and desires as beings as they can now hear the masks' voices. Hopefully, this shift in understanding a mask's agency motivates curators to let the regalia's family lead how they are displayed if their home *must* be a gallery or museum.¹⁶

Coda

Other writing has hinted at the sonic imaginary as a curatorial model, though it is not necessarily named. In Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's book *The Undercommons*, queer theorist Jack Halberstam writes, "Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us."¹⁷ An imaginative mode that embraces clashing, cacophonous histories can reveal this wild beyond. We choose *how* to witness every day: do we decide to silence a being by removing it from its culture or listen to it and provide space for it to tell its story? Embracing the sonic imaginary as a curatorial mode means we can refuse systems that trap and silence a being's history and ancestors. Through the sonic imaginary, we interlopers can learn to listen so that "Huuuuu Huuuu!" is no longer something to own but a story Tsonoqua can tell us about who she is and who she has always been.

¹⁶ The reasons a collection of masks or regalia would live in a museum are not uniform. For example, in my hometown of Campbell River, BC, several families' masks live in the Museum at Campbell River. During the museum's formation in the 1950s, houses in Campbell River burnt down quite frequently, and regalia collections were lost. The museum's staff commissioned new masks to be made, replacing those lost during the fire, and agreeing to lend them out to the family whenever they need them. The masks are perpetually on display, some even telling their story to an oration told overhead several times a day, but they are safe from fire and pests. Cases like this are far and few between, but they do happen.

¹⁷ Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommon," introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 7, 9.

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