



# STANDBY SNOW: CHRONICLES OF A HEAT WAVE

## CHAPTER ONE

ALL IMAGES UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

Mountain Times Arts (MTA), Mary Ellen Strom, and Laine Rettmer, *Standby Snow: Chronicles of a Heatwave* (2019), installation/performance stills at the Story Mill in Bozeman, Montana on August 28-29, 2019. Courtesy the artist.



SALLY BERGER

### INTRODUCTION: *STANDBY SNOW* AND MOUNTAIN TIME ARTS

Last August, *Standby Snow: Chronicles of a Heatwave*, a large-scale place-based multimedia, intertextual opera produced by Mountain Time Arts (MTA) and co-directed by video artist Mary Ellen Strom and opera director Laine Rettmer, was showcased at the Story Mill Grain Terminal in Bozeman, Montana (August 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019). On the same day (August 28<sup>th</sup>), sixteen-year-old, Swedish climate change activist Greta Thunberg arrived in New York City aboard a carbon-neutral sailing yacht, to attend the U.N. Climate Action Summit and take part in the Global Climate Strike happening in late September. The previous August, Thunberg had begun skipping school on Fridays for self-imposed sit-ins outside the Swedish Parliament, which she called “School Strike for Peace.” Her efforts inspired climate awareness movements including the youth-led Fridays-for-Future that

culminated one year and a month later on Friday, September 20<sup>th</sup> in what is purported to be the largest global climate protest in world history. Later in October, fires burned ferociously throughout parts of California, devastating homes, farms, acres of land, and threatening human and animal life. An increasing number of wildfires are taking place in the western United States and other forested areas of the world (like Australia) – rising temperatures intensify the dangers of human activity when interacting with conditions such as heat, dryness, and high winds.

The impact of human activity on climate has been speculated about since ancient times, but the prescient idea that burning fossil fuels increase carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and therefore raise earth temperatures was first theorized by Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius in 1896. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerns about global warming continued to grow, but it took the development of reliable computer modeling and years of carefully-documented scientific studies and shared data, to make the evidence irrefutable.<sup>1</sup> The scientific consensus on “anthropogenic global warming” reached 100% in November 2019, but reducing carbon emissions at rates recommended by



Mountain Time Arts (MTA), TOP *Gabriel Canal* (2017),  
 BOTTOM *Standby Snow: Chronicles of a Heatwave* (2019),  
 performance stills. Courtesy the artist.



the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), made up of scientists from around the world, has been difficult to achieve.<sup>2</sup> Resistance from the fossil fuel industry, corporate and private interests combine with the complexities of local and regional environmental situations in slowing progress.<sup>3</sup> A non-profit arts organization, MTA faces this issue head on: they have diligently addressed climate change since the organization's founding in 2015, specifically as it manifests in the Rocky Mountain West region, by integrating ongoing thematic and diverse community involvement with climate impact into their large-scale public art projects.

**MOUNTAIN TIME ARTS: FORMATION AND MISSION**

The idea for MTA was first envisioned by artist Jim Madden and art historian Dede Taylor who had long been involved in local Bozeman community building, strategic planning and creative projects when they acted on their idea to introduce a public art initiative. They reached out to video artist Mary Ellen Strom, whose groundbreaking, ambitious, multi-media work, *Geyser Land* (2003), made with choreographer and performance artist Ann Carlson, took place on a train travelling between Livingston and Bozeman, Montana. During the dusk-into-night train ride over Bozeman Pass, passengers were transformed into tourists visiting late 1800s Yellowstone National Park. They were entertained by poker games, stories and music enacted by regional ranchers, visiting performers and Native American drummers. Outside the windows of the train, they watched huge moving images of roaming bison and Muybridge motion studies projected onto the landscape; silent actors in still vignettes re-enacted historical photographs of Gandy dancers (immigrant railroad workers) and a Crow chief at the Yellowstone Park entrance. Madden and Taylor had both experienced the work and were immediately drawn "to her [Strom's] particular art, ethics, and aesthetics that were an inspiration and fit for our ways and ideas."<sup>4</sup> MTA was conceived based on this shared interest in creating public art projects that engage with the history, culture and environment of the western Rocky Mountain region.

Since the summer of 2016, the organization has showcased place-based and temporal art exhibitions and public performances in historic natural settings in and around Bozeman. MTA is a "creative place-maker" holistically dedicated to the idea of developing cross-generational and societal relationships among artists, scholars, students, and community members – including ranchers, farmers, politicians, planners and scientists – in the

research and development of art projects for the benefit of the larger community.<sup>5</sup> Their bedrock creative team is comprised of architects, artists, designers, composers, musicians, singers, performers, dancers, writers, curators, scholars, and more.

Taylor explained that MTA's most unique feature is their commitment to working collaboratively with people of different experience and knowledge bases. Madden, Taylor, and Strom have been instrumental in developing MTA's particular research method of "collective inquiry," involving long-term dedicated time with community members to understand their needs and point of view. Each project requires new research, new collaborators. For instance, the libretto for this year's *Standby Snow* was based on interviews about climate change conducted with firefighters, geologists, ranchers, environmentalists, Native American scholars, and politicians. For *Gabriel Canal* (2017), which centered on issues of drought and water resources, MTA founders attended meetings of the Association of Agricultural Irrigators, and worked with ranchers, farmers and geologists.

"The catalyst for Mountain Time Arts is that the Gallatin Valley [which receives its water from the Missouri River and slowly melting snowpack] is being impacted by population growth and climate change," explained Madden. "Communities all over the west are experiencing the same worries about water supplies. Everyone agrees there is climate change and we have growth problems, but the response varies."<sup>6</sup> People are drawn to Bozeman for its mountains, spectacular beauty, and the lure of the west as a paradisaical frontier (however romanticized) of unlimited resources, individualism, and free expression, but the city has attracted so many newcomers it is now the fastest growing metropolitan area in the United States according to the 2016-17 Census, and is slated to soon double its population.

Between 2016-2018, MTA's *Water Works* series comprehensively focused on the regional water system and conservation ideas and methods. MTA's first production for the series, *Flow* (2016), directed by Strom, set the tone for future commissions. The work was a large-scale video installation of historical images projected onto the Story Mill grain terminal that introduced the history of agricultural development of the area. The following six projects explored water conservation, resource sharing, education, and emotional loss through a range of artistic approaches, including dance, performance, video installation, tours, and ceremonies, which took place on local ranches, wetlands, storefronts and headwaters.

**SUMMER 2019: STANDBY SNOW AND INDIGENIZING COLONIZED SPACES**

The two art projects in this year's MTA program, *Indigenizing Colonized Spaces* by Adam Sings in the Timber (Apsaalooke/Crow), and *Standby Snow*, embrace the retelling and repositioning of Indigenous histories at the Story Mill grain terminal and Story Mill Community Park, areas where indigenous tribes hunted buffalo for thousands of years. Ranchers and farmers settled in the 1800s, and the Story Mill was built to produce flour from the mid-1800s into the mid-1960s. Since then, wetlands have been restored in the area, and a community park and site for public art now flourish.<sup>7</sup> *Indigenizing Colonized Spaces* is a documentary photographic series of life-size portraits displayed on banners. It features five intertribal women, descendants from the Gallatin Valley, wearing traditional ceremonial dress and standing in front of popular sites in and near Bozeman such as the Big Sky ski lift and the Lewis and Clark Morel. The dignified portraits of proud young women in their regalia call attention to the fact that: "The women are descendants of the tribes that originally lived here, and the portraits signal to the viewer that wherever we are in the Americas, we are on Native land."<sup>8</sup>

During the day, the abandoned mill and exposed theatrical set for *Standby Snow* looked unprepossessing. The stage platform – a borrowed flatbed truck (thriftily and environmentally repurposed), outfitted with microphones – stood in front of the silos. A lift to hold performers draped with a white sheet of fabric was to stage left. A small musicians pit (large enough for three musicians and several composers), and a large towering platform built to hold the video projector, co-director Strom, and the video projectionist Stephen St. Francis Decky, stood behind the audience. When *Standby Snow* began shortly after dusk the audience sat in chairs or on blankets in rapt attention facing the large grain silos, mountain ridge to their right. Co-director Rettmer described to me the power marshaled by staging in a vast landscape:

Working out in the land is incredible. There is a grandeur working that big; site specificity. The picture frame is everywhere you look, integrated into weather, into the site. When the light goes down it is the same as a stage curtain going up. The scale is like the Met; it is naturally a full-bodied experience.<sup>9</sup>

**STANDBY SNOW: SCENES AND DIVERSIONS**

The narrative of *Standby Snow* traverses the last 200 years of American history to cover recurring heat waves and wildfires in the American west, the exploits of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery (1804-1806), a Norwegian woman's recent experience travelling to see Grinnell Glacier, to the final dramatic scene,

which recounts Chief Plenty Coups' (1848-1932) vision as a young boy, which foresaw the disappearance of the buffalo, the coming of the white man, and the end of Crow nomadic hunting culture as it was known. The work is physically defined by four large video installations on each surface of the Story Mill silos and outer buildings and performances illuminated in the surrounding landscape.

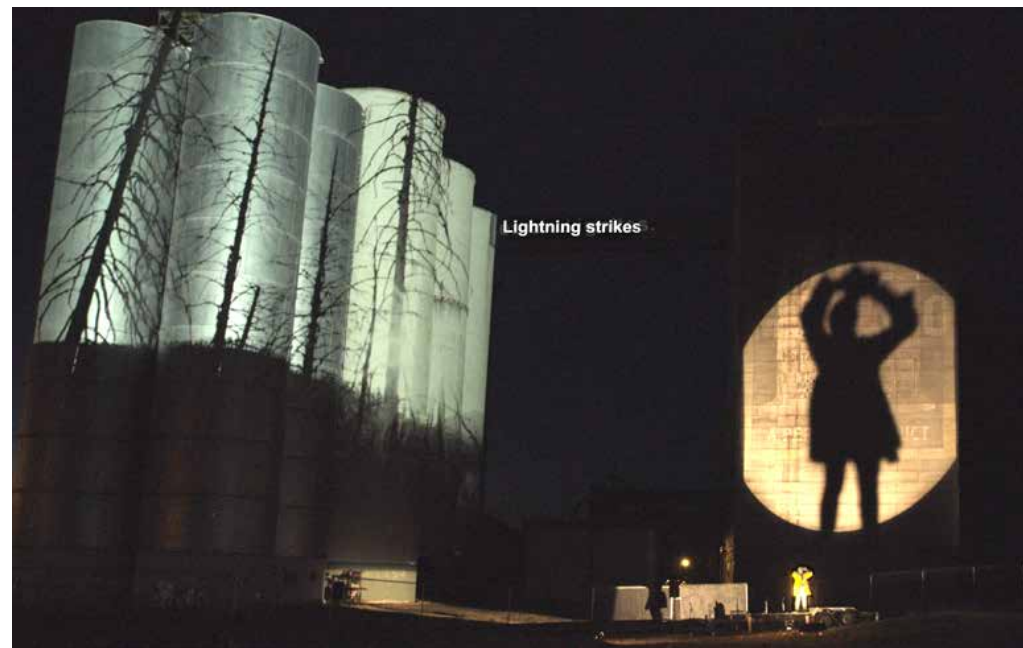
The non-linear libretto is told from multiple viewpoints. The opera is built upon four "Scenes" and three "Diversion" – the scenes revolve around stories told by performer, singer and educator Shane Doyle (Crow from Crow Agency, Montana), and sung in operatic verse with Cuban-American singer Aliana De La Guardia; the diversions are performed by the three "muses" (Rettmer, Florence Doyle [Apsaalooke/Crow] and Bridgett Isabella Semler) who sing in alt-pop style (with additional appearances by De La Guardia). Between the Scenes and Diversion of the production, Strom delivers clearly "scripted" stage directions for the audience to hear, intentionally breaking the fourth wall between the actors and the viewers. Some of her instructions are to imaginary stage-hands, delivered tongue-in-cheek, in reference to the settler colonialism that impacted the original Indigenous inhabitants of Montana: "Greg, please lower the control tower"; and "Brad, the lights are a bit hot overall. Can you take them down a few points? Phoebe, I think the white balance is too high can you check the R.I.E.? The white balance seems to be peaking."<sup>10</sup>

As it was presented in August, *Standby Snow* is a work-in-progress of Avant Garde theater. It is a combination of dramatic story, video art, and installation, which also combines opera, pop and Indigenous music. The work is an amalgam of nonfiction and drama, which strives to be as transparent as possible about its sources.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I describe some of the ways nonfictional material is blended into the work to parse its realism, playfulness, imagination, and daring. I do so to acknowledge what I perceive as a constructive and respectful mix of art and real life – one that makes this a highly successful hybrid collaboration of many cultures, textures, and individual voices in the seeking and expression of new knowledges.<sup>12</sup>

**Scene One, "Takes Off Like A Rocket"**

Doyle enters the stage wearing the iconic bright yellow uniform worn by firefighters, singing an honor song (which he later told me he improvised from a traditional Crow honor song by adding harmonic chords from the opera), then he raises a pair of binoculars to his eyes and sweeps the horizon. A spotlight casts his shadow on the Story Mill building behind him.

On the immense silos to his right, mining and logging extraction-industry web addresses appear, then dissolve into dark carcasses of fire-damaged lodgepole pines. De La Guardia,





wearing an enormous stylized and oversized white lab coat stands atop a fire tower (the industrial scissor lift mentioned earlier, with video images projected onto its cloth covered front surface). Doyle's voice co-mingles with De La Guardia's in an operatic song based on an interview with locally based Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Steve Running, a leading author on the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007: "Lightning strikes and ignites/ Summer starts earlier/ Trees dry out, grasses too/ Fire starts its run – takes off like a rocket/ Summer starts earlier/ Trees run out of water/ These are not fast-growing trees, never were."

**Diversion One, "Learning to Live with Fire"**

The three muses/singers (Rettmer, Doyle, and Semler), dressed in billowing white costumes and comical hats that mirror the shapes of the grain elevator (costumes are by organic textile designer Alayna Rasille), sing an alt-pop song that refers to the devastating "benchmark" Yellowstone National Park fire of 1988 that consumed millions of acres in Montana and Wyoming. The lyrics for the song (music composed by Rettmer for three

voices from samples by composer M.J. Williams) were based on information provided by University of Montana climate change conservationist Cathy Whitlock: "Fires are natural and necessary, but more and more of our land is burning. Fires are getting bigger and bigger. In 1988 we watched Yellowstone burn. That caught our attention and made us sit up. Made us think about, made us talk about, argue about, how to learn to live with fire. How to lose what we love to fire."

**Scene Two, "The Earth is an Entity"**

Doyle and De La Guardia stand together atop the fire tower. Doyle performs in a speaking voice, then sings, often discordantly, with De La Guardia. This scene is closely based on an interview by Doyle with his Montana State University school mate Brian King (Pikuni-Blackfeet), who shared his wide-ranging Indigenous perspective, life-long experience, and learned and sacred knowledge about mother earth, climate change, and how the Pikuni or Amskapi got their nontraditional name "Blackfeet" or "Blackfoot" from other tribes who noted the charcoal-



blackened bottoms of their moccasins from managing fires. First Doyle sings: "I am the earth the earth is me. The earth is an entity, a living entity." Then Doyle turns to a narrative speaking mode:

We had this down. We were self-sustainable. We knew how to relate to and take care of the earth. The non-Native way is that you are on top of the food chain, going to dominate everything. The Native way is that the earth is alive and has a spirit, and animals do too. They have intelligence. We don't assume we know everything. We view the earth as a mother not as an object to dominate.

King later told me that he was glad to be a "helper," someone who assists to "carry or implement" a vision, but that "some of the change that needs to happen, needs to come from the artists or creative people who help us see things differently." As he explained:

I feel like creative people and artistic people are the ones who are able to more easily tap into that sacred knowledge I was speaking about earlier. The knowledge that doesn't come from a book. There is a certain term that we call a vision, that is important to mention here, as it is what I believe MTA is carrying. [...] What I don't think people realize is that sometimes receiving a vision can be a difficult thing because you are then responsible to carry and implement that vision in the physical world. And you often need help because the burden is heavy and the things you have to do are many and you need the help of the community or others to implement your vision.<sup>13</sup>

**Diversion Two, "Make Lists and Copy them Twice" and Scene Three "Trespass"**

A lyrical rear-projection piece, performed by de la Guardia and Rettmer, appears as a shadow play in an intimate area behind center stage and, somewhat miraculously, some of the scenes are



projected on a narrow suspension of the grain elevator. Rettmer and De la Guardia friskily enact what may have been the first settlers' or even Lewis and Clark's original, joyful discovery of the verdant western landscape. In these scenes they dance and play in the woods, and revel in nature.<sup>14</sup> The narrative is based on Lewis and Clark's scientific journals from their 1804-1806 Corps of Discovery expedition. It was commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson after the Louisiana Purchase ostensibly to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean, but also to claim sovereignty over

the newly acquired lands of the west and the Native American Indians who lived on it. The words highlight the explorers' Enlightenment-era thinking and focus on the mapping, naming and categorizing of the land, rivers, flora and fauna around them. Transitioning to Scene Three, *Trespass*, Lewis and Clark stride onto center stage now wearing military jackets, tall black leather boots, and oversize *chapeau de bras* hats. They brandish a large measuring tape and discuss their official lists for the names of all the unfamiliar animals they have encountered. Clearly somewhat

flustered, they bicker a bit, but are determined to complete their mandate to name and claim all that surrounds them, without a thought to those who were there before them.<sup>15</sup>

#### Diversion Three, "Glacier/Evacuate"

This diversion revolves around the story of a Norwegian woman (never seen), who goes to great lengths to visit Grinnell Glacier with her Montana friends. She spends weekends getting in shape, takes days off from work, travels all the way from Norway, and fills a truck with diesel fuel – in order to drive to Glacier National Park's once-large centerpiece (now greatly diminished), Grinnell Glacier – only to be turned away by a wildfire at the last minute. Strom's lyrics and video images of vehicles fueling up at the local gas pump, driving past beef cattle ranges and on vacation, capture the contradictions of contemporary life that are taxing the ecosystem and confounding our sensibilities. She explains her idea behind the song (that in our desire to appreciate nature we destroy it): "It is located in ways people can identify. We are in a web of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and love of the land."<sup>16</sup>

#### Scene Four, "Storm"

For the final scene Doyle delivers a riveting stream-of-conscious retelling (from personal memories of hearing the story many times as a child) of the young Plenty Coups' vision quest in the sacred Crazy Mountains, which was interpreted by his elders as a prophetic dream. The sequence is underlined by a haunting, strident strumming guitar and darkly evocative video images of forests made up of the skeletons of dead lodgepole pines.

In Plenty Coups' dream, he sees the bison disappear and become replaced by spotted, hooved animals he had never seen before. A violent storm strikes, and the trees in the forest are knocked down until only one remains; in it is the lodge of the chickadee, a bird noted by the Crow people for being small but attentive and resilient.

Environmental stress is paramount: an ice jam, caused by rapid temperature fluctuations between melting and refreezing streams and rivers, is projected on the surface of the fire tower; Tree Dancers weakened from beetle infestations rock and sway on the hillside overlooking the mill in the storm. Doyle's telling of Plenty Coup's prophecy, De la Guardia's haunting eerie sounds amplified by the three muses, and the harsh strumming reach a loud, feverish pitch evoking a time as dark as that portrayed in *Dante's Inferno*. Then darkness and quiet.

#### STANDBY SNOW: FINAL CUE

The deafening silence is broken by Strom's final stage instructions: "Standby Audience. Standby Snow. Snow Go." Images of white snowflakes float above the viewers, rock 'n roll music fills the air, the cast, crew, director and musicians take their bows, and normalcy is restored. The audience gathers up their blankets, chairs and children, and return home for the evening.

But without a doubt we are all cued and waiting to see what happens in *Standby Snow: Chronicles of a Heat Wave, Chapter Two* next year.

#### CONCLUSION - MOUNTAIN TIME ARTS

Standby Snow and MTA employ strategies of reenactment, enactment, renaming, and collaboration. They engage with cultural and art history to remember the past, and to imagine new futures. The Story Mill itself is a site of trauma and of healing. MTA fills the site with new dreams and visions.

As Strom puts it:

The central question when working on sites in what we now call Montana is the history of Indigenous displacement. The United States was built on settler mindsets and ideologies of white supremacy. Speaking about that legacy is the first and foremost message that projects need to address when engaging with a site. Secondly, the environmental impact of that colonial legacy is urgent; the impact on the land of western industries (extraction, agriculture, tourism). The ways that Mountain Time Arts has found to do this, is through collaboration. The strategies that coastal artworlds esteem, such as valorizing ambiguity and subtlety are somewhat useless to us. We don't have time for that anymore. Learning how to make sure that each artwork is a learning project, is working toward cultural and environmental transformation, and uses both self-reflection, sincerity and irony – these are our tactics.<sup>17</sup>

And as Doyle adds: "The Crow showed how they valued their young people's experience by believing in Plenty Coups' vision. You can see with Greta her passion and commitment. Young people still have the spirit of light like Plenty Coups."<sup>18</sup>

*Standby Snow* is about the process of becoming, and hopefully Chapter Two will include new contributions from the youth members of the Sunrise Movement who performed as Tree Dancers in the final scene.<sup>19</sup> MTA's mission is to bring people together in environmental and art projects that gather, transform, and create new knowledges. Each initiative requires great amounts of dedication, effort, information sharing and community building among a vast range of people. Situated in one small area of our shared, living earth, under the clarity and largesse of the August Montana sky, theirs is a model of generative collaboration.

Notes and citations are online at:  
<http://www.mfj-online.org/berger-snow-notes/>

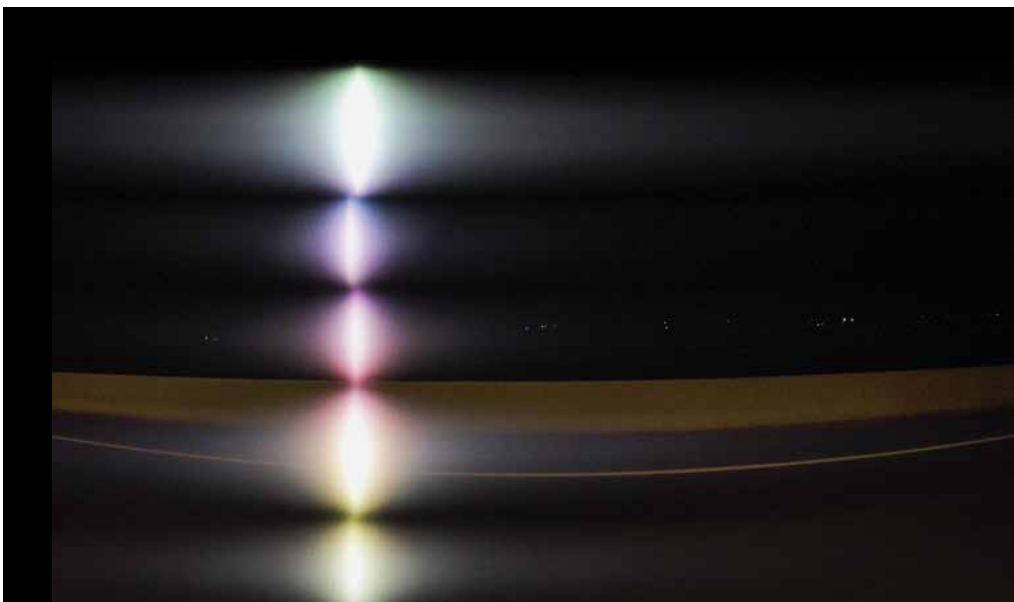


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