

Argent Kvasnikoff Tuyanitun: Tuggeht Dedication Speech

5-Jabu-25 (June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023)

Honorable guests, representatives, people of the Nichil, and residents of the City of Homer,

Thank you all for giving your presence here to myself, and the great people with me, our hosts, the Bunnell Street Arts Center. Being here today and having been invited to design this significant permanent feature in my own birthplace is an immense gesture which will always be remembered, and I give thanks to all those who each laid their own stone towards this landmark's completion. Whether it was material, monetary, or personal guidance, you have my eternal appreciation.

This accomplishment signifies a new feeling of interconnectedness, something that has been missing from this place for twelve generations. It is a beacon heralding both reconciliation and aspiration for all our people and the many visitors who now call our lands home. This was an incredibly difficult job. The logistics of a significant public work of art of this magnitude were a challenge, of course, but even more daunting was the prospect of opening the previously sealed door to our nation's identity and essence, hidden away as an act of preservation.

At the beginning of my role in this project, I was asked to imagine what a meaningful gesture of land acknowledgement would look like in this place. But not being familiar with this foreign concept, I had questions. What does it mean to be acknowledged? Why is it important? Where does it happen? How does it happen? And many others which challenged me and my understanding of the world around me. Surprising to both my colleagues and me was discovering that the biggest question of them all was about who. Who is acknowledged by indigenous land acknowledgement? Who does the acknowledging? And who receives the benefit? These questions created the necessity to thoroughly examine what it is that needs to be acknowledged.

To answer these questions, I needed to consider the more serious aspects of our land and history itself. As a leader of my family and people through my work, I often say the influences on our present are too heavy for me to work with. I am always cautious to fit any outside narrative that might affect our self-determination. I say they are too complicated, too nuanced, controversial, or just too misunderstood, to be brought up in a respectful and constructive manner through art. This is especially important for me because of the esoteric nature of today's art, and how its layers of meaning can be interpreted in multitudes of ways depending on the viewer.

Despite this reluctance and my determination to allow cultural reemergence to occur organically, facing this information as a group was important for us to do as the shadows of the past form

how our world functions now. An effective land acknowledgment can only ever be conceived from a place of honesty that is connected to its people living today. It

Acknowledgement can also only be effective if it incorporates permanence, and the acquiescence of the identity of its surroundings. All things such as statements, posters, petitions, signs, hopes, prayers, and wishes, quickly fade away. None can be compared to the act of uniting work and resources around an act of physical permanence. The creation of this fixture is one of these acts, and something which we can all be proud of today.

With these thoughts in mind, this design needed to show an ideal beyond any specified goal. It could not be a depiction of the romanticized past, it could not be a caricature of the politicized present, and it could not be a blind embrace of an unknown future. It needed to be connected to a meaning as complex as the world it inhabits and as dynamic as the country it stands on. It needed to be an appreciation of this place for what it is, not for what we think it could or should be. A place does not have its own innate name or purpose. Somewhere is only called a place because of the people who see it and live with it. In fact, our people do not have a significant history, or even a name, for this specific piece of coastline that we know today as Bishop's Beach. If one did exist, it would have been part of a legacy lost long ago. Even the name of the Homer area lowlands itself, Tuggeht, exists without known word origins, and its definition is only an educated guess based on secondary sources and language analysis. It is the absence of this connection that is what inspired me to create Tuyanitun: Tuggeht and use it as an anchor to bring others into the knowledge that places, like all things in life, are dependent on the viewer.

By orienting the design in relation to our unique descriptions of our landscapes and conventions of trails and directions, Tuyanitun: Tuggeht is an example of contemporary understanding uniting with indigenous systems. This is just one example of how a system of seeing the world can go beyond just a fun and interesting part of a culture, and that any system based in a unique people's vision can be viable and practical today. Especially if they are equally allowed to be translated using our current understanding of science and technology. In the case of this landmark, location is the first and most important element behind its meaning. We all understand how maps and the modern compass with its four cardinal directions work in navigation. However, they use systems of space and measurement that are not native to our land and do not meaningfully match the understanding of our worldview, a view that is always being shaped by the changing landscapes of our nation itself. By creating a standardized system using the five historic directions, Yunch', Yutsen, Yunit, Yuneq, and Yudut, I have given this place its own presence in the company of this worldview that goes beyond the context of time, and I hope, even the definitions of a culture itself. Instead of ascribing a lofty and poetic place name that has no connection to a measurable system, its coordinates, Yudut 5-5, can be measured with our own hands, and reconstructed by others who learn it.

This landmark is meant for everyone; everyone who lives on or visits these shores can feel like they are reflected in a piece of it themselves, as it is people who make up the definition of place. As much as it is a symbol of the continuing presence and power of our nation as it has been consecrated by cosmos and creators for millennia, it should also be a reminder that today we are all interconnected and depend on each other for success and happiness. While the turbulent waves of change have eroded much of our nation's identity, they have also become the source of our greatest strength. The resilience of our audacity to exist, and standing in those waves indefinitely, regardless of circumstance. This determination is what fuels my commitment to this project's vision. It is also what lights my innovation of all kinds of systems; language, writing, time, space, navigation, light, and most recently, mathematics, where I'm currently designing a base 25 number system that suits our environment, language, and modern identity.

But before any consideration of the connections to identity, purpose, and culture, however, the first and most important quality for me to consider is total beauty. I am an artist first and everything else about me is secondary. My favorite line from classical literature is from chapter 27 of the Tao Te-Ching, which reads "A good artist lets his intuition take him wherever it wants". I have found that this is always true. Your own intuition will always be more effective in inspiring and communicating than anything created having an agenda already in mind. From the beginning I have put form before function, as any significant statement can only be shared and spread with an inspiring visual composition to draw people in. The very first sketch of Tuyanitun: Tuggeht was only its shapes, oblong glass-like stones, completely devoid of context and purpose, because I wanted the look to be the guiding force. Achieving this look was ensuring that this landmark harmonizes with its surroundings, ones that are already imbued with beauty. Surroundings which include the natural; the sea, the sky, stones, and trees, sandhill cranes and our beloved dogs, and the manmade signs of human life; sea glass, marine equipment, cars and trucks, powerlines, and tsunami beacons.

It is within this environment, place, and people, that this landmark exists on every timeline, and it is my hope that it brings a feeling of interconnectedness once again.

Thank You