



Sharing Circles

Carol Newhouse and the
WomanShare Collective



Directors' Foreword

This fall, we are thrilled to present two groundbreaking exhibitions organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts, *Carlos Motta: Your Monsters, Our Idols* and *Sharing Circles: Carol Newhouse and the WomanShare Collective*. In different ways, both presentations demonstrate the Wex's importance as a laboratory for art and ideas—one that brings together diverse communities to explore our common entanglement, as cohabitants of a shared world. We draw inspiration from the featured artists whose work delves deeply into histories and herstories of queer and feminist resistance, drawing attention to lives and legacies overlooked by the official record- and gatekeepers. Animated by a spirit of defiant optimism, these exhibitions teach us to value difference in all its guises, and to trust in the power of collective self-determination, even in the face of seemingly immovable systems of domination and oppression. The artists' faith in the power of communal engagement is a tonic, and one from which we have so much to learn.

Sharing Circles—the first museum exhibition of pathbreaking queer photographer Carol Newhouse—transcends the traditional solo presentation. A celebration of the WomanShare Collective, the exhibition explores the making of a feminist community in rural southern Oregon during the heyday of the LGBTQIA+ liberation movement. Cofounded by Newhouse, her then lover Billie Miracle, and best friend Dian Wagner in 1974, WomanShare grew over the decades to become a pillar of the Women's Lands movement, offering a model for similar projects across the country and around the world. *Sharing Circles* presents the faces and voices of the women who collectively make up WomanShare; it also emphasizes their commitment to radical openness, both with each other and with outsiders in need. This generosity extends to WomanShare's current stewards, who have charted a new direction for the project led by queer Black, brown, and Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people. We express our deep gratitude to Newhouse and the entire WomanShare Collective, and to the exhibition's cocurators Daniel Marcus and Carmen Winant, together with research assistant Raechel Root and intern Arielle Irizarry, for realizing this landmark exhibition at the Wex.

Megan Cavanaugh and Kelly Stevelt
Co-Interim Executive Directors, Wexner Center for the Arts



Into the Circle

by
Daniel
Marcus



In June 1974, artist Billie Miracle attended a Moon Gathering with her lover, Carol Newhouse, and their friend, Dian.¹ Celebrating the final quarter of the lunar cycle, the ceremony was conceived by Jean Mountaingrove, a former Quaker turned lesbian spiritualist. It meant, in Mountaingrove's words, to tap into the participants' deeper sense of self as a form of consciousness-raising. The nine participants, all women, passed around hand-painted stones decorated with images of the earth and moon. Then, arranging themselves in a standing circle, each intoned her own name repeatedly—like a chant, Miracle later recalled, as in the litany of *Les Guérillères*, Monique Wittig's revolutionary feminist novel from 1969. The leader's sermon followed, expounding on the names of the Goddess, linking the personal—given names, first-person pronouns—with the pan-cultural: *She, We, Ours*.

Published in the inaugural issue of *WomanSpirit*, a quarterly journal devoted to feminist and lesbian spirituality, Miracle's account details her observations of the ceremony.² While Newhouse and another woman, Fran (later renamed Zarod), seemed captivated by the ritual, Miracle was nonplussed:

All the time I am aware of Carol: she is taking it in very seriously. I compare myself to how I think she is reacting. I am trying to keep clear of the whole ceremony, not letting myself get too involved. I am also aware of Fran. Both she and Carol seem able to flow with the rhythm of the events. I feel distant, frightened, and skeptical.³

Her sense of alienation intensified with the gathering's final phase. Participants were asked to pass a ring around the circle until, one by one, each woman felt called to express a personal wish or need. The first woman to speak was Mountaingrove's partner Ruth, whose wish "to be whole" stunned Miracle. "It sets the tone for other wishes: very serious, very large wishes."⁴ Uncertain, Miracle watched silently as Newhouse entered the circle to speak:

Finally Carol moves to the center with the ring. She asks for her relationship with Dian and me to pass from darkness into light as the new moon becomes the full moon. She begins to cry very hard. I feel her pain and yet I am surprised by it. I did not expect to be taken back to all of our depressing attempts to deal with our relationship. Fran says that like the seasons this will all pass. Dian puts her arms around Carol. I go to her too and smile, strongly and bravely, I hope, not showing my shock and upset, and say that I will try some more.⁵

There was more at stake than mere discord between friends: Miracle, Newhouse, and Dian were founders of a young collective and land project in southwestern Oregon, which they would soon name WomanShare. They had conceived the project as members of a consciousness-raising group in Montreal, departing Canada on a road trip from Mexico to Oregon that culminated with the purchase of a twenty-three-acre property outside Grants Pass, a town on the Rogue River in

Josephine County, in April 1974. Although Newhouse nor Miracle had funds to purchase their own shares, the trio had agreed to co-own the property; after cashing in a small fortune of stocks given to her by her father, Dian purchased it alone, and initially hesitated to extend rights to the deed to her comrades. At the same time, Dian's status as third wheel to Newhouse and Miracle left the project on unsteady footing.

These tensions erupted during the first Moon Gathering, tapping a reservoir of feeling that was both personal *and* collective. Unsettled by the emotional outpouring, Miracle left the circle deflated: "I am very depressed by the time we get [home]. I did not expect to be brought down by a ceremony about the full moon. But we had not seen her all night. The clouds were clearing just as we started to come down the mountain."⁶

Yet the group continued to convene over the following weeks, altering their routine to encourage new forms of expression. For a New Moon ceremony, Miracle devised a ritual of her own that encouraged women to value their personal autonomy. As Carol recalls,

Billie talks [with the group] about the image of the container, hidden, dark and secret. She has made ten small bags with draw strings, each from a different material. Each has a black bead attached to the draw strings, signifying the dark moon. She gives them to us to keep. We are very pleased as the bags are passed around the circle. We each decide which bag we like best and keep it if we want to. It is a happy exchange of bags and words. We find seeds inside the bags. Seeds, the small beginning, the New Moon.⁷

This ceremony culminated with a reading of Robin Morgan's 1972 poem "Monster," turning its penultimate line, "I am a monster," into a raucous chant: "We laughed and shouted it repeatedly together. The whole evening feels good to me – a high!"⁸

This change of mood reflected a deepening bond within the collective. By the autumn, Dian had taken up with a girlfriend, Sue Deevy, and the addition of another resident, Nelly Kaufer, brought their number to five. Summer workshops introduced scores of women to the project from as far away as San Francisco, establishing WomanShare as a nexus of lesbian culture on the West Coast. Over dinner one evening, Dian announced that she had added the other members of the collective to the deed, fulfilling WomanShare's promise of distributed ownership. Even so, questions of difference—especially class difference—continued to shape conversations among the five cohabitants, who were now partners in an economic relationship. As the group wrote in its coauthored memoir, *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective*, "In order to work as a whole, it has been important to consciously recognize [our] differences but not to become too threatened, and, thereby, blinded by them." Incorporating consciousness-raising into the practice of everyday life, WomanShare offered a framework—an optic of accountability—through which the five cohabitants could begin to see themselves as autonomous individuals.



The exhibition *Sharing Circles* is anchored by around 150 photographs and several dozen contact sheets, most made by Newhouse during her four-year term as a full-time resident of WomanShare. In these germinal years, she photographed her fellow "country lesbians" often and with sensitivity, while devoting little attention to the picturesque landscape around them. As Newhouse writes, her purpose was to encourage self-discovery, both for herself and for her viewership:

As I look back on the images [that] I created in the 70s and early 80s, I understand that I was creating lesbian visibility for myself as well as others. I was looking at lesbians through the lens of my camera much like one looks at a new discovery through a microscope. I wanted to see lesbians clearly and in detail. As I worked in the darkroom, I was discovering and capturing much of what was to become an expression of [the] lesbian culture we were creating together. Through making these images I came into myself, and I think I helped us see the beauty and strength of all we were becoming. If I had a goal back then I feel it must have been essentially the same as my work today: to move lesbians closer to the power of spirit.⁹

Newhouse's aspiration—to realize a lesbian visual culture—was not unique to her or her practice. It aligned her with other photographers in the Women's Lands milieu, including JEB (Joan E. Biren) and Ruth Mountaingrove, both of whom labored to naturalize images of lesbian affection and self-identification. In JEB's formulation, lesbian photography reflected and anticipated the rejection of patriarchal domination and encouraged "a spiral of existence in which we [wimmin] continually shed our male-identification as we move into a woman-centered world."¹⁰ For Mountaingrove, photography likewise offered a vehicle of self-liberation, by capturing and validating "the independent, strong, happy woman who lives in each of us," and who "needs to be seen" to be fully and freely lived.¹¹

Crucially, both JEB and Mountaingrove understood their projects in terms of an aesthetics of similarity, not difference. Individual women might "be affected by race, class, age, regional and other differences," JEB admitted. "But something about those of us who have survived as wimmin-loving wimmin in a woman-hating world is the same and something we are creating is the same."¹² In this formulation, photography reveals not an essential lesbian identity but a shared experience of domination and oppression—in other words, a similarity deriving from what Casey Hayden and Mary King provocatively termed the "sex caste system" in a tract of 1965.¹³ Becoming an artist in tandem with her attempted escape from this system, Newhouse's photography expressed lesbian visibility in a different register. Rather than document the collective's common lot as refugees of patriarchy, her camera accompanied—and abetted—their efforts to remake themselves as individuals within a self-defined system.

At times this focus on individuality came at the expense of the category of lesbian photography itself. Not all of Newhouse's photographs are immediately legible as pictures of "wimmin-loving wimmin." Take, for example, a photograph titled *Billie Flying* (p. 7). Newhouse fixes an image of Miracle leaping toward the camera, wiry arms outstretched as if to cast a spell. Not quite naked, Miracle wears a tangle of wispy fibers draped loosely about her neck, an adornment of her own fabrication. Locking eyes with the viewer, the subject embraces the camera's look, returning it in kind. It is a tender photograph, suffused with eroticism—but it is not a portrait of Miracle in any conventional sense. Elevating her beyond everyday life and love, Newhouse presents her subject as a new woman in a new world, self-created and sui generis.

Transcending portraiture, Newhouse delivered a vision of her companions at WomanShare from which few generalizations could be drawn. The inaugural issue of *The Blatant Image*, a journal of feminist photography coedited by the Mountaingroves, included her photograph *The 2 of Wands* (p. 15), one of a series of images pairing Miracle with Newhouse's new lover Susann Shanbaum, a singer-songwriter with the Berkeley Women's Music Collective. The women pose naked before a bonfire, its flames licking the bottom of the photograph. Crouching in the foreground, Shanbaum directs her gaze upward at Miracle, who hovers above her, radiating serene command.

A study in vulnerability and support, *The 2 of Wands* channels the charged energy of an initiation rite, and even a sexual awakening. Although the photograph seems at first to position Miracle and Shanbaum

as lovers, the pair were bonded, not through mutual desire, but by their common affection for Newhouse, the photographer. The image not only portrays this love triangle, implicating the photographer as an absent third figure, but also permits a self-conscious exploration—and temporary reworking—of their respective roles.

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“[A]ll this cooperative stuff, and all the talking we do about everything, [makes me] feel like I’m losing myself in it! It seems as if I don’t have any thoughts or ideas of my own.”¹⁴ Voiced by Dian during one of WomanShare’s early sharing circles, this complaint resonated with several members of the collective, who sometimes found it difficult to shoulder the heavy load of self-analysis the project required. To WomanShare resident Nelly Kaufer, the pattern of emotional self-exposure confused a boundary separating romantic from platonic intimacy, leaving her uncertain how to categorize her relationship with the collective:

I’ve become scared the last few weeks about us being so intimate, so tight, my feeling vulnerable to everyone here. All of a sudden, I realized this vulnerability I have [toward] you is the same kind of vulnerability I have towards my lovers... even though I don’t make love with you... I’m not saying that I want to stop being vulnerable to you all. I crave it! If I wasn’t vulnerable to you four, then I would be to someone else, and in fact, I feel it is safer to be vulnerable to the four of you than to one woman. But while I crave intimacy I still fear being vulnerable!¹⁵

Kaufer’s confession helps to clarify the stakes of Newhouse’s photographic practice, which took shape within the same regimen of vulnerability and exposure. By her own admission, Newhouse felt differently about matters of intimacy and individuality:

I spend much more energy worrying about losing our sense of togetherness than my sense of self. I don’t worry about losing my individuality ‘cause I am stuck with myself as an individual. I just am me. That’s the given. I am just myself and that’s not good enough, so I have to do something better than that—which I do—living collectively.¹⁶

Yet not all aspects of collective living came easily to her. Raised in a middle-class family, she had internalized her mother’s advice not to become “trapped in the kitchen as a housewife/servant.”¹⁷ Vexed by the sharing of kitchen duties, which seemed incompatible with women’s liberation, she resisted these chores until Miracle called her to account, leading to a lengthy discussion of her “classist conditioning.”¹⁸ The kitchen continued to trouble Newhouse, who never warmed to the role of household cook. But the group’s willingness to treat her “classism in the kitchen” as an opportunity for growth enabled her to find herself—and to see herself—in the trouble.

WomanShare’s rituals of visibility and vulnerability impacted Miracle as well. Although she valued her privacy, and often felt it necessary “to go off alone to feel strong and centered and creative,” Miracle nevertheless drew strength and inspiration from the group.¹⁹ Shaped by a lifetime spent on the collective’s land, her artistic practice has recently condensed around the symbolic edifice of house and home, a fixation she attributes to her working-class background.²⁰ Tracing the outlines of single-family dwellings, including the gable-roofed cabins she and her comrades built by hand at WomanShare, Miracle’s drawings testify to the need for personal space within the collective. As most cabins at WomanShare were only large enough to sleep a single woman and her lover, these structures provided conditions of intimacy while also offering refuge from the group’s interactions, which Miracle likens to “a war / on a hillside.”²¹ She writes:

**The day’s battle ends
The women go off alone ... each to her own shelter.
I see tears.
I see sweat.
I see exhaustion.
I see flashes of joy.
I see sticks in the women’s hands...**²²

Living within the circle was no easy matter, Miracle suggests. WomanShare laid each woman bare, exposing dimensions of the self that were previously hidden or buried. But there was also pleasure in vulnerability—and in nakedness, a source of power:

**I see fierce women!
Hateful women!
Strong and courageous women.
Frightened women.
Joyful women.
Wounded women.
Women fighting.**²³

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1 In reference to her involvement with WomanShare, Dian preferred not to use her patronym. To honor that wish, I refer to her as Dian in this essay.
2 “Moon Over the Mountain: Creating Our Own Ritual,” *WomanSpirit* vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall Equinox 1974), 29
3 “Moon Over the Mountain.”
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 “Moon Over the Mountain,” 30.
8 Ibid.
9 Carol Newhouse, “Artist Statement,” in Tee Corinne, ed., “Lesbian Photography on the U.S. West Coast, 1972–1997,” *Women Artists of the American West*, <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/rueff-school/waaw/corinne/Newhouse.htm>, accessed July 10, 2022.
10 JEB (Joan E. Biren), “Lesbian Photography—Seeing Through Our Own Eyes,” *The Blatant Image* no. 1 (March 1981): 51. “Wimmin” and “womon” are alternative spellings of ‘women’ and ‘woman,’ respectively.

11 Quoted in Jana Zvibleman and Ruth Mountaingrove, “Seeing a Feminist Vision,” *WomanSpirit* vol. 6, no. 21 (Fall Equinox 1979), 49.
12 JEB, “Lesbian Photography – Seeing Through Our Own Eyes.”
13 Casey Hayden and Mary King, “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo,” *Liberation* no. 10 (April 1966), 35.
14 Sue, Nelly, Dian, Carol, Billie, *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective* (Grants Pass, OR: WomanShare Books, 1976), 33.
15 *Country Lesbians*, 32–33.
16 *Country Lesbians*, 34–35.
17 *Country Lesbians*, 17.
18 *Country Lesbians*, 18.
19 *Country Lesbians*, 35
20 See Miracle’s interview with Raechel Root in this volume.
21 *Country Lesbians*, 133.
22 *Country Lesbians*, 134.
23 Ibid.



Carol Newhouse in Conversation with

Carmen
Winant



In 2019, **CARMEN WINANT** traveled from Ohio to meet **CAROL NEWHOUSE** for the first time. They had become acquainted months earlier, cultivating a friendship based on their shared commitments to photography and feminism. During her visit, Winant recorded this interview with Newhouse, which was originally published to accompany their collaborative participation in the exhibition *Staying with the Trouble* at Tufts University Art Galleries in 2021.

CARMEN Shall we start in Montreal? When did you first encounter feminist thinking?

CAROL This was '70 or '71. I was reading *Ms.* magazine, and I got my hands on Jill Johnston. *C.L.I.T. Papers* blew my mind. There were a lot of factors happening at once that fed my feminism. It wasn't like I met one person, or there was a single event.

CARMEN Where you married at that point?

CAROL No. I was married for less than a year—before Montreal. It was a marriage of convenience; I wasn't out yet. We were friends, intellectual equals. I knew it was short-term.

CARMEN Once you got to Montreal you were engaged in collective living, consciousness-raising, and so on. How did you describe what you were doing and feeling? Did you call it feminism?

CAROL We talked about women's liberation. This was the very early 1970s. There was limited language for it. We were less concerned with specific words, you know? Although we did learn quite a lot from the material coming from New York. We had started our consciousness-raising group

by then; we had begun to see each other differently, as an oppressed class. We discussed our personal experiences as women; we didn't exactly cover specific topics, as much as we just talked—about healthcare, body issues, health food, poverty, childcare, electoral politics. We were all white women, except one woman from India. There was some race consciousness among us. But as a result of so many years of segregation and systematic racism, our priorities were different in certain ways, and hard to reconcile.

CARMEN Did you call yourselves hippies?

CAROL No. we were something else. But we didn't know what. That was the whole point.

CARMEN How often did the consciousness-raising group meet?

CAROL It was regular—weekly. I don't think that would be possible now; people are pulled in too many directions. You asked about speed earlier. I suppose we moved both fast and slow.

CARMEN Let's talk a bit now about moving to the land. Am I right that Dian purchased the land but didn't put all three of your names on the

deed at first?

CAROL Yes. Dian was hesitant at first. She wasn't wealthy, and this was the only money that was ever going to come her way; she knew that. Billie was threatening to leave. She was furious; she felt betrayed. We decided to take two weeks of silence after we found out that Dian's was the only name on the deed; can you imagine? Dian left the land for a while and came back with a new lover. One night at dinner she raised a glass and told us that she had put the land in all of our names. At that moment any threat dissipated. We were all equal now.

CARMEN How long did you plan to be there? Did you think you'd live on that land forever?

CAROL We didn't think that way. Everything was in the present tense. We were inventing ourselves, caught up in the moment. I would have said a few years, maybe, if pressed.

CARMEN You mentioned earlier that your consciousness was informed by what was coming out of New York feminist groups and publications. I am curious for that reason about your decision to move to a rural place rather than a city center. Why move in that direction?

CAROL Well, we, and Dian in particular, had a vision. It started in our consciousness raising group and developed as we went. We spent months looking at different lands up and down the coast. In the process of looking for what we wanted, it became clear to us why we wanted it. We would say: "Well, we really want somewhere where we can walk around nude." And then we would ask: "Why do we want that? Why do we feel we need that? What is a safe place?" And so on. That is how we figured out that we wanted to run workshops on the land. Consciousness-raising had given us these skills to play out in the world. Through that process, we learned that we needed safety, privacy, and empowerment separate from white male dominance, oppression, and abuse. We needed our own land. A place of our own.

CARMEN Will you talk about the workshops?

CAROL The three of us started looking for land in January 1974. We got to what became WomanShare the following April. It was raining a lot. There were two buildings: a shack and a cottage that was falling apart. But they were adequate. We took control; we had to. We got intimate up there. We really fought for survival. The structures we lived in were pretty vulnerable. Over time, the land become part of us and vice versa.

CARMEN How did you advertise for the workshops?

CAROL There were a few other lands beginning, especially in Oregon, where we were. We would put up a flyer in town, never using the word "lesbian." We would say something like "Looking for women who want to live collectively," et cetera. And I think we took out small ads in newspapers. We used our women's network and lesbian contacts. We put up flyers in women's bookstores and restaurants. We called people on the phone.

CARMEN And you ran art and photography workshops on the land? With how many women?

CAROL The smaller workshops were around fifteen women. We also ran workshops on lesbian sexuality, class differences, and carpentry from June to September. A lot of women came to our land—and other lands too. But you have to understand that different lands had different structures; we were not homogeneous. There were a lot of different women, coming for different amounts of time for different reasons. Most did not have children, but some did.

CARMEN This feels distinct from the academic context I work in, in which everyone is an expert in some field, and that expertise is wielded in service of hierarchy rather than community.

CAROL We shared skills. People would come and bring their experience. Not only lesbians, but mostly. Or at least questioning. I remember a young woman drove up in a VW van for a long weekend workshop. It was a hot summer day and Dian greeted her entirely nude. The openness blew her mind. I remember her surprise. But the next day she was walking around without clothes. That is all it took! Women were so excited. She renamed herself on that trip.

CARMEN How many women renamed themselves?

CAROL It was significant to some and not others; it was common but not ubiquitous. It was a question of how much you wanted to leave behind. This project, lesbian separatism, was not about running away. It was about self-discovery and self-empowerment. It was about joy.

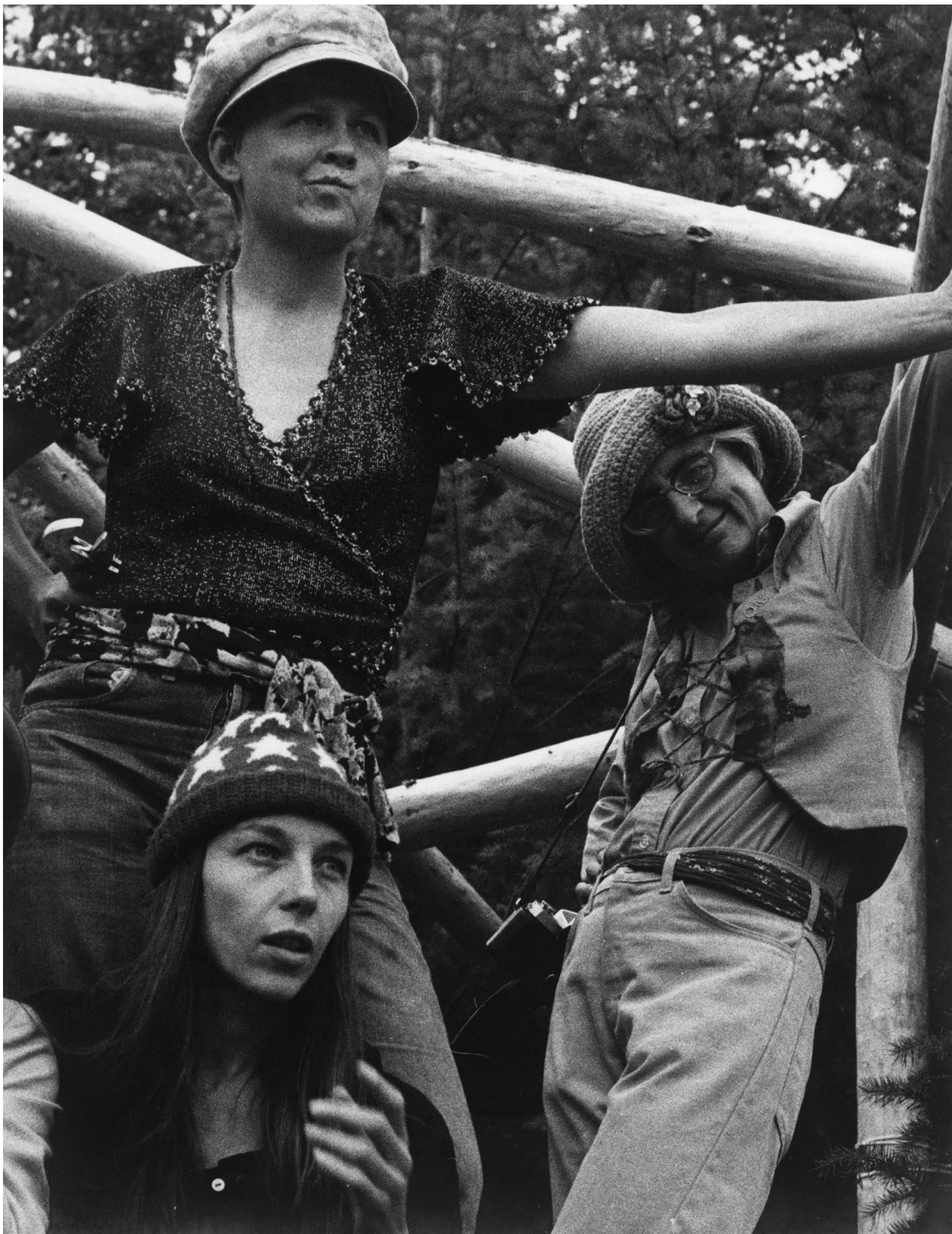
CARMEN WomanShare and other womyn's lands have helped me unlearn binary, capitalist-informed ideas of success and failure. By which I mean, for one thing, that many of these lands are no longer around or are not flourishing in the way they once were. But maybe that is not the same thing as failure. Maybe there is something important about how these social experiments and coalitions evolve or live on in different ways.

CAROL I've heard Billie say that we didn't make the revolution. But that was never my expectation, you know? The land was not a failure. It was a formative experience. We were making a life that we had only had glimpsed before that moment. We learned how women live together and create community. I eventually left after four years; I went to Berkeley. But I found that I use this collective consciousness all the time. In fact, when I hear certain women speaking, I think to myself, oh, she has been on Women's Land. And I am usually right.

CARMEN Wow. How?

CAROL Some sense of the big picture; some trust in the process; an optimism that we could get it done; a knowledge that we didn't have to have it all figured out already; a belief in collaboration. This goes for women who lived on the land for years, like me, and women who came for the weekend, and who took that experience back to their cities and homes. Often, later, we recognized each other out in the world.









Billie Miracle in Conversation with Raechel Root

A founding matriarch of WomanShare, **BILLIE MIRACLE** has been a galvanizing figure within the Women's Lands movement for over 40 years. Trained as an artist and art educator, Miracle made the land of southern Oregon an integral part of her creative practice. In this interview with Wex research assistant **RAEHEL ROOT**, Miracle discusses the evolution of her work at WomanShare.

RAEHEL Billie, your presence at WomanShare has been a constant from the very beginning—you've lived continuously on the land since 1974. Through all those years, you've also cultivated an artistic practice in a wide range of media, including painting, sculpture, printmaking, fiber arts, and ceramics. How did you first become attracted to art, and how did your life as an artist and your practice as an artist change when you became involved with the feminist movement?

BILLIE As a little kid, I loved to draw and paint—and my uncle was an artist, and my great uncle, an architect. Art was always in my life, but it was more a matter of being creative rather than fixating on what I was producing. When I went to college, I decided to study art education, thinking that I'd be more likely to get a job that way. Right out of college, I started teaching art in high school, outside Milwaukee. During the Vietnam War, my then husband and I moved to Canada, and I enrolled in graduate school at Concordia University. That was ultimately how I met Carol.

At that point in my life, feminism meant being part of a revolution. The art went along with that. Everything I did on the land at WomanShare, I also tried to express in my art—using the land, using the earth, and also getting other people involved in the process.

RAEHEL Tell me more about using the earth in your art. How did the land manifest in the art you've made at WomanShare, and how has art played

a role in your life on the land?

BILLIE As a child, I'd never learned how to make things—in school, they didn't teach girls to build, or to use tools, or anything like that. At WomanShare, I tried to learn as much as I could about building. Luckily, our community included a few people in the construction business who could teach me. I learned a lot from them—I also spent a lot of time outdoors and found that the soil here is very good for making clay. I learned how to make pottery and beads, and I organized pottery workshops at WomanShare to share this skill with others. I would fire clay outside without a kiln, using a fire pit. I still make ceramics that way. Just last winter, I fired clay in a wood stove right here in the house, and it worked really well.

RAEHEL Your moving to WomanShare pushed you to become really independent, then, but also to learn from others—to become a teacher and a student, in other words.

BILLIE Well, I always wanted to try new things, to do what I wasn't supposed to do, to rebel, all of that. In terms of art, but also in terms of working together, I was ready for anything. I mean, we worked hard—it's a long learning process, and an everyday process, to live in a collective. It's helpful to have art accompany that process, because it can either focus your mind or give you a way to represent what you've done—it's not just talking, but also doing, making.

When you're feeling good about making things, you can keep going on and keep working with other people. For me, art offered a way of—I don't want to say coping, but *dealing* with what was happening in my life. I was always kind of a leader, in a sense. I liked to make things work out in the group, finding the best way we could all work it out together. Not that I was always sweet to everybody. Of course not! But that's just part of the process—the creative process, too.

RAEHEL In your book *Country Lesbians*, you and your co-authors describe your efforts to work through differences in economic power and privilege within the collective. How did the sharing circle first emerge as a tool to deal with those power differentials?

BILLIE Well, we had to make trust between people, and that's not easy to do. Trust comes from the experience of living together, working together, and being around each other for a lot of time. Only after you've built trust can you begin to address all the things that make a situation unequal, like race, class, health, and age. It's not easy! Even when you are on the receiving end of inequality, you still have to work through all that stuff. It always takes longer than you'd want, but it does work.

As for the sharing circle, that came out of the consciousness-raising groups we had joined in the 1960s and 1970s, where we would try to make sense of our experience as women in terms larger than our own personal issues. We all felt that the act of sharing our feelings and thoughts was the most important way to change things. When you see somebody in pain or struggling, and they're part of your family, you've got to analyze that—you've got to figure it out and make it better.

RAEHEL That makes me curious to know more about how collectivity operated, practically, at WomanShare.

BILLIE Well, we had rules about meetings—about who could talk, and about how many times you could say something. Most meetings would relate to a specific situation: Something would happen and then we would have to sit and talk about why it happened. Could things have been done differently? How would we actually make things work differently next time around?

As a group, we had specific things we wanted to accomplish. People who came to WomanShare had to go through a trial period of three or six months before they could join the group. Visitors didn't always appreciate or approve of that. Unlike some of the other Woman's Lands around here, we had a lot of structure.

RAEHEL Architectural historian Jane Rendell points out that spatial structures—circles and boundaries, for instance—often come to define what it means to behave as a feminist. Circles are iconic of the Women's Lands movement, but I've noticed that you often base your artwork on the shape of a house. How did you first become interested in that motif?

BILLIE From the time I was a little child, I remember wanting to own a house. My parents could never afford to buy our own home, but I always wanted that—a house—in my life. Always. Even now.

In a way, WomanShare was also like that: I didn't really own the place, physically, since we shared it as a group. Now, for the first time, I finally have my own house, located next-door to WomanShare.

RAEHEL Home ownership is such a fraught goal, inseparable from the American dream of having a freestanding structure all to oneself. But for a long time, women couldn't really own property of their own, and for women to own property collectively would have been incredibly rare.

BILLIE And ownership takes us back to the issue of power: If you own something, you get to make all the decisions. For me, home ownership is a class issue, too. I came from a working-class family that couldn't afford a house. For us, like for so many Americans, ownership wasn't an option—but it was still a dream. How do you reconcile those things? It's a question that can be approached artistically in terms of color, or in terms of shape.

RAEHEL How did your collective ownership of WomanShare fit into this picture?

BILLIE Well, I never did feel I owned it. I felt I'd been given WomanShare as a shared space. I feel good about that, too—I didn't have to own it to

feel it was mine.

RAEHEL The Women's Lands movement raises so many difficult questions about space and property: What *is* a building? What counts as "a land"? What is ownership? When it came to building houses of your own at WomanShare, how did that process work in practice?

BILLIE As a builder, I had no skills at all. I learned everything from the other women living and visiting here—including a woman named Sally Smith, a contractor who lived next door. She was the first woman contractor in the city of San Francisco, in fact.

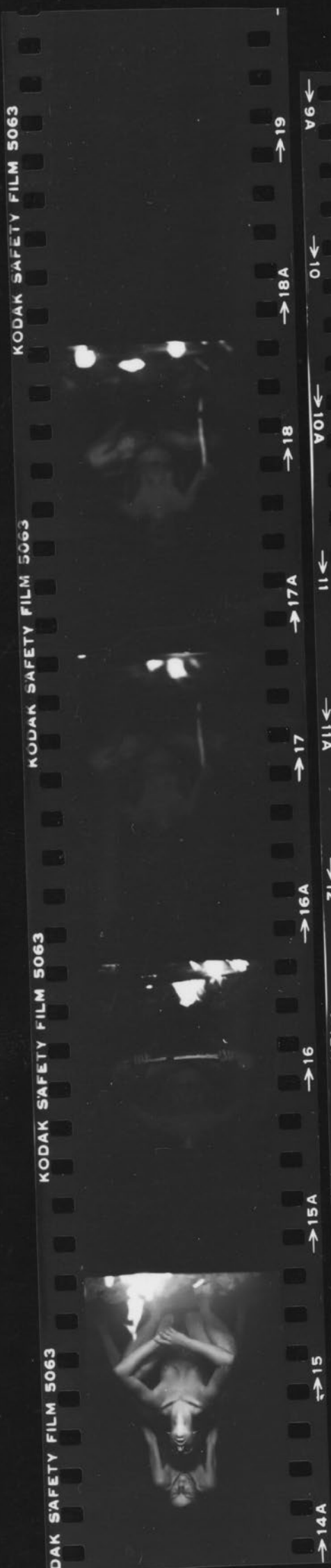
RAEHEL That's amazing. It sounds like a lot of the cabins at WomanShare were built collectively, is that right?

BILLIE Yes, although one person would always serve as the builder, with everyone else working under their supervision. It was usually Shannon—she lives down in the Bay Area now, but she taught me a lot over the years. So did Sally, who sometimes brought us to work on her projects. Most of us learned that way.

RAEHEL The cabins at WomanShare have become such characters in my mind—each one has a different name (Madrone, Rattlesnake, Kionna, Cascade, etc.), and within the community, they're often spoken of as akin to living entities. What sort of future do you imagine for these structures?

BILLIE Well, I hope that they stay women-built and women-cared-for. I feel lucky that they were so skillfully built and are still being well taken care of. I have a feeling they'll last. But I also know I have to let go and let the future become the future and change as it changes and trust that something good will come out of it.







Country Queers:

A Conversation with NativeWomanshare



LYCAN EL LOBO COSS and **BIANCA FOX DEL MAR BALLARA**—Lycan and Fox—became residents and land stewards at WomanShare in 2020. Working with founders Carol Newhouse and Billie Miracle, the two established NativeWomanshare, which aims to support queer BI-POC and Two-Spirit people. Newhouse and Miracle hope that this project will both secure WomanShare’s legacy within the larger Women’s Lands movement and transform it into something new.

The following conversation with Lycan and Fox was held over Zoom in July 2022. Their interlocutors were Nico Fuentes and Jonas Wooten, members of Currents, a similar intergenerational communal project in Athens County, Ohio, the ancestral territory of the Shawnee, Osage, Adena and Hopewell Peoples. The group discussed the origin of NativeWomanshare and the complexities of queer life in Appalachian Ohio.

The conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

LYCAN We live in Oregon, a predominantly white state. It is a state created for white people: During the Civil War, Southerners moved to Oregon because they didn’t want to live with Black and brown folks. Before moving here, Fox and I were part of many different communities, and I still help run one of the largest land-based community networks in the world. But these communities didn’t always work for me as an Indigenous person; when you’re Two-Spirit, you don’t fall neatly into the LGBTQ+ thing. When Fox and I started to collaborate, we asked, “What would it look like for Indigenous people not to be on a reservation? What would #landback look like for us, as Indigenous queer people? How do we connect with nature, spirituality, our roots, our knowledge, our food, as *queers*? And what does Indigenous sovereignty mean?”

When I was young, all I heard was, “Assimilate.” And I did; I assimilated well. I ignored my body’s messages. It was only as I got older that I found out it’s actually great to be Native American. But I still felt that I didn’t have anywhere to go. So Fox and I decided to create it. “It’s in our DNA. The more we work to create a place, the more the memories will come back.” And when this place became available, we wrote a letter to the elders saying, “This was queer land for the last forty years. It’s our Indigenous birthright. Give us a chance.” They loved the letter. So here we are, two years later, after a global pandemic and the worst fires Oregon has ever seen. We decided to name our project NativeWomanshare to honor the foundations our elders built for us: the descendants they didn’t know were coming.

We wanted to rematriate the land. In our culture, the mother, mother earth, the life bringer, is very important. As Indigenous people we felt that once you healed the mother—that is, the earth, and ourselves—then other forms of healing could begin. Indigenous people also understand queerness as a gift from the creator. It is medicine to be Two-Spirit—we teach that to our youth. And we teach them about the dangers of drugs, which are prominent in Native American society and also in queer society.

FOX We should acknowledge that Lycan identifies as Mēxihcah, and that I am Taíno. We are on the land of the Takelma people. Right now we are focused on building bridges with the Takelma, in service of building a broader Two-Spirit, queer, BIPOC community in southern Oregon. We advocate for Indigenous sovereignty and rights first. In the two years that we have had the privilege of being on this land, we have done a lot of land stewardship to heal the forest: protecting ourselves from ongoing risk of wildfires, remediating the land from a century of improper forest management, embracing the Indigenous wisdom of the land, and returning to some of the old lifeways. We want to be a model of Indigenous stewardship in our area. We also have a food sovereignty garden; we grow our own food and share with our queer and Native community. And we have cabins to host artist's residencies and events.

JONAS Do you host people regularly? How do they find you?

LYCAN We rely on our community, and on the example and advice of a queer group called the Radical Faeries, which has a sanctuary in southern Oregon, the Wolf Creek Radical Faerie Sanctuary. They've been doing this kind of project for fifty years and have helped us navigate it; people know about us that way. Recently, friends asked us to host someone escaping domestic violence with her two young children, and we let them stay here until she could find permanent housing. We've also hosted queers from the Bay Area when there were bad fires a couple years ago. Sometimes white people have asked us to visit—that is, if it is okay. And of course it is. It is part of our culture, as Indigenous leaders, to share.

FOX We are inclusive. That said, we are also holding space for Native people, Black People, and people of color offering them a safe space to transition into a more rural, land-based form of living in a part of the country where most of the land—especially farmland—is owned by Caucasian people. We are trying to counter the historical reality in which white people own land worked by Black, brown, and Native people, and to create a space where Native people can have their land back. Native people have the wisdom that the land needs to heal and repair itself. BIPOC people deserve to live on the land, to tend it, to connect with nature. That is our goal. But if someone is in need, we do our best to help them.

NICO How has NativeWomanshare navigated boundaries around substance abuse?

FOX I have personal experience with alcoholism; it has torn up my family. In many ways, alcoholism is a consequence of our displacement from the land and from our original mother, the Earth. That grief affects me and our community. We have talked about, but haven't completely agreed upon, making our communal places sober spaces. And we have learned that boundaries are necessary to create a safe, healing space for marginalized communities. That also means asking potential residents about their mental health and about potential substance abuse. There are other questions, too, in terms of capacity—whether they have a car, a job, physical ability. We want to include differently-abled people, but the reality is that we live on a steep mountain—we can't change that. But we are still in the early phases of this project. We have more to do to make the space welcoming for a diverse range of people.

LYCAN As I think about it, everyone, even in the LGBTQ+ community, is born straight. That's how your parents think about you. We grow up in straight society and learn to hide and suppress our queerness. When you have your first same-sex experience, it's usually at a house party or a gay bar and involves being armed with liquid courage—that is, a bit drunk. The serotonin rush gets associated with being drunk, and the idea that you need to be high to be who you really are. But I don't think we need that. Queers need a place where we can be sober and experience touch and love. That's why I'm opposed to drugs in the LGBTQ+ community. I want to set an example that you can have a clean, healthy, loving relationship, and that the courage to be yourself doesn't have to be found from another source or substance.

NICO So much of queer culture is a party scene. But I wonder about passing on that culture to our descendants. Drugs and alcohol can play a role in maintaining our oppression.

FOX Many queer people are traumatized from an early age. We need so much healing, not only for ourselves, but for seven generations to come.

NICO You mentioned your letter to Carol Newhouse and Billie Miracle asking if they would consider you as stewards. Now that you have begun working on your plans, have you gone in any different directions than the founders of WomanShare might have anticipated?

LYCAN We honor their legacy in the rematriation of the land...

FOX ...and the queerness of the land.

LYCAN It has been a beautiful dance with our elders. And it has involved a lot of bridge-building, because the gender politics of 1974 are not the same as those of 2022. I am a masculine-presenting, Two-Spirit person, but there was a time when I could have been arrested for my appearance. We honor our elders for the path they paved for us, and appreciate that they understand our need, as Indigenous women, to rematriate the land in our own way. WomanShare had a radical vision, and it was revolutionary for their time. But this is the new revolution, where brown and Indigenous women can stand up without fear. I think the vision has not changed but evolved. It is radical for white queers to say, "I had my time on the land; I built something there. And now I am passing it on to the original people."

FOX Jonas and Nico, you are involved in a communal living project in Appalachian Ohio called Currents. Does Currents have a physical land—a place?

JONAS I want to be careful in answering that question, because I can't speak for Currents as a whole. The organization has existed since 1981 and was formed from a collective that intended to deal with environmental issues in the region. There were two groups within the original collective. One wanted to live on the land as homesteaders; the other wanted Currents to be a respite—not necessarily a retreat—for fellow activists. It was not defined as a queer project. Four of the original eight members still live on the land, and a handful of people have moved in, none of whom have been there for more than three or four years. And it has begun to reinvent itself, as have many collectives in this area.

LYCAN Currents wasn't originally queer-focused?

JONAS No, but that is where the energy is moving. The founders were not queer-focused but shared our idea of not participating in capitalism. I am curious if, in your discussions with the founders of WomanShare, it took a while to find a shared language?

FOX The short answer is no. These women lived through the Civil Rights Movement and were aware of the need for racial justice. They wanted women of color to live here, as part of the community, for a long time. But there have been many recent changes in the discussions around racial justice and we have done a lot of learning together.

LYCAN There are around forty back-to-the-land projects in southern Oregon, and a lot of them are queer. When the question of racial justice came up, some members of the community say, "So are we not allowed to go back to the land because it should be reserved for Brown and Indigenous people?" People worried we were locking them out of a place they'd come in their youth. We had to clear up that misconception.

FOX Mostly, we feel supported and...

LYCAN ...loved.

FOX We feel successful for that reason. We can't do this project without the support of WomanShare or other partners in the area. There have been challenges, too. We are a minority within the greater land-project scene: the only Indigenous sovereignty project in the area.

LYCAN I'm thankful for what Carol and Billie did; we wouldn't be talking to you if not for them.

NICO I also feel grateful for what our elders have done. My family is from Puerto Rico, with a sliver of Taíno. As someone from a displaced family, I would not otherwise have had the opportunity to live on this land. And Currents is immense—more land than I would have been able to access as an individual. And while I have never before put myself in a space with so many straight cis dudes before, here we are. We find common ground and common values, and while that can be a challenge, it also feels like the only way forward.

LYCAN You'll survive, Nico. I'm a blue-collar laborer; I've been a construction foreman. And white cis men are all I ever had to work with. You're going to learn to navigate a different world.

JONAS I moved to Currents out of necessity. After considering the place for a while, I decided that I would "date" this community. I think we're still dating; we're not engaged yet. Everyone, including me, has grown since I became involved. But it is different being a queer down here. I come from Columbus, Ohio, where queers are everywhere.

LYCAN You're doing this for others, not just for yourself. The land misses queer people. Running back to the city, to the whole queer rainbow, can be tempting. But the land needs us.

JONAS That's what I keep telling myself, but it can be really hard. Sometimes I question what I'm doing here. Fox and Lycan, have either of you ever ended relationships with land projects?

FOX When I first came to southern Oregon, I was with my two best friends. We had a vision for a queer, magical, witchy land project, with circuses in the barn and an open-door policy for any queer to drop by any time. That was great for two months, but I remember finding myself responsible for an internet bill that was getting higher every month and being the only one who cleaned up after herself. I naturally outgrew it; I was ready for a new phase of life, learning about my needs and boundaries. That meant living alone, which I'd never done before.

LYCAN If you're going to live communally, you can have some autonomy, but you can't be completely autonomous. As humans, we used to live in tribes and clans and villages where we were much closer to each other. But then we built these monster cities and now we don't know how to live with each other anymore. When you live in a community, the community needs are also your needs. That's a lot to navigate, but it is why communal space is communal.

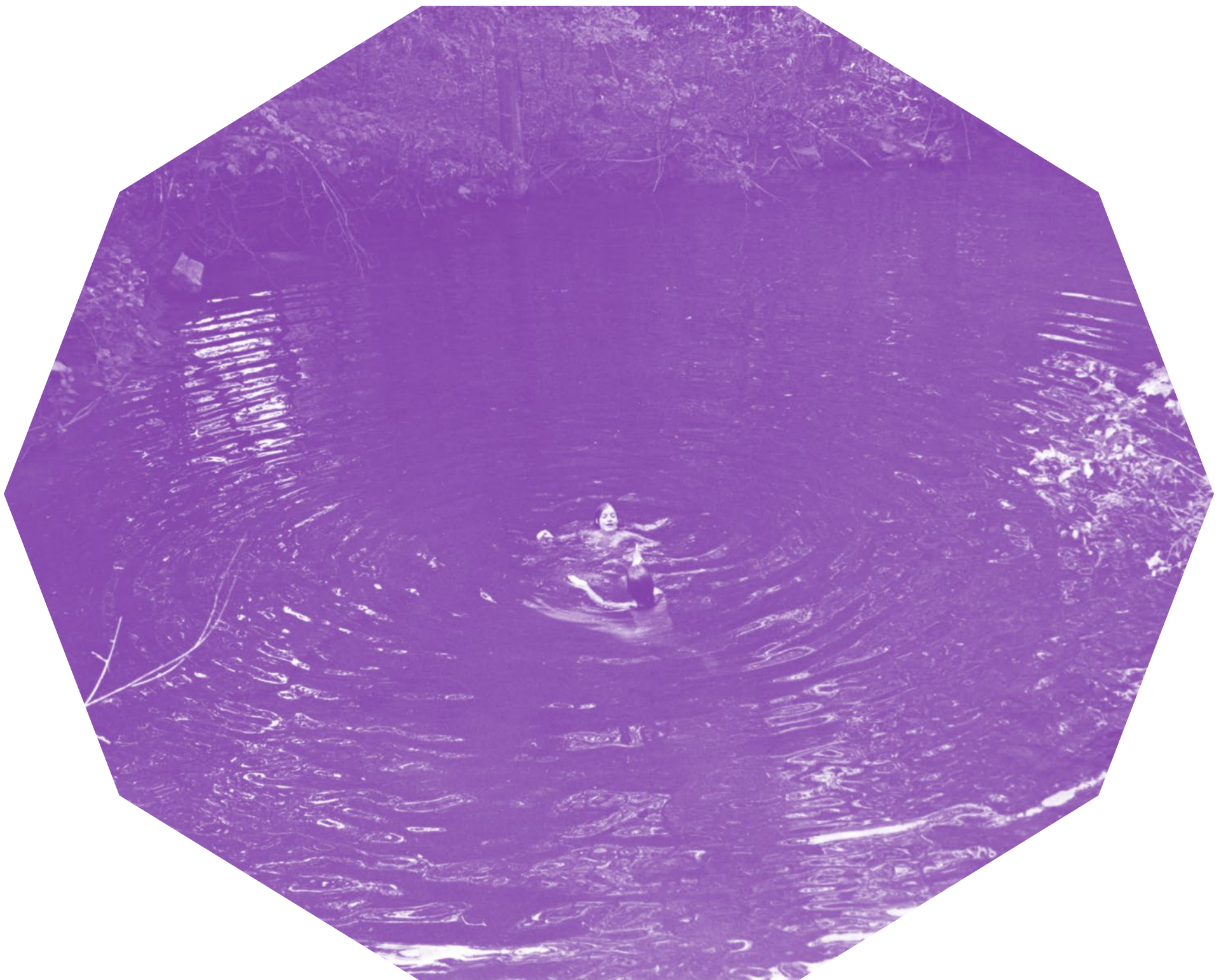
JONAS I spent my thirties trying to figure it out on my own. Now I am learning that, as queers, we are going to need each other in the end. Now I embrace it.

LYCAN You're doing such important work. One day, people will ask each other, "Did you ever meet our elders Nico and Jonas?" Think about it in that way as you continue to navigate your dating process with Currents. You're paving the way for future generations.

NICO Before Jonas and I came to Currents, trans kids were living on the land. That was inspiring and strengthening for us. Just as much, perhaps, as we will be for country queers of the future.

LYCAN Maybe we should have another meeting—a series where queers get together to talk about living on the land. There's the name of the series: Country Queers!

JONAS Country queers, coast to coast.



Acknowledgments

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

"We are on the traditional lands of many Indigenous cultures. Most recently, home of the People of the Eastern Woodlands, who migrated into the Ohio Valley after European Contact: The Shawnee, Wyandotte, Delaware, Miami, Ottawa, Peoria, Potawatomi, Seneca-Cayuga, Chippewa, among others; And the Ancients, known by their monuments: the people of the Adena, Hopewell, and Fort Ancient cultures." Marti Chaatsmith (Comanche Nation citizen, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma descendant and Ohio State professor), November 1, 2018. <https://earthworks.osu.edu/land>

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October 20, 2022

Fotofocus Columbus Community
Spotlight Day, Wex galleries
1:00 PM Curator's tour of *Your Monsters, Our Idols*
2:00 PM Film/Video Studio Tour
3:00 PM Curators' tour of *Sharing Circles: Carol Newhouse and the WomanShare Collective*

November 5, 2022

Reassembly
Wex galleries,
11:00 AM–2:00 PM

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COLOPHON

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wexner center for the arts AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

We are all white women.
None of us have any children.
None of us have had an abortion.
None of us have been raped.
Sue grew up in California.
Carol grew up on Long Island.
Billie grew up in Wisconsin.
Dian grew up in Illinois.
Nelly grew up in New Jersey.
Carol, Nelly, and Dian have middle class backgrounds
Sue has a lower middle class background
Billie is working class

Billie
Capricorn
Capricorn
Taurus

Carol
Sagittarius
Virgo
Cancer

SUN SIGNS:

Rising:
Moon:

Dian
Capricorn
Sagittarius
Gemini

Sue
Pisces
Cancer
Cancer

Nelly
Scorpio
Aquarius
Taurus

Carol and Billie have been married.
Dian and Nelly had long-term relationships with men.
Sue never related sexually with a man.
None of us smoke cigarettes.
Carol, Billie and Dian each have a cat.
Nelly has a dog.
Carol and Billie each have an M.A., Sue and Dian each have a B.A.,
Nelly has three years of college.

