The new tribe: Critical perspectives and practices in Aboriginal contemporary art

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Citation for published version (APA):
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The New Tribe

Introduction
Any definition of aboriginal contemporary art is bound to be controversial because the issue is not so much who is included, as who is excluded. As I pointed out in the last chapter, the American artist Jimmie Durham was marginalized from the discursive frame of aboriginal art, because he was unable to prove his membership with a federally recognized tribe. His exclusion was based on legal identity. On the other hand, there are situations when identity remains unproblematic. The artists of Haida Gwaii are a group whose identity is defined within a band/tribal community. Robert Davidson, for example, once told me that neither he nor any artist from his community of Haida Gwaii ever had problems with identity; “rather,” he says, “it’s the city Indians.” Artists like Davidson regard their identity as unproblematic because they are geographically closer to communities of which they are so much a part. Once outside their spaces, however, they are likely to become strangers where they either have to adjust, search for others who share similar perspectives, or return home.

Furthermore, aboriginal contemporary art is, in one way, a fiction, because it is socially constructed; on the other hand, it exists as part of a long line of Western aesthetic discourses, like “primitive art,” “non-Western art,” “ethnic art,” “tribal art,” and “craft.” These terms name art made by people outside Western society as such. Colin Rhodes contends it is “the distorting lens of Western constructions” (8) which was generated in the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “The primitive,” he points out, “was regarded, on the whole, as always more instinctive, less bound by artistic convention and history, and as somehow closer to fundamental aspects of human existence” (9). We are more apt to find aboriginal contemporary artists disagreeing with this as a definition for their practice; instead, they would position their work in the present tense as “contemporary,” not as an anachronistic or essentialist phenomenon of a past that belonged to their ancestors. For example, there are many conceptual and discursive differences that distinguish the aboriginal contemporary artists’ works from the traditional, historical works we see most often in (ethnographic) museums. The earlier artists produced works that were more closely related to, and constituted within, band/tribal cultures and language; today’s artists create works for the most part, for any and all publics. In the case of
tribal art, the dialogue was internal; in aboriginal contemporary art, the dialogue moves outward, with related dialogues that are aesthetic, political, moral, and didactic. The productions of meanings are fairly distinct. I contend that the Western definition of non-Westerners’ art is highly questionable; yet, without these definitions, post-World War II aboriginal art would not have the same urgency to position itself.

An examination of the artistic practices in pre-modern or pre-reservation times is, however, beyond the scope of this study; instead, I will focus on a new type of artist, the aboriginal contemporary artist whose practices, while unconventional, non-traditional, and sometimes controversial, continue to be, largely, strongly committed to expressing their aboriginal identity. These new artists tend to fall into the interstices of well-defined spaces. They are more likely to problematize their agency in relation to community. As I will show, their works can be analyzed, interpreted, and theorized, much differently than historic tribally-specific works. Edward Poitras once called this loose and heterogeneous group the “new tribe.”

I will begin by positioning the artist discursively in terms of identity. Then follows a brief examination of a socio-political and culturally affirming era post-World War II. I conclude with a profile of the aboriginal contemporary art scene, to give the reader a wide view of this new tribe’s operations.

**Objectifying Identity**

Identity encompasses an individual’s characteristics, his or her outward and conscious sense of self. The majority of people recognize and judge us from these characteristics, which may be based on our name, culture, society, sex, family, work, religion, politics, land, home, personal interests, and the experiences we have had. Where we come from is an essential component of our identity. Another mainstay of identity is a person’s name. Our names can imply various things: ethnicity, family history and popular taste. One’s name can be valuable, according an individual both reputation and fame. Names can identify a group entity as one being. For many, the family provides another source of identity: family ties, reunions and large family gatherings reinforce roots and a sense of belonging, making people feel they are special; one tends to feel a unique bond with people where a sense of belonging is fostered, and with whom one can be oneself. Gatherings bring back memories; they influence who we are in the community and make us aware of where we come from,
and what we are all about. Identity is something one must have in order to be an individual. It gives one a sense of self-esteem.

As the framework of identity continues to be politically debated, a critical concept that deserves attention is the notion of the “subject.” The term subject differs both semantically and ideologically from the more familiar term, “individual.” The subject is now seen to encompass the unconscious and subconscious dimensions of the “self;” furthermore, “subjectivity” implies contradictions, process, and change. The term “individual,” which dates from Renaissance rationalism, views “man” (sic) more on a conscious level (Descartes: “I think therefore I am”), implying that identity is a conscious sense of self. Psychoanalytic research, since Freud and extending through Lacan up to today’s psychoanalytical critics, prepares us to understand that it is through language that the subject is “constituted,” that language always precedes us and therefore endows us with our subjectivity. We are born into language (“signifying systems”). Through our lives we take on various roles or cultural positions, like “artist,” “father,” and so on. In this context, the art world can be seen as the “structuring agency” that produces its subjects. Moreover, subjectivity is relational, where both the “speaking subject” (“I”), and “subject of speech” (“You”), exist in a play of difference. For Louis Althusser, “ideologies interpellate individuals as subjects;” that is, they call us into being and inculcate in us a sense of belonging. He believes that ideology is the medium by which individuals are addressed and thus constituted as subjects. Althusser argues that institutions—religion, education, the family, the law, political parties, communication, and culture—are not neutral but ideologically subject-forming and produce normative conditions for subjecthood.

In the previous chapter, I described how state operations instituted ways to assimilate aboriginal people into a new universal Canadian society, enacting laws that segregated children from their families, disenfranchised women who married non-Status Indians, and outlawed spiritual practices and cultural expressions. In a total effort to create new subjects, the governments worked to erase traditional frameworks, perspectives and ideologies, in favour of European-derived ones. Consequently, aboriginal people all across the Americas adopted and adapted to the frameworks of the English, French, and Spanish cultures, and have since endeavoured to work within these cultures’ imposed languages. They have employed the language of the colonizer for their own benefit. This is the strategy by which Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) see post-colonial writers defining themselves, that: “[of] seizing the language
of the centre ("appropriate") and re-placing ("reconstituting") it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (38). Thus, this new consciousness of appropriation gives power to many of those—women, gays and lesbians, and various ethnicities—who have so long accepted their subject position as "other" in the context of the dominant ideology of modernity.

Furthermore, if one fails to define one's subject position, there is a risk that one's ethnic identity will be defined and objectified by someone else. "Different people in different societies struggle to define the boundaries of human nature, if only to be able to exclude some people or practices: 'savages,' 'infidels,' 'the insane,' 'the criminal,' 'the sexually deviant,' 'women,' 'Blacks,' etc., have all been excluded, both semantically and functionally, at different times and places" (Grossberg 1992:117). Native American anthropologist Wendy Rose has argued that the dominant framework of Western knowledge bases its canons on the "universal;" seeing themselves as "citizens of the world," Westerners consequently view all "others" as parochial and provincial. This is an ideology of unequal power relations, where the West is dominant and the "other" subordinated and objectified as "minority." Kobena Mercer suggests that "ethnicity" is an "ideological othering" of the dominant culture which defines its minority citizens. "Minority," he argues "[are seen as] minor, a subject who is in-fans, without a voice [...] who is spoken-for by the state [...]" (429). As Rose points out, for example, publishers are more willing to publish works by what she calls "whiteshamans"—like Grey Owl (a.k.a. Archie Belaney) or Ernest Thompson Seton—than genuine literature by Native Americans. The publishers' claim is that the "other" is unable to represent him or herself. As a result, the agents of popular taste see Western academic theories of the "other," and their subsequent (re)interpretations, as a ripe cultural territory.

As identity becomes increasingly objectified and globalized, it becomes paramount that we recognize the diversity and complexity that exist within all cultures. We have only to look within Canada to find fifty-three distinct aboriginal languages. These diversities were little understood, often making it easier for the mainstream to universalize them as "other." Defining the "other" in universal terms results in a homogenization of the identities of local cultures. Thus we see new forms of resistance where the local cultures see themselves in oppositional terms, such as "indigenization," "aboriginality," and "First Peoples," to name a few. Moreover, local groups seize on, subvert and transform to suit their own needs, global notions of modernity, modernization, post-modernism,
capitalism, imperialism and global media systems, making them part of their new cultural identity. Michel de Certeau has called this process “making do” and “making over.” These definitions of modernity can be limiting, despite the fact that non-Western peoples have begun redefining for themselves a new kind of modernity, which transcends the normal notions of newness, change, and progress. But whereas “making do” denotes limitations, “making over” has ideological connotations.

Identity politics in the cultural field is not just the struggle to define oneself against the dominant discursive practices of a contemporary art discourse; it aims at the subversion of the discourse that has steadfastly denied the articulation of the “other’s” cultural identity. The mainstream has used the politics of knowledge, for example, to prevent non-Western artists from transgressing the field by introducing culturally specific issues. The gate-keepers—who do not distinguish art from ideology, theory from practice—argue that to do so would compromise the (absolute) aesthetic ideals of art. Victor Burgin calls this discursive practice, the establishment of an authoritative canon: “The canon is the discourse made flesh; the discourse is the spirit of the canon. To refuse the discourse, the words of communion with the canon, in speaking of art or in making it, is to court the benign violence of institutional excommunication” (159). The discursive practices of institutions, and the power of “excommunication,” become, in Burgin’s view, part and parcel of the struggle: those positioned outside the centre want change, while those on the inside prefer the status quo. This is not always the case, however. There are those on the inside who are part of the radical struggle for change. Burgin’s notion of “refusing the discourse” refers to an oppositional practice that seeks radically different views. To present any view of relation, like the “tributary to the mainstream,” involves a power relation. Where radical views, or actions, are grounds for “benign excommunication,” the radical nature for change can become a spark that can contest or “re-fuse” the discourse. In other words, old discourses can become infused with new ideas, similar to Bourdieu’s notion of “space for position takings” (see Chapter 4). The cultural field is constantly negotiated, making it a “site of struggle.” The “site of confluence”—the space of non-Western history (tributary) and mainstream, for example—is conflictive, because it forces a re-examining of the spatial relations of dominant/mainstream and oppositional discourses, where the mainstream continues to speak from a position of power. The mainstream is still involved in speaking about “art” in a universal sense, but does this not mean it cannot change its complexion as other discourses become inscribed within and against the dominant discourse?
Saigon-born American film-maker/author, Trinh Minh-ha, continues to see many non-Western artists routinely subjected to marginalization. As the centre questions identity and gives it a status, the displaced “other” must necessarily objectify his or her own identity and culture. Nonetheless, after examining their “dis-placement” from these centres, many artists have tactically abrogated this view and instead now see the “centre” itself as marginal (327). Trinh Minh-ha’s dictum—there are margins in the centre and centres in the margins (331)—has allowed for the possibility of a new practice. Feminism, she says, is a marginalized practice, yet feminists are perceived by other women as the centre. These relations of power do take place on both sides of the border. As well, Indian reserves, once thought of as prisons, are now seen as cultural centres for most aboriginal peoples.

Negotiating the centre/margin/centre also brings into play the strategies of border crossing. Thus, the new cultural “other” as border crosser must understand both sides as a means of survival. Yet the subject of crossing boundaries has implications for identity, both within and beyond the boundaries. Trinh Minh-ha makes us aware that power relations exist everywhere, particularly in terms of who and where the definers are: Who creates the binarisms, for example, such as centre versus periphery (marginality)? Why are we forced to change, to reverse our values? She talks of the pain of her first departure from home and the subsequent frustration of “re-departing.” The second time, the departure was with the self-conscious awareness that her identity was now objectified, and the consequence of its objectification was political. Being a border crosser has enabled her to strategize her identity through the embrace of many other identities (subjectivities). We are always changing. This is empowerment. We are all border crossers, or perhaps we have the potential, if only we can accept new experiences, new ideas, new languages. Border crossing is necessary for survival. Finally, Trinh-Minh-ha asks: How can dominators dominate in these changing times? Many branches of Western epistemology invite the “other” across the border, but when that happens, the meeting (encounter) is unpredictable, and in its unpredictability misunderstandings do occur. The “other” may be emplaced, appropriated, rejected, pushed to the margins, physically and intellectually. That, is the struggle.

Today, identity politics allows individuals to choose their identities as members of one or more groups. Kobena Mercer says these political points of departure, “[are] culturally and politically constructed through political antagonism and cultural struggle” (427). In the next section
I will show how aboriginal artists, both individuals and groups, have entered the mainstream art world, and become knowledgeable about its spatial politics and discursive practices. They have had to learn how to play its games. They had to recognize, for instance, what or who is in or out; and understand the art world’s selective practices, such as the market which routinely separates “high” from “low” art. As well, they had to know how certain standards set by the “high” effectively segregate various arts communities.

A Brief History of the Politics in Aboriginal Contemporary Art

It would not be far-fetched to say that the Native political leadership greatly influenced the thinking and actions of aboriginal contemporary artists who formed cohesive groups to address common issues aimed at negotiating space within the art world. Aboriginal politicians, for their part, understood the value of using cultural signifiers to give their purposes an identity, so why wouldn’t artists similarly see the value of political action? And, the reverse is true as art making is a systemic tool for interpellation.

Several generations of people who suffered from the paralyzing effects of the Indian Act must have felt that change was inevitable, and that it would be a new, younger generation who would bring about a “cultural revolution.” Following World War II, Native organizations increasingly drew attention to cultural practices through efforts to encourage positive self-awareness; yet aboriginal people continued to exist on the margins of mainstream society. Depending on the perspective, isolation was both a scourge and a godsend. Banishment onto reserves was disastrous for the continuity of a traditional way of life, and any change and development were arduous; yet ironically, segregation actually helped maintain cultural traditions like language and some spiritual practices. Meanwhile, the traditional arts waned, and over the first half of the twentieth century, shifted from production meeting band/tribal needs into a growing external commodity.

Change began slowly. In 1950, the Royal Commission on the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences tabled a report on the state of national culture. Sixteen briefs and presentations were submitted to the Commission on the state of Native art and craft. However, the report made no major recommendations on the subject, and the Commission was content to shift the responsibility elsewhere in the government. The Commission barely examined the situation of aboriginal
cultures as a whole, because they were viewed more as an economic than an aesthetic concern. Aboriginal artists were not yet part of this picture, since they were still thought of as tribal artists, rather than the mainstream notion of the individual artist. (There were a few exceptions, such as the Native American artists Maria Martinez and Nampeyo in the American Southwest.) It was, however, during this period that the federal government was considering extending religious and cultural freedom to aboriginal peoples by revising the Indian Act.⁶

Despite the lack of support from the federal government and the art world, other institutions did step in to encourage positive change. Two British Columbia institutions, for example, took up the challenge. In 1949-50, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (MOA) commissioned two Kwakwaka’wakw carvers Mungo Martin⁷ (ca. 1881-1962) and Ellen Neel (1916-1966), to restore a number of “totem” poles at the Museum. This totem pole project heralded the beginning of active museum involvement in the promotion of Northwest Coast (NWC) art by practising artists, and not just the acquisition of historic art. Martin worked at MOA until 1951.⁹ A long-renowned master carver, he spent the next ten years as carver-in-residence at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (BCPM, now the Royal British Columbia Museum). This responsibility entitled him to teach traditional carving techniques to several generations of Kwakwaka’wakw carvers, notably Henry Hunt (his son-in-law), Tony Hunt (his grandson), and Douglas Cranmer (his step-grandson). In 1957 MOA commissioned two young artists, Haida Bill Reid and Kwakwaka’wakw Douglas Cranmer, to carve six poles and a memorial figure for the institution. Reid worked at the Museum for three and half years and eventually became one of Canada’s best-known aboriginal artists; while Cranmer eventually moved over to and began working with the British Columbia Provincial Museum, in Victoria.¹⁰

Clear across the country, rave reviews had greeted a young Ojibwa artist in his first commercial exhibition. His name was Norval Morrisseau and the show at the Pollock Gallery, a commercial gallery in Toronto, in 1962, was a decisive event that changed the way people were to look at aboriginal art and artists for years to come. Ruth Phillips has argued that Morrisseau’s non-aboriginal audiences (conditioned by European notions of “primitivism,” and witnessing Native art appropriated by Canadian nationalism) saw in him fresh “pagan” qualities (1993:244). He was seriously censured by his tribal elders, however, for representing and commodifying sacred images.¹¹ In reaction to the sad realities of
aboriginal life, Morrisseau's controversial cultural strategy—breaking with tradition to salvage Ojibwa culture—constructed a vision for the future, and for himself, artistically. Morrisseau was motivated by his despair in seeing the younger generation losing its ties with traditional Ojibwa culture. He saw the elders dying, young children being removed from the reserves to be educated in white schools. Morrisseau became the conduit for cultural transfer, positioning himself as a new communicator or "image-maker." In Mungo Martin's case, the tradition for cultural transfer was guaranteed because he had learned from his elder, Willie Seaweed; in Morrisseau's case we see a kind of post-reservation act, where tradition is transformed into a new strategy. Both strategies maintain a self-conscious link with the past, and intentionally oppose repeated efforts by governments and other state-sanctioned institutions to sever Native people from their roots and traditions. Many artists have followed Morrisseau's lead.

In the 1960s, aboriginal artists such as Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Tom Hill, Noel Wuttunee, Gerald Tailfeathers, Carl Ray, and Jackson Beardy, played important roles in spearheading the Native cultural revolution. Their emergence was buoyed by their convictions about personal identity, and by their dexterity in adapting to both the traditional and modern world.

The most significant cultural event of the late 1960s for many Native peoples was Expo 67, hosted in Montreal, which celebrated the centennial year of Canadian Confederation. For the first time, Indian artists and politicians came together from across Canada to assert their Native identity. The Indians of Canada Pavilion was their venue. It was a vital moment for Canada, because in the eyes of the world, it had to be seen as a successful and important developed country, and a nation which acknowledged Indians as equals and distinct members of society. Native artists such as Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray, Alex Janvier, Tony Hunt, George Clutesi, Noel Wuttunee, and Tom Hill received commissions to paint murals and panels on the façade of the Pavilion. They responded with enthusiasm and confidence, and their artistic expression came to be seen as modern and sophisticated, speaking out to an international community about who they were, where they came from, and where they were going. After Expo 67 closed, Native people continued to run the Indians of Canada Pavilion, with exhibits on art and culture, some of which were highly critical of the federal government, who was its sponsor.

Back on the west coast, the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) also celebrated the centennial by presenting Arts of the Raven, an exhibition
many regarded as the turning point in the appreciation of Northwest Coast art. The exhibition presented these works as fine art, not as ethnographic or curio art. The VAG enlisted Bill Reid to help organize the exhibition, which proved to be a decisive catalyst for artistic activity on the Northwest Coast. Peter Macnair (1980) writes that in the three years following Arts of the Raven, several dozen young Native artists would gain ascendency in the art world (85). Many of them gathered in northern British Columbia, near Hazelton, at an artists’ training program called the Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art. The place was called 'Ksan. It had opened in the mid-1950s, as a product of local initiative and federal funding, and its objective was to revive interest in Nisga’a (Tsimshian) art and culture, and train graduates for the future. A section of the reconstructed village of 'Ksan was opened for tourists in 1970, complete with a craft museum and an interpretation and cultural centre.16 One artist who taught at 'Ksan was Robert Davidson (Haida). In the summer of 1969, Davidson carved and raised a new pole, in his village of Masset, the first to go up on the Queen Charlotte Islands tribal grounds since 1884. The ceremonial raising of the pole heralded the rebirth of Haida culture as a whole. Macnair noted that, “Like many of his peers, Davidson has sought to contribute monumental works to his village to remind people that aspects of the ancient culture still live.”17 Several years later, Davidson was to construct a building in honour of his great-grandfather Charles Edenshaw.

Northwest Coast artists responded to this rebirth. Many of them searched deep within themselves and their communities for the elusive artistic tradition, because they needed a sculptural language to manifest itself. Martine Reid describes this new art as “a signifier in search of meaning […] Clearly, though, it is an art in gestation, soon to emerge in a different context, with new cultural significance. The process is not a decline into non-authenticity or an ascent into rediscovery, but a transformation and another metamorphosis in a long history of change” (1993:76).

In 1970, a group of aboriginal artists living in Winnipeg, some of whom had met at Expo 67, realized that once the interest generated by the Indians of Canada Pavilion abated, questions would remain about their future as artists. They formed a group and called themselves the Indian Group of Seven; they were Jackson Beardy, Joseph Sanchez, Carl Ray, Alex Janvier, Eddie Cobiness, Roy Thomas, Daphne Odjig, and later, Norval Morrisseau.18 The Indian Group of Seven lasted until 1976. Three of the seven had their first gallery showing at the Winnipeg
Art Gallery (WAG) in 1972, in an exhibition titled *Treaty Numbers 23, 287, and 1171: Three Indian Painters of the Prairies*, that included Jackson Beardy, Alex Janvier, and Daphne Odjig. Although the exhibition was intended to exhibit the works by these three Native artists in a critical aesthetic context, the exhibition’s title suggested otherwise. For them, the exhibition at the WAG became a political space within which their voices could be heard. Janvier, the more radical thinker of the three, had been signing his work using his treaty number—287 (fig. 24)—for ten years, protesting the impersonal viewpoint of Indian Affairs, which saw aboriginal people solely as treaty numbers. Hence, the name of the exhibition. Unlike 'Ksan, which was interested in reviving artistic and cultural traditions, this group focused on finding new markets for their work; but without institutional backing, they never had the same clout. Odjig opened a print shop and quickly became popular; Beardy continued working but never received great artistic acclaim.

The world was changing, yet for aboriginal Canadians change seemed unhurried. The combined efforts of aboriginal organizations to stop the federal government from abolishing their rights were gradually realizing results, and cultural centres were springing up across the country. In the meantime, a bombshell exploded in the United States.

The occupation at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, by several hundred Native Americans in the late winter of 1973, was a defining moment for aboriginal people across North America. For the first time in modern-day relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples, the international media focused its attention on Native issues. Aboriginal artists in the United States, inspired previously by the revolutionary fervour of the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969, the “Trail of Broken Treaties” and subsequent occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C., in November 1972, used Wounded Knee II in February 1973 as detonation for their art making. Despite this energy, the artistic reaction in Canada to political issues lay dormant.

In the following year, Tom Hill (Seneca) prophetically announced that, “in the future, art will probably manifest the political struggle more, especially as Indians become more vocal in their demands to be treated fairly.” Impatient for change, Hill organized *Indian Art '74* at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, an exhibition many regard as a landmark in the development of aboriginal contemporary arts. He gathered a wide range of individual and tribal expressions, and redefined “Indian art” in economic, cultural, and political terms: economic, because the opportunity for artists to sell their works opened a new market; cultural, in that
artists originating from different cultural groups across the country now had a chance to express themselves as such; and political, by virtue of all the artists coming together as a singular artistic voice; they realized that a space had now opened up for them. The new artist proved to be highly eclectic, borrowing styles from many sources: Native and non-Native, traditional and contemporary. Their intention was to try to incorporate themselves into the mainstream, instead of merely slipping by or getting tossed out. Collectively, they became a new kind of post-reservation artist. Ruth Phillips describes this artist as one who does not replicate “ancient forms known only by traditionalists, but one who has transformed [the visual forms] into new kinds of art in order to explore their meanings in the context of the modern world. This ‘appropriation’ is legitimate for these artists because it is a means of preserving knowledge for future generations and of uniting the self divided between two worlds” (251). As well, it was a way to insert themselves into new discourses that included the art market and collections and thus make the shift from craft to art.

With the federal government’s relinquishment of its assimilation policies in 1951 and the rising tide of political, historical, and cultural consciousness of the 1960s, the 1970s seemed the right time for aboriginal artists to begin organizing themselves. The First National Native Artists Symposium was held in October 1978, on Manitoulin Island, with subsequent gatherings in Regina (1979), Hazelton (1982), Lethbridge (1987), and Halifax (1993). Artists exchanged ideas on identity, traditional and contemporary artistic practices, centre/periphery, Native/non-Native art, art/craft, museum/gallery, and access to government funding. The conferences attracted the curious and the engaged. Government and arts council representatives, curators, anthropologists, sociologists, elders, and commercial gallery owners, helped create a forum for greater articulation regarding issues of post-reservation definitions of art, and of what it means to be an artist and aboriginal. Rather than arriving at clear conclusions, the conferences resulted instead in individual affirmations of identity and conviction, which served to strengthen aboriginal arts in all fields, together with the literary and performing arts.

By the late 1970s-1980s, the international economic downturn that had affected the country, also affected aboriginal artists. Some whose fortunes had risen quickly disappeared almost as fast; others managed to transcend the constraints of recessionary times, by concentrating on experimental work and participating in a growing number of exhibitions.
It was a decade of solidarity which saw newer and younger artists emerge, and the rise of persuasive and articulate voices, stimulating important scholarly writing on Native, women’s and environmental issues, and subsequently strengthening the visual and expressive resolve. In 1982, aboriginal Canadian and American artists gathered together in an exhibition called *New Work by a New Generation* at the Regina’s Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery. It focused on the artist as individualist; yet as the curator Robert Houle, explains:

> Each artist is invariably and intimately involved in recording personal experiences determined by tribal culture. This leaves the artist to create works of art traditionally inspired, but expressed through modern concepts and techniques. To deny the legitimacy of this inspirational source would be like refusing the Renaissance its Greco-Roman heritage; and to treat the validity of this creative process with deliberate reserve is sanctimonious (2).

This statement concerned a theme of self-emancipation from an established tradition—that all Native artists drew their subjects only from myths and legends. Several artists moved beyond this notion and began showing works based on political issues and ideas. Artists like Clifford Maracle, Robert Houle, Carl Beam, and Edward Poitras, built on Janvier’s political interests as expressed in his work, and found new ways of expressing the political moment. Their works were no longer conceived as primarily vehicles for aboriginal cultural expression; they were also making audiences aware of the complex realities of aboriginal life.

**The Aboriginal Contemporary Artist in the Present**

In the 1990s there was a notable shift in aboriginal contemporary artists’ attitudes as they seemed to become looser, and more detached from the quagmire of political issues. They no longer felt disenfranchised; rather, they were comforted in knowing their subjectivity was more complex than previously understood; they realized they were different, as was everyone else. They supported the post-modern position which celebrated plurality and reinforced the observation that Western art was in effect just another “other” in a theatre of “others.” Furthermore, the notion of centre/periphery took on new meaning as aboriginal contemporary artists started to realize that their centres or reference points were their communities, their reserves, their homes. Such realizations underlay
discourses of identity where artists now examine definitions of self as being critical to understanding their quotidian realities.

Hence, appreciative audiences of aboriginal contemporary art may find individual artists more thought-provoking than artists who reflect traditional conventions. Names like Houser, Scholder, Morrisseau, Pudlo Pudlat, Quick-to-see Smith, Ash Poitras, Tasseor, Howe, Davidson or Piqtoukin, resonate within us because they explore the human condition of the present. These artists are making new audiences aware of their personal perspectives.

Aboriginal contemporary art is made up of a vast number of artists living in both Canada and the United States, who participate within the dynamic mainstream art scene. As participants in the global community, they are intensely aware of the current conditions and circumstances that affect us all; in their everyday lives they are often driven to reflect and engage with a directness not always evident in traditional art. Through their works, both individually and collectively, aboriginal artists are effective communicators. James Luna’s The Artifact Piece (1987, fig. 15) at the San Diego Museum of Man, wrestled the stereotype—that aboriginal identities existed only in the past—away from ethnographic museums. In addition, aboriginal communities have recently been benefiting from artists’ projects like Rebecca Belmore’s cross-Canada tour of Ayum-ee-aawach Oomam-mowan: Speaking to their Mother (1991, fig. 33), in which she used a large wooden megaphone designed for people to speak directly to Mother Earth. In 1992, three major art exhibitions Indigena,25 Land Spirit Power26 and Submuloc,27 brought attention to aboriginal issues. Bill Reid’s installation of The Black Canoe (1993) at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., for instance, helped to give Canada a new identity, one that was now inclusive. Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds’ national tour of the 16 Song/Issues of Personal Assessment and Indigenous Renewal (1996) became a collaboration with Australian aboriginal artists. The message of each of these projects is to give voice back to aboriginal people, a strategically powerful tool. These artists help their audiences understand how to move into the larger world with an aboriginal sensibility, across a millennial divide, and into the twenty-first century.

Aboriginal contemporary art, by its very nature, is work being done today, for today, and about today. Artists borrow from everywhere. They look at ancient images, forms, and techniques, with an understanding that what their ancestors had to say continues to have meaning for them, and us all, in the present. None of them wishes us to believe they are located in some mythic past; instead, they understand their realities as energetic
practices of today, which offer them an unparalleled range within which to express themselves. They will, however, continue to tap into the past to try to make sense of this very complex world. These complexities are as true of reservation communities as they are of urban areas, and contemporary aboriginal art reflects this. The recent exhibition *Reservation X* (1998), for example, examined issues of community and identity (see Chapter 7). Artists find themselves driven to social and political lives beyond their artistic identities. In Canada, Art Thompson leads a massive group of former boarding school students into the courts seeking restitution, while Earl Muldoe and Neil Sterritt head the Nisga’a people through history-making land claims negotiations. Meanwhile, in the United States, jeweller and Colorado Senator Ben Night Horse Campbell is accountable for his, and other people, as state representative.

The world of aboriginal art is further complicated by our coexistence with many diverse ethnic and tribal identities, particularly in urban centres. San Francisco’s *Salad Bar*, which included Teresa Harlan and Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, was an art collective whose name metaphorically reflected the mix of equal but differing identities. This pointed to the reality of living in an international community, whose members bring with them new ideas and experiences. Coming in contact with multicultural conditions activates new relationships, which are then reflected in ourselves and in the art.

Artists realize that the traditional spaces within which they produce and exhibit have now gone well beyond the walls of the art gallery or similar institutions, to artist-run centres, community houses, cultural centres, restaurants, private homes, or anywhere outdoors. They continue to exhibit in the craft-market place—such as the Santa Fe Indian Market—in small booths, where vast numbers of people can come; they realize the power these centres have as places of commerce. There continue to be numerous market-type centres and fairs in cities throughout the world, where artists and galleries converge to exhibit and examine recent works. The art world’s most critical audiences, professional and popular, often frequent these sites.

Aboriginal contemporary artists interpret the conditions of their times. Richard Ray Whitman’s series *Street Chiefs* is an example of displaced and landless aboriginal people struggling with urban life, a facet other than the fictional and romantic ones normally accorded Indian people. Jeffrey Thomas’s *Exploring Metropolis*, (see next chapter), examines urban sociality where the mix of tribal identities is both persistent and contradictory; for him, Buffalo, New York contains some of the bleakest spaces of urban life.
Above all, contemporary artists realize that an important reality today is knowing, understanding and accessing new technologies. A prime example of the depth to which artists can go in combining new technologies with aboriginal traditional knowledge is Melanie Printup's Web-site at www.albany.net/~printup/. Similarly, there was Edward Poitras's JAW-REZ Web-site, which once had a home at the Banff Centre for the Arts (in Banff, Alberta). And Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds' In Our Language (1982), a public project on the Spectacolour Lighboard in Times Square, used new communicative strategies in public places. These aboriginal contemporary artists communicate with vast audiences using high-tech media; as such, it is a perfect medium—the choice of a specific technology, for the articulation of a specific idea, grants a very specific expression. In this regard, the computer has become a powerful tool and venue.

In contrast to the generally held stereotype that aboriginal people exist only in the past, and are not part of the modern world, the gulf between this reality and its perception lies, again, within the shifting sense of identity. Maintaining a strong connection with the past can be somewhat strenuous in that, while keeping up with the rest of society, one must struggle to hold true to tradition, which is the source of subjecthood. This is a fundamental concern faced by many aboriginal contemporary artists. Often inspired by visual traditions, they readily express themselves in contemporary media, and yet strive to maintain their aboriginal principles and philosophies. Some artists have maintained their particular responsibilities of carrying familial and tribal identities forward into the future. Generally, however, they find, negotiate, and express their responsibilities in different ways: Nora Naranjo-Morse continues a family tradition of working with clay, whether by creating ceramic sculptures or building her own home; Dempsey Bob carves masks for both the art market and local ceremonial use; Dorothy Grant designs clothing (she calls, "Feastwear") based on family crests which can be worn at important functions or as up-scale everyday clothing.

There is much to celebrate about the quality and diversity of artistic production, but one area of aboriginal contemporary art and art history that needs academic attention is the level of related criticism and artistic discourse. There is a shortage of in-depth critical texts. On the surface it would seem that artists reject scrutiny by critics—yet such critical analysis is an integral part of the discourse. It is true we are more apt to read descriptive rather than critical reviews, and that some critics may hesitate to critique contemporary Indian art for fear of being misinterpreted. As a
result, there have been very few comprehensive critical texts of aboriginal contemporary art written in the last thirty years. Nonetheless, we are now seeing some critical texts, like the most recent St. James Guide to Native North American Artists (1998); critical surveys of American and Canadian contemporary art, edited by Gerhard Hoffmann's Indianische Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert (1985) and Zeitgenössische Kunst der Indianer und Eskimo in Kanada (1988), appear only in German; Lucy Lippard's 1990 book, Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America, is important for its comprehensiveness and timeliness by profiling a number of aboriginal contemporary artists (but few Canadians). Beyond these are a number of very fine monographs on individual and group artists. However, these texts tend to be short on context, perhaps due to time constraints or the relative importance of the artist. Finally, there is Lawrence Abbott’s I Stand at the Center of the Good: Interviews with Contemporary Native American Artists (1994), which contains several interviews with no critical text; sadly, there is only one colour plate per artist.

Conclusion
As late as the 1970s, aboriginal artists were, for the most part, still finding themselves exhibiting in anthropology museums, but they soon grasped that the world was opening up to them, when their audiences, national and international, began increasing. Among them was a small but powerful critical audience of collectors and connoisseurs who appreciated specific aesthetic and artistic viewpoints. They tended to look at how works fit within their collections, acquiring pieces based on quality, and how the works connected to particular themes. The influence of these collectors continues to be great. Members of the general public; that is, non-Natives, account for the largest group purchasing Indian art. This public’s appreciation is not based on an informed understanding; these purchasers are more interested in owning something that is produced by an Indian artist. Nonetheless, there are those artists who are marginalized from such well-defined circles, and who prefer to live and work outside accepted spaces. Where do these aboriginal contemporary artists practice today? What is their relation to their community?

Aboriginal artists, like all aboriginal people, live in highly contestable spaces—spaces that continually collide and mix, spaces they will forever negotiate. The artist, however, sees these spaces—and their negotiation—as stimulation, finding themselves living or practising both in, and between, many communities. Consequently, they use art as a
means of persistence and identity. Though we are often quick to think of polar opposites, like reserve and urban spaces, these artists are nomads between the two. Within and without these traditional centres, they will find other centres for themselves. This has always been their reality. As a game of perception, artists constantly search for a periphery, knowing that being just beyond will bring out the trickster in them, either as a form of inspiration, a radical expression, or practice. Meanwhile, some artists may luxuriate in the knowledge that they are the centre, until, of course, they are displaced by some other artist. Though centres and peripheries are imaginary, constructed, loose, mobile, and ever-changing, they help us understand the nature of artistic practice. To this end, artists perceive the centres of production, or the markets, as being out of their reach in the larger cities. In reaction, some artists have re-examined their practice, seeing it not as production, but as strategy. Consequently, they have become consciously aware of the idea of centre and have influenced how the centre is perceived, shifting our perspective at the same time. They now help us to understand that centres include culture, language, or family, for example. These new centres of reference have come to include the reservation (both urban and rural) and are now a new and renewable source of infinite inspiration.

The new tribe is not so much warrior-like, because that position is not creative; rather, they are mischievously energetic, clever, and self-willed. The new tribe emerges out of tribal and non-tribal spaces departing on a quest like an ancient rite of passage, in search for inspirational adventures and experiences, encountering people who will open new doors, finding places to meet others with like dispositions to share stories and secrets, demanding to be taken seriously, and seeking new places to practise.

Notes
1 Robert Davidson, personal interview, 1998.
2 In the Plains Cree tradition new-born children were given names by an elder known to have powerful supernatural guardians. David Mandelbaum (1979) says that names were often “derived from an incident or a character in one of the shaman’s visions. He asked the spirit guardian from whom the name had come to protect the child. [...] If the child fell ill, its parents might call in a shaman other than the original namer to bestow another name. The former name was not abandoned and the child thenceforward was known by both names. The motive for renaming was not because the first name was unlucky, but that the child might receive additional supernatural aid with another name and namer. Adults could not change their names in this way. A grandfather could give one of his own names to his grandson in order that the boy might
inherit some of its supernatural potency. The old man would let it be known that only the child was to be called by that particular name (140). Nicknames were commonly given, often persisting through the lifetime of the person (141). Great fighters might name a child after one of their exploits in battle (141). A man who had performed a noteworthy deed or had had a remarkable experience in battle might be called by a name commemorative of the event [...]. A name of this kind was not formally bestowed, but was a matter of popular usage (141). Sometimes a child was named for an unusual occurrence (141). An eldest son often inherited his father’s name, especially if the father had been a man of distinction. Again the name was not formally bestowed. The people of the camp simply called the son by his father’s name (142). It was considered impolite to ask a man for his name. [There was a] taboo against mentioning one’s own name relating to the belief that the supernatural guardians from whom the name originated would be offended if the names were pronounced. However, a name that originated from a battle deed or from a particular incident could be freely uttered. It was disrespectful to refer to a dead person by name (142).


4 In Silverman’s (1983) analysis of Freud’s work she says that he, “encourages us to think of the subject as a complex of signifying processes (148) and a “remarkably coherent theory of identification (149); whereas, Lacan consolidates “the theoretical interconnections between subject, signifier, and the cultural order” (150).


6 McMaster (1993). The 1950 Royal Commission’s report gave birth to The Canada Council, whose responsibility was—and still is—to encourage the development of the arts and to support artistic activity in Canada.

7 Mungo Martin, who had learned from master carver Willie Seaweed (ca. 1873-1967), has been called the “slender thread” by members of the U’mista Cultural Society of Alert Bay, B.C., because he was an important link with earlier traditional masters. Both Seaweed and Martin had trained under the traditional apprenticeship system and contributed to the development of the southern Kwakwaka’wakw style, now practised most notably by the Hunt family carvers. Both carved not only model poles for sale to the non-Native public, but for Potlatches as well.

8 The preferred term is simply “poles,” since not all poles refer to family, clan, or personal totems. The word “totem” is from another cultural group altogether, who are the Algonquian speakers. The term refers to “relations”: family, clan, the entire cosmos; e.g., in Crees the word ni-totemuk means “my relations.”

9 Martin died in 1962. He was posthumously honoured by The Canada Council in 1964.

10 Until this day the RBCM continues to work with Kwakwaka’wakw artists while MOA works with Haida artists. This curious fact can be seen in the types of exhibitions each institution holds.


12 See Elizabeth; McLuhan (1984:70). Were Reid, Cranmer, and the Hunts in a similar predicament? The artists on the Northwest Coast come from very different visual traditions, where individual rights to possession of clan symbols exist. Also, Northwest Coast artists did not experience that same long-term interruption or disruption of cultural practices as did other aboriginal people, particularly in the east. The right to express one’s clan symbols publicly and for profit is different from claiming ownership of stories or narratives of a people or drawing on a visual tradition that is seen as the
property of spiritual leaders. In a conversation with George Longfish, in April 1992, he offered an updated interpretation of such a dilemma: "owning cultural information," he says, is, basically, understanding certain information and making one's own choices and decisions.

13 The NIC, through the Centennial Commission, provided sponsorship for Native organizational meetings, Powwows, and other cultural activities beginning in December 1964. The Centennial Indian Advisory Committee Celebrations subcommittee took control of these cultural events by March 1965. Each national pavilion at Expo 67 was represented by a Commissioner General. Andrew Delisle (Kahnawake) was appointed Commissioner General to reflect the independent status of Indian people.

14 Tony Hunt and his father, Henry, were commissioned to carve a pole which still stands at the Expo site on Ile-Notre-Dame.

15 Sherry Brydon (1997).

16 George F. MacDonald (1972).

17 Peter Macnair (1980), 90.


19 Quoted in Hickman (1975), 20.

20 At the Third National Native Artists Symposium in Hazelton, a special lobby group for the artists was created not only to organize future symposia, but to press for changes in the way national cultural agencies and institutions represented contemporary Native art. As a result, the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) was born, its membership consisting mainly of professional artists. Since its inception, it has worked closely with the Indian Art Centre at the Department of Indian Affairs—providing input into the development of the Centre’s programs as well as organizational structure. SCANA provided collaborative support for the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s 1992 exhibition, Indigena: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years.

21 During each session, tensions heated up through passionate discussions that somehow carried over to the next gathering. Each gathering had its own character and atmosphere, giving everyone a chance to be heard, to see the local environment, to see the traditions of the people, and to meet artists, curators, dealers, and others in the field of Native art.

22 Also during the mid-1980s, at a time when aboriginal cultures across Canada became increasingly mobilized, when cultural centres and artists’ co-operatives proved their worth, when media and other forms of Native communications provided news and information about the Native community both locally and to an international audience, major sources of government funding were severed. Indeed, many important Indian newspapers ceased to exist, as well as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s popular weekly radio programme Our Native Land, to name one. There is bitter irony in the fact that these communication strategies, created with government assistance to help overcome the devastating effects of assimilation, now withdrew their critically needed support of aboriginal telecommunications and thus hurt the aboriginal community. The “low-tech” moccasin telegraph, or word-of-mouth, as it were, was now the major means of communication.

23 This project was jointly organized by the Mackenzie and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, during the World Assembly of First Nations in Regina in 1982.
This stereotype was particularly aimed at the hugely influential works done by Norval Morrisseau and the great many artists he influenced, sometimes called the "Woodland School." Houle, himself, once referred to them as the "Woodpecker School."

See the exhibition catalogue *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, in which artists and writers responded to Columbus's Quincentennary in 1992.

See Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*. Held in 1992, celebrating Canada's 125th birthday, this was the first major international exhibition of aboriginal contemporary art held at the National Gallery.

*Submuloc* was a Native American art campaign to "decelebrate" Columbus’s quincentennary through an exhibition of works critiquing aspects of European culture. "Submuloc" spells Columbus backwards.