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

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“Object” and the Museum as Discursive Space

Introduction
In the late nineteenth century, the federal government’s policy of assimilation severely weakened most, if not all, aboriginal cultures through the Indian Act 1874. As we saw in Chapter 2, the Indian Act signified an enforced modernity with the emergence of the “reservation” period. The Act went so far as to forbid pivotal cultural expressions, like the Potlatch. This expression, which was the most significant activity on the West Coast, manifested itself through lavish feasts and gift-giving as a way of insuring privilege and status. The outlawing of other cultural and spiritual practices, like the Plains’ Sun Dance, resulted in many culturally relevant objects losing their value, function, and meaning. Accordingly, in the wake of this systematic discontinuity, massive quantities of distinct tribal objects were no longer useful and many ended up in numerous public and private collections, to be forever seen as “artifacts.” Mieke Bal has referred to artifacts as “deceptive denominators” (1996:204), because she argues, they take on “synecdochical” identities. In other words, these artifacts were a small element standing for a much larger whole. Most importantly, as these objects disappeared from aboriginal communities, the cultural practices and languages of the object disappeared. Sadly, their original purpose did not endure, nor were they ritually “killed.” This killing or death of the object is a theory associated with pre-historic Mimbres pots found in the Southwest. Pots with holes in their bottoms supposedly signified the release of their spirits when their owners had died. Similar practices occurred on the Plains where the deceased were interred with their personal objects to signify the final trip into the next world. But in museum collections, objects acquired new identities as commodity, artifact, specimen, art, heirloom, treasured cultural heritage, or as a sacred emblem. We now witness a profound interest by aboriginal communities in seeing objects, particularly the sacred and sensitive, returned to them. Before this reflexive action was routine, institutions were targeted as “sites of struggle” by a number of aboriginal contemporary artists.

In this chapter, I will examine the “object” and the museum as “discursive space”: 1) the object’s displacement through collecting practices; 2) the object’s discursive identity as artifact; 3) how issues of sanctity are played out and by whom; 4) how aboriginal contemporary artists are
critiquing the objectification of aboriginal identity in museums; and
finally, 5) how objects are now being reconstituted under tribal ownership through acts of repatriation.

I will intersperse these reflections with descriptions of artists’ practices as they intervene in this discursive space. For if the museum is a discursive space so too is the printed page and the following considerations will only bring us closer to understanding this uncertain relation. I will discuss how some artists in the last two decades have called attention to the often contradictory representational practices of museums. Believing their works can raise consciousness—a new generation now strongly articulates this museal discourse.

Rebecca Belmore
In the late 1980s, as artists worked in relative isolation from each other, a pivotal exhibition brought focus and attention to itself by raising profoundly disturbing issues in aboriginal representations. This exhibition was called The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples. \(^3\) Aboriginal contemporary artists like Rebecca Belmore were moved to address its issues theatrically.

Belmore, Ojibway, born in Upsala, Ontario, in 1960, is best known for her performance and installation works. The term “ironic humour” best describes her work. For example, in Artifact #67IB (1988, fig. 14), Belmore presents herself as an artifact framed within a box structure. Several signs surround her: “Artifact #67IB 1988,” “Glenbow Museum presents,” “The Spirit Sings Sponsored by Shell Oil,” and “Share the Sham.” Small prayer-like flags hang on a rope, perhaps as petition to the objects in the exhibition. As a stand-alone piece, Belmore’s performance might not have been successful. This may be the first such work, however, that explicitly critiques a particular museum and is supported by other aboriginal people, as the photograph indicates. Though it does not take too much reading to see the intended target, the evidence of strong support makes the work more powerful. Such is the nature of her work: it requires the participation of others.

The number, “671B,” may concern her Indian status, which, like a museum’s catalogue number, objectifies. She, as object, sits by the wintry road along which the 1988 Olympic flame passed. This performatory act, in part, brought attention to the role played by aboriginal people in the production of the exhibition, not as active participants but as “artifacts.” Aboriginal people, she points out, continue to be treated as artifacts by governments, cultural institutions and multinationals, especially during the production of this project. Shell Oil, the official sponsor for the exhibition, and the government of Alberta, were criticized for not settling land claim disputes with the Lubicon Cree, on whose land Shell was drilling. For its duplicitous role in “sharing the sham,” the Glenbow Museum suffered in its public relations as people began to take notice of the issue. Aboriginal people, for their part, strategically used the Calgary Winter Olympics to call attention to economic, social, and historical injustices. They no longer wanted treatment as passive objects, “dead or alive.” Museums and corporations, they say, can no longer have total control over the aestheticization of their image using aboriginal people as cultural dupes.

Most protests have a strategy: people gather in unity, signs and slogans of censure are printed, rallying cries shouted, while protesters pace endlessly in front of the offending political power (institution). It is theatre. Likewise, Belmore’s performance is theatre, political theatre. Aesthetic considerations are minimized; but the production is highly constructed. All the elements of protest are here. While the institution and corporation wanted to use aboriginal artifacts for the good of their image, they fully expected that the consumer would endow them with
value by attendance. The artist and aboriginal people, on the other hand, harnessed performance art as an effective strategy to create a conscious sense of self and agency.

**Collecting Practices**

This section examines some of the ways tribal objects have left aboriginal communities, and ended up in public and private collections, in the process becoming artifact. As Alan Shestack, former Director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, sums up the collecting perspective of most art or ethnographic museums:

Museum professionals are acquirers; we are inherently greedy collectors. Most of us go into the profession because the desire to accumulate and bring together objects of quality is in our blood. We are personally and professionally devoted to adding to and improving our holdings—that is what makes us tick. And to consciously or intentionally turn down a highly desirable object we can afford to buy on the basis that we suspect that it might have been removed illegally from its country of origin—and also knowing that it will end up in the collection of a rival institution or an unscrupulous private collector is a very hard thing to do. But those museums which do, it seems to me, can and should apply a certain degree of moral pressure on the others (97-98).

Though Shestack ends with some cautionary advice for the contemporary museum, scrupulous collecting practices were not always the case. As will become evident, acquiring tribal objects under conditions of the past were very different from today.

The very first relations between European and Indians were essentially reciprocal: each approached the “other” on equal footing; each wanted something from the “other.” The American scholar, Stephen Greenblatt disagrees with Tzvetan Todorov’s suggestion that Natives “parroted” Europeans in a show of reciprocity; instead, he suggests that aboriginal people mastered European signs that contributed to favourable exchanges. Greenblatt points out that a number of these initial exchanges were remarkably balanced:

We cannot make a universal principle out of this desire to possess a token of otherness, for there were peoples who resisted all contact and showed no interest in economic exchange, but it is sufficiently widespread to warrant a presumption about the behaviour of most human beings. [...] And it is in these early exchanges that we can
Reciprocal desires to possess tokens of “otherness” had distinct motives: Europeans wanted raw materials—gold, furs, fish, for example; whereas, aboriginal peoples wanted new technologies—guns, knives, pots, and so on. Possessing aboriginal products would, no doubt, have been perceived nominally, in much the same way Canadians give Inuit sculptures to foreign dignitaries today. During the early days of contact, Peace and Friendship treaties signified alliances between aboriginal people and Europeans to ensure peaceful conditions. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tremendous numbers of aboriginal peoples died from European diseases, suffering population losses of up to seventy-five percent. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, the shift in power relations and population now favoured Europeans. Thus, in this era, a principal theme was that aboriginal peoples were “vanishing,” not only numerically but culturally as well, because of draconian laws of assimilation.

As disease, warfare, and starvation decimated aboriginal populations, and the federal government instituted the reserve system, cultural expressions and their associated objects became unused, unwanted, and impotent. Efforts to modernize aboriginal people, and to extricate them from their pre-modern identity, were other themes characterizing the vanishing or “doomed” Indian. One senior official pronounced: “Our purpose in educating Indians is to make them forget their Native customs and become useful citizens of the Dominion.”

The government policy of “gradual civilization” meant the demise of traditional practices directed towards civilizing and making aboriginal people useful citizens.

Thus, Brooklyn Museum curator, Diana Fane observes in Objects of Myth and Memory: “mixing grim statistics about the future with nostalgia for the past, the rhetoric of the vanishing Indian was well established by the mid-1800s” (21). The discourse of the vanishing Indian during this time had extended equally into the fields of art and literature. From very early on, Fane notes, collecting aboriginal material culture was “frankly subjective, necessarily fragmentary, and mildly diverting—[it was] an incidental result of warfare, colonization, and adventure on the American frontier” (21). After the Philadelphia Exposition in 1876, museum-sponsored collecting expeditions reversed this position. “It was no longer sufficient for Indian things to surprise or entertain: they had to work in unison to create an authoritative account of Indian cultures before contact. Subsequently, exhibitions became the
main medium for presenting the story of America’s aboriginal race to the public” (21). Similarly, anthropologist/art historian, Sally Price, in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, jokingly adds that collecting was based on the notion that it contributed to human knowledge: “it seems only proper that ‘civilized’ people should control the fate of ‘tribal’ art, enshrining it in their cultural conservatories for the benefit of ‘the world’” (76). In a more serious vein, Foucault in *The Order of Things* reveals that scientific knowledge from the seventeenth century onward paid particular attention to taxonomic “classification,” that is, a practice of “gridding” the natural world in which everything was fitted with the greatest accuracy. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the development of ethnology moved from looking at objects as evolutionary evidence based on visible signs, to objects that synecdochically represented cultures. The rise of museums served the progress of science; characteristically, ethnology museums paid exclusive attention to pre-modern aboriginal cultures; so-called assimilated Indians were not much of a scientific challenge. Collecting began early in contact times, but it was not until the late nineteenth century that ethnographers undertook actual field-work collecting. This practice continues to this day, a practice I see as “one-way,” in that the circumstances and conditions for collecting were fertile, due largely to legislation outlawing aboriginal practices. Because these practices were considered antithetical to civilization, aboriginal people no longer saw any meaningful reason for holding on to their cherished objects. Objects collected from various aboriginal cultures were generally prosaic. Surprisingly, however, many ceremonial objects are part of important collections everywhere, and are the basis for much of the repatriation process today.

No institutions of art specifically collected objects, although there were some exceptions, like the Denver Art Museum. Public taste at the time could not accept the idea of aboriginal people creating art; yet Europeans could easily be stimulated by “primitive” forms, as we will see in the next section. Regardless, it is well known that no aboriginal language has a word for “art.” In Canada, organizations like the Canadian Handicraft Guild at the beginning of this century supported traditional aboriginal artists by preparing exhibitions and undertaking efforts to market their work.6 No doubt, some early collectors must have been sympathetic to aesthetically pleasing objects, because many public and private collections easily betray their biases.

Earlier, we saw Shestack refer to the “unscrupulous private collector” as someone outside our normal conceptions of collecting. In particular,
questionable collecting practices, like “looting,” have proven a threat to Native American sacred sites, particularly in the United States where commercial values of Indian antiquities have risen over the past fifteen years. “Looting is sacrilegious to many Native Americans as well as destructive of the sole source of information about their unwritten past.” This illegal activity is highly problematic for Native Americans who still actively conduct ceremonies in locations where religious shrines become targets for looters. Deborah L. Nichols points out that:

Removing sacred objects is not only a theft of property but, in the eyes of [many Native Americans], it also robs them of their power (33) [...]. Looting is a crime far beyond that of breaking a federal, state, or tribal law: it is an act of desecration that violates deeply held religious beliefs that are essential to the spiritual well-being of Native Americans. Ignorance plays a role in the persistence of looting, as does prejudice, but financial gain is an increasingly important factor (37).

Accordingly, museums have become the repositories of the material culture of the “other”, while simultaneously documenting its own colonial expansionist history. Former Director of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, Michael Ames, points out that museums are products of the establishment, representing the assumptions and definitions of that establishment, just as do most other major institutional complexes in large-scale societies (21). [...]. Large public museum[s] may express and authenticate the established or official values and images of society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternative values (22).

Despite establishment principles, critique can come from anywhere. Take for example an exhibition like _The West as America_ (1991), which challenged the dominant American view of progress. In doing so, the curators drew a great deal of criticism from the public and politicians alike. One does not assail the ideology of one’s own institutions. Objecting to the sanctity of American myths of progress is to invite critical reproach. It is a different matter, however, if one is not part of the dominant group. As I argued in the last chapter, the initiative to force change within the cultural field comes from those who have the least cultural capital. Thus, the concept of challenging institutional authority forms the central discussion of this chapter.
Though the impulse to collect is a core of our being, the politics of collecting perseveres in most institutions today. Historian and cultural critic James Clifford (1988) points out, “Old objects are endowed with a sense of ‘depth’ by their historically minded collectors. Temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty, and knowledge (222). [...] the value of exotic objects was their ability to testify to the concrete reality of an earlier stage of human Culture, a common past confirming Europe’s triumphant present” (228). To the degree that objects change meaning, museum visitors have become attuned to seeing aboriginal peoples in a synchronous “ethnographic present.” Discursively, the idea of the past is a prime motivator that has aboriginal artists destabilizing museal practices. By extension, in this “age of repatriation,” more and more museums restrain their efforts to expand their collections for fear they will be repatriated. Nevertheless, museums still have a responsibility to fulfill their authority and policies to collect. Repatriation should not mean, however, that institutions give up on aboriginal peoples and cultures; instead, collecting can continue taking on new and different forms and strategies where both sides benefit.

James Luna
In southern California, museum-goers came across an intriguing work, centred on the body of the aboriginal artist, that challenged everyone’s ethic of aesthetic. The Artifact Piece (1987, fig. 15a), by the Luiseño artist, James Luna, confounded viewers and thoroughly implicated them. In this work, the artist had to completely defer his subjecthood to the viewer.

Luna was born in Orange, California in 1950, and currently lives on the La Jolla Reservation, Valley Center, California. His spectacular performances, balanced by installation pieces, often find him as the central figure. Like many other artists, his experiences of being aboriginal motivate his work. In particular, the target is a society that gives little regard to aboriginal people. The majority discourse has long spoken of Indians in the past tense, by extension implicating museums. The Indian is sometime perceived as the pernicious “other” who tried to prevent westward expansion, or simply, as the “noble savage.” Whatever the view, Luna’s performances define himself in a play of difference.

The Artifact Piece plays on presence/absence, subject/object, and observer/observed. Jimmie Durham’s (1990) response to this work: “[It] seems genius to me—with that quietly outrageous Indian humor that

has been so valuable to our survival" (172). The humour, of course, catches viewers in a "candid camera" situation before they realize they are the victims of a duplicitous joke.

Luna introduced the work at San Diego's Museum of Man among its permanent exhibitions. British art critic, Jean Fisher, describes it as follows:
The artist [lies] on a bed of sand in a museum case, complete with name tag. Accompanying labels drew attention to scars on his body, documenting injuries received during an episode of "excessive drinking." Two additional cases contained the artist's personal documents and ceremonial items from the Luiseno reservation. These, together with the impression of his body in the sand, constituted the signs of his presence at moments when he was absent from the case [...] There is a diabolic humour in his parody of the "Indian" in the realm of the "undead."[...] If the purpose of the undead Indian of colonialism is to secure the self-identity of the onlooker, the shock of his real presence and the possibility that he may indeed be watching and listening disarms the voyeuristic gaze and denies it its structuring power (48).

Clearly, The Artifact Piece prompted diverse reactions from the observers who stared at the "body-as-artifact," as representation and thus synecdoche. Viewers were attracted to a body because of its reality effect. The occasional movement in the belly belied the "body-as-object," and evidenced...
its identity as living being. The semiotic effect of this piece lies in the viewer’s treatment of it. The museal discourse compelled viewers to treat it as object, relegating it to third-person status. It is conceivable that museum-goers did not know the historical underpinnings of this piece; in some ways, this is the attractive aspect of it, in that it caught viewers completely by surprise, even more so, in this southern California state where the Indian is both fiction (of Hollywood) and artifact (of the museum). Fisher mentions that the labels, which are in effect true and therefore factual, constitute the ironic twist that is part of that outrageous Indian humour. Luna, the artist, is rendered powerless and excluded, until of course, he decides to get up off the table. At that point he renders the viewer suddenly self-conscious as they realize that they are now the spectacle: “This ‘being seen’ is precipitated in the voyeur by what Sartre calls ‘le regard’.” The observer is now on view and becomes “other.” For a moment, the artifact piece is alive, giving the artist/aboriginal person control over his identity and subject position. Andrea Liss writes: “The Artifact Piece is designed to dislodge their (our) sense of mastery over territorial space and to acknowledge the contemporary existence of specific others” (9). This is surely the most daring piece, even more so than Belmore’s, in the way that it disarms the viewers once they realize the body’s true identity. Its force is not unlike female strippers who play with their male observers; there the power relation is always tenuous, the play/tease power relation is inverted. The body as eavesdropper waits for the moment when to disarm the gaze. I recall Luna telling how outraged he felt because of the comments he had overheard during his position as eavesdropper. He could not believe the kinds of ideas (baggage) people continued to hold true about Indians. Sometimes it is worthwhile not knowing what people think. Privacy has to be upheld; otherwise, we live in constant paranoia.

In this respect, Luna’s critique of museal exposition and his exposure (“performance”), suggest little evidence that he changed any attitudes. It may very well be that the public’s identification of Indians as past and savage was clarified a little during this time. Nevertheless, Luna has influenced the discursive space of ethnographic museums, which by their presentations, now must consider their power relations.

Primitivism

The discourse of “Primitivism” is one idea some aboriginal contemporary artists address with a degree of irony. In Primitivism, colonialism is the central idea, as Europeans had access to many cultures around the world,
including Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, through the objects brought back by countless explorers and sailors. Following the Enlightenment and European colonization, the West needed a frame to be able to make sense of its “other.” Europeans took for granted that there were many people within their culture whom they considered to be primitive: peasants, children, and the insane. Thus, the discourse of the primitive came to include expressions like a child’s—intuitive, essential, and innocent. In art, the term Primitivism described as a tendency, is neither a style nor a group of artists; rather, it is about artists’ reactions to the ideas of cultures they thought were primitive. British art historian, Colin Rhodes argues that “Primitivism lies in the artists’ interest in the primitive mind and it is usually marked by attempts to gain access to what are considered to be more fundamental modes of thinking and seeing” (7-8). Primitivism was not a dialogue between Western artists and the “other;” it was more rooted in appropriation than in “affinities” between the tribal and the modern. “The primitive 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). Professor of English Marianna Torgovnick sees Primitivism as a modern and post-modern obsession and cliche. Her study of Primitivism reveals how “specific kinds of ethnographic knowledge give way to the generalized tropes and images of the primitive” (1990:23), and how the two are at odds with each other. Furthermore, Sally Price examines the relationship between the “civilized” viewer and the “primitive” art object. She critiques exhibitions like the 1984 “Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern for their “arrogance,” because they dehumanize the art and artists from non-Western cultures. And, the project that generated the greatest debates around Primitivism was William Rubin’s exhibition “Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century, an example of unreconstructed Primitivism in which he was more interested in Western primitivist articulations than in trying to draw stylistic similarities.10

In recent times, many tribal objects have attained a previously unknown economic status resulting in their synecdochical shift from “ethnographic” to “objet d’art.” These objects of the market economy proliferate in magazines like American Indian Art Magazine and auction catalogues like Sotheby’s. Because art objects often command high values, decontextualized tribal objects have shifted from the ethnographically muted to the individuated art object—this semiotic shift can be indicated as a “sliding signifier.” Aestheticizing aboriginal objects complicates perspectives. American anthropologist, George Stocking Jr.,
reads this as “art by metamorphosis.” Price calls this transformation, a “distillation into a context-free aesthetic essence” (90).

Robert Goldwater believed that ethnographers of the late nineteenth century already appreciated many non-Western objects as art (“art primitif”) long before modern artists like Picasso, Gauguin, Kandinsky, and Klee. At the turn of the century, the prevailing naturalistic aesthetic (the classical aesthetic) shifted dramatically. Consequently, these artists began looking for new ideas elsewhere and found inspiration at their doorstep. Ethnographic museums in Europe, whose recontextualizing approach showed the public the complexities of primitive cultures, inspired many artists to look at certain formal qualities in primitive art, like masses and volumes, which were lacking in much of contemporary European art. With the simultaneous developments in art and literature, many artists visited the Trocadero in Paris (later to become the Musée de l’Homme), to view tribal objects as “universal” masterpieces. Many of the qualities of primitive man, they felt, transcended those of modern man, and these ideas developed into the category of Primitivism. One of these ideas was the synthesis of art and life, pioneered at the turn of the century by democratic idealists like William Morris. It meant simplicity and functionality. Rhodes indicates that artists of the “Blue Rider” group would sometimes would “go native,” by emulating local peasants (30). The idea of Primitivism was a return to the simple and uncorrupted way of life of primitives, whether in rural areas, or in foreign lands like Gauguin. Goldwater described Primitivism as Western man’s belief in an evolutionary process. Seemingly, this origin was “more profound, more important, and more valuable” (251); thus this axiomatic existence was what was most desirable. At the turn of the century in France and Germany, the primitivist movement began among a number of artists who frequented museums like the Trocadero. Some visited local curio shops that regularly marketed African and Oceanic objects.

In museums, the modernist notion of aestheticizing tribal objects was in direct contrast to the reigning contextualist approaches, where priority is given to the object’s formal qualities. The new formalist approach was adopted as a museological technique. Clifford expresses this taxonomic shift: “In the eyes of triumphant modernism some of these artifacts at least could be seen as universal masterpieces. The category of ‘primitive art’ emerged” (228). The arguments about ways of looking at tribal objects in museological contexts run both ways: for example, formalists argue that contextualist approaches say more about the curator and designer; whereas formalists were accused of taking
objects out of context. Michael Ames writes that extremes continue to exist, that these attitudes are passed onto the public who have difficulty reading exhibitions where the boundaries are blurred, i.e., showing art in museums, or showing museums as art (53).

Moreover, and to some extent important for the development and appreciation of aboriginal contemporary art, Primitivism expanded the metaphor of art. It suggested that primitivists create works (referents) intended for viewing as “universal” with well-defined formalist frames of references. Goldwater argues that primitive works are fetishistic with a specificity quite different from primitivists, where content (meaning) is more important and where objects have a subject position as a living entity. Price, on the other hand, contends the primitive artist was essentialized, “[as being] in particularly close touch with the ‘fundamental, basic, and essential drives of life’—drives that Civilized Man shares but ‘ bribies’ under a layer of learned behaviour” (32), a view she says that can be read as a transparent “racist foundation.” De Menil, for example, expounded this kind of essentialist notion: “However great the artist of today or tomorrow, he will never be as innocent as the primitive artist” (quoted in Price, 1962:33).

Goldwater further contends that Primitivism might never have developed had it not been for the colonization of foreign territories, with the resulting importation of objects and development of ethnological museums. Likewise, religious colonization rendered many objects unusable, and therefore open for commodification.

Running concurrently with this development was the major polemic in the Western art world, the “universality of art.” Price reads this universality as Western man’s belief in an essential beginning, or primitive origins that grew into civilization. The subtext here is the assumption of Western man’s benevolence towards others, implying tolerance, kindness, and charity. This paternalistic logic suggests that a unique Western individual is endowed with an enlightened appreciation for cultural diversity. Price, on the other hand, suggests alternatives to breaking the primitivist stereotype that has been ingrained in many Western sensibilities, albeit with a certain amount of trepidation:

It may be, however, that a merger of the ‘art’ and the ‘anthropology’ of non-Western cultural expression, would require little more on our part than a less proprietorial attitude toward the idea of aesthetic sensitivity (123). [...] Change is already underway, as distinguished institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art invite into their galleries selected Primitive
Masterpieces. But their doors have been opened more willingly to the objects themselves than to the aesthetic sensibilities that gave them birth (126).

Fifty years separate the two writers, and their views. Though Goldwater’s assessment is sensitive to “primitive” artists, Price’s transcultural views allows the “primitive” subjectivity as evidenced in the ironically titled book, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Price sees the relationships between the two; whereas, Goldwater sees one only in terms of the other. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian has argued that the idea of the “primitive” is essentially a “temporal concept” (18), which is where Goldwater has situated his argument. Price argues that the asymmetrical/binary, primitive/civilized, is already on unequal footing because of the term “art.” She suggests that the Western “others” do have the capacity to consciously articulate a position from their perspective.

In 1984, the now well-criticized exhibition, *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art*, juxtaposed works of mainstream Western artists alongside those of non-Western artists. Criticized for aestheticizing an extensive number of decontextualized objects, the exhibition’s organizers wanted to show the diversity of Western artists influenced by non-Western (art) objects under the rubric of “affinities.” However, the now famous *Artforum* debate between Thomas McEvilley, William Rubin, and Kirk Varnadoe goes beyond just taking positions. What the debate ultimately did was bring about a greater discursive distance between Primitivism and its “other;” that is, it made evident that forms can be aestheticized, but content is not so easily assimilated. The complexities of the two are in effect mutually exclusive: that appropriating forms remain at a level of Primitivism, and that primitivizing the “other” still cannot draw the two sides closer.

In 1989, for the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Primitivism’s discursive influence brought together Western and non-Western artists with a nostalgic hope of discovering true magicians, at once artists and shamans. The Canadian Ojibway artist Norval Morrisseau participated but did not attend; a docile selection of paintings represented him instead. More than a painter, Morrisseau’s shamanic practice is transcendent; we get visual glimpses in the work but never enough to be fully revealing. The organizers little understood that shamanism is not a public act to be aestheticized. Similar acts of presenting so-called primitive peoples are not new, but this was the first time living “primitive” artists met sophisticated “neo-primitivists” to share in some sort of public exhibitionary Powwow. Though this was a
case of highly intelligent curators desperately wanting to expand art's global horizons, artists (magiciens) like Morrisseau are content with being tied to localized practice; they understand that spiritual power cannot exist in forms of public spectacle, rather, the audience participates in an intercultural dialogical aesthetic. Though Magiciens did open up space for non-Western artists, I think the curators completely misunderstood who their guests were. On the other hand, Spivak asserts that:

this whole group is an embarrassment to both Eurocentric or nationcentric visions of identity and alterity. Yes we are the children of the enabling violation of imperialism. We should not be defined as having “been to school” in the West and thus disqualified everywhere. We should be used, and here I go back to an earlier point. We should be used to explain or make visible the ethicopolitical agenda in your tendency to conserve a center that you can then cede, only in a certain way (1993:214).

The discursive spatialities of the two could not communicate. The curators tried to interpret the complex discourse of the “other” for a Western art audience, and in doing so could not translate the profound alterity of their guests: they could only guess. There was little or no collaborative syncretic effort to discover, and decolonize the institutional and cultural spaces between, a practice which I believe is the most dynamic in arts. At best, the relations between Western and non-Western artistic practices remain diffuse.

As a contemporary artist, my intervention between the discourses occurred in 1992 at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, in a show called Savage Graces. In it, I wanted to open a new space. What was so unusual about this? As mentioned earlier, anthropology museums often represent objects, viz. “material culture” of non-Western peoples, whereas art museums represent the history of “aesthetic” objects by Western peoples. Both represent ideas; but, both offer only perspectives. Very often, when aboriginal contemporary artists began exhibiting their works they wavered between these two “representational apparatuses,” to use Althusser’s term. Aboriginal artists (peoples) often voiced their dissatisfaction at being treated as “objects” in anthropology museums, while being marginalized by art museums. They realized that in both cases they had little or no voice: in other words, they were treated as minors. The resistant “other,” the underrepresented body, soon began opening up new territories of possibility. Artists began thinking of negotiating spatial possibilities, as I
pointed out in the previous chapter. For the aboriginal artist this meant cracking the immutable spaces of the art museum ("position taking"), where they had always wanted a ground to stand. Realizing that gallery exhibitions were only one possibility, aboriginal artists began to see that parks, cultural centres in forests, castles, breweries, and reserves, provided other possibilities. Personally, I wanted to emancipate the anthropology museum from itself. Rather than affirm my subjectivity synecdochically, I wished to involve my subject position as artist. Consequently, I wanted to transform the museum into a playful site, to shake the boundaries between the museum, myself, and the public.\(^1\)

To this end, Primitivism has created a position for non-Western artists either to accept or critically engage deconstructively. Would the North American Indian art market survive if it were not considered primitive? It remains a multi-million dollar industry because audiences want "Indian-looking" art. The subtext is that buyers unconsciously impose a subtle hegemony. On the other hand, artists often reconstitute culturally copyrighted masks, poles, dance paraphernalia, for the market. Published historical reports point out that aboriginal peoples have always actively consented to trading or recreating objects. In these highly political times, this notion of consent is a discomforting realization. However, Henry Giroux argues that in radical theories of hegemony, consent works both ways. Either the dominant imposes its logic on the subordinated or, "[alternatively] in the revisionist radical version, consent is defined through more active forms of complicity in that subordinated groups are now viewed as partly negotiating their adaptation and place within the dominant culture" (193). Later in this chapter I will show how several aboriginal contemporary artists are responding to the idea of Primitivism.

**Jimmie Durham**

"I've lived all my adult life in voluntary exile from my own people, yet that can also be considered a Cherokee tradition." These are the words of American artist Jimmie Durham, who once lived in self-imposed exile in Mexico, and now lives somewhere in Europe. Durham is an interesting artist. Born in 1940 in Washington, Arkansas, he has been included in many of the major international exhibitions. He once found himself the centre of attention for self-identifying as Cherokee. Many prominent Native Americans, including former American Indian Movement leader, Russell Means, however, came to his defence. Durham's offence was that he could not prove his Indian identity under the 1990
Public Law 101-644, which placed legitimacy of identity in the hands of "federally-recognized or state-recognized" tribal governments. Indeed, since the legislation's initial introduction in December 1990, a number of galleries and museums in the U.S. have terminated exhibitions which featured artists of questionable heritage, out of fear of prosecution. After many years of championing Indian rights, Durham ironically finds himself on the outside looking in. Regardless of whether he is disqualified from ever showing as an American Indian, it can be argued that he was constituted within the discursive boundaries of Indian art. He remains absent, yet his older works and words remain part of the contemporary aboriginal art discourse.

Before all the fuss, Durham created some of the most interesting and critical "primitivist" works. Among them is On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian (1986, fig. 16), which is a critique of the positivist examination of cultures by one proto-ethnographic museum, New York's Museum of the American Indian (MAI; now called the National Museum of the American Indian). In particular, the critique targets the way MAI's exhibitions presented objects in such impersonal and simplistic terms,
and in such an aesthetically unappealing fashion, that aboriginal cultures looked child-like. This discursive mode of displaying aboriginal objects could be called “exhibitionist primitivism.” Indeed, displays like these suggest discursive statements on comparisons between civilized and uncivilized cultures. During its time, MAI never achieved the status of its sister institution, the Museum of Natural History, perhaps because of its distance from midtown. Its location on Broadway and 155th made it a self-contained and isolated museum with a distinct identity. In his works, Durham complicates the museum’s discursiveness by injecting a language of his own—“sociofacts” and—“scientifacts”—with a collection of materials that are “part-found, part-fabricated.” Jean Fisher says that Durham’s installation,

purported to illustrate the “natural history” of the Indian. [...] Despite the absurdity of the items, their signs of “Indianicity” led many viewers to mistake them for genuine museum articles, missing the parodic humour in his mime of the act of ethnographic surveillance (47).

Rather than the artifact as synecdoche, Durham draws attention to our blind faith in scientific objectivity, and the coldness of museum representation, that prompt us to accept this quasi-museum display as truth. In this display, Durham displays these “arti-fakes”13 as they would be presented in the MAI, lifeless and desanctified. The power in so much of Durham’s output is the naïve quality of workmanship. But in this piece, the viewer sees only objects randomly presented, and most of these viewers are unaware that the display is ironically pseudo-scientific. The viewer is caught up in reading the text as context, oblivious to the fact that the entire work should be read as a text. As in the case of Luna, the uninformed observer is completely unaware of the outrageous Indian humour that was once a form of resistance and that now strategically décents the museal gaze.

**Discursive space of the museum**

“[Objects] don’t mean; people mean.” — Antonio Gaultieri.

With this caution in mind, what are the signifying practices that museums confer upon tribal objects’ significance, identity, and biography? This is a central question that is critical for aboriginal people today, especially artists. It is a question of the museum’s discursiveness. Therefore, I want to consider to what extent the museum is an emerging discursive space.
Ames offers a useful formulation. He writes: “Large public museum[s] may express and authenticate the established or official values and images of society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternative values” (22). We come to understand museums as controlling the narratives assimilated by their publics; specifically, museum curators control the messages of the exhibitions and the objects. A persistent narrative for museums is the depiction of aboriginal peoples as existing in a classic past before the arrival of Europeans—their true identity. The museum visitor takes this as truth and cannot help but see it any other way. Consequently, the objects, as synecdoche, come to stand for aboriginal cultures, telling this evolutionary story “in the past tense.”

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Professor of Performance Studies, sees de-contextualized objects—objects removed from their original use and purpose—used by museums “metonymically” as representations for “the absent whole”:

The art of the metonym is an art that accepts the inherently fragmentary nature of the object. Showing it in all its partiality enhances the aura of its “realness.” The danger, of course, is that museums amass collections and are, in a sense, condemned ever after to exhibit them. (388)

As I mentioned previously, Mieke Bal (1996), in an attempt to clarify the terms of this museal rhetoric, notes that the term “artifact” exemplifies its status as synecdoche. A metonymic reading, on the other hand, would suggest that the object could only be understood if it was used in the actual (virtual) display in relation to others, in a contextual display, for example. As Bal explains, “metonymy,” is where one thing stands for another adjacent to it in place, time, or logic (80). A synecdochical reading isolates the object, as artifact, because it is readable as the culture, or representative of “the absent whole” from which it originates. Bal’s distinction makes this clearer.

There are, however, other ways of regarding the object than simply art and artifact: as heirloom, commodity, sacrament or patrimony. Michael Ames says, “[these] are all properties or values of the object, all phases in its life.” Furthermore:

... [v]values may be imposed by those wishing to possess or appropriate the object, and others asserted by those claiming moral jurisdiction. These transformations of meaning and use during the
Object’s careers could be better represented in museum interpretations. The longer the career of an object, however, the more segmented its history becomes, and the more knowledge about it becomes fragmented, contradictory, differentiated, and fodder for commodification and dispute (144).

Objects, like words, function in part to structure our understanding of the world. They reflect and are keys to different realities. We understand also that the object is a sign, but these signs do not refer to things, they signify concepts, and concepts are aspects of thought, not of reality. In the past, for example, museums have assigned certain meanings to objects. Now we are seeing aboriginal people render their perspectives on patrimony, as will be pointed out in later discussions of repatriation. In transforming these social relations, aboriginal people are now beginning to understand Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital;” the struggle to transform the inequalities of perspectives is the essence of cultural politics. My use of the term cultural capital means that objects are repositories for knowledge shared by various people and institutions, particularly those who have heavy investments in them. This can lead to ideological struggles, such as an objection to their treatment. These objects are now central to a new discursiveness.

If, then, an object has many properties and values associated with it, it may be useful to theorize that object under the concept of identity. How do language and ideology inform its identity? How does the career (or subjectivity) of an object change within different situations? And, how do objects serve to express aboriginal people’s identity?

Ames argues that to know objects, their history must be problematized in terms of their checkered, commodified, disputatious, and palimpsest-like careers (145). This notion of the “palimpsest” is an object’s history, layered with shifting meanings, reinscribed each time it changes hands or contexts, and built up in stages without ever completely erasing its previous history. Aldona Jonaitis calls this “wrapping” (1992:28). The object’s history, its wrapping, is its biography. Part of the curator’s work is this study of an object’s social history:

[…] the study of what happens to objects, and to the people they attract, once they leave the hands of the original users, and most particularly, once they become appropriated by scholars, collectors, and museums in the wealthier nations. Objects live beyond their origins, and acquire new meanings, new uses, and new owners along the way (46).
If an object has a history or biography, this implies that it must have begun with a discrete and undifferentiated identity. Ames’s notion of the palimpsest inscribes objects with a rather post-modern identity — multiple, fragmented, and shifting. These notions are fundamental to understanding the discursive politics of the object, where the conjuncture of aboriginal and non-aboriginal perspectives is the site of struggle.

While a palimpsest creates differing and often contradictory subjectivities, it would seem that tribally-specific objects must have very clearly defined and unified identities whose specificity is unquestioned. I once asked Walter Bonaise, a Plains Cree cultural instructor of the Poundmaker Reserve, Saskatchewan: Do objects have an identity? “Yes,” he said, “every object has an identity, especially ceremonial objects.” Another question: Can objects change their identity? “No, but, that depends upon the person describing their objects, whether he is selling or keeping. If we interpret these objects as having an identity, then we might see and handle them differently. If, for example, you’re going to talk about an object, you have to know and understand its identity.” Bonaise criticizes people’s passivity in learning and obtaining this kind of knowledge. He believes that undertaking the responsibility of knowing is difficult for most people. He continues: “If one knew an object’s identity, then potentially one could learn the language with which to speak.” Bonaise acknowledges that each tribe has particular languages of articulation and knowledge. Furthermore, he understands objects as having essential qualities that signify their individual origins. “Though each tribe may use different words,” he says, “they mean the same.” He goes on to say that the only difference is the particular way a person explains the object’s identity. For example, medicine bundles have individual identities given to them by their owners. Selected from nature, small objects are ordered specifically; this is how the bundle would have been revealed in a dream. Bonaise says, “Once they find its identity, they will know how to use and preserve it.” Gaultieri would say this is how devotees mystify objects.

Indeed, the object’s identity is part of the argument for repatriation; it is an attempt to return objects not only to their owners, but to their original function. Epistemologically, a shift must take place in understanding a tribal object’s identity and its intrinsic qualities; since once, it was richly invested through ritual practices often based on rights, privileges, and position. Returning objects to original communities is a chance for giving people new identities or recovering old ones. Canadian institutions are now respecting these conflicts. With the release of the
Task Force Report on Museums and First Nations (1992) we are now witnessing a shift in attitudes, as well as practices in acquisition, exhibition, and research policies. There is a more dynamic consciousness of the “Us/Them” duality, where museums with aboriginal holdings are more likely to work in partnership with specific First Nations communities, to become “Us.” Torgovnick (1994) points out that such a “we” identification “effaces particularities and affirms identification with a larger body whose common features are relatively bloodless” (264), although in this case it is the reverse. It is the political power of the tribes that is affirming the museums’ subject status. As Torgovnick argues, in the politics of inclusion, someone must surrender an aspect of themselves; in this case, it is the museums.

Likewise, museums have differing discursive subjectivities; they too are constituted in language. For this reason, they are discursive spaces with hybrid identities: museums are given identities by the objects they hold, and vice versa. Furthermore, we can assume that their strategies and practices for exhibiting and collecting also vary. For example, curators and other museum professionals view collections aesthetically, historically, or anthropologically. They ask questions about the object: What is its provenance? Who made it? When? Where? What were the circumstance and conditions of its creation?16

Objects now encompass new realities never before considered. Canadian museums are now more likely to try to surpass each other in establishing friendly relations with local aboriginal communities. Since the release of the Task Force Report, several museums across Canada have built such strong relations. At times, aboriginal contemporary artists are very much part of these activities.

Joane Cardinal-Schubert
Alberta artist, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, was inspired to create Is This My Grandmother’s? (1988, fig. 17a) by a visit to the research collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. “I thought,” she says, “what kind of possessions do Native people have of their grandparents, and great-grandparents? None. They’re all in Ottawa in the drawers” (quoted in Duffek 1989:36).

Cardinal-Schubert, born in 1942 in Red Deer, Alberta, is a multimedia artist. A multi-faceted cultural heritage and the influence of two grandmothers, one of German extraction, the other a Piegan (Blackfoot) holy woman, have had a considerable impact on the content of her work.
Working in a variety of media, she unites aboriginal spiritual symbolism and political issues to make contemporary statements.

During one particular visit, she saw in the museum's storage vaults many objects, including leather shirts, dresses, moccasins—anything considered organic—stuffed into clear plastic bags (fig. 17b). Not realizing that this practice of putting objects into plastic bags is preventive care, she had a spontaneous adverse reaction. Since many of the objects are made of organic material, storing them this way prevents insect infestations. This preventive care of cellophaning artifacts, a form of pest-control, does not work for her. Instead she questions: Just who are the pests?

Cardinal-Schubert focuses attention on the physical and discursive distance between the museum's artifacts and their originating communities. As contemporary aboriginal peoples try to become more aware of the historical circumstances that led to the removal of hundreds of thousands of objects from communities across the Americas, and that now sit lifeless in storage facilities around the world, the question for both communities is: How can life be brought back to these objects? Though in works like these there are no answers; only more questions. Inevitably, the more questions are raised, the more responses will follow. Unfortunately, these are not the usual responses artists have received, because they are seen as agitators. Many of these artists have understood full well the strategies of "resistance," "articulation," and "empowerment," of connecting art with the social and political. Cardinal-Schubert writes:

[Image has been removed due to copyright protection]

As well as the displacement of ceremonies and language, Native people suffered the loss of their cultural icons, their reliquiae. Ceremonial objects were taken from them and systematically collected by museums and collectors throughout the world as evidence of a dying culture.[...] These ceremonial objects are an important link in the cultural practice of most ceremonial rituals. Without them, life was meaningless—they were the cultural videos and bibles of the time. If someone were to remove the chalice from the tabernacle in the Catholic ritual, the ceremony could not continue. There would be no meaning without the symbolic ritual that goes along with that particular reliquiae, and the participants would have to deal with the horror of its loss as an icon. This is our heritage!\

Cardinal-Schubert was interpellated not by beauty but by horror, fear, and helplessness. Horror in a loathsome sense of seeing the objectification of her heritage; fear in the reverential sense that many of these objects were sacred and she could do little to rescue them; and helplessness in that she knew little of the appropriate address to be made to the object as a traditional way of entering into dialogue. Some of these impressions led her to ask: Is this my Grandmother's? The question is rhetorical; but, it does leave us to ponder the cruciform on which this dress hangs. The metaphor of the cross as Christianity leads us into different directions. First, the idea of the crucifix, which holds up the encased dress, is one of humiliation, as Christ was humiliated when he
hung on the cross. Though Cardinal-Schubert’s dress is a facsimile of a Ghost Dance dress, she presents it as an objectified dress left open for examination as artifact; whereas, the original dress was sanctified in the Ghost Dance religion of the late nineteenth century. This one is displaced, desanctified and devalued. Another aspect is its necrotic, death-like arrangement, outstretched as if it were on a rack. Similarly, the cross or tree from which Christ hung was used as an instrument of torture and persecution, and later came to represent sacrifice. Cardinal-Schubert makes a similar pronouncement in that the artifactuality of the dress is condemned to suffer and never to return to its original purpose. The rack on which the dress hangs is a framework not only for display and storage, but for its “artifact-ness.” Its identity will always be “other.”

The Warshirt Series, of which this was part, equips Cardinal-Schubert with a warrior’s fortitude at a time when a shift in power relations was taking place between museums and aboriginal people. The series began as a response to realizing that many war shirts ended up in museum collections. For her, sanctity is only possible if the objects are liberated from their confines and returned home.

Object Sanctity
In this section and the next, I propose to take into account the double usage of the term “object.” The first usage is as a noun: “anything that is visible or tangible and is relatively stable in form; a thing, a person, or matter to which thought or action is directed”—as in, “object sanctity”; second, as a verb form: “to offer a reason or argument in opposition; to express or feel disapproval, dislike, or distaste, be averse”—as in “object to sanctity.”

Antonio Gaultieri, retired professor of religion at Carleton University, wrote that “[an object’s] religious meaning may emerge only for those who live within its context [...] [where] cosmological and axiological meaning is not objectively present in the object but is interpolated by the devotees.[...] [Thus, objects] don’t mean; people mean.” Religious symbols “mediate the reality of another world whose inherent structure provides a therapeutic alternative to the profane world of bafflement, suffering, injustice, guilt, and death.”

Walter Bonaise echoes these thoughts, when he says that elders/owners give an object its identity, and thus its sanctity. Conversely, these objects serve to express the collective identity of aboriginal people. For example, I once asked him the following: Is an object like a medicine
bundle sacred, or is it the idea? He said that the many objects contained in a medicine bundle (Aya-chi-kana is the Cree word he uses) are ordered in particular ways, that its owner communicates with it in a particular language. “Today,” he pointed out, “many Native people do not know what to do with the bundles because it scares them.” He realized something had to be done, but this would only be possible with knowledgeable elders because of their access to language. He continued: “Awareness of the objects’ identity, their importance, and their powerful manifestation, should be well known. Museum curators and conservators find it particularly difficult handling bundles because they don’t understand the object’s meaning. If, for instance, we are to understand what to get out of them, we must first know how to open them, what their functions are, and then how to use them. If they are to help us, we must know how to connect with their power.” Bundles were (are) used and brought out for important ceremonies, because they helped the people. Unfortunately, this practice has been largely lost. He suggested that many unfortunate situations are happening to aboriginal people because they have lost certain kinds of knowledge; for example, the power of the bundles. The potential tensions between those who know and those who think they know, and the elemental nature of these objects, create a delicate pressure in aboriginal communities outside the museum, opposing the overall good. Thus Bonaise’s concern, “we must know how to connect with their power,” is an appeal to aboriginal people to work towards ensuring not just the sanctity of objects, but their identity as well.

Sacred objects, Gaultieri says, are “interpolated” by their devotees. In other words, meaning is given to the objects. Since they are culturally interpolated, they are constituted within specific cultural discourses; thus, they can only have meaning to their devotees. This cultural discursive function of objects raises the issue of their ideological function, which is why current struggles arise at museum sites. Ideology—here meaning a set of opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, or world view—lies at the heart of how objects are sanctified. For example, aboriginal people believe that objects function as living things; museums, on the other hand, see objects as constituent to their disciplinary identity to be studied and then exposed to their visitors; some have argued that objects reflect the museum’s colonial identity. Louis Althusser uses the homophonic term “interpellate” to suggest that “[...] ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)” (55). If we interpolate, or give meaning to objects, can objects in turn call out to us, attracting
our attention, as in: “Hey, you there!” or, “Hey, look!”? Do certain objects interpellate (hail) us by making us subjects? I contend that they do. Indeed, with the advancement of Primitivism and Formalism, objects from non-Western cultures are converted to aesthetic capital. Collecting and trading them has become a multimillion dollar industry. Objects that are aesthetically interesting can and do turn us around, by making us take notice. When curators place objects in exhibitions, they are enabling the objects to interpellate the viewer. Interestingly, these objects could be either sacred or profane. However, the interpellation is contingent upon our awareness of what Bonaise calls the “power-ness” of certain objects. Hence, the museum’s discourse is ambiguous, dependent as it is on its interlocutor’s knowledge. Only recently have aboriginal people become more involved in museological debates over interpretation as one fundamental issue. As I will show later, aboriginal contemporary artists have challenged the museum over these issues.

Curators are a strange lot; they are “exhibitionists.” Above all, the object is their prime means of attracting attention and making an argument. Bal’s (1996) three meanings of exhibition—exposition, expose, and exposure—facilitate our understanding of this curatorial practice. The idea of “exposition” is not only to bring an event to public attention, but it also defines a discursive practice. For example, curators market objects as commodities for public consumption; in their eyes, objects enter the museum as “failed metaphors” because they are no longer useful in the tribal sense. “Exposure” is performatory to the extent of presenting curatorial views; it is about the act of producing meaning through textual means. Curators make sense of the unspeakable objects for the audience. They objectify texts and textualize objects. To “expose” is not only to show or present objects, but to publicize one’s views about them. Peter Gathercole observes that objects do not have the power that curators do. He calls this “curatorial knowledge,” in which objects are transformed by the curator, thereby setting up a kind of power relation (75). Gathercole sees this power tending in the curator’s favour. But this is not always so obvious. Did the curators of the 1988 Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples exhibition consider their “curatorial knowledge” before selecting which objects would go on display? Or, did the objects interpellate the curators? I contend the latter was the case. Some curators were attracted for aesthetic reasons, others for scientific information, and still others came to realize that many of the objects had never appeared in a North American exhibition before. To some curators, these objects were coming home. The Spirits Sings was the last exhibition of
its kind. Since then, all exhibitions that have aboriginal content as a theme, now engage aboriginal people to prevent such uneven balances of power.

Furthermore, consider museum conservators, another element in the discursive interaction around the object. Are they interpellated by the object? Yes. Unlike curators, however, they sanctify the object of their concern, but in a manner quite different from that of spiritual leaders. This sanctification usually comes about only after an object is integrated into the collections as patrimony, not before. Entrusted by code, conservators are to preserve objects—debug, decontaminate, defer, democratize, detach—in other words, to “suspend” their organicity endlessly, at all costs. Interestingly, there is an underlying power relation with the curator. It is the curator’s passion to exhibit an object, at all costs, whereas the conservator plays an oppositional strategy by recommending limiting the object’s exposure, at all costs, because of its sanctity as object.

Objection to traditional museal practices is opening the way to a closer working relationship with aboriginal people. It is almost routine now to include aboriginal people as advisors on committees where their cultures are going to be represented. In Canada, anyhow, many more museums are careful not to risk repeating The Spirit Sings episode.

Two ideological views of sanctity: one side with a tradition of exhibiting objects as objects, the other tradition seeing objects as subjects. In both cases, however, the objects give these ideological views their particular identities and subjectivity. In either case, the objects interpellate these views differently: aesthetically, scientifically, or spiritually. The ideological struggle of interpellation, how museums treat objects, and the players involved, advance the discourse to new dimensions. Objects hail us, we take notice; that is how museum exposition operates. If they do not, the exposition is unsuccessful, or it may be that we are ignorant of the discourse.

Object to Sanctity

The attitude of artists within western societies towards museums has always been ambivalent. They use them, they are inspired by them, but they also mock them. One could even say that a part of the inspiration a great artist takes from an object in a museum is the energy to break the museum framework, to make the object contemporary, a part of contemporary struggles, as the particular artist interprets those struggles.
As I mentioned in the previous chapter, a number of aboriginal contemporary artists see museums as part of a radical geography. For the most part, aboriginal peoples marginalized in museal discourse and then objectified in exhibitions have become aware of their circumstance. Accordingly, for some of the following artists, disclosure of museal practice takes place in that radically discursive space. Consequently, they see the museum as a site of struggle where their works interrogate the museum’s (ab)use of aboriginal cultures. This, the second aspect of the word “object,” I will use as a verb offering a reason, an argument, and a critique of opposing past and present museum practices. While as artists, aboriginal contemporary artists share part of their identity with Western and non-Western colleagues, they have had a peculiar and ambivalent association with ethnographic museums. Their identities as aboriginal artists have been constituted within the modern non-art museum. As explained earlier, ethnographic museums have a history of representing the “other”—both non-Western and aboriginal North Americans. The primary discourse of the museum was its view of aboriginal people living in the past, before modernity changed them. Fabian has demonstrated that colonizers have denied the colonized “coevalness” through the use of such terms as “primitive,” “savage,” “tribal,” “traditional,” and “Third World” (17). “Primitive being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought” (18). Aboriginal contemporary artists have long taken the view that ethnographic museums are a burden on their contemporary identity; hence their struggle to contest the discourses that control them. Their resistance against the museum, to negotiate the status between time/space, sacred/secular and sanctity/artifactuality, has taken new directions.

Jane Ash Poitras

Jane Ash Poitras does not share the same museological polemic as the other artists discussed here, though she utilizes similar critical strategies. Instead of criticizing the (ab)use of the object, her subject is the Indian body politic as a casualty of modernity. Against modernity she positions the spirituality of the shaman as salvation for aboriginal culture. Since the late 1980s, the Shaman Never Die series has expressed the shaman’s subject position of healer for many of the social ills aboriginal people experienced during the reservation period. The shaman as metaphor is traditionally positioned as magician, priest, mystic, poet, and master of ecstasy. In her practice and personal life, Ash Poitras celebrates the survival of her ancestors
and the shaman. Thus, her paintings are both a critical practice and a reverential activity where some of the qualities of the shaman unfurl. "The paintings become a valorization of who I am, of my soul, of how I see life. In the metaphysical sense, I have to paint to live. The minute I stop painting I die" (quoted in Enright 1992:13).

Ash Poitras was born in the northern Alberta community of Fort Chipewyan in 1951. She continues to live and work in Edmonton. Though a prolific painter, this installation permitted her to explore new questions. In *Transformation, Assimilated Indian, Hudson's Bay Lure* (1992, fig. 18), she uses a museological technique of the display case as metaphors for seduction, change, and conversion. Reflecting a personal journey of discovery, from birth to death and back to rebirth, as the title indicates, Ash Poitras's frailties are an example of the problems and conflicts that are a constant threat to aboriginal community life. After the fragmentation and disintegration that signified the reservation period, aboriginal people now find themselves in radically new dispositions of renewal, affirmation, and self-determination.

The first display case, *Hudson's Bay Lure* (far right), is framed around materialism, commodification, and wonder. Of the three vitrines, this one has the look and feel of an early-twentieth-century showroom—the other two are modern—and it is filled to capacity. This case performs at least two functions: the first is to entice customers to consumer goods made by Indians; the second is an ethnographic trap, displaying objects salvaged from aboriginal cultures as a cabinet of curiosities. The display
is to entice and seduce viewers, to interpellate them within a dominant ideology as they look upon their “other.” The viewer is to look upon these objects with fascination; yet, the artist discourages our desires as we move to the next case.

In the second case, *Assimilated Indian* presents the dangers of habits and addiction, an unbearable lightness of being, in which addiction signifies death. The skeleton reaches for a can of beer, while hovering over a field of cigarette butts. Drinking among aboriginal people has long been a sign of resistance, to counter the pain of existence and the conditions of poverty. The use of intoxicants has always been for personal reasons, including communitas, for example. But abuse of intoxicants has, of course, far greater consequences for the individual and his/her social network. The idea of assimilation has also always been part of the anthropological discourse describing the aboriginal state of affairs: a kind of longing for the past while at the same time, aboriginal cultures are absorbed into the great body politic of the West. Assimilation is to make similar, to change identity. In this case, Ash Poitras’s skeletal figure is the final signifier of this idea. In the end, we all become the same. However, there is a twist. Though not apparent because of the visible signifiers, the twist is that this work is about museal practices, beginning with exposition of aboriginal people as artifact, and ending with the intense interest in their remains. Ash Poitras adds a bit of salt, noting that it is abundantly clear how this person died. There is no need for exhumation.

And in the last case on the left, *Transformation*, we sense freedom, self-control, resistance, and rebirth. The vitrine is completely empty, something of an anathema for museums that need objects for display. What is transformed? There is a sense that museums can no longer (ab)use aboriginal people for museal purposes, since many of the objects were not made for these purposes. The transformation is a shift from subject to exclusive sovereignty.

**Reconstitution through repatriation**

As Ojibwa writer Basil Johnson makes clear in the following passage, even with the renewed efforts today, aboriginal traditions remain tenuous.

When elders passed away, so did a portion of the tribal language come to an end as a tree disintegrates by degrees and in stages until it is no more; and, though infants were born to replenish the loss of life, not any one of them will learn the language of their
grandfathers or grandmothers to keep it alive and pass it on to their descendants. Thus the language dies (99).

When language dies, so does our understanding of objects: objects remain objects and will potentially remain artifacts forever. Can they become active subjects once again? Knowing an aboriginal language, one is able to articulate the object, to give meaning back to it that makes sense for others. Unless great strides take place in recovery of aboriginal languages or political efforts to enact language policy, similar to those in the French-Canadian province of Quebec, recovery rates among aboriginal cultures will remain a slender thread. Language regeneration is vital to understanding traditional concepts of the object. In the age of repatriation and reclamation, however, how are aboriginal people influencing institutional practices?

Here is one example. During the late 1970s and 1980s, Walter Bonaise and a group of elders, directed by the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College (Saskatoon), made regular visits to museums in western Canada. They developed amicable relations with museum staff who then allowed them access to collections to renew bonds with historic objects. This practice has, however, declined in recent years due in part to high travel costs. At these museum sites, elders would ask the staff to bring out specific objects which they would address through prayer. Out of deep respect for the object’s inherent sacred power, no elder touched the objects. Interestingly, these objects had remained in museums for so long they assumed an identity as object; in the presence of these elders, the objects became part of a shift. No longer seen as “objects” or “third person,” they were now constituted in a ritual first-person address. Devotees like Bonaise take the object’s sacred power seriously, and he counsels museum staff to be similarly careful in handling sacred objects. Aboriginal elders observe objects very differently from museologists. Bonaise says, “thorough understanding is crucial before deciding to open the bundles, otherwise, adverse affects could damage eyes or other parts of one’s body.” In more recent years, curators have begun to show knowledge and understanding of the processes Bonaise describes. He points out that some objects “kill;” it is very serious business. Adverse effects can cause one to go crazy, or to do something bad, even if one smells a medicine bundle. The repatriation of medicine bundles and other sacred and sensitive objects is riddled with problems.

Sacred and sensitive objects are housed in museums around the world. Bonaise indicates that some institutions are willing to return them to aboriginal people. But the problem for him is not only awareness of the
kinds of objects that should be returned; the understanding of the contents of the objects and associated material is also often lacking. He and others would be willing to accept their return. However, over the years while working with members of various Plains Cree bands, he felt they were not always in full agreement as to the consequences of repatriation. Some did not want to make a move to repatriate, perhaps because of the tremendous responsibility it entails. What does it mean to attempt repatriating artifacts? Bonaise says it all depends on the kinds of artifacts, because certain objects provide more valuable assistance than others. This echoes a similar concern of other aboriginal peoples across Canada and thus placates the fears of museums who feel aboriginal people are preparing for all-out repatriation. In the end, it is only “certain” objects that are going to help, spiritually and culturally; namely, sacred objects. The play on “object (to) sanctity” is not at cross purposes: on the one hand, it allows us to understand how meaning is conferred; while on the other, it allows for a politics that hopes to create an even playing field.

One aboriginal community that was successful leveling the field in repatriating objects from museums in the late 1970s, was the U’mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, British Columbia. It did so because the community was able to meet the conditions the museums had set, such as having a building. Kwakwaka'wakw historian Gloria Cranmer Webster (1992) writes:

We do not have a word for repatriation [...] The closest we come to it is the word u’mista, which describes the return of people taken captive in raids. It also means the return of something important. We are working towards the u’mista of much that was almost lost to us. The return of the potlatch collection is one u’mista (37).

How does U’mista and its community see themselves today? Their exhibitions, intended for the community, present their history and culture as an expression of their identity. All museums have similar kinds of mandates. U’mista call itself a “cultural centre;” the repatriated objects are placed in terms of the Centre’s own historicity, where the objects’ cultural and historical identities speak to the community. U’mista’s local audience is always aware of this, and they are always finding ways of transmitting their culture on to their children. “The renewed interest among younger people in learning about their cultural history is a kind of u’mista” (37). When they speak to the outside, they do so in traveling exhibits like A Slender Thread: The Art of Mungo Martin (1990), a local artist who lived during the reservation period when the Potlatch was outlawed. The federal government saw
the cultural practices of the Kwakwaka’wakw as an impediment to their acculturation or enfranchisement into Canadian society. Therefore, many of their institutional practices were outlawed and objects confiscated in an effort to erase their identity. Due to Mungo Martin’s efforts, the continuity of Kwakwaka’wakw artistic traditions has become legendary. U’mista’s presentations illustrate its patrimony and address its community. Outsiders learn who the Kwakwaka’wakw are and how they use cultural patrimony in the community. The Kwakwaka’wakw are not concerned with the same cultural politics as many of the artists discussed above. They see oppositionality as consuming energy which they would rather spend on strengthening their identity and, by extension, their community.

Repatriation is one way aboriginal people can take some form of control from museums. It is also a way to exercise cultural sovereignty by giving local communities a chance to rebuild on top of institutions that once disabled them. Aboriginal communities are now better positioned to control their fate. They are more conscious of the conditions of today and are readily able to actively participate in the modern world. Repatriation is a sign of the post-reservation.

Conclusion
I once asked Edward Poitras his opinion about having his work collected by ethnographic museums. He said: “Having my work [in a museum], I feel at home with my ancestors. At the National Gallery, they would look out of place.” This shift in attitude characterizes the current artistic practices of multiple spatialities. Art now reaches beyond the hallowed halls of art galleries and into new spaces. As well, aboriginal contemporary artists are much more complex subjects who cannot simply be examined by a discipline that is fixated around “artifacts.” Objects are not just cultural signifiers, but complex statements that are intellectually appealing. Each of these artists has made conceptual installations critiquing anthropological practice quite independently of each other. Their investigations have raised questions about the nature of representing the “other,” sometimes in very humorous ways, like James Luna’s and Rebecca Belmore’s self-representation as artifacts. Jimmie Durham has pointed out the weakness in our received beliefs in scientific objectivity. Joane Cardinal-Schubert has touched on the broad gap between aboriginal communities and museums. And Jane Ash Poitras has shown the malaise of modernity and aboriginal communities. Each objected by questioning the nature of the “object,” even when the object in these institutional spaces was about them and their cultural identity. This play
of the object is a complex game of rhetoric that museums never expected to be articulated by their subject and object of study.

In this chapter I examined the object’s discursive identity and the museum as discursive space. For nearly a century the institutional space of the museum has been so far removed from aboriginal communities that the museum visitor, upon seeing old artifacts, must have sensed that aboriginal people were long extinct. Indeed, museological discourse was about the past verging on necromancy, as Ames points out: “Museums are cannibalistic in appropriating other peoples’ material for their own study and interpretation, and they confine their representations to glass box display cases” (3). Of course, many of these objects that had long lived their original purpose somehow made their way into public and private collections. Some critics have argued that if aboriginal objects had not been collected there would have been a vacuum, leaving aboriginal people with no history and no identity. Though this argument is short-sighted, it is an attitude that museums whisper.

In reaction to the techniques of exposition, aboriginal contemporary artists began a critical discourse about the space that constituted them as subjects. They disliked the inference that their work could only be regarded as ethnographic because quality was compromised in favour of identity. Though there were still artists who maintained strong connections with museums, there came a generation whose members were not so forgiving. Instead, they took every opportunity to bring attention to museal practices through their own work. They took full advantage of the times. Lucy Lippard (1990) points out that,

Since the late ’60s, the feminist movement’s rehabilitation of subjectivity in the face of the dominant and loftily ‘objective’ stance has been one model in the ongoing search for identity within so-called minority groups. It is precisely the false identities to which deconstructionism calls attention that have led women and people of color to an obsession with self-definition, to a re-creation of identity from the inside out (11).

Though aboriginal contemporary artists have raised important questions, their positions have yet to be fully appreciated by aboriginal people, partly because much of their practice takes place in unfamiliar spaces. Moreover, despite the anti-museum reaction of a while ago, and the changes that have transpired, aboriginal contemporary artists now see the museum as just another space. Indeed, it is a space with its own identity and audiences, which some artists have “mined” with interesting results.
Following the Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, Canadian museums have become more self-consciously aware of their practices. Decisions affecting aboriginal people are being addressed openly and honestly. But questions continue to be raised about the ethics of collecting and exhibiting artifacts. Aboriginal scholars and practitioners are being involved throughout all phases of exhibition production. Museum exhibitions at Alberta’s Head Smashed In (1987), Saskatoon’s Wanuskewin (1992), Regina’s Royal Saskatchewan Museum (1994), Edmonton’s Provincial Museum of Alberta (1997), and more recently the Canadian Museum of Civilization (2001) have all created new permanent exhibitions that reflect these new partnerships.

Aboriginal communities’ interest in the object is in itself not really new. For many years aboriginal people have visited museums to see their contents. In the last two decades we have witnessed an increase in aboriginal communities generating repatriation requests—human remains and associated grave goods, sacred and sensitive; and objects taken from communities at a time their practices were considered illegal. Partnerships with aboriginal communities are now the new discursive language. Museums see this process as a two-way, win-win situation, unlike the past when the “salvage paradigm” or “urgent ethnology” were the principal ideas behind collecting and study.

Notes
1 An amendment to Indian Act 1880, S.C. 1884, c.27 (47 Vict.), sections 3, reads: “Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival know as the ‘Potlach’ [sic] or in the Indian dance know as the ‘Tasmanawas’ is guilty of a misdemeanor, and shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of not more than six nor less than two months in any gaol or other place of confinement; and any Indian or other person who encourages either directly or indirectly, an Indian or Indians to get up such a festival or dance, or to celebrate the same or who shall assist in the celebration of the same is guilty of a like offence, and shall be liable to the same punishment.” Aldona Jonaitis describes the Potlatch as: “a complex ceremonial during which the host family communicates its status by displaying inherited privileges embodied in lavishly decorated artworks and dances as well as by making eloquent speeches detailing those privileges. The guests are treated to a sumptuous cuisine and, at the end, receive gifts as payment for having witnessed these displays” (1991:12). Dickason says that the “give-away” aspect of Potlatches was held to be incompatible with Western economic practices and inimical to the concept of private property” (286).

2 In 1895 the Plains Cree Thirst Dance or Ni-pakway-simowin (among the Sioux, they call it the “Sun Dance”) was prohibited. Like the Northwest Coast Potlatches, the Thirst Dances was the most religious expression among the Plains Cree tribes. The Dance was always around the time of the summer solstice. Bands that normally
lived dispersed throughout the winter found this to be the time to gather for spiritual and other forms of union. The government saw what they called “self-mutilation” as against their definition of decency at a time when aboriginal people were to be assimilated and acculturated. Today, it is still practised though its significance is not as widespread as it once was, due in part to religious conversion of many aboriginal people.

Since *The Spirit Sings* exhibition of 1988, (re)presentation of aboriginal material culture has developed into a burgeoning critical discourse. Curators who routinely collected or exhibited such objects are now asking serious questions about their practice. Indeed, *The Spirit Sings* became a watershed in Canadian museology. With the subsequent release of the *Task Force Report on Museum and First Peoples*, many museums are now taking greater pains to work with aboriginal peoples on what/what not to exhibit and collect. As an example, at the Head-Smashed-In site, near Lethbridge (Alberta), curators negotiated with the local aboriginal community on how to exhibit medicine bundles. A compromise resulted in which simulations were created. Its simulated identity, however, served as a reminder to viewers the great respect accorded these sacred objects, thus establishing a principle that sanctity has little or no place in museums, that sacred-ness does transcend museum realities. This is but one example, but it’s a quantum leap made from just a short while ago.

Duncan Campbell Scott, superintendent of Indian education, quoted in the *Edmonton Bulletin*, August 9, 1910, in response to white officials at a local fair who wanted to use local aboriginal people dressed up in their traditional regalia.

See William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*. In this controversial exhibition, Elizabeth Broun, Director, National Museum of American Art explains: Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “artists did not work in isolation but were part of a wider movement of writers and thinkers in many disciplines and countries, all transfixed by the idea of progress as it applied to their own special studies” (viii). Elsewhere she adds: “Artists skated over the low points of the historical record—economic disasters, mining busts, droughts, depredations of the land, decimation of the buffalo herds, near obliteration of Indian cultures—with a consoling rhetoric of grand purpose” (viii). One of these low points, the “savage” turned “doomed” Indian is examined by Julie Schimmel, 149-189, through a number of artists and writers.

See my essay *Tenuous Lines of Descent: Indian Art and Craft of the Reservation Period* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1993), 93-120. The essay covers the area east of the Canadian Rockies during the first half of the twentieth century.


The idea of a “candid camera” comes from the name of a well-known American television show in which the show’s host would surreptitiously trick ordinary people doing skits usually set up by the program. The person(s) would be filmed doing, saying, funny things. We, the audience, are the observers. Only at the end did the host finally tell the victim, “Smile! You’re on Candid Camera.”

Quoted in Kaja Silverman, (1996), 164.

Thomas McEvilley, whose debates with Rubin are now legendary, further states: “Rubin has made highly inappropriate claims about the intentions of tribal cultures without letting them have their say, except through the mute presence of their unexplained religious objects, which are misleadingly presented as art objects. This attitude
toward primitive objects is so habitual in our culture that one hardly notices the hidden assumptions until they are pointed out" (1984:59). McEvilley argues that the exhibition’s creators failed to present its “other” as speaking subject, and failing to do so, one fails to know oneself. The voice of the “other” was silenced.

11 See my essay “Museums and Galleries as Sites for Artistic Intervention.”

12 The accusations were that some fast-rising Indian art stars, like Jimmie Durham and Randy Lee Whitehorse, were bogus Indians. A campaign begun by an artists’ lobby group in Santa Fe for protection against those who were usurping a market under false pretences, resulted in the introduction of the new Public Law. It states “that it is unlawful to offer or display for sale or sell any good, with or without a Government trademark, in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular Indian or Indian tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization, resident within the United States” (U.S. Department of the Interior).

13 This term was first used by the late Haida artist, Bill Reid, to describe some of early works that were copies of originals.

14 Robert Scholes, _Semiotics and Interpretation_ (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982).

15 Although Ames once told me that anthropologists have yet to abandon interest in the object’s original identity. Personal conversation, 1994.

16 I address some of these issues in the essay cited in note 8.


18 See reference to Ghost Dance in Edward Poitras’s _Wevoka’s Hat_, Chapter-3.


20 Antonio Gualtieri, _Buildings as Religious Testaments_, unpublished paper, uses buildings as examples of how we construct their meaning; I insert “objects” into the framework, since that is what buildings are also.


23 These are some of the terms used by Eliade to describe the shaman, which he argues is primarily a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia. “The word [shaman] comes to us, through the Russian, from the Tungusic _šaman_” (1964: 4).