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

McMaster, G.R.

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Introduction

A number of years ago I spoke with Walter Bonaise about some issues concerning the object. In his usual way, he spoke in English and occasionally Cree, which is what most people do back home. Sometimes he spoke only Cree, when no English words or phrases existed to describe his ideas. This is not unusual in any sense of the word. In this case, it seemed Cree was more appropriate because its untranslatability preserves particular words and phrases while giving them more cogent meaning. He was talking about medicine bundles. He uttered a phrase about the role of the bundles during the signing of the treaties. It wasn’t until after our conversation that it occurred to me that I should have asked him for a translation of the phrase he used. Later, I asked my mother how she would translate it; yet, I was not convinced she understood its use. She suggested that perhaps one of my uncles might have a better idea. To no avail. Neither of them verified what I thought I had heard. I left it at that.

What I thought I’d heard him say was that the bundles “speak”!

I decided to ask Bonaise some time later. What did he really mean by the phrase the “bundles speak”? The bundles, he said, were to protect our people. In turn, they had to be respected each time we came into contact with one. They are so powerful, only the very special and powerful of spiritual leaders or Wee-tay-wuk are given the right to make, handle, or own bundles. Only they knew how to find special objects that went into putting together a bundle. The bundle’s power is so significant, devotees believe each carries the spirit of a human being inside. The bundle is the human body, having legs and a head. They are sacred. For that reason alone, they are never opened, out of respect. Only if something is to be added by the spiritual leaders will the bundle be opened, and at no other time. They are always handled in a special way. Because they are considered animate, they are known to speak. Often, when troubled, they are addressed in a way that blesses and heals.

Now I began to understand what he meant.

This understanding raised the question: is it the object that is sacred, or the idea? Bonaise says that objects contained in medicine bundles are ordered in very particular ways, that their owners communicate with them in an equally particular language. Today, he points out, many
Indian people do not know what to do with them because of this power; it scares them. Other fears include keeping the bundles safe from looters, both Native or non-Native. Today, he says, everyone must be made aware of the identity of these objects, their importance, and the manifestations of their power. Museum curators and conservators find it particularly difficult handling bundles for preservation purposes, because they do not understand the object’s meaning. If we are to know them, we must first know how to open the bundles, what their functions are, and then how to use them. We must know how to connect with their power, if they are to help us. We must master their language.

As Bonaise said, bundles were brought out at the time of the treaty signings. Because Indian people believed in the bundles, they also believed that their power could prevail on the European to understand, and they expected the Europeans to look favourably upon the bundles. We know this didn’t happen. Regardless, these bundles were brought out and presented to everyone as witnesses to this historical agreement as all of the natural world was watching and listening. This included all the early European negotiators, North West Mounted Police, the Métis translators, and anyone else who happened by. Now, most surviving bundles are locked away in museum storage vaults across the country. Government officials must have known the power these bundles had in aboriginal peoples’ lives.

I once listened to Dr. Marlene Brant Castellano speak about the idea of “witnessing.” I asked her to explain. What she said was that for aboriginal people an important collective event like a ceremony was not only for the sake of human beings, it was for everything. That everything is present gives efficacy to the event, everyone and everything is witness to a powerful moment. The sun, the clouds, the air, the animals, the grasses, all were part of the event. All are interconnected. As well, I am reminded of Wohaw, the Kiowa artist, whose drawing *Wohaw in Two Worlds* (c.1882) similarly affirms the presence of witnesses in addition to another human being. In this drawing, Wohaw struggles to come to terms with giving up one way of life for another, and hopes that the very least he can do is balance the two. In the work, Wohaw pictures celestial (sun, moon, and a falling star) and terrestrial (buffalo and cow) witnesses. Wohaw pictures himself standing between a tipi and house; the tipi has a rock formation in front of it, while the house is a farm house, with a grid-like field. On another occasion I heard a lecturer speak about human beings as witnesses to the signing of treaties between Plains tribes and the Canadian government. He indicated that we’re often left to believe
there exists an official version of the event. Frequently, this version is signified by the signatures on the treaty. Yet, we are left with questions like: How accurate were translations? Did the Indian leaders fully understand all the intricacies of the treaties? What was left out of the official version of the story? The lecturer indicated that besides the official version of the transactions, there were often Mounted Police who routinely wrote diaries. Do these diaries exist? What would their version of events be? I believe there may have been others who could accurately recount the events, that perhaps written accounts do exist. Where are these written diaries and accounts? He says that they are locked up in the National Archives as state secrets, or something of that nature. Indian people are forbidden from having access to them, no doubt, for what truth claims they actually contain. I have not heard more on the matter. My point here is to indicate the cultural, linguistic, and political distance between what Indian people and early Canadians believe to be honest. One culture relies on written corporeal text, while the other believes in the efficacy of ethereal texts like medicine bundles. These cultural assumptions, however, do not figure in these moments. A critical, cultural space did not exist. Yet, the aboriginal people of today have taken other strategic routes to uncover original versions.

I became ever more convinced of the importance of aboriginal languages, not just for reasons of identity, but to understand the signification of objects. The importance of aboriginal languages as the language of articulation should not be underestimated. No doubt, we will continue handling objects in ways we have been taught, while others will bring other ways of knowing. By understanding the language, I was eventually able to find many relations into areas never before considered. I remember a time when I came upon a tribal elder; to whom I tried explaining the concept of “art,” with the hope of gaining his confidence to show me new ways of knowing. I only convinced myself of the futility of the exercise. As I see it, what may be more important is for us to draw from the aboriginal point of view these new ways of knowing into the English language, and subsequently into art historical discourse, which is the subject of this chapter.

Land, Language, and Identity
In this chapter I focus on those artists to whom the practice of articulation is fundamental to their notions of identity. I use Lawrence Grossberg’s definition of “articulation” to mean connecting new sets of relations out
of older, difficult, or even unworkable ones: “Articulation is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations—the context—within which a practice is located” (54). Thus by understanding the shifting relations within the art world, we begin to see the aboriginal contemporary artist practise new articulations that are often fundamental to notions of “aboriginality,” among them questions of land and language. This new practice brings with it new perspectives, sometimes at odds with prevailing views, and at other times consistent with them.² I maintain that the aboriginal contemporary artist not only uses the medium of art to make sense of the growing and complex reality of post-reservation times, but transforms these experiences and thoughts into intellectually powerful works of art that may be difficult to read. To begin, I want to consider the ideas of land and language as the basis for this new articulation.

For aboriginal people, land holds special meaning; it is the land that helps to shape their identity. The discursive concept of land, however, has become more complex and now includes land claims, aboriginality, politics, spirituality, and renewal, as terms of empowerment. Aboriginal people continue to regard land as owned by the community. Individual ownership is of no significance since land is neither saleable nor bequeathable. Individuals have only the rights to occupy and cultivate a share of the land. This follows the commonly expressed dictum: “We don’t own the land; the land owns us.” With the arrival of Europeans, however, the struggle for ownership began to be contested as the newcomers gained control over lands through conquest. Historically, the British did acknowledge certain aboriginal rights to the land; but, the current land claims discourse, for example, has become part of an ongoing struggle to re-establish “aboriginal title” to the land. Aboriginal people now have proved:

that they and their ancestors lived within, and were members of, organized societies; [that] these societies occupied the specific territory over which they were claiming aboriginal title; [that] their occupation was exclusive; and [that] this occupation was in effect when England claimed sovereignty over the region.³

Successful arguments in this process have established exclusive rights and title for aboriginal people to specific territories across the country.⁴ It will, nonetheless, take decades if not centuries before all land claims are ever totally settled. In the meantime, now that aboriginal people or
First Nations have established in law exclusive borders and divisions, they can begin to renew and sustain their rights, privileges and obligations as aboriginal people. With the recent success of the “Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en” case in British Columbia this can become a possibility. Part of the claim included the repatriation of over half their objects from the Canadian Museum of Civilization, on the grounds that many of the objects were integral to their continued identity. For them and many others, land claims are a reality signifying aboriginality, and a condition of the post-reservation period.

For the aboriginal contemporary artist, land—unlike “earth art” of the seventies, in which artists used metaphors of ecology and archaeology—has spiritual and political significance. Mohawk art historian, Lee-Ann Martin, writes that aboriginal identity continues to be embedded in notions of land:

Vital cultural knowledge about the land is encoded within the language of aboriginal peoples. Physical landmarks such as lakes, hills or rock formations reaffirm the connections of the people with the sacred and the profane, the natural and supernatural, the past and the present. Animals, trees and other plants are personified and perpetuated in both the spiritual and secular oral traditions of Native communities. Such specific knowledge of the land as expressed in the language contributes to a personal sense of cultural identity that locates aboriginal people throughout time in relation to a particular place.⁵

Ojibway storyteller, Esther Jacko, expresses a similar belief when she says: “By holding on strongly to my history and cultural beliefs, I was rewarded with a deep sense of identity with the land. This rooted feeling of continuity combined with the cultural values I had been taught saw me through many a good storm in the challenges of life” (65). Saulteaux artist, Robert Houle, sees land as the centre of power: “Today, many towns and cities are located in these traditional centres of power. First Nations people have known of them for thousands of years. They are mapped with songs and rituals. For this reason it is vitally important we try and make known the importance of land claims.” Frank LaPena, Wintu-Nomtipom artist, sees ceremony as constancy for aboriginal identity: “In order for human beings to maintain a relationship built on understanding and respect for the earth and for our own humanity, ceremonies are performed to remind us of our obligations. This is a commitment of choice. In ceremonies, both the spiritual and ordinary realms are present. In their connection they preserve and sustain the earth” (8). Chipewyan
artist, Jane Ash Poitras, agrees: “As I look around, I notice that Canada and the Americas are still occupied by the original indigenous peoples, who have already renewed the country in shamanism, and repeat this renewal in their festivals and ceremonies” (7). In another example, Robert Houle illustrates this perspective:

I recently visited Alex Janvier again at his home near Cold Lake [Alberta]. As we walked along the shore, I was moved when he picked up a small branch and handed it to me with the specific instruction to toss it into the lake. He said, “Now, your spirit will always be here.” In spite of distances in physiography across this vast continent, the First Nations have a spirituality that is grounded in a relationship with their surrounding space and in the sanctifying of territory. It is not a “landscape” as developed by European art history; it is not a Christian metaphor for one’s relationship with God. It is the indivisible contract between man and nature as equal before creation (1993:57).

Ecologist and philosopher, David Abram, affirms this relationship that: “In indigenous, oral cultures, nature itself is articulate: It speaks. The human voice in an oral culture is always to some extent participant with the voices of wolves, wind, and waves—participant, that is, with the encompassing discourse of an animate earth” (116). Given that aboriginal identity continues to be anchored in the idea of land and is fundamental to aboriginal peoples today, what about the language(s) of articulation? Language in contemporary aboriginal art comes to signify a new aesthetic. It is both discursively political and playful. Both English and/or an aboriginal language as a constituent part of the new aboriginal contemporary artist’s practice (like the conceptualists of the later 1960s and early 1970s) are now being used in varying ways. As I will make clear, many artists treat English as a “stratagem” to be exploited rhetorically by seizing the language of the centre; whereas, using aboriginal languages often signifies a “recovery” of a post-reservation identity.

It is a widely accepted notion, derived from Lacan, that subjects are constituted in language. The term “subject,” semantically and ideologically different from the more familiar term “individual,” is now seen to encompass the unconscious and subconscious dimensions of the “self.” “Subjectivity,” furthermore, implies contradictions, process, and change. Individual consciousness, on the other hand, can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge, and action. The term “individual,” which dates from Renaissance rationalism, views the human being on a more conscious level (Descartes: “I think therefore I
am”), implying identity is consciousness of self. Identity is constructed in and through language; it always related to what one is not—the Other. Psychoanalytic research since Freud and extending through Lacan prepares us to understand that it is through language that the subject is “constituted,” that language always precedes us and therefore gives us our subjectivity; in other words, we are born into language (“signifying systems”). It is through language that the subject is made into a social being. Through our lives we take on various roles or cultural positions, like “artist,” “father,” and so on. The art world, for example, is the “structuring agency” that produces its subjects. Subjectivity is relational, where both the “speaking subject” (“I”), and “subject of speech” (“You”), exist in a play of difference.

If we are constituted in language, then who controls the language? Louis Althusser argues that it is institutions—religion, education, the family, the law, political parties, communication, and culture—that are ideology-forming (50-57). His central thesis is that “ideologies interpellate individuals as subjects,” based on his belief that ideology is the process by which individuals are constituted as subjects. Ideology, in other words, calls individuals (“interpellates”) into place and confers on them their identity. This implies that ideology is bound up with the control over language. Madan Sarup argues that our identities are not completely determined by such institutions, for he believes we still have “free will” to limit or adapt to the external determinations (48). He believes that a subject’s identity is affected but not entirely determined by them. If this is the case, then for aboriginal people, it has been the federal government through its assimilation programs that has done so much to transform them by forcing them to learn new languages. Althusser would say that their consciousness is not free-floating but constructed, that their beliefs and meanings would come through these institutions. The idea of assimilation was to have aboriginal people identify not with other aboriginal people but with Europeans. Since contact, the system of education has aimed to supplant aboriginal cultures and to demolish internal cohesion. Edward Sapir has argued that one’s perception, or way of looking at the world, is largely determined by the language that one speaks. In Indian country, one is often accused of being either a “brown white man,” or an “apple;” that is, “white” on the inside and “red” on the outside. During the brutal reservation period, traditional frameworks, perspectives and ideologies were largely erased in favour of new ones.
Aboriginal people, however, have not completely succumbed. Instead, they were extremely adaptive to the frameworks of English, French, and Spanish, endeavouring to work around, within, and through these languages, to identify and use the language for their own benefit. This kind of discursive practice Ashcroft et al. describe as post-colonial: “[of] seizing the language of the centre (“appropriate”) and re-placing (“reconstituting”) it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (1989:38). Those who have so long accepted their subject-position as “other” to the dominant ideology of modernity—women, gays and lesbians, and various ethnicities—see this new consciousness as power.

Aboriginal people, for example, constitute themselves within new language games like many other so-called minorities. “Land claims,” for example, are not just actions to reclaim land illegally appropriated from aboriginal people. These claims are in themselves a discursive response that now includes identity, repatriation, language, and ways of life, thus subsuming many aspects of local aboriginal culture. Taking another example, what does the right to self-determination and self-government mean? We recall that this notion extends from establishing aboriginal title; it refers to social, cultural, economic, and political control; and, it is a group’s right to say who they are and how they constitute themselves. This, of course, leads to the political notion of nationhood, as reflected in the term “First Nation.” This term found efficacy in the early 1980s to describe the differential relations with the so-called “two founding nations” of Canada, the English and French. With aboriginal rights in hand, First Nations’ governments now institute power structures of authority and hierarchy, controlling memberships through instituting their own codes like determining “blood lines” and “blood quantum” as indicators. Others default to the already well-established Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) system.

For aboriginal people in the post-reservation period, the issues of land and the strategies of language are critical to their being. This form of tribalism, unfortunately, has come under critical examination because it is inherently fragmentary, particularly at a time when people everywhere say the world should be united. The unique historical relationship of the government to aboriginal peoples, however, accounts for the insistence of a continuing special status for First Nations. Thus, in North America there is no post-colonial world. Though the stakes are not as high in North America as they are in contemporary Central Europe, long relations between aboriginal people and democratically elected governments continue to ensure peace and relative stability. The plurality of
contemporary North American society, on the other hand, has greatly influenced current thinking among aboriginal people. It is in this realm that articulation, redefining the possibilities of life, can be played out.

Articulations
The artists to be considered here take the ideas of land and language not as issues of form but of meaning. Among its many uses we shall consider: land as hybridity (Poitras) and reclamation (Belanger); language as a tool of assimilation (Janvier), as critical discourse (Beam) and, as a discursive frame (Marshall); together, as articulation of local identities (Houle), and as performance (Belmore). Frequently, their use of land and language is an interplay of sign systems, one that brings to the viewer's attention concepts specific to the artist's spatiality. Though many artists use these concepts in their works, I particularly want to discuss works that allow us to read these ideas, because I believe they are fundamental to raising complex questions of identity.

The Peterborough Petroglyphs
The first illustration is the ancient site popularly known as the Peterborough Petroglyphs (fig. 19). These petroglyphs, located near the city of Peterborough, Ontario, were rediscovered by local anthropologists working in the area in the 1960s. I say “rediscovered,” because it has been said that local aboriginal people always knew of their existence. More recently, the site has become an international attraction, causing authorities to erect a covered building to protect it from decay and vandalism. When one visits the site, one sees tobacco offerings placed on the images as indicators of the site's continued use; as well, the site points to a cohesion with the land, the respect and reverence the ancients had for other beings, as seen on the rock's surface. These marks, delicately chiseled, were created for all to see and read, and to be continually used, not hidden in caves. Like the Lascaux petroglyphs in France, the Peterborough Petroglyphs are the most famous of their kind in the country. And, like the Lascaux paintings which begin Art History's narrative trace through Egypt, Greece, Italy, and colonial North and South America, so too, this work begins the aboriginal art historical narrative. But there is a difference. Though Lascaux is far removed from the modern European, Peterborough continues to be used by modern-day aboriginal people (and artists) as a source of inspiration, spirituality, truth, understanding, and wonder.
Today, aboriginal people are rearticulating these ideas in an effort to instil meaning and importance in their lives.

Esther Jacko, for example, points to the importance of storytelling: "[It] has helped me understand my historical background, cultural beliefs and the value system from the Ojibway point of view. This view approaches life with a totally different interpretation and offers unique explanations of our relationship with nature, the animals and the spirit world." American artist Jimmie Durham, however, sees it differently: "We have a need to maintain and recuperate land and culture that directly involves artistic work with political work: two necessities that are inextricably bound to each other" (1989:9). The difference in the
two enunciations is that Jacko speaks from within the culture, whereas Durham speaks from a distance outside aboriginal centres. Jacko's expresses healing, whereas Durham struggles to make a discursive space outside the centres.

Though not used politically, the Peterborough Petroglyphs is one of a vast number of sites across North America that allow aboriginal people to connect with the land, and specifically to place. Not dissimilar to how churches function for Christians, these sites are persistent reminders of the mysteries of place and must continue being articulated. Like the artists commissioned by the church, the people who conceived of these images were no doubt acutely aware of the magnitude of this space. This site signifies the importance of the land in the aboriginal (un)conscious, of its historicity and spirituality. Sites like this cover the landscape, with names that are older than memory; they are maps of the sacred and profane. These profound images are mediators between these two worlds, yet contemporary people can appreciate them for their beauty without understanding their spiritual significance. As the Peterborough Petroglyphs are visual mediators between two worlds, so too are the works of contemporary aboriginal artists. For the artist, sites like these are evidence of a great visual tradition.

Edward Poitras

When I first started showing my work, it was an identity issue [... of being] mixed. That's how I saw my life. As I grew up, I saw this connection with nature. [...] I have a very strong desire to change my own landscape.¹²

Edward Poitras's identity—artist, performer, teacher, urban and rural, Indian and Métis—is fixed strongly to the Prairies. Their influence has played a strong defining role in his aesthetic, which he acknowledges. His spatialized identity is defined by the land: the flatness of the Prairies, the tremendous expanse of the sky, the ever-powerful winds, the birds and animals that are always present, and the historical relations of its varied peoples. He feels comfortable here. That is why he chooses to live in Regina rather than larger urban areas like Toronto or Vancouver. Continually drawn to this land that most people would rather fly over, he is kept here by the odd mix of people and the extremes of weather. Though he frequently leaves, he just as quickly returns. He wants to move his body, not his home. He insists on his connection to land; his
attitude towards it remains unaltered. Like his ancestors, this land provides the spiritual, historical, political, and physical connection that gives the people their identity. To lose sight of this notion has serious implications for identity.

Earlier, I spoke about Poitras being a border crosser, about his accounts of growing up as a Métis on an Indian Reserve, then living in a predominantly urban, white environment. Being Métis signified being in between. As I quoted earlier, he says: “On the reserve, I was seen as Métis; but in the city, I was being called an Indian [...] I was getting it from both sides.” This peculiar cultural circumstance profoundly affected his life and work. The consequent feeling of marginality epitomized the notion of displacement. As a result, he repeatedly shifted his identity depending on the context. How he felt was one thing, how others viewed him was another. In this sense, reserve and urban politics were parallel, tending always to marginalize the minority “other” (mixed-blooms and Métis). Although as a child Poitras was made painfully aware of his difference, it was not until his early twenties that identity became an issue. Made conscious of his difference, he sought to submerge it. This process of repudiation is no doubt painful. He was sometimes so concerned with his contradictory status that he says, “I think there were a couple times I said I was Indian, but it didn’t seem right. I’m Métis [...] I am [...] well, with this treaty card, I’m Indian.” Since then, the Métis’ strengthening political identity has profoundly affected Poitras.

The politics of identity Poitras has encountered is nowhere more evident than in the site-specific work Offensive/Defensive (1988, fig. 20). Though the work was installed in two places simultaneously, it was part of a one-person show. The first part was installed just outside the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; the second part appeared somewhere on the Gordons Indian Reserve. The work is notably deceptive. From the photograph we see two patches of grass: Poitras took one piece of prairie sod from the Reserve and placed it on the manicured lawn of the Gallery; he then took sod from the Art Gallery lawn out to the Reserve. What was the result? The urban sod on the Reserve died immediately; but it returned to life shortly thereafter. The Reserve sod at the Gallery, on the other hand, flourished quite nicely. Offensive/Defensive plays on at least two metaphors: identity and displacement. The metaphor of identity follows this logic: one’s identity can remain relatively unaffected in urban environments; conversely, in the smaller rural/Reserve communities, identity may be more problematic than meets the eye. As well, it indicates the (un)sustainability of identities in different spaces (urban and
The metaphor of displacement highlights having to move from one place to another, and the sense of feeling out of place in urban environments, even though they have their advantages.

*Offensive/Defensive* received negative reactions from some members of the aboriginal community who felt it was irresponsible for Poitras to suggest that aboriginal cultural survival is possible only in the city.

I have a different reading. To me, there are many opportunities for cultural survival in both spaces, which is why the title is deceptive. On the one hand, Poitras suggests how consistent has been aboriginal people’s resistant and protective role upholding their principles and philosophies in the face of the government’s aggressive tactics of assimilation, to alter them, to change them into brown, white men. Being defensive has more to do with tradition, of maintaining tribal philosophies of aboriginality, which is being connected to the land. Conversely, being offensive is attitudinal, in that urban environments by their very nature allow for the coexistence of multiple identities. Aboriginal people can find room to express personal and tribal identities in any number of ways: you can be who you are or who you want to be. In the smaller reserve communities, members know who you are, unless you are a stranger. Thus, in coming to the reserve community for an extended period, one must make certain sacrifices to fit within the existing patterns, which may be rigid or fluid. If one works within the community codes, it is more likely that the group identity will persist.

*Offensive/Defensive* is a play on post-reservation identities, in that aboriginal people can now be seen to assume multiple identities beyond just the cultural. But, like everywhere else, the rise in identity consciousness has sparked essentialist debates about “Who is or is not an Indian?” In Canada, for example, the recently arrived members to reserves who have gained status through Bill C-31, are currently experiencing mild forms of marginalizing even though they are now legally Indian. In the United States, the so-called *Arts and Crafts Law 1990* has legalized artistic identity to keep out the “fakes.” What works of art like *Offensive/Defensive* do is reflect an important difference in reality; that is, the power inherent in art and the effectiveness of works like Poitras’s. How it’s played out in the real world is another matter; but, judging from the responses to it, its success is always contingent.

*Offensive/Defensive* implies that the issues surrounding land involve a constant struggle. In Canada, land claims have become big business as aboriginal people are now gaining real estate, and in doing so, are also exercising their cultural affinities once again. In other cases, aboriginal land claims are becoming an issue for the surprised urban dweller, as urban areas are now being targeted for claims. Now the Indians are on the “offensive.”

Finally, this work is about centre and periphery, saying that in fact, in every centre there is a periphery, and vice versa. For example, it used to be that reserves were the outposts, the “backwater.” This was before the identity-conscious sixties and seventies when so many young
aboriginal people were wanting to “go back” to the land. This meant going to reserves and other aboriginal communities in search of identity and to be identified. In effect, they were returning to the centre. These new centres have since begun to position themselves as such. Culturally, they are flourishing.

The deceptiveness of this piece renders the question of who is on the offensive or defensive, a constantly shifting one, making the work even more powerful and effective.

Lance Belanger
The next artist with a quest uses the land as his art gallery. He is Maliseet artist Lance Belanger who was born in 1956, on the Tobique Reserve in the Canadian Maritime region of New Brunswick. His family divided their time between the Tobique Reserve, where he spent his youth living with his grandparents, and the predominantly white neighbourhoods of New England. Belanger has since lived in Regina (Saskatchewan), Ottawa (Ontario), and Vancouver (British Columbia), where he currently makes his home.

Growing up along the eastern seaboard, and traveling to and from the Reserve and New England, were, he believes, relatively insignificant factors in the formation of his identity. “I was conscious of Tobique Reserve and my family,” he says, “but it didn’t mean anything at the time.” Consequently, little of Belanger’s recent work has to do with his own tribal identity; instead, his focus centres on creating a political space for the long extinct Taino Indians of the Caribbean. This interest began in the late 1980s while visiting the Taino Museum in the Dominican Republic; there he was inspired by a series of stone spheres. The Taino Indians were the first aboriginal people Columbus came in contact with and within fifty years they would be extinguished. The Lithic Spheres Project (1994), as it became known, is a reclamation of an extinct people. Taking the enigmatic shape, Belanger recreates his own spheres, within which he invests the spirit of the Taino. Then he “plants” the lithic spheres around the world, claiming what I call a spatial identity, more perceptual than real (fig. 21). Belanger combines a modernist sensibility with a sense of generosity and responsibility. As he puts it: “My assessment is based on pure enjoyment and awe. [...] What I’m doing is appropriating; but, I will try giving back as much as I can in terms of an outside understanding of Taino culture.” This statement—“appropriating [...] but [...] giving back”—the claim to be creating a new spatial identity for the
Taino, of "[protecting] what that process may have been," will be key to my analysis.

Does he court the danger of an intellectual overlay that suggests appropriation is the only way to appreciate the Taino, regardless of whether the truth is attainable? "My job," he says, "is not scientific [...] is to go in there and appreciate what they are." Belanger is experimental, creative, thoughtful, and empathetic, which leads him to engage with Taino art, and their memory, as Western history does in its continual affirmation of Christopher Columbus. The Taino were victims of Columbus, accorded no recognition except the distinction of being extinct, and objectified in museums.

The *Lithic Spheres* signify a substantive concept Belanger refers to as "reclamation." But, what is being reclaimed, given back, or demanded, to be returned? The original lithic spheres, found in varying sizes across Central America and the Caribbean by archaeologists, have since been deposited in museums as artifacts of an extinct people, and, in some cases, the spheres are used as adornment for gardens, parks, and museums. Some spheres in Costa Rica, for example, measure some twenty feet in circumference and weigh some fifteen tons (fig. 22). Their mystery, however, has endured; their meaning is forever lost; their physicality remains enigmatic. Although intellectual interpolation remains
contradictory, why does an artist like Belanger inculcate his very unscientific ideas? First of all, Belanger's *Lithic Spheres* project articulates the identity politics of place, his choice to reclaim the identity of the long-extinct Taino, to make a political space for them. Their mysteriousness ("extinct-ness") allows him opportunities for personal interpretation, like creating his own ceremonies, and physically "planting" their identity around the world. This is his artistic strategy, his aesthetic of tricks. As well, he sees this spatialized politics of place, in which articulation is at once political, spiritual, and cultural, as an opportunity for reclamation by simply taking ownership and responsibility. Reclamation, which often refers to the political empowerment through territoriality, also suggests the possibility of a cultural and intellectual self-empowerment: to decide upon one's own historical narrative, for example. Belanger says: "I can achieve my own reclamation in terms of my intellectual and physical territory with the use of pre-Colombian lithic spheres." Thus, he reclaims an intellectual and physical space for the Taino, the lost knowledge of who they are, by fixing them into our consciousness. Through this process,
they now become traces within our memory. This intellectual transformation has the potential to strengthen his own position, which I believe can be the foundation for a new aboriginal contemporary art practice based on the connection between land, language and identity.

Finally, Belanger believes that "we don't need to know the details about our ancestors [...] only] that they were there." *This a priori* statement suggests a strong concern for self that needs explanation. The idea of self-identity, of centring self, through a process strengthened by reclamation in terms of physical territory, political empowerment, and intellectual reclamation is, as I see it, the basis for Belanger's work. Hence, *Lithic Spheres* (fig. 23) is based on a dialectical strategy that implies that acquiescence to another knowledge of self can be both disempowering and decentring. While Western epistemologies and methodologies décentre through analysis, the alternative is to centre oneself through an exploration of the self. Belanger sees this can be done through an artistic practice firmly situated within the practices of everyday life. For example, he speaks of *Lithic Spheres* as being placed in the finest galleries in the world. What he means is that his project is to locate spaces outside normal institutional spaces, spaces that are natural, that to see them is to travel great distances: to the glaciers, the sand beaches, or valleys of Hawaii. They are in cities like New York, Phoenix,
Thunder Bay, Ottawa. They are public art. The works happen wherever he goes. They become the practice of his everyday life. This is his idea of reclamation. It is a project limited not to reclaiming land, but what comes with it: space and identity. It is a liberating process where he no longer feels or thinks in terms of confinement, but of sovereignty. Belanger believes in vigilance and assertiveness when it comes to articulating notions of sovereignty. It has to be an important part of his consciousness, wherever he goes, whatever he does, because it strengthens the identity of self. He means it in the same way Robert Houle means it, when he says “sovereignty over subjectivity,” that when sovereignty is exercised and understood, it places the self in a very different attitudinal situation, unlike his impoverished ancestors who were heavily controlled by legislation. Aboriginal rights allow Indians to make choices. How they are articulated, however, is critical to self-determination and consciousness.

Alex Janvier
In the mid-1960s Dene artist Alex Janvier was living and working in Ottawa, not as an artist, but employed by the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA). He abruptly left over internal pressures. During this time, the DIA was the prime employer of aboriginal people; no doubt it was trying to heal historical wounds brought on by its disastrous historical relations. This was one way to support and empower the new Indian. For Janvier, the institution was a vacuum that emptied everything out of the Indian. Before working with the DIA, his first institutional experience began at boarding school. His struggles follow from a process of self-realization to the development of a critical and intellectual understanding of the traditional space of the reserve—experiences that would be expressed by an artistic strategy. Known for his clever wit and critical observations, Janvier was the first aboriginal artist to understand the potential of critical positioning. This is reflected in his early works, particularly when he shifted from signing his paintings “Janvier” to the numbers “287” (fig. 24).

Alex Janvier was born on the Le Goff Reserve, Cold Lake First Nations (Alberta), in 1935. He was one of ten children raised in the Chipewyan tradition, speaking the Dene language. Like many other Indian children of his generation, he attended the Blue Quills Boarding School. By the late 1950s he was attending the Alberta College of Art (ACA). It was at the ACA that he began signing his work using his treaty number 287, instead of his Christian name.
It was an innocuous kind of gesture, expressing his subject position within a powerful bureaucracy. It is also a commanding reminder of the efficacy of governments and corporations in systems of subjection; and as outlined in Chapter 1, aboriginal peoples' experience with codification within a discursive system is now largely ubiquitous. Treaty numbers and treaty cards are part of a system of accounting for band members worked out by DIA. It is a largely racist system, as Menno Boldt explains:

[...]

although the Indian status-determining criteria embodied in the Indian Act were not derived from any explicit or consistent principle of 'race,' the effect of the act's status-determining criteria has been such as to create and perpetuate a racial category. And because Indian culture was never incorporated in the Indian Act criteria for Indian status determination, Indian culture has never been a criterion for band/tribal membership determination. In effect, the Indian Act status-determining criteria have served to preserve the race while neglecting the culture. Its criteria have created racial communities while disregarding cultural communities (207).

fig. 24 Alex Janvier, 287, detail of signature.
Because identity is no longer as clear as once presumed, band/tribal governments now have to determine new ways of identification, particularly since so many people no longer live on reserves. There are now stories to the effect that treaty cards, like the one Edward Poitras problematizes, are being counterfeited and sold in the streets. It is not sophisticated technology; but, owning a card gives the holder some exemption from paying taxes. What began as a universalizing tool of modernity, identification through the random issue of numbers, is no longer reliable. Will the band/tribal governments go high-tech? We have already seen the transcendent fingerprint used, which favours neither sex, colour, nor religion. We are now discovering that in the next millennium, the new standard will be the “iris ID,” which is an image of one’s eye pattern as unique as one’s fingerprints (with developed technology, the “iris ID” will replace Personal Identification Number (PIN) numbers on bank machines, and signatures on credit and ID cards). “Two eight seven” like “007” is now history. Yet both will always be remembered, for the number signified more than the person; it encompassed a persona. Janvier ceased using his numbered signature in the late 1970s. It is difficult to read the marks and strokes in Janvier’s work. We have to rely instead on his use of language, either from the paintings’ titles or from his interviews. Only then can we begin to understand his intentions. Janvier pushes abstraction beyond the aesthetic. Viewers would be hard pressed to interpret the artist’s intention on seeing the numbers 287; instead, they would probably read his work in ways other than what Janvier intended. Janvier is political; but his paintings belie this message. This is the fundamental problem when reading his work. Therefore, my intention is to look beyond the painting, at his working method, in order to understand his work.

Janvier’s return to the reserve was a return to land and Dene culture. By the early 1970s, long after he left the DIA and moved to Edmonton (Alberta), Janvier tired of urban life. He returned home to a quiet, slow-paced life on the reserve, where he quickly became interested in trying to understand the demanding tradition of Dene epistemology. Though he was born into the Dene language and community, he felt somewhat removed. His first decision, therefore, was to speak Dene every day, leading him to become an active participant in various traditional practices. It is from here I believe his critical narrative emerged: the articulation of a Dene perspective that was based on a greater understanding of the outside world. He was able to understand the world he came from through the world he was in. His return was not forced; rather, he saw a new
dimension from which to express this spatiality. Through the years, his life work reflected his everyday life—from seeing something new, to visiting a new country; or, from being aggravated by the military aircraft flying overhead, to celebrating his relationship to the land. Ultimately though, Janvier’s philosophy is of the land. Like many aboriginal people whose identity is articulated within the interrelation with the land, Janvier’s is nurtured in a sensitivity that sees the land as his “mother.” It is a sentient understanding. His turn to the philosophy of the land, through the Dene language, marks a return to a spirituality that guides his life and art. He sees it not only as a responsibility but a commitment, unlike the Catholic practice of absolution: it is a struggle of the spirit, a way of life, of having a firm and fundamental belief in a more than human relationship with the land. Walter Bonaise’s echoing statement, “it’s hard to be an Indian,” evokes the contradictions inherent in everyday life: the idea that conflicting positions, between taking ownership and responsibility for the struggle and being relieved of the right to struggle, mark the contradictory aspect of present-day life, particularly the dislocation and fragmentation from the land. Janvier’s works, however, signify these contradictions, though the viewer can easily miss the point, because his works, abstract as they are, are beautiful.

Janvier’s most compelling piece to date is *Morning Star* (1993, fig. 25), located in the Canadian Museum of Civilization. This immense work was done during the summer of 1993. Janvier was assisted by his son Dean. They both stood, high above the Museum’s south dome, on a specially designed geodesic, dome-like, aluminum-tubing scaffold that was placed on a one-metre wide horizontal catwalk that circled the base of the domed ceiling. It was calculated that they spent three months, working ten hours a day, seven days a week, on a work that measures 418 square metres (4,500 sq. ft.), 19 metres (62 ft.) in diameter, and rises 27.5 (90 ft.) metres above the floor. “It was a profound spiritual feeling,” he says, “of really being in it.” Like many of Janvier’s other murals located throughout Canada, *Morning Star’s* physicality establishes a spatial presence that is at once overpowering, yet composed. The viewer, as seen in fig. 26, can see it from the floor; then by escalator, rise to the top floor. At the top, the viewer is almost completely surrounded by the mural. The impact is humbling. The work is divided into four, each quadrant designating an episteme, or a set of relations held valid in a given historical period. The yellow quadrant, for example, signifies pre-contact, a time before the arrival of Europeans, when aboriginal people had a different sense of harmony with the land. Next, the blue quadrant signifies colonization, the loss of land
through treaties and the total colonial control of the Indian body politic. The red quadrant signifies the present, the post-reservation moment, where the power relations begin to shift marginally in favour of First Nations. It also signals a return to traditional morality and values. The final quadrant is white, signifying the unknown, the future. Janvier says it also means a time of healing, not just for aboriginal people, but for humanity. *Morning Star* is a history painting done in response to his band's land claims and as a tribute to the hunters and trappers in his area. He will always remember when, in 1952, the government expropriated their land for use as a Weapons Range; his people were then forced to move into the Cold Lake Reserve. Displacement and loss are important elements in this work, and as a result, they inform Janvier's politics. Of the "morning star" the Sioux holy man Black Elk once said: "Here you see the Morning Star. Who [ever] sees the Morning Star shall see more, for he shall be wise" (quoted in Neihardt 1932:xvii). For Janvier, this mural concerned finding direction, and by knowing the past, he and his children will be well-prepared for the future.

Janvier still lives on the reserve, still paints in the abstract style, and still has an edge that comes only to those who feel unjustly treated. His work will always confound; but at the same time, offers a magnificent
visual experience. He continues to be Dene, meaning that his way of life will always be coloured by his cultural perspective.

**Carl Beam**

Carl Beam's *The North American Iceberg* (1985, fig. 26) is a shrewd work. Yet its complexity tends to be eclipsed by one particular distinction. It was the first work by a contemporary aboriginal artist to be purchased by the National Gallery of Canada. This piece was collected not because it was done by an aboriginal contemporary artist, but by a very talented contemporary Canadian artist. Taken synecdochically, however, *The North American Iceberg* has come to stand for a whole body of which it is only a part. It has been popularized in this synecdochical function by some artists, making the work a kind of Trojan horse for aboriginal contemporary art because it is the first to enter the fortress, thereby making it possible for others to be considered. This work opens more than a space for future aboriginal artists, or for Beam himself and his place in Canadian art history. Rather, *The North American Iceberg* insinuates something greater than itself. It has come to stand for an entire discursive network previously ignored by the mainstream, and for that reason it is a synecdoche. In a way, this work gave Beam the legitimacy which he skilfully used to press into the mainstream's own discursiveness, concerned with maintaining its own pre-eminence. A few years later Beam joked to an audience of aboriginal artists, no doubt realizing

![Image has been removed due to copyright protection](168)
all that glitters is not gold, that the mainstream in Canada was not that fast. In fact, he said: “there are very few people [in] it [...] it’s not a roaring torrent [...] it’s more like a mud puddle, or tiny creek at best [...] it might [look] a mile deep but it’s only up to your knees” (quoted in Young Man 1988:91). If Beam was quick to test the depths of the mainstream, how then do we read this work against that discourse? What does he mean by the “North American Iceberg”? Is he referring to another master narrative?

Carl Beam was born at West Bay, Manitoulin Island (Ontario), in 1943. Art historian Amelia Trevelyan writes that Beam:

began life quite literally as the product of two cultures: his mother is Ojibway, his father Euro-American. Thus, he is contemporary artist, Canadian citizen, and a member of the Ojibway, or Anishnabe, as well as Anglo communities. He explores and unfolds these multiple identities in his work, resulting in his unique vision. From within this multi-layered identity, he sees and interprets the world from many, often divergent, perspectives. His scrupulous honesty in this process prevents his ignoring or privileging any of the realities he lives. The result is a clear, often stark, vision of the world, of the composite nature of culture and the universal imperative of responsibility, regardless of the content or medium in which he works (52).

Over the last fifteen to twenty years, Carl Beam’s work has been fairly consistent in technique, a seemingly random disarticulated juxtapositioning of photographic images, taken by the artist, or abstracted from well-known sources. We, the viewing subjects, are responsible for filling in the discontinuous spaces, the ruptures in between, with suture-like readings. Because Beam relies heavily on photographic images and seriality, we are solicited to read his works filmically. For this reason, I want to draw on Jacques-Alain Miller’s notion of suture as “lack” and “absence” (in Silverman 1983:200) and our struggle to make these spaces cohere with meaning and narrative. Silverman adds: “Theoreticians of cinematic suture agree that films are articulated and the viewing subject spoken by means of interlocking shots” (201). She insists that it is the transitions that remain the basic element of organization. Stephen Heath (rendered in Silverman) argues that the editing process is common to all shot transitions (201). Silverman explains:

Equally important to the cinematic organization are the operations of cutting and excluding. It is not merely that the camera is incapable of
showing us everything at once, but that it does not wish to do so. We
must be shown only enough to know that there is more, and to want
that "more" to be disclosed. A prime agency of disclosure is the cut,
which divides one shot from the next. The cut guarantees that both the
preceding and subsequent shots will function as structuring absences
to the present shot. These absences make possible a signifying ensem­
ble, convert one shot into a signifier of the next one, and the signified
of the preceding one (205).

In *The North American Iceberg* Beam makes use of image and word.
We see three views of the artist hovering above the phrase—The Artist
Flying Still—drawing our immediate attention; at the lower left he writes
"Revolving Sequential;" above right is the title "The North American Ice­
berg 85;" and beneath that it reads, "Ignored, the force moved unsung
because it is so real. Into the real it knows flash to light." Flying past the
bottom are the numbers one to eighteen. We see the artist's hand in the
upper left corner. In addition to his self-portraits are historic photographic
images of Geronimo, two bare-breasted Wichita women, and a group of
people including a man and two women. Photographic sequences of the
assassination of Anwar Sadat, Muybridge's flying eagle and running elk,
and images of a rocket launch and a raven complete the sequence.

The image/word relation is often difficult to make cohere, equiva­
lence can be misleading; yet, I do not want to be drawn away with reading
his work as pastiche, or a medley of borrowed images that lead nowhere.

Before reading the relations between the images, they must first be
read iconically—that is, as analogous relationships between sign and
meaning)—against the title of the work. This work is an objection to
the extraordinary arrogant title of its namesake, the 1985 exhibition *The
European Iceberg,* which was held in Toronto. The problem with ice­
bergs is that they float in similar waters with other icebergs, against
which they will occasionally collide. Carrying this metaphor further, it
can be said that icebergs focus on their own centrality; this is, of course,
it until they melt and their waters become one. In this context, the iceberg
from Europe was understood as a massive force flexing its muscles to
reposition itself as a force in the contemporary art world; in contrast,
Beam's iceberg of North America is not inconsequential. Unlike the
European iceberg which speaks about its impressive and influential
contemporaneity, the North American iceberg attempts to articulate its
historicity. Thus, both icebergs address particular metanarratives.

In *The North American Iceberg* there are several images that are
in no way referenced to being North American, or aboriginal for that
matter. Rather, the artist seems to indicate that he (or we) is (are) constituted by history, both past and present, and by events near and far, that there are heroes as well as everyday people. The camera shoots and everybody, and everything, bleeds; yet, the work is not concerned with death, but with subjectivity, with knowing and telling untold realities. The artist is pictured in three different angles while we take the fourth position in this "revolving sequential." We, the viewing subject (the absent spectator), become part of the picture, to complete the suture. We are also put in a position of spectators caught up in the gaze facing various figures who stare back at us, as well as witnessing world events—space travel and the assassination of Anwar Sadat.

The voyeuristic position we are placed in where we gaze at two prominently enlarged images of bare-breasted Wichita women, makes us feel their nakedness, not immodestly, but as if we were reading National Geographic. Whereas the reality of a man with two women, more than likely his two wives, is incongruent to Western values, yet they seem unsullied. The famous warrior-chief Geronimo is now suppressed to biography. These bits and pieces proffered by Beam as the tip of the North American iceberg are, however, far greater in their relations. Though each of these images can be read independently and iconically, they are only partial. If we take the idea of suture to draw relations between the words and images, we can extend this work to create a plural and complex meaning and narrative.

The history of North America is a history of relations between Europeans and aboriginal peoples. It is the narrative of two forces—one is not possible without the other. The nature of the relationship has been all but ignored in the mainstream discourse. I believe Beam's use of the phrase "revolving sequential" affirms the relationship. The Iroquoian Two-Row wampum belt (fig. 27) signifies this historical relation.
between the Iroquois and the European, where each is expected to respect the space of the other, like two boats going down a river. The revolving sequential further suggests a kind of double helix where Europeans and aboriginals continue to be distinct, while realizing there will be relations along the way. Thus, Beam’s work is in part a narrative of those relations; events along this historical trajectory will always form the conditions for particular moments. This work does not point so much to the future as a project in front of us; instead, it suggests that our collective past cannot be ignored because our North American identity is very real. Beam may therefore be saying that the camera has subjectively constituted this North American-ness.

Indeed, Beam is “flying still,” at least that is the paradox of this work and what it means. Beam has perforated spaces for others. More importantly, however, he has opened our minds to a far more complex understanding of who we are.

Carl Beam’s visual vocabulary, of using images like words, fascinates the viewer. We enter into his world, which is really our world, the global common. Yet sometimes, we are left trying to understand, to glue the images/words together, so they come to signify something. He sees and hears the same things we do; only he disarticulates them and we are left to do the connecting. We must play the game of signification, by making them into signs. The opportunity afforded by *The North American Iceberg*, of fastening images and words together, is a bit like trying to use the very basis of the English language. One can end up going in circles at the enormity of the task of connecting, or articulating, from the huge vocabulary Beam works with.

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**Teresa Marshall**

Teresa Marshall, born in 1962 on the Millbrook Reserve (Nova Scotia), is an idea-based artist, frequently using language as means to convey messages about identity. Her installations can be complex, sometimes political, yet they manage to project a great deal of humour. She has realized that the political is indeed inherent in much of what she does, but that it takes humour to advance the idea further.

When we imagine the present state of post-modern identities, we expect to see masses of disconnected and fragmented bodies in search of one true, unified self, or perhaps, celebrating yet another layer of the self that lies dormant or “closeted.” Indeed, Douglas Kellner suggests that contemporary identity “becomes a freely chosen game, a theatrical
presentation of the self, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images, and activities, relatively unconcerned about shifts, transformations, and dramatic change” (158). Conversely, when we envisage aboriginal identities in Canada, our projections tend to be slanted towards the common stereotypes. Recent works by Teresa Marshall problematize this discrepancy as a radical nineteenth-century intervention by a newly emerging nation state called Canada, which imposed disastrous parameters around and on the colonized aboriginal peoples. Her own strategy is to complicate and transgress the received identity of colonial discourse, what Homi Bhabha calls the “productive ambivalence [...] that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference.”

Without question, Marshall says, “my mother is Micmac and my father is ‘Canadian’.” This type of consonance is not recent. In fact, Marshall comments, “Micmac oral tradition says that the green-eyed Micmacs are a result of intermarriage between the early Norse, the Beothuks, and the Micmac.”

Indeed, Olive Dickason points out that it was British policy for a short while to encourage this kind of union (160). No doubt intertribal marriages were a part of the everyday life of Marshall’s ancestors. In the first instance, however, her argument remains keyed to the artificiality of early Canadians and their government that segregated these two opposing identities. The instrument of segregation was the infamous Indian Act 1876. For Marshall, unfortunately, the Indian Act is a “strait jacket” for anyone defined as “Indian.” Does this mean that those other aboriginal people who escaped the definition, but fall into the interstices of the Act, are content at being called “Canadian”? She, and many others like her, feel that their identity is constantly being manipulated by officialdom, leaving little room for agency. This leads us to examine the issue of “language as a discursive frame” through a fairly deceptive piece.

Marshall’s reference in the Bering Strait Jacket (1993, fig. 28) is, of course, the infamous Bering Strait theory. It seems that all but a few archaeologists now believe that the ancestors of the aboriginal North Americans came from Asia by crossing the Bering Strait, either because of the pressures from local enemies, or because they were in search of game. Experts studying this area give dates for this movement at around ten thousand years ago. Aboriginal peoples of the Americas of late, however, have invoked the right to disagree with this theory. They consider it just as fictive as their right to claim they came out of a hole in the ground or the sky, or that Coyote created the earth long ago when there was none, only water. What this theory of the Bering Strait does is to
position any or all aboriginal people in similar circumstances to the European colonizers of five hundred years ago, as *immigrants* and *colonizers*. Though this last point is dangerously arrogant, because it has been used by radical right-wing thinkers, Marshall’s point of contention is the discursiveness of this type of language and its force among the general public.

Marshall takes a man's suit coat, extending its sleeves into a strait jacket form that leaves no opening for the hands, and tethers restraining buckles at the end to bind the wearer. In the lapel pocket she places a white silk handkerchief labelled *Indian Act* in red ink; and in the coat's
lining, the 1752 Treaty\textsuperscript{27} is silk-screened. Basically, this treaty was the first of its kind to guarantee hunting and fishing rights for aboriginal people, as well as regular gift distributions, which later became annuity payments.

Clearly, this work is personal. By this I mean that its principal notion concerns Marshall as a person of Micmac ancestry. She says this strait jacket signifies for her and her ancestors the specificity of the law which was designed to reduce if not annihilate them. The tribes (or, First Nations) of the Canadian Maritime region, notably the Micmac and Maliseet, have had the longest contact with Europeans—longer than any other aboriginal people in Canada. More importantly, they have managed to continue living on their ancestral lands despite their reduced size. Accordingly, there is a curious twist in this hanging suit. Although there is no body, bodiless hands suspended just above are positioned to manipulate the suit. The red strings attached to the hands hold up the puppet-like suit. The suit looks for a (Micmac?) body. Are these the hands of people who cannot see or understand aboriginal people’s unique history, or are they the only sensory touch available to the functionaries who carry out the orders? Curiously, the label on the suit says “made in USA” suggesting that the United States government is somehow implicated. But, how? The treaty was British-made. Could it be that some of those tribes, who signed the 1725-28 Treaty, were from the U.S. side of the border? This tag does not make sense. Marshall may have seen the contradictory, if not constricting, parameters of this and other treaties that don’t make sense, least of all to contemporary Canadians who feel the aboriginal Canadian gets more than his or her “fair” share.

The suit, finally, was the uniform of the professional ruling class in the late nineteenth century, signifying that group’s power. It was not designed for any physical activity, but for the sedentary. Interestingly, at the signing of treaties in the late nineteenth century, suits were given to the chiefs, according them an authoritative identity on par with the white man. Suits were also given to young aboriginal boys once they entered the boarding schools. The suits were uniforms that took away their individuality. The suits signified assimilation, the success of “colonial alchemy,”\textsuperscript{28} at turning the savages into civilized human beings. As a result, the suits signify the position of difficulty early signatories were placed in, thus the strait jacket.

Teresa Marshall’s suit jacket objectifies its intended wearer; namely, the aboriginal (Micmac). Its constricting nature returns us to the idea that the identity of aboriginal people is differentiated from all other
Canadians. The *Bering Strait Jacket* in effect tells us that contemporary aboriginal identity continues to be restricted to being a "treaty Indian." In her case, however, is she allowed to have other identities? Unfortunately, she and others like her are in contradictory situations because of how these treaties are sanctified by aboriginal peoples, which can complicate any possibility for differing identities.

Marshall's *Bering Strait Jacket*, then, puts into place ways in which language and treaties, frame, constrict, and place frames around things. Her play and abrogation of well-known signifiers, Bering Strait, straight jacket, treaties, are the strengths of this work; it is an intellectually challenging piece that seizes the language of the centre and replaces it with a more powerful meaning. Land will always be contentious, whether one has been is a particular place for five hundred or twenty thousand years.

**Robert Houle**

Saulteaux artist Robert Houle often infuses his work with references to both land and language. Born in St. Boniface (Manitoba) in 1947 and raised on the Sandy Bay Reserve, Houle is one of the most sophisticated aboriginal contemporary artists. Not only is he an artist, but also a curator and an accomplished writer.

Robert Houle is one artist whose rhetorical strategies are significant as spatial strategies. On a number of occasions he gave differential treatment to this idea. In *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians A-Z* (1985, fig. 29), for example, we see an angled shelf of objects,
forms inspired by rawhide containers known as “parfleche.” The shelf can be read metaphorically as a library on which lie reference books. Each parfleche has written on it one letter of the alphabet and above each parfleche are common tribal names (A=Aztec, B=Beaver, C=Cree, [...] Z=Zuni), which in turn can be read as synecdoches. Houle implies at least two ideas: one, that knowledge of aboriginal cultures contained in books can be appropriated, studied, and learned; and two, the displacement of orality by the written word. Knowledge can be defined as “a set of ideas accepted by a group or society of people, ideas pertaining to what they accept as real for them” (McCarthy 1996:16). In this case, knowledge is two-sided: it is how aboriginal people see themselves, and how they are seen by others. This pseudo-scientific presentation suggests, however, a space not for Indians, but for others wanting to know about Indians. Herein lies the irony, fact versus fiction: many people, including aboriginal peoples, search for a quality known as “Indian-ness” at sometime or another. I often hear it said that it is the so-called “urban” Indians who are removed from the aboriginal centre and are therefore in search of it, because at some point they have been displaced. So where can one go to find it? Ethnology books are one source. Hobbyist groups in Europe and the U.S.A. attempting to learn how to dress, perform ceremonies, talk, and live a life of independence like the aboriginal people of the Plains, frequently consult books. Houle’s rhetorical strategy contends the impossibility of attaining such a quality, of assuming a look (identity) by reading these books, disputing that culture cannot be reduced to books. We can never fully know everything about Indians or even specific tribes because they are never static long enough to know. Houle, however, asks: Can our lives be so easily scripted? Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians A to Z assaults these scientific strategies for classification, as well as the betraying of objects for pedagogical purposes where aboriginal people become scientific, pedagogic, and consumer curiosities. In fact, this may be the total argument by aboriginal people today: that the study of Indians is a losing exercise. The entire installation is a rhetorical sign of this deprivation.

The second idea proposed concerns the displacement of orality as represented in the alphabetization of the tribal names—Aztec to Zuni. This displacement came about through the imposed forced attendance of many, if not all, aboriginal children at Westernized schools. Schooling, as we are now more aware, is a crucial element in the process of identity formation. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, based on the idea of the historical manipulation of identity, aboriginal children were taken
from their families and put into boarding schools where they received a purely Westernized schooling. The power of the written word, its contradictory status, replaces and displaces the oral culture. However, its ambiguous status in a post-reservation world is not lost on people like Houle, who see its power. In this work, he objectifies the alphabet for its power both to destroy and create. For artists like Houle, it is the strategy of the creative alphabet that accounts for a new, and profoundly reflexive, sense of self.

In early 1989, as artist-in-residence at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Houle created four oversized abstract paintings called *The Place Where God Lives* (1989, fig. 30), coloured red, green, blue, yellow, referring to the sacred place the Saulteaux call *Manito-wapah*. Manito, the word for God, also forms the root word for the western Canadian province of Manitoba, where Houle was born. Manito-wapah is located on a narrow stretch of Lake Manitoba where the currents ebb and flow. The waters hitting the rock make the sounds of distant drums. A similar phenomenon is believed to occur at the Peterborough Petroglyphs. Houle's work re-appropriates and reclaims Manitoba. It gives form, abstractly, to the tribal narratives Houle is constituting. In the presence of the works, one senses the place and its spiritual qualities. The four paintings form a group of religious paintings by Houle, signifying the Four Directions (Winds); "The Place Where God Lives" becomes "the place where the winds meet," the centre of the
cosmos. It is a metaphysical work, articulating Saulteaux epistemology. Though the paintings make interdiscursive allusions to landscape, they are not landscapes per se; instead, they suggest a cosmological totality. The meeting of the four directions, the sky above (male/Father) and earth below (female/Mother) are signified in ceremony.

Houle stops short of this depiction, for this would fall into objectification. Instead, he places the four works not in a circle or in a formation suggesting it, but side by side in a typical gallery setting where our reading of them is at an aesthetic level, nothing more. They are metaphor, in that they permit us to understand an experience in terms of art. These works help to structure a potential experience of creating a new reality for the observer. They become landscapes for the mind, speaking of a “real” other space for the Saulteaux. The works are modernist in their handling and placement, yet equally important as pure reference to an ancient aesthetic of simplicity. This work that signifies one sacred space, now hangs in that most hallowed of places for artists, the National Gallery of Canada.

Houle’s Anishnabe Walker Court, Part 2 (1993, fig. 31), was an installation in the Art Gallery of Ontario’s Walker Court. This work can be seen as a site-specific response to the 1985 piece by German artist Lothar Baumgarten for the exhibition The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today. Baumgarten’s installation, Monument to the Native People of Ontario, paid honour to local tribes of southern Ontario, by recovering their proper names as a strategic practice of giving them visibility and identity. There is something problematic about this foreign artist coming to Canada to give, or confer, meaning by inscribing their names on a gallery wall. Has he not done the same thing as ethnographic museums, which by putting aboriginal objects on display, objectified them? These names, like artifacts, are to be read synecdochically. Baumgarten’s strategy has a paradox attached to it, due to its interdiscursive relation to museum discourse. The gallery visitor sees the artist’s work standing for an aesthetic (art), and the proper names are read as standing for a larger whole (artifact). Is this what Houle read that prompted an interventionist Anishnabe Walker Court: Part 2?

Houle’s work is in the foreground, while Baumgarten’s is off in the distance. Baumgarten’s (NIPISSING) upper-case lettering is situated overhead on the very high archways on this inner courtyard; while Houle’s (“nipissing”) lower-case lettering at chest height is on the courtyard’s periphery. Baumgarten monumentalizes and thus speaks on behalf of the aboriginal people; Houle ironically quotes the authority while bringing
the tribes down to the viewer's level, an indication that they are still alive. It would seem that Houle seeks to undermine this space by calling it Anishnabe, meaning "the people," but more specifically by invoking the linguistic association of all the named tribes. Houle intends the word "court" to be used more as a notion of sovereignty than a delimited space. So, whereas Baumgarten monumentalizes, Houle reifies. Indeed, that is the politics of this work, in addition to calling into play the representational practices of art, in which representation of the "other" is an attempt to legitimate from a critical distance. For Houle to originate the idea of inscribing tribal names could have appeared self-righteous; instead, we now see a work where juxtaposition induces us to respond critically.

For the last several years, Houle's study of well-known historical events—works such as Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories (1993) and Pontiac's Conspiracy (1995)—has prompted new questions of interpretation and framing from an aboriginal perspective. In Kekabishcoon Péenish Chipedahbung (1997, fig. 32a,b), a quotation from the famed Odawa Chief Pontiac29 (written in the language of the artist, Saulteaux, and translating roughly as "I will thwart your progress till the early morning sunrise") is juxtaposed to a make of automobile called Pontiac. First, Houle confirms an historical moment, then demands that we look critically at the reductive stereotype of Indian names used as commodity forms. His final strategy is giving subjectivity back to Chief Pontiac.

![Image has been removed due to copyright protection]

fig. 31 Robert Houle, Anishnabe Walker Court, Part 2, 1993.
Historically, Pontiac was at the centre of a brief but bloody war known as Pontiac's Revolt in 1763. Pontiac amalgamated eighteen tribes as an effective opposition to the government's policies and actions. Houle's narrative juxtaposes the much-admired Chief against the present-day city of Detroit, Michigan, where the car of the same name is made. Although Pontiac himself was Odawa, the linguistic distance between the two is not far. "Kekabishcoon Péenish Chipedahbung" was a war cry uttered as a defiance against Euro-American colonizers who saw Pontiac's Confederacy as an obstacle. Indeed, the relations were very clear between the two sides. Houle endows Pontiac with status and subjecthood by giving him voice, albeit a Saulteaux voice. As well, Pontiac's subject presence is threaded through all the car advertisements presented by
Houle in the work. Like many Aboriginal people of his generation, Houle grew up knowing Pontiac as the name of an automobile. This is especially true for anyone born before the 1960s. Somehow, the automobile’s iconic hood ornament symbolized several desires: freedom, individuality, and romanticism, the subject position of the “noble savage.” Thus, any connection between Pontiac the car and Pontiac the stereotyped “Indian” and Odawa chief, is at best fortuitous. Correlate that with the dominant discourse of the day, the invisibility of aboriginal peoples, and the image/sign of Pontiac remains at the level of object; until of course Robert Houle declares Pontiac to be an individual with other qualities: warrior, hero, leader.

No image exists of Pontiac as he lived in the early eighteenth century; consequently, our only memory the name evokes is the hood ornament. So, how can Robert Houle continue to struggle/fight/examine/infer/insert/make manifest the identity of Pontiac when our vision is overwhelmingly saturated by a false, commodified image? Rather than continue the dehumanizing reference as commercial product, Houle’s strategy is to question the invisibility, absence, and objecthood that underlie the very possibility of that reference. Houle reasons that Pontiac’s life and times are important elements in our historical narrative; yet, in an odd sort of way, so is Pontiac the automobile, though perhaps only in relational terms. To be sure, Pontiac the person, not the city or automobile, has had to be reified through visual and literary texts. Thus, to have any oppositional power against an already powerful image and fiction-making machine, Pontiac’s image must be presented as real.

Robert Houle’s use of rhetorical strategies creates a radical geography within the art museum where his articulation seeks not to undermine, but rather, to insert new if not forgotten and/or suppressed narratives.

Rebecca Belmore
I end this discussion of the relations between land, language and identity with the work of Rebecca Belmore. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, her main means of expression is performance. In the following section, I examine a work that operates in public and private spaces depending on the significance of the moment.

Belmore’s sound and performance installation, Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother (1991, fig. 33a), took place in a meadow near Banff, Alberta. Sometime later she arranged to take it across Canada, asking aboriginal people from across the country to participate.
My heart is beating like a small drum, and I hope that you mother earth can feel it. Someday I will speak to you in my language. I have watched my grandmother live very close to you, my mother the same. I have watched my grandmother show respect for all that you have given her [...] Although I went away and left a certain kind of closeness to you, I have gone in a kind of circle. I think I am coming back to understanding where I came from [...] " (quoted in Townsend-Gault 1992:97).

This was for her a very deeply moving, personal and public address. Though her address is in English, she wishes it could have been in her
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ancestral language of Ojibwa, but she does not speak it. In this work she does not speak about, but to, the sentient cosmos. In this way, she and others participate in a dialogue not with human beings but with what Abram calls “a more-than-human cosmos.” In this piece, land and language meet; in fact, the whole of creation is addressed—“all my relations”—a reciprocity is renewed. “In multiple and diverse ways, taking a unique form in each indigenous culture, spoken language seems to give voice to, and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth” (71). This is what she means by her wish that someday her address will be in “my language,” Ojibwa. For aboriginal people, language originates from the land—“language originates in our sensuous receptivity to the sounds and shapes of the natural environment.”

It is one way to explain the notion of ab origine, that language has its origins in human beings trying to make sense of their relationship with the environing earth, where indigenous languages articulate the land and in turn the aboriginal is articulated by the land. “Indeed, if human language arises from the perceptual interplay between body and the world, then this language ‘belongs’ to the animate landscape as much as it ‘belongs’ to ourselves” (82). Thus Belmore’s address or utterance invokes that relationship; she becomes part of the landscape, she enters into a dialogue with all her relations.

Two ideas are inscribed in this piece: communication and sacred time/space. In the Banff photographs (fig. 33b), Chief John Snow of the nearby Stoney tribe stands beside the seated artist; he speaks into the attached microphone, his voice amplified by the megaphone. Everything and everybody become witnesses. The work’s efficacy is that it brings to our attention the continued belief in the relation of humanity to the rest of nature. Belmore created an opportunity for everyone to speak without prejudice, fear, or embarrassment to the universe, because at the moment of enunciation, everything and everybody—the animals, the grass, the wind, the rocks, the sun, the mountains—are witnesses to the address. Belmore’s work, in this instance, depends on performance and space for its efficacy. The fact that she uses technology as a medium of communication is not at issue; similar technologies are continually used in large public gatherings by aboriginal people. Amplification is for reaching beyond. We raise, lower, or mediate our voices, depending on the space or situation. Belmore’s point, as I see it, is not just amplification, but a belief in the power of communion with some type of audience.

The second idea relates to the space where the expiation occurs. Her insistence that the event take place outside carries with it the idea of
inclusiveness—everybody and everything. Having the event out-of-doors places everyone on an equal basis, no one is greater or lesser than the next. What she helps create is a moment, a sacred time, a liturgical moment, where every responsible action is subject to everybody and everything. As traditional spiritual beliefs indicate, there are key times of the year for large formal performance gatherings, but none for personal enunciations. Belmore’s performance is more informal and not subject to specific tribal orientation; rather, she creates time/space and context.

Belmore’s endeavor to reclaim a relationship with the land is also an effort to reconcile herself as an Ojibwa woman in a modern world. Her return is an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual journey that she shares with so many others. Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother is a profound articulation of that journey to understand what it means to be aboriginal: “I have gone in a kind of circle. I think I am coming back to understanding where I came from.”

Conclusion
I began this chapter by relating a story of the “speaking bundles.” Realizing the distances across cultural lines profoundly affected my understanding of language, particularly now that we are more knowledgeable about how one’s perceptions, how one looks at the world, are coloured by language. I became more aware of the critical importance of aboriginal languages as keys to articulation, particularly in regard to interpolating traditionally based objects.

Furthermore, the pressing situation today regarding aboriginal languages is the discovery that they are becoming increasingly extinct. Out of the fifty-three different aboriginal languages now known to exist in Canada, only Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut, are forecast to survive. The two “official” languages, English and French, now the common denominators for everyone, will supplant aboriginal languages, or as some have often expressed it, “entire libraries.” My subject, however, was not this issue; rather, it was how artists make use of language, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, as points of departure.

How do we draw from the aboriginal ways of knowing into the English language and subsequently into art historical discourse? I considered the ideas of land and language as the basis for a new articulation. As I pointed out in previous chapters, it is important to understand the shifting relations within the art world to see how aboriginal contemporary artists assert new articulations that are often fundamental to notions
of aboriginality, among them questions of land and language. This new practice brings with it new perspectives, sometimes at odds and at other times consistent, with prevailing views. Furthermore, language in contemporary aboriginal art has come to signify a new aesthetic. It is both discursively political and playful. Both English and/or an aboriginal language, as a constituent part of the new aboriginal contemporary artist’s practice, are now being used in varying ways. As I showed, many artists treat English as a stratagem to be exploited rhetorically by seizing the language of the centre; whereas, using aboriginal languages often signifies a construction of a post-reservation identity. All the artists I have examined engage in ideas of land and language. Frequently, their use of land and language is an interplay of sign systems, one that brings to the viewer’s attention concepts specific to the artist’s position. Though many artists use these concepts in their works, the works I discussed allow us to read these ideas, because they are fundamental to raising complex questions of identity.

In view of these analyses, I contend that the aboriginal contemporary artist uses the medium of art to make sense of the complex realities of post-reservation times, transforming these experiences and thoughts into intellectually powerful works. Though their works are often difficult to read, they have managed to maintain a perspective consistent with their cultural identity; in other words, the reference points within their respective cultures are observed and not manipulated. Land and language are still puissant to a post-reservation spirit, because together they instill a strong sense of identity.

Notes
2 See Robert Hughes, Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993). This book critiques the spectrum of politics in art, from left to right. In the end, I agree with his assessment that the only way out is through high standards. He argues: “Democracy’s task in the field of art is to make the world safe for elitism. Not an elitism based on race or money or social position, but on skill and imagination. The embodiment of high ability and intense vision is the only thing that makes art popular” (201).
3 Olive Dickason, Canada’s First Nations 353.
4 The case of Sparrow v. R (1987) recognized aboriginal people’s historic occupation and possession to their tribal lands.

7 Silverman 126.


9 E. Sapir, quoted in David Abram, 91: “We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.”

10 This point needs further investigation; however, it is beyond the purview of this dissertation.

11 Jacko 59.


13 McMaster, *Edward Poitras* 82.


16 Robert Houle (1991) first used this notion to suggest that in order for aboriginal peoples to overcome government interference in every part of their lives, and to achieve a more substantial position in their own affairs, they had to assert their liberation. Supposedly, Native artists were part of this articulation.

17 The National Gallery’s curator, Diana Nemiroff (1992) writes: “Beam’s painting was the first work by a native artist acquired by the National Gallery since the acquisition of a small Northwest Coast argillite pole in 1927. The absence of First Nations artists from the National Gallery’s collections is significant in hindsight yet unremarkable in light of the Gallery’s history” (18).


19 Mieke Bal in *Reading Rembrandt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 32, argues: “Iconicity is a ground of meaning production, a code, if you like, that establishes a relation between sign and meaning on the basis of analogy of a common property.”

20 Curated by the Italian Germano Celant, *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today*, was at the Art Gallery of Ontario, February-April 1985. The AGO’s chief curator Roald Nasgaard, considered it the “first and most ambitious exhibition of its kind in Canada and indeed on this continent” (9).

21 The “gaze,” as explained by Silverman can be understood in terms of the camera’s “association with a ‘true’ and ‘objective vision’ [...] and has been] installed ever since the early nineteenth century as the primary trope through which the Western subject apprehends the gaze. [...] Not only does the camera work to define the contemporary gaze in certain decisive ways, but the camera derives most of its psychic significance through its alignment with the gaze. When we feel the social gaze focused upon us, we feel photographically ‘framed.’ However, the converse is also true: when a real camera is trained upon us, we feel ourselves subjectively constituted, as if the resulting photograph could somehow determine ‘who’ we are” (1996:135).
Homi K. Bhabha indicates that to understand the productivity of colonial power, we must understand the productive (his emphasis) ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. What such a reading reveals are the boundaries of colonial discourse and it enables a transgression of these limits from the space of otherness.” The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) 67.

I will use this spelling to be consistent with Marshall’s use, although the most recent spelling shows this way: Mi’Kmaq.


Nemiroff 202.

The Bering Strait Jacket also interdiscursively alludes to that solitary felt jacket Joseph Beuys once suspended on an art gallery wall; Edward Poitras, too, was once moved to such an act.

Marshall’s reference to the 1752 Treaty specifically targets the idea for the Mi’Kmaq’s historical rights to self-determination. It concerns a very early period in Canadian history, indeed a very important period in terms of treaty making. Much earlier and prior to the signing of the treaty, a protracted war against the British commonly called the Mi’Kmaq War had been taking place since the early seventeenth century which lasted up until the Royal Proclamation of 1763. At the close of this period in 1749 the present-day city of Halifax was founded on Mi’Kmaq territory and without the Mi’Kmaq’s consent, which prompted them to formally declare war. Colonists and soldiers were commanded to destroy any natives they saw. In fact, bounties were paid for their scalps. The British, interestingly, encouraged marriage to native women (as a form of assimilation) and the continued practice of gift-giving with the hopes of influence. Indeed, this had some success on the Maliseet who eventually signed a treaty in 1749. It was not until three years later that the Mi’Kmaq’s signed a peace treaty, which Marshall carefully but ingeniously uses to line the suit. This treaty was the principal document used to design all later treaties. The terms of agreement included the right to fish and hunt, along with gifts which later became annuity payments, all for surrendering their lands. Interestingly, what they signed was in effect an agreement laid out in the terms of an earlier treaty called the Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1725-28, between the British and several Maritime tribes other than the Mi’Kmaq and Maliseet.


Chief Pontiac (1712/1725-1769) was also known as Ponteack, Pontiague, and Obwandiyag.

This was the same year in which the “Indian Magna Carta” or the Royal Proclamation was created, which established the idea of “reserved” lands for aboriginal people as a mechanism to control disposition of land for white settlement. See Houle’s 1994 exhibition Premises for a Self Rule held at Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto, in which he presented five paintings relating to treaties, beginning with the Royal Proclamation (referring to the 1763 Treaty) and ending with the Constitution Act (referring to the 1982 Canadian Constitution).