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

McMaster, G.R.

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> tribal peoples who are given a chance—who are not physically massacred or economically or socially overpowered so they are reduced to destitution—seem to have much less problem maintaining their own identity than we do. We are the people who are constantly worried about our own identity and feel it is threatened by diversity, multiculturalism, and so on (279).

To cite an example, Guy Brett, the British art critic, saw his cultural identity as an Englishman as unproblematic—at least, this is what he had always assumed. His lack of awareness was made apparent to him by Mexican-American artist, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, who questioned him as to his cultural identity. To Brett’s surprise, he now looked into Lacan’s mirror, and suddenly realised his “otherness” and status as a white male Anglo-Saxon. “Dominant cultures,” he says “[often see themselves as] whole and beyond question [...] accustomed to rule, to decide, to explain, to define. This is our conception of knowledge. But this self-confidence today is actually hollow, like an empty suit of clothes, a kind of void” (1992:52). Charles Lemert called the void, a “lost centre” (98); and Maybury-Lewis feels the centre itself is threatened. Madan Sarup sees the West’s preoccupation with identity as relating to its confidence and weakened sense of self: “It could be said that the impulse to preserve the past is part of the impulse to preserve the self [...] The past is the foundation of individual and collective identity” (97). “Nowadays,” says Thomas McEvilley of our changing world, “we see the next age not as a Prussian ordering or homogenization of world-wide culture, but as a pluralistic globalization of it. [...] Instead of one deeply etched line crossing the page, a series of more lightly inscribed lines run parallel” (142-144). The world colonial systems have been arrested and supplanted by decolonization movements. Despite this progress, aboriginal people in Canada continue to remain very much in a position in which domination and subordination are defining terms.

As I pointed out in Chapter 2, the federal government enforced draconian policies to rid aboriginal peoples of their specific identities.
(a kind of “ethnic cleansing”), and impose on them identities acceptable to mainstream society. Assimilation and acculturation were two processes used to reinforce this action. Despite this, aboriginal peoples resisted—but at an enormous cost. Throughout the twentieth century, aboriginal political organizations unrelentingly struggled to bring about changes to this relationship. But, it was not until after World War II, a period I call post-reservation, that radical reconstruction took hold, including the increasing migration of people to cities, aboriginal leaders’ demand for a new relationship with the federal government, aboriginal communities’ control of educational systems and economic development projects, and aboriginal people’s assertion of cultural freedom. Aboriginal people began to embrace the arts, both in urban and reserve spaces. Power structures shifted, as the federal government with its special relation with aboriginal people, saw them take far greater responsibility for their own affairs. Self-government, self-determination, and land claims are now discursive terms that hold significant currency; yet, their perceived efficacy far surpasses the simply post-colonial. Especially for visual artists and their work, these terms had ramifications that began appearing in many levels of society.

Jimmie Durham, for example, looks at the problem with aboriginal identity in society as perpetuating stereotypes: “We only get to protect culture, we don’t get to make a new thing. We get only to tell about the past, to tell about traditions, or to protect our traditions, we don’t get to move forward, the way jazz [and] blues move forward” (1998:29). Nevertheless, aboriginal people are more apt to hold on to things because of the suffering imposed by historical assimilationist processes. Because they have fought back to win legislation in their own favour, there is a need to want to hold on to the past. The question of whether or not “tradition” is an “albatross” doesn’t prevent it from still being there. But many aboriginal contemporary artists feel the strong need for such an identity because it makes them different. For if they were to accept a modernist identity, they run the risk of getting lost in the art world with everyone else. They would then be forced to rely on new forms of self-identity. Therefore, aboriginal communities will still practise traditions, and artists will continue to identify with those practices. The aboriginal artist sees the value of identity as “capital.”

As I have argued, the objectification of cultural identity through the arts has become key to this new consciousness, repeatedly played out on a national and international level by a new type of artist: one who moves freely about, living on or off the reserve; and one who recognizes
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the unlimited potential of art to express—poignantly and critically, personally or universally, locally or pan-tribally—issues, situations, and perspectives that are extra-tribal. What differentiates these artists from previous generations is their relation to a complex world outside the traditional tribal framework, where they apply new visual languages, and play in the “field of force” called the art world. These new artists have emerged from different backgrounds, shaped by various circumstances. Some of them have been widely acknowledged as the voice of the people, since they too, have been constituted within colonial discourses. It has been my thesis that they are not only carriers but innovators of culture, living betwixt and between several cultures and communities: finding comfort in the mainstream, in local aboriginal communities, and in liminal spaces between the two, where identity politics allows them to choose a position with respect to their identities, as members of one or more groups as their political point of departure. Nevertheless, they derive their foundation, in part, from a profound consciousness of their social, historical, political, and cultural identity. Coterminal with these experiences are the artists’ inter-relations with aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities, where they assume positions with the recognition that such identity is discursively and politically paramount. While their connection to community often signifies continuity, there are other connections that come deep from within their personal life. For example, changing senses of identity at the local level—who one is, where one belongs, what one’s place in the world is—are now profoundly affected by the accelerated forces of globalization. Contests over the representations of personal and collective identity and the categories through which identity is filtered (class, gender, ethnicity, and nation state) now come with the recognition that we all live in highly contestable spaces—spaces that continually collide and mix. The artist sees these spaces of negotiation as mental and physical arenas for articulation.

For the artist specifically, as for aboriginal people generally, identity has always played a critical role in affirming the continuity of culture. Personal memories, sad or happy, moments of joy or terror, are all inscribed in our consciousness. They are an easily manipulable text that can find expression in such means as art. Tribal memories, which are critical traces for oral cultures, are inscribed within the collective unconscious. Functioning to stabilize community, tribal memories are more conservative than personal memories. Consequently, for the contemporary aboriginal artist who is connected to tradition and community,
balance is critical. For example, the ephemeral quality of speaking is like producing a trace. In contemporary art, the artist takes the oral narratives to create new texts, while respecting traditional orality. As the language of art, like the language of ceremony, orality must remain fundamental. However, we are now “writing the ceremony,” concretizing and fixing the ephemeral narrative. As younger aboriginal people become more educated, the idea of orality is in danger of becoming obsolete. The contemporary aboriginal artist has not rejected the idea of orality; on the contrary, art’s ephemeral and ambiguous nature allows for multiple interpretations and thus in some ways helps preserve the idea of orality. This, I have argued, is a major reason why “installation art” has become increasingly popular as a medium of expression among aboriginal contemporary artists. It is continuous with a kind of traditional artistic practice, where, paradoxically, orality becomes preserved through the continuous act of shifting articulations. Contemporary installation art in effect replaces the single self-referential art object by process- and action-oriented works, consisting of several objects. Each of these objects relies on the other, and they are usually unable (or not made) to act on their own. Objects can be constantly rearranged, so that meaning becomes ever-more dynamic, and arguably, reflects and continues the idea of orality. For some artists, the art-market forces are destructive to certain traditional ideas. In spite of this, the practice of creating installation art has become a strategic alternative for the continuity of ideas, and not simply objects.

Aboriginal artistic self-expression is, likewise, no longer bound to specific places. Artists who often live away from established tribal spaces have been mediated by, and become mediators of, aboriginal identity in the modern world. As we have come to realize, the contemporary aboriginal artist in the 1970s and 1980s was largely influenced by the political discourse of cultural identity, and at the same time, by the art world’s quality debate. In the 1990s, however, artists are now more likely to be concerned with the highly competitive nature of this discursive field where quality is to some extent, still one of the major issues. More recently, the struggle for identity, is not so much with the quality of expression, or with making the best and most original mark, but rather with what the mark means. In other words, from a semiotic perspective, it is not the sign that is the issue but the signification. The point where notions of identity come into play is the differential reading of signs, where the discursive boundaries become clearer. I recall seeing an exhibition by contemporary Chicano artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem
a few years ago where I was profoundly affected by the fact that I could not read the works. Even though visually, they were powerfully moving, I had great difficulty reading the signs. My problem was that I had entered into a whole new spatial reality where I was a complete stranger. Suddenly, there were no similarities—only differences. I contend that this is the mainstream’s position when reading and thus accepting art that prefers to speak in a local, rather than international language. Making art in this way may not be a directly political act. Rather, it is a way to articulate issues of interest and concern to the artist, where artists are trying to make sense of the complexities, contradictions, not only of everyday life in a modern world, but in their bounded world as well.

A special function in this process befalls the museum. Institutionally and culturally, aboriginal people have been largely represented through the discursive space of the anthropology museum, and by extension, so too have aboriginal artists. From the perspective of the artist, the relation has been ambivalent: in terms of a space to exhibit, they really wanted to be associated with the art gallery. Still largely limited to exhibiting in anthropology museums as late as the 1980s, aboriginal artists soon realized the world in general was rapidly changing—they began finding new audiences for their work and patrons who were willing to make allowances for their new expressions—critiquing museums was like critiquing their “other.” Often this was done within the museums, and at other times in art galleries. Artists like James Luna staged a blatant critique that struck at the very heart of the museum by tackling his audiences with “crack backs,” or surprising his viewer when they least expect it. Other artists choose art galleries where audiences have come to expect works that discursively pounce on their subject, often through rhetorical strategies. Museums of ethnology are much more reticent because the public perceives their spaces as fairly neutral, where their discursive subjects are usually objectified and there is little chance of their opposition. Thus, galleries tend to be active in contrast to the more passive space of the museum.

Aboriginal contemporary artists changed all that. And, in doing so, they engendered two transformations. First, they got over the fact that the museum was their only venue, because many were beginning to exhibit their work in every space imaginable; to them, the museum was just another space. They were more in control of what and how their work was being presented. Second, and the most profound factor, is the ongoing relationship with the museum. Of all aboriginal people, they were the ones most often anchored to the museum as active subjects.
There were, of course, other aboriginal people subjectively engaged with the museum, especially those who were called “informants,” who worked directly with ethnologists to assist them to frame particular ideas. But it is largely the artists who exacted change within the museum community.

The exhibition *The Spirit Sings* also dramatically changed the way Canadians viewed the relationship between aboriginal people and museums, and it was a change artists had longed to bring about. The transformation that took place during *The Spirit Sings* resulted from the combined forces of aboriginal people during the Calgary Olympics of 1988. The world was moved more by a small band of northern Alberta Cree being displaced by a giant oil company and a duplicitous government, than by the exhibition itself. The media saw in the Cree a story; the Cree saw in the media, the medium. Together they combined to energize the museum community. The relation between the museum and the aboriginal community changed dramatically, enough that a Task Force was created to examine this relationship and recommend changes. The artists whose identity had always been safe in museums now assumed a greater discursive stance, not just in museums but in the art world as well.

Aboriginality is based in the people’s profound connection to land, that is furthermore articulated in specific tribal languages. This affinity is highly significant to the ideological basis that has long differentiated them from many other Canadians and Americans. David Abram points to the importance of language to this idea of aboriginality: “Enacted primarily in song, prayer, and story, among oral peoples language functions not simply to dialogue with other humans but also to converse with the more-than-human cosmos, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of the earth and sky, to invoke kinship even with those entities which, to the civilized mind, are utterly insentient and inert” (71). Because language constitutes us as subjects, there are many people of aboriginal ancestry who find themselves in contradictory positions today. This is because the federal government’s cleansing process during the reservation period almost completely reconstructed aboriginal identity, making language-specific identity problematic for individual tribes. Reinforced by aboriginal languages’ recovery, popularization, and strengthening today, aboriginal people’s ideological relation to land is the discursive glue that continues to set them apart from many other Canadians, particularly in the current age of land claims.

This glue is sovereignty, where aboriginal people must prove their usufructuary right, which in treaty terms means the right to use the land
for hunting and fishing purposes. By extension, aboriginal artists, like mainstream artists, claim a sort of personal sovereignty, like having the freedom of assertion, which is evidenced in their artistic practice. This places them in strategic attitudinal situations, unlike our impoverished ancestors who were heavily controlled by government legislation. Contemporary aboriginal artists can make choices, and these choices are essential in the articulation of aboriginal people's consciousness to self-determination. Part of that resoluteness is the recovery of aboriginal languages as fundamental to a post-reservation identity in which language is key to articulation; the other component is the control over signs and meanings so commonly discussed in post-colonial discourse. Thus, the aboriginal contemporary artist who uses the medium of art to make sense of the complex reality of post-modern/reservation times, provocatively and epistemologically, uses language—often English and/or an aboriginal language—to reposition the viewers. The artist thus transforms them into actively viewing subjects, and engages them dialogically. But more importantly, the language of visuality that is partly inspired by mainstream or Western art discourse, is syncretized with specific aboriginal visual discourses. The danger is that this syncretism makes their work difficult to read; hence, we come to regard this collision as the tension between the local and the global.

These shifts, between the local and the global, have become a powerful creative and interventionist force for many aboriginal contemporary artists, allowing them to move physically and psychologically in either direction. The artists’ subject position as multiple and diverse reflects this reality. Meanwhile, the mainstream itself has undergone major ideological shifts, fuelled in part by artists outside the dominant Western canon and in part by the growing recognition of pluralism and difference as leading indicators of change. These changes include notions of cultural identity, an artist’s relation to community, the question of the object, and the questioning of individualism. This is the so-called condition of the post-modern where boundaries are blurred and more permeable; and when communication and economies are becoming globalized, leading to a kind of creative chaos. In some cases, however, new boundaries are being created, especially when tribes now speak in terms of self-government and self-determination.

Greater numbers of aboriginal artists are pursuing an education in fine arts or art history, being exposed to new ideas, and posing new questions regarding their own position within the mainstream, for example. They also question their identity as “Indian”—Can they continue
to be “Indian”?—and the value of this identity in a changing world. Yet crossing intellectual frontiers, meeting people, and exchanging ideas are all characteristic of the cogency of artists coming together to share in this experience. These exchanges may centre on reflections regarding any space or place where these artists have lived, where they now live, or where they will live: the whole reality of being elsewhere. Indeed, there are many artists today in the visual, literary, and performing arts who use tradition in the most creative ways to represent aboriginal people in the modern world, whether the mainstream audiences understand it or not. It is a way to situate aboriginal people as being very much part of the contemporary world, as opposed to an identity of the past that is so often challenged.

These practices are an important part of a live culture today that can no longer sever past from present, “Indian” from “Western,” art from language, culture from politics. The perspectives and practices I have presented here enhance the notion that is today’s global culture. Everyone in his or her own way inhabits something, some place. For the art discussed here, that place is represented by the sign, “reservation x.”