



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

How to do things with pictures in the museum

Photography, montage and political space

Rombout, M.K.

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Other version

License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rombout, M. K. (2020). *How to do things with pictures in the museum: Photography, montage and political space*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



How to do Things with Pictures in the Museum:
Photography, Montage and Political Space

Melissa K. Rombout
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis
2020

How to do Things with Pictures in the Museum: Photography, Montage and Political Space

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam,
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex
ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde
commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen
op woensdag 2 december 2020 te 16:00 uur
door

Melissa Kathleen Rombout

Geboren te Fredericton

Promotiecommissie:

Promotor:	prof. dr. C.M.K.E. Lerm-Hayes	Universiteit van Amsterdam
Copromotor:	dr. S.Y. Berrebi	Universiteit van Amsterdam

Overige leden:	prof. dr. C.A.P. Clarkson	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. W. Davidts	Universiteit Gent
	dr. S.T. Kriebel	University College Cork
	prof. dr. K.E. Röttger	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. E.L. Sitzia	Universiteit van Amsterdam

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

How to do Things with Pictures in the Museum: Photography, Montage and Political Space

PREFACE

“The views expressed in this work are those of the artist...”

i-viii

INTRODUCTION

1

1. Doing Things with Pictures
2. Austin’s Theory of Language as Action
Pathways from Austin’s Work
 - Communication Theory
 - Social Science Theory
 - Law and Social Justice
 - Language Theory
 - Critical Art Theory
3. Key Literature on Performativities of Art
 - Art in the Public Sphere
 - The Power in the Object
 - Political Themes
 - Activist Modalities
 - The Distribution of the Sensible
4. The Museum as Display Space and Social Space
5. Unsettling Radical Action
 - Introduction to the Chapters
 - Interconnections

CHAPTER ONE

50

The Combative: Use Photography as a Weapon!

1. “Art is Dead!”
2. Cutting/Stitching: The Operations of Photomontage
 - Pictorial Intervention
 - Machine Age Media
 - Allegory
 - Radical Vision
 - Suture
3. The Combative
 - Use Photography as a Weapon!*
 - Germans Acorns*
4. Unhappy Performances?
 - Myth of the State
 - Art Historiography
5. Citation as Intervention
 - Mahnmal Friedenkreuz St. Lorenz (Austria) Project*

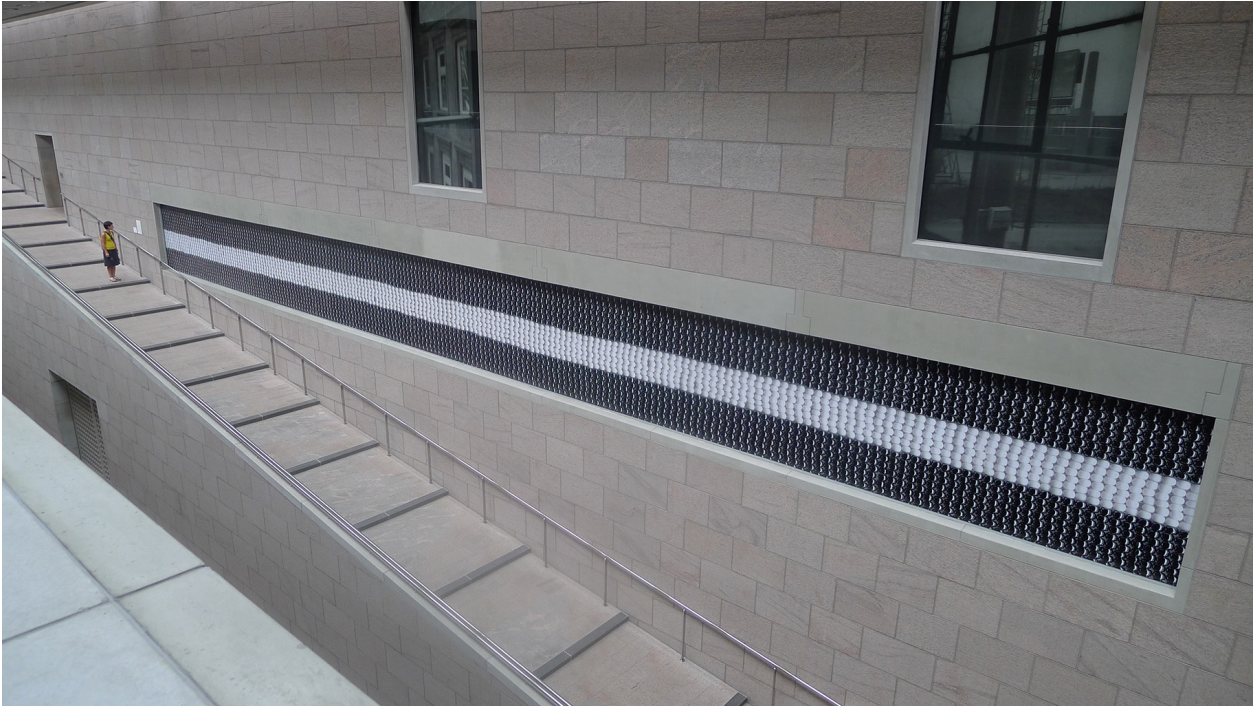
CHAPTER TWO

88

The Integrative: In the Kitchen with Höch and Rosler

1. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife!*
2. The Integrative
3. *Bringing the War Home*
 - House Beautiful (1967-1972)*
 - House Beautiful (2004-2008)*
4. Performing the Everyday
5. *C is for Chopper*
6. Emplacement

CHAPTER THREE	136
The Contemplative: Framing and Being Framed in Haacke's <i>Voici Alcan</i>	
1. Framing	
Here/Not Here	
Us/Not Us	
The Torture Aesthetic	
2. Being Framed: The Museum Stage	
3. Operations of the Contemplative	
4. A New Context	
<i>Voici Alcan</i> installation, 2013	
 CHAPTER FOUR	 194
The Interpellative: Wodiczko's Public Address	
1. The Body	
2. The Bundeshaus Projection	
3. The Interpellative: Art that Calls us into Community	
4. Counter Spectacle	
5. Afterimage	
 CHAPTER FIVE	 230
The Declarative: (M)oral Histories by Condé and Beveridge	
1. The Declarative	
2. The Oshawa Project	
3. Constructing the Intertextual Voice	
4. Metaframes: Sites of the Declarative	
The Community	
Art Spaces	
The Archive	
 CHAPTER SIX	 280
The Imperative: Gilbert and George in Thatcher's Britain	
1. Gilbert and George	
2. The Imperative in Thatcher's Britain	
3. Speaking through the Grid	
Admonition	
Exhortation	
Interrogation	
A Frame for Viewing	
4. Imperial Iconography	
5. Laddishness	
 CONCLUSION	 327
Looking Back to Look Forward	
 SUMMARY	 341
 SAMENVATTING	 343
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 347
 Appendix I: Acknowledgements	 399
 Appendix II: List of Illustrations	 405



PREFACE

“The views expressed in this work are those of the artist...”

The completion of this dissertation project—an exploration of ways in which selected photo-based works perform as political speech, a project that has persisted over a dozen years like a vine poking and twisting its way through the crevices of my “real” life—is also its beginning. In 2013, as I was working with renewed energy on revisions, I visited an acclaimed temporary exhibition at my “local” art museum in Ottawa, which is the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). This prestigious federal institution joined with other venues across the city to present *Sakahàn—International Indigenous Art*.¹ Most of the works on display in some way addressed the effects of the devastating history of European colonization and its lasting legacy for indigenous peoples, marked by concurrent waves of oppression and assimilation over four centuries. So, in this sense, the exhibition as a whole could be considered “political”, as was the very act of allotting gallery resources and spaces to curating this major group exhibition of more than 150 works by 80 artists in order to showcase contemporary indigenous art: as the NGC itself described the project “poetic, unexpected and challenging, the artworks document and interrogate distinct cultural and social issues.”²

In travelling through the gallery complex to explore the multiple sites of the installation, I noticed a—for me, remarkable—wall caption adjacent to a work by Nadia Myre. Myre is an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation and her work typically takes the form of three-dimensional installation pieces exploring traditional techniques such as beaded objects to explore questions of identity and loss. *For those who cannot speak: the land, the water, the animals and future generations* (2013) is a site-specific installation made especially for inclusion in the *Sakahàn* exhibition. In reality, there exists two different works bearing this title: a monumental

¹ The NGC literature promoting the exhibition explained that *Sakahàn* means “to light [a fire]” in the language of Canada’s Algonquin peoples.

² Text supplied by the National Gallery of Canada’s printed promotional literature and website <http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/exhibitions/current/details/sakahàn-international-indigenous-art-4463>.



[fig. p-1] Nadia Myre, *For those who cannot speak: the land, the water, the animals and the future generations*, belt made from thousands of beads, 2013



[fig. p-2] Nadia Myre, *For those who cannot speak: the land, the water, the animals and the future generations*, belt represented as 23m long photograph installed along the stairs at the National Gallery of Canada as part of the *Sakahàn* exhibition, 2013

beadwork belt made by Myre (not shown in the exhibition), and its representation as a wide mural-sized photographic image, installed in a niche along the monumentally scaled sloping walkway leading from the first gallery level to the second. [figs. p-1 and p-2]

For those who cannot speak refers to an excerpt from a statement read by Algonquin *kokoms* (grandmothers) in Ottawa standing before Canada's seat of government on Parliament Hill, a short distance away from the site of the gallery. Their performance exhorted "the Crown and all governments on Turtle Island" to behave in accordance with treaty law, Canada's own policies and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Most Canadian visitors reading this information in the explanatory wall text will understand that "the Crown" refers to Canada's federal government, so-called in reference to Canada's past and present as a constitutional monarchy, in which "the Crown" stands symbolically for the reigning monarch as head of state and symbolically as the state itself. Fewer visitors, Canadian or otherwise, are likely to recognize the term "Turtle Island" as a historical Aboriginal term for the North American continent resuscitated during the rise of indigenous rights activism in the 1970s.³

The work, while seemingly straightforward physically as a monumental close-up of beadwork printed on film and adhered to the stone wall, is semantically complex, staging a network of intersections: between the mammoth photographic installation and its three-dimensional sculptural referent; between historically gendered domains of political discourse and handcrafted beadwork; between indigenous culture and European law; and between the living (the grandmothers calling for justice) and the dead (the politicians of Canada's past, largely no-longer-living framers of land treaties and Aboriginal "management" policies).

The placement of an additional text placard next to the explanatory wall label reads:

The views expressed in this work are those of the artist and do not reflect the views of the National Gallery of Canada. [fig. p-3]

³ I myself only vaguely recalled the deep and recent histories of this term: poet Gary Snyder (closely associated with the Beat generation poets) proposed this term as a synthesis of indigenous and colonizer cultures positioning North America not merely as a land "discovered" and colonized by Europeans and people of European descent, but inhabited and stewarded by pre-existing and persisting cultures. Snyder's book of poems and essays entitled *Turtle Island* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975.



[fig. p-3] Disclaimer statement (left) and interpretive label, *For those who cannot speak: the land, the water, the animals and the future generations*, at the National Gallery of Canada *Sakahàn* exhibition, 2013

The creation of this additional label adds a fourth voice to the presentation of the installation, beyond that of 1) the original speakers, the grandmothers, 2) the artist amplifying their utterance; 3) the curator as the selector of the work and creator of the contextual interpretive label. The legal disclaimer parenthetically frames this presentation as a corporate, rather than curatorial, voice, the museum as a federal institution and, by extension, a program of the federal government still managing the ownership of contested land.

The institutional voice both distances, and implicates, aesthetic expression and political discursivity. Its placement next to an individual work among the 150 arguably “political” works on view in this exhibition is provocative on multiple counts. First, the

tautology is inescapable and hardly needs iterating: if the views in the work were NOT those of the artist, whose would they be? The very construction of this placard, the fact of it even being thought of—disassociating the national flagship cultural institution from political discourse generally and ongoing treaty disputes specifically— is another instance among a dismayingly growing body that constitutes a “haunting” by a regressive and nervous sitting government upon public servant cultural administrators. The disclaimer actually performs a bracketing or disavowal by a federal entity (national institution, national government) overlaying the declaration by *those who cannot speak*, a multi-nation constituency historically spoken *to, for or about*. It points (painfully) to the fact that the museum as an institution is certainly not among those who cannot speak. It speaks its own presumed truth, which clearly has not heard what the work and the constituencies spoken for attempt to say.

As a singular occurrence in the exhibition, this disclamatory gallery label strikes me as bizarre: its *presence* points to its *absence* from the display of the remaining 149 works situated elsewhere and also the entirety of the permanent collection currently on view. That body of work then, according to this logic, *does* express views with which the National Gallery (and its legal advisers representing its governing body, the Government of Canada) can comfortably associate itself. Its construction as a disclaimer points to further absurdist illusions: 1) of the divisibility of the artist’s expression in order to cleave its static form from its discursive content; 2) of the separability of the object from its performative stage; and 3) of the cautionary insistence of maintaining separate spheres— “art” and “politics”—in the eyes and minds of the eventual beholders. In referring back to the stated objectives of the exhibition cited above “to document and interrogate distinct cultural and social issues”, it is perhaps the gallery’s own curatorial interference that then produces and points to an unexpected instance of re-inscribing this distinction. The placard in this way becomes evidentiary, a “proof” of the continuance of a parallel and incommensurate set of experiences dividing Canada’s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. This, I can only imagine, is the reason the sign has been tolerated by the artist. In this way, the juxtaposition of the gallery’s nonsensical disclaimer disassociating itself from the work, while at the same time presenting it, ultimately serves to strengthen

the artist's proposition.⁴ The beadwork of Myre's sculpture, and its mammoth-scale photographic iteration, in fact refer to the historical ceremonial belts presented at the time of treaty-making, and is an unmistakable indictment of the failure of Canada's government to honour its historical promises.

The illusions that are “announced” by the gallery sign are also the departure points for this study, exploring works of contemporary photography-based art beyond aesthetic readings of static objects to probe their potency (and potentiality) as a dynamic staged performance and as visual utterance in the public sphere. The prefatory title of Myre's work—*For those who cannot speak*—announces its intention clearly: the work will speak to a political issue in the place of those whose voice is marginalized. The discourse within art history pertaining to works invested with an avowed political purpose has had a tendency to polarize between enthusiastic endorsement (as individual expression reaches toward collective discourse) and dismissive contempt (as this objective fails to meet the imperatives of modernism's aesthetic autonomy). In either regard, the works themselves are regarded as static physical objects, “things”, which merit evaluation only within the operations of their own physical framing and separate from the activation of discourse on the part of their audience. In her exploration of the political performativity of contemporary art, cultural analyst Mieke Bal points to this limitation in our encounters with works of art: “The history of art would have accustomed us more consistently to this had it paid more attention to what art does rather than to what it “says”.”⁵

⁴ The complex interaction between Aboriginal artists and museum practices has recently been the subject of critical analysis: See Gerald R. McMaster, “The New Tribe. Critical Perspectives and Practices in Aboriginal Contemporary Art” (doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1999); Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces. The Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011); and Brenda Lafleur, “Imaging Settlement and Displacement. At Home in Ka-na-ta,” (Doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2013).

⁵ Mieke Bal, *Endless Andness. The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14. An epilogue concerning Myre's *For those who cannot speak*: as the work was created specifically for *Sakahân*, it was not as yet possible to reproduce or to discuss the work in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, sent to members of the press in advance of the exhibition installation. Thus, there is no opportunity to ascertain if the disclaimer would or would not have also been applied in the (enduring) publication. Since the exhibition closed, the National Gallery of Canada has acquired Myre's monumental beadwork belt upon which the photographic work is based. Myre's monumental photograph remains in place. The artist agreed to remove the excerpt of the protest speech addressed to the Government of Canada by the *kokoms*; the National Gallery removed the disclaimer, “*The views expressed...*”. One could interpret this as either a “meet in the middle”

I have worked as a specialist in historical and contemporary photography and my interest in the analysis of specific contemporary works in this study, each in their own way an example of photographic montage, is to trace out how these images perform as a unique kind of visual utterance in the public sphere. Entwining the operations of *mimesis* (as indexical representations made by a recording camera) and *techné* (as rhetorical propositions), political photomontage arguably addresses our life worlds, performs in cultural spaces, and enables transformative experience. Working with concepts that interrogate the terms “political” and “art”, as well as inviting the participation of concepts from several contributing disciplines, I examine *how* political art can work as a kind of utterance. In the discussions that follow, I analyze the strategies through which visual utterances are activated, staged and viewed, and argue that understanding these strategies opens up a more productive framework for regarding photomontage specifically, and all works of art more generally.

accommodation, or as recognition of the mutability of the political through the choices made in the display of art. I consider that the excision of these two texts shortchanges viewers: they do not now have access to the layers of discourse that parenthetically preceded and supervised the original display of the work.