

STEVEN LOFT

2010 Visiting Trudeau Fellow
Ryerson University

BIOGRAPHY

Steven Loft is a Mohawk of the Six Nations and a curator, scholar, writer, and media artist. In 2010, he was named a visiting Trudeau fellow at Ryerson University in Toronto, where he is continuing his research on Indigenous art and aesthetics. Formerly, he was the curator-in-residence for Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Canada. While there, he curated exhibitions including *Back to the Beginning: Indigenous Abstraction* and *Steeling the Gaze: Portraits by Aboriginal Artists* (co-curated with Andrea Kunard), among others. Previously, he was the director/curator of the Urban Shaman Gallery (Winnipeg), Canada's largest Aboriginal artist-run public gallery; the Aboriginal curator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton; and the artistic director of the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers' Association. Loft has written extensively on Indigenous art and aesthetics for various magazines, catalogues, and arts publications. Loft also co-edited *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Aboriginal Media and New Media Art*, published by the Banff Centre Press in 2005. This book of essays by artists, curators, and scholars frames the landscape of contemporary Aboriginal art, the influence of Western criticism and standards, and the liberating advent of inexpensive technologies, including video and online media. His video works, which include *A History in Two Parts*, *2510037901*, *TAX THIS!* and *Out of the Darkness* have been screened at festivals and galleries across Canada and the world. He has curated over 50 group and solo exhibitions and is a sought-after speaker and lecturer. His recent curated program "Culture Shock" screened at the 2008 *imagineNATIVE* Film and Media Arts Festival and subsequently at the Berlin International Film Festival.

ABSTRACT

An Indigenous art history constitutes a trajectory of adaptability and cultural connectivity perfectly in keeping with Indigenous world views and customary, as well as contemporary, artistic practices. It is tied up in histories that include both pre- and post-contact epistemologies. It is customary and contemporary, reserve based and urban, tribal and hybrid, empirical and cosmological, living, dynamic and in constant flux. In this lecture Steven Loft looks at some of the major contemporary developments in the field of Indigenous art in Canada.

LECTURE

“Reflections on 20 Years of Aboriginal Art”

University of Victoria

FEBRUARY 8, 2012

My name is Steven Loft. I am Kanienkehaka of the Haudenosaunee. I would like to acknowledge my Elders and ancestors: those who came before me and inform who I am as a person.

As I look back on 20 years of working in Indigenous art, I would like to reflect on some of the key moments in the development of an Indigenous contemporary and art historical movement in Canada, as well as some of the major events happening at the time. Understanding the relationship between Canada and the Indigenous nations of this land is integral to the development of a unique aesthetic in contemporary Aboriginal art. Some of these events I have been a part of, some only peripherally, some I was not involved in personally at all, but they all had an influence on my career, and on my life.

This is by no means a comprehensive history of Aboriginal art. It is just a journey, one that I have been lucky enough to be part of. For me, Aboriginal art is innately political. It is the culmination of lived experiences, from pre-contact customary societies through the colonial enterprise. It is tied up in histories that include both pre- and post-contact epistemologies, narratives empowered by continuity, inextricably linked; and it is the assertion of cultural autonomy and sovereignty.

As Jolene Rickard has written, “[t]he work of Indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty

and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization and identity politics... Sovereignty is the border that shifts Indigenous experience from victimized stance to a strategic one.”¹

1967: Expo and the Indians of Canada Pavilion

Summer of 1967: My grandparents took me to Expo in Montreal. It was a fascinating trip, and I am sure I had a great time. Now, did we visit the Indians of Canada pavilion? Undoubtedly. Do I remember it? No, I just wanted to ride the monorail. But what was going on inside that pavilion and behind the scenes would have a tremendous impact on my life without me knowing it.

Expo 67 was a major landmark, an opportunity for Canada to show itself off to the world, and the decision to have an “Indians of Canada” pavilion probably seemed like a really good idea at the time, a chance to portray Canada’s wonderful relationship with its Indigenous peoples. It did not exactly turn out that way.

The Indians of Canada pavilion was a turning point at which Aboriginal—or “Indian art” as it was then called—and politics manifested themselves in the portrayal (and a very subversive one for the time) of histories and contemporary realities of Aboriginal people.

First Nations were one of only two “social” groups in the Canadian population that had separate representation in their own pavilion. The organizers had embarked on an ambitious series of consultations with Aboriginal groups, meant to represent answers to the question, “What do you want to tell the people of Canada and the world when they come to Expo 67?” Some key roles in the organization team were even held by Aboriginal people (several of them quite activist in their approach). The narrative that would ultimately emerge in the pavilion would confound and astound government officials and visitors alike.

1. Jolene Rickard, “Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand,” *Aperture* 139 (Spring 1995), 51.

That exhibition critically and cleverly enunciated the struggle of Aboriginal people for cultural integrity, primacy, and sovereignty, as much as they could in the 1960s. And it introduced the world to contemporary Aboriginal art. Following is an extract from a CBC broadcast from August 4, 1967:

From the outside, it has all the benign symbols of the traditional North American Indian: a teepee, a totem pole, pounding drums and chanting. But inside, the Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo 67 tells a different story: one of poverty, unfulfilled treaties, forced religion and the unhappy experiences of children in residential schools. As a young hostess conducts a tour, a reporter from *Expedition* remarks on a tone of bitterness in the pavilion's exhibits.²

It would be a long time before I realized how important this event was. I knew about it, as a part of our art history, but it was not until recently that it really hit home for me. It was at a conference just last year, where several of the participants from the pavilion recounted their experiences. I began to realize just how much we owe to those artists who re-envisioned Aboriginal art and activism in such a profound way. The stories they told were funny, and poignant, and made us all realize how far we have come, and how far we still have to go. As Metis scholar David Garneau said in his introductory remarks, “[c]learly, it was and remains a profound site of dissent and the birth of new possibilities.”³

The artists included in the pavilion were Tony and Henry Hunt (totem pole), George Clutesi, Noel Wuttunee, Gerald Tailfeathers, Ross Woods, Alex Janvier, Tom Hill, Norval Morrisseau, Francis Kagige, Jean-Marie Gros-Louis, Duke Redbird, and Robert Davidson. They were frontrunners and visionaries, and we owe them much.

2. “*Expedition: Expo 67’s Indians of Canada*,” CBC Digital Archives, <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/discover/programs/e/expedition/expedition-july-7-1967.html> (accessed May 9, 2012).

3. David Garneau, “Indian to Indigenous: Temporary Pavilions to Sovereign Display Territories,” paper presented at the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Conference, Toronto, Ontario, October 15-16, 2011.

1988: *The Spirit Sings*—Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples

Twenty-one years after the Indians of Canada pavilion, another exhibition of Aboriginal art would also incur much discussion and controversy. *The Spirit Sings*, organized by the Glenbow Museum and supported by Shell Oil Corporation, was the most expensive exhibition ever produced in Canada, with a budget of \$2.6 million (almost half of it from Shell).⁴

The exhibition borrowed huge amounts of cultural property—what we would refer to as our art history—from museums all over North America, chosen and curated by non-Aboriginals with no consultation with Aboriginal communities. The curators’ intent was to foster an appreciation of pre-contact Indigenous society and culture, all by borrowing looted objects from colonial institutions, while paying for it from money provided by a company that was actively fighting an Aboriginal land claim (the Lubicon Nation) and extracting resources from the disputed territory. A recipe for disaster? Most certainly! Although reasonably well attended, and of course supported by government and corporate interests, the exhibition has gone down as one of the lowest points in the museal history of Indigenous art in this country.

Rebecca Belmore’s protest performance in support of the Lubicon and their call for a boycott was a telling and powerful response. She staged her performance in front of the museum without the museum’s consent, holding a sign signifying her as artifact #671B. A museum code? Or a Liquor Control Board number for a cheap bottle of wine? She was intentionally ambiguous about this. Belmore was not only metaphorically codifying herself, she was constraining her body to a history of abuse and commodification

4. Ruth B. Phillips, “Show Times: De-Celebrating the Canadian Nation, Decolonising the Canadian Museum,” in *Rethinking Settler Colonialism*, ed. Annie E. Coombes (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006), 129.

perpetrated against Aboriginal people, including by museums. But as site of resistance and subversion, she rose above the museological taxonomies epitomized in *The Spirit Sings* and emerged as strong, unbowed, and in complete control.⁵

I would not become aware of the impact of *The Spirit Sings* for several years, but as I became more immersed in Indigenous art years later, the *Spirit Sings* debacle would come up often. As a result of the exhibition, the protests, and the long history of misrepresentation in museums and galleries, a Task Force on Museums and First Peoples formed to make recommendations to government and the arts community on the exhibition and dissemination of works of historical and contemporary art by Aboriginal people. The ensuing report had a much more positive effect than *The Spirit Sings*.

I would meet Rebecca Belmore a few years after her performance and am proud to say that we are friends. Her passion, her profound intellect, and her ability to synthesize complex issues into beautiful, sometimes disturbing, and always challenging works of art make her one of the most exceptional artists this country has ever produced. She has had and continues to have a profound effect on Indigenous art and the formation of cultural aesthetics in Canada and beyond.

July 11, 1990: Oka

In a very real sense, 1990 would begin my personal journey into my own Indigeneity and into Indigenous art. Oka galvanized the Aboriginal population. It was our struggle, our fight, our war, all getting played out on network television, within the bias of the day and playing to a populace decidedly unmoved by the struggle for Aboriginal sovereignty.

It began as a peaceful vigil by the Mohawk citizens of Kanasatake who were protesting against a plan by the municipality of Oka to

5. As a side note, recently, the government labelled Aboriginal groups opposing the Northern Gateway pipeline as “radicals” and “enemies of the state.” Some things never change!

enlarge a golf course on their ancestral territory. On July 11, 1990, the peaceful vigil took a drastic turn when the Quebec provincial police attacked the protesters, leading to a 78-day standoff between Mohawks, the Quebec police, and ultimately, the Canadian military.

The incident is seared into the memory of almost every Canadian and First Nations citizen who witnessed the events. Simply mentioning “Oka” conjures up images of tanks and barricades; of a Mohawk warrior and Canadian soldier facing off eye to eye; of Mohawk figures burned in effigy by the angry residents of a nearby community; of the tragic loss of life and lingering injury. Bonds were slashed between communities and between first nations and Canadians.⁶

Watching it all unfold was devastating. And maddening. And in its way, liberating. Anger and rage resonated through Aboriginal communities across the country, and our artists responded accordingly. I would start to see culture from a different framework, one based on resistance and, as Gerald Vizenor coined, “survivance.” Vizenor writes:

The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance, and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry.⁷

I was on a path that would realize itself fully three years later, in 1993. That year would change everything for me, but other factors were at play before that.

The previous year marked the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in what would become known as “the Americas.” Now, I

6. Shawn Atleo, “Oka, 20 Years Later: The Issues Remain,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 12, 2010, accessed May 11, 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/oka-20-years-later-the-issues-remain/article1634811/print/>

7. Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

could go on a lot about that particular bit of mis-navigation and the colonial legacy that resulted from it. Suffice it to say that Indigenous people in this part of the world have been living with the horrifying, genocidal, racist oppression engendered by it for these five centuries.

The year 1992 was an odd time to be Aboriginal! So much had happened recently and the Columbus quincentennial was a galvanizing time for good and bad. In 1992, two landmark exhibitions changed the landscape of Indigenous art in this country: *Land, Spirit, Power* at the National Gallery of Canada and *Indigena: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on the Five Hundred Years* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.⁸

The exhibitions of 1992 marked a turning point in so many ways, but they were not without controversy. The fact that two of *Land, Spirit, Power's* three curators were not Aboriginal pointed to a continued parochialism by the National Gallery concerning Aboriginal art. And there was that whole "What do we do about the Columbus celebration" thing? By not taking on the topic, the National Gallery did a disservice to the discourse of Indigenous sovereignty and anti-colonialism.

Indigena, on the other hand, was curated by two Aboriginal curators: Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin. It had a much more activist premise, and ultimately, it had the most impact on me. So I will concentrate on that one.

George Erasmus, former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, wrote in the catalogue for *Indigena*:

What are we going to celebrate? I don't like what has happened over the last 500 years, 125 years. I couldn't do a lot about it. But what are we going to do about the next 500 years? What are we going to do

8. At that time, the Canadian Museum of Civilization was the only national institution with a history of collecting and exhibiting contemporary Aboriginal art. Although the National Gallery presented *Land, Spirit, Power* that same year, it was another decade before the gallery committed fully to this practice.

about the next 10 years? So that when the year 2000 comes, around there are some differences!

I don't think that we have a solitary thing that we should be celebrating about unless we are going to do something different in the future. It's really time for some change. It's really time that the European people and their descendants, and the rest who are here and are Canadian, seriously begin to address the basic relationship they have with this land and the people who were here first. We can do things differently in this country—we can be leaders for the world!⁹

I spoke with Lee-Ann Martin recently about that time and the exhibition. Here is what she said:

Living in the US in the mid-1980s, I was working with colleagues to develop a national Native American arts project to de-celebrate the impending quincentennial, which was gaining considerable funding and press attention.

While the Government of Canada focused on the country's impending 125th anniversary in 1992, not the quincentennial, Gerald and I were determined to focus the exhibition on this long colonial history since the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. It was unusual at that time for Aboriginal curators to organize a project of such large scope and so political in nature at a national institution. In retrospect, I see that we wanted to shock museum visitors out of their complacency and ignorance of Aboriginal history. Many visitors commented that they wanted to see the "beautiful old art" of Aboriginal peoples. Exhibitions of contemporary art at the museum still explode the expectations of many visitors by presenting contemporary art as a historical continuum and mediation on future possibilities.

Our primary curatorial objective was to engage Indigenous artists, writers and performers in addressing issues of colonization and cultural tenacity, to reflect upon the colonial process. [Here she quotes from the curatorial statement:] "In a very real sense, this was a process in which a single culture came to dominate as never before

9. George Erasmus, "Forward," Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster (eds.), *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives in Canadian Art* (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992).

all the other cultures in the world and now enables it to determine nothing less than the destiny of the world".¹⁰

As an artistic project of reclamation and reaffirmation, *Indigena* asserted Indigenous presence in the political entity that is Canada.

1993: A Personal Turning Point

Art had always been part of my life. My maternal non-Aboriginal grandmother had started taking me to galleries, theatre, and concerts, when I was quite young. But what I was starting to see in 1992 in *Land, Spirit, Power* and even more in *Indigena* was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It got me thinking for the first time that art could be a way of forging identity, a bold, dynamic, in-your-face identity; fearless, sometimes angry, sometimes accusatory, but always unapologetically proud and rooted in a contemporary Aboriginality I had never really encountered before.

On March 20, 1993, my son Tyler was born and I got my first “real” job in the arts at the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers Association (NIIPA). It was quite a day, one that would profoundly change my life. That year also saw the release of Alanis Obomsawin’s incredible and chilling, film *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. All three of these events would profoundly change me, all three forming the direction my life would take. And all are interwoven in the formation of my sense of myself as an artist, as a thinker, as an Aboriginal person, and as a father.

My job with NIIPA began a career I am happy to say that I am still deeply passionate about, committed to, and involved in. The birth of my son would help me recognize the deeper meaning of personal, social and cultural responsibility. He still reminds me about our place in this world, and the joys implicit in it as well as the struggles, and why the latter are just as important. Obomsawin’s film

10. E-mail conversation between the author and Lee-Ann Martin, spring 2012.

would show me what it meant to be involved and implicated in the larger struggles of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

What I learned was that when members of a community assert control over their own lives and culture politically, socially, and artistically, they go beyond oppression. Thus, control of our “image” becomes not only an act of subversion, but of resistance and ultimately liberation.

This is the fundamental challenge to Aboriginal artists and cultural producers, and the one most exemplified in the work of Obomsawin. In a genre dominated by a colonialist, patriarchal hegemony, her work raised fundamental questions, not just about the subjects she portrays, but also about the system of manipulation and control of image that exists within the institutional arts, culture, and media mainstream. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* is a film, but it is also a site of power. It is a political and artistic statement that asserts an inalienable and inherent right to self-definition, self-awareness, and self-determination for Aboriginal people. It, and the films that followed it, are some of the most profound cultural works produced in this country.

Obomsawin’s films lead us on journeys beyond the superficial, perfunctory attention normally accorded to the subjects she chooses. She examines the clash of cultures and their repercussions on Aboriginal people through the lives and the stories of those most often voiceless. This view of Aboriginal expressive culture asserts not only an independence of vision and thought, but an assumption of cultural sovereignty not normally accorded Aboriginal people. Obomsawin juxtaposes the outcomes of a dominant colonialist hegemony against the personal experiences of her subjects. The Indians in Obomsawin’s films are not the homogeneous victims of an overbearing state, but are real people fighting a real battle to claim and reclaim themselves. For her subjects and for her, nationhood and sovereignty are not abstract concepts, but clearly identifiable aspects of cultural autonomy and survival.

From her earliest days at the National Film Board, Obomsawin has fought to tell the stories of Aboriginal people from a distinctly Indigenous vantage point. She establishes a non-linear, Indigenous aesthetic, one that references a shared and previously misrepresented history. She says, “History is crucial to me and to all of my work. In whatever I have done, in whatever I have made, I have always included history. History tells the story and educates. Otherwise how would we ever know how we have gotten to where we are now?”¹¹ She has consistently included herself within the structure of her documentaries, as interviewer, as narrator, and, in the case of *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, as eyewitness. This positions her not only as an observer but also as a participant in the stories she tells. This subjectivity creates a layer of meaning not constrained by anthropological concerns.

The events of 1990 at Oka had a profound effect on the Aboriginal people of this country. And although the media coverage was extensive, this is one of our stories and it needed to be told from our point of view. With *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, and the films that followed it, Obomsawin clearly established the “story” of Oka and its repercussions within the historiography of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations.

When I first saw *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, I was awestruck by the film’s ability to relate to me on an emotional and cognitive level. What did I feel? Anger? Pride? Bitterness? Certainly all of these things, but even more, I felt the voice of a nation, the voice of a people, my voice. Not in some kind of abstract, pan-Indian or oppressed sense, but a passionate voice, a voice of struggle and the voice of “all my relations.”

11. Steve Loft, “Sovereignty, Subjectivity and Social Action: The Films of Alanis Obomsawin,” Canada Council Archives, 2001, <http://canadacouncil.ca/canadacouncil/archives/prizes/ggvma/2001/2001-06-e.asp>

1995 and 2005: The Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale dates from 1895, the era of the great world fairs, places where it was not unusual to exhibit “exotic savages.” These large international expositions were developed as opportunities for both the exchange of ideas and the patriotic display of artistic and technological innovation. Spectacular public displays became the norm within these symbolic extravaganzas of industrial and colonial expansion. And Venice is one of the biggest. Every two years, the countries of the world showcase artists in national pavilions.

The Venice Biennale is in many ways an anachronistic throw-back to notions of nationalism and connoisseurship that do not represent contemporary art world realities. But it is still one of the largest, best-known, and best-attended international art fairs in the world.

In terms of the movement of Canadian Aboriginal art into the milieu of international discourses in art, the impact of the Venice Biennale cannot be underestimated. However, the fairs also remain places of exclusion, and this must be examined even as we celebrate those Aboriginal artists who do get invited. My own perception of the large international art fairs tends to be bemusement at this exclusion, but I have to say that in recent years I have seen a trend toward inclusion and an acknowledgement of differing aesthetic histories. While the fairs are often still problematic, I doubt that the trend will lose momentum. The metaphoric genie is indeed out of the bottle.

Metis artist Edward Poitras was the first Aboriginal person to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale and Anishnaabe artist Rebecca Belmore was the first Aboriginal woman to represent Canada there. A decade apart, these two artists both made bold, unapologetic statements about what it is to be Aboriginal today, yesterday, and tomorrow. Poitras’s work for Venice was a meditation on the coyote as trickster, an iconic figure in many Aboriginal cultures. His work exposed visitors to a particularly Aboriginal

cosmology, something most of them had never seen before. For exhibition curator Gerald McMaster,

Poitras' life and work epitomize the notion of place and the politics of identity. I argue that between the two (and more) communities—Reserve and urban—there exists a socially ambiguous zone, a site of articulation for Poitras and other contemporary (Native) artists that is frequently crossed, experienced, interrogated and negotiated.¹²

We would all celebrate Edward's triumph, but only until September of that year.

In September, an Ojibwa man, Dudley George, was gunned down by police in Ipperwash Provincial Park. He was an unarmed protestor and he was the first Aboriginal person in the 20th century to be killed during a land claim dispute. Twelve years later, in May 2007, Justice Sidney Linden, commissioner of the inquiry into George's death, ruled that the Ontario Provincial Police, the government of former Ontario premier Mike Harris, and the federal government all bore responsibility for the events that led to George's death.

The year 1995 had started so well, and we celebrated with Edward Poitras. By the end, we grieved and wondered if peace was ever possible, whether it was even desirable and what place art (and we) had in the struggle.

Almost a year later, in November 1996, the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was released. It was five years in the making, followed hearings from thousands of deputations, and told the stories of witnesses from across the country. The five-volume, 4,000-page report covered a vast range of issues; its 440 recommendations called for sweeping changes to the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and governments in Canada. On art and culture, the report noted the following:

Art is both the reflection and the extension of history, myth and spirituality. The arts are a bridge between traditional Aboriginal

12. Gerald McMaster, *Edward Poitras: Canada XLVI Biennale di Venezia* (Hull, QC : Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995), 86.

values and worldviews and contemporary Aboriginal lives. Whether they explore traditional forms, modern forms, or both, Aboriginal arts and artists are part of the evolving cultures of Aboriginal peoples. Their art not only defines distinct Aboriginal cultures but contributes greatly to the cultural definition and identity of Canada.¹³

Unfortunately, the large majority of the recommendations in the report have never been acted upon. It remains a profound and ignored document of Aboriginal/state relations in this country.

Rebecca Belmore's 2005 work for Venice, *Fountain*, was an elegy to the relationship of Indigenous people to land, to water, to blood, linked for Aboriginal people in a profound and cosmological way. Cathy Mattes describes Belmore's work:

Unlike commemorative water fountains that ostensibly represent prosperity, Belmore's *Fountain* contains layers of personal and global meaning. It touches on the power of place, and our common needs as human beings. Taking from the local and moving into the global, it also acknowledges the hegemonic nature of globalization and the potential for violence over our most important natural resource, water.¹⁴

Reflecting on her experience in Venice, Belmore relates the following story:

It was on the news. It was 1974. Indians with guns had taken over Anishnabe Park just outside of Kenora. A pulp and paper mill had dumped mercury into the river system throughout the 1960's. In 1970 the federal government acknowledged the contamination and banned commercial fishing. This loss of livelihood affected the social condition of the First Nations communities tied to those waters. The armed occupation manifested the anger and frustration experienced by the people. I recall my grandmother Maryanne watching small,

13. *Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, 1996, vol. 3, chapter 6, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071211060511/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si61_e.html#5. Visual and Performing Arts

14. Cathy Mattes, "Feature: The Last Time I Saw Venice—Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain*", *ConunDrumOnline*, June 2006, accessed May 11, 2012, http://www.conundrumonline.org/Issue_3/Last_Venice.htm

black and white, car-battery-operated television. She spoke, directing her Anishinabe words at the flickering screen. There was anger in her voice. “Mom, [I asked], what did Cocum just say?”

“She said, ‘If I wasn’t an old woman I would be there, too.’”¹⁵

2006: Norval Morrisseau—Shaman Artist

Although the work of Aboriginal artists had been increasingly appearing in mainstream galleries since the 1960s, *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist* was the first solo retrospective of a First Nations artist in the National Gallery of Canada. It marked a turning point and an apogee in the trajectory of Aboriginal art in this country. Morrisseau’s synthesis of Anishnaabe traditions and contemporary art provided a rich visual vocabulary in which human beings and animals interacted on spiritual and terrestrial planes of existence. Morrisseau’s art was characterized by the bold use of colour, strong “power lines,” and the stories and legends that were at the heart of his practice.

From his first sold-out exhibition at the Pollock Gallery in 1962 until the last few years before his death, Morrisseau was a prolific and committed artist, a man convinced of his own destiny and power to interpret and portray Anishnaabe culture. He brought a sensuality, a sexuality, and a spirituality that people had never before seen in Aboriginal art, and he taught Aboriginal artists not to be afraid to view themselves in relation to their history, their mythology, and their contemporary realities.

Morrisseau’s beautiful, complex, and ever evolving worlds were meditations and revelations on everything from the magical transformation of the shaman to the death and plague brought by the col-

15. Rebecca Belmore, “Personal Reflections,” presented at the symposium *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*, Venice, Italy, December 2005, and published in *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, DC, and New York: NMAI Editions, 2005), 148-9.

onizers. He redefined Indigenous artistic presence in Canada by and through Aboriginal world views, cosmologies, artistic traditions, and ways of being. He created self-defining narratives of art and culture that located Anishnaabe traditions and specific historical and social dynamics within the worlds he created. He called them his “travels to the world of invention.” I remember seeing him just a few months after his exhibition opened. Gaunt, frail, thin, this once robust man was now confined to a wheelchair. So weak was he that we all had to go out to the van he was riding in to pay our respects—respects due to an artist who was an originator and an innovator who had changed the way Aboriginal art was viewed in Canada. Morrisseau died on December 4, 2007, less than one year after his opening at the National Gallery.

He was not the first Aboriginal artist to have a solo exhibition at the National Gallery (that would be Inuit artist Pudlo Pudlat, in 1990¹⁶), but the scale, the size, and the reception of *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist* marked a turning point and a fundamental change at the National Gallery.

There have now been others—Daphne Odjig, Carl Beam, and the upcoming exhibition of the work of Dene Suline/Saulteaux artist Alex Janvier. For the first time in its history, the National Gallery of Canada has a department of Indigenous art. It’s a long way from 1986, when that august institution bought its first work of “contemporary Indian art.”

2011: Close Encounters

Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years, which opened in 2011, was the largest international exhibition of Indigenous artists ever mounted

16. In Canada, the term “Aboriginal” refers to the three “Indigenous peoples” identified in the Canadian constitution: First Nations (formerly known as Indians), Inuit (formerly known as Eskimos) and Metis. Pudlat (an Inuit artist) was the first Aboriginal person to have a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, while Morrisseau was the first First Nations artist.

in Canada, and perhaps anywhere. It was a time to reflect on the significance of Indigenous artists on the world art stage and here in North America, all while trying to stay warm in the numbing cold of a Winnipeg January night.

I was co-curator of the exhibition with Lee-Ann Martin, Candice Hopkins, and Jenny Western. This work was undoubtedly a highlight of my career, allowing me to work on a project of this size and scope with a brilliant group of collaborators. And, in one way it brought me back to 1992, as I had the chance to work with Lee-Ann Martin, the co-curator of the exhibition *Indigena*, which had such an impact on my thinking. *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* speculated about the future from the diverse perspectives of Indigenous artists and writers. For us, as curators, our feeling was that to date,

Indigenous thoughts, images, and words have been omitted in discussions addressing the future. If they have been included, it has often been through pan-Indian prophecies and predictions that are poorly understood and have been appropriated by the dominant culture. Those academic disciplines most associated with the study of Aboriginal arts and culture—art history and anthropology—have largely succeeded in freezing us in the past. Popular culture and media tend to reinforce this notion. In *Close Encounters*, Indigenous people offer speculative, critical, and aesthetic mediations on our collective future.¹⁷

The artists and writers included in the project pose intriguing possibilities for the next 500 years. As Hopi photographer and filmmaker Victor Masayesva notes, “[w]e all in different measure have carved out the future. We are all clairvoyants, soothsayers, prophets, knowingly assuming our predictions.”¹⁸ The idea to organize the exhibition on ideas of the future came quite early in the process. It

17. Candice Hopkins, Steven Loft, Lee-Ann Martin, and Jenny Western, “Introduction,” ed. Sherry Farrell-Racette, *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* (Winnipeg: Plug In Editions, 2011), 13.

18. Victor Masayesva, *Husk of Time: The Photographs of Victor Masayesva* (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 64.

was a means of radically divorcing Indigenous art and culture from the past and making the exhibition into a platform to speculate what the world might be like half a millennium from now. The exhibition's name was specific, at once recalling encounter narratives between Native and non-Native people, and pointing to the genre of science fiction and its often highly romanticized notions of contact.

Certainly, a lot has changed in the art world. Indigenous artists are represented in the largest public and private collections, in exhibitions in major galleries and international art shows and biennales, but the question is still whether their voices are being heard amid the self-congratulatory backslapping of the art elite. Is the movement of Indigenous aesthetics and cultural sovereignty getting through?

The answer is yes and no. Indubitably, the number and impact of Indigenous artists, and the critical dialogue about them, have come to represent a real movement in the art world. But what is sometimes lost in the (rightful) celebration of these accomplishments is the role of Indigenous art as an assertion of cultural sovereignty. Without acknowledging the colonial violence and cultural oppression committed against Indigenous peoples by settler states, there can be no peace, no rapprochement, no moving forward. Jolene Rickard once called sovereignty "a line in the sand." Viewed from an Indigenous perspective, sovereignty is predicated on notions of communal responsibility, cultural autonomy, traditional knowledge, and nationhood. It disavows colonialism not by being predicated on it but by functioning in relation to it. A daunting position, to say the least, but a position of cultural self-awareness and philosophical as well as ontological strength.

In reading the works of Indigenous artists, we must always be cognizant of the artists' position as creators, interpreters, translators, and purveyors of an inherent cultural epistemology. To decolonize is to supplant racist patriarchies in favour of multi-contextual dialogues, while understanding and acknowledging the place of an

inherent Indigenous sovereignty rooted in land, language, culture, and ways of knowing and being. It is a progression, a progression based on mutual respect, mutual understanding, and the desire to explore the complexities of inter-relationships. A progression that is vast and rich, but challenging, too.

Close Encounters was one manifestation of that progression. It showed what Indigenous artists thought about the future: a future of cultural dialogue that is polycultural, intercultural, and resistant to racist hegemonies.

It was a call to continue the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, while reminding us all of our shared responsibilities as Indigenous cultural producers.

The struggle for Indigenous rights and sovereignty continues, even as policies of assimilation and extinction still dominate government ideology. In our communities, in this country, and around the world, Indigenous peoples will continue to assert their inherent, treaty, and constitutional rights. And all along the way, accompanying them in their resistance, in their survivance, and into their future will be the artists.

In determining our art history we name ourselves, thereby creating our own self-perception and freeing ourselves from colonialist concepts too often internalized by Aboriginal people. Furthermore, we give our artists a framework and a foundation rooted in their own traditions, histories, cultures and futures. Native artists have had to face the fact that they exist within a cultural hegemony. There has been little to encourage them to develop a unique aesthetic outside the confines of a Euro-centric art history...yet, they have done just that!¹⁹

This quote was from my first major publication as a curator. I believed it then, and I believe it now. The journey continues.

19. Steven Loft, "Alt.Shift.Control," in eds. Steven Loft and Shirley Madill, *Alt.Shift.Control: Musings on Digital Identity* (Hamilton, ON: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2000), 7.