

**Charting the Development of Indigenous Curatorial Practice  
By Jonathan A. Lockyer**

**A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts, 2014  
Criticism and Curatorial Practice**

**OCAD University  
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## **Abstract**

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This thesis establishes a critical genealogy of the history of curating Indigenous art in Canada from an Ontario-centric perspective. Since the pivotal intervention by Indigenous artists, curators, and political activists in the staging of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, Quebec, the curation of Indigenous art in Canada has moved from a practice of necessity, largely unrecognized by mainstream arts institutions, to a professionalized practice that exists both within and on the margins of public galleries. The shifting parameters of the collection and exhibition practices of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada are inherently linked to a constant negotiation on the part of Indigenous curators. These numerous engagements manifested in the establishment of a number of Indigenous arts advocacy groups, artist-run centres, and the adoption of alternative modes of curating and exhibiting Indigenous artwork. This time period is characterized by fractious and often-contradictory views held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, curators, and public arts institutions on how the terms of inclusion should be shaped.

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To my father, Louis William Lockyer  
November 20, 1955-April 9, 2010

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

My thesis is, by and large, an Ontario-centric account of the development and progression of Indigenous curatorial practice. It is the aim of this thesis to chart the history and development of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada. This project is part of the ongoing process of recognizing and recording one aspect of Indigenous art history. It is also a project that approaches a discursive engagement with the history of curating Indigenous art. Due to the size and scope of this thesis, out of necessity, I have chosen to omit key figures, events, and exhibitions, particularly from northern Canada and British Columbia, that have taken place concurrently to the history I chart. The decision to omit certain people who work, and exhibitions that have taken place within these regions has been made with the intention of presenting an Ontario-centric approach to the research and writing of this thesis. The development of Indigenous curatorial practices in Canada is exceedingly complex, and while there have been numerous instances where exhibitions and events have acted as flashpoints on a national level, many of the developments within the profession have been shaped on a regional level. In attempting to understand the practice of curating Indigenous art on a national level, it is important to recognize the messy and often contentious climate in which Indigenous artists and curators have pushed for their representation within the mainstream of Canadian art. The individuals, exhibitions, and events I chronicle in this thesis represent what I have isolated as a series of flashpoints that

represented unified steps into the mainstream of Canadian art by diverse groups of Indigenous artists and curators.

This thesis is centered on a primary question: how has the practice of curating Indigenous art developed in Canada since 1967? To bring an understanding to this question, a series of five corresponding questions will be asked to come to a well-rounded understanding of the development of this practice. First, what were the major events and artistic movements between 1967 and 1992 that influenced the development of Indigenous curatorial practices in Canada? Second, what significance did the two major exhibitions staged in 1992, *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* and *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, held at the National Gallery of Canada and Canadian Museum of Civilization respectively, represent for the future developments of Indigenous curatorial practice through the late 1990s and beyond? Third, what effect did the professionalization of Indigenous curatorial practice have on Indigenous curators who worked within and outside of major public arts institutions? This question is significant as a number of Indigenous curators began to take up institutional positions at major public galleries in both the United States and Canada beyond the early 1990s. Fourth, what are the implications for the curation of international Indigenous art in Canada beyond the year 2010? Finally, what role does the practice of critical curatorial writing play in questioning the production and curation of contemporary Indigenous artwork in the present day? Through an examination of these questions, this thesis



establishes a genealogy of Indigenous curatorial practice that is connected primarily to events that have transpired or influenced the practice of curating Indigenous art in Canada from an Ontario-specific perspective.

Throughout this thesis I have identified individuals I refer to in my writing as either Indigenous or non-Indigenous. In the early drafts of this thesis, I had attempted to recognize Indigenous people by their cultural affiliation, but as the project developed this process became problematic. While I had recognized the cultural or racial affiliations of some Indigenous peoples, I had not done so evenly, nor had I held non-Indigenous peoples to the same standards of identification. The result of acknowledging the cultural heritage or racial background of some, while ignoring others made it clear that this was an uneven, racialized process of “naming” individuals. As a result, I have recognized the term ‘Indigenous’ as an accepted and cross-representational way of referring to the various cultural groups of First Peoples across North America. I have also chosen to recognize non-Indigenous arts professionals as such, not in an attempt to entrench the boundaries and limitations of identity politics, but to establish a need to reconcile the fraught relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and their approaches to curatorial practices within mainstream Canadian arts institutions.

As a non-Indigenous member of the OCAD University community, I feel the use of the term ‘Indigenous’ reflects the spirit and goals of the Indigenous Visual Culture (formerly known as Aboriginal Visual Culture) Program as a site

of inclusive pedagogical engagement within a public post-secondary arts institution. Throughout this essay I refer to people who identify as First Nations, Inuit, First Peoples, Aboriginal, Native American, Metis, and who may be status or non-status peoples in either Canada or the United States, as Indigenous. I recognize the scholarly work of others around the issues of naming and properly representing Indigenous peoples and cultures in North America is an inherently political process that has the ability to either perpetuate or challenge the legacies of colonization and assimilation both on a national and international level. When referring to a specific Indigenous worldview, I acknowledge the distinct cultural identity of the individual who expresses this viewpoint (eg. Mohawk, Cree, Anishinaabe worldviews). I do not propose the use of this term as a perfect solution, but as an attempt to engage with the often-fraught process of naming and recognizing, as well as to honour the self-recognition of Indigenous peoples.

The research I have conducted focuses on two primary sources of information that support the work of curatorial collectives and individuals, as well as events and exhibitions that have transpired in major public arts institutions that have, I argue, impacted the development of Indigenous curatorial practice. First, I have consulted exhibition catalogues, essays, and relevant corresponding literature on the exhibitions and curatorial work that I argue has played a significant role in what is an ongoing emergence of Indigenous curatorial practices.

Second, I have conducted interviews both in person and electronically with several individuals who, apart from being willing and available to engage with the work I have undertaken, are figures I have deemed to be of considerable significance based on their bodies of curatorial work, and that have contributed to the development of Indigenous curatorial practice on a national or international level. Indigenous curators David General, Candice Hopkins, Ryan Rice, and non-Indigenous curator Kathleen Ritter, have been variously involved in a number of curatorial “flashpoints” detailed throughout this thesis that have, in one way or another, contributed to the development of Indigenous curatorial practices in Canada. I contend that these flashpoints have proven to be moments when the worlds of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art have, either through amicable negotiation or fractious and ongoing advocacy work, collided and overlapped, resulting in a reconsideration of, and intervention into the ways in which Indigenous art has been curated. I have approached these catalogues, supporting publications, and interviews, as primary source material in charting the genealogy of Indigenous curatorial practices. This material comprises a small but rich body of source material that accounts for the last forty plus years of Indigenous art history. There exist a limited number of survey publications that have charted the history of contemporary Indigenous curatorial and artistic practices in North America that I have also consulted. W. Jackson Rushing III’s *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, (1999) as well as Ruth Phillips’ *Native North American Art* (1998) and *Museum Pieces: Towards*

*the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (2011) have contributed greatly to Indigenous art history. But by and large the history of the development of Indigenous curatorial practices is contained within the catalogues, publications and print sources, and personal accounts of the individuals and collectives that have been active over this short period of time.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators employ a plurality of professional practices and curatorial strategies that manifest themselves in remarkably different ways, and reflect their own position within the world of contemporary art. These strategies are predicated on their cultural background, the professional environment they work within, what institution they work with or within, their geographical location, as well as funding opportunities that are available to them. To construct a genealogy of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada requires an acknowledgement that the development of the practice as a whole has taken shape quite differently across the country. With that in mind, I must acknowledge that while the objective of this thesis is to chart the establishment and progression of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada, this thesis is written from an Ontario-centric perspective. This is a conscious choice that I have made, and I have done so for several reasons. First, I am an emerging curator and critical writer and have lived and been educated primarily in Ontario. By physically locating myself within Ontario, I acknowledge the prevailing influence the artistic and curatorial projects that have taken place within this province have had on me, and it is also a

reflection of the Ontario-centric nature of the mainstream Canadian art world more broadly speaking.

Second, in stating that this thesis focuses on curatorial developments from an Ontario-centric perspective, I acknowledge that this thesis is not a concise history of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada, nor does it aim to be. While focusing on several other galleries and artist-run centres within and outside of Ontario, my thesis pays great attention to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, as I will argue this institution has played a central role in establishing the parameters of inclusion for Indigenous artists and curators within the national discourse of mainstream art in Canada. It is also imperative to note that this institution has and continues to play a major role in determining what Indigenous art - from both a cultural and aesthetic perspective - is included, and what is left out of an established national consciousness of Canadian art practices.

This thesis must be contained within finite parameters, and therefore I have made a conscious decision to limit the breadth of knowledges and the historical perspectives that can be reasonably included. I acknowledge that this thesis does not engage with the corresponding histories of curating and critical writing regarding West Coast Indigenous and Inuit art in Canada, which have been shaped by distinct cultural, political, aesthetic, and geopolitical borders. Indigenous scholar and curator, Marcia Crosby, has published extensively regarding the history and contemporary realities of West Coast Indigenous arts and curatorial practices from the 1950s onwards. Similarly, Indigenous curator

and scholar Heather Igloliorte has published, curated, and consulted on numerous projects that have explored historical and contemporary representations of Inuit art in Canada. There have also been a number of non-Indigenous curators, notably Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, who have actively engaged with the production and curation of modern and contemporary West Coast and, to a lesser extent, Inuit art. All of these individuals have made invaluable contributions to their respective fields, and their work illustrates the vastly different points of engagement with Indigenous arts and curatorial practices in the country. Their work highlights the complexities of engaging with what amounts to a multiplicity of Indigenous curatorial and artistic practices that span cultural, aesthetic, historical, and geopolitical boundaries across Canada.

My thesis advocates for the various practices of curating Indigenous artwork in Canada. My thesis is focused on assembling and contextualizing a discursive pathway of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada over the last forty years, and constructs a historical narrative of the progressive, concerted, and often fractious efforts by Indigenous curators to establish a presence of Indigenous peoples and their various art practices within the collection and exhibition practices of mainstream public art galleries. The parameters for the curation of contemporary Indigenous artwork have changed considerably over the last forty-plus years. The practice has shifted from an undertaking of necessity that strove to break away from an anthropological positioning of Indigenous artwork, to an increasing professionalization of Indigenous curatorial practices that exist within

the previously-immutable spaces of major public art galleries in Canada. These shifts are inherently linked, by a series of flashpoints, to a constant negotiation on the part of Indigenous curators within major public arts institutions. These numerous engagements manifested in the establishment of a number of Indigenous arts advocacy groups, artist-run centres, and the adoption of alternative modes of curating and exhibiting Indigenous artwork. I argue that, following events surrounding the public unveiling and subsequent reception of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, Quebec, Indigenous curators have played a central role in shifting mainstream institutional attitudes towards the collection and exhibition of contemporary Indigenous artwork in Canada. While there have been major accomplishments made by Indigenous curators, significant questions remain in assessing and understanding where Indigenous curatorial practice stands in the present day.

I trace the roots of Indigenous curatorial practice back to the early advocacy work of Daphne Odjig and the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated who formed in the 1970s. This work was continued by Indigenous arts advocacy group the Society for Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA), as well as by the countless individual efforts of Indigenous artists and curators throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. This time period is characterized by acrimonious and often-contradictory views held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, curators, and arts administrators on how the terms of inclusion in major public arts institutions should be shaped. Notable and highly influential

exhibitions of this time included *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* at the National Gallery of Canada. Through the various curatorial and artistic projects of this time, a proverbial door was forced open by Indigenous artists and curators, and created an entry point into previously inaccessible institutional spaces. This led not only to an increase in the collection and exhibition of Indigenous artwork, but to the creation of curatorial positions within public art galleries, as well as funding programs specifically focused on supporting Indigenous curators and their various practices. The development of these positions and programs was a reflection of a series of collective and individual efforts by Indigenous artists and curators to establish a space for their various practices that had previously been non-existent within public art institutions. I contend that the inclusion of an Indigenous presence and perspective in major public art galleries should not be seen within the constricting terms of identity politics that limit the inclusion of Indigenous art based on racial or ethnic identities. Instead, the inclusion of Indigenous art should be part of an ongoing negotiation based on the aesthetic and conceptual merits of the various practices of artists and curators working within the field at any given time. This fight continued through the late 1990s and into the early 2000s by members of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC), and the individual efforts of curators and artists working within the field of Indigenous arts.



I argue that it has been in the last decade that the various practices of curating Indigenous art have reached a new stage of recognition within the mainstream of Canadian art. It has also been a time when a critical analysis of the practice of curating Indigenous art, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous arts professionals, has taken shape. Recent exhibitions *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* held in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 2011, and *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art*, held at the National Gallery of Canada in the summer of 2013, are two of the largest curatorial endeavors ever staged in Canada. Both exhibitions leave two questions to consider as the practice of curating Indigenous art moves forward. First, what are the implications of curating *international* Indigenous art in Canada? Canadian Indigenous curators, notably Greg A. Hill, Candice Hopkins, and Steven Loft, have expanded their various practices beyond the geopolitical borders of North America. While a contemporary approach to the curation of international Indigenous art was taking shape with the intent of addressing the lasting global effects of colonialism, it remained unclear what the connection between global populations of Indigenous peoples hinged on. Second, was there a need to establish a more rigorous critical writing practice that focused on the production and curation of contemporary Indigenous art? Indigenous curators, such as Richard William Hill, were concerned that while exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous artwork had received considerable attention within mainstream arts publications, a lack of critical writing that focused on the production and curation of contemporary Indigenous artwork was a significant

gap in a quickly expanding Indigenous arts community. By broadening the discursive scope of curating Indigenous artwork, Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators simultaneously raised questions about the interconnectivity of international Indigenous people, and how the expansion of this curatorial practice expansion the continued push for advancement and recognition of culturally and aesthetically diverse Indigenous arts practices. This thesis is part of what I see as an ongoing exploration of the practice of curating Indigenous art, and allows a way forward in my own understanding of the role I might play in what is an ongoing negotiation of a fractious, but unquestionably necessary nation to nation dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. I recognize that this thesis is simply one of a plurality of narratives that contributes to an alternative art history that recognizes the paralleling and overlapping mainstream and Indigenous art history in this country.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Rise of Indigenous Curatorial Practice in Canada**

The development of Indigenous curatorial practices has been characterized by several major flashpoints within the Indigenous arts community. Since the late 1960s each of these flashpoints was invariably tied to the push for increased representation of Indigenous people within the numerous spaces within the contemporary Canadian art world, whether through the art market, institutional collecting, curatorial, or hiring practices. The establishment of a definable Indigenous curatorial practice can be traced back to the early advocacy work of a group of artists who were highly active through the late 1960s and 1970s. These artists were often grouped into the Woodland School, with professional practices primarily based out of the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba. Up to this point, Indigenous artistic production was understood through an anthropological lens that positioned artwork produced by Indigenous people within the realm of artifact, and existed outside of the parameters of the established Western art canon. This work, by and large, was grouped into the realms of craft or tourist art. These attitudes were deeply entrenched within the institutional framework of the collection and exhibition of Indigenous artwork that in turn, influenced a wider public understanding of what constituted Indigenous artwork.

Up to the mid-1960s, major exhibitions of Indigenous art held at the National Gallery of Canada included *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern* (1927), *Arts of French Canada 1613-1870* (1947), *A Century of Fine Crafts*, (1957), *Canadian Fine Crafts* (1963), and *Three Hundred Years of*

*Canadian Art* (1967). The curatorial intent of these exhibitions positioned historical works of Indigenous art as artifact or craft object, with the work positioned as a precursor to the romantic work of French and English-Canadian Romantic artists Paul Kane, and Cornelius Krieghoff of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The romantic style of Kane and Krieghoff eventually gave way to modernist landscape art characterized by Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven, and Emily Carr in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These works were part of a dominant colonial narrative of the Canadian state and its subjects upheld by the National Gallery, but did not speak to the realities of life in the 1960s for many Indigenous people.<sup>1</sup>

By the mid-1960s increasing demands by Indigenous peoples and communities across the country called for recognition of the sovereignty of Indigenous nations guaranteed to them through their treaty rights with the Crown, and for the repeal of the paternalistic laws of the *Indian Act*. While Indigenous political leader Harold Cardinal was demanding that Federal and Provincial governments recognize the sovereignty of Indigenous communities, and reform the nation's legislated systems of oppression and violence carried out against Indigenous peoples, Indigenous artists carried forward the political spirit of their time through their own distinct aesthetic practices.<sup>2</sup> The political activism of Indigenous peoples throughout the 1960s was part of an emerging radical political consciousness within not just Canadian, but North American society. This spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011), 254.

<sup>2</sup> See Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society* (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press, 1969).

was reflected in the American Indian Movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and the Black Power movement, among others. The political climate of the 1960s in Canada was embodied within the Indians of Canada Pavilion, which represented the first major flashpoint for interactions between Indigenous artists and curators and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The 1960s in Ontario could be best characterized by three distinct influences on the creation and exhibition of Indigenous art. First was an increased interest in “Indian art,” specifically Inuit carvings, prints, and Woodland school paintings, fueled primarily by the Toronto-based Canadian art market. Second was an increased institutional awareness of “Indian” art as a modern practice that was strengthened with the staging of *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art in Canada* at the National Gallery of Canada between 1969 and 1970.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition showcased work by Indigenous artists from across the country and represented a plurality of aesthetic arts practices that were framed within a Modernist curatorial strategy. Third was the establishment of the Social Programs Division, and specifically the Cultural Affairs section of the Department of Indian Affairs (now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada), which functioned as a governmental body that promoted the public advancement, as well as the creation of funding opportunities, for Indigenous arts professionals. One of the major projects undertaken by Cultural Affairs was the development of the Indians of Canada Pavilion for the upcoming 1967 International and Universal

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<sup>3</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 254.

Exposition - commonly known as Expo 67 - in Montreal, Quebec. Expo 67 was conceived as a World's Fair that celebrated international cultural exchange while marking the centennial celebration of the establishment of the Dominion of Canada.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous author and political leader George Manuel was a member of the advisory committee that oversaw the development of the Indians of Canada Pavilion. Manuel, in his landmark 1974 publication *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, reflected on the governmental bureaucracy that shaped the initial planning stages for the content that would be included in the pavilion. Manuel saw these initial meetings, in which Indigenous people had little to no input, an extension of the bureaucratic structures Indigenous peoples in Canada encountered in their everyday existence.<sup>5</sup> Manuel detailed that initially the advisory committee, which was comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals, was not given authority to set their own agenda for consultation meetings, nor were they allowed to elect a chair for the planning committee. Furthermore, while the committee was given authority to select Indigenous artists who had submitted work for inclusion in the pavilion, they initially had no authority in dictating the architectural design of the pavilion or the artists' projects commissioned for installation on the pavilion's grounds.<sup>6</sup> Manuel also highlighted the economic disparities between Indigenous artists involved with the pavilion. West Coast carvers Henry Hunt and his assistant Simon Charlie had put in a bid to carve their totem pole for \$5,500

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<sup>4</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> George Manuel, *The Forth World: An Indian Reality*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel, 173-175.

CAD, while Manuel estimates a scale model of the pavilion cost upwards of \$250,000 CAD.<sup>7</sup> Manuel stated that rather than including Indigenous peoples in any meaningful way, they were simply brought in to go through a symbolic “exercise” arranged by government and Indian affairs officials.<sup>8</sup>

The Indians of Canada Pavilion was originally envisioned as an exercise in the promotion of what should be seen as a fictionalized narrative of Canadian nationalism that positioned Indigenous peoples and their cultures as outside mainstream Canadian culture.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the staging of the Indians of Canada Pavilion, Manuel states:

The Expo decisions stand out as especially useful, because relatively small sums of money were involved and very few political ambitions needed to be put on trial. Expo was intended to be a grand spiritual statement of all participants. Each pavilion was to be a testimony to the world about the people who had built it. Touring Expo was meant to be like a miniature tour around the world. The Department saw to it that Indian people had the same voice in our pavilion that we had in our own lives. Scaled down and to size.<sup>10</sup>

However, under the direction of Indigenous artist and curator Tom Hill, the pavilion became a cultural and political flashpoint between Indigenous artists, the public, and the Canadian government. Participating artists in the *Indians of Canada Pavilion* included Indigenous artists George Clutesi, Jean-Marie Gros-Louis, Tom Hill, Henry Hunt, Tony Hunt, Alex Janvier, Francis Kagige, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray, Gerald Tailfeathers, Ross Woods, and Noel Wuttunee. The

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<sup>7</sup> Manuel 173-175.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> Manuel, 177.

pavilion presented Indigenous cultural artifacts and newly created work by participating artists alongside a series of didactic graphics that illustrated the lasting effects of colonization on generations of Indigenous peoples. The artwork featured in the pavilion was juxtaposed with these blatantly politicized messages that conveyed the cultural, political, and social marginalization of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and challenged the hegemonic discourse of racial and cultural superiority perpetuated by generations of Provincial and Federal governments.<sup>11</sup> The planning and staging of the Indians of Canada Pavilion was the first major flashpoint, arguably, the first public act of social critique and collective action on the part of Indigenous artists and organizers, that while mired in governmental bureaucracy, set a template for future interactions between Indigenous artists and major public institutions.<sup>12</sup> Manuel's previous statements regarding the Indians of Canada Pavilion characterized a decade in which the ongoing consultation process between Indigenous peoples and their political organizations and the Canadian government was centered on the ongoing negotiation of diplomacy and self-government for Indigenous peoples and their nations.<sup>13</sup>

The ramifications of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo '67 gave considerable momentum to a small group of Indigenous artists who had shifted their focus to gaining increased representation for Indigenous artists and their

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Hill, "Indian Art in Canada: An Historical Perspective," in *Norval Morrisseau and The Emergence of the Image Makers*, eds. Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/Methuen, 1984), 21-22.

<sup>12</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Manuel, 171.



work in major public galleries. These artists recognized that gallery spaces fundamentally existed as colonial institutions with mandates that reflected a dominant Eurocentric Canadian nationalist narrative, and that change could only be affected through collective organization and peer support. In November of 1973, the Winnipeg Art Gallery staged *Treaty Numbers 23, 287 and 1171*, an exhibition that featured work by three Indigenous artists: Daphne Odjig, Jackson Beardy, and Alex Janvier. Following this exhibition and the ongoing conversations between Odjig and a number of other Indigenous artists, a group of seven practicing Indigenous artists from Canada and the United States came together - Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Janvier, Odjig, Carl Ray, Joseph Sanchez, and Roy Thomas - to form Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. The group became known colloquially as the “Indian Group of Seven.”<sup>14</sup> Soon after the organization’s founding, Norval Morrisseau replaced Thomas, while Indigenous sculptor and jeweler Bill Reid was considered the unofficial eighth member. By the early 1970s, Morrisseau, Odjig and Ray, among others, had experienced considerable critical and market success across Canada, but also recognized the limitations of attempting to address the disparities faced by Indigenous artists in Canadian public galleries. The group’s aim was to operate as advocates for emerging Indigenous artists, providing financial support for them in the process, and through exhibiting collectively, encourage galleries to accept work produced

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Sanchez, “The Formation of Professional Native Artists Inc.: The Indian Group of Seven,” in *Witness*, ed. Bonnie Devine (Sudbury: Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, 2009), 22.

by Indigenous artists that would have otherwise been overlooked.<sup>15</sup> Through the formation of Professional Native Indian Artists Inc., this initially loose coalition of artists was the first to push for the inclusion of Indigenous artists in mainstream public galleries in the country, as well as maintain a greater degree of control over the sale and exhibition of their work once it entered these galleries. The formation of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. was the result of more than a decade of struggle by this small group of predominately self-taught Indigenous artists that Tom Hill characterized as a collective of “image-makers.” Hill argued their work fostered individualism, Indigenous nationalism, and most importantly, a union of modern and traditional, culturally-specific Indigenous aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> The group owed their professional existence largely to Odjig, who by the mid 1970s had established one of the first Indigenous artist-run centres in the country, and was an early advocate for collective action among Indigenous artists.<sup>17</sup> While short lived - the group would disband in late 1975 - Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. was the first organized attempt by contemporary Indigenous artists to affect significant change in major Canadian public arts institutions. Their advocacy work created a template for emerging Indigenous artists to advocate for the exhibition of their work within the lexicon of mainstream contemporary Canadian art.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Hill, “Indian Art in Canada: An Historical Perspective,” 20.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Sanchez, *Witness*, 21-22.

In the short period following the disbanding of Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. a group of Indigenous artists, and now, curators and educators, had emerged in Canada that aimed to establish new aesthetic, political, and theoretical grounds through which contemporary Indigenous art could be exhibited and understood. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tom Hill, Robert Houle, and Gerald McMaster, all practicing Indigenous visual artists, had established themselves as the first generation of professional Indigenous curators who held various institutional curatorial positions. By the mid-1980s, Tom Hill had already spent a decade as the Director of the Cultural Affairs Department within the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and in 1982 returned to his home community of Six Nations of the Grand River to serve as director of the Woodland Cultural Centre, a position he held until 2005. Robert Houle served as curator of Indian Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (then known as the National Museum of Man) between 1977 and 1980. Building on the work of Houle within the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gerald McMaster established the first national Indian and Inuit Art Gallery at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (where he held the position of curator between 1981 and 2000), as well as establishing the first Bachelor of Arts (Native Art) program at the First Nations University in Regina, Saskatchewan.

As the individual curatorial practices of Hill, Houle and McMaster emerged, other Indigenous artists and curators such as Bob Boyer, David General and Alfred Young Man felt that, much like Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.,

their demands for better representation in public arts institutions would be more effective if voiced as a collective. The Society for Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) was eventually established as an advocacy group that pushed for and was successful in changing the way Indigenous artists and curators were represented in major public art galleries in Canada. The group's roots can be traced back to the first National Native Artists Conference, hosted October 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 1978 by the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation of West Bay (now M'Chigeeng), Manitoulin Island. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs organized the conference in conjunction with the Canadian Secretary of State and the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation. Indigenous organizers approached the conference with the intention of establishing a coherent response to the persistent lack of representation for Indigenous artists in major public arts and academic institutions across the country.<sup>18</sup> Participants at the conference acknowledged the significant achievements that had been made by a group of established Indigenous artists who had gained considerable recognition for their work, but emphasized that a number of issues concerning the exhibition and categorization of Indigenous art as "contemporary" remained their greatest challenge. As Tom Hill noted, Indigenous artists continued to face a number of challenges in having their work recognized as culturally and aesthetically significant within the world of contemporary art.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Young Man, "Bob Boyer and the Society of Canadian Artists of native Ancestry (SCANA)," in *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*, ed. Lee Ann Martin, (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Hill, "A Retrospect of Indian Art," *The Native Perspective* 3, no. 2, (1978): 34.

In relation to these concerns, many Indigenous artists felt beholden to a Western art market that was dominated by non-Indigenous collectors, curators, and critics, and that dictated the aesthetic and conceptual nature of “Indian art.” In 1978

Indigenous artist and curator David General states:

The incognizance of the art buying market has led to the development of preconceived ideas of what Indian art is and should be. There is a tendency to restrict the Indian artistic expression to the traditional art forms which undermine the credibility of Indian art as contemporary and reinforce the stigma of Indian art as curious or as an ethnographic extension of cultural heritage.<sup>20</sup>

Following the conference, Indigenous artists and curators began to discuss the possibility of an advocacy group that could carry forward the concerns of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc., while representing an increasingly diverse Indigenous arts community.

By 1983, SCANA existed as an informal Indigenous arts advocacy group. That same year the University of Lethbridge hosted that year’s national Native Arts Conference, and out of it, an ad-hoc committee was established to further develop SCANA as a nationally recognized, incorporated advocacy organization. By early 1984, SCANA had become an incorporated organization with a wide-ranging, but somewhat informal membership of influential Indigenous artists and curators. The preliminary discussions of what SCANA should look like and who it should represent included Indigenous artists Carl Beam, Bob Boyer, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, David General, Tom Hill, Robert Houle, Alex Janvier, Daphne

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<sup>20</sup> David General, “Indian Artists or Artists who are Indian?” *The Native Perspective* 3, no. 2 (1978): 32-33.

Odjig, and Alfred Young Man. Not all of these individuals would become “official” members within SCANA, and because of the unofficial membership structure of the organization, membership records are conflicting. In that same year, the organization hosted their first annual national conference in Hazelton, British Columbia. The conference was hosted jointly by the villages of Ksan, Kitwanga, and, Kitwancool in British Columbia.

In 1983, paralleling the formation of SCANA, significant development within the National Gallery of Canada that dealt specifically with the display and increased collection of contemporary Aboriginal artworks had been initiated. In a commissioned internal report, it was suggested, based on the collection and curatorial practices of other significant public arts institutions, that the National Gallery begin to actively pursue the collection and exhibition of contemporary artworks created by artists of Canadian Indigenous ancestry.<sup>21</sup> The gallery’s increasing desire to collect and exhibit works of contemporary art created by Indigenous artists was the culmination of several influencing factors and role-players. Following the founding of SCANA, the organization pushed strongly for representation of Indigenous artists at the National Gallery. As Diana Nemiroff, who held a variety of curatorial positions between 1984 and 2000, and at the time, was the National Gallery’s Curator of Contemporary Art, states:

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<sup>21</sup> Diana Nemiroff, “Modernism, Nationalism, and Beyond: A Critical History of Exhibitions of First Nations Art,” in *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, eds. Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, Charlotte Townsend Gault (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 16.

By analogy, the belated recognition now being given contemporary native art is the result of a similarly favourable conjuncture of circumstances. The first is the crisis of representation associated with postmodernism, which has caused some art historians to attempt to deconstruct the ethnocentric assumptions of universality in art discourse.<sup>22</sup>

Stated in 1992, this is the first acknowledgement by Nemiroff that the National Gallery had been influenced in any way by a rising postmodern consciousness within the institutional politics of collecting and representing Indigenous artwork. Nemiroff states that the manner in which art institutions such as the National Gallery were able to sustain a dialogue of cultural difference with Indigenous art in their collection and exhibition practices, should be undertaken collaboratively, and that a, “politics of opposition is unduly limiting.”<sup>23</sup> However, independent writer, curator and educator Charlotte Townsend-Gault recognized the existing acrimonious relationship between Indigenous peoples and art institutions, and spoke of the necessity to integrate Indigenous peoples and their professional practices into the operating structures of public art galleries. Townsend-Gault states that:

...cultural difference is expressed not by attempting to find common ground, common words, common symbols across cultures. It is finally dignified by protecting all sides from zealous over-simplification, by acknowledging a final untranslatability of certain concepts and subtleties from one culture to another.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nemiroff, “Modernism, Nationalism, and Beyond,” 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Charlotte Twonsend-Gault, “Kinds of Knowing,” in *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, eds. Robert Houle, Charlotte Townsend Gault (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 101.

These complicated positions expressed by non-Indigenous curators on the roles public art institutions play in establishing new relationships with Indigenous artists, coupled with mounting pressure from the membership of SCANA, contributed to an increasingly reactive climate within the mainstream Canadian arts community throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

It is also important to note that between 1981 and 1990 significant political tension between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian Federal and Quebec Provincial government had developed, running in parallel to the developments within the Indigenous arts community. These political developments stemmed from the introduction of the *Constitution Act of 1982* by the Federal government. The adoption of the Constitution by all provinces except Quebec led to the development of the Meech Lake Accord in 1987. The accord was aimed at winning Quebec's consent to the revised Constitution of 1982. However, many Indigenous people opposed the Accord, stating that nowhere in the negotiating process had Indigenous people been included, and that honouring Quebec as a distinct society would represent a continued rejection of the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and their nations. In July 1990, twelve days before the expiration of the unanimous ratification of the Accord by all ten provinces was needed, Elijah Harper, a Manitoba Member of the Legislative Assembly representing the riding of Rupertsland, formally opposed the ratification of the Accord by staging a filibuster that effectively defeated the Meech Lake Accord. The impact of Harper's political stance for all Indigenous



peoples had a widely felt impact on the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the federal government. The political climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s was a major flashpoint for Indigenous peoples in Canada, and unquestionably influenced Indigenous artists and curators working at this time. It is also important to note the significance of the conflict between the Mohawk people of Kanehsatake and the Quebec provincial government (and later within this same conflict, the Canadian federal government) during this time period. This conflict stemmed from the township of Oka's desire to build a nine-hole golf course on the sacred burial grounds of the Mohawk people, but would come to represent the contemporary disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada that were earlier characterized by Elijah Harper and his rejection of the Meech Lake Accord. While the issues that gave rise to the standoff between Mohawk warriors, the Surete du Quebec, and the Canadian Military stemmed back some 270 years, the "crisis" as it became known, lasted between July 11<sup>th</sup> and September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1990.<sup>25</sup>

In 1984, Carl Beam's first major solo exhibition opened at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Organized by non-Indigenous curator Elizabeth McLuhan, *Altered Egos: The Multimedia Work of Carl Beam* showcased a body of the artist's work from 1977 to 1984 that demonstrated

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<sup>25</sup> For further reading, see Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, *The People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Legacy of Oka*, (Toronto: Little, Brown and Co. Limited, 1991), and Gerald R. Alfred *Heading the Voices of Our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of native Nationalism*, (London: Oxford UP, 1995).

Beam's diverse artistic practice in a variety of media and techniques that were considered a significant aesthetic departure from his predecessors. The exhibition toured nationally and set the stage for both Beam's and SCANA's push for the National Gallery of Canada to establish a new relationship between the institution and contemporary Indigenous artists. The following year the Art Gallery of Ontario, the largest provincially funded gallery in the province, staged *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today*.<sup>26</sup> The exhibition showcased many of the preeminent contemporary avant-garde European artists of the time, placing them at the forefront of the global contemporary art movement. A number of these artists, including German artist Lothar Baumgarten, incorporated cultural themes of Aboriginal people into the work that was included in the exhibition. As part of the exhibition the AGO commissioned Baumgarten to create *Monument for the Native Peoples of Ontario* (1985) for display in the gallery's Walker Court, and which was subsequently purchased for the AGO's permanent collection, (as an indignant response to Baumgarten's installation, Robert Houle, in collaboration with the AGO, staged the intervention *Anishinaabe Walker Court* in 1993).<sup>27</sup> Beam attended the exhibition in 1985 and expressed his frustration that while cultural and aesthetic themes of Indigenous exoticism were

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<sup>26</sup> *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today* would be exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Ontario from February 8<sup>th</sup> to April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> For further reading, see Ruth Phillips, "Settler Monuments, Indigenous Memory: Dis-Membering and Re-Membering Canadian Art History," in *Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History*, eds. Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins (Toronto: University of Toronto P, 2012, 340-368).

given a central platform to artists in *The European Iceberg*, living Indigenous artists lacked inclusion in the province's largest public gallery.<sup>28</sup> As a response, Beam created a new work that represented an amalgamation of new developments in his aesthetic practice, and incorporated a growing critique of the insular nature of the mainstream contemporary art world.

Beam completed *The North American Iceberg* in 1985. The piece encapsulated his frustration with the mainstream art world and in many ways defined his career as an Indigenous artist working within and alongside the discourse of contemporary art both in Canada, and internationally. *The North American Iceberg* is a monumental mixed-media work that utilizes photo emulsion, paint, etching, stenciled and hand written text, and repetitive imagery from Indigenous and Western culture, and is rendered in reverse order on plexiglass. It was Beam's desire to create and exhibit the work as quickly as possible to represent the immediacy of the response he hoped to elicit in reaction to the AGO's exhibition.<sup>29</sup> Beam's creation of *The North American Iceberg* was an extension of this critique of the institutional marginalization and exclusion of Indigenous peoples, and utilized a variety of medias to assert the artist's own narrative on the current state of contemporary art. Beam exhibited the work at the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario in *Indian Art '85*. From there,

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<sup>28</sup> Ann Beam, "The Life and Work of Carl Beam: A Narrative Chronology," in *Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being*, ed. Greg A. Hill (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2010), 67.

<sup>29</sup> David General (Indigenous advisor/mentor, OCAD University Indigenous Visual Culture Department) in discussion with the author, April 10, 2013.

Beam exhibited *The North American Iceberg* and other recent works at the now-closed Brignall Gallery's *The North American Iceberg and Related Works* in Toronto, Ontario. Shortly after *The North American Iceberg* was installed at the Brignall Gallery, Beam wrote to Diana Nemiroff, Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada, and requested that she come to view the work. In the meantime, a dialogue had been established between David General and Bob Boyer of SCANA, and Diana Nemiroff and Brydon Smith (Director of the National Gallery), regarding the purchase of works of contemporary Indigenous art by the National Gallery.<sup>30</sup> In 1986 the National Gallery of Canada purchased Carl Beam's *The North American Iceberg* as part of a larger acquisition of works by contemporary Canadian artists.<sup>31</sup>

Beam's inclusion in this group of acquisitions was significant in that *The North American Iceberg* entered the gallery as the first artwork by an Indigenous artist that was purchased explicitly as a contemporary work of art. It is important to note that Beam's *North American Iceberg* was not the first work by an Indigenous artist to be purchased by the National Gallery. By 1986, the National Gallery owned a small collection of Indigenous artworks produced by artists of various cultural ancestries. The collection includes an argillite pole by an unknown Haida artist, purchased in 1927, and several Inuit prints and carvings, primarily from the Cape Dorset region, that came into the gallery's collection

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<sup>30</sup> General, discussion.

<sup>31</sup> The National Gallery of Canada considers any work created after in 1985 or later as a work of contemporary art.

throughout the 1950s. Two paintings, one by Indigenous artist Robert Markle, titled *Burlesque Series: Acrobat II* (1963), and the other by Indigenous artist Rita Letendre, titled *Atara* (1963), were purchased by the NGC in 1963 and 1974 respectively. At the behest of both artists, their cultural backgrounds were not acknowledged at the time their work was purchased. As Indigenous curator Greg A. Hill suggests, this may have been a strategic omission by both artists as a way into the gallery, in a sense, “entering through the back door,” as the National Gallery had no clear policy or interest in collecting works of art by contemporary Indigenous artists at the time.<sup>32</sup>

The inclusion of Beam’s *The North American Iceberg* in the National Gallery of Canada’s collection of contemporary art was a landmark shift for the gallery and Indigenous artists alike. It was perhaps the largest flashpoint between Indigenous artists, curators, and public arts institutions in the 1980s. Commenting on the purchase of Beam’s work, and the aesthetic importance the piece holds within the collection, Diana Nemiroff states that:

The painting, and its subject, are indicative of the complexities of identifying and positioning today what had earlier in this century been summarily described as “Indian art” and shown chiefly within an ethnographic or romantic primitivist context.<sup>33</sup>

By virtue of its acquisition by the National Gallery of Canada, *The North American Iceberg* was recognized as aesthetically significant in the canon of

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<sup>32</sup> Greg A. Hill, “Carl Beam: The Artist and Some of His Concerns,” in *Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being*, ed. Greg A. Hill (Ottawa, ON: National Gallery of Canada, 2010), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Nemiroff, “Modernism, Nationalism and Beyond,” 17.

contemporary Canadian art, and represented a reconsideration of the ways in which institutions and arts patrons define and understand Indigenous artwork. For SCANA membership, the purchase of Carl Beam's *The North American Iceberg* was a political gain, and signaled an opportunity to further their ongoing advocacy work that took aim specifically at National Gallery. SCANA's work to this point had pushed for increased representation in the National Gallery's permanent collection, as well as a commitment to staging exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous artwork.<sup>34</sup> As David General points out, once Beam's work entered the National Gallery as a piece of contemporary work, the terms of inclusion for Indigenous artists and their work changed not only for the National Gallery, but throughout the institutional art world.<sup>35</sup> The proverbial door had been opened for Indigenous artists to enter the National Gallery, and signaled a shift in the discursive landscape between Indigenous artists and public arts institutions. This was fostered in part by the work of SCANA, but also by the individual efforts of Indigenous artists and curators who had consistently pushed for representation within the National Gallery based on the aesthetic relevance of their practices within the context of mainstream contemporary Canadian art.

The work of individual Indigenous artists and advocacy groups as well as the tensions between the aesthetic relevance and the political nature of contemporary Indigenous art that was felt within many public arts institutions laid the foundations for the National Gallery of Canada's *Land Spirit Power: First*

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<sup>34</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 162.

<sup>35</sup> David General in discussion with the author.

*Nations at the National Gallery*. Staged in 1992 – the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ landing in present-day Hispaniola in the Caribbean Islands- *Land Spirit Power* was the first major exhibition of contemporary Indigenous artwork in the National Gallery’s history. Staged less than two years after the conflict at Oka, *Land Spirit Power* also coincided with a number of major exhibitions throughout the Americas that addressed the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the Americas. At the same time as the installation of *Land Spirit Power*, the Canadian Museum of Civilization staged *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, held from April 16<sup>th</sup> to October 12<sup>th</sup> 1992.<sup>36</sup> *Land Spirit Power*, and *Indigena* were the largest and most ambitious exhibitions of contemporary North American Indigenous artwork hosted at either of these public institutions to that point. Both these exhibitions, for various institutional, pedagogical, and curatorial reasons, represented a collective flashpoint between Indigenous artists and curators, and non-Indigenous arts institutions in Canada.

*Land Spirit Power* and *Indigena*, while similar in their rejection of the celebratory mood of the anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas five hundred years prior, ultimately differed in their curatorial and discursive approaches to the exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art. Diana Nemiroff, Charlotte Townsend-Gault (both of whom were non-Indigenous), and Robert Houle, were jointly responsible for the curation of *Land Spirit Power*. Nemiroff states that the aim of the exhibition was to reflect a postmodern perspective on the

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<sup>36</sup> Both exhibitions would tour extensively throughout the United States and Canada the following year.

placement of Indigenous art within the broader discourse of “Canadian art” taken up by the National Gallery, rather than engage directly with the legacy of colonization. Robert Houle questioned the National Gallery’s intentions in collecting and exhibiting contemporary Indigenous artwork, stating that this new direction was:

...not their making. They were forced into this position. The issue is also political. Can aboriginal Canada be given a special status next to works from English and French Canada? Is the NGC in the business of collecting art, or is it in the business of collecting art with adjectives before it? The issue becomes political because historically Native affairs have always been handled by a separate federal department jurisdiction.<sup>37</sup>

These conflicting attitudes reflected a sense of reactionary engagement with Indigenous artists and curators rather than the opening of productive and critical dialogue on the part of the National Gallery. Sites of cultural production that are implicitly linked to colonial power, such as the National Gallery, must effectively confront these legacies if they are to shed the weight of this legacy. At the time, this new dialogue of representation was far more complex than a renegotiation of the institutional relationships (or a lack thereof) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural actors. Regarding the possibility of sustaining an ongoing relationship between Indigenous people and public arts institutions, Indigenous curator Lee-Ann Martin stated that, “Complex histories, traditional knowledge, and contemporary issues necessitate the dynamic involvement of professional curators from Aboriginal communities in positions of authority that lead to this

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Houle, “The Struggle Against Cultural Apartheid: In Conversation with Clara Hargittay,” *Muse* 6, Autumn (1988): 60.



process of inclusion.”<sup>38</sup> This is perhaps the most significant difference between the National Gallery and Museum of Civilization’s curatorial endeavors during 1992. While the National Gallery’s *Land Spirit Power* was focused on reconciling its own relationship with Indigenous art, the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s *Indigena* was the first instance of Indigenous curators attempting to establish a distinct voice within contemporary curatorial practices in a public art institution.

*Indigena* was conceived and executed exclusively by Indigenous curators Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin as not only a response to the Columbus anniversary, but as a contemporary assertion of the place of Indigenous artists and curators in major public arts institutions. Previously, the Canadian Museum of Civilization had organized the 1989 exhibition *In the Shadow of the Sun: Perspectives of Contemporary Native Art*. The show and its companion catalogue differed from 1992’s *Indigena* in that the curatorial focus of *In the Shadow of the Sun* was to showcase the work of Indigenous artists who identified as Canadian, *Indigena* exhibited the work of North American artists of Indigenous ancestry. *Indigena* was organized around an Indigenous political agenda that confronted the colonial legacy of the landing of Columbus in the Americas. The exhibition also challenged the social and historical ramifications of the colonization of Indigenous peoples both within and outside the museum institution. In outlining

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<sup>38</sup> Lee-Ann Martin, “An/Other One: Aboriginal Art Curators and Art Museums,” in *The Edge of Everything: Curating for the Future*, ed. Catherine Thomas (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2002) 50.

their curatorial and pedagogical intentions within the exhibition, McMaster and Martin state that:

*INDIGENA* grew out of a concern that indigenous peoples would be the recipients of a five – hundred - year hangover without ever having attended Western civilization’s party. The objective of the project was, therefore, to address such issues as discovery, colonization, cultural critique and tenacity, from each of their perspectives.<sup>39</sup>

They go on to explain that:

...it is the intention of *INDIGENA* to present the widest range possible of art forms utilized today by Aboriginal peoples to show a broad representation of cultural ideas. The artists and writers are coming to terms with the scholarly disciplines of anthropology, history and art history, as well as contemporary issues of a social, political and religious nature. They share not only their Aboriginal histories but also a contemporary artistic language which they utilize in completely original works. In keeping with the principles of the project - and as a continuation of their peoples’ long history of adapting to change-the artists use European-based forms and technologies to express their values and philosophies.<sup>40</sup>

The staging, then, of *Indigena* was focused on a didactic approach of confronting the viewer with an upending and reorganizing of Eurocentric narratives of exploration and discovery. The curation of the exhibition sought to both expose and challenge the relationship of these colonial histories with national institutions that are implicated in the perpetuation of these narrative myths.<sup>41</sup> *Indigena* was not interested in the specifics of a single relationship between Indigenous artists and the Museum of Civilization. Instead the exhibition looked at the broader implications of the Canadian colonial project over the last five hundred years, and

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<sup>39</sup> Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1992) 15.

<sup>40</sup> McMaster and Martin, *Indigena*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 163.

the unique ways it influenced Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in their understanding of history. *Indigena* engaged both audiences and participating artists in a dialogue, rather than a monologue, of the issues at hand both inside and outside the museum institution. Through the staging of public colloquia, and the ongoing consultation of SCANA membership, *Indigena* made great attempts to initiate a broader conversation on the historical and contemporary importance of Indigenous artists and curators on a national and international level.<sup>42</sup>

The representation of Indigenous voices within both the physical and discursive constructs of contemporary public galleries in Canada reflected a new direction in the curation of Indigenous art. The work of Indigenous curators and artists at this time cast light on future movements for progressive change, and increased involvement by Indigenous artists and curators in public arts institutions. For Indigenous artists and curators, the shifts in the public and institutional consciousness represented by challenging new exhibitions presented a chance to consider what the future of representations of and by Aboriginal artists inside and outside of the gallery would hold and, if this new found relationship would prove sustainable.<sup>43</sup> However, some Indigenous artists and curators who were significantly involved in the events throughout the 1980s and early 1990s were aware of the misplaced political desires of institutional actors,

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<sup>42</sup> Gerald McMaster, "INDIGENA: A Native Curator's Perspective," *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 71.

<sup>43</sup> W. Jackson Rushing, "Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art," *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 6.

including both SCANA and the National Gallery. Commenting on the purchase of

*The North American Iceberg* several years later, Carl Beam stated:

I realize that when they bought my work that it wasn't from Carl the artist but from Carl the Indian. At the time, I felt honoured, but now I know that I was used politically - Indian art that's made as Indian is racially motivated, and I just can't do that. My work is made not for Indian people but for thinking people. In the global and evolutionary scheme, the difference between humans is negligible.<sup>44</sup>

Beam expressed his disdain for the inclusion of his work in the National Gallery's collection and rejected the prospect of being framed as an "Indian" artist, absent of narrative presence within the National Gallery. Reflecting on Beam's feelings towards his inclusion within the National Gallery's collection, and the symbolism *The North American Iceberg* would embody for both Indigenous artists, curators, and public arts institutions, Gerald McMaster asserts that *The North American Iceberg* was purchased:

"...not because it was done by an Aboriginal contemporary artist, but by a very talented Canadian artist...the work gave Beam a place in Canadian art history and provided him with a legitimacy that he used skillfully to press into the mainstream's own discursiveness-one that was concerned with its own pre-eminence."<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, a small group of Indigenous curators had gained access to the immutable spaces of colonial arts institutions and had begun, in earnest, a re-shaping of their own history and future. The representation of Indigenous voices within both the physical and discursive constructs of

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<sup>44</sup> Beam as quoted by John K. Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994) 179.

<sup>45</sup> Gerald McMaster, "Carl Beam: The North American Iceberg," in *Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being*, ed. Greg A. Hill (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2010), 35.

contemporary arts institutions in Canada reflects a collaborative process that aimed to bring recognition to the contemporary practices of Indigenous artists and curators.

1992 was a landmark year for exhibitions of Indigenous art in public institutions. The exhibitions *Land Spirit Power: First Nations At the National Gallery of Canada*, and *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* were signifiers of a new politics of representation for Aboriginal artists and curators in major public galleries in Canada. This time period is characterized by fractious and often-contradictory views held by Indigenous artists, curators, and public arts institutions on how the terms of inclusion should be shaped. The realization of these exhibitions was the culmination of the demands of individual and collective groups of Indigenous artists that their work not only be included within the collection and exhibition practices of these institutions, but that it be done on terms negotiated by indigenous artists and curators.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Indigenous Curatorial Practice and Critical Writing: A Literature Review**

Since the late 1970s, a growing body of critical writing by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators and academics has established a discursive framework through which the politics of inclusion for Indigenous arts in mainstream galleries can be understood. Until the 21st century, the majority of this writing was done through exhibition publications, reviews, and art journals. From the late 1970s onwards, various symposia on the state of Indigenous art would also play a significant role in the establishment of a collective discourse on the state of Indigenous art in Canada. The Society for Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry played a vital role in the staging of these symposia. The Aboriginal Curatorial Collective would carry this strategy forward following their incorporation in 2006.

Since the early 2000s, a small collection of publications has been produced that explicitly expounds on the history and future trajectory of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada. My literature review considers a number of pertinent essays drawn from exhibition catalogues that have, in some way, shaped or changed the way in which Indigenous curatorial practice is undertaken. This review of relevant literature considers writing produced during the late 1970s and 1980s, but primarily focuses on work produced from 1990 onwards. When relevant, I consider critical writing that, while not connected directly to a single exhibition or institution, contributed to the development of Indigenous curatorial practice. While the focus of this thesis is to consider work produced by

Indigenous curators, I also consider publications by non-Indigenous curators and academics whose work contributes to the growing discourse of Indigenous curatorial practice, or contemporary curation in general. To give context to the process of asserting Indigenous voices within institutional spaces, I consider the work of several Indigenous cultural theorists who have in one way or another, influenced the professional practice of Indigenous curators. In a relatively short period of time, a small group of Indigenous curators, academics, and cultural theorists have established what is now a growing body of critical writing that considers the challenges and developments within the profession of Indigenous curatorial practice.

While I have so far asserted that the roots of Indigenous curatorial practices can be indirectly traced back to the late 1960s and a group of Indigenous artists represented by Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig, a body of curatorial writing that focused on the work of Indigenous artists was not undertaken until the late 1970s. The first comprehensive publication that addressed the roadblocks contemporary Indigenous artists and curators faced in Canada was published in 1978, following the first National Native Arts Conference. In a special edition of *The Native Perspective* dedicated to Indigenous fine arts, a number of established artists and curators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, published a series of essays, artist profiles, and interviews that considered the state of Indigenous arts in the country. The publication was a reflection of the general attitudes of Indigenous artists at various stages of their careers who were actively pursuing

institutional recognition for their work. Within the publication, two essays stand out as an encapsulation of the general attitudes and challenges faced by Indigenous artists in attendance at the conference. In the first essay, titled “Indian Artists or Artists who are Indian?” David General, then head of the Department of Cultural Affairs for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, brought to light the immediate challenges faced by artists who defined themselves or their work as Indigenous. General saw the National Native Arts Conference as a time when both established and emerging artists were able to reflect on new ways forward for Indigenous artists working within a contemporary aesthetic.<sup>46</sup> The second essay, “A Retrospect of Indian Art,” details what Tom Hill saw as the development of an Indigenous art history in Canada, and placed the emergence of a new aesthetic sensibility by Indigenous artists in the early 1940s with the work of George Clutesi, and into the late 1950s and early 1960s with the early success of Mungo Martin in the west, and Norval Morrisseau in the east.<sup>47</sup> Both General and Hill’s contributions to *The Native Perspective* were significant in that they are early contributions to a body of curatorial and art historical writing by Indigenous curators that aimed to critically document and analyze the development and future of Indigenous art practices in Canada that would more fully manifest throughout the 1980s.

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<sup>46</sup> David General, “Indian Artists or Artists who are Indian?,” 33.

<sup>47</sup> Tom Hill, “A Retrospect of Indian Art,” *The Native Perspective, The Native Perspective* 3, no. 2, (1978): 34-35.



While I have previously noted the professional curatorial positions held by Robert Houle and Tom Hill respectively, the 1980s were a time period that gave way to an increasing professionalization of Indigenous curatorial practices in Canada. Indigenous curators were, for the first time, working with and within major public art galleries across the country. The question of what effect this newfound professionalization had on both established and emerging Indigenous curators who worked within and outside of major public arts institutions is of significant consideration to the work being undertaken throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Between 1982 and 1989, three exhibitions and their subsequent publications highlighted the shifting aesthetic and discursive approaches to Indigenous arts and curatorial practices, and the ways in which they interacted with mainstream Canadian arts institutions. The first exhibition, *New Work by a New Generation*, was organized by Indigenous curators Bob Boyer and Robert Houle at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan from July 9<sup>th</sup> to August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1982. The curatorial focus of *New Work by a New Generation* showcased work by artists from Canada, the United States, and Mexico who were not bound by a singular, but rather a plurality of cultural histories and aesthetic practices. In his catalogue essay, Houle declares that by the early 1980s a new generation of Indigenous artists had emerged who embraced a modernist aesthetic, and incorporated both traditional Indigenous and contemporary art aesthetics within their practices that questioned the legacy of classifying

Indigenous art within an anthropological framework.<sup>48</sup> Regarding the varying aesthetic practices represented in *New Work by a New Generation*, Houle states:

Their endeavor rests primarily upon two arguments: the first claims that, unlike traditional beadwork and quillwork, this new art has no utility but exists only for aesthetic contemplation: the second, that because of the universality of its forms and images this new expression is trans-cultural: whereas nonart conforms to the cultural milieu from which it rises. Thus as art transcends the native culture, it can offer a critique of that culture, whereas traditional arts and crafts are non-transcendental and can only represent the culture they are a part of.<sup>49</sup>

The second exhibition, *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, was staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the spring of 1984. Co-curated by Tom Hill and non-Indigenous curator Elizabeth McLuhan, the exhibition was the first major critical examination of Indigenous artists who were aesthetically grouped together as members of the Woodland School. In his essay “Indian Art in Canada: An Historical Perspective,” Hill considered the aesthetic qualities of Indigenous art practice up to the early 1980s, and locates the roots of these practices in ceremonial and craft art that incorporated Western materials from the 1840s. As well, Hill considers the significant influence of Indigenous political movements in the 1960s on some of the artists practicing at this time, and the impact these movements had on Indigenous people who lived within these social conditions.<sup>50</sup> Tom Hill states:

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Houle, “The Emergence of a New Aesthetic Tradition,” in *New Work by a New Generation*, eds. Robert Houle and Bob Boyer (Regina, Saskatchewan: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1982), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Hill, “Indian Art in Canada: An Historical Perspective,” 26.

What is clear is that some Indian artists will continue to produce work reflecting the realities of their human condition, which happen to be Indian. Is it this sense of “Indian consciousness,” which permeates even the most modern canvases, that inhibits Indian art’s credibility for an art gallery, relegating the work to an anthropological museum? If so, the Indian artist is not going to give up his perception of his community just to gain entrance to the art establishment.<sup>51</sup>

Hill argued that Morrisseau and his fellow Woodland school artists had brought an individual consciousness to their work that reflected the social and cultural realities of their existence as Indigenous people, and that this approach presented a significant challenge to institutional collection and exhibition practices regarding Indigenous art of the day.<sup>52</sup> Hill’s writing, while produced two years after the staging of *New Work by a New Generation*, presents a considerably different engagement with the aesthetics of Indigenous art that was at odds with the approach of Houle. Hill argued that Indigenous people would not sacrifice their “Indianness” to gain entry into the mainstream of contemporary Canadian art, while Houle claimed that a “new generation” of Indigenous artists who embraced the aesthetic and conceptual structures of Modernism within their practices had emerged. Both Hill and Houle’s arguments illustrate the multiple positions occupied by Indigenous artists and curators at the time. It is most effective to consider the relevancy of each argument on future curatorial and artistic endeavors by revisiting the viewpoint expressed by Carl Beam regarding his inclusion in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

Beam, whose work was included in *New Work by a New Generation*, states that,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

while he is in fact an Indigenous person creating art, his work should not be viewed through the exclusivity of his Indigenous identity, but should also not be discredited based on these racialized terms. Instead, Beam asserts his work, while produced as a reflection of his own individual experiences and influences as an Indigenous person, was made for individuals willing to engage with his work on a critical level that is not bound by racial barriers.<sup>53</sup> Beam's statement reflects both Hill and Houle's approaches to the production and curation of Indigenous art, representing the varying approaches to artistic and curatorial production that would be characterized by future exhibitions of Indigenous art during the 1980s and beyond.

The third exhibition and catalogue to feature significant curatorial writing on the state of contemporary Indigenous arts production was *Beyond History*, curated by Tom Hill and non-Indigenous curator Karen Duffek, staged at the Vancouver Art Gallery from May 31 to July 17, 1989. Tom Hill references the relevancy of *New Work by a New Generation* in developing a shifting approach to the curation of Indigenous art practices, and their relevancy within mainstream Canadian contemporary art. In adopting a supporting view to that of Houle, Hill argues that if Indigenous artists are to have any sustained impact within the mainstream Canadian art world, artists and curators must:

...come to terms with the various academic disciplines - namely anthropology and art history... The struggle for historical and critical validation will positively resolved (sic) as more exhibitions are produced

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<sup>53</sup> Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature*, 179.

based on artistic approach and the appropriateness of issues: issues which the art itself will provoke, regardless of its cultural reference.<sup>54</sup>

Hill states that Indigenous artists and curators must reconcile their distrust with the various academic disciplines in order to establish a new intellectual mode of Indigenous cultural production that can be understood through personal and political experiences, and is not based on a singular belief in tribal aesthetics.<sup>55</sup> In comparing Hill's analysis of Indigenous art production in 1984 and 1989 it is imperative to note that each analysis is predicated on an engagement with Indigenous art from significantly different cultural and aesthetic perspectives.

By the late 1980s, both Hill and Houle had established themselves as preeminent voices within the world of Indigenous art, having held prominent positions at major arts institutions in Canada, including Houle's time as Curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and Hill's position as Director of the Woodland Cultural Centre. The work produced in these three major exhibitions represented new insight into the curation and discursive engagement on the part of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators with the aesthetics of contemporary Indigenous artwork. It also shed light on the highly complex, and somewhat divisive nature of curating Indigenous artwork at the time, highlighting that the progression of the practice was far from a linear evolution. The curatorial essays produced for each of these three exhibitions were critical to establishing Indigenous curatorial and critical writing practices, and significantly influenced

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Hill, "Beyond History," in *Beyond History*, eds. Tom Hill and Karen Duffek (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989), 12.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

both Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators and critical writers through the 1990s and beyond.

At this time, it is important to examine the role non-Indigenous people played in the engagement of research, writing, and curatorial projects that involve Indigenous people. It is even more relevant given my own status as a non-Indigenous person whose thesis focuses on the work of Indigenous artists and curators. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith outlines the roots of colonialism and imperialism within Western academic disciplines, most notably philosophy and anthropology, as ways of organizing and subsequently “disciplining” the physical bodies of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and knowledge systems.<sup>56</sup> These disciplines have historically been occupied by non-Indigenous scholars who while engaging in writing and research with Indigenous histories and cultures, have simultaneously marginalized or excluded outright the cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. Tuhiwai Smith argues for a reclaiming of Indigenous spaces as a way of reordering these deeply colonial academic disciplines to open spaces for a plurality of Indigenous voices to reassert their cultural, political and social rights.<sup>57</sup> Non-Indigenous scholars Leslie Brown and Susan Strega outline the need for anti-oppressive research methodologies that operate within the everyday practices of individuals working from and within the

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<sup>56</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 146-148.

margins of a variety of academic and professional disciplines.<sup>58</sup> In their argument for a wider acceptance of anti-oppressive research practices, Brown and Strega state:

For White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual people, this is our most important work in the anti-oppressive practice - recognizing our own privilege and working to dismantle the unjust systems that keep us in that privileged space.<sup>59</sup>

Within the similar vein of critical race studies, non-Indigenous philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff argues that for non-Indigenous scholars to move towards a proactive approach to interrogating histories of racism and colonialism, they must engage in a dialogue that runs deeper than self-criticism.<sup>60</sup> Instead Alcoff argues that by building on a body of anti-racist methodologies, non-Indigenous people will be able to engage in a process of critical engagement that creates awareness of the historical and contemporary construction of white identity as superior. Alcoff argues the construct of white identity played a central role in the persistence of racial superiorities as the central motivating factor in continued marginalization based on racial and ethnic identity.<sup>61</sup> For non-Indigenous people a self-awareness and a capacity to willingly engage with one's own identity while

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<sup>58</sup> Leslie Brown and Susan Strega, "Transgressive Possibilities," in *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, eds. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>59</sup> Leslie Brown and Susan Strega, "Becoming an Anti-Oppressive Researcher," in *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, eds. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2005), 258.

<sup>60</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?," *Hypatia*, 13, no.3 (Summer 1998): 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

working with Indigenous peoples is integral to the future of curating Indigenous art in Canada. The refusal to acknowledge the prevailing influences of racial divides within the world of Canadian art has led to the continued marginalization of Indigenous artists and curators.

One of the first Indigenous writers to call attention to the institutional limitations and systemic racism experienced by Indigenous peoples was Indigenous curator and scholar Marcia Crosby. In “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” Crosby deconstructs popular representations of Indigenous people within the Canadian art historical canon. Crosby rejects prescribed institutional and theoretical spaces reserved for what she terms the “imaginary Indian,” a Eurocentric construction of Indigenous people that upholds the various stereotypes and imagined differences between Indigenous people and white settler Canadians. Crosby states that “Western historicizing posits indigenous peoples as illusory; historically, they are inscribed to stand as the West’s opposite, imaged and constructed so as to stress their great need to be saved through colonization and civilization.”<sup>62</sup> Crosby argues that Indigenous peoples and their cultures continued to be understood through the anthropological “salvage paradigm” within the art historical canon, stating:

Predicated on the concept of a dead or dying people whose culture needs to be “saved,” those doing the saving choose what fragments of a culture they will salvage. Having done this, they become both owners and interpreters of the artifacts or goods that have survived from that dying culture, artifacts

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<sup>62</sup> Marcia Crosby, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1991), 269.



that become rare and therefore valuable. This paradigm has animated Canadian art (that is, art within the Euro-Canadian tradition), ethnography for more than a century...<sup>63</sup>

Within the same discursive framework, Robert Houle considers how the conditions of modernism and subsequently, postmodernism, have marginalized Indigenous peoples and significantly limited their ability to position themselves within the larger discourse of art history in Canada. Houle states:

Any rethinking of the history of modernism has to include the question of whether Western art now includes indigenous art, particularly the contemporary art in question. Another important question, perhaps more immediate, is whether postmodernism, to reiterate Durham's cynicism, is just another fiction intended to exclude and protect... The real challenge facing these artists is to question all of that history; for one thing, they have never been part of it. They know why they have been excluded. The next question is, are they included in the current art discourse? Can they question a history they are not part of?<sup>64</sup>

Both Crosby and Houle map the considerable gap that existed in the early 1990s between the positioning of Indigenous peoples and their art within major public art galleries and the wider lexicon of Canadian art history.

Both Marcia Crosby and Robert Houle's writing coincides with an emerging reconsideration of the museum as an institutional space that upholds colonialist narratives of nationalism and cultural superiority. Two other influential publications, Douglas Crimp's *On the Museum's Ruins* (1993) and Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995) were part of

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<sup>63</sup> Crosby, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," 274.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," in *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, eds. Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, Charlotte Townsend Gault (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992) 70-71.

a growing body of non-Indigenous scholarly writing<sup>65</sup> that challenged the institutional and exhibitionary structures of Western museums. Drawing on Gramscian and Foucauldian conceptions of state/power relations, Bennett positions the birth of the modern museum as an exercise in the maintenance of imperialist narratives that can be dated back to late 19<sup>th</sup> century European society, and that extended to the establishment of the modern museum throughout the Westernized world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>66</sup> Crimp ties the unraveling of modernist institutional collection and exhibition practices to the postmodern turn within contemporary art, stating, “Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.”<sup>67</sup> Both Bennett and Crimp position the birth of the modern museum/gallery as part of a nationalist project that narrated a discourse of colonial society that is inherently tied to power relations, and that acts in the ordering of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, and geography. The combined work of Crosby, Houle, Bennett, Crimp and others established a discourse in which Indigenous curators could challenge the colonial legacies of art institutions in Canada, but by no means did the writings of these individuals create immediate change. Their work opened a door within these institutions, and provided a critical

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<sup>65</sup> See also Mieke Bal, “The Discourse of the Museum,” in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996, 201-218), and Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 79.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 58.

framework in which the necessity of bringing the practices of Indigenous curators into public art institutions was underlined.

By the mid-1990s, Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators and academics were producing a growing body of scholarly work that established an anti-oppressive, inclusive relationship that provided room for inclusion within a variety of academic and professional disciplines. American Indigenous literary theorist Gerald Vizenor's conception of a *postindian* identity directly confronts the historical misconceptions of "Indianness," and its relationships to contemporary Indigenous identities and cultures.<sup>68</sup> His work is regarded as foundational in its approach to Native American literary studies and critical theory, and recently has been taken up by a number of contemporary curators as a way of framing Indigenous resistance through individual cultural expression. Vizenor defines the concept of the "Indian" in several instances as it relates to a language of power and dominance rooted in the colonial framework of conquest and colonization throughout what is now North America. As Vizenor states:

...*indian*, misgiven here in italics, insinuates the obvious simulation and ruse of colonial dominance. Manifestly, the *indian* is an occidental misnomer, an overseas enactment that has no referent meaning to native cultures or communities.<sup>69</sup>

He goes on to state:

The simulation of the *indian* is the absence of real natives - the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance. Truly, natives are the storiers of an

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<sup>68</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, i-ii.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

imagic presence, and *indians* are the actual absence - the simulations of the tragic primitive.<sup>70</sup>

In Vizenor's view, the conceptualization of the "Indian" carries with it the baggage of colonization that works to define who contemporary Indigenous peoples are, and how they are able to exist in broader contemporary society. The "Indian" body is inscribed with meaning, and is a representation of a false presence, or an absence of being that functions to silence new representations of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>71</sup> These same limits, and restrictions, are part of the challenge Indigenous curators continue to face in their interaction and negotiation with Canadian contemporary arts institutions. Crosby contends that the construction of an "imaginary Indian" that is rooted in a static, unchanging positioning of Indigenous cultures, prevents the general public from understanding methods of Indigenous cultural and artistic production as significant in the development of modern, Indigenous artistic practices.<sup>72</sup> The construction of an "Indian" identity is predicated on simulations of "Indianness" that are familiar to non-Indigenous audiences and easily reproduced. The non-Indigenous viewer understands these representations as true through a continuous reaffirmation of their validity within the institutional spaces of education (primary, secondary, post-secondary, and the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Loretta Todd, "What More Do They Want?," in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, eds. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1992), 77.

<sup>72</sup> Marcia Crosby, "Making Indian Art "Modern"," in *Vancouver Art in the Sixties: Ruins in Process*, accessed November 7 2013, <http://www.vancouverartinthesixties.com/essays/making-indian-art-modern>.

various disciplines represented within the latter), as well as the public gallery. As outlined by Crosby, art galleries function as a space where Western constructions of Indigenous identity are upheld and promoted, and where mainstream Canadian identities are entrenched in opposition to an Indian “otherness.”<sup>73</sup>

Vizenor situated the *postindian* warrior as a representation of new simulations of Indigenous identities in the face of historical simulations of “Indian” stereotypes, realizing themselves in the face of *manifest manners*.

Vizenor explains this contestation, stating:

The postindian warriors hover over the ruins of tribal representations and surmount the scriptures of manifest manners with new stories; these warriors counter the surveillance and literature of dominance with their own simulations of survivance. The postindian arises from the earlier inventions of the tribes only to contravene the absence of the real with theatrical performances; the theatre of tribal consciousness is the recreation of the real, not the absence of the real in the simulations of dominance.<sup>74</sup>

He follows that:

Manifest manners are the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that are read as the authentic and sustained as representations of Native American Indians. The postindian warriors are new indications of a narrative recreation, the simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance.<sup>75</sup>

Through the subversion and re-appropriation of languages and aesthetics, new discourses of contemporary Indigenous cultural production may take shape.

Manifest manners are the cultural turns of colonial dominance over representations of Aboriginal peoples, and construct Aboriginal cultures, histories,

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<sup>73</sup> Crosby, “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” 279.

<sup>74</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

and societies in a linear progression that ends precisely during the rise of modern Western society.<sup>76</sup> Vizenor's theoretical framework deconstructed the fractious relationship between Indigenous artists and the mainstream and, while rooted in literary theory, Vizenor's work has recently been part of a widening discourse on artistic practices of contemporary Indigenous artists.<sup>77</sup>

The ongoing work in establishing an inclusive relationship between Indigenous curators and public art institutions has been predicated on a push by Indigenous artists and curators for inclusion within the collection and exhibition practices of major public arts institutions in Canada. This process is part of a movement sustained over several decades that continues to progress toward the reclamation of Indigenous self-determination through education, economics, cultural production, politics and historical narratives. Regarding the all-encompassing process of decolonization, Maori scholar and educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith states:

While rhetorically the indigenous movement may be encapsulated within the politics of self-determination it is a much more complex and dynamic movement which incorporates many dimensions, some of which are still unfolding. It involves a revitalization and reformulation of culture and tradition, an increased participation in and articulate rejection of Western institutions, a focus on strategic relations and alliances with non-indigenous

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<sup>76</sup> Ying-Wen Yu, "Playing Indian: Manifest Manners, Simulation and Pastiche," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 91.

<sup>77</sup> For an early instance of Vizenor's writing being applied to Indigenous arts practices see Alan Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999). More recently, Vizenor's *postindian theory* was applied to the work of Carl Beam. See Greg A. Hill, "Carl Beam: The Artist and Some of His Concerns," in *Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being*, ed. Greg A. Hill (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2010, 13-33).

groups. The movement has developed a shared international language or discourse which enables indigenous activists to talk to each other across their cultural differences while maintaining and taking their directions from their own communities or nations.<sup>78</sup>

The process of decolonization forces a reconsideration of the gallery as a neutral space, and challenges the institution to engage with its colonial legacy of exclusion of Indigenous voices. Tuhiwai Smith calls for the reclamation of Indigenous voices to counterbalance the dominant misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples and cultures.<sup>79</sup> Through a Nishnaabeg<sup>80</sup> worldview, Leanne Simpson looks to culturally specific modes of decolonization and self-determination for Indigenous peoples by rejecting the idea of “pan-Indigenous” modes of representation, and instead focusing on culturally specific modes of representation rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems. Simpson asserts that:

If we are serious about “saving” and “protecting” Indigenous Knowledge for future generations, and if we are serious about decolonizing our political systems and governance, we must be prepared to blatantly reject the colonizer’s view of our knowledge and we must embrace strategies based on our own distinctive Indigenous intellectual traditions.<sup>81</sup>

Strategies of decolonization as they apply to the visual arts seek to engage gallery visitors in new discourses of cultural production, where the historical importance of Indigenous curatorial practice is looked at as equal to that of Eurocentric art

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<sup>78</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (University of Otago Press, 1999), 110.

<sup>79</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 150.

<sup>80</sup> In this instance I have honoured Leanne Simpson’s use of terminology in her discussion of Anishinaabe people and their culture.

<sup>81</sup> Leanne Simpson, “Our Elder Brothers: The Lifeblood of Resurgence,” in *Lighting the Eighth Fire: The Liberation, Resurgence, and Protection of Indigenous Nationhoods*, ed. Leanne Simpson (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2008, 73-87), 76.

history. Situating Tuhiwai Smith's work within a Indigenous curatorial pedagogy, Steven Loft positions Smith's work within the parameters of curatorial practice, stating that:

Aboriginal curatorial practice is in a transitional space, as we see the creation and manifestation of decolonizing narratives where previously survival narratives (not to mention the work of non-Indigenous "expert" analysis and settler-dominated narratives) were predominant. The shifting of stance (at least as far as culture is concerned) can be linked to the resistance methodologies and critical frameworks iterating Indigenous discursive intentionality that have been taking place over the last two decades. And now, arguably, "the door to the white box" has been metaphorically kicked open and a new dialogue and discourse rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing is becoming prominent.<sup>82</sup>

The assertion that Indigenous peoples and cultures must break free from the legacy of colonization by not only asserting their cultural survival, but by claiming new discursive spaces within what have historically been considered colonial institutions is represented within Loft's outlook on the role of Indigenous curatorial practices. In Loft's view, Indigenous curatorial practice explicitly aligns itself with a practice of decolonization within Canadian public art institutions.<sup>83</sup> This approach, and in general the practice of curating Indigenous art, must be situated within the recently established framework of contemporary curatorial practice.

Only recently has a broader understanding of the role contemporary curation plays in the exhibition and collection practice of contemporary art institutions

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<sup>82</sup> Steven Loft, "Who, me? Decolonization as Control," in *Decolonize Me*, eds. Heather Igloliorte, Brenda L. Croft and Steven Loft (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery and Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2011) 80.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.



been analyzed by art historians and practicing curators. Since the early 2000s, a number of primarily non-Indigenous international scholars have published writings that explore the practice of curating contemporary art. According to Australian non-Indigenous art historian Terry Smith, the discursive practice of curating contemporary artwork must be understood through the changing parameters in which curators now practice.<sup>84</sup> Regarding the construction of a contemporary curatorial consciousness, Terry Smith states:

Curators do everything necessary to bring works up to the point where they may become subject to critical and historical judgment. They exercise a very similar repertoire of skills and competencies and are moved by a closely similar set of passions and commitments, but curators, on this reading, are appraisers, not judges. Nor are they mainly chroniclers, as art historians must be (even of the present and especially of the immediate past). Curators certainly may leap to attempt both judgment and claims of significance, but will do so with a conscious sense of how provisional their proposals must be.<sup>85</sup>

While Smith highlights the tension between the positioning of contemporary curatorial practice and the work of art historians, he argues that the process of decolonization within institutional spaces is relatively recent and, given the ties art institutions share in the maintenance of nationalistic narratives, may take decades to completely unfold.<sup>86</sup> He states:

Art exhibitions played a major role within the anticolonial and national liberation struggles that took political form in the non-aligned movement of the 1950s and appeared in art contexts in the 1980s. Since then

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<sup>84</sup> Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 50.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

decolonization has burgeoned as one of the major drivers of social, political, and cultural change in the world.<sup>87</sup>

Smith argues that contemporary curatorial endeavors should engage in a process of institutional decolonization as not only a reassessment of contemporary beliefs, but as a way of imagining future political and social possibilities.<sup>88</sup> Smith's views reflect what non-Indigenous art historian Ruth Phillips sees as the ability of Indigenous artists, curators and arts administrators to engage in a process of "Indigenization" within mainstream art institutions; that is, the traditional non-Indigenous practices of collection, exhibition, display, and curation are infused with a plurality of Indigenous perspectives that include community-based practices, Indigenous knowledge systems, and reflect contemporary political, cultural and social realities for Indigenous people.<sup>89</sup> Phillips states:

...The process of change we have witnessed since Expo 67 can be understood as one of indigenization, in two senses of the word. In a literal sense, indigenization refers to the incorporation into the mainstream museum world of concepts, protocols, and processes that originate in Aboriginal societies...In a second sense, however, I also use the term to refer to a characteristically Canadian model of pluralistic negotiation that arises from a unique history of interaction among Indigenous people, French and English colonizers and settlers, and diasporic immigrant communities.<sup>90</sup>

While Phillips' claim clearly states her view of the process of Indigenizing public art institutions, her stance that this endeavor is a pluralistic effort on the part of both Indigenous artists, curators, and the institutions, fails to capture the often-reactionary approach of institutions, such as the National Gallery of Canada and

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>89</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 10.

their approach to the inclusion of Indigenous art. Phillips' work focuses primarily on the institutional politics of representation that stem from collection and exhibition practices related to Indigenous art, rather than on the specific curatorial endeavors of professionals working within the practice of curating Indigenous art.<sup>91</sup> Phillips' writing is useful in contextualizing the prevailing influences of the shifting parameters of contemporary curatorial practices within public art galleries, and highlights tangible instances of institutional change born out of a push by Indigenous artists and curators for not only increased, but self-directed representation of their artwork and cultures.

The rise of Indigenous curators as recognized professionals within Canadian art institutions gave way to a new wave of critical writing that at first sought to establish the framework for an Indigenous art history. However, in a relatively short period of time, primarily between the mid 1980s and the present day, Indigenous curators and the institutions they work within have been heavily influenced by the postmodern shift in the display and production of contemporary artwork. Indigenous curators began to recognize the need to not only assert their cultural survival, but to begin a process of decolonizing their existence and presence within Canadian art institutions. The impact of critical race theory, as well as the introduction of new Indigenous research methodologies and

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<sup>91</sup> In Phillips' recent work one exception to this claim can be made. See Ruth Phillips, "Cancelling White Noise: Gerald McMaster's *Savage Graces* (1994)," *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, (Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 2012).

worldviews had a profound impact on the professional practices of Indigenous curators moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Indigenous Curatorial Practice in the New Millennium: The First Decade**

Following the staging of both *Land Spirit Power* at the National Gallery of Canada and *Indigena* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1992, new questions regarding not only the aesthetic qualities of Indigenous artistic production, but the establishment of professional Indigenous curators and curatorial practice in Canada emerged. The work of Indigenous artists and curators was still marginally represented within mainstream Canadian art institutions. This underrepresentation extended well beyond the acquisition and exhibition of work produced by Indigenous artists, as there continued to be significant underrepresentation in the hiring of Indigenous arts professionals. While this was not a new issue within mainstream Canadian art, it had yet to be addressed within major public arts institutions.

In 1997, Indigenous curator Lee-Ann Martin, then holding the position of First Peoples Equity Coordinator at the Canada Council for the Arts, identified the need for a sustained commitment to the continued inclusion of Indigenous arts, including the collection and exhibition of artworks, and the hiring of Indigenous cultural workers within public art galleries in the face of continued marginalization by Canadian arts institutions.<sup>92</sup> In February of that year, in conjunction with the First Peoples Secretariat at the Canada Council for the Arts, the first national meeting of 17 Indigenous curators was held in Ottawa, Ontario,

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<sup>92</sup> Lee-Ann Martin and Morgan Wood, "Shaping the Future of Aboriginal Curatorial Practice," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 13 no. 2, (Summer 1998): 22.

in an attempt to address the role Indigenous curators played in the facilitation of exhibitions of Indigenous artwork in public art institutions. Participants in the conference included Barry Ace, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Merle Handley, Lynn Hill, Tom Hill, July Papatsie, Arthur Renwick, Ann Smith, Jeffrey Thomas, and Joyce Whitebear-Reed, among others. As a result of the conference, the Visual Arts Section of the Canada Council for the Arts established the “Grants to Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in the Visual Arts Program,” with the goal of providing structural and financial support to Indigenous curators-in-residence to produce curatorial and literary work that focused on a broad range of contemporary Indigenous arts practices. As of 2014, the Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in Visual Arts Program has been awarded to 53 recipients, with the most recent awarded in 2012 to independent curator Wanda Nanibush, while Jim Logan currently acts as Program Officer for the Canada Council. Martin admitted that in addition to gaining increased financial support and institutional opportunities, establishing a cohesive approach to Indigenous curatorial practice had proved to be an exceptionally difficult undertaking considering the various culturally specific epistemologies employed by Indigenous curators that reflected their individual cultural and political histories, and the cultural and aesthetic practices of their communities.<sup>93</sup> The challenges and victories outlined at this inaugural meeting would define the next ten years of work by Indigenous curators in their attempts to not only establish a healthy curatorial practice, but a critical

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<sup>93</sup> Martin and Wood, “Shaping the Future of Aboriginal Curatorial Practice,” 24.

framework through which the profession could be interpreted.

By the year 2000, Lee-Ann Martin, along with a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators and art historians, had identified the crucial dilemma Indigenous arts and curatorial practices continued to face. Reflecting on the lead up to the two major exhibitions of Indigenous art in 1992, Indigenous curator Ryan Rice states, "...the 1992 "party" started something, and through this rendezvous non-Native curators and collectors began recognizing the work."<sup>94</sup>

The increased programming of Indigenous art in the early to mid 1990s had produced a heightened public and institutional consciousness of Indigenous arts practices. The need for the establishment of a long-term relationship between Indigenous curators, artists, and public institutions that extended beyond the acquisition of work, and included a strong curatorial infrastructure that integrated Indigenous curators had been identified by Lee-Ann Martin.<sup>95</sup> Concerning these needs, in 2002 Martin states:

The strategic inclusion of Aboriginal curators will unquestionably strengthen institutional commitment to Aboriginal art. More importantly, an expanded curatorial infrastructure allows for a critical exploration of overlooked and under-represented aspects of Aboriginal art history as well as contemporary art practices.<sup>96</sup>

Martin's assertion that the strengthening of Indigenous curatorial practice would ultimately benefit the Indigenous arts community, as well as public arts

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<sup>94</sup> Ryan Rice and Patsy Phillips, "'Visiting,'" in *Visiting: Conversations on Curatorial Practice and Native North American Art*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, -Madison, 2008), 11.

<sup>95</sup> Lee-Ann Martin, "An/Other One: Aboriginal Art, Curators, and Art Museums," 51.

<sup>96</sup> Martin, "An/Other One: Aboriginal Art, Curators, and Art Museums," 49.

institutions across the country was an opinion held by a number of professionals within the field. As Indigenous artist and independent curator Skawennati Tricia Fragnito outlined in 2000:

1. Any art made by a Native person is Native art.
2. Exclusively Aboriginal group shows should be less frequent and more focused.
3. Opportunities for solo shows for Native artists should increase.
4. Native curators should include non-Native artists in their practices.
5. Non-Native curators should include Native artists in their practices.<sup>97</sup>

These points were outlined at by Fragnito during the symposium “On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery,” hosted jointly by the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Vancouver Art Gallery in March 2000. Fragnito’s five key points on the future of Indigenous arts were made with the intention of broadening the reach of contemporary Indigenous arts, and highlight the major concerns of Indigenous artists and curators in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. While I have included Fragnito’s first point, I would caution against accepting the statement at face value, only insomuch as the debate regarding what constitutes “Native” art is exceedingly complex, with a diverse array of arguments tied to identity politics, cultural affiliations, and government policies regarding the legal status of Indigenous peoples. As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, specifically in my reference to the work of Robert Houle and Tom Hill, defining the cultural and aesthetic parameters of what constitutes Indigenous art is far from static. As early as 1978, Tom Hill offered insight into what has become a common question: what

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<sup>97</sup> Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, “Five Suggestions for Better Living,” in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, eds. Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg (Gatineau, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002, 229-237) 230.



is Indigenous art? Hill states that:

...I don't think anyone can really give a definition. I think the term 'Native art' was put together, certainly not by Indians, but if there has to be a definition, then I guess it's artwork produced by artists of Native ancestry. But that's a terrible definition and should not be one used, however it's applied to the art work of Native artists.<sup>98</sup>

As an alternative to Fragnito's first point, and building on the statement of Tom Hill, Ryan Rice offers his own take on defining contemporary Indigenous art.

Rice states:

Contemporary Indigenous art exists somewhere between the margin and centre of mainstream contemporary art - a result of the meeting of traditional and contemporary art practices - and to be fully understood must be viewed through a lens of sovereignty and self-determination that rejects the legacies of colonization, assimilation and the trappings of identity politics and defines their practice by the contemporary realities of Indigenous life.<sup>99</sup>

Stated in 2012, Rice offers a critical stance on the process of defining Indigenous art within the structures of mainstream art institutions. Nevertheless, Fragnito's points are integral to not only understanding the concerns of Indigenous curators in 2002, but are equally relevant to the various practices of curating Indigenous art by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators in 2014, making Fragnito's call all the more pressing. Echoing the calls by Martin and others, Fragnito was concerned that Indigenous arts had still only gained marginalized access to major

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<sup>98</sup> Melissa Lazore, "An Interview with Tom Hill," *The Native Perspective*, *The Native Perspective* 3, no. 2, (1978): 38-39.

<sup>99</sup> Ryan Rice, "Defining Moment: What is Contemporary (NATIVE) Art?" *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 3: Contemporary Native North American Art from the Northeast and Southeast*, eds. Ellen Taubman and David Revere McFadden, (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2012, 49-51) 50-51.

public arts institutions. She asserts that:

In the past, a general survey of Native art was a sufficient and even ground-breaking excuse for an exhibition, but today, with the evolution of curatorial practice from (supposedly) objective conservatism to an admittedly subjective exploration, artists should expect to be invited to participate in exhibitions with provocative themes.<sup>100</sup>

Fragrino's calls for fewer large group, or "survey" shows with a broad curatorial focus for the sake of inclusion, and for a move towards the assertion of individual autonomy within the curation of Indigenous art in major public art institutions, to prevent a "ghettoization" of Indigenous artwork within mainstream public art institutions.<sup>101</sup> This desire rejected a simple acknowledgement on the part of galleries of the existence or survival of Indigenous art practices, and instead aimed to assert Indigenous artists' and curators' right to a distinct space within public art galleries.<sup>102</sup> Mainstream art institutions still struggle to reconcile their colonial modes of representation with the contemporary practices of Indigenous artists. The continued lack of not only a progressive inclusion of Indigenous curators and artists, but the lack of a fundamental shift in the operating mandates, as well as collection and exhibition practices, of many major public art institutions would lead many Indigenous curators to openly question the role these galleries could play in the future of the Indigenous arts community and its burgeoning discourse.

Out of the continued frustrations felt by Indigenous artists in their inability

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

to gain wider representation in major public art galleries, many Indigenous curators considered the merits of alternative venues available to them both nationally and internationally. Indigenous curators saw these alternative modes of curating as a way to strengthen the practice and support the broader Indigenous arts community.<sup>103</sup> The existence and operation of Indigenous-run galleries and artists-run centres across the country was an indication of the possibilities Indigenous curators could create for themselves and fellow artists outside mainstream art institutions. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century several Indigenous-run galleries and artist-run centres had been established in Canada. Most notably, Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art Gallery had been in operation since 1996 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The gallery had become influential in the exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art and the fostering of Indigenous curatorial projects. Other examples include the Indigenous-run online gallery and artists' project, *CyberPowWow*, and the artist-run centre TRIBE Inc.: A Center for Evolving Aboriginal Media, Visual and Performing Arts, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. In addition, a number of Indigenous curators had managed to exercise a degree of autonomy through the installation and exhibition practices of public galleries. In 2003, under the guidance of Indigenous curator Richard William Hill, the Art Gallery of Ontario staged the exhibition *Meeting Ground*, which reinstalled the institution's McLaughlin Gallery - the oldest gallery in the

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<sup>103</sup> Richard William Hill, "And Also..." in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, eds. Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg (Gatineau, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002, 271-280), 272.

AGO's Canadian wing - alongside Indigenous artwork. The reinstallation was executed through a process of community engagement with Indigenous artists, curators and arts administrators, as well as Indigenous youth groups, in an attempt to break down the traditional distinction between European and Indigenous modes of artistic production, and the linear discourse of Canadian art history.<sup>104</sup> The reinstallation of the McLaughlin Gallery was representative, albeit temporarily, of the institutional change that could be brought about by the work of Indigenous curators.

In 2006 the National Gallery of Canada, under the curatorial direction of Greg A. Hill, the gallery's then Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, staged *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*. While Morrisseau's retrospective at the National Gallery was not the first solo retrospective of an Indigenous artist hosted by the institution – the first being a retrospective of Inuit artist Pudlo Pudlat's work in the 1990 exhibition *Pudlo: Thirty Years of Drawing* - it was arguably the highest profile to date. As an artist, Morrisseau occupied a unique space in the discursive construction of contemporary Indigenous artwork and its inclusion in major public art institutions in Canada.<sup>105</sup> Morrisseau's work had received a high degree of market success throughout his career, and his name had become

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<sup>104</sup> For a critical discussion of the reinstallation of the AGO's McLaughlin Gallery, see Richard William Hill, "Meeting Ground: The Reinstallation of the Art Gallery of Ontario's McLaughlin Gallery," in *Making A Noise!: Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History and Critical Writing*, ed. Lee-Ann Martin (Banff, Alberta: The Banff Centre Press, 2005, 51-70).

<sup>105</sup> For a detailed analysis of Morrisseau's relevance to the Western art canon, see Greg A. Hill, "Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist," *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006, 12-41).

synonymous with an entire generation of Indigenous artists whose practices emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Morrisseau's connection to the Woodland school, coupled with his market success and high public profile, contributed to his status as the representative for an entire generation of Indigenous artists. As an example, Morrisseau was given top billing at the previously-discussed 1984 exhibition *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, curated by Tom Hill and Elizabeth McLuhan at the Art Gallery of Ontario. There has yet to be an in-depth analysis of how, outside of the artist's aesthetics, Morrisseau ascended to his role of prominence among his peers.

Greg A. Hill asserts that the staging of Morrisseau's retrospective exhibition is indicative of the shifting parameters of the curation, exhibition and collection at the National Gallery of Canada, and serves as a reckoning in the re-examination of the institution's role in the dissemination of a linear reading of Canadian art history that to this point had largely excluded the contributions of Morrisseau and his peers.<sup>106</sup> Greg A. Hill saw this exhibition as a victory for Indigenous artists and curators, positioning the exhibition as emblematic of a new institutional consciousness of contemporary Indigenous arts practices, and presented an opportunity to advance the institutional inclusion of contemporary practices of Indigenous artists and curators alike.<sup>107</sup> On one hand, the announcement of Norval Morrisseau's career retrospective signaled a recognition

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<sup>106</sup> Greg A. Hill, "Preface," *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist*, ed. Greg A. Hill, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006, 10-11) 11.

<sup>107</sup> Steve Loft, "Reflections on 20 Years of Aboriginal Art," *Trudeau Foundation Papers* 4, no. 1 (2012): 29-30.

of the relevancy of Indigenous art practices, and contributed to an ongoing process of decolonization within the narrative of mainstream Canadian art history.<sup>108</sup> On the other, many Indigenous curators recognized the continued inability create space for Indigenous art, and the continued dominance of non-Indigenous curatorial strategies and operating mandates within major public galleries. The continued limitations and barriers placed on Indigenous arts professionals provided an impetus for the formation of the Indigenous arts advocacy group the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC).

At the same time as the development and staging of Norval Morrisseau's retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada was taking place, Indigenous curators Barry Ace and Ryan Rice began to lay the foundations for the establishment of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective. The ACC began through an initiative brought forward by Barry Ace who, at the time, was Chief Curator and Director of Aboriginal Art in the department of Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada. The collective aimed to challenge the common rhetoric used by both the Canada Council and major public art galleries that there were no Indigenous curators or writers working within these respective professions.<sup>109</sup> Ryan Rice, one of the founding members of the collective, states that the impetus for Ace to push for the founding of the ACC followed the Canada Council for the

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<sup>108</sup> Greg A. Hill, "A Curator Reflects: Towards a Haudenosaunee Perspective," *Witness: A Symposium on the History of the Woodland School*, ed. Bonnie Devine (Sudbury, Ontario: Aboriginal Curatorial Collective/Witness, 2007, 152-163), 157-158.

<sup>109</sup> Ryan Rice, email message to the author, March 11, 2014.

Arts' participation in the opening of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Rice states that while the Canada Council supported an Indigenous curatorial development program - the Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in Visual Arts Program - the Council, under the guidance of Vickie Henry, Director at the Canada Council Art Bank, selected non-Indigenous curator and art historian Ruth Phillips to serve as curator for a corresponding exhibition to the NMAI's opening at the Canada Consulate in Washington, D.C., citing a lack of working Indigenous professionals in the field.<sup>110</sup> Rice states that upholding the assertion that there were no Indigenous arts professionals working in their respective fields, "...gave way to opportunities for so-called "settler" experts to dominate a field they already dominated from an institutional standpoint."<sup>111</sup> The collective came together with the intention of creating a sustained response to the continued marginalization of Indigenous curatorial professionals, and saw themselves as stakeholders in the legacy of curatorial practice within the Indigenous arts community.<sup>112</sup> The Aboriginal Curatorial Collective was founded by Indigenous artists and curators Barry Ace, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Ron Noganosh, and Ryan Rice in April of 2005, and shortly thereafter produced a report, "A Proposal for A Framework for Action," that detailed the state of Indigenous curatorial practice both nationally and internationally, and sought to develop a strategy for long-term support for the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Indigenous curatorial community. The report, which formed the basis for the ACC's operating mandate, states that:

The curatorial and literary hegemony by non-Aboriginal curators and academics is adversely affecting both the employment and publishing opportunities of Aboriginal curators and Aboriginal curatorial residents. Furthermore, the existing status quo is silencing Aboriginal voices on Aboriginal art history. There exists a dominant group of non-aboriginal curators and academics in Canada who are identified as experts in their fields of Aboriginal arts and are dominating and controlling major publishing and curatorial contracts to the detriment of the Aboriginal curatorial community. The lack of Aboriginal driven exhibitions is also representative of the lack of Aboriginal curators currently employed in the field. This has resulted in exacerbating the marginality of Aboriginal artists, and curators, and in particular, new and emerging Aboriginal artists and curators. The number of Aboriginal curators currently employed indeterminately by an art institution in Canada is less than ten individuals in the entire country.<sup>113</sup>

On the heels of this initial meeting and subsequent report, the four founding members of the ACC held a round table discussion in June 2005 that outlined the short-term and long-term strategies for the promotion and enhancement of Indigenous arts, as well as the establishment of a national and international membership base.<sup>114</sup> Just shy of its first anniversary, the ACC officially incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in March of 2006, with a national symposium, *The Way Ahead: Surveying the Curatorial Landscape*, held from March 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> at Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art Gallery in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The goal of the two-day symposium was for Indigenous curators to collectively assess the current state of Indigenous arts and curatorial

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<sup>113</sup> "About: Aboriginal Curatorial Collective," Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, accessed March 2 2014, <http://www.aboriginalcuratorialcollective.org/about/>.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



practice in Canada, with the intention of establishing a collective commitment to promoting the inclusion of Indigenous curators and cultural workers in public arts institutions. This commitment reflected the previous ten years of critical discussion concerning the health and sustainability of the practice. Reflecting on the establishment of the ACC in 2014, Rice states:

The ACC was created with professional practice in mind. The membership was inclusive of curators, artists, cultural workers, arts administrators, students, art historians etc. that also included an alliance tier of those non-aboriginal professionals who supported and worked in the field, all of which was intended to emphasis professional curatorial experiences and how it supports our creative communities beyond the margins set in place.<sup>115</sup>

The alliance membership tier for non-Indigenous arts professionals was a means of extending awareness and support to non-Indigenous individuals working within the field and creating further awareness of curatorial projects that involved Indigenous art.<sup>116</sup>

In 2008, as part of the American Indian Curatorial Practice Symposium, Ryan Rice, in conversation with Indigenous arts administrator Patsy Phillips, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, provided a summary on the state of Indigenous arts in Canada, and the challenges these communities still faced. Phillips asserted that Canada's Indigenous artists have experienced a great deal of success in their move towards mainstream recognition not only in Canada, but internationally, in comparison to American Indigenous artists. In response, Rice states that:

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<sup>115</sup> Ryan Rice, email message to the author, March 11, 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

When I went to school in Santa Fe (Institute of American Indian Arts), I thought Santa Fe was the greatest place. When you leave Santa Fe or the southwest you don't see Indians or Indian Art anywhere in the United States unless you really seek it out. Native art in Canada is progressive and now teeters between mainstream and marginality but it still needs to be sought out.<sup>117</sup>

Rice is astute in his observation of the state of Indigenous arts in Canada, and his sentiment is representative of an ever-changing landscape for Indigenous artists and curators. By 2010, Indigenous artists and curators from Canada had enjoyed a considerable degree of mainstream exposure in Canadian and international art exhibitions and institutions, received a number of prestigious awards, and held prominent curatorial positions at a number of public institutions in addition to a variety of Indigenous artist-run centres. Indigenous artists Edward Poitras, in 1995, and Rebecca Belmore, in 2005, were chosen to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, the former co-curated by Gerald McMaster. In the same year, American Indigenous artist James Luna would be the first Native American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. Sponsored by the National Museum of the American Indian, Luna presented his performance piece *Emendatio* (2005). Indigenous artist Annie Pootoogook had exhibited work at *DOCUMENTA (12)* in 2006, while in 2012 Indigenous artists Duane Linklater and Brian Jungen exhibited their silent film *Modest Livelihood* (2012) at *DOCUMENTA (13)* in association with the Walter Phillips Gallery. Brian Jungen had been the recipient of the inaugural Sobey Art Award in 2002, which would be won twice more by Indigenous artists following Jungen's inaugural win. Annie

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<sup>117</sup> Rice and Phillips, "Visiting," 10.

Pootogook received the award in 2006, while Duane Linklater received the award in 2013. In 2007 Indigenous curator Greg A. Hill had been hired as Audain Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada, where he contributed to the staging of two solo retrospective exhibitions of Indigenous artists. Hill, in his various curatorial roles at the National Gallery of Canada, would first curate *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist* in 2006. In October of 2010, Hill curated the National Gallery's third (Hill's second) solo retrospective exhibition of work by an Indigenous artist, titled *Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being*. Indigenous artist and curator Bonnie Devine curated *The Drawings and Paintings of Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective*, which opened at the Art Gallery of Sudbury in October of 2007, and at the National Gallery of Canada in October 2009, as well as touring nationally. The newly re-opened Art Gallery of Ontario had hired Gerald McMaster as Curator of Canadian Art. In addition to Greg A. Hill and Gerald McMaster, several other prominent curators, such as Tom Hill, Steve Loft, Lee-Ann Martin, and Ryan Rice held curatorial positions at major public and Indigenous-run galleries. Indigenous artists and curators had, as Rice asserts, made a significant impact within the mainstream of Canadian and international contemporary art worlds, but occupied this space in a manner that could be best described as provisional. The awards received, acquisitions made, and professional positions held by Indigenous artists and curators were the result of a constant negotiation with mainstream arts institutions. By 2010, through an ongoing series of flashpoints between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and

institutions, Indigenous people had claimed a space within the mainstream of Canadian art.

The Indigenous arts community had begun to occupy, through a broad range of self-determined collective and individual actions, a space within the framework of major public arts institutions in Canada. However, individuals within this community also recognized the precarious nature of the space they occupied within the mainstream of Canadian art. In 2000, Richard William Hill asserted that with the relative exposure to the mainstream gained by this community, next steps should be taken by artists, educators, administrators, and curators to continue to grow the profession and associated practices in a critically engaged and self-reflexive direction. Richard Hill states that:

Native contemporary artists have been comfortable focusing on the important critique of Western hegemony in a highly public way, but we have only begun to turn that critical lens back on our own subjectivity, of which we retain a largely celebratory attitude. To be sure, this attitude is an act of resistance, but many of us may be reaching a point where we would like to exceed it.<sup>118</sup>

Hill's statement represents one the many changing attitudes towards the curation of contemporary Indigenous artwork in Canada. In his view, the dialogical practices of Indigenous curators should no longer be focused specifically on the need to gain access to mainstream Canadian art institutions. Instead, curators should expand upon the inroads made into these major institutions, and begin to think critically about the aesthetic and discursive roles of curating Indigenous art

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<sup>118</sup> Richard William Hill, "And Also...", 274.

within their own practices and the practices of others.<sup>119</sup> The tensions that Hill illustrates would prove to be a defining characteristic of Indigenous curatorial practice beyond 2010. Hill's statement outlined that while Indigenous artists and curators had asserted a presence within the mainstream of Canadian art, the inclusion and recognition of their professional practices not only had to be sought out, but also reinforced through their own critical engagement with artwork and exhibitions being produced.

By the late 20th and into the early 21st century a new consciousness around the collection, exhibition, and curation of Indigenous art had emerged in Canada. Within this new framework, Indigenous curators had created spaces in which their distinct practices were now seen, albeit on a marginal scale, within mainstream arts institutions. Through the work of various Indigenous arts advocacy groups and individual members of an expanding and increasingly diverse Indigenous arts community, the foundations of a distinct Indigenous curatorial practice had been established. Indigenous curators in Canada had established distinct practices that, while contributing to what was an emerging contemporary curatorial practice within the mainstream aimed to incorporate Indigenous-specific cultural modes of representation and understanding within their work. For Indigenous curators, the years between 2000 and 2010 represented increased opportunities to not only continue to assert an Indigenous presence within mainstream public galleries, but to grow the practice of curating

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 277-278.

Indigenous art as a whole.

The individual and collective advocacy work by a small group of Indigenous artists and curators had gained modest inclusion for Indigenous art in mainstream Canadian galleries. This inclusion opened the door for Indigenous curators to establish professional practices that, in one way or another, intersected with mainstream Canadian art institutions. The increased consideration given to Indigenous curatorial practice during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century considerably impacted the Indigenous arts community as a whole. With the increased exposure of Indigenous artists and curators to major public galleries, and the strengthening of Indigenous artist-run centres, as well as the utilization of alternative modes of curating, Indigenous curators were by all outward appearances, part of a healthy and expanding practice and had now integrated themselves within mainstream art institutions in Canada. But, along with the growth of Indigenous curatorial practices came new questions regarding the implications of curating international Indigenous artwork, and how to most effectively gain meaningful inclusion in mainstream art institutions, and maintain a degree of autonomy in the curation and exhibition of contemporary Indigenous artwork.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Indigenous Curatorial Practice Beyond 2010**

Through the work of various individuals and advocacy groups, Indigenous curatorial practice had moved beyond its existence as a marginalized profession and claimed a small space within the framework of major public arts institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, and to a lesser extent, the Art Gallery of Ontario. With the newfound role of Indigenous curators within public arts institutions came two major questions regarding the future of the profession as a whole. First, what were the implications of curating international Indigenous art in Canada? Canadian Indigenous curators, notably Greg A. Hill, Candice Hopkins, and Steven Loft, expanded their various practices beyond the geopolitical borders of North America. While a contemporary approach to the curation of international Indigenous art addressed the lasting effects of colonialism on global populations of Indigenous peoples, it was unclear how these populations would be brought together on a discursive level. Second, is there a need to establish a more rigorous critical writing practice that critically engaged with the production and curation of contemporary Indigenous art? Indigenous curators, such as Richard William Hill, have expressed concern that, while exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous artwork had received considerable attention within mainstream arts publications, a lack of critical writing that engaged with the production and curation of contemporary Indigenous artwork is a significant gap in a quickly expanding Indigenous arts community. By broadening the discursive scope of curating Indigenous artwork both Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators simultaneously

raised questions about the interconnectivity of international Indigenous peoples, and how this expansion impacted the continued push for advancement and recognition of culturally and aesthetically diverse Indigenous arts practices. Two major exhibitions of Indigenous art – *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, which was staged at a variety of public venues in downtown Winnipeg, Manitoba, between January and May 2011, and *Sakahan: International Indigenous Art*, staged at the National Gallery of Canada, with ancillary programs and exhibitions at a number of venues throughout the city of Ottawa between May and September 2013, were representative of these shifting discursive engagements.

Since the late 1960s Indigenous artists from both Canada and the United States had regularly worked and exhibited together. Influential exhibitions from the 1990s had included work by Indigenous artists who lived and worked in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Largely this artwork was grouped together as a way for Indigenous artists and curators to engage with the shared colonial experiences of Indigenous peoples in North America. As early as 2000, Jolene Rickard argued for the necessity of creating a far-reaching consciousness concerning “global Indigenous arts” as a way of deconstructing nationalistic institutional narratives that have historically excluded or marginalized Indigenous artists.<sup>120</sup> Rickard states:

The experience of Indigenous people in North America is artificially historicized by the recently constructed national borders of Canada, the

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<sup>120</sup> Jolene Rickard, “Indigenous Is the Local,” in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, eds. Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg (Gatineau, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002), 115.



United States, and Mexico. The physical, and political border between the United States and Canada is a colonizing construct that separates many Native Nations. Does the inclusion of First Nations people stop at the border? If the inclusion of Native art is based on a geographic designation of identity, does this prohibit the inclusion of individuals such as George Longfish, a Seneca-Tuscarora artist who lives in California but is originally from the Six Nations community at Oswegen?<sup>121</sup>

Rickard's writing deconstructs the limitations of understanding Indigenous art through the geopolitical constructs of colonial nation-states, and the various ways in which these states impose their rule on international populations of Indigenous peoples. Rickard goes on to state, "The Rez has become a tool used by internally colonized Natives to authenticate their experience and negate the claims of others to a Native heritage."<sup>122</sup> Rickard notes the exhibition *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, staged at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and curated by Gerald McMaster in 1998 as a relevant example of the prevailing influence of geopolitical borders on the construction of Indigenous identities. In her catalogue essay to the exhibition, Charlotte Townsend-Gault states that Indigenous peoples must find a way to navigate between modes of cultural hybridity, the murky waters of strategic essentialism, and the trappings of identity politics to create an effective way of reading the communicative possibilities of an Indigenous arts community not bound by geographic or conceptual borders.<sup>123</sup> For Indigenous curators to move beyond a nationalistic and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Let X=Audience," *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, ed. Gerald McMaster (Hull, Quebec: Goose Lane Editions/Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998), 49.

thus, colonial approach to curating Indigenous artwork, they must acknowledge the permeable boundaries and changing traditions that have become a lived reality for multiple generations of Indigenous peoples. Marcia Crosby's *Nations In Urban Landscapes* (1997, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver) and Gerald McMaster's *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (1998, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau) are both examples of challenges to the preconceived ideas of national borders and homelands of Indigenous artists practicing in North America. The work of these curators and academics provided a critical framework for subsequent curatorial endeavors that aimed to expand the praxis by creating an international Indigenous arts consciousness.

To better comprehend the impetus for the creation of an international Indigenous consciousness within curatorial practices, it is paramount to understand the international political climate concerning the rights of Indigenous people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In September of 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at the organization's New York headquarters.<sup>124</sup> While lacking any legal force, the declaration affirmed the inherent rights of global Indigenous peoples, recognized the historical injustices of colonization and the mass dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, languages, and cultures, and called for UN member nation-states to work towards the recognition

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<sup>124</sup> For the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, see [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf).

of sovereign Indigenous political, social, and economic organizations.<sup>125</sup> While 144 member countries supported the declaration, Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand - four countries with European colonial histories, and with living minority populations of Indigenous peoples - voted against the declaration. These nations cited the incompatibility of the document with a “Western democracy under a constitutional government,” claiming the inability of these governments to reconcile ideas of traditional Indigenous land ownership and sovereignty with colonial land ownership structures.<sup>126</sup> Each nation that had initially voted against UNDRIP eventually put forward their support, with the Canadian government pledging support for the declaration on November 12, 2010. The questionable historicizing of the Canadian nation-state’s relationship to their past and present is indicative of the deep-seated colonial attitudes that informed the relationships between Western democratic governments and Indigenous peoples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Canadian Prime Minister Steven Harper, while speaking at the 2009 G20 Summit in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, claimed that not only did other G20 nations aspire to achieve the longstanding stability of the Canadian parliamentary regime, but that the nation also had “no history of colonialism. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great

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<sup>125</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 61/295, “Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People,” September 13 2007, 2.

<sup>126</sup> “Native rights declaration inconsistent with legal tradition: Strahl,” *Canwest News Service*, September 13 2007, <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=23df9769-3423-4f43-b828-a755725c2719&k=23677>.

power but none of the things that threaten or bother them.”<sup>127</sup>

While the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People has had relatively little impact on forcing member nations to institute binding laws that promote reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, the declaration has had a far more nuanced impact globally on Indigenous peoples. Canadian historian Ken Coates states that the United Nations’ adoption of UNDRIP elevated the political, social, cultural, and economic concerns of Indigenous people from localized grievances to global priorities.<sup>128</sup> In the case of Canada, the shifting attitudes toward the outreach and support of an international Indigenous community gained strength in the Canadian Indigenous arts community. Indigenous curator Candice Hopkins suggests that because of the Canadian government’s precarious relationship with UNDRIP, Indigenous curators began to advocate for the need to reach beyond North American geopolitical borders to establish a wider network of Indigenous solidarity.<sup>129</sup> Hopkins’ statement expresses the desire by some Indigenous curators to establish an international consciousness of Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization that can be enacted within and through curatorial projects in major public arts

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<sup>127</sup> David Ljunggren, “Every G20 nation wants to be Canada, insists PM,” *Reuters*, September 25 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/26/columns-us-g20-canada-advantages-idUSTRE58P05Z20090926>.

<sup>128</sup> Ken Coates “From aspiration to inspiration: UNDRIP finding deep traction in Indigenous communities,” *Centre for International Governance Innovation: The Rise of the Forth World*, eds. Ken Coates and Terry Mitchell, September 18, 2003, <http://www.cigionline.org/blogs/aspiration-inspiration-undrip-finding-deep-traction-indigenous-communities>.

<sup>129</sup> Candice Hopkins (independent curator) in discussion with the author, March 10, 2014.

institutions and artist-run centres. This development informed future relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian nation-state on a multitude of levels, most notably within the world of Indigenous arts as posited in the exhibition *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*. In light of a shifting approach to the establishment of the rights of Indigenous peoples that attempted to recognize a global interconnectivity of Indigenous peoples and nations, a number of Indigenous curators working in Canada began to integrate a new approach to curating Indigenous artwork. This practice posited an international relationship between Indigenous peoples and united them through artistic production. While not directly referenced, this practice is representative of what Tuhiwai Smith sees as a political strategy of *envisioning*, which "... asks that people imagine a future, that they rise above present day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision."<sup>130</sup>

Since 2010 the curation of international Indigenous art in Canada has been realized in several high profile and large-scale exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art. The first, *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, was part of the Cultural Capitals of Canada program, which designated Winnipeg as a "cultural capital" for an 18-month term. The designation brought \$2 million in funding, and was organized under the theme "Arts for All," and included *Close Encounters* as part of its programming schedule. Co-curated by Indigenous curators Candice Hopkins, Steve Loft, Lee-Ann Martin, and Jenny Western, the exhibition featured

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<sup>130</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 152.

work by thirty-three international Indigenous artists and, at the time, was the largest exhibition of international Indigenous art ever staged in Canada. By challenging artists and choosing artworks that explored narratives of the past, present, and future, the curatorial team structured a narrative that reconfigured the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships or “encounters” as they have played out over the course of history, and what they may look like in the future. The collectively-written curatorial statement asserts that, “By radically reconsidering encounter narratives between native and non-native people, Indigenous prophecies, possible utopias and apocalypses, this exhibition proposes intriguing possibilities for the next 500 years.”<sup>131</sup> Regarding the curatorial team’s didactic approach to looking towards speculative futures, Candice Hopkins states that:

For the curators of *Close Encounters* it was because we were having similar conversations with people in New Zealand, Australia, and northern Europe and what we were finding was that for contemporary Indigenous artists who were working in these regions, one thing that was common ground for all of them was this association that Indigenous art and Indigenous people were still thought of as being from the past. So what we wanted to do was flip that on its head and project into the future. We wanted to think about why this was happening, especially when Indigenous people are often thought of as being prophetic, especially in Western culture and often, in stereotypical ways, but also in times of real social or political crisis... So we wanted to consider what the future could look like from the perspective of Indigenous artists and we didn’t necessarily want that future to be utopian.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Candice Hopkins, Steve Loft, Lee-Ann Martin, and Jenny Western, *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, accessed February 12 2014, <http://www.closeencounters.ca/exhibition.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Candice Hopkins in discussion with the author, March 10, 2014.

The curatorial direction of *Close Encounters* was informed as Hopkins notes, from the publication of George Manuel's *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*.<sup>133</sup>

Published in 1974, Manuel posits that to change political, social, and economic conditions locally, Indigenous people will have to unite on a global scale.<sup>134</sup>

Regarding the overarching concept of the Fourth World, Manuel states:

Our celebration honours the emergence of the Fourth World: the utilization of technology and its life-enhancing potential within the framework of the values of the peoples of the Aboriginal World - not a single messianic moment after which there will never be another raging storm, but the free use of power by natural human groupings, immediate communities, people who are in direct contact with one another, to harness the strength of the torrent for the growth of their own community. The Fourth World is not a vision of the future history of North America and the Indian peoples. The two histories are inseparable. It has been the insistence on the separation of the people from the land that has characterized much of recent history. It is this same insistence that has prevented European North Americans from developing their own identity in terms of the land so that they can be happy and secure in the knowledge of that identity.<sup>135</sup>

The embracement of Manuel's writing by the curatorial team was a validation of the spirit of internationalism between Indigenous peoples. The curators of *Close Encounters* established a historical connection to the grassroots movements and political flashpoints of the 1960s and 1970s, and demonstrated that the concept of international Indigenous solidarity is an evolving political strategy of resistance embraced by Indigenous people for nearly four decades.

The exhibition as a whole was conceptually abstract, as it invited contributing artists and writers to engage with a speculative future that is firmly

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> George Manuel, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan Canada, 1974), 10.

<sup>135</sup> Manuel, 11-12.

rooted in the contemporary realities of each individual's lived experiences as an Indigenous person. A significant companion to the physical exhibition was the accompanying publication to *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*. The publication goes beyond a straightforward documentation of the exhibition, with the seven contributors structuring their engagement with notions of the future in considerably different ways. Richard William Hill and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair contribute fictionalized stories of Indigenous survival rooted in contemporary and historical realities. Others, such as Victor Masayesva Jr, Edward Poitras and Megan Tamati-Quennell, structure personal, communal and historical narratives rooted in their individual cultural experiences as Indigenous people.

After considering the lasting impact of major exhibitions *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* and *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, non-Indigenous art critic J.J Kegan McFadden questions the lasting impact of *Close Encounters* not only on the non-Indigenous arts community, but also on the development of a more in-depth analysis of international Indigenous curatorial and arts practices.<sup>136</sup> McFadden's concerns are not without merit, as he worries that while the exhibition brought together international Indigenous artists from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, the exhibition as a whole neglected to engage with issues of

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<sup>136</sup> J.J. Kegan McFadden, "The stars are aligning themselves, in Winnipeg: Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years," *Fuse* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2011): <http://fusemagazine.org/2011/04/the-stars-are-aligning-themselves-in-winnipeg>.



poverty, violence and social exclusion that plague many Indigenous people in Winnipeg.<sup>137</sup> McFadden also questions the problematic nature of including Manitoba Hydro as a major exhibition sponsor considering the damage caused by the public energy provider to many Manitoba First Nations communities.<sup>138</sup> Both conceptually and discursively, *Close Encounters* was a significant departure from previous exhibitions of Indigenous artwork in Canada. In the relatively brief period of time since the staging of *Close Encounters*, it has proven difficult to assess the specific impacts the exhibition has had on the Indigenous arts community within Canada, largely due to a lack of critical writing that considers the aesthetic qualities and curatorial ambitions of the exhibition. This is not to say these views would be negative. Rather, the production of critical writing as a response to *Close Encounters* would not only contextualize the exhibition within the trajectory of Indigenous curatorial practice, but it would unpack the social implications of the curatorial project. Richard William Hill has made significant contributions to a growing body of critical art writing, and has expressed not just his concern for a lack of this writing by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, but also a pressing need for it. Hill states that:

“...I was concerned about the poverty of critical response to recent exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art. For a number of good reasons, our best and brightest art writers—with a few notable exceptions—have invested their energies in curating rather than criticism. A healthy art discourse is predicated on a balance between exhibitions and their critical

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

assessment; we have a lively art scene and it merits sincere consideration.”<sup>139</sup>

To be sure, *Close Encounters* signaled a new curatorial direction for Indigenous curators in Canada, but lacked a wider engagement by art critics, curators and critical writers, with issues that, as Hill outlined, have persisted throughout the short history of curating Indigenous artwork. The questions raised by McFadden regarding the staging of *Close Encounters* provide a framework through which the implications for the curation of international Indigenous art in Canada can be unpacked and interrogated. McFadden’s argued that in order to effectively unpack international Indigenous solidarity, homegrown political, social, and economic issues must be at the forefront of these conversations.<sup>140</sup> The impact of the curatorial direction of *Close Encounters* was felt on a much larger scale in the two years since, as Indigenous curators working within public arts institutions began to incorporate the work of international Indigenous artists within their curatorial practices, most recently in the National Gallery of Canada’s major exhibition *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art*.

Co-curated by Greg A. Hill, Candice Hopkins, and Christine Lalonde, *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art* surpassed the previous claim of *Close Encounters* as the largest exhibition of international Indigenous art in Canada, and was also the largest single exhibition staged in the National Gallery’s 130-year

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<sup>139</sup> Richard William Hill, “Close Readings-Alex Janvier at the Art Gallery of Alberta,” *Fuse*, 36 no. 2 (Spring 2013): [http://fusemagazine.org/2013/04/36-2\\_hill](http://fusemagazine.org/2013/04/36-2_hill).

<sup>140</sup> McFadden, “The stars are aligning themselves, in Winnipeg: Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years,”

existence. The exhibition featured the work of 77 contemporary Indigenous artists and collectives representing 16 different countries. The curatorial direction of such an expansive exhibition was structured loosely around the assertion that Indigenous artists have been engaged in a wide range of art practices that merge traditional Indigenous and contemporary non-Indigenous aesthetics to explore a range of issues related to identity, community, and tradition on a global scale. Reflecting on the enormity of the exhibition's aim, co-curator Hopkins asserts that by curating *Sakahān* on such a massive scale, as well as selecting work that is grand in both scope and size, the exhibition hoped to contradict the ghettoization of Indigenous artists and their work, and instead understood in the context of its intended impact on international contemporary art as a whole.<sup>141</sup>

*Sakahān* was curated with the intention of providing a wide platform to showcase the work of Indigenous artists from across the globe. Within the exhibition text and supporting literature of the exhibition, the curators made no attempt to set the terms for the self-definition of Indigenous identity by participating artists. Instead, the curators acknowledged the gaps that existed from nation to nation and from region to region, in this process of identifying and self-identifying as Indigenous. Hopkins, Hill and Lalonde acknowledged that this process was inherently tied to the legacy of colonization.<sup>142</sup> Non-Indigenous co-curator Christine Lalonde points out the complicated vocabulary of defining Indigeneity, stating:

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<sup>141</sup> Conversation with Candice Hopkins, March 10, 2014.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

Much of the current vocabulary has been born out of a discourse of colonization and is in the language of the dominating societies. Part of the counter-process of decolonization has been to reassert and respect the specific names by which people identify themselves, individually and collectively, in their own language, breaking away from assigned designations and refuting the act of naming as a manifestation of colonial power.<sup>143</sup>

The identity of Indigenous peoples as it is understood in contemporary society is inherently tied to the colonization of Indigenous populations on a global scale.

Lalonde states that the process of self-determination is part of an active process of identifying one's own cultural heritage or lineage and is integral to the curatorial approach of *Sakahān*, and in the case of this staging of the exhibition, is left to individual participating artists.<sup>144</sup> The long-term goals for Greg A. Hill and the National Gallery are to stage *Sakahān* every five years, and in the process, shift the curatorial focus to more specific themes, issues, or questions addressed by Indigenous artists around the globe. Hopkins recognizes that in narrowing the focus of the exhibition from iteration to iteration, a critical discourse on the relationship between international Indigenous peoples, (with issues regarding the state co-option of Indigenous identities such as in Brazil, Mexico, and many African nations), as well as disparities of economic and social privilege between Indigenous peoples must be unpacked.<sup>145</sup> Not only must they be unpacked, but Indigenous curators must also reconcile the relationship between the curatorial

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<sup>143</sup> Christine Lalonde, "Introduction: At the Crossroads of Indigeneity, Globalization and Contemporary Art," *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art*, eds. Greg A. Hill, Candice Hopkins, Christine Lalonde (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 14.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>145</sup> Candice Hopkins in discussion with the author, March 10, 2014.

projects they undertake, and the ongoing project of establishing an international Indigenous arts community that is based on the principles of collective international political organization and action.

The curatorial intent of *Sakahān* - if it is in fact part of a larger ongoing project executed by Greg A. Hill and the National Gallery - should be viewed collectively by those invested in this project as a stepping-stone in the establishment of an international Indigenous consciousness that builds upon previous curatorial projects such as *Close Encounters*. But to have any real affect, this curatorial project must acknowledge the national and international politics at play in establishing a cohesive interconnectivity between often disparate groups of Indigenous peoples. Jolene Rickard offers a strategy for meaningful engagement between international Indigenous peoples that, in part, stems from the United Nations' development of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, as well as the ongoing United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). Rickard employs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conceptualization of strategic essentialism, defined by Spivak as, "the ways in which subordinate or marginalized social groups may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity in which they band together in political movements."<sup>146</sup> Rickard argues that the development of an international Indigenous identity should focus on an enactment of strategic essentialism on the part of global populations of Indigenous peoples to achieve a

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<sup>146</sup> As quoted in, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 205.

heightened degree of political and social alliance, and the forging of a collective bond.<sup>147</sup> Rickard argues that global Indigenous arts can only be conceptualized if it is rooted in the reconfiguring of art history, theory, and criticism that establishes an interconnectivity between Indigenous artists and their aesthetic practices, and that fully integrates this dialogue within the broader consciousness of global contemporary art.<sup>148</sup> Rickard's conceptualization of a global Indigenous arts community brings forward a lingering question concerning the role of curating international Indigenous art in Canada that must be addressed if the profession, and community as a whole are to continue to develop. While I do not propose an answer to this question, the framework outlined by Rickard, as well as the specific questions posed by McFadden, offer an inroad to future considerations of this practice.

To continue to foster a critically engaged curatorial practice, Indigenous curators and artists must reconcile their relationship with arts institutions across the country. As I have previously outlined, Indigenous curators have made major inroads with regards to the acceptance of Indigenous art in mainstream public galleries, and have continued to strengthen their own artist-run centres and embraced various alternative modes of curating Indigenous art. In addition, a number of Indigenous artist-run centres such as Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art, have continued to operate outside of the structures of publicly

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<sup>147</sup> Jolene Rickard, "The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art," in *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art*, eds. Greg A. Hill, Candice Hopkins, Christine Lalonde (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 58.

<sup>148</sup> Jolene Rickard, "The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art," 54.

funded art galleries and have played a significant role in creating alternative spaces for Indigenous artists to curate and exhibit their work, as well as the increased the influence of new media art practices on the curation of Indigenous art.<sup>149</sup> However, the relationship between Indigenous artists, curators, and mainstream art institutions should be seen as one of constant negotiation. Hopkins reflects on one of the more divisive issues of placing warning and disclaimer signs throughout the installation of *Sakahān* at the National Gallery. Located at the main entrance, as well as in several other locations throughout the exhibition space, the warning signs read: “The views and opinions expressed in this exhibition are those of the artists and do not reflect the views of the National Gallery of Canada. Viewer discretion is advised.” Regarding the signs and their impact on the curatorial intent and content of *Sakahān*, Hopkins states:

Art institutions are deeply Westernized in their exhibition models and in their thinking, and that came to the forefront in *Sakahān*, specifically with the warning signs that were placed on the exhibition, which were a directive from the National Gallery that we as curators had no control over. This is something I think the community should have made a bigger deal about, because it was a hugely problematic issue.<sup>150</sup>

Hopkins is astute in her concerns, and feels the use of these signs in the institutional framing of *Sakahān* was representative of the continued marginalization of Indigenous art. The signs demonstrated a refusal to

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<sup>149</sup> See Dana Claxton, Steven Loft, Melanie Townsend, *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery/Art Gallery of Hamilton/Indigenous media Arts group, 2005) and the forthcoming Steve Loft, *Coded Territories: Tracing Pathways Indigenous in New Media Art* (Calgary: Univeristy of Calgary Press, 2014).

<sup>150</sup> Candice Hopkins in discussion with the author, March 10, 2014.

acknowledge the role public art institutions play in contextualizing the work of Indigenous artists. Such divisions are deeply rooted in the colonial framework of these institutions, and while Indigenous artists and curators have actively challenged the exhibition and collection practices of institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, with a considerable degrees of success, instances such as this should act as clear indications that an active engagement on the inclusion of Indigenous art must still take place. Hopkins highlights the contradictory nature of placing warning signs on the exhibition due to concerns over artistic content, when no other previous exhibitions at the National Gallery were imposed with such restrictions.<sup>151</sup> As an example, Hopkins cites the National Gallery's purchase of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967) and the ensuing public controversy over the perceived astronomical cost of the work, as an instance where the National Gallery issued no disclaimer addressing the work. While the example of Newman's work and the installation of *Sakahān* are quite different, they are representative of where the National Gallery's deep-seated concerns lie in regard to the aesthetics and content of the exhibition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art. These divisions can be traced to the mid-1980s when Carl Beam, members of the Society for Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry, as well as a chorus of individual Indigenous artists and curators, pushed for the inclusion of Indigenous artwork within the permanent collection and exhibition practices of

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.



the National Gallery.<sup>152</sup> Since the mid-1980s Indigenous arts and curatorial practices have presented significant challenges to the neo-colonialist model of collection and exhibition practices at the National Gallery.<sup>153</sup> The tensions arising from institutional framing within the curatorial direction of *Sakahān* are evidence of what is an ongoing struggle, rather than victory a for unmitigated artistic and curatorial representation of Indigenous art.

Steven Loft expresses similar concerns with regard to the institutionalization of Indigenous curating and art practices, but recognizes the inherent value, even necessity, of these endeavors, and offers a possible way forward. Loft states:

...colonialism is not a thing right, it's not a club, it's not a gun, it's not a legal framework, it's an ideology. So when you want to change these institutions, for us you have to indigenize them. When we have shows like this, we claim the space as indigenous space; we proclaim who and what we are firmly. When we talk about being indigenous, when we talk about being from this land, that's something that really has to be a part of this discussion every time. The National Gallery, for example, finally instituted a department of indigenous art. I think that's possibly more important than *Sakahān* itself.<sup>154</sup>

Loft asserts that Indigenous curators must confront the ideological structures of public art galleries as an act of decolonization. "Indigenization" speaks to the continued need to inject a plurality of Indigenous voices that transforms the

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<sup>152</sup> Young Man, "Bob Boyer and the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA)," 168.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Joseph Henry "Interview: Steve Loft on Indigenous Curation and 'Ghost Dance,'" BlouinArtinfo, accessed February 1 2014, <http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/962270/interview-steve-loft-on-indigenous-curation> (link discontinued).

ideologies of the institutional practices of curation.<sup>155</sup> Loft's attitudes reflect a need to create sustained change within galleries by establishing collections and institutional positions for Indigenous curators that will firmly entrench the production and curation of Indigenous art within the lexicon of institutional art history in Canada.

Ruth Phillips suggests that as Indigenous curators continue to push for a sustained practice of decolonization and Indigenization of public art galleries, these same institutions have become wary of generating new controversies as a risk not worth taking.<sup>156</sup> Phillips states that, "When museums decide to play it safe, they risk losing their efficacy as actors in the social worlds within which they function."<sup>157</sup> Phillips' statement is apt in its analysis of the institutional handling of exhibitions of Indigenous art, but could also be read as a critique of the production and curation of contemporary art across a broad spectrum. In a 2013 year-end review, *Globe and Mail* art critic James Adams reflects on "cultural gridlock" within the world of Canadian contemporary art and addresses the complete unwillingness of curators, academics and art critics to engage in any real criticism of the international contemporary art world.<sup>158</sup> Adams points to the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 297.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> James Adams, "Can you get away with it? Then it was probably art this year?" *The Globe and Mail Online*, Thursday December 26 2013, accessed Friday December 27 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/holiday-guide/holiday-survival-guide/can-you-get-away-with-it-then-its-probably-art/article16099257/>.

recent endeavors of Indigenous artists and curators as a site of cultural relevancy and necessity. Adams states:

There is, however, one realm, in Canada at least, where artists, curators, scholars and critics appear to be in confident accord, and that's with respect to what Sandals<sup>159</sup> calls "the growing recognition and continued mobilization of aboriginal art and artists...Among the biggest shows: *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art*, at the National Gallery; *Ghost Dance: Activism, Resistance, Art*, at the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto; *Witnesses: Art and Canada's Indian Residential Schools* at Vancouver's Belkin Art Gallery; and *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, a touring show originating with the Vancouver Art Gallery. Many of the artists in those exhibitions used conceptual conceits and multiplicity of materials favoured by their non-native contemporaries - but somehow, in their hands, the enterprise seemed fresher, more urgent, necessary even.<sup>160</sup>

Adams' statement is important in that it demonstrates the increasing relevancy Indigenous curatorial and artistic practices hold within the world of contemporary Canadian art. It is also indicative of the role Adams, who is non-Indigenous, can play in validating the work of Indigenous curators and artists. As an established art critic, Adams possesses the ability to validate exhibitions such as *Sakahān* by providing commentary<sup>161</sup> in a major national news outlet on the artwork and curatorial projects produced by Indigenous people. While it is important to note this power dynamic, it is nonetheless important that the work of Indigenous artists and curators continues to gain recognition within the dominant narrative spaces of

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<sup>159</sup> While not attributed by Adams, Leah Sandals is a staff writer for the publication *Canadian Art*.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> In addition to Adams' end of year account, see "Sakahān exhibit aims to 'explode the box' of aboriginal art in Canada," *The Globe and Mail Online*, May 17 2013, accessed December 27 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/sakahān-exhibit-aims-to-explode-the-box-of-aboriginal-art-in-canada/article11992899/>.

the mainstream of contemporary Canadian art. It is a space in which Indigenous artists and curators unquestionably belong, and one for which they have actively argued for more than forty years.

The ability of Indigenous curators to produce exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art that engage critically with the institutional and social legacies of the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous peoples and their cultures is not only a victory for the broader Indigenous arts community, but is integral to the progression and evolution of Canadian contemporary art. Exhibitions such as *Close Encounters* and *Sakahān* have built on the curatorial work of previous Indigenous curators who have asserted that not only does contemporary Indigenous artwork deserve consideration within major public arts institutions, but the terms of inclusion, as well as the process of cultural identification, lies within the artists and curators themselves. The postmodern and postcolonial turns experienced within public art galleries throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s signaled an emerging process of decolonization that placed Indigenous knowledge systems and community practices at the heart of this process. This engagement is part of an ongoing development of the agency of Indigenous curators in their negotiation of both physical and discursive spaces within which Indigenous art can be collected and exhibited.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this project has been to establish an annotated history of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada since the late 1960s, when a growing body of scholarly work and critical writing produced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people critically engaged with the relationship between Indigenous artists, curators, and public art galleries. I have stated that limited publications exist which critically examine the practice of curating Indigenous art. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute new observations to what is now a small but growing consciousness. I have undertaken this thesis with the desire to contribute to a growing body of work that critically examines the various incarnations of Indigenous curatorial practice in Canada, and the major flashpoints that have shaped the practice, as it exists today.

The parameters for the curation of contemporary Indigenous artwork have changed considerably over the last forty-plus years, shifting from a practice of necessity that strove to break away from an anthropological positioning of Indigenous artwork, to the increasing professionalization of Indigenous curatorial practice. These shifts are inherently linked to a constant negotiation on the part of Indigenous curators with regard to their position within major public art galleries across Canada. These numerous engagements manifested in the establishment of a number of Indigenous arts advocacy groups, artist-run centres, and the adoption of alternative modes of curating and exhibiting Indigenous artwork. The roots of Indigenous curatorial practice can be traced back to the advocacy work of Daphne

Odjig and the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated. The various practices of curating contemporary Indigenous artwork have also stemmed from several institutional shifts in the collection and exhibition of Indigenous artwork, and the rising consciousness of the art gallery as a site of institutional power that shapes and upholds dominant social and cultural norms. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a proverbial door was forced open by Indigenous artists, and curators, which created an entry point into previously inaccessible institutional spaces. This led not only to an increase in the collection and exhibition of Indigenous artwork, but to the creation of curatorial positions within public art galleries, as well as funding programs specifically focused on supporting Indigenous curators and their various practices. The development of these positions and programs was a reflection of a series of collective and individual efforts by Indigenous artists and curators to establish a presence of their various practices within public art galleries. The inclusion of an Indigenous presence in major public art galleries should not be seen within the constricting terms of identity politics that limit the inclusion of Indigenous art based on racial or ethnic identities. Instead, the inclusion of Indigenous art should be part of an ongoing negotiation based on the aesthetic, conceptual, and political merits of the various practices of artists and curators working within the field.

It is also important to note that within this thesis I have deliberately chosen to not engage with a number of conversations involving various practices of curating Indigenous art because they are beyond the scope of this thesis, however,

are nonetheless relevant for future consideration. First, I acknowledged that from a professional standpoint Indigenous women are by and large underrepresented within the fields of art history and curatorial practice. A number of established artists, curators and art historians, including Bonnie Devine, Lee-Ann Martin, Jolene Rickard, Marcia Crosby and Daphne Odjig have made significant contributions to the fields of art history and curatorial practice, and have created a small but significant space for emerging Indigenous women curators and artists to work within their respective fields. I have also previously outlined that I have taken an Ontario-centric approach to the research and writing of this thesis. As a result I have, by and large, not engaged with the various elements of West Coast and Inuit art that are part of a larger critical engagement with Indigenous art history. Finally, while I have outlined some of the major influences of government funding, specifically the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as the various funding programs within the Department of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs Canada, and the various impacts they have had on Indigenous art and curatorial practices, I have not focused on the specific histories of these funding bodies and the overall effects they have had on Indigenous artists and their respective communities. These are all important projects, but fall outside of the parameters of this thesis.

From the early advocacy of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. in the 1970s and 1980s, and the work of the Society for Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry through the 1980s and early 1990s, to the formation and subsequent

incorporation of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective in 2006, as well as the countless individual efforts by committed artists and curators, Indigenous curatorial practice has emerged as integral to the advancement of Indigenous art. Increased access for Indigenous curators to a number of public galleries brings new questions concerning the present and future of Indigenous curatorial practice, many of which cannot be answered within the confines of this thesis. This research and writing is my initial contribution to an emerging project that maps the development and progression of Indigenous arts and curatorial practice in Canada. My own position as a non-Indigenous (white) male who has engaged in a considerable body of research and scholarly writing that focuses on the work of Indigenous artists and curators rightfully warrants elaboration and a certain degree of scrutiny. In undertaking this project I have made great attempts to approach this work with respect, as well as with an acute awareness of the long history of non-Indigenous scholars, curators, art critics, collectors and dealers who have made a highly profitable living on the culture and history of Indigenous peoples. My writing has focused on the important work Indigenous curators have undertaken in their attempts to gain access and sustained representation within major public art galleries. I have illustrated the many inroads made by Indigenous artists and curators that have resulted in the insertion of Indigenous voices within a plurality of conversations from which they had previously been marginalized, or outright excluded.

With that said, I have also highlighted the disparities that still exist



between Indigenous peoples and numerous mainstream arts institutions which are spaces that are still predominately operated and governed by non-Indigenous peoples. Historically, non-Indigenous people - specifically, artists, curators, art historians, and academics from a variety of disciplines - have occupied positions of authority in producing a discourse regarding the cultural identity of Indigenous peoples. These institutional imbalances stretch beyond galleries, and are indicative of the under-representation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian universities and publishing houses that focus on the disciplines of curatorial practice, art history, and critical art writing. These imbalances are, without question, why the inclusion of contemporary Indigenous artwork and an Indigenous cultural perspective has only been part of the mainstream institutional practices within the world of contemporary Canadian art in the last three decades. I recognize the privileged position I hold as a white graduate student who has been afforded a funded opportunity to engage in a sustained body of research and critical writing that has led to the production of this thesis. It is an opportunity few individuals are given. Acknowledging this opportunity is increasingly relevant considering the small number of Indigenous curators, artists, or other members of the Indigenous arts community who, for a variety of reasons, have not been able to engage in the critical response to exhibitions of Indigenous art that have been produced over the last half-century.

As detailed throughout this essay, Indigenous curators hold a relatively small number of paid positions within major public arts institutions and these

individuals are ultimately responsible for the production of the majority of curatorial work that emerges from these institutions. Others work independently (not always by choice) and as a result, must split time between a variety of paid and unpaid projects. These mitigating factors, among the many others previously mentioned throughout this thesis, have contributed to a significant lack of critical writing produced by Indigenous arts professionals. This writing, or lack thereof, dictates the basis on which the inclusion of Indigenous art and curatorial practices into the broader discourse of Western art history may take place. As long as Indigenous peoples' contribution to this discourse continues to be determined by their access to financial and institutional support, disparities between Indigenous artists, curators, and mainstream art institutions will persist. Ultimately, it will be the ability of Indigenous arts professionals to engage in a discussion of artistic production and curatorial practice that will shape the future of an Indigenous art history, critical writing and curatorial practice.

The collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous arts professionals have extended beyond critical writing within the field of art history. Most notably, this collaborative spirit has manifested itself in the travelling exhibition *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*. Originally curated by Indigenous artists and curators Tania Willard and Skeena Reece, *Beat Nation* was first launched as an online exhibition<sup>162</sup> titled *Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture* in collaboration with the Vancouver-based artist-run centre,

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<sup>162</sup> To see the original online version of *Beat Nation* go to <<http://www.beatnation.org>>.

grunt gallery and the gallery's director Greg Alteen, who is non-Indigenous. The initial online exhibition was made possible by a combination of grunt gallery's commitment to providing online spaces for Indigenous art to be shown, as well as the funding the artist-run centre received through Heritage Canada's Gateway Fund program, which was created specifically to fund online projects that increase the cultural content produced by Indigenous peoples and other minority populations in Canada. *Beat Nation* was the last in a series of eight curated online exhibitions that were executed in collaboration with grunt gallery. Other online exhibitions included *First Nations Performance* (2005), *First Vision* (2008), *The Medicine Project* (2008), *Nikamon Ohci Askiy (sings because of the land)* (2008), as well as the *Aboriginal Creators Project* (2007) that produced three curated sites of work by Indigenous artists Rebecca Belmore, Dana Claxton, and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. While Heritage Canada cancelled the Gateway Fund program in March of 2010, the content of *Beat Nation* continued to evolve into various physical manifestations that were staged at grunt gallery and SAW Gallery in Ottawa, Ontario, as well as a number of festivals both nationally and internationally. In July 2011, Kathleen Ritter, then-Associate Curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, approached Willard, Reece, and Alteen with the possibility of expanding the original online content and staging *Beat Nation* as a feature exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in February 2012.<sup>163</sup> Ritter and Willard acted as co-curators of the latest incarnation of the exhibition, titled *Beat*

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<sup>163</sup> Kathleen Ritter (independent curator) in conversation with the author, March 27, 2013.

*Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*. The exhibition has gone on to tour nationally and has continued to evolve from installation to installation. *Beat Nation* offers a glimpse at the sustained collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators. *Beat Nation* should be seen as an exhibition that deliberately evolves as it travels, fostering dialogue between the curatorial concept, the artists' work, the audience, and the city it is staged in, and is representative of the positive and lasting collaborative curatorial possibilities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators and public arts institutions.

The research and writing of this thesis has been greatly influenced by the work of other established non-Indigenous art historians and critical writers, specifically, Elizabeth McLuhan, Ruth Phillips, W. Jackson Rushing III, and Charlotte Townsend Gault. I see their work as part of an ongoing contribution by non-Indigenous peoples to a continuously unfolding dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working within the worlds of art history, curatorial practice, and critical writing. These individuals have made valuable contributions with regard to locating Indigenous art practices within the field of Western art history, and have often done so in collaboration with Indigenous artists, curators, critical writers, and academics. The goal of this thesis is to establish a critical history of Indigenous art in Canada, with a specific focus on a series of flashpoints I have deemed critical to the development of an Indigenous curatorial practice that has evolved over the last forty plus years. By no means do I intend for my work to take the place of work produced by Indigenous curators, scholars

or writers working within the same field. Instead, I hope for my work to act as an account of the research and critical writing produced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples working within this field up to this point. I believe that for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to map a relationship that has been fraught with conflict and marked by the impacts of the colonization of countless generations of Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous peoples must explicate their role in what has been a continued oppression and ignoring of Indigenous peoples' constitutional rights. This reconciliation is part of a much larger nation to nation dialogue that has been repeatedly called for by Indigenous peoples, but has yet to take effect in any meaningful way, both in the world of contemporary art and beyond.

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