

# Switch On

## Features

### Unsettled Objects (The Alchemy of Dispossession and Display)

By Gina Badger

***Tools for Conviviality***, The Power Plant's Summer 2012 group exhibition, presented a lively collection of work from ten artists and groups.<sup>1</sup> Curated by Melanie O'Brian, the exhibition did not lend itself easily to an overall reading, offering instead many provocative interpretive tangents. This essay develops a reading of three works in the exhibition, one by Raymond Boisjoly and two by Abbas Akhavan, highlighting the relationship between Indigenous culture and territory and settler-colonial dispossession.<sup>2</sup> When read together, Boisjoly's *captured speech writing back: Toronto* (2012) and Akhavan's *Untitled Garden* (2008–09) and *Makeshift Objects* (2008) work a bit of exhibition magic—alchemically creating meaning and affect in excess of their own forms and references while opening a critical reflection on the display devices of the gallery.

Strolling the boardwalk along Lake Ontario, visitors would first come upon Boisjoly's billboard-sized image, *captured speech writing back: Toronto* [cswb:T], mounted on The Power Plant's south-facing exterior wall. Created specifically for *Tools for Conviviality*, cswb:T is an iteration of an ongoing work, *The Writing Lesson* (2011–).<sup>3</sup> The banner is a two-part superimposed image; the background is an inverted, digitally sepia-toned photograph of Toronto's Museum subway station, recognizable for the replica Nisgaa and Haida totem poles adorning its platform. The totem poles, thousands of miles away from the Pacific Northwest Coast cultures and geographies that give them spiritual and aesthetic specificity, have absurdly become mascots for Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).

The photograph serves as an example of the disturbing abstractions that so often plague museum collections.<sup>4</sup> Here, multiple acts of dispossession are in evidence: the totem poles were removed from their Indigenous west coast context and put on display at the ROM, then reproduced inside a Toronto subway station and finally mobilized as a distinct identity marker of their new metropolitan location. This cumulative effect strips the Indigeneity of the totem poles down to its bare minimum, rendering them abstracted signifiers of a universalized Indigenous reality that appears distant and conquered. Imported to Toronto to teach city folk about Indigenous practices of recording history, the display of these Pacific Northwest Totem poles also obscures the Indigeneity of their new host territory, the historical conflict and/or meeting place of Wyandot (Huron), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Anishinabek (Ojibwa)<sup>5</sup> peoples, and the current home of a large and diverse Indigenous population.

But in *captured speech writing back: Toronto*, the story doesn't end with the photograph. Floating on top of its sepia tones is a striking array of jagged white lines, script-like but largely illegible. Resembling the band names and titles emblazoned on black metal album covers and t-shirts, the graphic is a black metal translation of Toronto—a colonial name with Indigenous origins, like many place names in present-day North America.<sup>6</sup> Black metal vernacular script, as Boisjoly's artist statement stipulates, references Indigenous pre-Christian spirituality in Scandinavia. A highly aestheticized form, black metal script does not abide by strict rules, but generally eschews legibility in favour of symmetry and a certain evil aura.<sup>7</sup> Boisjoly's uncanny layering of three mismatched symbols—the place name, the script, the totem poles—reveals them all for what they are, second-order translations of Indigenous cultural objects. Seeing them all together triggers an aneurism in the banality of settler-colonial forgetting and reaffirms

their basic Indigeneity.

Affixed to the physical boundary of gallery, facing the waters of the lake, *cswb:T* acts as a powerful acknowledgment of Toronto as Indigenous territory. This acknowledgment stands as a warning and/or a welcome; a thorny tool for conviviality suited to our colonial present. It also establishes a constellation of themes for considering the works inside the exhibition: cultural property, dispossession and host territory.

Entering the gallery from the south doors, adjacent to Boisjoly's piece, visitors are affronted by Abbas Akhavan's *Untitled Garden*, a long, rectangular cedar planter housing a row of tidy, cone-shaped emerald cedar trees.<sup>8</sup> The sixty-five-foot-long row of cedars stands about eight feet tall and blocks off the gallery's central hallway—normally a key artery for moving between the gallery's various smaller rooms—forcing visitors to confront the shrubs and walk the length of the planter in order to access the rest of the exhibition. *Thuja occidentalis*, or emerald cedar, is the species used worldwide in civic and corporate plazas, often to greenwash what are in fact security barricades. The tree is indigenous to Eastern Canada, the same species that clings to rocky cliff edges and windswept expanses of shield, and easily exceeds a thousand years of age if left to its own devices. As related in Akhavan's artist statement, *Thuja occidentalis*, transported in early trade between North American colonies and Britain, became a key tool in the enclosure of the commons, that infamously violent era of dispossession and privatization that jump-started British capitalism in the seventeenth century. During that period, the tree was used to delineate the boundaries of newly claimed private property. Then, as now, the cedars' deceptively friendly appearance obscured their purpose of restricting access and controlling movement.

Having taken Boisjoly's invitation to acknowledge the Indigenous character of Toronto—and by extension, the land currently occupied by the exhibition—it is easy enough to read Akhavan's geometric cedars as indigenous flora, creatures of this place. The cedars stand stiffly in a straight line, blocking pathways as well as sightlines, just as they do in granite planters worldwide. And yet, because they bisect a gallery instead of a plaza, they force the attention of the viewer. Their branches give off a subtle mentholated odour; the smell of their just-watered soil enlivens the air. Here, is it the very displacement of the cedars that prompts viewers to read them this way, imposing a consideration of the stringent controls that direct navigation in public gallery space. This is certainly one of the most exciting possibilities of exhibition display: the denaturalization of objects so ubiquitous that it is otherwise difficult to recognize their histories.

Walking around the imposing length of *Untitled Garden* and through the exhibition to the left or the right, viewers can eventually double-back, ending up in a long and narrow room created by the two walls of the gallery's central hallway and the planter. Occupying this room are two long, waist-high exhibition vitrines containing the multifarious and menacing forms of Akhavan's *Makeshift Objects*. Each one of the shivs in the display cases is a makeshift weapon fashioned from household objects: a toothbrush burned and melted to a sharp point; a comb whittled into a blade; a jagged shard of plate wrapped with tape for a grip; a newspaper rolled tightly and folded into a truncheon. An intriguing ambiguity lingers over whether these objects were fabricated for an artworld display context, or whether they are an assortment of found artifacts (in fact, they were made by Akhavan using objects culled from his own home). This witty and disturbing collection makes a notable addition to a series of artworks that interrogate the fabrications and omissions of museum display (most famously, Fred Wilson's 1992 intervention into the Maryland Historical Society's collection, *Mining the Museum*).

But there is something else at work in *Makeshift Objects*: the lurking violence of conviviality, the hostile within the hospitable that makes every domestic object a potential threat.<sup>9</sup> This double-dip is deeply unsettling. In his text *Tools for Conviviality*(1973), Ivan Illich uses conviviality to denote the hostile

interruption of the capitalist mode of production. For him—and by extension perhaps for O'Brian's curatorial framework—conviviality is that which destroys the productive capacity of capitalism, replacing its social organization with new forms. In *Makeshift Objects*, there is no such creative force, no easy optimism, only a churning, helpless need to escape through destruction—suicide, murder—in any case, a way out of this prison. Together with Boisjoly's *captured speech writing back: Toronto* and the barricade that is *Untitled Garden*, the message here is clear: hospitality has its limits. There are defense mechanisms underlying the power dynamics of contemporary settler-colonial states—the ease of occupying host territory should never be taken for granted.

Boisjoly and Akhavan's three artworks, read together against the backdrop of present-day Toronto, provide an incredibly rich landscape from which to interpret the theme of *Tools for Conviviality*. They bring settler-colonial realities into the foreground, and highlight a vital Indigenous presence, rooted in territory and stretching across human and botanical populations. Working against the abstracting and naturalizing tendencies of gallery display, these artworks make visible the Indigenous character of their specific objects and symbols, as well as the very ground they are exhibited on. On a meta-level, this reading demonstrates how displacement, recontextualization and superimposition create meaning in display contexts. It shows how exhibition-making can be a project of repossession of cultural objects and histories that unsettles institutions and audiences. How close does this actually get to Illich's conviviality—a full-fledged breakdown of capitalist modes of social organization? Well, not too close, necessarily. For that, we gotta use the tools.<sup>10</sup>

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Gina Badger is an artist and writer based in Toronto. Working in the expanded field of sculpture and installation, her favoured research methods include listening, walking and eating. She has most recently exhibited at the Blackwood Gallery (Mississauga) and is currently preparing work for the forthcoming publications *Heteropolis* (edited by the Montreal-based group Adaptive Actions) and *The Lake* (edited by Toronto artist Maggie Groat), both forthcoming in 2013. Born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, Badger is the descendent of farmer settlers in Treaty 6 territory. She is currently Editorial Director at *FUSE* Magazine.

## NOTES

1. The complete list: Abbas Akhavan, Raymond Boisjoly, Geoffrey Farmer, Claire Fontaine, Kyla Mallett, Swintak/Don Miller, Reece Terris, Oscar Tuazon, Ulla von Brandenburg, Franz West.
2. This essay is, in part, adapted from my notes for a Sunday Scene gallery tour I led at The Power Plant on 4 July 2012. My warmest thanks to both Raymond and Abbas for collegial fact-checking of this essay. Carly Whitefield, Shiri Pasternak, Sarah Nesbitt and Maggie Groat, for your keen readership and editorial generosity, I thank you as well.
3. Boisjoly is a Vancouver-based artist of Haida and Québécois descent originally from Chilliwack, British Columbia.
4. Museum collections are built through dispossession—removed from their native contexts, cultural objects are shorn of their use value and gain new symbolic value through their recontextualization and display.
5. Autonyms first, exonyms in parentheses.
6. All works in *The Writing Lesson* involve black metal translations of Indigenous place names in present-day Canada and the U.S. As far as Toronto goes, Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee elders and cultural organizations, and settler historians, geographers and linguists all have their preferred etymologies. Retired Mohawk teacher Ima Johnson (Turtle Clan) traces it to the Mohawk word *tkaronton*, meaning “logs in the water,” and most Mohawk linguists refer to some variation

on this theme (thanks to Donna Bomberry at the Kawennio:io Language Preservation Project for assisting with this research). For a list of print sources, see Victoria Freeman, "Indigenous Hauntings in Settler-Colonial Spaces: The Activism of Indigenous Ancestors in the City of Toronto," in Colleen Boyd and Coll Thrush, *Phanton Past, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American Culture* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 241.

7. Personal correspondence between the author and musician/writer/trouble-maker, Jonah Campbell.

8. Akhavan is a Toronto-based artist, born in Tehran.

9. See the Derridean etymology of hospitality, in evidence in multiple works since 1997. A similar dynamic is at work in the three pieces by the French collective artist Claire Fontaine also included in *Tools for Conviviality*: coins concealing tiny, curved blades; garden tools cum anarchist battle flags; the paper cover of a volume of *Society of the Spectacle* wrapped around a brick.

10. As is currently being done by thousands of activists and organizers working under the banner of the grassroots Idle No More movement in their use of a full suite of tactics to address ongoing Indigenous dispossession in Canada and beyond.