

**RICHARD WILLIAM HILL**

We want to explore what it means that a discourse on contemporary Indigenous art that is already established to varying degrees in settler colonies like Canada, the US, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand has begun to make its way into the international art world. One of the ways that I experience talking about Indigenous issues in Europe, or even in parts of the US, is as a temporal overlap between the present and my experiences in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Canada, when the task was simply to get particular issues and histories on the table and convince people they were worth talking about. Back then, we had both the excitement and challenge of artists and writers creating a discourse and negotiating their access to institutions from a position of virtual exclusion from the public sphere and institutional support in general. Having the benefit not only of that experience, but also of the institutional reification of that discourse, I am now wondering how it might be different this time around? Warts and all, we have an established discourse to put on the table from the outset.

Maybe we can start by trying to map out a concise history of what has happened already? But even before doing that it might be useful to chart the present geography of a discourse that has grown from many specific contexts into a global notion of the “Indigenous.” To show, right at the moment, where this discourse lives? Candice, as one of the curators of the first giant global Indigenous art exhibition *Sakahān* at the National Gallery of Canada in 2013, you are much better placed than I am to explain the scope of what is now covered by the term Indigenous. When we both began our careers we likely imagined that our area of specialization (which neither of us stick to exclusively, I should add) involved Indigenous art in Canada and the US. In Canada I think Indigenous art has had relative institutional success; it is now shown in mainstream and artist run institutions, discussed in mainstream Canadian periodicals, supported by national, provincial and territorial arts councils and so forth. There is certainly always room for improvement and in many cases inclusion is token, rather than deep and real. But compared to twenty years ago, things are much improved. My sense is that this reception has been different in the US and perhaps elsewhere. Can you help me fill in the gaps of my situational parochialism? I’m trying to catch up, but there is now so much to know.

**CANDICE HOPKINS**

When we started working on *Sakahān* in 2009, we didn’t want to replicate relationships between Indigenous people founded on a shared colonizer and a shared language—Canada, Australia, United States and New Zealand as former British colonies. We also wanted to challenge the idea of what international might mean in the indigenous context. For me, this meant digging deep into histories of activism and international relations and the origins of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which we can trace back to the development of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975. I was interested, for example, in the work of Grand Chief George Manuel, one of the initiators of the World Council. Manuel, who was from the Secwepemc Nation in British Columbia, quite famously came up with the idea of what he called the “fourth world.” Unlike the third world, which is characterized economically in terms of a perceived lack of development, the fourth world was characterized by origins and was a way for indigenous peoples from around the world to come together. Imperfect and rife with social and economic challenges that accompany each of our specific histories of subjugation and colonial violence, it was also a place of potential, namely the sharing of knowledge and political strategies outside of the confines of national borders. During his travels, one of the groups that Manuel met were members of the Sámi Action Group (SAG). Comprised of seven members, a number of whom were artists, they were actively protesting the building of a massive hydroelectric dam on the Alta River. Although they didn’t stop the dam, their actions resulted in a pause. During this moment, for the first time, the Norwegian government was pressured to consider the rights of Sámi peoples and launched a formal commission. For me, the understanding of international was first rooted in political histories. We also looked to artist-driven models. At the same time as this increased political agency for indigenous peoples around the world (during the 1960s and 1970s significant land rights and legal claims took place in Canada, Australian and

New Zealand) there are a number of gatherings and forums for Pacific artists from the South and North Pacific. While Aotearoa / New Zealand now also operates on a bi-cultural model to the point where Mōari is now understood as an official language alongside English, Maori artists participate at all levels of the contemporary conversation there, although, like Canada, there is still a question of how customary practices like weaving and carving are contextualized and circulate. In Norway what emerged is very much a parallel system both artistically and politically. There is now a Sámi Parliament and institutions for Sámi art—the Sámi National Museum being just one of the culturally-specific organizations initiated. As a result, from the perspective of artists I have spoken with, there is the feeling that mainstream arts institutions don’t need to necessarily collect or exhibit Sámi art because this belongs in Sámi museums and galleries.

A similar sentiment was voiced recently in an open forum initiated by the Whitney Museum, where for a day, curators were online and answered questions of the virtual audience. Cree artist Duane Linklater inquired why they don’t have a significant collection of Native American art. Their response was that this was being covered by other institutions, so thus not a part of their *responsibility*. Of course this sentiment is not shared in the Southwest where I live now—here we have both a mix of these “parallel institutions,” like the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, and also contemporary institutions like SITE Santa Fe, which is increasingly showing the work of Indigenous artists from North, South, and Central America. I think that this support of places like SITE Santa Fe that were founded on exhibiting international contemporary art parallels an increased interest in Indigenous art globally—including with the Sydney Biennial, the Asia Pacific Triennial, and now, documenta 14. For me, I approach this with a healthy degree of skepticism as well, as it seems as though Western or European interest in anything indigenous often takes place in times of crisis. The counter-culture movement in the 1960s was a crisis of belief, therefore hippies found solace in the wide-scale appropriation and bastardization of Native belief systems. The crisis is now an environmental and philosophical one. It’s no surprise that indigenous cosmologies are being circulated and reshaped by non-Native academics as a counter to the Anthropocene. Once again though, this is at the sacrifice of providing a place for Native peoples to speak for ourselves.

Richard, I have always wanted to ask—you spent a great deal of time living in Europe working closely with Jimmie Durham and Jean Fisher. What reception did your ideas have in that context? I am interested in particular about what was relevant to audiences there and what didn’t have traction.

**RWH**

I wish I had a more insightful answer. I lived in London from 2004 until 2007 while I was working on my PhD, with Jean as my supervisor. Jean had been in New York in the 1980s and became interested in contemporary art by what at the time would have been called “Indian” artists. She and Jimmie co-curated two important early exhibitions, *Ni Go Tlunh A Doh Ka (We Are Always Turning Around On Purpose)* at the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, SUNY Old Westbury (1986) and *We the People* at Artists Space, New York (1987). She was very helpful to me because I was looking for someone who both understood Indigenous issues and could help me theorize some of the questions I was grappling with in a broader context. Beyond that though, I could not really detect much interest in contemporary Indigenous art at all, although to be fair, I was not evangelizing very hard. I had a lot of work to do on my thesis and I am shy and not very charismatic at the best of times. But the sense I had was that people either associated Indigenous issues with a played-out post-colonial theory or saw them as much less urgent than the political situations of people who were coming to Europe from places that were more economically or politically insecure. The last few times I have been to Europe I had a sense that it was changing somewhat, probably thanks to the interventions of people like yourself and others who have been targeting big international venues as spaces for intervention.

I’d like eventually to talk more about how (and why) we might participate in that discourse, but I’d also like to back up a bit and respond to how you have defined the move toward a global Indigenous. I like

that you have framed this as arising out of political actions, which suggests to me that what we are discussing is less an identity to be pinned down and essentialized and more an ongoing work in progress arising out of shared experiences and concerns. As you know, one of my greatest anxieties about the way in which Indigenous cultural politics have played out in North America has to do with how a sizable number of people in our own communities have tended to essentialize Indigenous identities in relation to an idealized “traditional” or pre-contact past. I have a horror that we may be in the process of exporting these ideas globally.

Yet, I think even the discourse in North America is not as tidy as it looks at first glance. When the idea of contemporary “Indian” or “Native” art first began to come to the foreground here in the 1980s and 1990s it was an emergent situation with many possibilities. For example, many artists said back then that, while their cultural heritage certainly informed their work, they did not necessarily consider themselves “Indian” artists. Artists like Jimmie and Brian Jungen (and others) have managed to maintain that stance, I think, but eventually the idea of contemporary Indigenous art became institutionalized in various ways: as an academic specialization, an arts council funding category, a curatorial specialization and so on. As it takes on institutional reality, it seems a good time to remind ourselves that it is a constructed category that, like the global Indigenous, united a lot of diverse cultural traditions and impulses under a single signifier. So poking at its boundaries seems worthwhile, just to keep the definition loose and open. The artist Raymond Boisjoly has been doing a great job of that recently. And relatively recent works by artists like Kent Monkman and Terrance Houle so confidently move across many boundaries that it would be absurd to even try to confine them within some tiny identity politics. I guess for myself my interest in “contemporary Indigenous art” is as a specific area of specialization that sits alongside—maybe straddles is a better word—my general interest in art and its various histories. I would define that specialization roughly as: art and writing addressing Indigenous issues or culture in some way. For me this might be created by anybody who wants to be in the conversation, although not everyone agrees on that either. Likewise an artist of Indigenous heritage, like Jimmie, contributed to that discourse but also went on to make work about European architecture, among other things, that is not directly connected to this discourse at all. To me this was very liberating as a meta-gesture in relation to the Indigenous art discourse; that one could engage with anything. And of course in whatever he does his perspective is likely to reflect the total of his experiences just as it does with all artists.

**CH** I think that you make a great point in your nightmare situation: that being the fear of exporting of some sketchy idea of what tradition is (usually a very watered down one directed at non-Native audiences). I am writing at the moment from Honolulu, where I am taking part in the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Conference. Here “recovering curator”—her words not mine—Ngahiraka Mason, asked whether the contemporary works being produced at the moment by indigenous artists might be forming something of a “future crime scene.” From what I understand, she is speaking about the fact that many of these works emerge from a lack of connection, or dispossession from one’s home community, loss of language, customary practices and so on. If this is the basis for these artworks, how will they be read in the future? It is a provocative question, but also one based on the idea that contemporary Indigenous practices be necessarily founded in these things, when we know that, for some of us, relationships to our home communities are complex, unhealthy or even non-existent and perhaps not the basis for our practices at all. What it also implies is that these works are indeed evidence of colonial crimes—the very reason many of us don’t speak our indigenous languages is because of the forced assimilation of state-run residential and boarding schools where children were punished (all-too-often physically) for speaking their mother tongues in an attempt to “kill the Indian to save the child.” An alarming number of children never came home and those who did were deeply scarred, traumatized. The schools were part of the larger project of land dispossession, economic subjugation (we were allowed to hunt and fish for subsistence but never to make

any money off of these endeavors), and a deliberate breakdown of community relationships. So here we get into a bit of the messiness of these conversations, that even within our field, there are very different ideas of what contemporary indigenous art is, or should be, what its basis is and what topics it might address. For me, this again circles back to perception and the need to address Indigenous issues or culture *in all of its complexities*.

You and I spoke recently about returning to this moment—the 1980s and 90s. For me, I was re-reading writings by Jean Fisher and Jimmie Durham, in part because of my anxiety that we sometimes find ourselves in something of a perpetual return—where questions that were asked in that time still crop up today, and for whatever reason, we have a hard time remembering the good thinking that took place then. In a recent article in *Canadian Art* you put this into words when you asked whether “Indigenous Art was better in the 1980s and 1990s” putting forward works like James Luna’s *Artifact Piece* (1986), which still resonates after all this time. At the heart of the article was a question—whether identity politics now has taken a conservative turn. As you know, one of the discussions that many of us are having concerns decolonialism as well as—in Canada at least—a scramble for institutions to “indigenize” their practices and methodologies. It’s true, what was a manufactured category is now a verb! My concern is that the practice of decolonization, on an individual level, seems to be taking on a number of pre-scripted activities, (re)learning one’s language, getting back to the land, learning to hunt, sing, drum, and so on. There are a number of things folded into this re-learning that also haven’t been parsed out, for me foremost among them, is how colonial patriarchy is now so embedded in our communities it is hard to distinguish it from tradition. Before I veer us off too far in another direction however, I wanted to come back to this question, whether Indigenous art was better in the 80s and 90s, and what does this reveal about where we are at today?

**RWH** The metaphor of the crime scene (if it was even meant as a metaphor!) is a telling one, in that it gives a sense of how much people feel is at stake in these questions. That is much better than complacency. I think we both share that sense of urgency, but also concern not to fall into the usual colonial traps in responding to it. We want to bring the right tools to hand so that we expand rather than circumscribe our place in the world. So if this is a crime narrative, I hope it turns out to be the more interesting sort, in which the process of investigation reveals that people and events are not quite what they first seemed.

The question of where we are today seems urgent and I think we both have been responding to this by looking both forward and back. To borrow the title from one of Jean and Jimmie’s co-curated exhibitions from the 1980s, “we are always turning around on purpose.” But I think it is true that many people seem already to have forgotten what has gone before, or re-imagined it as a simplistic, heroic origin story culminating in the present institutional success. In that case the thread of conservative identity politics and simplistic cultural revival—which was there from the start, but playing a minor role amongst a tapestry of other possibilities—is re-imagined as the crucial or even exclusive element. This does a disservice to the very diverse agendas of artists at that time. Also, it tends to lead to boring pale-echo repetitions of things done much better before. Watching our growing institutional success I was surprised to see how the tools of identity politics, especially those designed to shut down criticism by limiting who can speak about what, tend to be very effective in state run institutional contexts. They become the means by which individuals can accrue institutional power. This creates an institutional culture where art offering safe, conservative, happy stories about cultural revival ends up favoured over the kinds of daring acts of exploration and agency that were commonplace earlier. It doesn’t mean that terrific work isn’t getting done and recognized, but it has to struggle both against being framed in a conservative discourse and also with a relative lack of critical response. To hide this, as you say, dramatic adjectives like “indigenizing” and especially “decolonial” have been appropriated from a history of genuine decolonial struggle and applied to the various things we do: decolonial pedagogy, decolonial aesthetics, etc. Would that it was



Walter Scott, Winona's Rez Blues, 2012.  
Originally published in Modern Painter, May 2012. Courtesy: the artist



Raymond Boisjoly, *Interlocutions*, 2014.  
Courtesy: Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Photo: SITE Photography

## A NOTE ON SOME INTERLOCUTIONS

Raymond Boisjoly (Haida Nation)

*Interlocutions* began as a project concerning the ways introduced artistic processes, specifically serigraph printing, transformed the traditional imagery of the Northwest Coast—a geocultural region extending from Southeast Alaska along the coast of British Columbia to northern Washington State. The artists from this region that utilized serigraphy generally began by producing imagery that floated freely on the blank expanse of a page. Within a decade, artists from diverse nations such as Robert Davidson, Beau Dick and Joe David were creating elaborate images that deliberately negotiated the page as a framing device. Serigraphy became a common image production tool on the NWC in the late 1960s and 1970s though it had been used earlier by Henry Speck and others to print editions. Through my research into this realm, I began thinking about the varied historical trajectories of other realms of cultural practice pursued by Indigenous peoples. N. Scott Momaday’s novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968), is an important book in Native American literary history. Through its narrative, Momaday’s book provides an example of Indigenous people articulating their experiences and cultural worlds using borrowed artistic forms. While also taking an interest in the linguistic turn of early conceptual art and how all of these things seemed to develop in parallel to one another, I created a body of work departing from visual and literary impulses to consider how technologies and other introduced phenomena are modified to serve the creative means of Indigenous peoples.

### ***An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 1***

An Alutiit person enters and says  
Our memory marks Afognak.  
Afognak marks us.

### ***An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 2***

An Alutiit person enters and asks  
What are we tethered to?  
Then  
What holds us together?  
Then  
How do we endure?

### ***An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 3***

An Alutiit person enters and says  
When I am home on our island I sense that the land exudes grief.  
Then  
This feeling.  
Then  
Many of us have left the land of our ancestors perhaps because the grief  
becomes unbearable.

### ***An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 4***

An Alutiit person enters and tells a story about Afognak.  
The audience listens.  
Then  
Someone tells a related story.  
And so on.

### ***An Event Score for Haunting (Eve Tuck)<sup>1</sup>***

A person enters and reads  
The audience remembers relentlessly  
Then  
The audience feels no ease  
Then  
What can decolonization mean other than the return of stolen land?  
Then  
What must it feel like to be haunted?

### ***An Event Score for the Epistemic Violence of Translation (Edgar Heap of Birds)***

1.  
A person enters and speaks in Alutiit  
2.  
A person enters and speaks in Alutiit  
The audience listens

1. Please see *A Glossary of Haunting* by Eve Tuck and C. Ree



Tanya Lukin Linklater, *Horse Hair Question 2* (details), 2016, *A Parallel Excavation* installation views at Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Blaine Campbell



Tanya Lukin Linklater, *Horse Hair Question 1* (details), 2016, *A Parallel Excavation* installation views at Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Blaine Campbell

true. All too often such terms are an alibi for what often amounts to an Indigenous person ending up with a nice middle class career in a state run institution. We include a few convenient pan-Indian non-sense ceremonies at the start of a few meetings, utter some recycled hippie New Age wisdom from time to time and the job is done. Many of us, myself included, politely go along with this but lately I feel that it is important to be frank about it. The sooner we recognize that we middle-class Indigenous folks—artists, curators and academics say—are complicit in these institutions and in a larger global economy, the better. To imagine that we can just go off and do our own thing in some bracketed-off section of a state cultural institution, or on a reserve or reservation, is naïve. It's not that we shouldn't be in all those places trying to make change, but we need to strategize that change in the full context of our situation. Since the colonial-era fur trade—hell, since Columbus first kidnapped Indigenous people in the hopes that they would make good slaves—we have been at the centre of the process of the globalization of capital. If we don't address our issues at that level and bring them into a larger dialogue of concern about the effects of global capitalism, then we have no chance of challenging the problem at its root.

I have sometimes heard the effort to extend the reach of Indigenous artists into the international art world framed in the terms of a marketing campaign to win recognition for the work of our artists, with the writer or curator's job to be one of career promotion for them. Don't you think we could make a much more convincing and compelling case if we instead imagined ourselves engaging—as ourselves, without sacrificing our particularity—in a social and political discourse about what has been sacrificed to the logic of the global economy and how we might address that collectively? Or am I preaching now?

CH

You have been challenging us to think about this for some time—how we, making use of the full context of our situations—can have a more intelligent conversation about capital and economies (monetary, cultural, and otherwise). Some have said that Indigenous peoples in the Western Hemisphere experienced the impact of globalization first hand when in 1492 three lost ships filled with a self-proclaimed Messiah, drunks, and rapists, broached the horizon binding the so-called Old World with the New. We have been trying to get the story right ever since. Our colleague, and fellow skeptic, Paul Chaat Smith writes for an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian titled *Evidence*—you can see that this crime scene idea really has legs—that we are still grappling with answering the question “what really happened”.

We conclude the answer is the biggest story never told: the rise and fall and rise of the Americas, the ways America changed Europe, Africa and Asia, and how Europe changed America, a story featuring Indians as actors on the world stage and not merely victims. It is a story of changing worlds and how people managed that change in often, surprising, ingenious ways. [...] the greatest mass human extinction in history, and the countless ways Indians survived and triumphed in the face of adversity. It is a story where Indians are partners in global markets, savvy diplomats, and eager consumers of new technology. It brings into focus a hemisphere that before contact was outrageously diverse, deliciously complex, endlessly fascinating, and one that would become only more so with every passing century.<sup>1</sup>

Some of this evidence is in how the massive amounts of gold and silver mined from the Americas bolstered economies across Europe, directly enabling the spread of the Renaissance. I remember that one of the most evocative installations in that exhibition was a wall of three things: the first were a cluster of gold effigies, the second were multitudes of rifles, and the third were hundreds of bibles. Taken simply, you can understand that this is first premised on showing the great wealth that was in the Americas at the time of contact and at the same time why this land was desired, and the second and third, stages of genocide and assimilation respectively. However, what I think this points to again, and the reason for the attempt to present this side of the story in a national museum no less, is evidence of the anxiety and true struggle many of us are up against: the fight against historical amnesia.

Speaking of sacrifices, I am reminded of an intervention that the artist Beau Dick undertook with collaborators on the steps of Parliament

Hill in Ottawa, Canada. He was enacting a “shaming ceremony” directed towards the Federal Government for their ongoing assimilationist policies hidden in major omnibus bills. This ceremony took place in 2013 during a time of heightened political action in Canada spurred from the movement #Idle No More. The group broke pieces of a copper shield—the copper being the most valuable item in many Northwest Coast Indigenous societies—and in doing so, put forward a different idea of wealth. This is, status achieved by the very things that you can afford to give away or destroy. At the culmination of the event, the copper pieces were wrapped up and laid on the stairs of the building, like a gift. The response of someone in parliament was to get rid of the evidence. They shipped the parts off to a museum in British Columbia, washing their hands of the crime.

I think it's important to bring this up, not just because of their attempt to put forward a competing idea of wealth, and because I like that they turned the grounds of Parliament into a stage for collective dissent, but largely because of the response—what some might call a failure. The immediate reaction was not to ignore the gift, but to pass it off and place it in the collection of a museum. Here again we are faced with the idea that the most comfortable place for us, in their eyes anyway, is not on the steps of parliament speaking back, but hidden away in the belly of a museum. Many years ago Jimmie Durham wrote that we can't counter amnesia (or ignorance) with “a longer list of facts,” rather, we must trust confusion more. Perhaps trusting in this confusion is how we might end feeling at home in this world. I think that we want to resist getting too comfortable in institutions, because these are not our homes. Maybe it is only from this place of contradiction and shifting ground, that we can begin to have conversations about complicity. I think you are right. Now, it's not so much about asking hard questions of others, but asking them of ourselves.

Our task is definitely not about “winning favor” but one of continuing to dig into the project of empire—together—to expose its roots. The poet Fred Moten makes a call for minor voices—Black, Indigenous, and so on—to come together in a noisy, discordant chorus so that we can call out against debt and disparity and “refuse to be the broken apart.” I see myself in this, because as you know, for Indigenous peoples any division between artistic and political practice is always already false.

RWH

Well, we have generated quite a few words here and while you and I will likely go on having evolving versions of this conversation for a long time (I hope!), perhaps this is a good place to stop for now? I would only want to add a few concluding caveats. The first is that, in trying to be general with limited time and space, we have only hinted at how these questions have played out through works of art, which is actually to me often where things get the most complex, particular and interesting. Also, although we have touched on many issues and mentioned a few important people, there are many, many others whom we have not had a chance to mention. And lastly, it is important to remember that if virtually any two other Indigenous artists, curators or scholars had been invited to tell this story, the result would likely have been very different. So I'll end with a nod to all the ways the narrative we have just spun might potentially be expanded, complicated or productively disputed.

CH

Yes, we already need a part two! I have just landed in Vancouver and getting over the jet lag that accompanies a red-eye flight and preparing to see an exhibition by a great provocateur, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. What continues to attract me to his paintings is how his stance has never shifted: he is always placing evidence at our feet—the land ripped apart, extracted, debased, the corruption of Native leaders in our own communities, how these leaders, instead of working for us, have their hands in the pockets of corporations, and how at times even art history worked against us by appropriating the parts they liked and ignoring the rest. Despite our newly found comfort, we can't forget what we are up against.

1 <http://www.paulchaatsmith.com/presenting-evidence.html>. Accessed 24 May 2016.