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BRIAN JUNGEN: NEW MONUMENTS

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Brian Jungen and I are from the same hometown of Fort St. John, British Columbia. It's a place in the northeastern corner of the province built on the banks of what is now known as the Peace River and is the only prairie land in the province.<sup>1</sup> As a result there are lots of ranchers, and because of the expansive forests, loggers. Now most people are drawn to the area by oil. When I was growing up the city had branded itself "the land of the new totems." Despite this reference, totems were never created by, nor were they part of the iconography of the Dunne-za people who traditionally occupied this area. (Largely, totems were and are made by those populating Canada's Northwest coast.) "New totems," as it turns out, weren't in reference to Fort St. John's Aboriginal populations at all, but a symbol for what the city had become: an unlikely centre for oil production following its discovery there in 1952. The industry's tall skeletal steel towers called oil derricks, from which the totem reference is derived, are now scattered throughout the region and spread off the Alaska Highway north of the city on cut-lines and at the end of long gravel roads. (It's of no surprise that on the lawn of the city's museum, dwarfing the modest log building is a well-kept derrick and a red pump jack.) In this case, the totem is deliberately emptied of its original meaning and intent and becomes symbolic of another idea of progress, wealth, and cultural revitalization — this time enabled by resource development (and exploitation).

Jungen's recent exhibition at Catriona Jeffries was filled with five tall sculptures made to resemble Northwest coast totem poles. Each sculpture was constructed from multiple cut-up and re-sewn golf bags ranging in colour from red to grey, blue, yellow, and black. (A sixth sculpture, nearly entirely black, was showing at the time as part of the 2007 Montreal Biennale). Through each bag's meticulous re-working, stylized beaks, ovoids, and other anthropomorphic

forms, akin to those found on totems, took shape. The object's material origins — from TaylorMade, a high-end brand of golf bag — are never fully concealed and carries with it a refusal to have its brand and identity as a consumer object subsumed by this new form. Through their re-construction, the bags, now as ersatz totems, combine vastly different understandings of land use and occupation in Canada through the economies of sport and culture.

Golf is associated with the rise of the leisure class between the 1920s and the 1950s and carries with it a particular brand of cultural elitism particularly in North America (home to over half of the world's courses). The increasing fetishization of the sport, first enabled by the concept of private property, is furthered by the ever-increasing gap between use-value and exchange value in commodity culture. In his critique of the private ownership as it relates to land, artist Gordon Matta-Clark has lamented that "private property has made us so stupid and narrow-minded that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists as capital for us...."<sup>2</sup> Golf facilitates highly mediated relationships to land through the creation of what could be considered fictive and idealized landscapes (complete with highly-manicured meadows, ponds, and simulated forests). In considering the social history of lawns, a personal form of "turf," it has been written:

Appearing at the turn of the century, Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* argued that the suburb marked a retreat from labour to leisure, and contended that the lawn had become an index of social standing and a register of civility. To Veblen, membership in the leisure class could be measured by the extent of wasteful suburban lawn. The lawn itself represented a cultural shift from production values to those of luxury, and thus reflected and procured privilege.<sup>3</sup>

The rise of the North American leisure class and its growth in the suburbs of North America, indicated by Veblen in the quote above, coincides with the use of totems in British Columbia as a marketing tool and tourist attraction. In the 1920s poles were marketed as one of the highlights on the journey through the Inside Passage that linked Washington State northward to Alaska. In 1924 the federal government marketed the poles as a feature attraction on the new Canadian National Rail Line (CNR) in northwestern BC that passed through the Skeena River Valley. Members of the committee included representatives from government and corporate interests including the Department of Indian Affairs, the CNR, Canadian National Parks, the Ministry of Mines, along with the National Museum who supervised the poles' preservation in Gitksan villages along the route. Not surprisingly, the project was met with resistance from the Gitksan people who were still subject to an unsettled land question.<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s major players in the lumber industry funded the acquisition of totem poles and other monumental carvings as part of the BC Totem Pole Preservation project. Some 37 carvings, their removal from Native communities facilitated through the project, are now held in the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. At the same time caricature-like illustrations of totem poles, representative of the '50s and the era's generalized attitudes towards Native cultures, were used to visually brand British Columbia as a "land of totems." With these marketing strategies, tourism campaigns, and preservation initiatives "the bad trope of anthropology (and carried over into postcolonial discourse), [one again] locates First Nations culture in the past as a culture which had its peak 'pre-contact' and just after."<sup>5</sup> (The repeated location of First Nations culture as something that occurred in the past, an idea sparked by anthropology and fuelled by popular culture, is witnessed in the Gitksan's then failed attempt to call attention to their *then present* situation).

Following this altered use of the object, as a symbol of progress on a monumental level, Jungen has stated previously that he is interested in the ubiquity of native objects and artifacts specifically the way that "they have been corrupted and applied and assimilated commercially" by the tourist industry.<sup>6</sup> Totem poles rival headdresses and tomahawks in being the single most appropriated symbol of Native culture even by Native people themselves. Haida art historian Marcia Crosby relays that in the 1960s when "national and Indian organizations were being formed, leaders debated about whether to use a totem pole or a feather headdress as their national symbol. These objects, which had meaning within and between First Nations, also had currency in the public sphere...."<sup>7</sup> To further complicate the object's origins, once firmly rooted in the local, the poles now have a new role as mass-reproductions of authenticity. A messy hybrid of local aesthetics, the plastic souvenirs that now populate the shelves of tourist stores are more often than not modeled on actual totems to lend them a degree of legitimacy in their role as stand-ins for the real thing. "The ideological effect of globalization," as writer Jeff Derksen reminds us, "is to obscure relationships rather than [reveal] them." The local in this instance "'emerges' from within the new relations of commodity production — in which commodities *and* culture are produced [anew]."<sup>8</sup> In this instance the poles have become part of "the 'wallpapering' of habitas: the incorporation of Native imagery into 'the vast heaving mass of ephemeral and disposable forms'" of Western culture.<sup>9</sup>

As a means of freeing objects firmly rooted in the past, Jungen's new works conflate multiple time periods from pre-European contact to the present day. Further drawing attention to the passage of time are the work's titles which mark each decade in a fifty-year period. They begin with the sculpture *1960* and end at a point three years in the future with *2010* (the year that Vancouver will host the

Winter Olympics). To begin the series in 1960 is not an arbitrary decision. 1960 saw the Canadian Bill of Rights gain Royal Assent and approval by Parliament, the beginnings of "the Quiet Revolution" in Quebec and, importantly, the right to vote by First Nations people. Consider that non-Native women in Canada gained this status some forty years previous. Aboriginal title would not be established until over twenty years later when Canada's constitution recognized Aboriginal rights in 1982. (Between 1927 and 1951, in a period of political prohibition, it was illegal for Aboriginal people to raise funds for the purposes of pursuing a land claim).<sup>10</sup> The one sculpture missing in the exhibition was 1990 installed at the time in Montreal. Calling attention to another key date in the struggle for the recognition of Aboriginal land title, 1990 marked the beginning of the Oka crisis — a point that ignited ugly racial divides when two differing ideas of land use came to a head. The event was sparked by the decision of Oka's mayor to expand a golf course over Mohawk burial grounds (land to which Mohawk title had previously been denied). The resulting standoff, which left three people dead, included a blockade of Montreal's Mercier Bridge and brought national attention to the grand failure of the land claims process in Canada. Through a conflation of time the sculptures oscillate between the recent past and the imagined future. They exist in a state of suspended transformation: by not clearly existing as one thing or the other they destabilize the economic and cultural values attached to both consumer and cultural objects as well as the idea that First Nations culture is something that only exists in the past.<sup>11</sup> In this instance, to borrow from Cuahtémoc Medina, ontological stability is prevented by "the complexity of economic cycles and the dilemmas of the postcolonial condition."<sup>12</sup>

To call Jungen's sculptures simply totem poles would be a mistake (in the same way that Jungen's earlier *Prototypes*

for *New Understanding* are not masks). Rather, they borrow these forms to enable their re-consideration. For one, these works are hollow, voluminous almost, with their stability owing to tubes rather than to cedar. One characteristic that these new forms do share with traditional poles is the process of anthropomorphism. Tracing the way that totem poles have been understood in the discourse of anthropology, for Claude Levi-Strauss, totem poles were the physical markers of a liminal space, a complex classification system that functioned as one way of creating sense of the world. From this perspective the poles acted as mediators between the physical environment and society. Later, this understanding would be expanded (likely with additional insight from the object's makers who are often overlooked as experts of their own culture) to include the idea that they function metaphorically as a way of creating relationships between two seemingly dissimilar things.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on this idea of facilitating relationships between different objects and materials are Jungen's *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998–2005), where black, red, and white Nike Air Jordan shoes were transformed into objects reminiscent of Northwest coast masks. The *Prototypes*, as Jungen has previously relayed, are built with the understanding that they have a "secular existence," the idea that materials guide the composition of the work.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, it is not the tension created by bringing two seemingly dissimilar objects and materials together that is important but rather the very potential to *transform* the relationships between them and what they stand for, if only temporarily. It is through the combination of the two materials, each weighted with their specific subjects, histories, and references to local and global economies and cultures, where the possibility for new understandings is found.<sup>15</sup> Central to the objects themselves are non-linear and inverted hierarchies: the most important figure in a pole is often found near the bottom, the very thing that holds the rest up.

The only other object work in Jungen's exhibition at Catriona Jeffries was a decidedly imperfect and precarious rendering of the province of British Columbia, created from eighteen precise scale plywood cutouts of Indian reserves in Vancouver's metropolitan region. The surface of each irregular plain was covered with a thin, even layer of red wool felt. The material references two early trade commodities: beaver pelts (used in the making of high-quality felt) and woolen Hudson's Bay Company blankets, the first mass-produced blanket in the country.<sup>16</sup> They also contained a likeness, whether intended or not, to putting greens. Yet it is the act of cutting out the reserves and putting them on display as altered, miniaturized objects that points to yet another commodity: land and its ongoing negotiation and negation in the history of Canada. Following Heidegger, the processes of place-making are inextricably linked to the construction of an authentic subjectivity. It's not so much the construction of subjectivity that is brought forth in Jungen's projects, but the meaning found in the transformations, re-appropriation, and re-signification of the land and the built environment.

On their material and symbolic level Jungen's sculptures bring First Nation's culture into globalism, not as an act of resistance in the conventional sense, "but in order to rearticulate the discourse of globalization." Jungen's works reroute and draw attention to the new and increasingly complicated ways that global economies take over and recreate culture. At the time of writing, Jungen's "poles" were on a boat heading across the Atlantic Ocean. Too big to ship by plane they had to be transported in a manner akin to the way that totem poles would have made their first trips across the Atlantic as relics, curios, and ethnographic objects destined for museums and private collections abroad. Jungen's "new monuments" are making the long slow journey which linked Europe to the so-called new world.

## NOTES

1. Fort St. John is home to the oldest European settlement in British Columbia (established in 1794 following Alexander Mackenzie's expedition down Peace River one year prior) as well as the oldest documented Native settlement, dating back over 10,500 years.
2. Gordon Matta-Clark cited in Pamela M Lee's *Object to be Destroyed* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000), 104.
3. Text from the exhibition, *The American Lawn*, <http://www.cca.qc.ca/pages/Niveau3.asp?page=depliant&lang=eng>. Accessed 28 August 2007.
4. Land that the Gitksan sought recognition for is referred to as a "land question" here because, as Haida Art historian Marcia Crosby has pointed out, Aboriginal people do not "claim" land, as it was originally theirs. The land they seek is under question with the provincial and federal government. Cited from Marcia Crosby *Indian Art/Aboriginal Title* (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994) and Ronald W. Hawker's *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-61* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 172-175.
5. Derksen, 10.
6. Cuauhtémoc Medina, "High Curios," *Brian Jungen* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 33.
7. Crosby cited in *Nations In Urban Landscapes* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1997), 25.
8. Emphasis added. Jeff Derksen, "Global Shoes, Local Things. Relations of Production Masks, and Architect Enemies," *Tripwire* #4, Winter 2000/01, p. 9.
9. Medina, 33.

10. Crosby, M.A. Thesis, 79.

11. Medina, 33.

12. Medina, 36.

13. Cited from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totem\\_poles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totem_poles) accessed 16 August 2007.

14. Cited from the interview "Prototypes + Petroglyphs + Pop: Author Michael Turner talks with Vancouver-based artist Brian Jungen," *Mix Magazine* Winter 2000/2001, p. 30-33. I have often wondered if the name *Prototypes for New Understanding* carried with it a relationship to Le Corbusier's radical 1923 book *Towards a New Architecture* (*Vers une architecture*). Both put forth the possibility of a fictional place (Jungen's are prototypes, Le Corbusier's plans for a more humanist way of living in urban space). Jungen would later unearth Le Corbusier's plans in a project for Darling Foundry in Montreal entitled *Habitat 04 – Cité radieuse des chats/Cats Radiant City* (2004) a play on the architect's unrealized plans *Radiant City*, an urban renewal project proposed for cities across North America. The installation also makes reference to *Habitat '67*, architect Moshe

Safdie's socialist housing complex, since turned into high-priced condominiums. In this instance Jungen is providing "social housing" for homeless cats.

15. The full quote is as follows: "My prototypes are built with the understanding that they have a secular existence that the materials guide the composition and are pushed to the forefront but not necessarily in a disruptive manner. I am interested in creating and transforming relationships between materials and subjects, but perhaps the polarities in these relationships are not so disparate." Cited from "In Conversation; Brian Jungen and Simon Starling" *Brian Jungen* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 134.

16. Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) blankets were made in Canada beginning in the 1780s and spread westward with the establishment of new trading posts. The HBC goes to lengths to uphold their historic role as a trade commodity between Native and non-Native people. What is often left out is their parallel history as a startlingly effective carrier of infectious disease, which would go on to kill more than a third of the Native population in Canada.

17. Derksen, 10.