

Ruptures on the Architectural Grid: Brian Jungen's Treaty Project, Métis Road Allowance Houses and other Models of Inhabiting the 'In-between'

- Candice Hopkins

Brian Jungen is from the northeastern region of British Columbia (BC), an area large enough to hold the states of California, Oregon, and Washington. Like much of Canada, it is sparsely populated and remote. This region marks the beginning of the Alaska Highway, a road over 2,500 kilometres long that links northern BC with the Yukon Territory and Alaska. Completed by the American Army in 1943, the Highway enabled Americans to bring supplies overland to their northern-most state. It also runs directly through Indian Reserve 172, where Jungen's ancestors are from, an area that was ceded in 1899 with the signing of Treaty 8 between the British Crown (now the Government of Canada) and the Aboriginal people living in the area. Upon its completion the Treaty would include the northeastern part of BC to the Rocky Mountains, Alberta and Saskatchewan and up to the Northwest Territories.

Treaty 8 was one of the last of the numbered treaties to be signed in the country. In the early 1890s, there was little incentive for the federal government to seek an agreement as there wasn't yet a significant need for land for settlement. Although there had been talk of valuable resources in the form of oil, gas, and minerals, this was not adequate enough to set the Treaty process in motion. This changed nearly overnight with the discovery of gold in the Yukon Territory in 1896. The Klondike Gold Rush brought forth thousands of people, in the time-span of just a few years, to an area that had never seen as much as a fraction of that. Most prospectors reached the Territory by water and then travelled overland to the interior by the Chilkoot Trail

or the White Pass to stake their claims. The trail inland was gruelling both on travellers and the animals they brought with them. (There is an infamous bend in the climb to the summit where, if you look down, you can see the piles of bleached white bones of hundreds of horses who, exhausted and likely starved, voluntarily leapt over the edge.)

This was the easy route, however. Others went over land, up through Alberta, over to BC and then north. Given the urgency and the cultural politics of the day, many had little regard for the Aboriginal people whose land they were passing through. Such a people were understandably restless and wanted protection for their territories and possessions. The government, unfortunately, would not intervene until the Treaty was signed three years later.

Treaty 8, in many ways, has come to represent a site where two conflicting interpretations came to rest; the first based on the understanding that the signing was largely a symbolic gesture signifying peace and friendship (a perspective that has been considered by the federal government as the byproduct of mistranslation) and the other being the surrender of all Aboriginal title to the land in exchange for reserves, government aid and, for some, one-time settlements of 185 acre plots of land or cash. This agreement ensured that there was little or no resistance to future settlement, burgeoning industry, oil and mineral exploration, and the use of the region for travel and the transport of goods.

The concept of property and land ownership, however, was not all that easily understood or rationalised by a people who



Top

View of a street between the tents of the Eighteenth Engineers' Headquarters and Service Company camp at Whitehorse during the building of the Alaska Highway, May 1942.
Image courtesy Yukon Archives, Robert Hays Fonds.

Bottom

The Eighteenth Engineers constructing a bridge over Cracker Creek on the Alaska Highway, June 1942.
Image courtesy Yukon Archives, Robert Hays Fonds.

Opposite left

Brian Jungen

Greater Vancouver, 200718 baltic plywood cutouts, wool fabric
320 x 335 x 7.6 cmImage courtesy Catriona Jeffries
Gallery, Vancouver.

Photograph by Scott Massey.

Opposite centre and right

Brian Jungen

Bush Capsule, along with study, 2008Plastic chairs, polyethylene,
fluorescent lightsImage courtesy Catriona Jeffries
Gallery, Vancouver.

had developed a fluid and shifting notion of territory, not based on 'ownership' of the land *per se*, but one defined in relation to the environment, its available resources and also to itinerancy, which was enacted through a network of overlapping routes for hunting, trapping and communication. They lived what could be called a 'pluri-local' lifestyle which, to borrow from Stephen Cairns, "consist[s] of one's sense of origin, current location and possible destination".¹ The Aboriginal people who live along the Alaska Highway for example, did not reside in one area, preferring instead to settle farther south in the summer and relocate north to better hunting areas in the winter.² The idea that one couldn't continue to have free use over this itinerant route (which could easily stretch for one hundred miles) but would instead 'own' a single plot in a grid measured one mile by one mile was, for obvious reasons, not readily accepted. Land and identity are deeply intertwined and as such are not so easily untangled. Subjectivity, in this sense, was developed in relation to all the shifting elements of the land, not relative to the built environment. It was through the Treaty signing process and its implications that this land (and all the areas of Canada which had been designated as reserve land before this point) shifted from what Henri Lefebvre has called "social space" to "abstract space". Abstract space is "alienated space, universalised and therefore without time. Reified as exchange value by the state, by planners, by capitalist interests, it is an object of instrumentalisation, a way to condition and contain its inhabitants." Social space "complicates the notion of space tied unilaterally to the means of production, appealing instead to its use value and rejecting its representation as necessarily functionalist. Social space is determined conflictually, it is riven at its foundation, heterogeneous and structured around difference."³

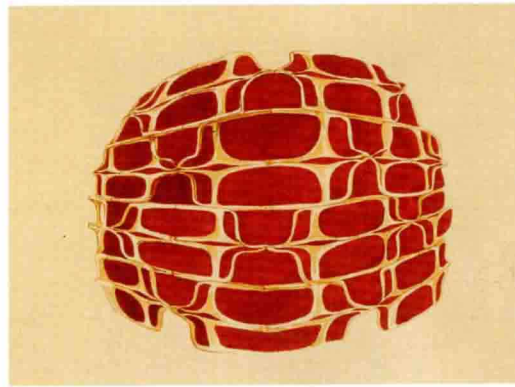
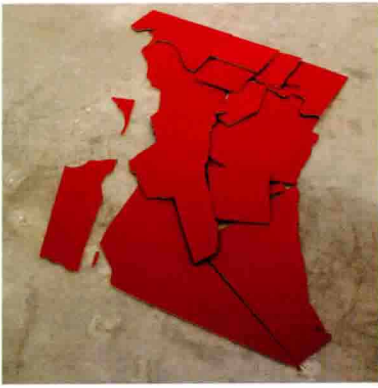
When asked why he wanted to do a work based on Treaty 8, Jungen replied that it was because the Treaty itself was so bizarre and unfair. The project he is now developing situates itself between these two differing understandings of property and between social

and abstract space. As art historian, Pamela Lee, has pointed out the "very notion of property as a thing to be owned is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning as late as the eighteenth century".⁴

An aspect of Jungen's project, which will be exhibited in 2008, is the construction of a tent of sorts. Initially installed in his home community on Treaty 8, the artist expects the structure to be used in summer 2009 during the annual Treaty Days Celebration as a site for the distribution of annuities for the Aboriginal people. Each is entitled to five dollars, given out by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, along with a handshake. Through the building of this structure, which is not a pavilion in the conventional sense as its politics are too riven, Jungen is forming a third space; a structure that physically demarcates the historic meeting point of two nations and also calls attention to the ways in which the distribution of annuities (and other promises outlined by the Treaty) have become a performative gesture. Designed to be ephemeral, the structure does not aspire to historical stability as conventional monuments do: it embraces inhabiting the moment.

Jungen's previous projects often bring together disparate objects. In the past he has furthered the discourse on the readymade by taking apart and resewing Nike Air Jordan trainers into Northwest Coast 'masks' and by re-assembling plastic lawn chairs into massive bow whale skeletons. Here he brings together two different cultures and all the meaning and history invoked in a single handshake. The second part of Jungen's project involves the act of submitting proposals for the possible purchase of various plots of land in the region. He had initially considered filing a lawsuit against the federal government. As curator, Jessica Morgan, has described; the suit would seek compensation for Aboriginal people "who have subsequently left the designated reserves allotted by the Crown in 1900".⁵ The process, while of symbolic importance, would take years to come to fruition and would be fraught with enormous legal fees.

Jungen's purchase of this land could be considered akin to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates*, an ongoing project where the



artist purchased unusable, diminutive slivers of property between buildings (in some cases less than 30 centimetres wide) often at auctions in New York for very little money. In contrast to the *Fake Estates*—purchased specifically by Matta-Clark because, due to their small size and close proximity to other buildings, they were not developable—much of the land Jungen is interested in buying is unusable precisely because it is too remote and far away from other developed areas. The idea, then, of proposing a shopping mall in Buick Creek, an area near Jungen’s reserve, which is home to approximately 25 people, becomes absurd. To quote Lee’s writing on Matta-Clark:

The paradox of buying this unusable land, of submitting without use value to the registers of exchange value, presents a contemporary attenuation of Marx’ early thinking on property, when he notes 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’.⁶

These lands, then, are ‘leftover’ because they are not (or can not) be legislated for use and they refuse ownership because they are illegible and ambiguous. Jungen’s proposal to purchase land in Treaty 8 is also calls attention to the history of the Métis settlement in Canada: comprised by settlers who, because of their heritage, were more often than not left out of the Treaty signing process. The Métis, people, who were of mixed European and native ancestry, quite literally occupied a no-man’s land. They didn’t have the right to live on Aboriginal reserves and often didn’t have the means to purchase land that, up to that point, had been rightfully theirs (an issue that was the cause of some of the most significant rebellions and protests in the formation of Canada). In the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba Métis people increasingly occupied the only area fitting their predicament; slim strips of land bordering

farming communities and Aboriginal reserves set aside for the building of future roads. It was in these road allowances where the Prairie’s first squatters came into being; people who, through this illegal act, called into question social and economic systems that didn’t serve all of the citizens of the country. The road allowances were formed in the late 1920s, as a result of plans to transfer control of what were called Crown Lands (lands owned by the federal government) to settlers. Through the surveying process and the division of the Prairies into systemised units of measure—acres, in this instance—ten metre wide plots of land were set aside for future roads. These areas, as can be imagined, were too narrow for conventional habitation—their intention being for transportation, not for settlement.

What is significant about the Métis occupation of these spaces was the degree to which they subverted the land from this newly defined purpose. Through the simple act of habitation, these sites were transformed from property into social space.⁷ In other words, it was through defining (an)other space, that they rendered a social dimension to the land. If the architectural grid speaks to the rationalisation (colonisation) of space so to speak, the Métis sought refuge in the peripheries of this grid, the in-between, and the non-site. For Matta-Clark, property was only accorded value when it passed into a state of uselessness or ruin. Yet it was only land in this state that the Métis could accord it value. In an act that is part reterritorialisation, part cultural re-appropriation, and part stealthy inversion, the houses that the Métis people brought over to this area, and subsequently transformed, were former trappers’ cabins.

For Heidegger, the processes of building and place-making are inextricably linked to the constitution of authentic subjectivity. Perhaps it’s not so much the constitution of authentic subjectivity that is brought forth in Jungen’s project and the Métis settlements but the meaning found in the transformation, re-appropriation, and resignification of land and the built environment.