

## Presence and Absence REDUX: Indian Art in the 1990s

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### Article abstract

Les années 1990 sont une décennie cruciale pour l'avancement et le positionnement de l'art et de l'autonomie autochtones dans les récits dominants des états ayant subi la colonisation. Cet article reprend l'exposé des faits de cette période avec des détails fort nécessaires. Pensé comme une historiographie, il propose d'explorer chronologiquement comment les conservateurs et les artistes autochtones, et leurs alliés, ont répondu et réagi à des moments clés des mesures coloniales et les interventions qu'elles ont suscitées du point de vue politique, artistique, muséologique et du commissariat d'expositions. À la lumière du 150e anniversaire de la Confédération canadienne, et quinze ans après la présentation de la communication originale au colloque, *Mondialisation et postcolonialisme : Définitions de la culture visuelle V*, du Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, il reste urgent de faire une analyse critique des préoccupations contemporaines plus vastes, relatives à la mise en contexte et à la réconciliation de l'histoire de l'art autochtone sous-représentée.

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Les années 1990 sont une décennie cruciale pour l'avancement et le positionnement de l'art et de l'autonomie autochtones dans les récits dominants des états ayant subi la colonisation. Cet article reprend l'exposé des faits de cette période avec des détails fort nécessaires. Pensé comme une historiographie, il propose d'explorer chronologiquement comment les conservateurs et les artistes autochtones, et leurs alliés, ont répondu et réagi à des moments clés des mesures coloniales et les interventions qu'elles ont suscitées du point de vue politique, artistique, muséologique et du commissariat d'expositions. À la lumière du 150<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la Confédération canadienne, et quinze ans après la présentation de la communication originale au colloque, *Mondialisation et postcolonialisme: Définitions de la culture visuelle v*, du Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, il reste urgent de faire une analyse critique des préoccupations contemporaines plus vastes, relatives à la mise en contexte et à la réconciliation de l'histoire de l'art autochtone sous-représentée.

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1. Ryan Rice, "Presence and Absence: Indian Art in the 1990s," *Mondialisation et postcolonialisme: Définitions de la Culture Visuelle v*, conf. proceedings (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, 2002).

"Presence and Absence: Indian Art in the 1990s" was a paper I originally presented and published as part of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal's (MACM) colloquium *Mondialisation et postcolonialisme: Définitions de la culture visuelle v*, held October 5–6, 2001.<sup>1</sup> In the aftershock of the 9/11 attacks, which shook the world just weeks before, the colloquium's discourse quickly shifted. With this catastrophe clearly weighing heavily on their minds, keynote speaker Homi K. Bhabha and fellow presenter Coco Fusco focused on the unforeseeable effects the aftermath of this event would have on their communities, but especially on people of colour. Although Bhabha addressed the subject of colonization and globalization in the Americas, he did so through a narrow lens focused mainly on the history of African enslavement. His biased perspective on colonization acknowledged neither Onkwehón:we<sup>2</sup> presence and colonial displacement, nor our continued relevance to local, national, and global histories and post-colonial theories. His presentation thus brought to the fore ongoing questions about whose art histories, politics, and culture matter. In response, my presentation sought to address the rhetoric of Indigenous erasure in the history of the Americas. Only a decade earlier, both Canada and the US had enthusiastically celebrated the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of North America, with many galleries and institutions mounting exhibitions and celebratory projects to mark the quincentennial. At the same time, however, Onkwehón:we from across Turtle Island were advancing a counter-narrative, proactively fostering activist curatorial and artistic practices that contested this monolithic narrative.

The redux version of my paper emphasizes the significance of Onkwehón:we art produced in Canada throughout the 1990s, thus re-centring this influential period and emphasizing its continued relevance to the current moment. Fifteen years after hearing Bhabha speak at MACM, and a quarter century after the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyages, there is still an urgent need to critically engage with the theoretical questions of globalization and post-colonialism; this is how we measure the longstanding framework of prejudice and exclusion that obscures the presence and contributions of Onkwehón:we across a shifting global art and cultural discourse. In light of the current celebrations surrounding the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, as well as the underlying national objective of reconciliation, it is imperative that we take another look at where Onkwehón:we have been, as our past informs our future.

The 1990s remain a pivotal decade for the advancement and positioning of Onkwehón:we art, which has steadily grown and expanded into the twenty-first century. The reiteration and recollection of this period confirms its significance as an era of developing agency among Onkwehón:we artists, curators, and scholars, whose works compensated for prior absence by foregrounding our histories and centering Indigeneity. At that time, a national apology for the Indian Residential School System was not on the horizon, to say nothing of a national framework for truth and reconciliation. And yet, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was realized, a national art policy assessment completed,<sup>3</sup> and “Indigenization” was initiated as a self-determined form of resistance and resurgence. It was a decade that framed Onkwehón:we art and culture in terms of accomplishment and arrival—the results of a blueprint mapped decades earlier at Expo 67’s Indians of Canada Pavilion, where the ground-breaking and strategic efforts of Onkwehón:we artists and activists legitimized our creative agency and economies across the “institution of art” and on a world stage. Today, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and its ninety-four calls to action, Canadian governments, both Federal and Provincial, have put forward targeted art and research funding as a form of restitution. As this contradicts the spirit of Canada 150 celebrations, which have further disrupted Onkwehón:we-Canada relations, its success will have to be assessed in the years to follow.

The essay that follows is an abridged version of the original, lightly edited to reflect upon and address the underpinning of my work as a curator and artist both then and now. The decade upon which it focuses (1990–2000) witnessed the efforts of many Onkwehón:we artists and curators to name our own practice and envision our future, while also claiming space in our own communities and in the art world.

#### REDUX: Onkwehón:we Art in the 1990s

In the context of Onkwehón:we art in Canada, red was a signifier of absence. As an artist, curator, and founding member of an arts collective in the 1990s,<sup>4</sup> I witnessed firsthand the leaps and bounds made in that decade by Onkwehón:we art as an “institution.” And yet, it was from this same vantage point that I also witnessed the short shelf life our art had in many major, mainstream art institutions. It was as if we still hadn’t arrived on *their* terms or by *their* standards. Even so, Onkwehón:we artists were beginning to receive public and critical attention and acclaim. Our work both challenged and aligned us with a global audience. By speaking beyond the boundaries of our community, many of us felt that we had arrived, to borrow an expression from contemporary Mohawk photographer Greg Staats, “at a more perfect form of communication.”<sup>5</sup>

Indications of that arrival abounded during the 1990s. Our many voices, once silenced, exuded strength and diversity. Fine examples of art in all disciplines were created and exhibited, and the public began to gain a better understanding and appreciation of our communities, cultures, and struggles. Our arts strengthened our identity as well as Canada’s. However, we were still marginalized as “Others”: not Western, not Canadian, not American, simply

2. Onkwehón:we, pronounced oon-gway-hoon-way, is a Kanien’kéha word that means means “original people.” I use it throughout the text to indicate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples who are also sometimes referred to collectively as Indian, Aboriginal, Indigenous, or Native. There are 630 different Onkwehón:we nations in Canada with distinct languages; they may prefer different terminology.

3. The Canada Council for the Arts funded the independent assessment, “The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Contemporary Native Art and Public Art Museums in Canada,” written by Lee Ann Martin (Ottawa: Canada Council for the Arts, 1990).

4. Fifteen years later, I’m working from an expanded perspective, which includes helping to found the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and my experiences as an educator, professor, research chair, activist, and mentor.

5. Audra Simpson, “Renewal in New Works From Greg Staats,” exh. brochure (Gatineau: Indian Art Centre, 2000).

NOT. Our marginalization, which relegated us to the periphery of the art world, indicted that our work was not comprehensible, not up to *their* standards, or not aesthetically pleasing or valid to those who judged and occupied positions of power.

By examining the 1990s in cultural, economic, and political terms, we see that much of our relationship as Onkwehón:we with the Canadian nation state, and thus with its major art institutions, was still dominated by colonial systems and Western categories of art and culture. Our practices were constantly being measured according to the criteria of authenticity, ethnography, and Western art theory. Art institutions struggled to see our lived reality, and either placed us in the museological context of an imagined “authentic” past, or relegated us to the role of contemporary art’s “Other.” They were unsuccessful in their attempts to classify us as a specific movement or period. Their linear approach did not allow them to see things the way we do—to understand that the future contains both the present and the past.

A national shift towards implementing mandates to encompass and embrace diversity within public and private institutions allowed for the fitful support of Onkwehón:we art. It was premature, however, for Canada to ethically contribute to the theoretical discourse of post-colonialism, as Onkwehón:we nations continued to be controlled by the Canadian legislature through the Indian Act. Although we opposed this reign, we were forced to embrace and navigate its deficiencies in order to claim autonomy. Our nations are diverse and many, and our situation was such that we needed to maintain control over our land and resources by any means necessary, be they colonial or not. We continued to live with the legacy of our own history, languages, rituals, politics, and social values, which were often present in the living strata of our creative culture, whether it be in a piece of pottery or a work of new-media art. In my view, the era between 1990 and the early 2000s was defined by our collective efforts to name and thus claim ownership of our own practices, while also reflecting upon our vision for the future and the spaces we would claim for ourselves in our own communities and in the art world.

#### Climate: Yesterday’s Forecast

The 1990s started with a bang. The “Oka Crisis” opened the eyes of many to the issues of Onkwehón:we peoples on a national level. What began as a peaceful demonstration by the Mohawks of Kanehsatà:ke, who opposed the use and appropriation of their traditional land for the expansion of a nine-hole golf course, flared into a seventy-eight-day standoff, which ignited a sense of solidarity among Onkwehón:we across the country. In support of the people of Kanehsatà:ke, Kahnawà:ke—a Mohawk reserve situated on the South Shore of Montreal—closed off essential arteries (the Mercier Bridge and Highways 132 and 138) connecting residents and traffic to the city. A matter of profound inconvenience to the non-Onkwehón:we neighbouring communities on the South Shore, the blockade in Kahnawà:ke became a bargaining tool for the Mohawks of Kanehsatà:ke in their negotiations for land. As elders, spiritual leaders, band councillors, chiefs, and advisors sat at a table with the Sûreté du Québec, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada officials, the situation grew beyond the initial concern of land in

Kanehsatà:ke. Issues of injustice, inequality, land claims, economies, treaties, and social inequity exploded on the national screen as Onkwehón:we communities shared their stories across Canada.

While we shared our stories of past and present, we all saw that racism was alive and well—and televisable. The national news and media portrayed Onkwehón:we, but specifically Mohawks, as terrorists, while they broadcast footage of neighbouring communities burning effigies of “Indian” people as a protest against us. Towards the end of the summer of 1990, demonstrators at the blockade in Kanehsatà:ke eventually retreated into the confined space of their Treatment Centre, and the Canadian Army surrounded both Mohawk communities. During the seventy-eight-day standoff, one Sûreté du Québec officer was killed, and many Onkwehón:we women, children, and elderly were traumatized as they evacuated their homes and communities. The smell of tear gas lingered in the air throughout the summer and fall months. Once negotiations concluded, Kahnawà:ke opened up the highways and bridge, and later the men, women, and children that occupied the Treatment Centre in Kanehsatà:ke walked out. Onkwehón:we communities regarded them as heroes, while many Canadians looked upon them as militants. The tone was set for a new decade. It was a time to reflect and to understand who we were and where we were headed as Onkwehón:we people.

In the midst of the crisis, the Meech Lake Accord—an amendment to the Canadian Constitution that would have given Quebec the status of a “distinct society,” while leaving Onkwehón:we and other “minority” groups out of the picture—came to an abrupt conclusion. Elijah Harper, a Cree from Red Sucker Lake, Manitoba, and the first Onkwehón:we to be elected to the provincial legislature, raised his eagle feather in the air and said “no” to the proposed amendment. The repercussions of both the failure of the Meech Lake Accord and the Oka Crisis within the arts community in Canada were enormous. Exhibitions were coordinated in spaces across the country in response to the Crisis and the issues it raised. It sparked a loud voice of collective protest in fine art, dance, theatre, literature, and film, which sought to question the state we lived in. Artists were inspired to create pieces that reflected the tension they felt. Several documentary films were produced that captivated audiences worldwide,<sup>6</sup> including a number of award-winning films by Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin.

Canada was then faced with the enormous task of restoring relationships with Onkwehón:we across the country. In 1991, four Onkwehón:we and three non-Onkwehón:we commissioners were appointed to investigate the questions being raised. Justice, poverty, racism, assimilation policies, and cultural survival were laid out as the issues to be studied by what is known as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). The Commission’s report was to guide and advise the government in bringing about a fundamental change in its relationship with Onkwehón:we nations, and to help foster a harmonious co-existence among settlers and Onkwehón:we. The visual and performing arts were included in the Commission because of their cultural significance and their tremendous contributions to our ways of life and identity. The Commission was surprised to learn how little support Onkwehón:we arts received from granting agencies and public and private Canadian art

6. Alanis Obomsawin’s film, *Kahnesatake: 250 Years of Resistance* (1993), contextualized the event through both a historical perspective and a first-person account from behind the razor wire. Obomsawin went on to release a suite of related films further illustrating the atrocity, including *My Name is Kahentioosta* (1995), *Spudwrench: Kahnawake Man* (1997), and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (2000).

institutions. When the report was finally published and disseminated in 1996, it recommended the creation of an Onkwehón:we arts council; a review of the policies of existing granting agencies to ensure their criteria were relevant to, and inclusive of, Onkwehón:we; the establishment of funding for training in the arts; and the support of visual and performance-arts spaces in our communities, both on the reserve and in urban centres.

### Indian in the Cupboard: Where Does it Go?

Before discussing what happened after the Meech Lake Accord, the Oka Crisis, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, I would like to take us back just a little to the late 1980s. In 1988, an exhibition titled *The Spirit Sings* opened at the Glenbow Museum, Alberta. The Lubicon Lake First Nation immediately boycotted it, because the exhibition sponsor, Shell Oil Company, was responsible for destroying their territory, poisoning their resources, and dispossessing them of their land for the purposes of extracting oil.<sup>7</sup> The boycott also triggered a broader, public conversation related to representation, voice, and intellectual and spiritual property. *The Spirit Sings* was viewed as a colonial version of the past, one that lacked Onkwehón:we participation, consultation, and representation in the arts. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the national council of elected First Nations leaders in Canada, became involved in the issue and organized a symposium with the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) to discuss longstanding issues between museums and Onkwehón:we. George Erasmus, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said of the matter:

It raised questions that museums had to deal with and a lot of questions that Native people had to address... What kind of role should Native people play in the presentation of their own past, their own history?... When the exhibition came to Ottawa we had to ask the Indigenous community what we were going to do. We could have continued with the boycott. But we needed to get beyond that. What we are embarking on now is the beginning of a different kind of relationship between two potentially strong allies.<sup>8</sup>

A joint task force between the AFN and CMA was put together “to develop an ethical framework and strategies by which Aboriginal peoples and cultural institutions [could] work together to represent Aboriginal history and culture.”<sup>9</sup> The publication *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* was released in 1992. Though the document was primarily concerned with ethnographic, archaeological, and cultural objects and collections, there was also concern for the lack of representation of contemporary Onkwehón:we art in public galleries and institutions. Through consultation, it was “agreed that Canadian art museums should be encouraged to work with artists of First Nations ancestry to enhance their collections and exhibition programming in this area.”<sup>10</sup> As an ancillary result, the Canada Council Art Bank acquired 135 works produced by Onkwehón:we artists between 1996 and 1999.

The issue of representation and the absence of our art from mainstream institutions continued to be debated amongst Onkwehón:we artists and curators. Due to a lack of understanding of our culture, non-Onkwehón:we curators and critics sometimes hesitated to work with Onkwehón:we artists, because we challenged the entrenched, colonial ethics and values commonly

7. The exhibition opened in conjunction with the 1988 Winter Olympics hosted in Calgary, AB, and the Shell Oil Company shared no interest in, or profits with, Onkwehón:we.

8. *Task Force on Museums and First Peoples: Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* (1st ed. 1992; Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, 1994).

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

used to evaluate our practice. Questions we heard again and again included “How does it fit in?” and “Where do we put it?” In return, we asked ourselves, “Do we even want to submit to their judgment?” Often, our work was passed on to anthropologists or ethnographers, who became the new gatekeepers to our advancement. In an ethnographic context, works were commonly measured by their “authenticity” or traditional narrative structure or function, which were considered less important than Western standards of aesthetic and artistic value. Throughout its lifetime, the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA), a lobby and advocacy group founded in 1978, worked hard to address issues of presence, absence, and the placement and representation of Onkwehón:we art in Canada. Its members participated as advisors and supporters for various exhibitions in the 1990s (*Beyond History*, 1989; *Indigena*, 1992), and they criticized the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) for the lack of Onkwehón:we representation in its collection and programming. SCANA’s presence and sustained lobbying efforts led it to be recognized as the national voice for Onkwehón:we art in Canada, and it was supported by the Assembly of First Nations, and financially through the Indian Art Centre. However, its presence on the national Onkwehón:we art scene ended in 1996.

#### De-Celebration

Much as 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, 1992 was the year in which America celebrated the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery of the New World.” Festivities across the Americas were planned and executed. Just as many Onkwehón:we in Canada are unenthusiastic about the country’s sesquicentennial, Onkwehón:we across the Americas felt there was no cause for celebration in 1992. Instead, we viewed it as a time to reflect upon our own histories and experiences of contact and its consequences. A mass holocaust, a recognized cultural genocide, an immense clash of cultures, the spread of disease, and physical displacement are part of a collective history shared by Onkwehón:we of the Americas. Our pride and dignity had to be recovered in the face of colonial demands for us to vanish materially, physically, and symbolically from the national frame and landscape. In spite of all that was done to eradicate or assimilate us, we endured, and we have been able to grasp Western tools and technologies for the benefit of enduring traditions that span eras and generations. We did this in order to further our survivance, but we did not let go of our past.

Onkwehón:we artists, critics, and curators were already addressing these issues in their artwork, and 1992 was the year in which they were more readily accepted and viewed. Exhibitions throughout Canada and the United States challenged the narrative of “discovery.” *Indigena*, a landmark blockbuster exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History), set out to disseminate contemporary perspectives on the state of being Onkwehón:we during the quincentennial anniversary year. Curated by Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster, the exhibition included nineteen artists from various disciplines and at various stages of their careers. Together they assembled a wide range of Onkwehón:we perspectives, thus representing all of our communities and the four directions. For the catalogue, eight Onkwehón:we writers were commissioned to respond to

the politics, culture, tradition, and identity within the curatorial framework addressing issues around “discovery” and the colonial project. At the same time, the artists included personal and collective experiences, and thus confronted a limited global discourse by exposing and bring historical violence and trauma to the forefront. Art gave agency to artists working for change and engaged in explicit critique, constructing a discourse of reclaiming and re-examining history, and addressing issues of power, authority, and ownership in relation to land, identity, and culture.

*Land Spirit Power* was a very significant undertaking, because it was the first, large-scale exhibition of contemporary Onkwehón:we art to be held at the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>11</sup> Also presented in 1992, this exhibition was part of another celebration—the country’s 125th anniversary. Similar to *Indigena*, *Land Spirit Power* responded to a watershed of political and cultural events. Artists were asked to respond to the notion of “land” and the perception of it as a plentiful and boundless resource. This exhibition claimed that it put aside Western parameters to accept a more multi-vocal expression of art; then NGC Director Shirley L. Thompson referred to it as “an important step towards the openness of spirit that we hope will characterize the next 125 years.”<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, we went on to feel the absence of our presence within Canada’s national gallery, with no Onkwehón:we curators, exhibitions, substantial programming, or any representation throughout the rest of the decade.

The city of Montreal, originally an Iroquoian village otherwise known as Hochelaga, was also planning a party in 1992, and we were invited. Festivities for the 350th anniversary (1642–1992)<sup>13</sup> of the settlement of the city included exhibitions and performances featuring Onkwehón:we artists, and, in the summer of 1992, *New Territories 350/500 Years After: An Exhibition of Contemporary Aboriginal Art of Canada* was presented in four of Montreal’s Maisons de la culture. Twenty-seven First Nations artists and seventeen Inuit artists participated in this intercultural reflection upon the colonial framework of these anniversary celebrations. Another component to the *New Territories* exhibition was an exchange between Onkwehón:we artists from Quebec and Mexico.

An exhibition titled *Kahswenhtha*, produced by the Kanien’kehá:ka Raotitíóhkwa Cultural Center in Kahnawà:ke, also coincided with Montreal’s anniversary celebrations. This exhibition used the philosophies of the Two Row Wampum, or *Kahswenhtha*, to present the Mohawk perspective on Montreal’s history and the impact of our co-existence with settlers. It reminded us of these principles through documentation, historical and cultural artefacts, art, and music from our territory. The exhibition made it abundantly clear that the Mohawk Nation is integral to the history of Tio’tia:ke (Montreal).

Also in Montreal, the exhibition *Art Mohawk ’92* featured artists from the three Mohawk communities in Quebec—Akwasasne, Kahnawà:ke and Kanehsatà:ke—and was presented at the Strathearn Centre (now Montreal arts interculturels, or MAI). This large group exhibition, which came on the heels of the Oka Crisis, invited non-Onkwehón:we visitors to gain a better understanding of their Mohawk neighbours. *Art Mohawk ’92* also offered a rare look at the work of painter, writer, and activist Louis Hall (Karoniaktajeh) (1917–1993) of Kahnawà:ke, Quebec. A devout Mohawk traditionalist and nationalist,

11. Another exhibition, *Strengthening The Spirit: Works by Native Artists*, curated by Janice Seline, was organized and hosted by the National Gallery of Canada in conjunction with the Indigenous Nations of the Americas International Conference. The small exhibition ran from November 10, 1991 to February 2, 1992.

12. Dr. Shirley L. Thompson, “Foreword,” *Land Spirit Power*, eds. Robert Houle, Diana Nemiroff, et al. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 7.

13. Montreal is currently celebrating its 375th anniversary, which officially started on December 11, 2016. See, “vive 375,” La Société des célébrations du 375<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de Montreal, 2015, [www.375mtl.com](http://www.375mtl.com).



Hall was known for his forceful critiques of power relationships, religion, and history. His polemical writings and illustrations were self-published in two booklets, *The Warrior's Handbook* and *Rebuilding the Iroquois Confederacy* (c. 1980), and his iconic design of the Unity Flag (aka the Warrior Flag) is a symbol of the fight for Onkwehón:we rights and sovereignty.

That same year, Sauteaux artist Robert Houle exhibited his multimedia installation *Hochelaga* at Galerie Article, Montreal. His work raised issues of Onkwehón:we sovereignty within the province of Quebec, whose demand for the right to call itself a “distinct society” has been an ongoing point of contention. Colonial governance is twice as strong in Quebec, as the French and English fight each other for dominion over the territory. In his installation, Houle used the sacred circle, an important element found within Onkwehón:we spirituality and symbolism, to remind us that “the centre cannot be occupied by anyone.”<sup>14</sup>

### The (War) Party's Over

1992 ended soon enough, and Onkwehón:we artists and curators were faced with the question “What happens next?” It soon became apparent that the “celebratory” funds for exhibitions, exchanges, and residencies were gone. The party was over. Now we had to envision ways to maintain a strong Onkwehón:we presence in the country and its arts institutions without additional support. Our political and aesthetic statements were heard across North America—and to some extent the world—and awareness of our histories and contemporary realities had become more familiar to the general public. Yet the mood was one of a lingering hangover, a time to reflect.

From September 10 to 14, 1993, SCANA held its fifth national symposium in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Called *A Gathering in Honour of Our Teachers, Our Elders and Those Who Went Before Us*, it celebrated senior artists who had paved the way for Onkwehón:we in the art world. Among them were Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Bill Reid, Norval Morrisseau, and Benjamin Chee Chee. At the same time, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia opened *Pe'l A'tukwey: let me... tell a story*, its first ever exhibition addressing contemporary Onkwehón:we art, with an emphasis on Mi'kmaq and Maliseet nations of Atlantic Canada.

Art institutions and museums began asking the same question again: Where do Onkwehón:we fit in? Since the celebrations and their aftermath—the de-celebration—were over, it seemed as if we were back to square one. Instead of backing down, Onkwehón:we artists continued in the spirit of each nations' goals for self-governance and self-determination. To some extent, previous barriers were still down. Artists took hold of this opportunity and did not hesitate to continue producing works that were animated by their nations' traditions, that articulated our political goals, and that sought to clear an aesthetic space for us. Definitions of Onkwehón:we art grew even broader and welcomed performance art, new media, and computer technology, while at the same time revitalizing the use of customary arts. Our experiences were directly shaped by a sense of community and the power of nationhood in the face of globalization. Many young and emerging artists began to address issues of identity, conveying their experiences of hybridity across diverse social landscapes. The expression of political and colonial situations

14. Robert Houle, “Foreword,” *Hochelaga*, exh. cat., ed Curtis J. Collins (Montreal: article, 1992).

started to shift subtly and become camouflaged within our artwork. The critique of colonialism and its discourse remained present, but individualism and community spirit began to shine though. Readdressing the past while reclaiming the present was a common theme and it remained at the forefront of our concerns.

George Littlechild, Plains Cree, was very successful in processing this spirit by “de-colonizing the archival photograph.” Littlechild, a survivor of the Sixties’ Scoop, in which the government removed Onkwehón:we children from their homes and placed them in foster homes until they reached adulthood, was able to reclaim his own identity and his people by researching and tracking archival photographs of his ancestors. Through this archival method of recovery, he breathed new life into images of people once classified as unknown. Littlechild reclaimed them as his parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. In reuniting his family, Littlechild posed questions of responsibility that prefigured the reconciliation process Canada faces in 2017. Who is responsible for breaking up these families and their way of life? Why do we have to reconstitute them? What has happened to these people through time?

### Digging Our Scene

By 1994, just four years after the Oka Crisis, we were increasingly aware of the absence of our presence. But as the national attention and blockbuster shows receded, the provincial scene (rural, reserve, and urban) was becoming quite active. In April 1994, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Eric Robertson, and I formed the First Nations artist collective Nation To Nation in Montreal as a means of celebrating our creative processes and re-introducing the importance and role of art within our communities. We chose the name Nation To Nation to reflect the teachings of the *Kahswenhtha* (Two Row Wampum) and to acknowledge and respect each other’s cultural diversity. Nation To Nation allowed us to create dialogue between people and “peoples,” as individuals, collectives, communities, and countries. It also allowed us freedom of movement: rather than focusing on a permanent home, Nation to Nation moved from space to space, city to city, nation to nation. As a collective of Onkwehón:we artists, our main goals were to encourage discussions of Onkwehón:we art and culture, as well as to function as a catalyst for creative expression. As artists, we believed in creativity as a fundamental link between all aspects of community. To achieve these goals, and to establish our presence, Nation to Nation coordinated exhibitions and organized events, performances, and workshops to strengthen an active arts community.

Nation to Nation’s exhibition *Native Love* (1995) featured a roster that began with thirty-eight artists from across North America. It brought together artists and writers in the spirit of solidarity and provided a platform for considering a subject we are not often associated with—love—from an Onkwehón:we perspective. In an essay accompanying the exhibition titled “Making Native Love,” Audra Simpson wrote:

If we were to trust popular and scholarly representations of Native People, we would have to conclude that they, unlike any other peoples in the world, are without love. Native People are represented in mechanistic and ultimately loveless terms: as

hunter-gatherers and horticulturists of yesterday and cultural revivalists of today. They are written in popular press as activists (troublemakers), as artists-with-a-mission, as cigarette smugglers. In new-age journals as naturally in tune with the earth, in movies of the seventies as shape-changers. They are Indian Princesses, savage squaws, brave-hearted men and guerrilla warriors. Rarely however, are they in love (the tragedy of Pocahontas aside), rarely are they contemplating love, acting out love or simply being, as they are—their Native selves in love or out of love, in the funk, out of the funk.<sup>15</sup>

*Native Love* allowed us to let down our guard and contemplate our personal voice and experiences. It wasn't surprising that most of the artists paired themselves with a writer who was a family member, a lover, or a friend. The exhibition went on to tour for three years, with presentations at Artspace, Peterborough; AKA artist-run and Tribe Inc., Saskatoon; Urban Shaman, Winnipeg; Open Space, Victoria; and the Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford. It was well-received and created dialogue amongst our communities, even stirring up some controversy.

*Cyberpowwow* (1997), Nation to Nation's next ambitious project, was eventually expanded to become an ongoing experiment in online communities and digital art. Skawennati Tricia Fagnito coordinated the project, which was rooted in her early experiences navigating the World Wide Web. In realizing the importance of this new technology, Skawennati initiated a process of re-imagining space and territory. The World Wide Web offered cyberspace, a place beyond colonial borders and limitations, as a newfound form of freedom that Nation to Nation was well suited to embrace. Literary and visual artists, as well as art critics, were asked to provide art and text for a website built around the theme of cyberspace as a new territory, a new technology, and a new meeting place. It was a chance to dispel myths of Onkwehón:we obsolescence by claiming a space and embracing digital technologies as culturally relevant media. Visitors were invited to read and view the works online, and to react in a chat room where dialogue happened globally in real time. The initial launch of the website for *Cyberpowwow* honoured the tradition of a powwow with physical gatherings, hosted by Galerie Oboro in Montreal and Circle Vision Arts Corporation in Saskatoon, where people could log onto the site and chat room.

In realizing *Cyberpowwow* as a borderless, self-determined, "Aboriginal" territory, invited artists and scholars addressed issues loaded with the politics of misrepresentation (historical as well as contemporary), social concerns, identity, hybridity, stereotypes, and nation-to-nation relations. By breaking down and deconstructing barriers within the technological environment, we were conscious of, and privileged by, its global reach. There were four iterations of *Cyberpowwow*, and it eventually grew to include a residency between 1997 and 2004.

Nation To Nation reached its initial goals by producing projects that brought attention to Onkwehón:we art through community initiatives. Working in the same vein, collective members Lori Blondeau and Bradlee LaRocque went on to found Tribe Inc. in Saskatoon. Responding to Saskatchewan's high population of Onkwehón:we, Tribe Inc. set goals in keeping with the need for the development and presentation of Onkwehón:we media, visual, and performing arts on local, provincial, and national scales.

15. Audra Simpson, "Making Native Love," *Nation To Nation*, 1995, <http://cyberpowwow.net/nation-2nation/love.htm>.

There have been other Onkwehón:we artist-run centres, collectives, and arts organizations to emerge, including Lick, Toronto, which was formed by artists who used saltlicks as a medium; Sakewewak First Nations Artists Collective, Regina; Terres en Vue/Land InSights, Montreal; and the Centre for Aboriginal Media, Toronto, to name only a few. By broadening diversity and presence, each organization expanded to fill a void and was able to share Onkwehón:we knowledge and visions with our own community, as well as a broader urban audience. Urban Shaman, an artist-run centre/gallery that opened in 1996, was developed to counter the lack of exhibition opportunities for Onkwehón:we artists in Winnipeg, which has the highest population of urban Onkwehón:we in Canada. Since their inception, Urban Shaman and Tribe Inc. have played a vital role in providing opportunities for Onkwehón:we artists to produce, exhibit, and disseminate their work on a local and national level in Canada.

### Exhibitionists

At the same time (post-sesquicentennial), Onkwehón:we artists across Canada were involved in numerous solo and group exhibitions that reflected our growing art history and constant testing of the boundaries of “Indian art.” Artist-run centres and smaller institutions were producing, coordinating, curating, and hosting our exhibitions, many of which had a huge impact on the art world. In 1995, curator Gerald McMaster presented the work of Métis artist Edward Poitras as Canada’s entry to the renowned Venice Biennale. Created with a trickster sensibility, Poitras’ exhibition toyed with the idea of confusing boundaries. It revealed the complexities of hybrid identity and pitted the self against the “Other” within a global context in which power, powerlessness, strength, and weakness were played out and juxtaposed against each other.

Onkwehón:we curators, critics, and writers were also making their presence known in mainstream art institutions. In 1995, Lynn Hill curated *AlterNative: Contemporary Photo Compositions*, a photo-based group exhibition, organized by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, which deconstructed stereotypical images of Indians. At the Power Plant in Toronto, Arthur Renwick curated Faye Heavyshield’s exhibition *Into the Garden of Angels* (1994). Her minimalist sculptures were a testament to the personal and collective effects of assimilation programs, such as those carried out by Christianity and the Residential School System. Marcia Crosby examined the notion of space and belonging to place and territory in *Nations in Urban Landscapes* (1995) at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, while Patricia Deadman explored relationships between the land and its inhabitants in *Staking Land Claims* (1997) at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff. In *Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art* (1996), curator Doreen Jensen celebrated the impact and influence that West Coast aesthetics have had on provincial and national identity. She also presented innovative works by emerging Onkwehón:we artists contributing to British Columbia’s arts panorama.

Two frontrunner institutions, the Thunder Bay Art Gallery (TBAG) and the Woodland Cultural Centre,<sup>16</sup> continued presenting exhibitions of Onkwehón:we artists throughout the late 1990s. *Basket, Bead and Quill* (1995), a seminal exhibition at TBAG, explored the relationship between traditional

16. The Canadian Museum of Civilization also mounted the exhibitions *Reservation x: The Power of Place* (1997) and *Emergence from the Shadows: First Peoples’ Photographic Perspectives* (1999), which both presented contemporary art.

and contemporary arts practices, and emphasized how links to tradition became stronger for many of us at the turn of the millennium. The Woodland Cultural Centre's *Godi'nigoha': The Women's Mind* (1997) took a long, hard look at contributions made by women artists within a matrilineal society. The curatorial premise reiterated Haudenosaunee matriarchal duties and how fundamental values of respect, rooted in our spirituality, will sustain us economically, globally, environmentally, and politically.

The 1990s offered an assortment of experiences, events, and tactics that provided us with the strength and skills we needed to enter the new millennium. It was clear that we had arrived. Onkwehón:we artists had the freedom to experiment with genres and styles that issued from our traditions and our collective experiences, as well as from Western art forms. These same artists grasped, without cultural shame, all of the tools and techniques available to them. Our established presence catapulted us into a national and international realm, and our contributions to contemporary artistic development and practice were increasingly recognized. Exhibitions of new works, retrospectives, and further experimentation in the arts strengthened our creative output, while the emphasis on nationhood, community, and home were stronger than ever. Advocacy for our place in art history and art institutions was rising. We continued to produce work, to write, and to curate at an unprecedented rate, yet we still remained absent from survey textbooks and art history courses. In order to find our place within the global picture, we felt we must write and rewrite our own histories.

A substantive or exhaustive Onkwehón:we art history textbook is still a work in progress, scattered in bits and pieces across several decades of private, personal, and public archives. Our collective and institutional memory needs to be preserved and made accessible to the future generations who will carry our momentum forward. The path we traveled has been mapped out. Like oral traditions, the performance of our histories needs to be told, written, read, heard, acknowledged, and, most importantly, remembered. The 1990s built a significant part of the platform upon which we stand today, where red is now an indication of absolute and long-standing presence. ¶